



Here Comes a Candle

Fredric Brown , Bill Pronzini (Introduction)

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Here Comes a Candle is Fredric Brown at his most audacious in a novel that was far ahead of its time. It is the story of Joe Bailey, whose young life is at a crossroads. Not only is he involved with a tough Milwaukee racketeer and two completely different women, but he is haunted by childhood trauma. Psychologically complex and told in an array of stylistic variations, it is a tour de force with a savagely ironic ending not to be soon forgotten.

Here Comes a Candle Details

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Author : Fredric Brown , Bill Pronzini (Introduction)

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From Reader Review Here Comes a Candle for online ebook

Antonius Block says

One of the most audacious books I've ever read, this is noir fiction at its most existential, fatalistic, and experimental. It tells a familiar story of a young, ambivalent man ('Average Joe' Bailey) who can't decide if he wants to follow the straight path in life of honest work, marriage, and limited hopes, or the crooked but ambitious path to achieving The American Dream under the wing of a local gangster. His dilemma is defined in terms of two girls he meets on the same day: one a nice, sweet, hard-working girl and the other an intimidating, voluptuous femme fatale. The push/pull attraction he feels toward each consumes his thoughts and exacerbates his indecisiveness.

What's so unusual about the novel is the form in which it is told, beginning with an omniscient, sardonic narrator that gradually recedes into third person limited (with bouts of intense second person), and then punctuating the book by at times turning it into – in order – a radio program, a screenplay, a sportscast, a video, a stage play, and a newspaper article – devices which at once distance and deconstruct Joe's dilemma and at the same time delve into his psychological states with bold perspectives only afforded by a dream logic that is impossible in reality.

Dreams and nightmares actually form the crux of the story. The title refers to a children's nursery rhyme that has plagued Joe with nightmares since his childhood:

*Here comes a candle to light you to bed
And here comes a chopper to chop off your head*

The candle and the axe both recur throughout his dreams and his waking life, his memories and his present reality, and become emblematic of his deep-seated, textbook Freudian phobia that originated in the depths of his childhood and which will doom him as surely as the narrator assures us he is doomed from the opening pages. Joe is consumed by fear; not just this childhood phobia, but fears over life decisions, fear of commitment and being tied down, the fear of his mentor's wrath for having eyes for his girl, and even that greater fear that consumed an entire generation: the fear of the atomic bomb, referenced repeatedly throughout the book, intensifying the absurdity of total imminent doom and nothing at all making any difference. But while these fears are always somewhere in the background, buried in his subconscious, the narrative is ironically about his existential dilemma in choosing one of two alternatives, with each character and each situation pushing or pulling him in one of two directions, a choice which is at the very same time being negated by the fatalism at the core of his life experience.

It's an imaginative, thoughtful, formally daring book whose true subject is, as the above should suggest, nothing short of the human condition itself.

Cullen Gallagher says

Brown's masterpiece, a mixed-media melange that incorporates the novel, the stage play, the radio play, the screenplay, and the newspaper. Brown's playfulness with narrative form highlights the inter-disciplinary field of all things "noir," and the crossover between the literary, stage, screen, and radio world and reality (represented by the newspaper). Indicative of Brown's fusion of comedy, suspense, horror, and psychology.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

Fredric Brown's [Here Comes A Candle](#)

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - July 18, 2018

This is the 3rd bk I've read by Brown, all mysteries. The 1st was [Night of the Jabberwock](#) (my review: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), the 2nd was [The Lenient Beast](#) (my review: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>). They've all been different but this one shares psychological depth w/ [The Lenient Beast](#) while expanding it formally.

It's divided into chapters of "The Story" alternating w/ different formal treatments: "THE RADIO", "THE SCREEN", "THE SPORTCAST", "THE VIDEO", "THE STAGE", & "THE NEWSPAPER". Each of these alternative treatments allow disclosure of viewpoints that wd be unrealistic in the general story flow. There's a very *noir* set-up:

"And that, in a general sort of way, is everything that had happened to Joe Bailey, up to August 26, 1948. That's as good a starting place as any. It's the day Joe met the girl he was going to kill." - p 1

Brown always shows insight.. or at least says things that I agree w/:

"And what you don't know doesn't hurt you. Or does it? A dentist puts you under gas and pulls a tooth; you come out of anesthesia and you have no memory of pain. But can you be sure you didn't feel it at the time?" - p 4

Exactly. It's my opinion that such anesthesia makes things 'workable' at the time but doesn't affect the underlying subconscious trauma. Brown seems to be pushing his realism envelope a little w/ this one, I wonder if it approached discomfort for his publisher (Dutton, 1950; Bantam, 1951):

