

James Branch Cabell

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James Branch Cabell (April 14, 1879 - May 5, 1958) was an American author of fantasy fiction and belles lettres. While Cabell's surname is often mispronounced "Ka-BELL", he himself pronounced it "CAB-ble". To remind an editor of the correct pronunciation, Cabell composed this rhyme: "Tell the rabble my name is Cabell."



James Branch Cabell
photographed by Carl Van
Vechten, 1935

Contents

- 1 Life

- 2 Works
 - 2.1 Jurgén
 - 2.2 The Biography of Manuel
- 3 Influence
 - 3.1 Others
- 4 Quotations
- 5 Notes
- 6 References
- 7 External links

Life

Cabell was born and lived most of his life in Richmond, Virginia; though he wintered in Florida until the death of his first wife in 1949, and eventually retired there. He matriculated at the College of William and Mary in 1894 at the age of fifteen and graduated in 1898. While an undergraduate, Cabell taught French and Greek at the College.

He worked from 1898 to 1900 as a newspaper reporter in New York City, but returned to Richmond in 1901, where he continued to work as a reporter. 1901 was an eventful year for Cabell: his first stories were accepted for publication, and he was suspected of the murder of John Scott, a

wealthy Richmonder. In 1902, seven of his first stories appeared in national magazines.

Between 1911 and 1913, he was employed by his uncle in the office of the Branch coalmines in West Virginia. On November 8, 1913, he married Priscilla Bradley Shepherd. In 1915 a son, Ballard Hartwell Cabell, was born. Priscilla died in March of 1949; Cabell remarried in June of 1950 to Margaret Waller Freeman.

During his life, he published fifty-two books, including novels, genealogy, collections of short stories, poetry, and miscellanea. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1937. Today, the modern languages house and an endowed law professorship at the College of William and Mary are named in his honor.

Cabell died of a cerebral hemorrhage. He is buried in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. In 1970, Virginia Commonwealth University, also located in Richmond, named its main campus library "James Branch Cabell Library" in his honor, and the undergraduate literary journal at the university is named Poictesme after the fictional province in his novel *Jurgen*.

Works

Jurgen

Cabell's eighth book, *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice* (1919), was the subject of a scandal shortly after its publication. The eponymous hero, who considers himself a "monstrous clever fellow", embarks on a journey through ever more fantastic realms, even to hell and heaven. Everywhere he goes, he winds up seducing the local women, even the Devil's wife.

The novel was denounced by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice; they attempted to bring a prosecution for obscenity. The case went on for two years before Cabell and his publishers won: the "indecentencies" were double entendres that also had a perfectly decent interpretation, though it appeared that what had actually offended the prosecution most was a joke about papal infallibility.

Cabell took an author's revenge: the revised edition of 1926 included a previously "lost" passage in which the hero is placed on trial by the Philistines,

with a large dung-beetle as the chief prosecutor. He also wrote a short book, *Taboo*, in which he thanks John H. Sumner and the Society for Suppression of Vice for generating the publicity that gave his career a boost.

Due to the notoriety of the suppression of *Jurgen*, Cabell became a figure of international fame. In the early 1920s he became the leader of a group of writers known as "The James Branch Cabell School", which included such figures as H.L. Mencken, Carl Van Vechten and Elinor Wylie.

The Biography of Manuel

Other works include *Figures of Earth*, which tells the story of Manuel the swineherd, a scoundrel who rises to conquer a realm by playing on others' expectations - his motto *Mundus Vult Decipi*, meaning "the world wishes to be deceived".

The Silver Stallion is a loose sequel to *Figures of Earth* that deals with the creation of the legend of Manuel the Redeemer, in which Manuel is pictured as an infallible hero, an example to which all others should aspire; but some of the former knights of Manuel have not yet died, and remember how things really were.

All of these books are part of *The Biography of Manuel*, the story in 18 volumes of Dom Manuel and his descendants through many generations. Cabell stated that he considered the *Biography* to be a single work, and supervised its publication in a single uniform edition, known as the *Storisende Edition*, published from 1927 to 1930.

Many of these books take place in a fictional country known as "Poictesme", pronounced "pwa-tem". It was the author's invention to situate Poictesme roughly in the south of France. The name suggests the two real French cities of Poitiers (medieval Poictiers) and Angoulême (medieval Angoulesme). Several others take place in the fictional town of Lichfield, Virginia.

After concluding the *Biography* in 1932, Cabell shortened his pen name to *Branch Cabell*. The "truncated" name was used for all his new, "post-*Biography*" publications until the printing of *There Were Two Pirates* (1946).

Influence

Cabell's work was thought of very highly by a

number of his peers, including Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Jack Woodford. When Twain died he was reading Cabell's *Chivalry*. And although now largely forgotten by the general public, his work was remarkably influential on later authors of fantastic fiction.

James Blish was a fan of his works, and for a time edited Kalki, the journal of the Cabell Society.

Robert A. Heinlein was greatly inspired by his boldness, and originally described his famous book *Stranger in a Strange Land* as "a Cabellesque satire", and a later work, *Job, A Comedy of Justice* (with the title derived from *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice*), features, like *Jurgen*, an appearance of the Slavic god Koschei.

Fritz Leiber's *Swords of Lankmar* was also influenced by *Jurgen*. Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* books show considerable stylistic resemblances to Cabell; Cugel the Clever in those books bears a strong resemblance, not least in his opinion of himself, to Jurgen.

