

# **Inside Scientology**

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*The Story of America's Most  
Secretive Religion*

Janet Reitman

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*For my father, and for Lee  
with love...*

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# Introduction

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## *The World's Fastest-Growing Religion*

THE LIMESTONE AND granite Church of Scientology in midtown Manhattan is located just northwest of Times Square, at 227 West 46th Street. Blending in seamlessly amid Broadway theaters, restaurants, and hotels, the place is very easy to miss, though it is seven stories tall and marked with a large metal awning proclaiming SCIENTOLOGY in gold letters. At various times during the year, clusters of attractive young men and women are posted on nearby street corners, where they offer free "stress tests" or hand out fliers. Ranging in age from the late teens to the early twenties, they are dressed as conservatively as young bank executives.

On a hot July morning several years ago, I was approached by one of these clear-eyed young men. "Hi!" he said, with a smile. "Do you have a minute?" He introduced himself as Emmett. "We're showing a film down the street," he said, casually pulling a glossy, postcard-sized flier from the stack he held in his hand. "It's about Dianetics—ever heard of it?"

I looked at the handout, which featured a large, exploding volcano, instantly familiar from the Dianetics commercials that played on local television stations when I was a teenager. The flier, which invited me to come and see the free introductory film ("Showing Now! Bring Your Friends!"), proclaimed that *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* was "the most popular book on the mind ever written" and a bestseller for over fifty years, with "over 25 million copies in circulation in 50 languages on Earth."

"Okay," I said.

"Great!" A huge grin spread across Emmett's face. He escorted me across the street.

Inside the church, two young women in long skirts stood by the reception desk. Like Emmett, they seemed to be about twenty, had blond hair, and looked freshly scrubbed, reminding me of Mormon missionaries. They led me down a set of marble steps, and we entered the main lobby, a large glossy space with lighting that bathed everything in a pinkish-golden glow. Aside from my guides and me, it was completely empty.

The room appeared to be set up as a Scientology museum. Books by Scientology's founder L. Ron Hubbard—more than fifty of them—lined the walls, as did black-and-white photos of the man, all presenting him as a robust patriarch with graying sideburns and a benevolent smile, dressed in a sport jacket and ascot.

But far more prominent than Hubbard was Tom Cruise. Projected on a large video panel, his image dominated the space: earnest, handsome, dressed in a black turtleneck, looking directly into a camera and apparently giving a testimonial to the faith. What Cruise was actually saying, however, I couldn't tell. His words were almost completely drowned out by the sound of myriad other videos playing simultaneously nearby. The Church of Scientology, unlike other houses of worship, did not invite somber reflection on its beliefs but rather offered a technological wonderland: music videos promoting the group's Youth for Human Rights campaign played alongside infomercials extolling the wonders of Dianetics, which appeared alongside videos and documentary-style reports on the great

work of Scientology's "volunteer ministers" at Ground Zero, which played next to a video of Tom Cruise receiving an award for outstanding service.

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I was escorted into a small screening room to watch the free introductory film. This turned out to be a high-quality, rather long infomercial featuring a cast of ostensibly real people who explained how Dianetics had changed their lives and improved their health dramatically, curing them of ailments ranging from brain cancer to depression. It was fifteen minutes of fantastic and totally outlandish claims, and yet each testimonial was presented in such a reasonable way that in spite of myself, I felt a kind of hopeful.

After the film, a woman came into the screening room and told me that she'd like me to fill out a questionnaire. Laurie, as she introduced herself, was a matronly woman of about fifty. She began her pitch gently. "Tell me about yourself," she said. "What made you interested in Scientology?"

Over the next hour or so, Laurie asked me a series of questions: Was I married? Was I happy? What were my goals? Did I feel like I was living up to my potential? She exuded warmth and was resolutely nonaggressive. And to my amazement, I began to open up to her, telling her about my relationship with my boyfriend and my desire to quit smoking.

In response, Laurie delivered a soft sell for Scientology's "introductory package": a four-hour seminar and twelve hours of Dianetics auditing, a form of counseling that cost \$50. "You don't have to do it," Laurie said. "It's just something I get the feeling might help you." She patted my arm.

Laurie also had me take the two-hundred-question Oxford Capacity Analysis, Scientology's well-known personality test, which poses such questions as "Do you often sing or whistle just for the fun of it?" and "Do you sometimes feel that your age is against you (too young or too old)?" After looking at my test, Laurie told me that I had "blocks" in communication but was basically confident, though I did seem to suffer from nonspecific anxiety. "These are *all* things we can help you with," she said, and smiled. "It's really such a good thing you came in," she added, as she took my credit card. "You'll see."

On Monday, I returned to the church to begin my \$50 package. My partner in auditing was named David. Sitting down across from me, he asked me to "relive" a moment of physical pain. "Don't choose something that's too stressful," he suggested.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, but try as I might, I could not relive much of anything. After fifteen minutes, I gave up.

Waiting just outside the room was Jane, a Scientology registrar who told me she was now handling my "case." A redhead dressed in jeans and a lightweight blouse, she asked me how it went. "I'm not sure this is for me," I told her.

"A lot of people feel that way when they first start auditing; it's not unusual," Jane said soothingly, all the while steering me away from the exit. She walked me down a long hall and into her office, where, on her desk, lay the results of my personality test. Jane studied them a bit. "What you need is something more personal," she said. She suggested Life Repair, a \$2,000 package of one-on-one private auditing sessions, which she said would help me handle my everyday problems. Then, after I finished Life Repair, which could take a month or so, I could get right to The Bridge to Total Freedom, which, Jane explained, was how people really made gains, or had "wins," as she called them.

