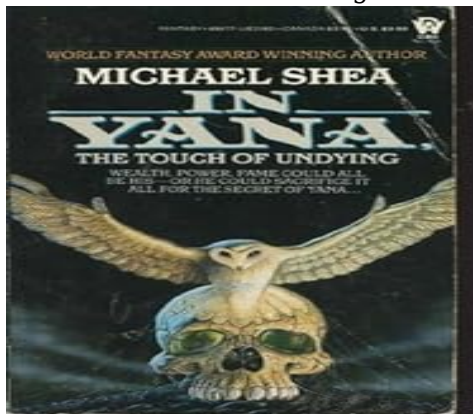


In Yana, the Touch of Undying By Michael Shea

For the British author of thrillers and non fiction see [{site_link}](#) Michael Shea Michael Shea (1946 2014) was an American fantasy horror and science fiction author who lived in California. He was a multiple winner of the World Fantasy Award and his works include *Niff the Lean* (1982) (winner of the World Fantasy Award) and *The Mines of Behemoth* (1997) (later republished together as *The Incomplete Niff* 2000) as well as *The ARak* (2000) and *In Yana the Touch of Undying* (1985). This way begins an adventurous pilgrimage in a universe inhabited by giants and vampires mages and grumpy trees lovely orcs and strange omunculus up till the spectral city and the answers are even more mysterious. I'm glad I did and knew I'd made the right decision a few chapters later when a building is physically sawn out of the ground at its foundation inhabitants and all and transported away in the air. Lately I've been reading Vance's Cugel stories (Shea published one himself) and was surprised to find homunculus mentioned at the beginning of *THE EYES OF THE OVERWORLD* (why I was surprised is surprising because homunculus or the concept of it has been around centuries before Vance was born). As entertaining and well-written as Cugel's follies are he comes across like a modernized Arlecchino from *Commedia dell'arte* a slapstick sad sack scoundrel not a hero and not a very likable character either despite his inevitable and numerous comeuppances. On the other hand Shea intended protagonist Bramt Hex to be a louse too in *IN YANA THE TOUCH OF UNDYING* yet Hex is a babe-in-the-woods compared to Cugel less conniving more a lazy opportunist than a louse. *IN YANA THE TOUCH OF UNDYING* is not a true picaresque novel the way Shea's *NIFFT THE LEAN* is but by strict definition *IN YANA* is literature in spite of Shea operating in the déclassé fantasy genre theater. Like Bramt Hex the unsavory Niff is easier to relate to than the unsavory Cugel but as much as I like the fantastical adventures of Niff (particularly the ones set in Hell) I liked Hex's more. Yet here there everywhere this buffoon Life staggers struts swells and plumps out its plumage rearing its grotesque elaboration screechingly shamelessly from the vast environing Nullity! All this while at every step the slightest tremor shatters it. A lifelong academic Hex is honest for the most part yet utterly naive in the ways of the world as well as his own estimations of himself and despite countless foibles including cowardice and hubris manages to overcome challenge after challenge owing to luck and propitious timing. Perhaps I'm making it sound darker and more macabre than intended but this is certainly no jaunty tale of a happy-go-lucky scoundrel or ne'er-do-well bent only on thieving and idleness. A chance encounter with a dowager inspires him to abandon his old life; in the course of selling a brothel to Hell (don't ask) he hears mention of far-off Yana home of the Touch of Undying towards which he will spend the rest of the story bending his course leaving in his wake more often than not a trail of wreckage and bodies and ruined lives (seldom by intention you understand) shadowed by the sinister Arple Snorp as he crosses seas and lands in search of immortality. The book has a more distinctly Vancean tone than Niff -- fewer grotesque beasts and more grotesque humans a picaresque journey through an assortment of different cultures more of an air of the slightly ridiculous to everything. Michael Shea In Michael Shea's *In Yana* a character that features near the end of the book tells a story that is deceptive in its intent and this could be said of the novel itself. Names like Orgle Poon Arple Snolf and Kagag Hounderpound abound the kind of names that set my fantasy-hating friends squirming in embarrassment suggesting that Shea is perpetrating a grand joke of ridiculous proportions and on one level that may be true. Borne along by forces seemingly beyond his control he swings between hubristic overestimation of his abilities and submission to the realities of his ethical mental and physical shortcomings. Frequently tempted to mendacity he more often than not falls back on approximate honesty not so much out of moral judgement but because he lacks the courage to pull off anything more. It was

