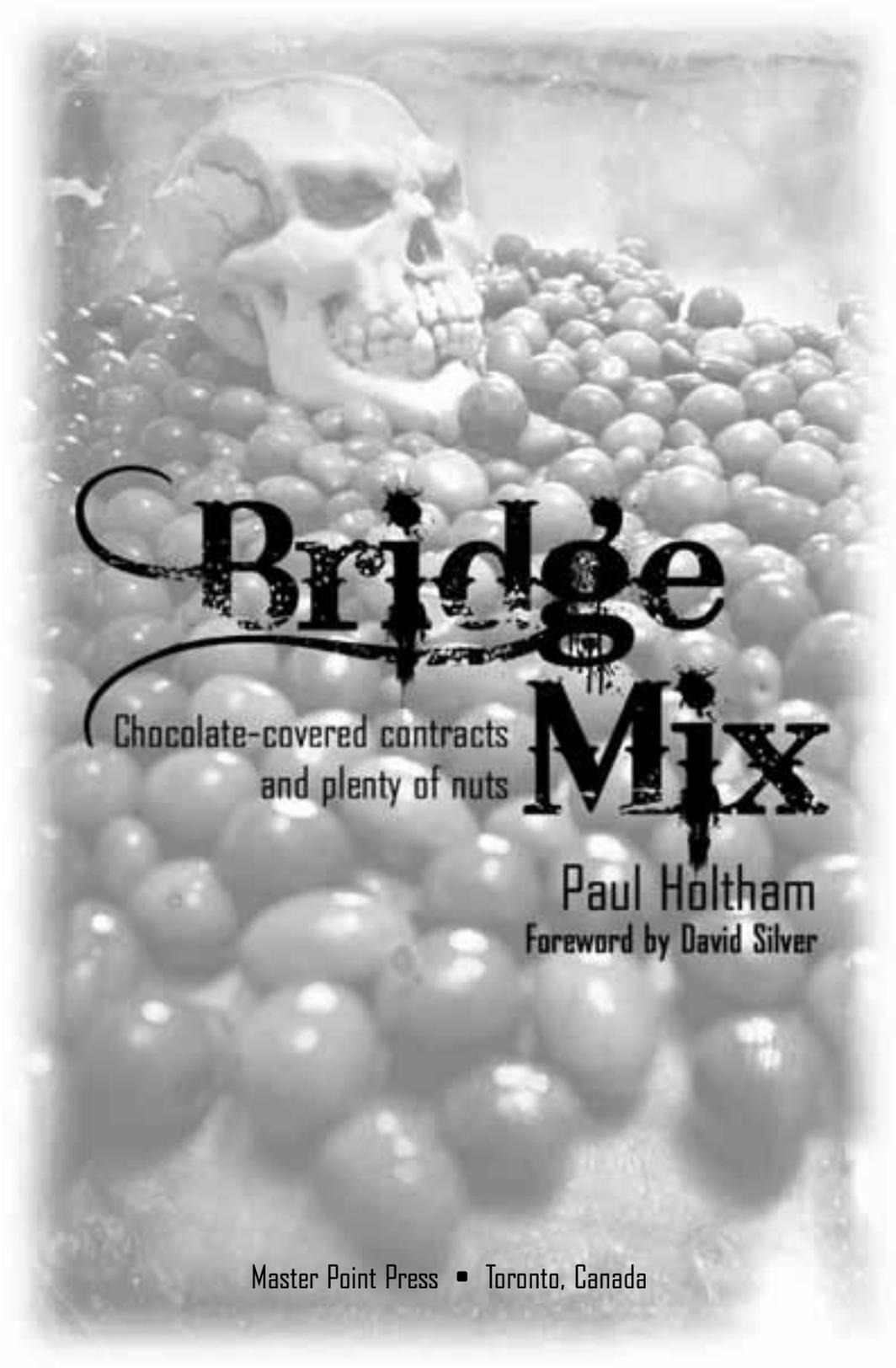


Bridge
Mix

Chocolate-covered contracts
and plenty of nuts

Paul Holtham
Foreword by David Silver



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Foreword

And now, something completely different. A bridge book that combines frenetic pacing with exotic characters and interesting deals. *Bridge Mix* is a psychedelic trip through various bridge competitions as it might be told by Ford Prefect living his hallucinations in real time. But Paul Holtham's book makes *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* seem like *Alice in Wonderland*. Holtham achieves his stunning effects through two devices—style and characterization—each complementing the other to produce an engrossing, delightful narrative.

