

MY PAL ROSS

Mike Resnick

I'd like to tell you a little about my late friend, Ross H. Spencer, because his story is unique.

Ross loved his native Youngstown, Ohio, but he moved to the Chicago area to work in first a Studebaker and then a Ford plant. He took time off to help win the war in the Pacific, for which he was properly decorated and from which he made most of his lifelong friends. He fiddled a bit with poetry, but never wrote a word of fiction in his life, except maybe to the IRS. Then, in his early 50s, he had a serious heart attack, brought on by too many beers and too many cigarettes.

While he was recuperating in the hospital -- and it was a long recuperation; he was never able to do physical work again -- his wife bought him a couple of books to cheer him up. He was never much of a reader, and she didn't know quite what to get him, so she picked up two of Robert Parker's hard-boiled detective novels, solely because the hero, Spenser, shared an almost identical last name with Ross. Ross read them. He told me when I asked about his origins as a writer that he found the books so inadvertently funny that he wondered what would happen if someone tried to be that funny on purpose. I felt an instant kinship with him, because that was exactly how I had recently created my favorite character, Lucifer Jones, after watching Ursula Andress in the truly ridiculous *She*.

So, lying in a hospital bed, this man who'd never written more than an occasional poem, took pen to notebook and started writing *The DADA Caper*. It was an amusing book, but Ross was still teaching himself his craft. By the time he wrote the second one, *The Reggis Arms Caper* he was the funniest mystery writer in America...and by the time he finished the third, *The Stranger City Caper*, he was the funniest fiction writer alive. All self-taught in a hospital bed at the age of 50-plus, his only textbooks a pair of best-selling novels that he found too silly to be considered seriously.

And while he was learning to write fiction, he turned back to poetry as well. Most people didn't know that, because Ross was still an amateur and didn't know how to sell his poems. He produced one book of wonderful (and often hilarious) Robert Service-type poetry called WELCOME, LOSERS -- but it was published by a small press in an edition of 100 copies. I have one; I suspect Ross died with 75 of them in his basement. He kept writing poems -- I have several that he jotted down in letters to me -- but no more ever saw print; he simply didn't know how to market them. (And to tell the truth, I don't think he cared. He was more interested in writing them than selling them.)

Ross's Chance Purdue books hit the stands a couple of years before I finally got around to submitting the first Lucifer Jones novel. I had a feeling Lucifer would be a tough sell (he wasn't, but I was a little less confident back then), so I asked Ross what inside information he had about Avon, the house that published the Purdue books. How did he know to send such oddball humor there, and did he think they'd go for my pulp parodies?

His answer: he didn't know anything about Avon. He finished *The DADA Caper*, went to the library, picked up a copy of *Writer's Market*, and started submitting at the "A's". (Thank god Avon wasn't called Zeus, or he'd have given up long before he ever sold the book. I truly don't think any other publisher would have taken a chance on such an oddball off-the-wall comic novel. Later, after he'd established his reputation, they all did -- but not in the beginning.)

I wasn't the only Chance Purdue fan. David Merrick optioned all 5 Purdue books for Broadway. He never did anything with them, but he sent Ross a \$10,000 check every January for the better part of 15 years. (OK, Ross is dead, so I can tell you: Avon paid a less-than-earthshaking \$2,000 apiece for the first 3 Purdue books, \$2,500 for the fourth, and \$3,000 for the

fifth. He did a -lot- better after I finally helped him get an agent.)

I have written 3 fan letters in my life. One went to Ross, and we became friends for the last two decades of his life. He finally moved back to Youngstown about ten years before he died. He was a salty old guy who lived for the Three B's: beer, baseball, and broads. (He was happily and faithfully married, but he sure did like to look. I share both syndromes.)

I only met Ross once. We spoke on the phone many times, and since he hated to type we corresponded weekly by trading audio tapes, often reading the latest Chance Purdue and Lucifer Jones adventures to each other. Somehow I talked him into coming to the 1982 Worldcon (Chicon IV). He spent a few hours observing the macrocosm, joined us for dinner at the Greek Islands, went home a couple of hours later, and never again complained to me about how strange mystery writers and fans were.

As I said, I've written 3 fan letters. One was to Barry Malzberg; he became my closest friend in science fiction, and I managed to bring most of his very best work back into print with the omnibus volume, *The Passage of the Light*. The second was to Alexander Lake, the hunter/author who started me out on my lifetime love affair with Africa; he died a month before I wrote it, but 40 years later I was able to bring his forgotten classics, *Killers in Africa* and *Hunter's Choice*, back into print.

Ross was the third, and just a few months before his death I was able to edit *The Compleat Chance Purdie*, which if nothing else shows that when I write a fan letter to a writer, I'm sincere.

Anyway, this is the introduction I wrote for the book:

A couple of decades ago I went to the bookstore, looking for a nice, hard-boiled detective novel in the Raymond Chandler mold.

I picked up *The Stranger City Caper*, primarily because of the cover art, which showed a private dick in a trenchcoat. I'd never heard of the author before, but I bought it anyway.

Well, let me tell you: covers can be misleading. I got home, opened the book -- and twenty minutes later I was laughing so hard that I was literally gasping for breath.

I knew long before I finished the book that Ross Spencer was a comic genius -- an opinion that has only become firmer over the years -- and I spent the next couple of days scouring the stores for any other Chance Purdue adventures that I could find.

