



SCIENCE FICTION: EXTRATERRESTRIALS

Featured story: Sandkings (1979), by George R.R. Martin on p. 521.

Other stories for this week:

The Beautiful Gelreesh (2003), by Jeffrey Ford on p. 963.

The Country Doctor (1993) by Steven Utley on p. 814.

CONTENTS



Plot



Characters



Motifs and
Themes



Key Terms



discussions



Other Stories

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

- enjoyed a distinguished career writing science fiction and horror well before writing the fantasy series Game of Thrones
- won both the Hugo and Nebula awards for best story with "Sandkings".
- wrote the story in 1979 in the context of Cold War between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. The middle-east was the center of this battle during the oil crisis of the 1970's.
- wrote in the wake of Frank Herbert's first "Dune" trilogy's completion in 1976; it changed science fiction from a focus on technology to a focus on society and culture.
- Published his story after the landmark film "Star Wars" was released in 1977, a film highly influenced by "Dune".
- was observing the social changes of the 1970's, including "party" culture, feminism, and interest in world religions.



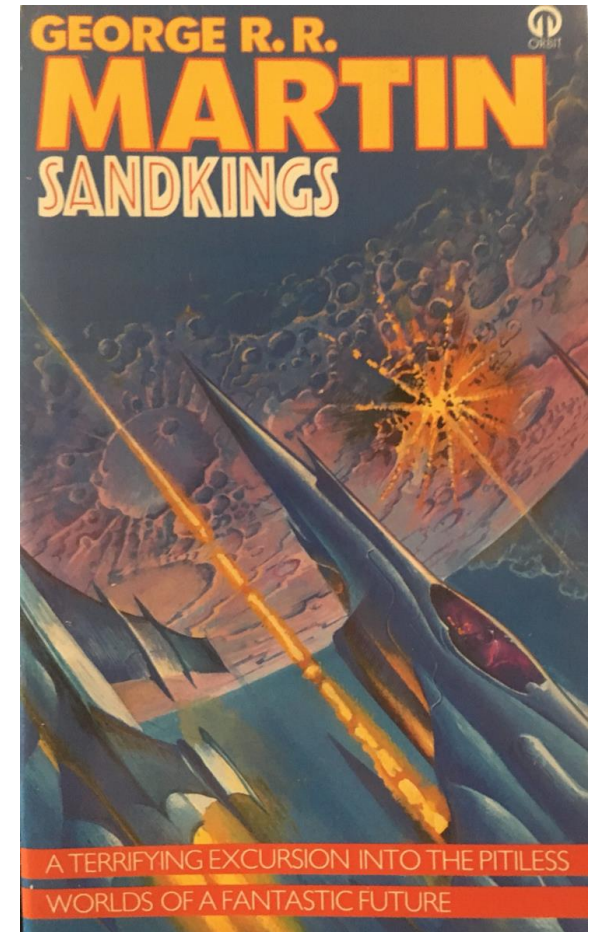


“SANDKINGS” AND GAME OF THRONES: COMMON THEMES...

- A "many-faced" god
- warring political factions
- Cynical cruelty for pleasure
- Descent into murderous quest for power
- Torture and domestic abuse highlighted
- Revenge of the abused creature (sandkings, dragons)
- Ultimately, the "monster" turns out to have a human face

SETTING

- Asgard is planet Baldur's largest city and has the largest starport.
- Close to the starport, there are streets with many importer's markets, and Kress finds a small shop called Wo & Shade. He has never seen before where he is shown the sandkings.
- A sprawling manor house among the dry, rocky hills outside Asgard.



CHARACTERS

- Simon Kress, a wealthy playboy on the planet Baldur, loves to collect dangerous, exotic animals.
- Jala Wo, one of the owners of the shop who shows Kress the sandkings.
- Cath m'Lane, Kress's ex-lover.
- Minor characters include friends who attend Kress's parties and "exterminators" hired by Kress.

