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Leigh Brackett: American science fiction writer—her life and work

Carr, John Leonard, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1988

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UMI
LEIGH BRACKETT: AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

WRITER — HER LIFE AND WORK

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By

John Leonard Carr, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1988

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To Willie Glover and Chris Zacher, *sine qua non*
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Leigh Brackett was a twentieth century American writer who worked with notable competence in several fields. She is perhaps best known as a science fiction writer and within the genre she rose to prominence. Prior to the 1950's, Brackett, her friend C.L. (Catherine) Moore, and Francis Stevens (pen name of Gertrude Bennet, who wrote for All-Story Weekly from 1916 to 1920) were the only women writers of magazine science fiction to win reputations and status as "name" authors. Unlike her contemporary C.L. Moore, who stopped writing in the mid-1950's, Brackett produced for another quarter century saleable, well-regarded science fiction. The lush planetary romances she wrote between 1940 and 1955 for the science fiction adventure magazines define the excellences possible within the type; hers became the standard against which other tales of the popular subgenre of space opera were measured. Brackett also wrote a number of well-received detective fictions and one award-winning western novel. In addition, she was a successful Hollywood screenwriter who wrote or co-wrote several classic Howard Hawks films, including The Big Sleep (1946), Red River (1948), Rio Bravo (1959) and El Dorado (1967). The last year of Brackett's life she gave to the writing of a final lush space opera,
completing only weeks before her death the first draft of the script for the second of George Lucas' interplanetary extravaganzas, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). The connection has a pleasing historical symmetry as well, for the *Star Wars* trilogy had its immediate ancestry in the space opera universe created in the 1930's and 40's in the science fiction magazines. She died, of cancer, in Los Angeles in 1978, and was buried in Kinsman, Ohio, beside her husband of thirty years, well-known science fiction writer Edmond Hamilton. The variety of Brackett's professional interests can be seen in her membership in the following organizations:

- Writers Guild of America
- Television Academy of Arts and Sciences
- International Platform Association
- Western Writers of America
- Science Fiction Writers of America
- Mystery Writers of America

Leigh Brackett's biography has yet to be written; here I attempt what amounts to a sketch for one. Information about the writer's personal life has been difficult to come by. What biographical material exists is scattered, buried here and there in articles, prefaces and interviews focused on other matters. As one would expect, her professional accomplishments and the matters surrounding them are documented best. Consequently, my account of her life is at core an account of her life as a writer. I try to show what in her life led Brackett to writing, what other writers influenced her,
the career(s) she had, and the kind of writer she was. I permit myself
general observations about the quality of her work, but detailed
discussions of individual Brackett stories are reserved for other
chapters.

However, I have not approached everything in Brackett's life solely
from the point of view of its relevance to her writing. Science
fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov and Harlan Ellison have created
public personalities; Brackett was more private. Nevertheless, small
glimpses into her personal life are available, supported by evidence
that is indirect but revealing. I am indebted to Dennis Petrie for the
warning implicit in his concise definition of biography: "the
narrative of a life which is lived by one person and written by
another." At times I have been painfully aware of the incompleteness
of my knowledge. I console myself with the thought that no matter
what I discovered of Brackett that knowledge would always remain
incomplete and my picture of her private self necessarily contain an
element of speculation.

What I know of her life comes partly from a series of interviews
with those who had known her, partly from what Brackett said or wrote
about herself, and partly from what her husband and others wrote about
her. Her long and successful career as a professional writer offers
its own evidence; the writer's work of course also offers clues about
its creator. The day-to-day details are often hidden but the broad
outline can be traced. It is true that not enough is known; though I
have longed for one, I have encountered no Brackett Boswell. Still,
the pieces of her life that I do know suggest comprehensible patterns.
Encouraged by this, I now and then attempt to recreate some flavor of what I take to be her personality. When I can, I connect the circumstances of Brackett's life to her writing. When I feel able, I draw attention to what seem to be the shaping forces. Speculation, where it exists, is clearly labeled as such.

On her father's side, Brackett's people were New Englanders and had been since 1630. Her father, William Franklin Brackett, left Portsmouth, N.H. circa 1890 to settle the length of the continent away in Pasadena, California. Her mother's family, the Douglasses, came to Ulster county in New York in 1725 from Scotland. Later they migrated west, "picking up Sioux and Mohawk relatives on the way" as Elizabeth Lynn puts it. Lynn is paraphrasing Brackett, who said: "The Douglasses picked up a strain of native American blood to go with the imported Scotch (it's interesting to note how much better the Scots got on with the Indians than did the English) . . . one Mohawk in New York, one Sioux farther west." Margaret Douglass, Leigh's mother, was born in St. Louis, but her family settled in Pasadena at about the same time as William Brackett arrived.

Brackett was matter of fact about her Indian ancestors, neither publicizing nor making a secret of them. I do not suppose that the fact made any difference to her life at all. Still, it may have left its mark on her fiction, in ways both minor and major. For one example, on the opening page of her first hardcover science fiction novel (The Starmen, 1952), in the midst of a description of a revival of a Druidic festival, appears this unusual metaphor describing a mutual shock of recognition between strangers: "If two Mohawks were to
meet unexpectedly in the hills of Afghanistan they would recognize each other.6 An in-joke with herself that brought a momentary smile to the writer, one may guess. More importantly, Brackett's science fantasy reveals a constant sympathy with tribal peoples and, as the years go by, a growing sophistication as to how tribes actually functioned. From childhood she maintained a serious amateur interest in anthropology. Perhaps the most interesting part of one of her best novels, Follow the Free Wind (1963), is Brackett's vivid description of tribal life as a Crow Indian might have lived it at the turn of the nineteenth century. By the time of her last literary work, The Book of Skaith (1976), she had progressed to inventing several complex tribal societies, differing in customs, traditions, social organization, and methods of warfare. Her somewhat romantic conception of native American tribal life provided Brackett with the situation for many of her pulp stories. A central figure in her fiction is the hero born out of his proper time. Commonly this figure both derives his stature and acquires his problems from his insistence on living by a heroic code of honor designed for tribal warriors and of use only on the frontier or in combat. So I offer as speculation that Brakcett's observable lifelong interest in anthropology may have been sparked by her interest in her own ancestry.

Brackett was born in Los Angeles, California on December 7, 1915. Her accounts of family fortunes during her childhood are uniformly tinged with memories of vanished wealth and fading gentility. Both of her mother's grandfathers had been millionaires but, to quote Brackett: "By the time I came along all that had gone with the wind,
leaving only a few relics . . . [such as] a 14-foot high grandfather clock.\textsuperscript{7} Her grandfather, Archibald Douglass, described by Brackett as too trusting and with "no head for business"\textsuperscript{8} lost nearly all his inheritance in a series of unfortunate business deals. He retained only a small beach house in Santa Monica. The house was dotted with incongruous momentoes of bygone luxury. The massive grandfather clock, for example, "required special bracing and could only barely scrouch itself onto the stair-landing."\textsuperscript{9}

Archibald Douglass' daughter Margaret was a small, delicate and beautiful woman whose marriage to promising young CPA William Brackett might have halted the slow decline. But William Brackett was not favored by fortune either. The worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 killed him at thirty. His only child, Leigh, was three years old and retained no memories of her father whatsoever. Her father's early death profoundly changed the shape of his daughter's life. Nearly fifty years afterwards, in one of the last interviews she gave before her own death, Leigh Brackett said:

I didn't believe that you were supposed to sit around waiting for a man to come along and want you and provide you with this, that, and the other. I don't need anybody to provide for me. I'll provide for myself. My father and mother dearly loved each other and they were wonderful people and they got married and he died. So where was she? I always prefer to have a little something in my own hands that I have control of."\textsuperscript{10}

Margaret Douglass Brackett appears to have adjusted to being a widow by returning to being a daughter. One might say that she quite conspicuously did not take control of her life. Instead she took up
residence in her father's small beach house. She never remarried. Consequently, Leigh spent much the greater part of her childhood in the small house on the Santa Monica beach, where "Grandfather Douglass took in my mother and me, and he was thereafter in loco parentis."11

The shaping influences of Leigh Brackett's childhood seem to have been her relationships with her mother and grandfather, the opportunity for travel, the overwhelming presence of the beach and the Pacific Ocean, and her own powerful imagination and constant reading. Leigh was an active, energetic, determined girl, sufficiently popular with other children but with a decided taste for solitude.

I remember that one of the happiest things I used to do as a child was to walk out to the empty jetty and sit on the stringer with my feet in the ocean and just listen to the breathing of the sea and look out at the horizon and just feel and think. I loved being alone.12

Both Brackett and her future husband Ed Hamilton, who was referring to what her family had told him of his wife's youth, describe her younger self as a "tomboy," strong-willed and, as a little girl, given to violent fits of temper. She was rebellious, at many things and in many ways. Combining the various accounts, one forms a picture of an athletic and self-reliant girl, good at games (especially volleyball and swimming), physically aggressive, and obviously very much more at home outdoors or lost in a book than in her mother's parlor. Mother and daughter were constantly at odds, and Brackett remembers being much reprimanded and criticized. "They [her mother and all the other women in the family] looked down on me a great deal because I was big and
husky and active, running up and down the beach, playing with the boys and doing things . . . I got so many lectures."13

The girl took after her father in looks, being a brunette with a round face and a stocky, muscular body. She had blue eyes and sandy-brown hair. Later in her life, in those parts of biographical sketches or interviews that dealt with her childhood, Brackett was to take care to describe her mother as a fair-skinned beauty, slight of body and ultra-feminine in appearance and manner. The contrast is always plain: the beautiful mother and the changeling daughter. It is not that Brackett was herself unattractive. Though not conventionally pretty, she was by all accounts a well-liked girl and young woman; in addition, she was outgoing, athletic and intelligent. People found her likeable. Jack Williamson, for example, who met Brackett when she was in her mid-twenties, described her as "not pretty in any delicate way" but "healthy, vital, young . . . and attractive."14 My point is that one of the obvious patterns of Leigh Brackett's life is that in looks (coincidentally) and in behavior and life style (intentionally) she was as different as possible from her mother.

The child had a stormy relationship with her mother and found the going similarly rocky with her Grandmother Douglas and her maternal Great-Aunt Sarah. Mother and daughter were opposites in most things; each, however, was strong-willed. Her mother, said Leigh, was "the proverbial daisy with a ten-penny-nail for a stem."15 Margaret Brackett seems to have clung to the scraps of social status and position left to her; her daughter later described her as a "possessive, dependent, and domineering"16 woman. In another interview
Leigh Brackett refers to her mother as a "feminine, helpless little person . . . all of the women in my family were professional ladies with a capital 'L'." The girl "despised their attitude" which she found "ridiculous." In her turn, Margaret Brackett could not have been pleased with her daughter's hard to control energy and drive, nor by the girl's disregarded for conventional notions of femininity and love of rough and tumble play. Tension was inevitable. Leigh Brackett was a doer, her mother a firm believer in the dictum that "A lady never did anything for herself; somebody always did it for her." This mother-daughter conflict apparently was never resolved. Jack Williamson, meeting Leigh in the early 1940's, says he felt she was "a free spirit who was tied down by family ties of some sort." He judged that she "wasn't congenial with her family." In his autobiography Williamson refers again to his "sense of Brackett's quietly stubborn conflict with her mundane family environment." Edmond Hamilton, who met Brackett when Williamson did, talked of the early days of his acquaintanceship with her in a 1976 interview and referred humorously to when "I got you [Brackett] back at ten o'clock one night and you got quite a scolding for being out that late." The humorous elements may have been lost on the woman in her mid-twenties who had to endure the scolding. Leigh Brackett found escapes, in books and on the beach at first and later in her work and with friends. But her references to her mother always carry a burden of buried resentment, as in the following example:

But I preferred the beach. I could get free of the grown-ups there. The company of Ladies can become trying, especially
when one's own feet and hands grow too large and capable, and one's skin lacks that transparent pallor.  

One of the ladies that Brackett certainly had in mind in the above remark was her mother's aunt, the child's Great-Aunt-Sarah, who lived with her husband at the Fairmont in San Francisco. Brackett described the woman in caustic terms: her aunt "had Money" and apparently made a life out of being "Not Well." Since Aunt Sarah was "Not Well" and Uncle George was, it seems, all too often kept away by the responsibilities of business (understandably, too, one can hear Brackett add sotto voce), Margaret Brackett found a role as the older lady's genteel companion, "with, perforce, me" the daughter adds. But whatever the girl may have felt, this tenuous link to the world of wealth and privilege must have been important to her mother; life was considerably more frugal in the limited circumstances of her father's house. The escapes and entertainments offered by the beach that so pleased her daughter seem unlikely to have mattered much to Margaret Brackett.

Inevitably, two fading ladies and a tomboy did not form a harmonious trio. Great-Aunt-Sarah shared her niece's disapproval of the girl's appearance, interests, and friends. For example, the pair referred to the friends Brackett made in the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society (LASFS) as "those terrible people." A good many years later, Brackett told a revealing anecdote. Although Brackett had been a published writer for some time, her Great-Aunt-Sarah made a practice of saying sweetly: "Why don't you write nice stories for the Ladies' Home Journal?" I used to say, "I wish I could, because they pay well, but I can't read the Ladies' Home Journal and I'm sure I couldn't
write for it." So there we were. The dig was especially
galling—enough for Brackett to remember it over nearly forty years—
since income from the young woman's writing had been supporting her
family for years.

A more positive result of the child's exposure to the wealthier
branch of the Douglass family was contact with those who had the
necessary funds and leisure for travel. As a girl, Brackett accompan­
ied her mother and great-aunt through much of the United States; once
they went on a trip to the Panama Canal Zone and through the Canal.
Leigh saw New England and Virginia and "did quite a bit of travelling
in the West." Brackett was an intelligent and curious child; the
experience of seeing the world outside of California affected her
strongly. As she says, "[I] got it pounded through my head that there
were other places and other people beyond my own dooryard; I was very
fortunate in this." This pleasure in travelling—or as she, no doubt
more accurately, put it "visiting"—remained with Brackett all of her
life. She and her husband-to-be Edmond Hamilton spent much of their
married life on the move, maintaining two homes half a continent apart,
in Ohio and California. In addition, they often went to science fic­
tion conventions, both inside and outside of the United States, and
once went on a trip around the world. Brackett found the world outside
of her mother's parlor congenial and liked to move around in it.

The habit of travel, begun early and maintained life long, was to
be of great importance to Brackett's fiction when she came to write
it. One of the distinguishing traits of her work was a strong sense of
place; a Leigh Brackett story could be relied on to be packed with
descriptive detail and well-realized settings. Her science fantasies, for example, have a solidity of setting rare among the fantastic but usually tissue-thin and stereotyped landscapes of that subgenre. I offer as partial explanation this conjecture. I believe that Brackett had that cast of mind for which feeling and seeing were more potent ways of knowing than intellectual speculation (almost the opposite might be said about Edmond Hamilton). Her fiction, for example, is almost never extrapolative or idea-centered; in my opinion, the weakest efforts in her canon—such as the short story "Momies and Daddies" (1974)—are the results of her rare efforts to write such work. Rather, her natural strengths were a literate and poetic style and the ability to describe a place or evoke a mood. For her, early exposure to a variety of places and customs was invaluable, even more so than for most would-be writers. Brackett was not the sort of writer who was comfortable researching an unseen place from books and then setting a story there.

All of her fiction shows this trait. Hence, her extensive travelling in the American West is reflected in Follow The Free Wind's vigorous and detailed descriptions of the Rocky Mountains. Not until she and Hamilton had moved to northeastern Ohio and spent several years there restoring an abandoned farmhouse did she attempt The Long Tomorrow (1955) with its lovingly detailed portrait of the Ohio Amish and their bond to the land. Only after years of living within forty miles of Akron, Ohio did Brackett write a mystery, The Tiger Among Us (1957), set in that city and its suburbs. Similarly, it was when Brackett had herself visited London and Iran that she wrote her final
mystery novel The Silent Partner (1967), set for the most part in those places. Her first two mysteries, of course, are set in the Los Angeles environs where she grew up.

The Silent Partner is successful in depicting its spoiled playboy protagonist adrift in a decadent Los Angeles. Brackett’s pictures of Iranian landscapes and architecture are also good. However, her insight into the culture and people of Iran is superficial; her rendering of its politics standard issue Cold War polemics. These flaws are the result, I feel, of Brackett’s experience of Iran as a tourist. She did not live there, could not know the culture at first hand, and so had to try to apprehend it intellectually.

The space opera nature of Brackett’s science fantasies did not require her to have any scientific knowledge of the actual Mars or other moons and planets of the solar system. Her Mars was as close to fairyland as to the real planet. She had been an avid childhood reader, which made her at home in imaginary realms: "by the time I was twelve, I had gone through the classics . . . Edgar Rice Burroughs, Haggard, Conan Doyle, Jack London, and fifty or sixty others."31 (Prominent among the others were Talbot Mundy, John Buchan, P.C. Wren and Rudyard Kipling.) The world of romance, where heroes found adventure set amidst marvels, captured Brackett’s deepest creative self when she was a girl.