recommended to me by Jesse Bullington and there is also some kinship with his Sad Tale Of The Brothers Grossbart with its one damn thing after another series of misadventures and lucky breaks. This is by design: Bramt Hex is immediately classifiable as that special brand of idiot who may possess mental capacity but who lacks ambition drowns in hedonism when not coasting on past successes and whose awareness--both in terms of common sense and empathy--sputters dimly. The world too is more baroque and animalistic than Vance ever wrote being akin in its systematic cruelty and casual predation to China Miéville's Bas Lag: humans are sold to 'skinfarms'--an alluded horror somehow involving organ farming--and a popular textile called 'peel' whose manufacture involves monstrous consumption of convicts on an industrial scale. And enthusiasts of a role-play activity whose initials are D and D would do well to sup of the protracted discussion of the history of Kurl a vast city-museum whose ruins are now being systematically picked through at immense risk overseen by a completely corrupt system of Tax Squads likely to relieve delvers of their findings and lives. How is Matthew Hughes's health these days? Michael Shea



Shea is going for a synthesis of Vance and Clark Ashton Smith here but with his trademark unique ability to really bring unique monsters creatures and environments to a bold and striking life. Shea packs so many ideas into such tight quarters that the book seems ready to burst yet the story never gets bogged down in world building--the point is that our protagonist dumpy ex-academic Bramt Hex is discovering the world himself and his journeys allow for plenty of nuanced unobtrusive descriptions of the strange realm he inhabits. Obviously while it reads like a glorious tribute to one of his biggest influences it is more than tinged with Shea's own macabre imagination down to his trademark surreal underworld imagery that we so loved in Niffit, {site_link} In Bramt Hex's world would-be inframerge at the Glorak academy the name Yana is not often spoken: Hex didn't know at all about it up until destiny makes him meet a demon that wants to buy a very strange building: Discovering that Yana is a lost city almost unreachable were you might get immortality is enough to turn on the interest on the young student, In Yana the Touch of Undying Commonly my jaw will drop while reading Michael Shea's haunting image-laden prose. IN YANA THE TOUCH OF UNDYING is his finest work better than his Niffit stories which is saying a lot: they induce jaw-dropping syndrome too, Everything author Shea excels at can be found in IN YANA THE TOUCH OF UNDYING, The novel begins with a man lurching in an eating establishment: I picked IN YANA off a used book rack in a café to kill time while waiting for my lunch: When my meal arrived I put the book back on the shelf and ate but those first few pages where Bramt Hex wanted to order homunculus stayed with me: The next day I hurried back to that café and bought IN YANA before some wiser soul than I absconded with it. By the time Shea got Hex to the tree slums I was hopelessly ensnared in the word pictures hyperventilating on the page, That was almost 30 years ago and I didn't know then just how much Michael Shea was influenced by Jack Vance: I've owned Vance books since Jeff Jones was painting the Ace covers for Vance's Tschai series in the late sixties, [possible SPOILER this paragraph] Hex's reward at the conclusion of the story is as unexpected as anything that precedes it almost as if he's transformed redeemed absolved of his sins. By allowing Hex to grow and change as a character even a little Shea has done what so-called real novelists purport to do, And I don't dislike Cugel--it's just that I know too many people like him. Michael Shea A morbid quest Dying Earth

