

In Memory of George C Chesbro

November 18th 2008 George Chesbro passed away of congestive heart failure at 68 years of age.

Those are facts and presented the way a reporter would present them. When it comes to Chesbro I'm a fan. And so while there will be facts in this piece I'm writing it will be written as a fan of an author who made my world a better place by adding to it with his books and kindness.

At the time of his death Chesbro had published 27 novels, he had also had hundreds of short stories published. After teaching special education for years he was inspired to write about a detective with a disability, in part by the success of the television show Ironside.

The first of the novels was SHADOW OF A BROKEN MAN, it was also the first to feature his series character Mongo the Magnificent. I discovered Mongo in the mid nineties while hanging out at Mystery One Bookstore in Milwaukee. I had been sober a few years and was spending a lot of my free time reading and in the pursuit of more books. I wanted something new to read and picked up a paperback of DARK CHANT IN A CRIMSON KEY. Richard Katz, the owner of the store, got a huge grin and told me I'd love it. Normally Richard would recommend reading a series in order, but as I soon discovered, a lot of the earlier books were out of print. I read DARK CHANT and was hooked. It was a perfect book to start with, Mongo was the lead character but it also featured two of Chesbro's other characters, Chant and Angel, both of whom had some books of their own. Mongo is a dwarf, he worked his way through college in a circus known as Mongo the magnificent. He eventually graduated and taught criminal justice and worked as a PI on the side. Eventually he opened his own agency with his brother Garth, a former New York cop. Chant is a dangerous man, working on a world wide scale correcting injustices in his own secret way. Angel is a vet, a sniper and an artist. Dark Chant brought all these characters together and threw me head first into George Chesbro's world. It's an exciting place commingling detective fiction with supernatural as squeezed through a pulp filter.

This was an eye opening experience for me, both as a reader and collector. I had to have all the books. I was able to find some paperbacks quickly, but as this was before I was on the internet I did it the old fashioned way, I went book hunting. I was soon buying every paperback I found, I had multiple copies of a lot of titles. Little by little I tracked down the hard covers and this was the first time I paid more than cover price for a book. I read every book, I read all the non series books, and I started digging through old copies of Alfred Hitchcock and Ellery Queen among others looking for short stories. Two more hard covers came out after this and then I learned a hard lesson. George was dropped by his publisher.

He eventually started publishing books with Apache Beach Publications, a company started by his wife.

Around the time DREAM OF A FALLING EAGLE came out I sent George a letter, this was pre email for me. He wrote me back the day he got it and I was thrilled. I actually have the letter framed. This was one of my very first experiences with an author outside of reading the books. A few years later when I started interviewing authors George was one of the first I went to. I'm still a huge fan and I still buy all the paperbacks I can find. I give them to all sorts of people and tell them they will love the books, so far they all have.

The loss of George Chesbro is personal for me and I really feel a gap left behind. Following this piece I'm going to reprint the interview I did with George so you can get some of this in his own words. It's one of my first and looking back there is a lot more I wish I had asked. The thing I hope you take away from this is a desire to find these great books, it's through his words that George Chesbro will live on every time someone opens a book he wrote.

Interview with George Chesbro
(Originally on the Mystery One Website)

Jon Jordan: Most of your books take place in what my friends and I like to call the "Mongo-verse", which would encompass the Veil books, the Chant books as well as the books with Mongo and Garth. What prompted the idea behind a dwarf detective with such a diverse background?

George C Chesbro: I've written extensively on the birth of Mongo, including in the introduction to IN THE HOUSE OF SECRET ENEMIES. To summarize: Back in the 70's, when I had just started to publish short stories, I began searching for a series character I could use in more than one story. There were a lot of "handicapped" detectives on TV (Ironside, Longstreet, etc.). Out of nowhere, believing that it is good for the soul to have one insane idea a day, whether you need it or not, the notion of a dwarf private detective came to me. The thought certainly amused me, but I considered such a character bizarre and absurd, unworkable and un-publishable, and thus a waste of time to spend and length of time trying to develop it. I kept searching, but the damn dwarf just wouldn't go away. Finally, in an attempt to "exorcise" the idea, I started a short story (really a novelette, since developing a dwarf takes time, in a manner of speaking). It was to be a satire. Halfway through, I discovered a key to the man's character was a simple quest to be taken seriously, for dignity. That touched me, and I started over again, this time doing it "straight" (or as straight as I'm able). I gave Mongo dignity, and in return he gave me a career. The diverse background was, I thought, necessary in order to properly equip him in a "world of giants".

JJ: Have we seen the end of Mongo, or will he be back at some point? And for that matter, what about Chant and Veil?

