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## AN INTERVIEW WITH HUGH B. CAVE

Conducted By Timothy Ray Dill

December, 1996

Vintage New Media asked me if I would like to interview Hugh B. Cave for Pulp Fiction Monthly. Interview Hugh B. Cave! Why even ask? I remember talking to a book dealer in Tampa Florida a few years ago and mentioning Hugh's work. The dealer spent several minutes telling me that besides being a great author, Cave is a great guy. After a few phone calls to Mr. Cave, I agree completely. I now even own a nicely autographed copy of *Death Stalks The Night!*

Hugh B. Cave has had an adventurous life. He was born in England on July 11, 1910 and raised primarily around Boston. He began writing professionally at an early age. He sold stories to both the pulps and the slicks at the same time before turning to novels. He has written in most of the pulp genres including adventure, detective, spicy, horror, and western. Several of his stories have been reprinted recently by Barnes & Noble, High Adventure, and Tattered Pages Press to name a few. Several comments on pulp writing by Mr. Cave have appeared in recent fanzine articles and pulp "history" books.

This interview was conducted by submitting written questions to Mr. Cave. I've kept the order of the questions exactly as I submitted them to Mr. Cave. His answers reveal a keenly intelligent man with a lifetime of fascinating stories. As you will read, most of Mr. Cave's personal collection of his pulp stories were destroyed in a fire. Editors are constantly requesting his old stories. If you own a pulp which contains a Hugh B. Cave story and wouldn't mind copying that story, please e-mail me at [timrdrbr@premier1.premier.net](mailto:timrdrbr@premier1.premier.net) with contact information. I'll send a note to Mr. Cave. Wouldn't it be a nice surprise to receive a letter or phone call from the author himself?

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**Tim Dill:** You were very young when you became a professional writer. Was that always the career path that you had intended?

**Hugh B. Cave:** My English mother was born in India and knew Kipling. Her father built the Great Indian Peninsula Railway there and was mayor of Bombay for a time. I'm told that when Queen Victoria offered him knighthood, he replied that any damn fool could put a "sir" in front of his name, but he would be most grateful to be honored with a C.I.E.—Companion of the Indian Empire. Victoria gave him that in Buckingham Palace.

My mother became a nurse and was asked to serve in the Boer war in South Africa. My father, Tom Cave, followed her there and became a

paymaster in the British army. They were married there. A sister of my mother settled in the Australian outback when life there was rather primitive. Another settled in what was then Persia, where her son died trying to save a worker in a mine explosion. When I was four and a half years old, my parents opted for a new life in America, where they knew no one.

So, you see, I must have been born with a bit of adventure in my genes. And on top of that, my mother was a great reader. I was named after Hugh Walpole. I read Kipling, Conrad, Stevenson, and other such authors while in high school, and wrote short stories for the school paper. (My brother Geoffrey, four years older, had written for his high-school paper, too.) Then while still in high school I became a reporter and feature writer on the staff of a Y.M.C.A. publication,

*Boston Young Men's News*, and began selling poetry to newspapers and short stories to Sunday School magazines and such.

So, then, yes—I guess you could say I always wanted to be a writer. At least, I can't recall ever wanting to be anything else!

**Tim Dill:** Tell me about the days as an office boy in Boston. Is that where you got the fiction bug? I believe you started there just after high school.

**Hugh B. Cave:** I wasn't an office boy, exactly. I graduated from high school with a college scholarship but had to go to work because my dad had been severely injured by a runaway street car. So I got a job with a vanity publishing company in Boston, rented an apartment in Back Bay, and took selected courses at Boston University in the evenings.

At the publishing company I was a jack-of-all-trades, editing and sometimes rewriting manuscripts, designing and doing art work for book jackets, corresponding with some of the authors, and helping to put together several trade magazines also produced by this publisher. On the side I was selling poetry and short stories of my own to various newspapers and small magazines. One of my poems was set to music by Carlyle Davis and sung by him in Carnegie Hall in New York. Then in 1929, while still working for this company, I made my first pulp sale to *Brief Stories*, with a short story called *Island Ordeal*.

