



# The Steam-Driven Boy and Other Strangers

*John Sladek*

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## **The Steam-Driven Boy and Other Strangers** John Sladek

The Steam-Driven Boy is John Sladek's first collection of brilliant, eccentric, darkly satirical and downright weird science fiction stories. As a bonus it includes his parodies of SF authors, uproariously spoofing Asimov (and the Laws of Robotics), Ballard, Bradbury, Dick, Poe, Cordwainer Smith, and more.

Further details may be found at <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/pl.cgi?4...>

## **The Steam-Driven Boy and Other Strangers Details**

Date : Published July 1973 by Panther

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Author : John Sladek

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## From Reader Review The Steam-Driven Boy and Other Strangers for online ebook

### Nate D says

At first: I might be concerned that these were so overfilled with sheer craziness if they weren't far too pithy and funny to care. Part of what may become a sustained 70s sci-fi binge. The first couple ("The Secret of the Old Custard" and "The Aggressor" are both excellent absurdist whirlwinds of invention.

Then: Actually, I'm becoming concerned that these are so overfilled with sheer craziness that not even pithiness and amusement can overcome it. Sometimes an advantage of longer-form storytelling is that the ideas have to be strong enough to sustain over a more developed story arc. Which some of these really, really are not (any given episode of the spy pastiche, for instance, each immediately abandoned).

Later: A couple of these actually do settle down into properly developing single ideas, and regain my enjoyment. The title story, ridiculous as it may be, is a good one, as is "The Trancendental Sandwich". Earlier, for all its familiarity of theme, I quite liked the nightmarish disintegration of "The Happy Breed".

At last: I quit while I was ahead by skipping out on the section of parodies, which I suspect would not play to my favorite bits of Sladek.

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### Blogbaas Van 'tVliegend Eiland says

7/10

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### Oriana says

oh sure, some super-weird 60s sci-fi, why not? especially when it's been endorsed by both tuck & manny.

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### Igor says

I don't know if I should call my kids pups or cubs. And neither does any cordwainer or smith.

It is good however that none of my children is named F'....

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### knig says

Its been a long time since I had so much fun with sci fi. Well, technically these 24 short stories don't class as sci fi: more of a romp through the dark, wry recesses of a florid imagination transversing the idiosyncratic atlas of our timeless genus: and poking holes all the way through!

Best of breed are, of course, 'the parodies', where Sladek takes on 'the big boys' (Asimov, Bradbury, Wells, etc) in a winner takes all literary slam fest.

'Broot Force' here is sheer gold. A scientist ponders his failure to build a life like robot. Recapping the homespun 'Laws of Robish' we are quickly reminded of Law 1: A robot must not injure a human being, or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm and Law 2: A robot must obey orders given it by a human being except where such orders conflict with the first Law....R-2's problem was one of recognition: It had mistaken Dr Swanson for a piece of machinery and partially dismantled him. R3 was equipped with many 'human detection' devices..Alas, it judged its own behaviour as human and refused to obey any one else's orders... And so this black farce goes on, crammed with dry humour, juxtaposing concepts and general outrageousness.

Perhaps the most innovative, quirky piece in the lot is 'The Secret of the Old Custard': a bizarre, surreal take on a post-apocalyptic 'dis'-order (I think Russia won this one), with a healthy pounding of the capitalist meme. Oh, and an indictment of the breakdown of both social and family structures. And here is how he does it:

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eb...>

Go on, its only three pages, AND, a free read.

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## Manny says

If you like science fiction and bizarre humour, this book is a must-read - in particular the second half, which consists of short stories spoofing the SF greats. He totally nails Philip K. Dick, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Cordwainer Smith and J.G. Ballard, among others. It's cruel but very funny.

I had a quote from the Asimov parody *Broot Force* up on my door for ages. "As the semantic engineer, your job is naming parts and tightening nuts and bolts. I suggest you go back to your office and do that - right now!"

Speaking of which...

