
APOCALYPSE LATER
The Library of Halexandria #3
Doc Savage 1933-1935

APOCALYPSE LATER

ZINE
ISSUE #8

"That remains my favourite review anyone did of it, just because you grokked so much of what I was going for."

— Jasper DeWitt on *The Patient*

APOCALYPSE LATER BOOKS
BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

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ZINE

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APOCALYPSE LATER ZINE #8

The Library of Halexandria #3

REVIEWS FROM THE NAMELESS ZINE

DOC SAVAGE 1933-1935

APOCALYPSE LATER

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INTRODUCTION

I don't know when I first encountered Doc Savage but it was certainly a long time ago, maybe forty years. Like so many other characters, I found him in used form either in a charity shop or on a bookstall, and I took a stack of his adventures home with me for not a lot of cash. I believe that the first book that I read was *The Freckled Shark*, which, to hindsight, is hardly the best place to start, as the seventy-third book in the series. But hey, it was a start and I enjoyed the twenty or so other books in the stack that came with it, whichever they were.

I probably encountered him next in the form of Ron Ely, who was perhaps the only good thing about the legendary misstep that was *Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze* (1975), which I saw on British television. Camped up to the nines, with patriotic music from John Philip Sousa, it felt painfully outdated in competition with *Jaws*, the first modern blockbuster. If I'd had any sort of intention to track down the rest of the books, it probably died a swift death at that point.

Fast forward to 2015. I'm running Arizona Fandom at this point and attempting to track down all the conventions in state to document. Imagine my surprise when I find mention of Doc Con, a dedicated Doc Savage convention that was being held just up the road from me in Glendale. That shocked me, as did the fact that it was on year eighteen. As a fan of pulp fiction generally, at this point, rather than Doc specifically, I naturally bought a couple of memberships and discovered a small but highly welcoming community.

Doc Con was never a massive affair. Its first year attracted only five attendees, which includes the gentleman who held it in his house. Doc Con 18 had bulked up attendance to ninety, with Ron Ely himself as the special guest. It unfolded in a single room at the Comfort Suites just off the 101, with panels and presentations at the front and a set of dealers at the back. That's a cosy event in comparison to pretty much any other convention I've attended, but it felt very right.

That was October 2015 and I took full opportunity to stock up on as many *Doc Savage* books as I could. I maybe owned thirty of them when I arrived at Doc Con but I left with far more than that on the back seat to bulk up my collection. It wasn't all of them but I was a heck of a lot closer than I was and that meant that there was only one thing left to do: dive in.

So I started reading them and reviewing them at the Nameless Zine, one per month in the pulp publication order, so I could experience how the series grew as readers of *Doc Savage Magazine* did back in the thirties. That first issue came out in March 1933, so I wasn't on an anniversary when I posted my first review in November 2015, but I am now. I'm eighty-nine reviews into the series in May 2023, as I publish this zine, which covers the first three years worth of *Doc Savage* novels, but the series has now turned ninety years old.

It's been quite the ride and I'm only about halfway through the series, but I've found much to talk about, not only the stories and their writers, but also their internal progression, their slang and their connection to history, both then and now. It could be argued that Doc has no relevance today, his ideas a thing of the past, but it could also be argued that he's more needed than ever.

LESTER DENT

THE MAN OF BRONZE

PULP PUBLICATION:
#1, MARCH 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#1, OCTOBER 1964
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#14, JANUARY 2008

Having attended and thoroughly enjoyed a dedicated *Doc Savage* convention, now that I know that Glendale has had such a creature for no fewer than eighteen years, and given that it allowed me to cheaply fill in almost all the gaps in my Bantam *Doc Savage* paperback collection, the singles at least, it's about time I ran through the whole lot.

Doc Savage was created by author Lester Dent using a house name, Kenneth Robeson, back in the thirties, making his debut in the March 1933 issue of *Doc Savage Magazine*. Now, almost ninety years on, most have never even seen a copy of that or indeed any other pulp, but many know Doc through those paperback reprints published by Bantam, which started in October 1964 and notably finished.

This origin story filled the first issue of the pulp magazine, the initial Bantam paperback and, in a rather mangled way, the only movie in which Doc has currently featured, 1975's huge misstep *Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze*.

I recently re-watched that movie for the first time in decades, then saw a fascinating fan edit at Doc Con 18 that strips out all the camp nonsense and, finally, re-read the book. While books are almost always better than their adaptations to the big screen, there's really no comparison here. The movie is a mess, even with a well-cast lead in Ron Ely, and even the de-camped fan edit can't fully restore what that feature should have been. The book, however, is a triumph.

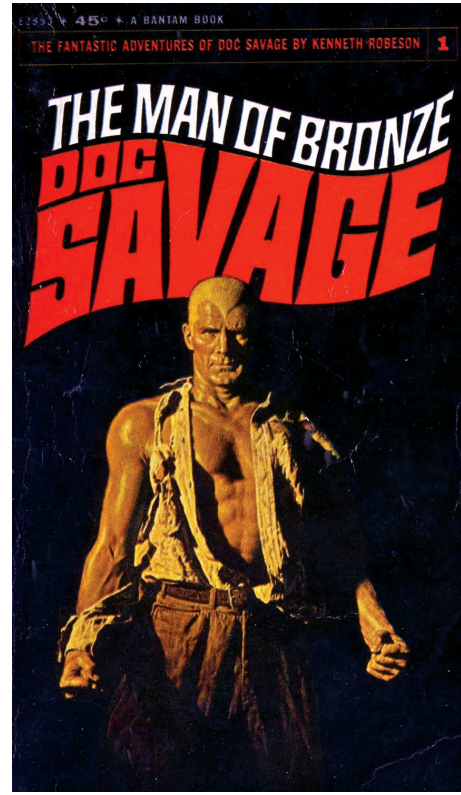
Clark Savage, Jr. was clearly the prototype for Superman, who quickly stole his spotlight and unfortunately hasn't given it back yet.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman in 1933 (what a coincidence that was) but he didn't make his first appearance until 1938 in *Action Comics* #1. Savage wasn't able to leap tall buildings with a single bound, but he shared many attributes with the later superhero, right down to the same first name and their Arctic hideaway, the Fortress of Solitude, which Savage used back in the thirties but didn't show up for Superman until the fifties.

However, Savage was a human being rather than an alien, whose "superpowers" were obtained through dedicated training from a very young age, including a rigorous two hour exercise session every day that aims for both mental and physical prowess. It might be a stretch but at least we could become a Doc Savage, should we match his effort. We could never become a Superman and that's why I've always much preferred the former. His moral compass is more believable too, given that he was actually born an American.

We're introduced to Doc Savage in New York City after the death of his father from a strange tropical disease. Believing him to have been murdered, not least because someone seems particularly keen on following up with his son, he travels to the central American country of Hidalgo with his five henchmen, not yet known as the Fabulous Five but still each the world's predominant expert in their field. There he tracks down a lost tribe in a lost valley, who had been previously helped by Clark Savage Sr. and, in thanks, given access to the fabulous wealth of the Mayans, secreted below their temple.

Of course, they run through a huge amount of action and adventure in merely getting to Hidalgo and they run through a whole lot more while there, both in the capital city and



in the lost valley, where the warriors (who are bizarrely also the criminals) of the tribe try to mount a coup and the murder of each of the interlopers.

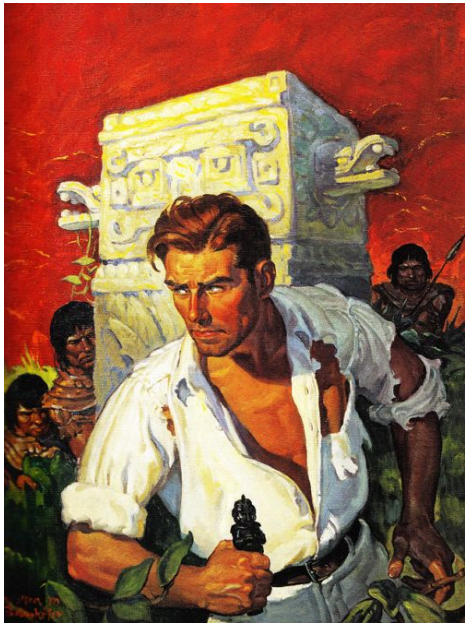
Lester Dent was amazingly prolific. He died in 1959 at the age of only fifty-four but he left behind 159 published *Doc Savage* novels (with an extra one in the can), amongst a broader output. At this point in his career, he clearly wasn't the writer he would become, but he was able to spin an enjoyable yarn out of his wild imagination. His short staccato sentences might prove offputting, but if you stick with it, you'll get hooked partway through by the sheer force of Dent's will and Doc's drive.

The Man of Bronze is a truly archetypal Doc Savage story, an excellent start to the man

and his adventures, but it's not an archetypal *Doc Savage* story, because this one's mostly about him at the expense of his companions. If you read this one and stop, you'd wonder why he even has companions because they don't contribute much or often, mostly standing around while their leader saves the day in flamboyant style. There are the rumblings of who these men will become and hints at why they're there, but they're only rumblings and hints at this point i ntime because this is our introduction to Doc and the rest can wait for another day, formal announcements of who they are enough for now.

Of course, we learn about Doc quickly. Dent tells us about his exercise regimen in the very first chapter, adds the Fortress of Solitude and his odd subconscious trilling in the second and throws him immediately into danger for good measure at the same time. From then on, the pace rarely slows down but Doc remains calm and composed throughout. It's no surprise to find that this man would soon become a hero to millions of readers.

From an action adventure standpoint, there's nothing to worry about. We're given action quickly in New York, more action in the air as they travel to central America, still more action in Hidalgo and not much else but action once they arrive in the lost valley whose secret will soon finance Savage's mission to fight the forces of evil wherever they might arise. This tribe owed Savage Sr. and they soon owe Savage Jr. too, so sending him fantastic quantities of gold whenever he needs funds is the least they can do. The chief's daughter, an obvious love interest, doesn't fill that role here as Doc's mission puts him above that sort of distraction. It's still good to see such a character given such qualities, though, even if she doesn't get to roll onwards in the series.



I've read this one a few times and, as I mentioned earlier, it's also the story that got adapted into film, so I know it rather well. Even so familiar with what goes down, I still find it enjoyable and it still makes my pulse race as I get wrapped up in the majesty of it all. I've read other Doc Savages, of course, but not for a long while and I don't remember their stories with anywhere near the detail I remember this one. It's going to be interesting to immerse myself back into this pulp world of the thirties and explore it alongside Doc with the original stories in order of publication in the pulps, which was something not echoed by the Bantam reprints.

LESTER DENT

THE LAND OF TERROR

PULP PUBLICATION:
#2, APRIL 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#8, AUGUST 1965
COVER: DOUG ROSA

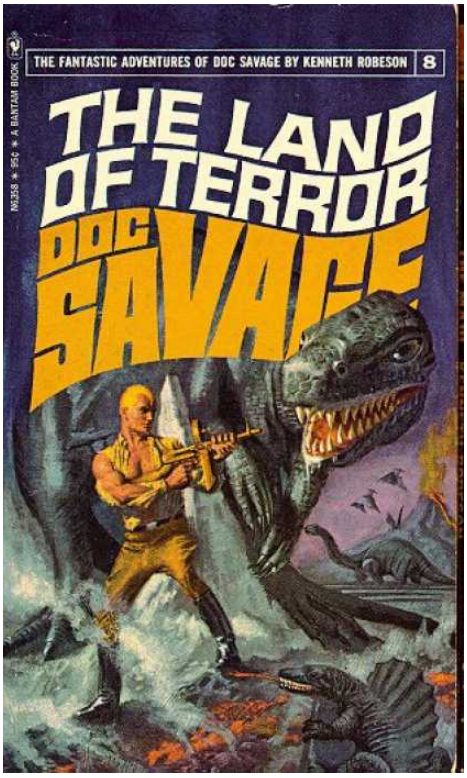
SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#14, JANUARY 2008

The second Doc Savage adventure pales in comparison to the first. In fact, it pales so far that it becomes actively annoying at points. Lester Dent set up his hero well, but hadn't figured out how to use him properly yet.

It starts well enough, with a mysterious murder. Jerome Coffern, chief chemist at the suitably generic Mammoth Manufacturing Company, is less than a hundred yards from the car of Doc Savage, with whom he's about to have dinner, when he's attacked by two men. They use an air pistol to shoot him with a special substance that melts him down to nothing: flesh, bone, clothing, even the very pavement he dies on, disappearing entirely. All that's left for Savage to identify the body is his right wrist which conveniently wears a watch that Doc gave him.

Unfortunately Dent lets himself go in the ensuing chase scene. As I mentioned in my review of the first Doc Savage story, *The Man of Bronze*, the reason he's so much more fun than Superman, sadly still the more famous character inspired by him, is because he's an honest to goodness human being who has to work daily to hone and maintain his physical and mental powers, rather than merely some alien who mysteriously has them just by being born. However, while I can buy into a man so dedicated that he becomes good at everything, there are limits.

In the first novel, the only overt example of Doc's talents exceeding viability is his decent command of ancient Mayan. That's a stretch, but everything else is at least believable in a great heroic character worthy of chronicling



in a pulp series: his speed, his strength, his acrobatic skill. Real people do all that stuff; he just happens to do all of it.

Here, any such grounding is thrown out of the window almost immediately. Doc finds Coffern's body and quickly chases the car that screeches away, beginning with a spectacular leap over a fence. And here's the rest of that paragraph:

> The height exceeded by more than two feet the world record for the high jump. Yet Doc went over it with far more ease than an average man would take a knee-high obstacle. The very facility with which he did it showed he was capable of a far higher jump than that.

This is clearly ridiculous and it's followed by him overhauling that vehicle on foot and also staying underwater longer than pearl divers, amid apparently no end of astounding record breaking feats. It's the wrong direction to take Savage (if the right way to take Superman) but Dent didn't know that yet. Doc Savage should not be superhuman; he should just be closer to the limits of what a human can be than the rest of us.

Dent makes other bad decisions here about Doc's character development, but fortunately also some good ones about the world which he inhabits. The most obvious other bad call is the one that renders him surprisingly violent. In the first book, the main villain does die but by his own hand, choosing to avoid capture by Doc Savage by leaping off a huge cliff to his death. Here, Doc actually metes out justice by killing the bad guys. Sure, they're all trying to kill him, but it wouldn't take too many stories for Dent to put Doc above that sort of thing, capturing rather than killing and sending the criminals with their defective minds off to be cured in an upstate clinic.

The best decision here ties to the locations, which are pulp era mainstays. Doc follows those initial killers to a former pirate ship, now moored and used as a cross between a haunted house attraction and a museum. It's just what this second story needed to host a set of battles, full of traps and pitfalls and secrets. Then it's a submarine underneath the ship. Eventually it's the land of terror of the title, which is a remote island in the South Pacific, a former volcano with steep sides that helped keep it stuck in prehistory, full of wild plant life and, of course, dinosaurs. The first book had Doc and his men travel to a lost civilisation, inspired by Rider Haggard, while the second sees them in a lost world much

closer to the Arthur Conan Doyle model.

Another standard for the pulp era is how the boss villain is kept hidden throughout, even from his own men. Dent used this in the first and second stories, here having Kar, the mysterious leader of these killers, talk to them only over the phone, albeit one on a dedicated circuit so he can't be too far away from them. Similarly archetypal is the use of highly cool technology with suitably wild names, such as the Smoke of Eternity, which is the amazing acid that found use right at the outset with the melting of Jerome Coffern and would soon find still more devasting purpose as the story progresses.

So, from one angle, this is a solid rollicking adventure following all the right traditions of the pulp era, with good guys chasing bad guys around the city and around the world, hurling spanners into their works and then cutting their power off at the source. We even get points where we follow some of Doc's men rather than Doc himself, giving supporting players like Renny a chance in the spotlight. All this is positive stuff, making it as fast paced and action packed a ride as *The Man of Bronze*, if not more so.

The flipside contains those bad decisions. The choice to make Doc more than human lessens him in our eyes because it moves his accomplishments out of the theoretical reach of his readers. Sure, we can still root for him and cheer when he saves the day, but we can't really believe that, even with a two hour daily exercise regimen and every single one of the right circumstances, we could become a Doc Savage. The choice to have him kill, even when justice is served by the act, darkens him morally and makes him harder to support. It takes a revenge-driven character like Batman

to make darkness the right way to go. Doc Savage is the inspiring hero who's above such pettiness, just not yet.

In this instance, the negative dominated the first half of the book for me but the positive took over for the most part when Doc and his men left New York for the South Seas. Sadly they take a character with them in good faith even though he's clearly up to no good and we know precisely how that's all going to turn out in the end. It doesn't help our trust in Dent's plotting or, indeed, in Doc's judgement. It's the one human thing he does in this book and it's the one we didn't want.

LESTER DENT

QUEST OF THE SPIDER

PULP PUBLICATION:
#3, MAY 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#68, MAY 1972
COVER: FRED PFEIFFER

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#30, OCTOBER 2009

For some reason, Bantam dragged their heels before reprinting the third Doc Savage story, *Quest of the Spider*, which didn't see a paperback release until #68 in their series. Only one other novel had to wait longer to find a new audience: *Bequest of Evil*, the 96th pulp magazine story but only 173rd in the Bantam paperback reprint run, and that one didn't even stem from the pen of Doc's usual writer, Lester Dent.

Some readers have suggested that the delay is because *Quest of the Spider* is a weak entry in the series with a routine cops and robbers plot, a cheap villain who does little of note at any point in the story and a poor choice of location in the Louisiana swamps, especially after the fantastic locations of the first two novels. Much scorn has also been heaped upon the idea of having Doc Savage disguise himself in an alligator skin at one particular point in the story.

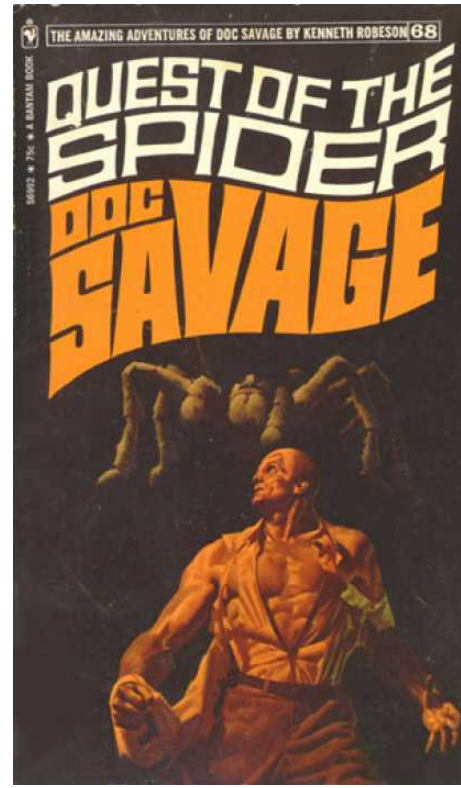
I have to admit that these detractors have a point, especially when it comes to that frankly unbelievable disguise, but I can counter their negativity with the suggestion that *Quest of the Spider* is an enjoyable romp with most of the component parts needed for a successful yarn and a few additional ones to boot which set the series onto a solid footing. I enjoyed it far more than its predecessor and would argue that, for all its many faults, it's a better book for a few reasons.

The story, which revolves around the forced acquisitions of southern lumber mills through a reign of terror by the villainous Gray Spider, is unashamedly pulp entertainment but it's

also more down to earth and believable than the discovery in *The Land of Terror* of a second lost world running and one that has been stuck in prehistory. I love reading Victorian lost world novels but they're rooted in an era of exploration and discovery in which vast swathes of the globe hadn't yet been mapped. People loved to wonder about what might be there. May 1933, when this novel saw print in *Doc Savage Magazine*, is too late for that sense of wonder to still be valid. It's a throwback which had none of the validity of the lost valley in *The Man of Bronze*.

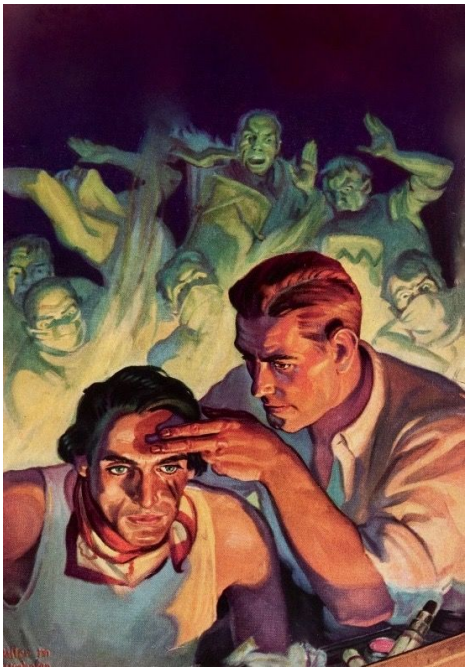
We're kept until the very finalé to discover which one of a pair of characters will be unmasked as the Gray Spider. Doc is hired by "Big" Eric Danielson, down to earth president of the largest lumber company in the south, to find out what's going on with his industry, and Doc's price is a cool million dollars, so it has to be a big deal. While Danielson can't see it, it's clear to us that the Gray Spider works for him but Dent sets up two characters for that spot and we're kept wondering throughout as to which it will be. Compare that to the utterly obvious choice of one possible villain in *The Land of Terror* and this seems inspired, while that was an exercise not only in inevitability but sadly also in the gullibility of our heroes.

Each of Doc's assistants had been repeatedly highlighted as a world-renowned talent in their own right, but they spent those first two books pretty much sitting around waiting for Doc to save the day. Here, they're each given their own turn in the spotlight. While they could certainly have been a little more successful in their exploits here, they do at least get to show that they can do more than just traipse along in the shadow of their leader. I appreciated that immensely.



Doc himself is also toned down at least a little from *The Land of Terror*. He's the leader of this band and he leads from the front, both physically and mentally, but, in my humble opinion, when he becomes too superhuman his adventures suffer. Here, he performs fantastic feats for sure, a level above the talents of anyone around him including his assistants, but he doesn't leap tall buildings in a single bound and I appreciated that too.

Finally, there are also some scenes of real power in this book that trump anything to be found anywhere in the first two. One tasks Doc's assistants with reacting to his apparent demise in the Louisiana swamps while battling an alligator. Lester Dent's prose, as stuck in short, simple sentences as ever for much of



the book, acquires notable impact in sombre musings on how this apparent superman may actually be mortal after all. Another involves the heroic sacrifice of one of the Gray Spider's swamp-dwelling minions after Doc's humanity sparks a revelation that he was fighting for the wrong side all along.

These two sections are gloriously emotional and, for all its faults, elevate this book in some ways above its predecessors. It's not a bad novel, simply uninspired in many ways while an important one in others. Bantam's reticence in releasing it is one reason why I chose to work through the Doc Savage stories in order of original pulp release rather than in the arbitrary order in which Bantam chose to reprint them. I want to watch Doc and his team grow naturally rather than jump around his greatest hits for a while until the quality inevitably drops.

Of course, all this unfolds in traditional pulp terms. There is a single villain, hiding behind a mask and an imposing name, plotting from his lair deep in the Louisiana swamps, known as the Castle of the Moccasin. His goals are down to earth but his implementation of them involves a community of subhuman swamp dwellers, which makes little sense but adds much atmosphere to proceedings.

It all highlights that, while Lester Dent may have had early delusions of real literary value (and they certainly grew over time), what he did best was to knock out imaginative and immersive pulp novels every single month.

LESTER DENT

THE POLAR TREASURE

PULP PUBLICATION:
#4, JUNE 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#4, APRIL 1965
COVER: FRANK MCCARTHY

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#6, APRIL 2007

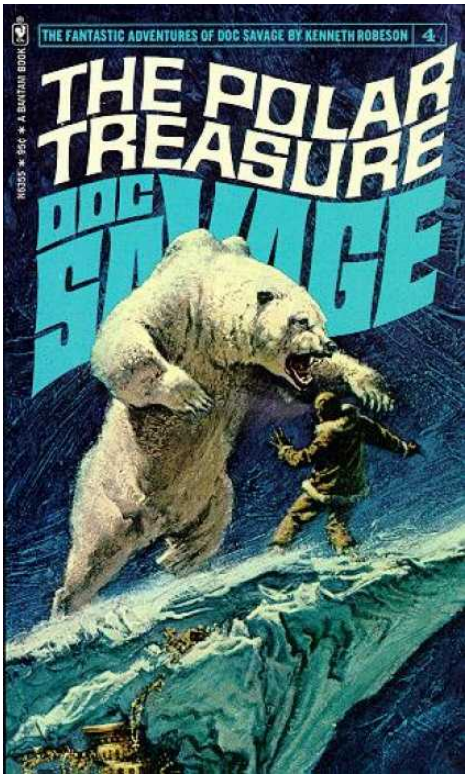
The fourth Doc Savage adventure, originally published in *Doc Savage Magazine* in June 1933, was also the fourth Bantam reprint, a convergence that really didn't happen often. In fact, out of the 181 novels published in pulp format, only eight of them occupied the same position in the order of the paperback run. Bantam really jumped around a lot.

I mentioned in my review of *Quest of the Spider* that I enjoyed it more than its two predecessors, even though it's generally seen as a weaker entry in the series. To me, *The Polar Treasure* follows on well from that book, keeping most of its good points and improving a few of its bad ones.

The brief synopsis is quintessential pulp intrigue: it's a lost treasure story, upon which Doc stumbles by contacting a blind violinist who has been performing one of his works. He's Victor Vail and he's become caught up between the two factions searching for it as, unbeknownst to him, the treasure map was tattooed onto his back using ink that can only be seen with X-rays.

The treasure was on the *Oceanic*, a liner that was chased into the Arctic over fifteen years earlier by an enemy raider during the First World War and promptly lost in the ice. Unknown to Vail, who was merely travelling from Africa to England with his wife and their young daughter, it also carried fifty million dollars in diamonds and gold bullion, hardly a minor prize to those who know about it.

The factions seeking this prize are led by the suitably named nautical souls, Ben O'Gard and Keelhaul de Rosa, both crew members on



the *Oceanic*. The former saved Vail's life in the incident, though his wife and daughter were sadly lost, while the latter attempted to kidnap him but was foiled. The mystery is deepened by the fact that Vail hasn't encountered either faction since the *Oceanic* went down, except that he often hears a strange sound which he calls the Clicking Danger, the sound of the nervous chattering teeth of one of Ben O'Gard's men.

Even only four books in, it's not rocket science to figure out where this story will take us, but it's handled well with some believable twists and turns to keep us paying attention to the little details. It's going to be a while before I can put Doc's poor judgement in *The Land of Terror* behind me, when he poured his trust into a man who was clearly the villain of the piece. He slips up here too, but in a more believable fashion, and, even when he does so, it's not the disaster it could be because he has contingency plans to save the day. It means that we don't feel the danger quite like we perhaps should, but we do thrill to the chase and grin at the ingenuity of Doc and his men after each cliffhanger is addressed.

Once again, the locations are exotic but much more down to earth than they were when the series began. The lost worlds of the first two novels were replaced by the swamps of Louisiana in the third and the remote Arctic here in the fourth. While some of what happens in both stretches credulity, at least these locations are believable and Lester Dent's prose, while still simple and abbreviated, is more than up to describing these places with a powerful sense of mood. While the swamps are dense and claustrophobic, the wastes of the Arctic are remote and wide open, but Dent is able to highlight their respective dangers.

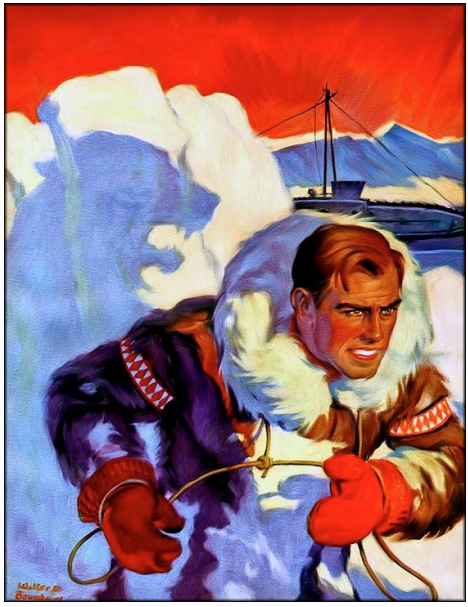
There's more for Doc's companions to do here too. While they were in place from the very beginning, Dent was clearly focused on introducing Doc himself in the first two books, only gradually extending that introduction to his men starting with the third. They're more capable here than they were in *Quest of the Spider* but still notably behind Doc in what they're able to do. The capture by Monk and Ham of five villains very early in the story and Johnny's stakeout of their headquarters while disguised as a newspaper vendor are great examples of how these talented folk should be used instead of merely following their leader around to flesh out the cast. Quite a few opportunities arise later in the story too, such as the needs for the skills of Monk in chem-

istry and Renny in electricity.

One little detail that I believe appears for the first time here is the high-speed elevator that is reserved for Doc's private use. The New York building on which he occupies the 86th floor is never named, but is understood to be the Empire State Building (with some notable detractors). I rather like the concept that in such an important location, one elevator could be reserved for a single man and be configured in such a way that it moves much faster than the others. When Doc descends in a hurry, it goes so fast that he goes into freefall at points. It's a neat way to set Doc aside from the rest of the human race, both in physical ability and within the establishment.

Of course, we don't stay there for long when we have an Arctic adventure upon which to embark! There's all the usual adventure and action here, even while Doc and his men are submerged below the North Atlantic in a submarine. I don't really buy the epic brawls between Captain McCluskey and first Monk and then Renny and finally Doc, but it's a glorious way to build relationships in our eyes between the team.

I enjoyed *The Polar Treasure* as much as I did *Quest of the Spider*, but it's also clearly a better book. Dent had started out with a fully formed vision for these Doc Savage novels, but it changed as the series went on. Here, he's still working out the balance that he should find between Doc and his companions and between the realistic and the fantastic but, to my mind, the third and fourth novels ably show how well he was progressing.



LESTER DENT

PIRATE OF THE PACIFIC

PULP PUBLICATION:
#5, JULY 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#19, AUGUST 1967
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#6, APRIL 2007

The fifth Doc Savage adventure, *Pirate of the Pacific*, which first saw print in *Doc Savage Magazine* in July 1933, had to wait until #19 in the Bantam paperback reprint series. Why, I have no idea because this is a bundle of fun and it also sees a real opponent for Doc, for the first time, in the Mongol pirate Tom Too. What's more, it follows directly on from the events of *The Polar Treasure*, beginning with the return from the Arctic of the *Helldiver*, a submarine loaded down with treasure.

[Note: I hadn't realised this at the time but the pulps tended to lead from one story to the next, while the Bantam reprints, because they were generally out of order, edited that out.]

Perhaps Bantam were a little reticent in 1967, during the civil rights era and the counter-culture revolution, to put much push behind a book that is now notably racist, not only as a clear example of the Yellow Peril genre of devious Asian masterminds but also with a ridiculous overuse of pidgin English, described here as "beach jargon". Yes, we all know that many Japanese have trouble with their L's and R's, but Tom Too's men are either Mongols or mixes of multiple Asian ethnicities and there's really no reason why any of them would have such issues. And this would only come up as the letter is spoken anyway, not when it's silent in words which read here as "halm", "fol", "sholt" or "pelhaps"! That's nuts!

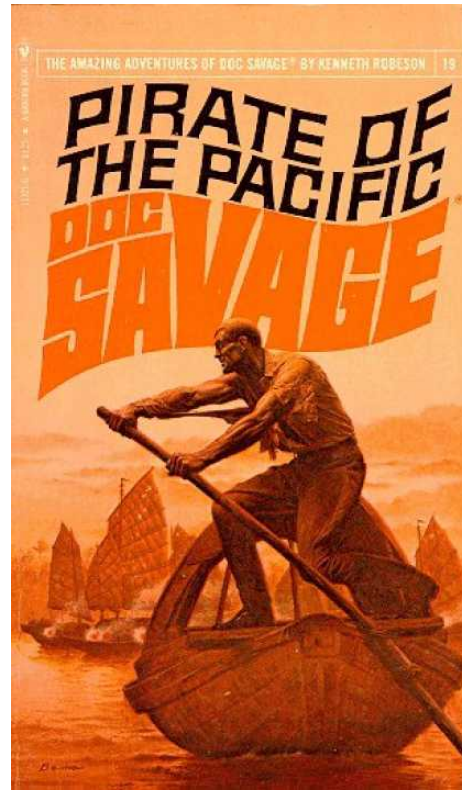
Such extreme racial stereotyping aside (and Renny gets into blackface at one point here), author Lester Dent got a lot of things right. He segues well from one adventure into the next. He remains grounded with yet another exotic

location that's also thoroughly believable. He introduces all the standard features of the *Doc Savage* universe succinctly and sparsely so that new readers will feel right at home with book five but regulars won't be bored by the repetition of things they already know. He even gives us a contemporary historical tie, with a sea voyage leaving the port of San Francisco past the new Golden Gate Bridge, still under construction but a major point of attention.

Best of all, he sets up an intricate web around the villain of the piece, which Doc and his men attempt to penetrate for the entire adventure with only gradual success. Perhaps learning from previous books, Dent keeps Tom Too notably out of the way, resonant from the first chapter but not named until page 47 of the Bantam paperback and never showing up in person until the very end of the story. He orchestrates his chaos from afar and stays relentlessly a step ahead of our heroes.

That's refreshing, because up to this point Doc had always found a way to be ahead of pretty much everything and everyone. Here, that's not the case, though he does cause as much trouble for Tom Too as Tom Too does for him. This is well highlighted within a conversation of the pirate's Mongol henchmen. "Verily," one says, "this bronze devil has not been one thorn in our sides—he has been a whole thicket of them."

Doc gets drawn into Tom Too's activities through a friend, Juan Mindoro, a political power in the Luzon Union, a fictional nation quite obviously based on the Philippines. Mindoro was instrumental in achieving independence for his country and setting up a fair and honest government. But Tom Too, a fierce and calculating pirate, is threatening that hard won freedom. He's forced Mindoro into



hiding and is now preparing a coup.

While we root for Doc Savage and his men, as always, it's good to see him being made to fight for his victory by an opponent who's worthy of the name. Even far from his comfort zone, Tom Too remains dangerous and deadly, even succeeding in the kidnap of three of our heroes. He suckers the rest onto the Malay Queen, a liner bound for Asia, with the leaked suggestion that the men are on board. Then, as Doc cleverly tries to locate and free them, Tom Too and his men cleverly block their every move and counter it with two of their own. He's like the hydra, with two new heads appearing for every one that's cut off, and he keeps escalating his attacks, keeping Doc on the defensive. I'd suggest that this book sees

more attacks against Doc and more obstacles thrown into his way than the previous four combined.

Perhaps this growing frustration at a clever foe is why death doesn't seem out of place in response. Early on, Doc has many Tom Too followers sent to his institution in upstate New York, so that they can be cured of their criminal tendencies. Later, though, as the adventure gets more fraught, that falls by the wayside as our heroes find that they have to kill or be killed. There are still a few scenes that feel uncharacteristic though, such as an early one in which Renny attempts to fight his way out of a trap by spinning in "a complete circle, the machine-gun muzzle blowing a red flame from his big fist."

The odd feeling at scenes like that is underlined by Doc's odd attitude to things like guns. It's not unfair to think of Doc and his men as conservative Americans, who may not fight for truth, justice and the American way in the blind sense we might think of in the superhero comics, but certainly for truth, justice and humanity. That up state institution is morally right wing, an assurance that there's a right way and a wrong way and the right way can be forced. There's a strong sense of morality and decency in all six of our heroes, who work hard, live hard and fight hard.

Yet people like the NRA would be horrified at how Doc regards weapons. He uses them, as needed, and has even invented them, with a stack of compact machine guns to his credit. Yet, when Juan Mindoro asks why he doesn't take one with him, he explains: "Put a gun in a man's hand, and he will use it. Let him carry one, and he is lost—seized with a feeling of helplessness. Therefore, since I carry no fire-arms, none can be taken from me to leave the resultant feeling of helplessness."

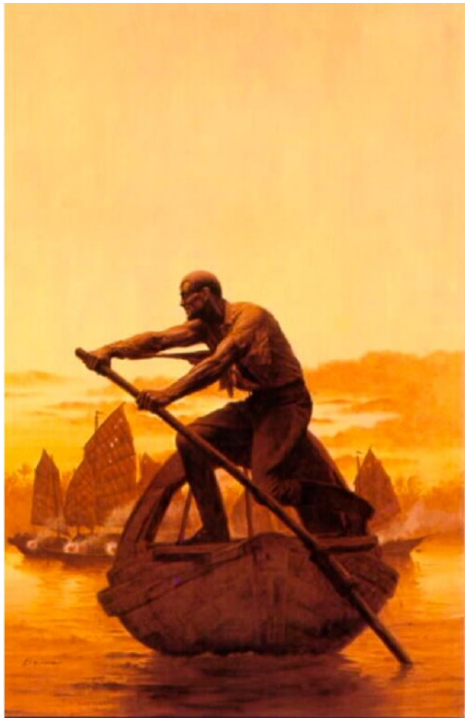
This reminds me of Robert A Heinlein, who had something very similar suggested to the lead in *Tunnel in the Sky*. I see a lot of moral and political similarities between what Heinlein wrote about and what I'm reading in Doc Savage.

