



Ron Goulart & The Two Jims

*By Pat Nolan writing as
Perry O'Dickle*

Ron Goulart

Ron Goulart is the spark that originally ignited the interest in pulp fiction and led to **Dime Pulp**. His *The Hardboiled Dicks: An Anthology and Study of Pulp Detective Fiction* (1967), *Cheap Thrills, An Informal History of the Pulp Magazine* (1972), and *The Dime Detectives* (1982) were a first serious and intriguing glimpse into the genre for these offices in the mid-80s. Prior to that, Goulart's wacky sci-fi stories of tech gone wrong (notably robots) were diverting reading characterized by his penchant for goofball humor. Sadly, Ron Goulart passed away in January of 2022 at the age of 89.

Goulart was a prolific writer, historian, and proselytizer of pulp fiction and its emergent heir, the comic book. Writing under his own name as well as over a half dozen pen names, his novels and stories were an easy read, always with a little MAD comics edge, nothing too serious or violent, slapstick certainly. The grim shadow of "noir" did not often intrude in his easy going tales.

Ron Goulart may be viewed as a lightweight by the toting crowd but the sheer volume of his engagement in the pulp/comic genre allows him to claim the turf he helped established. He was the author of over two dozen compendiums on comics and golden age pulp fiction illustrating the comic book's emergence from the fantastic pulp genre and the Sunday Funnies. He wrote numerous

futuristic novels that played off the unintended Schumpeterian and most often hilarious consequences of mechano-tech—he was the gleeful saboteur of a Popular Science future. Of the over two dozen nonseries novels, including *Clockwork Pirates* (1971), *The Robot in the Closet* (1981), and *Now He Thinks He's Dead* (1992), most are of a whacky dysfunctional Murphey's Law universe. His Barnum System series of novels is a planetary circus of its own with such titles as *Spacehawk, Inc.* (1974) and *Galaxy Jane* (1986) among numerous other linked and obtuse permutations his agile mind could hatch: *Hail Hibbler* (1980), *After Things Fell Apart* (1970). Goulart's era was the twenty years span from the mid-70s to the early 90s in which he wrote under many pen names (Chad Calhoun, Zeke Masters, Jillian Kearny) as well as his own, collaborating on a range of projects in the pulp comic book genres which included penning Flash Gordon stories, Vampirella, and Avenger. In the 1970s, he wrote several novels based on Lee Falk's *The Phantom* ("the ghost who walks"), a character incorporating proto-super heroes, essentially Tarzan as Batman with a brace of 45's, for Avon Books under the pseudonym "Frank Shawn".

That he had a sense of humor about a dystopian future of robots and AI just made his stories all the more human and entertaining. He was not overshadowed by noir even though he worked on and wrote about the genre that engendered it. The cruel macho psychopathy of hard boiled prose was not his maître. Goulart kept it light, parodying the fantastic and sometimes brutal pulp genres of sci-fi and crime fiction. He was a hack in the good sense of the word, and epitomized an era's liberality of imagination by the range of his output, well worth a wiki lookup. A playful satirist with a riotous sense of humor as evidenced in his Groucho Marx detective series, written after the turn of century, in presenting such pulp tropes as "Lord of the Jungle," "Secret Agent," "Master Detective," and "Private Eye" versions of Groucho with felicity and breezy Hollywood wit. Nor was he above writing for TV programs or penning bodice rippers under a woman's name.

Goulart, as pulp historian, engaged in preserving a particular generic tone characteristic of an era of transition from pulp to comic book to graphic novel by being an active participant in that transition. His authoritative histories are gems of preservation and reference covering the parallel development of pulp publications and of illustrated storytelling in the form of comic strips and books. In his

roles as pulp writer and scholarly aficionado, Goulart was a champion of the imagination and a real kick in the pants.

A timely Goulart retrospective is in order, a Goulart Omnibus (there is enough material for a couple collected volumes) at the very least! A festschrift, perhaps? The world needs to appreciate more of his sardonic wit. Pass the word.

The Two Jims

The two Jims, James Sallis and James Crumley (1939–2008), could not be more different yet both represent a singular uniqueness in their stylistic genre, the crime novel. Crumley's novels are full of gregarious bluster. Sallis's novellas are thoughtful and subversive. Crumley's actions and their aftermaths are full frontal view of violence's consequences. For Sallis, what is depicted are the consequences of those actions as rueful denouements. A Crumley story usually contains enough material for at least three novels, wide ranging and galloping all over the place. They are a unique blend of the western and the private eye/finder of lost kids/kittens genre. Sallis says all he needs to say in the length of a novella. The language is precise and elliptical, Simenon-like, in evoking a mood.

