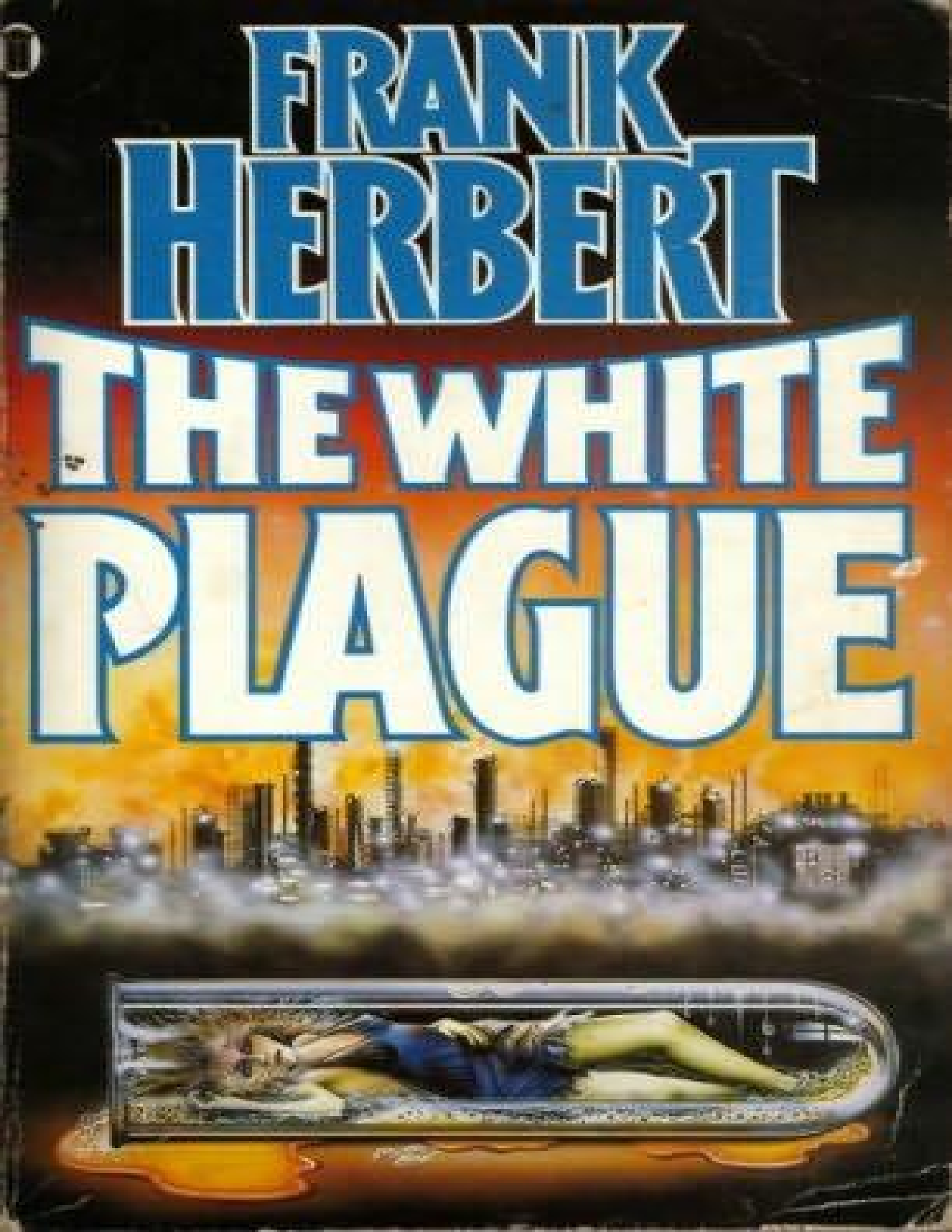
FRANK HERBERT

THE WHITE PLAGUE



The White Plague

Frank Herbert

1982

To Ned Brown

For his years of friendship

PRECEDE

There's a lust for power in the Irish as there is in every people, a lusting after the Ascendancy where you can tell others how to behave. It has a peculiar shape with the Irish, though. It comes of having lost our ancient ways -- the simpler laws, the rath and the family at the core of society.