Holtham's style is evocative, but not imitative. Here is an incident from the beginning of the book.

With maximum weirdness, the paper descended back into reading range. It crumpled into my knees like the Hindenberg going down, minus the combustion. Then my fists came to rest and the top accordioned open. I gazed upon the Cheeseburger Diet to Health. Reluctantly (very reluctantly; it was the single bravest act of my life) I stretched the pages apart and willed my gaze to follow the flattening wrinkles outward across the left one.

The euphony and rhythm of the sentences are pleasing to the reader because of the author's skill in handling the words, both familiar and unusual, in vivid imagery, e.g. "accordioned open", "Cheeseburger Diet". The well-read bridge player will vaguely recall seeing this style before — William Faulkner's "The Bear" is a classic example, but frankly, I prefer Holtham to Faulkner. Holtham has a mischievous talent for inventing words that fit neatly into his narrative and enhance the reader's enjoyment. He also is skilled in adapting his style to the context of his story. The hands being played are described in a stream-of-conscious-

ness real time. Eavesdropping on an expert's thought processes as he plays a hand, trying to get a count by evaluating the spot cards played and adjusting his game plan to the developments revealed, or implied, by the play of the cards is a refreshing and informative mode of presentation. I found it far more enjoyable than the usual arcane discussion of probabilities, odds, and technicalities in most bridge books, including my own.

The characters in *Bridge Mix* are stranger than the customers in Chalmun's Cantina, *Star Wars'* watering hole for galactic aliens. Egyptian gods, Norse gods, aliens with strange shapes and bidding systems, all sit down at the table during the weirdest Individual event ever held in a bridge tournament. They all have individuality and all are skillful and aggressive opponents. And just when our hero, and the reader, begins to understand them we are teleported to another game in an even more outlandish location to face another quartet of foes from the Galactic Bridge Federation.

The action never stops, and the reader never tires of it.

David Silver
January 2011

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Halloween

It was a dark and stormy night. Really. A chilly, totally dreary All Hallows Eve. And my birthday to boot. *New England sure is a chip off the old block*, I thought sourly, and winced as the Sheraton's vast, depopulated lobby blanched to radioactive whiteness. An instant later it convulsed with the latest and most murderous blast in Thor's drive-by shooting spree. He was not exclusively the L.A. god of thunder.

Worse, the accompanying deluge was solid; it would have made Noah curse God for not telling him to build a submarine, and it acted like a hydraulic press. The megawatt discharges down into the lobby's climate-controlled air formed a corrosive concoction that singed my nose hairs and stung my eyes.

I was skimming through a cheesy tabloid someone had actually bought. Another day, another Elvis sighting. I burped unhappily. After an indigestible hotel supper, and unable to go for a therapeutic walk, I was killing time before the evening session of the Individual. Aside from everything else, I had a malignant bridge hangover that kept me trying to sort the lightning flashes into suits. Oh yes, and the couch was trying to eat me.

I cursed the cheapskate gene that left me unable to fork over money for a room just for the day. A soft, roomy bed to hide under was paradise lost. Being away from people for free was the one advantage the current ambience provided, though the result wasn't exactly solitude.

I found myself eyeing the alcove beside my couch, wherein a quarter-guzzling, randomly dispensing Coke machine, a caffeine junkie's last resort, hawked its wares. Its location was friendly to would-be vandals; the alcove didn't face the front desk, which was practically over the horizon anyway. A miniature rain forest loomed behind me — vicariously glorying in the deluge, damn its imitation primeval heart — and was ringed with nice fist-sized rocks.

Esthetics were the main reason I hadn't resorted to vandalism yet: the glowing white ENJOY ICE-COLD SPRITE command, one of several

parading across the machine's pop-bellied abdomen, was missing the R and E in SPRITE.