Everything happened in a hurry then. I began to sell to *Astounding Stories*, *Action Stories*, *Short Stories*, and soon was in a position to quit my job—the only one I've ever had—and survive as a full-time writer.

**Tim Dill:** What was your initial exposure to the pulp field?

**Hugh B. Cave:** I think I've just answered that. If by "exposure" you mean when did I first become acquainted with the pulps, that might call for a bit of expansion.

I was born in 1910, in England, and came to the U.S. A. at age four and a half, as mentioned before. By the time I was old enough to notice such things, pulp magazines were displayed on

racks in every drugstore in the land—dozens and dozens of intriguing titles all gussied up in bright, shiny, alluring covers. Being interested in the printed word in *any* form, especially fiction, I made a point of acquiring some of those magazines.

Some very good writers were writing for the pulps, I discovered. Max Brand, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Talbot Mundy . . . the list was quite long. And the stories were fun to read. There was no TV then, remember, and pulp tales took the reader to all sorts of exotic, far-off places. Or to the old West. Or to other planets. Or worlds of the weird and fantastic. I would buy a magazine, read it, write something of the same sort, and mail it to the editor. I'm sure many must have been rejected in those early days, but I remember only the letters of acceptance.

And even then—as I began to sell to the pulps—I was reading fiction in *The Saturday Evening Post* and other such "slick-paper" magazines. After all, they paid more money and were considered more "respectable."

**Tim Dill:** You've written stories in most of the genre's such as detective, adventure, spicy, horror, jungle adventures, etc. Do you have a favorite?

**Hugh B. Cave:** A favorite genre? Well now, in the beginning, because I had grown up hearing about India, Africa, Australia, the South Seas and such, I leaned toward adventure stories. And because I enjoyed the work of Conan Doyle I wrote detective stories. Then, because I admired Edgar Allen Poe and Ambrose Bierce, I began writing for such magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Strange Tales*. Then Westerns, because I liked the work of such writers as Zane Grey, Max Brand and Owen Wister.

But then I moved into mainstream books, and from those to the slicks, writing for *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Redbook*, *Esquire*, *Country Gentleman*, *Colliers*, *Ladies Home Journal*, etc. And when the slicks faded as a fiction market and I concentrated on writing novels, I enjoyed doing what was then known as "horror." But I beg not to be called a "horror writer", even though in 1991 the Horror Writers Association gave me their Lifetime Achievement Award. My novels in the field should more

properly be called mystery or dark fantasy, I think. At any rate, they are *not* packed with the gore, garbage language and obscurity found in so much of today's "horror" fiction.

**Tim Dill:** You've said in the past that the Spicy's were fun. Did you consider them easy to write?

**Hugh B. Cave:** Were the spicy stories easier to write than other pulp tales? I think they were, if only because the editors did not lay down any rigid guidelines. A writer for the Spicies was free to let his imagination take wings and soar, especially in tales aimed at *Spicy Mystery* and *Spicy Adventure*. In truth, I don't think they ever turned down a story of mine, and I had 70 stories published in the three magazines mentioned above plus *Private Detective Stories*, *Romantic Detective*, and *Speed Adventure Stories*, which were later brought out by the same publisher.

A footnote here, please. In some twenty of my stories for the Spicies I used a character I called "The Eel." He had no other name. In the adventure magazine he was "your gentleman correspondent," operating all over the world. In the detective book he was a private eye. For *Spicy Mystery Stories* he was likely to be almost anything. He told his stories in the first person, present tense, a la Damon Runyon, and I had a great time writing them, and he was pretty popular—got lots of covers. One of these days his escapades will be gathered together in a book of some sort. Stay tuned.

**Tim Dill:** You published many of your Spicy stories under the pen name of Justin Case. I've always wondered where you came up with that name. Just in case you became famous?

