



No. 60

December 1975

## Edmond Hamilton: An Interview

Conducted by Paul Walker

The first score or so of stories I wrote were, indeed, all about the destruction of the Earth, usually aborted at the last moment. I believe that this came about from a profound dissatisfaction with the world. I was in college when I was too young for it, I was not well adjusted . . . after a magnificent boyhood, I had a faintly unhappy adolescence. I believe I was working that off fictionally in a desire to see everything go smash. I may add I am profoundly distrustful of cheap and easy psychological explanations, but I believe this one is true.

☆☆☆

It's very difficult to look back 50 years and more and be truthful about my early days at my small academic college and why I became alienated from academic life. One's mind paints up a plausible scheme of things that maybe didn't really happen like that at all.

I was, first, alienated because of the difference in ages between myself and other students. I was, actually, 14 years old when I matriculated . . . but became 15 on October 21, 1919. I am glad to say that I made friends, I was invited to join one of the social clubs that took the place of fraternities in our college. But all the same, there was a difference there.

I think that difference in ages was one of the main reasons why I didn't do well in college. But also I have a dislike for the academic life. With joy I exchanged the atmosphere of books, papers, politeness, for the work I took to on the railroad . . . the gusty, profane and likeable men I worked with, I preferred infinitely to professors.

But I am sure that my fascination with science fiction, with the world of the imagination, did not alienate me from college. I had that fascination before I ever entered college, I maintained it, but it was something apart from classes and learning. I feel I'm vague here, but as I say, I'm sure that my lifelong obsession with imaginative scenes and possibilities did not turn me off formal education. In fact, many an idea I used later in stories, I got from my physics classes at school then.

☆☆☆

My interest in science led me to major in physics when I entered college, and came from the fact that I was at that time a fanatic amateur in wireless telegraphy (we didn't use the word 'radio' in those days). So I decided I would like to be an electrical engineer.

But I was at that time far more profoundly interested in literature than in science. The rather hard cruel logic of physical science was no doubt good for my wandering mind, though.

... about A. Merritt and his influence on me. It was very profound. I did not particularly try to imitate Merritt, though I did a few times. The writer I most imitated was Homer Eon Flint, who wrote such world-moving epics as "The Planeteer," etc. for Munsey magazines. Anyone who looks into those stories can clearly see my debt to Flint, which I have always acknowledged.

But Merritt was the writer who inspired me, if I can use so grandiose a term. He is thought of as a fantasy writer but actually was, except for a few fantasy stories, a straight sf writer and a hell of a good one. In 1919-1920 he was using Eddington's exposition of the Einstein theory in a story! He was my idol ... and when I met him in later years, I was delighted to find that the idol did not have feet of clay but was a very wonderful man. I think his stories are as great as ever, and I note that they stay in print forever.

Merritt wrote me good advice in his letters. He questioned the necessity for going to other planets when something could just as easily take place in a remote corner of Earth. He advised me not to read too much science fiction, but to read science and let my imagination play around what I read.

I don't know what Merritt's exact age was when I first met him in June of 1937 ... but he was exactly like your favorite uncle. He was warmly outgoing with a dry sense of humor. He had for several years corresponded with myself and with Jack Williamson, and had invited us to come and see him when we were in New York. We did so, going with considerable awe and trembling to the offices of the *American Weekly*, of which Merritt was editor. His greeting could not have been more friendly, and the three of us sat in a little office where he chewed tobacco, spat through the open window, and talked of fantasy, fantasy writers, and on and on for a couple of hours. What did I like about him?

#### LUNA Monthly

Editor: Ann F. Dietz

Published by Frank & Ann Dietz, 655 Orchard Street, Oradell, N.J. 07649

#### DEADLINE FOR MATERIAL:

First Friday of preceding month

#### SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

50¢ per copy, 75¢ on newsstand

\$5.25 per year Third Class mail within U.S.