Heinlein was a military man who served proudly in the American navy and he built freedom into many of his books, not least *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, which places a lunar struggle for independence in the framework of the American Revolution. Yet, for all his influence within the right wing, who ate up books like *Starship Troopers*, he also found a major audience in the hippies of the counter-culture who approved of the free philosophy of *Stranger in a Strange Land*. He preached tolerance, pioneered the concept of "pay it forward" and featured a host of ethnic heroes

and bizarre marriages at a time when that just wasn't done.

Similarly, while Doc Savage stories are all about traditional American right wing values, with a strong emphasis on the power and potential of the individual, they don't stop there. At the end of this book Doc refuses reward for services rendered, because it's not why he does what he does. While there's an element of addiction to adventure, he fights for others simply because it's the right thing to do.

So he's a tolerant man and a champion of the underdog. What he eventually accepts as a reward is the founding of a Savage Memorial Hospital, which is set up to take no payment except from those who can afford it. So, while he's a traditionalist, he's also someone who wouldn't play well to the current right wing in America or, for that matter to their opposition. His is a voice that doesn't seem to exist in America today and, for the most part, that's a shame.



LESTER DENT

THE RED SKULL

PULP PUBLICATION:
#6, AUGUST 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#17, MAY 1967
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#25, JANUARY 2009

The Red Skull is the sixth adventure, which was first published in *Doc Savage Magazine* in August 1933 and later reprinted as #17 in the Bantam paper-back line, two books before the story that came before it, which is referenced in the second chapter.

That story, *Pirate of the Pacific* was notable for how difficult regular writer Lester Dent made it for Doc to track down the villain, Tom Too. It made for a better story, to my mind, to see Doc struggle, even if he made it out on top in the end. *The Red Skull* tones that down to a degree, but he still has to work to unravel the mystery at the heart of the story and unmask the villain behind it.

As always, that story is relatively simple and, this time out, it takes Doc and his men to Arizona, where a dam project is being threatened by sabotage and Monk's secretary, Lea Aster, is being held prisoner. Doc is brought in by a dam worker named Bandy Stevens, who arrives on the 86th floor dead as a doornail, killed by a poison that had been applied to the button in the express elevator.

I enjoyed this approach and the odd fact that it took 21 pages of paperback to get to Doc, much longer than usual. A crew of crooks led by Buttons Zortell had been trying to stop Stevens from reaching Doc and they continue to work to confuse the Man of Bronze, so we don't even hear Arizona mentioned for quite some time and take even longer to reach it. It's good to see Savage and his men down here in my home state though, especially in a canyon with rock formations that look like skulls, hence the title.

If the previous novel was notable for its awful attempts to give its Asian characters voice, attempts which are easily seen as racist today, this one is notable for its use of slang. I have a pretty decent vocabulary but haven't been so flummoxed by so many new words in a novel for many a year. The bad guys certainly have a flair for the vernacular, as they say.

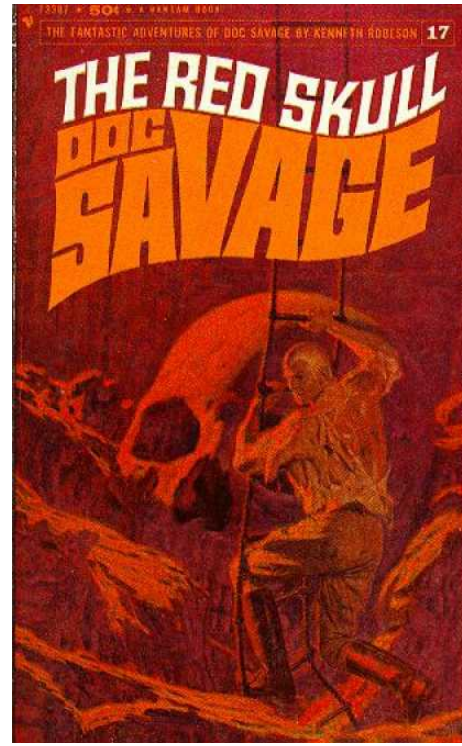
Much of it just appears odd to eighty years of hindsight and this review will serve as a firm reminder for me to look a whole slew of examples up in a dictionary of slang.

Some of it is obvious, like "sky chariot" for an aeroplane, and some is at least vaguely understandable in context: a "hogleg" would seem to be a gun, a "sportocular" is some sort of visual magnification device and "dornicks" are things to be thrown.

But what's a "rannihan"? How about a "box of a jigger" or a "plumb cultus temper", the latter belonging to a "locoed goat". Lea Aster is described frequently as a "mohairrie", the derivation of which I'd love to figure out. [Edit: Murray Miller wrote in to suggest that "mohairrie" is derived from a Spanish word for woman, "mujare", and I'm sure he's spot on. Thanks!]

Some of it simply looks strange nowadays, such as the frequent use of an umlaut to trigger us to pronounce a pair of consecutive vowels separately, in words like "aërial" and "coöperation".

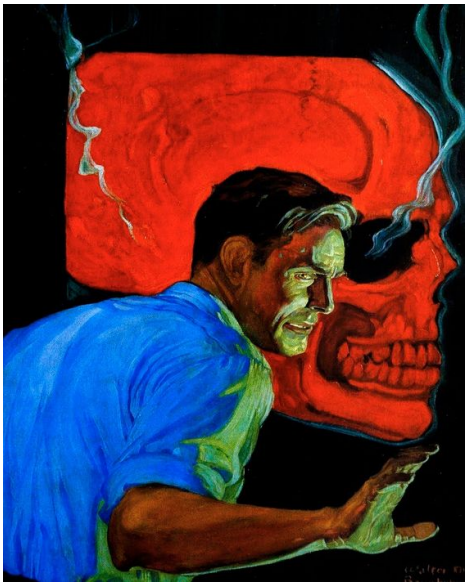
Some of it looks even more strange because it carries a sexual connotation today that clearly wasn't there in 1933. When Buttons Zortell complains to one of his men about the "boner you pulled", he's simply talking about a boneheaded move; "a mess of bum shootin'" on the part of the hoods is just poor marksmanship; and Monk's "explosive ejaculation" down a phone line is absolutely not an early form of phone sex.



Another oddity notable here is the habit of Dent to describe around names that exist in the real world rather than actually naming them. I don't know if this was done for legal reasons or simply through disinterest to conduct basic research, but it still feels strange, for instance, for Doc to talk to "the editor of the leading Phoenix newspaper" rather than "the editor of the *Arizona Republic*".

So this is interesting linguistically. It's also interesting from the standpoint of general pop culture.

We've already seen how Doc Savage was a key influence on the creation and development of Superman, down to having a Fortress of Solitude first, but the Man of Steel isn't the



only character to owe much to the Man of Bronze. Here, Doc introduces a flying device that thoroughly resembles what we know today as the batplane. It wouldn't surprise me either to find that the highly popular Marvel villain known as the Red Skull was named for this novel, as his debut appearance was only eight years later.

It's also interesting to Doc Savage fans, as Dent was still expanding his basic world and gradually introducing new elements and people. I don't know how often Lea Aster will return in future novels, but it feels like she ought to often. While she does spend most of her time in this book being kept prisoner by the men who kidnapped her from Monk's laboratory, she's a capable and bright woman able to think on her feet and her actions, even as a prisoner, are enough to save people from certain death.

While it can't boast the admirable tension of *Pirate of the Pacific*, the thoroughly enjoyable cat and mouse aspect of that story continues on here, albeit to a lesser degree. The identity of the boss villain is kept neatly obscured, partly through the use of a pseudonym, as he has his men call him "Nick Clipton" to avoid Doc discovering his real identity. The key location is, once again, down to earth and believable, keeping the story grounded and only elevated back into fantasy by some of the gadgets Doc uses.

Even only six books in, this isn't an undying classic but it's a solid read that highlights how Dent was figuring out his formula well.

LESTER DENT

THE LOST OASIS

PULP PUBLICATION:
#7, SEPTEMBER 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#6, APRIL 1965
COVER: STANLEY MELTZOFF

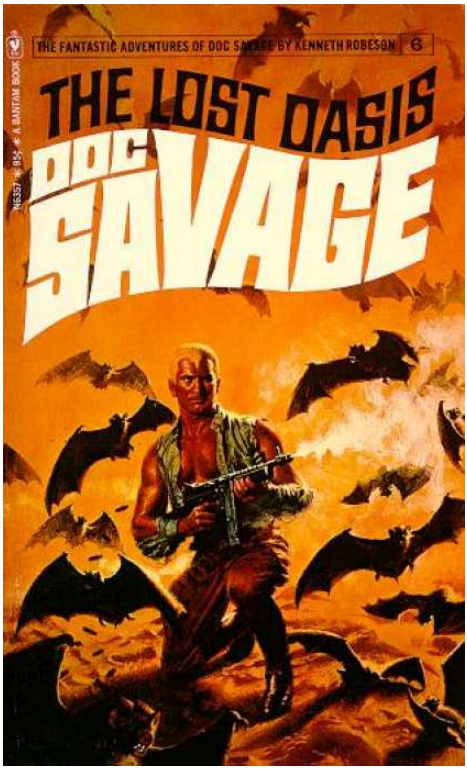
SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#7, MARCH 2008

The seventh *Doc Savage* novel is a relatively straightforward entry in the series that gets right down to business. The early scenes are both thoughtful and controlled but they really count as the beginning of a chase that lasts for 72 full pages and ten chapters in the Bantam paperback edition, or well over half the book. This is precisely what pulp action aims to do but rarely achieves. Sadly, it all ends in cliché with the lost oasis of the title being utterly predictable in every way, but it's a great ride to get there!

In fact, that contrast really defines the book: well thought out adventure combined with cheap gimmicks. That means that half is really strong and half is really weak but unfortunately it moves the wrong way to start on a high note but end on a low one.

Surely Lester Dent was writing far enough ahead of deadlines that this novel was written before *The Red Skull* hit print, so maybe he saw a potential problem himself in how long it took Doc Savage to enter the fray in that previous book. Where he didn't show up until page 21 there, he's obvious at the top of page 2 here and he dominates proceedings from that point on quickly and consistently.

Returning to New York from the Fortress of Solitude, he discovers that a million dollar bounty has been offered to whoever can find him, from someone on board a ship at sea whose only advertised name is "Imperiled!" So, while the public and press crowd the docks waiting for the *Yankee Beauty* and its inherent mystery to arrive, Doc surreptitiously swims out to look for himself.



The early scenes on board are tense and constructed with careful choreography, as Doc doesn't yet know if those who seek him are friends or foes. They also build the mystery, with a lovely English lady, a fat foe and a ghost zeppelin, not to mention an apparently inexplicable murder and a bizarre attack. Doc still doesn't introduce himself, but cleverly trails those seeking him from boat to shore, where he elicits the help of his faithful five and the chase is on in earnest.

I loved how this progressed, from the thoughtful suspense on the *Yankee Beauty* into a chase that goes from sea to land to air before ending up, inevitably, at the lost oasis of the title. Each transition is fraught with new danger, each segment is as tense as the last and we never let up for a second.

The point at which we start to breathe again doesn't arrive for 72 pages as chapter eleven settles down into a battle, albeit one fought on board a lost zeppelin in flight over the African desert. There are many component parts here that seem perfect for pulp adventure, but the zeppelin is the one that fits here the best, as it has a neat origin and it also serves multiple purposes at different points in the story.

By comparison, otherwise worthy elements seem cheap and thrown into the mix only because such things are expected. Identifying the mysterious fluttering death as vampire bats can't be seen as a spoiler, given that they're advertised on the five line blurb on the back of the Bantam edition, but they're wasted as props and the fact that they're extra-large and venomous to boot feels cheap and unworthy. The same goes for the carnivorous plants that are also highlighted in the paperback's brief synopsis as they're hardly in the story and don't really do anything even when they are.

The Lost Oasis also suffers from a common flaw of many of the early Doc Savage novels, namely a far too quick conclusion. I'm not aware of Lester Dent's writing process, other than it being quick enough to feed a monthly magazine with a new novel every issue. He may have carefully plotted out his stories in advance using chapter-based synopses, but it really doesn't feel like it. It feels like he sat down at the typewriter and just wrote what came to mind, checking his word count periodically to make sure he could wrap within his limits but leaving it too late to make cuts to allow for a proper ending.

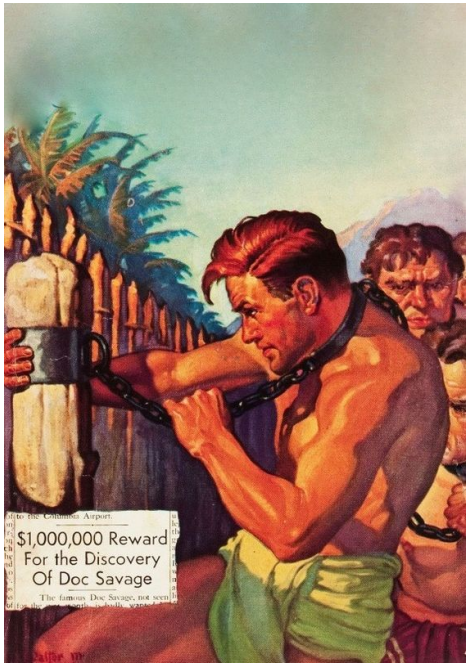
He hooked me here with so much: not just the mystery at the core of this adventure, but also its heroes and its villains, what it pro-

mised for a key location, its key props and those surrounding them, and, of course, the fluttering death, as every Savage adventure should have a mysterious means of killing.

Yet I found myself disappointed with most of those. The mystery resolves itself early, the heroes are either killed off quickly or wasted in standard support, the villains are routine and forgettable, the props are mostly ignored and, as mentioned, the fluttering death is underwhelming. How could Dent allow such a promising character as Lady Nelia, beautiful English aristocrat and lost aviatrix, to go to waste? It's a real shame that she falls into the routine role that Monja, the chief's daughter, started in *The Man of Bronze*, namely a means to highlight Doc's firm dedication to his task.

Fortunately, most of these complaints don't show up until two thirds of the way through the book and, until that point, it's a whole heck of a lot of fun. It sets up well, it builds well and it entertains well as any pulp action adventure series should. Dent was clearly learning how to pace himself, build his tension and keep us on our toes, or at least until he ran out of space. During that 72 page chase and for a while beyond it, we're given quintessential Doc Savage, the Man in Bronze firmly the man in charge with his aides following along to help save the day.

What we don't get is much subtlety. The more intricate plotting of *Pirate of the Pacific* is forgotten or ignored, along with the patience of *The Red Skull*. This is cliffhanger territory and we don't have time for intricacies and patience. Doc is on the case immediately, in the middle of the action very quickly and in hot pursuit soon after that. For as long as Dent sustains that pace, we're with him. Once it flags and the clichés creep in, we wonder why



we're with him and that's not a good feeling for us to have in a series all about him!

LESTER DENT

THE SARGASSO OGRE

PULP PUBLICATION:
#8, OCTOBER 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#18, JULY 1967
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#7, MARCH 2008

Book eight for Doc Savage, *The Sargasso Ogre*, is a thoroughly enjoyable early entry in the series that takes full advantage of a fantastic location, even if it does so in an overly fantastic manner. Then again, the Sargasso Sea was far more exotic and far less explained back in October 1933 than it is today.

Here, as in many examples of pulp fiction, it's a dangerous and ghostly area whose abundant seaweed traps ships and those on them end up having to form an isolated civilisation. Hammer returned to this idea as late as 1968 with their film, *The Lost Continent*, but it was a frequent choice of location back in the thirties and even earlier. Today, of course, we know that ships bog down in the Sargasso because of calm winds rather than the sargassum seaweed, which isn't remotely as abundant as pulp fiction would have had us believe, rather like quicksand, and which provides no impediment to shipping at all.

Doc Savage and his men end up in the Sargasso when the *Cameronic*, a cruise ship carrying them home from Alexandria, is hijacked and navigated there by the Sargasso Ogre of the title and his ruthless gang. This isn't the first ship to fall prey to these hijackers but it's the first to contain men both able and willing to fight back and so we're all set for the sort of action we expect from Doc Savage and his crew.

The Sargasso is a particularly evocative location for Doc to explore and he does so magnificently, bobbing under the seaweed and floating around within the Sargasso Ogre's realm. Lester Dent does a great job of evoking

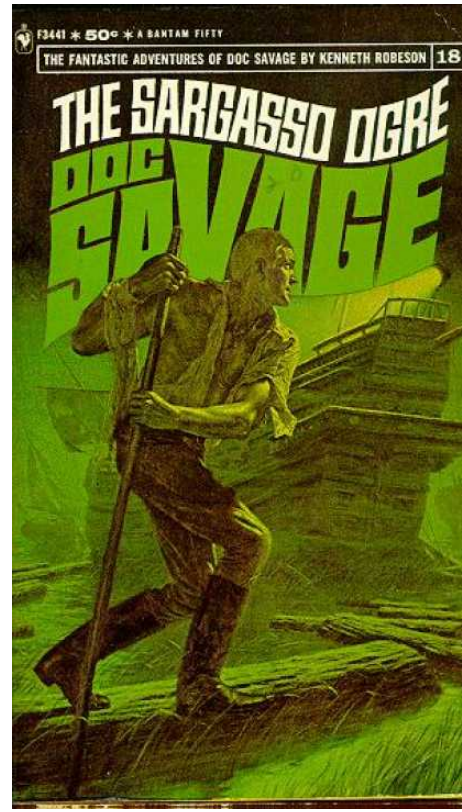
mood and it's no hardship to visualise what he conjured up here. It reminded me that it took far too long for Doc to reach the big screen, the eventual feature not arriving until 1975. Had he been filmed back in the thirties, this book would have been a fantastic choice to adapt.

It's been notable that the last few books have highlighted how these folks never have a dull moment, with each story transitioning promptly into the next. Doc and his crew are only in Egypt because it's where they flew the zeppelin they rescued in *The Red Skull*, with a cargo of freed slaves and priceless diamonds. They expect a quiet journey home, but a price is put on Long Tom's head on the very first page and Pasha Bey, the head of an Egyptian assassin's guild, is tasked with taking his life.

I liked how Bey, who naturally takes the job, recognises Doc. With seven adventures under his belt thus far, he ought to have been all over the newspapers and so easily recognised wherever he goes. However, I also liked how Bey doesn't recognise Long Tom or realise his connection to Savage, thus allowing him to walk into a job that will inevitably backfire on him.

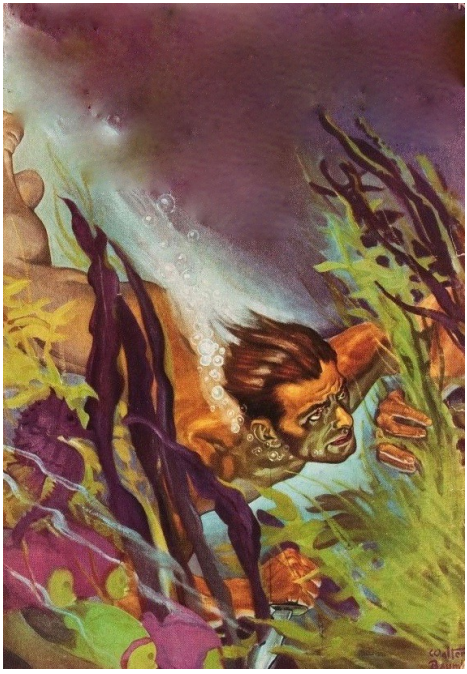
These early scenes, which take us into the Alexandrian catacombs, are well done but relatively routine compared to where we'll end up, as are those on the *Cameronic*. We'd spent plenty of time on a cruise liner only three books earlier in the best story thus far, *Pirate of the Pacific*, and nothing on this cruise liner outdoes what happened on that one. It's the Sargasso Sea that makes this book worthy of special attention and we arrive there soon enough, fifty or so pages in.

I adored the location and Dent puts it to great use. The great gyre of the North Atlantic



has trawled in a wide variety of ships over the years, even centuries, so those who have been stranded there have brought lots of material to scavenge and that makes for a colourful environment indeed, with varied clothes and weapons from many eras decorating both the Ogre's gang and those who stand against him.

Interestingly, those who stand against him are the women of the Sargasso, who have occupied a battleship under the command of Kina la Forge, a multi-lingual flame-headed wench with her own pet monkey called Nero. Initially, she's a glorious character, born in the Sargasso of parents stranded there, educated from the libraries of derelict ships and lording it over a realm of Oriental splendour; everything naturally acquired from the numerous



vessels stuck in the weeds.

Of course, like every other gorgeous young lady who has met Doc thus far, she falls for him, but she is at least savvy enough to see that he's not interested. She has every potential of being a great female character but, inevitably, the inherent sexism of the day and the testosterone of these novels win out and she's relegated to weak support. Even throwaway vocabulary betrays Dent's inability to see women as strong leads in this series. Even on a warship facing off against the Sargasso Ogre, housekeeping must apparently be done!

Things progress much as we expect, though with notable atmosphere. Doc has the fore throughout, much of his work in the Sargasso done solo, but Monk gets a chance to find his way onto the warship of the ladies too and thus steals a little attention back for a while. From the very beginning, Dent fashioned a team but failed to give most of its members enough to do. Only at points do Doc's five men get chances to show why they're part of that team and I'm still waiting for those chances to start to multiply.

Dent is still giving us rapid fire finalés too, but at least this one, as abrupt as always, actually makes sense, wrapping up proceedings with a glorious irony. I'm keeping my eye on these endings too, hoping that Dent will start to pace himself better and wondering when that will happen.

There's one other thing that leapt out of this one as odd. It's another of those moments that would presumably have made complete sense to the readers of 1933 but has dated enough to no longer do so today. At one point, Doc is inside the hold of a ship, about to face off against members of the Ogre's piratical crew, and he looks up to see "a rust scale as large as a spelling book." It took me a moment to realise what a rust scale was, just a large patch of rust on the hull rather than some piece of nautical equipment, but how large is a spelling book? I have no idea. Such creatures were presumably notable for their size back in the pulp era, but I can only guess.

This isn't as large as a spelling book, but it's a lot more fun.

LESTER DENT

THE CZAR OF FEAR

PULP PUBLICATION:
#9, NOVEMBER 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

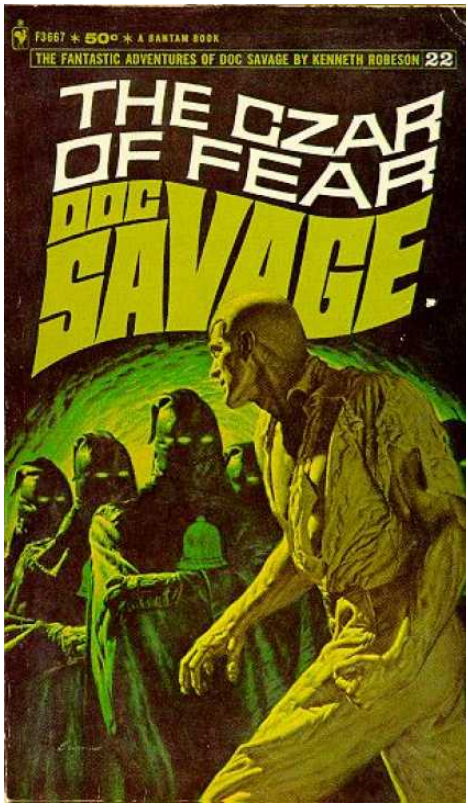
BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#22, MARCH 1968
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#17, APRIL 2008

The eighth Doc Savage novel, *The Sargasso Ogre*, was a great example of an adventure elevated by its location. Sure, the Ogre was a decent foil for the Man of Bronze, but his lair dominated proceedings, given that it was the exotic Sargasso Sea itself. The same logic applied to earlier entries in the series as wildly diverse as *The Man of Bronze*, *The Lost Oasis* and *The Land of Terror*, which respectively visit a Mayan valley in the fictional South American country of Hidalgo, an obscure oasis in the Egyptian desert and an island in the South Seas stuck in prehistory.

With book nine, regular writer Lester Dent takes a different approach, given that his location, a small industrial town in the Allegheny Mountains with the optimistic name of Prosper City, is rather routine. Instead, he plays up the villain of the piece, the Czar of Fear himself, generally known as the Green Bell, who's rather like the Gray Spider of the third story, *Quest of the Spider*, merely done right.

The fantastic paperback cover by James Bama (inspired by the original by Walter M Baumhofer) sets the tone wonderfully, with Doc Savage facing a set of mysteriously garbed enemies who look like a cross between the Ku Klux Klan and the Spanish Inquisition, but bathed in an eerie green light and blocking the way to what appears to be a whirlpool into another dimension but is presumably just a mine tunnel in Prosper City. These are the followers of the Green Bell, a name echoed in



everything from their outfits to the weird tones that he broadcasts over the radio to announce an impending death.

This cover hints at a timeless battle outside of our realm of reality but, in fact, this was a thoroughly grounded novel for November 1933, perhaps the most grounded in the series thus far. It reminds to a degree of *The Red Skull*, if that book had spent most of its pages at the Arizona dam being threatened by Nick Clipton and his cronies. By reducing the introduction and expanding the action, the book benefits not only from more substantial plot but also an admirable amount of social commentary.

1933 marked the heart of the Great Depression. Four years into an apparently endless slump, unemployment had reached one in four and working class men and women were seriously hurting. No wonder Dent wanted to pit Doc Savage against a mysterious and unscrupulous businessman who cares not about the workers in his town but only his own profitable future. Readers able to afford the dime an issue of *Doc Savage Magazine* cost or able to borrow a copy from someone else would have identified with the decent townsfolk of Prosper City who want to work but are held back by a mysterious villain and thrilled to Doc's fight to get the town working again.

I mentioned in my review of *Pirate of the Pacific* that Doc Savage doesn't fit easily into today's polarised political climate. He's outwardly right-wing, a man who epitomises the traditional American power of the individual, a man so confident of the moral high ground that he surgically transforms captured crooks into upstanding citizens. Yet he often seems overtly left-wing too, a man who avoids the use of guns unless absolutely necessary as reliance on them makes a man weak and a man who donates his reward for keeping the Philippines safe into setting up a free hospital for the poor.

This dichotomy is very apparent here too. Doc clearly feels for the working men of Prosper City and he gives them all food and money, albeit as advance wages. He identifies with the common man in ways that make him feel like a trade union leader. Yet he gets the factories to work by outright buying them, just as a venture capitalist might do, albeit with the aim of selling them all back to their original owners once the problem at hand is solved, and at the same price to boot, so like an honest venture capitalist, if such a creature even exists. Reading these Doc Savage novels in order is definitely a history lesson in how

much America has changed in what is only eighty some years.

The other heroes of the story, beyond Savage and his five close associates, could easily be read today as socialist activists: Jim and Alice Cash and their friend and mentor, Aunt Nora Boston, who starts a Benevolent Society to help those out of work. Back in 1933, these would more likely have been seen as angels or, at a time when the national spirit was called upon most, simply good Americans. The villains, on the other hand, like factory owner Judborn Tugg who sparks the decline of the town when he cuts wages for his workforce, are almost Dickensian in their willingness to put profit above human decency. Again, in 1933, he and his ilk would have been bad Americans as much as villains to hiss at and rail against.

I was impressed with the mystery behind Tugg's actions and those which soon followed to make the situation worse. Clearly there was evil intent behind everything but the endgame was kept neatly obscured by cliffhanging action and urgent need. *The Quest of the Spider* was criticised for how weak the Gray Spider was as an evil mastermind, especially given that he's kept out of the story for the most part. The Green Bell is the evil mastermind that the Gray Spider should have been: active in his villainy, but still always at a distance, leading his meetings surreptitiously from below ground, even as his followers think he's the masked and cowled dummy in front of them.

I also enjoyed how I had to wait to see who he actually was, because so many people could have been the Green Bell, hidden behind a hood and a changed voice. I especially appreciated how he isn't ever actively identified at all, but only through a combination of observations after he's vanquished.

There's not as much cat and mouse action as in *The Pirate of the Pacific*, but this is a very strong Doc Savage with a solid grounding in the troubles of the time and a suitably outré opponent to battle. Lester Dent was surely finding his stride at this point, with even the rapid ending more acceptable than usual.

LESTER DENT

THE PHANTOM CITY

PULP PUBLICATION:
#10, DECEMBER 1933
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#10, MARCH 1966
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#36, JANUARY 2010

The Man of Bronze kicked off *Doc Savage Magazine* in March 1933, meaning that *The Phantom City*, the tenth monthly novel, arrived in December, and it certainly felt like a Christmas present to me!

For a start, it's a rip-roaring adventure in the classic style. There's an Edgar Rice Burroughs influence discernible here, though Doc and his men are kept very much down to Earth even whilst visiting the Phantom City of the title. That's because, while it's surely fictional, it's located in a real place where lost cities are likely to be waiting to be discovered.

I've mentioned before I how I prefer more grounded locations to the wilder choices that Lester Dent made in these early Doc Savages, but while *The Land of Terror* was just a cheap attempt to pretend that prehistory las-ted on one South Sea island and *The Sargasso Ogre* was set in a romanticised version of the Sargasso Sea, *The Phantom City* is much more believable.

Doc reaches it by travelling through a subterranean river that flows beneath the desert of Rub' Al Khali, the Empty Quarter of the Arabian peninsula which contains a quarter of a million square miles of sun-drenched devastation. The frankincense route was here a couple of millennia ago and the likelihood of cities lost beneath the sands is large, like Iram of the Pillars, mentioned in a lot more fiction than just this novel.

Today, the Rub' Al Khali is as empty and almost as unexplored as it was in 1933 and it's even more shocking to us to realise that there is somewhere on God's green that is so large and so unexplored even today. The realisation

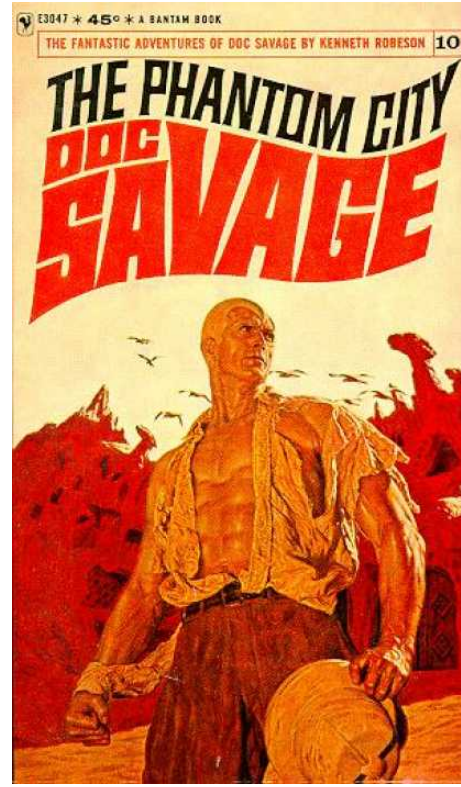
instilled in me at least a little of the wanderlust surely felt by all the Victorian explorers who went off to far flung corners of the world to fill in those gaps in the map. Frankly, the Phantom City of the title is a little more believable today than the beginning of the book as the people of Manhattan don't look twice at shifty Muslim terrorists.

There's much more to love here too, some of which is obvious and some more subtle, found only through reading these books in the order of publication in *Doc Savage Magazine*.

Most obvious is perhaps the introduction of Habeas Corpus, Monk's pet pig, whom he uses to torment Ham. He paid one qirsh for him, equivalent to about four American cents, in the coastal Arabian town of Bustan. He's described here as "a razor-back with legs as long as those of a dog, and ears so big they resembled wings." One neat comparison is that the pig is "as homely a specimen of the porker species as Monk was of the human race."

Still prominent is the use of sign language. Doc and his men have already used it to communicate in silence, but here they find that it's a way to talk with the exotic white haired girl in satin Arabian trousers who's at the centre of the mystery. It turns out that she hails from the Phantom City and she learned sign language from a westerner who found his way in and sparked the succession of events that lead to this story. The neat part is that she can't speak English aloud, as he had been rendered a deaf mute by torture, but can approximate it within sign language.

There's a clear demonstration of just how much clout Doc has in New York, along with an explanation of why he has it. At one point, Mohallet, the villain of the piece, is trapped in a building with his men, surrounded by police



officers. Doc goes in with special infra-red goggles and, to make them effective, he has the lights of Broadway turned completely off. That's serious! How can he get away with it? Well, his surgical skills saved the police commissioner's life. That's how!

Those paying closer attention will see that this novel follows on overtly from the previous one, as Dent had been doing for half a dozen books thus far, but he also explicitly references an earlier book, *The Polar Treasure*. Mohallet seeks out Doc so he can rent the *Helldiver*, the submarine he read about months earlier when Doc and his men travelled up towards the pole. This, along with the introduction of Habeas Corpus, suggests that Lester Dent was starting to really build the world of

Doc Savage rather than just churn out novels.

He also seems to have improved considerably as a writer. As much as I've found great enjoyment in the first nine Doc Savage novels, there have been common problems that have riddled them through and I've highlighted three of them in particular. I'm very happy to report that *The Phantom City* doesn't suffer from any of these three issues. Dent addressed them all! Now, let's see how long that lasts.

The first is that Doc himself is apparently without flaw. Sure, he's the superhuman lead to this series, so we expect him to be something special, but any hero needs to have a flaw to ground them. Dent highlights Doc's daily two hour routine from the angle that, if anyone else did that from childhood, they'd potentially be just as special as Doc, but he still needs a flaw to humanise him. Here, Doc walks into not merely one trap but two! The man is human after all! Thank the stars!

That issue leads to another, which is that Doc being so incredible means that his five assistants rarely get anything to do and we wonder why they hang around. Only rarely in these early novels do they do much but fail so Doc can succeed and I can count on the fingers of one hand how often they all justify their billing. Fortunately, they all have purpose here: Monk uses his skill in chemistry to save them from a trap, Johnny's knowledge of geology is put to good use and Renny's navigation is tested. We're even let in on Long Tom having a museum full of mementos from their adventures, even if we don't get to see it; he's sure to place one of Mohallet's magnetic guns into it. Sure, Ham is mostly comic relief this time out, but we can't have it all!

Finally, there's the fact that many of these novels seem like Dent kept on writing until he was about to hit his word limit and had to conjure up an ending of sorts in the last couple of pages. This one feels more like he actually wrote an outline and planned out the progression so that it ends appropriately with everything wrapped up neatly over quite a few pages. I can't understate how good that felt after so many rapid fire conclusions.

There is a weaker side, but it's outweighed by the stronger stuff this time out. Mohallet is a decent foe, but he pales in the shadow of most of the recent villains, like the Pirate of the Pacific, the Sargasso Ogre and the Green Bell. The admirable attention given to Doc's journey towards the Phantom City means that we don't spend as much time there as we'd like. A goof is apparent there too, given that Monk really should have figured out what we wait until the last page to discover. An earlier goof assumes that Manhattan would fall into sheer darkness when Broadway is shut off, as if there's no rest of the city to address too.

As I've highlighted some interesting use of language in previous reviews, I'll call out what appears to be an oxymoron. The four Muslim terrorists stalking the streets of Manhattan weren't frequent bathers, so they "reeked faintly". Now, I'd have thought that "reeked" was a word to use only when "smelled" isn't sufficient, but apparently it may have been a mere synonym back in 1933. If only I had Johnny's language skills!

There's something to enjoy in each of Dent's novels from 1933, but some are clearly more enjoyable than others. Looking back on the first ten, though, I've had a blast with the last three. *The Sargasso Ogre* had the location, *The Czar of Fear* had the substance and *The Phantom City* combined both into what is surely the best Doc yet.

LESTER DENT

BRAND OF THE WEREWOLF

PULP PUBLICATION:
#11, JANUARY 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#5, APRIL 1965
COVER: MORT KUNSTLER

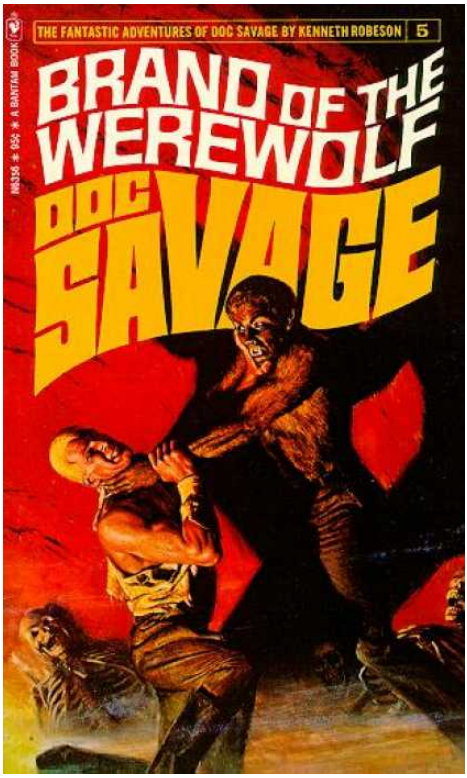
SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#13, DECEMBER 2007

Lester Dent's stories improved throughout his first year writing *Doc Savage Magazine* in 1933. The December novel, *The Phantom City*, was arguably his best yet and it was surrounded by challenging competition. With each story, I've found myself looking forward to the next more and more.

