

# Scientific snippets in tense thriller



The Pittsburgh Stealers by Ronald Klueh. Published by America House, 2002, pp239, £14, ISBN 1591291593.

**M**urder, computer hacking, dirty tricks and pure evil – not the words I would have associated with Ronald Klueh, who in real life is a highly distinguished metallurgist at the Oak Ridge National Laboratories. He normally writes exciting papers on steels – *The Pittsburgh Stealers* is his first novel.

I am not myself a reader of novels. The last novel I read was back in my childhood in Kenya, more than 30 years ago. But during one of my e-mail conversations with the author, I learnt of his

new adventure, and out of curiosity I ordered a copy of the book.

The book is set in the Vietnam era, with all its associated lies and atrocities. However, the story is not about the war, but rather about Ralph, a brilliant and well educated scientist who is at the forefront of developments in computer technology. He loses his job and the repercussions lead to alcoholism and divorce, although he remains in love with Alice.

The story begins with a nightmare as Alice and Ralph find their daughter Cindy in jail for being

caught with a bomb in her car. Cindy, rather unconvincingly, claims to have been framed by the FBI. Neither Alice or Ralph can afford the US\$50,000 bail required to get Cindy out of the US jail.

Alice's taunts eventually drive Ralph to rob banks in order to raise the bail bond, using his intimate knowledge of computers and the skills of a native American hacker. The story that follows is so original that it makes for compelling reading – I found it impossible to put the book down until I had finished the last page, almost disappointed that there wasn't more.

Before I began the book, I imagined that it might contain something of Ronald Klueh himself. I do not mean as a character in the story, but rather some indications that the book is written by a metallurgist. Actually, there is almost nothing of this sort, although the one or two occasions where I suspected an influence are quite clever. At a tense moment in the story, Ralph's computer starts to present random files rather than the one which might save his life. One of these random files is a listing of creep rupture data that look genuine to me, with the units of stress in ksi (kilogrammes per square inch) and with the rupture life decreasing as the stress is increased. Klueh is famous for his work on creep deformation. On another occasion the pock-marked face of a character is said to look like plastic formed in a rough mould.

The book authentically presents the time period in which the story is set, the era of Nixon and Kissenger. For example, the computer terminals were teletypes, chugging out only capital letters. There was only the odd hint of a cathode ray tube as an interface with the number crunchers. Ralph was lucky enough to have two teleprinters. The book that Cindy reads while in hospital is *Love Story*, and even the Jackson Chemical Company's product *Viscoflow* seems to have the right balance of viscosity and surface tension.

I should emphasise that the book is not technical. I made a deliberate attempt to find scientific snippets. It is a thriller with no holds barred and a story that holds together until the very end. At every stage I felt for Ralph and hoped beyond hope that he would be successful in surviving to the end.

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