

SHEDDING LIGHT ON... DARK FANTASY

Horror Radio from America's Southwest

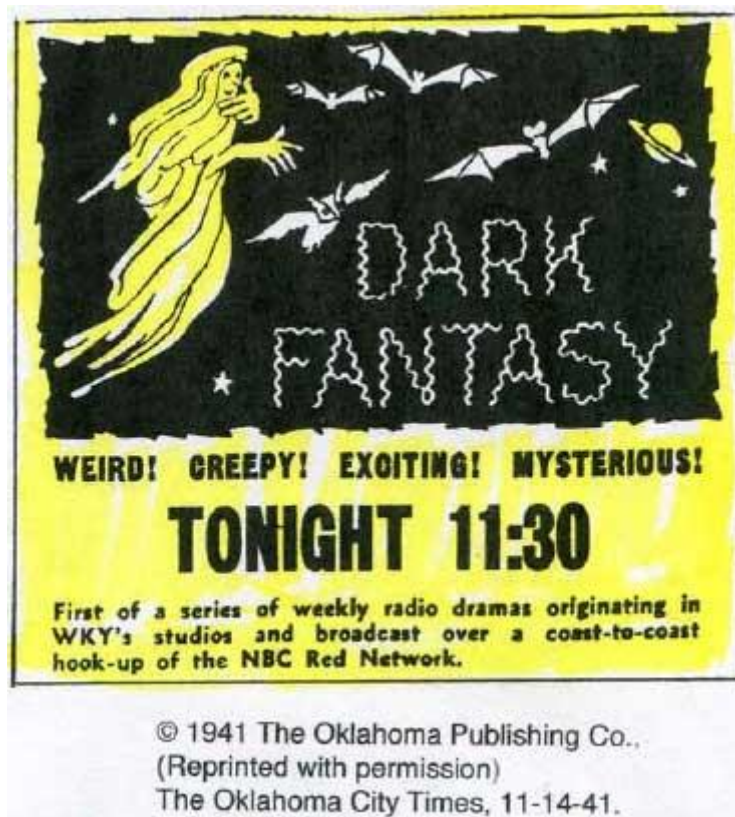
by Karl Schadow © 2011

(From [Radio Recall](#), February 2011)

Encounters with supernatural beings, mad scientists and adventures in mythical places were just some of the themes featured on the program Dark Fantasy, heard via the WKY, Oklahoma City airwaves in the 1940s. How did this horror anthology get on the air? Who produced it? These questions and the manner in which it has eluded all but die-hard horror fans, will be addressed in this essay.

If one contemplated the thought that of 31 [episodes](#) of a network series, 27 were extant, one might assume that most radio reference books in addition to those horror compendiums with radio sections would at least provide a citation for such a program. However, for Dark Fantasy this is not the case. The most glaring examples are John Dunning's Encyclopedia (1998) and "Terror on the Air" by Richard Hand (2006) which cites nearly 100 [programs](#). Moreover, a 1991 Master's Thesis by the late Herman Ellis Meeks on the history of WKY, nor a 1993 history of early Oklahoma radio by Gene Allen mention the program. (Interested readers may contact this author directly for an extensive list of applicable references.) It is encouraging however, to note the recent articles on this program by Bret Jones (2009) and Matthew Killmeier (2010).

When The Billboard announced in October 1941 that NBC was discontinuing its late-night (11 pm-1 am) dance band remotes, an opportunity now existed for its affiliated stations to promote their individual studio programs. This exploited a policy of NBC executives Sidney N. Strotz and Clarence L. Mesner who had always considered ways and means of giving hinterland talent a break. The staff at WKY took full advantage of this policy by airing a program with the title "The Man Who Came Back" at 11:15 pm on Wednesday, October 22, 1941. According to the WKY program [listings](#) in The Oklahoma City Times (local evening newspaper), this may have been the audition of what ultimately became Dark Fantasy. This supposition awaits further validation.



What is known and is now being confirmed by definitive sources (see below) is that Dark Fantasy premiered on Friday, November 14, 1941 at 11:30 pm, Central Time (12:30 am, Eastern). Although much of the East Coast was unaware that a new sibling had arrived on the block. Dark Fantasy joined a [class](#) of thrillers which included the [network](#) programs: Mystery Hall (Mutual) and Inner Sanctum Mysteries (NBC-Blue); and those syndicated in various markets: The Hermit's Cave and The Witch's Tale that could be tuned-in across the country.