I was especially interested in revisiting *Brand of the Werewolf*, the first novel of 1934, as it holds a notable record. When Bantam reprinted the entire series in paperback in the sixties, this one was the most successful title, racking up 185,000 sales. Why that was the case, I have no idea, because it's a decent effort but not up to the standards set by the previous few. I've heard suggestions that it just had a bigger print run but, if that's all it took, why didn't Bantam print more of each book? The biggest draw the novel has today can't account for those sales all on its own.

That's the fact that this was the moment that we meet what little family Doc Savage has left. We learned about his father in *The Man of Bronze*, but that's been it thus far. Here, we're introduced to two further relatives, even if one of them is already dead by the time we get to him.

He's Alex Savage, a successful businessman in agriculture and industry who had homesteaded some of the roughest land in Canada over the prior forty years, what Dent describes ably as "a collection of pinnacle and canyons, boulders and brush." It's a sprawling estate on the west coast, the perfect environment for



Ham's debonair outfits to get shredded by nature. Alex is Doc's uncle and the Man of Bronze is on his way to spend some well-earned holiday time with him, along with his five cohorts. It's clearly been a while since the two have met, as Doc has never previously met his niece, Patricia Savage, who is eighteen and also living at the family cabin.

Pat would become easily the most frequent co-star of the Doc Savage novels after the Fabulous Five. She would be back in *Fear Cay*, the 19th novel, originally published in Septem-ber 1934, and would go on to appear in 39 of the original 181 adventures. It's not surprising; she adds a personal dimension to Doc, who sorely needed it because he was so deliberately impersonal, the frequent attentions of gorgeous ladies and rescued damsels consistently rebuffed throughout the series.

I'd be surprised if Dent knew how popular she would be at this point, because he can't be sure what he wants her to be. Half of her is the standard female supporting character for *Doc Savage* novels, as an enticing mix of beauty, danger and self-will; the other half is the standard damsel in distress, which means that Pat keeps getting kidnapped, only to promptly rescue herself over and over again. At one point, she even suffers from hysteria, or what Dent describes as "the jitters", and Doc has to render her unconscious to help. I can't help but feel that Dent might not have written her that way if he expected she'd be back often in future novels.

Alex and Pat are introduced relatively early, only five chapters in, but it takes Doc and his men quite some time to reach them; they stumble upon Alex's grave almost halfway into the book and reach the cabin shortly thereafter. The time spent before this is fascinating, because it involves something that we haven't seen in the earlier novels: helplessness.

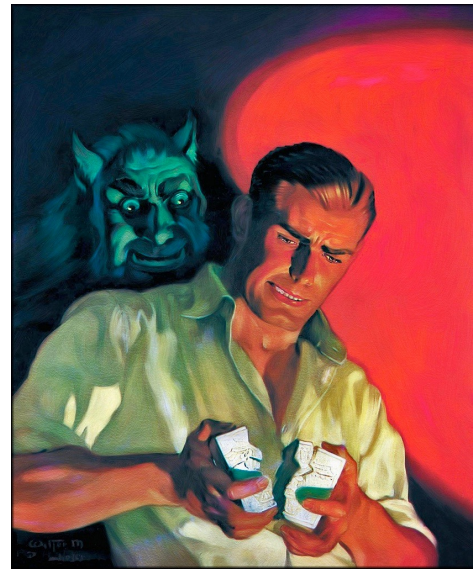
I don't mean that they're easy picking on the train west, merely that they packed for holiday rather than adventure and that means that they're far less equipped for the threat which soon faces them than they would normally be. They're also a long way from home. Thus far, I believe every adventure has either started in New York, which means they can supply from headquarters, or has continued directly on from its predecessor, in which case they're already supplied. Here, they're on the other side of the continent and relatively open to what is clearly an unexpected attack. They simply have to make do with what they have and I appreciated that approach. It also made Doc feel a little more human and some

of his deduction here, unaided by gadgetry, is superb.

Also introduced early are examples why this is both a good and bad novel. The former is the MacGuffin of the piece, namely an ivory cube which starts out in the possession of Pat Savage, who knows it's important but isn't able to figure out why. The latter is the latent racism of the time, given that the Savages in western Canada employ a pair of Native American servants: Tiny, who is inevitably anything but, and her husband, Boat Face, who's annoyingly stereotypical.

Readers of the Bantam paperback are often disappointed for a couple of reasons. One is that the title of the book, which suggests a supernatural flavour, is ably backed up by the cover art featuring a werewolf with his hands around Doc's throat. There are no werewolves in this book, merely the brand of the title which is used as a scare tactic rather like we might expect from a *Scooby-Doo* cartoon. The other is that the brief synopsis on the back cover, which runs for the usual mere couple of sentences, gives away the villain and gets Alex Savage's connection to Doc wrong. It's stunning ineptitude! If we go back to *Scooby- Doo*, it would be like introducing the lighthouse keeper as the villain in the opening credits.

The real story involves a Spanish galleon that had travelled north up the coast with Henry Morgan's famous treasure on board, only to be lost. Alex Savage discovered it on his land, crewed by skeletons, which leads to some atmospheric scenes late in the story but also what has come to be an inevitable sort of ending, one that echoes *The Sargasso Ogre* and *The Czar of Fear*, among others. I had hoped that Dent was getting past those "I'm running out of space, let's just have the bad guy blow



himself up" finalés, but apparently not.

Fortunately, this backs up how he was getting past some of the other frequent problems of these early novels. I've been watching for three of them: the need for Doc to have flaws, the need for Doc's men to have stuff to do, and the need for interesting planned out endings. The latter is still a problem here, but the other two are well avoided, the former by that lack of preparation that leaves Doc and his men wrapped up in a grand adventure without the usual gadgets and tools that give them an edge and the latter by giving each member of Doc's team validation to be along for the ride.

Renny is tasked with mapping Alex's estate from the sky, using infra-red to peek through the fog. Monk is set to analyse butter in the Savages' cabin, for reasons that escape everyone except Doc at the time. Long Tom uses electric wave tests to determine the potential for valuable mineral deposits underground, while Johnny prospects outcroppings for the same purpose. Well, OK, Ham is comic relief again in this one, as he was in *The Phantom*

City, taking the role of guard on more than one occasion, demonstrating how his clothes are not remotely suited to the outdoor terrain and even falling foul of a new trick of Monk's: using ventriloquism to make Habeas Corpus "speak". I laughed each time that came up, though possibly because Dent doesn't allow the joke to outstay its welcome.

So I liked this story for many reasons. Sure, it introduced Pat Savage, but here that works less as the set-up for a new regular character and more for gifting Doc a real chance to be human. His cohorts felt more like real cohorts than the hangers-on that they've often been up until recently. As long as we didn't read the Bantam back cover blurb, the revelation of the villain is well-handled and his relationship to his own colleagues is a neatly changing one. The ivory cube is a gorgeous MacGuffin, even if its purpose is a little far-fetched, and the skeleton-crewed lost galleon is a fantastic location.

There are flaws though, beyond the lack of werewolf. The brand is used capably but isn't really explained to my satisfaction. It felt like a cool gimmick that should have been ditched when it failed to be meaningful to the growing story. I'm used to Renny saying "Holy cow!" but he seems to say it a heck of a lot in this one; I should go back and count the instances. Also, Long Tom loses a couple of teeth in a section that seems out of place in the grand scheme of things. I didn't realise he was buck-toothed to begin with, but a fight that we don't even see rectifies that by knocking them out of his jaw. Given that Bantam reprinted the original stories out of order and I've certainly read books written before this one, I don't recall him being without front teeth. Maybe Dent conveniently forgot that scene as he continued the series.

In between the good and the bad isn't only the average but also the interesting. The age of the story can be discerned through the use of the spelling "clew" rather than "clue" and also the use of "rods" as a measure of distance. Dent also introduces a new part of Doc's two-hour daily routine that we hadn't previously seen: it involves him casting some small white balls onto the ground and estimating the distance between them.

All in all, this is a decent story, better than its reputation amongst fans whose opinions were skewed by the lack of werewolf activity and the Bantam back cover spoiler, but not up there with the previous few.

LESTER DENT

THE MAN WHO SHOOK THE EARTH

PULP PUBLICATION:
#12, FEBRUARY 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

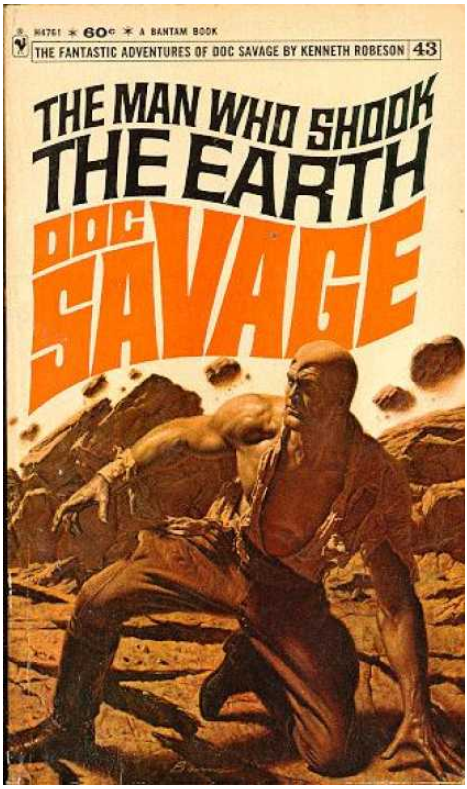
BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#43, DECEMBER 1969
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#34, FEBRUARY 2010

After such fantastic growth within 1933, building consistently throughout the second half of the year, I'm finding Lester Dent's work in early 1934 to be rather underwhelming. *Brand of the Werewolf* did well in ways that are mostly only visible to hindsight, but it was disappointing on many of its own merits. Next up is *The Man Who Shook the Earth*, which felt too overly familiar to move the series forward much at all.

The core story is clearly the old mainstay of industrial takeover through overly dramatic subterfuge. It's the same scheme that plagued the lumber mills of Louisiana way back in *Quest of the Spider* and the same scheme that hit the factories of New York State in *The Czar of Fear*. Here, the only change is that it's the nitrate industry in Antofagasta, Chile, which the globe by my bed tells me is a real place, that's under threat.

If the story isn't new, at least the mystery that Dent crafts around it is worthy of note. He wasn't close to being up to the task when he wrote *Quest of the Spider*, ignoring the bad guy for most of the book and so only vaguely generating any interest in his exploits. In *The Czar of Fear*, he was much more on the ball, weaving red herrings around the villain throughout, so that we were still guessing at the identity of the Green Bell when it was finally unveiled on the last page. Here, the Little White Brother is a constant danger to the owners of Chilean nitrate mines, willing and able to use his mysterious power to generate earthquakes precise enough to be used as a tool of assassination, in an area where



quakes simply don't happen.

That's a great gimmick to begin with, but it's aided by some clever plotting that begins with the opening chapter that sees Monk get suckered into leaving a fake journalist on his own inside Doc's headquarters. It's not quite as ridiculous as it sounds, as he does funnel five hundred bucks from the man into feeding the homeless, but he firmly drops the ball or, translated into the traditional unintentionally hilarious 1934 slang: "I guess I pulled a boner, Doc." Incidentally, the new instance of archaic vernacular here is the surprising use of "shaggin'" to mean "following", as in someone surreptitiously trailing someone else.

I thoroughly enjoyed the ensuing cat-and-mouse chase through New York for a whole slew of reasons. One is that the Little White Brother's henchmen aren't all idiots, as we've come to expect from the henchmen of sinister arch-villains; Velvet is rather capable, even if he's a second or third stringer. Another is that we're never sure who's in control throughout; it clearly isn't John Acre, who has travelled from Chile to see Doc, only to be kidnapped once he arrives in New York, but is it the men who kidnapped him or the men in hot pursuit who have the edge?

The inclusion of the Midas Club in this chase is another boon, given that Ham has half a dozen rooms in this rather exclusive place, a club restricted to those with over five million dollars in the bank that they had earned themselves; inheritance oddly fails to count. What's more, within the Midas Club, Doc's men bump into an "entrancing beauty" in "exotic evening attire", namely one Helen Tipperary 'Tip' Galligan. She's but the newest in a long line of tough, capable and headstrong young ladies who keep showing up in Doc's adventures, and she's cast from the same go-getting mould as thirties newspaper reporter, Torchy Blane, as clearly a prototype for Lois Lane as Doc Savage was for Superman.

This long and tense, if often paused, chase scene, is reminiscent of the similar one that opened *The Lost Oasis* but it's more grounded and it almost seems like an afterthought when Doc decides that he and his men should fly down to Chile. Until two thirds of the way through the novel, we're more aware than they are of the earthquakes, because of the frequency by which headlines are shouted in the background by newsboys in the street.

The best thing about waiting so long to travel is that it gives Dent a real opportunity to build John Acre, the character we don't

quite meet early on and who gains in mystery with each chapter that passes. He's kidnapped, he's safe; he's in New York, he's in Chile; he's dead, he's alive. Wisely kept on the periphery of things until we get to South America, he's a great character and he's used well in all his guises. It's worth mentioning that the scene in which he "dies" is a highly impactful one from an emotional standpoint and it's handled in an interestingly offhand way. I won't spoil what happens, but it's bigger than anything in any of the previous novels.

Dent was definitely working at a level of complexity higher than in the stories he wrote a year earlier, *The Man Who Shook the Earth* finishing up his first twelve months on the job. The repetition of background information like Chilean earthquakes is a great example of something he wasn't up to when he began to tell Doc's stories. The multiple John Acres are another. A third is the inclusion of an odd little mystery of scant substance but much interest: doors begin to mysteriously open at Doc's approach, which fascinates Monk, who tries to figure out how his boss is doing it. This is inconsequential to the plot, which was the be-all and end-all within the early books, but it paints an engaging texture behind the story and it builds character within Doc's team too.

Something else worthy of note is how Dent was really starting to see people like Monk as individuals in their own right, not simply as members of Doc's team. Early in the series, readers could be excused for wondering why Doc even had a team, given that he did everything himself and they didn't contribute much to proceedings, except perhaps to slip up once in a while to cause a hiccough that keeps the story moving along. This does improve as the series progresses, and the last few novels saw a conscious effort on Dent's part to have Doc allot jobs to each of his men to justify their presence.

Here, though, for perhaps the first time, one of Doc's team is given some attention that has nothing to do with the wider story at all. Doc is absent from the first chapter because he's demonstrating to "two score of famous surgeons" "an extremely delicate piece of work to remove a paralytic condition from the nerve center of a man's left eye." That eye belongs to Johnny, the bespectacled geologist of Doc's team, who has suffered from the condition since the Great War. Of course, I could only wonder whether Long Tom might receive similar treatment soon for the buck teeth that were knocked out during *Brand of the Werewolf*.

All in all, this book felt like a stopgap, content to retread familiar old ground with new characters. Like its immediate predecessor, its greatest successes are little things obvious in hindsight rather than anything that might have pulled readers in back in February 1934. Perhaps that's why Bantam waited to reprint it; it was the twelfth novel published in Doc Savage Magazine, but the 43rd of the paperback reprints. Only *Quest of the Spider*, one of the weaker entries in the series thus far, took longer to reach fresh eyeballs.

LESTER DENT

METEOR MENACE

PULP PUBLICATION:
#13, MARCH 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#3, OCTOBER 1964
COVER: JAMES AVATI

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#35, JANUARY 2010

While March 1934's *Doc Savage* novel, *Meteor Menace*, was the thirteenth published in the pulps, it was third to be reprinted in paperback by Bantam, following only the origin story, *The Man of Bronze*, and the ever-popular *The Thousand-Headed Man*. Bantam apparently held this one in high regard and I can see why because it moves along well and gets freakier than the series had gotten up until this point.

As has become the trend, we begin in the location we left off last time out. Here, that's Antafagasta, Chile, after Doc and his men helped defeat the Little White Brother and his threat to the local nitrate industry, and we don't move on to the next location for well over a third of the book.

We begin with Doc avoiding the limelight as a massive crowd of 200,000 throng to see the dedication ceremony for the free hospital that serves as his reward. Unfortunately, the waiting and confusion remind of the opening of *Life of Brian* but things settle down when the action kicks in, with Tibetans aiming to assassinate the man of bronze and with "she-tiger Rae Stanley," who is, of course, "tall and exquisitely beautiful, with hair the hue of mahogany," stirring up the mystery.

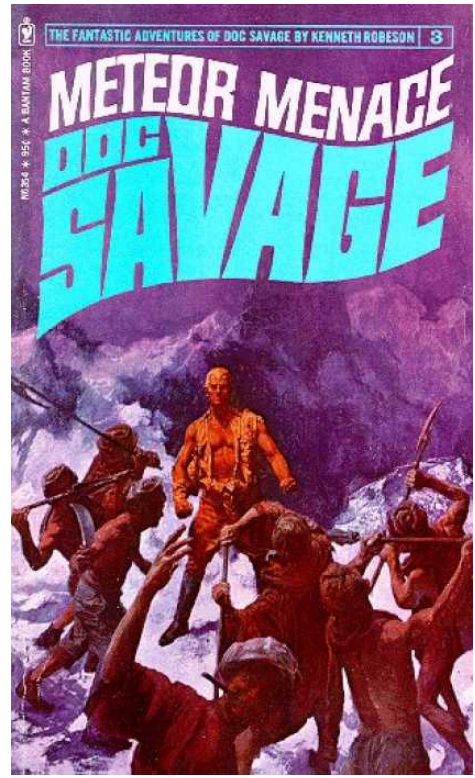
And mystery is an understatement here. With Tibetans on the attack in Antafagasta, it won't be much of a surprise to find that we soon end up in the remote reaches of the Himalayas, in a village called Tonyi, the name of which identifies their location to Doc as the Konkaling sector of eastern Tibet. What's bizarre here is that neither Doc nor his five aides were aware of the travel. They were all

rendered wild and insensible by the close passage of the Blue Meteor, a bizarre weapon indeed, and a full month passes before they recover, during which time they've been transported from South America to Asia.

This is freaky stuff indeed. I'll long remember the mindless Ham, impeccably dressed but gibbering and bouncing off boulders with no apparent sensibilities left. I'll also long remember Doc's "sheepishness of expression" on being told what happened during their missing month, namely that he has become engaged to be married to "entrancingly pretty Rae Stanley". Writer Lester Dent apparently acquired the habit of prefacing his characters with adjectives early in 1934 and indulged it with abandon here.

For all the fun that arises from this odd situation, the freakishness stands out more. Doc and his men had never faced anything like this before. It's a rare occasion indeed when a villain gets the jump on Doc and has him, however briefly, under his thumb, but for a weapon that doesn't even touch its victims to steal a full month from their lives is downright terrifying to anyone who fears the loss of control. In fact, the Blue Meteor really trumps any of the superweapons that the various criminal masterminds have deployed against Doc and his men thus far. It's hard to beat the sheer power of the targeted earthquakes of *The Man Who Shook the Earth* but this is far freakier, far nastier and far more personal.

The mastermind this time out is the inevitably mysterious Mo-Gwei, a name which didn't influence that of the gremlin or the Scottish post-rock band but merely shared the same derivation. Mogwai or mogui are Chinese demons, originally just the souls of the dead but later souls that wreak vengeance on



those who wronged them in life. I got a kick out of Mo-Gwei, "the devil-faced one", who initially appears to be much like the usual megalomaniacal mastermind but who turns out to be vastly different. He might not seem it initially, but he's a refreshing villain.

How the natives are treated is less refreshing, starting with the character of Saturday Loo. Dent did seem to have done some homework, littering his text with Tibetan words, like "arabas" or two-wheeled carts; "tashkin" or mountain sage; and "buran", a violent Asian windstorm. He also introduces two different phrasings of native language: the respectful speech used by educated Tibetans, known as "rje-sa", and the more profane "p'al-skad", spoken by regular peasant folk. Yet, there's clear racism on display, not only in a selection

of pseudo-Confucian quips such as, "A wise man does not carry a musk deer which he has shot in the forbidden forest" or "It is said that the wisest fox has the deepest den", but in outrageous paragraphs that shock today.

At one point, a cockney named Shrops asks a crew of Tibetans to get a launch ready and the result is that "Tibetans stumbled out to comply with this command. Like most Asiatics, they showed a marked lack of mechanical ability as they lowered the launch. The task took them some time." At another point, Doc's hiding place inside a trunk is discovered in memorable fashion: "The Tibetan who opened the trunk was a squat fellow who, thanks to a Tibetan national custom of consuming thirty to fifty cups of buttered tea a day, was extremely fat." Time has certainly changed how novelists depict other races!

I've found the changes in literary style in over eighty years fascinating. There's more slang in this novel that stands out to 21st century eyes, as I've come to expect. Ham and Monk "hammered heels" early on to leap into a fray, but that's rather self-explanatory. More obscure is a phrase uttered by that Cockney named Shrops: "'E's like the Irishman's flea: They can't put 'ands on 'im." This simile crops up a lot in the 1920s, apparently sourced from an old story, even recounted in film in 1913. I'd never heard of it before, just as I'd never seen a very mild English expletive, "blimey", spelled as "blimme". That looks so wrong that I'd have pronounced it incorrectly, had I not grown up with the word!

There are notable changes beyond the literary style too. Doc's engagement is the most obvious, as Dent has explained many times that he's dedicated himself so single-mindedly to fighting injustice that he's unwilling to bring any woman into danger; best of luck dedicating two hours a day to the grueling routine that keeps his senses honed if he'd settled down into matrimony! Anyway, it's completely obvious that the engagement was a red herring. Those watching more carefully will notice that Doc's weird trilling sound, thus far a subconscious action that he may not even realise he's doing, is used here deliberately, as a wordless warning.

All in all, it's not difficult to see why Bantam rushed this one into print quickly as the third paperback in their reprint run, rather than wait for its natural place in the order of the series. The real third story was *Quest of the Spider*, a weaker novel with a notably weaker villain, which Bantam took their sweet time in reprinting; it eventually showed up as #68 in their line. In the paperbacks, *Meteor Menace* surely helped to establish the series on a high note. In the pulps, it was a step up from the lesser pair of novels that began 1934: the important but problematic *Brand of the Werewolf* and the routine *The Man Who Shook the Earth*.

LESTER DENT

THE MONSTERS

PULP PUBLICATION:
#14, APRIL 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#7, JUNE 1965
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#18, JUNE 2008

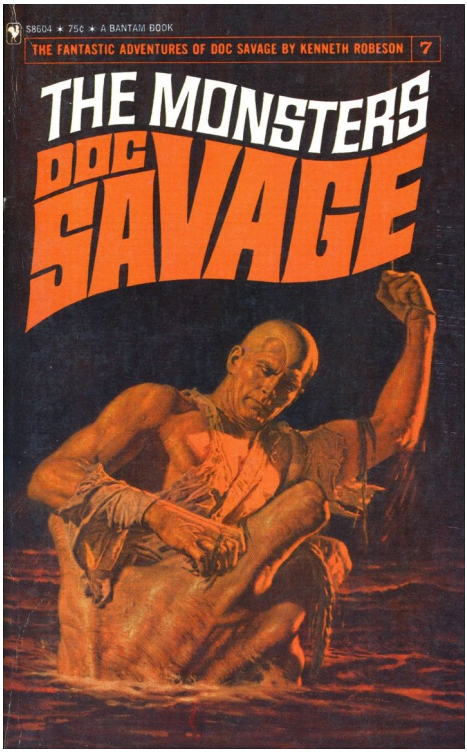
March 1934's *Doc Savage* title, *Meteor Menace*, was a notable step up after a underwhelming beginning to the year and I was hoping that *The Monsters* would continue that. In some ways it does but, in others, it's a missed opportunity and the latter wins out in the end.

The most obvious success is the continuation of freakiness. The amnesiac effects of the Blue Meteor the previous month prompted the freakiest scenes in the series thus far and it would be hard indeed to out-do them. However, writer Lester Dent does give it a solid shot here, introducing a grotesque fat man, a snivelling coward called Griswold Rock, as a captive within a house that's very freaky indeed. It's a sprawling mansion surrounded by a forty foot wall; its iron gate is fifteen feet tall and fifteen wide and it protects a courtyard that's packed with "a huge, crisscrossed net of copper cables" all carrying high voltage electricity.

What's more, when Doc and his men try to rescue him, they're hindered by some sort of giant who destroys half the house from within. *The Monsters* may be an annoyingly generic title to us today but it's hardly an inappropriate definition of what can be found inside the book.

It takes a while to get to Griswold Rock's weird mansion. In fact, it takes a while to get to Doc Savage this time out. Instead, we introduce the capability for devastation of the monsters of the title.

We start out in northern Michigan, outside a town called Trapper Lake. A half-breed by the name of Bruno Hen gives all his money to



his neighbour, Carl MacBride, just in case something happens to him; if it does, as he expects, then MacBride should travel to New York City to secure the services of Doc Savage to investigate. Only a single page later, Bruno Hen is dead, his shrieks ending in a "piercing, bleating sound, remindful of a mouse which had been stepped upon," and his shack turned into "little more than a great shapeless wad of timber and planks." So MacBride, being an honest man, brings the story to Doc Savage, only to fall dead upon the floor of his office after speaking Doc's name, shot by a weapon secreted within a banjo.

These novels only ran to 140 pages or so when reprinted by Bantam in paperback, so dedicating twenty of them to an introduction means that a good chunk of the novel this time out is over by the time we even meet the Man of Bronze. Instead, we accompany Bruno Hen through the Atlas Congress of Wonders, whose barkers freely reference Doc as the only man with more strength or mental acuity than their exhibits, and the backwoods which he calls his home. Then we accompany Carl MacBride on his first plane trip, on which he unwittingly meets the man who will soon shoot him dead, and his bright-eyed journey into New York City.

While many might complain at how long it takes to reach the star of the show, I'm willing to praise Dent for setting the scene with such care. I'll reserve my complaints for other things, some of which have been getting more and more annoying with each book.

I've already called out Renny's exclamations of "Holy Cow!" but I wonder if they are more or less frequent than the use of "simian" to describe Monk Mayfair. While the structure of these novels is gradually improving, there are still far too many stubbornly short sentences; Dent still hasn't found a semi-colon that he likes and he has an odd aversion to conjunctions too.

There are plenty of new complaints as well, though most are minor. There's a real cheat of a paragraph, in which Dent speaks to his readers to acknowledge that he's having Doc do something utterly different to what he knows we expect; there's an inappropriate use of pinheads as retarded African cannibals; and the overdone cowardice of Griswold Rock is a sure-fire gimme that there's more to that character than might initially meet the eye. I laughed aloud at Rock's suggestion that, once rescued, his overt cowardice will prompt him to leave the country and flee to Europe. In 1934. He clearly hasn't been reading the pap-

ers! There's a hilarious understatement from Doc: as the monsters of the title start ripping their plane apart with their bare hands, he stops Monk from investigating. "'Wait!' Doc admonished sharply. 'Those things may be dangerous.'" The phrase, "No shit, Sherlock", springs rapidly to mind. There's even a weird use of a line, "It was a peaceful scene," on two consecutive pages, right before the chapter entitled *Night Terror*, which is about as peaceful as you might imagine.

Most of those are small enough errors that they should have been caught by an editor; the only large one is the mismanagement of the leading lady. Here, she's Jean Morris, a steel-haired lion-tamer at the Atlas Congress of Wonders, and she keeps showing up in the story without ever really finding a purpose. Sure, she knows the pinheads, who do find a purpose, and she has a vast potential as a character, but it feels like Dent simply forgot what he was going to use her for and just left her in anyway.

None of this is to say that The Monsters isn't enjoyable. The vast sweep of the story is well handled and I got a kick out of the Michigan backwoods. Of course, Doc and his men travel to Trapper Lake to look into the mysterious death of Bruno Hen, which the papers suggest was due to a freak tornado. Of course, they figure out what's going on, but they have to work hard to stop the villain of the piece from achieving his megalomaniacal goals. He's an underwhelming villain, with an underwhelming name, Pere Teston, and a propensity for being outshone by his creations, the monsters of the title, but there's nothing wrong with his diabolical plans which are suitably enjoyable and impactful.

As always, there are moments that stand

out to me, over eighty years on, either for linguistic or historical reasons.

The former tend to manifest in the use of slang. A carnival barker doesn't merely bully or rag Bruno Hen, for instance, he bullyrags him, a portmanteau word that I haven't heard before. Similarly, I've never heard of a plane being described as a "sky lizzie", but presumably it simply refers to a "tin lizzie" that flies. I had no idea what "pac-type shoes" were, but they're waterproof moccasins. Usually, as with these examples, it's the words or phrases that I've never heard that stand out, but sometimes they're ones I know but don't expect. For instance, Doc uses the term "half an hour", a standard English phrase that only stands out to me because Americans tend to use "a half hour" instead. Maybe that's a recent linguistic change.

The most telling historical moment is one where Dent describes a backwoods town built out of logs as having "an aspect somewhat out of place in this modern age." This novel is over

eighty years old but it serves well to remind us that "modern" is a relative term. Another odd historical note comes when Doc hurtles along in his roadster so quickly that Griswold Rock utters "a terrified choking sound" and grasps the door. He's doing all of seventy miles an hour, something most cars on our freeways do today, but it was not so expected in the mid-thirties.

There's little here to progress the mythology of Doc Savage forward. Early in the story, he escapes death from the bullets that take down Carl MacBride because he's prudently placed a wall of bulletproof glass between his 86th floor office and the corridor outside. Also, Monk has now trained Habeas Corpus, his pet pig, to do more than just appear to sass Ham through the magic of ventriloquism; here, he uses him as a sort of bloodhound.

As always, I enjoyed *The Monsters* but, some agreeable freakiness aside, it's a missed opportunity. The monsters of the title are glorious creations who deserved more opportunities than they were given. At least the ending, in which they play a large part, isn't quite the usual one for Doc Savage novels; there isn't a single explosion, even if the villain is ultimately hoisted by his own petard. I know that Dent did bring back at least one antagonist for a second adventure but this marks the first time I've actually wanted that to happen; I'd love to see the monsters again, but put to better use. Let's see how often that feeling arises as I continue through the series.

LESTER DENT

THE MYSTERY ON THE SNOW

PULP PUBLICATION:
#15, MAY 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#69, JULY 1972
COVER: FRED PFEIFFER

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#37, MAY 2010

Only a couple of weeks after reading *The Mystery on the Snow*, I find that it's already fading away from me to a collection of scenes and impressions. I struggled to remember the answer behind the title, which suggests that it wasn't as notable a mystery as author Lester Dent might have planned it to be.

Now, that's not to say that it's gone. I do remember the mystery itself, though more for Doc's reaction to it than for anything inherent in the scene. He's in the far north of Canada, inside the Arctic Circle, and he's come across a clearing in the spruce. There are two teams of dogs, still attached to their sledges and the tracks behind them show how they came into the clearing. There are snowshoe prints too, in soft snow, showing just where people walked about. However, there's nobody anywhere to be seen, just a fire, a partially prepared meal and some blood on the snow. The bitter cold doesn't stop a chill from running up Doc's spine as he realises what the scene is missing: any tracks leading outwards.

It's a good scene for a number of reasons. It's set up well, taking up an entire chapter to outline and then another one to run through possibilities and deepen the mystery. Doc calls his team who suggest ideas, just as we do, but to no avail. Dent, through Doc, explains why none of them are viable. "On the face of it," suggests Doc, "the thing seems inexplicable." And, of course, there's no quick explanation given; we don't discover the answer until close to the end of the book. I refreshed myself as to what that was and realise why I forgot it: it's an appropriate but underwhelming answer.

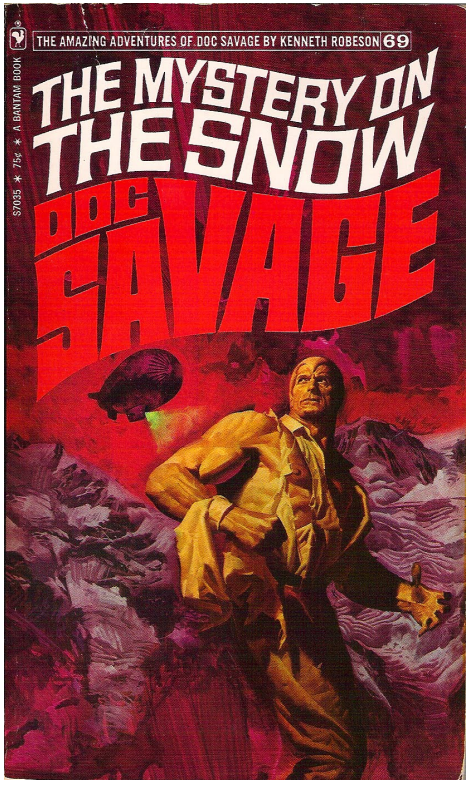
And that highlights the problem with the book. The whole thing is underwhelming, but consistently so. Nothing stands out as particularly awful, because this isn't a bad novel per se. It's just that very little stands out at all, so it's far from a good one either. Perhaps that's why Bantam took so long to reprint it; it was fifteenth in the original pulp series but only the 69th paperback.

The names are one underwhelming factor. The villain is actually neatly hidden, but his name is Stroam, which doesn't excite as much as any of the prior villains in the series thus far. Other character names like Kulden, Ben Lane and Mahal aren't much better and the latter could easily have been spiced up, given that he's a cut rate clairvoyant. Dent could have gone with Mahal the Mystic! That would have been a better way to introduce him!

The best name is Midnat D'Avis, who's the lady of the month, but she's underused and so can't live up to her considerable potential as both a stubborn PI and "a pint size edition of femininity". She was the only character who had the real possibility of being memorable.

In fact, I'm remembering locations much more than I am the characters, such as the sprawling warehouse of the Hidalgo Trading Company and the steel panelled reception room at Mahal's establishment. Sadly, when we head north to figure out what's going on up there in the Arctic Circle, we're aiming at Snow Mountain! Seriously, Dent couldn't come up with a better name for a mountain in the frozen wastes of the north than that?

What's oddest is that there isn't even any connection to bring Doc and his team into the mystery. There's a deliberate lack of one and we actually spend quite a lot of time in New York before heading north to find out why. Ben Lane wants to bring Doc in but he doesn't because the bad guys do well at stopping him. They do almost as well at stopping Doc from finding out, but not quite and so it's only that



pressure that sends him to Canada.

These obstacles are put in front of both Doc and Lane consistently enough that we don't even meet the latter until a hundred pages in and, even then, that's at the point where he thinks Doc is dead and vice versa!

Fortunately, a lot of the time in New York is spent at Doc's warehouse, about which we learn quite a bit. We've been here before, but not long enough to realise that the walls are feet thick and lined with steel beams, making the place like a giant bomb shelter or, as Dent puts it, "a gigantic vault". I don't remember the dozen airplanes housed there either, but there they are. One of the most memorable parts of this one is Doc navigating through the vast ceiling of the warehouse to literally get the drop on some bad guys.

There are other memorable parts too. Doc has his men wear new shoes that turn out to be trackable through some sort of radioactive presence in their heels and soles. A captured Renny leaves a glorious hint in a pool of his own blood which he shapes into the form of Long Island. Doc stops cars below his plane by dropping gas bombs that interfere with their engines. When one character manages to get into Doc's offices, he's trapped there by a set of bulletproof glass panels. So there's certainly cool stuff here.

There's also some brutal stuff. One minion attempts to kill Doc and his men by chewing on his own hair because he believes it's been coated with a chemical compound that forms a poisonous gas when mixed with saliva. It turns out to be cyanide instead and it causes the man's death. Even worse, we meet one man late in the novel who has no face, because of the method of torture that has been used on him; acid was dropped onto it, one drop at a time. We don't see it happen but we see the result and it's worthy of being played up.

But there's more dubious stuff too. When Monk screws up early in the book, Dent feels that he needs to play up the man's capabilities with a line like, "He was ordinarily a canny fellow, hard to take unawares." Only ten pages later, we get the same thing with another man in Doc's crew. "Renny, in his associations with Doc Savage," points out Dent, "had walked much in the shadow of danger. This had made him wary. Rarely was he caught napping." Of course, Dent only needs these lines because Monk keeps getting taken unawares and Renny keeps getting caught napping!

