TOM DeMARCO

coauthor of PEOPLEWARE: PRODUCTIVE PROJECTS AND TEAMS

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THE DEADLINE

A NOVEL ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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"... insightful business principles for team–based project management ..."
— John Sculley

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THE
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CONTENTS

PREFACE

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$\mathcal{D}$uring the 1930's, the University of Colorado physicist George Gamow began writing a series of short stories about a certain Mr. Tompkins, a middle-aged bank clerk. Mr. Tompkins, the stories related, was interested in modern science. He would trundle off to evening lectures put on by a local university physics professor, and inevitably fall asleep partway through. When he awoke, he would find himself in some alternate universe where one or another of the basic physical constants was strikingly changed.

In one of these stories, for example, Mr. T. awoke in a universe where the speed of light was only fifteen miles per hour. That meant he could observe relativistic effects on his bicycle: The city blocks became shorter in the direction of travel as he accelerated, and time on the post office clock slowed down. In another story, Mr. Tompkins visited a world where Planck's Constant was 1.0, and there he could *see* quantum mechanics in action on a billiard table: The billiard balls refused to move smoothly across the table, but took up quantum positions in probabilistic fashion.

When I first came across the Gamow stories, I was just a teenager. Like Mr. Tompkins, I too had an interest in modern science. I had already read numerous descriptions of relativity and quantum mechanics, but it was only when I read *Mr. Tompkins in Wonderland* that I began to develop a visceral sense of what these matters were all about.

I have always admired Gamow's ingenious pedagogical device. It occurred to me that a similar device might be used to demonstrate some of the principles of project management. All I'd have to do is portray a veteran project manager sent off to some Wonderland where various of the rules governing project work could be instructively altered. Thus was born, with apologies to George Gamow, the idea of *The Deadline,* the story of a manager named Tompkins and his remarkable experiences running software projects in the ex-Soviet Republic of Morovia.

May 1997   T.D.M.
Camden, Maine

1

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKING

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*M*r. Tompkins took his seat in the very last row of Baldrige-One, the main auditorium at the Big Telephone and Telecommunications Company's Penelope, New Jersey, facility. He'd spent a lot of time in this auditorium during the past few weeks, attending out-placement lectures. Mr. T., along with a few thousand other professional and middle management employees, was being given the boot. Oh, that wasn't the term they used. They preferred to call it "made redundant" or "downsized" or "right-sized" or "streamlined" or "managed down" or, best of all, "Released to Seek Opportunities Elsewhere." They'd even made an acronym out of that one: ReSOE. Tompkins was a ReSOE.

Today's event was yet another in the series called "Opportunity Knocking." This five-week program, according to the posted notice, was to be "more than 100 hours of inspirational training, skits, musical interludes, and celebration of ReSOE status." The still-employed Human Resources people who put on the various sessions seemed pretty convinced that ReSOE was a blessing in disguise. They made it clear that they would have dearly loved to be ReSOEs themselves. They really would. But no such luck. No sir, they would just have to soldier on, bearing the burdens of salary and benefits as best they could. Up on the stage now, they were trying to put on a brave front.

The last few rows of the auditorium were in what the acoustic engineers called a "null area." For some reason (no one had even a good theory about this), almost no sound from the stage could be heard in these rows. It made it a perfect place for a snooze. Tompkins always sat here.

He put down today's ton of handouts on the seat in front of him. Two fat loose-leaf notebooks and the usual assortment of favors were packed into a new canvas bag with its printed logo: "Our Company Is Thinning Down So the Rest of the World Can Fatten Up." At the top of the bag was a baseball cap embroidered "ReSOE and Proud of It!" Tompkins put the hat on, pulled it down over his face and, within a few minutes, drifted off to sleep.

A long chorus line of HR people on the stage was singing "Opportunity Knocking: Okay!" The audience was supposed to clap the rhythm and join in at the chorus, shouting out "Okay!" as loud as they could. At the left side of the stage was a man with a megaphone, exhorting the audience with cries of "Louder! Louder!" A few people in the crowd were clapping softly, but no one was shouting. Still, the noise, even the little bit that penetrated the null area, was enough to rouse Mr. T.

