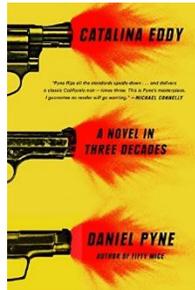


Dropping A Dime—One

Catalina Eddy, A Novel in Three Decades, Daniel Pyne, Blue Rider Press, 2017



Primarily utilized in YA fiction, the novella is perhaps underrated as a form ideally suited for the terse, largely cinematic, action focused prose that characterizes much of crime fiction. Ranging from approximately 120 to 200 pages, the novella shares qualities with the screenplay in that its length is more or less analogous to a 90 or 120 minute feature as well as with its emphasis on dialogue in developing the story. Pulp fiction's breezy, sly, ironic, idiomatic, sardonic, satirical, prone to hyperbole style of storytelling, couched largely in the American vernacular, constitutes much of its entertainment value. Pulp fiction has always been about the reading experience as entertainment. Driven by the action needed to keep the reader's attention and the constraints of its length, the novella doesn't have time to waste with aimless ruminations, flabby Freudian conjecture, or Clancy Bloat, aka geek bait (really just footnotes inserted into the narrative), that invariably activates the "cut-to-the-chase" mode to scan the page looking for something germane to jump out. The crisp concision of the novella is its charm, a quick easygoing read demanding no more than a suspension of belief in the turning of a page.

As per example, the successful utilization of the novella as a medium for pulp fiction is well illustrated in the two books under review, *Catalina Eddy, A Novel in Three Decades* by Daniel Pyne (Blue Rider Press, 2017), and *Basil's War* by Stephen Hunter (Mysterious Press, 2021).

Daniel Pyne is the author of four novels, including *Catalina Eddy*, and a raft of TV and screen writing credits, among them *Miami Vice* and the remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Stephen Hunter, former film critic for The Washington Post, is the chief honcho of the successful Bob Lee Swagger franchise. Oh, and a Pulitzer Prize recipient for Criticism in 2003.

Catalina Eddy is in effect three novellas under one cover: 1. *The Big Empty*, taking place in 1954, 132pp; 2. *Losertown*, in 1987, 170pp; 3. *Portuguese Bend*, 2016, 168pp. All the action in each time frame begins in the June gloom following the May gray of the Southern California coastal climate. The Catalina eddy is a weather pattern feature (as one of the characters explains), and weather is

the ground against which these stories are set, how it influences moods as a gripe about something you can't do anything about, a SoCal regional trope much as was Raymond Chandler's Santa Ana winds.

Heavy in irony, pulp references and allusions, *Catalina Eddy* might be classified as meta-pulp. The tough guy narration of *The Big Empty*, a play on *The Big Sleep*, has a Chandleresque sense of place (LA) although the prose style is more reminiscent of a later generation lean and mean PI pulps. If there is any doubt as to its ironic undercurrent, the PI's name is Lovely. TV reportage of the atomic bomb tests on Bikini Atoll that open the first novella serves as a political time stamp, as does Reagan's war on drugs and California politics in *Losertown* aka San Diego, and the new century's dysfunction of obscene wealth contrasted with the corruption, greed, and poverty that it is built upon, set in the contemporaneous *Portuguese Bend*.

The Big Empty, also a nod to Ellroy's *The Big Nowhere*, employs many PI tropes: the PI gets his phone messages at an Asian grocers, his office is a counter in a coffee shop, hangs out in a jazz club, in love with the chanteuse, and so on—he may be a tough guy but he's a soft touch. Pulp fiction aficionados will likely get all the PI nods and nudges. The ironic twist is that the *de rigueur* body the PI stumbles upon also happens to be that of his ex-wife. In the process of investigating her murder, he encounters a religious cult and a government protected scientist who is a serial killer. *The Big Empty* offers a cleanly delineated, no frills narrative, all straight lines and right angles as if it were a kind of pulp Cubism.

