

WHO GOES THERE?

by John W. Campbell, Jr. (1938)

IN ANTHOLOGY: THE ANTARKTOS CYCLE, Call of Cthulhu Fiction,
Chaosium, Inc. 1999

This story first appeared in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION in 1938 under the pseudonym Don Stuart. It was subsequently published elsewhere with the author's real name attached but with its title changed to THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD. It was made into a very respectable B-movie in 1951 - THE THING - though the script never ventured beyond the first half of the story which is pretty much a straight 'men in a confined space with an alien' yarn. Despite a desperately unconvincing creature, the film influenced one of the two greatest sci-fi/horror films ever made: ALIEN (1979), another tale of people pursued through corridors by something nasty. In 1982, John Carpenter made the other greatest sci-fi/horror film ever. His version of THE THING sticks closely to the original story, as told in WHO GOES THERE? A sequel, of sorts, appeared in the form of a video game - also called THE THING - in 2002.

WHO GOES THERE? begins with a meeting. Thirty-seven men from an expedition to the South Pole are in a stinking room in their base, gathered around a table upon which something lays covered in canvas. As Blair, the biologist, pokes and prods at it, Commander Garry declares that there is a difference of opinion which he wants everybody to know about. He asks his second-in-command to update the rest of the team on the situation that led to this impasse.

McReady steps forward: *'A figure from some forgotten myth, a looming, bronze statue that held life and walked. Six feet four inches he stood as he halted beside the table, and, with a characteristic glance upward to assure himself of room under the low ceiling beams, straightened.'* Campbell continues: *'And he was bronze - his great red-bronze beard, the heavy hair that matched it. The gnarled, corded hands gripping, relaxing, gripping and relaxing on the table planks were bronze. Even the deep-sunken eyes beneath heavy brows were bronze.'*

No surprise, after that description, that some have claimed that this man is actually Dr Clark Savage, Jr. (Personally, I disagree with the theory).

McReady tells how he led a secondary expedition to explore anomalous magnetic readings. They found the source buried beneath twenty-million-year-old ice: a torpedo-shaped spacecraft. One of its passengers was frozen ten feet from the ship. The men dug it up, one of them, Barclay, accidentally piercing its skull with an ice-axe. He was ill for the next three days.

They tried to thaw out the spacecraft with a thermite bomb but it reacted with magnesium in the hull and there was a massive explosion. The ship was completely obliterated. So they returned to the main camp with nothing - except a frozen alien.

The problem is this: Blair wants to defrost the creature to examine it, as does the physician Dr Copper. But physicist Norris objects, claiming that micro organisms have been known to survive freezing temperatures and that any the creature carries could be lethal to humans.

The men are asked to vote but before they do so, Norris asks Blair to unwrap it to show them what the fuss is about. *"How the hell can these birds tell what they are voting on? They haven't seen those three red eyes, and that blue hair like crawling worms."*

At this, the first description of the thing, it's hard not to conjure up a fairly ridiculous image. Definitely B-movie material. Fortunately, any idea that the alien might look absurd is dispelled immediately: *"Nothing Earth ever spawned had the unutterable sublimation of devastating wrath that thing let loose on its face when it looked around this frozen desolation twenty million years ago. Mad? It was mad clear through - searing, blistering mad!"*

Despite the horror of the thing, the men vote to let the examination proceed. The meeting ends, the creature is placed in the warm kitchen (despite cook Kinner's objections) to defrost, and Connant stands guard.

Most of the story so far has been argument and counter-argument between the men, but this serves to rack up the tension, showing that nerves are already frayed. You don't, as the reader, realise you've bought into this until the moment Connant is alone while the rest of the men sleep, with the steady drip drip drip of melting ice in the background. And then, behind him, a floorboard creaks. That's when you feel a chill run

down your spine and you say to yourself 'This is going to be GOOD!'

Blair is shaken awake by Connant who reports that the creature has escaped. The camp comes to full alert. The dogs are heard howling. The men run to the kennels where they confront the alien. It's alive! Not for long. They shoot it, burn it, electrocute it and the dogs tear the remains to pieces.

Examining what's left, Blair realises that it had been transforming itself into a dog. It can absorb and mimic other life-forms, including humans. If it gets beyond the camp, into the world, it could take over every life form on Earth. Before telling the others this, he destroys all means of leaving the camp. He then loses his mind.

At this point, the story suddenly becomes something very special. It simply oozes paranoia from every page. The tension is unbearable and it's virtually impossible to stop reading as the team members realise that any of them could be an alien. The only thing that occasionally breaks the tension when it shouldn't be broken, is the writing style. John W. Campbell Jr used some very strange sentence structures. Sometimes, his sentences seem to make no sense at all until you hit the right intonation... and to do that you have to read them two or even three times. This gets really irritating in a story that needs to be driven along by language rather than interrupted by it. I thought perhaps it might simply be a case of the language having dated somewhat but soon dismissed this when I realised how many of his contemporaries I read without any such problems.

A more serious problem occurs with the characterization, or rather, the complete lack of it. Campbell doesn't give us any insight into the individuals caught up in this nightmare scenario. They are just names and it's impossible to identify with any of them.

With Blair locked up in an outbuilding, Doctor Copper devises a method to test for infection. The team all test negative but, as the relief washes over them, Copper suddenly realises that the method is flawed and either he or Commander Garry must be an alien.

McReady reveals that he has killed all the dogs and that they had all started changing as they tried to escape. Connant realises that they got infected when they ate bits of the creature. It means that pieces of the monster must live independently from the whole. It's this discovery that

leads to an infallible test - because if infected blood can live its own life when separated from the body, it will seek to survive if attacked with, for example, a hot wire.

Kinner is the next to crack. They put him in a room nearby where they can hear him loudly praying and singing hymns. He stops when someone sticks a knife in his throat. McReady thinks it's a straightforward murder until the body starts growing scaly fur and razor-sharp talons.

Time for the hot wire test.

A character called Dutton is the first to reveal that he's not entirely himself. The rest of the men tear him apart in a truly brutal scene. His tattered remains are burned, electrocuted and splashed with acid.

Not unexpectedly, Connant is the next to go. Then Commander Garry.

Eventually, fifteen creatures are exposed and killed. The last, almost forgotten, is Blair. When McReady goes to the outbuilding and kills the creature, he is only just in time. Left to its own devices, it had been using spare parts to build an antigravity pack. Strapped into this, it would have been able to escape and infect the population of the Earth.

It must be admitted, the story's end isn't as dramatic and satisfactory as the one John Carpenter devised for *THE THING*. But it hardly matters. John Campbell broke new ground with *WHO GOES THERE?* by introducing sophisticated, psychological horror to the science fiction genre. Despite the occasionally muddled and baroque quality of his language, he carried it off with style and produced an unforgettable tale.

Frightening, excellent and riddled with palpable paranoia.