He yawned and straightened up in his chair. The first thing he noticed was that someone else was sitting there in the quiet zone, only one seat away. The second thing he noticed was that she was lovely. She seemed to be in her early thirties, dark and rather exotic-looking: mid-length black hair in a Dutch cut, very dark eyes. She was looking up at the muted stage act and smiling very slightly. It was not exactly a smile of approval. He thought he might have seen her somewhere before.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

She kept her eyes on the stage. "Only some very important stuff."

"Could you net it out for me?"

"They want you to go away but not change your long-distance account over to MCI."

"Anything else?"

"Um . . . let's see, you've been asleep for about an hour. Was there anything else during that hour? No, I guess not. Some songs."

"I see. A typically triumphant morning for HR."

"Ooooh. Mr. Tompkins has awakened, how shall we say it? in a slightly bilious mood."

"I see you have the advantage over me," Mr. T. said, offering his hand. "Tompkins."

"Hoolihan," she said, shaking his hand. Her eyes, as she turned to face him, were not just dark, but almost black. It felt good looking into them. Mr. Tompkins found himself blushing slightly.

"Umm . . . first name, Webster. Webster Tompkins."

"Lahksa."

"Funny name."

"It's an old Balkan name. From Morovia."

"But Hoolihan . . . ?"

"Mmm. A girlish indiscretion on my mother's part. He was Irish, a deckhand on a freighter. A rather cute deckhand, I understand. Mother always had a weakness for sailors." She smiled at him lopsidedly. Tompkins felt a sudden extra beat in his heart.

"Ah," he said, cleverly.

"Ah."

"We've met, I think." He meant it as a question.

"Yes." She didn't go on.

"I see." He still couldn't remember where it might have been. He looked around the auditorium. There wasn't another soul anywhere near enough to hear. They were sitting in a public auditorium and yet were able to have a private conversation. He turned back to his charming neighbor. "You're a ReSOE, I take it?"

"No."

"No? Staying on then?"

"Also no."

"I don't get it."

"Not an employee at all. The truth is that I'm a spy."

He laughed, thinking it a joke. "Do tell."

"An industrial spy. You've heard of such things?"

"Yes, I guess."

"You don't believe me."

"Well, . . . it's just that you don't look the part."

She smiled that maddening smile again. Of course, she did look the part. In fact, she looked like she was born for the part.

"Not exactly, I mean."

She shook her head. "I can give you proof." She unclipped her identity badge and passed it to him.

Tompkins looked down at the badge. It was imprinted HOOLIHAN, Lahksa, over her photo. "Wait a minute . . ." he said, looking more closely at the badge. On the surface it looked okay, but there was something wrong with the lamination. In fact, it wasn't a lamination at all; it was just plastic wrap. He peeled it back and the photo came away from the badge. He saw there was another photo underneath, this one of a middle-aged man. And now that he looked, her name was on a sticky label pasted on the front of the badge. He lifted the label and saw the name STORGEL, Walter, underneath. "Why, this is about the worst forgery I can imagine."

She sighed. "The resources available within the Morovian KVJ are not what you'd call 'sophisticated.'"

"You really are . . . ?"

"Mmm. Going to turn me in?"

"Uh . . ." A month ago, of course, he would have done just that. But a lot of things can happen in a month, things that change you. He thought about it for a moment. "No, I don't think so." He handed her back the pieces of her badge, which she tucked neatly into her purse.

"Wasn't Morovia some kind of a, well, a *Communist* country?" Tompkins asked her.

"Uh huh. Sort of."

"You worked for a Communist government?"

"I guess you could say that."

He shook his head. "What's the point? I mean, if the 1980's proved anything, it was that Communism is a bankrupt philosophy."

"Mmm. The 1990's, of course, are showing us that the alternative ain't too great either."

"Well, it is true that there have been a lot of layoffs."

"Only 3.3 million lost jobs in the last nine months. Yours among them."

A long pause as Mr. Tompkins digested that thought. Now it was he who said, "Mmm," and he thought, What a heavy conversation. He switched gears, artfully, "Tell me, Ms. Hoolihan, what's it like to be a spy? I mean, I am in the market for a new job."

"Oh no, Webster, you're not the spy type," she snickered. "Not the type at all."

He felt a bit miffed. "Well, I don't know about that."