"How much do you think people spend on psychotherapy?" Jane asked me. I replied that it varied in New York, \$150-\$250 could be standard for a forty-five-minute session. Auditing, she said, was much cheaper. Auditing sessions were sold in 12.5-hour blocks, known as intensives; one intensive, she said, cost \$750—half the price of therapy, hour for hour. "It's worth it, I promise you," she said.

"I'll think about it," I told her.

Jane seemed disappointed. "We should get you going as soon as possible," she said. "I really want you to have a win."

Scientology—the term means "the study of truth"—calls itself the "fastest-growing religion in the world." Born in 1954, the group now claims millions of members in 165 different countries and eighty-five hundred Scientology churches, missions, and outreach groups across the globe. Its holdings, which include real estate on several continents, are widely assumed to be worth billions of dollars. Its missionaries, known as "volunteer ministers," tour the developing world and are sent, en masse, to deliver aid in familiar disaster zones such as earthquake-ravaged Port-au-Prince or New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Wherever large groups of people are circulating—in city centers, on street corners, in subway stations, at shopping malls, and on college campuses—you can find Scientologists offering free "stress tests" and distributing leaflets. Like members of another homegrown American faith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Scientologists live in virtually every major city in America and in numerous smaller cities and suburbs as well; they can be found in every age group and vocation. Each year, according to the church's estimates, fifty to sixty thousand people sign up for a Scientology course or buy a book about the faith for the first time.

Take a look at these statistics, and you might easily assume that Scientology is one of the most successful new religious movements in America. Certainly it is among the most recognizable, thanks to its most famous, not to mention outspoken, member, Tom Cruise. The creation of the late science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology is considered by some academics within the field of comparative religion to be one of the most significant faiths born in the past century. But type the word *Scientology* into Google, and it becomes immediately clear that it is also America's most controversial religion. It has been referred to as a "cult," a "dangerous cult," and an "evil cult." There are websites declaring that "Scientology kills" and "Scientology lies." Others are dedicated to exposing Scientology's "secret documents," its "secret teachings," and "what Scientology won't tell you." On message boards, former members post stories about their "escape" from the Church of Scientology, their "recovery" from the Church of Scientology, and their "life after" Scientology. It is a church that, over the past fifty years, has been the subject of more than half a dozen wide-scale government investigations around the world, and thousands of lawsuits, many of which center on its controversial doctrine and practices. Scientology, as its critics point out, is unlike any other Western religion in that it withholds key aspects of its central theology from all but its most exalted followers. This would be akin to the Catholic Church telling only a select number of the faithful that Jesus Christ died for their sins.

Whether or not Scientology *is* a religion is a matter of enduring debate. In Germany, where the church has been described as a "totalitarian" organization, Scientology has been roundly condemned as a cult, and its members have been barred from holding public office or even joining some political

parties. In Great Britain, Scientology is also viewed as something other than a religion, but it is nonetheless protected by a statute that criminalizes hate speech and threatening actions directed against religious groups (in May 2008, for example, a fifteen-year-old boy was arrested in London for holding a picket sign denouncing Scientology). Australia banned the practice of Scientology in the 1960s but reversed this decision and recognized it as a religion in 1983; yet one outspoken member of the Australian government, Senator Nick Xenophon, has denounced Scientology as a "criminal organization." The French Church of Scientology has been under investigation for more than a decade. In October 2009, a French court found Scientology guilty of fraud and imposed a fine of nearly a million dollars. But the judge stopped short of banning Scientology from France, as the prosecution had requested. Scientology celebrated this decision as a victory. "I don't think that's going to have an lasting impact," the former inspector general of the Church of Scientology, Marty Rathbun, told a Canadian radio interviewer, in response to the verdict. The fine, he explained, was "like chump change" to the church.

The United States, where Scientology was born and where a majority of Scientologists live, has legitimized Scientology as a religion and granted it all of the legal protections that such a status confers, including tax exemption. But within the church itself, Scientology is usually defined as an "applied religious philosophy"—a "spiritual science" offering practical solutions to the problems of everyday life. Within every individual, it asserts, is a happier, purer, better self—a "perfect" self—waiting to be realized. Scientology claims that this idealized self can be realized today, in real time, and what's more, that this self can be godlike, immortal, and marked by supernatural powers. The traditional religious bedrock—worship, God, love and compassion, even the very concept of faith—is wholly absent from its precepts. And, unique among modern religions, Scientology charges members for every service, book, and course offered, promising greater and greater spiritual enlightenment with every dollar spent. People don't "believe" in Scientology; they buy into it.

This is a story about a global spiritual enterprise that trades in a product called "spiritual freedom." It is, on many levels, a story about the buying and selling of self-betterment: an elusive but essentially American concept that has never been more in demand than it is today. As far back as the mid-nineteenth century, when a New England hypnotist named Phineas Quimby popularized a form of healing he called "mind cure," Americans have yearned for a quick fix for their physical, psychological, and spiritual imperfections. The Church of Scientology is a shape-shifting and powerful organization that promises that fix.

The Scientologists you will read about in these pages are members, or former members, of a wealthy and mysterious organization whose goal, like that of most religions, is to improve human society. The church also aspires to greatly increase its global footprint and, finally, to make money, though members will never say this specifically. Rather, if you were to ask, they would tell you that they want to "clear the planet"—to remove, in a literal sense, the stain of war, insanity, and disease from the world—which, like all worthwhile endeavors, comes at a cost.