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From the Philip K. Dick interview quoted in one of notgettingenough's reviews:

Have you read Sladek's parody of my writing? It's so much better than anything that I can do. And I walked around and I was really off the ground. Walking on cloud nine, after I read the parody. And I wrote Ed Ferman, who is the editor of F&SF. This appeared originally in F&SF. And I said, I have talent, Sladek has genius. And Ed Ferman wrote back and said, fine, I'm going to buy a lot of stuff from Sladek. And he did. He commissioned eight more parodies. And they're all marvelous; a parody of Asimov. Sladek said I was the hardest person to parody. I have his book in front of me. In England it's called *The Steam-Driven Boy and other Strangers*. Sladek says the I Ching is a hoax. And Sladek is right. His parody of me is called "Solar Shoe Salesman." And in it somebody consults the tiles and it gives him many small greatneses deny. It does not further to discover several gifts only. The wise King avoids fried foods. And I says, ah, Sladek, you finished it off man. I can never consult the I Ching again. And all started laughing. I'm looking at this parody and I'm saying if I could write as well as Sladek.

'What has one leg in the morning, four legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening, and when is a door not a door?'

'Hmmm,' said the old computer. 'That's a toughy. Would it be Long John Silver with a three-legged parrot?'

'No.'

'How about a leg of mutton magically transformed into a dog that pees on your doorstep at dusk?'

'No.'

'Okay, I give. What is it?'

'A coffee table, made from a door!' Hampton explained how one began in the morning by putting one leg on, and had all four in place by the afternoon, but one fell off in the evening.

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## **Bradley says**

A collection of short and shorter science fiction which is rounded off by a series of tales parodying the genres giants as known in the 70's.

This is some seriously weird imaginings capturing that strange experimental era of the early 70s.

In that sense the stories have not aged well, but in the wider sense, like Victorian gothic it is timeless.

There is a strongly surreal element running through much of this book with a disjointed dreamlike quality too it.

When I was younger every Monty Python sketch had to be funny, if they were not it was because I failed to understand it. Years later I discover actually some sketches had always been poor.

Reading this I had the sneaky suspicion I was missing the joke at times. Am I reading crap or am I just not understanding it.

If there were rules and guidelines constraining his wilder flights of surrealism they were lost on me. Anything seemed possible at any time and meaningless jumble ensued.

When I asked my pillow about this it ate the family pet by way of reply. This left my right foot attached to my elbow in disbelief.

I simply read on because the tales were short enough not to bore even if they made little conventional sense.

An overall blanket star rating fails to convey the variety of story, some are one star, some are five. The best seller was gibberish, This Happy Breed was excellent about a human race that gave themselves over to the seeming comfort of machines.

Robots appear in a good many stories and usually reduce the human condition in the process. Time travel another theme so the author can tie the reader in paradox.

The parodying of other writers was clever and funny in a student revue manner.

Overall effect ended up as a 2.

If I had my time again the more surreal stuff would have been skipped instantly (they don't improve) and what would remain would be a solid 3.

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### **Karl Geiger says**

Definitely for the completist who got started on Sladek's work and needs to finish his earlier pieces.

Imaginative short-stories whose meaning and inferences will be lost on the modern reader. Worth the time if you're really interesting in seeing the author develop.

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### **Steph Bennion says**

Bonkers. The parodies are sublime.

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### **David says**

Good parodies of the following authors:

The Purloined Butter (Edgar Allan Poe)

Pemberly's Start-Afresh Calliope (H.G. Wells)

Ralph 4F (Hugo Gernsback)

Engineer to the Gods (Robert Heinlein)

Broot Force (Isaac Asimov)

Joy Ride (Ray Bradbury)

The Moon is Sixpence (Arthur C. Clarke)

Solar Shoe-Salesman (Philip K. Dick)

One Damned Thing after Another (Cordwainer Smith)

The Sublimation World (J.G. Ballard)

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### **Tuck says**

funny and disturbing (what tabs WERE they dropping in the 60's) short sci fi stories and a bonus section of 10 parodies of famous sci fi writers that is frankly even funnier and spot-on than Sladek's own. The title story is a great combination of steampunk, time travel, hardware jism, and noir. but maybe my favorite is the first "the secret of the old custard" as it directly slams into my work with dewey:

"Glen was a pathetic figure as he moved so as not to cast a shadow on the curtains. His bright, skin-tight plastic suit was far from skin-tight, and even his cape looked baggy.

