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Desmond Cory feature by his sons

JOHNNY FEDORA, DESMOND CORY

and SHAUN McCARTHY

by

Richard and John McCarthy

Undertow is arguably Desmond Cory's most successful novel. While it did not attain the fame and commercial success of later thrillers such as *Deadfall* (filmed starring Michael Caine) or *The Circe Complex* (adapted as a successful Thames Television series), *Undertow* was to be reprinted six times following its original publication in 1962.

Such interest in the novel should perhaps not surprise us. In the USA, *Undertow* was well received from the outset, with the Buffalo Evening News writing: "Desmond Cory provides what is far and away one of the most sheerly exciting climaxes of the year. *Undertow* is a gem-hard thriller, plotted tightly, told with economy and vigour. It calls for loads of hurrahs for Mr. Cory - and for many encores". Anthony Boucher of the New York Times went further, writing in 1965: "For my money, Johnny Fedora, professional killer for British Intelligence, more than deserves to take over James Bond's avid audience".

Comparisons with Bond are inevitable; but what few people realise is that Fedora actually pre-dated Bond by two years and can claim to be British Intelligence's first fictional 'licensed to kill' secret agent. At the height of Cory's popularity, a new Johnny Fedora story was an eagerly-awaited event for critics and public alike. Yet despite this, nowadays these well-crafted thrillers remain generally unknown to the public. On the whole, this is probably due to the fact that they have been overshadowed by the success of James Bond films. Notwithstanding this, Fedora novels are quite different to Bond ones, as we hope you'll discover when you read this new publication of *Undertow*. There is sophistication in the plots, and Cory's writing style sets it apart from the gung-ho, action packed secret agent stories seen on the big screen. In reality, Ian Fleming also did not pack so much adrenalin non-stop action into his Bond novels. Yet due to the success of the Bond films in the sixties, it was inevitable that remarks such as those from Boucher would lead Fedora to being dubbed "the thinking man's James Bond" (first used by Book and Bookmen in 1966).

To place it in context with the other Fedora novels, *Undertow* is actually his eleventh espionage assignment. In the first novel, *Secret Ministry*, Johnny Fedora is introduced as a secret agent whose forte is the ability to outshoot, outwit, and outmanoeuvre his Cold War opponents. In subsequent novels, such as *Undertow*, he is often teamed up with Sebastian Trout from the Foreign Office. Johnny's connection with British intelligence is unofficial, but he is contracted by them for specific assignments.

The last five Fedora books form part of the Feramontov Quintet. They share a common antagonist in Feramontov, a Soviet intelligence chief. The quintet begins

with *Undertow* and also comprises *Hammerhea*d, *Feramontov, Timelock* and *Sunburst*. Like Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Moriarity, Fedora and Feramontov see each other as arch-enemies, although here the stakes are higher with, on occasion, the future of civilisation at stake.

Among the questions we're often asked at the Desmond Cory website, are: where did the author get the inspiration for the Johnny Fedora novels, and what more do we know about him? Why did he choose Desmond Cory as his *nom de plume?* Who were his seminal influences? What was he like as a person?

In reality the novelist Shaun McCarthy was a very modest, even secretive, man. A university professor of English Literature by day, few knew about his alter ego as a successful writer of detective and thriller novels. To us, he was just the father who was always there, challenging us to games of Risk or Buccaneer. While we got on with the normalities of life as kids going to school and playing in the garden, our father would now and again disappear into his study to tap away for hours on his typewriter. Only later did we discover that his novels had made it onto the big screen and television and that he'd met well-known actors such as Michael Caine and Michael York, worked with Graham Greene, Peter Duffel and Bryan Forbes on the screenplay of *England Made Me*; shared drinks with Shirley Bassey - who sang the theme song on the film of *Deadfall*; and met a host of other celebrities from legendary film composer John Barry to legendary Welsh fly-half Barry John.

In this hitherto unpublished interview, conducted in 1999 but only discovered stored on computer after his death, Desmond Cory spoke at great length about his influences, career, early ambitions, hobbies and methodology; and also explains how the pseudonym Desmond Cory came about.

Q: *Your career as a novelist began with a Johnny Fedora story, Secret Ministry…*

DC: Or Fedora started me off as a novelist, according to how you look at it.

Q: *But you told me once Fedora was nine-tenths a Peter Cheyney creation.*

DC: Did I say that? Ten-ninths I should of course have said.

Q: *And you were deliberately imitating Cheyney's style as well?*

DC: Perhaps not so much the style as the technique, I mean the narrative technique. I can't say I used Cheyney's books as a model. Not so much the Lemmy Caution or the Slim Callaghan stories but the wartime series which all had the word Dark in the title. Fedora was based on the main character of Dark Hero quite specifically and that's one of Cheyney's best books anyway in my opinion.

