

# DOC SAVAGE AND HIS CIRCLE

By Ron Goulart

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“The giant bronze man and his five friends would confront undreamed perils as the very depths of hell itself crashed upon their heads.”

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He had always been apprehensive lest something of the kind occur. The scientists who had trained him during his childhood had been afraid of his losing human qualities; they had guarded him against this as much as possible. When a man's entire life is fantastic, he must guard against his own personality becoming strange,” Kenneth Robeson, *The Dagger In The Sky*.

You never know what sort of monument you'll get or what you'll be remembered for. Lester Dent had hopes to have a chance to write what he felt were first rate books and stories, the kind of thing that shows up on slick paper and best seller lists. Instead, he got hired to write the Doc Savage series and he spent nearly two decades hidden behind the pen name of Kenneth Robeson. The current Bantam paperback revivals of the old Doc Savage novels have now sold over twelve million copies and so Dent has become, some ten years after his death, one of the best selling authors of the century.

The official version of the inception of Doc Savage is that the entire concept was originated by Henry W. Ralston of Street & Smith. More probably, the character developed out of the numerous conferences on new titles which followed the unexpected success of *The Shadow*. “*The Shadow* was going so good, it fooled hell out of everybody,” recalls Walter Gibson (the writer who



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There were 181 novels devoted to Doc Savage. "the man whose name was becoming a byword in the odd corners of the world!"



"He has the clue-following ability of Tarzan, the scientific sleuthing of Craig Kennedy and the morals of Jesus Christ," so Dent described his creation to a reporter.

handed this description of the character: "A Man of Bronze—known as Doc, who looks very much like Clark Gable. He is so well built that the impression is not of size, but of power." Baumhofer ignored this and made Doc look like a model he was using at the moment. In the stories of course, Doc's full name is Clark Savage.

When he took on the Doc Savage job in 1933, Lester Dent was in his early thirties and already a prolific writer of pulp stories. A contemporary describes him as being then "a huge, red-headed man, six feet three and weighing around two hundred pounds." Dent grew up on his family's farm in La Plata, Missouri and despite his later wanderings he continued to refer to himself as "just a Missouri hillbilly." In the mid 1930s, writing about himself in the

third person for a publicity release, Dent depicted his early years this way:

As a small boy, Lester Dent was taken across Wyoming in a covered wagon. Six weeks were required for the trip which can be made by automobile today in three hours.

Dent lived as a youth on a Wyoming cow ranch. Also lived on a farm near La Plata, Mo.

Dent was nineteen years old before his hair was ever cut by a barber.

Dent has only a high school education, but he attended Chilocco Business College, learned to

telegraph, and went to work for \$45.00 a month.

Dent studied law nights.

While working a night telegraph job—from midnight until eight in the morning—Dent turned his hand to writing adventure stories. His first thirteen stories, nobody would buy. The fourteenth story sold for \$250.00.

A few months later, a large New York publishing house, after reading the first story Dent sent them, telegraphed him to the effect that, "if you make less than a hundred dollars a week on your present job, advise you to quit; come to New York and be taken under our wing, with a five-hun-

"Doc... looks very much like Clark Gable."

dred-dollar-a-month drawing account."

After telegraphing friends in New York to inquire around about the publisher's sanity, Dent went to New York. That was in 1931.

The publisher who called Dent away from his Associated Press job in Tulsa was Dell. He wrote stories for their *War Aces*, *War Birds*, *All Western*, *Western Romances* and *All Detective*. He eventually wrote for many of the other pulp outfits and had sold to Street & Smith's *Popular* and *Top Notch* before taking up the Savage assignment. Though much of the pulp writing Dent did sounds like the work of a man who is enjoying himself, he often privately referred to it as "crud." Asked to explain Doc Savage to a reporter, Dent said, "He has the clue-following ability of Sherlock Holmes, the muscular tree-swinging ability of Tarzan, the scientific sleuthing of



"A giant who towered four inches over six feet. His face was severe, his mouth thin and grim. This was 'Renny' or Colonel John Renwick." Known for engineering skill.

