

CHARLIE CHAN: THE MAKING OF AN IMMORTAL

By NEIL ELLMAN

THE CREATION OF Earl Derr Biggers' fictional detective Charlie Chan was the result of a change in the author's attitude from that of a young and idealistic humorist writing for the *Boston Traveller* to that of a more worldly writer with an appreciation for steady royalties. In his column, "The Fact Is," the early Biggers had belittled best-sellerism:

Peter de Puyster Blottingpad,
Who wrote "Marie, the Subtle Sinner,"
Does his best work when he has had
Plenty of artichokes for dinner.
Mable Redink, the "girl Dumas,"
Who mingles history and fiction,
Read books on corporation law
In order to improve her diction.
Samuel Gay, who's all the rage
Because he has convulsed the nation,
Spends hours before a monkey's cage,
Gathering loads of inspiration.
Mildred McNeal, the poetess,
Sleeps on a book of Villon's verses;
Unkind remarks cause her distress,
And so do funerals and hearses.
Thus is our sadness put to rout
By publishers—kind gloom dispellers—
Who send us cheery news about
The folks who write the worst best sellers.

After writing his first novel, *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, Biggers retained his idealistic desire to create great litera-

ture: "I am anxious to try another novel soon, but I want it to come to me—I don't want it to be one of those things that the author had to go to. So far it hasn't come. And when it does come I hope it will be, not a giddy farce thinly covering a play, but a fine, real, true story of American life, with plenty of humor and characters that will stand out and be beloved by the readers" (to H. H. Howland, April 26, 1915). If Biggers sounded fearful of becoming a "Peter de Puyster Blottingpad," indeed, a "giddy farce thinly covering a play" aptly describes his next novel, *Love Insurance*. Perhaps, while contemplating a genuinely "literary" novel, he began to realize that he never would write one.

Shortly, under the pressures of domestic life, Biggers began to show more interest in income than in art. Offered advance royalties for *The Agony Column*, he wrote to Howland on July 27, 1916, "I feel that I owe it to my family to accept the largest of these." A month later, he explained, "We are just furnishing a house in Pelham [New York], and I don't feel like letting this chance for unexpected money go by" (to W. C. Bobbs, August 1, 1916). What remained of idealism now took the form of pride in his craft. Money, however, became increasingly important. Thus, he wrote to Bobbs on December 12, 1916, "I used to feel, when a book failed that I could easily write another, but as I grow older that feeling is not so strong, and I begin to worry about the future and to acknowledge the need of getting all I can as I go along."

By 1919 Biggers had found short story writing more lucrative than novels. To be sure, although he was generally doing well, neither he nor the Bobbs-Merrill Company had earned much from the publication of his first three novels.

In August, 1922, in answer to Howland's insistence that he try another novel, he explained, "At the present moment G. H. Lorimer [editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*] is paying such fantastic figures for short stories that I am not contemplating a novel in the near future." But two months later he wrote to Laurance Chambers, "I am . . . contemplating a novel—a mystery story of Honolulu." The reversal stemmed from the same motives—money and security. In the same letter he asked for a loan of \$1,200 to make a payment on his new house. Financial need, worsened when he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1924, amplified his need to finish the book.

It was this new novel which turned out to be the first in the Chan series, though it is clear from correspondence that Biggers began with no intention of a series featuring one character. Chan was a secondary figure in this first work. It is even doubtful that Biggers had any initial intention of writing "detective fiction." He pointed out to Howland, ". . . as I have said from the first . . . the book should be put forward as 'a romantic mystery story' with the emphasis on romantic" (to Howland, December 20, 1924).

Biggers first got the idea for the novel during a three-month stay in Honolulu, where he thought of "a suspicion-proof method" of murder, "a trick that is most easily possible at Waikiki Beach, and would be impossible nearly everywhere else" (to Chambers, December 18, 1922). The "trick" was to be a feat of long-distance swimming. His plot, as he then imagined it, concerned a young writer seeking material for a murder mystery at Waikiki and finding the situation turned into real murder. At this point, Chan had not entered the picture.