I shifted uncomfortably. The shriekingly yellow Naugahyde lounge, mounted on spindly chrome legs that *crouched*, may have looked like a humungous comfort insect, but it behaved like a carnivorous plant. Like others of its species, it secreted a perspiration-like substance that lulled its victim into thinking he was merely a bit too warm while the exudate ate through clothes and skin to get at his vitals. It would surely tear off great swatches of flesh if said victim panicked and bolted. Deadly, but since their diet consisted mainly of salesmen and conventioners, not totally unappreciated.

For a while I had needed only to squirm sporadically, but the damned thing had worked itself into a feeding frenzy, and now I had to do it every thirty seconds or so to avoid becoming dinner. I was already a few ounces lighter thanks to some lapses. The ferns behind me rustled impatiently across the back of my neck, exasperated at my selfishness in shifting our paper around.

The fact that I remained hunkered down in a backwater of what had incrementally evolved into the world's worst theme park (Perfect Storm Land! Come for the heart-pounding terror! Stay for the corrosive asphyxiation!) should have told me something about the damage being done to my brain chemistry.

Outside, the rest of the downtown core had been sheared away by a capricious power failure. Between discharges, all that was visible from the couch was a shivery patch of sidewalk and two dead gooseneck streetlamps. Whenever Thor cut loose, a massive Victorian stone courthouse across the street fluoresced gaily in and out of existence. The city beyond became a murky twentieth-century Brigadoon on drugs.

A whole volley of explosions slammed through the glass, rippling it like cellophane. *Eek*. I wheezed, vibrated, and wheezed some more. *The Coke machine! Now!* But my muscles had gone deaf, and I perforce succumbed to fatalism. Ozone poisoning couldn't be the best way to go, but I figured I'd be well preserved, possibly in an interesting color. Then the most virulent fusillade to date irradiated the tabloid with a harsh phosphorescent vibrance. No mercy. It seemed to go on forever. But before I could get myself together and dump the blinding blarney

back onto the glass coffee table and give everyone's eyes a break, a dark *something* squiggled over in the left page at the edge of my vision. Left. Sinister.

Like stenciling pulling loose from the bottom of a luminous white swimming pool, three wavering lines of ghostly black letters billowed up toward me.

Overtop both pages.

Out past the margins.

Into the quivering, ion-charged air.

Now the size of Second Coming headlines, they floated threateningly a foot away at eye level, a spectral billboard announcing a new reality. Words leered, registered. I knew what I was squinting at.

My horoscope. The one section I hadn't been desperate enough to read.

'Fortune will favor you, Virgo,' it prophesied. 'But be wary. An old family friend will try to deceive you.'

Ever been in a car accident, the kind where you bleed a lot? Then you know the sequence: an indeterminate interval of numbing, incapacitating shock; then denial, followed by (the interval depending on how much is poking out of you that shouldn't be) wild acceptance and an adrenaline rush that balloons your arteries while you fight to be calm, analytical, in control. My forehead once had a thirty-mile-per-hour introduction to my car's windshield, and the millrace of emotions was repeating now, only now I was mortally afraid my sanity had plowed right through the barrier between reality and the place where Cronenberg films are documentaries. Back then I'd stumbled past row after row of brightly lit houses on a bitter winter night to end up detailing my predicament into an out-of-order pay phone. I was coping less effectively this time. Paranoia was an ice-cold blade at my sphincter as brain-jarring reports smashed holes in space and time, non-stop. One ka-boom — two ka-booms

Seconds trudged by while its heavy, suffocating tympani continued kicking lobby butt... and trailed away.

The apparition was no less intimidating for want of a sound track, but it soon began losing cohesion and disintegrated into harmless black whorls. They faded to paler and paler gray... until I was left staring glassily at a perfectly ordinary newspaper being crinkled to death

at the end of rigidly outthrust arms. I was inclined to stay that way too; atavistic rigor has always served me well, dating from childhood nights when Grandma's Art Deco walnut dresser would mutate into a ten-eyed, soul-hungry emissary of Satan.

The couch was not interested in granting me a reprieve. I had to perform the requisite cheek roll, which led to my hyper-extended arms sagging at my elbows, then my shoulders. With maximum weirdness, the paper descended back into reading range. It crumpled into my knees like the Hindenburg going down, minus the combustion. Then my fists came to rest and the top accordioned open. I gazed upon the Cheeseburger Diet to Health.

