

# In Print

## The dreams are upstairs

Biology professor to science fiction writer in a few simple steps

By Steve Miller

**H**is name is Compton Crook and there's a fair chance that someone you know was taught by him at Towson State in one of its recent incarnations. An ecologist and biologist, the graying gentleman appears nearly Prussian with his close-clipped hair and ramrod walk. It is easy to imagine him lecturing to a group of students as they walk among the flowers and weeds, naming the plants without fail.

Yet all it takes to change this Professor Emeritus at Towson State University into someone completely different is the quick ascent of a flight of stairs. Arriving at the comfortably furnished upstairs office is not Compton Crook the field ecologist, but Stephen Tall the science fiction writer.

This change has been going on, without benefit of a magic ring or even a SHAZAM, for nearly 25 years.

"When I came to Towson we were building a biology department," says Crook, "and most of my writing was research reports or what have you. When I did write something else, why, it was bad enough that I was writing fiction—but I had to do something to keep the science writing apart from the science fiction. That's why I became Stephen Tall."

It was Stephen Tall, then, who sold a story to the radio show X Minus One, and also Stephen Tall who wrote the stories that were later collected into *The Stardust Voyages*, a collection which has been sold in most of the English-speaking countries of the world as well as in an Italian translation.

**THE SECRET** was well kept until recently, when Stephen Tall came out into the light after Compton Crook's retirement from active teaching at Towson.



Steve Miller

Stephen Tall's office is filled with Compton Crook's influence. A pair of binoculars stand at the ready for instant bird watching from the upstairs

window. A certificate from an African game preserve identifies the animals spotted by Crook and his wife Beverly as they spied from a treehouse. Crook's influence extends much further than that, however.

"I saw that the writers, Bradbury and Heinlein and whoever, tended to have an area of competence. I was a field biologist and there was little about ecology back then (1955). So I decided to write about what I know, and what I enjoy."

Fiction writing came to Stephen Tall rather easily since Compton Crook had been writing much of his life. Crook was the first winner of the Boy Scouts of America writing contest and had a story published in *Boys Life* as a result.

"The Great Smokey Mountains were my haunts in them days, you see. I was a mountain boy and I guess I wrote mountain fiction, like Jesse Stuart. Oh, not so good as Jesse probably, but I started out with mountain stories and then some slick stuff for the ladies magazines."

The various stories that make up *The Stardust Voyages* are based on the *Starship Stardust* and its explorations—it regularly goes "where no man has gone before." Tall laughs when his material is compared to *Star Trek*.

"No, it really isn't so. The first *Stardust* story came out in 1966 before the first *Star Trek* story. And the original story that gave me the idea I wrote long before, and after a while I distilled the characters and the basic idea out of it without ever finishing it. It wasn't a very good story, you see, but it was a good idea."

Science fiction purists and naval officers as well prefer Tall's version of the exploration ships. Unlike the *Enterprise*, on which the only exploration is done by Kirk and Spock and a

few useless crew members, the *Stardust* is shown as an exploration vessel. There are teams of experts including a painter who manages to see what is really there no matter if it appears to the exploration team or not. Biologists, chemists, physicists, and just plain scientists make up the bulk of the crew on *Stardust*.

"Oh yes, I tried working for a newspaper when I was young. But you see, the news put my feet to sleep. I loved the writing and I still do. News just didn't excite me, and that's why I went back to school and got involved with biology."

**TALL CLAIMS** that he couldn't write "if I had to depend on it for my income. I write two or three pages a day, that's enough. I write long hand, and I enjoy writing. I also enjoy a lot of other things and if I couldn't garden and birdwatch and what have you, why I don't think I would want to write. I like writing science fiction because it's speculative. Isn't it?"

The stories coming out of the background of mountains and biology frequently reflect the places Compton Crook has traveled—Africa, the Andes, Antarctica. The stories also reflect an ingenious humor and wit. The space ship *Stardust* is powered by an element with special powers. That element is called timonium. Characters in *The Stardust Voyages* include the geologist Pegleg, his friend Wildcat, and a painter with nearly witchcraft-style ability, one Ursula Potts.

Although his stories have the whole universe to play around in, Tall/Crook claims not to try to write to a universal audience.

"I'm very much a regional writer, as much so as Jesse Stuart with his mountain stories. That's why I haven't had a lot of foreign editions—although there have been a few. I couldn't write a story about a man named Kruschev, because I couldn't make that man fit the name. So my characters have American names 'cause that's what I know. I also write about very particular outdoor settings, settings that most foreign populations just aren't familiar with. So my work isn't going to be translated a lot—although the Italian edition of *Stardust* is a good job."

With that statement the regional science fiction writer descends the stairs to become Compton Crook, field biologist, and starts to catch up on the flowers of earth, and some bird-watching. ●

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