The use of a Hawaiian setting particularly appealed to Biggers. He explained to Chambers on November 21, 1924, "I felt that in pushing it, it might be well to soft pedal murder and play up the setting. I have never mentioned Honolulu to anybody but what they said—'Oh, I've always wanted to go there. . . .'" By using the setting, Biggers hoped to sell his book to a clientele outside the regular mystery audience. In effect, he considered local color more important than the detective fiction element.

The plot of *The House Without A Key* turned out richer than Biggers first imagined. The primary addition was a humorous, almost satirical, subplot concerning John Quincy Winterslip's conversion from stodgy Bostonian to carefree man of the Islands. Another addition, of less immediate impact on the plot, but of more lasting significance, was the introduction of a Chinese-Hawaiian assistant detective—Charlie Chan. Whether or not he was based on a real human being has been much debated. Chang Apana, one of the few Chinese members of the Honolulu police force, claimed to be his original, a claim which Biggers loudly denied time and time again. Even his wife defended his originality with vehemence: "As of course you know, nothing could be farther from the truth. Earl had written three Chan stories before he ever heard of Apana, who was the very antithesis of Charlie in every way, appearance, character, point of view and career. It seems cruel, after all the hard work Earl put into creating Charlie Chan, and inventing again and again such original and clever plots, for a lot of hack reporters to claim that it all came from a little Hawaiian cop, whose only activity was running down opium smugglers in Honolulu" (Mrs. Biggers to Chambers, January 17, 1934).

Years later, Biggers was to write: "Sinister and wicked Chinese are old stuff, but an amiable Chinese on the side of law and order had never been used up to that time. . . . If I understand Charlie Chan correctly, he has an idea that if you understand a man's character you can nearly predict what he is apt to do in any set of circumstances" ("Creating Charlie Chan," *New York Times*, March 22, 1931). This is a fine description of the later Chan, but it is hardly adequate for the earliest Chan, who had not quite ceased to be the "sinister and wicked Chinese." He was not, of course, a Hawaiian Fu Manchu, but there was something opaque and uncanny about his abilities. As Chan himself explained in *The House Without A Key*: "Chinese most psychic people in the world. Sensitives, like film in camera. A look, a laugh, a gesture perhaps. Something go click." Furthermore, his rather "sneaky" police methods closely fitted the whodunit convention of the Oriental. For instance, Ronald A. Knox had believed that a Chinese character should *never* figure in a mystery story. "Why this should be so," he tried to explain, "I do not know, unless we can find a reason for it in our Western habit of assuming that the Celestial is over-equipped in the matter of brains, and under-equipped in the matter of morals" ("A Detective Story Decalogue," *The Art of the Mystery Story*, p. 195).

A reflection of such attitudes in the character of Charlie Chan no doubt reinforced stereotypes of the Chinese and contributed to the immediate popularity of the detective. The author originally cared very little for *The House Without A Key*, which he described as "ideal stuff for the lads who get their fiction at the drug store." Furthermore, he explained, "I can't quite take this kind of tale seriously, and never could—now less than ever" (to Chambers, De-

ember 18, 1922; September 18, 1924). Description of Chan as "a Chinaman" in the early stories reveals the author's original attitude toward his famous character. After becoming involved with Chan, Biggers never used the word "Chinaman" except as an insult (Mrs. Biggers to Chambers, May 22, 1933). In the later novels, Chan was always "a Chinese."

That Biggers used Chan again, however, is not to be wondered at. Although the first Chan novel was not a best-seller, the detective attracted and inspired a flood of letters demanding his future appearance. Until then, Biggers had never mentioned Chan's name in his correspondence, but, on April 20, 1925, he advised Chambers to "play up Charlie Chan a bit" and further explained, "I never followed up on Baldpate the way I should have done, and I am not going to be so stupid this time." On August 23 he was saying, "I am conscious at the present time of a larger following in the mystery field than I ever had before." By the time Biggers had finished a second Chan novel, *The Chinese Parrot*, he felt at last financially secure (to Chambers, February 9, 1926). The greatest contributing factor was the money from the first serial rights to the novels, all of which were to be placed in *The Saturday Evening Post*. For *Behind That Curtain*, Biggers received the then staggering sum of \$25,000 (to Chambers, January 10, 1928).