"He reaches up and pushes the damp hair back from his forehead and then, eyes open now, rolls over onto his back and stares up at the celining. Don't let what you notice now startle you. It is natural for men, especially young men, to awaken so." - p 6

"*Francy is back; she sits in the chair on whose arm you're sitting. If you could only drop your arm around her. Those breasts. Her dress cut low. You can almost see the aureoles around the nipples. To kiss them. To put your face between. Quit looking. Her hair brushing your hand on the back of the chair.*" - p 131

"Joe had brought a *Journal* with him so she could look at the theater ads and pick what show she wanted to see. He'd looked them over himself and rather wanted to see an exciting jungle picture, *Man Eaters of Kumoan*, at the Warner. They sat down in a booth to look over the ads together and he had no difficulty at all on selling her on the jungle picture. Just casual mention of a slight preference did it; she said she hadn't seen a good jungle picture in a long time and she'd like it." - pp 31-32

Do 'jungle pictures' even exist as a genre anymore? There was a movie called "Man-Eater of Kumaon" made in 1948. Maybe he was referring to that. I tend to think of the Tarzan movies wch were probably very popular in their day. The "Man-Eater" one was set in India, the Tarzan ones were set in Africa. These days, the few jungle movies I can think of from the last 40+ yrs have been mostly set in the Amazon. It's fun for me to think of a genre as having gone out of fashion. I'd go for a good jungle picture right now.

"He learned that she read quite a bit, mostly novels, but that she hadn't read any science fiction, which was Joe's favorite reading. That she smoked occasionally, drank a little beer or wine occasionally, but not too much. That she liked "good" music although she didn't really know anything about it, and liked good swing like Stan Kenton or Benny Goodman" - pp 32-33

I like the plug for SF. Brown also wrote SF & I'm reading one of those novels now. If he'd specifically mentioned Kenton's "City of Glass", wch he did in collaboration w/ Robert Graettinger, that wd've really made my day.

Joe, the fledgling criminal, has a 'Pinko' friend. These days, maybe his friend wd be a 'Greenie'.

"["]What's the moment of greatest ecstasy in a man's life? The culmination of intercourse, the orgasm. The moment when a part of him is returning to the body of a woman. That's the closest he ever gets to going back where he came from. His one moment of pure ecstasy."

""And besides, it's fun," Joe said. He thought of Francine.

""Don't you ever take anything seriously, Joe? Except making money, being a big-shot gambler? No, I guess I'm wrong; you do think some, or you wouldn't read the kind of stuff you read. It takes imagination, abstract imagination, to like science fiction and fantasy. Know what I think, Joe? That you're afraid to think, afraid to let yourself think." - p 38

Then there comes the 1st of the interpolations, "THE RADIO", where Brown throws away realist conventions in the presumed interest of making the perspectives on the story more entertaining & varied:

"MUSIC: *Series theme (motif from Rachmaninoff's Isle of the Dead.)*

"ANNOUNCER: Hold tightly to your chairs, folks. Today we bring you another thrilling episode in—

"MUSIC *Eerie sting.*

"ANNOUNCER: THE ADVENTURES OF JOE BAILEY!" - p 47

I don't know the Rachmaninoff piece (1908) but I know the painting (1880), & quite like it, by Arnold Böcklin. In "THE RADIO" there's an 'interview' w/ Joe about his childhood & its relevance to the title of the bk is revealed:

"JOE:" [...] ""Here comes a candle to light you to bed. And here comes a chopper to chop off your head."

"DOCTOR: And did it frighten you when you first heard it?

"JOE: I don't remember for sure. A little, I guess. I've often wondered why they put something like that in nursery rhymes for kids. It's silly, isn't it?" - p 50

An incident involving the nursery rhyme & the death of his father are revealed as 2 traumatically formative experiences in his childhood:

"JOE: (*Sullenly.*) I didn't hear it. I was *there*."

"MUSIC *Eerie sting.*

"JOE: I was there. I saw him get killed."

"DOCTOR: (*Startled.*) You mean he took you along, on a holdup?

"JOE: No. All right, if you've got to know! I took the cops there! It was my fault he got killed!" - p 59

The mood of doom so characteristic of post-WWII SF is here too in the mouth of a bar-tender:

"Krasno shrugged. "Joe, every war up to now has been a war, but the next one won't be; it'll be something you can't picture. It'll end up with the few of you who're left living in caves and fighting wild dogs—if all the dogs aren't eaten before it gets that far. And it's going to happen, Joe. It could happen next week. Just read the papers."" - p 74

I commented on the newness of pizza in my review of The Lenient Beast, here it's brunch:

"["If you'll go shopping with me and help carry it back, I can make us a brunch."

