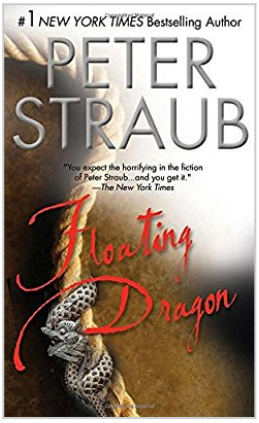


# Floating Dragon

*By Peter Straub*



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**Let the terror begin again in this "deliciously imaginative" (*San Francisco Chronicle*) novel from #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Peter Straub.**

The quiet suburban town of Hampstead is threatened by two horrors. One is natural. The hideous unstoppable creation of man's power gone mad. The other is not natural at all. And it makes the first look like child's play...

**"Unspeakable horror…has 'Bestseller' written all over it."—*Los Angeles Times***

**"Straub's effects are quite spectacular…I was fairly awed by some of the more nightmarish scenes in *Floating Dragon*."—*The New York Times***

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- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 624 pages

## Editorial Review

Review

"Here is a novel guaranteed to double the national nightmare quotient, so watch out."—*Cosmopolitan*

"Buy it today.  Anything by Straub is worth several thousand John Sauls and a million V.C. Andrewses."—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A book that positively bubbles with invention, jammed with characters, color, events, hackle-raising twists of fate, horrific monsters, terrifying nightmares, and a reality that shimmers and shifts as much as the noxious stream from a witch’s cauldron.”—*Book World*

About the Author
**Peter Straub** is the author of seventeen novels, which have been translated into more than twenty languages. They include *Ghost Story*, *Koko*, *Mr. X*, *In the Night Room*, and two collaborations with Stephen King, *The Talisman* and *Black House*. He has written two volumes of poetry and two collections of short fiction, and he edited the Library of America’s edition of *H. P. Lovecraft: Tales* and the Library of America’s two-volume anthology, *American Fantastic Tales*. He has won the British Fantasy Award, eight Bram Stoker Awards, three International Horror Guild Awards, and ten World Fantasy Awards. In 1997, he was named Grand Master at the World Horror Convention. In 2005, he was given the Horror Writers Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award. At the World Fantasy Convention in 2010, he was given the WFC’s Life Achievement Award.



1

***1962–1963***

For Stony Baxter Friedgood, her infrequent adulteries were adventures—picking up a man who thought he was picking her up gave her life a sense of drama missing since she had been twenty and a student at Scripps-Claremont. Not only adventures, they were the salvation of her marriage. In college she had juggled four boyfriends, and only one of them, a mathematics graduate student named Leo Friedgood, had known of the existence of the others. Leo had seemed amused by her secretiveness, as he was amused by her private school nickname. Only after several months did Stony realize the extent to which amusement masked arousal.

She married him just after graduation—no graduate school for Stony, and no more for Leo, who shaved his beard and bought a suit and took a job with Telpro Corporation, which had an office in Santa Monica.

2

***1969***

Tabby Smithfield grew to the age of five in an enormous stone house in Hampstead, Connecticut, with four

acres of well-tended ground and a burglar alarm on the front gates. The neighborhood, consisting of sixteen houses along Long Island Sound, was impressive enough to attract its own tourists; perhaps six cars a day trolled down Mount Avenue, the drivers and passengers leaning to glimpse the mansions behind the gates. Locally, Mount Avenue was “The Golden Mile,” though it was twice longer than that; it was the original road between Hillhaven, the Victorian suburb of Patchin, and Hampstead. Mount Avenue, the site of the original farm settlements of Hampstead and Hillhaven, had once been the principal coaching road north to New Haven, but its hectic days were long past. Manufacturers with plants in Bridgeport or Woodville, a doctor, and the head of Patchin County’s biggest legal practice lived in the impressive houses, along with others like them, older people who wished no excitement in their private lives. Tourists rubbernecking along the Golden Mile rarely saw them—there might be a visiting movie star taking the sea-laden air along the coastal road or a college president pausing for breath before he made his pitch for funds, but the owners of the houses were invisible.