Reluctantly (very reluctantly; it was the single bravest act of my life) I stretched the pages apart and willed my gaze to follow the flattening wrinkles outward across the left one.

Thank God. My brain hadn't gone completely freelance. There they were. The same words. Only now they were lying flat on the page in their little printy way, inert, innocuous... inane.

Good thing they don't say, 'You'll be roadkill in an hour', I thought distractedly. I squeezed out an Errol Flynn devil-may-care chuckle. Grace under pressure. Then why was I hearing Don Knotts whinny? Bad. Hysteria under pressure. Reflexively I swiveled my head — safe, it wasn't touching the couch — to see if anyone had come within eye-shot of my madness. Only the ferns, and true to form they were busy feigning indifference to the wild-eyed weirdo even as they subtly stiffened and pulled away.

I jerked my paranoia back to where it belonged and was grateful to see the horoscope hadn't roused from its lethargy. The fear that I would live out the rest of my life as a whacko dwindled appreciably once I knew the words themselves weren't imaginary, but how had I acquired their movie rights? In the frantic early seconds when I'd thought I could maybe blink the swirling nightmare away, optical illusion had been one hellaciously attractive theory. After being flayed by epileptic fluorescent lights all afternoon and then being cauterized by gigavolts of lightning, why *wouldn't* my frazzled optic nerves mutiny?

Alas, the image had lasted too long; my eyes had recorded it too faithfully. An *uberchill* curdled my supper. Had the Stepin Fetchit feets-don't-fail-me-now S-S-Supernatural finally surfaced in my reality

— meaning my reality had always been a sham? Or, more rationally if not more believably, had the stupendous confluence of all that lightning forged a fistula that commingled our universe with one where the Supernatural was physics? And how long might *that* last?

Having Halloween go on forever because it was reality struck the fear gong harder than did the idea of being whacko — even major whacko, not reasonably benign and easily medicated whacko. Both prospects were terrifying, but a vision of me lugging a Saturday night special around town and sticking up 7-11s in order to support my new friends at the psychic hotline added the extra element of mortification.

Brrr.

Unfortunately the horoscope had a credential aside from its Hammer Message-From-Beyond presentation.

It described my still-to-come afternoon session.

Alcoholic honorary-uncle Rodney, he who'd introduced me to bridge — and other pastimes — had bumped into me in the morning (bumped, literally; he wasn't a morning person) and separated me from a twenty for whichever addiction proved more pressing.

He employed a typical cock-and-bull story about leaving his wallet in a taxi. He put the twenty in his wallet. He was a good soul, well worth the tithe — even for me — but it was a mystery how he'd gotten into my parents' circle, because they considered indulgences like alcohol or card-playing barely a cut above pedophilia. I got frostbite at family get-togethers and I was generally sober. Did his harmless and mutually understood prevarication count as deception? Iffy. But Fortune, well, Fortune had favored the hell out of me that morning, to the tune of three boards above average.

The opponents hadn't exhibited unusual largesse, for an Individual, but my partners hadn't sprayed the room with matchpoints either. There were none of the usual horror stories: no tinpot messiah bidding king-empty seventh to the skies, relentlessly ignoring the strain on your ethics as you try to keep from shrieking your doubles of the opponents' suit (your hundred honors); no deal where the opponents had more trumps than I did. My suits were led on defense and no free-range trumps were left to roam when my partners were on play. On top of all that, my own opening leads were survivable, the odd endplay actually made a difference, and I had guessed two queens.

Two queens? I gulped. I wished I hadn't remembered that. *Rats*. Everything seemed hell-bent on authenticating the tabloid drivel — including, I abruptly realized, the way I hadn't heard from Thor after he'd ushered in the weirdness. The sibilant baying of his rain hounds was missing, too.

I had some serious gibbering to do.

Somewhere along the line, the witches' brew my lungs had been sipping at had reverted to the standard undernourished air substitute Westinghouse kept a half-step ahead of Legionnaires' disease — and it was a honeyed milkshake going down my throat. My lungs became bellows. I could feel my brain becoming less and less of a fogbank as it got to metabolize oxygen instead of ozone.

Hmm. Ozone. Ozone narcosis. Rhymed with wishful diagnosis, but if I never looked it up it could never be ruled out, could it?

