

## MEET

Roderick Frederick Ronald William MacArthur McBan

The Richest Boy In The Galaxy

Rod McBan had to flee Old North Australia ...  
someone was trying to kill him, and someone  
had almost succeeded!

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# ***NORSTRILIA***

**Cordwainer Smith**

**BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK**

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# NORSTRILIA

## THEME AND PROLOGUE

Story, place, and time – these are the essentials.

1

The story is simple. There was a boy who bought the planet Earth. We know that, to our cost. It only happened once, and we have taken pains that it will never happen again. He came to Earth, got what he wanted, and got away alive, in a series of very remarkable adventures. That's the story.

2

The place? That's Old North Australia. What other place could it be? Where else do the farmers pay ten million credits for a handkerchief, five for a bottle of beer? Where else do people lead peaceful lives, untouched by militarism, on a world which is booby-trapped with death and things worse than death. Old North Australia has stroon – the sancta Clara drug – and more than a thousand other planets clamor for it. But you can get stroon only from Norstrilia – that's what they call it, for short – because it is a virus which grows on enormous, gigantic, misshapen sheep. The sheep were taken from Earth to start a pastoral system; they ended up as the greatest of imaginable treasures. The simple farmers became simple billionaires, but they kept their farming ways. They started tough and they got tougher. People get pretty mean if you rob them and hurt them for almost three thousand years. They get obstinate. They avoid strangers, except for sending out spies and a very occasional tourist. They don't mess with other people, and they're death, death inside out and turned over twice, if you mess with them.

Then one of their kids showed up on Earth and bought it. The whole place, lock, stock and under-people.

That was a real embarrassment for Earth.

And for Norstrilia, too.

If it had been the two governments, Norstrilia would have collected all the eye-teeth on earth and sold them back at compound interest. That's the way Norstrilians do business. Or they might have said, "Skip it, clobber. You can keep your wet old ball. We've got a nice dry world of our own." That's the temper they have. Unpredictable.

But a kid had bought Earth, and it was his.

Legally he had the right to pump up the Sunset Ocean, shoot it into space, and sell

water all over the inhabited galaxy.

He didn't.

He wanted something else.

The Earth authorities thought it was girls, so they tried to throw girls at him of all shapes, sizes, smells and ages – all the way from young ladies of good family down to dog-derived undergirls who smelled of romance all the time, except for the first five minutes after they had had hot antiseptic showers. But he didn't want girls. He wanted postage stamps.

That baffled both Earth and Norstrilia. The Norstrilians are a hard people from a harsh planet, and they think highly of property. (Why shouldn't they? They have most of it.) A story like this could only have started in Norstrilia.

3

What's Norstrilia like?

Somebody once singsonged it up, like this:

"Grey lay the land, oh. Grey grass from sky to sky. Not near the weir, dear. Not a mountain, low or high – only hills and grey grey. Watch the dappled dimpled twinkles blooming on the star bar.

"That is Norstrilia.

"All the muddy glubbery is gone – all the poverty, the waiting and the pain. People fought their way away, their way away from monstrous forms. People fought for hands and noses, eyes and feet, man and woman. They got it all back again. Back they came from daylight nightmares, centuries when monstrous men, sucking the water around the pools, dreamed of being men again. They found it. Men they were again, again, far away from a horrid *when*,

"The sheep, poor beasties, did not make it. Out of their sickness they distilled immortality for man. Who says research could do it? Research, besmirch! It was a pure accident. Smack up an accident, man, and you've got it made.

"Beige-brown sheep lie on blue-grey grass while the clouds rush past, low overhead, like iron pipes ceilinging the world.

"Take your pick of sick sheep, man, it's the sick that pays. Sneeze me a planet, man, or cough me up a spot of life-forever. If it's barmy there, where the noddies and trolls like you live, it's too right here.

"That's the book, boy.

"If you haven't seen it, you haven't seen Norstrilia. If you did see it, you wouldn't believe it. If you got there, you wouldn't get off alive.

"Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons wait for you down there. Little pets they are, little little little pets. Cute little things, they say. Don't you believe it. No man ever saw them and walked away alive. You won't either. That's the final dash, flash. That's the utter clobber, clobber.

"Charts call the place Old North Australia." We can suppose that that is what it is

like.

4

Time: first century of the Rediscovery of Man.

When C'mell lived.

About the time they polished off Shayol, like wiping an apple on the sleeve.

Long deep into our own time. Fifteen thousand years after the bombs went up and the boom came down on Old Old Earth.

Recent, see?

5

What happens in the story?

Read it.

Who's there?

It starts with Rod McBan – who had the real name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William Mac-Arthur McBan. But you can't tell a story if you call the main person by a name as long as Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan. You have to do what his neighbors did – call him Rod McBan. The old ladies always said, "Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-first . . ." and then sighed. Flurp a squirt at them, friends. We don't need numbers. We know his family was distinguished. We know the poor kid was born to troubles.

Why shouldn't he have troubles?

He was due to inherit the Station of Doom.

