

"Yawn . . . Barbie and Ken Save the Day": A Review of Hugh B. Cave's *The Evil Returns*

By Tony Fonseca

Cave, Hugh B. *The Evil Returns*. New York: Leisure, 2001. 359p.

Hugh B. Cave is nothing short of a legend in the dark fantasy and detective fiction genres. During the Golden Age of the Pulp Magazines between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, one could find his name on the cover of *Dime Detective*, *Detective Fiction Weekly*, and *Weird Tales*, not to mention countless other magazines. On occasion Cave has put away his magnifying glass, porkpie hat, and pipe in order to take up the creation of a horror text, as he does in *The Evil Returns*, wherein one of his most alluring super criminals, Margal, makes his reappearance after being written off as dead. In it, the author returns his readers to the mysterious island of Haiti, where Cave himself lived for more than 5 years in the 1950s, and where he has set many tales of voodoo and mind control.

The Evil Returns is the story of a Haitian bocor (something of a witch doctor) who devises an ingenious plan to take over the world by influencing the leader of its greatest nation—the President of the United States—to do his bidding. Cave recreates an interesting villain in the indestructible Margal, a somewhat James Bondish heavy who has no legs and must be carried around by a 6'2", 300 pound female servant. Margal has recently escaped a sure death in a fiery blaze; in fact, when the tale opens, he is thought to be dead by everyone in Port-au-Prince and is hiding out in the elite Turgeau district with Clarisse, his servant. Like any good villain, Margal is hideously deformed: "He appears to be a dwarf. Wasted away by some illness or accident that has scarred and shriveled him, he might be forty years old or sixty. His hair, touched with gray, is just beginning to grow back after being destroyed." Despite his deformities and handicaps, Margal is a powerful monster, an excellent vehicle for a horror text, as he is born with the ability to take over any number of minds by simply performing a voodoo ritual while holding something belonging to his subject. More importantly, once he has taken over someone's mind, Margal can control it from thousands of miles away.

Margal's need to acquire something of the President's so that he may eventually control his mind and thereby usurp Presidential power is what drives the plot of the novel. Having no "in" with the leader of the free world, Margal begins by having his servant get the underpants of the ten year old daughter of the son of one of the President's most trusted advisors. In doing so, he takes over the girl, Merry Dawson, and through her takes over her father, Brian. Brian then becomes the next pawn in his game to control the President's advisor (Brian's father), who can then procure a few items that will allow Margal to take over the President.

Certainly, Margal and Clarisse make an interesting visual team, and Cave's control of the intricate plot through the novel is admirable. However, Cave fails to create a work of fiction that transcends the genre or in any way challenges its limitations, which is what

the great writers do when they create "classics," for he relies on formulaic heroes and heroines, and a rather formulaic ending. In fact, what drags *The Evil Returns* down to the level of a pulp production is the complete lack of original thought that goes into Cave's protagonists -- those people who must stop Margal in this page turner. Brian Dawson is a womanizer and an all around slime ball. The privileged son of a very powerful man in the U. S. government, Dawson marries for practical gain only, and treats his wife as if she were excess baggage. From the second the reader meets Dawson, s/he can predict, accurately, that Dawson will somehow go over to the dark side, and that he will meet his demise because of it. There is very little of interest in such a character, even when he attempts to do the honorable thing and stop the mastermind from his worldly conquest.

Dawson's wife, Sandy, is barely more than a prop in the novel. She seems to have no purpose other than to be "forced" through Margal's mind control to strip down to her underwear at times, and to long to correct the mistake that she made by not marrying her college sweetheart, an adventurer/pilot named Ken (apparently the male counterpart to Cave's good natured Barbie female lead). She does manage, however, to persuade Dawson to hire Ken and keep him in his employ, so that when little Merry is kidnapped, and Brian Dawson goes off to save her, only to find himself now being controlled by Margal, Ken is conveniently available to get involved in the Florida everglades adventure with Sandy (who becomes, not surprisingly, 'Hun,' by midway through the novel).

Hun.... I mean Sandy is of almost no help to Ken during the trek across Florida's swamp-locked small towns. The two search for Merry Dawson, who they find out has been kidnapped and taken to Florida by Margal. Sandy is a cardboard cutout woman, much like Clarisse. Her role in *The Evil Returns* seems to be nothing more than to supply a little T&A when it is necessary to spice up the plot a bit. Sandy's uninteresting character is mirrored in Cave's hero, Ken, who has about as much personality as rock. Ken serves only one purpose—apparently Cave needs a big, innocuous adventurer who can learn martial arts moves just by watching movies (I kid you not; he actually uses this 'talent' in one scene of the novel), who can fly a plane, and who can save Sandy or send her away whenever the adventure gets a bit too rough for a woman.

By the end of *The Evil Returns*, I had had a *Paradise Lost* experience: I felt almost compelled to root for the villain, Margal—to hope that he could somehow defeat the cardboard cutouts. After all, at least Margal is interesting. But Margal's victory was not to be. As often happens with hackneyed fiction, the guys in the white hats predictably win, and the villain fades into nothingness. As with all super villains who seem indestructible, Margal has one weakness, which of course just happens to play into Ken's realm of heroic possibilities. Still, I couldn't help but wonder why a superhuman being with such powers of the mind as those Margal practices throughout the novel wouldn't simply realize that he would have been better off outright killing the hero and heroine who are trekking across the Everglades to stop him, rather than turning them into sexual wind-up toys and keeping them alive—so that they could predictably defeat him. But then again, why do those James Bond super villains always choose slow torture—rather than a quick execution style shot to the head—as the method of killing the man who has foiled every plan of world domination? That is an answer only the writers of such formulae know.

At least there is one saving grace to *The Evil Returns*. After all the marionettes of evil and bad guy side kicks are predictably killed off, after the master plan to take over the world has been foiled in an unbelievably anti-climatic scene of "chicken", after the Kens and

Barbies beat the mean little man and save the little girl—Margal and Clarisse seemingly escape certain death once more. Certainly Cave was thinking sequel, but I like to think, as many scholars have argued about Milton's epic poem, that just maybe, the writer knew who was really the most likable character, and it wasn't the guy riding off into the sunset in victory.

Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume II (Summer 2001)