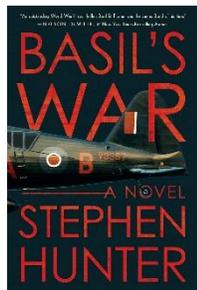
Losertown opens on a Deputy US Attorney briefing his new boss, an evil Nixon appointed female US Attorney ideologue, as well as the affair he's having with a married FBI agent. Of the three novellas, this is the most subtly nuanced. A drug bust of a wealthy former surfer and smuggler is used to pressure the mayor of Losertown. The twist is that the man they bust is innocent of the charges and has to endure the inept politically framed machinations of the government that lead to the death of his partner and the destruction of everything he has. Throw in a firefight with a rightwing nut job and a subtle resolution revelation at the end to tie things up and you have a nicely framed story. Pyne's screenwriter chops serve him well here. He doesn't miss a beat.

Portuguese Bend is probably the most lyrical of the three novellas, thanks in part to Susan Sontag's writing on photography, as its protagonist is a freelance crime photographer working for the Long Beach Police Department, a nod to Arthur Fellig aka Weegee, who has an intuitive feel for framing his crime scene

shots verging on artistic genius. A doctored photo leads the photographer to suspect the cover up of a shootout that left a female undercover cop paralyzed from the waist down. Enter the wheelchair and shades of Ironsides, the cop and the photographer team up to get to the bottom of a murder that involves crooked cops and a homicide detective by the name of Terry Lennox (!). The title, *Portuguese Bend*, refers to a geographical feature on the southern coast of the Palos Verde peninsula, incidentally the wealthiest zip code in the US, located west of the urban sprawl of the greater Los Angeles area, and where the Catalina eddy wind pattern is often centered. There's a pop feel to the last story in this masterful triptych of crime fiction, a certain ineffable casualness in the pacing and attention to the characters who, despite the flying bullets and impossible situations, get to ride off into the sunset, a Southern California sunset once the coastal fog clears.

Each novella evokes a style consistent to the era in which they are set: classic first person voiceover, law & order procedural, and HD Widescreen pilot. Additionally, the device of having a peripheral character in one novella become a central figure in a subsequent story works as a subtle linkage connecting a sequence of well told tales.

Basil's War, Stephen Hunter, Mysterious Press, 2021



Stephen Hunter's *Basil's War* from Mysterious Press hit the stands yesterday (5/4/21). Its 288 printed pages doesn't qualify it as a novella, but the wide margins, line spacing and font size would argue for fewer pages in manuscript (perhaps by 88?). But no matter, *Basil's War* is a gem, a scrumptious hors d'oeuvre from the author of the Bob Lee Swagger sniper franchise, and a perfect example of the succinctness and directness a novella demands.

Basil St. Florian, a British playboy and wealthy ne'er-do-well, a kind of ginger David Niven now serving in British Army Intelligence, possesses just the right mix of duplicity and audacity to make him, in the later years of World War II, a perfect spy. His mission is to track down a handwritten manuscript from the 17th century which holds a clue to the identity of a mole in the British cryptography section at Bletchley Hall, and for which he must parachute behind enemy lines, get to Paris, photograph the manuscript, which he does (of course), all the while staying one step of the SS and German intelligence, and somehow getting back to HQ in London with the goods. The novel follows a fairly straightforward story arc, replicating the tone of popular fiction of

that day as is found in the *G8 & His Flying Aces* adventures, except that it is British, very British, and very droll (a French loan word).

One of the tells of a potentially good story is an E. B. White opening (“Where's Papa going with that ax?”), usually the first sentence, but at least within in the space of the first few paragraphs. *Basil's War* opens tantalizingly with tantalizing dialogue. The reader is transported to a boudoir and the arch repartee of its two occupants, male and female, one of whom but not both could be David Niven or Maureen O'Hara. The depiction is that of a Hollywood war movie in grainy black and white. But it is wit and sparkling language that powers *Basil's War* as the action slaloms between the mission briefing and the actuality of getting to Paris, paced cinematically so that there is always new information or new action. The technical and period details are authoritative but not overwhelmingly so and key to the clever denouement. The witty ironic dialogue with a touch of Wildean bite could have been lifted from a Noel Coward play. All of it is amusing, quite accurate, and very well done.