And then he gets around. He crosses all sorts of people. C'mell, the most beautiful of the girlygirls of Earth. Jean-Jacques Vomact, whose family must have preceded the human race. The wild old man at Adaminabay. The trained spiders of Earthport. The sub-commissioner Tadrinker. The Lord Jestocost, whose name is a page in history. The friends of the Ee-telly-kelly, and a queer tankful of friends they were. B'dank, of the cattle-police. The Catmaster. Tostig Amaral, about whom the less said the better. Ruth, in pursuit. C'mell, in flight. The Lady Johanna, laughing.

He gets away.

He *got* away. See, that's the story. Now you don't have to read it.

Except for the details.

They follow.

(He also bought one million women, far too many for any one boy to put to practical use, but it is not altogether certain, reader, that you will be told what he did about them.)

## AT THE GATE OF THE GARDEN OF DEATH

Rod McBan faced the day of days. He knew what it was all about, but he could not really feel it. He wondered if they had tranquilized him with half-refined stroon, a product so rare and precious that it was never, never sold off-planet.

He knew that by nightfall he would be laughing and giggling and drooling in one of the Dying Rooms, where the unfit were put away to thin out the human breed, or else he would stand forth as the oldest landholder on the planet, Chief Heir to the Station of Doom. The farm had been salvaged by his great-<sup>32</sup>-grandfather had bought an ice-asteroid, crashed it into the farm over the violent objections of his neighbors, and learned clever tricks with artesian wells which kept his grass growing while the neighbors' fields turned from grey-green to blowing dust. The McBans had kept the sarcastic old name for their farming station, the Station of Doom. By night, Rod knew, the Station would be his. Or he would be dying, giggling his way to death in the killing place where people laughed and grinned and rollicked about while they died.

He found himself humming a bit of a rhyme that had always been a part of the tradition of Old North Australia:

*"We kill to live, and die to grow –  
That's the way the world must go!"*

He'd been taught, bone deep, that his own world was a very special world, envied, loved, hated, and dreaded across the galaxy. He knew that he was part of a very special people. Other races and kinds of men farmed crops, or raised food, or designed machines, and manufactured weapons. Norstrilians did none of these things. From their dry fields, their sparse wells, their enormous sick sheep, they refined immortality itself.

And sold it for a high, high price. Rod McBan walked a little way into the yard. His home lay behind him. It was a log cabin built out of Daimoni beams – beams uncuttable, unchangeable, solid beyond all expectations of solidity. They had been purchased as a matched set thirty-odd planet hops away and brought to Old North Australia by photo-sails. The cabin was a fort which could withstand even major weapons, but it was still a cabin, simple inside and with a front yard of scuffed dust. The last red bit of dawn was whitening into day. Rod knew that he could not go far. He could hear the women out behind the house, the kinswomen who had come to barber and groom him for the triumph – or the other.

They never knew how much he knew. Because of his affliction, they had thought around him for years, counting on his telepathic deafness to be constant. Trouble was, it wasn't; lots of times he heard things which nobody intended him to hear. He even remem-

bered the sad little poem they had about the young people who failed to pass the test for one reason or another and had to go to the Dying House instead of coming forth as Norstrilian citizens and fully recognized subjects of Her-majesty-the-queen. (Nors-tril-ians had not had a real queen for some fifteen thousand years, but they were strong on tradition and did not let mere facts boggle them.) How did the little poem run, "This is the house of the long ago . . ."? In its own gloomy way it was cheerful. He erased his own footprint from the dust and suddenly he remembered the whole thing. He chanted it softly to himself.

*"This is the house of the long ago,  
Where the old ones murmur an endless woe,  
Where the pain of time is an actual pain,  
And things once known always come again.  
Out in the Garden of Death, our young  
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.  
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,  
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.  
This is the house of the long ago.  
Those who die young do not enter here.  
Those living on know that hell is near.  
The old ones who suffer have willed it so.  
Out in the Garden of Death, the old  
Look with awe on the young and bold."*

It was all right to say that they looked with awe at the young and bold, but he hadn't met a person yet who did not prefer life to death. He'd heard about people who chose death – of course he had – who hadn't? But the experience was third-hand, fourth-hand, fifth-hand.

He knew that some people had said of him that he would be better off dead, just because he had never learned to communicate telepathically and had to use old spoken words like off-worlders or barbarians.

Rod himself certainly didn't think he would be better dead.

Indeed, he sometimes looked at normal people and wondered how they managed to go through life with the constant silly chatter of other people's thoughts running through their minds. In the times that his mind lifted, so that he could hier for a while, he knew that hundreds or thousands of minds rattled in on him with unbearable clarity; he could even hier the minds that thought they had their telepathic shields up. Then, in a little while, the merciful cloud of his handicap came down on his mind again and he had a deep unique privacy which everybody on Old North Australia should have envied.

His computer had said to him once, "The words *hier* and *spiek* are corruptions of the words *hear* and *speak*. They are always pronounced in the second rising tone of voice, as though you were asking a question under the pressure of amusement and alarm, if you say the words with your voice. They refer only to telepathic communication between persons or between persons and underpeople."

"What are underpeople?" he had asked. "Animals modified to speak, to understand, and usually to look like men. They differ from cerebro-centered robots in that the robots