

BLACK LIGHT

K. A. BEDFORD

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Ruth Black is an eccentric novelist who has immigrated to Australia at the end of the Great War in an attempt to leave behind her own grief at the death of her husband Antony in the Somme. The wealthy widow hopes for a fresh start in the sleepy coastal township of Pelican River – but then her Aunt Julia arrives from England with an urgent message warning of an imminent, terrifying threat to Ruth's life.

Now, with the assistance of her good friend, the inventor Gordon Duncombe, Ruth must enter unknown realms in an attempt to avoid her impending doom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.A. Bedford is the author of *Hydrogen Steel*, *Eclipse*, *Orbital Burn*, *Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait* and *Paradox Resolution*. *Eclipse* and *Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait* both won the Aurealis Award for Best Australian Science Fiction Novel in their years, and *Time Machines* was also shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award.

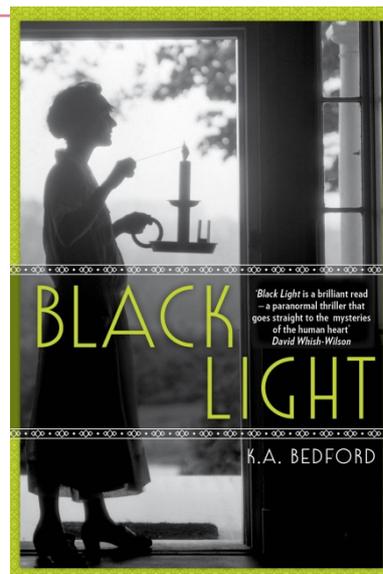
INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Black Light is set not long after the Great War, though you don't commit to an actual year. Readers may notice that on one hand it seems like an historical novel, but some of the details seem to have a kind of fictional bending. What were your intentions in creating a slightly skewiff historical setting?

It's an alternate-history novel. Somewhere back, long before the start of the story, there was a point where the timeline forked: in one direction it went on and became our familiar world; in another it went almost in the same direction, and became this world, with its foreign constellations, supernatural elements, Bentley motorcars with six wheels, and much else.

In a similar vein, if Pelican River is really the coastal township of Mandurah, to the south of Perth, Western Australia, then why not just call it Mandurah?

It is Mandurah, and it is very much not Mandurah. In the real Mandurah, there is no analogue of Frenchman's Hill, the site of Ruth's home, with its view down over the eastern foreshore (and the fish canneries). I was very much inspired by the real Mandurah in Pelican River's broad geometry and layout, and several actual historical incidents, but the town I had in mind needed to be quite different.



Where did your protagonist Mrs Black come from?

I've been writing about this character since the late 80s, and *Black Light* is in fact the third complete novel I've written about some version of her character. The first one I did, in the late 80s, was a much more traditional brick-sized fantasy novel (the single-spaced printout I produced at one point ran to over 700 pages), but featured a striking aristocratic woman in a 1930s-ish fantasy world who, while on a cruise, happens accidentally to spot her husband vanishing. She wasn't supposed to see it happen. He was supposed to just go through a door and never return, but she saw it, thought it was odd, but before she can do much about it, the ship is attacked and sinks (harrowing few chapters about the ship sinking, etc, which she survives), but she's determined to find out what happened.

Then there was another version of the story, again with the period setting, and again with a more overtly fantasy world, in which the mysterious loss of her husband happened years ago, but she still has these two kids – but they are abducted by Mysterious Forces, and she has to set out to get them back. Also featured Gentleman Magician dude in a three-piece suit, and fun sidekicks, all in a city that was meant to give a vibe of somehow Belle Epoque Paris. It was too ambitious for my feeble powers at the time, and also died a death.

Then there was the original version of *Black Light*, written thirteen years ago. Again, overtly fantastical world, different placenames, but similar to the real world. It wasn't until I was getting the book ready to send to the publisher last year that I thought, bummer it, and changed everything back to the things those false placenames were standing in for. It also had extraneous characters who ended up doing nothing so they had to go as well.

So all in all, Ruth Black has had some adventures over a long, long period of time. I'm not sure why the character stayed with me for so long. I did like the idea of a powerful, burning need/desire/drive to find missing/lost/dead husband, and that said husband might be a spy or similar – and I liked the idea of an unconventional heroine who dresses in a man's suit (though probably tailored), and looks very Art Deco. I always imagine her very tall and stylised, with short glossy hair.