Writers don't write fan letters to other writers, but within a week I had written one to Ross, a charming man who then lived about 40 miles away from me in Illinois. (We have both since moved to Ohio, though we're now a couple of hundred miles apart.) He responded not with a letter, but with an audio cassette -- he actually hates to type -- I responded in kind, and we've been friends ever since. When I finally met him, he turned out to be a fun-loving, white-haired, cigar-smoking gent with a twinkle in his eye -- exactly the kind of person you would pick to be the creator of the immortal Chance Purdue.

Ross kicked off his late-in-life literary career by writing and selling five Purdue novels. He's since sold a batch more books, and has gone on to greater fame than Chance ever brought him -- but to me Chance Purdue is classic, archtypal Ross Spencer, than which nothing is funnier. It's the kind of thing he does both effortlessly and better than anybody else.

Purdue is the perfect parody of the hard-boiled detective. He doesn't feel much pain, especially if you hit him above the neck. He's just about irresistible to women. He's so dumb that he can't even spell FBI. If there are twenty right ways to solve a crime and one wrong way, he'll invariably opt for the wrong way and solve it anyway. He is incapable of writing a two-sentence paragraph. (Footnote for historians: Ross once showed me the unfinished manuscript of his very first creation, detective Clay Pierce,

who is a clone of Chance Purdue in every way but one: Clay is incapable of writing a paragraph of less than two thousand words.)

Shortly after discovering Ross's work, I loaned a couple of the Purdue books to my friend, the award-winning science fiction writer Barry Malzberg. His comment upon returning them: "I never saw so many one-liners in my life. The man is the Henny Youngman of mystery novelists."

Actually, Ross isn't a mystery novelist at all. What he is is the funniest writer alive. I know this, because when I sit down to write humor I am the second-funniest writer alive, and I can't hold a candle to Spencer.

So what lies ahead of you in this five-in-one volume? Well, let me give you a very brief hint.

First there's *The DADA Caper*, in which we meet Chance Purdue, a detective so dumb that his IQ would freeze water, as he goes up against DADA, an enemy whose acronym stands for "Destroy America! Destroy America!" -- which will show you how committed (and redundant) they are.

Next comes *The Reggis Arms Caper*, in which Chance saves the world from another Japanese invasion, and first meets the CIA's sexiest agent, Brandy Alexander.

Then there's *The Stranger City Caper*, in which Chance must ferret out mystery among the minor-leaguers -- which in this case include a left-handed catcher with a wooden leg, a first baseman named Attila, and a shortstop who gets a triple hernia while pivoting to turn a double play.

After that there's *The Abu Wahab Caper*, a saga of gambling and corruption, in which Chance crosses paths with Quick Cash Kelly, Opportunity O'Flynn, Bet-a-Bunch Dugan, and a cud-chewing racehorse with two huge humps on its back.

And finally there's *The Radish River Caper*, which reunites Chance with Brandy Alexander and the infamous Dr. Ho Ho Ho, as he courts mystery and danger on the football field with such memorable characters as Suicide Lewisite and Zanzibar McStrangle.

If you've never read Chance Purdue before, I envy you, because you've got a few evenings of uproarious laughter awaiting you. If you *have* encountered him before, you'll be pleased to know that he hasn't changed one iota: he's still funnier than any of his competitors by quite a few levels of magnitude.

And, as editor, I will make a solemn pledge to you: if enough of you buy this book, I will harass Ross Spencer day and night until he completes that Clay Pierce novel and Alexander Books brings it to a helplessly laughing public.

Back to the present. I always check **abebooks.com** and **bookfinder.com** every couple of weeks to see if I can upgrade some of my too-often-read editions of some of my favorite writers -- "M. E. Chamber" (Kendell Foster Crossen), Craig Rice, a handful of others -- and of course Ross is always on the list. When I was checking in November, 2004, I came across a title I'd never heard of before -- and that seemed passing strange, because Ross told me he'd sent me copies of every book he wrote, and he had discussed them all with me. The title was *Signifying Nothing*, and it came out from the same tiny press that did *Welcome, Losers...* so I figured it was another volume of poetry that he'd somehow neglected to tell me about.

Of course I ordered it, and gave it to myself for Christmas. And when I opened it up and looked through it, I realized that the introduction I'd written was wrong. Ross *had* written and published a Clay Pearce novel. I also realized why he'd never mentioned it. The copyright date puts it a year before the first Chance Purdue book. It's funny, but nowhere near as well written -- and more to the point, all five Purdue plots exist as sections of *Signifying Nothing*; there would be no sense in ever reprinting it. Ross always knew what he wanted to do, and this was simply a first draft of it, a draft he didn't care to show people who loved his more professional work.

As for the Clay Pearce manuscript Ross showed me, I now realize that, at his higher skill level, he was re-imagining Clay Pearce. I don't have the manuscript, but I still have a number of audio cassettes, many of which were new and hilarious Clay Pearce adventures. I listened to them just before writing this, and it's like a totally different, far surer hand wrote these, as opposed to the book I bought for Christmas.

So now I wonder if there are any Chance Purdue manuscripts I don't know about, and who do I have to kill to get my hands on one?

But until one turns up, I'll settle for the ones that are in print, and for the pleasure of having known my funny and salty old friend.

BLIMP

Mike Estabrook

“I
didn't think
they
could sleep in
a blimp,”
she said watching
it floating high
in the sky
over the ball field
like a big fat turtle.