Outside the gray stone house, however, those taking a fast peek through the opened gates in 1969 might have seen a tall dark-haired man in tennis whites playing with a small boy. Perhaps a uniformed nanny would have been hovering on the steps before the front door, her posture inexplicably tense. And perhaps the boy’s posture too would have seemed awkward, inhabited by the same tension, as if little Tabby Smithfield were half-aware that he was not supposed to be playing with his father. They make an oddly static and incomplete scene, father and son and nanny. They are badly composed: one figure is missing.

3

***1964***

Stony Friedgood’s first affair after her marriage was in 1964, with the husband of a friend, a neighbor in their neat row of tract houses: he was unlike Leo, being jovial and blond and easygoing, a very junior banker, and Leo invariably spoke of him with contempt. This affair endured only two months.

Stony’s delicate face, which was sharp-featured and framed in shining brown hair, became familiar in galleries and art museums, in certain bars at certain times. Considered from a utilitarian point of view, one neither Stony’s nor Leo’s parents could have understood, the Friedgoods had a successful marriage. By the time Leo was promoted twice and transferred to Telpro’s New York offices, their income had doubled and Stony weighed only a pound more than when she was a student at Scripps. She left behind her yoga classes, a half-completed gourmet-cooking course, four unused tickets to a concert series, the undigested and already vague memories of six or seven men. Leo left nothing at all behind—the company paid to ship east his sailboat and the eight cases he called his “cellar.”

4

***1968***

Monty Smithfield, his grandfather, was the great figure in Tabby’s early childhood. It was Monty who kissed him first when he returned from nursery school, and Monty and his mother took him to his first haircut. Birthdays and Christmases Monty gave him stupefying presents, vast train sets and every possible sort of preschool vehicle from walkers to Big Wheels, even a dwarf pony stabled at a riding school. This was presented with much fanfare at Tabby’s third birthday. August, 1968. Monty had provided a party for twenty children, a band playing Beatle songs and tunes from Disney movies, an ice sculpture of a brontosaurus—Tabby loved dinosaurs then, and only evolution kept Monty Smithfield from buying his grandson a baby monster. “Come on, Clark,” called the jubilant old man as the gardener led out the shaggy little pony. “Mount your son on this great beast.” But Clark Smithfield had gone inside to his bedroom and was at that moment whacking a tennis ball against the elaborate headboard with a well-worn Spaulding

racket, trying to chip the paint off one of the wooden curlicues.

Like any child, Tabby had no idea of what his father did for a living, no idea that there was a living to be earned. Clark Smithfield was at home four or five days every week, playing his rock records in the living room of their wing of the big house, going out to tennis matches whenever he could. If at the age of three or four Tabby had been asked what his father did, he would have answered that he played games. Clark never took him to the company of which he was a nominal vice-president; his grandfather did, and showed him off to the secretaries, announcing that here was the future chairman of the board of Smithfield Systems, Inc. Before he showed Tabby the computer room, the old man opened a door and said, “For the record, this is your father’s office.” It was a small dusty room containing an almost bare desk and many photographs of Tabby’s father winning college tennis tournaments; also a Richard Nixon dart board, as dusty as everything else. “Does my daddy work here?” Tabby asked with sweet innocence, and one of the secretaries snickered. “He *does*,” Tabby insisted valiantly. “He *does* work here. Look! He plays tennis here!” A spasm of distaste passed over Monty Smithfield’s tidy features, and the old man did not smile for the remainder of the tour.

Whenever his father and grandfather were in the same room—at the family dinners Clark could not avoid, at any occasion when Monty came into his son’s living quarters—an almost visible atmosphere of dislike frosted the air. At these times Tabby saw his father shrink to a child only slightly older than himself. “Why don’t you like Grandpa?” he asked his father once, when Clark was reading him a bedtime story. “Oh, it’s too complicated for you,” Clark sighed.