'Is it? Is that all?' [his wife speaking]

'No. Say, that neighbor of ours has been raking the leaves an awfully long time'.

'Answer me. What's wrong? Something at the office?'

'Everything. The carbon paper and stamps and paper clips have begun to disappear. I'm afraid they'll blame me. The boss is going to buy a computer to keep track of the loss. Someone stole my ration book on the train, and I found I had last week's newspaper. I.B.M. stock is falling, faintly falling. I have a cold, or something. And---and they're doing away with the Dewey Decimal System.'

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## Emma says

Tenalp yawaraf a morf emoc I, snatibahni htraE olleh. D NT WSH T DSTR U, JST GV U KNWLDG.  
CwN www wNDwRSTwND Mw?

Sladek's short stories are one crazy ride, you never know what will happen next, as he constantly pulls tricks from the hat like a magician turned into a broken automaton. The bad side of this is that sometimes the tricks come raining down all at once, taking away all the fun. The magician might tear his belly apart and reveal some hot chick inside, but wait, she is in fact a robot, who was once a human who lived in the future, but came back to the past with a time bicycle and now is split in two or three or four selves and she may be a spy or a whore or a scientist. And wait to see what's inside the bunny!

Have I bored you or what?

This is how some of the stories feel - a mumbo-jumbo of characters and events that are not actually related, which don't make any sense and are not even funny. I skipped those after a page or two (*Secret Identity*, *The Best-Seller*, *Solar Shoe-Salesman*). As a matter of fact, there are only a few stories that make sense (sort of). I'm speaking from my point of view, as I'm not very familiar with the science-fiction genre and thus couldn't grasp the alleged references to SF masterworks. In this respect, the *Parodies* section was totally wasted on me.

I don't know why, but I've started with the bad parts; I'm a bit angry, it's true, because the title and some good ratings have deceived me into believing that I'll adore these stories. They are not quite what I've expected, but fortunately many stories are a lot of fun - crazy and absurd as they may be. In fact: they are outrageously crazy and absurd! They are a blend of surrealism, humor and science-fiction which sometimes hits the right mix (as in *The Secret of the Old Custard*, *A Report on the Migrations of Educational Materials*, *The Happy Breed*, *The Transcendental Sandwich*, *The Momster*, 1937 A.D.!).

*Jenny and Peter came home from school, demanding a 'snack'. Agnes gave them Hungarian goulash, bread and butter, coffee and apple pie. They paid 95 cents each, and each tipped her 15 cents. They were gruff, dour eight-year-olds who talked little while they ate. Agnes was a little afraid of them. After their snack, they belted on guns and went out to hunt other children, before it grew too dark to see them.*

*I truly felt like weeping with him, but, for various reasons, my tear ducts had been removed.*

*There was money all over the floor, and lucky charms, but it was electrified. I tore along on my scooter, whose headlamp seemed to show darkness instead of light. I had to hurry, before the bureau closed, but the hands on my watch were wrong, no matter how I turned it to look at it.*

Oh, and there were also riddles throughout the stories, like these:

‘ELBANIMOBBA SI NOITIDOC NAMUH EHT!’

‘HE CUAE IONDTION AN TBOMABLS!’

‘TH HMN CNDTN S BMNBL!’

‘HET MUNAH NOCDTINOI SI BONIMAABEL!’

(please don't tell me you wouldn't wreck your brain to understand it, because I did!)

To get a sense of how Sladek's stories feel, you can watch the short movie *Breakfast*, made by the surrealist artist **Jan Švankmajer** (there are also *Lunch* and *Dinner*, if your interest is aroused).

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