Q: *Cheyney was a hugely popular writer in the 40's but his books haven't lasted as much as others, have they?*

DC: Probably because many critics did not consider him a very good writer. But he was an excellent craftsman and a good storyteller and if as a beginner you decide to imitate someone it's probably wise to imitate someone who's not completely out of your range, so to speak. Like Conrad or Graham Greene.

Q: *How did you actually set about writing your first book?*

DC: Under what you might call optimum conditions, I suppose. What happened was that I was demobbed from the Marines in January '48 and wasn't due to go up to Oxford until September and my mother was determined to spoil me something rotten, so every morning I'd have breakfast in bed and then I'd sit propped up on the pillows with an exercise book on my knees and I'd write in longhand for four hours or so, through till lunchtime. You couldn't think of a lazier way to write a book.

Q: *And you found it all quite easy?*

DC: Yes, of course, because I was simply amusing myself. The idea that there's more to writing books - that didn't come to me until much later. You might say that to begin with I wanted to write rather than to be a writer, if you follow that distinction.

Q: *You felt a compulsion to write?*

DC: That might be putting it too strongly. I think I just liked writing in the way that I liked playing football and cricket. The difference was that I wasn't very good at games and I felt maybe I was quite good at writing and so possibly might get somewhere with it. The question was whether I was good enough to get anything I wrote published and of course there was only one way to find that out. I imagine it's like that with anyone else who tries it.

Q: *You hoped to be published rather than expected it?*

DC: Exactly. Well, you have to remember that I was still nineteen years old when I started that story and at that age one hopes for all kinds of things without worrying too much about whether they'll really come off or not.

Q: *Day-dreaming…*

DC: That does come into it. In one way, fiction-writing is day-dreaming. Though I don't think it helps much to think of it in that way.

Q: *Because there's a lot of discipline involved in it as well.*

DC: And however much natural talent you have, the discipline still has to be learned and it's difficult to do that if conditions are against you. I actually began a Fedora story a few months earlier, when I was in Malta waiting to be demobbed, but military discipline is of a kind that doesn't really permit you to practise any other at the same time. I don't say it can't be done, but I found that I couldn't do it. I think I got down about thirty pages of a longhand draft and then my demob number came up anyway so that was that.

Q: *Does that draft still exist?*

DC: Yes, it does. I've got it in my files somewhere. I've never liked to throw anything I've written away because you never know if eventually it won't prove to be re-workable somehow. I can think of nothing less likely than in the case we're talking about, because it was really written by a different person to the one who's talking to you now, but even so…

Q: *I know of writers who throw ninety per cent of what they write away*.

DC: Yes, so do I. I suppose they set themselves higher standards than what I and Ernie Wise do.

Q: *But you do set yourself a certain standard, surely?*

DC: Yes. But I've always assumed that someone of my limited abilities isn't going to achieve perfection or come anywhere near it. There's no such thing as perfection where a creative work is concerned, I felt that far more strongly when I began writing than I do now, and… back in those days I had the idea that the only way to learn to handle narrative was to write as many novels as possible, and I took it for granted that in doing that I'd make a lot of mistakes. I still don't think I was altogether wrong, though I find the results a bit embarrassing now… or would if I tried to reread them, which in fact I never do.

Q: *We're still talking about Johnny Fedora?*

DC: Oh, very much so. I don't think Johnny ever evolved very much as a series character, but I did find myself ridding him of his more preposterous attributes as time went by. And that's quite normal, of course. You see the same thing happening with Peter Wimsey and Albert Campion. Series characters tend to

mature as their writers get older and of course that creates another problem if the series goes on for a long time. If Fedora was thirty-ish in 1948, which I suppose he was, then by the time I published the last Fedora story in 1979 he'd have been… sixty or thereabouts, a bit long in the tooth anyway for the kind of experiences a sex-and-violence hero is supposed to undergo. But of course the only thing to do with that problem is ignore it. Everyone does. Toughie heroes stay the same age no matter how many decades the series lasts and nobody cares a damn.

Q: *What sort of mistakes did you make?*

DC: Driving into bunkers, chiefly. What's more, I still do it on occasion. Well, I know you don't play golf so I'll try to explain a bit more clearly. The thing about golf is that you don't try to hit the ball as hard and as far as you can, though that's what most novices do… You try to make sure the ball lands up in a place that'll make the next shot easier and so on all the way round the course. When you're writing you may get what seems to you a terrific idea for starting off a new story, so you tee off with tremendous enthusiasm and impetus – whang! - and sure enough the ball goes through the air like a bomb for maybe twenty or thirty or even fifty pages and then you look at where it's ended up and you think, oh hell, what do I do now? At best you can improvise some sort of a shot from out behind that tree and at worst you realise you're stuck and you have to go back and start all over again. And then of course you feel very disappointed because you thought it was such a cracker when you hit it.