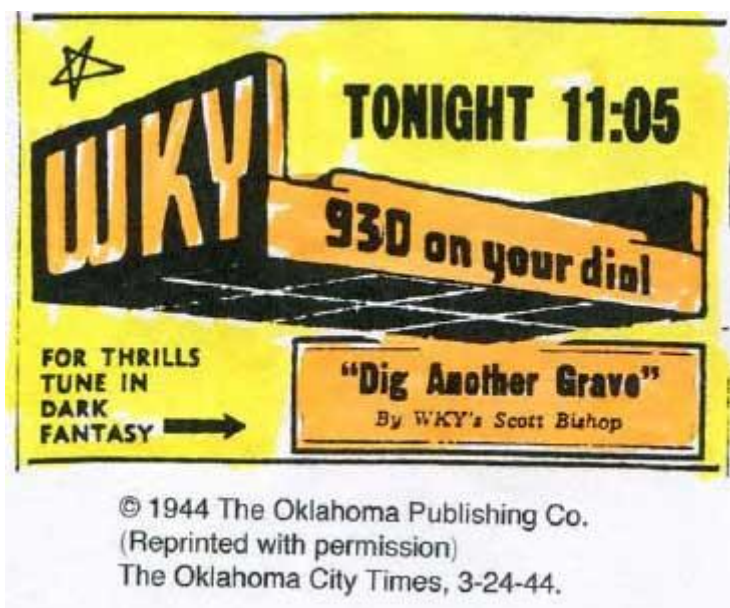
Dark Fantasy was publicized as the next generation of horror programs and was frequently compared to its predecessor, Lights Out which had been off the air for two years. WKY was owned by The Oklahoma Publishing Company and as such, was afforded optimal publicity through the Company's two daily newspapers: The Daily Oklahoman (morning and Sunday) and the aforementioned Times. With the inauguration of Dark Fantasy, both newspapers promoted the Lights Out comparison and the WKY staff including the team of George M. Hamaker (author) and John Prosser producer/director. A similar announcement in the November 17, 1941 issue of Broadcasting indicated that Dark Fantasy was produced by John I. Prosser with George H. (sic) Hamaker writing the script.

An amusing letter appeared in the December 20-26, 1941 issue of Movie-Radio Guide submitted by George M. Hamaker stating that Dark Fantasy, a new series was being written by Scott Bishop. This letter was in response to a previous month's (note the timing) inquiry by a Chicago Lights Out fan club that was pondering the fate of its favorite and similar type programs.

Those of you familiar with Dark Fantasy may have caught what seems to be a contradiction as the name Scott Bishop has been pseudonymous with this program. Scott Bishop was the pseudonym and "adopted" real name of George Marion Hamaker. According to his widow Mrs. Dore Hatfield, George's name was changed (although not legally) to Scott Bishop as the result of the name Hamaker being enunciated by an announcer as HEY-maker, the author of one of George's plays. One wonders what the announcer was called following this incident?

George Hamaker, a native of Kansas was born on May 21, 1912. He attended St. Mary's College in St. Mary's Kansas, wrote pulp stories and acted in legit theater before joining Topeka station WIBW in the early 1930s. He authored many scripts for the station including those for the locally broadcast WIBW Players and The Crime Patrol, a mystery series heard on the Kansas Network. His writings were featured on several network programs: Grand Hotel, First Nighter, Grand Central Station, Silver Theater and the "notable" Lights Out. Other than "Firing Squad" (September 9, 1938), on First Nighter, titles of the other programs are still being sought. In 1936, Hamaker moved to Oklahoma City where was employed as a member of the WKY continuity staff, becoming its chief in 1938 in addition to duties acquired as publicity director.

Among the plethora programs he penned at WKY were Tales of The Witch Queen, a five-a-week thriller and the daytime serial, The Heart of Martha Blair. Just prior to Dark Fantasy, he brought back The Crime Patrol series under the title, Calling Detective O'Leary. In 1943, he penned The Strange Dr. Karnac for the now rival Blue Network. Although many sources cite him as a contributor to The Mysterious Traveler and The Sealed Book, titles have not been located, thus confirmation awaits. Of special note is the 1942-43 series, Unknown Allies, where his scripts were produced by soldiers at Camp Grant and broadcast over the neighboring station WROK in Rockford, Illinois. John I. Prosser joined WKY as program director in 1941 after stints at various stations and also as a member of the advertising agency, N.W. Ayer & Sons.