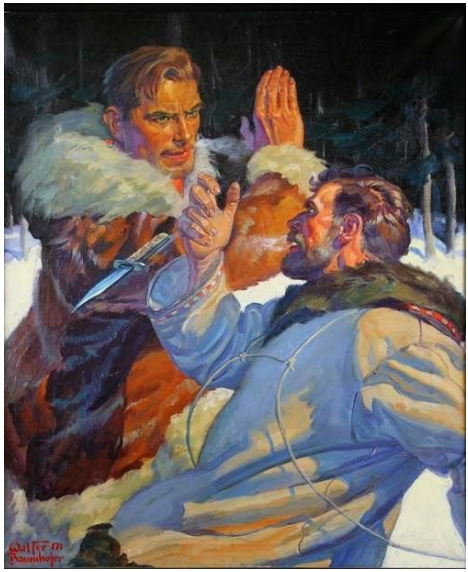
Given all the clever things that Doc and his men get up to, one other scene here played

really wrong for me. As is often the case, Doc has collected and incapacitated a bunch of crooks, ready for delivery to his upstate New York clinic so that they can each be medically "cured of their knavery". When he makes the call, he uses a code, referring to them as "a shipment of guinea pigs", just in case an eager operator is listening. Yet, earlier, a captured Renny is forced to radio in to Doc that things went well, and there's no code in play. Why hadn't they agreed that "Hey Doc!" or some such innocuous phrase, when used as the first line in a conversation, should be interpreted as a warning?

Now, if there's nothing special with the story, at least there should be something on the linguistic side that stands out? There's usually interesting slang to highlight or other historical notes?

Well, not really. There's little linguistically to stand out this time either. We get more use of the diaresis, an umlaut that tells us that two consecutive vowels should be pronounced separately rather than together; a couple of examples here being "coöperation" and "aërodynamics", which isn't easy to pronounce with three syllables in "aero".

The slang is forgettable because the hoods



are mostly French Canadians who merely talk like zis in ze broken English, m'sieu'. The funniest example of slang arrives when fiery Midnat d'Avis suggests that she can accomplish more than Doc's men. Ham exclaims, "The crust of the hussy!" though he does add that he likes her style. And that's about it.

So, I guess that wraps up a capable but underwhelming episode in the annals of Doc Savage.

HAROLD A. DAVIS

THE KING MAKER

PULP PUBLICATION:
#16, JUNE 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#79, FEBRUARY 1975
COVER: FRED PFEIFFER

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#19, JULY 2008

The Doc Savage novels, even in the pulp days, were always written as "by Kenneth Robeson". In reality, up until this point, that house name only concealed a man named Lester Dent, who wrote each of the first fifteen books solo. He would go on to write most of the rest of the series too but not everything and an array of other authors also got their moments to play in a sandbox that we often equate entirely with him.

This was the first time that happened, with a new writer, Harold A. Davis, stepping in to write June 1934's novel, the sixteenth in the series, from an outline by Dent. I'm happy to say that he does a pretty decent job, following the formula that Dent had established very closely but in text that flows better. That was my first surprise here; at this point, at least, Davis was clearly a better writer than Dent, even working from the latter's story. He would go on to write fourteen books in the series, his last being September 1946's *The Exploding Lake*.

Other than the more sophisticated sentence structure, which is apparent immediately, *The King Maker* begins just like any Doc Savage novel: another character takes the usual elevator to the 86th floor to see Doc and attempt to enlist his help. Well, not quite. This time out, two characters find themselves in the same elevator at the same time and this sets up a neat little misdirection trick.

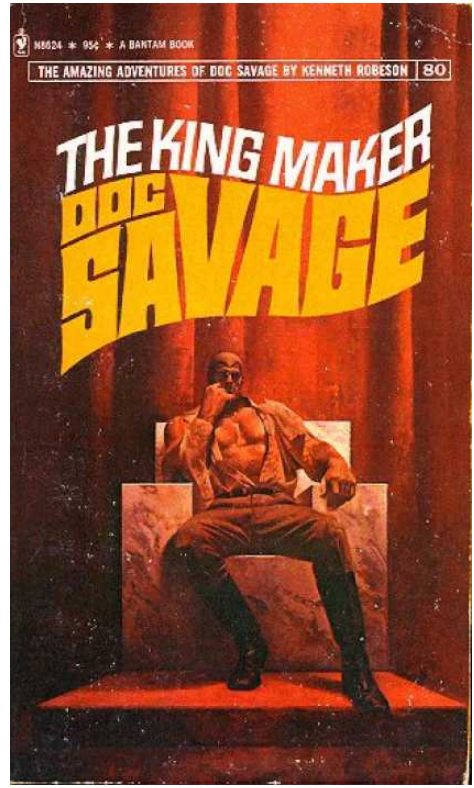
One is a pompous nobleman from Calbia, a small Balkan nation, who calls himself Baron Damitru Mendl, the Calbian ambassador to the United States. The other is a tiny old woman in a shabby outfit, seeking a world-renowned

surgeon to look at her crippled son. Or, at least, she says she is; her actions on leaving Doc's office suggest otherwise and, a scant four pages later, the outplayed Baron Mendl is murdered on his yacht. It's a spectacular death too, as the entire boat explodes mysteriously in the wake of a hissing sound. That this crone is soon exposed as a male dwarf named Muta merely adds flavour.

Of course, Doc is not a stupid man and, from the outset, he plays the game into which he's invited with a cunning that may not always be immediately apparent or, indeed, foolproof. It's good to see Doc a little less superhuman but it's also good to see that he isn't necessarily caught in the traps we think he is; one has him played neatly by a princess, only for him to turn the tables just as neatly.

On the flipside of that, it's good to see Doc's men taking the initiative when opportunity presents itself and not always fall flat on their faces. One of the biggest problems of the early Dent books is that they're truly Doc Savage novels in the sense that Doc Savage dominates utterly; I often wondered why he put up with his five assistants, given that they do more harm than good, world renowned experts in their fields or not. It's not hard to argue that he'd have saved the day in many of those early adventures quicker and more efficiently, not to mention with lower death counts, if he'd have worked them on his own.

Here, thankfully, Davis puts them to good use and they feel more like a coherent team than they have in any previous novel. Sure, they get caught on occasion but they also contribute materially, whether individually or together, to the success that we know has to come eventually. After all, Doc and his men can only come back next month for another



adventure if they win out this month in this one, so we never expect any apparent death to be real. Late in the book, Doc refreshingly sets them each goals in enemy territory and each of them, including himself, runs his mission solo to achieve those goals. Davis may have worked to Dent's template on almost everything else, but this new approach is a worthy addition.

Unless I've let things slip past me, Davis also solidifies another component part of the Doc Savage mythos that I'm remembering from later books, that being the verbose vocabulary of Johnny. It certainly isn't a new thing here, Dent having played with it in earlier books, and the reasoning is all Dent too: "Johnny... never used a small word where he could think of a big one" could have been copied and

pasted from any earlier novel. However, I'm not remembering his dialogue being the sheer onslaught of daunting words that it is here, in lines like, "The superannuated crone has terminated her meanderings."

There's even another little addition snuck in by Davis, which is the inclusion of exercises to develop toe dexterity in Doc's daily regimen, but before you think that I'm discarding Dent for Davis like last week's trash, the latter does make one error that he should never have flirted with. There's a firm suggestion that Doc falls for the leading lady of this book, Princess Gusta of Calbia, for real and, while this exposure of his humanity is refreshing, it isn't appropriate for the character and it serves only to weaken him. Fortunately, Davis does not take it to a ridiculous degree, but it's there nonetheless and it shouldn't be.

Much of the rest is pretty good. Doc and his men end up in Calbia, of course, to help end a civil war that's brewing between the establishment forces of King Dal de Galbin and rebels who follow a nobleman called Conte Cozonac. Of course, the figureheads aren't the most important players, with an array of agents and double agents complicating our, and Doc's, understanding of the situation. Another intriguing idea adds further spice to the mixture: a suggestion by Conte Cozonac that Doc should become the King of Calbia, at least temporarily, to put an end to the conflict.

There's little else of note here beyond how closely Davis follows Dent and where he does not. I only found one linguistic oddity of note, which is an exclamation of Renny's. Masquerading as a legendary flyer, Champ Dugan, "the Purple Terror", he faces off against a set of nine Calbian planes, the pilots of which are not as skilled as they might appear, something that Renny notes immediately. His choice of dismissive wording, however, is oddly "Kiwis." This surely isn't a racial slur against people from New Zealand, but I'm unsure as to what it means in this context. Reading up on the term, I found that military pilots did use the epithet for non-flying officers, as kiwis are small birds whose wings aren't strong enough to lift them off the ground. Maybe there's another meaning that I haven't located yet.

All in all, this is a solid entry in the series and, had Davis managed to resist his urge to relax Doc's stubborn avoidance of romantic involvement, it would be up there with some of the best thus far. As it stands, it's better than many of Dent's previous novels and it adds more than just another volume to the series. If it has another downside, it's that it adheres so respectfully close to Dent's formula that we wonder how it will fade into the background of the series to come.

LESTER DENT

THE THOUSAND-HEADED MAN

PULP PUBLICATION:
#17, JULY 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#2, OCTOBER 1964
COVER: JAMES BAMA

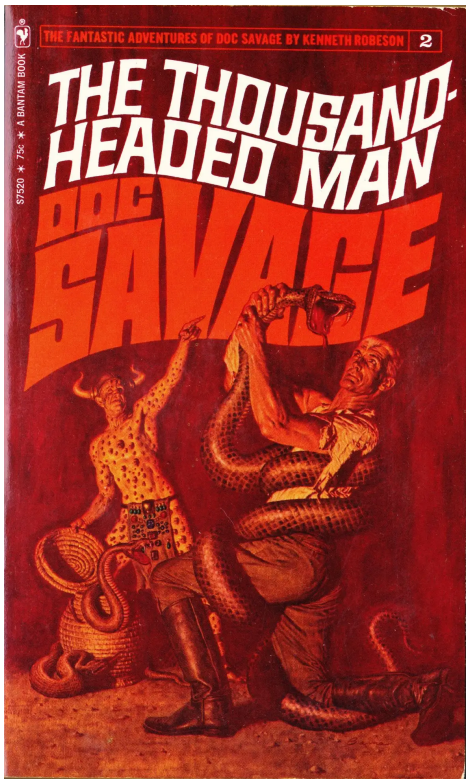
SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#20, AUGUST 2008

If regular Doc Savage writer, Lester Dent, thought that he had something to prove after Harold A. Davis turned in a pretty decent sixteenth in the series, *The King Maker*, he had nothing to worry about. With this seventeenth novel, first published in *Doc Savage Magazine* in July 1934, he knocked it out of the park. When Bantam reprinted the series in the sixties, this was the second title to see print, after the obvious introduction of *The Man of Bronze*.

I also remember this with a lot of pleasure, more than any other book in the series. Now, I haven't read all 182 original books by any means but I have read a bunch over the years and this one always stood out as my personal favourite. Reading afresh, in much better context than ever before, I see why.

For a start, it's a yellow peril novel. I've always had a weakness for the yellow peril genre, which is as fun as it is politically incorrect, and I should emphasise that not only did I not grow up with racist notions of the inscrutable Orient but I did use this genre as an exotic gateway drug into authentic Asian culture, which I still find fascinating.

Our villain isn't really the Thousand-Headed Man of the title; it's a man by the name of Sen Gat, who is so quintessentially yellow peril he has incredibly long fingernails to highlight to one and all that he has no need of work. He also has the inevitable lair in London, though in Shoreditch rather than the usual Limehouse, for some reason, and it has the inevitable collection of secret buttons to get him out of whatever scrapes he has a habit of getting into.



Everything is astoundingly clichéd, right down to the pidgin English of his minions, as this early passage highlights:

> The blackness of a rear doorway sheltered him a moment later. He knocked, and after the briefest of pauses there was a stir, and a slant-eyed celestial opened the door.
>
> "Sen Gat," said the thin man.
>
> The oriental was blandly expressionless.
>
> "Velly solly," he singsonged. "No catchee such man this place."
>
> The visitor scowled. "You tell Sen Gat I'm here or you all same catchee hell."
>
> The yellow man grasped the door as if to shut it. "You all same come alongside big mistake. No Sen Gat--"

Some of this is surely just the standard racism of the time, but Dent falls into a few traps that I've called out in previous books. Pidgin English isn't a single language, but a merging of the Queen's English with whatever local languages happen to exist in a particular place. Dent doesn't seem to grasp this so mixes up Chinese, Malays and others and has them all talk like Aborigines. The word of this book is surely "mebbeso". He also gives them the stereotypical Japanese tendency to pronounce Rs as Ls even when the letters aren't even spoken! Who ever pronounced "feathers" as "feathels"? Just swapping every R for an L when it's pronounced by a "slant-eyed" "celestial" "yellow man" goes beyond racist to just plain idiotic.

Another reason to love the book, flawed as its yellow peril approach is, has to be its mystery. This begins with three black sticks, made of an odd material, which turn out to be keys to the city of the Thousand-Headed Man, located somewhere in the jungles of Indochina. Sen Gat wants in, of course, and so do others, like our leading lady, Lucille Copeland, whose father had brought those keys back to England.

We end up there, of course, though there's a great deal of action, adventure and intrigue on the journey. What's important here is that it comes in a variety of forms.

We have the standard city-based game of cat and mouse between Doc and Sen Gat. At one point the latter has Doc's five men captive and they bargain over the phone, but Dent gives Doc a neat edge with a clock chiming an hour slow behind him. We learn here that he has an in with the British police force, through

a codename of SX73182, so they help him out even as they search the city for him as the prime suspect in a couple of murders.

We have clever subterfuge, such as the Sen Gat henchman who flies Lucille Copeland towards Indochina under the guise of being Monk. We have a race of planes, with Doc catching his nemesis at each re-fuelling stop but the villain aware of it and bright enough to work his sabotage cleverly. We have the Indochina jungle and its natives and wild animals to cope with too.

And we have a string of weird buildings and occurrences, which proved highly engaging and memorable to my younger self. We start out with the Pagoda of the Hands, situated in the middle of the jungle with no context to guide us. It's large and empty, except for a mysterious rustling sound that presages doom, and decorated with nothing but human hands. Later, we reach the Pagoda of the Feet and... I'm getting rather ahead of myself. All this is quintessential pulp fiction, exotic and mysterious and weird.

Sure, there are problems. I have no idea how Doc, travelling from southern Russia to Indochina, found himself in Abyssinia. That's the former name for the northern half of Ethiopia, which is on a different continent entirely; I wonder if Dent mistook it for Afghanistan. Similarly, he has Hindu villagers wear turbans, when that's a religious requirement of the Sikhs; Hindus tend to go bare-headed. Perhaps that substitution of Shoreditch for Limehouse was just another goof in a book with plenty of those to go around.

Without daring to venture into spoiler territory, I adored everything about the city of the Thousand-Headed Man. It's not just one more Lost City, though it is one of those; Dent

builds it with fascination as much as stones and everything about it is notable: its geography and architecture, its occupants and their weird choice of living weaponry, their notably un-stereotypical demeanour and the way in which they end the book, which is as appropriate as it is surprising to see from Dent.

Linguistically, there are some interesting moments, none of which tie to the horrendous pidgin of Sen Gat's minions. Some words are introduced through an aboriginal Indochinese language of "khas", which Doc unusually struggles to comprehend. The other exotic word used a few times is "creese", which Dent explains to be "a long knife with a crooked blade and a carved handle."

One word he fails to explain, presumably because it wasn't at all unusual at the time, is "nihil", as in "Doc Savage completed his scru-

tiny of the vicinity, but the results were nihil." This is a word I know from Latin, but I was surprised to see it used here, as we've long since contracted it down to "nil". The thirties slang phrase of the book is surely Long Tom's line, "Suppose we put the pump on those babies," which has nothing to do with incubation or aircraft and more with the interrogation of suspects.

There were two other things that surprised me here.

One is how much destruction comes at Doc's hands this time out. We're used to him using his brain to solve problems, but he uses brute force on a number of occasions here to get past obstacles and I have to point out that I cringed at some of what he did, as I often do in Indiana Jones movies.

The other was how little time we spend in the city of the Thousand-Headed Man. I'm not complaining about the very capable build-up but the Bantam paperback runs 150 pages and we don't meet the title character until page 120; in many ways, he's the MacGuffin of the story, and certainly not the villain we expect. I remembered much more from his city, but that was clearly my imagination running away with me. Then again, that's a real measure of success with a pulp novel and this one is a real spark for imagination. It's still my favourite.

LESTER DENT

THE SQUEAKING GOBLIN

PULP PUBLICATION:
#18, AUGUST 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#35, APRIL 1969
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#12, NOVEMBER 2007

Regular Doc Savage writer Lester Dent surely had his work cut out to write something more memorable than his previous outing in the series, *The Thousand-Headed Man*. He chose to one-up himself by throwing Doc and his men into immediate action and leaving them there for almost the entire book. *The Lost Oasis* began with what is close to being a 72-page chase scene (counting in Bantam paperback pages), but this one knocks that out of the water. When we get to page 105, which is only thirty or so pages from the end, two days pass in a single sentence and it suddenly reminds us that nobody had even a moment to breathe until that point. Most of the book is taken up by less than a day.

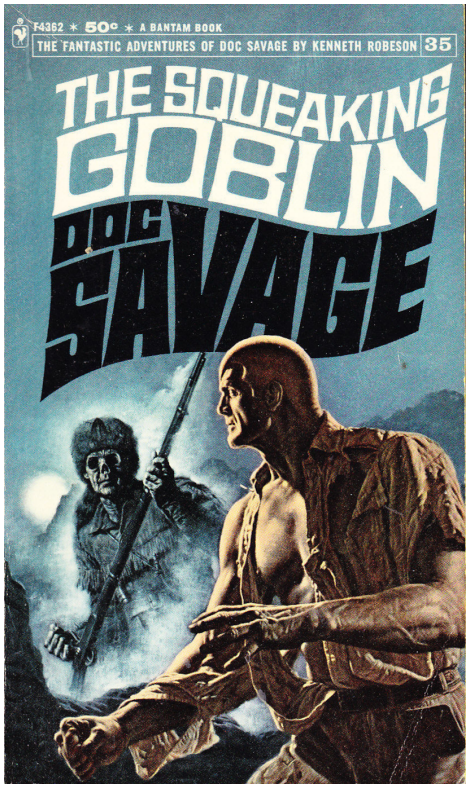
Doc shows up in chapter three, after a pair of introductory chapters to establish the title character, an elusive soul who looks rather like a corpse in a coonskin cap but can shoot a rifle with incredible accuracy. "Holy cow!" Renny inevitably exclaims. "A guy dressed like Daniel Boone!" He's naturally the Squeaking Goblin of the title and he's a villain on the case so quickly that he has a rifle aimed at Doc before the latter even gets out of his seaplane. Of course, Doc has an eye on him too, so we find ourselves right down to business from this very first appearance.

We're in Maine, on the coast where Chelton Raymond is hiding out in his boat waiting for Doc Savage to show up and save his bacon. He's a rich but scared man, because the Squeaking Goblin has it in for him for no reason he can name. We find out soon enough that it's because of his name, the Raymonds being one half of a good ol' fashioned centuried Kentucky mountain feud, the Raymonds hating the Snows with a palpable passion and the Snows hating the Raymonds right back just as much.

What adds a spooky little extra to this story is that the Squeaking Goblin is not just known to these families, he should be long dead. Frosta Raymond explains to Doc that he was old Columbus Snow, who shot the Raymonds with a muzzle-loading rifle that squeaked as it fired. However, her granddaddy Raymond did for Snow eighty years earlier and the feud had gradually calmed down ever since. Now, the Squeaking Goblin is back and the previous six months have seen a massive resurgence of the feud, with dozens of dead on either side, a fact that only gradually seeps through to the combatants. After all, if the Squeaking Goblin is supposed to be a Snow who kills Raymonds, who's killing the Snows? Well, apparently the Snows see it the other way around.

I had a blast with this feud, which is so powerful a concept to these Kentucky mountain folk that they even use the word "feuded" as meaning someone who has been killed in a feud. The only catch is the hillbilly dialect that Dent uses, because *The Beverly Hillbillies* sure done for that kind of talkin' for us newfangled folks. This has similarities to Gabby Johnson's *Blazing Saddles* "authentic frontier gibberish", with gems such as, "Quare we never heerd no shot. We all be down the crick a piece all mornin'." We don't even get to Kentucky until page 77 but we've had conniptions from this dialect from the very first chapter. Of course, the characters all have names like Tige and Jug; no wonder they aren't sure about rich old Chelton; he sounds rather like an Ivy League graduate in a house full of folks what can't read none.

Overall, this entry in the series is notable mostly for its breakneck pace. It isn't that the story is poor, it's that it seems to be const-



ructed so carefully for its effect that it falls easily apart when we start to think about details. I don't want to spoil the revelation of who the villain really is, because the build-up to that is tense and capable but, once we know, we can't help but wonder why he would have made some of the phone calls he did. Was he asking for trouble or did Dent change his mind about who the villain would be partway through the novel?

It's fair to add the bullets of the Squeaking Goblin into this category too; it's notably freaky to find them vanishing into thin air after killing people, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how. Dent sets us up with that huge mystery and gradually realises that it's not so huge and downplays it far enough that we don't care when we're eventually let in on the secret that we knew from the very start.

There are some moments of note though. I got a real kick out of a McGuffin in the form of a book, *The Life and Horrible Deeds of That Adopted Moor, Black Raymond*. There's also a great use of ventriloquism, one of the talents of Doc and some of his men that isn't always used to its best effect in this series. However, these are minor aspects compared to two others.

One is that this is a gory read indeed. The death count is higher than most of the previous books and that goes double for those killed as we read. Even when they're "off screen", they're often found in brutal fashion. One of many examples is Doc's discovery of one corpse: "The man lay face-down. His head had no hair on top. It was a very wet and red head, as if freshly painted with scarlet. When Doc lifted him to turn him over, a small fountain of crimson came to life in the back of his bald head." Beyond the use of a couple of different colours as equivalents in successive sentences, this is a strong visual image that couldn't have found a way into mainstream movies until thirty years later.

The other is the use of disguises. At one point, Jug Snow and his bevy of Snows come across a strange man in the road. He's a cripple, his legs "crossed in grotesque fashion under him", on top of a platform mounted on wheels; he propels himself with a pair of short stout sticks. What's more, he has a head that's entirely free of hair, right down to a lack of eyebrows and lashes. His teeth are blackened and he's apparently both deaf and dumb, even though he has an accordion slung around him. The only way this character could be any more politically incorrect is if he was in black-

face. The prose says that "He resembled a deformed, hairless monster," and we're not fooled as to which of Doc's men this surely has to be. That goes for his companion too, a tall and skinny man named Fatty Irvin, covered in scars, chewing on tobacco and stuttering wildly. Times sure have changed.

That's obvious in the language too. Beyond "supermalagorgeous", which is a peach of a multi-syllabic word from Johnny, there are a few words I don't believe I've ever experienced in proper context. One is "spondulicks", a slang term for cash that I first heard in British comedy, of all places. It's odd to hear this issue from the mouth of Jug Snow, given that he has enough trouble with two syllable words to attempt one with three. Another is "sumac", which is a flowering plant but I've only previously heard it in the name of the exotica vocalist, Yma Sumac.

By far the best example of old language comes in a single sentence late in the novel as Doc sets up a trap for the villain and has what must be half of the population of the Kentucky mountains turn up to watch. "They came in buggies, surries, and even a few decrepit flivvers," we're told, "although the mountain roads were not kind to automobiles, and not many were used. Most of the travel was by jolt wagon and horseback, or afoot." Apparently "flivver" was a nickname for the original Ford Model T and it came to describe any cheap car; a "surrey" is a turn-of-the-century carriage, similar to what we imagine the Amish drive; and a "jolt wagon" appears to be the simplest vehicle possible, a set of planks with wheels attached and some mules in front to pull it.

And that leaves one word that I'm utterly confused by. Early in the book, a private detective tells Chelton Raymond of Doc Savage's

major reputation: "They say he's a ring-tailed wizard." Beyond "wizard" obviously meaning someone capable of incredible feats, I have absolutely no idea whatsoever what "ring-tailed" has to do with the price of fish in Denmark and it isn't the sort of thing that's easily googleable. Every result seems to be a lemur and I'm pretty sure that's not what Lester Dent had in mind, however easily Doc moves between the trees.

LESTER DENT

FEAR CAY

PULP PUBLICATION:
#19, SEPTEMBER 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#11, MAY 1966
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#13, DECEMBER 2007

Today, *Fear Cay*, the nineteenth Doc Savage adventure, written by Lester Dent for the September 1934 issue of *Doc Savage Magazine*, is probably most remembered for featuring the second appearance of Pat Savage, Doc's niece, who shows up in search of adventure and promptly receives it, being mistakenly kidnapped and transported to the mysterious island of the title. However, it's well worth remembering for other things too.

For one, the MacGuffin of the piece is a "mysterious weed" rooted (pun not intended) in antiquity. It's no spoiler to identify this as silphium, so important to the inhabitants of ancient Cyrene that they put it on most of their coinage. The reason that Dent could get mileage out of this is because it may no longer exist, though its importance to Mediterranean cultures of the era is not in doubt. There's no consensus on what it was, if it still exists or why it might not, but legend suggests that the very last stalk of silphium was given to the Emperor Nero as a curiosity. Dent enhances its supposed medicinal benefits to the degree of bestowing immortality or, at least, extreme longevity.

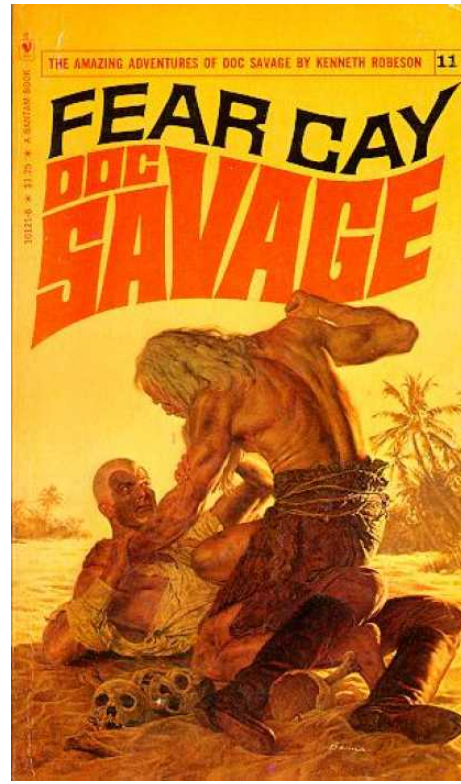
The other is the character of Dan Thunden, the reason why silphium is the MacGuffin of our story. He's supposedly 131 years old, but he's still spry, described at points as an "amazing acrobat" and a "fighting cyclone", a man able to give Doc a run for his money. However, while his extreme age and anomalous condition make him interesting to the cast of this story, he's interesting to us for a different reason, namely that such stand-out

characteristics would normally ensure a place as the villain of the piece, but he remains firmly his own man. Or, as he says in his southern accent, "Old Dan Thunden is wukkin' foah himself."

The real villain is a man named Santini, who runs the gloriously named concern, Fountain of Youth, Inc. He stumbled upon Thunden, a captain who sailed the *Sea Nymph* out of New York in 1843 when he was a forty year old man, and decided that opportunity was knocking. His mistake, as we might imagine, was to attempt to keep Doc Savage away from his business, an attempt that naturally backfired and, in fact, brought Doc Savage right into his business. You'd think that these villains would learn, almost twenty novels into the series!

While this is far from the most original Doc Savage yarn yet, Dent was clearly having fun with the story and mixing a few things up. Perhaps the most formulaic aspects to these novels are the beginnings and the endings, but this one starts out a little differently to normal because Doc apparently screws up. You won't be too surprised to find that he doesn't really and his collapse on a New York street after picking up a leather pocketbook is all part of a counter to the trap he knew full well he was triggering, but it's a new approach to bringing him in that I appreciated.

However, he does fall for one of Santini's tricks soon afterwards, while attempting to meet Kel Avery at the airport on his arrival, as this person is set up to be the key character to the story. Doc and his men fall prey to a simple diversionary tactic, not realising that Kelmina Avery is a) female and b) the well-known movie actress, Maureen Darleen, who's arriving on the same flight. I always enjoy it when Doc slips up, not to see the hero of the



story fail but because he does it so rarely and it reminds us that he is, contrary to billing, human. To me, his flaws are the best way to emphasise his talents.

Instead, it's Pat Savage who finds Kel Avery, just in time to be kidnapped alongside her, though she is bright enough to convince the crooks to let "her maid" go, thus delivering the real Kel Avery into Doc's capable hands. After all, even if he gets fooled on occasion, he doesn't stay fooled for long! It's a clever way for Dent to kill two birds with one stone: highlighting Doc's admittedly infrequent fallibility and, in the process, giving Pat the opportunity to shine by demonstrating her abilities.

Her first appearance, in *Brand of the Werewolf*, wasn't a great one, not least because she succumbed to the jitters, so prompting Doc to

knock her out to carry her across a chasm. She did have possibility, as she rescued herself as often as she found herself kidnapped, but she didn't seem like anyone that Dent might have considered bringing back. After all, this is a notably testosterone-fuelled series for men, with its alpha male hero, who ignores the attentions of women, and his five male sidekicks, who rarely get an opportunity to do otherwise. Monk and Ham do occasionally vie for the attentions of the latest leading lady, but always get precisely nowhere because her eyes are always on Doc, who fails to return the look. However, Pat, even in proto-form in *Brand of the Werewolf*, was a wonderful way to counter that lack of a heroine and this first return to the series underlines it. No wonder she would be back so often in future novels; she's the character whom, to the powers of hindsight, was so obviously missing from most of the prior ones.

Most of the story continues as we might expect, once aware of the wildcard that Dan Thunden plays. It's restricted to New York and its environs for half the novel, before we chase off to the island of Fear Cay to spend the other half on location in a suitably dangerous environment with its abundance of caverns and tunnels and traps, not to mention its underground sound that sends men fleeing in abject terror. There are other aspects of note though which tie, as is so often the case, to the time the novel was written, not just historically but also linguistically.

The most telling historical angle is highlighted by Da Clima, the big bodyguard of Kel Avery, being afraid of the speed at which Doc drives when in pursuit of the kidnappers of his employer. Dent describes him as having even bigger muscles than Doc, but that makes him "a trifle muscle-bound", so Doc's physique is superior. It may have made sense at the time, but it's hard today to buy into a tough bodyguard turning to jelly at a mere 85mph.

Linguistically, I'll skip quickly past the easy transliterations of Dan Thunden's southern accent in lines such as, "Belay yoah jaw an' walk up to that shanty" or "Quick! Befoah they ha'm mah granddaughtah." Instead, I'll call out the spelling of "blonde" with an "e"; given that I still see that in everyday use today, I wonder why Americans don't just give in and put it back where it belongs.

There aren't many slang terms being used here for a change, but I did puzzle over "Doc Savage and his scuts", knowing them only as the tails of rabbits, but apparently it was a pejorative Irish term to describe someone seen as "foolish, contemptible or objectionable". Dent was certainly in an Irish mood, as he has a NYPD cop use the word "begorra" twice in two lines (without ever mentioning

that he's Irish). My favourite, though, comes in dialogue from Monk:

> "That old yahoo, Dan Thunden, is sure a lick-splitting freak," the homely chemist declared. "Imagine a gink a hundred and thirty-one years old being able to hop around like he can."

I had to raise a smile at "lick-splitting freak" but I looked up "gink" and found that it's another pejorative term for someone seen as "foolish or contemptible". I wonder if Lester Dent had bookmarked the page for "contemptible" in his book of synonyms.

From the perspective of series progression, we're given the revelation that, in addition to Doc's honorary commission in the NYPD, he holds another as a postal inspector, as confirmed by a card that's signed by the postmaster general. In our internet-dominated world, it's odd to even think such a role even exists, but it's an important one, even prompting feature films back in the thirties to promote that profession as a heroic one. We're also introduced to another of Doc's vehicles. This one's a truck of the sort commonly used by grocers for deliveries, but it's armour-plated, with a variety of portholes for guns and tyres that are filled with sponge rubber rather than air.

"This, she some bus," comments Clima, and he's not wrong. However, for all its interesting aspects, I don't think he could realistically have said, "This, she some novel." It's a decent one, but perhaps not the return for Pat Savage that we might have hoped for.

LESTER DENT

DEATH IN SILVER

PULP PUBLICATION:
#20, OCTOBER 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#26, JULY 1968
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#3, JANUARY 2007

The twentieth *Doc Savage* novel, *Death in Silver*, written by Lester Dent and published in *Doc Savage Magazine* in October 1934, marks a change in direction for the series in a number of ways.

For one, it's the first story thus far to be set entirely in New York City and its immediate environs, like the Hudson River. Many prior novels started there, only to move on to more exotic locations during their second halves; that trend began with *The Man of Bronze*, which started in New York City but soon moved to a lost valley in the fictional central American country of Hidalgo. Its villains are all home grown too, even with a traditional hidden mastermind behind a more obvious gang.

For another, Doc is brought into the story through a believable coincidence. Prior novels tended to start with someone seeking out his help, usually by taking the elevator up to his 86th floor office, or trying to do so but failing in a manner that captures his attention. For a while, one adventure would lead directly into the next, beginning wherever the prior one ended. The worst examples had the bad guys attempt to keep Doc out of their business by attacking him, acts which, through sheer irony, brought their misdeeds to his attention.

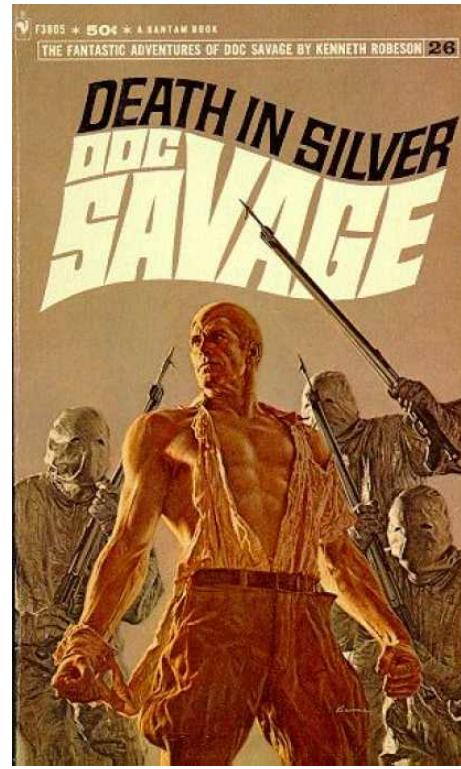
And for a third, Dent must have realised that he hadn't yet found a satisfying way to appropriately divvy up work between Doc and his five assistants. Some of these novels fail to find anything of importance for them to do and the rest only reach varying degrees of success. Not one fully explains how these five men, each at the very peak of their respective

profession, are able to assist Doc so relentlessly instead of doing their own jobs. This reaches a ridiculous level when all of them traipse off on holiday with him in *Brand of the Werewolf* for no discernible reason whatsoever. Here, Dent finally applies a believable solution, which is to say that they do actually have lives and so are unable to join Doc on every single adventure.

While I'm a sucker for exotic locations, all these changes are decent ones and they help the credibility of the story. The bad guys this time out, a gang of crooks known as the Silver Death's-Heads, assassinate the owner of a shipping company, Paine L. Winthrop of the Seven Seas, in emphatic fashion, blowing him up in his office forty storeys above Wall Street. Monk's laboratory is in the penthouse above, so he feels the effect of the blast. He and Ham investigate, not bringing in Doc until page 17 of the Bantam paperback edition, much later than usual. Only four pages further, we find that Johnny's lecturing in London; Long Tom's in Europe, collaborating on experiments with a colleague; and Renny's in South Africa, overseeing the construction of a hydro-electric plant. With Monk and Ham rumbled and kidnapped, Doc joins the fray.

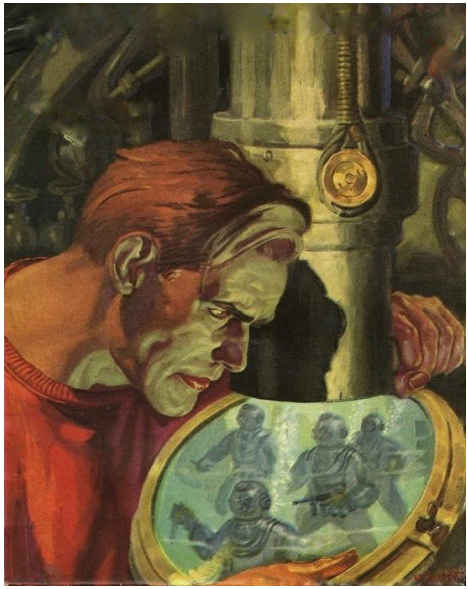
Surely the most grounded Doc Savage novel thus far, *Death in Silver* doesn't abandon its roots as much as finesse them into a more believable story.