In particular, Brackett seems not so much to have read Burroughs as to have inhaled him; it would be hard to exaggerate, I think, the importance of his gorgeous Martian daydreams to a solitary child who found life at home restrictive. More than once Brackett referred to
her introduction to Burroughs' *The Gods of Mars* as changing the course of her life. An adult finds many flaws in Edgar Rice Burroughs the writer; a child adrift in the spaciousness of the beach is still capable of grasping the core of the marvelous that lies beneath the tinsel and dross. Brackett remarked later that her "happiest hours [were spent] sitting all by myself on the stringer of a jetty, way out at the end, with my bare feet in the Pacific, staring at the horizon and thinking tremendous thoughts. There were other youngsters and I played with them, but I was never lonely when I was alone."32

Burroughs' fate was to be an inspiration to writers better than he was; along with H.G. Wells he dominated the imaginations of two generations of American science fiction writers. Brian Aldiss refers to Burroughs and Wells as exemplifying, respectively, the thinking and dreaming poles of modern fantasy.33 Critic E.F. Bleiler writes: "It is no exaggeration to say that an entire generation of readers grew up on his [Burroughs] fiction, and in some unaccountable way took the sense of adventure and discarded the sometimes flawed application."34

More, perhaps, than that of any other American science fiction writer, Brackett's career exemplifies this process of turning lead into gold. Stories such as "The Beast-Jewel of Mars" (1948) demonstrate that she was neither unaware of the faults of her original model, nor above correcting them. However, she never turned her back on either Burroughs or the romantic storytelling tradition he represented. Her commitment to this style of writing was lifelong. At the age of sixty, she was quoted as saying:
This is probably heresy, but I think in the earlier days stories were better [that is, the stories in the science fiction magazines of the 1930's and 1940's]. I'm sure that if I were eight years old now and reading Harlan Ellison, for instance, I wouldn't get the thrill and charge that I got out of Edgar Rice Burroughs.35

Later in the interview she refers disparagingly to current science fiction as "all this inner world stuff, Freudian psychology, and sort of grotty sex."36 Brackett grudgingly admits that all this "stuff" has its place, but states emphatically her preference for reading about "strange worlds and shooting the nebula and getting lost in the Horsehead, or the Coalsack, and the drowned suns, burning like candles in the dark nebulae."37

Of course, the roots of Brackett's pulp fiction go back further than Edgar Rice Burroughs and the American science fiction magazines. She read those popular English writers of the generation before hers, John Buchan and Talbot Mundy. Earlier yet, in the 1880's, England had experienced a resurgence of popular interest in romantic tales of adventure. Writers from this period also influenced Brackett. Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines and She, and Rudyard Kipling's Kim are some of the products of this revival. Brackett encountered Kipling's The Jungle Book as a very young child; surely one genesis of her cat, bird and mole people lies there. Haggard founded that durable pulp type, the lost race story; Brackett's Mars is dotted with lost races and forgotten cities. Of course, so is Burroughs' Africa. Unlike Burroughs, however, Haggard had first-hand experience with Africa; this shows in his anthropological realism and in the obvious admiration with which he presents
presents his magnificent Zulu warriors. Brackett follows this course with her Martian and (especially) her Skaithian tribesmen, making them people with distinctive customs and cultures, not spear carriers for the hero to use or abuse as he will. In particular, the racism that everywhere colors Burroughs is notably lacking in Brackett’s work.

Besides her devotion to adventure fiction, "stories where things happened, the wilder and more exotic the better," the child developed an interest in serious non-fiction, also to continue lifelong. Brackett described herself as something of a problem student at school, "bright enough . . . but inclined to be bull-headed and stubborn when I was bored with a subject," and in general the important parts of her education seem to have been self-administered. School, however, introduced her to history, especially ancient history, which she took to immediately with important consequences for her future writing. "When I was, I think, in the seventh or eighth grade, they gave us Breasted’s The Ancient World. I became an ancient history buff right then. Anything about prehistoric man or Babylonia, Assyria, and Egypt was fascinating." The interest in history led naturally to other, related interests. "As I grew older . . . I began to read widely in mythology and comparative religion . . . I was always fascinated by exotic histories and their inextricably intertwined religions." As an adult she was also keenly interested in archaeology and anthropology, and read "a fair bit of astronomical material."

Significantly, these interests center on the soft sciences, those that focus on peoples and cultures and the products of the human
imagination, and so are filled with specific and colorful incident. Only her reading in astronomy does not fit this model.

My belief, though, is that it was unlikely Brackett was very much interested in theories of stellar formation; rather, her imagination was taken by the concept of the stars as fiery symbols of grandeur, mystery and adventure, awaiting humanity in the vastness of space. Over and over in her work, voyaging to the stars symbolizes escape from the constrictions of the mundane. The idea, not the actuality, was what caught Leigh Brackett. Referring to her husband's well known but scientifically inaccurate descriptive phrase the "great booming suns of outer space" she wrote: "if the great suns don't boom, they damn well ought to."43

These intellectual tastes may not be as close to the heart of Brackett's creativity as her seemingly instinctual love of adventure stories and her early internalization of Edgar Rice Burroughs, but they nonetheless play an important role in her writing. When coupled with her flair for sharply visualized and evocative settings, they explain the unusual solidity and depth of her romantic science fantasies. Brackett's heroes exist in worlds that have a "lived in" feeling, an unusual quality for the genre. Aware that even the most exotic societies must consist of more than villainous priests and nude princesses, she said:

I delight in creating worlds and building civilizations. I always want to know how the people eat, what crops they grow, what kind of houses they live in, where they get the building material, do they build with mud, brick, stone, or wood or what? All these things working together fascinate me.44
As Brackett's science fantasies grew longer and she grew more skillful as a writer, this interest in the background texture of the stories becomes more pronounced, culminating in the three Skaith novels of the 1970's. The plausible social ecologies she creates to populate her new world are among the trilogy's major strengths.

Finally, no discussion of the shaping forces on the young Leigh Brackett's imagination would be complete without mention of her exposure to films, which "played a very important part in my life then, too. They always have." Especially important were the movies of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., of whom she "was a great fan. . . . I saw everyone of his films over and over and over." Her favorite Fairbanks' film was The Mark of Zorro. So desperate did the child become for a sequel with "more about Zorro (or it may have been Don Q)" that "I started writing one on little scraps of paper." This was her first attempt at writing. In her mid-twenties Brackett was a "great admirer" of actor Humphrey Bogart. Ed Hamilton "always thought the main character [of Brackett's science fantasy story "The Veil of Astellar" (1944)] was modeled after Humphrey Bogart. . . . Each time I read the story I seem to hear the somber unforgettable Bogart voice, as a sort of voice over."

The last part of my discussion of Brackett's childhood deals with two contrasting areas, the beach and her schooling. If reading was the child's mental playground, the beach was her physical one. The Pacific was as potent an influence on her imagination as the books she read. She loved the beach and the ocean unqualifiedly; it is not hard to see why she preferred them to the company of her mother and her aunt. As a
girl Brackett seems to have passionately wanted freedom to be herself and actively to have sought time to be alone. Outside her grandfather’s front door was the Pacific. As she said: "I was fortunate, I grew up at the beach, which in those days [the early 1920’s] was a very lonely place. There were other houses, I don’t mean it was isolated; we were only a mile or so from the town. But there was an awful lot of empty beach."51 Judging from what she later wrote and said, the child and then the young woman valued the emptiness as much as the sun, sand and water. "I think there is something in being a loner . . . you have to be enough of an individual yourself, or otherwise nothing that is individual is going to come out of you."52

Much of the first half of Brackett’s life was spent in close contact with the shore and the ocean, and I think they as profoundly shaped her character as her relationship with her mother or her father’s early death. In 1944 Brackett wrote an autobiographical sketch for Startling Stories in which she said: "I lived at the beach during those [childhood] years and am still an incurable beachcomber. I would rather swim and lie in the sun than anything else I know, and some day I’m going to have a good sturdy sea-going boat so I can loaf in style."53 She goes on to speak with pride of the rough and tumble pick-up volleyball games that were a part of her life on the beach: "Meanwhile, I play volley-ball, the sand-lot kind with only two on a side, and the way we do it you can get your head torn off."54 I find it revealing to read these words written by a woman nearing thirty; Brackett had left her girlhood behind but not her physical aggressiveness, or physical competence nor competitive spirit. In
particular, she sounds like someone in no danger of turning into a "feminine, helpless little person."

What else did she list as her likes? "Anything to do with ships and the sea . . . people, the genuine kind . . . dogs, horses, cars . . . the theatre, the movies, books, beer, and working hard at something I enjoy doing." This self-summary of tastes and interests, written at the midway point of Brackett's life, supports an obvious point: the daughter made her life as different from her mother's as humanly possible. Margaret Brackett disapproved of the theatre and did not own a car; she seems most unlikely to have been the sort of woman who enjoyed beer, dogs or horses. The mother's credo was: "A lady never did anything for her self, somebody always did it for her." In turn, her daughter's life was to be a demonstration of the work ethic in action; Leigh achieved in several fields an enviable reputation as a reliable professional. Writing of herself, Leigh Brackett tells us simply of the pleasure of "working hard at something I enjoy."

Brackett described her education as "rather haphazard because we moved around quite a bit." She attended a small private school in Santa Monica. School was one more source of friction between mother and daughter: "My mother was a segregationist; she didn't want me to be with boys, so I went to an all-girl school." Later, her mother's illness took Brackett out of school for several years. Leigh Brackett was offered a scholarship for college, "but I couldn't go because I had to get to work for we were a little short on money." As a result, Brackett received relatively little formal education. An avid reader, Brackett made herself well-informed in several areas. However, her
curtailed schooling, and especially her lack of a sound scientific education, certainly limited her later career in science fiction.

Despite years of trying, she was unable to sell consistently to John W. Campbell, the strong-willed editor of Astounding Science Fiction, then the science fiction magazines most prestigious and lucrative market. Astounding was the bastion, the heart and soul, of hard-core science fiction. Campbell wanted the science accurate, the extrapolation plausible; he wanted idea-oriented stories; his writers had to be aware—indeed should be fascinated by—the multitudinous ways that science changed society. Brackett had neither the training nor the temperament to write this kind of story. She was well aware that her lack of a strong scientific background was the basic reason she couldn't sell to Campbell.

Unfortunately, Brackett's later critical reputation became the victim of this failure to become a Campbell writer and steady contributor to Astounding. The magazine dominated the 40's; nearly all of those who came to be seen as the top writers of that decade appeared regularly in Astounding. Such a list would include: Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Sprague deCamp, Lester del Rey, A.E. Van Vogh, the Kuttners, Theodore Sturgeon, and the refurbished Cliff Simak and Jack Williamson. Scholarly attention to science fiction of that era has thus concentrated on Astounding and its "Golden Age."

Whatever its deficiencies, the Santa Monica school did serve to introduce Brackett to the theatre, a world to which she took at once with great enthusiasm. She described herself as disappearing "almost immediately into the dramatic department" to emerge as "a ham of the
first curing." The theatre was to be important to Brackett's life in several ways. She felt that she had real talent as an actress, and there is evidence that this is so. She "placed second for dramatic reading in the Festival of Arts and Sciences, and later taught speech and drama for a year." As late as 1944 she was to write: "I enjoy writing, and even in the bad periods I wouldn't trade the job, except maybe for acting..." With obvious fondness she recounts that: "The high spot of my high school career came when, during a highly dramatic performance, I scared two small members of the audience into screaming hysterics." Brackett was not able, however, to follow her interest in acting.

The ending of her education and the continued decline in her family's fortunes forced her to choose a career. Self-reliance and a distaste for dependent relationships were core aspects of her personality. Many things in Brackett's life seem, to me, to show that she could face a difficult reality without self-deception or despair; this, of course, is also part of the code all her fictional heroes live by. Thus, she accepted that her looks were not sufficient for the stage. She could not play ingenues, was "far too young for character parts." Consequently, too many roles would be closed to her and she would not be able to make a living. "And of course the entire family went right out through the roof en bloc when I mentioned the possibility; it was one of the few things they ever agreed on." She returned to an earlier career choice; she would be a writer.

Brackett's immersion in the world of the stage had affected her in several ways. Acting either added fuel to or was the source of her
desire to write for the movies. And she did actively want to be a scriptwriter. Brackett's involvement with Howard Hawks and *The Big Sleep* is usually presented as an example of Hawks's serendipity with new talent. For Brackett, it is seen as a stroke of pure good fortune, with Howard Hawks acting as human lightning bolt transforming her career. In fact, their meeting was as much the product of Brackett's ambition as of anything else. She was to be very proud of the publication on her first book, a hard-boiled detective story *No Good From A Corpse* (1944): "... it [did not] set any worlds on fire, but I loved it. It was my child, my first-born, full-length novel." The author had definite plans for her new child:

> It was published and Howard Hawks read it. I had a friend in Martindale's bookstore. Hawks came in every couple of weeks and bought an armload of thrillers and my friend saw to it that mine got in the pile. A few days later my agent rang me up and said, "Howard Hawks wants to see you." I fell on the floor."

Moreover, Brackett's immediate success as a scriptwriter may owe something—perhaps a great deal—to what she learned from the stage. At age thirty, with her scriptwriting career still ahead of her, one of her career ambitions was to direct a film: "I hope, in about forty years, to hold a three-way contract with some studio. Directing is my other [with writing and acting] passion." Where else but the theatre would she have gotten a taste for directing? Finally, among the reasons Hawks hired the unknown Brackett for *The Big Sleep* was: "Leigh Brackett knew screen formula and a little bit about how to write scenes." Since Brackett's only previous Hollywood experience had been scripting *The Vampire's Ghost* (1944), a Republic quickie made "in
ten days and that was two days over schedule," the theatre again seems the logical primary source for prior experience with formulae and scenes.

Critic Rosmarie Arbur suggests that Brackett's involvement in the theatre at the all-girls' academy her mother chose affected Brackett's later writing in an unforeseeable way. Arbur points out "the practical necessity in an all-girls' school for students of drama to concentrate on characters—not the characters' gender—in the plays they perform. Thus, although not unusual, it is nonetheless significant that when Brackett starred in her senior play, her role was that of a masculine character."71

Later in her life Brackett's fiction—her western, the "tough" detective novels, her screenwriting for Howard Hawks and actor John Wayne, her adventure-oriented science fiction—was distinguished by her ability to enter imaginatively into characters, almost all masculine, whose lives and values differed extensively from stereotypes of feminine behavior. Thus, Howard Hawks, asked about Brackett's work on a western (El Dorado 1966), replied: "She wrote that like a man. She writes good."72 Hawks's statement is easy to misinterpret. It is not, for instance, an example of insensitive sexism on Hawks's part. Rather it is his acknowledgement of a 20th century woman writer's empathy for male actors playing 19th century outlaws, sheriffs, and gunmen, an empathy that let her write scenes portraying them and their heroics plausibly.

Finally, Brackett's work showed a life long facility with dialogue. Howard Hawks had read her first mystery novel "and liked the
a good ear for the rhythms of speech, but acting would inevitably refine this talent.

Leigh Brackett’s screenwriting, however, was years in her future. After graduation from high school she faced both the necessity of earning a living and the obligation to provide some financial support for her family. She "taught speech and drama for a year at another school."74 She also taught swimming, which she seems to have enjoyed more. Brackett, however, felt "I wasn’t cut out to be a teacher,"75 and made the decision to be a full time writer.

Brackett had been writing virtually all of her life, and, from the age of thirteen on, trying to sell her writing. Her earliest efforts, though, were not serious attempts at writing for a living:

I had reached the ripe age of 13. I was going to have to make my way in the world. What could be more pleasant, I thought, or easier ... I thought ... than writing stories and having people buy them? One could write anywhere, one would be free of routine, etc., etc. So I began writing. I wrote novels, plain godawful novels, and short stories that had only their brevity to recommend them. I don’t think anybody bothered to read them ... they were handwritten ... I sincerely hope they didn’t. Certainly nobody bought them.76

Now (circa 1935), with her formal education ended and teaching having been tried and discarded, Brackett began a serious attempt to make her living with her typewriter. She approached her new career enthusiastically, but her apprenticeship was a long and rough one.

Her initial ally was her grandfather Douglas. She was close to the old man and he provided the financial support the young writer needed: "I was fortunate, my grandfather subsidized me until I had begun to sell. Otherwise I might have had to get a job and I might never have
had enough energy left over to develop as a writer. I think this happens with quite a few people."77

At the start of her career Brackett consciously set out to make her living writing for the pulp magazines, to be, in other words, a genre writer, a professional. She does not appear to have considered writing "serious" contemporary novels. As a reader, she liked historical romances, science fiction, fantasy and adventure stories; these were what she would write.

As a would-be professional, she naturally took first aim at the top rates, such as those offered by Argosy, whose pages had contained many an Edgar Rice Burroughs' tale, and Adventure. Predictably, the novice did not make a dent in that highly competitive market. "I broke my heart trying to write stories about people I didn't know, in places I had never seen, competing in my innocence with the likes of John Buchan and Talbot Mundy and P.C. Wren, and getting just as far as you might imagine."78 As her remark implies, the veteran Leigh Brackett blamed her initial failure on her younger self's lack of experience, both with writing and with life. "And unfortunately I hadn't been anywhere, I didn't know anything, and I was bucking the biggest names in the business."79

Brackett's self-evaluation reinforces a point made earlier in this chapter: she could write well only about what she had experienced imaginatively or felt and known first hand. When she was uninterested in a subject or knew about a place only from books—when she wrote from her head, not her heart—then her writing loses energy and life and one becomes aware of inert genre conventions, presented competently but
without the emotional force necessary to revitalize formula. As a writer, part of her growth consisted of learning what settings, subjects and themes she could handle. Such self-knowledge was at least as important as improved technique. It is most unlikely that in her early twenties Brackett would have been able to write convincingly of an India or Africa derived second hand from reading Talbot Mundy or the French Foreign Legion stories of P.C. Wren. In any case, her initial efforts failed to sell and her career stalled.

At this critical moment, something paradoxical in Brackett's nature asserted itself. Her imagination was fired by tales of romance and adventure, but she was practical and pragmatic about career options. She combined a genuine love of writing with a firm sense of writing as work and a writer as someone who was paid for doing a job. Stubborn in her pursuit of a goal, she was at the same time capable—as her earlier decision not to pursue acting shows—of objectivity about herself and her talents. She revised her aims, abandoned attempts at top of the line markets, and returned to a childhood love: "Finally I faced it. .. science fiction was what I really wanted to write, even though everyone had discouraged me. . . . it was a small, miserable, low-paying market, with the reverse of prestige, in those days, but I decided I didn't care. It was something I felt I could write; if I had never been to Mars, why, then, dammit, who had?" 

Though this was to prove a wise and fortunate choice on her part, Brackett's initial efforts in the science fiction field met with no more success than her earlier attempts at the more lucrative markets. "Time was running out on me. I couldn't go on being a hopeful
writer-to-be forever, out of Grandfather's pocket." In what she termed "a last desperate measure" she "gambled on Laurence D'Orsay and his agency-cum-writing-course" and, to continue the metaphor, hit the jackpot in the form of the entry into her life of Henry Kuttner. Kuttner offered friendship, professional connections, and literary advice; contact with him was the turning point in Leigh Brackett's career.

