



in this issue:

ED McBAIN on
writing mysteries

PHYLLIS WHITNEY on
longevity

BILL PRONZINI says
goodbye to
Bruno Fischer

ANDREW COBURN

MARGARET MARON

WARREN MURPHY

DONALD HAMILTON

JIM HUANG of
Drood Review

An important new
column by agent
DONALD MAASS

Starting a
Sisters in Crime Chapter



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THE FIRST LADY OF FEMALE DETECTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCIA MULLER

By Michael Pettengell

Marcia Muller has become one of the most influential of practicing writers in the mystery field. With the publication of *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1978) she created the first female detective who was based more on realism than sexist stereotypes. Sharon McCone has the qualities of a living, breathing individual and an increasing number of readers not only care about her adventures solving crimes, but they hunger for the kind of personal information told between friends. It is this kind of thought-provoking relationship that Muller has fostered with her readers. Her work has marked a

real breakthrough in terms of presenting to the reading public a believable female protagonist and mystery readers continue to respond enthusiastically. Many writers have been inspired by her work, and the mystery genre itself is indebted to her for bringing crime fiction out of the dark ages and making it real, making it contemporary, and making it popular. In the following interview she discusses the creation of Sharon McCone, the many influences on her work, and several of her novels, including her newest, *Pennies on a Dead Woman's Eyes*.

(continued on page 36)

Table of Contents

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN PUBLISHING: 4

What's New by Jan Grape 4

Reading Lists for Literate Travelers

Who Love A Mystery 6

Elmore Leonard Named Winner of

North American Hammett Prize 6

In Remembrance

Bruno Fischer by Gary Lovisi 7

Some Words by and About

Bruno Fischer by Bill Pronzini 7

Samuel S. Walker, Jr. 8

Jack Arnold 9

Linda Grey to Establish

Hardcover/Paperback Imprint in

Partnership With Bantam Books 12

Spring 1992 Out to Lunch Report

by Sharon Jarvis 12

From Zebra Books/Kensington

Publishing Corp. 13

Mystery Scene Bestseller List 27

THE MYSTERY SCENE 1992

AMERICAN MYSTERY AWARD

WINNERS 50

Christie Caper Weekend 52

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR 14

REGIONAL NEWS 18

Death Down Under

by Graeme Flanagan 18

The Los Angeles Chapter of

Sisters in Crime News by Marisa

Babjak-Wiggins 19

Murder Northwest by Robert Lopresti 19

Northern California News

by Gloria White 20

BRITISH NEWS 21

London After Dark

by Maxim Jakubowski 21

MYSTERY ARTICLES 22

Old Age is Not a Disease

by Phyllis A. Whitney 22

The Bottom Line by Donald Maass 22

The Man Behind Matt Helm: An

Interview With Donald Hamilton

by Michael Pettengell 24

Interview: Jim Huang

by Ted Fitzgerald 28

Uneven Streets by Pete Crowther 30

From Out of the West: Offspring of

Hannibal Lecter by Dale L. Walker 34

Evan Hunter on Writing Mysteries

by John Pescatore 35

The First Lady of Female Detection: An

Interview With Marcia Muller by

Michael Pettengell 36

Malice Domestic IV

by Donna Huston Murray 39

MYSTERY COLUMNS 41

Sisters in Crime by Eve K. Sandstrom 41

Starting a Local SinC Chapter

by Dee Maharg 41

Mystery Seen: A Movie Review Column

by Max Allan Collins 42

Curmudgeon's Corner

by Warren Murphy 44

MYSTERY NEW BOOKS 45

Setting First, Characters and Plot

to Follow by Dana Stabenow 45

How I Kept Trying to Write *Dark Horse*

and Finally Succeeded

by Will Murray 45

The Weekend Was Murder

by Joan Lowery Nixon 46

No Free Ride by C.J. Henderson 47

Hunger, or a Bite-Sized Thriller

by W.R. Danzig 47

Top Ten Reasons David Letterman

Quit Writing Mystery Novels

by Deborah Adams 47

Coming Home With a *Bootlegger's*

Daughter by Margaret Maron 49

The Metamorphosis of *Night Butterfly*

by Patricia McFall 50

The Day I Became a Hologram

by Warren Murphy 51

YOUNG ADULT 52

John Bellairs: A Retrospective Look

at an Author and His Work

by Sharron McElmeel 52

MYSTERY BOOK REVIEWS 53

by Barry N. Malzberg, Richard Romano,

Linda C. Griffin, Andrew Coburn,

Ted Fitzgerald

CROSSOVER BOOKS 60

Isaac Asimov by Al Sarrantonio 60

Mean Streets, Mad Scientists

(Installment 10) by John E. Stith 60

Dark Voices From Spine Tingling Press

or Where is Vincent Price

When You Really Need Him

by Melissa Mia Hall 61

CLASSIFIED ADS 62

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Advertiser's Index

MYSTERIOUS PRESS 3
FATAL OUTCOME
by PATRICIA WALLACE 5
CROWN PUBLISHING GROUP 9
PULPHOUSE PUBLISHING INC. 10
PULPHOUSE PUBLISHING INC. 11
RANDOM HOUSE 13
TOR BOOKS 16
TOR BOOKS 17
MYSTERY SCENE BOOKS 23
MYSTERY SCENE BOOKS 25
THE SCREAM FACTORY 29
MILLION MAGAZINE 31
TOR BOOKS 32
WORLDWIDE MYSTERY 33
WALKER AND COMPANY 43
MYSTERIOUS PRESS 48
WORLDWIDE MYSTERY 49
MYSTERY SCENE BOOKS 51
CD PUBLICATIONS 59
GRYPHON PUBLICATIONS 62
THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP 63
GOLD EAGLE outside back cover