We still have our bad guys, who follow the instructions of a talented leader, who reports to a mysterious mastermind, who in turn speaks to his minions from the shadows with a disguised voice. Here, he doesn't even have a cool sounding mysterious mastermind name; he's merely the boss, the chief, the master. The most overt nod to the pulp tropes of the



day was to costume this gang in outfits woven from wire made from molten down silver dollars. This highlights how they're after that most old fashioned of goals too: money. While their leader does have grander motives which he keeps hidden, even his everyday lieutenant, with as many talents as he has, is driven by simple greed, which manifests itself in a notable crime spree that the mastermind is hardly happy about!

We still have various technological marvels, both large and small, though they can and do fail. For instance, Doc's anaesthetic globes, the curse of so many inept villains in earlier books, fail to take down the clever Ull and his Silver Death's-Heads, and Doc's submarine, the Helldiver, is caught by use of electro-magnets. However, new tech is deployed, such as a new



way for Doc to determine if someone's following him; it looks like "black clover seed" but explodes like firecrackers when stepped on. We know that the substance on the tip of Ham's sword cane knocks people out but we learn here that, administered in an even smaller dose, it acts instead as a stimulant. Pat even has a trick phone that emits tear gas when spoken into.

We still have our new leading lady, guesting for an episode to lust after Doc and fail to get anywhere. In this instalment, that's Lorna Zane, private secretary to the now deceased Paine L. Winthrop. As always, she's depicted as capable ("I was born and raised in Montana," she says, pointing her gun at Doc) but spends more time as a hostage than as anything else. Of course, that's becoming a trend for Pat too. Now living in New York and running a beauty salon and gymnasium on Park Avenue, she doesn't spend much time in this one but does get kidnapped yet again; her kidnap count is actually higher than her appearance count.

We still have our small cast of other supporting characters, one of whom is guaranteed to be the master criminal behind everything, but who? Is it Harry "Rapid" Pace, Winthrop's efficiency expert, who has an awkward condition which prompts him to say almost everything twice, or is it Hugh McCoy, the financial consultant on the proposed merger between the shipping companies of Winthrop and Bedford Burgess Gardner, who had mysteriously given all his employees five months of paid vacation then picked up as though nothing had ever changed? Given that the only other character of note is Don Ull, the lieutenant of the Silver Death's-Heads, that's not a heck of a lot of choice but there are red herrings enough to keep us guessing. I should add that Ull is notable, though, as an incorrigible criminal who nonetheless owns many patents; he does prove to be a worthy foe.

The most surprising new development is Dent's use of longer, more complex sentences. There are actual conjunctions here and they are used correctly. During these early novels, I often wondered if Dent's simplistic sentence structure was a deliberate stylistic choice or just because that's all he knew how to write at the time. This, more than any prior book, shows that he's capable of telling stories without over-simplifying his grammar. Dent even acknowledges this in dialogue:

> "Gardner is owner of Transatlantic Lines, the ocean line which was Paine L. Winthrop's chief rival until lately, when there has been talk of the two companies merging," said Pace, using what for him was an extraordinarily long sentence.

His vocabulary was always more interesting than his grammar. As tends to be the case,

there are words here that I needed to look up. Outside Pat's new salon are two doormen, who don't simply wear uniforms; they're "caparisoned" in them. That's a fantastic word which means to be decoratively attired; a caparison is an ornamental cloth used to cover a horse. Another word I had to look up in the dictionary was "retroussé", which means a nose whose tip is attractively upturned. This also highlights Dent's use of accented words, upon which I've commented before. While he uses "débris" repeatedly and even "béret", he surprisingly drops the umlaut from "coordinated".

A more recognisable word here, if in a different spelling, is "lolapaloosa", meaning something spectacular; Pace uses it to describe Gardner's mansion. Another oddly familiar term is "Father Knickerbocker", which Dent suggests is a name New Yorkers give to their city. This came from Washington Irving, who wrote his satirical history of New York under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker. It's still in use today, most prominently in abbreviated form by the New York Knicks.

It isn't just words that are odd here. One brief conversation that took me aback was an early one between Doc Savage and a unnamed NYPD lieutenant. The Silver Death's-Heads are uncannily good at vanishing after heists into the waterfront district around the East River. The officer plans to track down their lair with plain-clothes cops and a whole army of stool pigeons. Doc literally bets that it won't work, with the cop's suggestion of fifty bucks to be paid by the loser to the police Death Benefit Fund, presumably on the honour system, as it never gets mentioned again.

All in all, *Death in Silver* is a highly enjoyable entry into the *Doc Savage* series and it's well-regarded by the fans. In fact, when Doc finally reached the big screen in the mid seventies, it was *Death in Silver* that was to be the story adapted. Producer George Pal soon realised that a background story was needed first, so shifted forward to be the second film in the projected series with the origin story kicking things off. Of course, the ill advised campness of 1975's *Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze*, not to mention the sheer dominance of *Jaws*, released the same month, meant that Doc flopped both critically and commercially and the series was done for.

In the pulps, of course, it was merely #20 with 161 stories more to go, so it served as a strong entry with a worthy stylistic shift. The next few novels would feature subsets of Doc's assistants, who would often discover the next adventure during an absence.

LESTER DENT

THE SEA MAGICIAN

PULP PUBLICATION:
#21, NOVEMBER 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#44, JANUARY 1970
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#8, JULY 2007

Last month's thrilling episode, the twentieth, in the adventures of Doc Savage, set a precedent that this one emphatically follows. It could be argued, that at twenty-one, the series had finally grown up.

The problem is that Doc isn't a solo adventurer, as much as it sometimes seems that way. He has a team of five assistants, all global leaders in their fields, who apparently spend their entire lives traipsing along with him, even though they rarely get to do enough to warrant their presence. For quite a while, as one novel began where the prior one ended, their respective worlds must surely have wondered when their scions were coming back.

Death in Silver solved that by casually mentioning that three of the five were abroad: Johnny lecturing in London, Long Tom experimenting in Europe and Renny overseeing in South Africa. In other words, they're not able to join Doc on the adventure that was about to spring up and he'd have to get by with Monk and Ham. Beyond seeming far more realistic, this allowed writer Lester Dent to focus in on a trio of leads (plus Doc's niece, Pat, who was clearly proving popular with readers), rather than try yet again to shuffle the action between six eager participants.

The Sea Magician begins with *Death in Silver* an active adventure. We just hop the pond to check in on what Johnny's up to in England, because we know that, after nineteen thrilling adventures all across the globe, a calm and sedate lecture tour is hardly going to keep him happy. Sure enough, he's soon heading up to the Wash, that area of marshland some ways

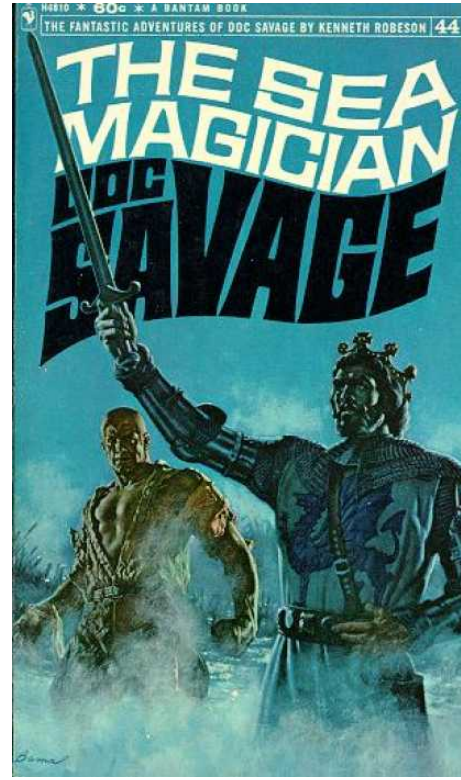
up the coast where Norfolk meets Lincolnshire, after reading a newspaper piece about some poor farmer who was apparently killed by the ghost of King John, who happened to use an ancient broadsword to do the deed and left him with a coin dated 1216 in his pocket.

The last time I wrote about the Wash was in Guy N. Smith's novel, *The Slime Beast* and its sequel. In that book, a couple of treasure hunters sought the crown jewels which King John lost there in 1216. Here, that knowledge constitutes a sort of spoiler, because American audiences of the thirties apparently only knew King John as the villain in *Robin Hood* stories. It's only a mild spoiler, though, and I don't have a problem providing that background. The point is that, even if the English might automatically associate the Wash with King John's treasure, Americans in November 1934 were still not going to buy into a ghostly murderer and in a *Doc Savage* novel, they'd be right behind him investigating the truth.

Johnny doesn't buy into a ghostly murderer either, especially when he comes up against a very palpable King John himself and fights him, his opponent talking all the while as if he really was a dead king from the 13th century. Johnny wins too, only to be promptly knocked out by another King John sneaking up behind him. Even in *Scooby-Doo*, ghosts don't replicate.

Naturally, Johnny is promptly taken prisoner. Naturally, Doc Savage is already on his way, albeit for other reasons. Naturally, the game, as Sherlock Holmes would say, is afoot.

I particularly enjoyed the way this one built because Doc isn't coming to rescue Johnny and really has no idea where he is. It takes a particular set of circumstances to connect a few different dots and put him, with Ham and Monk, on the trail. That's very refreshing for a



series in which adventures usually ride up to the 86th floor and knock on Doc's door.

It's also refreshing to find Renny and Long Tom still abroad and out of the picture. That gives Monk and Ham plenty to do, in one instance in disguise, as they follow a lead onto an island off the coast of the U.K. which is apparently sovereign territory, ruled over by a self-proclaimed king who has invented a neat technique to extract gold from seawater. That isn't a spoiler, by the way, given that it's on the back of the Bantam paperback edition, and there's plenty still to discover in this one, in which twists and turns keep us on the hop for most of the story.

This book was a great way for Lester Dent to play with old tropes like ancient legends, tiny independent nations and mad science, all

perfect for the pulps, but ground them in a realistic setting. The villain has a base motive of making lots of money and those working for him do too. What spoiled the realism for me was the local talk. Being English, I have a pretty good idea how people talk in the various regions of the country and they don't talk like they do here. Dent seems to have the idea that the only language spoken in England is Cockney and that's as far from the rural accent of Norfolk as can be imagined.

I should add that this didn't just hurt my belief in this novel but in all the others that went before. If Dent can't get language right in an English story, how can I buy into earlier characters from farflung countries like Venezuela or Tibet speaking the way that they do? Many of those earlier novels contain words from other languages whose usage I can't question because of my sheer ignorance. They simply ring true. Yet I know the usage here doesn't ring true. While "bloke" is an acceptable slang term for "man", for instance, not one Englishman uses it the way that a large proportion of the bad guys use it here. "Some bloke dropped this off earlier" is valid. "I think that's a damn lie, bloke," is not. Neither is, "Listen, bloke, Hi arsked you—" nor "Bloke, it'll be a long time before you know!"

The realism falls apart outside the language too, but Dent adds in little touches that bring us back in. For instance, the damsel in distress in this novel is Elaine Mills, a bright young thing who impresses for quite a while during the early chapters but mysteriously loses all ability to function once a male saviour arrives to help her out. Sure, it's just the sexism of the time but it does get tiring. Yet Dent also adds touches like one when the bad guys realise Doc Savage is on the case. One mentions that a friend, who tried to kill the Man of Bronze, didn't just fail but changed afterwards. He didn't recognise him on the street, he gave up his life of crime and he got a job in a factory, "'onest as they come". That's the first time we see the results of Doc's mysterious up-state clinic after the fact; usually we only hear about it beforehand.

All in all, this is an enjoyable romp but I enjoyed the first half far more than the second, when things get entirely routine. The first half has some neat plotting to weave together a set of characters who don't know each other; an uncharacteristic concentration on characters other than Doc and his men; and a good approach to villains, whose attempts to get Doc out of the way are highly believable. Unfortunately, the second half descends into routine action and only has believable science to underpin it. Gold can and has been extracted from seawater, merely not in quantities sufficient to offset the cost of doing so. It's fair game for a pulp adventure novel to invent a new method that makes it a viable enterprise and it would absolutely be worth millions!

So, this is a transition novel. There's a lot of good here, as Dent tries to shift the series onto solid ground and succeeds in a number of ways. However, there's a lot of bad too, as he seems to forget about some of the things that made the *Doc Savage* formula work so well. For a start, Doc himself hasn't been used less at any point in the series thus far; there are a few points where we might easily forget this is about Doc Savage and think it's a spin-off with Monk and Ham instead, who, to be fair, get some great interaction. I'd have liked a lot more with Elaine Mills too, but she's shifted from lead violin to third triangle for no apparent reason and that sat poorly with me.

LESTER DENT

THE ANNIHILIST

PULP PUBLICATION:
#22, DECEMBER 1934
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

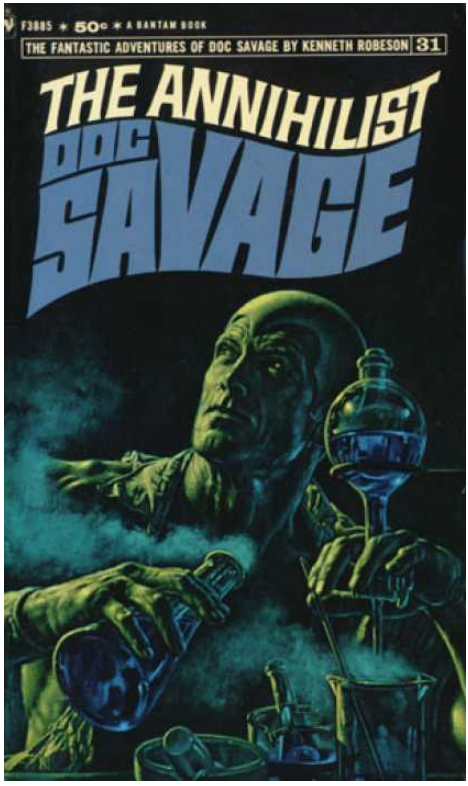
BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#31, AUGUST 1965
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#26, JANUARY 2008

This one came out of nowhere for me. It's one of the best *Doc Savage* adventures in the series thus far and perhaps the most consistently enjoyable from a pulp standpoint, going deep into crime and horror as well as straight adventure. And why things suddenly fell into place in December 1934, I have no clue.

The only notable idea building at the time was the one, introduced in *Death in Silver*, to thin down the number of Doc's assistants per novel to a manageable number, but this is a major step forward from what we saw in *The Sea Magician* where Monk and Ham got so much prominence that they took over for a while. Long Tom is absent for the third book in a row and Johnny's gone again too. Renny is here but not for a while and he arrives in a different location, following his own thread of the story until he eventually joins up with the rest of the crew late in the novel. This is more comparable to *Death in Silver* in balance (and other things), but it's also better and more consistent. It's undeniably the most mature *Doc Savage* yet and the one that looks deepest at what Doc actually does.

There was at least one hint in *The Sea Magician* as to where Dent was going next. At one point in that book, a criminal mentions that a friend had run up against the Man of Bronze and emerged rather changed for it; not only did he fail to recognise his friend in the street, he had gone straight and found a job in a factory! It only took 21 books before someone in a story acknowledges something that we readers have seen all along, that Doc doesn't kill crooks, at least when he can help it; he



drugs them instead and sends them to a facility he maintains in upstate New York for their criminal tendencies to be removed, thus turning them into productive citizens. I'd suggest that an examination of this was long overdue!

Well, here, the crooks do more than just acknowledge it; they investigate it and trigger a whole story around the techniques used and how they could be adapted for dark purposes. We're finally given an explanation of the actual concepts to flesh out what was previously a cheap abstraction: through his research, Doc had discovered that aggressive, criminal or antisocial behaviour is caused by a chemical imbalance in a gland in the lower brain; he also formulated a chemical to correct that imbalance. His treatment involves some surgery, the application of this chemical and the removal of some memories, as well as training and exercise.

Now, it's tough to imagine what Americans might have thought about this in late 1934, but the question of morality behind what Doc is doing is raised in the text by Dent himself. While he clearly comes out on Doc's side, which is hardly surprising, he points out that the students of this college "entered unwillingly, usually under the effects of a stupor-inducing drug" and the place "turned them into honest men whether they wished it or not." He adds, "The world did not know about the place. The world would probably have been shocked." He suggests that the knowledge "would excite many misguided reformers who would stir up government investigations, for the criminals had no choice about taking the treatment." And, the most damning criticism of them all: "Doc Savage, in the final analysis, was a private individual, and such are not supposed to mete out their own brand of justice. The courts are for that. And Doc Savage had never sent a crook before an American court."

As if to nail this point home, he introduces an unusual antagonist to complement the usual villains. He's a police inspector named Clarence "Hardboiled" Humboldt, a tough-as-nails cop tasked with cleaning up Manhattan and doing an outstanding job of it so far. His first act in this story is to tap Doc on the chest with a blackjack and threaten him. As it moves on and the circumstances behind the growing number of deaths starts to implicate Doc as the killer, Hardboiled is keen to take him down. He arrests him more than once, though Doc always slips through his fingers, but he never gives up. He's a fantastic character and

a good way to highlight the differences between right and wrong, lawful and unlawful, or moral and immoral. Doc is on the wrong side of each of those, even if we're clearly supposed to side with him and perhaps see him as above such comparisons. Sadly, Hardboiled comes around a little too easily in the end, but he's still a great character.

The story begins with the pop-eyed death, which sounds funny but describes people who die of some sort of impromptu brain swelling that prompts their eyes to pop almost out of their skulls. It's not pretty and it adds a strong sense of horror to this dark crime story. It's worth mentioning here that, at the very end of *The Sea Magician*, Monk points out that nobody had died during that adventure. Well, Dent makes up for lost time here: there are three deaths on the first page of the Bantam paperback, rising to nine by the end of page four, eight by the pop-eyed death and one by assassination. Later on, entire rooms fall prey to the pop-eyed death and whole swathes of criminals collapse and die en masse. No wonder the papers panic and people start leaving New York, thinking that it's the result of some sort of communicative disease.

The beginning of Chapter IV is particularly horrific. Monk and Ham have been captured and surrounded by thugs; Doc arrives just in time to watch them all die horrible deaths, every one of them except for Doc, Ham and Monk. Doc, who never shows emotion, is quite literally taken aback, approaching one dying crook, freezing and then stepping back; Monk backs away too and it takes three attempts for him to even speak, while Ham is so horrified that he averts his eyes and examines the ceiling. Doc, "stark bewilderment" on his face, says that, "I only know that it was one of the most hideous, mysterious things I have ever seen happen." Asked to explain the "room of fantastic death", he comments, "Believe me, I was never before so much at a loss for an explanation of a happening."

And we believe him. It's a truly startling scene and it sets the stage for much that follows. Doc is shocked, puzzled and eventually even shot. This isn't what we're used to in a *Doc Savage* novel; Doc doesn't show emotion and he makes it out of every situation in one piece. Well, not any more! Needless to say, that wound isn't too serious; he makes it through, of course, albeit with "a bullet hole through his Herculean torso." Looking back at all the previous novels, I can only think of one scene that would fit well alongside the cruel, horrific and dangerous action depicted here and that's the faceless man in *The Mystery on the Snow*, his visage created by slow dripping of acid onto his face. However, we don't see that; we just meet the man and listen to his story. If that were here, we'd see it happen.

In fact, we do see a scene of torture and it's even worse. Poor Sidney Lorrey, brother to the physician who runs Doc's clinic, is tortured brutally by a sadist named Leo; plucking his fingernails out with pliers is only the beginning. In fact, while he's ostensibly looking for information, Leo soon gives up asking questions entirely in favour of just having fun. Even "other onlookers, hardened criminals, were becoming nauseated and turning away." And Dent, so awkward with sentence structure and descriptive language at the beginning of this series, not even two years earlier, shows how far he's progressed with sentences like this one:

> Leo, purple-faced, hot-eyed and intent seemed not to hear, for he was engaged

> in the process of whittling Lorrey's fingers down to the bone, one at a time and showing Lorrey, with fiendish chuckles, the naked grey of the exposed bones.

It's almost appropriate for Dent to have one of his lead villains be squeamish, namely Boke, who is clearly one of the more important of the unusual number of antagonists Doc has to unravel here. We're kept on the hop wondering if each villain is working for this villain or that one? How many are working together and how many are fighting each other? Who's ultimately in charge? Is there only one leader and is he the Crime Annihilist? At one point, Boke collects three quarters of the organised crime leaders in New York City and its environs into one room so he's an important man, but he's also a squeamish one. He can't bear violence, not even the mention of it. Boke would have trouble reading this book because of the violence it covers!

In such context, Dent's habit of using words we don't recognise today, at least not as intended, becomes almost a sinister act. Ham's sword cane saves the day at one point, the tip "coated with a substance which seemed to have a mucilaginous quality". That just means "sticky", but it sounds so much more extreme when only pages away from more pop-eyed death. So does "maul", used here to mean a large hammer, but conjuring up darker meanings because of the context. On the other hand, it's hard to think dark thoughts about the word "phaeton", which was a vehicle that was faster and lighter than a touring car, with no windows or permanent roof; it was a style already on the way out in 1934, soon to be replaced by the convertible. Of course, we still have the coupé, a two door car with a fixed roof, also mentioned here on a couple of occasions, but without that ending accent; Americans would soon drop it and reduce the word to one syllable.

The most surprising word to us, over eighty years on, is "shaggin'", which in the thirties was apparently an equivalent to "tailing". When Monk and Ham follow a sniper, only to be told, "You two must have been shaggin' the wrong guy!", there really isn't anything sexual going on. Honest! [Note: this word had already seen use in *The Man Who Shook the Earth* almost a year earlier, but I'd forgotten.]

The other surprising moment from a cultural perspective isn't a word but a suggestion. Late in the novel, it becomes clear that the victims of the pop-eyed death, contrary to initial belief, were all criminals, but from a variety of different levels. We're told: "Not all of the dead crooks were persons who had committed heinous crimes. One man had been beating his wife when he fell dead with his eyes sticking out." Wow! That sort of attitude really dates a novel!

On the other hand, there's one character who's notably ahead of his time, a "feminine-mannered" villain with "fragile features and a rose petal skin." We're not told that he's gay, but it's heavily implied. He may even be a transvestite, as there are a number of ways to read his character. Today, we might believe that he's crossgender, but I doubt Dent was going quite that far in 1934! Regardless, it's another feather in his cap that he was so willing to step outside the traditional list of characterisations viable for pulp novels, even if beating your wife was deemed non-heinous. A further nod goes to the fact that the chief villain survives the book for a change; he's captured, of course, but alive. That's refreshing, after so many convenient instances of

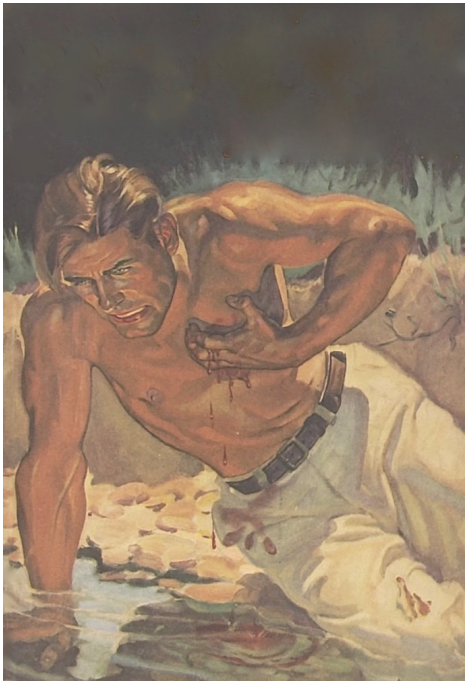
deadly karma in prior books.

Then again, Dent wasn't entirely routine. After all, he was increasingly bringing Pat Savage into the fray. She's back again here, with one fantastic scene of female empowerment, even if it's during yet another kidnapping. Unless I've miscounted, she's now appeared in four Doc Savage novels but has been kidnapped six times. That's hardly a good ratio for anyone, especially if we're supposed to acknowledge that female empowerment as meaningful!

Given that Dent has done everything else in this novel, it can't be too much of a shock to find that he also extended the Doc Savage mythos a little. We discover a new gadget of Doc's for one: a button on his shirt sleeve which, when torn off and a surrounding metal band removed, shows that it's razor sharp, great for cutting yourself free when you've been captured and bound. For two, with Doc on the run from Insp. Humboldt, we spend some time at Renny's apartment. He has a penthouse overlooking Central Park; he had designed the building and also supervised its erection, down to the secret escape passage under the bath that Doc shows his assistants. Surprisingly for a rather old-fashioned man of action, his apartment was "an incredible array of modernistic metals and glass."

And that happy vision is a great place to leave *The Annihilist*. Let's avoid such lurid lines as, "Monk had a box seat for the pageant of fantastic death" and remember instead that Renny's apartment is filled with mechanical gadgets and that his "wide, glass-covered terrace was a greenhouse of tropical shrubs."

Yes, that's more like it. And I should add that this superb, if notably gruesome, entry into the series feels like an odd time for Lester Dent to take another break, but...



RICHARD SALE

THE MYSTIC MULLAH

PULP PUBLICATION:
#23, JANUARY 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#9, NOVEMBER 1965
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#46, MARCH 2011

While the name on the cover was always Kenneth Robeson, the original *Doc Savage* novels were mostly the work of Lester Dent. He wrote 133 of the 181 published in *Doc Savage Magazine*, including the first (*The Man of Bronze* in March 1933) and the last (*Up from Earth's Center* in the Summer 1949 edition). And, of course, most of the early stories were his: he wrote all the first fifteen and twenty-seven of the first thirty; the other three were written by other writers from his outlines. The first of those was *The King Maker*, written by Harold A. Davis; the second is this, written by Richard Sale [Note: there is speculation that Dent took over and finished it himself].

That news won't be surprising to readers because it doesn't follow any of the trends in play in the later months of 1934.

Most obviously, Dent had found that it was hard to keep both Doc and all five of his assistants (let alone cousin Pat too), busy throughout each of their adventures. So, in October 1934, he left both Long Tom and Johnny out of *Death in Silver*, explaining that they were working out of the country. A month later, for *The Sea Magician*, he followed Johnny over the pond to England and dropped Renny and Pat. While that pair were back for *The Annihilist* in December, Long Tom and Johnny were still absent. Here, however, the whole gang's back in play (except for Pat).

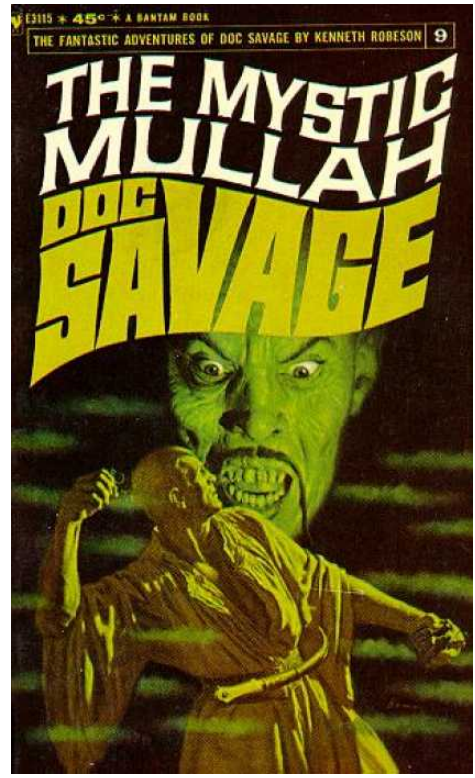
Another trend was towards more realistic villains, at least within the mythology of the Doc Savage world. *Death in Silver* featured a terrorist group, *The Sea Magician* a group exploiting an invention to extract gold from sea-

water efficiently and *The Annihilist* the consequences of Doc's cure for criminality falling into the wrong hands. This, however, dips right back into yellow peril territory, apparently ignoring entirely the vast ramifications of what went down in that previous book.

Finally, Dent was getting better and better as a writer, his vocabulary, sentence structure and framework all showing major progression. Richard Sale, however, sets this story up as a relentless set of cliffhangers, each moving the action from one setpiece location to another. Some of it is good stuff, but the technique is transparent. He also adheres strictly to a number of series traditions, especially at the beginning and end of the novel.

We start with notables arriving in New York City, one of them finding his way to the 86th floor of a very familiar building to visit Doc Savage, only to die a weirdly horrible death. If someone down at Police Headquarters would have mapped out all the murders in New York from 1933 to 1934, they would surely find nowhere with a higher frequency for corpses than the corridor outside Doc Savage's penthouse. This time, the victim is a man named Hadim and the method is death by nebulous green flying snakes. You know, that sort of weirdly horrible death.

If there's any originality at this point, it's the fact that Doc is apparently not in town. Johnny discovers the body and Ham and Monk soon join him on his investigations. It's the latter pair who soon experience the Mystic Mullah of the title, in a form not unlike that of his method of murder: a green ghostly floating head, albeit one that speaks. Doc's initial absence is, I believe, longer than in any book in the series thus far; he doesn't make an appearance until page 27 of the Bantam paper-



back edition, almost 20% of the way into the book. What's more, there are other points at which he vanishes for quite a while too, partly because Richard Sale's apparent solution to keeping six men busy is to have two of them kidnapped at any point in time.

Once Doc shows up, of course, we're in regular territory. The important person in dire need of help is the Khan Nadir Shar, Son of Divinity, Destined Master of Ten Thousand Lances, Khan of Tanan, Ruler of Outer Mongolia. The mysterious but tough woman at the heart of the story is Joan Lyndell, a western woman in business in the city of Tanan, who has great power and influence there. The villain of the piece, of course, is the Mystic Mullah, whose identity is so secret that even his followers don't know who he is. Nothing in

this paragraph will be remotely surprising to regular readers of Doc Savage.

There are, however, some little details that are worthy of mention, many of which are new tricks up Doc's sleeve, metaphorically at least. One is actually secreted in his shoes; he escapes from a tight situation by releasing chemicals from one of his heels, which flare up brightly when exposed to air. Other chemicals are used later on to bleach people and their clothing for tracking purposes. Best of all, Doc introduces a set of radio controlled anaesthetic bombs, which are just as much fun as they sound!

It isn't all gadgetry though. An actor is hired at one point to impersonate Johnny; he even succeeds, even if he also ends up dead for his troubles. Renny loses much of his left ear to a bullet and Ham loses his sword cane at the docks, though he replaces it from his collection. Perhaps best of all, we're introduced to an assassination technique in Tanan known as the human spider; it features disposable girls with deadly poison secreted under their sharp fingernails.

Clearly Sale tried hard to write a solid Doc Savage adventure and he did reasonably well. It could well be argued that its episodic nature is a positive attribute, action shifting from the docks to a refinery to an abandoned yacht club to a beachfront amusement park and, eventually, all the way to Outer Mongolia; it could also, however, be argued that it simply shows a lack of understanding of how to craft the structure of a novel. Similarly, the traditional elements could be seen as respectful nods to the series or the lack of a confident imagination which could make something more of them. I might believe the former more if the ending hadn't been so wildly unimaginative.

What I will praise Richard Sale for is how well he keeps us guessing as to the identity of the villain. There are a number of believable candidates and their respective likelihood wanes and waxes with the story. I still hadn't figured out who it was when the secret was finally revealed. I'll also add tentative praise for a neat scene when one of those candidates, a fascinatingly facetious character with the name of Oscar Gibson saves Doc's life. I'd be more effusive if I wasn't wondering whether that moment starts us down a slippery slope.

It also includes an example of odd vocabulary, something that's fascinated me in my explorations of this series. To save Doc, Gibson uses "a fragment of twelve-ounce duck"; that's a tightly woven cotton fabric, that's used for a lot of purposes, but here sails. Other nautical terms used are "seining" and "coaming". Ham does the former at one point to the darkness; a "seine" is a fishing net, so he's casting out his hands to discover what might be in front of him when his eyes are unable to do the job. The latter is a raised frame on a boat used to keep out water; a mahogany coaming is shot up here.

I wonder if Sale had a nautical background. If he did, it didn't manifest itself again during the Doc Savage series, as this was the only novel in it that he wrote. It's a decent enough ride, with plenty of action and a decent helping of intrigue. All of Doc's men get their moments, even if they're far too easily kidnapped in this book, a fact that really hurts the flow. I'm mostly interested in whether some of Sale's additions to the canon will remain there or whether a succession of other authors, not least Lester Dent, will ignore Renny's shredded ear or Doc's flying anaesthetic bombs.

LESTER DENT

THE RED SNOW

PULP PUBLICATION:
#24, FEBRUARY 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

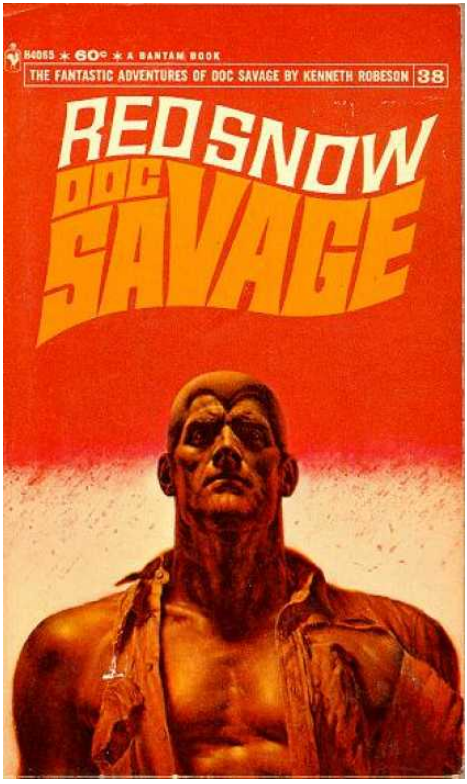
BANTAM PUBLICATION
(AS RED SNOW):
#38, JULY 1969
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#48, JANUARY 2011

Regular writer Lester Dent returned to *Doc Savage Magazine* in February 1935, in between Richard Sale adapting one of his outlines in *The Mystic Mullah* and W. Ryerson Johnson adapting another in *Land of Always-Night*. This return to regularly scheduled programming makes the former feel out of place in the flow of the series, with its yellow peril villain and everyone in Doc's group playing their part. Here, we're focused in on Doc and the double act of Monk and Ham, with a brief appearance by Pat. "There were three other members of the group of five remarkable assistants which Doc Savage maintained," explains Dent at one point, "but they were abroad at the moment."

The Red Snow also feels progressive, because we're not really sure what's going on for the longest time, the mystery behind the titular substance a refreshingly deep one. Dent sets it all up fabulously, showing what the red snow can do (which is to melt away whatever it comes into contact with, including human beings, leaving them as handfuls of red dust), before setting Doc up neatly with a concerted attack.

He's in Florida, not on an adventure for a change but to do some scientific research into whether it might be possible to eliminate mosquitoes by introducing a focused deadly disease into their ecosystem. This is happening in reality nowadays, so it's good to see Doc so far ahead of the curve! The press don't believe a word of it, thinking this to be a cover story and, neatly, so do the bad guys, who ambush Doc for precisely that reason; surely he must have caught wind of their shenanigans



and travelled to Miami to hinder their plans! Doc, of course, has no knowledge of them or their dastardly deeds and I did appreciate this notably new approach to setting a *Doc Savage* adventure into motion.

I liked how it happens too. White men in blackface interrupt the arrival of his luggage and, as Doc climbs down from a hotel window to investigate, half a dozen more erupt from inside peddlers' carts to ambush him. Why they want his luggage, he has no idea, but he doesn't expect to discover a corpse inside one of his trunks either. Suddenly, everything's in motion and with Doc on the run too, accused of murder. It's the little things that make all the difference and not having the month's mystery catch the elevator up to die outside his 86th floor office for a change is one of them.

It takes us a long time to figure out what's going on because Dent lets us and his characters in on details slowly. We go to mysterious houses, where rings are thrown, men are kept captive and wild substances are introduced. One key appears to be a collection of four hidden pedestals, upon which machinery had stood but is never there when our characters find them. We meet strange characters like Fluency Beech and the Baron Lang Ark. Many people die from the mysterious red snow. We're don't know who are bad guys and who are good and we're not even sure why either are doing what they're doing. Patience is an important attribute to have with *Red Snow* but it pays off well.

Dent certainly seemed to ready to change a few things up here, unusual for a series not only driven by a formula but one he created. This blurring of the plot is a good one, perhaps showing that the process of writing was improving his skills; he'd turned out twenty-two novels in two years, which could hardly be described as slacking. Another new idea is to ditch the assumption that everything has to unfold strictly in chronological order. Dent has Monk and Ham driving at speed, then backs up to explain why with an easy statement; "Ham gave thought to the immediate past," he says and suddenly we're in a flashback. A further innovation is that the book ends with a preview of the next adventure; for a refreshing change, Dent carefully wraps up a number of loose ends in the story, then calmly explains what's coming next.

He also builds the mythology of *Doc Savage* a little more. For instance, Doc has demonstrated his ability to read lips before, but here he does that in a different language. We also

find that he has studied scenes of danger on film, having compiled reels of such scenes so that he can watch and re-watch, conditioning himself to think outside the box when such danger strikes. Most surprisingly, Doc tells Monk that "there is one subject which I gave up studying a long time ago, simply because it seemed impossible to get the thing down to a point where it could be understood with any reliability." He's talking about women and, for all his people skills, he apparently can't tell when a woman is lying.