Kuttner worked as a reader for the Laurence D'Orsay agency, which was "operated by a cousin [of his] through marriage." Only a year older than Brackett, he was already a frequent contributor to Weird Tales and had recently (1937) begun selling science fiction. He sold mostly to Thrilling Wonder Stories, at that time among the pulpiest of the pulps. Cover artist Howard Brown's early efforts are said to have been responsible for the coinage of the term "Bug-Eyed Monsters." Not yet an important science fiction writer, though he was to become one, Kuttner was a major influence on Brackett's career; he may, in fact, have saved her career. As she put it: "Henry Kuttner was reading for Laurence then, and he took a special interest in my limping efforts at SF and fantasy, writing me long and detailed criticisms on his own time. If it hadn't been for Hank, I might never have made it; it would certainly have taken me much longer."

Brackett first met Kuttner, at least through the mail, circa 1938. Before discussing the details of their relationship, I would like to leave Leigh Brackett—still, at 23, a struggling, unpublished writer—and talk for a moment about the man who was first a mentor and then a life-long friend, and (after Burroughs) the writer who most
decisively influenced her. To my mind, Kuttner is among the most interesting of American science fiction writers, as much for the nature of his career as for the excellent stories he was eventually to write. Robert Silverberg, implicitly comparing his own career to Kuttner's, called him the "first of the SF hacks-turned-artist." Although from the start an extraordinarily facile and prolific writer, Kuttner was also something of a late bloomer. To this day, the derivative and formulaic nature of his early output somewhat overshadows the quality of his later work. In this, as in much else, Kuttner's career paralleled—one might even say foreshadowed—Brackett's. Kuttner and his future wife were to be close friends of Brackett and her future husband, and Brackett seems to have absorbed many of Kuttner's attitudes towards writing.

Born in 1914, Henry (Hank) Kuttner was raised on the West Coast, as a very young child in Los Angeles and then San Francisco (the two cities of Brackett's childhood as well), returning to Los Angeles for high school. Like her, he was an early and avid reader who "from the time he learned to read . . . lived as much in the world of literature as he did in that of immediate experience." Unlike her, Kuttner seems to have been uninterested in sports and the out of doors. As a reader, his tastes followed a familiar progression: Oz to Edgar Rice Burroughs to the science fiction magazines. Brackett's father had died when she was three; Kuttner's died when he was five. His mother, left with three children to support (Kuttner had two older brothers), for a time ran a boarding house. Kuttner, who was in any case a markedly private and reticent individual, said very little about his
childhood in later life; Sam Moskowitz notes that Kuttner both "in personal conversation and in print studiously bypassed the subject." As an adult, Kuttner was a slight, quiet man who, in Ray Bradbury's words, "gazed at you and thought his private thoughts." Shy and physically unprepossessing, he hid beneath an ordinary surface a complicated self full of surprises. His friends all noted his wicked sense of humor; Bradbury, who knew him well, called him "special, peculiar and, in his own mild way, maniacally creative." His mind had an analytical bent that Leigh Brackett’s lacked. Kuttner harbored a passion for writing, and he was apparently a born teacher.

Brackett and Kuttner were thus contemporaries who grew up in the same places at the same time, reading the same books and magazines. From early adolescence, both were desperate to become writers. Small wonder that they found themselves in sympathy with each other from the start. Interestingly, in a variety of ways (in the origins of his career, attitude toward writing, strengths as a writer, and in many personality traits) Kuttner closely resembled Edmond Hamilton, Brackett’s husband-to-be. The two men wrote for many of the same markets; had a good many mutual friends, among them Mort Weisinger and Julie Schwartz; and were to become friends themselves. Each was a slightly built intellectual; each a prolific writer for the pulp magazines.

Kuttner moved to New York City to write full time. There, in mid-1940 he married the——at the time——much better known science fiction and fantasy writer C.L. (Catherine) Moore. Simultaneously with his move and his marriage Kuttner’s writing underwent a remarkable
transformation; the second rank pulp writer of the 1930's became an equal partner (with his wife) in the production of the most literarily sophisticated science fiction stories of the 1940's. Virtually by themselves the pair carried the top magazine, Astounding, through the war years, contributing forty-one stories to Campbell's magazine between 1942 and 1947. Critic James Gunn writes that the Kuttners were among "the finest writers to marry magazine science fiction to literary form."92

In 1948, the Kuttners moved from New York to Laguna Beach, California; among the science fiction writers who visited them there were Leigh Brackett and Ed Hamilton. The two couples became close friends, while the strong parallelism in their careers continued. The Kuttners (together) wrote lavish science fantasies for the same markets (Startling Stories and Thrilling Wonder Stories) for which Brackett and Hamilton (separately) were also writing. Like Brackett, the Kuttners wrote detective novels and worked on movie screenplays and television scripts. In addition, Kuttner and Moore both attended the University of Southern California, where Henry "earned a bachelor's degree in three and a half years."93 He began work on a master's degree in English, planning to write a thesis—here once again one is reminded of Brackett—on the works of H. Rider Haggard. In the middle of this astounding work schedule Kuttner found the time to teach a writing course at U.S.C. Then, nearly finished with work on his masters, Henry Kuttner suffered a heart attack and died in his sleep on February 4, 1958. He was forty-four years old, and (alone or with his wife) had written roughly a score of novels and over two hundred short stories.
Brackett remembered his help. In 1977 The Best of Leigh Brackett, a short story collection, appeared from Doubleday. Intended as a tribute to her accomplishments in science fiction, it contained ten of the finest stories she had written for the now long vanished pulps, offered an overview of her career, and was the last book that she saw published in her lifetime. The volume was dedicated to the memory of Henry Kuttner.

How did Kuttner help Leigh Brackett as a writer? First, with matters of technique. Just what was in the "long and detailed criticisms" Kuttner wrote her is not known, but there are obvious areas for conjecture. For example, Kuttner was noted for his ease with plot construction. An early Kuttner story might be facile but it would also be well-plotted and well-paced. Brackett tells us, rather charmingly, of her own early trouble with plotting:

Plot was always a great mystery to me and if I tried to do an outline I killed the story dead. I had to feel it. It was like Byron's words, "If I miss my pounce I go grumbling back into the thickets like an old tiger." I had more half stories because I had written myself into a box and couldn't get myself out of it.95

Also, Kuttner's best stories are written in a precise, economical style that favors understatement and irony over the piling on of sensual detail. According to Brackett, "Like most new writers I think I overwrote dreadfully. I never used one adjective when ten would do."96 Part of the advice Kuttner gave her "was a gentle insistence on buying more purple pencils to cope with my purple prose."97
Second, Kuttner introduced her to a wide range of contemporary literature. Ray Bradbury, another of Kuttner's pupils, recalls: "He told us [Bradbury and Brackett] about Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty and Raymond Chandler and [other writers] with very clean styles." Elsewhere, Bradbury has written of his introduction by Kuttner to Thorne Smith, John Collier and the short stories of William Faulkner.

He [Kuttner] lent me copies of various mystery writers and advised me, as did Leigh Brackett, whom he was helping, too, to try James Cain, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler. . . . It always seemed, to Brackett and me, that every time we looked up there was Kuttner half a block ahead on the road, going in or coming out of libraries.99

Third, Kuttner introduced Brackett to the people of the science fiction field and, in particular, found her an excellent agent, his own, Julius (Julie) Schwartz. At a time when a thousand new science fiction books are published each year, it is hard to remember how small were the horizons of the early science fiction world, and how useful to a writer's career it was to have entry into that world with its multiple interlocking professional contacts. In his quirky, revealing history of science fiction, The Engines of the Night, Barry Malzberg notes:

"Modern" science fiction, generally dated as having begun in late 1937 with the ascent of Campbell, was a literature centered around a compact group of people. It was no Bloomsbury but there could have been no more than fifty core figures who did 90 percent of the writing and the editing. All of them knew one another, most knew one another well, lived together, collaborated, bought each other's material, married each other's wives, and so on.100
Henry Kuttner was solidly established at the center of that core group; Malzberg, somewhat melodramatically, states: "The Kuttners . . . knew where to bury all the bodies." Brackett was an outsider who through Kuttner quickly became an insider.

Most importantly, Kuttner introduced Brackett (through the mail) to his New York agent, Julie Schwartz. Schwartz was then the preeminent agent in the science fiction field. Besides Kuttner, his clients included Robert Bloch, Edmond Hamilton, C.L. Moore, Otto Binder, Manly Wade Wellman, Stanley Weinbaum and Alfred Bester. An affable, intelligent, energetic man, Schwartz had been a prominent fan before he turned literary agent; he knew everyone who mattered in science fiction.

In September of 1984 I met Julie Schwartz at the Los Angeles World Science Fiction Convention. I am grateful to him, for he was a most helpful and valuable source of information about Leigh Brackett and Ed Hamilton. Asked when he had first met Brackett, Schwartz replied:

It's not a question of when I first met her, it's when I first heard about her. One of my good friends and clients was Henry Kuttner. This must be around 1937 or 38. Strangely enough, although I was Henry Kuttner's agent, he worked for an agent. He preferred me because he knew I was a specialist in science fiction and knew the markets better than his boss. The agent's name was Laurence D'Orsay. He always had the back ad in Writer's Digest, a magazine designed for would-be-writers.

Evidently, Leigh Brackett sent them some stories which D'Orsay gave him [Kuttner] to read, and he saw right away that he shouldn't let D'Orsay handle this author. He didn't know it was a girl, as Leigh could be male or female. So Kuttner said [to Brackett]: "Why don't you contact my agent in New York and send him a science fiction story? I think you have a lot of talent."

I really only dealt with professionals; I didn't try to break in new writers. But when Hank wrote me and said look at
some stories from Leigh Brackett, I said okay. I don't remember about the first stories she sent, whether they were acceptable or not. But eventually I did start selling them.103

Schwartz and Brackett became close friends, though they did not meet in person until the summer of 1941, more than a year after he had sold his first story for her. It is almost impossible to overestimate the boost that Leight Brackett's career received when Julie Schwartz agreed to take her on as a client. Barry Malzberg explains: "There is no substitute for personal editorial contact in this business, particularly at the outset of a career. It is easy enough to sell short stories by mail, but in order to sell them in any quantity the editors should be met; it is ten times easier to sell a first novel to an editor who knows you."104

Brackett of course was not known to anyone; moreover, she was a California writer, 3,000 miles away from New York, home of all the editors and the place where the deals were made. (This is why Kuttner had moved to New York when he decided to become a full time writer.) Schwartz was on the spot, known to everyone, and had a good track record. Editors trusted him; a manuscript from a Julie Schwartz writer received special treatment because of his reputation. As Schwartz put it in our interview:

The one thing the magazine editors appreciated was that when I submitted a story they knew the manuscript [had been prepared] by a pro. They loved that, and I'll tell you why. Fred Pohl was saying yesterday [9/2/84] that he used to get 80 scripts a week or more. Well, its very handy when you had to pick out 4 or 5 a month to know that these stories were written by professionals. My scripts were a step above the slush pile, where 79 of the 80 were no good to start with.105
No agent can sell a writer who is without talent, of course, but that step out of the slush pile into the forefront of editorial attention is a big one. Schwartz's contribution to Brackett's career has been virtually ignored, though Leigh Brackett acknowledged its value:

In the field of fiction, one can do without, but it's much better to have an agent. . . . They're right on the spot. They know who has a need for a story. In those days [the 1930's and 40's] they could take it around, submit it, and send you back the editorial comments. Very often, Julie would send back a story saying "just isn't good enough," "try again," or "do thus and such to it." He was very useful to me, very useful.106

Henry Kuttner and Julius Schwartz tipped the scale for Brackett. No longer isolated and writing in a vacuum, she had received positive feedback about her ability to practice her chosen trade and had made personal entry into professional circles. Although at the start of 1939 she had yet to sell her first story, the worst crisis of her career was already in the past. I wanted to know what Julie Schwartz saw in those early Leigh Brackett stories that persuaded him to keep plugging them, over and beyond what was due friendship to Kuttner. He replied:

She was a very literary type writer. Also, she typed beautiful manuscripts, which is very important. Many writers don't even bother to type out a good manuscript. They cross out words or the paper is poor. She turned in a good manuscript. I'm sure Henry Kuttner told her to do that.

She was very literate. I liked her descriptions of things. . . . She was very strong at that. I don't think she was too happy writing action, but she could write convincing action.107

Brackett's growth as a writer would continue, but her apprenticeship was over. From now on she would always have access to
markets and at least a small reputation. Good money and success on a large scale were still in her future, but she was no longer an anonymous hopeful. The process of turning adolescent daydreams into saleable stories had taken half of her life. She summed it up neatly enough: "I had started to write quite seriously when I was thirteen. I had decided right then that I would be a writer because, obviously, it was a very easy way to make a living; all you had to do was sit down and write stories. Ten years later, at the end of 1939, I sold the first one."108

Writer (1940-1978)

From 1939 until the last days of her life Brackett's existence would center around being a working writer. This, then, is the end of the long story I have told about her background and beginnings. During that story something of Brackett's character has, I hope, emerged, as well as her basic attitudes toward writing. The combination of her ability and her practical attitudes explain why, despite many failures, she finally established herself in the pulps. Most of her fellow pulp writers, however, suffered through stunted careers spent producing ephemeral work for miserable pay. I would like to offer some thoughts on those qualities that separated Brackett from the run-of-the-mill pulpster.

Her native talent was the foundation and sine qua non of her career; without it nothing else would have happened for Brackett. Creative talent, however, is not by itself so uncommon; what is rare is the ability to put it to use. Along with her creativity Brackett also demonstrated preserverance and self-discipline. Goal-oriented and
determined, she kept writing in the face of editorial rejection and 
disparagement from the "ladies" of her family.

Still, even pulp writers who got regularly into print possessed 
writing ability of some sort, however minimal; and they achieved 
publication by being stubborn in the pursuit of what talent they had. 
Brackett’s career differed because she was better able than most to 
exploit and market her ability. She was flexible and pragmatic about 
career choices, and she had an unusual willingness to accept and profit 
from criticism.

Brackett did not victimize herself over her initial failures; 
instead, her response to them was pragmatic. As her career 
illustrates, she was objective, both about her abilities and the proper 
marketplace for them. Unable to read Ladies’ Home Journal, for 
example, she did not let good word rates tempt her into trying to sell 
to it. Unable to crack the top of the line pulp markets, she revised 
her aim downward to the realm of the possible. Finally, goals and 
abilities coincided. She broke into print. The name she made for 
herself in a small field led to greater financial success elsewhere. 
She was able to move in this fashion from science fiction to the 
detective pulps, to hardcover publication, to scriptwriting.

Leigh Brackett’s career also demonstrates her readiness to listen 
to informed criticism. Consequently, she profited many times from the 
experience of others. She was neither egotistical nor defensive about 
her work, which made it much easier for her to improve it. Not 
succeeding as a writer, she sought professional advice via Writer’s 
Digest; this in turn led her to the D’Orsay agency and Henry Kuttner.
Fortunate in Kuttner's help, she was also quick to apply his comments to her writing. Julie Schwartz earned Brackett's gratitude not only for selling her stories but also for passing on editorial comment and rejecting the occasional unsatisfactory manuscript. Brackett understood the value of Schwartz's expert judgment on the marketability of her work; in this attitude she was already a professional.

Brackett's career was to be marked by this lack of temperament or touchiness about her writing, something that paved her way considerably. The ability to work with others and to adapt her writing to their direction was especially useful to her as a scriptwriter, by nature a cooperative enterprise. Asked at the end of her career the inevitable question as to her advice to would-be writers, she replied:

One of the things you have got to learn is to take criticism. I have met people in the writing field (and people in the acting field where it's even worse) [who] simply cannot take the least little criticism or blow to their egos. They cannot accept the fact that something they've done isn't good.... I've seen girls go into absolute hysterics because the director said: "Look, you're not doing the scene right." Well, they weren't. They were nineteen or twenty and obviously didn't know their business. You've simply got to learn. So many writers wouldn't dream of revising a story.

But let's return to 1939. Before leaving for New York, Henry Kuttner had introduced Brackett to West Coast fandom, in the form of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society (LASFS). There she "met the science-fiction world, both fan and professional, and made friendships that have lasted ever since, with Ray Bradbury, Jack Williamson, Forrie Ackerman . . . Heinlein, Willy Ley, Cleve Cartmill . . . all invaluable in sparking my own imagination and ambition. And, of course, Ed Hamilton." Unlike Kuttner and Hamilton, who had long been involved
With fandom, Brackett had not known even of the existence of organized fan groups until after she had broken in as a writer. Consequently, these new contacts were primarily of social importance to Brackett. She found it easier, I think, to make the move from science fiction to other kinds of writing than did those, like Hamilton and even Kuttner, who from their teens had been immersed in the small social world of science fiction. That world seems to have provided Brackett with most of her lifelong friends, but science fiction was only one of several factors shaping her goals and ambitions as a writer.

Brackett also became a member of the Manana Literary Society, a talented and informal offshoot of the LASFS. Here she made the acquaintance, and in some cases the friendship, of people prominent in the inner circles of science fiction. Robert Heinlein, the founder, also acted as host "to the little Saturday-night gatherings" held at his Laurel Canyon home on Lookout Mountain Road in the Hollywood hills. An elite group met there. Regular attendees included Cleve Cartmill, Jack Williamson, Arthur K. Barnes (a popular writer for Thrilling Wonder Stories), Phyllis and Anthony Boucher, and Mick and Annette McComas. Jack Williamson recalls "Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore were there now and then" and that "sometimes I was allowed to bring Ray Bradbury, though he was still so brash and noisy that Leslyn [Heinlein's first wife] didn't always want him." Among visiting writers were Willy Ley, L. Sprague deCamp, L. Ron Hubbard, Ed Hamilton, Julius Schwartz and E.E. "Doc" Smith.
These were unusually able and creative people, with a wide range of interests. Brackett's contact with them not only completed the initiation into the science fiction world that Kuttner had begun, it also exposed her to other literary scenes and offered intellectual stimulation from what Williamson remembers as "a remarkable group." Two, Heinlein and Hubbard, would find fame outside the boundaries of genre science fiction, becoming millionaires in the process. The host, Heinlein, was already the most important new writer in science fiction and the unquestioned star of Campbell's Astounding. He had impressed Williamson as "the most truly civilized person I had even known." Henry Kuttner I have discussed at length elsewhere. Williamson remembers Cleve Cartmill "as a sardonic but likeable newspaperman who knew the seamy underside of Los Angeles politics." Mick McComas and Tony Boucher would a little later (in 1949) start The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, among the most important of the 1950's science fiction magazines. Meanwhile Boucher (real name A.P. White) passed the time as "a musicologist specializing in Gregorian chant, and, as H.H. Holmes, a prolific writer and reviewer of mystery novels." He had as well a long running radio show on opera. The society was sophisticated company for a young woman writer with little formal education and an experience of life limited to some extent by her gender and conventional upbringing.