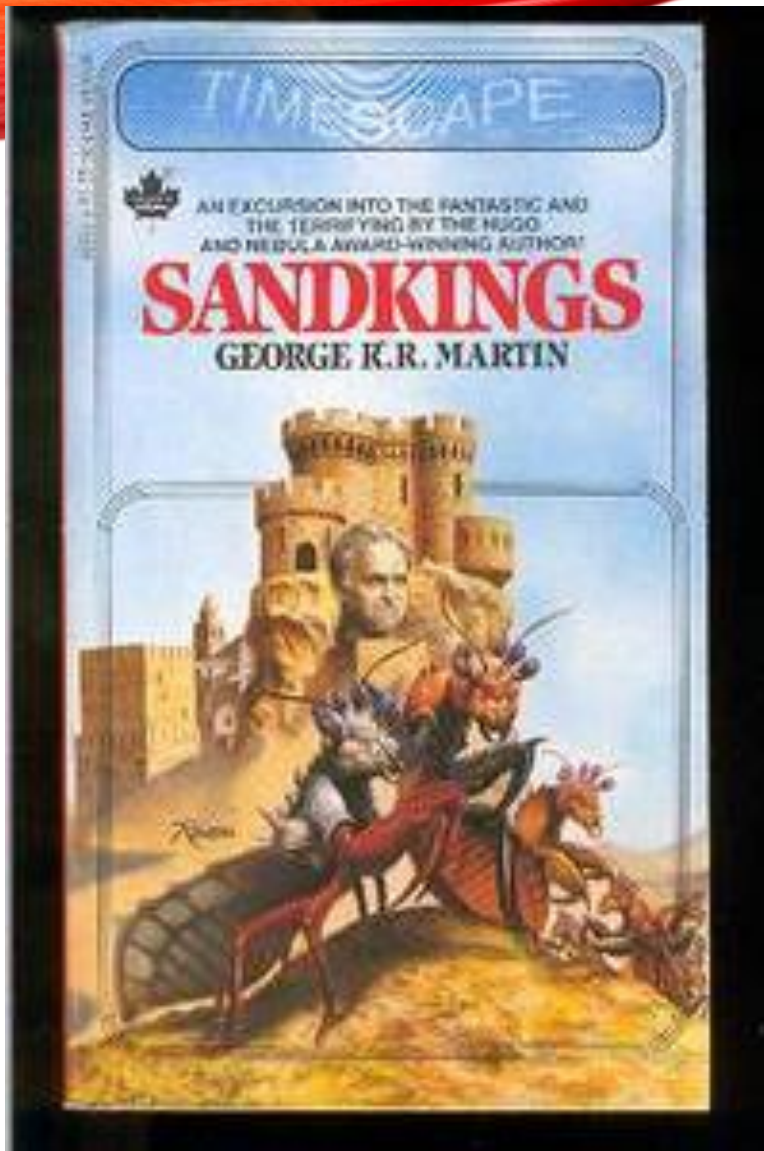


Face carved in sand: image from the Outer Limits Canadian television film, 1995, of Sandkings.

PLOT SUMMARY: THE BEGINNING

- The story begins with Kress going on a vacation. When he returns most of his pets have died of starvation. He doesn't care because to him they aren't truly pets; they are entertainment. He wants something new, something more exotic.
- He discovers a new store that sells strange lifeforms and is shown the Sandkings.
- Sandkings are small insect-like creatures, though they aren't insects. They build castles in the sand and war with each other. They appear tiny, but Kress is told that they grow to the size of their environment. They are partially psychic, forming a "hive mind" ruled by a Queen known as the maw. If you project your face into the terrarium, they will even worship you, building your face into their castles.