Aarrgghh. I'd had enough. Of the couch, the horoscope, the ferns, the lobby, the funk I was in. I needed time and distance. *Abandon ship*. Adrenaline spurted, inertia splintered, and I yanked myself to my feet, ignoring the pain of the skin toll to *Plasticus carnivorous*. I bequeathed the paper to the ferns (less than grateful, as you might expect), and stalked off toward the elevators. Rabbiting out of the front door would have been my preference, but I knew I couldn't, not unless I wanted to be haunted by the horoscope and its attendant goings-on forever. To manufacture the jumbo quantities of pooh needed to pooh-pooh them, I needed to go back to the killing fields, play my guts out, and have a forty percent game. Eat one for the Gipper. It wasn't like there was no precedent for it, and I was, for want of a better word, hopeful. Sitting through deal after deal being afraid that my suits wouldn't break badly or that my opponents would screw up would be strange though, sort of like walking into a final exam and hoping none of the questions you'd studied for were on it.

Still, what a waste of a great afternoon session. Either way, my bar tab was going to be unwieldy.

Three hours later, going into the last round, the afternoon session had repeated itself.

And to my surprise I wasn't a wreck. My psyche had rebounded like flubber. I guess *bingo!* phobia has a short half-life. Again there had been few outright gifts; mostly I'd had the steady returns that had

matchpointed so well before. While back-to-back magic sessions in an Individual aren't the ego steroids they are in the Reisinger, they can flush a lot of self-doubt out of your system. That my results had been preordained by ability rather than fate was... believable. I suppose even winning the Irish sweepstakes eventually engenders a sense of entitlement. Besides, I'd had a revelation about my supernatural — note the small s — revelation: I'd dreamed it. Sound and fury notwithstanding, I'd fallen asleep — a micro-sleep — and my omnivorous subconscious had animated the part of the paper I hadn't consciously paid attention to. So simple, really. Why didn't I think of it before? It beat the hell out of ozone narcosis.

I could have my glorious triumph and eat it too.

Just keep riding the wave and don't blow your wee brainies out, I admonished the bleary-eyed goblin I'd been startled to see staring out at me from the washroom mirror. I'd known I was bit ragged around the edges, but I looked like a Gahan Wilson cartoon. Next I discovered I was glowing with a low-grade fever, and immediately more symptoms began jostling to get to the head of the line. The winner was my incipient facial stubble, a mass of parasitic eggs hatching. Plunging my head into a toilet and flushing — *cold, cold, swirling water* — actually crossed my mind. Instead slathering on facefuls of cold tap water seemed like a cop-out, but the tap water provided a palliative for my mood. I felt less like emergency-room fodder as I headed back out. To table thirteen.

From a distance, as I clumsily flamencoed through the checkerboard of white-skirted tables, my destination looked to be occupied by a pair of psychedelic dandelions. Before whimsy reverted to paranoia I was within a few tables and the Disney aura imploded. It left a reassuringly down-to-earth if depressing tableau of two vitrified geezesses (harsh, but a lifetime in the status trenches, masterpoint or otherwise, had left its stamp). Both had a bushelful of frizzy hair — one hennaed, one blued — and both were as gaunt as pterodactyls. Neither was petite, and they were looming into each other at the table's far corner, their body language screaming, 'Prepare to repel boarders!' as they bickered quasi-politely. Some of their tension undoubtedly stemmed from annoyance at being decked out in nearly identical outfits: elegantly inappropriate knee-length black cocktail dresses (no décolletage, mercifully) straight from Saks Fifth Avenue or its ilk if the dazzle of

jewelry around every encircleable part of their upper bodies was any indicator. Even Shopping Channel junk in that quantity would have napalmed my bank account.

As is the proper order of things, they ignored me when I plunked myself down on Henna Hair's right. I remembered at the last second not to wedge myself too snugly into the shabby 'folding' chair. It was a bottom-feeder, literally. Unlike its more evolved cousins in the lobby, its minimal upholstery forced it to rely on swallowing chunks whole, with no predigestion. Smoosh your terminal self too far into its throat, then forget and lean forward, and *bam!* — you found out what it felt like to be a mouse. I'd seen several tournament rookies doing a telltale bent-over Groucho walk.

