
AN INTERVIEW WITH WILL MURRAY

Conducted by Timothy Ray Dill

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Will Murray, author, pulp historian, literary agent for the Lester Dent estate, and the list of titles continues. If you love pulps and the stories behind the stories, then you know of Will Murray. His definitive works on pulp legends Walter B. Gibson and Lester Dent are legendary themselves. He discovered Doc Savage through the Bantam paperbacks in the late sixties and eventually became "Kenneth Robeson" to officially pen the Doc Savage novels in the nineties. The Doc Savage series is currently in hiatus, but Will would love to write a few more. We would love it too, Will.

Tim Dill: You earn a living as a professional writer. Could you compare your modern day experiences with those of a vintage pulp writer?

Will Murray: I think it's harder to get established these days. Fewer markets. Narrower markets. In the pulp era, if Black Mask rejected a story, you could try it on any number of lesser markets until it sold. These days, there are almost no magazine markets to launch a writer full-time. It's also interesting that writers are less well paid than then. Dent got \$750.00 per Doc--about a cent and a half per word. People writing the Executioner, for example, earn about a penny or two a word. And a 1997 penny has only a fraction of the buying power of a 1937 penny! I had a hard time breaking in. It took years. Many pulp writers got off the ground within the first year. It's funny. I used to wish I had lived in the Depression so I could write for the pulps. I don't anymore. Most pulp writers wrote formula stuff about ordinary cops, detectives and such mundane heroes. Unless you were Dent or Gibson or Chandler or Howard or Lovecraft, you were constrained to write tripe. Today, there's more artistic freedom, royalties, etc. Although I see bad omens. Too many good writers today are forced by economic necessity to pen Star Trek, etc. novels when they should be doing their own characters. If writers become mere tools of media phenomena like Star Wars, we're going to lose a generation of writers who should be creating the characters of the future. I'm guilty of that too. My latest novel, War Dogs of the Golden Horde, published under the name, Ray W. Murill, is a *Mars Attacks* novel.

Tim Dill: About ten years ago, you said that you crammed all of your published material into two bookshelves and watched it grow as a motivational tool. Do you still do this? How many

bookshelves are crammed full of your material now?

Will Murray: I started that about 20 years ago, actually. That bookshelf now contains my Bantam Doc Savage collection--or what will fit. My published works--now some 50 novels, assorted short stories in various anthologies and possibly a couple thousand articles in magazines ranging from Starlog to Lovecraft Studies--long ago moved to a tall bookcase and then exploded beyond the point where a single bookcase could contain them. I've been forced to store much of it in boxes, although I do shelve my novels and anthology appearances. I would need a large room to properly display everything now. My chief motivation these days is deadlines and checks.

Tim Dill: What projects are currently on your schedule?

Will Murray: Let's see. This fall my first--and probably only--*Executioner* novel will be released, Red Horse. I did it as a lark. A DAW anthology called The UFO Files will contain another of my *Cryptic Events* story called "Diplomatic Exchange." I have a Spider-Man novelette, *Side-by-Side with the Astonishing Ant-Man* coming up in The Untold Tales of Spider-Man anthology. Have just gotten approval for a *Hulk* novelette for a 1998 Marvel anthology, The Ultimate Hulk, which I'm calling *Transformations*. Upcoming in Starlog, I have interviews with Doc Savage model Steve Holland and Shadow interior artist Edd Cartier. This summer, a third Necronomicon Press Clark Ashton Smith collection I've edited, The Treader of the Dust, will be released. My big project at the moment is resuming my Lester Dent biography, which got sidetracked when I took over the *Destroyer* series.

I've had discussions with a small press publisher about this project, and I guess it's just a matter of clearing the time and picking up the threads. It's been a deferred dream for a while. I hope to see it realized. I should mention that I recently left the *Destroyer* series after a solid ten-year run. I was not enjoying it anymore. I really didn't want to quit, but felt that was the way to go. Having written some 4-6 long novels a year over a ten-year stretch, I'm decompressing from novel-writing. I imagine the right project will come along to get me going again.

Tim Dill: You've based characters in your *Destroyer* novels on pulp fans Tom Johnson and Nick Carr. What other inside novelties have you inserted into your books?