Q: *Is that the famous writer's block?*

DC: It's a form of writer's block but the classic block is when you feel you can't play any kind of a shot at all even when the ball's sitting up on top of a tee. It's a mental problem, not a mechanical one, and I've never suffered from it to any serious extent… but it must be agonising if you're prone to it.

Q: *Shakespeare was, according to that film script, Shakespeare in Love.*

DC: And he solved the problem in a very agreeable way, as I seem to remember. In fact if there was ever a writer who didn't suffer from writer's block I'm convinced it was Shakespeare.

Q: *So do you write in the fantasy genres because you like making up plots or do you compose plots because you like to work in fantasy genres?*

DC: Chicken-and-egg question, that one. But more chicken, perhaps, because the chicken doesn't choose either to come out of the egg or to lay one and I don't think I have too much choice, either. The trouble with fantasy genres is that whether you're writing Regency romances or science-fiction epics, the rules of the game are much stricter than for the novel as such, where almost anything goes… and though you can break it when you want, and I sometimes have done, publishers don't as a rule like to whack a book down in front of the general public and say, "Look, this is a book, I hope you'll love it." No, they like to say, "This is a crime novel," "This is a war book," "This is erotic fiction," or whatever. And the reason for that is that most people have quite clearly specified tastes and don't want to find themselves reading a spy thriller when they thought what they were buying was a gripping novel about hitchhiking in Tasmania; any more than they'd like it if they bought a packet of cornflakes when they thought they were buying a jar of marmalade, even though they both come under the general heading of breakfast food. You don't need to be a writer to see that; it's straightforward common sense.

Q: *But it means that once a pattern has been laid down, you're working to a particular formula.*

DC: Exactly, but it's not only writers who have to do that. When at one time I was interviewing people for teaching posts, I was constantly coming up against men and women who claimed they had twenty years' experience of teaching,

but when you questioned them closely you found out that in fact they had one years' experience twenty times… but they themselves hadn't realised it. I could easily give you the names – but I won't – of very popular writers who sincerely believe they've written twenty books when in fact they've written one book twenty times… and their readers don't mind this in the least because it's so often a reflection of their own experience of life. It's the same with films and always has been… If it's Gary Cooper it's got to be a Western, or if it's Bogart it's got to be a toughie, if it's Doris Day then God help us.

Q: *In contrast, you have written in several genres very successfully*.

DC: If I have, it has to be because I didn't suddenly switch to another genre out of sheer boredom or desperation. I alternated detective stories with the Fedora books right from the start, with the idea if giving myself a rest in between all those Fedoras, and then later on I made various attempts at bringing elements of one genre into the other and so forth. So I don't think I've written the same book twenty times, or thirty, or whatever. It may well be that readers would have preferred it if I hadn't wiggled around so much and so would my various publishers, I think… but my publishers have been pretty tolerant, on the whole. They reject me when I wiggle too far off the bone, but that's fair enough. They're allowed to.

Q: *Have you had many rejections?*

DC: Not as many as Hemingway, but too many for my liking. Of course it's what to my mind are my best books that get rejected, which I'll admit bugs me a little. But then I tell myself that's exactly why they're rejected and then I feel better about it.

Q: *They're books which don't fall into a prescribed pattern?*

DC: Well, that's it. They do and they don't. Even when you admit the necessity to conform to a pattern there's nothing to say you can't stretch it, in just the way Chandler suggests you should and in the way he did himself. Bradman didn't do anything with a cricket bat that the laws of cricket don't permit, but he had trouble with the selectors in the beginning because they thought his basic technique wasn't sound enough for him to cope with a sticky English wicket. In other words, he didn't conform to a standard pattern of batsmanship that was then generally recognised. Okay, but batting is about scoring runs, not about conforming to a generally accepted set of rules, and as soon as he started hitting everyone all over the park they realised their grievous error. Now I'd be really immodest f I compared myself to Bradman and I'm not doing that, I'm saying that if a book is good for fifty or sixty runs on a decent wicket, maybe we shouldn't worry too much about whether it fits into this, that or the other pattern or not. In an ideal world, it wouldn't. But publishers aren't idealists, very far from it.

All this is only relevant because if at any time you run into adverse criticism or get a book rejected it doesn't mean you're a very poor writer, it usually means that some standard of judgement is being applied that as a writer you yourself can't recognise. Which at any rate is a consolatory thought.