three times her prior advance money in the process. Her new novel promised to be dynamite. The advance assured it lots of loving care...until her editor left. The publisher then promoted an editorial assistant who was assigned the project.

Disaster! My immediate response was to phone the editorial director and make sure he was still excited about the book. I then arranged lunch with the new editor and pitched the project just as hard as I had the first time around. It worked. She got fired up. Then, when the manuscript (a 1000-page monster) came in, I sent it to her accompanied by a box of Godiva chocolates.

Sound silly? Not at all. That editor paid attention, and discovered that she had a career-making novel on her hands. She promoted it heavily in house, obtained quotes, got a splendid cover and did tons of low-cost but effective marketing. Just published, it has shipped well. New pitfalls lie ahead, but more on those in a moment.

Do the words "splendid cover" sound to you like an oxymoron? If so, you've likely been stung by poor packaging. Recovering from that blow is difficult; sometimes impossible. To prevent it from happening, you've got to get involved. Be aware, though, that there is a right way and a wrong way to influence cover decisions.

The wrong way is to, a) rudely dictate your cover to b) your editor. The right way is to politely suggest cover approaches that speak to your unique readers. You must also make sure your ideas reach your publisher's art director. Never assume you know better than he how to package your book. Still, you know your readers better than anyone and can best highlight the features of your story that are unique and appealing to them.

(Some editors and agents reading this column are shuddering right now, I know, but believe me a polite, short and businesslike dialogue over cover approaches is far better than relying on cold luck to make your book look great. At the same time, no one can screw themselves worse than an author, so be careful.)

Once published, your novel faces further pitfalls. Not all of them are beyond your control. Failure to advertise and promote is one avoidable problem. (For more on this complex subject, please see my column in *Mystery Scene* #32.)

More difficult to cope with are problems like underprinting, overprinting, overshipping (with consequent heavy returns), early remaindering and pulping, etc. Here your only defenses lie in strategic planning. Advances too small or--sometimes--too large in turn tend to engender fatal publishing miscalculations.

Plots that play short term trends are also risky. They may win big advances, but their chances of early death are much bigger, too. Better, in my opinion, to write fiction that *others* want to imitate rather than the reverse.

Ideally, one's novels either achieve an immediate level of high sales, and sustain it, or show a pattern of healthy sellthrough and rising sales. If this happens, it is inevitably accompanied by certain temptations.

One is to quickly become a full-time novelist. That is the dream of most fiction writers, and one

can hardly blame those who rush to make it come true. Going full time right away is not necessarily a mistake, either. What is dangerous, though, is to assume that one's career is locked on track. It isn't; not, anyway, until you've passed the *five-book threshold*.

What is that--?

The five-book threshold does not automatically arrive with one's fifth book. (It may come with the sixth or seventh, but it rarely comes sooner than the fifth.) It is that point at which it becomes clear that the trend of one's numbers is verifiably up. Returns are low. Reorders are strong. No one can deny it: You're in.

Either now or en route, several new temptations appear. One is to leverage up to bigger money. I love doing that for my clients, of course, yet it takes skill to keep an author's career from overheating. Letting advances lag is bad, but big money is not necessarily a safety net, either--not before you've hit the threshold.

In pursuit of big money, many agents rush to change publishers, too. Our open and competitive market is a joy, to be sure, but unless an author is very unhappy with his current publisher there are many compelling reasons to stay in place. One of them is backlist.

Everyone understands, I think, the value of having all of one's books in one publisher's catalogue. For one thing, the retailer and wholesaler need only deal with one source. Less well understood, though, is the effect of backlist on future deals. Once paid for, and left in print, backlist novels are money machines. The more of these machines a publisher has, the more cash he can count on to lessen the risk of lofty new advances.

(That, by the way, is also the reason for a little noticed phenomenon: The big leaps upward in money more often occur with one's current publisher than when one switches canoes.)

A final temptation is this: Having tasted early success, the desire to write the Great American Novel...or the Book I've Always Wanted to Write...or whatever. I'm not saying that one must slavishly crank out carbon copies of one's first novel. A healthy writer grows in his craft. Still, a radical change of direction too early in the game can lead to disaster.

A good rule of thumb for new authors is this: If you change genres, direction, or your publisher, start counting from zero. Your goal, once again, is the five-book threshold.