"You're a manager. A systems manager, and a good one."

"Some people don't seem to think so. I've, after all, been ReSOEd."

"Some people don't seem to think at all. Such people tend to become executives in large companies like this one."

"Yes, well. Anyway, just for my information, do tell me what's involved in being a spy. I mean, I never got to meet one before."

"As you might expect, stealing corporate secrets, the odd kidnapping, maybe occasionally bumping someone off."

"Really?!?"

"Oh, sure. All in a day's work."

"Well, that doesn't seem very respectable. You would actually kidnap people or even . . . you know, kill them, just to gain commercial advantage?"

She yawned. "I guess. Not just anybody, though. For bumping off, I mean. Whoever it was would have to deserve it."

"Well, even so. I'm not at all sure I approve. I mean, I'm quite sure I don't approve. What kind of a person would kidnap another human being—we just won't even talk about the other—what kind of a person would do that?"

"A pretty clever person, I guess."

"Clever?!? You have to be clever to do that?"

"Not the actual act of kidnapping. That's fairly mechanical. No, the trick is, knowing *whom* to kidnap." She bent down to her feet where there was a small refrigerator bag from which she took a canned soft drink and opened it. "Could I offer you a drink?"

"Um. No, thanks. I really don't drink anything but . . ."

". . . diet Dr. Pepper." She pulled out a cold can of diet Dr. Pepper.

"Oh. Well, since you have one . . ."

She pulled the tab and passed it to him. "Cheers," she said, clunking her drink against his.

"Cheers." He drank a mouthful. "What's so hard about knowing whom to kidnap?"

"Let me answer that question with a question. What's the hardest job in management?"

"People," Tompkins replied automatically. He knew exactly where he stood on this subject. "Getting the right people for the right job. That's what makes the difference between a good manager and a drone."

"Mmm."

Now he remembered where it was he had seen her before. It was in that corporate management class he'd taken almost half a year ago. She had been in the last row, only a few seats away when he had stood up to contest the seminar leader on this very point. Yes, now he remembered. They'd sent some guy named Kalbfuss, Edgar Kalbfuss, to teach the course, a guy who was probably about twenty-five and had obviously never managed anything or anyone. And he was there to teach management to people like Tompkins, who'd been managing for half their lives. And the worst of it was, he was prepared to teach a whole week with (judging from the agenda) not a single thing to say about people management. Tompkins stood, told him off, and then walked out. Life was too short for that kind of "training."

She'd heard it that day, but now he told her again what he'd said to Kalbfuss: "Get the right people. Then, no matter what all else you may do wrong after that, the people will save you. That's what management is all about."

"Mmm."

A long, significant silence.

"Oh." Tompkins caught on at last. "You're suggesting that figuring out the right people to kidnap is the same?"

"Sure. You have to pick the ones who will give your side a meaningful advantage, and whose loss will cripple your competitor. It's not easy knowing whom to pick."

"Well, I don't know. I suppose you could just pick the most *prominent* person within an organization. Wouldn't it be as simple as that?"

"Get serious. If I really wanted to harm this organization, for example, would I pick the most prominent person? The CEO, for example?"

"Oh. Well, certainly not in this case. I guess if you removed the CEO, the company's stock would probably go up about twenty points."

"Exactly. This is what I call the Roger Smith Effect, after the past chairman of General Motors. I was the one who decided to sabotage GM by not removing Smith."

"Oh. Good job."

"Now, if I did want to do some real damage to the Big Telephone and Telecommunications Company, I'd know exactly which managers to pick."

"You would?" Tompkins had some ideas of his own about who was really indispensable to the company.

"Sure. Want to see?" She took a pad out of her purse and wrote down three names. Then, she considered for a moment, and wrote down a fourth. She passed the pad to him.

He stared at the list. "Ugh," Tompkins said. "This would be like bombing the company back into the dark ages. You've picked exactly the four who . . . Wait a minute, these people are friends of mine. They have spouses and kids. You're not thinking of . . . ?"

"Oh, no. Don't worry about them. As long as the company keeps its present executive level, there is no need to sabotage it. Believe me, your soon-to-be-former employer is going nowhere, with these four good managers or without. It's not them I'm here for, Webster. It's you."