At times, more frequently as he grew closer to five, Tabby heard them fighting.

Clark and his father argued about the length of Clark’s hair, about Clark’s aspirations as a tennis player (which his father scorned), about Clark’s attitude. Clark and Monty Smithfield normally kept a cool distance from each other, but when Monty decided to harangue his son, they shouted—in the dining room, in both living rooms, in the hallway, on the lawn. These arguments always ended with Clark storming away from his father.

“What are you going to do?” Monty called out to him after a wrangle Tabby witnessed. “Leave home? You can’t *afford* to—you couldn’t *get* another job.”

Tabby’s face went white—he didn’t understand the words, but he heard the scorn in them. That day he did not speak until dinnertime.

Clark’s wife and mother were the glue that held the two families in their uneasy harmony: Monty genuinely liked Jean, Tabby’s mother, and Jean and her mother-in-law kept Clark in his job. Maybe if Clark Smithfield had been either a twenty-percent-better tennis player than he was, or a twenty-percent-worse one, the misery in the old house on Mount Avenue would have dissipated. Or if he had been less intransigent, his father less adamant. But Jean and her mother-in-law, thinking that the passage of time would reconcile Clark to his job and Monty to his son, kept the families together. And so they stayed, in their sometimes almost comfortable antagonism. Until the first truly terrible thing that happened to Tabby and his family.

5

***1975***

The Friedgoods, who appeared to be a model couple, moved to a builder’s colonial in Hampstead in 1975, when Tabby Smithfield was ten years old and living with his father and stepmother in South Florida. As Leo Friedgood was on his way upward into the world he coveted, Clark Smithfield appeared to be running out his meager luck: he had a job as a bartender, quit that to take a job as salesman for Hollinsworth Vitreous, was

fired from that when he got drunk on the yacht belonging to the president of the company and vomited on Robert Hollinsworth's carpet-weave slippers, did another stint tending bar, and took a job as a security guard. He worked nights and nipped from a bottle whenever his round took him back to the security station. Like his first wife, his mother was also dead—Agnes Smithfield had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage one warm May morning as she discussed the installation of a rock garden with the groundsman and her life had fled before her body struck the ground. Monty Smithfield had sold his big house on Mount Avenue and moved with the housekeeper and cook into a house called "Four Hearths" on Hermitage Road, five minutes inland. His end of Hermitage Road was only two wooded hilly blocks from the place the Friedgoods bought.

Leo was now a division vice-president for Telpro, making nearly fifty thousand dollars a year; he bought his suits at Tripler, grew a thick aggressive mustache and let his hair get long enough to be bushy. Always fleshy, he had put on twenty extra pounds despite a daily mile-long jog, and now—arrogant eyes, dark mustache and unrestrained hair—he had the faintly lawless, buccaneerlike appearance of many a corporate executive who sees himself as a predator in a jungle full of predators.

In 1975, the first year on Cannon Road in Hampstead, Stony joined New Neighbors, High Minds—a book discussion group—the League of Women Voters and a cooking class, the YMCA, and the library. She would have looked for a job, but Leo did not want her to work. She would have tried to get pregnant, but Leo, whose own childhood was an epic of maternal bullying, became irrational when she tried to discuss it. In the *Hampstead Gazette* she read an ad for a yoga class and quit the New Neighbors. Soon after, she left High Minds and the League too.

The *Hampstead Gazette* came twice weekly. The little tabloid was Stony's chief source of information about her new town. From it she learned of the Women's Art League, and joined that, thinking she would meet painters—one of the boys in California had been a painter. And because she wanted to, of course she did. Pat Dobbin was celebrated locally, neither especially good nor bad; he lived alone in a small house in the woods; he did illustrations—these much better than his paintings—to make a living. During one of Leo's business trips, she attended an Art League dinner with the painter: she was aware that the midge-sized red-haired woman carrying a notebook was Sarah Spry, author of the weekly social column "What Sarah Saw" in the *Gazette*, but was not prepared to see this item in the next week's column:

*Sarah Saw:* Thistown's brilliant painter and illustrator PAT DOBBIN (can't say enough about the boy! Caught his stunning new abstract seascapes at PALMER GALLERY yet?) at the Women's Art League bash parading in elegant black tie and showing off a lovely mystery woman. Who's the unknown beauty, Pat? Fess up and tell Sarah.