In addition, the Manana Literary Society was a stimulant to a writer's creativity. Sharp wits and verbal agility were in demand.
by Brackett as "urbane, courteous, a great raconteur." Presumably this made a nice contrast with the adolescent Ray Bradbury, described by Brackett as "an ebullient kid, bursting at the seam with drive and talent that he hadn't yet learned to control, a maker of horrible puns." Meetings also offered "in-depth conversations on fantasy and science fiction," nor were members above "swapping information on magazine publishers and markets." In 1942 Tony Boucher capped the group's verbal playfullness by including many members in his new detective novel, *Rocket to the Morgue*. Science fiction authors present in thin disguise included Hamilton, Williamson, Hubbard and John Campbell, while Heinlein's character was a chief suspect.

Brackett met Heinlein, Hamilton et al after she had made her first sale, so although lacking in experience she could at least claim professional status. Surprisingly, her first sales had been to John Campbell, who late in 1939 bought two of her stories in the same week. The sales were surprising because, as Terry Carr succinctly puts it: "Space opera wasn't John Campbell's style." In retrospect, it seems clear that Brackett had neither the training nor the cast of mind needed to write the sort of fiction that Campbell wanted. Referring to "The Martian Quest" (1940), the first of the stories to appear in *Astounding*, Elizabeth Lynn writes: "The hero solves the problem which faces him through a rather ill-yoked pairing of brute courage and modern chemistry." Brackett was herself puzzled, saying: "And I still don't know why he bought them. They weren't very good stories. Unless he hoped he was discovering a new writer. Unfortunately, I didn't go in the right direction."
Campbell was science fiction's top market, both in prestige and pay, so Brackett continued for a time to try to sell to him. She met with little success. He bought only one more story, "The Sorcerer of Rhiannon" (1942), then "he rejected one of mine rather viciously, so I decided it was a waste of time."127

Her true home as a writer of science fiction was elsewhere; the Astounding stories were a false start. MidWest fan Howard Devore, a friend of Hamilton's and Brackett's for twenty years, told me:

I think her real love was always space opera. I distinctly recall, she told me that she had sold very little to John Campbell. For one thing, he didn't want space opera the way she wrote it, and effectively she could make more money writing at her own pace and selling to Planet Stories rather than rewriting for John Campbell.128

Another of the economic frustrations of trying to write for Campbell was that "when you wrote a Campbell-type story and it didn't sell then you had no place else to go with it."129 Brackett made a good choice when she accepted that she had no future as an Astounding writer and decided to concentrate on the other science fiction markets. Her gift in her career decisions was to combine professional self-interest with personal enthusiasm. Still, Campbell was the decade's dominant figure. His Astounding was where science fiction was going; Planet Stories was where it had been. It would be Brackett's lot to perfect and so be identified with space opera, an older form of science fiction closely connected to fantasy, while modern science fiction went its way without her.
Interestingly, Julius Schwartz's records show that he had no part in selling those first two stories. In 1939 Campbell was actively seeking new writers; Brackett may have sent them to him herself. Not until June 21, 1940 did Schwartz sell his first Brackett story, "The Demon of Darkside." *Startling Stories* paid $30 for it, with Schwartz receiving an agent's fee of ten percent. Five days later he sold "The Stellar Legion" (original title "Gentleman Ranker") to *Planet Stories*, the first of the twenty Leigh Brackett stories that were to appear in that magazine over the next fifteen years. *Planet* was the magazine that Brackett was to be most closely associated with and her work there exemplified all that was good about its brand of vivid, brightly colored space opera; these sales, rather than the two to Campbell, represent the true launching of her career as a pulp writer.

*Planet* was Brackett's primary market during the first four years of her career; she also had sales to *Startling Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Comet Stories*, *Science Fiction Quarterly*, *Super Science Stories* and *Astonishing Stories*. She appeared once in *Amazing*, "wherein [editor] Raymond A. Palmer, who had bought her story through her agent, introduced her as a man;" and, as mentioned, one final time in *Astounding*. Her earliest stories were nothing out of the ordinary; their plots, in particular, were often clumsy. Only one or two have since been reprinted. It is not until (to pick an approximate date) the middle of 1942 that she stopped being a promising writer and begins to be an accomplished one. After that, her improvement was rapid.
By the middle of 1943 Brackett had moved into the front ranks of
writers for Planet, Thrilling Wonder and Startling. On July 23 of that
year Schwartz sold "The Veil of Astellar" to Thrilling Wonder; thirty years later Ed Hamilton selected it for inclusion in The Best of Leigh Brackett, calling it a "dark, haunting story . . . [having] great power." Then, on Dec. 12, 1943 Schwartz sold the longest of Brackett's works to date, "Shadow Over Mars," to Startling, where the story would appear in the Fall of 1944. Editor Oscar J. Friend gave the short novel a big build-up; promotion in the preceding Summer 1944 issue gushed: "Not since Marie Corelli have we had a woman writer who could unleash her imagination so vividly and set the pictures down in such strong, graphic style." The Fall issue included a picture of Brackett and a short autobiographical essay. "Shadow Over Mars" also received the (perhaps a trifle dubious) honor of an Earle K. Bergey cover. Although Brackett's story had its heroine clad in a sensible coverall, Bergey's cover shows a near naked red-haired woman in an honest to goodness brass bra. She is intently watching a muscular man in a vivid green shirt lash pink gorillas with a chain. The gorillas have been given fangs that would not be out of place on sabre-toothed tigers. Brackett's reputation was damaged by this sort of juvenile packaging, first with the serious fans, and later with critics. Her readers, however, loved it (cover and story both), and the letter columns of the next issue were filled with enthusiastic phrase. Within the tiny world of the science fiction pulps, Brackett had arrived as a name writer.
Acceptance and praise must have been pleasant for her. We know that she read the comments about her work that appeared in the letter columns. For example, she wrote a lengthy letter to Planet Stories (Winter, 1943) replying to what she perceived as racist comments fans had made about her story "Citadel of Lost Ships" (March, 1943).\(^{137}\) The story (original title "Gypsy World") had been sold by Schwartz on October 8, 1942.\(^{138}\) While unremarkable as fiction, its heart at least was on the side of the angels; the work is a science fiction parable denouncing Hitler's savage treatment of Europe's gypsies.

Brackett, however, was making only incidental progress toward earning a decent living. Her markets, to understate the case dramatically, were not lucrative. She was paid between one half a cent and a penny a word, minus Julius Schwartz's ten percent. And Brackett was not, as the pulps understood the term, a prolific writer. An early hero of Jack Williamson, the legendary pulp writer Max Brand (real name Frederick Faust), "was said to turn out four thousand words every day and sell every word, unrevised, under a whole score of pen names."\(^{139}\) L. Ron Hubbard, future founder of Scientology and sometimes visitor to the Manana Literary Society, was "reputed to hammer his copy out on an electric typewriter, two thousand words an hour with never a revision."\(^{140}\) On a lesser but still impressive scale, in 1938 Ed Hamilton found it little trouble to write a 40,000 word novel for Startling Stories in eighteen days. Hamilton adds, disarmingly: "In fact, I made it nearer fifty than forty thousand words, having so much interesting material that I felt I could not leave out."\(^{141}\) Words so produced might not be memorable (one thinks, perhaps, of Truman
Brackett for better or for worse was never remotely in that high production league. Those who could write saleable stories that fast had to be artful, indeed were sometimes masterful, plotters, and plotting was that part of the art of writing that came hardest to Leigh Brackett. She imagined a story and felt her way into it rather than constructed it. Her approach during those years was to "write an opening and let it grow," a hit or miss method that as often as not did not work for her. "When it did not, I found myself in a box canyon with no way up the walls, and another beautiful idea went into the files to gather dust." Also, her strengths as a writer were stylistic and descriptive, and these are story values innately harder and slower to crank out than pure plot. Consequently, once Brackett had reached the point where she was consistently producing saleable stories, she was faced with a new problem: she could not produce them fast enough to live off her markets.

Julius Schwartz's records illustrate her problem. For 1940, Schwartz sold 5 Brackett stories for $202.50; in 1941, 7 stories for $439; in 1942, 10 stories for $817.50. Finally, in 1943, four years after her first sale, she broke the thousand dollar barrier; her six stories of that year sold for $1068.75, of which her share was $961.88. The importance of "Shadow Over Mars" can now be seen more clearly. She received $400 for it; that single sale brought in twice as much money as she had earned in the whole of 1940, and as much as she made during all of 1941. In his term as her agent, which
effectively ended in mid 1944, Schwartz sold thirty-two Brackett stories for a little over $3,000. Even allowing for the forties' dollar greater buying power, this was just barely scraping by. It is obvious why Brackett lived at home. A comment Julius Schwartz made put Brackett's earnings in perspective. He said: "The ambition of people in the early depression days was to make a hundred dollars a week. Many people were making 15, 20, 25 dollars a week. People working in almost any industry were making just that amount of money, so to make a hundred dollars a week was incredible." Brackett in 1943 had averaged $18 a week.

Consequently, as she turned twenty-nine Brackett's financial position was still precarious. The five year period from 1939 to 1944, however, had been productive artistically and socially. By 1944 she was not only a published writer; within the science fiction pulps she was a popular one. Her reputation was growing and her name on a magazine cover sold copies. More important, her writing skills had also grown. She had mastered pulp formulae, by no means an easy thing to do. Space opera in particular had a very formal set of conventions; Brackett was now able to make them work for her in a story.

Socially, she had made a number of important professional contacts. On a more personal level, Brackett became lasting friends with Henry Kuttner, Jack Williamson, Julie Schwartz, "Doc" Smith and Ray Bradbury. Brackett and Bradbury formed an especially close friendship. Their relationship in the early 1940's resembled Brackett's and Kuttner's of a few years earlier, only with teacher and student roles reversed. Bradbury was an outgoing young man who badly wanted to be a
writer. He wrote prodigiously and showed his work to everyone. Jack Williamson, Ed Hamilton, Julius Schwartz and Henry Kuttner all read his early stories and, to one degree or another, commented on them. Bradbury, though, remembers Brackett as the most important of his teachers.

Bradbury's preface to A Memory of Murder (1984), a collection of his pulp mystery fiction, recalls his struggle to become a writer. He begins with praise for Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James Cain, three writers whom Brackett also used as models. Bradbury continues:

... [another] one of my heroes was Leigh Brackett, who met me every Sunday noon at Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, California, there to read my drear imitation of her Stark on Mars stories or my carbon copies of her first-rate detective tales, which were beginning to appear [in Dime Detective, Dime Mystery Magazine, Detective Tales, and Black Mask] ... I would lie on the beach and weep with envy at how easily her characters slid forth,冒险ed, died, or lived to grieve a death. How she managed to plow through my early agonized contrivances I cannot say ... .

Leigh was my loving teacher, and I had yet to work free from her influence, both creative and constricting. Most of the stories in this collection were written to please Leigh, to get an occasional "Well done!" or, once in a while, "This is your best yet!"147

In a way the weekly meetings at Muscle Beach recreated in adult fashion the two great loves of Brackett's childhood, reading adventure stories and playing on the beach. They were important to Bradbury, who says of those days: "Leigh would read my short stories and kick the hell out of me and criticize me—and be good to me. She was selling . . . and I wasn't selling anything, so I needed their [Bradbury refers also to Edmond Hamilton] encouragement and friendship."148
decades later Bradbury would collect the best of the stories he had produced for their informal workshop, and dedicate to Leigh Brackett the resulting volume.

Bradbury's tribute touches on another facet of Brackett's writing—her own pulp detective fiction. These stories are today lost in obscurity; even Rosemarie Arbur's bibliography of Brackett's works does not mention them. Yet Brackett's decision to move from science fiction to another kind of writing was crucial to her career.

In the early 1940's the pulp detective magazines were in their vigorous prime, with scores of different titles on every newsstand. The first of the breed, Detective Story, was begun in 1915 "when Street and Smith decided to convert their nickle thriller, Nick Carter, into a pulp that featured the adventures of Carter but also offered crime stories by other writers." Detective Story's success called into being a pack of flourishing competitors. The two best were Black Mask and Dime Detective. Black Mask, in particular, achieved cult status and earned from its readers a respect rarely given to pulp magazines. (Two other pulp magazines to whom this sort of recognition and reader—and writer—loyalty were given were Farnsworth Wright's Weird Tales and John Campbell's 1940's version of Astounding.)

During the 1920's Black Mask and the others created a new kind of writing about crime: it was called the "hard-boiled" school, and had at its center the cynical figure of the tough, lonely, private investigator. The new subgenre was a curious mix of the brutal and the sentimental, as if high-minded morality plays had become 20th century
street theater. The pulps were given to stylized violence but detective fiction offered a writer potential for more than shoot-em-ups.

At Black Mask, for example, editor Joseph T. "Cap" Shaw "felt that 'action is meaningless unless it involves recognizable human character in three-dimensional form.'" Raymond Chandler wrote in the belief that "the best way to comment on large things is to comment on small things." Chandler and Dashiell Hammett were Black Mask's best-known writers; indeed, to this day their works defines the still lively subgenre. But the field contained many other good writers, such as Erle Stanley Gardner and Cornell Woolrich. Through the 1930's Dime Detective, with Woolrich as star writer, was Black Mask's primary rival. Woolrich wrote emotionally suffocating, frightening stories; at least one critic has been moved to call him "the Poe of the twentieth century and the poet of its shadows." Another critic, Steven Marcus, writes of these detective magazines and their talented nexus of writers, that within their own context they were doing "the structural equivalent of what Hemingway and the writers who clustered naturally about Hemingway were doing in their kind of writing during that period." More then anything else, the detective pulps created, then celebrated the myth of the private eye, urban knight errant. He emerged from their pages to take his place beside the cowboy as a larger than life American hero. Its best writers made works of art of the hard-boiled private eye tale; their art, moreover, was uniquely American. In the Continental Op and Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, Hammett and Chandler had created heroes who caught the public's imagination. When
the characters moved from the pulps to Hollywood, they took their creators with them.

Perhaps that consideration was on Leigh Brackett's mind when she began writing her detective fiction. Her obvious motives, however, were the need to make more money and the happy discovery that she found the detective story easier to write than science fiction. Recalling her early career, Brackett said:

I did have a knack for science fiction which I dearly loved, so for a while I wrote nothing but science fiction. However I was never a quantity producer and it was a very small field. Inasmuch as I had some financial responsibilities, I had to broaden out, so I took to writing detective stories. I wrote quite a few of them for the pulp magazines.

Of course, Brackett would have been aware that she was entering an exciting field, a native American art form with commercial possibilities as well. She had since adolescence read detective fiction. Of it, she said: "Now, Hammett and Chandler were very strong influences, and James Cain, whose style I greatly admired." Her mentor, Henry Kuttner, also thought well of these writers and urged them as models. The result was that Brackett had a clear sense of what she wanted to do when she began writing detective fiction; once begun, she found to her surprise that the form was easier to master than science fiction had been. Late in her life she wrote:

When I think about it, it's an odd thing, I never had any trouble at all constructing or plotting mystery stories. But that's more like working out an equation; given a certain event, other events will inevitably follow, and variables are limited by the space-time framework in which these events occur. In science fiction, the space-time framework has to be invented and the variables are what you make them.
In addition to this ease in plotting, Brackett benefited from a coincidence of settings. I have spoken before of the importance of setting to the quality of Brackett's work, and her apparent necessity to experience a location, either actually or imaginatively, before being able to recreate it in her writing. Hammett and Chandler set the majority of their fiction in San Francisco and southern California, the scenes of Brackett's childhood.

Julius Schwartz's records show seven sales of Brackett detective fiction. Other stories may exist, sold by Brackett directly to a particular market. Brackett, for example, spoke of having sold to Popular Detective, though Schwartz has no record of this. According to Ray Bradbury—although here Bradbury may be confusing his own sales with hers—Brackett also sold to Dime Detective, Dime Mystery Magazine, Detective Tales and Black Mask. MidWest fan Robert Briney recalls Brackett as saying that she also sold to Thrilling Detective. In any case, here are the seven stories that Schwartz sold, together with the payment. As far as I know, this is the first time the information has appeared in print.