Skipping back two months to the previous Dent novel, *The Annihilist* was a notably brutal affair with a stupendous amount of death. This calms down a lot but there's still quite a lot of violence and brutality. Most obviously, the red snow doesn't provide a pleasant death, even if it's an emphatically clean one; it finds Leslie Thorne and a witness watches his arm fall off and the rest of him fall over, collapsing into a cloud of red dust and nothing else. However, that's far from the worst of it.

During one gunfight, a man receives a shotgun blast to the face. Another catches a brick that way, hurled by Doc, and Monk attempts a little torture by folding a man in half. Doc is shot in chapter four and spends the rest of it without hearing; he has a bulletproof vest on but his shirt is ribboned, just like the covers, both Walter M. Baumhofer's in the pulps and James Bama's on the Bantam editions. Even Habeas Corpus gets shot in this one, but the cruellest moment is surely when the villains dump the bloody corpse of a cop at the feet of a woman who's minding her own business and tending her flower beds.

From a linguistic standpoint, everything interesting that I've been finding in this series gets its moment here. Spelling is the least of it,

though "cocoanuts" apparently didn't lose the "a" by 1935. Accents show up, both in use of foreign words like "mêlée" or to highlight an extra syllable in words like "reënforcing" or "coördination". Slang is on show in dialogue such as, "Looks like we ride shank's mare from here," a phrase I'm used to as "Shanks's pony", both of which mean having to walk. The change of language over time is manifested in a villain wearing "golf knickers" which make him look "somewhat ridiculous", albeit not because in the UK, only women wear knickers.

A few words or phrases were new to me. When a blinded Monk bumps into Ham, the latter shouts, "You will slough me by accident, will you!" I have no idea what this means, as the only meaning of "slough" I'm aware of, at least as a verb, refers to the removal of something, often dead skin. Another one I'm at a loss to explain: "The car had a cut-out; it was

open." I don't know what a "cut-out" is here but it may or may not be an exhaust cutout to free up horsepower. The only "old" mention I could find was a 1916 legal case, in which a driver had opened his cut-out to make his vehicle noisier, his horn having been removed for repair. Finally, there's mention of a captive wearing an eyepatch, or "a black flap held in place by a string or an elastic." Now, "elastic" I get, but "an elastic"? Apparently we've changed the usage of that word!

I'll leave you with my favourite though, which highlights how Dent was becoming comfortable with the language he was putting to good use. He puts Doc into a tough situation but allows him a lucky way out (unlike the point where he needs scientific equipment that he doesn't have on his person, so is forced to order it from New York, prompting a notable delay). Here's the language he uses, which is purple prose but far beyond anything he would have considered using a couple of years earlier: "Dame Fortune is a vagrant, unreliable hussy, and Doc Savage had long ago ceased to rely upon her entirely. But occasionally the wench did make an offering which was not to be spurned. She made one now."

I like that and I like the fact that Dent was finally able to string complex sentences together. Here's a complex sentence to highlight how next month's adventure is going to be a weird one: "From the Arctic wastes, the next call would come. But it was not from the Arctic as civilized man knew it, but from a fabulous domain in the depths of the earth—the Land of Always-Night—a spot unknown to civilization, yet populated by a race so advanced that the intricacies of radio, of television, of surgery and medicine, of electro-chemistry, were little more complicated than the problems which confront a small child."

W. RYERSON JOHNSON

LAND OF ALWAYS-NIGHT

PULP PUBLICATION:
#25, MARCH 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#13, SEPTEMBER 1966
COVER: JAMES BAMA

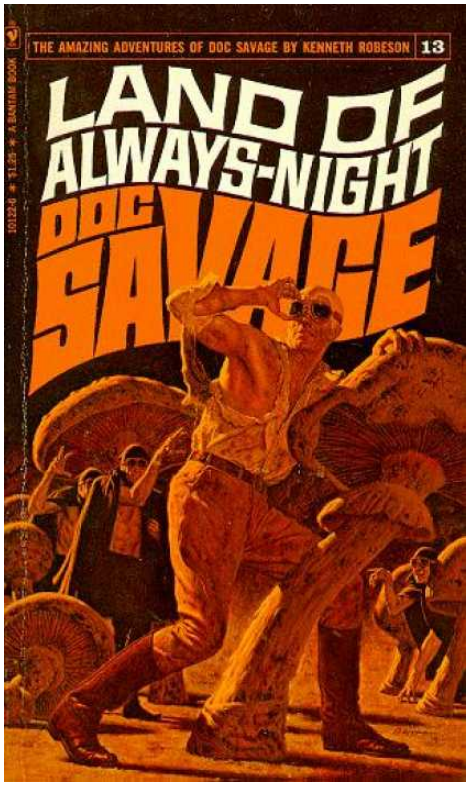
SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#4, FEBRUARY 2007

The first two years of monthly Doc Savage novels were mostly written by Lester Dent. Only two were penned by other authors, apparently from outlines by Dent, and they didn't feel right. *The King Maker* and *The Mystic* Mullah were enjoyable novels but they didn't read like Dent's work and they didn't follow the flow of what he was doing at the time.

Land of Always-Night kicked off year three of *Doc Savage Magazine* with another new author but, for once, that author gets it right. He was W. (for Walter) Ryerson Johnson and he would go on to write two later books in the series, *The Fantastic Island* and *The Motion Menace*. Based on this one, which is one of the best in the series thus far, I'm thoroughly looking forward to seeing how those turn out.

While it's clear pretty quickly that this isn't a Dent book because of Johnson's superior command of the English language, it plays out just like it should. All the component parts of a Doc Savage novel are here and they show up when they should and how they should. The only choice of Johnson's to go against the grain at the time was to include all five of Doc's men, but he manages them superbly, whether it's within a scene that shares them all or within the book as a whole. In fact, I'd argue that he does that better than Dent had managed thus far.

Johnson's different approach shows up in smaller details. For instance, the villain of the piece here is a strange creature by the name of Ool. He has weirdly white skin with golden down instead of hair and he has a pair of bulky goggles whose glass is utterly black. What's



more, he spends the first page killing someone in a suitably bizarre manner, waving his right hand like a butterfly and taking a life with a single snakelike touch. That's a cool bunch of attributes but it's not unusual for a Doc Savage story. What's odd is that he feels rather like the villain and the villain's henchman wrapped up into a single character.

The early pages play up Ool as a member of a different race. "My people had a civilization greater than yours", he tells a New York City crime boss, "some thousands of years ago." We aren't let on which race, of course, but Johnson has him collide with culture. He talks about killing Beery Hosmer as he discovers chocolate creams, a neat contrast and a neat attention to detail. Each of Johnson's characters has defining characteristics to help us distinguish them, which is a transparent trick but one that works relatively well. For instance, that crime boss is "Watches" Bowen who has a penchant for Napoleon brandy and carries at least four watches with him at any one time. Bowen is a sort of partner in crime who has henchmen of his own, but Ool always remains his own man.

He's a successful one too. For all that he doesn't seem to understand much of the culture around him, he's sharp as a knife and tough too. While we know today that Doc Savage isn't going to die in book #25 of a much longer series and 1935 readers surely knew that too as he had to be back for another adventure the following month, it has to be said that Johnson works the suspense angle well. I certainly came closer here to believing that the man of bronze was no more than in any prior novel. Ool has reason to want Doc dead and he has a really good set of attempts at accomplishing that. It initially appears like he wins a battle to the death and succeeding attempts are well framed too; I particularly liked the fake cop who smears poison on Doc's 86th floor telephone, then leaves to ring him from downstairs.

The cover of the Bantam paperback edition shows fantastic suspense too; it's one of my favourite James Bama paintings and a rare example that I much prefer to the Walter M. Baumhofer pulp cover. It depicts Doc and his inevitable torn shirt weaving his way through a set of giant mushrooms, his helmet hair fortunately obscured but a pair of Ool's weird googles on his face, both pursuing and being pursued by a number of freakish opponents. It makes a great attempt at the the impossible task of suggesting that what we see can't be seen because it's taking place in utter dark-

ness.

Where this bizarre landscape might be located you'll need to discover yourself, but I will highlight that not one but two characters pretend to be the same person: Gray Forstay, the only surviving member of the Lenderthorn Expedition, which was attacked by black shapes on pack ice far into the arctic north. While it's not too hard to connect the various dots and some have cast scorn on the viability of such a hidden civilisation, I'd suggest that it's a rare novel, even a rare Doc Savage novel, to have so much happen in so few pages.

Johnson doesn't waste the space he was given to play with. This book is packed with moves and countermoves, intrigue and discovery, setpiece after setpiece. I could name a whole bunch of favourites, but I have to call out the scene where crooks fail in an attempt to steal the goggles from Doc and escape from his custody to discover that they're all dining downstairs. It's a neat bit of subterfuge that conjures up strong visuals. Of course, not all of this is entirely successful; I was never in doubt as to who Dimiter Daikoff the giant killer, who claims to be a patriot not a murderer, really is.

Linguistically, there's less than usual on which to comment and it's mostly unsurprising. Johnson really likes his em dashes, which are paired up for even longer dashes on many occasions, often within a single page. There's a phone call that sounds like it came, see, from an Edward G. Robinson gangster movie, see, from the thirties; of course, that was contemporary to the novel, this first seeing print in *Doc Savage Magazine* for March 1935. An intriguing piece of slang accompanies a crook who aims to blow a door open; he uses "soup and soap", the latter being exactly what you'd expect but the former being a vial of nitroglycerine. The most surprising language for me was in the spelling of "phenagling", which I have only ever seen written as "finagling".

What's most surprising of all is the fact that only half of me is happy that the regular series writer, Lester Dent, would return the next month for five novels in a row. The other half is unhappy that I'll have to wait nine whole months until the next W. Ryerson Johnson story. However, Dent's dominance would weaken around that time as a few different writers would pen entries in the series, including Lawrence Donovan, who would write nine in a period of less than three years. Until this point, I wouldn't have seen that as promising. Now, I'm far more open-minded.

LESTER DENT

THE SPOOK LEGION

PULP PUBLICATION:
#26, APRIL 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#16, MARCH 1967
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#5, MARCH 2007

After *Land of Always-Night*, surely the best entry in the Doc Savage series thus far to be written by an author other than Lester Dent, I can't be too upset to begin a run of five books written by that regular author. Dent had helped to create Doc, he knew him better than anyone else and the flow of the series is his. Even a book as strong as *Land of Always-Night* feels like an anomaly simply because he didn't write it.

What I'll add to that here is that I wonder if Dent read those books written by others and found them useful as a writer. His command of the English language was clearly growing throughout the first couple of years but this one contains his most complex sentences to date, with an abundance of description that helps to build layers of meaning. And I remember him being scared of semi-colons! Well, W. Ryerson Johnson upped the game on the linguistic front in that last book, so it's good to see Dent able to meet that challenge here.

He has fun with this one across the board, not just with its language. It's set up well, with an imaginative way to introduce Doc to new readers in chapter one: through references in a science textbook. Then we get the hook to the story, with actions that are believable for eighty years ago but feel like they're from an alternate universe to ours today. For instance, someone opens a window on an aeroplane and the ensuing gust of wind blows a piece of paper into the face of a fat man. The latter reads it, pulls out a revolver and puts three bullets into the empty seat in front of him. Oh yeah, that would play out very differently in

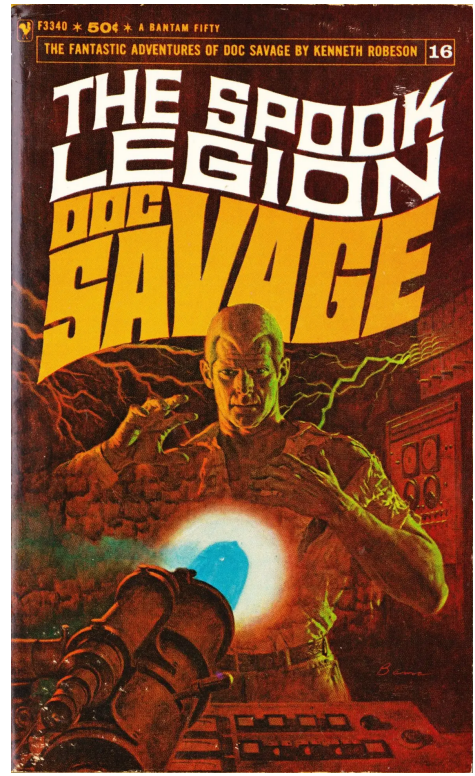
2017!

We soon discover that the fat man is "Telegraph" Edmunds and he apparently believes that the seat contained an invisible man, a belief that soon proves to be surprisingly grounded. Now, as wild as this idea is, I don't have a problem with it, especially as Dent jumps through a whole bunch of linguistic hoops to explain it scientifically rather than supernaturally. "It has something to do with altering the electronic composition of the body," explains Doc to his men, "securing an atomic motific status which results in complete diaphaneity." Nonsense, of course, but fair game for a pulp adventure novel.

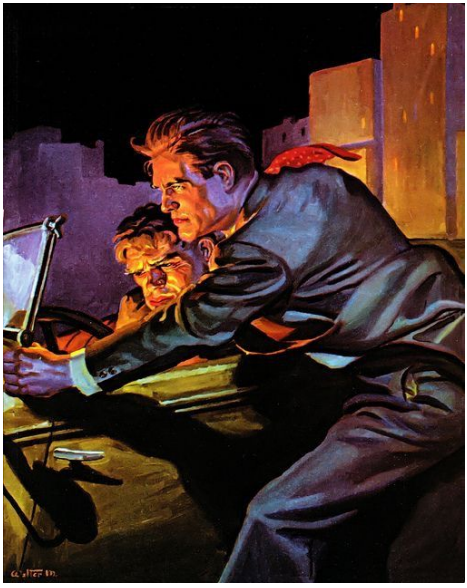
Where I expect my problem to lie is later in the series when someone becomes convinced that invisibility is real and everyone else then ridicules it as impossible. Watch this space! I couldn't fail to read the lesson of *Methusaleh's Children* into this; when the impossible is demonstrated to be achievable, such as extreme longevity in that book, then mankind will find a way to make it routine. We just have to know. Well, after this book, mankind knows that invisibility is achievable, thus someone ought to reinvent it.

Before he brings out the process itself, Dent deepens the mystery considerably and effectively, initially through hearsay and then observable action; there's a clever scene where a parachute drifts down from a crashing plane, with someone clearly controlling it who just happens to be invisible. There's a memorable robbery as well, a robbery staged during an opera performance by persons unseen to the large crowd. The potential for this idea is vast and Dent has a lot of fun exploring it.

Sure, he trawls some old tropes in the process, but that's not too high a price to pay



for a fun ride. There's a cast of characters that doesn't surprise, for a start; the names may be new but they're all thoroughly recognisable. There's a villain who remains unknown until a revelation in the last chapter, a capable henchman ("Telegraph" Edmunds, of course) and a crew of idiots. There are a couple of important victims with clumsy names (P. Treve Easeman and Sawyer Linnett Bonefelt); one neat touch is to have their very visibility held for ransom. There's a beautiful young lady who's also smart, tough and daring but somehow gets kidnapped quickly; she's Easeman's daughter, Ada. There's a mysterious heroic type by the name of Russel Wray, who's Bonefelt's bodyguard. And there are a few other characters of note who show up at odd points to play their parts too. They're all expected



but still fun.

Other aspects aren't old tropes for the Doc Savage series but are old tropes in popular culture. For instance, the offices of Sawyer Bonefelt would have felt mildly clichéd in 1935 but are tired today: obviously carved out of the old dark house genre that was last viable a couple of decades on the other side of *Scooby-Doo*. The offices are in the worst slum in the city and they're bleak and unfurnished, but only as a front: they're the only visible part of an entire grime-covered city block, which conceals luxurious and neatly quiet headquarters, complete with secret passages with knots in the walnut panelling just large enough for eyeballs and gun barrels.

More contemporary is Bonefelt's business model, his nickname of Old Bonepicker coming from his specialty of "buying up defunct corporations and manufacturing enterprises and breaking them into parts and selling them for what usually amounted to a profit." Monk calls it "a buzzard's way of making a living", but it sounds just like what Mitt Romney does at Bain Capital and he was a state governor who had a decent shot at becoming US President, thus underlining yet again how political morals have changed over the last century. Doc Savage was a realistic hero in the mid-thirties but a strange cross between fascist and communist to 21st century eyes.

Beyond the core story, which tasks Doc, Monk and Ham with discovering and exposing the mastermind behind an invisible criminal army, the "spook legion" of the title, there's quite a lot for fans of the wider series to expand its mythology.

For a start, Monk and Ham escalate their interpersonal conflict from antagonistic to violent: Monk grabs the lawyer by the throat and Ham punches him in the stomach. With them the only assistants present (Renny and Long Tom are in Europe and Johnny is investigating a newly discovered cliff dwelling in the west), the rest of the progression comes from Doc and his methods. We discover that his superfirers have special compensators built in to digest muzzle flame and make it difficult to spot them in action. We find that he has license plates of surrounding states stashed in his cars, taken from used vehicles that were then run into the ocean, waiting for a reason to switch them out for the purposes of concealment. We also find that using chemical bleach is much quicker in changing a car's colour than repainting it.

We also find some believable flaws in Doc's superhuman abilities. These haven't bugged me since the excesses of the first six months of novels, but it's good to get a periodic reminder that he is human. For instance, at one point he has to fire a grappling hook from one building to another, so he can sneak up to the 86th

floor; it's not an easy task and he fails on the first attempt, succeeding instead on a second. Much more embarrassingly, he gets knocked out during the robbery at the opera and the invisible crooks lift his prints, planting them later as a decoy that sets Doc up to the authorities as the leader of the spook legion. On a safer note, he has a box at the opera, as did his father before him, and, while it's never stated outright, it's hinted that he's the "unnamed contributor who had lifted the operatic enterprise from its financial dilemma".

There's interest from the standpoint of language too, beyond further use of accents where we wouldn't expect to see them today, whether in words borrowed from foreign languages like "débutante" and "débris" or whether with the goal of highlighting an extra syllable, like "reënacted".

Monk gets a couple of instances this time out. At one point, having been turned invisible, he rags on the unseen man behind him: "You oughta brought a velocipede," he tells him. "Then you wouldn't have to ride my heels like you been doin'." Velocipedes were bicycles, of course, but dating to long before 1935. Maybe they were on Dent's mind while creating a character called "Old Bonepicker", as they were colloquially known as "boneshakers". The other line from Monk is, "Those birds are old heads," which means here that the enemy are not stupid.

Two others are a little more surprising. Late in the novel, the enemy, searching for Doc, "lifted the rug in the inner office and advanced carefully, as if seining." I remember "seining" from *The Mystic Mullah*, but that novel was written by Richard Sale rather than Lester Dent; I wonder if the word came from the latter's outline or whether Dent was indeed picking up linguistic details from the books he didn't write. The other surprising example is an offhand reference to "this Russel Wray chick", odd because Russel Wray is male. Nowadays, it's an exclusively female epithet, as in "chick flick" or "chick magnet", and that dates back at least as far as Shakespeare, who used it in *The Tempest*. Apparently, however, it was also a diminutive for Charles, especially in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and may have been so widespread that it became used, however briefly, in slang, for a "man", just like we might use "guy" or "dude" today.

And, with that, I'll leave you with a vision of Monk blushing in the street. While invisible, he passes "a group of chattering office girls, out for lunch". "Do you realize," Monk asked, "that we're walking down the street without a thing on?"

Next month, all five of Doc's assistants are back together again in a Lester Dent novel, for the first time since *Fear Cay* eight months earlier and for the last time until *Resurrection Day* a year and a half later.

LESTER DENT

THE SECRET IN THE SKY

PULP PUBLICATION:
#27, MAY 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#20, JANUARY 1967
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#16, MARCH 2008

As much as I've enjoyed seeing what other authors brought to Doc Savage's table, not least the fantastic *Land of Always-Night* by W. Ryerson Johnson, it's always satisfying to get back into the rhythm of a run of Lester Dent novels. *The Spook Legion* was a decent romp into super-science territory and *The Secret in the Sky* is a worthy companion piece.

The gimmick here is well staged. Willard Kipring Parker Spanner, a man whose four names must suggest some level of importance or Dent wouldn't have recounted them four times in four paragraphs, is discovered dead on a New York street. The problem is that he left Doc Savage a 1930s voicemail less than three hours earlier, when he was in San Francisco. It takes almost twice that time to travel from San Francisco to New York today, almost eighty years on, so it must have seemed a crazy accomplishment to Doc. Then again, he spent part of *The Spook Legion* invisible so his mind must have been at least open to the possibility.

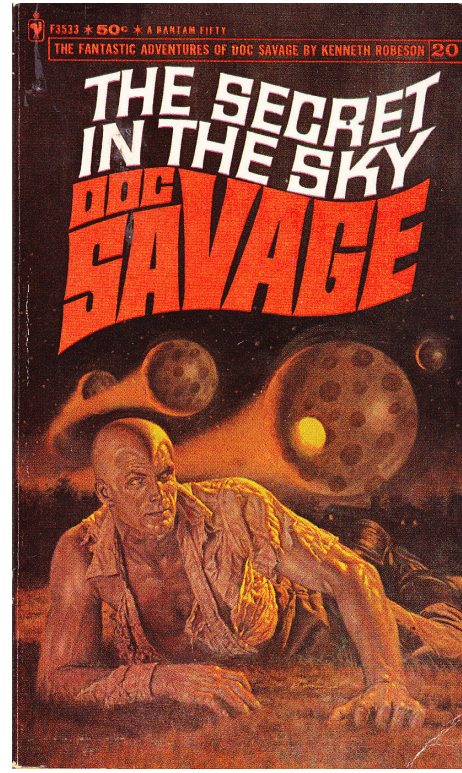
Spanner is an important man, if not a rich one, and Doc knows him, enough to go to the morgue to identify his body, whereupon he runs into a set of hoods who steal the clothes off Spanner's corpse. The story is clearly in motion and it promptly leads Doc, Ham and Monk to a rural oyster farm with a clever underground alarm system and a "taut rope of liquid fire" hanging in the sky. Mysteries stack onto mysteries for quite some time before they start to get a handle on what's going on, not least because Dent keeps them busy with action. There's a great setpiece scene when

Doc's plane is destroyed on the ground by another, sent into it by a homing device. There are more at the mysterious mansion in Oklahoma where we start to pick up those characters we expected but hadn't met yet.

In particular, I'm talking about Lanca Jaxon, this novel's gorgeous young lady, who enters the story with style. Monk and Ham have just escaped from the mansion and discovered the perfect getaway vehicle: big, powerful and bulletproof. However, as they start to hotwire it, they find that Lanca is sitting in the back pointing a gun at them, with hollow-point bullets no less. It's all an unfortunate mistake, of course, but this book proceeds with a cat and mouse approach throughout. One minute, our heroes are free, the next they're captured, then they're free again, the next... and you get the picture.

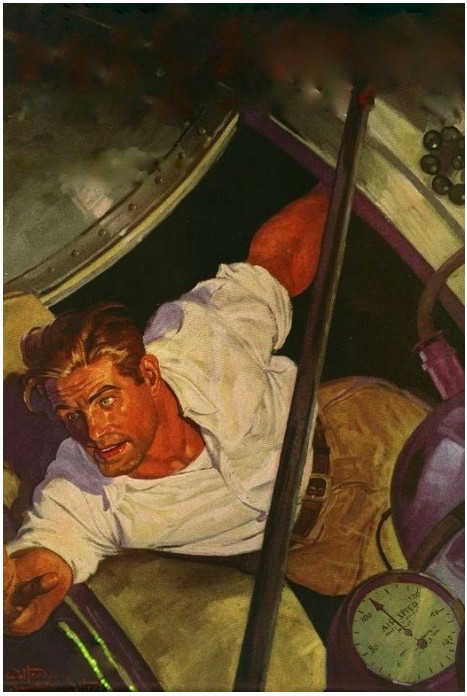
By the way, this does allow Dent to utilise all five of Doc's men for once without the usual problem of struggling to find enough for each of them to do. Here, it's all Doc, Ham and Monk until soon into the second half. The other three are in upper New York, presumably helping with the vocational training given to the graduates of Doc's clinic after their surgical treatment. Well, until we shift over to them because Doc, Ham and Monk are not just taken captive but securely bound too. The alternation works pretty well.

It's also about halfway that we see what we have expected all along. Willard Spanner travelled from San Francisco to New York in less than three hours in a sophisticated piece of flying machinery, a ball that can move at high speed in any direction without causing gravitational problems for the occupants. It would surely be the logical future of the aëronautical industry if only... well, if you read *The Spook Legion*, you won't be surprised at how this one ends; if *The Roar Devil* follows suit, then we'll have a new trend on our hands.



There are other trends apparent too. One long-running trend is enhanced here when Monk appears to have been killed in a fight; he has two deep and bloody gouges to his head. Ham, whose long running feud with Monk we know is an act, is distraught. "He's the best friend I've got," he wails, only to revert to his usual antagonistic type when it becomes clear that Monk is alive after all. One possible trend is that Dent chose here to mention a Tulsa newspaper by name. It's called *The Graphic* and probably isn't real, but still sounds more realistic than "the leading Phoenix newspaper", which is what he used in *The Red Skull*.

Another trend, new in *The Spook Legion*, the



previous novel, but emphasised here is Doc's ability to sway people to his needs, not through his hypnotic gold flaked eyes but by his connections. We learned early in the series that the New York police department had given Doc and his men honorary commissions and *The Thousand-Headed Man* added that he had a similar in with the London equivalent. There have been others too, but they've been official positions every time. In *The Spook Legion*, it's his stature as the anonymous saviour of the opera company targetted by invisible men that gives him some clout and, here, we get two more examples. One is a commercial airline, whose employees are put at his service when he shows them a card; he owns a "goodly portion" of their stock. The other is a newspaper, whose publisher won't play ball with him; he'll only hand over the notes that Doc needs in return for exclusive rights to his adventures. Doc nixes that by highlighting that he's both a federal agent and a director of the chain which owns the majority stock of the paper. "You win," replies the publisher.

Outside of that, the most obvious enhancement to the Doc mythos is a prominent use of his answering machine on the very first page. If I'm remembering correctly, we've encountered this device before, the combination of a dictaphone voice recorder and a phonographic speaker, but we haven't heard the message that Doc set before. We get that here. "This is a mechanical robot," it says, "speaking from Doc Savage's headquarters and advising you that Doc Savage is not present, but that any message you care to speak will be recorded on a dictaphone and will come to Doc Savage's attention later." It wraps up with, "You may proceed with whatever you wish to say, if anything." This seems odd to me, not just the impersonal nature of the message but the fact that it mentions Doc Savage three times. Talk about redundant! It also flies in the face of the suggestion that Doc's ego isn't as big as his many talents.

On the language side, there's the now expected uses of accents, often to aid pronunciation, but also some new words. The first is explained as it's mentioned, which is an odd approach. Willard Spanner "was a nabob", but if we don't know what that is, the rest of the sentence is happy to explain: "a somebody, a big shot." Lanca Jaxon doesn't just have good teeth, they "would have graced the advertising of any dentifrice." That's any sort of paste or powder to clean teeth, so Dent is saying that she looks like she should be on a toothpaste commercial.

The word that I had to search for an explanation on is "bobtail". From the context, it's

obviously a gun term as a hood named Stunted bobtailed his rifle and found that it no longer functioned properly. Searching tells me that it's a different grip, but to change to a bobtail involves reworking the entire frame, so it's not a simple task. The other thing I learned from reading about bobtailing is that gun owners have a language all their own and it's an almost impenetrable one to someone like me who knows next to nothing about the things.

So, that's *The Secret in the Sky*, which secret naturally doesn't survive the novel. It's another capableoriginal art entry in the series from Lester Dent, who was clearly a reliable author at this point, with twenty-four *Doc Savage* novels under his belt in just over two years. However, the only thing elevating it and its predecessor, *The Spook Legion*, is its use of super-science, which may well not be a good thing.

LESTER DENT

THE ROAR DEVIL

PULP PUBLICATION:
#28, JUNE 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#88, AUGUST 1965
COVER: BORIS VALLEJO

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#44, JANUARY 2008

The Roar Devil was the 28th novel to be published in *Doc Savage Magazine*, back in June 1935, but it wasn't apparently high on Bantam's list to reprint in paperback, eventually appearing as late as #88 in that series. Some of the earlier books, such as *Quest of the Spider* and *The Mystery on the Snow*, had waited for more months to be reprinted but this one would be the highest Bantam reprint number until August 1937's *Ost* became Bantam's #89, *The Magic Island*.

What's odd is that those earlier two delayed novels were clearly lesser entries in the series, while this one stands up surprisingly well, at least to my way of thinking, far from the retread of *The Man Who Shook the Earth* that its synopsis might suggest. Many fans don't regard it highly and I do have to concede that the Roar Devil of the title does less with his sinister powers than perhaps any villain in the series thus far, but I appreciated a number of the approaches that regular author Lester Dent took this time and they made this book stand out for attention.

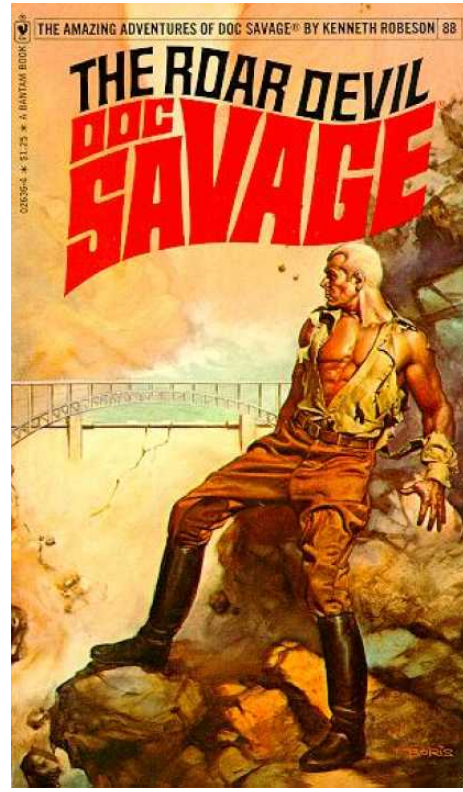
For a start, this month's female presence is Retta Kenn, who shows up on page one and is given the first line of dialogue. What's more, she's there on the last page too, to speak the last line of dialogue. She's unusual in a lot of ways, the most obvious being that she's far from the damsel in distress that we're used to. While she does get captured in the first chapter, by crime boss Dove Zachies, she turns the tables on him in the second, fashioning her own escape. She'd already got the better of Zachies's henchman in the first couple of

pages, by pretending to be deaf, and she even rescues Doc and his men at one point. She's smart, sassy and able to take care of herself, even though she does know it and is certainly rather full of herself. I think that it's fair to say that she has the largest role given to any woman so far in the series, with the most capability and the most ability to get a reaction out of Doc. I liked her a lot and would love to see her guest in a Pat Savage story.

And Dent seems to like her too. She dominates the first two chapters and ends them by witnessing the work of the Roar Devil, whom she's seeking in her capacity as assistant to this month's unwieldy name. That's a former NYPD policeman and instructor by the name of V. Venable Mear, who is now a consulting criminologist, not to mention crusading crime fighter. Those wild names do continue, by the way, with Mear's client, the mysterious April Fifth, and a wonderful character called Flagler D'Aughtell, with a tramp like demeanour and an unusual take on the English language.

What the Roar Devil does, by the way, is cause infrastructure to collapse, like a dam above Powertown, a major water and electricity supplier to New York City. More intriguingly, as that's hardly a new talent in this series, given that *The Man Who Shook the Earth* came less than a year and a half earlier, he's also able to entirely mute sound. Now, that's much more like it! The few scenes with all charac-ters present unable to hear anything at all are the freakiest since Doc and his men losing months of their lives as gibbering wrecks in *Meteor Menace*.

Another unusual approach is the structure of the plot. Usually, we're given a villain to work his villainy on the general public, but this novel is structured as a battle between a



pair of villains, with the general public mostly stuck standing around watching it happen and hoping it doesn't affect them, even as they know that it's highly likely to, given that much of Powertown now sits below the floodline and the various dams keeping them from drowning are threatened.

Those villains, of course, are Dove Zachies and the Roar Devil; the former has something that the latter wants and he'll do everything he can to get it. There are traditional elements here too: of course nobody knows who the Roar Devil is, as he keeps his identity a secret even from those working for him, but, even there, Dent does something to shake things up somewhat. Not only does he disguise his voice by singing rather than speaking, but it's expl-

ained to us early and reenforced often that the Roar Devil is Leland Ricketts, the Powertown mayor. Naturally, we don't believe that in the slightest, for no better reason than it's pushed at us so strongly and also because it's Ricketts who calls in Doc Savage. Still, it's refreshing.

A third unusual aspect to this novel is the way Doc and his men are introduced. I found *The Red Skull* notable for its late introduction of Doc, on page 21 of the Bantam paperback. Here, he doesn't show up until page 23, albeit four pages sooner than in *The Mystic Mullah*. Dent delays the introduction of his assistants as well and he brings them each in separately. Renny is first up, for a change, and Doc sends him on to Powertown where he battles Retta Kenn, only just getting the better of her; she leaves him with a pair of bruised shins and a black eye for his troubles. "What a woman!" he exclaims. "I didn't think they came like you." Monk and Ham, a double act as ever, arrive a couple of chapters later and it's a couple more again before Johnny shows up.

Long Tom doesn't appear, being out of the country, but the four who do are introduced separately, then sent off to take care of something in isolation and kept that way until close to the finalé. If Dent's goal was to give these regular characters a long overdue opportunity to shine on their own, then he succeeds. Even though everyone, Doc included, is captured at some point, they all do good work. One of the biggest problems I have with this series is that Doc's assistants rarely seem to justify their billing as Doc's assistants. Sure, they're great talents in their respective fields but they're just as often morons triggering obvious traps.

If the approach is a strong point, at least in my humble opinion, these new angles are sometimes implemented at the cost of the story. There are great ideas here, such as the sound suppressor or the vaporised truth serum, but little is actually done with them. The Roar Devil is too busy going after Dove Zachies to actually roar much, so there's not much destruction. Sometimes it feels rather like Doc is sticking his head into a room to figure out what the argument raging inside is all about. Sure, it's a really big room and a bloody argument but that's really the substance.

There's actually more of interest from a series perspective, with a number of things worthy of note. Doc orders Monk and Ham to follow a car by tapping on an inlaid table in his 86th floor headquarters; his actions relay down to a telegraph sounder in the basement which is mounted on a resonator for them to hear. Another new discovery at headquarters is that Doc has a button that stops all elevator cages anywhere in the building; that's a pretty big deal, given how busy it is in the, as always

unnamed, Empire State Building. One further surprising thing occurs when Johnny speaks to his colleagues in ancient Mayan, so as to conduct a private conversation in public; for the first time thus far, a character recognises it as Mayan, though he doesn't understand the words because he only knows a more modern incarnation.

Most interesting to me, though, were some details about Doc's costume. We're told that he habitually wears a bulletproof coat under his business suit and a pair of shorts made out of very light chain mail. Now, while Doc does wear a business suit in many of the original pulp cover illustrations, every one of which thus far was the work of Walter M. Baumhofer, he doesn't tend to wear anything more substantial on the Bantam covers than a ripped shirt that doesn't show up anything like this underneath. The cover of this paperback is no exception, a painting by Boris Vallejo rather than James Bama. And, for all those Doc fans who can't take the Bama helmet hair seriously, there's a very telling sentence here:

> "Some one might shoot him in the head, but they would have to do it accurately, because the bronze hair in view was not his own, but artificial hair on a thin but immensely strong metal skullcap."

Why, of course, the immensely strong metal skullcap would have a startling widow's peak, we're not told.

With a quick acknowledgement of the scene where Monk stumbles on Ham scratching Habeas's ear, I'll add a few interesting linguistic elements. There were three words that leapt out at me this time, though two only from the context. I'm sure we'd all conjure up the same image from the word "menage", but here it appears to describe a large household. It technically ought to have an acute accent on the first vowel but Dent uncharacteristically fails to include that. I've also heard the word "glom" before, usually meaning to take possession of a physical item, but here that item is a human being: the Roar Devil aims to glom Dove Zachies, while Monk and Ham both get glommed. The new word to me was "camisado", which turns out to be a surprise attack that happens when the enemy are asleep.

There are a couple of phrases I had to look up too. This sentence in particular is a glorious example of thirties slang: "If we can cinch that idea in the bronze guy's head, then croak Ricketts, we'll have handed the bronze guy a dead cat." The "dead cat" part is completely new to me and it's a rather awkward phrase to google, but it's also something of a rabbit hole. Did you know that a "dead cat bounce" is a temporary boost in share prices after a sustained fall? Anyway, back at the office of Mayor Ricketts, "The attackers had come to the conclusion that they had caught a Tartar." This is to encounter someone unexpectedly troublesome. It's not hard to see why neither of these phrases is in common parlance today, but they do have their quaint charm.

