
An Interview With Talmage Powell

Talmage Powell has been writing for over fifty years now. His career has included the pulps, paperbacks, and television. With hundreds of stories to his credit, he has been consistently creative, inventive, and always entertaining. He was gracious enough to answer some of our questions recently about his experiences and perspective on writing.

VNM: You studied writing at University of North Carolina and soon after began your writing career in the pulps during the 1940's. What writers inspired you to take up this profession? Did the pulps and the pulp writers of the 1920's and 1930's influence your career choice and your writing style?

Mr. Powell: I just assumed early-on that I would grow up to be a writer. I can't identify any specific inspiration, or reason, for that state of mind. I received my first brush with "publication" when I was in the fifth grade. I wrote a little story as an English assignment and the next day the teacher varied the usual daily routine to read the story to the class and invite discussion.

The pulps were an influence simply because they were there, a voracious market, said to consume a billion words a year.

Magazine fiction in those days supplied entertainment in proportion comparable to TV today. Editors were under constant pressure to fill their "books" (they never referred to the publications as magazines) with stories that would retain and expand their readership in viciously competitive circumstances.

The result for writers was largely a sellers market. Publishers employed staffs of specialist readers to spot signs of talent in the "slush pile", unsolicited stories that came in "over the transom". Writers received reports on submissions usually in two weeks or less, and were paid on acceptance. The writer who could steadily produce quickly moved up to double the base rate of a penny a word.

Additionally, the economics of the era, the actual purchasing power of the dollar, favored the writer.

The minimum wage was forty-cents an hour, and prices were geared thereto. A returning GI could buy a brand new home for fifty-five hundred to seventy-five hundred dollars, with an interest rate of four-and-one-quarter percent. Coffee and two donuts cost all of a dime. A blue-plate

special, soup or juice, meat, two vegetables, salad, drink, dessert hit you for seventy-five cents, and a kid with a nickel was king of the neighborhood as he treated his cronies at a penny-candy counter. Ten cents for a large loaf of bread, a double-feature movie two-bits. Credit cards were non-existent and usury laws in most states made it illegal to charge a customer more than six-percent interest on an installment payment purchase. The full-time professional pulp writer producing 10,000 words a week at two cents per word received, in minimum wage/commodity prices extrapolation, a purchasing power of \$135,000.00 per year in today's dollars. Actually he came out better than that, for the tax-rate bite was far less painful when "hard currency" was a meaningful term.

In the matter of style, if I have one some academic will have to define it. I never thought of it consciously. My personal method was to think first of a predominating effect I wanted a story to build to and achieve, both in structuring and in the writing, which influenced the choice of words. Characterization and atmosphere creation also determined the nuances and I've sometimes spent half-a-day hunting the precisely right word, more often than not experiencing defeat.

We are all of course influenced at subliminal levels constantly, but as a writer I never consciously tried to do anything except be myself.

Subjected to political correctness pressures, accumulated inflation, the bureaucratic Great Society, the demise of the short story in prose form, in a stressed-out world largely bounded by the computer and television, the aspiring young writer today has no way of experiencing, even comprehending, anything like the pulp fraternity.

VNM: How would you characterize the pulps of the 1940's and the changing readers interests from the previous two decades?

Mr. Powell: The pulps of the 1940's had evolved to a higher level of plotting,

characterization, and writing. The emphasis had gradually moved on from action for its own sake to the more meaningful results. The stories were more mature, featuring characters that were more three dimensional and action that was more believable. The trend provided a broader scope and opportunity for writers to be themselves, less restricted by formula precepts. As a result, while pulp continued preponderantly as unabashedly commercial mass entertainment, stories that have survived did surface in the medium. These classics are rightfully among the best that American writing has produced.

The participants were not aware of it at the time, but in hindsight pulp writers and editors created one of two indigenous American art forms, the other being the jazz idiom in the field of music.

VNM: You had written for a number of different pulp genres including detective, shudder, western, and western romance. Did you prefer any one genre over another? Did you try to bring a certain type of style throughout all genres that is uniquely Talmage Powell?

Mr. Powell: I thought of genre in broad general terms, let it go at that, and enjoyed writing in any terminology. I was constantly jotting story "germs" in a notebook. These bits might come from any source, a news story, something from my own past, the experience of a friend, a dollop of gossip, you name it. The germ usually suggested a type of story, and I would write it for magazines that published the category. Or I might approach from a different stance and look for something that would yield a story for a specific magazine genus.