The reader must wonder at one point whether the author had as much enjoyment in writing it as the reader has in reading it. The added bonus is that *Basil's War* is a master's class on how to write succinctly with the spare deftness of a journalist's touch. As a former film critic for The Washington Post, Hunter is knowledgeable in the art of storytelling employed by the cinema, how the action unfolds with each revelation, building to the surprise resolution in perfectly timed steps. Besides the writing, which is terrific, the plot lines are tied together with cunning plot turns appropriate for all those who wish to experience their guilty pleasures. A number of famous names from that period are provided with cameo appearances, among them Winston Churchill and Alan Turing, and a well-known film couple that dropping a dime on would spoil the clincher. If there is such a thing as proof to the pudding, i.e., the novella, it is found in these pages.

Dropping A Dime—2
Come Back, Nolan, Come Back
Max Allan Collins' Master Thief, Nolan, Returns
In All-New Editions Of His Classic Adventures

DOUBLE DOWN | Max Allan Collins | May 25, 2021 | Trade Paperback | 352 pp ISBN: 978-1789091410; e-ISBN 978-1789091427 US \$13.95; CAN \$18.95

FULL DISCLOSURE: **Hard Case Crime** provided the review copy of *Double Down* by Max Allan Collins after these editorial offices begged for any kind of review material, press releases, etc., to post in this column, essentially filler in an effort to give the impression that we here at **Dime Pulp** are dialed in and ready to drop a dime on the fine art of pulp fiction (which may sound to some like an oxymoron but more on that later).

Hard Case Crime might have even thought that they had merely tossed a crumb our way but it had the effect of opening up a whole new box of donuts. At any rate the classy pulp tome with its appropriately garish cover remedied an editorial unfamiliarity with Max Allen Collins' writing and his master thief and heist maven, Nolan.

Hard Case has built a solid inventory of reprints of some underappreciated and long forgotten authors of the paperback pocket book explosion of the 40s and 50s as pulp magazine fare evolved to standalone crime novels. Reprints of Collins titles make available a later iteration of popular adventure/crime novels of the waning decades of the 20th century in what might be termed "pop pulp," a style readily adapted to graphic novel storyboard treatment. This is not to overlook their emphasis on the work of Donald Westlake, Laurence Block, or the terrific Gregory MacDonald twofer riff on O. Henry's *The Ransom of Red Chief* reissued as *Snatch*. As well, **Hard Case** has published a few excellent original works including Von Doviack's *Charlesgate Confidential*.



The great thing about **Hard Case Crime** paperback novels is the nostalgic eye candy of titillating covers in that postwar Madison Ave advertising style that bring to mind twirling the wire kiosks of paperback novels in the corner pharmacy over by the greeting cards display looking for something to jump out, something lurid, scandalous, colorful at least, in the hues of rebellion. Essentially these **Hard Case Crime** paperbacks work as artifacts of taste and

nostalgia, a repackaging of an idealized past in the history of crime/men's adventure literature as a popular mode of storytelling. Although the genre will likely remain popular, actual volumes of bound pulp paper with the eye catching covers may become specialized objects much like vinyl LPs, especially with the advent of the more cost effective eBooks. As I write this, public libraries are discarding their mass paperback collections in favor of the less space demanding digital formats.

Hard Case Crime titles are also repositories and reiterations of some incredibly terrific writing and imaginative storytelling. The writing style of the hardboiled pulp genre is sourced in the Anglo-American idiom with its laconic exaggerations, understated asides, snappy comebacks, and quaint argot. They are in the main imaginary constructs based, to some extent on experience, but passing themselves off as the real world for reading entertainment. Often situations are farfetched and downright improbable but nothing good writing, deft imagination, and diverting dialogue can't paper over to render the illogical and unlikely thinkable. What makes the pulp genre an art is the diverse skill of its practitioners.