"Me?"

"Uh huh."

"For what? What use would the Morovian K–V– . . . whatever it is, have for me?"

"The KVJ. No, it's not the KVJ that needs you, but the Nation State of Morovia."

"Explain, please."

"Well, our Nation's Noble Leader, we call him NNL, for short, has proclaimed that Morovia will be first in the world in export of shrink-wrapped software by the year 2000. It's our grand plan for the future. We're building a world-class software factory. And we need someone to manage it. It's as simple as that."

"You're proposing to hire me?"

"Sort of."

"I'm flabbergasted."

"Also available."

"Well, that's true enough." Tompkins took another swig of his drink. He looked at her cagily. "Tell me what you're offering."

"Oh, we can discuss that later. When we're there."

He laughed, incredulously. "There? You think I'm going off to Morovia with you before we've even discussed terms."

"I do."

"I find that a very dubious proposition. I mean, given what I know about you and your inclination to use heavy-handed methods. Who knows what you might do to me if I decided not to accept your offer?"

"Who knows indeed?"

"I'd be a very foolish fellow to go with you. . . ." He stopped, wondering what he'd been going to say next. His tongue seemed a bit thick in his mouth, like a dry rag.

"Very foolish. Yes," she agreed.

"I, uh . . ." Tompkins looked down at the drink in his hand. "Say, you wouldn't have . . . ?"

"Mmm," she said, smiling her mysterious smile.

"Urghhhh. . . ."

A moment later, Mr. Tompkins slid quietly down into his seat, quite unconscious.

About the Book

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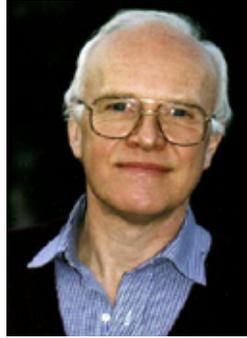
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[Based in Camden, Maine, Tom DeMarco is a principal of the Atlantic Systems Guild (www.systemsguild.com) and author or coauthor of three other best-selling DH books: <u>Peopleware</u>, <u>Software State-of-the-Art</u>, and <u>Why Does Software Cost So Much?</u>]

DHQ: *Your new book,* The Deadline, *is called a "novel about project management." What advantages did you find in writing a novel instead of using a nonfiction genre like the essay?*

TDM: What I would have killed for when I was a young manager was an opportunity to be a fly on the wall and observe a really gifted manager do his or her job. How would that manager handle the dozens of sticky little problems that were then grinding me down? How would he or she deal with problem workers, fragmentation, low motivation, conflicting goals, and pressure from above? The novel form offered me a way to make that fly-on-the-wall experience available to others. If the novel works as I hope it will, reading it should almost be the equivalent of adding two great years to your management experience.

DHQ: *How does Mr. Tompkins, the protagonist of the story, wind up in Morovia developing software for a former Soviet state? And where exactly is Morovia?*

TDM: Let me take the second question first. Morovia is a peaceful, pretty little backwater nation tucked into the lower Balkans, on the coast of the Ionian Sea. Coming out of a long period of political repression, like the rest of the Soviet bloc, it suddenly finds itself full of potential for new ideas, new industries, and new opportunity. I placed the action there because I wanted to put Mr. Tompkins in a situation where starting a whole software industry from scratch would be conceivable.

But I also wanted the place to have a dark enough history so that the use of some heavy-handed methods might be part of the game. Poor Mr. Tompkins, you see, doesn't actually *accept* the job; he gets kidnapped. And the motivation provided from above is starkly effective: He is to finish the job on schedule or pay for it with his life. So we have a manager who has his very survival staked on a project deadline. How would you manage a project if your life depended on making the deadline? That's the question he is faced with. I'll give you a tiny hint about his answer: He does not decide to improve his organization's CMM level.