Each episode of Dark Fantasy was a complete story in itself with no recurring characters. The cast was composed of WKY staff members and additional Oklahoma City talent. Ben Morris and Eleanor Naylor Caughron were most often heard in leading roles. Charles Carshon and Alf Daniels filled in on occasion for Ben Morris, while Georgianna Cook and Erma Rae did likewise for Mrs. Caughron. Of special note is the appearance of stage and screen star Jane Wyatt in "Debt of the Past" (January 16, 1942). On that day, Miss Wyatt was one of the headliners in Oklahoma City's Mile-o-Dimes campaign festivities to combat infantile paralysis.

The supporting players on Dark Fantasy were: Minnie Jo Curtis, Muir Hite (also specialist in animal imitations), WKY Traffic Manager Daryl McAllister (also the resident sound effects expert), Fred Wayne, Eugene Francis, Murillo Schofield, Garland Moss, George Ande, Bloyce Wright and Don Stolz, who, at age 93 is the owner (for over sixty years) of the one of America's most prominent entertainment facilities, The Old Log Theater in Excelsior, Minnesota. Additional members comprising the production staff for Dark Fantasy included: Charles Purnell and Doug Fleming sound effects artists, and Ken Wright providing mysterious music on the Kilgen Organ. Keith Painton announced the first five episodes with Tom Paxton carrying those duties for most of the remainder of the series.



The cast of "Dark Fantasy" courts multiple disaster while preparing its thirteenth broadcast for Friday the thirteenth.

Cast of *Dark Fantasy* defying superstition for the program's 13th episode, "W is for Werewolf" to be aired Friday, February 13th. L-R: animal imitator Muir Hite chasing cat, under the ladder producer John I. Prosser overseeing author Scott Bishop, and on ladder, sound man Charles Parnell and actress Eleanor Naylor Caughron. Photo from the February 13, 1942 issue of *The Daily Oklahoman*. Used with permission of The Oklahoma Publishing Company.

At its inception, *Dark Fantasy* was promoted as being the first dramatic series to be aired in the history of the NBC-Red Network which had not originated at The Big Three (New York, Chicago, Hollywood). Oops, someone needed to review the logs as recently as the previous spring to discover that WTIC (Hartford, Connecticut) aired its Guy Hedlund Players in a 13-week Saturday afternoon series, 2:30 pm on WKY.

Notwithstanding, WKY was no novice in originating network programs of a musical variety. Since January 21, 1939 when *Southwestern Stars* debuted on the NBC-Blue (two months later switched to the Red) the station produced five additional Red Network programs: *Cameos of Melody*, *Southwestern Serenade*, *Summertime Swing*, *Campfire Embers* and *Southern Rivers*. Most of these commenced as local productions later achieving national status.

As previously mentioned, the initial network performance of *Dark Fantasy* was November 14, 1941. Definitive sources providing confirmation are the NBC Master and Traffic Books for Station WEAf from the NBC Collection at The Library of Congress. These logs are an astute documentation of the actual programs aired on any given day while also indicating which stations or group of stations carried the programs. For most days, the Traffic Books provided an episode title, while a few included a copy of the script stamped 'Approved for Broadcast.' These are not to be confused with the corrected 'As Broadcast' copies of the scripts.

Depending upon which announcer was assigned to the New York Studios for that particular evening, one might even find a cast member or two, but most often no extra tidbits of information. Alternatively, press releases provided to newspapers by the network indicated what was planned to be broadcast for a given day, usually seven to ten days in advance. Some newspapers did not include radio program listings past midnight, while others provided a complete, though less detailed log. A good example of this latter group is *The New York Times*. The name, *Dark Fantasy* or simply an episode title did not appear in the listings until January 23, 1942, the tenth episode. However, several other New York City newspapers listed *Dark Fantasy* throughout its entire run. It behooves all OTR researchers to check multiple sources and verify information. It is unknown how the myth started that *Dark Fantasy* did not achieve network status until January 2, 1942. Finally, this myth has been debunked.

Following the close of the network run on June 19, 1942, WKY announced in the trade publication *Radio Daily* that it was offering the entire series on a syndicated basis to local stations, ad agencies and potential sponsors. This offer was repeated in 1943. A one-time listing (October 20, 1942) in *The Hutchinson, Kansas News* suggests that *Dark Fantasy* may have been aired. Additional research is warranted.