Max Allen Collins' genre specific Nolan novellas have a certain tongue-in-cheek air to them that seems more pop than pulp, particularly with their emphasis on comic book collecting as a kind of meta-referent. Pop fetishizes consumer objects for their cultural resonance whereas pulp is a category of materials used in the manufacture of entertainment literature just as film specifies the medium of cinema. Pop pulp subjects relive imagined circumstances through the objects of their obsession, fantasizing situations in which they can partake in tandem or take on the persona of their fixation. Collins clearly defines his protagonists, Jon and Nolan, as separate individuals yet Nolan doesn't exist without Jon nor can Jon indulge in his fantasy without Nolan. Or, at the very least, the poster of steely-eyed, rock-jawed Lee Van Cleef that eerily resembles, who else, Nolan.

Also, by way of disclosure, there is a certain amount of resonance to the Nolan referent around the editorial offices of **Dime Pulp** as it is the family name of one of our contributing authors, Pat Nolan, who is also the brain behind this mad pulp caper as well as the man behind the curtain at Nualláin House, Publisher—Nualláin being Gaelic for Nolan, donchaknow, in tribute to that jolly leprechaun of prose, Flann O'Brien (of *The Third Policeman* fame) whose real name was Brian O'Nolan or O'Nualláin if you've an ear for Celtic speak. It goes without saying that Nolans are a pretty ubiquitous lot and can be found from Quebec City to Buenos Aires. Most often

it's a last name, but sometimes a first, especially in the Appalachians and rural South where, as indentured servants and criminals let loose in the new colonies, Nolans headed for those hills as soon as their feet hit dry land after a long and horrific Atlantic crossing. Throw a rock in those parts and you'll no doubt hit a Nolan, first name or last. Nolans are everywhere, but for Max Allen Collins, Nolan is a mononym—it isn't his first or his last name but both, and as such underlines his iconic role as the heroic figure.

Double Down was released by **Hard Case Crime** in May of 2021 following the April release of *Two For the Money*. As the titles suggest, each volume features two Collins novella reprints from his Nolan series of the 1970s and 80s. The last two volumes, *Tough Tender* and *Mad Money*, will follow in 2022 and 2023. Collins opens with a useful introduction to the genesis of the Nolan series, admitting inspiration from the Porter novels of Donald Westlake's pseudonymous Richard Stark as well as reiterating a firm denial that he was copy/parodying Don Pendleton's *The Executioner* series whose main character is a similar sounding "Dolan."

These are Max Allan Collins' fledgling works written years before he wrote *Road to Perdition*, before his *Quarry* novels were turned into a Cinemax original series, before he was named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America or ghosting the Mike Hammer novels for the late Mickey Spillane. Set against a ground of pop culture nostalgia for comic books, old movies, and golden age cartoons, the stories work as an accessory after the fact to their illustrated four color context. Nolan is the master thief, and young Jon, the comic book aficionado, is the sorcerer's apprentice. Collins' narrative style, a casual conversational ramble, allows veracity to the coincidental material that makes up the underworld of criminals or at least reprehensible lifestyles somewhere in the middle of Iowa where Collins attended the university and its fabled Writers Workshop.

In the first novella, *Fly Paper*, Jon and Nolan fly to Detroit to commit their righteous payback heist where a comic book convention is also being held and which allows plenty of opportunity to nerd out on comic book references, and of course, since they're flying, there has to be a skyjacking, DB Cooper style. From this story alone one would get the impression that being a thief, albeit an honorable one, is harder work than might first appear.

Collins uses as epigraph at the beginning of the second novella, *Hush Money*, a quote from 30's bank robber, Alvin Karpis, to give an inkling of insight into his Nolan character: "*A thief is anybody who gets out and works for his living, like robbing a bank, or breaking into a place and stealing stuff. . .*" On the other hand and in direct contrast to Nolan, "*A hoodlum is a pretty lousy kind of scum. He works for gangsters and bumps off guys after they've been put on the spot.*" In this light, Nolan is a working man, not a mob connected mug.

The midwestern locales of Cedar Rapids and Des Moines in the Nolan sagas provide an entirely appropriate set location for the revalorization of a regional culture hero, the bandit, the bank robber as in the likes of the James Brothers. The Daltons, and half a century later, Machine Gun Kelly, Pretty Boy Floyd, John Dillinger. Nolan has worked managing Mob assets, but he is not a mobster, and he would like to break free from the association but lacks the leverage or is thwarted or suffers a setback which in itself is the MacGuffin to these tales. He wants out of the game, independence, but will the game let him?