Now, suppose that in spite of all your caution, forethought and planning, things go drastically wrong. Can anything be done to help writers already marked to "perish"?

By the time I receive the call from the drowning writer it is, in most cases, already too late to rescue him. The realistic options open to him go something like this:

- 1) Switch genres.
- 2) Adopt a pseudonym and try again.
- 3) Hunker down and wait. The sting of bad numbers will fade--in a few years.

Unsatisfying options, I agree. In fact, they are downright humiliating. But sometimes it truly is better to run away, the better to live to fight again

another day.

However, there are other possibilities. These require courage and clear vision on the part of both the author and his agent.

One strategy that works is to write a bigger book--if you're ready. I don't just mean longer; I mean a novel that is much greater in scope, scale and quality. Up and down the publishing pipeline, the new book can then be presented as a great leap forward, and one's previous numbers, with luck, will not be held against one.

Changing publishers is also sometimes possible. If you've been stung, though, this can prove difficult. When they are not rolling the dice on newcomers, publishers today are only interested in sure bets. Not too many years ago, I got angry when editors asked for royalty statements when I was moving a client. Now it is routine. Publishers want proof that they are not walking into a trap.

Switching formats can also help you get unstuck; that is, if your novels have been original paperbacks, go hardcover and vice versa. That has drawbacks, so do it only if you have to.

Finally, the most difficult advice of all to follow: If you are marked to "perish," keep alive your sense of adventure. You started writing because it is fun and fulfilling. If you lose that joy and let bitterness overwhelm you, believe me you will compound your troubles.

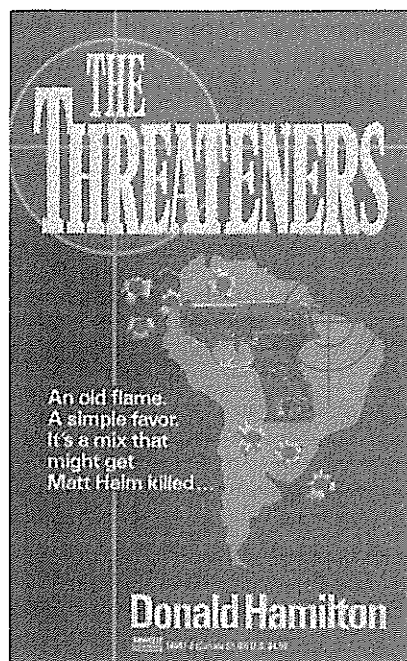
Why? Because anxiety is the enemy of creativity. And creativity--plus confidence--are what you are going to need to survive.

(Donald Maass is president of the Donald Maass Literary Agency in New York City.)

THE MAN BEHIND MATT HELM: AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD HAMILTON By Michael Pettengill

Few founders of the original paperback have weathered the storm of popular opinion as well as Donald Hamilton. Having created one of the most familiar and lasting of the espionage/detective characters, Hamilton continues to publish on a regular basis and his newest Matt Helm novel, *The Threateners*, was published in March. Whereas those characters comparable to Helm (such as the suave James Bond and the long-lived Nick Carter) are no longer breathing the fresh air of original fiction, Matt Helm novels are as energetic and exciting as the day they first appeared; somehow Hamilton seems to keep abreast of the times continuing to present believable stories and interesting characters. Those of you who know Matt Helm only from the films starring Dean Martin, albeit worth their weight in acetate as popular culture artifacts, should pick up the first Matt Helm, *Death of a Citizen* (1960). Chances are that before long you will have made your way through the entire Helm

canon, although selective readers may want to begin with the latest installment, *The Threateners*, since Hamilton has a knack of keeping each novel separate in effectiveness while the entire series remains intact.



A standard question asked most writers, and yet one which is of some interest, is how they got into writing. What made you consider writing as a profession?

I don't know. I was writing way back in high school. Generally you can say that for anything I've written I've read something like it. I used to read Leslie Charteris' *The Saint* and of course Hammett...Hemingway and Ross Macdonald. I read plenty of pulps. As a matter of fact, I worked like hell to get into the pulps and I couldn't do it. I hate to say it, but I must have been too good a writer or something. Because the first stories I really worked hard on. I sent them off to *Black Mask*, of course, and *Dime Detective*...I can't remember the rest of the magazines. Turned out one or two stories a month. Or maybe even one a week. And I'd send them off and they'd bounce... send them off and they'd bounce...send them off and they'd bounce. And finally I had a funny idea about a little old love story and I wrote it and *Collier's Magazine* took it for a hell of a lot more money than any pulp would have paid me. So then I wrote another one and they took that. Besides a couple of Western short stories I managed to get out, those are about the only short stories I've done. I'm not a short story writer so how I managed to do that I don't know.

Did it discourage you at all when you were getting the rejection slips?

