

**Tom Weaver, Science Fiction Stars and Horror Heroes: Interviews with Actors, Directors,  
Producers and Writers of the 1940-1960s  
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When someone uses the term “King of the Monster Hunters”, which someone inevitably does in the course of an evening, I always picture Robert Armstrong cajoling the natives on Skull Island or Richard Denning, harpoon in hand and snorkel mask on, ready to brave the depths of the Black Lagoon in search of Gill-man (aka the Creature from the Black Lagoon). Denning’s character in this classic Universal creature feature is... (how shall I put it?) keen, very keen to bag himself a prehistoric monster. And who wouldn’t be? Assuming the odds aren’t completely in the monster’s favour that is.

But not all monster hunters need underwater skills or a big net to go about their business. Tom Weaver, described by USA TODAY as, yes, the “King of the Monster Hunters”, braves the den of Science Fiction Stars and Horror Heroes to bring us this collection of interviews with actors, directors, producers and writers of the 1940s-1960s, and not a tranquiliser dart in sight. To say I don’t envy him his task would be a complete lie. Weaver has spent the last 20 years or more tracking down and interviewing the denizens of Hollywood B movies from the Golden, the Silver and even the Bronze era of filmmaking. Along with his studies of Classic and almost classic, Universal and Poverty Row Horror movies from the 30s and 40s, Weaver has produced an invaluable archive of interviews with some of the best- and some of the least-known horror and science fiction actors and filmmakers of the first half of the 20th century. His current IMDb bio reports that he has interviewed in the region of 500 actors, writers, producers and directors. It’s probably more. You name them, chances are Weaver’s interviewed them. His extensive publications - whose titles alone are enough to whet the appetite of any Monster Movie Kid – include *They Fought in the Creature Features* (1995), *I Was a Monster Movie Maker* (2001), *Monsters, Mutants and Heavenly Creatures* (2001) *Science Fiction Confidential* (2002) and *It Came from Horrorwood* (2004).

Like all of Weaver’s published interviews, this excellent new edition of his *Science Fiction Stars and Horror Heroes* (a reprint from the library bound edition of 1991) is a real treat. Hazel Court, Louis M. Heyward, Herk Harvey, Kim Hunter, Phyllis Coates, Richard Matheson and Janet Leigh are among the 28 stars, movie makers and writers featured here, along with plenty of rare photos and production stills. There is a wealth of little-known facts, “behind the scenes” details and fascinating rumours to be gleaned from their conversations with Weaver, whose skill as an interviewer rests in his ability to draw his subjects into conversation through a combination of candour, tact, good humour and those two essentials - genuine enthusiasm and impeccable research.

Richard Matheson’s interview is one of the longest in the collection; it’s also one of the most rewarding. He talks about his initial disappointment with Jack Arnold’s 1957 film version of his novel *The Shrinking Man*; his script for a sequel, *The Fantastic Little Girl*, which sees the shrinking man’s wife shrink too, eventually joining him in the “submicroscopic world”. The film was never made, however, despite Universal’s desire to reuse all the expensive sets and giant props which featured in the original. Through the course of the interview we also learn how Sam Arkoff (co-founder of film production company AIP)

wasn't too hot on the idea of making *House of Usher* (which Matheson was scriptwriter for) because there was no monster in it, no real selling point, as Weaver puts it. Seemingly he came round to the idea when encouraged to see the house itself as the monster. Now why didn't I think of that?!

With great charm and good humour, Kim Hunter discusses her early film experiences working with Val Lewton, William Castle, Powell and Pressburger. Even when asked the question "Do you remember what your initial reaction was when you were asked to play a chimpanzee in *Planet of the Apes*?" Hunter manages to maintain her poise, humour and honesty. She explains that herself and co-star Roddy MacDowell were suitably short for the role of the chimps and also talks about the strain of the four hour make-up sittings and the general stress all the simian actors felt while shooting the films. She took Valium during shooting of the first film, and remembers how "One of the gorillas came up to me once and said, 'My wife tells me I've started talking in my sleep, and I've never done that before in my life!' One of the gorillas [laughs]!" It must have been some tough gig alright, if it could make a gorilla break down.