Cabell was also a major influence on Neil Gaiman, [1] acknowledged as such in the rear of Gaiman's

novels *Stardust* and *American Gods*. This thematic and stylistic influence is highly evident in the multi-layered pantheons of Gaiman's most famous work, *The Sandman*, which have many parallels in Cabell's work, particularly *Jurgen*.

There are also references to Cabell himself in the works of many other fantasy and science fiction authors. For example, the *Leshy Circuit* stories by Larry Niven feature planets and places whose names are taken from Cabell, and his protagonist in *A World Out of Time* is named Jerome Branch Corbell. H. Beam Piper also used names from Cabell for some of his invented planets.

From 1969 through 1972, the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series returned six of Cabell's novels to print, and elevated his profile in the fantasy genre. Today, many more of his works are available from Wildside Press.

Others

Though best known as a fantasist, the plots and characters of his first few novels, *The Eagle's Shadow* (1904), *The Cords of Vanity* (1909), and *The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck* (1915), do not wander out of the everyday society of Virginia's

beleaguered gentry. But Cabell's signature droll style is clearly in evidence, and in later printings each book would bear a characteristically Cabellian subtitle: *A Comedy of Purse-Strings*, *A Comedy of Shirking*, and *A Comedy of Limitations*, respectively.

His later novel, *The First Gentleman of America: A Comedy of Conquest* (1942), retells the strange career of an American Indian from the shores of the Potomac who sailed away with Spanish explorers, later to return, be made chief of his tribe, and kill all the Spaniards in the new Virginia settlement. Cabell delivered a more concise, historical treatment of the novel's events in *The First Virginian*, part one of his 1947 work of non-fiction, *Let Me Lie*, a book on the history of Virginia.

Other works include:

- *The Soul of Melicent* (1913, later retitled *Domnei*)
- *The Cream of the Jest* (1917)
- *The High Place* (1923)
- *Something about Eve* (1927)
- *The Nightmare Has Triplets* (trilogy comprising *Smirt* (1934), *Smith* (1935), and

Smire (1937))

- *The King Was in His Counting House* (1938)
- *The Devil's Own Dear Son* (1949)
- *Anecdotia Americana* (with introduction by J. Mortimer Hall)

Quotations

- "The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears this is true." -- Coth in Cabell, *The Silver Stallion*
- "...when I have been telling you, from alpha to omega, what is the one great thing the sigil taught me—that everything in life is miraculous. For the sigil taught me that it rests within the power of each of us to awaken at will from a dragging nightmare of life made up of unimportant tasks and tedious useless little habits, to see life as it really is, and to rejoice in its exquisite wonderfulness. If the sigil were proved to be the top of a tomato-can, it would not alter that big fact, nor my fixed faith. No Harrowby, the common names we call things by do not matter—except to show how very dull we are," - James Branch Cabell, *The Cream of the Jest*
- "In the early part of the 20th century, there

was a fantasy writer named James Branch Cabell who had a theory of writing as magic. His books (highly recommended, especially *Jurgen*) are both funny and mythological... and it's easy to see how his process of creating characters was really a process of evocation and invocation." - Philip H. Farber

- "Once we understand the fundamentals of Mr. Cabell's artistic aims, it is not easy to escape the fact that in *Figures of Earth* he undertook the staggering and almost unsuspected task of rewriting humanity's sacred books, just as in *Jurgen* he gave us a stupendous analogue of the ceaseless quest for beauty. For we must accept the truth that Mr. Cabell is not a novelist at all in the common acceptance of the term, but a historian of the human soul. His books are neither documentary nor representational; his characters are symbols of human desires and motives. By the not at all simple process of recording faithfully the projections of his rich and varied imagination, he has written thirteen books, which he accurately terms biography, wherein is the bitter-sweet truth about human life." - Burton Rascoe
- "I have finished *Jurgen*; a great and beautiful book, and the saddest book I ever read. I don't know why, exactly. The book hurts me

- tears me to small pieces - but somehow it sets me free. It says the word that I've been trying to pronounce for so long. It tells me everything I am, and have been, and may be, unsparingly... I don't know why I cry over it so much. It's too - something-or-other - to stand. I've been sitting here tonight, reading it aloud, with the tears streaming down my face..." --Deems Taylor, Letter to Mary Kennedy, 12 December 1920

- "...For a book, once it is printed and published, becomes individual. It is by its publication as decisively severed from its author as in parturition a child is cut off from its parent. The book 'means' thereafter, perforce,—both grammatically and actually,—whatever meaning this or that reader gets out of it." - James Branch Cabell, "A Note on Cabellian Harmonics" in *Cabellian Harmonics*, April 1928

Notes

1. ^ Neil Gaiman's Journal: Novelisting

References

- Inge, M. Thomas; Edgar E. MacDonald

(eds.) (1983). *James Branch Cabell: Centennial Essays*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press. ISBN 0-8071-1028-0.

- McNeill, Warren A. (1928). *Cabellian Harmonics*. New York: Random House.

External links

James Branch Cabell

- Encyclopaedia Britannica
- James Branch Cabell Library (Virginia Commonwealth University)

Cabell works online

- Domnei (Litrix Reading Room)
- Jorgen: A Comedy of Justice (University of Virginia)
- The Cream of The Jest (University of Wisconsin)
- Works by James Branch Cabell at Project Gutenberg

Bibliographies

- Chronology of James Branch Cabell's Published Works
- Summary Bibliography at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database

Fan sites

- James Branch Cabell
- Mundus Vult Decipi

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