Will Murray: God, there must be dozens of in-jokes and the like scattered over my 40-something *Destroyers*. I once wrote a series of humorous short stories about a PI named Mike Brunt. I stuck him in a *Destroyer* once. It was #77: Coin of the Realm. A character in #80: Hostile Takeover, P. M. Looncraft, was loosely based on H. P. Lovecraft. Cthulhu cameoid in #100: Last Rites. My last *Destroyer* before I bailed from the series, #107: Feast or Famine, ended with Remo going off with a woman I based on my then-fiancee. I've since become unfianced. If I ever return to the series--a possibility I suppose--I will have to resolve that situation somehow. Lester Dent's treasure-hunting adventures inspired a Marvel *Destroyer* comic book I once scripted called "Golden Rule." A lot of my film assignments for Starlog have inspired *Destroyers*. My week on the set of Rambo III in 1988 inspired Shooting Schedule. A lot of people have wondered what stuntman/movie actor was the model for Sunny Joe Roam, first introduced in Shooting Schedule and revealed to be Remo's father in Last Rites. I based him on Dick Durock, whom I met on the set of The Return of Swamp Thing. As a big fan of 1960s Marvel Comics, I tend to insert sly references to Things Marvelous. Under the name Martin S. Lieber, Stan Lee was a major character in Rain of Terror. The number 334 occurs often. It's my street address.

Tim Dill: You've said in the past that Lester Dent and Stan Lee have had a major influence on your writing. What other authors have influenced you in the past and how do they influence you with your current projects?

Will Murray: I think my major influences other than Dent and Stan, have been Walter B. Gibson, H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Raymond Chandler, Sax Rohmer, and Talbot Mundy. From Gibson, I learned to plot on a higher level and to keep the reader involved and guessing, not just from chapter to chapter, but from book to book. He really is the third major influence on how I write. All others, their influence has ebbed with the passing of time. It's there, but I'm not consciously aware of it. When I write novels, I guess I consciously try to write with Gibson's cleverness of plot and Dent's excitement. They are my two pulp Masters.

Tim Dill: You met Norma Dent, the wife of the late Lester Dent, and maintained a professional relationship with her until her death. You became the literary agent for the Lester Dent estate and have been responsible for the reprinting of many Dent stories. How did you meet Mrs. Dent and come to serve in that capacity?

Will Murray: My first contacts with Mrs. Dent were by letter and telephone around 1973, when I was launching Duende, my short-lived pulp fanzine of so long ago. I first met Mrs. Dent at the 1977 Pulpcon, and we became friends. She invited me to her home, an invitation I finally took up in 1978. She was a steady strong-minded soul who had a profound impact on my life and career. I visited La Plata 3 times all told, and can still smell the dryish scent of old Doc Savage manuscripts that smacked me in the face when I opened the antique steel filing cabinet that contained the carbons of the first few years worth of Doc manuscripts. It was in one drawer that I stumbled across the fateful outline called Python Isle, which would be the first novel I ever wrote, and the experience that launched my fiction career. I became the literary agent for the Dent estate when I brokered the complicated deal in 1978 that resulted in the lost Doc novel, which I retitled The Red Spider, being published. It was a tricky situation. Bantam wanted to publish it. Conde Nast owned the copyright but not the manuscript. And Mrs. Dent owned the manuscripts but no rights to it. For a while there was a huge impass, but happily it all worked out. After that, I handled all Dent rights matters. I'm very proud of the fact that my hard work earned me the privilege of finishing some of Lester Dent's uncompleted Docs. But I'm more proud I helped give Mrs. Dent some

income during her most frail years. I see it as my way of repaying Lester for the entertainment and inspiration he gave me. She was wonderful to me.

Tim Dill: Have you actively marketed Dent stories or mainly been available for requests from publishers?

Will Murray: Both. Most sales are the result of requests. But if I discover a market, I will pursue it. When Richard Kyle launched the new incarnation of *Argosy*, knowing that he was a huge Doc and Dent fan, I offered him several stories I thought appropriate to *Argosy*, and he brought two, *Punkins and the Moon Varmint* and *Two Kukulcans*, both of which are forthcoming. When my friend Don Hutchison announced a collection of Royal Canadian Mounted Police pulp stories through Mosaic Press, I offered him a choice of three Dent's, figuring he'd take one. He took all three! *Blazing Tunics* is the working title, and it will feature two stories--one never published--about a bizarre Dent Mountie hero called the Silver Corporal. It's due later this year. As one might imagine, markets for some of Dent's stories are hard to find. I think his two *Black Mask* stories featuring Oscar Sale will be reprinted as long as readers care about Hardboiled P.I's. But other than fanzines, I don't see much opportunity to market his WWI air-war stuff, of which he wrote over a dozen stories. Some time I would like to assemble the best of his western yarns into a collection--but one-author collections are tough to market these days.