The Nolan stories are narrated matter-of-factly, a backstory always close at hand to smooth over any unexpected inconsistency, told with a faux naïve garrulousness that renders the character Jon, Nolan's foil, and in some respects, his Watson. The depictions are spare and not averse to cliché, sketched with minimalist efficiency. The characterizations with the exception of the protagonists are also austere presented. Unfortunately the "love making" and opposite sex encounters have not weathered well the decades since they were originally conceived (pardon the pun) and come off as horn-dog "pin-up sublimations."

As we've advocated before here at **Dime Pulp**, the novella is the ideal vehicle for crime fiction and these two novellas by Collins don't disappoint in their succinct story arc leading to resolutions that invariably beg for further opportunities to thieve and adventure in the spirit of radio/movie serials of the forties, and four color comic books.

In evolutionary terms, comic books and pulp magazines stem from the same source: penny dreadfuls, the National Police Gazette, and sensationalist yellow journalism of the 19th century. Following WWII, pulp novels and comic books emerged as the go-to reading entertainment while monthly magazines lagged into obsolescence and radio dramas morphed into TV shows. The mood and thrust of the postwar pulp novel reflected the upheaval and brutality

engendered by another world war. Crime novels of that time depicted unflinchingly the cruelty and disillusionment of desperate men and women with a darkness and fatalism termed *noir*. Revenge and lawlessness became more prevalent as themes such as *injustice must be avenged* took prominence. Yet Justice is blind and wields a double edge sword and in the end, the realization that vengeance is a poor substitute for justice. To enter into that self-devouring pit is enter the lair of the viper Vendetta[®]. Literary depictions of violence tend to be one dimensional, fleeting, and unsatisfactory. It is the lead up to the act, and its consequences, that grabs attention as all violence enacted on the screen or on the page is symbolic no matter how well depicted or orchestrated in its intent to trigger the amygdala's flight or fight response. A successful effort is often judged by how well and how often the symbolic can undermine the suspension of belief and present the reader with real chills. To be able to accomplish such a feat takes imagination and not a little sadism.

In contrast to the violent vengeful dark despair found in the postwar pulps novels, there was a kind of daffy innocence to prewar pulp fiction appearing in monthly magazines, often as cliff hanger serials, and selling at newsstands. And it is this particular tenor **Dime Pulp** would like to echo even though it is yet another marginal drop in the meta bucket. Serials were a large part of pulp fiction's appeal, working class epics on the installment plan for one thin dime. As a serial pulp magazine, **Dime Pulp**, as in the pulpy days of yore, hopes to offer not only high quality serials but garishly appropriate cover renditions. Pruriently attractive colorful cover art and its arousing effect in stirring up the imagination was a main selling point on the newsstands. A fact attested to by **Dime Pulp's** *A Detective Story* by Colin Deerwood as the story is entirely predicated on the author fixing his gaze on the cover of a vintage issue of Black Mask magazine and improvising time travel to an imagined place where such a detective might live, say in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor. As a serial it has unlimited potential for unfolding from the pages of pulp to the pages of panels. As well, the nominal policiers of Helene Baron-Murdock's *Hard Boiled Myth* find themselves with a seemingly endless and labyrinthine source of material gleaned from Greek myth and tragedy. Although the stories are episodic, the thread follows a sheriff's detective toward the end of his career and retirement. *The Last Resort*, *A Lee Malone Adventure*, Pat Nolan's pastiche of the private eye genre turned on its head (buxom babe with brains vs. splinter faced chisel chin with a breath that could pickle a squid) was based on a character from a short story published serially in a weekly newspaper. The novel too, published in 2012 by Nualláin

House, Publishers., was written in installments over the course of a few years for a monthly writing workshop, and now returns to publication in its serial roots.