The church claims that more than half of its members were introduced to Scientology through family or friends. Indeed, at this point in its development, many current members are second- or even third-generation Scientologists. For example, the actress Priscilla Presley, who joined Scientology in

the 1970s, raised her daughter, Lisa Marie, in the church; the British writer and graphic novelist Neil Gaiman, who currently maintains that he is not a practicing Scientologist, was nonetheless brought up in Scientology, at the church's worldwide headquarters. Other famous second-generation Scientologists include the actors Juliette Lewis, Elizabeth Moss, Giovanni Ribisi, and Danny Masterson, who introduced the faith to his girlfriend, the model Bijou Phillips, and to his former costar on *That Seventies Show*, Lauren Prepon. Sky Dayton, the founder of Earthlink, one of the first Internet service providers, also grew up in Scientology, as did the church's current spokesman, Tommy Davis, the son of the actress and longtime Scientologist Anne Archer.

But the vast majority of Scientologists are people you have never heard of. Many work in various parts of the entertainment industry, but still more of them write, teach, create art, build houses, trade stock, manage hedge funds, own businesses, and invent new forms of technology. They run schools and drug rehabilitation programs, work in prisons and inner cities, and lobby Congress and federal regulators. Roughly a quarter of them, according to church figures, were raised Catholic, another quarter Protestant; the rest come from Jewish, Mormon, Hindu, and even Muslim backgrounds. As for education, some Scientologists hold professional or advanced degrees; others are high school graduates; some never finished school.

What unites all of these individual Scientologists is a belief in their inherent spiritual imperfection, which can be rectified—if not totally reversed—only through intense study of, and rigid adherence to, the teachings of a single man: Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard. Though he has been dead some twenty years, Hubbard's followers regard him as a living, vital entity—a personal Jesus of sorts. They refer to him, often in the present tense, as LRH or Ron, as if he were a friend. Hubbard's writings are known as "technology" or "tech" and are considered infallible doctrine. "If it isn't written, it isn't true," Hubbard once said. For a Scientologist to question the efficacy of anything Hubbard wrote is to question the very foundations of his or her belief.

Right now, church officials claim, Scientology is experiencing unprecedented expansion, its worldwide membership "growing faster now than at any time in its history." This is a claim the organization has made for many years. And to be sure, Scientology has expanded its reach in the developing world, where the church is opening missions in such far-flung locales as Kazakhstan. As a corporation, the Church of Scientology owns tremendous quantities of real estate virtually everywhere, for which it paid cash. Its holdings include a 55-acre Georgian estate in Sussex, England; a 64,000-square-foot medieval-style castle and resort in South Africa; more than a dozen architectural landmarks in the United States and Europe; and a cruise ship. Since 2004, the church has purchased seventy buildings in cities around the world, many of them faded gems that have been meticulously restored.

Some observers of the movement, however, contend that Scientology's new churches front an organization that is on the decline. In 2001, a survey conducted by the City University of New York found only fifty-five thousand people in the United States who claimed to be Scientologists; in 2008, a similar survey conducted by researchers at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, determined that there might be only twenty-five thousand American Scientologists. And, even allowing for a significant margin of error, these figures fall in the same range as another measure of the movement's numbers: the International Association of Scientologists, to which virtually all dedicated Scientologists belong, reportedly has just forty thousand members. At most, experts say, there are probably no more than a quarter of a million practicing Scientologists in the world today.

But discerning what is true about the Church of Scientology is a challenge. Since it was granted tax-exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service in 1993, Scientology has not released any public information about its membership or finances. The church also has earned a reputation for harassing former church insiders and squelching critics through litigation. Those critics, who comprise an ever-growing network of ex-Scientologists (or "apostates," in church parlance), academics, and independent free-speech and human-rights activists, have fought back in recent years by blogging and posting a significant amount of information on the Internet: scans of controversial memos, photographs, legal briefs, and depositions, as well as written testimony and videotaped interviews with disillusioned former members, including some who were its highest-ranking officials. All paint the church in a negative light; some consider it abusive.

My own reporting on Scientology began in the summer of 2005, with an article for *Rolling Stone*. It was inspired, as were many of the pieces on the church assigned during that year, by Tom Cruise—more specifically, by the recent emergence of Tom Cruise as Scientology's most ardent proselytizer. This was a new role for the actor, who, until 2004, had been fiercely private about his faith, insisting that journalists stay off the topic entirely during interviews.

That was the news hook that first piqued my interest in Scientology. What sustained it was curiosity about a church that, for all of its notoriety, has remained America's least understood new faith, and seemingly an indelible one. The past fifty-odd years have seen the birth of dozens of religions; many have come and gone without a trace. The Church of Scientology has endured decades of scandal, litigation, government inquiry, exodus, street protest, and blistering media exposés in high-visibility venues such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*,\* and CNN. But unlike many alternative religions, it has not died, or gone underground, or fled overseas. It has persevered.

And yet, for virtually all of its history, Scientology has maintained an aura of mystery. This holds true even today, when the church is in some ways more accessible than ever. Since 2009, the Church of Scientology has significantly upgraded its online presence, creating, for example, a flashy new website to explain its beliefs and its connection to other religions and philosophies; it even offers a virtual tour of a Scientology organization. A separate Scientology video channel presents scores of testimonials to Scientology's effectiveness in handling life's problems, as well as slick advertisements featuring hip-looking young people promoting such themes as "life" and "purpose." In a recent online ad, "An Invitation to Freedom," a multiracial assortment of college-age men and women, standing atop skyscrapers, along beaches, and on oceanside cliffs, reach toward the sunrise. "You," proclaims one pretty girl, "are a spirit." "You are your own soul," the narration continues. "You are not mortal. You can be free."