Tim Dill: You are the latest Kenneth Robeson and have written seven authorized Doc Savage novels for Bantam books with the last being published in 1993. The "All-New Adventures of the Mighty Man of Bronze" is currently in hiatus. You posted a number of chapters of your unfinished Doc novels on the internet with hopes that it would spur the interest of fans and Bantam to continue the series. The legal department of Conde' Nast Publications, Inc., the copyright owners of the Street & Smith characters, sent a "cease and desist" letter to you. Inquiries about copyrights and possible publishing projects involving Conde' Nast properties have been referred to the legal department instead of the marketing department. It seems like Conde' Nast would rather sit on their pulp properties for the moment than utilize them. What is happening inside the Conde' Nast organization?

Will Murray: Actually, none of this has anything to do with Conde Nast. I believe the concerns originate within Bantam Books, who currently holds the license to publish Doc. I suspect Conde Nast would prefer Bantam resume their Doc program in order to keep the character in the public eye and possibly generate interest in Hollywood. Conde Nast politely asked me to stop posting Doc chapters to protect their claim to the character. I think the e-mail response to my Doc chapters caused Bantam to alert Conde Nast. As for what's going on inside Bantam, I have no direct knowledge. The licensing agreement expires some time before the year 2000, and they will have to do something or lose the right to do Doc. I remain cautiously optimistic that I will be asked to write a few more Docs. But the decision is entirely in Bantam's hands.

Tim Dill: Being a professional writer and also one of the top experts in the pulp history field, what is your view of the future of Doc Savage and other pulp characters in the main stream publishing market?

Will Murray: Unless there is a major Doc Savage movie to catapult the character into the national consciousness, I suspect Doc interest may stagnate or dwindle. It's sad, but for a character to remain popular there has to be a media tie-in and a renewable audience. Teenagers don't read like they used to and this is choking off the future of pulp characters. The prospects for other pulp heroes, possibly excepting The Shadow, are even more dire. The potential is there. But to flourish they have to be published and promoted. We live in an era where American mainstays like baseball and comic books are dying from slow declining interest. Reversing these trends involves major efforts. I don't see any. While I feel there may be another Doc revival, without a media-tie in like a TV show or film, I fear it will be a last gasp. At least in the mass-market arena. On the other hand, it's so cheap to reprint Doc, Bantam may release a smattering of old ones every few years just to hold on to the rights. As long as they keep Doc alive, something could happen.

Tim Dill: You wrote an honors thesis, entitled *Doc Savage: The Genesis of a Popular Fiction Hero*, while at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Dent's work as well as

a lot of pulp fiction is not usually considered legitimate literature by scholars. Did the University instructors have any problems with the subject matter?

Will Murray: I hadn't thought about this in many years. As I recall, my advisor, Professor Willey, was very open to the subject but kept pushing me to compare Doc to more literary works, like Frank Norris' MacTeague. Being stubborn, I resisted this because I wanted to delve into Doc in terms of the pulp field and the Depression. My thesis did pass, but I understand there was some dissent. But not enough to deny me credit. Ironically, about a month after graduating, I visited Doc editor John L. Nanovic in New York and learned from him the story of Colonel Richard Henry Savage, the true-life inspiration for Doc. If I had only known this a few weeks earlier, my thesis would have been that much more groundbreaking. Not that I think it would have mattered to the dissenters on the faculty board. But that was so long ago....

Tim Dill: Your pulp related articles are sought after by old and new fans alike. Have you ever considered reprinting them or posting them to your web page?

Will Murray: I'm too busy to do the necessary retyping. But it is something I'd like to see happen. For several years, Necronomicon Press has had plans to collect my best articles on H. P. Lovecraft in booklet form. It's to be called Mapping the Mythos: Cthulhu's Cartographer. There has also been some talk of collecting my best non-Lovecraft pulp articles. But Necro has gotten so busy with their trade paperback program I don't know when or if these things will happen.

Tim Dill: In 1985, "Adventures of Doc Savage" was produced for National Public Radio. You adapted one of the two shows from a Doc Savage tale. These radio dramas are really excellent. Tell us the background on this project.

Will Murray: It started when producer-director Roger Rittner contacted me about rights to the 1934 Dent Doc radio scripts. He wanted to recreate them. But the 15 minute format made that unworkable. I think I suggested adapting two novels in the I Love a Mystery serial form instead. Roger picked Fear Cay because it involved Pat. I

went with The Thousand-Headed Man because it was one of Dent's favorite Docs--the other was Sargasso Ogre--and had almost been made as a movie starring Chuck (The Rifleman) Connors in 1967. The project stalled out due to lack of funding for over two years. I had completely given up when Roger called to say it finally got off the ground. Roger kindly sent me audition tapes so I had input into picking the cast and theme music. I remember going to the last taping and the wrap party, which was a lot of fun. I interviewed everyone for an article but never got around to writing it. We talked about a second set of episodes. I wanted to do Resurrection Day and Roger was leaning toward adapting my then-unpublished Python Isle. We never got past the talking stage. Again, funding thwarted future serials. But it was a great experience.