""Brunch?"

""Cross between breakfast and lunch."

"Joe grinned at her. "Been eating 'em all my life and never knew what they were. Sure, Ellie. Why not?"" - p 78

"THE SCREEN" comes along & adds movie-making instructions:

"Again there is a sound effect instead of music; a kettledrum, tuned low, is being thumped to the exact rhythm of the ticking clock in the previous scene. Kettledrum continues at exactly the same tempo and volume throughout this scene. Camera lens should be slightly out of focus to give a blurred, unreal effect. Joe slowly sits up in bed and his eyes open, although he is obviously, from the glazed stare in them, not awake." - p 97

In "THE SPORTCAST" *Rachmaninoff's* "Isle of the Dead" is back. The 'sport' context is "Cops & Robbers":

"We're broadcasting a game that's always exciting, even when you played it when you were kids and it wasn't for keeps. The good old game of *Cops & Robbers!*" - p 147

This device allows even more 'impossible' & unrealistic Points-Of-View than before, as does "THE VIDEO":

"ANNOUNCER: For number eight in our science series, we bring you something truly unusual. Something that has never been attempted before on a television program. Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to *telecast a dream.*" - p 176

"VOICE FROM OFF SCREEN: I am an electroencephalographer.

"ANNOUNCER: Ah, yes. Currently a practicing electronencephalographer of Adelaide, South Australia." - p 177

Having spent some quality time in Adelaide, this piques my interest.

"Here in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, it is six P.M. It is, therefore, four o'clock in the morning in the American city, an excellent time to set our trap for shadows. We have chosen a point of origin almost halfway around the earth for two reasons. First, the time differential; second, to minimize to the vanishing point the possibility that any one of our audience might chance to know the dreamer and guess, from portions

of the dream or characters in it, who the dreamer is. Thus we assure him the privacy that dreams deserve." - p 179

I don't know where dream research is at these days but I do know that I knew a guy as early as the beginning of the 1980s who was seriously working in such an area. Otherwise, these days, an 'ordinary citizen' such as myself can play a duet w/ someone 14 hours away in time zones as if there were nothing to it:

"2018.06.15 duet with Warren Burt — Australia — via Skype" - uploaded July 14, 2018 - 10:20
<https://youtu.be/6DJRuxzjz8Q>
<https://archive.org/details/2018.06.1...>

This bk is special. I'd never heard of it before finding it & deciding to read it. Its obscurity is even more proof that the best things in life often lay neglected. That's why you shd attend & support the UNDERAPPRECIATED MOVIEMAKERS FESTIVAL: <http://idioideo.pleintekst.nl/UNDERAP...>

Lukas Persson says

This is BY FAR my favorite book by Fredric Brown, and possibly even on my top five of all time. What an inventive, touching, funny, and engaging story, I would LOVE to see this made into a movie!

Sam says

A crime novel that's anything but stereotypical. Sure it's about murder and two-bit gangsters, but Brown plays with prose style in revolutionary ways. Apart from sturdy narrative passages, there are a number of sequences where the narrator shifts from an omniscient voice to a screenwriter, a newscaster, a sports announcer -- and somehow, none of it is schtick, none of it is just a gimmick. These, after all, are the voices of the coming information age, and they loom over the life of our man Joey just as much as the moral conscience and lust for power that clash with one another and bring about his fall.

Barry Eysman says

If you've not read Fredric Brown, this is a good place to start. But pretty much everything he wrote is a good place to start. This novel is a morality play, a summery Saturday pulp fiction, and a horror story. It is written in a variety of styles, as a novel, as a movie script, as the calling of a radio ballgame. The horrifying ending to nursery rhyme is threaded throughout the book. It's delicious 'cause you know it's coming. And makes for a neat sardonic ending. Recommend this book? Oh, yes. It's a quiet subtle novel that will get under your skin

Karl says

This is copy 52 of 300 signed numberd copies published by Milipede Press in Hardcover.

Timothy Mayer says

Frederic Brown isn't well-known today, but his short stories and novels were widely published when he was in his prime. After he passed on in 1972, he was mostly remembered for the novel *Martians Go Home*, a hilarious SF satire. He wrote for both the science fiction and mystery market, earning countless awards in each.

Here Comes A Candle was first published in 1950.

The hero of *Candle* is Joe Bailey, a 19-year-old numbers runner for a local Milwaukee gangster named Mitch. Mitch has been feeling the heat lately, so he's had to curtail his lucrative sports lottery games and look for other opportunities. While he's cooking up the next scheme, he keeps Joe on a small retainer, allowing Joe the time to think about the past.