It's not a bad pitch, immortality. And yet the ads stop short of precise explanation. This is a central problem and in some ways the central genius of Scientology's presentation of its message. It is a church that deals in generalities: freedom, truth, immortality. Problems crop up when interested parties try to pin down the specifics. Scientology has always been hostile to serious journalistic inquiry and independent peer or academic review, and indeed has been so covetous of its doctrine that it has gone to court to keep its most exclusive teachings out of the public domain. The writer James F. Lewis, a philosophy professor and an expert in New Age and other new religious groups, has called

Scientology "the most persistently controversial of all contemporary new religious movements." Even today, with much of Scientology's doctrine freely available on the Internet, many academics, well aware of Scientology's reputation for defensiveness, have avoided the subject entirely; the same has often held true for many news organizations. This situation has allowed Scientology, for good or for ill, to remain relatively inscrutable. It has also made understanding Scientology, in any meaningful and balanced way, almost impossible.

This book, the culmination of a five-year journey, sets out to provide that understanding. It has been my goal to write the first objective modern history of the Church of Scientology. Much of the current Scientology canon—a relatively slender list—consists of memoirs and histories penned by former Scientologists, and they present some credibility problems. These accounts, while compelling, contain information that is hard to verify, and they are palpably hostile toward the organization. To make things even more complicated, a number of former church insiders who've given sworn testimony against Scientology have later changed their stories after allegedly receiving payoffs or other incentives. The church itself, while more open to speaking with reporters in recent years, has always balked at truly meaningful dialogue. In one stunning example of this, the Scientology spokesman Tommy Davis in 2009 walked off the set during an interview on ABC's *Nightline* after the reporter Martin Bashir dared to ask him about a controversial aspect of church doctrine.

How then to write about the church? Perhaps the most credible source is L. Ron Hubbard himself, whose voluminous "tech" in many ways tells the unvarnished story of both his ideology and his organization. But to glean the truth of Hubbard's church, in all its permutations, requires that one learn its language—the lingua franca of Hubbard's world.

It is the goal of *Inside Scientology* to translate this language and separate myth from fact. My reporting is based on the reading of thousands of pages of Scientology doctrine, including many confidential papers and memos that have never before been made available, and on personal interviews and e-mail exchanges with roughly one hundred former and current Scientologists, ranging from well-known critics of Scientology to church loyalists who, before being interviewed for this book, had never spoken to a reporter. It also draws on my conversations with a number of academics on both sides of the ideological spectrum, and, crucially, my talks with Scientology officials. Early in my reporting, in an unexpected moment of openness, the church granted me unprecedented access to its officials, schools, social programs, and key religious headquarters. This yielded a rare, and at times wholly uncensored, view into one of the most exclusive, and elusive, communities in the world.

Scientology is a faith that is both mainstream and marginal. Known for its Hollywood members, it is run by a uniformed set of believers who rarely, if ever, appear in the public eye. It is an insular society—one that exists, to a large degree, as something of a parallel universe to the secular world, with its own nomenclature, ethical code, and, most daunting to those who break its rules, its own rigorously enforced justice system. As an American subculture, it has been described to me, many times, as a subculture within a subculture within a subculture, whose outer layers appear harmless and even appealing, but which hides an inner stratum that reeks of authoritarian control.

For the past five years, I have sought to understand Scientology: not to judge, but simply to absorb. What I have found defies expectations, and even definition.

# PART I

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# Chapter 1

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## The Founder

Adventure is the vitamizing element in histories, both individual and social ... Its adepts are rarely chaste, or merciful, or even lawabiding at all, and any moral peptonizing, or sugaring, takes out the interest, with the truth, of their lives. And so it is with all great characters.

—WILLIAM BOLITHO, *TWELVE AGAINST THE GODS*

WHATEVER ELSE MIGHT be said about Lafayette Ron Hubbard, he undoubtedly had a strange and unique genius. One of the most effective hucksters of his generation, he understood the common American yearning for self-transformation and exploited it by connecting this impulse to two of the great American passions of the twentieth century: science and religion. He would remove all that was fuzzi and imprecise about religion. He would discard all that was cold and inhuman about science. And he'd sell the results like soap. Some people think he was the greatest con man of his time. Others believe he was a savior.

As a young man, Hubbard was a prolific writer of science fiction and fantasy, as well as an amateur explorer, magician, and hypnotist. At the age of forty, he came up with an alternative to psychotherapy that he called Dianetics, wrote a best-selling book about it, and became famous. Within a year he lost everything. In 1952, he started over, reimagining Dianetics as a spiritual science he called Scientology. Over the course of the next thirty-five years, he would be a salesman, guru, sea commodore, spymaster, poet, recluse, tyrant, and, last but not least, a very rich man.

When Hubbard died in 1985, the world took note, but he remained a mystery. Hubbard's official biography, which has been rigorously promoted by the Church of Scientology, presents him as a modern-day Ulysses: a restless explorer and spiritual seeker whose youthful adventures led him to the far corners of the Orient, where he visited Buddhist lamaseries, befriended Manchurian warlords, and even lived for a time with bandits in the hills of Tibet. Significantly less glowing assessments of Hubbard can be found in a number of court transcripts, affidavits, and even some of Hubbard's own early writings, which present the founder of Scientology as a fabulist whose claims contained certain embellishments, together with, in many cases, outright fabrications.

Hubbard was born in Tilden, Nebraska, on March 13, 1911. His father, Harry Ross "Hub" Hubbard, served in the navy; when he was promoted to lieutenant in 1921, the Hubbards embarked on a life of perpetual motion, relocating almost yearly to posts in Guam, San Diego, Seattle and Bremerton in the state of Washington, and Washington, D.C. For Ron, an only child, it was an exciting but alienating way to spend his childhood, and loneliness would remain an issue throughout his life. "When I was very young, I was pathetically eager for a home," Hubbard wrote in the early 1940s.