I confess to having a soft spot for the inventor Gordon Duncombe and hope that at some point in the future he and Mrs Black may see fit to become more than just friends. Did you have a character like Gordon Duncombe so that you could also have a time machine in this novel?

No, Gordon was in the previous version of the book, when his big project was a flying machine (a helicopter with two contra-rotating rotors so it didn't need a tailboom), but in this most recent version I thought it would be more fun to have him building a time machine. And, of course, it is true that I like time travel as a plot element in my work. Only one of my previous books doesn't have some kind of time travel in it. Also, having Gordon working on time travel means I can bring in real-world figures like H. G. Wells, for example, which was also lots of fun.

Is Ruth going to be a time traveller?

Not if she can help it, but who knows? Maybe. I'm also still trying to figure out the supernatural Cold War going on in the background. (The business with the supernatural Cold War, and the 'Order of Pentacles', comes from another, unrelated book I did ages ago.)

What's next for Ruth Black?

I've got an opening already worked out, in which strong onshore winds against Hagan's Head beach causes a certain amount of beach erosion, exposing skeletal remains from long ago (this used to happen quite a bit in actual Mandurah history), and at first it's assumed that these remains, like all the others, are from some poor sap who tried to escape a shipwreck, but expired after reaching shore, and finding nothing but beach, salty bushes, and exposure. Except these skeletal remains are from a woman. A very tall woman. A very tall woman carrying an expensive, very modern watch (or similar trinket from the 1920s. Also, there's the issue of the terrible thing Gordon found two years in the future – what was that? Was it the Wall Street Crash and ensuing Great Depression, or something else entirely or even worse? At this point I'm not sure. Though the idea of having a wealthy and privileged character suddenly lose everything and have to remake herself does also have a certain appealing challenge about it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is Ruth's relationship to the landscape and the people of her adopted home? In what ways is it possible to look at this novel via the theme of alienation?
2. Who or what are the elves? What do you think they represent in this book? What difference does it make to the story that the author has included them? Can *Black Light* be seen to be offering a perspective on the relationship of British subjects to the land they colonised?
3. In what ways is *Black Light* a novel about class? How did class structure manifest in the Australia of the 1920s?
4. In what way is Ruth Black a woman of her time? In what ways is she ahead of her time? How does she 'fit' into her new society? And how does her position in Australia differ from her position in the one she left behind?
5. What is the significance of Ruth's wearing of men's suits and ties? Is she cross-dressing (a popular thing at the time), or is she making a statement, or perhaps something else? How do you think she would look?
6. During the 1920s, huge advances were made in scientific understanding. In particular, there was a leap forward in the development of thought around the (very counterintuitive) nature of quantum mechanics. This was greatly resisted by Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientists of the modern age.

I had always understood that event B was caused by event A. Yet the latest findings in the new quantum theory suggested, bafflingly, that event B could simply happen, on its own, with no prior cause. ... That there was no longer such a thing as certainty. There was no telling what further strangeness might be shown to exist. Reality, in a sense, was up for grabs. [p. 90]

How is the era of scientific thought represented in Bedford's novel? How does Bedford's plot utilise idea that 'reality is up for grabs'?

7. How and why does Bedford utilise such real life figures as H. G. Wells?

8. Do you think there is some connection to be made between the chaos and upheaval of the Great War and the upheaval in thinking that followed?
9. How would you describe the genre of this book?
10. Sometimes when a sci-fi writer sets their writing in the future, the ideas and concepts contained in a novel can act as a vision or template for scientific concepts or inventions still to come. What is the possible role of sci-fi writers in contributing to technological and conceptual scientific advancement?
11. What do you think is the purpose of a science-fiction writer instead giving their work a historic setting – especially when that era itself marks a decade in the advancement of scientific thought?
12. What kind of a world is the deadworld? How do human beings interact in this world? How do other creatures fit into it, such as the demon, Mr Ukresh Nor?
13. What do you think has happened to Antony Black?
14. Who is the cigarette smoking man who is present during Ruth's interrogation?
15. What do you think might happen in the chapter immediately following the final chapter in *Black Light*?
16. In what direction do you think K. A. Bedford might take a sequel?