5.75 per year Third Class mail worldwide

7.50 per year First Class mail within North America

Subscriptions requiring special invoicing 50¢ additional

Microfilm Edition: \$17.00 per reel (year)

Back issues: #1 to 37 - 75¢ each, #38 to current - 50¢ each

All checks and money orders must be payable to Franklin M. Dietz Jr. only

US ISSN 0024-7375

#### ADVERTISING RATES:

Full page \$8.00 Quarter page \$2.50

Half page 4.50 Eighth page 1.50

Classified advertising: 2¢ per word

Half-tone copy: \$5.00 additional

Rates are for camera-ready copy. Please request special LUNA layout sheets for setting up copy. Ads requiring preparation should be submitted in advance for quotation.

#### COPY SIZE: (inside margins)

Full page 6" x 9"

Half page 3" x 9" or 6" x 4½"

Quarter page 3" x 4½"

Eighth page 3" x 2¼"

#### OTHER LUNA PUBLICATIONS:

LUNA' Editor: Franklin M. Dietz Jr.

Speech Transcripts Published Irregularly

LUNA Annual Editor: Ann F. Dietz

Bibliography To be published

Member: Science Fiction Publishers Association

#### OVERSEAS SUBSCRIPTION RATES for LUNA Monthly via Airmail/FC through agents:

AUSTRALIA A\$6.30

Gary Mason, GPO Box 1583, Adelaide, S.A. 5001, Australia

GREAT BRITAIN 450p

Aardvark House, P.O. Box 10, Winchester SO22 4QA, England

JAPAN ¥3000

Takumi Shibano, 1-14-10, O-okayama, Meguro-ku, Tokyo, Japan

Everything . . . a wide statement. But especially the real friendliness he felt for us and for everyone engaged in fantasy.

If you want to know more about Merritt, there is a book which gives loads of information about him. The book is *Nothing's Sacred on Sunday* by Emile C. Schurmacher (Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1951). Schurmacher was a reporter on the *American Weekly*, and wrote his book about being such a reporter. He idolized Merritt as an editor . . . about Merritt's fantasy and his towering reputation as a fantasy writer, Schurmacher knew little and only devoted a couple of pages to that. But Merritt as an editor and as a man was his subject. The darned book is scarce now, but your public library may have a copy.

☆☆☆

I've been trying to remember about what literature I was reading when I first started to write, and as nearly as I can recall, my reading would be described as omnivorous. You must note that in many cases I was reading things far over my head, I had interest but not complete comprehension.

That would be in the mid to late Twenties. I remember working my way through all the main Elizabethan dramatists at that time. All *except* Shakespeare. Some sour recollection of compulsory Shakespeare in school gave me a bias against him. Then, in the summer of 1930, I decided to read some things I had so far avoided . . . I read Shakespeare from first to last, in the chronological order of the plays. I well remember that it was in reading *Coriolanus* that I got the first impact of his greatness. I also that summer read Malory's *Mort d'Artur* and Casanova's *Memoirs* in the original French, thus teaching myself to read French, so that I can still read it fluently. But if the above list, along with which I include Sir Thomas Browne and Robert Burton, seems too high-toned to be probable, be assured that in the same period I read every kind of thriller.

About what scientific books most influenced me in the old days, and what story-ideas I got from them: I've been trying to think of some. Jeans' *The Universe Around Us* and Eddington's *Nature of the Physical World* were general seminal influences in the field of astronomy. But I got more story ideas from *The Science of Life* by H.G. Wells and Julian Huxley, a large popularization of biological science.

I had not studied biology in school, concentrating on the physical sciences. Therefore this fine book was a revelation to me and a great stimulus. Particularly the section on genetics . . . I got ideas from that for "The Man Who Evolved," "Devolution" and "The Accursed Galaxy." I mention those three because I just recently heard from Isaac Asimov that he wants to use those tales in his *Before the Golden Age* sf anthology. Also "The Master of the Genes," a 1934 story, came from that work.