The itinerant nature of Hubbard's childhood stimulated a lifelong love for adventure and also fueled what by any estimation was a particularly rich and detailed inner life. He grew up thrilling to the stories told by the men in his father's naval circles, and had particularly romantic notions of the sea, "a lovely, vicious lonely thing," as he conceived of it. A restless boy with an isolationist streak, he harbored dreams of commanding his own ship—though he had no intention of winding up like his

father, a naval supply officer who spent most of his career behind a desk. Harry Hubbard, as the journalist Russell Miller noted in his critical yet comprehensive biography of Hubbard, *Barefaced Messiah*, was "a deeply conservative plodder, a man ruled by routine and conformity." Ron Hubbard, by contrast, was a dreamer who saw himself as the hero of his own adventure story. Though his real-life exploits were limited—routine Boy Scout hikes\* and swimming expeditions were interspersed with a few exotic trips with one or both of his parents through the Panama Canal and eventually parts of Asia and the South Pacific—Hubbard viewed himself as a young Jack London; he penned swashbuckling accounts of his (greatly embellished) heroics in his journal, and later projected his fantasies onto fictional (and often, like him, redheaded) heroes: sailors, spies, pilots, soldiers of fortune. He had a sponge-like ability to absorb facts and details about the places he'd visited, no matter how briefly, and he wrote breezily, "as if he was a well-traveled man of the world," Miller noted, and "a carefree, two-fisted, knockabout adventurer," not the gawky, freckled teenager he actually was.

In 1929, Hubbard entered Swavely, a preparatory school in Manassas, Virginia, in anticipation of what his parents hoped would be his next step: the U.S. Naval Academy. But appointment to Annapolis was not to be—terrible at math, Hubbard failed that portion of his entrance exam and was also discovered to be nearsighted, instantly disqualifying him from becoming a cadet. Faced with life as a civilian, Hubbard enrolled at George Washington University in the fall of 1930 with a major in civil engineering. But while exceedingly bright, Hubbard was a diffident student and had no more interest in engineering than he'd had in mathematics.

Hubbard's destiny, he felt certain, lay in more exciting realms. Fascinated by the concept of "motorless flight," he'd earned a commercial glider pilot's license in 1931 and also learned how to fly a small stunt plane. That summer, he and a friend took off to "barnstorm" around the Midwest. It was a rather hapless adventure; the stunt plane, "which had a faculty for ground-looping at sixty miles an hour," Hubbard later said, by turns sank into mud, went off course, and nearly plowed into a fence. But it was a genuine adventure nonetheless. Hubbard returned to college that fall with a new self-coined nickname: L. Ron "Flash" Hubbard, "daredevil speed pilot and parachute artist."

The following summer, Hubbard chartered an aged four-mast schooner, intending to lead an expedition around the Caribbean in search of pirate treasure. He promoted the trip as a research and motion-picture voyage—he dubbed it the Caribbean Motion Picture Expedition. Placing an ad in local college newspapers for "adventurous young men with wanderlust," he managed to recruit some fifty other students to go with him, at the cost of \$250 per person. The trip was a bust: not only did the expedition fail to explore or film a single pirate haunt, but, plagued first by bad weather and then by financial difficulties, the men made it only as far as Martinique before the captain, who would later call the voyage "the worst trip I ever made," decided to turn back. Hubbard, however, maintained that the trip had been a great success, even telling his college newspaper that the *New York Times* had agreed to buy some of the group's photographs.\*

The ability to spin a setback as a triumph was a quality that would define Hubbard throughout his life. He was an immensely charming young man whose stories, while sometimes dubious, were often by virtue of his own salesmanship, utterly convincing. Garrulous, with self-deprecating humor and a ready wit, he attracted people like a magnet and made them believe in his dreams. What's more, he seemed to believe in them himself. A naval commander named Joseph Cheesman "Snake" Thompson had imparted to the youthful Hubbard a crucial bit of wisdom: "If it's not true for you, it's not true."

Hubbard took that as a motto. "If there is anyone in the world calculated to believe what he wants to believe," he later said, "it is I."

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By 1938, L. Ron Hubbard was twenty-seven years old, a tall, strapping young man with a head of thick, fiery red hair and one of those unforgettable faces: pale, long-nosed, a bit fleshy around the lip and frequently flushed—all of which, as one acquaintance noted, gave him "the look of a reincarnated Pan who'd been a bit too long on the ambrosia." But he also had tremendous self-confidence, which had served him well through the hardest years of the Great Depression. "I seem to have a sort of personal awareness which only begins to come alive when I begin to believe in a destiny," he wrote to his wife, Polly, a flying enthusiast he'd met on a Maryland airfield in 1932 and married the following year.

Hubbard had dropped out of college in 1932, having spent two unimpressive years there. With neither a job nor a college degree, he tried his hand at freelance journalism but soon gave it up for mass-market fiction, action-packed stories that constituted one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the 1930s—a precursor, in many ways, to TV. Published in cheap, dime-store magazines known as "pulp," the narratives generally featured hearty, adventurous men who'd fly spy missions over occupied Germany, engage in battle on the high seas, or romance weak-kneed women held captive in enemy forts—a perfect format, in other words, for Hubbard to express his own lusty sensibilities.

Within a year of embarking on this career, he'd found success, largely due to his journeyman's approach. Tremendously prolific, he wrote westerns, detective stories, adventure tales, and mysteries churning out thousands of words every day and sending his stories, one after another, to New York City publishers. This entrepreneurial spirit seemed at odds with Hubbard's more fanciful, decidedly impractical side. But Hubbard was an interesting paradox: a man who not only dreamed improbably large, but also recognized the bottom line. "My writing is not a game," he wrote in an essay entitled "The Manuscript Factory" in 1936. "It is a business, a hardheaded enterprise which fails only when I fail."