From February 17, 1944 to April 12, 1944, a new, nine-week local series of the program was produced by WKY. Other than titles of two episodes (different from the original series) and the identity of the production team of Prosser and Bishop, little has been unearthed regarding this intriguing chapter of the *Dark Fantasy* saga.

Although broadcast logs of *Dark Fantasy* may be found in an assortment of [dealer](#) catalogues, on various websites and in reference tomes, these are fraught with erroneous information which is the result of limited research and data repetition. In conjunction with these sources, the following list of additional material has been scoured: Traffic and Master Books, recordings and label information from transcription discs, and press releases from the NBC Collections, The Library of Congress and a plethora of newspaper and trade periodicals.

As mentioned in Part I, "The Man Who Came Back" the story of a murder victim who returns to haunt his killer, was likely an audition for *Dark Fantasy* as aired on WKY, Wednesday,

October 22, 1941. This occurrence conflicts to what is stated in the April 16, 1942 NBC Press Release which indicated that [the program](#)'s idea was borne November 3, 1941. It is currently unknown when the title "Dark Fantasy" was coined, but the premise for the program had been percolating in the brain of Scott Bishop for many years.

The thirty minute "audition" was repeated to accommodate a 25-minute format for the network series which commenced Friday, November 14, 1941 at 11:30 pm Central Time. This immediately followed another WKY production, *Southern Rivers* which had been on the network for the past six weeks. *Southern Rivers* aired from 11:05 pm (or 11:15 pm depending upon the date) until 11:30 pm. The five minute segments preceding this program and following *Dark Fantasy* were devoted to news broadcasts.

We will see shortly the importance of news and its impact on the scheduling of *Dark Fantasy*. An extremely favorable review in the December 3, 1941 issue of *Variety* not only enforces the concept that *Dark Fantasy* did indeed air coast-to-coast from its inception, it also provides a snapshot of one of the four [episodes](#) in the series that lack extant audio and script information. Instead of repeating the cast list to conclude his review, this author wonders why Hobe Morrison did not cite the names of the [organist](#), sound effects artists, engineers or others associated with the program to which he had given such high praise.

To assemble a plot synopsis, information was also gleaned from the program's index cards in the NBC Collections and the closing narrative from the preceding episode "The Man Who Came Back." Thus, the second episode "The Soul of Shan-Hi-Wan" (November 21, 1941), a tale of the tombs of ancient China, featured the adventures that befell a young couple who acquired in San Francisco, a small brass idol with the inscription "Possess Me and Die," in which they nearly fulfill the prophesy. Further intrigue into the episode is garnered following the perusal of the NBC Master Books. WEAf announcer Bill Abernathy wrote... Story of "The Cat Woman"... above the episode's title on the program page. Did this script borrow from "Catwife" of *Lights Out*?



"The Soul of Shan-Hi-Wan" was one of the titles written by Scott Bishop (under the Hamaker byline) and Richard Breen for a four-week series on WKY entitled *Tales of The Witch-Queen* broadcast during November and December 1940. This program featured a single week-long

story heard in daily (Mon-Fri) 15-minute episodes. It would be most interesting to compare this 75-minute version to its truncated *Dark Fantasy* counterpart.

Another script recycled from *Tales of The Witch-Queen* was "The Thing from the Sea" aired as Episode #3 of *Dark Fantasy* on November 28, 1941. Hollywood moguls aboard a yacht rediscover a mythical island called Ebaan and its ancient inhabitants whose spirits have the ability to enter the bodies of other persons. Episode #4, "The Demon Tree" (December 5, 1941) was based on the legend of The Strangling Oak of Nannau Woods near London, England. The experiences of a group who enter the forest will be with them as long as they live. This was yet another story which was previously broadcast on *Tales of The Witch-Queen* with the varied title, "The Ghost of Gobarow Forest."

"Men Call Me Mad" was originally slated for December 12, 1941 but was pre-empted for a War news report by John Vandercook. According to the most definitive source available-NBC Traffic and Master Books- an NBC orchestra performed between 12:30 and 12:50 am with Vandercook on as of 12:50 am. "Men Call Me Mad," story of a scientist who travels between universes was subsequently aired the following week on December 19th. On this date, both *The Daily Oklahoman* and *The Oklahoma City Times* heralded the return after a one-week lapse of WKY's prestige program.