Romanized governments dismay us. They always resolve themselves into widely separated Ascendants and Subjects, the latter being more numerous than the former, of course. Sometimes it's done with great subtlety as it was in America, the slow accumulations of power, law upon law and all of it manipulated by an elite whose monopoly it is to understand the private language of injustice. Do not blame the Ascendants. Such separation requires docile Subjects as well. This may be the lot of any government, Marxist Russians included. There's a peculiar human susceptibility you see when you look at the Soviets, them building an almost exact copy of the czarist regimes: the same paranoia, the same secret police, the same untouchable military, and the murder squads, the Siberian death camps, the lid of terror on creative imagination, deportation for the ones who cannot be killed off or bought off. It's like some terrible plastic memory sitting there in the dark of our minds, ready on the instant to reshape itself into primitive patterns the moment the heat touches it. I fear for the shape of things which may come from the heat of O'Neill's plague. Truly, I fear, for the heat is great.

-- Fintan Craig Doheny

May the hearthstone of hell be his bed rest forever!

-- Old Irish Curse

It was an ordinary gray British Ford, the spartan economy model with right-hand drive customary in Ireland. John Roe O'Neill would remember the driver's brown-sweatered right arm resting on the car's windowsill in the cloud-filtered light of that Dublin afternoon. A nightmare capsule of memory, it excluded everything else in the scene; just the car and that arm.

Several other surviving witnesses commented on a crumpled break in the Ford's left front wing. The break had begun to rust.

Speaking from her hospital bed, one witness said: "The break was a jagged thing and I was afraid someone would be cut if they brushed against it."

Two of those who recalled seeing the car come out of Lower Leeson Street knew the driver casually, but only from his days in postal uniform. He was Francis Bley, a retired postman working part-time as a watchman at a building site in Dun Laoghaire. Bley left for work early every Wednesday, giving himself time to run a few errands and then pick up his wife, Tessie. On that one day each week, Tessie spent the morning doing "light secretarial" for a betting shop in King Street. It was Tessie's habit to spend the rest of the day with her widowed sister who lived in a remodeled gatehouse off the Dun Laoghaire bypass

"just a few minutes out of his way."

This was a Wednesday. May 20. Bley was on his way to pick up Tessie.

The Ford's left front door, although appearing undamaged by the accident that had crumpled the wing, still required a twist of wire around the doorpost to keep it closed. The door rattled every time the car hit a bump.

"I heard it rattling when it turned onto St. Stephen's Green South," one witness said. "It's God's own mercy I wasn't at the Grafton corner when it happened."

Bley turned right off St. Stephen's Green South, which put him on St.

Stephen's Green West, hugging the left lane as he headed for Grafton Street.

There were better routes for him to make his connection with Tessie, but this was "his way."

"He liked to see all the people," Tessie said. "God rest him, that's what he said he missed most when he quit the postal -- all the people."

Bley, slight and wrinkled, had that skin-stretched cadaverous look that is common among certain aged Celts from the south of Ireland. He wore a soiled brown hat almost the exact shade of his patched sweater, and he drove with the patient detachment of someone who came this way often. And if the truth were known, he rather liked being slowed by the heavy traffic.

It had been cold and wet through most of spring and, while it was still cloudy, the cloud cover had thinned and there was a feeling that there might be a break in the weather. Only a few of the pedestrians carried umbrellas.

The trees of St. Stephen's Green on Bley's right were in full leaf.

As the Ford inched along in the congested traffic, the man watching for it from a fourth-floor window of the Irish Film Society Building nodded once in satisfaction.

Right on time.

Bley's Ford had been selected because of this Wednesday punctuality. There was also the fact that Bley did not garage his car where he and Tessie lived in Davitt Road. The Ford was parked outside beside a thick yew hedge, which could be approached from the street along a path shielded by a parked van.

There had been a van parked in this covering position the previous night.

Neighbors had seen it but no one had thought to comment at the time.

"There were often vehicles parked in that place," one said. "How were we to know?"

The watcher at the Film Society Building had many names but he had been born Joseph Leo Herity. He was a small, solidly fleshy man with a long, thin face and pale, almost translucent skin. Herity wore his blond hair combed straight back and hanging almost to the collar. His light brown eyes were deeply set and he had a pugged nose with prominent nostrils from which hair protruded.