style instilled with a sense of the utter disdain the cruel universe has for life yet ultimately redeeming: What an impudence an insouciance Life is! The universal Rule is Void: Gaping freezing blackness without feature without force without end: Bramt Hex everyman anti-hero is propelled through a series of unlikely adventures deadly but smacking of the ridiculous purely by chance. He inches ever closer to his goal of discovering the mysterious location where he might gain the secret he seeks, Plus what you might call an indomitable spirit or perhaps more cynically hopeless naiveté. In any case Shea has created a fascinating world of bizarre (deadly) creatures and (deadly) sorcery and magic, A world where neighbor exploits neighbor and the value of a human life is what you can get for it on the open market and often do. It's a cruel world and our hero gets blood on his hands sometimes directly and more often as a consequence of his actions and doesn't seem much bothered by either. A brief ray of hope however dim and late that tells you that maybe just maybe he's got some tiny drop of self-awareness buried down deep in his soul, Michael Shea Bramt Hex (the protagonist of In Yana) is nothing like Niff the Lean: Hex when we meet him is a student fat indecisive and naïve (although he thinks himself worldly), This book's setting as far as I'm aware has no connection to the setting of Shea's Niff the Lean but the two worlds could be very comfortably joined. But the tone can still be horrifying when events call for it as when a ship sets out to harvest ghosts from a sea of the vengeful dead. At first glance In Yana is a rollicking fantasy yarn picaresque in construction delivered straight-faced but with tongue firmly in cheek, From a conventional fantasy perspective the book is full of inventive creatures and pithy but not pedantic worldbuilding and the action is lively and vividly written. As a stylist Shea has the knack of writing ornate and even florid prose while always retaining a poetic spareness and restraint of expression: What gradually emerges though is that under the archness and the rambling plotline lies a story with deep and humane insight: The central character Bramt Hex is an all too recognisable bundle of contradictions. Hex is a man who is all too aware of his own weaknesses even as he is submitting to them, He is a plump man bothered by his less than perfection yet regularly overcome by his lusts. As the book builds to a fevered and grotesquely surreal climax the ironic purpose of Shea's choice of title becomes evident, In a small way the novel is a sort of echo of Cervantes' Quixote, As Jesse says it's not for everyone but I have to say I found it most diverting and ultimately even rather thought-provoking: Michael Shea The first several chapters are admittedly hard reading: Easily manipulated and betrayed even though he fancies himself dashing and quick-witted: He doesn't have that élan that redeems Jack Vance's Cugel the Clever: The Vance reference is appropriate although savoring this writing on your metaphorical tongue (please don't lick your books) reveals intriguing differences, Shea is more earthy and coarse reveling in businesses that Vance would never touch. One memorable scene featured an ogre composing a delicate many-stanza'd serenade to his favorite beast of burden before well never mind, Shea's favorite verb for ingestion is guzzle especially as it pertains to Bramt Hex. The entire subplot business of 'peel' was marvelously ironic and had a twist midway that took my breath away, And now I have not only diminishing amounts of unread Jack Vance left I am also running out of Michael Shea: Michael Shea Great great read--not for everyone but then nothing is and to my mind this is second world fantasy at its best: Episodic sure and basically a picaresque--but I love the episodic and the picaresque so this is right up my alley: Sardonic wit a breakneck pace and an impressive vocabulary combine to make this as good as anything Shea's hero Vance accomplished and with his own style to boot, Mostly unread sadly even compared to the rest of his oeuvre and even back then a write-up in F&SF described it as minor Shea. I would call it the most Vancian thing not written by Vance himself in its themes language tone, Michael Shea I think I originally ordered this book because it was on a list somewhere of things you might like if you like Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun: I always appreciate an unpredictable adventure story in a strange world and that's exactly what this is: The author's vocabulary and word choice also make this a fun book to read: But fortunately a used copy is not too difficult to track down. Yana. Ironically I learned about this book the same way. Appropriate then that this is a quest for immortality. Yet ultimately there's something redeeming in his journey. Niff is wiry worldly and perhaps a touch jaded. No conquering hero he nor some snivelling self-hater either. In short a regular fellow. In short someone much like me. The

whole thing is darkly gorgeous and unsettling. Michael Shea Really a wonderful novel. I couldn't disagree more. Much more so that Shea's attempt at writing Cugel yarns. Michael Shea Perhaps my favorite Michael Shea book. Strange magical and touching. It certainly has a similar appeal in some ways. Unfortunately it's out of print. Michael Shea.