When Leo returned from his trip, he read this paragraph and asked, "Did you enjoy the Art League thing Friday night? Too bad I couldn't have gone with you." His eyes were bright and ironic.

6

***November 1970***

Unlike her husband, Jean Smithfield was a careful driver. When she and Clark left their son with his grandparents for an evening, she always insisted on driving home if Clark went over his normal limit of two drinks before dinner and a couple of glasses of wine while they ate. On nights when Clark complained more than usually about his father or reminisced through ancient tennis matches, she drove home even if it meant

listening to Clark railing about her relationship with his father. He would say, “You actually *like* that old buzzard! Do you know what that does to me? Christ, sometimes I think he turns you on—all those pinstripe suits get to you, don’t they? You dig white hair. You don’t have any more loyalty to me than to let the old man’s phony charm get to you.” If Clark were really bad, he’d pass out before they pulled through the gates. “He’ll never get Tabby,” he would mutter. “He’ll never forget I existed and make Tabby into his son. One thing he’ll never do.” Jean did her best to ignore this ranting.

They usually ate at a French restaurant up toward Patchin on the Post Road. One night in late November in 1970, Jean took a dollar from her bag as they went outside and stationed herself where the valet could see her. “I can drive,” Clark grumped. “Not tonight,” she said, and gave the bill to the boy when he got out of their car. “We ought to have a goddamned Mercedes,” Clark said as he let himself into the passenger seat. “All it takes is money,” she informed him.

Jean pulled out across the oncoming lane and pointed the car toward Pigeon Lane, the next traffic light.

“He’s at it again,” Clark muttered. “He wants to send Tabby to the Academy—public school isn’t good enough for his grandson.”

“You went to the Academy,” Jean said.

“Because my father could *afford* it!” Clark screamed. “Don’t you get the point, dammit? I’m Tabby’s father, dammit, and . . .”

Jean was looking at him and she saw his face go slack as the sentence died away. Clark no longer looked angry or drunk. He looked worried.

She snapped her head forward and saw a station wagon sliding across the dividing line, coming toward them. *Ice*, she thought, *a patch of . . .*

“Move it!” Clark shouted. And Jean twisted the wheel to the right. Another car which had pulled out of the restaurant just behind them struck her left-rear bumper so hard that Jean’s hands flew off the steering wheel.

The station wagon, which had been going nearly fifty miles an hour before it struck the slick of ice, slammed straight into her door. Jean Smithfield tried to say “Tabby” before she died, but the door had crushed her chest and she did not have time.

In the mansion on Mount Avenue, her son woke up screaming.

The nineteen-year-old driver of the station wagon fell out of his car and tried to crawl away across the frozen road. He was bleeding from his scalp. Clark Smithfield, completely unharmed, took one look at his wife and threw up in his lap. Then he got out of the car and fell to his knees. Clark saw the boy who had killed his wife and yelled at him to stop. He struggled to his feet. The boy sat up twenty feet from his ruined car and was covered with snow and black mush that had been snow. Blood dripped from his nose and chin. Clark instantly recognized a fellow drunk. *“Animal!”* he screamed.

Tabby was rushing around his bedroom still yelling, feeling blindly for the light switch. He knew where nothing was; he was in an inside-out world. He caromed into his bed, slipped on a rag rug, and his screams went up an octave. Within seconds his grandfather and his nanny were at the door.

It took the Hampstead police ten minutes to reach the tangle of cars on the Post Road.

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Harold Cole:**

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**Louise Villanueva:**

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