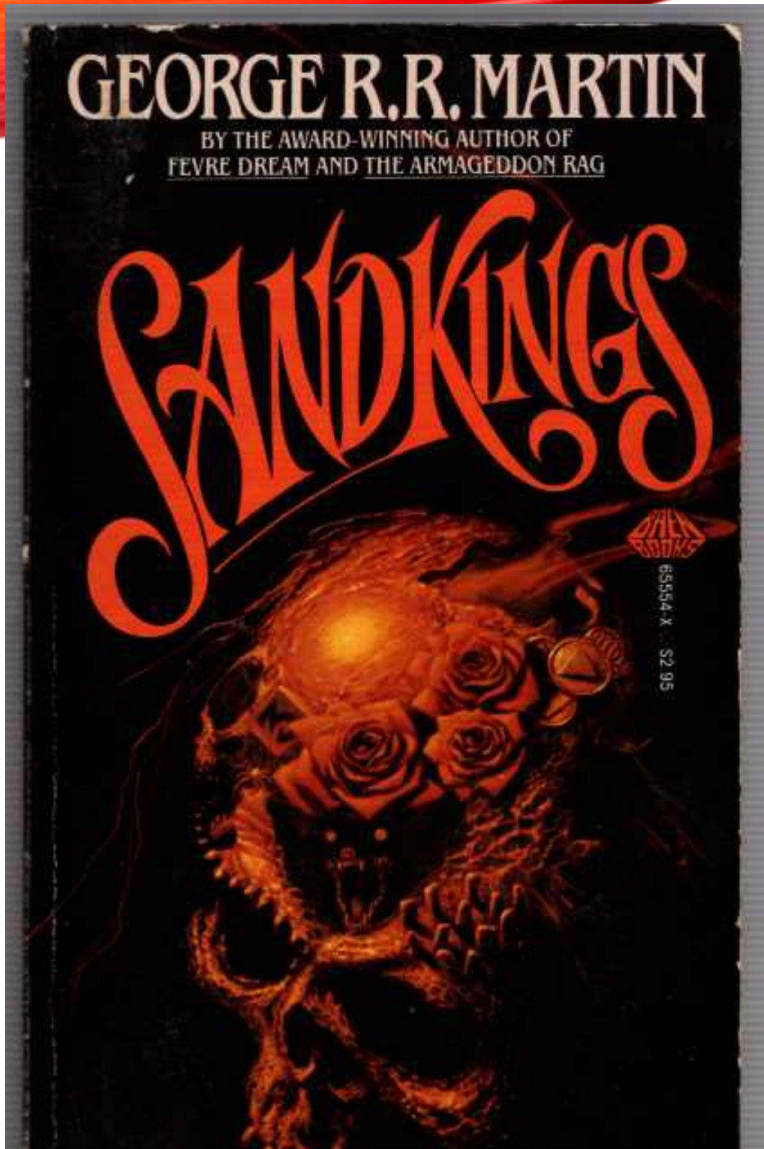
THE MIDDLE

- Kress is primarily interested in the wars, but they don't come fast enough; consequently, he begins to starve the creatures so they will war over the small scraps of food he gives them on the nights when he invites people over to watch the wars. The man who sells him the creatures warns him that this is a bad idea. Kress doesn't care.
- Eventually, Kress grows bored of the Sandkings wars and begins to put other animals into their terrarium to see which will win. Each time some of the Sandkings are killed but they come out victorious.
- Eventually, Kress learns that Cath has reported the sandkings to the animal control authorities. After bribing the authorities, he then films himself feeding a puppy to the sandkings and sends the footage to her. As he goes to bed, he notices his face on the castles has become twisted and sinister. Outraged, he pokes a sword into the white maw (a sandking Queen), injuring it. His intention of punishing the other maws is cut short when a sandking escapes the tank. Horrified, he crushes it beneath his heel and re-seals the tank, vowing never to open it again. He then goes to bed.
- Cath arrives the next day with a sledgehammer and tries to smash the sandkings' terrarium. Trying frantically to stop her, Kress stabs her with a sword. In dying, she finally breaks the plastic, releasing the sandkings. Kress flees the house in a panic. By the time he returns, the sandkings have taken over.