James Crumley

James Crumley's novels feature the characters of C.W. Sughrue, Viet vet drunk turned private investigator, and P.I. Milo Milodragovitch, each in their own adventures although they cross paths in the 1996 novel *Bordersnakes*. Crumley's anti-heroes are both big men with big personalities and essentially mirror images of each other. Not that it matters. What carries Crumley's novels is the sheer bravado of his storytelling. Anyone who's ever worked as a bartender has probably come across a character like Crumley, loud, raucous, and a genial everyone's my friend demeanor. Until the booze runs out.

Both PIs, Sughrue and Milodragovitch are hard drinkers, and hail from the cowboy states, Texas and Montana, the author's home turf. They are the giants from the north exacting their version of justice in a particularly cockeyed world. A natural born storyteller, Crumley spins tales of mishaps and bad luck death

defying scrapes that are often hilarious in their telling but also tragic in their own right as a history of bad choices. His characters inhabit a world of regret and wounded psyches. Often times the graphic violence seems gratuitous, yet no one would doubt the authenticity of the pictures Crumley paints. Crumley's is a world of right and wrong with a lot of leeway gray viewed from the other side of the tracks where there is honor of a kind among outlaws and where some situations can only be resolved by violence. The plotting of the novels allows Crumley's penchant for the shaggy dog tale and wide ranging hair of the dog that follows.

In *The Long Good Kiss*, a sick lovesick saga if there ever was one, Crumley defies the beat with squirrely maneuvers, digressions, soul searchingly bared and nakedly sentimental. Sughrue is the hero who must defeat the dragon, save (find) the maiden, and deal with his own demons. The common theme of these novels is of a quest for vengeance as a means to an uncertain redemption that requires guts, determination, foolish pride, and a firearm. What follows are the peripatetic permutations of Crumley's telling. In a world ruled by violence, Crumley organizes his action like a cavalry charge or a commando operation, and often things go wrong (otherwise you wouldn't have a story) and the hero suffers the consequences of hubris.

Most of Crumley's novels begin in a bar (any bar) rendered accurately from long habituation. In *The Long Good Kiss*, Sughrue is drinking the "heart out of a spring afternoon," and *Bordersnakes* starts out with Milo in a bar fight. PIs now seem only viable in the dimlit underbelly of prairie states (the American steppes) drinking dens where the world is still wild and desperate. And to do what they think they have to do and maybe sorta do it, they have to be Grizzly Adams cloned with a mean streets PI, a paladin in the Marlowe mode, mug like Richard Boone and shoulders like Cheyenne Bodey's, and none of that 77 Sunset Strip cute beatnik stuff. The western had been an almost daily staple of evening TV viewing in the decades of the 60s and 70s—there was always someone stalking the dusty street ready to shoot a gun after dinner.

Crumley's surrogates are thoughtful yet violent, men of instinctive action with not a little self-recrimination, flawed in effect, which always makes for the best PIs. His guys have another Chandleresque inflection beside the shining armor complex—they

get sappy around dames, and it's always their downfall, and always what inflicts the most pain. Crumley has no qualms in laying out all the details of betrayal and bitterness with the telling authenticity of the barroom orator. His rhetorical hooks to keep your attention, the left hook, the right hook, the uppercut, the fist to the throat, the kick in the groin so vividly depicted that they actually tickle the amygdala and tenuous (fight or flight) signals are expressed as subtle experience by their visceral hair raising realism . Crumley can do that.

His novels each have the scale of classical epics and myths in that the hero has to undergo various altruistic trials and battle the inhuman in himself and in others. Crumley never achieved mainstream success with his seven novels, *The Last Good Kiss*, *The Mexican Tree Duck* and *The Right Madness* featuring C.W. Sughrue, along with *The Wrong Case*, *Dancing Bear* and *The Final Country* featuring Milo Milodragovitch, although *The Mexican Tree Duck* won him a Dashiell Hammett Award in 1994, and his work has been cited as influential to a generation of the top crime fiction authors including Connelly, Pelecanos, and Lehane.

There's a bar in Missoula, Montana that Crumley used to frequent, hold forth, spin his stories, and gauge the effectiveness of his outrageous stories on the credulousness of his interlocutors. Reading their expressions was probably the greatest pleasure, typing up the stories was the real work. There's an effigy of Crumley on a stool at one end of the bar where he perched and held his monologues. Better than any mantlepiece tribute. Crumley was, in Lord Buckley's words, "God's own drunk,"

James Sallis

James Sallis is the polar opposite of Crumley. Where Crumley might be said to use a machete to carve out his stories, Sallis uses a scalpel or, at the very least, an x-acto knife to shape his. Carefully crafted, the stories are quiet and deep. Their mood is dark, subdued, cerebral. In many respects they depict the psychological essence of noir. His characters are revealed in nuanced dialogue or by the mundane ambiguity of a scene. Throughout there is the subtle stylistic shadow and light reminiscent of German Expressionism and a dream-like melancholy framed in a meticulously considered language. Sallis's novellas, no matter their content, are literary.