Not really. I figured I'd find the combination some time. All the writer's manuals and teachers and everything are always telling you to slant the darn stuff. As far as I'm concerned, that's for the birds. I have never been able to sell anything like that. If I say I'll read *Collier's Magazine* or what not or *The*

American or *Cosmopolitan* to figure out what they want, well, that doesn't work...at least not for me. It never has. Every time I try to write something that I think a magazine wants, it falls flat on its face. If I write something that I want it practically always sells. In order to become a success at being a writer I would think it almost has to be something hereditary...I just don't know what the secret is. All I know is that I started writing when I was in high school and it fascinated me and I kept on. Of course there are people who aren't as lucky as I. The things I have wanted to write are the things people wanted to read. And I know some guys who spent their lives writing stuff that they liked but that they can't sell. They are probably just as good a writer as I am, the only thing is that the stuff that turned them on didn't turn on anybody else. I don't really keep in touch with others in the field though. I hate to talk about writing (laughs)...with other writers, because they all have such screwy ideas and they're all wrong! They all have to go and make little outlines. I just don't see how anybody can write a book with an outline. If I knew how a book was going to end I'd never be able to write it because it would be a big bore. Every day I sit down and I find out that new things are happening, that's the fun of it.

The most recent book, *The Threateners*, is wonderful, but it took a little longer to come out than the one before which was called...?

The Frighteners. That was 1989 I believe. The problem with the writing of *The Threateners* was that I got about half way through and my wife died. That threw me for awhile...it's dedicated to her and we had been married for forty-eight years. Of course, I didn't get very far on the book during that tough time. Then I decided that I didn't want to rattle around in that big house, big enough anyway that we had raised four kids in it. And I didn't need all that and I just wanted to get away so I bought this boat and rented out the house. And living on the boat is very handy. Everything is compact and it's quite comfortable...no problems. It took awhile to get started again on *The Threateners* which is why there was a two-year hiatus between that and the previous Matt Helm. I don't think, however, that there is a difference between the first and second halves of *The Threateners*. I wasn't actively aware of my personal feelings coming out in the writing, but when I finished it I was six months older and had been through a kind of harrowing experience. So it's at least possible that this one may read a little differently.

The book reminds me of the early books with Matt Helm because he is settled at the beginning and then through the loss of something he loves he gets unsettled. In fact, when I read the passage to my wife about Matt Helm's dog and what eventually happens to him, she had tears in her eyes.

That's what she's supposed to do. You'll be glad to know that I have a dog just like that. He's lying right here. And he's doing fine. He's getting on. Will be eight next month. I actually thought it was time to pry Helm loose in *The Threateners* a little bit. Of course, it's sad to see the dog go, but I thought I'd better do it that way.

How long does it take you to complete a Matt

"Brock Callahan is surely one of the major detectives since Chandler's Philip Marlowe."

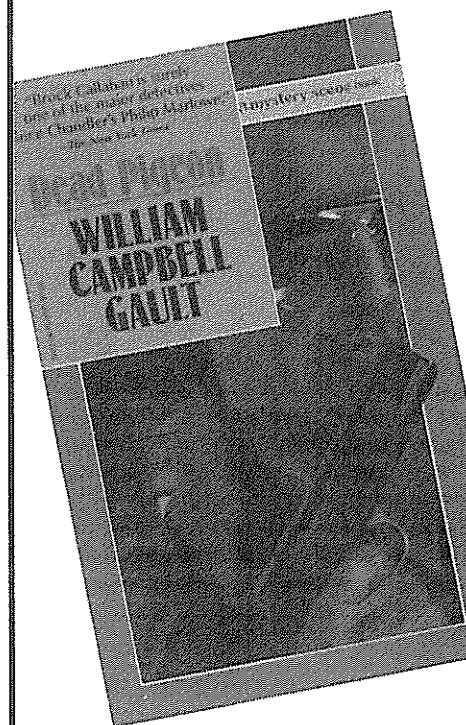
--*The New York Times*

"[Gault writes] about people instead of characters, people so real and vivid that you'll think you know them personally. Even more important, this boy Gault can write, never badly and sometimes like an angel."

--Fredric Brown

Dead Pigeon

WILLIAM
CAMPBELL
GAULT



A mystery scene book

Carroll & Graf Mystery
Distributed by Publishers Group West
\$3.95 ISBN 0-88184-839-5

Helm novel?

Well, normally I write one a year. And that includes traveling and resting up from the last one and stuff like that. The actual writing doesn't take that long. But it averages out to about one a year with the research and everything else. And I revise every day as I go along. With a computer revision is endless. I rewrite each chapter every morning until I get to the end of it. And then I may go back and rewrite it again.

Do you follow Hemingway's advice and stop with the next section firmly in mind for when you begin the next day?

Well, that's a nice theory, but I usually write as far as I can until I don't know what's going to happen and then I start the next morning. I don't have the strength of mind to stop when it's going well.

Helm has been around for a long time. Is there a secret to writing a series like that with a long-standing main character?