From his fourth-floor vantage, Herity commanded an overview of the entire setting for the drama he was about to ignite. Directly across from him, the tall trees of the green formed a verdant wall enclosing the flow of vehicles and pedestrians. The Robert Emmet statue stood opposite his window and, to the left of it, there was a black-on-white sign to the public toilets. Bley's Ford had stopped with the traffic just to the left of Herity's window. A white tour bus with blue-and-red stripes down its side loomed over the small Ford. Traffic fumes were thick even at the fourth-floor level.

Herity checked Bley's license number to be certain. Yes -- JIA-5028. Then there was the crumpled left front wing.

The traffic began to inch forward, then stopped once more.

Herity glanced left at the Grafton Street corner. He could see the signs of the Toy World shop and the Irish Permanent Society on the ground floor of the red brick building soon to be taken over by the Ulster Bank. There had been some protest about that, one ragged march with a few signs, but it had died out quickly. The Ulster Bank had powerful friends in the government.

Barney and his lot, Herity thought. They think we're ignorant of their scheme to make a peace with the Ulster boys!

Again, Bley's Ford inched toward the corner, but once more was stopped. There was heavy foot traffic where Grafton took off from St. Stephen's

Green.

A bald-headed man in a dark blue suit had stopped almost directly beneath Herity's window and was examining the cinema marquee. Two young men pushing bicycles threaded their way past the bald-headed man.

The traffic remained stopped.

Herity looked down at the top of Bley's car. So innocent-looking, that car.

Herity had been one of the two-man team to emerge from the yew-shrouded van near Bley's parking spot the previous night. In Herity's hands had been a molded plastic package, which they had attached like a deformed limpet under Bley's car. At the core of that package lay a tiny radio receiver. The transmitter sat on the windowsill in front of Herity. A small black metal rectangle, it had a thin wire antenna and two recessed toggle switches -- one painted yellow, the other red. Yellow armed it, red transmitted.

A glance at his wristwatch told Herity that they were already five minutes past Zero Time. Not Bley's fault. It was the blasted traffic.

"You can set your bloody watch by Bley," the leader of their selection team had said. "The old bastard should be running a tram."

"What're his politics?" Greaves had asked.

"Who cares about his politics?" Herity had countered. "He's perfect and he'll be dying for a grand cause."

"The street'll be full of people," Greaves had said. "And there'll be tourists sure as hell is full of Brits."

"We warned 'em to stop the Ulster boys," Herity had said. Greaves could be an old woman sometimes! "They know what to expect when they don't listen to us."

It was settled then. And now Bley's car was inching once more toward the Grafton Street corner, toward the mass of pedestrians, including the possible tourists.

John Roe O'Neill, his wife, Mary, and their five-year-old twins, Kevin and Mairead, could have been classified as tourists, although John expected to be six months in Ireland while completing the research called for under his grant from the Pastermorn Foundation of New Haven, Conn.

"An Overview of Irish Genetic Research."

He thought the title pompous, but it was only a cover. The real research was into the acceptance of the new genetics by a Roman Catholic society, whether such a society had taken a position to cope with the explosive potentials in molecular biology.

The project was much on his mind that Wednesday morning but necessary preparations required his attention. High on his list was the need to transfer funds from America to the Allied Irish Bank. Mary wanted to go shopping for sweaters "to keep our darlings warm of an evening."

"There y' go," John teased as they left the Sherbourne Hotel, stepping into the rush of tourists and businessmen. "Only four days in Ireland and already you sound like a local."

"And why not?" she demanded. "And both my grandmothers from Limerick."

They laughed, drawing a few curious stares. The children tugged at Mary, anxious to be off shopping.

Ireland suited Mary, John thought. She had pale clear skin and dark blue eyes. Jet-black hair -- "Spanish Hair," her family called it -- framed her rather round face. A sweet face. Irish skin and Irish features. He bent and kissed her before leaving. It brought a blush to her face but she was pleased at his show of affection and she gave him a warm smile as they parted.

John walked away briskly, humming to himself, amused when he recognized the tune: "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'."