In her interview with Weaver, Janet Leigh, once again, confirms the old rumour that after filming *Psycho* she always took baths rather than showers and, more intriguingly, reveals that Hitchcock was not happy with Leigh's co-star, John Gavin (the second-rate Rock Hudson), because his love scenes with Leigh were so unconvincing. Broaching the subject of her later forays in the horror genre, particularly the 1972 stinker *Night of the Lepus* (a film about mutant killer bunnies that wasn't meant to be a joke), Weaver asks if she and the rest of the cast and crew realised from day one it was a losing battle (not with the rabbits but the film's general hopelessness). She figures day four or five sealed the deal - whichever day it was that they shot their first scenes with the man in the giant bunny costume.

Herk Harvey, the director, producer and incredibly creepy lead ghoul of *Carnival of Souls* (1962) discusses how he made this surreal and groundbreaking cinematic tour de force on a 3-week holiday from his job as an industrial filmmaker, with a \$30,000 budget and a crew of six. Gordon Hessler, director at AIP in the late 1960s who carried on their Poe/Price cycle when Corman left, tells the story of the wrap party for *Cry of the Banshee*, involving fancy-dress, a naked girl in a cake and a roaring drunk and angry Vincent Price. Hazel Court talks of her fondness for playing scheming vixens in Corman films: "I loved them – I liked sacrificing myself to the Devil and branding myself in *The Masque of the Red Death* and all that. But that's not me at all!" Quoting part of *Time* magazine's review for the film - "The sexy, lusty redhead is played by the English actress Miss Hazel Court, in whose cleavage you could sink the entire works of Edgar Allan Poe and a bottle of his favourite booze at the same time" – she laughingly admits "I – I rather like that one!" Court also recalls that at the time of making *Red Death* her co-star Jane Asher was dating Paul McCartney and all through filming kept herself busy knitting balaclavas for the Fab Four so they could go out at night and not be recognised.

There are so many more great stars and great stories here. I've saved my personal favourite till last. Acquanetta starred in 1940s Universal films like *Captive Wild Woman* and *Jungle Woman*, playing both an exotic beauty and enraged she-Ape. She was born on an "Indian" reservation in Wyoming; her mother was Arapaho, but, on her father's side, she also claims descent from the Royal House (which one isn't clear). I'm not quite sure how Weaver managed to keep his composure for this interview, which is at times

quite hilarious, and occasionally jaw-dropping. Although she had many powerful male friends in high places, including Walter Winchell, William Randolph Hearst, J. Edgar Hoover and the 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Acquanea was known in Hollywood as Miss Innocent, and according to her, when she left they still called her that. Without a birth certificate, she could not get a passport, but Hoover, “a personal friend”, sorted that out for her. She remembers, “He was a curious man. Although he had interesting stories around him, because he was never married, he still was attracted to certain types of women, he liked to photograph them. And he would come to New York and photograph us.” Acquanea also tells of the so-called feud between her and that other exotic actress Maria Montez, who always seemed to pip her at the post for starring roles in lush Technicolor A pictures. Mimicking Montez’s Spanish accent Acquanea explains how Montez would not “geev up thees role” in the 1942 *Arabian Nights* so that Acquanea could have it instead. She follows this by telling Weaver “She later drowned in a bathtub...”, as though the two events were connected. They could be, as Acquanea admits, she has certain gifts - an ability to see into the future and to channel psychic powers.

One can’t but feel a tremendous warmth and goodwill towards many of the interviewees. A few are bitter, a few are a bit nuts, and a few are haunted by regrets, but their memories of filmmaking are touching, insightful and hugely entertaining. A good part of this fond feeling is undoubtedly connected to a deep sense of nostalgia and an awareness that the days they speak of are gone forever and that they themselves will perhaps not be with us much longer. Indeed, a depressing number of the stars and filmmakers in this collection have since passed away; Herk Harvey, Janet Leigh, Kim Hunter and Acquanea are among them. In his opening to the collection Weaver notes how “Efforts to locate and interview the older filmmakers are becoming more of a race against time than ever... The history of these pictures has to be written because these people are not going to be around forever.” No one said a monster hunter’s job is always an easy one but I’m very glad someone is doing it.

ELIZABETH McCARTHY

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