DHQ: *One of the lessons in the book about deadlines is that extreme time pressure may accelerate progress initially, but it soon hits a plateau, in which further pressure is ineffective. What can managers learn from this dynamic?*

TDM: The first thing they can learn is what Tim Lister has been telling us for years now: "People under time pressure don't think faster." Like much of what Tim tells us, this seems patently obvious after he's said it. But before he pointed it out, most of us (and most of the software industry) didn't have a clue. Of course people don't think faster, they can't. And since their work is think-intensive, they can't do the work faster. So the effects of pressure can only be felt in a few very limited ways: They can waste less time, they can put off other work, or they can steal time from their personal lives. The first of these effects is good, but not worth a lot, since most software developers were trying not to waste time, even before the pressure was put on. Putting off other work is productivity neutral, since the work has to be done eventually anyway. And stealing time from your family is a long-term disaster, because you burn out.

Poor managers apply a lot of pressure, because they don't know what else to do. Great managers apply very little. They know the limitations of pressure. They spend most of their energies doing the hard work of management: motivation, team formation, and design and re-design of the organization to eliminate waste (bloated meetings, overdocumentation, and pointless regimentation).

DHQ: *Mr. Tompkins sets up a Project Management Laboratory, in which each of six software products is developed by a set of competing teams. Tell us about this experiment and its appeal to project managers.*

TDM: Virtually all the data we have today about project dynamics is data collected from live projects whose purpose was to do something other than teach us about project dynamics. Conspicuously missing from our history is that bread-and-butter tool for understanding causality: the controlled experiment.

Since Mr. Tompkins has little time but a ton of people, he decides to hedge his bets. He sets up rival projects to do the same work. (Even if only one of them finishes before the deadline, his bacon is saved.) Then he sets out to alter some of the variables, hoping to stumble upon an advantage that will enable one or a few of the teams to outperform. In the process, he is effectively running a controlled experiment. If he lives, he realizes, he's going to understand project dynamics a lot better than he did before.

DHQ: *Most of the chapters in* The Deadline *contain entries from Mr. Tompkins' project management journal. Were these the seeds of the storyline? or were they written after you'd finished the chapters?*

TDM: Most of them came out of my own journal. They were lessons that I learned the hard way, just as Mr. Tompkins does.

Though I suffered the hard knocks that led to these journal entries, I was often too dim or too bruised to see the lessons myself. It has been my great good fortune over the years to be surrounded by people who were magnificent abstractors: They could say, "Look, there's a pattern here." And my own contribution has been that every time they made me go Ahah, I had the good sense to write it down in my journal.

DHQ: *And we have the good fortune to read it. Tom, let's continue this on the Web! Thank you.*

DHQ: *One of the main characters, Belinda Binda -- a brilliant-but-burned-out project manager -- takes the lead in selecting team managers by gut feel, rather than by resume alone. How can readers apply this technique in real life?*

TDM: Sorry. There is no way. Belinda's talent has nothing to do with technique. She's just got a great gut. And she knows enough to trust it. Hiring is the most important thing a manager does. Some people do it superbly and others don't. I don't. But I have worked with great managers for nearly thirty years now, and I have seen their guts at work. In this one respect at least, managers are born, not made.

DHQ: *There are many colorful characters in the novel, especially among the consultants who are enlisted to counsel Mr. Tompkins. Some of these consultants—such as Aristotle Kenoros, Harry Winnipeg, T. Johns Caporous, and the Great Yordini—seem remarkably like some of the software industry's gurus. Are there real-life counterparts to these characters?*

TDM: Of course not.

DHQ: *One of the consultant characters in the novel introduces the idea of using function points. What are function points, and how are they used?*

TDM: Function points are the most essential metric in common use today. Derived from the specification, the function metric is the earliest and most solid quantification of project size. You may decide not to use function points for one reason or another on your next project, but not knowing about the concept at all or not being able to apply it would be a foolish and dangerous kind of ignorance.

DHQ: *Morovia's Tyrant explains to Tompkins that the software products under development are meant to be near-copies of extremely successful software products. His idea is that imitation is legal, short of copying the code outright, and that he can give away the copycat products as updates to the originals (and still somehow make a profit). Is this attitude toward development prevalent today? What does it say about the software market and the future of software?*

TDM: As MIT economist Lester Thurow has pointed out: "In the 19th Century, if you built a better mousetrap, the world would beat a pathway to your door; today building a better mousetrap is not as important as building one more cheaply." The emphasis has shifted from invention capacity to production ingenuity. That explains why it was the Dutch who invented the CD player and the Americans who invented the VCR, but it was the Japanese who got rich on both of them. So too in software. Ideas are no longer king. If they were, Apple would have[*] eaten Microsoft's lunch instead of the other way around.