THE END

- He hires exterminators to get rid of them, only to watch them fail. The sandkings grow smarter and he flees to the desert.
- He comes across a village and thinks he's saved, only to discover it is actually one of his lost group of sandkings living in a new massive castle. As they surround him and drag him to the waiting mouth of the maw, he screams; all of them have his face.





MOTIFS

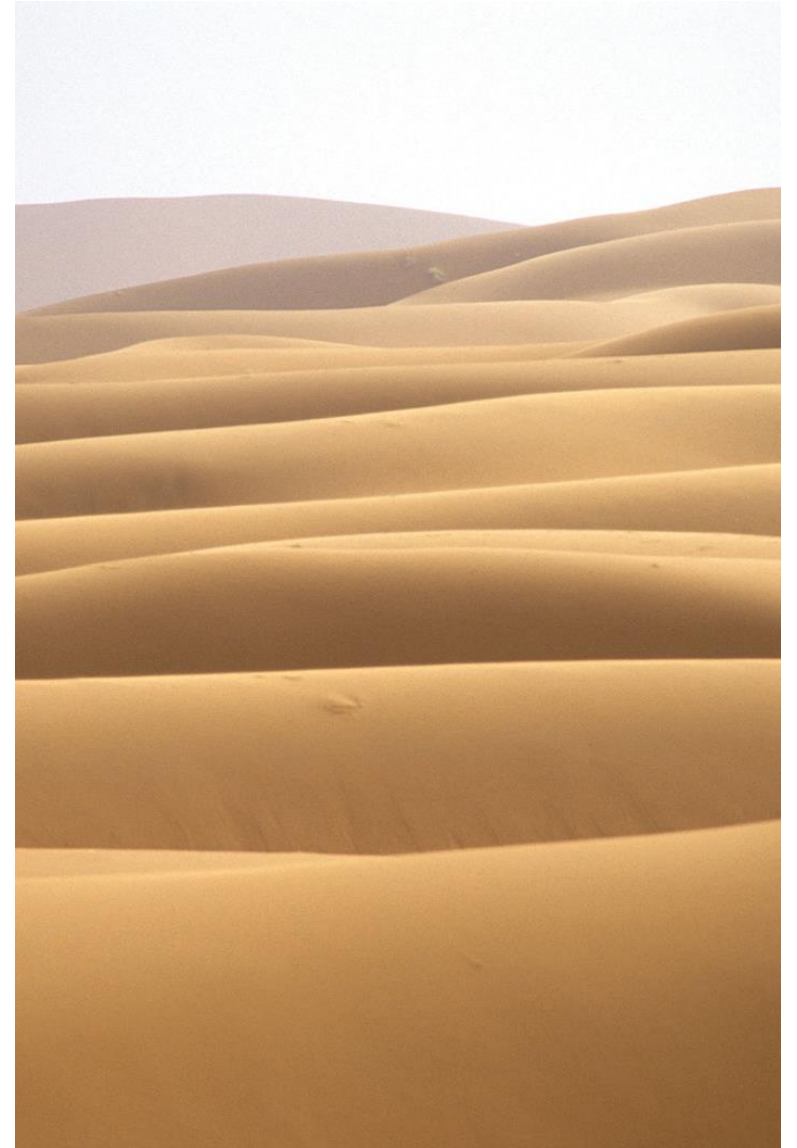
Face. The sandkings build Kress's face into their castles, but they alter his image throughout the story in keeping with how he treats each group. At first his image is benevolent, but it becomes twisted and moronic. Cath, during their fight, says, "you should see yourself, Simon. You look like one of your pets" (p. 530). Finally, the sandkings make "a hideous caricature of his face..." (p. 533). In the end, when he stumbles in the red castle, all the creatures have his distorted face.