And Joe's past isn't pretty: he grew up in poverty after seeing his father gunned down in a bungled movie theater robbery. It gets worse: Joe has a pathological fear of candles and hatchets. His uncle had taught him a poem which ended with the rhyme:

"Here comes a candle to light you to bed,
Here comes a chopper to chop off your head."

As a young child, Joe suffered from horrid nightmares, until a psychologist was able to help him. Still, he feels guilty over his father's death and still abhors those candles and axes.

Now Joe has met two women who will forever change his life. One is the pretty and sensible Elle, who works as a waitress at the local diner owned by her uncle. The other is the seductive Francy, Mitch's gun moll girlfriend. Elle is the sensible choice, but how many men make sensible choices when their hormones are raging?

Brown did an unusual thing when he wrote *Candle*: he told the flashbacks and dream sequences in other writing formats than the standard novel: radio script, movie script, sports cast, etc. Such literary experiments are not unusual today, but were quite visionary for 1950.

Ultimately, the novel is one depressing trip. You just know Joe is going to do the wrong thing and there is no one around to give him sound advice. His best friend and fellow science fiction magazine fan is a communist. The bartender who warns Joe of Mitch's plans keeps howling about nuclear doom. The only father figure who appears in the book is Dixie, a sadistic hold-up man.

Candle is an excellent psychological horror novel from the same stream that produced *Nightmare Alley*.

Ben Loory says

Okay, wow! This book was a delight! And also almost impossible to describe. It's a pretty by-the-numbers crime novel that's injected with some (creepy and spooky) Freudian mumbo-jumbo and then unexpectedly told through super-fun alternating stylistic sections-- here's a radioplay, a teleplay, a sportscast replete with interviews, a futuristic dream-broadcast, a stage play, etc-- and which then blossoms into full-blown (and very convincing!) horror in the last few pages. Which really scared me; it was kind of amazing. I really don't know how this whole thing came together; the thought process behind it escapes me-- but it hangs together! And the feeling of delight-in-invention is off the charts. If Brown wrote with a little less "aw shucks" in his style and a little more attention to feeling and sensation (as opposed to exclusively (endlessly spiraling) thought processes), he'd probably be a little more well-remembered today. Not that he isn't well-remembered. But more so!

This has been the best Brown novel I've read yet. (But I haven't read em all-- yet.)

Olga says

You could never guess how far self-punishment can go. Making one mistake after another, young Joe Bailey lets us in his intricate world, filled with constant doubt and regret. Desperately looking for a meaning of his own life, Joe becomes a boy-toy of two absolutely different femmes. Maybe, they are not that different? In the end, only one of them will survive.

Nancy Oakes says

"Here comes a candle to light you to bed
And here comes a chopper to chop off your head"

The above couplet is taken from the rhyme called "Oranges and Lemons," and serves as a centerpiece of this awesome noir crime novel written in 1950. The main character of *Here Comes a Candle* is young Joe Bailey, who has a phobia of candles and axes based on an early childhood trauma associated with that rhyme.

Joe worked as a numbers runner in Milwaukee for a thug named Mitch until a police investigation put that racket on hold for a while, and now just kind of hangs out, supported by handouts from Mitch. He's kept on the payroll because Mitch might need him later, and everything moves along as normal until he meets Ellie, the niece of the owner of a local diner. Ellie is a nice girl, who has moved to the area to work for her uncle, and she and Joe hit it off. But there's another dame in the picture: Francine, Mitch's girlfriend. She's the kind of woman Joe can only aspire to, but it doesn't matter...he wants her, or at least someone like her, but it takes the kind of money that buys a robin's-egg blue convertible and Joe doesn't have it. But he may get his chance when Mitch comes up with a proposition for him that might put him up in the big time.

The story itself is good, but what makes this book unique (well, at least for the 50s anyway) are the various techniques used by Brown throughout the novel in telling Joe's backstory. Flashbacks and dreams that enter in Joe's psyche are experienced via different "media": a radio broadcast of "The Adventures of Joe Bailey" starts off these odd chapters, and from there we get a glimpse into Joe's earliest childhood traumas. Then there's "the screen," composed as a screenplay complete with fade ins, dissolve tos, cut tos, etc. A sportscasts of a game of cops and robbers is the next format, and a telecast of one of Joe's dreams is also presented. In between each one is straight narrative so that the story continues. It was probably very unusual for its time, but it works.