The women's social status being equal, they were each firmly seeing to it that the other knew her place in the bridge hierarchy. Steel rang on steel: a Bob-Hamman-was-at-my-birthday-party lunge effortlessly parried by a sneering my-team-beat-Garozzo's; then a breathtaking flurry of regional placings with Lawrence, Soloway; a slashing Marty Bergen *I-should-be-paying-you...*

Too good to tune out, they were draining me like succubi, when a cooling comber of displaced air broke against my right side. I presumed it signified the arrival of our fourth, praise be. Having long since been battered into accepting that tournaments were no place for actual manners, I dredged up my standard game face, punched in the cursory appraisal option, and glanced up.

My game face dissolved into a flustered gawk as steel-gray raptor eyes engulfed me. They probed clinically, catalogued ruthlessly, illuminating the seedy canyons of my emotional underworld, exposing the shameful dark things huddling there. Even (shudder) Sister Dominica's most menopausally withering glare had never prompted such a need to apologize for my existence. Cops would sell their souls for that look if they weren't already convinced they owned it.

The eyes flicked away, and for the second time that day I found myself scrambling to repack the fragments of my worldview around my gooey interior. I was getting used to it, the way a drunk gets used to summary bisection by parking meters.

The eyes had a different but equally devastating effect on the distaff side of the table. The women were lacquered tureens of simmering

hormone soup — not *bouillon de Tom Jones*; more substantial, like *crème de Paul Newman*.

His face was breathtakingly ascetic, the flesh shrink-wrapped on his skull as if his genes weren't programmed to dole out enough skin. The square jut of chin, the salients of cheekbones — everywhere that bone or cartilage met skin looked painful, most notably his nose, which projected violently, like the blade of a boomerang someone had whipped through the back of his head. It would have kept him off a plane these days. He obviously lived on adrenaline and maybe nicotine and not much else that was legal. Photosynthesis was out; sunlight wouldn't have left his complexion that sallow. Moonlight either. Still, having the skin tone of Leslie Howard raised in a tobacco kiln didn't seem to deter women over fifty. Its non-Club-Med-ness was accentuated by startlingly black bushy eyebrows too luxuriant to have sprung from his Imax forehead's patina of skin; they had to have been rooted in his sinuses. A blunt widow's peak of less robust blackness expanded into a streamlined mass contoured to his skull and trimmed to Republican Mean Length. Its part, on the side, was inexplicably normal bone-white, a racing stripe. His ear was the dead opposite of cauliflower.

I'd been peripherally aware of the head's transportation — tall, and of course, gaunt — but I bit back a gape when I saw how fabulously he was turned out: a rich black Victorian evening suit complete with frothy white boutonniere and opalescent triangle of pocket handkerchief, ornate silver fob leading to a watch secreted in the vest, and a crisp white shirt with a black silk cravat banding the starched wingtip collar into proper chafing position.

Halloween, I remembered. *Costume*. I'd already encountered the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, and been partnered by Ronald Reagan two rounds ago — fittingly, I thought, he'd been the dummy — but this was of another order entirely. This specter looked so utterly *right* in it. I couldn't tell if he was supposed to be anyone in particular, but if the Mad Hatter's tea party had included a velociraptor, that would have been my guess. No rental could have done justice to his morphology and cold, elemental elegance, but the problem was that if ever anybody didn't look like a party animal, the type to splurge on a custom-made costume, he was it — a conundrum that added to his disconcerting effect.

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What if your birthday is Halloween...?

It can't be good, surely, but when the hero of these stories (or is it a novel? — we're not sure) enters the Individual event at a local tournament one October, the powers-that-be really decide to punish him severely.

Holtham's fiction combines elements of Douglas Coupland, Douglas Adams and Victor Mollo, so you can expect bizarre characters, far-out humor, lots of subliminal cultural references — oh yes, and bridge too. The story starts at the bridge tournament, where a recognizable ghost with a family connection shows up to play. The narrator wends his way through marathon rubber bridge games with the Norse and Egyptian gods, and finishes up in outer space on a luxury cruise ship (did you ever think about the issues of playing bridge with a telepath?).

“The action never stops, and the reader never tires of it.”

David Silver, author of *Tales out of School* and other books.



PAUL HOLTHAM lives in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.
This is his first book.



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