From *World Machine* by Carl Snyder, a 1910 (approx) history of astronomical science, a brilliant work in its time, came the idea for "The Ephemeræ." From *The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade, a masterful free-thinking Victorian's history of civilization, came a suggestion that I've used in many stories . . . the suggestion that someday in the future, when man had expanded his race to many worlds, the Earth would be a holy planet visited by pilgrims from all over the universe. What an idea for a Victorian writer! I used that idea in "Forgotten World," and several other stories.

The above should give you an idea of how I used thoughts from scientific books, for stories.

☆☆☆

About my interest in science, and the attitude of us early sf writers toward science, I believe you have cleared up for me a puzzling thing about many presentday sf writers . . . their lack of interest in science. This explains the mystery (to me) of why so many of them have not the slightest interest in the space program and its great achievements. To me, sf without the scientific element amounts to very little. I believe that young writers do regard stories not as something whose subject matter interests them passionately, i.e. scientific possibilities, but as exercises in English lit. I don't think without true passion about whatever you write, no matter how crude it may be, you can ever be as happy writing. That is just my opinion.

☆☆☆

How did I work? I just sat down and wrote like crazy . . . I took no notes, or outlines.

I started by doing a rewrite of each story, then for quite a few years I wrote everything out first draft and the hell with rewriting. Of course, the fact I wasn't getting paid much for those stories had something to do with that. As time went on, I became more careful.

☆☆☆

About planning my early stories, or not planning them . . . I must have given you the wrong impression if you thought I did not plan out those early yarns. In fact, for many years I planned each story rigorously and the longer ones in a chapter-by-chapter synopsis. I ceased to do this in later years. I suppose by then I had confidence enough that I would not go badly astray, but could develop the plot naturally as I went along. It's been a long time since I outlined a story in advance. I just start, and let the subconscious develop the thing. One thing, though . . . I always had a weakness for wanting to know what the very last line of the story would be. I suppose that is because it is the place where you leave the reader, and therefore I feel it is the final impression you want the story to give.

About markets today, and how has the sf market changed, and do I think that the whole pulp era was a waste of time? No, I don't think so . . . of course, the question is a purely speculative one, and until we can return to an alternative time-track and do things over differently, it doesn't have much real meaning. However, I think that there has been too much crying about sf being forced into a ghetto, and away from the mainstream. I think this is a lot of b.s. The reason why us pulp writers of sf didn't appear in the mainstream was simply that we weren't good enough writers for the mainstream. Those of us who were good enough . . . Bob Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and a few others, were welcomed by mainstream markets. I believe that in the pulp era most of us producing sf were not so much writing stories as making myths, on a great scale. I think that was very much worth while but it is a different thing from writing professional stories of the mainstream.

By 'making myths' . . . that is simply a way I refer to many of our early sf stories when we did not or could not construct a real story but wrote somewhat inchoate fictions about vast and striking events, worlds destroyed, worlds saved, monstrous incursions, etc. In my own case, many of these almost completely lacked what you might call a human story.

How do I feel about the rapid, high-production way we oldtime pulp writers employed in our work? I can't speak for others, but for me it was the best way in the world to work. I might have been a more polished writer had I worked in more leisurely fashion, but I might too have been the centipede who didn't know which leg to lift first.

The market has so changed, is so much more demanding, that this high-production method probably wouldn't work at all these days. It was hard on the back, hellishly hard on the eyes and nervous system, but there was something intoxicating about batting a story right out, and to the devil with revisions.

One of the most ghastly stories I ever wrote was "Outside the Universe," a wild tale of three galaxies at war. I wrote that in 1928, over 50,000 words of it first draft. I used a very small portable typewriter on a big, flat-top inherited desk. In writing those hectic space-battles, my hard pounding made the little typewriter creep all over the desk, and I would stand up and follow it in my burning enthusiasm. No wonder I changed to an IBM typewriter . . . I always did pound too hard. Terrible stuff, I say now of that story . . . yet A. Merritt loved it, so testified in print in *Weird Tales*, and tried to get his publishers, Horace Liveright, to print it in book form. Just a few days ago I got from Editions Opta, in France, payment for the new French translation of that old yarn . . . payment over 3 times what I got originally from *Weird Tales* magazine!