So what had been originally scheduled for December 19th? Many newspapers failed to list the corrected titles and thus through this minor oversight, we gain the title of what was probably one of the most fascinating tales of the series. An adaptation of the First World War story, "Three Lines of Old French" by Abraham Merritt told the hardships of a French surgeon and the mystifying death of one of his patients. Why was this not bumped up a week to December 26th?

With the entry of the US into World War II, the radio networks had instituted a policy of tempering war themes from their dramatic programs lest the public believe they were actual events. WKY listeners did have the opportunity to hear at least one version of this story as it was aired as a special Armistice Day broadcast on November 11, 1940. "The Headless Dead," a gruesome tale from the annals of The Tower of London was the purported title for December 26th. However, this was replaced by "The House of Bread," the chronicles of Scott Bishop's fantastic worldwide sojourn as the result of a dream. Incidentally, Ben Morris was cast as Scott Bishop.

The Holiday theme continued with "Resolution, 1841" on January 2, 1942 featuring the fulfillment of a century-old promise and its role in the lives of two couples. The discovery of prehistoric human bones results in terrible consequences for a scientist in "The Curse of the Neanderthal" on January 9, 1942. Guest star Jane Wyatt on January 16th, played the role of a woman valiantly determined to ascertain the seemingly outdated practices and appearances of her desperately and newly acquired employer in "Debt from the Past."

For the following week, the previously pre-empted tale, "The Headless Dead" was presented. This was a variation of the script previously used on *The Crime Patrol* series over WIBW in 1937. Voodoo, Black Magic and the thirst for money form the basis of "Death is a Savage

Deity" (January 30, 1942). The ocean-adventure theme returns to *Dark Fantasy* on February 6th with the 12th episode, "The Sea Phantom," a search for a sunken treasure of gold.

A tropical island hosts the 13th episode on Friday, February 13th, entitled, "W is for Werewolf." Of special note is the cast photo which appeared in *The Daily Oklahoman* promoting this story. The inclusion of two members of the superstition-defying "cast" who are not included in the closing credits (but should have been), provides a clue to the identity of the wolf (animal imitator Muir Hite) and one of the sound effects artists (Charles Purnell) who otherwise would have not received the proper recognition.

For the episode of February 20th, an NBC Press Release indicated that "A Delicate Case of Murder" involving the spirit world was the first of six new episodes of *Dark Fantasy*. Apparently, the program had achieved enough status to warrant an extension of its initial 13-week run. An opera star keeps a date with a strange and mysterious madman in "Spawn of the Subhuman" (February 27, 1942). "The Man with the Scarlet Satchel" (March 6, 1942) tells the story of an engineering inventor who exacts revenge with a most unusual compound, modeling clay.

Another Friday the 13th episode "Superstition Be Hanged" follows the fate of a circus troupe and a white feather. America's first superhighway is the setting for a man out-of-the-past determined to resolve a conflict with a red-haired individual in "Pennsylvania Turnpike" heard on March 20, 1942. WKY organist Ken Wright's fascination with that infamous lost continent provides a grand idea which Scott Bishop developed into "Convoy for Atlantis" (March 27, 1942).

With Episode #20 on April 3rd, *Dark Fantasy* was once again granted a six-week extension. Concomitant with this extension came a new time as the program was now heard 25 minutes earlier at 11:05 pm (12:05 am, Eastern War Time). Listeners were treated to a terrifying thriller featuring a downed airplane pilot and his plight with hungry leopards. The airplane also plays a vital role in "The Edge of The Shadow" (April 10, 1942) when a farmer's dream results in mayhem for all.

One of four *Dark Fantasy* episodes with no extant audio or complete script for review is Episode #22 "Karari" often cited incorrectly as "Curare." The only clue we have as to the plot, is the preview emoted by announcer Keith Painton (subbing for Tom Paxton) in the previous weeks broadcast. "... weird and pulse-pounding tale of terror called ..."Karari"...which relates how an angry witch doctor of the Ecuador jungle brews a bitter, deadly poison to use against a strange and heartless enemy..."