"Murder in the Family" Mammoth Detective for $100
sold 11/6/42 (appeared March 1943)

"The Death Dealer" original title "The Misfortune Teller"
Flynn's Detective Fiction for $135
sold 11/24/42 (appeared March 1943)

"Case of the Wandering Redhead" original title: "Red-Headed Poison"
Flynn's Detective Fiction for $62.50
sold 12/22/42 (appeared April 1943)
"No Star Is Lost" Thrilling Detective for $50
sold 8/13/43 (July 1944)

"Design for Dying" Flynn's Detective Fiction for $143.75
original title "The Joker"
sold 12/28/43 (June 1944)

"Murder is Bigamy" Thrilling Detective for $100
original title "Down Like a Dog"
sold 5/5/44 (July 1945)

"I Feel Bad Killing You" New Detective for $137.50
original title "The Cop Came Back"
sold 6/12/44 (Oct. 1944) 160

Although most likely these stories are deservedly obscure, writing them had several important consequences for Leigh Brackett. They affected her science fiction, led to her first hardcover novel, and provided at least two lines of entry into the career as scriptwriter that she sought. First, Brackett learned while writing those stories; they sharpened her skills and improved her science fiction. Brackett's friend Robert Briney remembers a discussion with her, in the course of which he discovered the existence of her early pulp detective fiction. Briney was interested. He tells us:

Leigh promised to send me a list of her detective novelets, and this information duly arrived a couple of weeks after the Bellefontaine [Ohio, summer, 1954] gathering. I eventually tracked down and read most of these stories, and found them to be well-crafted but not particularly memorable pulp stories in the Black Mask mode. On the other hand, as I read more widely in detective fiction, I realized that many of Leigh's science fantasy novelets—dealing as they did with themes of lost love, betrayal, guilt, and revenge—were solidly in the hardboiled detective tradition. Leigh later confirmed that she had consciously tried to incorporate the best features of the hardboiled school into her science fiction.
Brackett thought "The Halfling" (1943) to be "very much in the detective story style" and referred to it as a successful example of her attempt to take "what I considered to be very good and powerful in the detective story genre and use it in the science fiction."\textsuperscript{162}

Second, detective fiction was Brackett's path to hardcover publication. Practically speaking, it was impossible for writers of magazine science fiction to get their works published in hardcover by a commercial publishing house.\textsuperscript{163} This situation, by the way, continued into the early 1950's. The no hardcover publication rule applied to everyone, even the stars of Campbell's Astounding. No matter how good or popular an author, in science fiction he or she soon bumped into a definite ceiling: a limited audience (a few hundred thousand), and a limited income (a few thousand dollars a year).\textsuperscript{164} The writer of detective fiction, however, was not trapped in a literary ghetto. After all, Alfred A. Knopf had published Dashiell Hammett's first novel, Red Harvest, in early 1929, then had a best-seller the next year with Hammett's The Maltese Falcon (1930). The Maltese Falcon, in fact, went through seven reprintings in its first year.\textsuperscript{165} In 1934 James M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice was published, while in 1939 The Big Sleep appeared in hardcover, the first of a string of classic private eye novels by Raymond Chandler. From the start Brackett must have been aware that if her experiment with detective fiction went well, she would have an excellent chance of selling a novel to a hardcover house.

The science fiction pulps heavily influenced Brackett's writing. Early on, when help was needed, they formed the basis for her career;
and were, for as long as they existed, a market she could rely on. But hardcover publication was a giant step, away from pulp limits, and toward more money, greater recognition and a wider range of opportunity. Most pulp writers never made that step.

And of course Brackett's pulp detective stories led to her first novel in exactly the anticipated sequence. Brackett approached that novel methodically. Asked whether early in her career she wrote on a "regularly structured or scheduled basis or as the spirit moved you?" Brackett answered testily: "I wrote every bloody morning, as many words as I could write, and I also wrote in the evenings while I was working on my novel. I wrote pulp in the morning for the money, for one or two cents a word, two cents if I was lucky, and then in the evenings I worked on my novel." Written during 1943, the novel was entitled *No Good From A Corpse* and appeared in 1944 from the New York publishing firm of Coward-McCann.

Brackett was naturally very proud of her first novel, referring to it in conversation as "my child, my first-born, full-length novel" and, more judiciously, in print: "My first full-length, hard-bound novel was a murder mystery, Hammett-Chandler- & well-water, but done with love." As mentioned earlier, *No Good From A Corpse* introduced Brackett to Howard Hawks, and so was the instrument of the most dramatic "lucky break" in Brackett's career. That fact is widely known and often referred to in writings about Brackett. Less widely known is that Brackett ghostwrote a hard-boiled detective novel for popular movie actor George Sanders. Jack Williamson remembers that Brackett was paid $500 (half a year's pulp wages) for the novel, which
appeared in 1946 from Simon and Schuster under the title Stranger at Home. According to Robert Briney "the terms of her [Leigh Brackett's] contract for the book enjoined her against claiming the work as her own." Nevertheless, Brackett's authorship is supported both by Williamson's and Briney's recollections, and by Rosemarie Arbur, who states authoritatively: "that it [Stranger At Home] was written by Brackett is attested to in a letter from Edmond Hamilton to Pearce S. Grove (director of library at Eastern New Mexico University)—19 July 1969—about the donation of the Brackett and Hamilton papers to the library." Sanders, in any case, gave the game away with his dedication: "To Leigh Brackett, whom I have never met." I should add that although Stranger At Home was published in 1946, it was probably written two years earlier, as Brackett's involvement with Hawks would have left her with little time to produce a novel on the side.

How, we might ask, did Leigh Brackett come to be ghostwriting mystery novels for a Hollywood star? Bibliographic evidence and the testimony of Jack Williamson offer grounds for informed speculation. George Sanders "wrote" two mysteries, of which Stranger At Home was the second. The first was Crime On My Hands (1944), ghostwritten by Craig Rice and Cleve Cartmill. Brackett, you will remember, knew Cartmill from the Manana Literary Society; it is possible, perhaps even likely, that Brackett met Craig Rice through Cartmill. Craig Rice was the pseudonym of Georgiana Ann Randolph Craig, a popular forties mystery writer. According to Williamson: "Craig Rice got a contract to write one for George Sanders ... she made the deal ... she didn't want to
write it, so she got Leigh to do it, for probably five hundred dollars."173

Conceivably, these tangential connections to the Hollywood movie establishment contain the answer to a mystery I have so far been unable to solve. The capsule biography of Brackett dates her involvement with scriptwriting to her work on The Big Sleep in mid-1944. In fact, the New York Times Directory of Film gives The Big Sleep as her first screen credit. Brackett, however, made no secret of, though neither did she place any emphasis on, a prior screenwriting job and initial credit. Both the Writer's Index and Arbur's Bibliography list, correctly, The Vampire's Ghost (1944) as Brackett's first film. In a 1976 questionnaire she filled out for Dennis Aig, at the time a graduate student at The Ohio State University, Brackett referred to The Vampire's Ghost as "a 10-day wonder (and two days over schedule at that) for Republic. It's not a film I brag about."174 In an unpublished interview given in October of 1975, Brackett was more expansive:

The one small job I had before then was over at Republic. I worked a week and a half on the treatment. Because this was my first job, I was teamed up with a writer who knew what he was doing, Johnny Butler, who was one of the old Black Mask crowd. We did the script in three days; they shot the picture in ten days and that was two days over schedule.175

About that job, Brackett elsewhere mentions, in passing but with due appreciation of the humor, that the cameraman was fired "after the second day because he was taking too much time."176

The Vampire's Ghost is probably as trivial as its title indicates, but that Brackett had landed a scriptwriting job, any scriptwriting
job, was another major boost to her career, comparable to first hardcover publication. Nor was Republic a studio to be despised. It was the most important of the B-studios, producing forty to fifty films a year (mostly Westerns). Film critic David Cook notes in his *A History of Narrative Film* that Republic "also provided the training ground for many a director who went on to better things."177 Occasionally, too, a major director such as John Ford, Raoul Walsh or Orson Welles would direct a special project for Republic, an example being Welles "nightmarishly expressionistic version of Macbeth (1948), shot in twenty-three days on *papier mache* and cardboard sets."178 A more typical Republic production, though, was a formula Western starring Gene Autry, Johnny Mack Brown, John Wayne or Roy Rogers.179

The mystery mentioned earlier is how Brackett got the job. I've found no written record, nor has anyone I've interviewed known. Perhaps the clue is her involvement with detective fiction. All in the same year Brackett ghostwrote a detective novel for a movie star, met mystery writers—Craig Rice and (perhaps) Craig Cartmill—with access to Hollywood studios, and worked on a film script with an old Black Mask writer. But I can only speculate about possible connections. It is equally likely that Brackett's experience in the theater left her with contacts that led to the scriptwriting job. Or the real explanation may be currently unknown.

As mentioned, Hawks hired Brackett not only because he liked her book but also because she knew a little bit about writing scenes. Her only prior professional experience was *The Vampire's Ghost*, and professional experience may— I say may— have tipped the scales in
Brackett's favor when Hawks decided to keep her on even though, as he said, "I hired her through an agent and I thought I was hiring a man." That Brackett had a Hollywood agent is itself revealing. It tells us she was ambitious to be a scriptwriter and that she was actively seeking such work.

Now we have arrived at the last of the pivotal points in Brackett's career. A bolt of pure (but not entirely accidental) good fortune saw her leap from the pulp ghetto into a world where the horizons were much bigger. In mid-1944 Howard Hawks, a Hollywood producer and director of considerable repute, hired her to do the script of _The Big Sleep_. Her co-scriptwriter was William Faulkner; the stars were Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Brackett always spoke of the job as a piece of sensational luck for her, as of course it was. Hawks's surprise—and, one wonders, his discomfort—at discovering Brackett to be a woman was widely reported at the time, and became an item in a Hollywood gossip column. Hedda Hopper, Hollywood's professional gossip, informed readers "that Hawks told his agent, "This fellow would make a good screenwriter for _The Big Sleep_; get Mr. Brackett for me." In spite of his astonishment at being confronted by a fresh-faced young woman, not yet thirty, he stuck by his decision." Brackett, naturally, told the story of her original interview with Hawks many times; it was as staple of her interviews. This version is a concise summary of the event, remembered from the cool perspective of three decades:

_How did I come to write screenplays? I wrote a book, a hard boiled mystery, which was published in 1944. Howard Hawks read it and liked the dialogue. He was somewhat shaken to discover that it was Miss and not Mr. Brackett, but put me_
under contract nevertheless, and set me to work on The Big Sleep. 182

Her contact with Hawks lasted, on and off, for another quarter century, and enriched Brackett both financially and artistically. He paid her $100 a week to start, more than five times what she had averaged writing for the pulps in 1943. 183 Later in her life Brackett's work for Hawks would make her moderately wealthy, something no writer weaned on the starvation wages of the science fiction pulps could fail to appreciate. During the last two decades of her life Brackett and her husband maintained two comfortable homes and traveled extensively. They owned four cars, keeping two at each residence. 184 Neither of them was given to shows of affluence, but though the couple lived unpretentiously they lived very comfortably as well. Brackett's scriptwriting—above all, her scriptwriting for Hawks—was the chief source of this financial ease and security.

Artistically, Hawks acted as a conduit, pouring into Brackett's life a steady infusion of creative and interesting people. Through her work for him, for example, she met Christopher Isherwood, John Collier, Steven Longstreet 185 and Howard Hughes. 186 In addition, Hawks ran a notably professional set, using the best talent and most highly skilled craftsmen available. He was known for his efficient and creative handling of those who worked for him, one reason so many wanted to. Thus, on Hawks's projects Brackett worked with some very talented artists, such as scriptwriter Jules Furthman. Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner were friends of Hawks; he had used all three—Hemingway, Faulkner, and Furthman—on the script of To Have
and Have Not (1945), the Bogart and Bacall film just previous to The Big Sleep. In fact, writes film critic and Hawks scholar Joseph McBride, career-long Hawks "collaborated with a remarkable array of first-rate writers." Hawks's cameramen, too, says David Cook, "were among the most distinguished Hollywood has ever known: Gregg Toland, Lee Garmes, James Wong Howe, Tony Gaudio, Ernest Haller, Russell Harlen, and Sid Hickox." Finally, Hawks was highly regarded for his ability to evoke strong performances from his actors. Consequently, he directed a remarkably diverse group of Hollywood stars. To give just a few examples out of many, Gary Cooper, Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe all had hit roles in Hawks's films.

In the center of this network of talent was Hawks himself. As an independent producer and director, Hawks was, to an extent rare in Hollywood, the man in sole charge. He developed (if not actually wrote) every script he shot (and he rewrote whole chunks of them himself on the set). He produced most of the films he directed (and he walked out on many he did not produce when some meddling Mayer or Goldwyn told him what and what not to do). As a producer Hawks controlled all those decisions about a film project that the director (in his job as director) does not: he hired the writers and approved their work; he hired the set designer, editor, musical director, cinematographer and approved their work; and, extremely important in film, he hired the actors who would embody the characters.

The entry on Hawks in Ephraim Katz's The Film Encyclopedia notes: "he came as close as any other Hollywood director to what the French term an auteur, the complete filmmaker in control of his material from start to finish." In Hawks, Brackett was working with nothing less than a major American artist. It is a mark of her own talent that, in
addition to her other work for him, she was Hawks's scriptwriter of choice for the last dozen years of his professional life.

Since the figure of Hawks looms so large in Brackett's life, perhaps an overview of his career would be helpful here. Hawks had a particular genius for working within the Hollywood studio system, using it without being used by it. He successfully made movies for more than fifty years, directing Mary Pickford in *The Little Princess* (1917) and Jennifer O'Neil in *Rio Lobos* (1970). Of Hawks, Ephriam Katz writes "[his was] one of the longest, most versatile and most professional directorial careers in American film."193

Hawks's reputation, always high within the movie industry, has risen steadily since his death; for most of his career he was regarded as "merely" a fine storyteller. Hawks, in fact, was a great storyteller; moreover, he could tell any kind of story. Joseph McBride calls Hawks: "The most versatile of all great American directors, . . . [working] with equal ease in screwball comedies, westerns, gangster movies, musicals, private-eye melodramas, and adventure films."194 Writing in a similar vein, David Cook states: "Like one of his own heroes, Howard Hawks was a versatile professional who distinguished himself in every major film genre and virtually inaugurated several of them."195 Hawks made several dozen popular movies. A sampling of his best would include *Scarface* (1932); *Bringing Up Baby* (1938); *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939); *His Girl Friday* (1940); *To Have and Have Not* (1944); *The Big Sleep* (1946); *Red River* (1948); *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *El Dorado* (1967).
Brackett worked on at least eight more Hawks's projects after finishing her part of *The Big Sleep* on September 26, 1944. First, she adapted the mystery novel *The Black Door* (Screenplay title: *The Turning Wheel*), finishing work on the script on March 26, 1945. However, this project, "planned by Hawks from 1945 through 1951," never materialized. Then, "according to Christian Nyby, both Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett worked with Hawks on the screenplay of *Red River*, uncredited." Soon after that, Brackett's Hollywood career went on hold for a time. In a letter to her friend E. Hoffmann Price, she explains:

I had written three films before I was married, including *The Big Sleep*, plus a fourth script that went down the drain. I worked six months at Columbia the first part of 1946. After that the movie business fell in due to strikes and depressions. No work for anybody except the favored few. I forgot about Hollywood and went back to writing science-fiction. In 1957 Howard Hawks . . . went back into production and called me out to work on *Rio Bravo*. Since then I've worked more or less regularly in films and TV.

So, after a hiatus of a dozen years, came screenplays for *Rio Bravo* (February, 1958) and *Hatari!* (September, 1960). Brackett then extensively revised the script of *Man's Favorite Sport?* (December, 1962), but did not receive a credit for her work. Uncharacteristically, she was angry enough to write (on the title page of her copy of the script): "I worked on this final version for four months, writing ahead of the camera during shooting but got no credit—the Guild said it was a polish rather than original contribution."* Man's Favorite Sport?* was followed by *El Dorado* (January, 1966), and then her final Hawks's script—and his last
movie—*Rio Lobo* (December, 1969). Bits and pieces of other work Brackett did for Hawks also exist. For example, some time in the early 1960's she wrote a screenplay "about a tiger hunt in India" called *Bengal Tiger*. It was "planned as a John Wayne film to follow *Hatari!*" but was another project that never materialized. In addition, Brackett did the 1959 novelization of the *Rio Bravo* screenplay.

Brackett gave Hawks the major part of her creativity during the twelve years between 1958 and 1970, a period during which she wrote almost no science fiction. In return, she received ample financial reward and the opportunity to work with an artist of stature on major film projects. As a little girl her first attempt at writing had been a continuation of the adventures of Zorro, starring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.; the Hawks's films were a fulfillment of that long ago urge.

Her involvement with *Red River* is noteworthy, as the film is perhaps Hawks's best western. That Brackett worked on the script was discovered only recently by Gerald Mast, and is an aspect of her career still scarcely known. In May 1980 Mast interviewed Christian Nyby, Hawks's film editor; he found that Brackett, and Jules Furthman too, had worked uncredited on the script. If Brackett's contribution was substantial, she deserves credit for a significant achievement. Gerald Mast, for example, allots an entire chapter of his critical study of Hawks to *Red River*. He calls the film a "genre epic" that occupies "an unique place in the work of Howard Hawks . . . as one of Hawks’s biggest, most ambitious, and most expensive undertakings." Mast has special praise for the film's "elegant symmetries of narrative construction."
My guess is that Hawks and Brackett were able to work well together because both were genre artists. They met, after all, through the medium of detective fiction; later Brackett would write westerns and adventure stories for Hawks. Both of them accepted the conventions of the genres they worked in; then, as they matured as artists, used those conventions for their own purposes, often in very subtle ways. Joseph McBride writes of Hawks that to understand him a critic must place primary importance on the physical immediacy of Hawks's works, rather than the abstract thematic values. Verbalizing Hawks's themes has a tendency to make them sound puerile, but a close viewing of his work makes it clear that his greatness was in his ability to make people come alive on screen.

If we change the terms of that equation, substituting "use of rhythm, image, mood and setting" for "ability to make people come alive on screen," then we have as good a way of understanding Brackett's science fantasies as we could want. Hawks and Brackett were similar in their ability to draw strength from genre conventions, without being much troubled by the restrictions imposed by formula. Perhaps this is because Hawks and Brackett were not seeking to escape from genre; instead, they wanted to create better genre stories.

Hawks and Brackett also shared a certain temperamental affinity in their attitude toward their work. Neither was comfortable being thought of as an artist; both Hawks and Brackett preferred to present themselves as craftsmen. For each, that attitude was partly a pose. Asked about their work Hawks or Brackett were at ease with matters of technique and avoided questions about meaning. Both disliked pompous or heavy-handed storytelling.
Some central relationships define the shape of an individual's life. Hawks seems to me to have been a powerful force in Brackett's. Working for him altered her life professionally, financially and artistically. As a result, I have jumped ahead a good many years in my narrative in order to follow the relationship to its end.

Let's return to 1946 and begin another of her life's core relationships. From Jack Williamson comes a glimpse of Brackett at 30. During World War II Williamson had served in the South Pacific as an Air Force weatherman, and was mustered out at Fort McArthur, California in late November of 1945. He writes:

A free man again, I looked up Leigh Brackett. She seemed pleased to see me, and we went out together. Never quite in love, we were fond of each other. She had written affectionate letters now and then through the war. Now I found her life changed as much as mine. A successful film writer, she was doing scripts for Howard Hawks, talking of Bogart and Bacall and William Faulkner....