There were roughly three hundred pulp fiction writers in New York during the 1930s, and most, not all of them, knew of L. Ron Hubbard. He'd emerged on the scene in 1934 and joined the American Fiction Guild, which counted numerous pulp fiction writers as members. Every week, a number of guild members would meet for lunch at a midtown cafeteria, where Hubbard, a night owl who wrote frenzied bursts and thought nothing of interrupting a colleague's sleep to discuss a story, or some other revelation, soon developed a reputation as a champion raconteur. In his memoir *The Pulp Jungle*, Frank Gruber, a writer of western and detective stories, recalled one New York get-together during which Hubbard, then twenty-three, regaled a group of writers with tales of his adventure-filled life. Fascinated, Gruber took notes. "He had been in the United States Marines for seven years, he had been an explorer on the upper Amazon for four years, he'd been a white hunter in Africa for three years ... After listening for a couple of hours, I said, 'Ron, you're eighty-four years old, aren't you?'"

It was a joke, but Hubbard, as Gruber recalled, "blew his stack." Most pulp fiction writers told tall tales—virtually everyone in the New York pulp world had a story, usually wholly made-up—but Hubbard regarded his own as gospel truth. His tall tales were part of his image, a self-created

mythology that made him just as much a product of his imagination as his stories were. This seemed to suit his editors just fine. Beleaguered by the Depression, Americans were looking for heroes, and the editors of magazines like *Thrilling Wonder Stories* or *Adventure* were all too happy to publish the work of "one of aviation's most distinguished hell raisers," as Hubbard was described in one magazine; it went on to state that Hubbard, at various times in his life, had been a "Top Sergeant in the Marines, radio crooner, newspaper reporter, gold miner in the West Indies, and movie director—explorer."

But Hubbard's efforts did not transfer into monetary success: the average pulp fiction writer earned just a penny per word, and even the most prolific among them often found it hard to make a living. Hoping to break into the far more lucrative business of screenwriting, Hubbard moved to Hollywood in 1935 but produced just one script, an adaptation of his story "The Secret of Treasure Island," which was purchased as a Saturday morning serial by Columbia Pictures. In 1936, Hubbard moved with Polly and their two young children, L. Ron Hubbard Jr., known as "Nibs," and Katherine, to South Colby, Washington, near Hubbard's parents. There, Hubbard set out to work on a novel.

He also studied the world of popular advertising and at one point in the 1930s wrote a long letter to the head of Kellogg's Foods, proposing his ideas for new, more artistic packaging for breakfast cereal. He suggested that the lyrics to popular ballads, accompanied by watercolor pictures, be printed on cereal boxes; even short illustrated stories might be published on them. These innovations could, he believed, have a profound effect, making a functional box not only decorative but also a symbol of positive cultural values. "Corn flakes could, in no better way, become synonymous for bravery and gallantry," Hubbard wrote. Kellogg's didn't respond—though in later years some of these ideas would, in fact, find their way onto cereal boxes.

Hubbard remained undeterred. "I have high hopes of smashing my name into history so violently that it will take a legendary form," he told Polly. "That goal is the real goal as far as I am concerned."

By 1939, L. Ron Hubbard had tired of writing western and adventure stories, and his screenwriting efforts had failed. He was looking for a new challenge and found it in an unexpected genre: science fiction. Until the late 1930s, science fiction had been one of the more obscure areas of the pulp market, dominated by hackneyed stories of alien invaders and bug-eyed monsters. This changed, however, with the ascension of John W. Campbell to editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, the most popular science fiction magazine of the day. A fast-talking, chain-smoking, twenty-eight-year-old graduate of Duke University, Campbell saw science fiction as a metaphor, and under his exacting eye, the genre was radically transformed. Gone were the stock characters and formulaic plots. Campbell wanted fictional stories whose characters seemed human and whose plots reflected actual scientific discovery. He required that his writers gain a detailed knowledge of science and didn't hesitate to correct them if they were wrong.

Out of Campbell's vision came science fiction's golden age, during which some of the great technological advances of the future were first anticipated. Robert Heinlein, for example, wrote of waterbeds, moving sidewalks, moon landings, and the coming space race. Arthur C. Clarke predicted the birth of telecommunications satellites. Jack Williamson invented the term *genetic engineering* and, in the early 1940s, also explored the concept of anti-matter, a realm of physics that would not be

fully realized until the advent of the particle accelerator in 1954. The moon landing, space shuttles, high-powered weapons, satellites, robotics, automated surveillance systems—all were predicted by science fiction writers informed by the scientific theories and developments of the day. *Astounding* brought these two worlds together. "We were all exploring possible human futures—most of them still seeming splendid in those years before the [atomic] bomb," said Jack Williamson, who began writing for *Astounding* in 1939. Though they still made only a penny a word, writing for Campbell meant membership in a "gifted crew as important as the money," said Williamson. "The best stories in the competing magazines were often his rejects."

L. Ron Hubbard did not fit Campbell's idea of a science fiction writer. He had a rudimentary understanding of science and engineering, but he lacked the rigorous scientific grounding possessed by writers such as Heinlein or Isaac Asimov, a Columbia University—educated biochemist. But Hubbard did have tremendous intellectual curiosity and research skills—"Given one slim fact for a background, I have found it easy to take off down the channel of research and canal-boat out a cargo of stories," he once wrote—and he was fascinated by such themes as psychic phenomena and psychological control, which Campbell also found intriguing.