Maw. (normally defined as an animal's jaw or stomach). At first, these are tiny, hidden, and peaceful. When Kress begins to starve the sandkings, the maw of each group turns violent as it starves. As Kress's own hunger for more violent spectacle increases, dropping in spiders and snakes, taking revenge on Cath by dropping in a puppy, so does the violence and appetite of the maw increase: after the tank explodes, it appears as "something slimy and featureless, a piece of raw meat the size of a man's head..." (p. 531).

MOTIFS

Desert. Kress “lives alone in a sprawling house among the dry, rocky hills...” (p.521). The desert is isolating, dry, desolate, an image of loneliness and death. The sandkings live in dry sandy conditions, and each group functions as a single creature. At the end, Kress wanders east into a desert to find the transformed red sandkings evolved into a new creature all with identical faces...his face.

Cruelty. We learn at the beginning that Kress has let his piranha starve and eat each other when he goes on vacation: “it amused him”. Throughout, he is cruel for the sake of entertainment. Kress invites social enemies to his party so they will be envious of him. He starves the sandkings, drinks late into night watching them at war; he makes a snuff tape with a puppy to scandalize Cath, his ex-lover; and when he throws Lissandra and her henchmen down the stairs he feels “a sickly kind of excitement...almost sexual.” Kress takes pleasure in other’s suffering.