Well, the secret which I didn't know at the time I started is that you shouldn't put any dates into it. Anybody who sits down and reads several of them can figure that this guy must be fairly old by now. Whereas if I hadn't nailed him down pretty accurately in the first few books, I could fudge more easily. That's about it. Writing a series is a little easier in a way in that you'll know who the main character is going to be and what the general outline or shape of the book is going to be. There are certain things you have to repeat in each book. You've got to kind of give the reader the general idea of the organization and his own history as far as it applies to the book in question.

Is it difficult to keep it creative when you have done so many?

Well, of course you do find yourself plagiarizing yourself. I mean, every so often when I read an old one I think, "Oh, my gosh, I used that again?" You know. Usually that happens with observations and opinions and stuff that really aren't worth repeating, but you find yourself repeating them a few books later. Certain things should be repeated, like Matt Helm's little prejudices and opinions are all right to repeat. But just general observations for some reason tend to pop up again and again.

Matt Helm is certainly not too fond of women in pants.

Well, I've kind of tapered off on that. But I thought that was a reasonable quirk for him to have. Of course, I've had a lot of women complain...feminist or something, I don't know what. That doesn't really bother me because I think the guy is entitled to his prejudices. And I can't see why objecting to a woman's pants is anti-feminist. I mean, he still likes women!

How much is Helm like you?

Well, I ain't killed nobody. I don't know. He's a fairly competent and husky guy and I'm pretty much a sedentary typewriter type.

That's interesting because the photos on the early Fawcett paperbacks make you look pretty tough.

Well, that's what the pictures are supposed to do.

Before you created Matt Helm you did several books which you have characterized as having anti-heroes. I find those books not only

well-written but very interesting.

Yeah, but you get tired of the guy who is always getting pushed around. At least I did. I finally discovered that I needed a stronger character to pull it out in the end. The first actual book I published was called *Date With Darkness*. I wrote it after the war and if you've read it you know that the background is right there. The hero, Philip Branch, is a kind of an anti-hero.

It's like a Matt Helm book without Matt Helm...the same situations, but with a different kind of main character. It is also reminiscent of some of Hitchcock's films.

Well, nobody liked it very much when it came out. The one I kind of liked was *Line of Fire*. The one about the gunsmith. And these came before Helm. I may have written a Western after I wrote the first Helm, because at the time I was kind of alternating them. I was writing a mystery and then I was writing a Western so I can't really recall whether the last Western was after the first Helm or not.

What attracted you to the Western genre?

Well, I've always enjoyed reading and I write anything I like to read. So I had a good time with them. I guess I like *The Big Country* the best since they made the best movie of it. The film version of *Smokey Valley* was called *The Violent Men* with Glenn Ford and Barbara Stanwyck and some gal I can't remember. I believe *The Big Country* was very successful and it still comes around on the late show every now and then. They did a good job on that one. And it made me a little richer (laughs). Let's see, in terms of films, there were the two Westerns, there were four Matt Helms and *The Steel Mirror* was made into a movie way back when with Sterling Hayden, who was a nice guy, and they called it *Five Steps to Danger*. It was kind of a minor one and I had to dash off to a little town somewhere near Santa Fe in order to catch it because I had never seen it and it never came to any of the big theaters for some reason. I had nothing to do with the making of that one.

Did you have input in the making of the others?

I kind of fudged with a script for *The Big Country*. That's about all.

Did they use it?

Well, they used a few words. They had such a crew working on it. There must have been seven or eight writers on it before they finally got it made. I wasn't pleased with the Matt Helm movies at all. But like I say, I cried all the way to the bank. I thought the first one was good fun, *The Silencers*. I mean, it wasn't Matt Helm but it was good fun. The other three were kind of mechanical. They tried to be too funny and too gadgety.

An early book of yours that I am very fond of is *Night Walker*. About a guy who is in the wrong place at the wrong time and must assume the identity of the man who tried to murder him.

Glad you liked it. I remember the book. I think that was a *Collier's* serial.

Another good one is *Assignment: Murder*, which was reprinted as *Assassins Have Starry Eyes*.

They had to change the title on that because Edward S. Aarons had the "Assignment" series.

They thought it would confuse people. And I always thought that the title they changed it to was silly. *Assignment: Murder* was my original title and they changed it to *Assassins Have Starry Eyes* which I thought was ridiculous.

It is kind of poetic.

Well, yeah (laughs). But that one I kind of enjoyed doing.

You haven't written a Western in a long time.

No, for a while I had a contract for the Matt Helms that required me to put out one a year and they would have liked me to do more. That kept me busy enough that I couldn't take time off to play with the Westerns. By the time I returned to them I found that I had forgotten too much of the background to get back into it. And besides, it's too bad but they don't seem to sell very well. Unless your name is L'Amour you don't seem to make much money in Westerns.

Is there some relationship between your Western heroes and the hero of the Matt Helm series?

I don't know. I just put a guy in there who would work in the story. In two cases in my Westerns the hero comes from the East; that is always nice to play with because the townspeople all think he must be a dodo since he wears a funny hat. He has to prove himself and that gives you a nice conflict right from the start.

What made you decide to create a hero like Helm who is so different than the anti-heroes of your other early novels?