After assigning Hubbard a story for *Astounding's* sister publication, *Unknown*, Campbell soon began to nurture Hubbard's talent as a fantasy writer. The heroes of his stories tended to reflect one of two distinct archetypes. One was the shy, wimpy, bookish sort who, through magic of his own or some other supernatural power, is transported to an alternate, somewhat parallel, universe, where he is transformed into a roguish adventurer. The other was the solitary loner type, hugely self-driven, often with autocratic leanings. "Some thought him a Fascist because of the authoritarian tone of certain stories," recalled the science fiction writer L. Sprague De Camp, who also remembered that Hubbard was careful not to admit to having any political ideology. "He gave wildly different impressions of himself ... One science fiction writer, then an idealistic left-liberal, was convinced that Hubbard had profound liberal convictions. To others, Hubbard expressed withering disdain for politics and politicians." When asked whether he would fight in World War II, Hubbard balked. "Me? Fight for a political system?"

In fact, Hubbard wanted desperately to join the military. During the late 1930s, he'd tried to interest various branches of the service in his "research," and in 1939, he made a formal application to the War Department to "offer my services in whatever capacity they might be of the greatest use." Nothing came of these attempts. In March 1941, with America's entrance into the war almost certain, Hubbard applied once more to join the navy, providing letters of recommendation from a long list of contacts he'd cultivated. Four months later, on July 19, 1941, L. Ron Hubbard was commissioned as a lieutenant (junior grade) in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

For years, the Church of Scientology has maintained that Hubbard, who would later give himself the self-styled rank of Commodore, was a "master mariner" and a fearless war hero.\* This was an image Hubbard carefully nurtured, boasting to fellow sailors of his lengthy experience on destroyers.

But Hubbard's naval records show that he had an inglorious wartime career. Boastful and often argumentative, with a propensity for having his "feelings hurt," as one superior noted, he was a behavior problem from day one. Though he did get the opportunity to take the helm of a submarine chaser in April 1943, he was relieved of that duty within a month after he (unwittingly, he claimed) steered his ship into Mexican waters and took target practice by firing on the Los Coronados Islands.

Depressed and suffering from ulcers, Hubbard spent the rest of the war drifting from post to post ~~taking part in various training programs, serving as the navigator of a cargo ship, and studying for several months at the School of Military Government at Princeton.~~ For the first time in his life, he seemed utterly lost. "The Great Era of Adventure is over," he wrote in his journal, sounding decades older than his thirty-three years. "I feel a little like a child who tries to see romance in an attic and holds tenaciously as long as he can to his conception, though he well recognizes the substance ... as a disinteresting tangle of old cloth and dust.

"Money, a nice car, good food and a 'good job' mean nothing to me when compared to being able to possess the thought that there is a surprise over the horizon," he added. "[But] I have come to that state of mind, that supreme disillusion of knowing that nothing waits, that the horizon never seen does not exist. I am restless still."

The city of Los Angeles lives in the American imagination as a realm of fresh beginnings and limitless possibility. That this is something of a hollow promise has never mattered all that much; southern California, as the writer Carey McWilliams reflected, was built on artifice, "conjured into existence" by its founders in the late nineteenth century and enduring ever since as a city of hope, though, as is often the case, that hope may be utterly false.

It was here that L. Ron Hubbard found himself at the end of World War II. On leave, and with no apparent desire to see Polly and the children, Hubbard followed the path of numerous science fiction writers, including Robert Heinlein, who'd moved to southern California, as had myriad other authors, scientists, and intellectuals since the start of the war. Low on cash and looking for a cheap place to stay, Hubbard found it within a sprawling Craftsman-style house at 1003 South Orange Grove Avenue in Pasadena, the home of the enigmatic, brilliant rocket scientist John Whiteside Parsons.

The scion of a wealthy Pasadena family, Jack Parsons was a self-taught chemist and explosives expert and a leader of the fledgling rocket program at the California Institute of Technology. The intellectual hub of the California aerospace industry, Caltech was also the birthplace of American rocket science, a discipline that seemed to merge the worlds of science and fantasy and might pave the way for the "promising new futures" foretold in magazines like *Astounding Science Fiction*. It would also give birth to an entire sector of the California economy, for nowhere else in America did the dreams of amateurs dovetail so neatly with the needs of both the U.S. government and private industry.

A stellar assortment of Nobel laureates and other geniuses had wandered the elegant grounds of Caltech's Pasadena campus over the years, among them Albert Einstein, Edwin Hubble, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Linus Pauling. Parsons was a protégé of the great aeronautics expert Theodore von Kármán, with whom he'd conducted secret experiments during the war. Though still in his early thirties, Parsons helped invent a new form of solid jet fuel that, in years to come, helped NASA start the U.S. space program. There is a crater on the moon named after Parsons.

Unbeknownst to most of his colleagues, Parsons was also an occultist; a devotee of the British writer and black magician Aleister Crowley, or the "Great Beast," as he liked to be known. Crowley was the founder of a school of esoteric thought he called Thelema. His most famous work, a lengthy

prose poem entitled *The Book of the Law*, laid out its central, hedonistic doctrine: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."

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To disseminate Thelema, Crowley took over an already-existing mystical society called the Order of the Temple of the Orientis, or OTO, whose Los Angeles branch was known as the Agape Lodge. Parsons, who'd been inducted into the lodge in 1940, soon became OTO's Los Angeles leader.

Parsons brought an air of glamour to the underground world of Thelema. Witty and sophisticated, he was a lover of music and poetry, a sexual libertine, and a ladies' man whose dark wavy hair and good looks lent him an air of danger. At his twenty-five-acre Pasadena estate, which became the Agape Lodge's home, Parsons hosted regular parties where he would discuss literature and mysticism while members of the lodge wandered the garden paths, consorting with a variety of free spirits: chemists, poets, artists, engineers, nuclear physicists, Caltech grad students. A large structure known as the Tea House became the site of secret rendezvous. Partner swapping and general sexual debauchery were the rule, as were all-night bacchanals in which Parsons, dressed in a three-piece suit, would engage his friends in fencing duels or recite Crowley's poem "Hymn to Pan."