**Hugh B. Cave:** Ah, yes, Justin Case! I was working with agent Lurton "Count" Blassingame at the time the Spicies came into being, and he phoned me one day to tell me about this New York publisher who was planning a trio of magazines to be called *Spicy Mystery Stories*, *Spicy Adventure Stories* and *Spicy Detective Stories*. The editors, he said, would like me to write for them, with payment on acceptance at higher rates than most of the other pulps were paying.

I was on the verge of breaking into the slicks at the time, notably *The Saturday Evening Post* and was pretty sure it wouldn't help me to have my name on the covers of magazines with the word "Spicy" in their titles. So I asked Count to ask the editors if I might use a pen-name. They said yes. I first thought of using the name Barnett, which is my middle name. But after some heavy thinking I decided on Case, as being closer to Cave, and then wondered what to use instead of Hugh B.

With Case in there, it was easy. Justin came to mind very quickly, and the Spicy editors got a chuckle out of it, promising it would remain my exclusive property and not become a house name. Later on, when they reprinted some of the 70 stories I sold them, they came up with some far-out names themselves, even using "John Wayne" on one story of mine.

By the way, I still use the Justin Case moniker now and then. It even appeared recently in a Barnes & Noble anthology! And I never, ever, used my real name in the Spicies.

**Tim Dill:** The pulp field seems to be in an upsurge of popularity lately. I see Barnes & Noble reprinting several pulp related volumes, Vintage New Media is breaking new ground with electronic pulp reprints on the internet, and the quality of printing in *High Adventure* just keeps getting better. Any thoughts on this area?

**Hugh B. Cave:** Yes, Barnes & Noble has published several handsome volumes of pulp stories. And many fine books have been and are being written about the pulps. And there are some handsome magazines being published about the pulps, such as *High Adventure*, which you mentioned, and *Pulp Vault*, and *Echoes*, to name just a few. So why have pulp stories survived? Why are books being written about them and magazines being devoted to them? Why is there an annual Pulpcon? Why is Vintage New Media offering pulp stories and interviews such as this on the internet? I think I know a few of the reasons.

While the pulp magazines unquestionably published some poor stories, they also published some excellent work by writers who went on to become well known names. Pulp writers, remember, got their style, their values, their

thinking, from the old masters. The best ones knew the basics of writing and were able to come up with consistently good work even though writing in a hurry for low rates.

For many years I was one of the judges of the Scholastic Magazines' annual short story contest for high school students. The prizes were college scholarships. Year after year the stories became more and more obscure because teachers were teaching these kids it was "arty" to write that way. It was also virtually incomprehensible. Art itself, of course, took off on this murky road some years ago. No one has understood so-called modern art for years. And what about classical music? Have you listened to some of the newer compositions? Some sound like cats fighting on a back-alley fence.

So what do we have? Those kids, who learned this dismal stuff from teachers who themselves couldn't write worth a damn, are now editors, and accepting only the sort of writing they think of as "art." And some of it is beyond understanding.

I read a review recently by a respected reviewer. This is what he said of an "important" new novel: "*I don't get it. I just don't get it. Period.*"

But you "get" a pulp story. Well or badly written, it has a beginning, a middle, an end. And many readers like that.

**Tim Dill:** Can you compare some of today's authors with the authors of the pulp era?

**Hugh B. Cave:** I'm sure many of today's big names, if born back in the pulp era, would have begun their careers writing for the pulps. Some did, of course. Among today's well-known writers, some would undoubtedly have written for *Detective Story* or *Black Mask*, some for the love pulps, others for such magazines as *Astounding* or *Western Story* or *Weird Tales*, still others for *Short Stories*, *Adventure*, or *Blue Book*. There were some 200 pulp magazines, remember, covering almost every genre. It was nice to be able to earn a living while learning one's trade or, if you like, polishing one's skills. I, for one, learned a lot from pulp editors and am grateful to them.

**Tim Dill:** The sheer volume of material that you have written is staggering. Reading some of your correspondence written in the early 30's, you mention sending thirty or more published pulp stories to your British Literary Agent per month. How did you endure this type of pace?