Unbeknownst to most, this episode was pre-empted in New York and much of the nation for a War news report by Martin Agronsky. However, it was broadcast and aired over WKY. Had it not aired on WKY, it's most likely that announcements in the local newspapers would have indicated such an occurrence for the following week's episode on April 24th as was divulged the previous December 19th for "Men Call Me Mad." Moreover, a great deal of publicity but curiously lacking plot details was afforded "The Screaming Skulls" broadcast on April 24,

1942, stated as the 23rd episode. Compounding the lack of a plot synopsis is the absence of extant audio and script.

"The Letter from Yesterday" (May 1, 1942) based on an actual event of a recently discovered "lost" mailbag relates the fate of two couples separated in time by decades. Sports enthusiasts applauded the golf tale "The Cup of Gold" (original title, "The Days of Gold") as presented on May 8, 1942 which involved a trophy, a murder and interplanetary travel.

Another chapter from *The Crime Patrol* anthology was "A Coffin for Two." The title of this haunted house adventure was changed to "Funeral Arrangements Completed" just prior to broadcast on May 15, 1942. This episode (#26) ushered in the third and final six-week extension of *Dark Fantasy*. "Dead Hands Reaching" (May 22, 1942) was featured in the May 16-22, 1942 issue of *Movie-Radio Guide*; promoted as "...one of the most unusual of all Dark Fantasy adventures..." A man's escape from a grim reality leads him to use a drug that results in dire consequences. The photos and accompanying story in *Movie-Radio Guide* provide a classic illustration of the editing of radio broadcasts, as the character Philip does not appear in the final script. This author wonders why an earlier issue of this periodical wasn't used to exploit the series. This would have been a timely and effective follow up to the brief mention in the magazine's "Letters" section as outlined in Part I of this essay.

To prevent his eternal damnation, the proverbial deal with the devil is contracted by a dead man in "Rendezvous with Satan" (May 29, 1942). Although the DigitalDeliToo website offers an interesting argument as to the potential pre-emption of this episode, all evidence gathered from those definitive sources indicates the contrary. The program was actually performed twice on that evening in the WKY studios. Commencing on May 29, 1942, *Dark Fantasy* was heard via the network 35 minutes earlier at 10:30 pm CWT. Local listeners however, tuned in WKY at the usual time, 11:05 pm. Sponsored programs on the network and on WKY prompted the new schedule. "I Am Your Brother" (June 5, 1942) relates the story of two men whose relationship spans an incredible 10,000 years.

The fourth episode from the aforementioned *Tales of The Witch-Queen* series was broadcast as *Dark Fantasy* Episode #30. Originally titled, "The Deathmaker of Shillingham Road" the episode was heard as "The Sleeping Death" on June 12, 1942. It is the ominous story of a mad surgeon seeking brutal revenge on those he believes cost him a brilliant career.

Fans can only speculate as to the conclusion of this story as only the first half audio is extant. This is not the sole ramification of this "incomplete" episode, as we are denied a preview of the final network tale of the series, June 19, 1942. Most, if not all logs indicate that "Seance" occupies this slot. However, this is incorrect. Even with a purported 17-minute segment extant, a inquiry by this author on the online OTR Digest resulted in not one response for the explanation as to the origin of this audio. Moreover, the recording is an exact duplication from another extant episode "A Delicate Case of Murder."

An NBC press release of June 9, 1942 indicated that *Dark Fantasy* was to fade from the airwaves following the broadcast of the 31st original tale, "The Hearse with the Broken Wheel," which told the story of Simon Gray extraordinary undertaker. Most illuminating

however, is that this was not the episode that was chosen for the finale. Okay, you exclaim, then what was? Fans were delighted to a live repeat performance of one of the series best episodes, "The Demon Tree." Once again, a definitive source, the NBC Master Books supply the only solution. It remains unknown how "The Demon Tree" was chosen for this distinct honor. This author encourages all OTR dealers to remove "Seance" from their respective catalogues.

The exact composition of the 1942-43 and 1943-44 syndicated offerings remain to be elucidated. These series along with the local 1944 production present numerous opportunities for further research. Only two of seven titles of the local series have been identified. "Death Conducts an Experiment" which relates a college girl's love for a man who doesn't exist, was broadcast on March 1, 1944. The episode of March 29, 1944 was the eerie "Dig Another Grave."

Exploring the intricacies of the horror and terror of *Dark Fantasy* must await yet another issue of Radio Recall. Those readers who wish to share their passion for the superb program are encouraged to contact this author either via email: bluecar91@hotmail.com or USPS: Box 1031, Sandston, VA 23150.