Hollywood success had moved her, professionally and financially, far beyond our old world. Or so I felt.... Her cheering letters followed me back to New Mexico and kept on coming through those first uneasy civilian months when I needed cheer. I was jolted when she wrote, late next year, that she and Ed Hamilton were engaged.

Peripheral to the first half of Brackett's life, Ed Hamilton is the single most important figure of the second. They met briefly in the summer of 1940 and again in the summer of 1941, when Hamilton and Julie Schwartz drove across the country to California. According to Hamilton, he and Schwartz "lived in Los Angeles in a bungalow that was kind of the center of the science fiction group out there, and we could get together with some beer and booze and sit around and drink." As a member of the LASFS, Brackett was among those who came by. From the
start much of what she and Hamilton had in common was their mutual interest in science fiction. Hamilton recalled, "The first date we ever had, we went down to the science fiction society meeting." Throughout their life together they kept up a network of social contacts, fan and professional, in the science fiction community.

It is hard to say now how serious their initial relationship was; Williamson, who was Hamilton's close friend, was obviously surprised when he heard of their marriage. Hamilton had returned to his Pennsylvania home in the fall of 1941. During the war years he and Brackett kept in touch through what appears to have been only intermittent correspondence. Then, writes Hamilton, "I went back out to California in the summer of 1946 and Leigh and Ray Bradbury met me at the Hotel Roosevelt bar in Hollywood and welcomed me back to the coast." Hamilton spent that summer "assiduously paying court." He and Brackett were married New Year's eve in San Gabriel, California. Ray Bradbury was their best man.

Hamilton (1904-1977) was a prolific pulp writer. He had the career Brackett might have if she had never left Planet Stories. Hamilton wrote everything—comics, mysteries, space opera, horror fiction—but thought of himself and was thought of as a science fiction writer. His name is well-known in the science fiction field, but he is nonetheless a curiously anonymous figure. Some critics think Ed Hamilton to be underrated today. No consensus, however, exists about his stature as a writer or his importance in the history of American science fiction. In The Engines of the Night Barry Malzberg portrays Hamilton as a man with talent bigger than anything he applied it to. He was, says
Malzberg, a writer of promise who burnt out on too much dreary hack work. Malzberg uses Hamilton as a model for Ruthven, the cynical, aging, betrayed pulp writer who is the central character of "Corridors," the short story that ends the book. Jack Williamson, on the other hand, writes that Hamilton was, "one of our great pioneers, an able writer whose maturing abilities kept pace with the growth of science fiction." The Science Fiction Encyclopedia ambiguously ends its summary of Hamilton's career by stating, "He was able, in other words, to take space opera seriously enough to make it good." All parties agree that Ed Hamilton had a considerable narrative talent.

English science fiction critic Brian Stableford writes approvingly of the intellectual audacity that startled and pleased Hamilton's early readers. In fact, continues Stableford:

> It was this trade in mind-opening impossibilities which distinguished it [pulp science fiction] from other brands of pulp fiction, and made it something more than a new and bizarre variety of costume melodrama. As a literary strategy it was very much a blunt instrument, but it worked, in its way. Hamilton became exceptional among pulp writers, and a favorite of sf fans, simply because he told bigger lies than most in a fashion more barefaced than any.

As the above remark implies, within the narrow limits of magazine science fiction Hamilton was famous in the 1930's. His first sale had been to Weird Tales in 1926. His work quickly became very popular with that magazine's readers; so much so, notes science fiction historian Sam Moskowitz, that "Weird Tales ... never rejected an Edmond Hamilton story for any reason." With "Crashing Suns" (Weird Tales 1928) and "Within the Nebula" (Weird Tales 1929) Hamilton did as much as any other single individual to invent the subgenre of space opera. His
"Interstellar Patrol" stories (1928-1930) predate even Doc Smith's "Lensman" series. Starting in 1928, Hamilton solidified his reputation with a number of sales to Amazing Stories. Hugo Gernsback himself bought the first, "The Comet Doom". The 1935 appearance of "The Accursed Galaxy" in Astounding saw Hamilton at the peak of his popularity. Science fiction fans nicknamed him the "World Wrecker" and "World Saver".

Jack Williamson, throughout the 1930's Hamilton's closest friend, called him "almost the perfect pulpster. The stories he wrote then were strongly plotted and action-packed, hammered out at white heat and never revised.... His ideas were often original, sometimes epic." Williamson spoke of Hamilton's ability to lose himself in the drama of space opera. The paradoxical quality of Hamilton's reputation rests on this simultaneous image of commercial hack and genuine enthusiast. Shortly before his death, Hamilton himself wrote:

Very clear in my mind is the walk home [winter, 1927] on the dark, long ice-sheathed streets, with the great belt of Orion and the Pleiades burning in frosty splendor above the roofs. Dreaming of them as huge and awesome suns, I visualized a far-future civilization that would web the star-worlds. It would require a long-reaching arm of law and order to deal with cosmic menaces—and there began the Patrol.

I could not get this, to me, staggering vision down on paper fast enough. I well remember that, working on a big old flat-top desk on a small portable typewriter, my feverish banging on the keyboard when I came to the great space-battles made the little machine "walk" all over the desk—and how I would get up from my chair and follow the typewriter, still banging away in my excitement.

Although he is talking of pulp writer Max Brand and not Ed Hamilton, Jack Williamson makes a relevant comment: "When I came to look at literary theory, it struck me that Max Brand had a lot in
common with Homer: the same poetic rhythms and repeated epithets, the same vast backgrounds and giant-size characters and themes of history being made. Brand's rapid typing, unrevised, wasn't all that different from oral composition. Later Williamson remarks, "Pulp paper itself was nearly as ephemeral as a strolling minstrel's chant."

Hamilton's reputation suffered in the 1940's from his authorship of Captain Future, a magazine devoted to the adventures of a science fiction superhero. Aimed at a juvenile audience, Captain Future had been cynically conceived and came to be seen by many as exploitive of genuine science fiction. Like parts off an assembly line, Captain Future stories were carefully designed to be as much like one another as possible. They were written to fit strict guidelines, says Sam Maskowitz. He tells us, for example: "Each story must be a crusade to bring to justice an arch villain; and, in each novel, the hero must be captured and escape three times." In addition, in 1938 Hamilton had had a personal falling out with John Campbell, so that he, like his wife, was not a part of Astounding's "Golden Age."

For a few years after his marriage, Hamilton's stories appeared regularly in Startling and Thrilling Wonder. Their author, however, had begun a second career in the comics. His work there increasingly took him away from magazine science fiction. Hamilton, in 1946, followed his friend Mort Weisinger, ex-editor of Captain Future, to DC Comics, where Weisinger became editorial director. A goodly number of science fiction figures wrote for the comics during the forties, Alfred Bester, Horace Gold, Sam Merwin, Henry Kuttner and Otto Binder, among others. Hamilton, however, stayed with it the longest and was the most
successful. In his wife's words: "He became one of the top two or three top writers for Batman and Superman comics, and this took up much of his time and energy for nearly twenty years." As mentioned, Hamilton built a quite considerable reputation. Schwartz, who had left science fiction agenting in 1944 to work for All-American Comics, also did well in the field, eventually becoming Senior Editor at DC Comics. He readily agreed with Brackett's assessment of her husband's status as a top writer, and added: "You know, in dealing with science fiction as a whole, the comics are just as important as the pulps." In the 1950's Schwartz edited two of the best of the science fiction comic books, Mystery in Space and Strange Adventures; Hamilton wrote for both.

Ed Hamilton, however, had mixed feelings about his work for the comics, as Brackett, Williamson and Schwartz all agree. Though he wrote them for two decades, Hamilton is on record as having regarded the comics as a temporary thing. He would occasionally make statements like: "Well, of course, the main attraction with comic books was that they paid so much more than science fiction." I asked Schwartz what Hamilton disliked about his job. He replied: "He was too good a writer. It wasn't demeaning but it didn't take much literary skill." Brackett wrote to the Hamiltons' mutual friend, fellow Weird Tales writer E. Hoffmann Price: "... Ed did his ball-carrying in the comics, during the falling in time of the magazine
markets: ... And it was a man-killing business, even though he was
doing it for old friends for whom he had great affection, and they for
him." 231 Price, who had been Hamilton's friend since 1931, gave as his
opinion: "It [writing for the comics] was a desperate effort to make a
living. When the pulps failed, my answer was to get a job, also
moonlighting job, plus side lines, and quit writing till I made a
modest retirement. He sweated it out in the comics." 232 No evidence
at all exists that the situation was ever a cause of friction between
Brackett and Hamilton, but there is certainly a sharp contrast between
her income and status as a screenwriter and her husband's as a writer
of scripts for comic books. To outward eyes, however, the couple
always functioned as a team, each a staunch public admirer of the other.

Hamilton makes his own, rather cheerful accounting of Captain
Future, Superman, Batman et al in an engaging 6,000 word memoir written
in mid-1976 for the paperback/magazine Weird Heroes. Moreover,
whatever the nature of Hamilton's burden, Brackett helped at least a
little. Revealing yet another—and previously unknown—example of
Brackett's range as a writer, Schwartz told me: "[at times when] Ed
wasn't feeling well she ghostwrote some [comic] stories. One was for
Strange Adventures and the other was a Batman story." 233 A later
Schwartz letter identified the Batman as "The Lord of Batmanor". 234

Hamilton never stopped writing (and selling) science fiction but
his later work had little impact on the field. Perhaps this is because
he stuck with the familiar forms of an earlier age, although as the
Science Fiction Encyclopedia says: "After his marriage to Leigh
Brackett in 1946 his output diminished, but the quality increased. In 1967 and 1968, after his retirement from the comics, Hamilton produced three short novels for Ace Books, the "Starwolf" series. These final space opera stories were written and sold a full forty years after "Within the Nebula." Brackett, I think, puts the case fairly when she writes: "In a time when wide-ranging star-adventures were out of fashion, he continued to write them with eminent success; they had become more literary without becoming dull or pretentious."

It is possible, even tempting, to find irony in the fact that Ed Hamilton died at the beginning of 1977, the same year that *Star Wars*, among the most commercially successful movies ever made, was released. Even to a casual eye there are many similarities between Hamilton's space operas, perhaps especially the 1946 novel *The Star Kings*, and the George Lucas movie. Barry Malzberg, in fact, after noting that at the time of Hamilton's death all of his fiction was out of print, states flatly: "Much of Star Wars and The Empire Strikes Back appear to be based upon a close reading of his work." It is true that there was a good deal of comment within the science fiction world when Lucas hired Leigh Brackett (whom Malzberg discusses in this context solely as Hamilton's wife) to do the script for the sequel to *Star Wars*. Lloyd Biggle, Jr. states that "the reaction of myself and some other writers when we heard that she would do the script for the second *Star Wars* was 'the next one will have a plot.' " Reversing Malzberg's point, a 1984 essay in *Amazing* by science fiction writer and critic Algis Budrys discusses in detail Brackett's influence on *Star Wars*. 
Budrys claims: "George Lucas is the man who filmed a Planet story."

Of Lucas's hiring of Brackett, he writes: "It was, of course, only the polite thing to do."240

I would like to respond briefly to Malzberg's point, since I think it is simultaneously unfair to Lucas, Brackett and Hamilton. His remark, however, does contain the proverbial grain of truth; it is a useful reminder, if one is needed, that there are clear and immediate sources for Star Wars and the two following films. Hamilton, who also wrote many of the super hero comic books that Lucas loved as a child, is without a doubt one spiritual godfather to the movie. But the outrage that Malzberg gives to the observation is hollow; the indignation, upon closer examination, seems a sham.

First, Hamilton neither owned nor originated space opera, so it is silly to imagine it could be stolen from him. The space opera universe was the communal creation of scores of pulp writers. Hamilton was among the first and among the most successful, but no more so than other 1930s writers like John Campbell, Jr., Doc Smith, and Jack Williamson. In addition, important elements of space opera had originated in the works of pulp writers of the generation before. Edgar Rice Burroughs was one; another—a particular influence on the young Hamilton—was the now long forgotten pulpster for the Munsey magazines with the evocative name of Homer Eon Flint.241 Moreover, the core elements of space opera are as old as the Greek myths and the stories of the original Homer.
Second, Lucas has made no secret of his copious and varied borrowings of plots, character and exotic trappings; an essential, obvious part of the appeal of Star Wars is its nostalgia for the entertainments of a vanished American past. What matters about the movie is that Lucas put to good use materials available to anyone. Specifically, he succeeded in making a technologically sophisticated movie that captured the kinetic narrative movement and vivid color of old fashioned space opera. Was there ever any question that Lucas’s artistic achievement was just that, transferring to film the vigor and immediacy of good pulp writing, rather than the originality of his concepts?

Third, and most important, Malzberg’s observation does Hamilton, whom it ostensibly defends, a subtle disservice. Hamilton was not a failure because Lucas is a success. Hamilton, in actuality, was not a failure. The field that mattered most to him was science fiction; in the 20s and 30s he rose to a prominence and acclaim that were all any science fiction writer could then hope to achieve. Canons of taste and literary fashion changed, but Hamilton remained a respected member of the science fiction community. He suffered neither poverty nor personal rejection. All his life he was a popular guest at science fiction conventions, where he and his wife were figures whose stories and opinions were eagerly sought after. In 1964, Hamilton and Brackett were co-guests of honor at the Oakland World Science Fiction Convention. All his life, too, Hamilton found ready markets for his work; to say the least about his career, he was for five decades a successful commercial writer. Nor was Hamilton regarded by his
audience as a relic from a dusty past. In 1973 science fiction writer Lloyd Biggle gave a party for Hamilton and Brackett, who were his house guests for several days. Biggle related with some surprise the lionization of Hamilton by the young Michigan science fiction fans he had invited. Due to Hamilton's involvement with Superman and the rest, Biggle said, the fans obviously regarded him as a popular contemporary writer.242

Hamilton was not trapped in the grinding poverty that stunted the life of his pulp contemporary (and correspondent) H. P. Lovecraft. Instead Hamilton lived the last part of his life in upper middle-class comfort, travelling constantly. Ed Hamilton was a human being who wrote professionally for fifty years; of course he encountered some frustration and unhappiness. He often wrote to deadlines and under confining editorial restrictions; for much of his life it was financially necessary for Hamilton to turn out material at a high rate of speed. His life offers clues as to the personal costs of his enormous production. At his death he had written 205 science fiction short stories; 39 science fiction novels; some hundreds of comic strips; one detective novel; and assorted mystery and horror short stories.243 But his career stands apart from George Lucas's; Hamilton's successes and failures were his own. Who can tell, one day the critical consensus may be that Hamilton's was the career more vital and significant than Lucas's. Any comparison based on Lucas making more money is finally shallow.

All of his friends remember Hamilton as an interesting conversationalist with an especially good stock of stories that he told
well. He was an obviously intelligent man and one who deeply loved books. Brackett termed her husband a "bibliophile"; certainly Hamilton had the passions of a serious collector and accumulated an extensive library of first editions. As a writer, Hamilton remains something of an enigma: he did a great deal of routine work, but had also an original mind and was always capable of rising above the routine. A pure pulp science fiction writer, in many ways he personified the virtues and vices of the medium itself. It is intriguing but not surprising that he married a woman nicknamed "Queen of the Space Opera."

But Star Wars and its attendant tangle of confused ironies was thirty years in the future of 1947, the first year Brackett and Hamilton spent as a couple. They lived in Los Angeles, where, as Hamilton wrote, "our two typewriters now rattle in the same apartment."244 Their living came initially from the space opera they both wrote for the science fiction pulps; then Hamilton's money from the comics became increasingly important. However, the Los Angeles apartment was a temporary residence; Hamilton had strong family ties back east as well as an affection for the countryside around Newcastle, Pennsylvania where he had grown up. Consequently, in the summer of 1949 Brackett and Hamilton set out on a cross-country car trip, accompanied by their friends Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore. The trip was a highlight of the couple's friendship, although Lloyd Biggle told me that, "Ed said when he proposed it Henry thought it would be certain to wreck their friendship."245 Once back east the Hamiltons sought a chance to settle down.
In 1950, Brackett and Hamilton bought a country home in northeastern Ohio, just across from the Pennsylvania border. Hamilton wrote: "It was an ancient little Ohio farmhouse, built in 1819, a mile outside the quaint New England-like village of Kinsman ... the house had been vacant and abandoned for years, it had never had electricity, and its water supply was a stone-lined well dug out sometime before the Civil War." The place must have offered a series of startling contrasts to life in Los Angeles. Kinsman is tiny to begin with, and the Hamiltons lived by themselves on the 33 acres of land they had purchased along with the old house.

Their new home was quiet, isolated and located in an area of some natural beauty. In addition, the land had in the past for many years had belonged to Hamilton's family. Furthermore, Hamilton's sister Adeline lived with her husband, "across the Orangeville-Kinsman Road from the house which the Hamiltons bought." Another sister who lived nearby, Esther Hamilton, was a columnist for the Youngstown Vindicator.

Fixing up "our ancient wreck in the woods" was an on-going job that seems to have happily occupied Brackett and Hamilton for much of the rest of their lives. In their first years in Ohio, when all income came from the pulps and the comics and money was scarce, the couple themselves did a great deal of the work that needed to be done on the 19th century farmhouse. Hard manual labor became a constant part of the background of Brackett's life; I've wondered to what extent she missed the beach and the volleyball games. A hard worker at all that
she attempted, she threw herself into the battles of an Ohio farm life that even in 1950 represented an older and more primitive style of existence. She learned to scythe a lawn and use a bush hook, to put up her own ceilings and her own preserves, and, writes Hamilton, "lay down new floors, tack up wall paneling, and on at least one occasion she was up on the roof helping tack shingles." In between the space operas set on Mars or Venus she writes of "doing battle with burdocks the size of oaks ... [and] ripping four by eight sheets of 3/4 inch ply the long way with a handsaw, and hammering far into the night.