**Hugh B. Cave:** I was young and full of ginger back then, but didn't write any 30 stories a month, believe me. About sending stories to England, I had an English agent, and when I had enough stories on hand from various pulps to send him a bundle, I did so. He then re-sold them to various English and European magazines that published such stories.

I actually wrote about 800 pulp stories under one name or another. Sadly, I no longer have the notebooks in which I kept records of when they were written, where sold, how much I was paid for them, when and where they were published, reprinted, etc. All that information was lost when a fire took out the garden house in which I had it stored—along with a small mountain of pulp magazines (worth a fortune today) in which the stories appeared. But I do know the number of stories listed in my notebooks had passed the 800 mark. What else I now know about my pulp output I've learned mostly from collectors and fans, and such books Leonard A. Robbins' wonderful *The Pulp Magazine Index*.

I would write a short story in a couple of days, I seem to remember. Novelettes took three or four days, and serials much longer, of course. And I didn't send out first-draft copy, ever. I had a reputation for turning out clean copy, which I earned by editing and retyping everything at least once. Other writers—H. Bedford Jones, for instance—wrote much faster than that, so I was not by any means the most prolific pulp writer. I once read that Bedford Jones often worked on several stories at once, using different typewriters. And once, when in N.Y., I visited Arthur J. Burks and watched him pound away at a manual typewriter to meet a deadline while half a dozen friends, including Manly Wade Wellman, sat around his apartment talking.

But I'm probably not the slowest writer, either. Counting pulps and slicks, I've had something like 1200 shorts, novelettes and serials published, along with 30-some books.

**Tim Dill:** With the tremendous volume of pulp fiction that you have written, there must be a few pieces that are not up to your personal standards. Are you ashamed of any of your work?

**Hugh B. Cave:** In putting together collections of my pulp stories for book publication, I have rejected some that I didn't think were up to par. Just recently, for instance, when reading over some of those previously mentioned *Spicy* magazine "Eel" stories for possible book publication, I threw out one that I thought wasn't good enough. But, no, I haven't had anything published that I'm actually "ashamed" of.

**Tim Dill:** One of your techniques to help with plotting was to read a racing form and use the horse's names to inspire a plot. I thought that was extremely clever. What other story writing techniques have you used?

**Hugh B. Cave:** "Where do you get your ideas?" is a question every writer is asked again and again. As it should be, I suppose, because without ideas there would be no stories. That business of using racetrack entries came about when I rented an office in the old Industrial Trust Building in Providence, R.I., in which to work. On my way to the office each morning I would buy a Racing Form so as to put a few small bets down during my lunch hour on horses running at Narragansett Park.

It worked, too. Try it yourself. You run down a list of entries in a race, pick out names that seem to indicate characters or suggest some kind of action, then weave a story-line around them. What you come up with won't be a ready-made plot, of course. You'll have to fill it in and build on it. But a pulp writer had to churn out stories one after another, and *anything* beat sitting there staring at a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter. I found it worked especially well for detective stories, and remember using it for many of the 63 shorts, novelettes and serials I wrote for *Detective Fiction Weekly*.

Other idea sources? Well, now, I carried a small notebook—what writer doesn't?—in which to jot down any ideas that came into my so-called head anywhere, at any time. And, of course, a mind *alert* for ideas is always receptive to them, like an

empty bucket out in the yard waiting for drops of rain to fall. I'm still into all this, by the way. Couldn't halt the process now even if I wanted to.

**Tim Dill:** You published extensively in both the pulp field and the slicks. Were the slicks considerably harder to write and plot?

**Hugh B. Cave:** The slicks were harder to sell because they paid so much more and the competition was heftier. Take *The Saturday Evening Post*, for instance. I mean the old one, the Curtis publication. They would report on a story in 48 hours, and they paid top rates, which meant they got first look at just about everything that seemed to be a possible *Post* story.

And yes, stories for the slicks took me longer to plot and write because they had to be of more general interest than pulp tales. A pulp western, for instance, was aimed at readers of western stories. A pulp detective yarn was aimed at lovers of mystery. The slicks, though, were aimed at whole families of readers.