In *The Chinese Parrot* Biggers did not play upon the stereotype. Instead, the detective became more American, more Western, more human. This novel is hardly so funny as the first, for Chan, now promoted to the rank of detective sergeant, is no longer a comic figure. Humorous abuse of English is now replaced by aphoristic and sagacious remarks. But the most important change involved Biggers'

play upon Chan's oriental-occidental dual nature. In the first novel, Chan, dressed in occidental clothes, was very much Chinese. In *The Chinese Parrot* Chan is still a Chinese, but his whole way of life is changing in the face of occidental ways. When his cousin, Chan Kee Lim, asks, "The foreign devil police—what has a Chinese in common with them?" Chan answers, "There are times, honorable cousin, when I do not quite understand myself." The new Chan is no longer a stereotyped oriental but a more rounded and more human character. The great detectives are seldom married; even more seldom do they have home lives. Chan was the first and most successful "domestic" detective in fiction. Although Biggers was concerned primarily with financial success, he went beyond the earlier Chan because he had always wanted to create characters who would "stand out and be beloved by the readers." The almost sinister, certainly comical, Chan of the first novel was attractive but hardly lovable. Furthermore, the author thoroughly knew his audience and no doubt catered to its susceptibility to the domestic possibilities inherent in Chan.

Not until the third Chan novel, *Behind That Curtain*, did Biggers decide to make Chan the hero of an extended series. The relatively poor book sales of *The Chinese Parrot* forced him to reflect: "'Am I on the right track with Charlie Chan?' But thinking back on the readers' comments and the notices, I think I am. They all like him, they all want more of him. Charlie's not the guilty party" (to Chambers, November 11, 1926).

In the third and remaining novels of the series, Chan's "image" became firmly established. The reader is introduced to Henry, his eldest son, and Rose, his eldest daughter, both Americanized to an extent their father cannot fully

comprehend. Chan's aphorisms grow in number, wisdom, and eloquence. Typical of them are the following from *Charlie Chan Carries On*: "Many times honey in the mouth means poison in the heart," and "The drum which makes the most noise is filled with wind." Chan's new seriousness is balanced by the addition of a fumbling assistant, Kashimo, who may be the first Japanese detective in literature.

Biggers early became afraid that the movies would ruin his creation. When Conrad Veidt was being considered as the movies' first Charlie Chan, Biggers feared that the German actor and his German director would "scare the public to death, and brand Charlie as a sinister devil from the Orient" (to Chambers, January 31, 1927). After Sojin and Warner Baxter played the detective, Chan's career in the movies seemed at an end: "The news is all about over there that Charlie cannot be cast—Fox tried every Chinese laundryman on the Coast, but never thought of trying an actor—and the issue looks like a dead one" (to Chambers, December 10, 1929). The successful portrayal of Chan finally achieved by Warner Oland meant a great deal to Biggers, for he considered it the final step needed to establish Chan "as the leading sleuth of his generation," as he wrote to Chambers on February 6, 1931. Toward that end, he became careful not to overexpose Chan and forbade the radio broadcasting of Chan scripts as well as the publication of comic strips based on the detective.

The following year, 1932, saw a complete reversal of the situation. Not only was this a period of ill health for Biggers, but the depression began seriously to affect the publishing industry, and Twentieth-Century Fox decided that Chan was finished in the movies. Now despondent, Biggers was forced to allow the radio broadcasts and to

admit that his plans for Chan were futile: "As it seems to me that Chan is just now at the peak of his 'run' . . . my theory is that I had better toss off all Chan stories I intend writing as quickly as possible, before he fades out of the public mind, and get it over with. *I don't believe he is immortal after all*" (to Chambers, January 18, 1933). But he was to write no more. Three months later, Earl Derr Biggers was dead.

In some respects, Chan's continuing fame owes more to the radio series, the comic strip, continuation of the movies, and now television than to the original novels. Indeed, though the detective's name is a household word, the name of his creator is known by few. Whether or not Biggers was a true artist, he was a craftsman who created a character that outlived him. The mystery is that Charlie Chan, begun for financial need and developed following the leads to financial success, has an independent existence.

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