John's Wednesday appointment for "transfer of foreign funds" was at two P.M.

at the Allied Irish Bank, Grafton and Chatham streets. There was a sign just inside the bank's entrance, white letters on black: "Non Branch Customers Upstairs." A uniformed guard led him up the stairs to the office of the bank manager, Charles Mulrain, a small, nervous man with tow-colored hair and pale blue eyes behind gold-framed glasses. Mulrain had a habit of touching the corners of his mouth with a forefinger, first left side then right, followed by a quick downward brush of his dark tie. He made a joke about having his office on the first floor, "what you Americans call the second floor."

"It is confusing until you catch on," John agreed.

"Well!" A quick touching of lips and tie. "You understand that we'd normally do this at our main office, but . . ."

"When I called, they assured me it was . . ."

"As a convenience to the customer," Mulrain said. He lifted a folder from his desk, glanced inside it, nodded. "Yes, this amount . . . if you'll make yourself comfortable here, I'll just get the proper forms and be right back."

Mulrain left, giving John a tight smile at the door.

John went to the window and pulled back a heavy lace curtain to look down on Grafton Street. The sidewalks were thick with people all the way up to the arched gateway into St. Stephen's Green two short blocks up Grafton. The motor traffic was two abreast filling the street and crawling along toward him. There was a workman cleaning the parapet on the roof of the shopping center diagonally across the street -- a white-coated figure with a long-handled brush. He stood outlined against a row of five chimney pots.

Glancing at the closed door of the manager's office, John wondered how long Mulrain would be. Everything was so damned formal here. John looked at his watch. Mary would arrive with the children in a few minutes. They planned to have tea, then John would walk down Grafton to Trinity College and begin work at the college library -- the real start of his research project.

Much later, John would look back on those few minutes at the bank manager's

"first-floor" window and think how another sequence of events had been set in motion without his knowledge, an inescapable thing like a movie film where one frame followed another without ever the chance to deviate. It all centered around Francis Bley's old car and a small VHF transmitter in the hands of a determined man watching from an open window that looked down on that corner where Grafton met St. Stephen's Green.

Bley, patient as always, eased along at the traffic's pace. Herity, in his window vantage point, toggled the arming switch of his transmitter, making sure the antenna wire dangled out over the sill.

As he neared the Grafton corner, the crush of pedestrians forced Bley to stop and he missed the turn of the traffic light. He heard the tour bus gain clear of traffic off to his right, trundling off in a rumble of its heavy diesel.

Barricades were being erected on the building to his left and a big white-on-red sign had been raised over the rough construction: "This Building to be Remodeled by G. Tottenham Sons, Ltd." Bley looked to his right and noted the tall blue-and-white Prestige Cafeteria sign, feeling a small pang of hunger. The pedestrian isthmus beside him was jammed with people waiting to cross over to St. Stephen's Green and others struggling to make a way through the cars stopped on Grafton and blocking Bley's path. The crush of pedestrians was particularly heavy around Bley's car, people passing both front and back. A woman in a brown tweed coat, a white parcel clutched under her right elbow and each hand grasping a hand of a

small child, hesitated at the right front corner of Bley's car while she sought an opening through the press of people.

John Roe O'Neill, standing at the bank manager's window, recognized Mary. He saw her first because of her familiar tweed coat and the way she carried her head, that sleek cap of jet hair. He smiled. The twins were screened from him by the hurrying adults but he knew from Mary's stance that she held the children's hands. A brief break in the throng allowed John a glimpse of the top of Kevin's head and the old Ford with the driver's brown-sweatered elbow protruding.

Where is that damned bank manager? John wondered. She'll be here any minute.

He dropped the heavy lace curtain and looked once more at his wrist-watch.

Herity, at the open window above and behind Bley, nodded once more to himself.

He stepped back away from the window and toggled the second switch on his transmitter.

Bley's car exploded, ripped apart from the bottom. The bomb, exploding almost under Bley's feet, drove him upward with a large piece of the car's roof, his body crushed, dismembered and scattered. The large section of roof sailed upward in a slow arc to come crashing onto the Irish Permanent Society Building, demolishing chimney pots and slates.

It was not a large bomb as such things went, but it had been expertly placed.

The old car was transformed into jagged bits of metal and glass -- an orange ball of fire peppered with deadly shrapnel. A section of the car's bonnet decapitated Mary O'Neill. The twins became part of a bloody puddle blown against the iron fencing across the street at St. Stephen's Green. Their bodies were more easily identified later because they were the only children of that age in the throng.