Tim Dill: You have said in the past that you would like to write a novel which features both The Shadow and Doc Savage. Have you plotted this one yet?

Will Murray: No. For a while, I considered sticking The Shadow into The Ice Genius, one of my unfinished Docs, because it had a worthy villain. I believe I also toyed with putting The Shadow into another planned Doc, The War Maker. Ultimately I sensed we weren't going to get the rights to use The Shadow, so I abandoned the whole idea. It sure would have been a kick to bring those two great characters together in a way that would work. These days, I would be happy just to finish up my unfinished Docs. I've written a lot of novels, but those 7 Docs remain my favorites.

Tim Dill: Can you explain your relationship with Walter B. Gibson, the creator of The Shadow, and relate some anecdotes?

Will Murray: I met Walter at a comic book convention in New York City in 1974, where I interviewed him. Our friendship grew from there. I have a lot of special memories of Walter. Editing what turned out to be his final Shadow story, Blackmail Bay, for The Duende History of The Shadow Magazine. (He submitted it untitled, I imagine knowing I'd get a kick out of titling it.) I remember him doing his magic act at various Pulpcons. He would be doing the usual handkerchief-and-wands trick when he would pretend to goof. Your heart would sink, thinking

he'd gotten too old to pull a sleight off. But he was just manipulating his audience, as he did in *The Shadow*. In person or in print, he was a master of the fake out. One day he called me with a problem. He was going to write a new Norgil the Magician story and had decided Norgil's real name would be W. Bates Loring, an anagram of Walter B. Gibson. He couldn't think of what the W. stood for. I offered him my first name, William. Later, he amended it to Williams, after Williams College. Unfortunately, he never got around to writing the story. Walter was an amazing guy. I feel very lucky to have been his friend and still miss hearing his hoarse voice coming over the telephone wire.

Tim Dill: I once heard that Walter B. Gibson was working on a new *Shadow* novel prior to his death. I also heard that Gibson's estate was auctioned to pay his bills. What can you tell us about these rumors?

Will Murray: I alerted the guy who ultimately bought the unfinished *Shadow* novel of the impending auction. He tells me all Walter managed to write was a chapter or so--before *The Shadow* makes his entrance. There's an outline of sorts, I think incomplete. So it's not much more than a curiosity. The story was to feature the return of Shiwan Khan. It's untitled. Among those papers was another unfinished *Shadow* item. A 1934 *Shadow* radio serial Walter wrote on spec. It's a brand-new story, but alas, incomplete. The auction took place only a year or so ago. It wasn't to pay Walter's bills, but was triggered by the declining health of his widow, Litzka, who since passed away.

Tim Dill: John Nanovic was *Street & Smith's* editor for *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage* magazines among others during the "golden" age of the two series. He played significant roles in plotting and shaping the stories. I read once that he didn't even know that Bantam was reprinting *Doc Savage* until you mentioned it. What can you tell us about Mr. Nanovic's role in pulp history then and now?

Will Murray: In my opinion, John Nanovic was the most important pulp editor of the 1930s, bar none. He edited the two formative hero pulps, *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage*, as well as many others like Nick Carter, The Skipper, The Whisperer, Pete Rice, and The Avenger. He was young and unlike a lot of his contemporaries,

enjoyed the stories he was editing. The hero pulps gave the pulp magazine field probably an extra decade or two of borrowed time, until TV finally dealt the death blow. John's skill helped make all that possible. Nanovic made an important decision early in his career. He let the writer write in his own style. Other S&S editors preferred to edit the magazines into a sort of gray S&S house style until everything in an issue read as if the same bored hack had penned it. Because of Nanovic, Dent's exciting voice came through uncensored. That's the chief reason we can read and enjoy Doc today. Today, John is basically retired, and shows only a mild interest in the old days. It's too bad. He was a hell of an editor in his day.

Tim Dill: Why do you think pulp fiction has survived and is increasing in popularity?

