

HUNTING LAKE

by Mike Resnick

In my life, I have written a grand total of three fan letters to writers. One of the recipients, Barry Malzberg, became my closest friend and occasional collaborator. Another, humorist Ross Spencer, also became a good friend. The third was African writer Alexander Lake, who died on Christmas Day, 1961, a month before I wrote to him. I've always regretted not meeting Lake, who has been virtually forgotten by the American reading public, despite a number of bestsellers.

I recently moved THE RESNICK LIBRARY OF AFRICAN ADVENTURE from St. Martin's Press over to Alexander Books, an offshoot of WorldComm Press. The primary reason was to bring Lake back into print.

Sounds simple, right? I mean, hell, all editors do is sit on their judgment all day and see what comes in the mail.

Well, sometimes it's not quite that easy. Take Lake, for example.

Hell, take the whole damned chronology:

1954: I buy the paperback edition of KILLERS IN AFRICA at age 12, take it to summer camp with me, read it in its entirety once a week for two months. From that day to this, I am fascinated by all things African, I take 5 safaris, I write 13 books and 18 short stories set in Africa, and I never forget that it is Alexander Lake who awakened this passion in me.

1988: St. Martin's Press buys Tor Books. St. Martin's also publishes Peter Capstick's LIBRARY OF AFRICAN HUNTING, a series of classic reprints.

1989: IVORY becomes a Nebula and Clarke nominee for Tor right after SANTIAGO hits #3 on the bestseller list, and the nice people at Tor look about for ways to keep me happily in their stable. I tell them that if Capstick ever dies or gives up editing the Library, I want to take it over.

1991: St. Martin's informs me that Capstick has moved to a different publisher, and I can edit the Library. I tell them that the first two authors I want to bring back -- they've each written two books -- are Alexander Lake and John Boyes, a scalawag who was one of the Kenya pioneers and at one time was the white king of the Kikuyu. They reply that they'll reprint the Boyes books, which were written in 1910 and 1928 and are in the public domain, but with so many classics available for free they won't spend a penny to purchase the Lakes, which we all assume are still under copyright. I reluctantly agree -- after all, no one else is beating down my door to edit books about killing animals in this Politically Correct year of 1991 -- and I select three books, by Boyes, F. C. Selous, and Arthur Neumann, for publication, writing new introductions for each.

1992: WorldComm Press, which specializes in small editions of trade paperbacks, is feeling expansive and approaches me about writing a mystery novel and editing a line of mass market science fiction. I agree, and suggest that I'd also like to bring the reprint series over from St. Martin's Press, which isn't making any money on them anyway and would probably be happy to let them go, so that we can at least make an attempt to get Lake's books back into print. The publisher, Ralph Roberts, has never heard of Alexander Lake. I loan him copies of KILLERS IN AFRICA and HUNTER'S CHOICE; he calls back two nights later -- he loves them, and he'll start up the African reprint line as soon as I'm ready.

January, 1993: In an attempt to find out who owns the rights to Lake's books, I write to Doubleday's accounting department and ask who they are sending his royalty checks to. Their records only go back to the 1970s, and no royalties have been paid out since then. It takes them a mere 3 months to tell me that.

April, 1993: Ray Feist suggests that I write to the Doubleday legal department to find out what literary agent represented Lake during the contract negotiations. (If he did it himself, I'm out of luck, and the search -- and project -- ends here.) Doubleday takes four months to respond that Lake was represented by the McIntosh and Otis Agency.

August, 1993: I write McIntosh and Otis and ask who owns the rights to Lake's books. They write back to tell me that they've never heard of Lake. I write back and suggest they check their files back to the 1940s. They write back to say that they did, and they've still never heard of him. This correspondence takes nine weeks.

October, 1993: Once more I write to the Doubleday legal department and tell them that McIntosh and Otis has no record of representing Alexander Lake, and could they please check the contracts again? They do, and finally direct me to Elizabeth McKee of McIntosh, McKee and Dodds. I write to her and ask who owns the rights to Lake's books. No answer. I write again. No answer. I phone. She's out of town on an extended vacation.