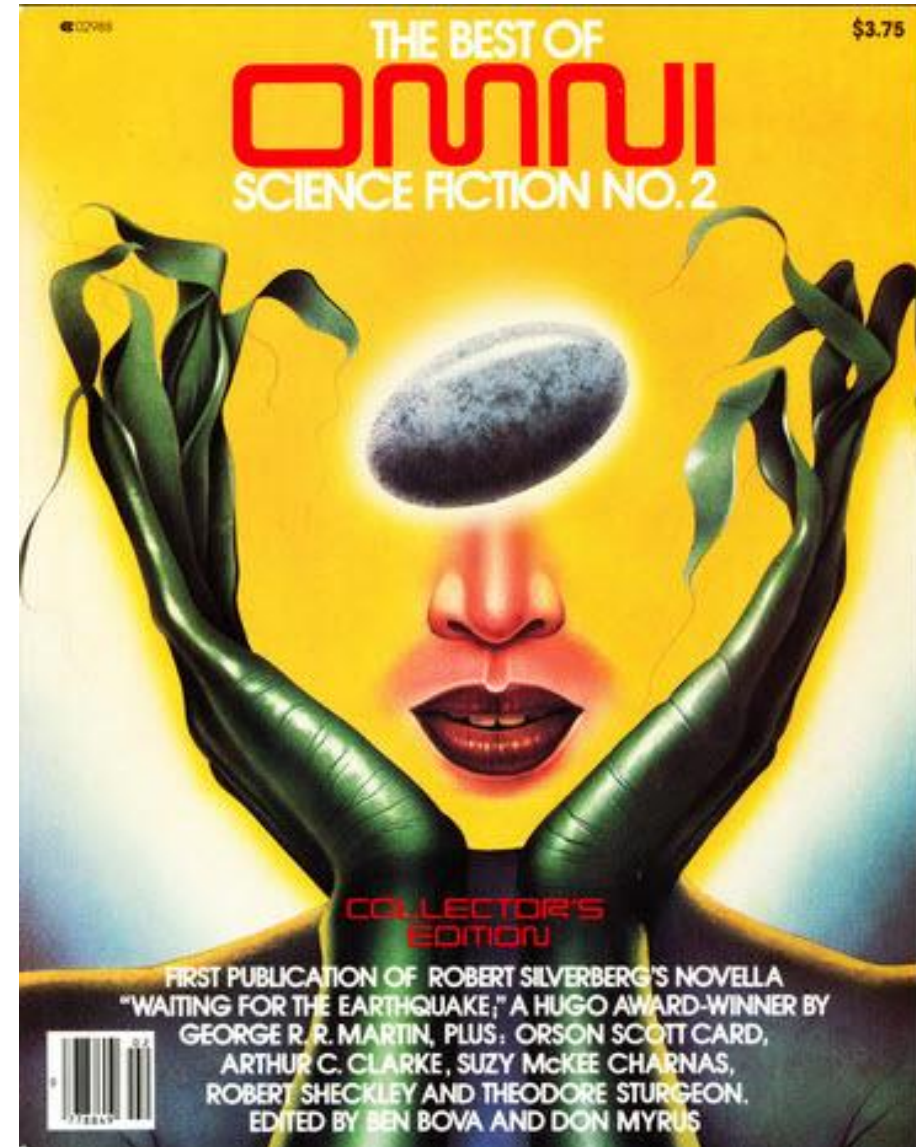
MOTIFS

Pleasure. Simon Kress is portrayed as a single playboy with his own sprawling manor house. He holds decadent parties. He drinks wine from his wine cellar and smokes “pleasure sticks”. He doesn’t care what other people want or need. He is cruel to his pets, to his friends, and his ex-lover. He wants to make them feel envy; he wants to take revenge. He thinks in terms of his own pleasure and not of other people’s feelings. He is what we would call a narcissist: understanding everything in terms of your own needs, ego, and self-image.

Alien. Simon Kress collects rare pets such as a carrion hawk, a “shambler”, and “genuine Earth piranha”, but is always hunts for the exotic in the emporiums where “rare and costly alien artifacts” are kept. He questions Wo about the “alien” status of his lifeforms; he lets Wo know that from time to time he feeds litters of kittens to his shamble from Cotho (presumably another world...). He buys the sandkings because Wo tells him they will worship him—but this desire to cruelly exploit an alien life form returns in the distorted alien version of his own self.

THEMES

- Monstrosity
- Aliens
- gods
- Colonialism



MONSTROSITY IN FRANKENSTEIN AND “SANDKINGS”

Karen Haak-Schoff, thinking about early and later science fiction monsters, compares the two works and notes some important similarities:

- The two stories draw attention to the “monster lurking beneath the human skin”.
- Frankenstein is the name of the professor, not the Creature, who is never named. Frankenstein’s hunger for glory leads him the discovery of the “elixir of life”, but he is filled with horror and disgust at the creature; he rejects and abandons it, making it an outcast and an enemy. The professor behaves “monstrously” towards his creation. Meanwhile, his creation progresses, becoming more and more human as it demonstrates its ability to think and speak intelligently and sympathetically.
- Simon Kress exploits other life as “pets” for his amusement. We watch him transform into a monster through his torture of the sandkings while we witness the tiny colonies transform, finally, into human-like creatures—the four-armed bipeds of the red castle, each with the identical face—of Simon Kress.
- The true monster in both is the human caregiver betraying his role as such, and both the creatures and the humans have a transformative effect on each other.

Source: Haak-Schoff, K. (2018). Human Monstrosity in Frankenstein and George R. R. Martin’s ‘Sandkings’. *Kepler 452B. Animality*. Issue 2.



PENGUIN CLASSICS

MARY SHELLEY

Frankenstein: The 1818 Text

Introduction by CHARLOTTE GORDON

WHO ARE THE ALIENS?



What is alien? Simon Kress wished to observe alien life and ended up observing only his own image in a fearful form. The sandkings reflect the image of their god, Kress.

Can we truly imagine an alien? The most successful alien monster to date, from the film “Alien”, is a powerful, slimy, giant, heartless creature that is all jaws. It is a parasite bursting out of human bodies and devouring all life forms. Is this monster an extension of our own fears? In other words, to what extent is the “alien” a fantasy showing us our own worst selves in a horrible form?