Will Murray: There's a line in *Sunset Boulevard* where Norma Desmond said, "We didn't need voices then. We had faces." Well, pulp fiction writers had voices. You could read a paragraph of Gibson and instantly know it from Norvell Page. Robert J. Hogan wrote nothing like Frederick C. Davis. Think of the pulp writers who stood out, who are still read today. They pounded out narrative-driven stories that forced a writer to develop a distinct narrative voice. That's why when we read a bad Doc, it's still enjoyable. Dent's familiar voice keeps us reading. Today, the dialogue-driven story written in the so-called "transparent style" mode is in fashion. Writers don't have voices. I think today's reader hungers for stories written in a distinctive voice. They find them in the past. I don't know what was in the water back in the first half of the 20th Century, but there was a lot of vitality in even the popular writers of that period. Have there been groundbreaking giants like H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Dashiell Hammett and others who virtually created new kinds of heroes and sub-genres within scant years of one another since? No. I sometimes wonder if we'll ever see a period as fertile and creative ever again.

Tim Dill: You are a frequent guest at Pulpcon. What experiences have you had at Pulpcon?

Will Murray: I used to go to the Pulpcons to buy pulps and meet my pulpy friends. These days I go to see my old friends and meet my readers. I

have pretty much all the pulps I ever wanted. Twenty years of Pulpconning has produced a blur of images. But this stands out: When I went to my first Pulpcon in 1974, the old-timers who read my articles were surprised to discover I was in my 20s. People thought I was 45 or so--like many of them. At the last Pulpcon I attended, a young fan came up and expressed astonishment that I was only in my 40s. After reading my articles he was sure I'd be at least 65!

Tim Dill: The 1994 Universal film, *The Shadow*, was very controversial with pulp fans and also a box office flop. Your excellent book, [The Duende History of The Shadow Magazine](#), was the source book for the film. Unfortunately David Koepp's script deviated from the pulp perspective significantly although James Luceno's novelization of the screenplay was much better. What are your thoughts about the film and the book now?

Will Murray: I remain very gratified that the film was as true to Gibson's vision as it was. Having read previous scripts, I saw how truly awful it might have been. I think the biggest problem the filmmakers had--and I'm referring to the producer, director and cast too--is that they failed to connect with the potential audience. They didn't understand *The Shadow's* basic appeal or why people were so captivated by him. Consequently, they tried to make him more realistic, giving him dark motivations and explaining too much of his background. In stripping away all mystery in favor of giving Cranston a 90s psychological motivation, they threw away the essential appeal of *The Shadow*: he's a fantasy figure. A dark angel of good using the psychological tools of the evil to defeat true evil, not a bad guy trying to wrestle with his inner demons. Gibson's *Shadow*, whatever inner demons he might or might not have had, knew who he was and what he was about. Still, it's a hell of a better film that might could have been, and I'm grateful for that. Everyone should be.

Tim Dill: After the box office disappointments of the recent pulp inspired films, what is your opinion of the future of our pulp heroes in the theater?

Will Murray: Right now, they look pretty grim. There are two Universal direct-to-video *Shadow* features in the works. They might be good, they might be terrible. We'll see. Every

once in a while talk of filming Doc Savage surfaces. But nothing happens. The hope of the future is a major Doc film. It could still happen, but right now the lights on the 86th floor are out, and night is closing in. Of other pulp heroes, I see scant chance of Spider, G-8, or Avenger films--especially since *The Phantom* tanked. Yet there's a new Zorro movie in the works. Indiana Jones may be revived. And Tarzan will be a major Disney animated film in a couple of years. So hope springs eternal.

Tim Dill: What role do you see the internet playing in the future of pulps or in books in general?

Will Murray: This is a very intriguing prospect. I've been collecting pulp-related paperback reprints or some 25 years now and as the years go on there are fewer and fewer of them. New writers are crowding the old out. But also, paperback publishers have higher and higher sales expectations--something Doc and *The Shadow* and others can't aspire to when the highbar is [Star Wars](#)-level sales. One interesting trend of late has been small press publishers doing pulp reprints profitably. For Necronimicon Press I've been editing trade paperback collections of Clark Ashton Smith--who you can't give away to paperback publishers--yet the small trade editions do quite well and have resulted in a rekindling of interest in Smith. I think this is one important trend in keeping the pulp flame alive. This suggests to me the other will be the internet. The audience may be shrinking because there are no mass market vehicles for pulp fiction. Internet venues can arrest that. Even reverse it. Let's face it, electrons are cheaper than paper. And niche publishing is a coming thing. I know one former paperback distributor who believes the paperback is doomed. I tend to agree with him. It's in an upward death spiral of declining readership and escalating cover prices--the first \$8.00 paperback came out last month--that may kill paperbacks forever before long. Popular fiction should be cheap and disposable. The paperback is not. Given that fact, niche publishing and the internet look very promising. I guess one big question remains: Will electronic publishing be profitable? The answer to that lies in cyber-space.

THE END



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