The book has a nice little twist at the end and is a bit on the pulpy side. The characters are rather stereotypical but it hardly matters. Brown also offers the reader a look at prevailing attitudes of the time (life in the shadow of the atomic bomb, for example) and his experimental cuts into Joe's psyche are incredibly well done. *Here Comes a Candle* is really a lot of fun as well as a good story. There are also (in my edition) two added entries: a short story entitled "The Joke," which reads like an episode from the old *Twilight Zone* series, and what Brown calls a "bitch piece," about the foibles of Christianity and religion.

I'm looking forward to more of Fredric Brown's work. If you like noir or like your crime fiction with a doosey of a twist at the end, you may enjoy this one.

Viktor says

This is a 5-star AND a 1-star. I think that this novel might define the "dime store novel psychology" that we've all heard about.

David says

The hero of Frederic Brown's *Here Comes a Candle* is Joe Bailey, a small-time numbers runner who is haunted by a nursery rhyme ("Here comes a candle / To light you to bed, / And here comes a chopper / To chop off your head") and by his belief that he was responsible for his father's death. The narrative alternates between sections of straightforward narration (called "The Story") and detours into other narrative modes. The first two detours, "The Radio" and "The Screen," are flashback continuations of "The Story" given in the forms indicated: a radio script and a screenplay. For most of the novel, Brown has no apparent reason for making these narrative shifts, other than the fact that he can. Maybe readers will be amused by Brown's shifting modes, or maybe they will be annoyed, but they will likely not find the story enriched. The third and fourth of these sections are the most likely to amuse or to annoy: in "The Sportscast," a play-by-play man rides along to narrate our hero's first robbery, and in "The Video," scientists use virtual-reality-style technology to broadcast one of our hero's dreams. It is only in the last two of these sections, "The Stage" and "The Newspaper," that Brown seems to be doing more than just showing how clever he is. Say what you want about *Here Comes a Candle*, you cannot blame Frederic Brown for not trying hard enough.

Dragonfruit says

"Here Comes an Candle to Light You to Bed, Here Comes a Chopper to Chop off Your Head" What a horrible rhyme to tell a child! Once I started this one I couldn't put it down. And it's hard to predict too, even though the author gives away the ending right away.

Brad says

What a wonderfully demented thriller! Highly readable and a bit experimental in style. I'm always impressed with Fredric Brown.

Tony says

Brown, Fredric. *HERE COMES A CANDLE*. (1950). ****. This is a new edition of this novel published in 2006, with an introduction by Bill Pronzini. Brown was born in Cincinnati in 1906 and died at age 65 in 1972. He was enormously prolific, not just with crime fiction, but also science fiction and westerns. He was primarily known for his short stories which were published in various pulp and mainstream magazines. His first novel, "The Fabulous Clipjoint" (1947), won an Edgar for best first novel. This novel from Brown is slightly dated and drags in parts, but it contains lots of innovative narrative techniques that he used to tell the

story. The techniques used in this novel include the following: A radio show broadcast; A film clip scenario; a blow-by-blow description of events a la a sportscaster, etc. The book should be read if only to see how he makes it all work. The story itself is pretty mundane. Joe Baily, the central character, is at a crossroads of his life. He is nineteen years old. When he was a small child, his uncle used to tell him nursery rhymes before he went to bed. One of the rhymes, a couplet from an old British standard, was, "Here's a candle to light you to bed. Here's a chopper to chop off your head." This was scary enough, but it was reinforced in the child's mind when he sees shadows on his bedroom wall that simulate the action in the couplet. He has bad dreams about this well into his teens, and has specific phobias about candles and about axes, etc. He dropped out of high school with only a year to go and decided he wanted to make it big early on. He started out running numbers and selling pool tickets for the major numbers racketeer in Milwaukee, Mitch, but then the city government cracked down. Joe decides to stick with Mitch until things blow over and he can get back his old job. Mitch keeps stringing him along, telling him how he planned to open a casino just outside of the county limits and that he, Joe, would be a kingpin in the operation. Enter Ellie. Ellie was a young woman who lived in the same rooming house as Joe. They met and began to date. The problem was that Joe fell in love with Ellie, but didn't want to be tied down to marriage and all that follows. Ellie was in love with Joe, but was afraid of what she didn't know about him. Color Ellie in white. Joe later meets Mitch's girlfriend, Francie. She is a voluptuous temptress and leads Joe on. He wants her in the worst way. Color Francie blue. The tension that developed among this threesome becomes of uttermost importance in the book, and causes Joe to have second thoughts about his choice of career when he is with Ellie, but turns him lustful when he is with Francie. He is inducted into the "gang" when he is taken along for a ride and ends up participating in a gas station robbery. Now he's in the soup. How he manages to resolve all these problems is Brown's plot. Unfortunately, the ending is not at all what you would expect. Recommended.