DHQ: *In various parts of the novel, Mr. Tompkins deceives his boss, the sinister Minister Belok. He lets Belok believe that crazy schedules are going to be met and that certain brutal management directives imposed from above are really being implemented by Tompkins. Under what circumstances is deceit justifiable by subordinate managers? When should a manager "just say no" or quit in protest, instead of using subterfuge?*

TDM: Most of what we learned in kindergarten about truth-telling and honorable comportment are reasonable guides to how managers need to behave. That would certainly be true in any kind of healthy organization. But Mr. Tompkins finds himself in circumstances that simply do not let him behave the way he knows he should:

> Belok silenced him with a wave of the hand. "You better be on schedule with those products, Tompkins You don't want to be here in front of me if you are not. It would be one damn sorry day for you if you had stand here and tell me that you weren't going to make the June 1st delivery for all six products. One very very sorry day indeed. I am not kidding about this. Now, are you on schedule?"
>   "Sure," Mr. Tompkins said, his voice flat.

I wish that this sort of thing happened only in novels. But it doesn't. Most of us have been in almost exactly that situation at one time or another. What should you do with a Belok-like superior? Hunker down, I guess, and try to survive until a reasonable exit point presents itself. Grin and bear it for now, and get your revenge later by publishing it in a book.

DHQ: Thanks, Tom!

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[*] *This interview originally appeared in Volume VIII, Number 2 of The Dorset House Quarterly (DHQ), a free newsletter for readers of Dorset House books. Call (800) 342-6657 or (212) 620-4053 to request a subscription.*

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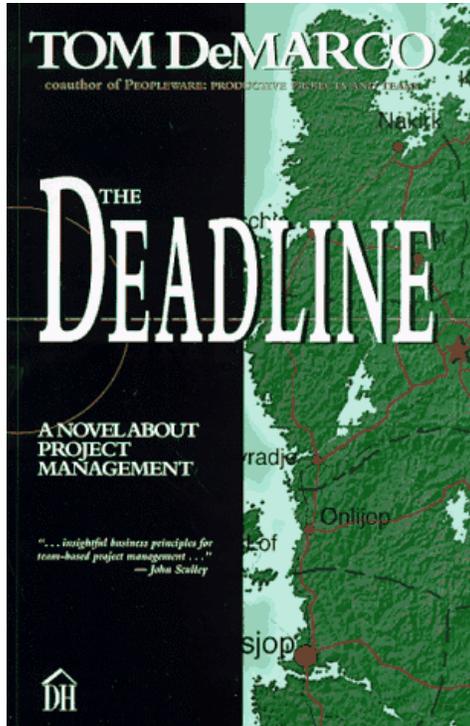
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For something completely different, look for Tom DeMarco's mainstream novel, *Dark Harbor House,* recently published by Down East Books. Lisa Alther (author of *Kinflicks*) had the following to say about *Dark Harbor House*:

"I missed this book whenever I had to put it down, and rushed to get back to it."

You can order DHH as well from Amazon. Just search on "DeMarco Dark Harbor" or use the following direct link:

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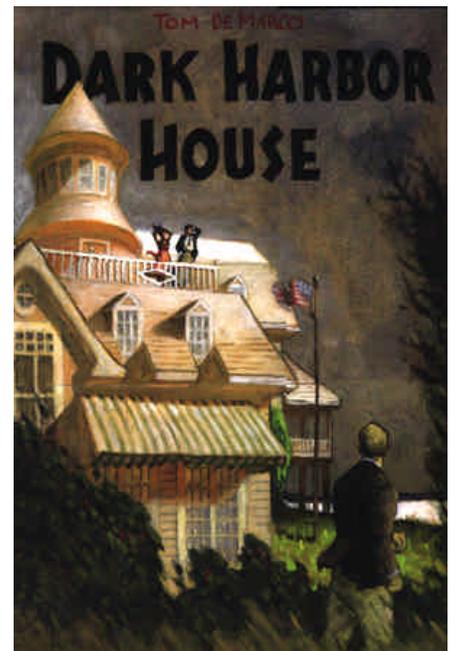
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