And I'll wrap up with the note that we end with a beginning. With everything taken care of, Doc is all set to investigate the Roar Devil's sound suppressing equipment only to be sideswiped into a deeper mystery, a new adventure to rediscover the meaning of the word "Qui".

LESTER DENT

QUEST OF QUI

PULP PUBLICATION:
#29, JULY 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#12, JULY 1966
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#33, JANUARY 2010

Perhaps because Lester Dent was back in the hot seat, writing his third of five Doc Savage novels in a row, *The Roar Devil* ended with a movie trailer style push for *The Quest of Qui*, which Bantam inexplicably shortened for its paperback release to simply *Quest of Qui*. The definite article makes sense as the majority of the book involves various people trying to find this lost civilisation in "the bleak fastnesses of Labrador".

[Edit: thanks to Dafydd Neal Dyer for clarifying that the novel was submitted to Street & Smith as *The Quest of Qui* but was shortened, presumably to aid the alliteration, to simply *Quest of Qui* and it stayed without the definite article throughout subsequent publications.]

Those who are getting used to Monk and Ham being Doc's dominant, if perennially bickering, assistants will be surprised to find that Johnny takes the lead here and ends up with perhaps a higher page count than anyone else, even if he spends most of it running around the snowy wastes of eastern Canada in only his red underwear. It seems that he has quite the constitution!

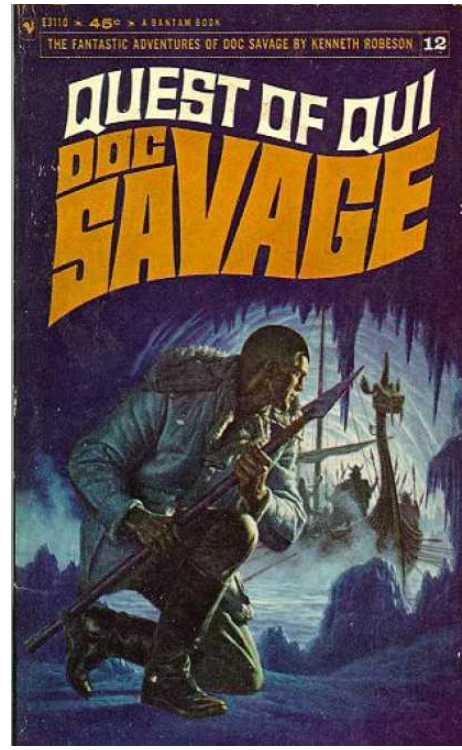
He starts out the book watching a movie newsreel and investigating what he sees. A crew of Vikings apparently stole a yacht called the *Sea Scream* off Long Island, leaving its occupants in their dragonboat. Johnny sees this and checks it out, realising that the boat is genuine, and so follows its trail up to Labrador. He discovers a man there on the snow, shot but not dead, babbling about the 1,200 year old mystery of Qui and how Kettler won't be able to find it again without the golden-

haired girl. Johnny is captured, recognised and left to die in a water-filled hole in the snow, his plane destroyed. His only hope is the radio transmitter that he was using to contact Doc Savage; that's still on and transmitting.

Enter Doc and Renny, back in New York, the latter in fine form given that we get no less than three "Holy cow!" proclamations in four pages. One of those is issued after an antique Viking knife is thrown at them, in their own headquarters, by person or persons unseen. They ring Monk, who's going through precisely the same thing with an antique Viking spear. I should add that none of them immediately assume invisible attackers, as the events of *The Spook Legion*, only two books earlier, apparently count for nothing and have been completely forgotten.

Ham does show up, albeit quite a bit later because he's kidnapped first, but Long Tom is absent, superintending a construction project in South America. Instead Dent spends some time showing us around the private digs of Doc's assistants. Behind a mahogany door at Monk's place, he has a dedicated room for Habeas Corpus; that qualifies as "no doubt the most expensive pigpen in the world" with its marble floor, a chromium trough and a ten square foot wallowing box full of perfumed mud. Over at Ham's Park Avenue apartments, he has a case of two dozen black sword-canes. The rest know that he's been kidnapped only because no cane is missing.

In fact, Dent keeps on letting us in on new little details that expand the *Doc Savage* mythos, as if he's in no rush at all to get on with the story. He explains that Doc's honorary commission on the New York Police Department was awarded after he designed their radio system and their inter-station teletype hook-



up. When Ham shows up, he's unconscious because Doc hasn't told any of his men about the knockout gas he built into his car as a trap. We discover that his waterfront warehouse on the Hudson contains more than planes; it also contains an experimental submarine that Doc is working on and a dirigible that can make flights into the stratosphere.

We know about the latter because the Vikings soon destroy the warehouse by backing a truck up to its side, packed with dynamite and oil drums, and blowing it up. We're halfway into the novel at this point and they have continued to be one step ahead of Doc and his men throughout. Dent just doesn't seem interested in them anymore, having introduced them in such fantastic fashion. He's content with them offstage while Doc's team tries to catch them up. So we learn that the

invisible chalk that his men use is slightly sticky so can be easily secreted in their hair and that it can be used not only to leave messages on glass but even inside pockets, albeit in crude fashion.

It takes a while for them to get fed up chasing their tails and finally follow up on Johnny's fading transmission from the Canadian wastes. They've become coated in a weird luminescence, "grotesque, dancing satans of pale flame". They've come upon Thorpe Carleth, who runs Carleth Air Lines, and his able manservant, Peabody. And they take him up on his kind offer to borrow one of his experimental aircraft to fly up to Labrador and see what might be going on.

Eventually, of course, things start to settle down, but it's fully two thirds of the way through the book before we really begin to figure anything out. There are indeed Vikings, not least the tough lady of the novel, Ingra, but the men who sailed the dragonboat down to Long Island aren't among their number. The real Vikings are but one of the mysteries to be explored once we eventually make it to Qui, which is almost exotic enough to live up to the billing it was given at the end of *The Roar Devil*.

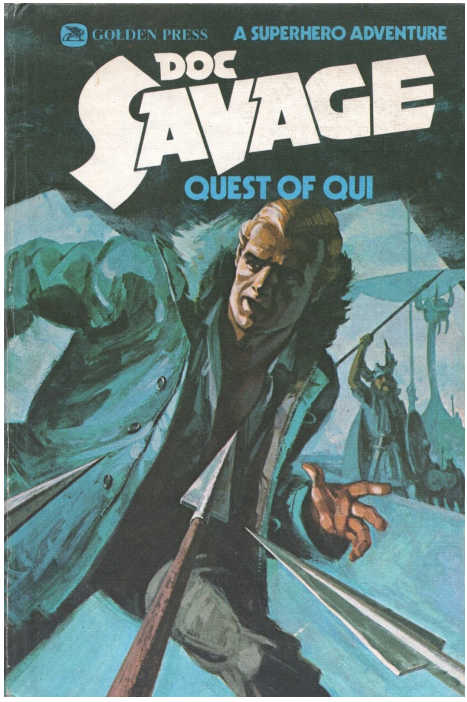
I liked the way that Dent designed Qui, though I'd have preferred it if he'd got us there sooner and populated the place with less clichéd action. At least we leave it in less clichéd fashion, which must mean something. It felt to me like Dent knew what he was going to do in Qui from moment one, but had no idea how he was going to get us there, so he spent chapter after chapter expanding on the *Doc Savage* mythos until something fell into place that would work. That means much less story than usual but much more detail.

As always, there's room for some linguistic gems from the thirties. One word that I'd love to see brought back into common parlance is "catawampus", which here means askew or awry, as in a square that Ham draws in his pocket that turns out to be a diamond. Less appealing to my OCD is "a stairs", rather than 'the stairs', which just seems wrong. One word that I knew but hadn't heard in a long while is "tyro" meaning a beginner, here the pilot who faces off against Doc in a tense dogfight. Another that I've learned here in Arizona is "wikiup", which is a Native American dwelling built with a frame and covered with brush; there are some of those in Qui.

That leaves a couple that involve Ham. As if Johnny wasn't embarrassed enough running around in the snow in his red underwear, Ham, "the Beau Brummell of New York", finds himself dressed in a gunny sack, a cheap bag made out of burlap that's the precise opposite of his usual sartorial elegance. The one that I had to look up was a rather out-of-character comment hurled his way by Peabody, Carleth's gentleman's gentleman who's so good at his

job that Ham wants to hire him. "Nerts to you!" he says. "Nerts" turns out to be a simple dialectical pronunciation of "Nuts!"

So, all in all, while the lost civilisation of Qui might almost live up to its billing, *The Quest of Qui* is a mixed gunny sack, worthy in some ways, just not the ones we tend to expect. It's not lacking in action, not really, but it's mostly abstracted action where there isn't a clear enemy to battle. There's a great deal of promise that tends not to be followed up on. Instead, we get the sort of details that long term fans will dig but a new reader won't find particularly impressive. And, once again, we ignore lessons learned in recent books because invisibility is clearly not the sort of assumption that should be first and foremost for a series with an open end.

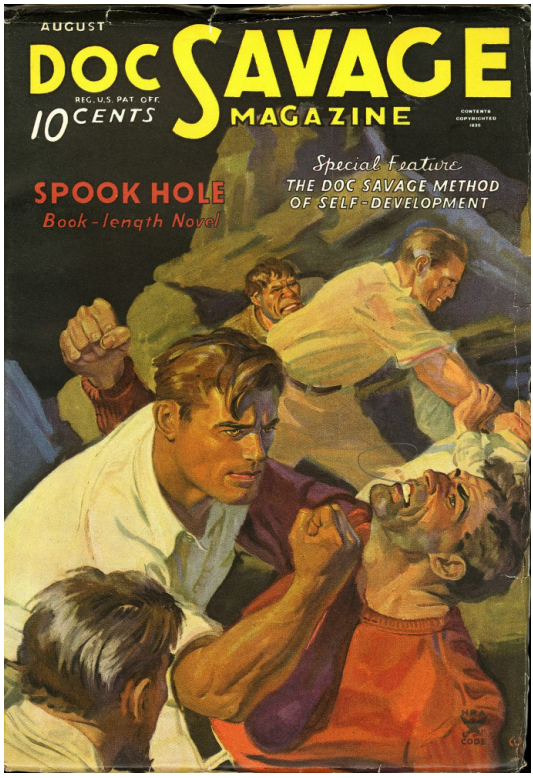


A strange Viking ship attacks a yacht in Long Island Sound, and starts the trail which leads Doc Savage and his crew on the

QUEST OF QUI

A Complete Book-length Novel

By KENNETH ROBESON



LESTER DENT

SPOOK HOLE

PULP PUBLICATION:
#30, JULY 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#70, SEPTEMBER 1972
COVER: FRED PFEIFFER

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#43, JANUARY 2010

The last of five novels in a row for regular *Doc Savage* author Lester Dent, *Spook Hole* may well be the best of them, even if it didn't have the movie trailer set-up of *Quest of Qui*. It's a great example of how Dent could play with his formula to create something that's at once precisely what we expect and also something innovative. What's important is where that innovation lies.

Initially, everything seems to follow the usual formula. We're treated to a fantastic set-up in the early chapters, with many promising angles. Doc shows up early and most of his assistants are introduced quickly enough. The usual roles are assigned: the villain and his henchman; the mystery man behind everything; and the story's token lady, who is, of course, young and beautiful. We gradually find out which exotic location we'll likely be visiting in the second half and, sure enough, that's when the planes come out. Eventually, the villain comes a cropper by his own actions and we're done for the month.

Now, that deliberately vague summary does sound familiar, doesn't it? It could be used, with every word intact, to describe the vast majority of Dent's entries in this series and there were plenty of them by this point. *Spook Hole* was the thirtieth monthly novel for *Doc Savage Magazine* and Dent had written all but three of them. That's a very impressive output and I'm sure it was only possible because he'd figured out how to work it to a formula. What elevates this one is how he mixes things up a little to keep that formula fresh.

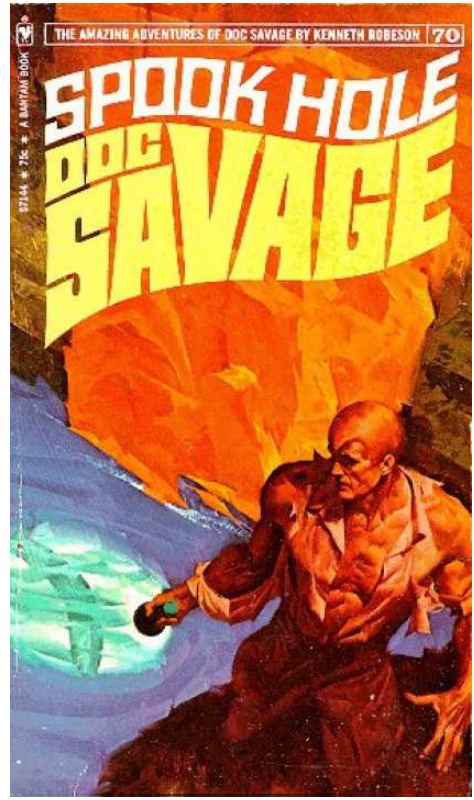
For a start, there isn't a single villain; there

are two and they're battling each other. The first is Captain Wapp of the whaler *Harpoon*, who speaks with a thick European accent. The other is Oliver Orman Braski, who is a more traditional American hood. Both of their gangs want to nab Hezemiah Law first, so as to gain whatever it is that he keeps at Spook Hole that's worth a million bucks, and they're more than happy to kill everyone on the other side to get it.

For another, the henchman is so capable he's the henchman for both Wapp and Braski. His name is Ropes, because he carries a unique weapon: a two-foot length of heavy wire hawser that's wrapped in adhesive tape. As we start out, he's working for Wapp, but we soon discover that he's a double agent for Braski. When things get a little tense, due to the involvement of Doc Savage, he persuades the two villains to join forces instead and work together. After all, there'll be plenty of money to go around once they find Hezemiah Law and Spook Hole. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?

The mystery man gets a surprising amount of time, even though it doesn't seem like it because Dent manages a character subterfuge very well for a change, and he spends most of it on his own stirring things up between the other sides. Long term readers will naturally see through the subterfuge, but new readers may not, partly because there's another, more obvious subterfuge in the neatly annoying Sass, a character that Captain Wapp hires on when he bulks up his numbers. In between are a couple of cab drivers, which Dent handles well too, because, while we expect one of them to be one of Doc's assistants in disguise, we don't necessarily expect the second to be too.

The token lady gets a lot less time than ex-



pected, partly because Hezemiah Law's niece, Nancy, knows nothing and does nothing but get kidnapped. Talking of young ladies getting kidnapped, Pat Savage is back again too, with an interesting couple of scenes. Initially, she lasts two pages, Doc dismissing her outright after she's served her purpose:

> "I asked you to help us simply because I cannot imitate a woman's voice with any great success," Doc told her. "You promised faithfully to clear out after you did that. I'm holding you to that promise."

So that's it for Pat. Except it isn't. And then, when she's finally out, she's immediately back in again. Doc drops her off at her beauty salon

but, only a single page later, she's waiting at headquarters for him with Nancy Law. While Pat is only a peripheral character here, spending most of her time kidnapped as usual, Dent does at least have some fun with her while she's around.

A less obvious scene of note is Doc's first appearance. There's a giant black shape floating through the events of the first chapter, tying up one-armed men and knocking out hoods. It's a man, of course, secreted under a rubber cape and hood, but we won't know who it is until he takes them off. Well, series regulars will all recognise who half a page earlier because of the strange trilling sound that he makes. That's a good approach for Dent and I believe it's the first time he used it.

The other notable approach that Dent takes here is to keep the mystery in mind throughout but focus instead on the action. The mystery, of course, is wrapped up in whatever Hezemiah Law is doing in Spook Hole, but we're not let in on that secret until almost the last page:

> "It is very baffling, this secret," Johnny told Pat. "I do not believe I ever went through so much trouble before and learned so little. Frankly, it gives me a headache."

Of course, it really doesn't matter what it is, because that whole side of the book is a huge MacGuffin, but Dent keeps it alive by continually adding little details to deepen its mystery. While everyone in the book cares deeply about that MacGuffin, we care more about what they'll do to get to it: Wapp and his men, Braski and his, Ropes and whichever side he'll end up on... The mysterious one-armed man turns out to be a sort of Yojimbo character, a clever man playing everyone against each other, including Doc and his own team. By the end, we've seen more dynamics than perhaps the last dozen books combined.

Talking of Doc's team, I should outline who's in play here. He's first up, as he always used to be, but Monk and Ham aren't far behind. Johnny is in the action before we know it, prompting a rescue mission; he's in fine form here, unlike many prior books in which his supposedly impenetrable vocabulary consists largely of words that I know. Here, he was just as impenetrable for me:

> "Consummate ischiagra, a bit of cephalalgia, and a touch of torticollis describes my condition," Johnny groaned.
>
> "Put it in small words," Monk requested.
>
> "I feel like hades," Johnny complied.

Only a couple of pages further on:

> "Acrimonious contumeliousness, I call

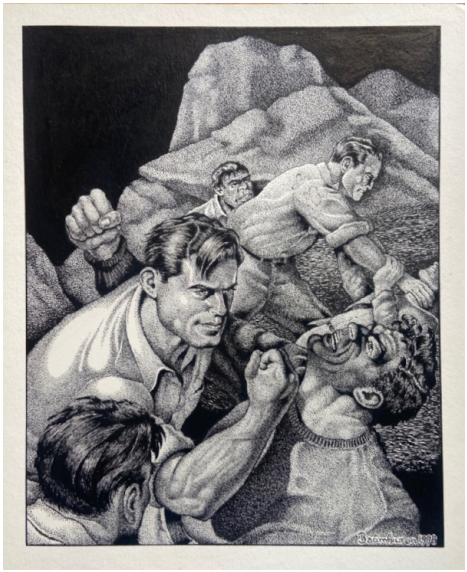
it," Johnny said.

"Holy smoke!" gulped a sailor. "We have the dictionary along with us."

Ironically, Johnny has to help out his colleagues here. When Doc asks Nancy Law for her uncle's profession, it turns out to be ichthyology and Monk honestly asks Johnny to translate. I knew that one when I was a child and I'm not a world-renowned scientist. Long Tom shows up later, albeit in unusual fashion, but Renny's abroad for this one, building a railway in a remote part of Asia.

And, talking of abroad, the eventual action takes place in and offshore from Blanca Gorde, a small coastal town on the Chilean side of Patagonia. This is entirely fictional, unlike Doc's last trip to that country, back in *Meteor Menace*, as Antafagasta is a big enough town to appear on my globe. One nice touch this time is that Doc stays behind, after the mystery is wrapped up, to pick up what knowledge he can from Hezemiah Law. Unfortunately, we get there by plane from Doc's warehouse on the Hudson, which has been miraculously restored after being blown up and burned down by fake Vikings last month in *Quest of Qui*.

Last time out, Dent spent a lot of time expanding the *Doc Savage* mythos, but at the expense of the story. Here, he's able to juggle the two, letting us in on a few new details as they become applicable. For instance, there's a prowler alarm on Doc's headquarters that doesn't just monitor the obvious rooms on the 86th floor but also the areas around them; it's triggered here by an eavesdropper in the internal fire escape shaft. As Doc gives chase in his extra-fast elevator, we learn that he consulted heavily on the design of the building and Renny drew up its blueprints. Another neat little addition is a large fish tank in



the laboratory, which contains a glass tube that can serve as a secret emergency exit with its own mini-elevator.

Renny isn't the only one to help out. Doc tracks Johnny at the outset of the book by following his footprints, an easy task because they're visible to black light; Monk had helped Doc to blend fluorescent chemicals which are contained within the porous heels of all their shoes. Of course, there are other people helping out Doc all the time, not least the staff at his upstate New York clinic. Thus far, everyone put through the process to repatriate crooks into honest society was sent there unconscious. Here, we learn about other alternatives, Patagonia being a rather long way from New York state. One is to sucker a crook into delivering himself, with a note from Doc asking to reimburse the man with ten thousand dollars. He isn't lying, but that ten grand only shows up in the bank accounts of those who have undergone a full treatment and been released into society.

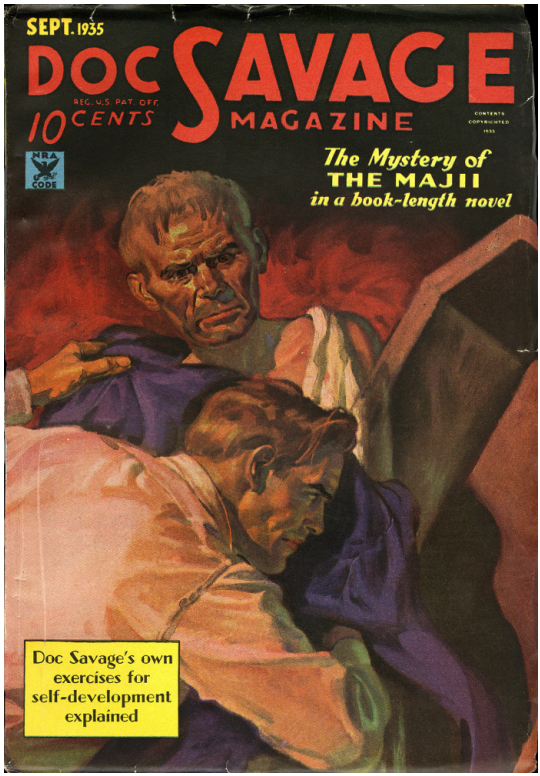
Last time out, we visited Monk's laboratory,

with its dedicated room for Habeas Corpus, and Ham's apartment on Park Avenue; we also spent part of *The Annihilist* in Renny's penthouse overlooking Central Park. Here, we get a glimpse at Long Tom's digs, which are every bit as modest as everyone else's are flamboyant: "a miserly room off a gloomy basement laboratory where Long Tom conducted his experiments; an extremely lowly environment, considering that Long Tom was probably several times a millionaire in his own right."

There's much less of note on the linguistic side and almost all of it comes from Captain Wapp and his European accent; the one exception issuing from Braski, who suggests that "Old Hezemiah Law would have had a pup." I hadn't heard that before, but it clearly means the same as having kittens. I have no idea why cute baby animals should have anything to do with anger, but hey.

Most obviously, Wapp says "bane" a lot and I have no idea what it means. Initially I just thought it was the way that he pronounced "been", given that his first line is "You bane in big hurry", but that soon falls apart as his dialogue proliferates. The following gloriously broken sentence has a clear meaning, but what "bane" adds to it, I have zero clue: "One funny move he bane make, and aye take with mine hands his neck and make with it a large crack."

I looked up two other words that Wapp uses more than once. I presume his use of "monkeyshiner" refers to the sort of troublemaker he doesn't want to go up against but must. It has a racist connotation nowadays, referring to a black man who acts up to please whites, but I don't think that applies here. The other is "bummers", which I have no doubt doesn't mean here what it meant when I was growing up in England, namely homosexuals. Here, it's a clearly pejorative term for people of less worth and presumably comes from the same root as "bums", with the focus being on "loafers" rather than "vagrants".



LESTER DENT

THE MAJII

PULP PUBLICATION:
#31, SEPTEMBER 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

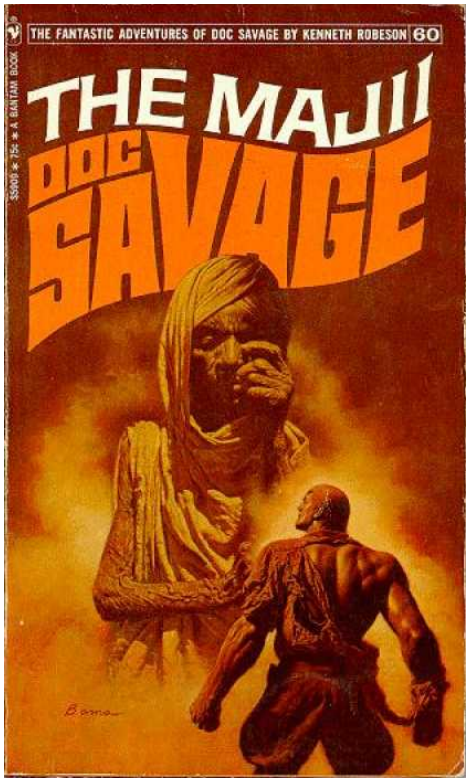
BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#60, MAY 1971
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#9, AUGUST 2007

After five Lester Dent novels on the trot, September 1935 marked the beginning of five non-Lester Dent novels on the trot. J. Allan Dunn, a new face to the series, got his shot first, with *The Majii*, writing from an outline by Dent and he does a surprisingly good job. I just wish I knew how to pronounce it. Is it Magi? Madgy? Ma-Jee? Who knows. It sounds weird and those three dots almost make the word look like it's written in Sanskrit.

That's not the only agreeably weird edge that Dunn brings with him, even though his previous work was mostly in westerns, with adventure stories as his backup. He was British by birth but emigrated to the U.S. in 1893 and moved around quite a lot, as perhaps befits a member of New York's Explorers Club and Adventurers' Club. His qualifications are there and he wrote a thousand stories, novels and serials before his death in 1941. This novel, however, was his only contribution to the *Doc Savage* series.

The Majii starts out like *The Mystic Mullah*, one of three previous non-Dent novels, with the arrival in New York of a foreign dignitary, here the Ranee of Jondore, yet another fictional country. We later find out that it's a jewel-rich Asian province under British control. Surprisingly it has a population comparable to the U.S.A., which is a rather wild suggestion, even if the British Empire did account for a quarter of the world's population when this book was written. Then again, hyperbole is the name of the game. The Nizam of Jondore, the leader of his nation, is apparently the richest man in the world, courtesy of



those jewels, which makes me wonder how he has so little power to kick out the foreign occupying force.

The Ranee is the widow of its last Nizam, who is recently deceased; his half-brother has inherited the throne as it's presumably male line and all that. She's cruising around the world to get a handle on her grief, which can't be helped by a band of murderous thugs who decide to chase her through New York, even though she has a brace of armed guards at her side. What's weird here is that the last of them commits suicide when subjected to the will of Rama Tura, fakir and disciple of the Majii, a legendary Jondorian who lived thirty generations ago.

Rama Tura isn't our big boss, because the Majii shows up late in the book to claim that role for himself, but he's so capable a henchman that he almost rises to the billing of sidekick. He's in New York because he's touring an uncanny stage act that involves him turning glass into valuable jewels, apparently using the unbridled power of the human mind and nothing else. Yes, suckers fell for stuff like this all the time back in the thirties, because the exotic Orient was inscrutable and mysterious to Americans who had just survived the Great Depression. Rama Tura knows how to milk it too; his introductory scene is as an apparent corpse on a bed who comes back to life to talk with the Ranee:

> "I am the dead who lives at will," he said. "What do you want?"

Also like *The Mystic Mullah*, Doc doesn't show up for a few chapters so that the back story can deepen before he joins in. When he does so, it's because he's called into hospital by a former teacher to examine the Ranee, who's at death's door after collapsing at one of Rama Tura's public demonstrations right as the fakir conveniently announces that she's about to die to the assembled throng. And so the game is afoot. Incidentally, that former teacher mentions Doc to his colleague: "But that was years ago. The man has far outstripped me—outstripped any one I know, for that matter. He is a mental wizard."

Doc's very much the focus here. Renny and Johnny are out of the country, the former attending an engineering conclave in Germany and the latter leading some archaeological research in Central America. Long Tom is due to leave the country too but doesn't and Dunn frames his participation in an interesting way. An electrical outfit has offered him $50,000 plus bonus to superintend some construction

in South America and he was preparing to leave when Doc calls him. Discovering that Monk and Ham, already on the case, have been captured by the enemy, he immediately joins the fray, turning down that nice little salary. I liked that approach. I didn't like the fact that it was a completely worthless sentiment given that he's promptly captured too.

Monk and Ham are taken in a clever manner but one that doesn't ring entirely fair. They're attending a further Rama Tura demonstration and Doc has sneaked backstage to plant a camera to record their act. When they see a bronze elbow sticking out from the covering over a stretcher, they assume that it's Doc who's being carried out and promptly investigate. In the elevator, the "body" promptly shoots them with "some pungent, burning liquid" that blinds them so much that Monk can't even hit his enemy with a machine pistol in a frickin' elevator. Yeah, I'm not buying into him being that poor a shot. Can he hit the side of a barn with a cannon? Tune in next week.

Long Tom just disappears. He drives into the story and apparently gets captured before he gets anywhere. We have no idea how, just that it happens because he doesn't answer Doc's messages. That seems cheap, but it's surely to allow Dunn to focus on the Man of Bronze, who's heading out to the airport to meet the new Nizam of Jongore, Kadir Lingh, who's arriving from San Francisco on the midnight flight. He gets there just a little too late, the brief battle he misses leaving one man with sliced eyes. Ouch! And, just in case we're truly unable to imagine that agony, Dunn is happy to provide us a suitably painful explanation: "The blade had all but separated his eyeballs as a sharp knife would a pair of apples." It's OK, folks, he's a bad guy; he killed a taxi driver earlier in the book.

All this adds a freakiness to the story that I found welcome. Characters aren't where Doc expects them to be, so he spends time and effort trying to figure out why and where they might have got to. It gives us the impression that Rama Tura is so firmly on top of the game that Doc is still trying to work out which game it is. Moving a chess piece when you're playing Monopoly really doesn't help any and it takes quite a while for Doc to realise what's actually going on. I appreciated this because, while I'm on Doc's side and want him to come out on top in the end, I don't like the stories where he's an invulnerable all-knowing superman who's unable to make an error. I'm particularly fond of one scene here, as Rama Tura pulls a neat trick on him that leaves him dazed and confused and the chapter ending with the line, "Standing there slapping his face, he ceased to remember." That's tough.

There's a lot of freakiness here, usually in the wake of whatever Rama Tura's just got up to. At one point, Doc's yet again a step behind him, walking through the empty Hotel Vincent in an attempt to find any human being not drugged by the villain. He eventually finds a telephone operator quietly reading in a tiny room. This chapter feels like it could have been sourced from a *Weird Tales* story and it's an agreeable tone to find in a *Doc Savage*. When we finally get to Jondore, which happens much later in the page count than usual, we spend the majority of our time within the ancient tomb of the Majii, a vast, inevitably black cube of a building which has never been seen by western eyes. It could easily be transplanted as is into a Cthulhu mythos story, just secreted within a swamp to be worshipped by a cult of fish-creatures.

So far, so good, but Dunn seems to have had some ambition here. Maybe he was a fan and he wanted to make a mark on the series that would always remain his. Maybe he was just a professional who did his homework and felt it was fair for him to do a little expansion of the *Doc Savage* mythos while he was at it. Either way, he does that a lot, especially within the 86th floor headquarters, which are fleshed out like never before.

Dunn has Doc run through some forensic tests while explaining how he can do that in his laboratory. Hundreds of scrapbooks, furnished by an agency, sit on shelves covering "every political development reported by the press of the world, among other things." An electro-spectroscopic analysis contrivance can break down even microscopic samples into their chemical components. There are geological charts for the region and thousands of tiny labelled vials containing its different soils, clays and rocks. There are weather charts too, "automatically recorded by his own instruments". How big these headquarters are we are not told, but they can't be small!

The 86th floor also has to be large enough to hide rooms all over the place. Dunn introduces us to one that Doc keeps secret inside his HQ; it's a "ventilated wall compartment", perfect for hiding villains who choose to drug themselves into slumber rather than spill the beans to Doc. He also introduces us to another one outside the HQ, down the corridor and around the corner. This one's even more secret, as it's activated by thermostatic technology embedded within the plaster of the wall. He has to put his hands up against the right spot, keep them there, then release and keep them there again. This is an extra-special compartment because it allows Doc to tap his own phone and even cut it off entirely if he wants. But hey, he's a big target, right? Dunn even lets us in on the fact that he makes his own distilled water there in the laboratory as a previous enemy had once tried to poison him through the water supply to the building.

If that isn't enough, Dunn even takes a go at Doc's two hour daily routine, something we haven't seen expanded in quite some time. He suggests that it includes a memory routine, though sadly he doesn't explain what. I could do with that little trick! He merely points out that his memory was being prepped for greatness from the outset. How's this for starting early?

> "In the cradle stage, he had been broken of forgetting things, just as other children are broken of the thumb-sucking habit."

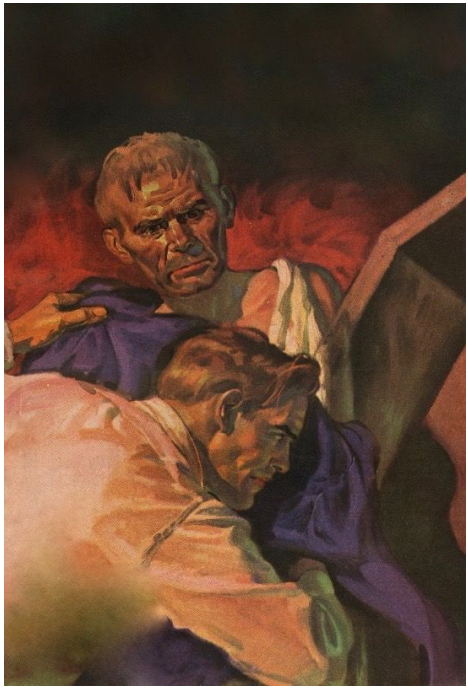
Oh, and we even get a new trick that he's secreted within his clothing. At one point, having been captured, he rips the seams on his trousers open, on both legs. They each give out powders, one yellow and one blue. Combining the two creates an acidic fog which burns anyone who happens to move into it. We know that killing is against Doc's ethos but apparently burning them horribly is fine, in the right circumstances.

Dunn doesn't give anywhere near as much attention to Doc's assistants. The closest he comes is a scene where Monk, Ham and Long Tom return to HQ and Monk vanishes. Ham is distraught and Long Tom calls him on it. "You two guys give me a pain. You put in your time trying to kill each other. And the minute one of you thinks the other is in a jam, you bust out in tears." Of course, the moment Monk shows back up, it's immediately back on like

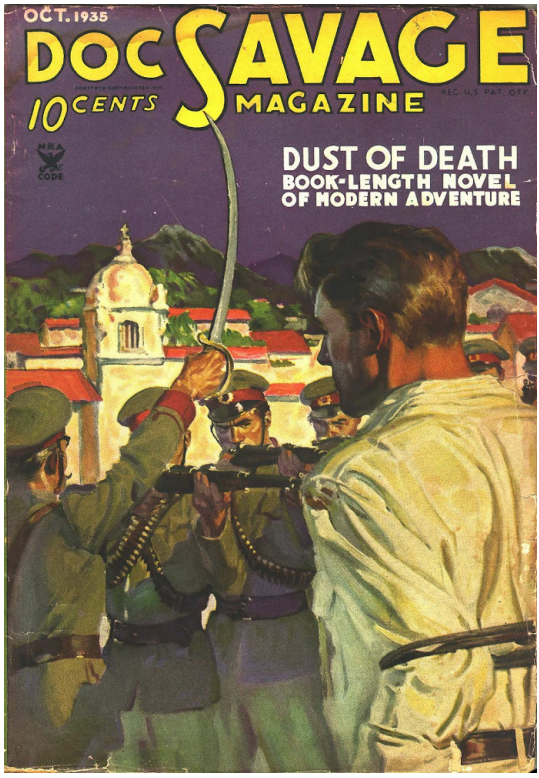
Donkey Kong. I often wonder if pitting these two against each other was the most fun part of writing a *Doc Savage* novel or the least. Maybe it depended on the day.

There are points in this novel where the language gets a little clumsy, but Dunn certainly isn't afraid of crafting long sentences and there are a few instances of words that stood out to me. He uses "interne" twice, so telling me that it's not just a typo; it's just an archaic form of "intern". I think that I've seen "rompled" before, but I did really like the sentence in which it's used here: "Echoes rompled hollowly through the darkness." I was surprised to see "a shenanigan", given that shenanigans happen in the plural more often than not, but it's apparently perfectly acceptable in the singular. That leaves "bowser", which I had to look up. The meaning is obvious, given that Monk shouts, "Scat, bowser!" to a dog, but I wondered where the generic nickname came from. It looks like it may date back to a 1920 book by Thornton Burgess, an author of many novels for children about animals, including *Bowser the Hound* in 1920 and at least one sequel, *Bowser the Hound Meets His Match* in 1928. I have no idea how he met his match or what that match was, but wouldn't it be hilarious if it was a pig with large ears?