GC: Mongo will be back. I also have plans for Chant and Veil.

JJ: The approach you took to taking care of the problems with the back list seems brilliant to me. Starting your own publishing house

seems like a huge undertaking. Was it?

GC: Starting our own publishing house was, indeed, a huge undertaking. Any success we have had, I owe entirely to my wife, Robin, the President of Apache Beach Publications. A writer herself, Robin runs the business, and has also designed most of the new covers.

JJ: Any plans to publish other authors?

GC: We would publish other authors in a similar situation, namely writers with some following and a lot of their books currently out of print.

JJ: You have your first hardcover out with Apache Beach. What is it, and what's it about?

GC: The Keeper is about a Palestinian-American, ex-Navy Intelligence, with a secret past and very dangerous secrets. It is possible to read a summary, and also the Prologue, at www.dangerousdwarf.com.

JJ: What do you think is the biggest problem with Publishing today? Richard Barre was dropped, Sparkle Hayter has turned to a small publishing house overseas. I mean, why are so many great authors being ignored?

GC: Publishing is quite different today than when I started. However, one thing that remains constant is that non-best-selling authors are routinely ignored.

JJ: What other authors do you like to read?

GC: I don't read as much fiction as I used to. My model when I began was Ross Macdonald.

JJ: The Mongo stories started as short stories in magazine form. (Now collected in In The House Of Secret Enemies) Do you think the short story format is a better way to start a series?

GC: I don't know what is the best way to start a series; for a novice, short stories are much easier to get published.

JJ: Besides writing, what other jobs have you had?

GC: I worked 17 years as a Special Education teacher, working with the educable mentally retarded, before I quite to write full time. After that, when I needed money, I worked as a night security guard and a teacher of severely disturbed, very dangerous children.

JJ: The first fan letter I ever wrote and got an answer to, was to you. You answered quickly and answered questions I had. Do you like interaction with fans? Do you think writers tend to be more approachable than say, actors or musicians?

GC: I have no idea how approachable other artists of any persuasion may be. As for myself, I am always deeply appreciative that anyone should be interested in my work enough to buy and read it. I like to express that appreciation.

JJ: Do you write on a schedule, or do you wait for the mood to hit you? And do you work from an outline, or kind of let the work guide you?

GC: I write on a schedule - - early mornings, five days a week. I like to work from an outline that is as detailed as possible (although things may change as I get into it).

JJ: What do you think is more important to good writing, plot or characterization ?

GC: I think both plot and characterization are important. I consider so-called "plotless fiction" a joke.

JJ: In your book, Bone, a good part of the book deals with the tunnels and areas under New York. Did you do a lot of research on this? Is it really like that?

GC: I indeed did a great deal of research for Bone, and yes, it really is like that.

JJ: If you were able to go back in time and talk to yourself at 16 or 17, what advice would you have given to a young George?

GC: Any advice I might have given to the 16 or 17-year-old George would have been ignored. My next book is entitled Prism; A Memoir As Fiction; Volume One; The Dark Engine. Read that, and you'll see what I mean.

JJ: Some of your books seem to touch on problems with in our society, and government. Is this intentional?

GC: Touching on problems in our society and government is, indeed, intentional.

JJ: Your Mongo books seem to be more than just mystery. Do you find that they appeal to a wider audience? Do they attract the fantasy readers?

GC: I do have a lot of "crossover fans", fantasy and sci-fi.

JJ: Throughout your publishing career you have always had wonderful artwork on the cover. The first Mongo books, the mysterious press run, and the new ones as well. How much input have you had on the art?

GC: I had no input on the artwork for the original editions. Now my wife, Robin, does the covers, so I like to think I have some input.

JJ: How would you describe a perfect weekend?

GC: A perfect weekend is one that caps off a good week of work.

JJ: Because of your books, I now own and enjoy operas by Wagner. What kind of music do you enjoy?

GC: I'm happy to hear I introduced you to Wagner. I have very eclectic tastes in music, although as I grow older I find I listen mostly to classical.

JJ: Since you first started writing, computers have come a long way. You wrote a short story about a man fighting computers and he needed to use punch cards (The Paper War, Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine Jan.1971). Since then computers have come a long way. Do you feel that computers and the internet play a big part in writing?

GC: For better or worse, computers and the internet have had an enormous impact on writing and publishing. Apache Beach Publications couldn't exist without the internet.

JJ: What is your favorite thing you've written?

GC: They're all my favorites. The Beasts of Valhalla was probably the most difficult to conceive, consummate, and sell.

JJ: What's the one thing that's always in your refrigerator?

GC: Grapefruit juice.