Obviously, Ohio offered a different set of experiences to a woman who had grown up in a California beach house and been a Hollywood scriptwriter. There was more to it, too, than the work of reconstruction on the old house. Always sensitive to her environment, Brackett responded strongly to the different texture of the rural midwest. She seems to have experienced in a physical, immediate way the natural rhythms of the country and the weather and of farming communities. A native Southern Californian, she encountered the seasons and wrote of the pleasures of life in "this green and fertile Midwest ... spring blossoms, autumn leaves, and water."

Her fiction profited from her new knowledge, most notably in The Long Tomorrow (1955). The novel began, Hamilton tells us, "... from her interest in the Ohio village background that is now [c. 1975] her home for half the year (the other half being spent in the California desert). When she first came to Ohio, she was greatly intrigued by the Amish folk here who continue their old, simple way of life in the midst
of the modern world." The Amish reject the notion of progress and so also reject the technologies that would change their lives; one might expect a science fiction writer to be fascinated. Imagine for a moment the contrast the Amish must have made with the members of the LASFS. Two more divergent subcultures might be hard to find in America. In any case, The Long Tomorrow was a change of pace novel for Brackett. It contains a finely-drawn portrait, subtle and sensual and judicious, of Ohio farm life under what amounts to the conditions of the 1850's. It has been the most praised of all her books. It seems clear that she would not—and could not—have written it had she and Hamilton not set up residence in Kinsman.

The purchase of the Ohio home in 1950, with Brackett slightly more than halfway through her life, set in place the last of the key patterns that shaped her existence. The physical rhythms of her life were soon established. For the next quarter century Brackett would oscillate between Ohio and California. The couple's roots appear to have been deepest in Kinsman, although in 1967 she and Hamilton bought a house in Lancaster, California that became a true second home. By her early thirties Brackett had made her essential choices, both personal and career; the rest of her life is the story of the consequences of those choices. Her best artistically still lay ahead, and perhaps her time of personal fulfillment. However, no more radical changes occur.

Brackett continued to do the kind of work that she had always done: pulp science fiction; mystery novels; and screenplays. She improved, but improvement was a matter of refining and polishing what
she was already doing. Two books stand out from this neat tri-partal career symmetry. One has already been mentioned, *The Long Tomorrow*. The other is *Follow the Free Wind* (1963), an historical novel set in the American West of the early 19th century. The central character, mulatto mountain man Jim Beckwourth, is an historical figure who had long been one of Hamilton’s heroes. All his life Hamilton had pursued a serious amateur’s interest in the history of the West. In 1935 and 1937 he had spent weeks visiting Jack Williamson at his parent’s ranch in New Mexico. His farmhouse in Ohio contained a library of 3,000 books. Wrote Hamilton: "A very large portion of this library consists of history, especially ancient history and the history of the American West." He had begun a book on Beckwourth, then put it aside. Brackett restarted the project and wrote the novel. As critic Rosemarie Arbur notes: "This [*Follow the Free Wind*] is the only western Brackett ever wrote, yet it merited the 1963 Silver Spur Award from the Western Writers of America for being that year’s best western." Brackett dedicated the book to her husband: "For Edmond, Who First Introduced Me To The Enemy Of Horses." Brackett’s marriage to Hamilton proved solid. Their relationship endured, to all appearances happily, until his death in 1977. In fact, her life, viewed from the outside, seems to have been a good one. Her career as a writer was certainly an ongoing success. Brackett was a reliable producer of good work and she was well paid. She established a reputation for competence in several different fields. She got better as she got older. Money was not a problem. From all accounts,
although there can be no final proof of this sort of statement, she was also a woman fundamentally at peace with herself and her life.

After the 1947 collapse of the job market for Hollywood screenwriters, Brackett returned to the science fiction pulps. There she remained a very popular though, as before, not at all prolific author. Between 1948 and 1955 she sold twenty-three stories to Thrilling Wonder, Startling and Planet, an average of three a year. These stories contain almost all of her best pulp work. They were not, however, a way to get rich. Brackett commanded top rates; Startling Stories, for example, paid her $800 for the 40,000 word short novel "Sea-Kings of Mars" (1949), two cents a word. But her rate of production could at best have provided a few thousand dollars a year. There were of course portents of better days on the horizon. In particular, the publishing industry would change in ways that financially would greatly benefit Brackett.

In the early 1950's science fiction hardcovers arrived. Publishers had at last seen an opportunity to profit from the field. Two decades of popular magazine stories were cheaply available for reprinting, while the magazines had also created an audience interested in reading or rereading them. Consequently, Brackett's first science fiction hardcover novel, The Starman (an expansion of an earlier magazine story), appeared in 1952 from Gnome Press. A British hardcover followed two years later.

Simultaneously, paperback books were flourishing. Several major publishing companies began house lines. Don Wollheim, a N.Y. science

Some works Brackett slightly revised or expanded from the original magazine version. The fact is, however, that Brackett wrote very little science fiction of any sort in the nineteen years between 1955 and 1974, only a few inconsequential short stories and the small revisions mentioned above. Even here, Ed Hamilton, uncredited, had expanded two of Brackett's magazine stories into 1964's *People of the Talisman* and *The Secret of Sinharat.* The Ace publications were essentially successful marketing and packaging strategies, with Brackett living off the artistic capital of her earlier pulp stories. Since the mid 1950's the paperbacks had become the successors of the pulps, and so were the natural market for adventure stories and fantastic fiction. These Ace reissues, moreover, were very important in keeping younger generations of science fiction readers familiar with Brackett's best work. Thus, although she wrote little current science fiction, she did not become a figure from the past.
As for the old pulp science fiction magazines themselves, they died in 1955. The collapse of the major magazine distribution network, the American News Company, was the obvious immediate cause; more fundamental problems were the challenges posed by the new media, television, and by the paperback industry. Planet Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, and Startling Stories were among the scores of magazines that ceased publication.

With her pulp markets destroyed, Brackett turned to other kinds of writing, with highly successful results. As Hamilton put it: "in eighteen months, in 1956-57, she wrote not only The Long Tomorrow but also two novels of crime and suspense, The Tiger Among Us, which became an Alan Ladd movie, and An Eye for an Eye, which formed the plot for the "Markham" series on television."262

Then, in late 1957, Howard Hawks called to offer Brackett work on the script of Rio Bravo. For the next dozen years her creative energies would be expended primarily—but not completely—on film projects with Hawks. She also found time for occasional work as a writer of radio scripts and television drama. Her radio plays include "First Nighter" and "Dr. Christian". 1962 saw the appearance of her first television drama, "Tanganyika", a production of Twentieth Century Fox Television. In 1963 she sold three scripts to the Alfred Hitchcock Hour. Later, in the 1970's, Brackett would write other television mysteries.

Scriptwriting and her work in radio and television brought Brackett good money. In the mid 1950's the Hamiltons drove a Corvair; by the
late 1950's Leigh Brackett was driving a Thunderbird; by the 1960's Ed Hamilton was driving a Corvette. In 1966 Hamilton retired from the comics. He was sixty-two and Brackett was fifty-one, and the couple wanted to travel. They went on a round the world tour. Julie Schwartz and his wife saw them off in a farewell dinner in New York; the Hamiltons visited Egypt, Iran, India and Australia; and E. Hoffmann Price welcomed them back to San Francisco. Brackett used the trip to research her last mystery novel, _The Silent Partner_ (1969).

Brackett's scriptwriting also kept the couple in constant motion, back and forth, between California and Ohio. Finally, in 1967, they bought a second home in Lancaster, California. The Hamiltons' friends, science fiction fans Roy and DeeDee Lavender, were guests at both homes. The Lavenders were kind enough to describe them for me. The dwelling in Lancaster, they said, was a typical, one-story California ranch house. Roy Lavender remembered it as "A solar house ... open, lots of glass in the house ... decorated artistically and in very good taste." DeeDee Lavender recalled Brackett's study as very colorful, done in Mexican style with a serape on the wall. The Kinsman place they described as a typical farm house, decorated in a homey early American style. The original 1819 log walls were still there, plastered over. I was interested to hear from Roy Lavender that the Hamiltons at some point had a farm pond dug out, about 100 feet by 25 feet, and "then hauled in sand so they could use it as a bathing beach." To me, the image is a fanciful one. I imagine Brackett regarding it as a final, tiny midwest echo of the distant Pacific. In
California, Brackett lived in desert country, cold enough at times for snow. The beach of her childhood, she wrote sadly, had been: "a wonderful place to grow up in. Not so now; the sand is about to sink under the weight of wall-to-wall apartment houses, and I never go there any more."  

The 1960s closed on a high point for Brackett and Hamilton. They were both ardent partisans of the space program. They connected to it emotionally and imaginatively, no doubt due to their decades spent creating human futures on other worlds. With the help of Esther Hamilton, who got them accredited for the pressbox through the Youngstown Vindicator, Hamilton and Brackett attended the 1969 Apollo 12 moon launch. The experience moved them both.  

Brackett and, especially, Hamilton were products of what now seems an America of long ago. As Hamilton said, "when I was a youngster there was a proverb, 'You could as soon do that as fly to the moon.'" People with a serious interest in that "crazy Buck Rogers stuff" were generally thought to be, said Brackett succinctly, "nutcases." Consequently, Brackett and Hamilton viewed the moon landings as a real life vindication of a romantic dream held by the early science fiction community.  

Born in 1904, Hamilton had been raised on "a farm outside Poland, Ohio," a place "without electricity, water or gas." Of his childhood Hamilton wrote: "The cows, the chickens, the sugar camps in the snowy woods which we children hung around, gave the whole feel of an old, tranquil, unchanging rural America." Six decades later his
pad." Hamilton added that the rough draft of the first half, which
was mostly about Stark and Mars, was his, while Brackett did the rough
draft of the second half, which was about the Star Kings. However,
the story was a true collaboration, which Brackett and Hamilton are
said to have deeply enjoyed. This pleasurable experience awoke in
Brackett a rebirth of interest in Stark, about whom she had a quarter
of a century ago written three of her best pulp science fantasies. She
began a series of novels involving him.

_Last Dangerous Visions_ has been scheduled for publication half a
dozen times since 1973. Editor Harlan Ellison has, alas, each time and
for any number of reasons decided not to relinquish the manuscript.
During this lengthy process, _Last Dangerous Visions_ has become
something of a legend, perhaps the most famous non-book in science
fiction history. Likewise, "Stark and the Star Kings" ranks among the
best known of all of Brackett's or Hamilton's works, though no one
except Ellison has ever read it.

Still, though it has yet to be published, the story had literary
offspring almost immediately. January of 1974 saw the serialization of
the first Stark novel, _The Ginger Star_, in _IF: Worlds of Science
Fiction_. _IF_ was _Galaxy_ 's sister magazine; _The Ginger Star_ was
Brackett's first magazine appearance in a decade and her first
significant science fiction since two 1957 stories in _Venture Science
Fiction_. Brackett had taken Stark out of the old and perhaps overly
familiar worlds of the pulp solar system, and set him on a quest on
Skaith, a new and fantastic star world she had created. Earlier in her
career, Brackett had refined and deepened the pulp Mars in many ways, but the original model she had always owed to Edgar Rice Burroughs. Skaith, a gloomy, dying world of somber magics, was entirely her own, and its creation seemed to liberate something in her imagination. Before the year was out she had published another Skaith novel, The Hounds of Skaith. It was apparent that, twenty years after the death of its parent magazine, the Planet Stories tale was making an impressive curtain call. Brackett had kept the vigor of her original pulp model while toning down the melodrama and deepening the emotions. The beautiful descriptions were still there, but not florid, as they had sometimes been in the past. These two novels were Brackett's best space opera; they represent her smoothest blending of the fabulous with the plausible. As mentioned, 1974 also saw the publication of the third and final story for Roger Elwood. In addition, on November 12 Brackett finished a teleplay called "Archer: The Body Beautiful" for Paramount Television.

Leigh Brackett concentrated mostly on teleplays during 1975. On January 15 she finished a collaborative effort with Juanita Bartlett, "The Four Pound Brick," an episode of The Rockford Files. On April 10 Brackett finished "Reflection of Fear" for Twentieth Century Fox Television. During the summer of 1975 she fell ill. She was unable to travel to California where a job writing the pilot script for an intended new television series was waiting. This was a special disappointment to her. She said: "It's the first science fiction job I've ever had in Hollywood. I don't think that most people out there
even know I write science fiction because few of them seem to read it." Upon her recovery, Brackett would work on the script during the fall and into the following year. In addition, on November 12 she finished "Secret of Morningstar Mansion," for the Nancy Drew Mystery Series.

She found time also during that busy year to edit a Ballantine paperback anthology, The Best of Planet Stories #1. Its lead story was "Lorelei of the Red Mist" (1946), by Leigh Brackett and Ray Bradbury. Brackett had written 10,000 words of it in 1944; then came the call from Howard Hawks. She turned her work over to Ray Bradbury, who wrote another 10,000 words and sold the whole to Planet.

Brackett also contributed to the volume a 3,000 word Introduction: "Beyond Our Narrow Skies." She was a writer who usually avoided theoretical discussions of science fiction, but "Beyond Our Narrow Skies" contains a clear statement of her views on space opera, its origins, and her intentions in writing it. During the 1940's, she said, Planet and Astounding published fiction with fundamentally different aims. "Astounding went for the cerebrum, Planet for the gut, and it had always seemed to me that one target was as valid as the other. Chacun a son gout." Space opera, she wrote, has always been and will always be popular:

There's a reason for this. The tale of adventure—of great courage and daring, of battle against the forces of darkness and the unknown—has been with the human race since it first learned to talk. It began as part of the primitive survival technique, interwoven with magic and ritual, to explain and propitiate the vast forces of nature with which man could not cope in any other fashion. The tales grew into religions.
They became myth and legend. They became the Mabinogion and
the Ulster Cycle and the Volupsa. They became Arthur and
Robin Hood, and Tarzan of the Apes.

The so-called space opera is the folk-tale, the hero-tale,
of our particular niche in history.301

Brackett's final literary space opera, The Reavers of Skaith, was
published in 1976. During that same year the Science Fiction Book Club
collected the three Ballantine paperbacks and issued them as a single
volume: The Book of Skaith. This made it obvious that the Skaith
trilogy—like J. R. R. Tolkein's Lord of the Rings—was a single story
of many interwoven parts. As with Tolkein's work, the Skaith books had
been published separately for commercial reasons, not artistic ones.

In addition, at some time in the first half of 1976 Brackett
finished the script for the television pilot illness had kept her from
writing in the summer of 1975. Her teleplay was entitled "The Day the
Men Went Mad." However, the proposed series, a Twilight Zone–like
anthology to be called The Theatre of the Unknown, like many other
Hollywood projects never materialized.302

Brackett started work on a fourth Eric John Stark novel in 1976,
but stopped as it became apparent that Ed Hamilton was dying. Marion
Zimmer Bradle told me: "He'd [Hamilton] always wanted to visit England
and they'd planned that someday they'd go. When she knew he had cancer
the first thing she did was get money together to take him to England
so that he could stay there for a few weeks, quietly, on a farm. And
he was very happy."303 In October Brackett and Hamilton were visitors
at the second World Fantasy Convention in New York. The couple
returned to California, where Ed Hamilton died on February 1, 1977.
1977 saw the appearance of several autobiographical pieces that had obviously been written the year before. As mentioned, her husband had edited *The Best of Leigh Brackett* and written an Introduction for it; Brackett wrote a short Afterword for the book. She herself had edited *The Best of Edmond Hamilton* and written a lengthy Introduction for the volume. She also wrote a 1,000 word foreword to *The Sword Woman*, by Robert E. Howard. Brackett had read and liked Howard in the 1930's. Her Introduction celebrated Howard's heroine:

> It's too bad that Robert E. Howard didn't write more stories about his Sword Woman, Dark Agnes de Chastillon. She was quite a character ... more intelligent than Conan, more attractive than Solomon Kane, and as fine a swashbuckler as any of Howard's heroes. Perhaps she came a little before her time. Women who could do things were not very popular in fiction back in the '30s, particularly in the adventure story field. 304

Brackett spent the summer of 1977 with Hamilton's sister Adeline in Kinsman, then returned to California. 305 She returned to work on a fourth Stark novel. Then George Lucas, whose *Star Wars* had been an enormous box office success, called to ask her to do the script for the sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*. According to Julie Schwartz, Leigh was delighted by the offer. 306 She worked on the script all of the final year of her life, finishing the first draft early in 1978. She turned the draft in to Lucas, then immediately entered Lancaster General Hospital in Palmdale, California. There, on Saturday, March 18, 1978, at 1:30 p.m., she died of cancer. Her obituary in the *Youngstown Vindicator* noted that she had been ill for the previous five years and had been hospitalized several times previously. 307
By late 1976, if not long before, Leigh Brackett must have known she was dying. It was typical of her to spend her last year hard at work at her life's chosen task, writing. One might wonder why she dropped the fourth Skaith novel and accepted the contract for *The Empire Strikes Back*. The contract would make her rich, of course; but she was already well off, knew she would not live to spend the money, and she had no direct heirs. Fred Pohl, science fiction writer and editor, had been co-guest of honor with Brackett at a convention immediately after she had signed to do the second Lucas film. He offered this speculation, which I think as good a guess as any.

I think she was aware that what Lucas was doing was taking the science fiction pulp stories of the 1930's and 1940's and putting them on the screen, and of course she was there. She was part of that. I know that it gave her a lot of pleasure. It was the two things she was really good at, science fiction and film scripts. For the first time in her life I think they went together.

Of course, Brackett did not live to see the film, and another writer had to revise and polish her first draft. Still, *The Empire Strikes Back* was a critical and commercial success. It was one of the most popular movies ever made, and a rare example of a sequel not inferior to the original. It was a good note to leave on.
Chapter One: Notes

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5 Brackett, interview conducted by Paul Walker, Sept.-Nov. 1973, p. 373; hereafter cited as Walker.


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8 Walker, p. 373.

9 Walker, p. 373.

10 Youngstown, p. 3.


12 Youngstown, p. 15.

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18 Youngstown, p. 3.

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29 Youngstown, p. 1.

30 Walker, p. 375.

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48 Walker, p. 376.


