

Johnston McCulley

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Johnston McCulley (February 2, 1883 Ottawa,Illinois- November 23 . 1958) was the author of hundreds of stories, fifty novels, and numerous screenplays for film and television.

McCulley started as a police reporter for The Police Gazette and served as an Army public affairs officer during World War I. An amateur history buff, he went on to a career in pulp fiction and screenplays, often using a Southern California backdrop for his stories.

His Zorro character was first serialized in the story "The Curse of Capistrano" in 1919 in the pulp magazine *All-Story Weekly* in 1919.

Zorro became his most enduring character, appearing in four novels (the last three were all serialized in Argosy Magazine, which had absorbed "All-Story"). The first appeared in 1919, the second in 1922, then there was a significant gap before the appearance of the third novel "Zorro Rides Again" in 1931. The appearance of the 1920

Douglas Fairbanks silent movie based on the first novel was the direct cause for McCulley reviving what has originally been a one-time hero plot.

The popularity of the character led to three novellas appearing in Argosy in 1932, 1933, and 1934. In between he wrote many other novels and stories set in early Spanish era California which did not have Zorro as the lead character. The last full length novel "The Sign of Zorro" appeared in 1941, and was very likely also written in response to the popularity of the character in the movies. Republic optioned the character for a serial "Zorro's Fighting Legion" which was released in 1939 and was well received. Over the coming decade Republic released three other serials connected in some way with the Zorro character. In 1940 the feature length movie starring Tyrone Power and Linda Darnell made the character much wider known to the public at large, and McCulley decided to bring his character back with new stories.

McCulley made an arrangement with the pulp West Magazine to produce a brand new Zorro short story for every issue. The first of these stories appeared in July 1944. The last one appeared in July 1951, the final issue of the publication. 53

adventures in all were published in West. An addition story (possibly a story originally written for West which went unpublished when West folded) appeared in Max Brand's Western Magazine in the May 1954 issue. The final Zorro story appeared in Short Story Magazine April 1959, after McCulley's death and after the Zorro television program had become nationally popular.

Many of his characters—the Green Ghost, the Thunderbolt, and the Crimson Clown—were inspirations for the masked heroes that have appeared in popular culture from McCulley's time to the present day.

Probably his second most popular character from the pulps was "The Black Star", a criminal mastermind who is pursued by Roger Verbeck-Flagellum and Muggs, a millionaire bachelor and his ex-thug partner. Black Star first appeared in the Street & Smith pulp Detective Story Magazine 5 March 1916 with a story titled "Rogue For a Day". Black Star was what was once termed a 'Gentleman Criminal', in that he does not commit murder, nor does he permit any of his gang to kill anyone, not even the police or his arch enemy Roger Verbeck. He does not threaten women, always keeps his word, and is invariably courteous,

nor does he deal with narcotics in any of his stories. He is always seen in a black cloak and a black hood on which is embossed a jet black star. The Black Star and his gang used "Vapor Bombs" and "vapor guns" which rendered their victims instantly unconscious, a technique which pre-dated the Green Hornet's gas gun by several decades. These stories were very popular with the readership of Detective Story Magazine and some of them were reprinted by Chelsia House, a division of Street & Smith, in a series of inexpensive hardback books. The character lasted through the end of 1930.

The Crimson Clown also appeared in Detective Story Magazine beginning in 1926, and immediately attracted reader interest, so much so that Street & Smith published two hardback collections of his adventures---"The Crimson Clown" (1927) was rushed to press just as soon as there was enough material available to fill a hardback volume. This was followed by "The Crimson Clown Again" (1928). The Crimson Clown is Delton Prouse, a wealthy young bachelor, able veteran of The Great War, explorer, and all around adventurer who functions as a modern Robin Hood, stealing from the unjustly rich and returning money to helpless victims or worthy

organizations. He dresses in a mostly white clown suit and uses a tear gas pistol (later this became a "gas gun"). These stories, although very popular for the time period, do not date well. By the end of 1931 McCulley had permanently retired the character.

Some of McCulley's tales are available from Wildside Press. Pulp Adventures Inc. has published two oversized trade paperback volumes reprinting many of the original Zorro stories.

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