

The First Two Pages of “The Yellow Crown” by Carol Gyzander

From *Under Twin Suns: Alternate Histories of the Yellow Sign*

edited by James Chambers (Hippocampus Press)

An Essay by Carol Gyzander

How do you write a follow-on to a well-known, classic story in the weird fiction genre, told one hundred and twenty-five years ago by a megalomaniacal, unreliable narrator? That’s what confronted me when I was invited to write my story, “The Yellow Crown,” for *Under Twin Suns: Alternate Histories of the Yellow Sign*. The anthology is inspired by the writings of Robert W. Chambers in *The King in Yellow* (1895). An early writer of weird fiction, Chambers was an influence on H. P. Lovecraft, a prominent cosmic horror/weird fiction author.

The genre is weird fiction, not graphic horror—things start out normal but gradually turn strange, as in *The Twilight Zone* shows.

Four stories in the original anthology overlap, like the linked stories in Art Taylor’s *On the Road with Del & Louise*; all contain a play called *The King In Yellow*. If one reads the second act, it drives you mad! The play occurs in the declining, alternate world of Carcosa that is ruled by a powerful entity called the King in Yellow, but the play is never wholly shared. My story is a continuation of the story “The Repairer of Reputations.”

I had four main goals that I needed to accomplish in my piece, which needed to be addressed from the outset:

- Just as Chambers did, I needed to start my weird fiction tale in what appeared to be an ordinary world but have it start to turn strange quickly. I only had five thousand words at my disposal, compared to twenty thousand in the original story.
- Chambers' *Yellow Mythos* has a significant and dedicated following, and I needed to provide sufficient linkage to the source material to satisfy their intellectual and emotional interest.
- However, I also needed to make the story accessible to those who had not read the inspiration material. Without repeating the original story, I had to define the weird world well enough to ground the characters and actions.
- Lastly, the original piece was entirely male-centered, as one would expect from a work written in 1895; the only female character was a bit of desirable side dressing. I opted to take the contrasting approach of a female-centered story. My main character is a down-on-her-luck waitress, Betty, who longs for an emotional connection in her life.

“The Yellow Crown” occurs a decade after “The Repairer of Reputations,” which is told by Hildrith Castaigne. He was trying to wrest control of the world from his cousin, military officer Louis—and was also in love with Louis’s fiancée, Constance. It was set in a then-future 1920s New York City where things were very different and strange: military forces occupied the city, and what we’d call subway stations were seen

by the main character to be Lethal Chambers (i.e., suicide bunkers) because people went in but didn't come back out again.

So, I needed to set the time and place and connect the world of my story with that strange New York City without spending too long describing the world. It begins as our main character, Betty, arrives at a house on Bleeker Street in hopes of a job:

The leaded-glass transom window over the massive mahogany door looked down at Betty as if judging her best dress, such as it was. She stood in front of the three-story brick residence on Bleeker Street and debated about inquiring after the job. She looked left and right, but none of the passers-by paid any attention to her or the building.

The sounds of a regimental march came to her ears, likely from the twentieth dragoon regiment heading to their barracks in nearby Washington Square Park after yet another maneuver. Over the stern beat floated the fluid notes of the jazz club down the street. Of course, jazz music was everywhere those days.

The young woman considered walking right up to the front door and knocking as, after all, this was a house of ill repute, although there was nothing on the exterior to indicate this. Would the standard proprieties apply? But her heart quailed, and she ducked her head and scurried along the side alley until she reached the servants' entrance in the rear.

Betty adjusted the back seams of her stockings and smoothed her short, bobbed hair under her cloche hat.

Betty's clothing and the prolific jazz hint that the time period is at the end of the 1920s; more details later in the story confirm the date. Bleeker Street and Washington Square Park help place it in New York City.

However, references to the dragoon regiment, their barracks in the park, and military maneuvers in the city—all images from the Chambers story—set the idea that this is not the New York City that we expect. The original character, Louis, was a

member of such a regiment. This orients those familiar with the Yellow Mythos as to which story is the inspiration and plants a hint as to how the Madam of the house fits in when we meet her later; she is Constance, Louis's fiancée. It also clues new readers to the idea that the military presence could be significant later in the story.

The house of ill-repute sitting in plain sight with nobody paying any attention to it also reveals that this world is not like our own. Imbuing the house with the ability to judge Betty hints that there is some greater power at play here.

We get an additional foreshadowing that things are not as Betty expects when she is greeted by the middle-aged woman who answers the door and invites her inside:

“... I'm Evelyn Palmer. I run the house here, at least all the support side. Madam is, of course, in charge of the establishment.” A small smile played about her lips. “As you shall soon understand. Come in, come on in.”

Things continue to take a turn for the unusual when Betty is offered an extremely generous salary with little in the way of an interview, based upon a mutual friend who has recommended her. We learn that it is not a typical house of ill repute, and the woman in charge of the house has an attitude toward her employees that is different from the times:

Evelyn cocked her head to one side. “Certainly, dear. But that is your pay for each week. We like to take care of all the women that we can here. Of course, *some* people think that Madam has some of the ladies take care of all the men upstairs.” She pursed her lips and shook her head.

Betty is the main character, and we see her being nervous and yet hopeful from the very beginning. With luck, the reader starts to like her right away. The focus on Betty, Evelyn, and the Madam in the first several pages establishes that women are the power players here; later in the story, men indeed appear as desirable window dressing just as the woman did in the original story.

I hope that I managed to meet my four goals in these first several pages. Readers understand the strange world of an alternate New York City and are ready for the story to take some weird turns. New readers of the Yellow Mythos feel at home, while experienced readers know how and where it fits in the mythos. All will be engaged enough with Betty to follow the rest of her story, where the male-oriented world of the King in Yellow is turned on its head most unexpectedly by the bit player in the original tale—the Madam wearing the Yellow Crown.

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Bram Stoker Award®-nominated author Carol Gyzander writes and edits horror, dark fiction, suspense, and science fiction. Her latest work is a cryptid novella, *Forget Me Not*, from the Systema Paradoxa series NeoParadoxa. Her short stories are in numerous anthologies, including “The Yellow Crown” in the Stoker-nominated weird fiction anthology *Under Twin Suns: Alternate Histories of the Yellow Sign* (from Hippocampus Press, 2021). Carol co-edited the *Even in the Grave* ghost story anthology with James Chambers (NeoParadoxa, July 2022).

Carol’s a lifelong volunteer and was a fifteen-year scout leader. She’s the Horror Writers Association (HWA) NY Chapter Co-Chair and co-host of the monthly HWA NY Galactic Terrors online reading series. As HWA Chapter Program Co-Manager, she helps support chapters in the US. HWA, HNS, MWA, SinC.

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