Well, actually he was not supposed to be a series character. At least I didn't think of him as such. After I got him going and the first book came out, my editor said, "Look, let's make a series of this," and I said, "Sure."

***Death of a Citizen*, the first Matt Helm book, is one of the best of its kind. Was it very successful when it was first published?**

Successful? I mean, it sold. You never know how successful a book is until years later if and when the royalties keep coming in in small drips and drabs. But you know that the book is still alive. That means that it's successful. But there weren't any of them that really made me a mint of money as such. I got a nice contract with Fawcett because they had had somebody who had left them, I forget who it was. So they were looking for another guy to put the push behind and my editor said, look we've got this guy right here, he's right in the shop. So they gave me a try and gave me a contract for so-and-so many books at one a year, wanting more than that, but I didn't want to get stuck at a pace I couldn't keep.

Matt Helm seems to have influenced many writers at the time to start writing espionage fiction.

You never know who starts what. I think it's just like inventing DNA or something. The climate is ripe and all of a sudden three or four guys come up with the same experiment or the same kind of general character. And I suspect that at that time it was the Cold War. It was a time of conflict, more than there is now. Now you don't know who are the "black hats" and who are the "white hats." And Helm had to change over the years a little bit because you haven't got those nice villains over there any more.

Is there a kind of formula for the Helm book? Or, how do you get your ideas for the next one?

No, I just go someplace and take a look at some scenery and decide what I'm going to do. I start some people going in that scenery, on of them being Matt Helm and see what happens. So I go with my characters.

Do you have a plot firmly in mind beforehand?

Heavens, no. As a matter of fact right now I'm a hundred and fifty pages into a book and I still don't know what the plot is. The working title is *The Plunderers*. But I haven't figured out what they are plundering yet (laughs). As you might expect, it's got a boat in it. And the boat is having all sorts of problems going down the intercoastal waterway. And I've done it this way since I started. I could never understand anybody who could write an outline because I never knew what was going to happen until it happened in my books. There have been times when I've had to back up and go in another direction. There have been times when I could see that a certain line of writing wasn't profitable and just wasn't going to work out and I had to tear up a chapter or two and aim them off in a different direction where I could see there would be some kind of a resolution. You don't try to think up a simple plot, you just try to explain things as they happen.

What was it like publishing with Fawcett back in the sixties, since they are considered one of the real pioneers in paperback publishing?

They were nice and they had some good editors. It was a good relationship. But I haven't spent much time, and I spend even less time now, in New York. I try to avoid editors and writers and agents and everything like that as much as possible. I suppose publishing has changed since I started. You are aware of that stuff when you are starting out, but once you've got to the point where they're taking it, or at least pretty sure to take it, you don't really know what's going on there. I gather that it is much harder to break in now than it was when I did. When I started out all I did was pack the darn thing up and sent it in. It never occurred to me to get an agent unless I started selling a few things. They all had readers and they all were very nice about it. And they sent me little notes saying, "This isn't it, but we'd like to see your next," and stuff like that. And one day they took it. Which was really very nice. I knew I was a writer and that it was just a matter of time. But it allowed me to quit trying to be a chemist and be a writer full time. I became a chemist even though I was writing way back when. And my father said, "That's all very well, but you have to have a way to make a living." And so I worked my way up to a degree in chemistry which came in very handy. It got me a commission in the war fixing up bad smells at a naval experiment station. Then they wanted me to stay on in a civilian capacity so I switched over. After I had been there a year or so after the war my stuff started to sell and it was obvious that it would be more profitable for me to spend my time writing rather than mixing up bad smells and trying to knock off stories in the evening and in my spare time.

Anthony Boucher was one critic who had high praise for your books throughout the

sixties. Did you know him personally?

No, I liked what he wrote, particularly what he wrote about me. But I never did meet him.

The place of popular literature in our society seems to be changing. But did it bother you that people might not have taken your books seriously or appreciated their artistic qualities?

Well, there may be people who knock off potbottlers, as they call them. There may be people who are really clever at it and can take a look and say, "Well, I can write this and knock off something that really doesn't mean anything to me." I can't do that. I mean, this is what I wanted to write and I'm writing it. I'm doing the best I can with it.

Well, you are still a master at it. The new book, *The Threateners*, is just as good as the others and probably better than most. I think it is a real accomplishment. What are your feelings about your writing today?

Well, the books come slower. I mean, I'm seventy-five years old. And everything comes a little slower at seventy-five, if you know what I mean. I don't have any favorites among the Matt Helms really. As a matter of fact, I get them all mixed up. I have to take a look inside in order to remember what each book was dealing with. Once I look at it, of course, I remember, but if you just mention a title I might not be able to remember which one that was. I started with *Death of a Citizen* and the *Murderer's*

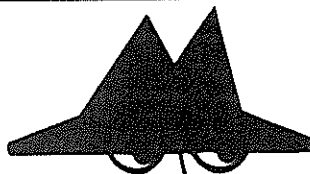
Row and then we had *The Silencers*, I think, and for some reason they liked the one-word title, so I went with that idea.