By 1944, Parsons had turned his eleven-bedroom home into a boarding house for the eccentrics of Los Angeles, placing an ad urging "artists, musicians, atheists, anarchists, or other exotic types" to apply for a room. Among those who won a spot were a professional fortuneteller, a onetime organist for Hollywood's great silent-movie palaces, and an aging courtesan. Other less flamboyant boarders at the Parsonage, as the house was known, included Nieson Himmel, then a twenty-three-year-old journalist who would later become one of the most prominent crime reporters at the *Los Angeles Times*, and the physicist Robert Cornog, chief engineer of the Manhattan Project's ordnance division and a creator of the atom bomb.

One August day in 1945, Lieutenant Commander L. Ron Hubbard, on leave from the navy, came to lunch at the Parsonage as the guest of another boarder. Parsons had never met Hubbard, though as a dedicated science fiction fan he had read most of his stories in *Unknown* and *Astounding*, and was no doubt thrilled to have the writer at his table. After lunch, Parsons invited him to spend the rest of his leave at the Parsonage. Hubbard moved in that afternoon.

Now sporting a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, Hubbard cut a dashing figure at 1003 South Orange Grove Avenue. He'd arrived in full military regalia, his lieutenant's bars gleaming on the shoulders of his navy whites. Within a day or two, he was dominating the conversation around the communal dinner table, telling his housemates how he'd narrowly escaped from Japanese-occupied Java by making off on a raft after suffering bullet wounds and broken bones in his feet. He also claimed to have been involved in a variety of counterintelligence activities,\* to have commanded ships in both the Atlantic and the Pacific theaters, to have battled a polar bear in the Aleutians, and, while in England, to have had his skull measured by scientists at the British Museum.

"He was a fascinating storyteller," recalled Nieson Himmel, who was Hubbard's roommate at the Parsonage. "Everyone believed him." Himmel, however, recognized the polar bear story as an old folk legend and recalled the skull-measuring tale as part of a story by George Bernard Shaw. "He was so obviously a phony. But he was not a dummy," said Himmel. "He was very sharp and very quick ... he could charm the shit out of anybody."

Perhaps the person Hubbard charmed most was Parsons, who saw a kindred spirit in the young

naval officer, and Hubbard thought the same of him. As the author George Pendle pointed out in his fascinating biography of Parsons, *Strange Angel*, Parsons was in many ways the embodiment of the man Hubbard wanted to be. Sophisticated, well connected, with impeccable bona fides, Parsons was both an intellectual and a serious scientist, and had no need to lie or embellish his credentials. Though his family had lost much of its fortune in the Depression, Parsons had made a substantial amount as one of the founders of the Aerojet Engineering Corporation, an aerospace company that benefited substantially from government sponsorship during World War II. Prior to that, he'd gained entrance to the rarefied world of Caltech by impressing the Hungarian-born von Kármán with his innate intelligence and enthusiasm for scientific experimentation, which seemed to override his lack of formal training. (Parsons, like Hubbard, lacked a college degree.)

Soon, Hubbard and Parsons were fencing, without masks, in the living room of the Parsonage. Afterward, often with Robert Heinlein, a frequent guest, they'd engage in lively discussions about science and science fiction. Parsons ultimately began to reveal to Hubbard the secrets of Thelema. This of course involved breaking the sacred code—Hubbard was not even an initiate of the Agape Lodge. But he seemed intrinsically capable of understanding esoteric principles, and, to Parsons's surprise, he was already familiar with Crowley's writing. He also had an impressive grasp of the field of magic, no doubt acquired from the years he spent writing fantasy for John W. Campbell. "From some of his experiences, I deduce he is in direct touch with some higher intelligence, probably his Guardian Angel," Parsons wrote to Crowley. "He is the most Thelemic person I have ever met and is in complete accord with our own principles."

Hubbard also seemed enamored of Parsons, though self-interest motivated him as much as a sense of fellowship did. Soon after he arrived at the Parsonage, Hubbard succeeded in stealing away Parsons's mistress, Sara Northrup, a seductive and spirited twenty-one-year-old blonde known by house members as "Betty." Just about every man at 1003 South Orange Grove Avenue was in love with Betty, recalled Nieson Himmel, but only Hubbard had the audacity to act on it. Hubbard was still married to Polly, though he'd seen her only sporadically since the late 1930s and had left his family behind upon settling in Pasadena. "He was irresistible to women, swept girls off their feet," said Himmel. "There were other girls living there with guys and he went through them one by one." Finally he set his sights on Betty, and the two began a passionate affair. Parsons did nothing; challenging Hubbard and making a stand against free love would have defied his own Thelemic principles.

Nieson Himmel recalled that Hubbard, on at least one occasion at the Parsonage, talked about his desire to start his own religion. Certainly many others had done it. During the 1920s and 1930s in particular, Los Angeles teemed with new or offbeat religions, from the Theosophists to the Mighty "I Am" to the Church of Divine Science and the yoga-inspired Vedanta Society. There were also many prophets in residence, notably the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, whose International Church of the Foursquare Gospel was one of the country's first mega churches—at its peak, McPherson's Angelus Temple in Echo Park attracted crowds of well over five thousand people, and it had its own Bible school, radio station, and publishing house, as well as numerous bands and choirs. It was also a lucrative business. H. L. Mencken once called McPherson "the most profitable ecclesiastic in America."

As Hubbard kept scant records during this time, we will never know his precise ideas on the matter, nor what he might have learned or assimilated from Aleister Crowley's Thelema. But Hubbard would later refer to Crowley as a "good friend," even though the two never met. Seizing upon this



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