expanded *The Shadow* from a radio voice into a pulp novel hero for Street & Smith.) "Ralston wanted to start another adventure magazine, but for a long time he didn't even have a title." John Nanovic, who edited both *The Shadow* and the new *Doc Savage* magazines, was also in on the planning of the new series. Basically, the Doc Savage format—that of a strong and brilliant hero and his coterie of gifted and whimsical sidekicks—is Frank Meriwell and his chums updated. And there was numerous other successful gangs of fictional do-gooders around in the 1920s and 30s that might have served as inspiration, especially Edgar Wallace's *Four Just Men*. Street & Smith might even have noticed a series one of their own authors was doing over at Fiction House. A year before the debut of Doc, Theodore Tinsley was writing novelets about a manhunter named Major Lacey, who had his headquarters in "the towering pinnacle of the Cloud building" and was aided by a variously gifted quartet of his ex-Marine buddies. Clark Gable influenced the development of Doc, too. When artist Walter Baumhofer was called in to paint the cover for the first issue of *Doc Savage Magazine* he was



This illustration originally appeared in the March 1936 *DOC SAVAGE MAGAZINE*, "The Metal Masters." All illustrations are reprinted by permission of Conde Nast Publications, Inc.

Craig Kennedy and the morals of Jesus Christ."

The first issue of *Doc Savage Magazine* was dated March, 1933, and sold for ten cents. The Baumhofer cover showed a slightly tattered Doc standing in front of a piece of Mayan ruin that had several sinister natives lurking behind it. Baumhofer, who did every cover of the magazine for the next several years, has yet to read a Doc Savage novel. He usually based his cover paintings on a short synopsis pro-

vided by one of the art editors. He got seventy-five dollars per oil painting. The interior illustrations were drawn by Paul Orban. Orban followed directions and so inside the new magazine Doc did indeed look like Clark Gable for awhile. "I actually read all the stories," Orban told me. "The editors never interfered or suggested what to draw. The artists were on their own... The going price was fifteen dollars a drawing and thirty dollars for a double page spread." Unlike Baumhofer, who never encountered Lester Dent, Orban did meet him once, though briefly.

The maiden Doc Savage adventure was titled "The Man Of Bronze." This inaugural novel about Clark Savage, Jr. and his group is written in a breathless turgid prose that is not characteristic of Dent and probably indicates some editorial committee work. It begins, "There was death afoot in the darkness," and ends, "The giant bronze man and his five friends would confront undreamed perils as the very depths of hell itself crashed upon their heads. And through all that, the work of Savage would go on!" In between the reader is introduced to Doc, who possesses "an unusually high forehead, a mobile and

muscular, but not too-full mouth, lean cheeks." He looks like a statue sculptured in bronze, is what he looks like, and "most marvelous of all were his eyes. They glistened like pools of flake gold." He also has nice teeth. "This man was Clark Savage, Jr. Doc Savage! The man whose name was becoming a byword in the odd corners of the world!" This exclamatory novel also introduces

melodrama. Dent's sense of humor moved closer to the surface and by the mid 1930s the Doc Savage adventures had some resemblance to the screwball movies of the period. He was more and more mixing adventure and detective elements with wackiness and producing a sort of pulpwood equivalent of films *The Thin Man*, *Gunga Din*, and *China Seas*. These movies, despite different

"He looks like a statue sculptured in bronze."

Doc's crew of five, walking into Doc's headquarters atop one of the tallest buildings in New York.

The rest of the first novel details Doc's avenging the recent death of his father, exploring Mayan ruins in the Central American republic of Hidalgo, unmasking a villain known as the Feathered Serpent and finding enough gold to finance the remaining years of his pulp career.

In the issue after this came a lost world novel, "The Land of Terror," and next a Southern swamp adventure, "Quest of the Spider." As the series progressed a distinct Dent-type of book developed. The dime novel aura which was present in the first stories faded and both the plots and the prose dropped much of their

locales and themes, shared a fooling-around quality that was current then in a good many Hollywood pictures. In his Doc Savage novels Dent pushed the usual pulp adventure and science fiction plots often quite close to parody, whether he was dealing with infernal machines, plagues, master thieves, pixies or ogres. While quite a few of his competitors can now be read for their unconscious humor, all of the laughs in Dent are intentional. He excelled in devising villains who were both bizarre and baggy-pantsed. For instance:

Off to one side was a child's crib. It was an elaborate thing, with carvings and gilt inlays, and here and there rows of pearl studding . . . The crib was about four feet long. The man who occupied it had plenty of room. . . He was a little gem of a man.