Q: *I can't believe it doesn't hurt a bit to have a manuscript rejected. It's got to be like proposing marriage and being turned down.*

DC: And when she married someone else you realise how lucky you were. Quite. And of course I'm talking about my present attitude to it. If you're in a position where you really need the money you can't afford to risk rejections and if you do cop one then yes, it's a serious blow. But in fact Johnny Fedora went through sixteen titles without ever being rejected and the only time he came near it was in a story called The Head, in which I departed a little from the norm in that he wasn't up against a human enemy but natural forces on top of a mountain. Naturally I thought it was the best story I'd written to that date, but my then publishers thought that such readers as I then had wouldn't like even

that much of a departure from the expected… but in the end they took a chance on it and since then I've been allowed to break the rules of the game on quite a few occasions and have got away with it. But there are just as many occasions when I haven't.

Q: *Do you feel affection for Johnny? Or did you get sick and tired of the Fedora formula in the end?*

DC: I feel a lot of affection for Fedora because I associate him with the days when life was a bit of a struggle, financially speaking, as it is for most of us when we do indeed get married and start up a family, and Fedora never let me down in that respect. I don't know that I ever got tired of him, either, but round about 1970 I came to the conclusion that the kind of story he had perforce to get involved in was being James-Bonded out of existence and that the general public were getting a surfeit of it, so I'd better do something else. And I did. Johnny could survive everything the baddies threw at him over twenty years but he couldn't survive adverse market forces because nobody can. I suppose a television series might have given him a few more years of life, but though that was always being talked about it never came off and it would have been an artificial sort of survival anyway. Bond didn't really survive, either. The films got to have no resemblance whatsoever to the books and the same thing would have happened to Fedora. He's not the greatest fictional character ever created but he is my creation, for what he's worth, and on the whole I think that's the way that it should be.

Q: *Yes, I wondered about that, because although you claimed he was modelled so closely on a typical Cheyney character, I've always supposed that he had to have at least something of the author's personality behind him.*

DC: Iris Murdoch once told me my lead characters were too like me, and that's an opinion I certainly have to respect. I was surprised all the same because on the surface at any rate Fedora is totally unlike me. But if you go under the surface I suppose you could say that if I had his peculiar skills and accomplishments, and had to operate within the limits of a fictional genre, then I'd act and think and have broadly the same attitude to life as he does. That's the hell of a big if, though. But if you live in the company of your author for sixteen titles it's logical to suppose that something of him is going to rub off onto you.

Q: *Do you regret that?*

DC: Only in the sense that it isn't intentional and in theory nothing should happen in a work of fiction that the author doesn't intend. But in practice any number of things of that kind do happen and… no, I don't regret it. And I don't welcome it. I accept it, that's all.

Q: *Well, that attitude is a bit Fedora-ish, for a start. I mean the… "Got to go and kill another Russian agent, have I? Oh well…" A weary shrug of the shoulders and off he goes. The same when it comes to bedding the girls. "It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it." Don't you agree?*

DC: That may be Johnny's attitude but it's not mine. Or if it is, I can't afford to admit it.

Q: *Then would you care to admit where you got the Desmond Cory name from? What made you choose that name specifically?*

DC: You know that's the question I'm most often asked? And it's always puzzled me because it seems so irrelevant somehow, even though I did give a lot of thought to the matter. In the end I got the Desmond from Desmond MacCarthy, who was a very distant relative of mine and quite a well known literary figure in his day, but the Cory part is rather more complicated. I thought it would be good to have a surname beginning with a C because quite a large number of suspense and crime writers at that time had names beginning with a C… Cheyney, of course, Leslie Charteris, Victor Canning,

Agatha Christie. James Hadley Chase, Dickson Carr and so on… and as in most libraries and bookstalls the shelves were arranged in alphabetical order, the C section would be where addicts of that kind of fiction would most probably look. And there I'd be, along with all those greats… and while I was wondering what name to choose I remember looking out of the window and seeing a van, I think a laundry van, going by with the name CARY on it and I thought, oh hell, that'll do. Only it wouldn't because there was already a famous novelist called Joyce Cary, so I changed it to Cory and that was that.

Q: *That was a very calculated way of going about it. The capital C business, I mean…*

DC: Of course, I never found out if the idea worked or not. I learned later that publishers then had the theory that authors' names should be simpler and easy to remember so you should avoid names like Henrietta Giggleswick… obviously fallacious as it'd be far easier to remember a name like Henrietta Giggleswick than, say, Bert Harris… But as I didn't know about that particular shibboleth at the time it didn't influence me in any way.

For more information on Desmond Cory, visit www.desmondcory.com.

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