January, 1994: Ms. McKee writes to tell me that yes, she did indeed represent Alexander Lake in the early 1950s, but she has had no word from him or his literary estate in more than a third of a century. She no longer has any records telling her who his literary heirs are. She has no idea where to look.

February, 1994: I call my own literary agent, Eleanor Wood, explain the problem, and ask for suggestions. She gives me the number of the Copyright Department of the Library of Congress. Maybe, she suggests, the books are public domain. If KILLERS IN AFRICA's copyright wasn't renewed in 1981, it's mine for the taking; if it was renewed, at least I'll be able to find out who renewed it.

March, 1994: I call the Copyright Department. They ask what years the two books were originally published, then tell me to send them \$40.00 for each title to track down the copyright status. I send them a check for \$80.00 on my birthday, March 5.

June, 1994: It is now two years since WorldComm has agreed to publish THE RESNICK LIBRARY OF AFRICAN ADVENTURE, and Ralph understandably wants to know where it is. I tell him that I moved it from St. Martin's for the express purpose of publishing Alexander Lake, and I'm not giving him any other titles until I know beyond all doubt the Lake is unobtainable. He runs his own copyright check -- evidently publishers have access to the Copyright Department's data -- and can't find a renewal. I agree that if they're public domain we'll publish them, but I won't be satisfied until I get it in black-and-white from the Copyright Department. Ralph mutters and grumbles, but agrees to postpone the LIBRARY until 1995.

July and August, 1994: I call the Copyright Department weekly, trying to find out what happened to my request. I never get the same person twice, and no one there seems to know what's going on.

September, 1994: I give up trying to get a response out of the Copyright Department. I promise WorldComm that if I still haven't determined Lake's copyright status by the end of the year, I'll give them a different title to kick off the new line.

October, 1994: Finally! The Copyright Department tells me

that Lake's children, Storm Alexis Lake-Bartel and Richard K. Nelson, renewed the copyrights, and gives me their addresses as of 1987: Storm is at a post office box in La Honda, Richard is in San Mateo. I call Ralph Roberts to tell him the news. Now comes the tricky part: if either of them say No, that's the end of it, and my dream of bringing Alexander Lake back into print is dead...so I have to decide which of them is more likely to say Yes. All I have to go on is their names. There's a son, Richard, who should be called Lake and isn't (I don't know at the time that he's a stepson; for all I know, he's a blood son who hated Lake and took on a stepfather's last name to spite him); and there's a daughter, obviously married, who could reasonably be expected to have dumped Lake's name but chose to keep it: Lake-Bartel. Easy choice. I write to the daughter. And two weeks later the letter comes back, Address Unknown.

November, 1994: My very last chance is to make contact with the son. I write to the San Mateo address. It comes back, Address Unknown. I am so close and so far away, I hate to think of what it's doing to my blood pressure. I try to get Storm's phone number from the La Honda operator; no record of a Lake-Bartel. (It turns out that she got divorced sometime after 1987 and is once again going under the name of Lake.) Then I try to get Richard's phone number from the San Mateo operator. I don't have much hope; it's a common name -- there are probably ten Richard Nelsons in any fair-sized city. But just for once, Fate is on my side. Thank goodness he uses that middle initial, because while the operator doesn't have a Richard K. Nelson at the address the Copyright Department gave me, she does have one in the area code. I take the number, call, leave a message on Richard's answering machine, he calls back, and five years after I start jockeying to bring KILLERS IN AFRICA and HUNTER'S CHOICE back into print, I finally make contact with the two people who can make it possible, and a week later we're in business.

Easy job being an editor, right? If I make a dime an hour for the time I put in, I think I'll be ahead of the game.

Anyway, as I write these words, KILLERS IN AFRICA is in print, and HUNTER'S CHOICE is a month from publication and will be in print long before any of you read this. Two-thirds of my Good Samaritan work is done: I got Lake back into print, and I got all of Barry Malzberg's recursive science fiction back into print in one big volume (PASSAGE OF THE LIGHT, written by Barry, edited by me and Tony Lewis, published by NESFA, and you should all run right out and buy it.) If I can just get Ross Spencer's hilarious Chance Perdue novels back into print -- and I'm working on it; it may even be a fait accompli by the time you read this -- I'll feel like I've paid my dues in full.