I could turn out a 5000-word pulp story in one sitting if I had to. (Not that I did it often!) Only once that I recall did I ever do a slickpaper story in one session at the typewriter, and that was a tale called *The Mission*, which appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* and was based on something that really happened to a little girl in Haiti, where I spent several years studying and writing about voodoo.

**Tim Dill:** You were very active in the American Fiction Guild during the thirties. What are your fondest memories with this organization?

**Hugh B. Cave:** According to a newspaper clipping in a scrapbook of mine, The American Fiction Guild was "a national association of writers and artists whose aim is to improve the standard of fiction in all-fiction magazines, which magazines publish 80 per cent of the fiction published in this country." I was named "president" of the Rhode Island district and asked to establish a Rhode Island chapter. Some prominent New York pulp writers were behind the movement, I seem to remember, but before I could establish an active R.I. chapter the Guild

just sort of faded away. My file on it disappeared long ago, and there is no way I can look things up.

I do recall that I wrote to H.P. Lovecraft about joining up, and we exchanged a few letters on that and other subjects. And I suppose I must have contacted other R.I. pulp writers, if there were any in Little Rhody at that time.

**Tim Dill:** You've called H.P. Lovecraft an artist in the past. Could you explain this statement?

**Hugh B. Cave:** H.P. Lovecraft was most certainly a word artist.

I do think he is sometimes admired for the wrong reason, though. His imitators try to copy his prose style when they ought to be trying to capture his creativity or his masterful ability to lure the reader along to an explosive climax.

His work has endured because it's different, not just because of August Derleth and other admirers who have devoted or are presently devoting themselves to keeping it alive.

**Tim Dill:** Do you consider yourself an artist or a business man?

**Hugh B. Cave:** Hey, I'm a writer. I've been a writer since high school. The only time I ever tried to be anything else was when I bought an old rundown coffee plantation in Jamaica's Blue Mountains and restored it, and even then I spent all of my spare time at a typewriter.

I hope I'm a businessman when it comes to selling what I write, but first of all I'm a writer.

**Tim Dill:** I've read that the target audience of most pulps was twelve year old boys. Have you consciously "written down" to your audience at times?

**Hugh B. Cave:** Twelve-year-old boys? No, no. Kids didn't read the pulps. Not many kids, anyway. What 12-year-old would have understood the stories in, say, *Weird Tales*?

The pulps reached their peak in the thirties, remember, when this fair land of ours was deep in a depression. Also, that was before television

came on the scene to whisk its viewers off to exciting, far-away places. Pulp fiction took its readers all over the world, in fact all over the universe, and most of those readers, I'm sure, were adults seeking a break from the struggle to stay alive in what was one of the darkest periods in our country's history. As Robert Bloch pointed out in his Pulpcon speech, the year he and I were co-Guests, the pulps, like the movies, were an escape hatch for people caught up in a dreary struggle for existence.

I didn't read the pulps as a kid; I know that. I read the authors mentioned earlier in this interview. And when I wrote for kids I wrote for *Boys' Life* and *American Boy*.

**Tim Dill:** What was the best pulp publishing house in your opinion as an author?

**Hugh B. Cave:** In all fairness, I don't think I should try to answer this. Lurton Blassingame became my agent very early in the game, and thereafter he handled all my pulp work. (Not the slicks; I handled those myself.) So I had no way of knowing which pulp publishers were easy to work with and which were difficult. All I know is that Blassingame was able to sell everything I sent him.

I did briefly meet a few editors along the way. Rogers Terrill of Popular Publication comes to mind, also Roy de S. Horn of *Short Stories* and Wally Bamber of *Far East Adventure Stories*. Wally, when driving through Rhode Island one day, graciously stopped at my Pawtucket digs to give me a couple of original cover paintings for Cave stories he had published. But the only editor I ever knew well was Popular's Kenneth White. As a friend of my agent, Ken began accompanying Blassingame and me and a pal, Larry Dunn, on fishing trips to Maine and New Hampshire. We kept it up for years. One summer the four of us spent six weeks canoeing through the Canadian wilderness between Lake Huron and Hudson's Bay. Ken White was a fine editor and a great guy. My son, Ken Cave, is named after him.