I stopped writing so fast, long ago. I did make an exception for the Captain Future series. They didn't at first pay much for those. So I did them first draft, a chapter a day, allowing 2 days for the first chapter, which is more difficult. Later, when they upped the price they paid, I did two drafts and the writing of the stories improved.

There is no use, however, in giving advice to someone to write at high speed, because as I say, the market has so changed that you can't sell that high-speed stuff any more.

I should explain, referring to my statement on the Captain Future series, that I did not make a practice of hurrying the writing of stories that would not pay well. I've always believed that a writer should do every story the very best he can, no matter if it'll be paid

*Continued on Page 12*

On National Rodent Day Jenny gives a party even though life is not easy. Cats and dogs are slowly diminishing the numbers of rodents in their group. Bouncer makes a speech about freedom, and Jenny gives the speech direction by saying that they should find a peaceful island to live on. They supply their ship and after many troubles escape to sea. The first few days they take life easy, but after a time become seasick, homesick and downhearted. Food is low when land is sighted.

The geography book calls the island "Skog" and states it is inhabited by one skog. None know what a skog is. Lousie wants to bring him a gift in friendship but Bouncer makes a show of force and launches cannon balls from the ship.

Bouncer claims the land and proclaims himself King while Jenny says they all feel like kings. They return to the ship for the night and in the morning find a huge footprint on the beach. A trap is laid for the monster and they wait on shore and at dawn find they are marooned on the island. Bouncer grumbles, but Jenny puts her plan for capturing the skog into operation. It works. The skog begs not to be killed and says he was just trying to get them to leave because the cannon and the trap frightened him. Jenny says that they all should have talked first and all agree to build a village and to live in peace. Bouncer decides they need a national anthem and an orchestra and that HE will lead it.

An interesting story. Bouncer is the prototype of all the people who have a good idea and lead others into projects, and then when things are going wrong disclaim any responsibility for their actions. Jenny and Lousie are too passive for me. They have good ideas, and yet they go along with the crowd. Group dynamics in action. I think the author was trying to show that one should make plans and rather than show force show friendship first, yet the characters that show these traits are so weak the concept is hard to grasp. All they seem capable of is an "I told you so" attitude.

The artwork is excellent and just for that I would recommend the book. The work is done in pastels and all the details are small pen point lines which take hours to do. The original artwork must be fantastic.

Sandy Deckinger

\*\*\*\*\*

#### EDMOND HAMILTON: An Interview continued from Page 4

for in buttons. But I was trying to make a living writing sf, and when they asked me to take on the Captain Future chore, I had to specify that until they could pay more for the stories, I'd have to do them in as little time as possible. They agreed, and the first few of them were just sort of written off as rapidly as possible... though I had made out a schema of background for the stories, which I adhered to carefully. But I have never believed in dashing out a story because it was an unpretentious thing.

☆☆☆

I met Leigh Brackett in the summer of 1940. Jack Williamson and I went over to Beverly Hills to see Julius Schwartz and Mort Weisinger, Mort being then sf editor of Standard Magazines. Julie Schwartz was my agent, and he was also Leigh's agent, and while we were there, Leigh stopped to see Julie and he introduced us. I saw her several times in that summer. The next summer, that of 1941, Julie and I drove out to Los Angeles and spent the summer there, renting a bungalow in a court. We had quite a gang of sf people come by in evenings... Bradbury was selling newspapers on the corner of the street, in those days, and Henry Kuttner, Art Barnes, and a good many others came by. Leigh came to see us in the afternoons sometimes, and I got better acquainted with her. Then when I went back to Pennsylvania that fall I lost track of her during the war years. I went back out to California in the summer of 1946 and Leigh and Ray Bradbury met me at the Hotel Roosevelt bar in Hollywood and welcomed me back to the coast. I fell hard for her at once and have remained that way ever since!

#### NEW BOOKS continued from Page 6

Zolar. THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS. Sphere, 40p. ne, pb. 7221.9430.7

These books may only be sold outside the United Kingdom subject to market restrictions. © Aardvark House 1975.