CRITIQUE OF RELIGION



- Simon Kress loves the idea that the sandkings will “literally worship” him, emblazoning their castles with images of his face.
- The sandkings’ portrayal of his face are slightly different at first. The reds were “creative; the “white idol” seemed “young and mischievous” while the blacks was “wise and beneficent”; the orange castle depiction was “crude and cartoonish” (525).
- These differences become more severe as the story progresses.
- Their “god” has many faces depending on their perception of his attitude to them.

-The many-faced god from Game of Thrones HBO series. He wears the faces of dead men and women.

THE GOD OF ALIEN (1979)



Alien (Ridley Scott) appeared in the same year as “Sandkings”. The alien monster is an insect-like nightmare creature using humans as hosts to reproduce.

In “Sandkings”, Kress plays god and his presence is cast over the living space; the sandkings worship him, his face. He is the master of their situation at first, but he loses control.

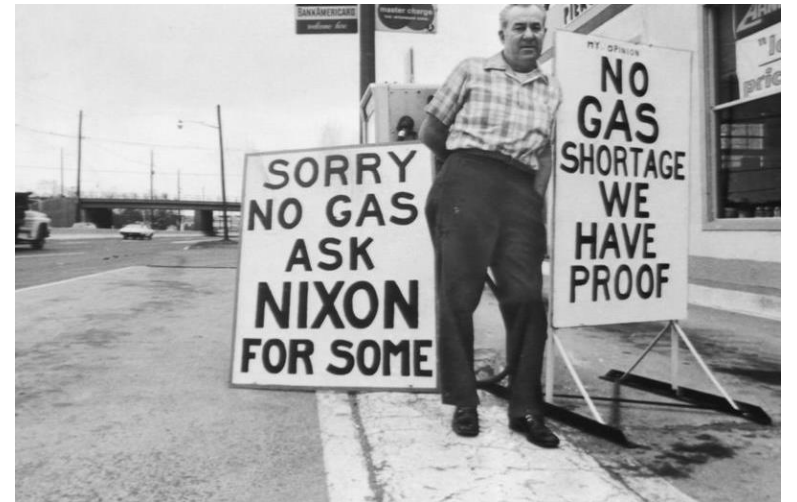
R.S. Higgins observes that in Alien, it is the Company that is the unseen entity overseeing the creature’s protection. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) discovers that the Company wants the alien to live at all costs. The Company arranges the encounter; the Company sacrifices the crew to transport the alien. But Ripley kills the alien in the end. The greedy Company exploits its human servants and is the failed god overlooking the scene. In this way, it functions as the “alien under the skin” of the enterprise. The Company loses control of the scenario and suffers the loss of its capital investment at the end.

- Higgins, R. S. (2020). The Good, the God, and the Ugly: The Role of the Beloved Monster in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible. *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology*, 74(2), 132–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964319896307>

Ripley confronting company man Burke from the Film Alien.

POLITICS OF COLONIALISM

- In “Sandkings”, the whites are Kress’s favourite, but even they portray him as a “cruel idiot god”.
- Kress is the overseer of the desert and favours the whites.
- He holds lavish parties while his subjects fight for food.
- The sandkings rise up against him to take back their land.
- This is the colonial nightmare: the local servants rising up against their rich foreign masters.
- In 1979, America was dealing with the troubles in the middle east resulting in an oil crisis; the U.S.A. was also still debating the lost war effort in Vietnam where they had tried to replace the French empire. From the beginning, citizens in Canada and the U.S.A. questioned the moral legitimacy of the war.



OTHER STORIES

- The Beautiful Gelreesh(2003), by Jeffrey Ford on p. 963.
 - This is a brief story about an outcast creature.
- The Country Doctor (1993) by Steven Utley on p. 814.
 - This story is about the stange happenings in a small town and ends up in a graveyard.





KEY TERMS

1. Exotic
2. Alien
3. hive-mind
4. Psychic
5. Maw
6. Monstrosity
7. Bipod
8. Colonialism
9. Idol
10. Parasite