Since some of you may be wondering what all the fuss is about, here's the introduction I wrote for HUNTER'S CHOICE, which will hopefully whet your appetites:

When we reprinted Alexander Lake's first book, KILLERS IN AFRICA, last spring, we promised you that if it sold at all well, we'd be following it up with his HUNTER'S CHOICE. The sales figures are in, the readers have spoken, and here it is -- another book by that most readable of all authors of Africana.

Encountering an Alexander Lake book is very much like sitting around an African campfire and letting an old pro spin tales of his youth -- but while KILLERS IN AFRICA was strictly about hunting, and was divided into chapters about various animals,

HUNTER'S CHOICE is a true potpourri of tales guaranteed to tweak anyone's sense of wonder and adventure.

It even has a chapter unique to African books. Every hunter will happily tell you about the chase and the kill, and then regale you with how wonderful that kudu or impala tasted -- but only Alexander Lake tells you, delightfully, how to cook that beast once you've killed it.

Ever wonder how to trap sixty monkeys armed with nothing but twenty gallons of bad booze? Trust Lake to supply the hilarious answer.

Could anyone -- even Lake's brilliant tracker, Ubusuku -- possibly kill the Big Five armed only with a hand axe? Lake describes the hunt that was initiated by a two thousand pound bet (the pre-World War I equivalent of a \$100,000 wager) between an American hunter and Lake's employer, Nicobar Jones.

Lake even recounts a jungle murder, and the recovery of three of King John's emeralds.

And, of course, he tells these tales within the framework of his life: an American, with American attitudes and an American way of looking at things, who made his way across the African continent as a professional hunter. He recalls his clients, both good and bad, humorous and tragic, with a contagious fondness.

It is amazing to me that this book could have remained out of print for close to forty years, for it is a pure delight from the first page to the last. Still, while Lake was obviously a happy and contented man, true fame eluded him until the last decade of his life.

He was born Alexander James Lake in Chicago, Illinois, on July 29, 1893. His father was a Methodist minister, and the family moved to South Africa in 1908. Lake went to Jeppestown High School in Johannesburg, and then attended the Marist Brothers College, where he captained the rifle team that represented the Transvaal at the All-British Empire Shumaker Cup. His team came in second, but he himself set a record of 10 bull's-eyes in 11 seconds, which brought him to the attention of the famed trader Nicobar Jones, who hired him as a meat hunter, a job that took him to Portugese East Africa, Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia, and German Southwest Africa. Within a couple of years he was a fully-fledged and licensed white hunter.

He took time off from his hunting career to fight for the American forces as a pilot in Europe during World War I, then went back to his beloved Africa for another twelve years, after which he returned to the United States, working as a reporter and editor for a number of newspapers in the Pacific Northwest. Then Africa called to him once again, and he returned there in 1937 for three more years. When he came back to the States in 1940, this time to stay, he met and married his wife, Mildred, and began writing anything that would sell: African reminiscences, business articles, even some pulp fiction.

Says his daughter, Storm Alexis Lake: "He loved being the center of attention, and he was fascinating and fun to be around. He loved life and lived it to its fullest, with a very wild first 40 years. When he met and fell in love with my mother, he became tamed and settled down for the first time in his life. It's amazing what a good woman can do for a man! Once a heavy drinker, after meeting my mother he never touched alcohol again."

After World War II ended, he and Mildred bought a home on the Pacific Coast near the California/Oregon border, and he finally started cracking the major markets -- Look, Collier's, Time, Reader's Digest -- with his accounts of Africa and hunting. His main markets, however, were Field and Stream and Argosy, where

he delighted in debunking the myths of African hunting and setting the record straight.

KILLERS IN AFRICA became a bestseller in 1953, and HUNTER'S CHOICE also made the bestseller lists a year later. These led Lake to a job as a consultant and writer for Sol Lesser, producer of the Tarzan films. (In fact, Lake may well be the reason that Gordon Scott was allowed to speak in sentences, rather than monosyllables. At least I'd like to think so.)