Lastly, just to reiterate, in case it was not made previously clear: the aim of **Dime Pulp**, aside from garnering a few discerning readers, is to indulge in a speculative fiction make-work program for the benefit and amusement of the author(s), and to partake of the imagination. You are welcome to come along for the ride.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it,

Perry O'Dickle
for **Dime Pulp**

DIME THREE:

He's Back! (Nolan, That Is)

I gotta come clean. Once again the gang at *Hard Case Crime* have crossed the transom with the requisite paper in the form of two novels in the Nolan series by Max Allen Collins. If *Dime Pulp* were a legit operation, we might expect more, but since it isn't, we don't. The latest from *Hard Case Crime* did keep these offices burning the midnight *oeil*. Not due to a guilty conscience, however, but in pursuit of guilty pleasure, i.e., reading crime fiction.



To make up for the gap in our limited knowledge of the Nolan saga, those Hard Case types bookended these offices with the original Collins foray into Nolan territory, and then an encore, as a wrap up to an epic crime career, written thirty three years later. Collins' origin stories for the Nolan and Jon characters begin in a novella titled *Bait Money*, a boy meets thief story, in which the bond between apprentice and master is forged and sets the tone for all the Nolan-centric adventures to follow.

Hard Case Crime has reprinted four novellas from that late 80s period, *Two For The Money* and *Double Down* (reviewed in *Dropping A Dime Two*) each in the twofer format, which will be joining another two (four) titles slated for publication in 2022 and 2023. *Skim Deep*, the encore curtain call for Nolan and Jon, is novel length in its own right.

The incredibly prolific pulp polymath Max Allen Collins is a *Hard Case Crime* franchise author, it should be noted, Mickey Spillane's heir apparent, and author of the Quarry assassin series (also well represented under the *Hard Case Crime* imprint). In the

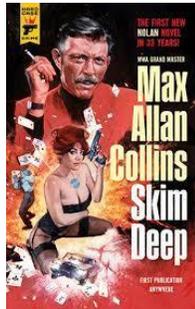
author's note to *Two For The Money*, Collins reveals that the idea for the title and the plot of the first story, *Bait Money*, was inspired by his girlfriend who worked in a bank. The story starts off solid with a portrayal of Nolan, heist meister extraordinaire, trying to smooth things over with the mob over his killing of one of the bosses' relatives. The mobster wants a blood price and Nolan has to find a way to pay it. Enter Jon, a comic book aficionado and amateur who has come up with a plan to take down a local bank. Needless to say it's a bad plan, but the pro sees a way of fixing it and potentially clearing his debt. And naturally there are double crosses, unfaithful women, killing, and last minute glitches.

The Nolan character, Collins admits, is based on Richard Stark's Parker. And to fix him in the reader's mind, he is described as looking like Lee Van Cleef. If you were reading *Bait Money* when it was first published, you would know who Lee Van Cleef was and what he looked like. For the new generation of readers, *Hard Case Crime* has commissioned covers featuring the likeness of a Van Cleef-ish looking protagonist. And while Parker is a meticulously formulated character, Nolan, ostensibly just as tough, is humanized by taking on an heir apparent in Jon who also adds some comic (book) relief as it is his naivete that informs the narrative. There the resemblance ends, due primarily to a difference in styles.

Donald Westlake's Richard Stark, author of the Parker novels, presents a casebook for the terse, uncompromisingly "stark," stoic, "just the facts, ma'am," Joe Friday deadpan voiceover narration. It is a style Stark is known for, and one admired by countless crime fiction buffs and aspiring writers. The economy of the prose finds its source in an older generation of writers who knew the value of counting words, as they were paid by the word, and well aware of the editorial constraints on length. The Parker novels may be formulaic but they have an edge that never gets dull. Combined with nearly imperceptible cinematic scene transitions and you have a style well worth emulating.

Max Allen Collins' Nolan stories have what might be termed an improvisational discursive style, aka the kitchen sink approach, in which everything you need to know (cue Ed McMahon) about the characters' looks, motivations, hopes, fears, hangnails, and warts are presumed open secrets from the discourse of the omniscient narrator who does not hesitate to tell the reader how it is. Collins is a good storyteller whose style is no style, just a recounting of the honest to goodness facts of a story that is too good to be true and bound to go south at any point, and of course that's what the reader is looking for behind the feints and dodges, and seemingly untenable albeit predictable situations.