At conscious level I didn't try to exercise a singular style. I was simply myself at all times, as I've mentioned. It worked rather well. At times it violated genre definition but editors accepted it. Two quick examples: A short story, MURDER METHOD, first appearing in a magazine and reprinted as the lead story in that year's E. P. Dutton annual anthology, BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR, didn't include a detective in the cast nor, for that matter, a mystery in the usual definition. A 20,000 word novelette, DIABLO'S DAUGHTER, set in frontier Florida was published in a long-running western magazine that never before, or after, printed a

story set east of the Mississippi. To ease the anticipated reader reaction, the editor included a brief sidebar on the title page commenting that the frontier west was a state of mind, an ambiance, which frontier Florida reflected just as vividly as did the Old West.

VNM: You had written over 200 stories for many different magazines and genres. Yet, a large percentage of the stories were for Popular Publications. Did you develop a special relationship with the editors there?

Mr. Powell: I did 202 stories for pulp-format publications, while also writing for other types of magazines. In the pulps I was Talmage Powell, Milton T. Lamb, Milton T. Land, Robert Henry, Dave Sands. Lamb and Land were my own pseudonyms and I did all the stories appearing with those by-lines. Robert Henry and Dave Sands were house names at Street and Smith and Popular Publications respectively, and various other writers also appeared under those names. The Lamb name I had used at Periodical House, and the Land discrepancy occurred when an editor at Popular called my agent one day to say he was using two stories of mine in a single issue and asked if I had a preferred pen name to by-line the second story. Over the phone he heard "Milton T. Lamb" as "Milton T. Land", which he used. As a consequence I was "Lamb" at Periodical House (Ace Magazines) and "Land" at Popular.

Pulp, it turns out, constitutes only a small part of my work, but it was perhaps the most important phase. It demanded writing discipline; it required the constant exercise of originality; it offered the opportunity to learn and employ techniques that are essential in any genre of creative writing. It was the exercise that provided the foundation from which I have remained in print for a half-century.

The large percentage of my pulp output was done for Popular Publications simply because they paid the most money and, in my opinion, published the best quality stories. I had a special relationship with Michael Tilden and Alden Norton at Popular, but the same was true with several other editors, Fanny Ellsworth at Best Books, Donald Wollheim of Ace and Babette Rosmond when she was editing The Shadow and Doc Savage at Street and Smith Publications.

VNM: *During your pulp era, you worked both in the short story format as well as the longer length novella format. After the pulps, your Ed Rivers series was a huge success in the traditional novel format. Do you prefer one format over the others? From a creative writing point of view, is one format harder than the others?*

Mr. Powell: My preferences in format and length have been influenced by the vicissitudes of the market. From the creative writing point of view, I am partial to the challenge of the short story. When best done, the short story is the literary diamond, a single facet of it often implying what a book delineates in a chapter, the sum total of the facets yielding a predominating effect often achievable only in short story form.

VNM: *How do you compare today's fiction in terms of creativity, plot, and overall quality with the best from the pulps? What aspects of the pulp era writing would you like to see make a revival in today's fiction?*

Mr. Powell: Big, big questions...Today's thrillers are clearly a continuation of pulp. The era of the magazines themselves was the period of basic and essential creation. As pulp explored and evolved, the fundamentals of structure and method emerged. Just as Georges Polti once proved that there are only thirty-seven possible basic dramatic situations, so pulp would seem to have surfaced the full spectrum of possibilities in popular fiction falling into the genera of mystery, suspense, sci-fi, western, eerie. Wherever today's thriller ranges it's on territory first probed by pulp, which means that a pulp scholar can lift a present day thriller from the bookshelf and quote title and issue of the pulp wherein the notion first appeared.

The writing today is often a little slicker, the character exposition perhaps sometimes a little more profound, the overall quality in some cases a little higher, all of which is natural to a continuance of the evolutionary direction set by pulp, clearly mapped by a comparison of the early pulp stories with those of the latter day. But frankly, I don't see the level of creativity today as the equal of that which burst forth in the pulp era. Could be the computer has something to do with it, being a crutch as well as a tool, perhaps

changing the evolutionary direction at last, toward an Orwellian future of computer-generated fiction. But right now the fiction writer has the luxury of standing on the shoulders of the originators who bequeathed a knowledge of techniques in suspense creation, inventive plotting, character creation, atmospheric usage, and all the devices and ploys essential to keeping a reader in hand through the final paragraph. These elements so infused our artistic heritage that the student in the college classroom today is largely unaware of the source from which they emanated.

This is a verity, and regardless of the otherwise attitude of the academic extremist in the ivory tower, the real-world truth does not change.

I would like to see the short story stage a meaningful revival in today's fiction. However, the chance of such a phenomenon occurring is less than snowball-in-hell.

THE END



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