You mention in the book *The Great Detectives* (1978) that you got Helm's first name from the Bible. Do you remember where you got his last name?

Not really. It just seemed like a good one. You know, you think of the character and you think of the book and then you try to think of a nice comfortable name that you'll feel good about working with. And "Matt Helm" seems to have worked out pretty well.

How has your writing schedule changed throughout your career?

Well, I used to write all day and all week and on and on. But now I usually get up at five, have breakfast, walk the dog and then I get to work and probably around ten o'clock I kind of start getting tired of it. And then I may do a little correspondence...pay a few bills. And then I leave the afternoon free for errands or for going down to the rifle range and shooting off a few or stuff like that. I like to do a little shooting to keep my hand in. At the moment I have a .22 rifle which I use a couple times a week for silhouette shooting. I haven't been doing much real sailing in this boat. It's more a floating home. I ran it down to Florida last fall and brought it back here to Connecticut this spring which is 1500 miles each way. So it hasn't sat idle. But



MYSTERY SCENE MYSTERY BESTSELLER LIST

HARDCOVER

- 1 "I" IS FOR INNOCENT
- 2 A STAINED WHITE RADIANCE
- 3 ZOMBIES OF THE GENE POOL
- 4 BOOKED TO DIE
- 5 LULLABY TOWN
- 6 DEATH BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON
- 7 THE END OF THE PIER
- 8 THE HANGMAN'S BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER
- 9 DEATH AND TAXES
- 10 GUARDIAN ANGEL

Sue Grafton (Henry Holt)
James Lee Burke (Hyperion)
Sharyn McCrumb (Simon & Schuster)
John Dunning (Scribner's)
Robert Crais (Bantam)
Joan Hess (St. Martin's Press)
Martha Grimes (Knopf)
Sharyn McCrumb (Scribner's)
Sue Dunlap (Delacorte)
Sara Paretsky (Delacorte)

PAPERBACK

- 1 "H" IS FOR HOMICIDE
- 2 STALKING THE ANGEL
- 3 BODY OF EVIDENCE
- 4 THE CHRISTIE CAPER
- 5 POISONED IVY
- 6 PASTIME
- 7 MONKEY'S RAINCOAT
- 8 LONGSHOT
- 9 A SUITABLE VENGEANCE
- 10 AN OWL TOO MANY

Sue Grafton (Fawcett)
Robert Crais (Bantam)
Patricia D. Cornwell (Avon)
Carolyn Hart (Bantam)
M.D. Lake (Avon)
Robert B. Parker (Berkley)
Robert Crais (Bantam)
Dick Francis (Fawcett)
Elizabeth George (Bantam)
Charlotte MacLeod (Mysterious Press)

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while I'm here it stays put. It's a big boat to handle by yourself. And it's a lot of work to get it away from the dock! (laughs) I can do it all by myself, but I must be feeling real strong and it has to be a real nice day. No big adventures...that's how you tell a good sailor, he doesn't have any adventures.

One of the Matt Helms I recently reread was *The Devastators*.

Now, you'll have to refresh my memory.

That's the one about the evil scientist who develops a mutant strain of the Black Plague.

Oh, the one with the rats. As a matter of fact, I reread that one recently, too, for some reason. I thought it was pretty good. Some people thought it was a little too science-fictiony. For that one, my wife and I bought a little British sports car and drove all over Scotland and the continent, too. As I say, when I want to start a new Matt Helm I just think of a place I want to go and go there. The big problem with it is that by the time I get to writing it I'm so far away from the place I visited that I have to go back and check things out again.

Do you think fiction about the so-called secret agent will cease to be popular?

I don't know, I'm not under contract for these now, so I just write them and I suppose eventually someday people will get tired of them, but so far I just send them in and that's about it. You kind of wonder how long a subject like this will last. I don't think I'll be around long enough to do any more non-Matt Helm books. Unless somebody gets tired of Matt Helm and asks me to write something else, I'll probably keep right on with him. It's been over thirty years, you know. But, then again, there's always something to worry about.

INTERVIEW: JIM HUANG

By Ted Fitzgerald

1992 is a significant year for the American Mystery Award-winning *Drood Review of Mystery*. The Boston-based publication marks its tenth year of publication even as its editorial offices move westward from the Bay State to Kalamazoo, Michigan, with founder, editor and publisher Jim Huang. In early March, Huang sat down amid boxes packed and unpacked and spoke with *Mystery Scene* about *Drood's* development and operations, its philosophy and audience and the roles of publishers, bookstores and fan publications in promoting mystery fiction.

Establishing and publishing *Drood* shows a deep and obvious love of mystery fiction. How long have you been interested in mysteries and how did this interest lead to *Drood*?