In some sense Parker doesn't seem to have a future, going from one heist to another, scrabbling to stay even. Nolan, on the other hand, is trying to get just enough ahead so he can open up a snazzy club while staying out of the clutches of the mob. He wants to retire from the heist biz and lead a normal and happy life without a .32 Colt breathing down his neck. It would be difficult to make Nolan into a petty bourgeois but he has the dreams of one, a quintessential American dream, though with more than a little tang of cynicism. Parker is an untamed animal, a force of nature, with which nature will deal.



The second novella in *Two For The Money* is titled *Blood Money* in which the bonding between Nolan and Jon solidifies in their quest for revenge against the men who killed Jon's guardian uncle, the "Planner" (shades of Dortmund). The "eye for an eye" theme is big in the Bible Belt Midwest where most of the action takes place: Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, anywhere the mob and fundamentalism might have its tentacles. There are no shortages of derring-do, shootouts, kidnappings, and miraculous rescues. Enough twists and turns to keep the pages turning, a few slapstick moments to offset the more compelling business of getting the money and getting revenge, and the hedging justifications for that chosen lifestyle of outlier/outlaw. Yet there are consequences: that butterfly whose butt you kicked is going to come back around in the form of a homicidal maniac looking to get even. And take all the money.

Can an author go back to a character thirty three years later and pick up where he left off? What will have changed in experience and maturity of style? These are question the curious reader might ask as they dip into *Skim Deep*, the epilogue to the Nolan saga, the last ride into the Acapulco sunset.

Nolan is retired from the heist biz with that snazzy club he always wanted and the soft life is making him sentimental so he pops the question to his longtime live-in gf. Enter Vegas, where Jon now resides trying to make a living as a comic book artist keyboardist for a casino cover band and where Nolan and his bride-to-be are heading to get hitched. Enter, also, revenge, in the form of "Maw" Comfort, matriarch of a clan of crooks from (where else?) Missouri, three of whose members Nolan has had to eliminate for stepping on the toes of his thief's integrity and going for the double cross. And, of course, money, the root of all robbery, in the form of a casino skim. This one time, the coming together of the retired robber and his now journeyman partner is not with the object to plan a job but to celebrate and "legalize" a relationship about which Jon's feelings are ambivalent

(incidentally). Not to spoil all the machinations of the plot, but like a Jacques Tati movie, everything that goes around, comes around and meets at the intersection in a head-on collision. The pitch might be spun as: they fall in shit and come out smelling like roses.

As for the difference in style, Collins has not abandoned his fussy omniscient narrator nor the breezy improvisational writing style. The sex scenes have improved in detail if not in sensitivity. In the portrayal of Jon, Collins allows more of the autobiographical nature of the character emerge (which has always been there on one level of emphasis or another). That the main action does not take place in the Quad Cities area somehow ups the ante on the techniques of graphic violence. In *Skim Deep*, the pulp adventure returns to its roots as a Western, and Collins' long expertise in the pulp genre skillfully brings about the denouement to everyone's (characters included) satisfaction.

To read in this crime fiction genre is to discover something about the American psyche, the deep rooted divide of oblivious well-off swells and the continual rebellion of the have-nots who want theirs. The symbolic outlaw then becomes valorized to justify contravening societal norms as a leveling of the playing field, a kind of grass roots communism, a Utopic equitable community. Yet the myth of egalitarianism posits a level playing field in which universal values are applied equally when obviously this is never the case—the “nature” of humans intervenes—hierarchies or boundaries are created depending on the circumstances. Idealized individuals (such as Nolan and Parker) stand symbolically for the masses, and differences are glossed over to align with the symbolic outlier outlaws who are too unruly to fit into the narrow category of convention and reside at the periphery where dogs howl to be let in, but flee the multitude once the gates are opened (thus their tantalizing mystery). Fiction can only deal these issues a glancing blow in the hazy nostalgia for a way it has never been.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it,

Perry O'Dickle
for *Dime Pulp*