

Jack Finney's

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1955)

James Rollins

Writing about him in *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King said that one of Jack Finney's great abilities as a writer was "his talent for allowing his stories to slip unobtrusively, almost casually, into another world." What makes this talent so unique, however, was that it was on display in all of Finney's work, whether it was mainstream, comedy, fantasy, science fiction, or thriller. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Finney (1911–1995) worked in a New York advertising agency (a background he later used in his novel, *Good Neighbor Sam*) before becoming a full-time writer. His first novel, *Five Against the House* (about college students who try to rob a casino), was published in 1954. Aside from *The Body Snatchers* (1955), Finney's greatest success came with his science fiction thriller, *Time and Again* (1970), which is about a secret government project involving time travel to New York City in 1882. The author of nearly two dozen novels and three short story collections, Finney was given the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement in 1987, proving that the ingredients of a thriller, especially as demonstrated in *The Body Snatchers*, are not limited to any genre.

"The book is much better than the movie."

Who hasn't heard that statement from time to time? That hope prompted me to pick up a copy of Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I was a high school student, and I had just seen the 1978 remake of the 1956 black-and-white film. I vaguely remembered Don Siegel's original masterpiece—with the haunting last scene of a raving Dr. Miles Bennell running through the streets yelling, "You're next!" But as an avid reader of all things pulp, I wanted to look at the source material upon which these two movies were based.

It wasn't easy to find. The novel was first published in 1955 under the shorter title, *The Body Snatchers*, but I finally managed to locate a battered

reprint in a second-hand store that specialized in science fiction. I read the dog-eared copy in one long session, baking under a window as the sun moved across the sky. It was a simple story. Aliens invade a small town, replacing its inhabitants with perfect copies. The novel opens with the narrator, a small town doctor in Mill Valley, California, being faced with a peculiar patient, a woman who believes her uncle is not her uncle. While the man looks exactly like her uncle and talks like him, even has all his memories, she insists “his responses aren’t *emotionally* right . . . there’s something *missing*.”

This opens the way for a taut tale of mounting paranoia and suspicion. The effect is heightened by the first-person perspective, a narrator of unflagging commonness, along with a setting as familiar as Mayberry. Dr. Miles Bennell is no swashbuckling hero or brawny champion, nor is he particularly bright or inventive. He is freshly divorced, rather bumbling, too quick to trust, and easy to sway. He lives in a town where “from down the block you could hear the far-off clatter of a lawnmower” and where one could sit “on the wide old porch in the comfortably battered wicker furniture, or the porch swing, eating bacon and tomato sandwiches on toast, sipping coffee, talking about nothing much.”

This simple setting, with events narrated by an ordinary man, slowly and inexorably persuades the reader to believe in alien seed pods that burst during the thick of night and grow human copies. Richard Matheson and Stephen King (the latter acknowledges the influence of both Finney and Matheson) employ a similar technique in their novels, populating unremarkable towns with ordinary folk and challenging them with extraordinary horrors. The device brings the terror directly into the reader’s everyday world.

But the dread becomes even more powerful when considered in relation to the decade when it was written. Jack Finney, a native of Marin County, where the story takes place, was also reflecting the paranoia of his time. Much has been written about the story’s parallel to the growing “red menace” of Communism. Between 1950 and 1954, the political witch-hunts of Joe McCarthy created fierce suspicion throughout the United States. Many 1950s critics linked the cold and emotionless pod-people with Communist infiltrators, while later critics maintained that the pod-people were a metaphor for a political culture determined to make everyone identical, tolerating no dissent.

Finney drew on other real-world tensions to add resonance and topi-

cality to this multilayered novel, to stoke the fear and uneasiness lurking in the hearts of his readers. For example, the narrator, Dr. Bennell, relates a past encounter with a shoeshine man named Billy, a middle-aged black man.

Billy professed a genuine love for shoes. He'd nod with approving criticalness when you showed up with a new pair. "Good leather," he'd murmur, nodding . . . He obviously took contentment in one of the simpler occupations of the world, and the money involved seemed actually unimportant.

But one night, Dr. Bennell overhears Billy speaking to a friend when there aren't any patrons around. The black shoeshine man reveals the truth about himself, parodying his own antics: "Please le'me kiss your feet! Le'me kiss 'em!" As he continues mocking his customers, Dr. Bennell is forced into a terrible realization.

Never before had I heard such ugly, bitter, and vicious contempt . . . contempt for the people taken in by his daily antics, but even more for himself, the man who supplied the servility they bought from him.

This same mimicry and deception is what Bennell witnesses in the pod-people when they drop their masks, revealing their true nature. So, it isn't just the extremes of McCarthyism that give this novel power, but also the racism prevalent at the time. How can anyone read the above section and not squirm? It forced both sides of the racial divide to wonder who were wearing masks of hypocrisy and what lurked beneath them.

The novel's topicality also touched upon another social turn during the mid 1950s: the slow deterioration and wasting of small towns across America following the end of World War II. Mill Valley seems a bucolic, idyllic community, but the fear and heightened attentiveness of our narrator finally completely open his eyes to the true dilapidated condition of his town.

Everything I was seeing now had been here to see then, except that—you don't really see the familiar until it's thrust upon you, you don't actually notice, until there's a reason to do so.

In this ultra-aware state, Dr. Bennell notes the empty stores, the fly-specked windows, the sun-faded signs, the closed up inns, the shuttered Sequoia theater. His girlfriend notes it, too. "When did all this *happen?*"

“A little at a time . . . We’re just realizing it now; the town’s dying.”

And most disturbing—it is not the aliens that caused this deterioration. It’s another sign of the times, continuing all the way to today’s battle between small town businesses and the cold calculation of major corporations, those vast conglomerates that destroy the mom-and-pop outfits across America, wearing their own masks, imitating and intimidating. Finney uses all these root fears—of outsiders trying to control us, of racial conflict, of changing times—to draw his readers into a screaming edge of terror that has a significance the movies based on *The Body Snatchers* (there are four) don’t attempt. Such is the work of a true master of his craft.

But it’s worth noting one last difference between the book and the movies, one last proof of the power of Finney’s words over the cinematic flicker. And that lies at the end of the book. All the movies conclude with a cynical and pessimistic hopelessness. In the original black-and-white film, our hero is reduced to a wailing Cassandra, with no one to heed his call.

But what about the book? In the final section, Dr. Bennell and his girlfriend have a chance to escape, but instead the two remain behind to burn a field of growing alien seed pods, sacrificing their own freedom. Contrary to our expectations, Bennell becomes a hero whose last act of defiance has an unexpected result. The pods abandon their invasion, forsaking the planet and its implacable inhabitants, searching for easier targets. Finney offers hope, suggesting that it takes only one person to stand up against the tide, whether it’s ruthless conformity, racism, or the trampling spread of corporations, and for this reader, that makes the book indeed much better than the movie.

James Rollins is the *New York Times* best-selling author of adventure thrillers, sold to over thirty countries. You’ll often find him underground or underwater as a caver and scuba diver. These hobbies have helped in the creation of his earlier books, including *Subterranean*, *Deep Fathom*, *Amazonia*, and *Sandstorm*. His thrillers *Map of Bones*, *Black Order*, and *The Judas Strain* earned national accolades, such as one of 2005’s “top crowd pleasers” (*New York Times*) and as one of 2006’s “hottest summer reads” (*People* magazine). He was also handpicked to novelize *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. His works include *The Last Oracle* as well as his first middle-school book, *Jake Ransom and the Skull King’s Shadow*, and his Sigma thriller, *The Doomsday Key*. His most recent thriller is *Altar of Eden* (2010).