I've been reading mysteries for a long time, dating back to high school. I started out reading science fiction and mysteries were shelved next to science fiction in the book shops where I bought my books. Over time I became more and more interested in mysteries and less in science fiction. By the time I was out of college I was pretty much reading mysteries exclusively. I got into publishing

through science fiction where there's a big tradition of fan publishing, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fan publications. I was happy to add to that number. When I looked around for the same sort of thing in the mystery field there was *Armchair Detective* but I didn't find any others, especially one dealing with new books and what to read. When I saw there wasn't any, I decided to go ahead and do one myself. I had done some fan publishing in high school (a fanzine titled *Cloak and Dagger* around 1977-78) (but) I didn't have time to publish in college. Coming out of Swarthmore, I moved up to Boston and started law school, which—believe it or not—left me with a lot of free time on my hands. So I came back to publishing and started the *Drood Review* in September 1982. From September '82 to summer '83, *Drood* was small, with rudimentary production values...a lot of content but not much to it visually. In the summer of '83, a group of people with whom I'd worked on the student paper at Swarthmore moved up to Boston and suddenly we had a talented group of people to exploit. We used the techniques we'd utilized at Swarthmore to transform *Drood* into the format seen today.

Is there a basic philosophy to *Drood* and has it changed much over the past decade?

I don't think it's changed in ten years. Basically, we want to help readers figure out what books they should read next. Our desire to do that grows out of our own desire to find new books to read. We read voraciously and always want to know about new writers. I think the thing that sets *Drood* apart from most book reviews, especially those done by mainstream reviewers, is our willingness to take the book seriously. What you're *not* going to see in *Drood* is the assumption that a good book is not a genre book. We don't talk about a book transcending the genre. It's my own feeling that the best writing being done today is being done in the genres. The form imposes a discipline on the writers that makes them write better.

Apart from taking the books seriously is our willingness to look at their social messages. For example, we've been very concerned about stereotyping in mysteries and have frequently pointed out instances of negative portrayals of women, gays and other groups. It's my feeling that popular fiction isn't just a mirror to society but also goes a long way toward shaping society.

What developments and changes have you observed in mystery writing and the mystery field since starting *Drood*?

Obviously, the increased presence of women in the field. Women have always been the majority of mystery readers. It took publishers a long time to figure out that these women wanted to read about people like themselves and that men were interested in reading about strong female characters as well. The genre has gotten a lot stronger in the last ten years and, from my point of view, I attribute a lot of that to specialty mystery booksellers. By themselves they're not enough to make a book successful but they provide a strong base to build on and, more importantly, they provide expertise and feedback to authors and publishers willing to listen. There are also a lot more periodicals which I think is great. The more of them out there, the better off we all are. The conventions, which give dedicated

mystery fans a chance to get together, are important as well. When *Drood* ran conventions in Boston from 1984-86, it was a new and unfamiliar idea in fandom. Last year, there were four successful regional or specialty conventions. People are used to the idea and eagerly look forward to attending one. We were ahead of the curve on conventions but we've concentrated on *Drood* which has grown considerably since 1986.

In hard numbers, how much has it grown?

Our paid circulation is approaching 1,700. We have subscribers in forty-nine of the fifty states—North Dakota, where are you?—several APO and FPO subscribers as well as those in a half-dozen countries including Britain, Japan, Australia and Saudi Arabia.

Who makes up this 1,700 and how well do they view *Drood*?

Reaction has been terrific. Readers appreciate having information they can rely on, and that's not just the reviews but also the quarterly previews of forthcoming titles. In addition to fans, authors and editors use *Drood*. Librarians find it very helpful in deciding which mysteries to buy. Booksellers in the genre largely use *Drood* to catch up with things they missed one way or another. We're a good primary source for a good bookseller who needs to stock more than bestsellers. We don't hear a lot back from publishers. We see our reviews quoted more and more on book jackets but we don't get a lot of direct feedback from publishers.

No authors have thrown bricks through our windows...yet. Most seem grateful for the reviews, even negative ones. It's rare that a writer is really angry with us. Maybe they're just not talking to us. That goes back to the part about taking the books seriously. Mystery writers recognize that we will never belittle a book because it's a mystery and I think that's rare concerning book reviewers. We do print negative reviews—we print a lot of them. I'd say our standards are very high but we don't make the mistake of excusing a fault because we take the book too lightly. It also means that a positive review in *Drood* means something.

Writers often ask us why we don't review a book and, in virtually all cases, the answer is that the publishers didn't do their job in getting the galleys to us in a timely fashion. We'd like our review to reach readers the same time the book reaches the bookstores. In order to do that, we need three to four months lead time. It doesn't help a book to have the review come out a week or month or year after the book has left bookstores. With the increased number of titles the shelf life of each is being reduced.

Other than publishers getting galleys to you early enough, how does a book end up being reviewed in *Drood*?

Drood is all staff-written, to avoid duplication and as a matter of quality. The core group of reviewers is Swarthmore people, which explains a lot of our orientation. Everyone else is a personal contact. Short reviews are a matter of who's in the right place at the right time. Reviewers have favorites and I'll try to assign them with that in mind. One of the things that's good about our reviewers is that they're open to reviewing new writers and that's allowed us to cover newcomers. Our longer pieces are developed both by the writers, who have an enthusiasm for an