Lew Griffin, Sallis's PI, is portrayed realistically, not as a knight in shining armor, but as gritty, a survivor in spite of himself, haunted, flawed. Griffin is featured in six novellas, all titled after insects (companions of the loner or lonely man) beginning with *The Long Legged Fly* in 1992 and including *Bluebottle* in 1999, and *Ghost Of A Flea* in 2001. The action is often muted, viewed in the aftermath or off camera, the consequences telling the story that led to them. Lew Griffin is a black man, obviously self-educated and fond of quoting French authors, living in or on the edge of poverty in and around New Orleans. He finds people or saves them or kills them but always with lengthy soul searching consideration. He's a tough guy because he is forced to be not because he wants to be. He has no illusions, thus the basis of his sustained noir ennui. The tang of adrenaline is rare in Sallis's crime fiction yet the depictions and progressions of the stories are always satisfying, literate contemplative ruminations on the human condition.

Sallis's novel *Drive* (2005), about a stunt driver who moonlights as a getaway driver, was made into a successful movie starring Ryan Gosling. His John Turner series about an ex-cop, ex-con, ex-psychotherapist now deputy sheriff up Cripple Creek is his entry into the swamp noir genre and presents no end of labyrinthian possibilities. Two of his recent novellas, *Sara Jane* (2019) and *Others Of Our Kind* (2013) are illustrations of his range as a storyteller and finesse in developing his characters, both of whom are women. Sallis moves out of the shadows in these novellas. In *Sara Jane*, a tale of great subtlety, the tone is the washed out yellows shading to amber of a prairie state. *Others Of Our Kind* is about Jenny Rowen who was abducted at age eight, and in this tale, the mood lighting is that of a not quite noir grayish blue.

Sara Jane is about a female deputy sheriff and the telling proceeds obliquely as a montage of memory revealed in elliptical snatches of reminiscence and circumstance. Understated, the story carries the reader along, meandering through seemingly unrelated threads that quietly become meaningful. Over the course of the narration, connections are made, peripheral epiphanies, illusive and open ended, flash like dry lightning. The secret of Sara Jane's past will be revealed as the story closes but how the revelation unfolds is what makes the narrative a remarkable piece of writing. Then it's over, and the reader is pleasantly surprised by a story carefully encapsulated by brevity and the resonance of impressions.

Others Of Our Kind offers an odd psychological study of a crime victim. How the story unfolds and how it progresses is not the expected enervated existential crisis. Absent is the moral outrage of a young girl abducted and kept in a box for two years. Absent also is an anguished recovery of identity and reconciliation with family. The expected trauma tropes give way to those of an unbound freedom, not victimhood. As an older successful professional, Jenny remains blithely unaffected by her ordeals, as a sex slave, as a mall rat. A crime of similar nature has occurred and through her professional contacts as a TV News editor she consults with the police detective who is investigating the case. Jenny's introspection about her past provides the context over which the narrative develops. The tale is told with unusual candor in a series of set scenes that emphasize the mundane matter of fact passage of time. No high drama interposes in the precise delineation that resolves almost through sheer inertia. The story arc is vast and accounts for decades. In the epilogical resolution, the final scene is approached as if from a distance gradually closing in, and Jenny is much older now, retired to a sunshine state, at her writing desk, thoughtful, putting the finishing touches to her story, one that doesn't accommodate the beats of formula crime fiction but works just as well. Sallis allows the story to find its own way at its own pace and he needs only 118 pages to do it.

Stylistically, Sallis's stories work like films and demonstrate the focused character-based concerns attributed to European cinema. The sensibilities are refined even if they do belong to country folk, the characterizations are centered albeit spare befitting a quotidian stroll through the psyche. His novellas are cinematic in their pacing, each like a finely wrought ninety minute story leaving you wanting more. They progress in brief narrative takes and cuts. an artful shuffle of suspenseful digressions undercutting any determining sense of purpose. Nor are they dialogue driven narratives. Rather they are etudes on framing circumstance.

The author of eighteen novels as well as the acclaimed biography *Chester Himes, A Life* (2001), James Sallis has been translated into German, French, and Spanish, earning acclaim in each of those languages with the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière, the Deutsche Krimi Preis, and the Spanish Brigada 21 as well as

Bouchercon's Lifetime Achievement Award. He is also recipient of the Hammett Prize for excellence in literary crime fiction.

Besides his crime centered fiction, Sallis has published collections of short stories, poetry, criticism, scholarly studies on the role of the guitar in American Jazz, and translations from the Russian, French, and Spanish. Notably, his translation of Raymond Queneau's *Saint Glinglin* (1993) leads to the assumption that Sallis is more than passing familiar with the unique approaches to the narrative by the influential French author and founder of Oulipo. He has admitted that he draws some of his esthetic for his stylistic approach from Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet, two proponents of the *Nouveau Roman*. Sallis captures that particular *je ne sais quois élan*, and seems perfectly comfortable with the novella form, one that he has undoubtedly mastered.