**Tim Dill:** Did you ever meet Emile C. Tepperman? What can you tell me about him?

**Hugh B. Cave:** I know about Tepperman, of course, but never met him or corresponded with him. I'm not even sure that I ever appeared on a contents page with him. Sorry.

**Tim Dill:** You stored most of your pulp field work in the garden house of your home. A fire destroyed all of your hundreds of pulp magazines. Quite a tragedy for pulp enthusiasts. Have you been able to replace most of them? Are you actively trying to find copies of these magazines?

**Hugh B. Cave:** No, I haven't been able to replace most of those lost stories. Only a few. And actually I'm not trying very hard to find whole magazines. It's too late in the day for me to start collecting those, and they're expensive. Besides, where I'm living now I haven't room to store them. I *am* looking for copies of my missing stories, however, because anthology editors keep requesting certain types, and publishers keep coming up with new ideas for collections.

For example Barnes & Noble has used many short pulp stories of mine in their "100 Little" series of anthologies. And the following collections of my short stories have been published:

*The Witching Lands.* Doubleday, 1962. West Indies stories from the slicks.

*Murgunstrumm and Others.* Carcosa, 1977 Pulp weird-menace stories.

*A Summer Romance & Other Stories.* Longmans, 1980. Stories from Good Housekeeping.

*The Corpse Maker.* Starmont, 1988. Pulp mystery stories.

*Death Stalks The Night.* Fedogan & Bremor, 1995. Pulp weird menace stories.

*The Dagger of Tsiang.* Tattered Pages Press. Pulp adventure stories.

Three other collections are on the way, one from Fedogan & Bremer, two from Necronomicon Press. And I'm working on others.

**Tim Dill:** Looking back at all your work, what one piece or area are you the most proud of?

**Hugh B. Cave:** That's a tough one. What *one* piece? My *Murgunstrumm and Others*, published by Karl Edward Wagner's Carosa, won a World Fantasy Award. My voodoo novel, *The Cross on the Drum*, was a double bookclub selection. A short story of mine called *The Mission*, illustrated with a magnificent full-page portrait of it's little Haitian heroine, Yolande, by artist Peter Stevens, was said by the *Post's* editors to have received more reader mail than anything of its kind the magazine ever published. And three of the five war books I wrote as a correspondent in World War II were reprinted in the 1980s for the Navel Academy.

Then there's a little American Magazine "storiette" of mine called *Two Were Left*, about an Eskimo boy and his dog marooned on an iceberg, that has been reprinted nearly a hundred times, in schoolbooks.

My "proudest piece" would have to be one of those. I don't know which one.

**Tim Dill:** Some hard core pulp fans detest the work of pulp authors who made the transition into the slicks. These fans feel that the slicks offered a very unimaginative and generic brand of fiction. What is your opinion of the slicks' creativity compared to that of the pulps?

**Hugh B. Cave:** I'll have to take the middle road on this one. Some slick fiction is written to formula. So was some pulp fiction. Actually, soon after I became established in the pulps I began trying to hit the slicks as well, and I'm not sure there was all that much difference between the two.

Take, for instance, my *Tsiang House* tales for *Short Stories*, which have now been reprinted in the Tattered Pages Press volume, *The Dagger of Tsiang*. Two of them were originally published in *The Canadian Magazine*, a slick, yet publisher Doug Ellis did not hesitate to use them in the book. And I'm sure that the South Seas adventure tales I sold to *The Saturday Evening Post* after seeing that part of the world as a correspondent in World War II were every bit as

imaginative as anything of mine that ever appeared in a pulp.

Of course, if you're a big fan of say, my creepy novelettes in *Dime Mystery* or *Terror Tales*, you're not likely to be all that enthusiastic about my novelettes in *Good Housekeeping*. Believe me, though, the same sincerity and hard work went into both.

**THE END**



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