I looked something else up too and it wasn't the catch to speaking ancient Mayan to your colleagues to ensure that your captors don't know what you're up to. I get the general concept but when the line is "See a man called Kadir Lingh", I'm not sure how much a dead language is going to help. What I looked up was an idea raised by this sentence: "Two men were lying atop the roof in cots. This in itself was not unusual, as tenement inhabitants often slept on the roofs." Apparently, this was



a real thing. Before the advent of air conditioning, apartments in tenements were often too hot to bear, so tenants slept on roofs or on fire escapes, often in great numbers. Back in 1908, *The New York Times* ran a piece about rich folk catching on to this idea and using "roof beds", each of them with its own little roof to keep off the rain. The biggest catch to sleeping on tenement roofs, though, is a likelihood of burning your feet on the tar.



HAROLD A. DAVIS

DUST OF DEATH

PULP PUBLICATION:
#32, OCTOBER 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#32, APRIL 1969
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#10, SEPTEMBER 2007

Back in June 1934, Harold A. Davis became the first author other than creator Lester Dent to pen a *Doc Savage* novel. Just over a year later, in September 1935, he became the first author other than Lester Dent to return and pen a second. This was in part because these two writers knew each other, having worked together on a paper in Oklahoma together, *The Tulsa World*. When Davis followed Dent to New York City, the latter introduced him to Street & Smith and the rest is history. He would eventually go on to write thirteen entries in the series.

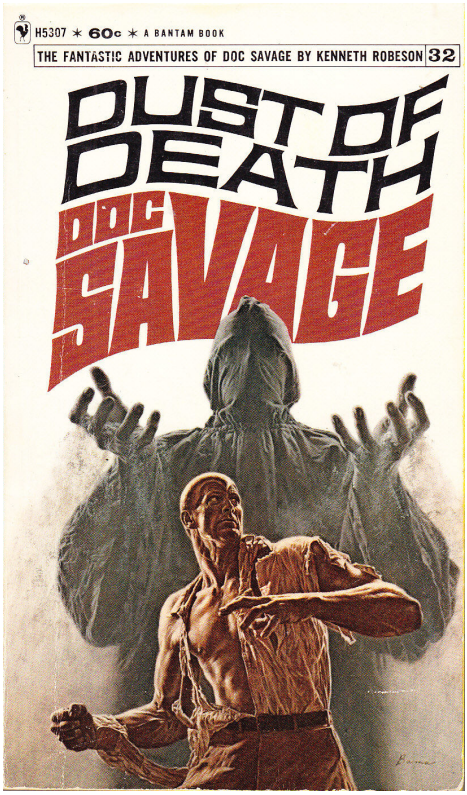
That first novel was *The King Maker* and it's not very hard to see a number of similarities between it and *Dust of Death*. Both are war novels, the former revolving around a civil war in the fictional Balkan nation of Calbia and the latter taking place during a war between two fictional rival countries in South America, Santa Amazo and Delezon. Both prominently feature legendary pilots, "The Purple Terror" Champ Dugan in *The King Maker* and Ace Jackson in this one. And both are described as Kiwis, though the former book highlights that that does not mean that they're from New Zealand, as we might expect, "kiwi" instead being a term used by military pilots to describe non-flying officers. I can only assume in this instance that it's used in jest, as these folk really know how to fly!

What's most different is in the use of Doc's assistants. *The King Maker* was notable for Doc having them run a set of solo missions behind enemy lines, something that gives them real value. *Dust of Death*, however, is nigh on a solo

adventure for Doc, even if Long Tom is first and foremost for a couple of chapters. Johnny and Renny are absent, without even a mention as to why or where, and Ham and Monk are firmly comic relief in this one, especially given that the book marks a milestone in their antagonistic relationship, gifting Ham with a memorable foil for Monk's pig, Habeas Corpus, in the form of a jungle ape by the name of Chemistry.

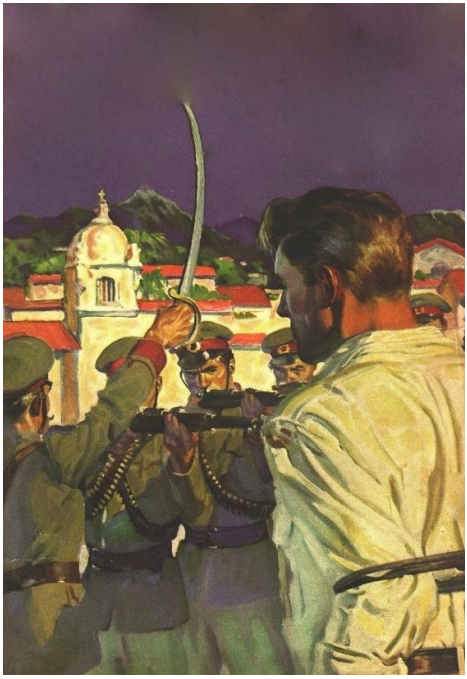
Davis gets down to business immediately. The first chapter sees Long Tom fly from Argentina to Santa Amazo to see Ace Jackson, an old friend, who's in hospital there. His arrival sparks much interest and that leads the villain of the piece, known as the Inca in Gray, to try an assassination attempt against him. It fails, naturally, but an army officer is murdered and there's much use of an awful foreign accent. "Our consul, he ees not have right for you thees military field to use." Oh yes, I have no doubt that everyone in South America sounds like that! Or maybe not.

The second chapter escalates the drama. We meet Jackson, all bandaged up and restricted to bed after a try on his life: his plane broke apart in mid-air while he was delivering much needed serum to a fever-struck tribe in the mountains, and his parachute had been tampered with too. We also meet Señorita Anita Carcetas, who's clearly smitten with this ace pilot who's serving as commander of Santa Amoza's air force. She's as beautiful as we might expect, but she's also the daughter of the republic's president. And as Jackson explains the intrigue in play, with the Inca in Gray apparently behind the war and eager for it to continue, that villain's men mount one more attempt at his life, right there in the hospital, which fails but results in a particularly weird



death, courtesy of the dust of the title.

For a while, this is textbook stuff, even if nobody rides up an elevator to see Doc Savage on the 86th floor of a well known skyscraper in New York. We're given a succession of suspects, every one of which could well be the Inca in Gray: Junio Serrato, the War Minister of Santa Amoza, whom Long Tom apprehends and promptly releases again; a European arms dealer by the name of Count Hoffe; and Don Kurrell, an oilman representing the company who owns the Santa Amoza oil fields. Long Tom is also neatly captured by the forces of the Inca in Gray, who substitute a message of their own for the cable that Long Tom wired to Doc Savage back in New York. And, as that's received, we learn that Doc and his men use a



simple little code when communicating, ensuring that each line in a cable begins with a five letter word. As the one he apparently receives from Long Tom does not adhere to that rule, it must be a fake and there's something going on down in South America!

I thoroughly enjoyed this for quite a while, the story moving on neatly in capable prose with action around every corner and intrigue following in its wake. There's even an unusual attack on Doc in New York; nobody takes the elevator up to the 86th floor but a couple do take it up to the 100th, an observation deck, where they cut the cable to Doc's private elevator, so prompting it to plummet downward with Doc, Monk and Ham inside. That doesn't achieve much, as it turns out, as the shaft is carefully constructed to automatically slow a descent and act, through compression of the air below, as a natural shock absorber. I don't buy into that in the slightest, not least because we're promptly told that the shafts are made of brick.

Of course, the trio merely take this as added incentive to travel down to Santa Amoza to see what's happening down there, which they do in a "stratosphere dirigible", which apparently will be much faster than a plane, just not fast enough to save Long Tom from being shot to death by firing squad in Delezon. Oh yeah, Davis really goes there! He does it again later in the book with an even more prominent character too! Needless to say, the characters we absolutely know will be back for the next novel in the series don't really die, but Davis handles these scenes surprisingly well, better than the icky scenes with Ham and Monk staked out in an ant-pit.

There are downsides that go beyond Doc mostly running solo. There's a point where he borrows a ramshackle plane to fly over to Delezon and immediately gets more performance out of it than the experienced pilot who's been flying it for a while; that's eminently forgiveable compared to when, soon afterwards, he lashes the stick, climbs out of the plane and re-tunes the carburettor in mid-flight, just like he's Jimi Hendrix playing the guitar. It's a little far-fetched, but hey, it's Doc Savage, superman. It is, at least, more believable than some of what he got up to in the first half dozen books. There's a tough fight scene here that makes up for this a little because it stretches the Man of Bronze, rendering him a little more human again.

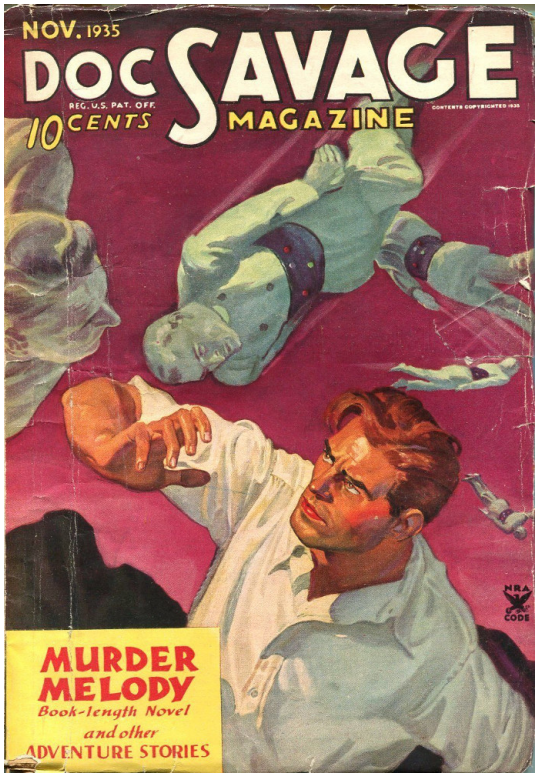
The downside I can't talk much about is the motivation of the villainous Inca in Gray. He's set up capably, as a mysterious instigator who is keeping the war going for reasons known only to him. As suspects point fingers at other

suspects, we really focus in on those reasons. Why would someone step in cleverly every time the war is about to end, whichever side will win, to throw a spanner in the works and keep it all running? Well, I'm still at a loss because the revelation that's prompted by the eventual unmasking of the Inca in Gray makes no sense at all. It wasn't who I expected, I can tell you that, but that's mostly because I was trying to use logic. Silly me!

Before I return to Chemistry, who's the primary reason why this novel is important to the series, I'll highlight a couple of words that I had to look up. There are fewer than usual, by the way, for reasons I can't explain. I can't explain either why one of them is American slang while the other is British. The American one arrives after the engine of Doc's plane starts playing up, it "grew logy"; this is apparently a slang term meaning "sluggish". It's in the air that we find the British one too. Long Tom is being transported as a prisoner in the belly of a plane with live fire exploding around it; he identifies what's happening by listening to the sounds. A close "woof" accompanied by the plane swaying and pitching means that it must be Archies. That's German anti-aircraft fire and the term dates back to the First World War, when an RAF pilot, Vice-Marshal Amyas Borton, frequently sang a song while flying between fire over the western front: "Archibald, certainly not! Get back to work at once, sir, like a shot!"

Of course, nobody remembers *Dust of Death* today for its use of British World War I slang. They remember it mostly because, after Monk had spent novel after novel using his pet pig, Habeas Corpus, to torment Ham, the latter is finally able to get some revenge. Monk picked up Habeas in Arabia as long ago as December 1933, in *The Phantom City*, the tenth book in the series and twenty-two novels earlier. Here, he and Ham decide to take different paths out of the jungles between Santa Amazo and Delezon because neither will trust the other. Shortly afterwards, Ham caves and tries to find Monk, finding instead his lookalike in an odd-looking monkey that's "larger than a chimpanzee, but smaller than a gorilla." It's rust-coloured like Monk and has no tail. Ham honestly mistakes it for his colleague and soon realises that it's the perfect way to torment the simian one. So how fortunate it is for him then when the local Indians, for whom the creature is some sort of sacred ape, give it to him and he dubs it Chemistry.

Yeah, there are a lot of issues here, many of which I haven't even mentioned—Mayans? In Inca territory?—but it's often an interesting read and it's good to hear from Harold A. Davis again.



LAWRENCE DONOVAN

MURDER MELODY

PULP PUBLICATION:
#33, NOVEMBER 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#15, JANUARY 1967
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#38, JUNE 2010

Halfway into a five month run for authors other than Lester Dent, *Murder Melody* introduces a new one to the series, one Lawrence Donovan. He had started writing pulps in 1929 and worked for many of them under a variety of pseudonyms. He created a number of characters, including the Whisperer, and mystery grew up around him: where he was from, what he did before writing, even how to spell his name. He's supposed to have worked in Hollywood before the pulps but IMDb doesn't have an entry for him, so that casts doubt on the family tale that he was given the chance to write the 1925 silent version of *Ben-Hur*, only to lose out due to diving into a bottle instead.

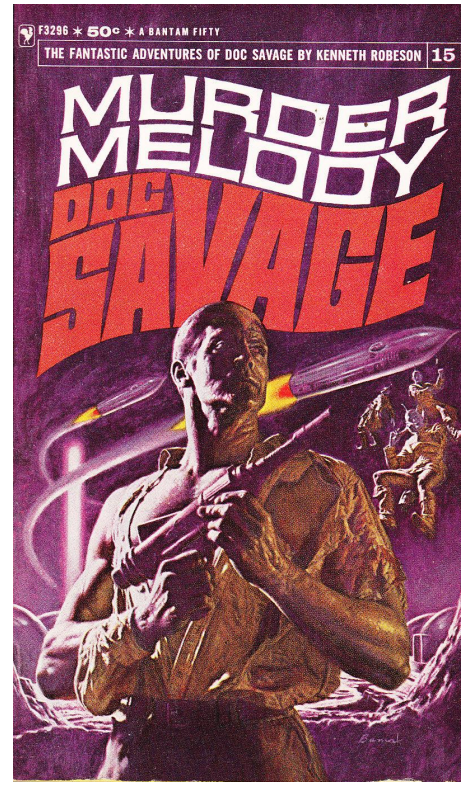
His work on *Doc Savage* starts pretty well, all things considered. He gets down to business with absolutely no messing around; he avoids the trend for long characterful prologues that leave Doc's introduction until chapter five or six. He aims for all out action, with never a dull moment; it's not quite *The Lost Oasis* with its opening ten chapter chase, but it's closer than the series has been for a while. He even includes all Doc's five assistants, something we hadn't seen since *The Secret in the Sky* in May 1935; this came six months later in November. And, most notably, this is perhaps the weirdest entry in the series thus far and agreeably so for quite a while.

We begin in Vancouver, BC, into which Doc, Johnny and Monk fly to witness some sort of odd demonstration. Doc's received an unusual message, you see, written in exquisite script on rolled gold leaf, which he inherently trusts; he apparently places enough faith in his inter-

pretation of handwriting to put himself and his men into clear danger. The earth shakes inexplicably, the location not being on a fault-line, a day after a similarly inexplicable quake on the other side of the country in Provincetown, MA. While this happens, an odd man dies while talking to someone through a button on his vest and passing on a fresh message to Doc, secreted in his throat. Nobody touches him; the murder weapon is apparently the melody of the title, a weird trilling not unlike the sound that Doc generates subconsciously in times of thought.

I should emphasise how strange this corpse really is. His face is strangely silvered and his vest is woven from an unknown alloy. In addition to a radio communication button, he has another which triggers a powerful magnet and a third which apparently allows him to counter the effects of gravity. A trio of similar men escape Doc's anaesthetic globules by triggering their levitation buttons and floating away on the breeze, even though unconscious. Doc sets the corpse on the same path, to avoid publicity, planning to retrieve it the next day out of mid-air. Oh, and these folk speak a strange language which is unknown even to Doc. That doesn't happen often.

That's a heck of a lot to cram into only two chapters, but Donovan isn't done. Whoever's behind this new mystery can draw on some major power, because he doesn't just play with the earth at will, he plays with the air and water too. He drapes Vancouver in smog, so that Doc's plane is the only one in the sky, manipulates it with a strange force and then does the same with the ships in the harbour, causing devastation that's promptly ignored. Strangest of all, he sucks those four men down from the sky and into the water, replacing



them with a hundred foot geyser. So much for retrieving the corpse.

Eventually we discover that this villain is named Zoro and he leads a band of Zoromen who appear like Hindus. Who wear turbans, a mistake that Lester Dent made earlier in the series in *The Thousand-Headed Man*. In an odd touch, Monk shows an uncharacteristic streak of racism, calling these Hindus "greasy" three times in two pages and then again later. It's notable and not easily disregarded as casual racism of the time, because precisely no other character follows suit. Donovan sees Monk as a blundering fool and chooses to not even pair him up with Ham for their usual bicker fest until about halfway through the novel.

We come to learn what Zoro is doing soon enough, though we have to wait a long while

to find out why and we continue to puzzle over the details as we do much of what Donovan threw into this novel.

For instance, his chief task at hand appears to be to steal a large quantity of an explosive called trinitromite from a factory located on the Columbia river outside Portland for reasons unknown but clearly nefarious. To achieve this, he steals a steamship in the Aleutians so he can speed it far too quickly over a thousand miles of water. It's almost like Donovan wanted to show off Zoro's advanced technology more than he wanted to acknowledge Vancouver as the most technologically advanced port in the British Empire and full of easier to acquire ships with exactly the sort of holds he needs.

In fact, I have no idea why the Aleutians are even in this story, except to hint at intrigue and provide a cliffhanger when an island turns into an erupting volcano and blocks an ongoing radio call between Doc and Ham. These scenes constitute great action for little apparent reason and that trend continues throughout the novel. It's a real rollercoaster of a ride and it's hard not to thrill to it, but it's also easy to see why many fans are unhappy with the book. There are far too many holes, conveniences and unexplained devices for the plot to hold together, even before we factor in an oversize bucketload of super-science.

For instance, the book is called *Murder Melody* because Zoro has figured out a way to kill people by playing a flute at them, which is a suitably weird technique. However, the explanation is that it's done with chemistry. I'm not even an amateur chemist, let alone Monk Mayfair, but I fail to understand how flutes generate chemicals, especially in ways that do not affect the people who are playing them but do affect everyone else who might be in the general vicinity with a quick death.

There are a lot of explanations here that are notable only for their absence and the explanations that do show up are far from convincing. I adore lost civilisation stories and this is clearly one of those, that's called the Kingdom of Subterranae because, well, you know where it is. It really is a rather convenient name, especially for a race which speaks a language that nobody on the surface understands. Oh, but they figured out radio and television a long time before us, so they tuned into our broadcasts from deep inside the earth and so now the million or so people in Manyon City speak English with an American accent. And naturally they named their age old civilisation from the Latin.

Donovan stretches a lot of things too far. Other authors might imagine that an underground race might lose the sense of vision and compensate by heightening others; you know, Mole People. Donovan sets up giant towers that reflect non-existent light incredibly well.

Other authors might wonder how an entirely enclosed ecosystem could function. Donovan just suggests that it works exactly the same way as it does on the surface. Other authors may leave these people where they are and have humans drill into their world. Donovan has them invent advanced pressure-resistant ships that can speed through rock just like it's water. When the *Pellucidar* series appears to be grounded in comparison, then you know you are getting the science really wrong.

Well, at least he has an ensemble cast of characters to keep the plot mysterious, right? Well, no. There are only three human characters here, beyond Doc and his team. One of them is the captain of the steamship that Zoro steals and he's only in the story because Donovan clearly wanted to create a catchphrase of his own to match the ones we know so well. "By the great hornspoon!" is pretty cool, even if he'll never get to use it again. The other two are characters whose motivations make so little sense that I'm not even going to introduce them. On the sort of human side, as I have to treat the occupants of Subterranae, only Zoro and Lanta get opportunity. The former is the villain of the piece, who's invulnerable until he isn't; while the latter is the expected beautiful princess who would give her life for her people. Donovan does try to trick us a few times but we never buy it.

With absolutely nothing worthy of note on the linguistic or historical sides, except the presence of some crazy extreme Cockney and Scots accents belonging to Canadian officials, that just leaves some notes about Doc and his men. I've mentioned Doc's faith in his handwriting analysis; he also demonstrates other talents this time out. The most believable is an uncanny ability to identify where he is using only his sense of smell and his in depth knowledge of geography, which apparently extends to the depths of every harbour in the country. That wild and superhuman talent does at least play far better than the point where he leaps off the top of a ship's mast, grabs a rope most of the way down and uses the palm of his hand to slow his descent; the rope is left smoking from the friction but it doesn't affect the man of bronze in the slightest. Nah, not buying that one, Laurence.

Even though Donovan gives all five of Doc's men some time in this book, he has surprisingly little for them to do. Johnny gets a sort of *Jurassic Park* moment while being transported through six mile depths and primeval rock formations. He even starts the novel off with his portable seismograph. It's Ham, though, who's given the most memorable moment; after the plane he's on crashes into the Arctic Ocean, Renny and Long Tom are able to swim to safety much easier than Ham, as the latter insists on taking his sword cane with him. I like that.

All this makes *Murder Melody* an odd entry in the series. It has all the elements a Doc Savage story needs. It even feels right, with action and technology and a whole kingdom to save. However, it falls apart the moment we start to think about it. It's like a house of cards; it's an impressive thing before a card slips away but, once it does, the rest follow suit and there's nothing left.

W. RYERSON JOHNSON

THE FANTASTIC ISLAND

PULP PUBLICATION:
#34, DECEMBER 1935
COVER: WALTER M. BAUMHOFER

BANTAM PUBLICATION:
#14, DECEMBER 1966
COVER: JAMES BAMA

SANCTUM PUBLICATION:
#23, JANUARY 2008

December 1935's issue of *Doc Savage Magazine*, credited, as always, to Kenneth Robeson, was the fifth novel in a row to be written by a different author. Lester Dent had finished a run of five books in August, then handed over to a relay team comprised of J. Allan Dunn, Harold A. Davis, Lawrence Donovan and, by this point, W. Ryerson Johnson, who had previously contributed *Land of Always-Night* back in March.

The Fantastic Island has something of a poor reputation with fans, many of whom truly loathe the mechanism that lies behind a number of mysterious deaths in the book, but I find that it's a real mixed bag. It's consistently inconsistent, from the first few pages to the last few. It begins, for instance, with some clumsy language, odd given the vibrant prose of *Land of Always-Night*, but Johnny is kidnapped in the very first line. In other words, it starts horribly and wonderfully all at the same time.

He disappeared while on an archaeological expedition to the Galapagos islands, prompting Doc to ask a couple of his other assistants to investigate. Fortunately, Monk and Ham aren't far away, vacationing on a yacht called the *Seven Seas* somewhere off Panama. With Pat Savage.

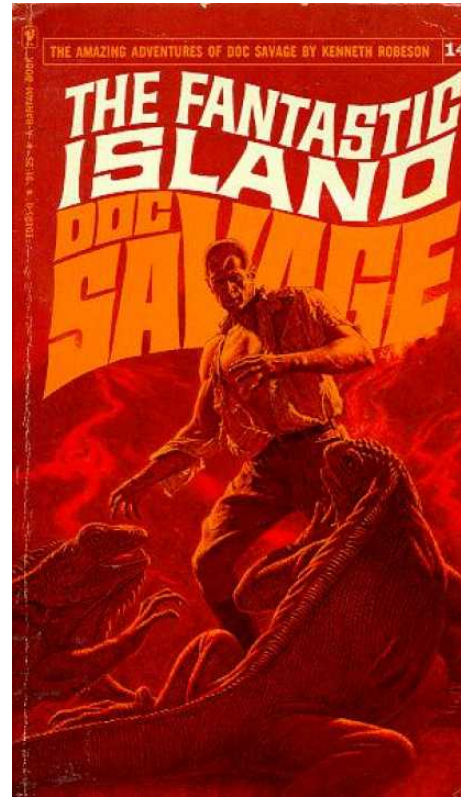
Now, why Monk and Ham are sharing a boat in the middle of nowhere with Pat, I have no idea. Even if we put every one of our dirty thoughts aside, which might be difficult, Monk and Ham spend their time annoying everyone around them with the constant bickering that constitutes the vast majority of their dialogue.

Yeah, we know they're secretly best friends but they're not best friends that anyone else ever wants to be around, so I don't buy into Pat volunteering to spend a holiday stuck in between these two perennial opponents.

Anyway, they head over to the Galapagos and find themselves suckered into a graveyard of ships, red lightning flaring all around them as they become the latest wreck of over two dozen. At least the prose quickly improves, as they survive the wreck and escape inland, and so does the imagery. If the red lightning was not hellish enough, they discover a volcanic landscape honeycombed with pits, the stench of sulphur pervading the atmosphere as a small army of slaves dig within the pits, under the thirsty whips of their guards. Johnson had us visit some wild locations in *Land of Always-Night* and this one is worthy of similar praise.

But then he turns it into a gothic. Here, on a remote volcanic island, they find a mediaeval Slavic castle, lorded over by Count Alexander Ramadanoff, a very polite, if clearly insane and wildly dangerous, Russian noble. He is completely in charge of his domain, as any villainous noble worth his salt must be, not only over his men and his slaves, which include Johnny and his crew, but everyone else who's been shipwrecked in the vicinity, such as Monk, Ham and Pat, who promptly become "guests" of the Count, in other words prisoners without bars. At least until they piss him off, anyway, and then it's the pits. Or the thumbnail death.

Johnson builds the story well, gradually introducing Doc and his men as needed. Long Tom arrives in chapter 4, witnessing a "grayish-blue streak" of a tiny creature attacking the boy who operates Doc's special elevator. Doc's not far behind him, showing up later



than he has perhaps showed up at any point in the series thus far. Naturally he soon figures out that the boy was bitten by a venomous centipede indigenous only to the Galapagos islands, as the Count has both a surprisingly long reach and the arrogance to be so frickin' obvious. And, finally, Renny joins the fray, calling Doc and Long Tom back to HQ after the centipede strikes again, killing a two hundred pound cop before Renny could kill it. And so we have the whole gang involved, including Pat, for the first time since *Fear Cay* fifteen books earlier.

A few things become quickly obvious, the first being that Johnson clearly hadn't done his homework. Only two books earlier, in *Dust of Death*, we'd learned about the simple trick

that Doc and his men use when sending telegrams to ensure authenticity: each line begins with a five letter word. Johnson utterly failed to notice and so ignored that idea here, with Doc and Renny trusting an important cable from Monk even though their code would have proven it obviously untrustworthy.

Another is that he wanted an overt villain. Most of Lester Dent's novels thus far involve a key villain doing all the villainous things that villains do, but at a distance and usually under a mask or a fake name behind which his real identity stays unknown even to his own men. Count Alexander Ramadanoff is probably the most obvious bad guy the series had seen thus far. We know that he's the villain from his first appearance and he only gets more villainous from there. He's a worthy opponent for Doc but he knows it too and he relishes it. When the Man of Bronze fails to hypnotise him, he simply ignores him and continues on with his villainy.

For a third, as the logical counter to Ramadanoff's villainy, Johnson wants Doc to be the epitome of the hero. Simply saving the day, rescuing the girl and defeating the villain just isn't enough for him; he has Savage dive into shark infested waters to save Renny, setting up a overtly heroic repeat of the alligator incident in *Quest of the Spider*, albeit without the ensuing idiotic disguise. I believe that the shark scene here was written for a couple of reasons: Johnson is clearly a cliffhanger serial sort of guy, ending each chapter just like it's setting up next week's thrilling instalment, and he really doesn't like Renny.

Now, I have no idea what our favourite big engineer ever did to W. Ryerson Johnson, but the author treats him poorly throughout. It's one thing to face him off against Count Ramadanoff in a bare knuckle fight, in which the Count plays with his opponent and, becoming bored with his pitiful challenge, knocks Renny out, proclaiming that, "It appears that I must live all my life without meeting a foe worthy of my efforts." That's embarrassing, to be sure, but Johnson even has him fail to punch his way through a wooden door panel, namely his signature move, even wailing about it to Doc afterwards. That's mortifying. Having a bullet throw a high torch thistle, some sort of Galapagos cactus, onto Renny's shoulders a couple of chapters from the end, prompting him to spend the next three weeks pulling barbs out of his skin, is adding insult to injury for no valid reason whatsoever.

The cliffhangers work much better, though they do get progressively wilder until they make no sense outside of just cliffhanging. I appreciate the army of starved iguanas—"scabrous monsters, with frenzied grunts and a blood-chilling grate of serrated teeth"—though they really ought to have been given more to do, and the horde of wild pigs is a fantastic addition, giving Habeas Corpus something to do in the process, but the tidal wave of carnivorous crabs makes no sense at all. How did the Count's men capture them again after each use? At least it all happens quickly. For all that the first chapter started so clumsily, boy, does it get moving! The action comes fast and furious and it doesn't quit.

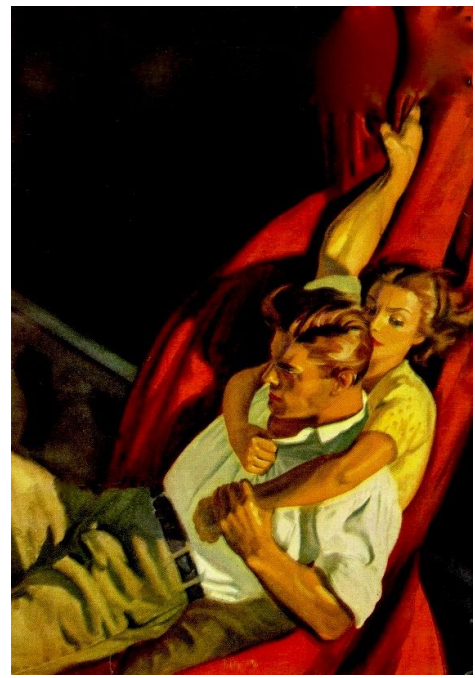
Sadly, it also means that Johnson runs out of space to finish things up properly. He's far too busy setting his armies of wild animals into motion as living weapons to pay attention to his word count and that means that the book finishes in annoyingly quick fashion. We can almost hear his mind realise his predicament and whisper directions to him, like a second

rate Cecil B. DeMille. Cue the volcano! Blow up the house! Ah, crap! We're supposed to find the treasure! Just look over there! Oh, and we need explanations. Throw out some explanations! That'll do. Now, I want lava flowing over there to wipe out everything! And... cut! That's a wrap! Where's my lunch?

As outlandish as some of this got, I was with Johnson after a couple of chapters and I was with him all the way until a couple of chapters from the end, when he lost me completely. Yes, part of that is the revelation about the mechanism behind the thumbnail death, as underwhelming and frankly unbelievable as it gets. Most of it, though, is the sheer speed at which everything wraps up. We're supposed to believe that the Count has used an army of slaves to search for the MacGuffin for twenty years, without distraction because he's on an island with nothing but his mediaeval Slavic mansion, but Doc Savage can track it down in three hours? No. we don't buy into that at all.

The other thing that we wouldn't buy into, except for the date, is Robbie the Robot. No, not the one we all know and love from 1956's *Forbidden Planet*. This is the first in a surprising number of precursors; after Johnson created a Robbie the Robot here in 1935, Isaac Asimov followed suit in a short story and even Tom Swift designed one in a children's book right before the movie. Here, Robbie is used in conjunction with neatly designed landscaping outside the Hidalgo Trading Company, Doc's hangar on the Hudson waterfront. It's all set up to make attackers feel like they can perform a successful ambush, but instead of Doc popping his head out to be shot to death, it's "A mechanical likeness of Doc. Robbie, the Robot." Cool, huh?

Well, as cool as that is, it's about the only element anywhere in the book to add to the Doc Savage mythos, other than Pat's holidaying habits, and the only word that stands out for attention is "knout", a heavy and vicious whip from Russia that resembles a cat-o-nine tails. This isn't a book of particular interest to the series, except as a second outing for W. Ryerson Johnson which both succeeds admirably and fails dismally to echo the works of Lester Dent that preceded it. Mostly, it's an argument point for fans. Put four of them on a convention panel, kick them off with, "*The Fantastic Island*: Good or Bad?" and let them at it for an hour while you sit back and enjoy.



SUBMISSIONS

I welcome submissions to Apocalypse Later Music, though I can't guarantee that everything submitted will be reviewed.

Please read the following important notes before submitting anything.

I primarily review the good stuff. There's just too much of it out there nowadays to waste any time reviewing the bad stuff. Almost everything that I review is, in my opinion, either good or interesting and, hopefully, both. I believe that it's worth listening to and I recommend it to some degree, if it happens to be your sort of thing. Now, if you're a die hard black/death metalhead, you might not dig any of the psychedelic rock and vice versa. However, maybe you will! Open ears, open minds and all that.

I have zero interest in being a hatchet man critic who slams everything he writes about. I'll only give a bad review if it's in the public interest, such as a major act releasing a disappointing album. Even then, I'll often keep away.

If I do review, I'll still be completely honest and point out the good and the bad in any release.

I'm primarily reviewing new material only. Each month at Apocalypse Later Music, I review releases from the previous two months. I might stretch a little beyond that for a submission, but not far. Each January, I also try to catch up with highly regarded albums and obvious omissions from the previous year that I didn't get round to at the time. I then bundle my reviews up at the end of a quarter and publish in zine form midway through the following month.

I'm especially interested in studio albums or EPs that do something new and different. I try to review an indie release and a major band each weekday, one rock and one metal, with each week deliberately varied in both genres and countries covered.

If you still want to submit, thank you! You can do so in a couple of ways:

1. Digital copy: please e-mail me at hal@hornsablaze.com a link to where I can download mp3s in 320k. Please include promotional material such as an EPK, high res cover art, etc.
2. Physical: e-mail me for a mailing address.

Either way but especially digitally, please include any promotional material such as a press kit, high res cover art, band photo, etc.

And, whether you submit or not and whether I liked it or not, all the best with your music! Don't quit! The world is a better place because you create.

Submissions of books for review at the Nameless Zine wouldn't come to me directly. If you have books that fit the scope of a predominantly science fiction/fantasy/horror e-zine, please see the contact details at the bottom of the main page at thenamelesszine.org.

I don't review film submissions much any more, as most of my film reviews are for books.

CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOUT HAL C. F. ASTELL

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the Dread Lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He primarily writes for his own site, Apocalypse Later, but also anyone else who asks nicely. He writes monthly book reviews for the Nameless Zine.

Born and raised in the cold and rain of England half a century ago, he's still learning about the word "heat" many years after moving to Phoenix, Arizona where he lives with his much better half Dee in a house full of critters and oddities, a library with a ghost guard ferret and more cultural artefacts than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite film is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*; his favourite actor is Warren William; and he believes Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made.

He reads science fiction, horror and the pulps. He watches anything unusual and much that isn't. He listens to everything except mainstream western pop music. He annoys those around him by talking too much about Guy N. Smith, Doc Savage and the *Friday Rock Show*.

He tries not to go outdoors, but he's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in kilt and forked beard, while his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He hasn't been trepanned yet, but he's friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell

My personal site is Dawtrina. I run Smithland, a Guy N. Smith fan site. I founded and co-run the CoKoCon science fiction/fantasy convention. I co-founded the Arizona Penny Dreadfuls. I've run the Awesomelys since 2013. I write for the Nameless Zine.

The Arizona Penny Dreadfuls	azpennydreadfuls.org
The Awesomelys	awesomelys.com
CoKoCon	cokocon.org
Dawtrina	dawtrina.com
The Nameless Zine	thenamelesszine.org
Smithland	guynsmith.rocks

ABOUT APOCALYPSE LATER

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference as he could never remember who the one good actor was in forgettable episodes of long crime film series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he was reviewing his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250 list. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering *Apocalypse Now* last and it stuck. It didn't have to be funny.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, such as old films, foreign films, indie films, local films, microbudget films, and so on, always avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background. Let's just get to the content and make it readable.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, in order to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* It's been followed by half a dozen others with double digits more always in process.

This growth eventually turned into the Apocalypse Later Empire, which continues to sprawl. In addition to film and book reviews, he posts a pair of album reviews each weekday from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe. He runs the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, Arizona, the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, or ALIFFF. He publishes books by himself and others. He presents programs of quality international short films at conventions across the southwest.

Apocalypse Later is celebrating its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

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Latest Books from Apocalypse Later Press (available on Amazon):

The Awesomely Awful '80s, Part 2
A Horror Movie Calendar


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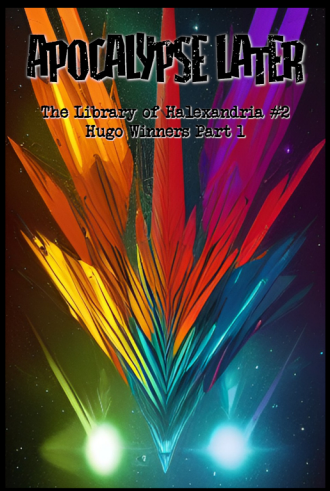
Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, was born in the pulps in 1933, and dedicated his life to the defeat of evil in all its forms. Trained from birth for this fight, he travelled the world with his five trusty aides, leaders in their own fields, and often his headstrong niece Pat, to tackle a wild and wonderful succession of amazing adventures.

This zine covers his first three years of adventures, from *The Man of Bronze* in March 1933 to *The Fantastic Island* in December 1935.



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