His face had that utter handsomeness which pen-and-ink artists give their heroes in the love story magazines. He wore little bathing trunks and a little bathrobe, smoked a little cigar in a little holder, and a toy glass on a rack at the side held a toy drink in which leaned a toy swizzle stick.

Dent was also partial to slender, salty tomboy heroines and they appear in most of his novels:

The big eyes were blue, a nice shade. There was more about her that was nice, too. Her nose, the shape of her mouth. Long Tom had a weakness for slender girls, and this one was certainly slender. She wore stout leather boots, shorts, a khaki pith helmet.

"Don't stand there staring!" she



Brigadier General Theodore Marly Brooks, "Ham", was "slender, waspy, quick-moving . . . and possibly the most astute lawyer Harvard ever turned out."



snapped. "I want a witness! Somebody to prove I saw it."

She was a redhead. In height, she would have topped Doc's shoulder a bit. . . Altogether her features could hardly have been improved upon. She wore an amazing costume—a loose, brocaded Russian blouse, drawn in at the waist with a belt fashioned of parallel lines of gold coins. From this dangled a slender, jewelled sword which Doc was certain dated back at least four centuries. There was also an efficient, spike-nosed, very modern automatic pistol.

Dent's action was often presented in choppy, quick-cut movie style. As in this assault from the novel, "Red Snow":

Doc Savage put on speed. He came in sight of the basement window just in time to see the gold-hosed legs of his quarry disappearing inside. Then, in the basement, a man saw Doc and bellowed profanely. What might have been a thick-walled steel pipe of small diameter jutted out of the window. Its tip acquired a flickering red spear-point of flame. The weapon was an automatic rifle of military calibre and its roar volleyed through the compound.



"Last came the most remarkable character of all. Only a few inches over five feet, he weighed better than two hundred pounds. He had the build of a gorilla. . . "Monk."



Doc Savage had rolled behind a palm, which, after the fashion of palms when stunted, was extremely wide at the base. The tree shuddered, and dead leaves loosened and fluttered in the wind. A cupro-nickel-jacketed slug came entirely through the bole. More followed. The bole began to split. The racket was terrific.

He also worked out a distinctive and personal way of starting a story. These were often abrupt and unlike the usual slow and moody Street & Smith openings so much favored by writers like Walter Gibson. For example:

When Ethel's Mama blew up, she shook the earth in more ways than one.

When the plane landed on a farmer's oat-stubble field in the Mississippi bottoms near St. Louis, the time was around ten in the morning.

The farmer had turned his cattle onto the stubble field to graze, and among the animals was a rogue bull which was a horned devil with strangers.

The bull charged the aviator.

The flier killed the bull with a spear.

The street should be very clean. The long-faced man had been sweeping it since daylight.



"Next was Major Thomas J. Roberts, dubbed 'Long Tom'. Long Tom was the physical weakling of the crowd... He was a wizard with electricity."

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The magazine created a Doc Savage Credo, organized a Doc Savage Club and offered portraits, lapel pins and a gold award for deserving nominees.

Never completely reverent of Doc, Dent extemporized abilities for him that went beyond the wildest talents of your average everyday superhero. In one novel, for instance, Doc Savage displays not only a remarkable knack for fashion designing but an exceptional skill for leading a dance band.

*Doc Savage Magazine* proved to be another best-selling title for Street & Smith and it stayed on the stands for sixteen years all told. The periodical remained monthly until after the war and then declined down through bi-monthly and finally quarterly publication. There were 181 separate novels devoted to Doc Savage, all credited to Kenneth Robeson. Of these Dent seems to have written all but about two

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Ron Ely, the six-foot five, Texas born, television Tarzan will play the Man of Bronze in the Warner Brothers movie of the same name. In the background is the painting used on Bantam's paperback version of *THE MAN OF BRONZE*.