Finally, in his last few years, Lake began researching his father's missionary work in Africa. This in turn led him to investigate reported answers to prayer, and that led to two more bestsellers, YOUR PRAYERS ARE ALWAYS ANSWERED and YOU NEED NEVER WALK ALONE. He died on Christmas Day, 1961, while working on a biography of his father.

I discovered Alexander Lake when I was eleven years old. I picked up a copy of KILLERS IN AFRICA, and had read half of it in the bookstore before my mother realized she was either going to have to buy the book or leave me in the store overnight. A few months later I bought HUNTER'S CHOICE with money I had earned mowing lawns, and from that day forward I knew two things: that someday I would visit the wonderful continent that Lake had made come alive on the printed page (I have, 5 times now, with more trips planned), and that I would find some way to make my living from Africa (that took a little longer, and considering that I became a science fiction writer, it was a lot more difficult -- but I managed. I would confidently suggest that no other science fiction writer, dead or alive, has set 13 books and 22 works of short fiction in Africa or African analogs, or received as many major and minor awards for them. And of course, a lot of Lake's reminiscences have been appropriated, thinly-disguised, in my fiction.)

Before we go any further, I want to tell you a little something about the cover to this edition of HUNTER'S CHOICE. At first glance it appears to be a scene from Chapter 6 ("Don't Spoil the Heads") of this book, but if you'll look at it closely, you'll see it's really from KILLERS IN AFRICA'S chapter on elephants. The giveaway is the figure of Lake himself, on the ground beneath the elephant. The African with the axe is, of course, Ubusuku.

So why didn't we run it on KILLERS IN AFRICA? Simple. I didn't know Storm Alexis Lake then. Over the past few months she has graciously gone through her father's old notes and magazine articles as we try to find enough uncollected material to create a brand-new Alexander Lake book. During one of our phone conversations, she mentioned that she and her brother owned this remarkable painting of her father's miraculous escape from a wounded elephant, rendered by an artist named Kahn. Before she was through describing it, I knew we had the cover for HUNTER'S CHOICE.

By the way, as the editor of this series, I do try to be thorough, and when it came time to publish HUNTER'S CHOICE, I thought I would see if I could find a negative opinion, since mine is one of unmitigated praise. Well, I checked every review ever written, and I finally found one, in the September, 1954 issue of African Wild Life, published by the South African Wild Life Society, of which less than 2,000 copies were printed. (How's that for thorough?)

The reviewer, who uses only his initials -- D.E.N. -- takes Lake rather severely to task for two misstatements: that lions charge in "forty-foot leaps" and that the lion "is the fastest

animal on earth."

Well, they once measured the stride of the great race horse, Swaps, and it turned out to be 33 feet 8 inches, so I have to assume that Lake -- who probably did not have a measuring tape handy when charged by lions -- was wrong.

As for his statement that the lion is the fastest animal on earth, I'm sure he was as aware of the cheetah's 65-mile-per-hour speed as everyone else. What you have to remember is that we aren't the only creatures who know lions have very little stamina; lions know it too. Hence, unlike the cheetah, who spots his meal a quarter mile away and then runs it down across open territory, the lion rarely charges more than sixty yards. If he hasn't caught his prey by then, he usually gives up. Now, there is no question that the cheetah is the fastest animal on earth, but it takes him a little time to work up to his top speed, whereas the lion is going full speed at his first stride. I've seen them both in action, and I'd be willing to bet Lake was right -- if you limit it to the length of ground a lion charges (and since Lake was more aware of a lion's limitations than most men, why would he describe a longer race?) So much for D.E.N., whoever he or she was.

Okay. I've gone on long enough, and you've got a wonderful book to read. I think if I were to choose a single word to describe HUNTER'S CHOICE, it would be evocative. Lake's description of his office, or Ubusuku's hunt, or the mystic power of a Zulu witch doctor, or the Sunday baseball games in Johannesburg, or a lonely Christmas Eve in the bush... well, if they don't make you wish you'd been there, then somebody shorted your soul in the areas of Romance and Adventure.

-end-