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52 Youngstown, p. 15.
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54 "Author," p. 112.
55 "Author," p. 113.
56 Youngstown, p. 3.
57 Youngstown, p. 1.
58 Youngstown, p. 2.
59 Youngstown, p. 2.
60 "Author," p. 113.
61 "Author," p. 113.
62 "Author," p. 113.
63 "Author, p. 113.
64 Walker, p. 376.
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66 Youngstown, p. 3.
67 Youngstown, p. 3.
68 "Author," p. 112.
68 "Author," p. 113.
70 Youngstown, p. 6.
73 SFR, p. 12.
74 "Author," p. 113.
75 "Author," p. 113.
76 Walker, p. 376.
77 Youngstown, p. 10.
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79 SFR, p. 8.
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81 Walker, p. 377.
82 Walker, p. 377.
83 Walker, p. 377.
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87 Walker, p. 284.

89 Moskowitz, "Kuttner," p. 320.


91 Bradbury, intro. Best Kuttner, p. viii.


95 Youngstown, p. 4.

96 Youngstown, p. 4.


101 Malzberg, Engines, p. 16.

102 Personal interview with Julius Schwartz, 3 Sept. 1984.


104 Malzberg, Engines, p. 114.


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108 Youngstown, p. 2.
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123 Carr, *Classic Science Fiction*, p. 344.
124 Carr, *Classic Science Fiction*, p. 344.
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130 Letter received from Julius Schwartz, 6 Sept 1984; hereafter cited as Schwartz list.
131 Schwartz list.
132 Carr, p. 344.
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134 Hamilton, intro. to Best Brackett, p. viii.
135 Schwartz list.
138 Schwartz list.
139 Williamson, Wonder, p. 54.
140 Williamson, Wonder, p. 185.
143 Brackett, Afterword, p. 359.
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145 Schwartz list.
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152 Pronzini, *Detective and Mystery Stories*, p. 122.


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157 *Youngstown*, p. 4.

158 Bradbury, intro. to *A Memory of Murder*, p. 7.


160 Schwartz list, somewhat modified by further bibliographic information received in a letter from Robert E. Briney, 20 Jan. 1987.

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166 *Youngstown*, p. 5.

167 *Youngstown*, p. 3.


170 Briney, p. 259.


Brackett, response to questionnaire from Dennis Aig (1976), p. 1.

Youngstown, p. 6.

SFR, p. 12


Cook, Narrative Film, p. 371.


Briney, p. 258.

Walker, p. 379.


Youngstown, p. 6.

Personal interview with Dennis Aig, 9 Feb. 1984.

McBride, Hawks on Hawks, p. 57.


Cook, Narrative Film, p. 293.

A more complete list would include: James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Joan Crawford, Gary Cooper, John and Lionel Barrymore, Carol Lombard, Frances Farmer, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, Rita Hayworth, Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck, John Wayne, Montgomery Cliff, Danny Kaye, Kirk Douglas, Ginger Rogers, Marilyn Monroe, Charles Coburn, Jane Russell, Joan Collins (as Princess Nellifer in The Land of the Pharaohs 1955), Dean Martin, Angie Dickerson, James Caan, Robert Mitchum, and of course
Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall.


192 Katz, *Film Encyclopedia*, p. 542.


195 Cook, *Narrative Film*, p. 293.


199 Brackett, letter sent to me by E. Hoffmann Price, 24 May, 1985. Internal evidence indicates Brackett sent the letter to Price some time during the late 1960s.


206 McBride, *Hawks on Hawks*, p. 3.


208 SFR, p. 7.

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210 Walker, p. 369.

211 SFR, p. 12.

214 Nicholls, Science Fiction Encyclopedia, p. 271.
217 Williamson, Wonder, p. 74.
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219 Williamson, Wonder, p. 64.
220 Williamson, Wonder, p. 64.
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229 SFR, p. 8.
Letter received from Julius Schwartz, 7 Nov. 1984.

Nicholls, Science Fiction Encyclopedia, p. 271.

Brackett, intro. to Best of Hamilton, p. xv.

Malzberg, Engines, p. 82.


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Hamilton, intro. to Best Brackett, p. xi.


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Brackett, Afterword, p. 360.

Hamilton, intro. to Best Brackett, p. xi.

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Hamilton, intro. to Best of Brackett, p. x.

256 Arbur, Biblio, p. 16.


258 see Arbur Biblio, pp. 8-13.

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263 Youngstown Vindicator, Obituary: "Leigh Brackett Hamilton Dies; Book, Movie Writer" (19 Mar. 1978), Section D, p. 18; hereafter cited as Vindicator obituary.


265 Arbur, Biblio, p. 25.

266 Personal interview with Roy and Dee Dee Lavendar, 25 June 1984.

267 Personal interview with Dennis Aig and Annie Bertignoli, 9 Feb. 1984.


271 Brackett, Afterword, p. 361.

272 see, for example, Brackett and Hamilton's Vindicator articles, 19 Nov. 1969.

273 Youngstown, p. 13.


275 Youngstown, p. 4.
279 Walders, p. 73.
280 Youngstown, p. 12.
281 Williamson, Locus, p. 2.
282 Williamson, Locus, p. 2.
285 Walders, p. 74.
286 Walders, p. 74.
289 Arbur, Biblio, p. 32.
290 As of this writing (June 1988) still unpublished.
291 SFR, p. 13.
292 SFR, p. 13.
293 Arbur, "No 'Long Goodbye' is Good Enough," p. 5.
297 SFR, p. 13.
300 Brackett, intro. to Best Planet Stories, p. 2.
301 Brackett, intro. to *Best Planet Stories*, p. 2.

302 SFR, p. 13.


CHAPTER II
THE PULP ERA: 1896-1955

In this chapter I try to establish what pulp is and the conditions, limits and conventions under which it was written in the bygone days of the pulp magazines. Through this condensed history I hope to impart a sense of what it means to say that Leigh Brackett began as—and in some ways remained—a pulp writer. It will, I trust, be clear that I do not regard becoming a successful pulp writer an inconsiderable achievement. That Brackett was primarily a science fiction writer is also important, for among the many pulp genres the SF magazines were unique. They offered her opportunities a pulp writer rarely found elsewhere. Among them were the artistic potential of the form, the loyalty and cohesiveness of the audience, and the ambition and high standards of the field's most important editors.¹

The first true mass circulation magazines were born in the 1880s, their arrival made both possible and inevitable by the growing technological and social complexity of the United States. Large scale advertising, modern techniques of mass distribution, cheap timber, the railroads, and the steadily increasing literacy of the general population had created a market and the means to exploit it. The result was the modern magazine era.²
Frank A. Munsey's *Argosy* appeared in 1896, marking the split of the mass magazines into two groups, the slicks and the pulps. These names were derived from the types of paper used by the two sets of magazines. According to *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, "Pulp magazines, as their name suggests, were printed on cheap paper manufactured from chemically treated wood pulp, a process invented in the early 1880s." The term "pulp" however soon came to stand for more than the inexpensive grade of paper. As critic Algis Budrys describes the ongoing process: "'Pulp' once meant a kind of paper, then a kind of magazine and then a kind of writing. . . . Because it's [now] a style, independent of physical format, it seems quite likely that pulp will never disappear." The immense commercial success of current movies such as *Rambo* and *Rocky IV* attest to the probable truth of Budrys's assertion. The pulps were loud; the material they published was geared toward the sensational and the fantastic. The slicks, on the other hand, were aimed at the middle class and "were very much family magazines, with a more demure format, and usually were printed on coated, slick paper." The *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's* were examples of popular "slick" magazines.

For decades the pulps contained all of American science fiction, although the pulps in their prime encompassed much more than SF. Exact circulation figures are now impossible to determine, but the numbers were certainly very large and the pulps themselves were virtually omnipresent. Critic Frank Cioffi thinks "an approximate [monthly] figure for pulp magazine circulation of the mid-thirties is ten million—and since most magazines were read by at least three
people, it can be fairly guessed that the pulps were read by thirty to forty percent of the literate American public. Fred Pohl, who became that year the nineteen-year-old editor of two minor SF magazines, lists as the largest pulp chains of 1939 Popular Publications, the Thrilling Group, and Street & Smith, then continues, "but there were at least a dozen other sizeable pulp houses, and any number of small and transients. Put them all together and there were close to five hundred pulp magazines, with aggregate annual sales of around a hundred million copies." To put these circulation figures in perspective, one should remember that the 1930s America absorbing this flood of pulp had a population little more than half that of today. Those hundred million or so magazines can be roughly divided into four categories: adventure, western, detective, and love stories. These general classes, though, could themselves be subdivided almost endlessly: war stories, sea stories, air stories, jungle stories, oriental stories, sports stories, and pseudo-science stories (or what we today call science fiction).

Though fragmented into a myriad of specialized categories, the pulps were true mass media. They provided a counterpoint to Hollywood's equally genre oriented movies. They played a dominant role in the everyday imagination of the nation, fixing, for example, the image of the Wild West in the public mind. The daydreams of the pulp machine were shared by millions and pulp heroes achieved widespread fame. The history of a major firm such as Street & Smith shows numerous examples of pulp's ability to fire the popular imagination. Horatio Alger's plucky poor boys with interchangeable
names—Ragged, Dick, Tattered Tom—and the rags to riches melodramas in which they starred are part of the firm's contribution to American popular culture. So are Buffalo Bill, Frank Merriwell of Yale, the Shadow, and Doc Savage. Street & Smith published both the first detective magazine and Astounding Science Fiction. Though admittedly more successful than most, Street & Smith was but one of a great crowd of competing chains and magazines. Widely scorned, the pulps were also widely read; they are best thought of as a pipeline that led directly to the nation's collective unconscious.

The pulp magazines, however, have never been awarded anything remotely like the study accorded to their twentieth century counterparts, the movies. To the extent that they have been noticed, they have been dismissed. Frank Cioffi's study of science fiction in the thirties, Formula Fiction?, claims "judging from the criticism written on the pulps, they are a form of popular literature that is widely misunderstood." Why is it, Cioffi asks, that "an industry which provided the American public with enormous amounts of reading material should be completely ignored today" and suggests a part of the reason may be "ideological biases that are difficult to overcome." Why is it, Cioffi asks, that "an industry which provided the American public with enormous amounts of reading material should be completely ignored today" and suggests a part of the reason may be "ideological biases that are difficult to overcome."9

The problem perhaps was that pulp magazines were unabashedly money-making enterprises and as such were heavily dependent on economies of scale. A pulp came into existence because a publisher saw an opportunity to make a profit; it stayed in existence only by regularly showing a profit. For pulp publisher and writer both, the key to profit was sustained high volume production: the publisher hoping to
print (and sell) as many copies of as many magazines as was possible; the writer to produce (and sell) as many words in a year as he could. Thus, when Street&Smith came to authorize a history of its hundred year existence, the resulting book was proudly titled *The Fiction Factory*. Within such pulp factories, writers were one part of a vast assembly line and not regarded by anybody—including, usually, themselves—as the most important part. From the publishers' point of view, pulp stories were a commodity, no different from grain or leather or cloth. Pulp was a raw material they bought more or less indiscriminately from anyone who could produce it, altered to fit house needs and policies, and published by the ton. Stories existed for no other reason than to make money for the package in which they were distributed, that is, the magazine (directly) and (indirectly) the chain to which the individual magazine belonged. Like other commodities, pulp was commonly ordered in the specific amount needed. Thus, an editor might assign a writer he considered reliable a 10,000 word story, such being the number needed to fill a certain size hole in the magazine's projected makeup for the month; the editor might as easily have asked for 5,000 words or 20,000. The writer's function was to produce the requisite number of words by the—often very short—deadline. In 1937, veteran editor and publisher Harold Hersey wrote *Pulpwood Editor*, a revealing account of his lifetime in the pulps. An anecdote refers to then popular pulp writer Harold de Polo, who "used the pseudonym 'Philip Space' for many yarns." Adds Hersey, "I have always felt that this nom de plume symbolized the pulpwood universe to a T."
Students in a hard school, pulp writers who survived developed attitudes and working methods quite different from those traditionally associated with literary creativity. Some became mini-fiction factories in their own right. Fred Pohl offers a sharp-edged picture of such a writer:

If you want to think of a successful pulp writer in the late 30s, imagine a man with a forty-dollar typewriter on a kitchen table. By his right hand is an ashtray with a cigarette burning in it and a cup of coffee or a bottle of beer within easy reach. Stacked just past his typewriter are white sheets, carbons, and second sheets. Stacked to his left are finished pages, complete with carbon copies. He has taught himself to type reasonably neatly because he can't afford a stenographer, and above all he has taught himself to type fast. A prolific pulpster could keep up a steady forty or fifty words a minute for long periods; there were a few writers who wrote ten thousand words a day [emphasis Pohl's] and kept it up for years on end. Some writers contracted to write the entire contents of some magazines on a flat per-issue fee, under a dozen pseudonyms... sometimes the fee for a whole magazine was as little as $150, for as much as sixty thousand words.12

Walter B. Gibson, who as Maxwell Grant wrote The Shadow for Street& Smith, "once estimated he had written more than 29 million words during his career" including for many years "two 60,000 word novels every month featuring the cloaked crime fighter."13

In any case, in the pulps the total package—the magazine—was what counted, not the individual story, and certainly not the individuality of the writer. For Algis Budrys, this situation illustrates the "fundamental difference between the classical publishing attitude—that the publisher is transmitting the author's work to the author's audience—and the commercial attitude, which is that the audience is the publisher's and the role of the author is
that of a subcontractor." What qualities did a pulp editor value in a writer? According to Fred Pohl: "Dependability, personal contact, and adherence to policy, those were the important considerations; literary quality came a poor fourth." It might be as well to pause here for a moment and recall that Leigh Brackett's initial success as a writer came through obtaining Julie Schwartz as an agent—a New Yorker who knew and was known by all the science fiction editors and who regularly made the rounds of their offices to determine what they wanted.

A pulp fact of life was the unequal nature of the editor/writer relationship. Editors were powerful, writers plentiful and pliable. As a consequence, the history of magazine science fiction is as much or more about strong editors as important writers. Budrys points out:

The situation of the writer moved to produce a piece of work and then casting about for a publication medium is still not as frequent in SF as in other forms, and during the core period here discussed [c. 1926-1955] was extremely rare. The novice writer, of course, is an exception, but any writer displaying consistent promise was quickly encouraged by editors to write essentially to their order. The pulps, knowing what they wanted, sought out writers who could supply it to demand and on time. Science fiction, originating as a pulp genre, was no exception. Ed Hamilton, contracting in 1940 to write Captain Future magazine for Mort Weisinger, was firmly in this tradition. The early stages of Leigh Brackett's career could serve as an illustration of Budrys's point about novice writers and pulp editors. Later, although never sufficiently prolific to fill a monthly magazine with her product, the now established Brackett
regularly received smaller orders from editors who knew she was reliable. In 1947, for example, Startling Stories's editor Sam Merwin requested 40,000 words (worth $800). Since she wrote for the science fiction pulps, her editors seemed to have been aware that the fiction she produced was of a higher quality than most, but equally important to Brackett's success was her reputation for delivering on time. The ability to meet deadlines was crucial to a pulp writer's career. The fiction factories were insatiable. Magazines came out on a monthly basis (the most successful came out twice a month; a few appeared weekly) and had a predetermined number of pages, all of which had to be filled. A writer who was late with a promised manuscript created a serious problem for an editor.

After a story was bought—or, if you will, an order was filled—the pulps practiced other commercial strategies of interest to a critic. Stylistic analysis of a story, for example, may be next to impossible, due to the difficulty in determining what a pulp writer actually wrote, as opposed to what was finally published. Manuscripts submitted to pulp magazines were often processed by editors to make them as uniform as possible. As Budrys puts it: "From an operational standpoint, a story becomes merchandise the instant the manuscript and publishing rights have been purchased." Once it was their property, pulp editors had no qualms about revising a story to bring it into line with house policy. This revision could be severe in the extreme. House policy might very well include such drastic imperatives as: 1) breaking all compound sentences into simple ones; 2) substituting shorter words for all words containing more than a
certain number of syllables; 3) breaking up all long paragraphs (this
of course would be done without regard to topic sentences); 4)
requiring a mandatory amount of dialogue (if the writer had not
included sufficient dialogue, the editor would simply add more); and
5) excising "complicated" punctuation marks such as the semi-colon.¹⁹

Editors understandably considered work of this sort tedious,
though they were sometimes saddled with worse. Manuscripts
(particularly those coming from a writer who month after month
produced the entire contents of a magazine) might arrive in such awful
disarray that the interests of simple coherence required an editor to
rewrite from end to end, becoming in effect unannounced co-author.
Science fiction writer Damon Knight, then an obscure fan, was in 1943
hired—on the recommendation of fellow fan Fred Pohl—by Popular
Publications as an assistant editor. Knight reports G-8 and His
Battle Aces (an air war pulp written by one man, Robert J. Hogan) to
have been so terrible that the staffers rotated editorial
responsibilities among themselves. Remembers Knight: "A G-8
manuscript edited by Fred [Pohl], which they showed me, had no word of
the original text unchanged. The one I did concerned a plot by the
Germans in World War I to make their soldiers incredibly fierce by
injecting them with rhinoceros juice."²⁰ Pohl himself recalls, "the
girl who checked the word count in manuscripts held the pages upside
down so she wouldn't have to read them."²¹

Pulp magazines were also edited according to strict formulas of
content. An individual house might have specific conventions a story
must follow: "[that] the hero would face a physical confrontation of
some sort within the text of the first full printed page," for example. Shoot the sheriff in the first paragraph, young writers were advised by veteran pulpsters. Other conventions were industry wide, e.g., "brunette women could wear more daring dress than blondes and act faster." The average pulp editor spent a good part of his time enforcing such conventions and house rules.

Where the author failed to supply them [pulp conventions], supposing the manuscript were purchased nevertheless, the editor was under orders to impose them. (Nor was the author ever consulted, though he might be instructed in how to spare the editor trouble next time.)

To a contemporary reader, highly noticeable pulp formulas of content are the assumptions about race and sex. Ethnic stereotypes were the norm; racism, the more powerful for being largely unconscious, was everywhere. In these crudities the pulps were the mirror of the culture from which they spring. As L. Sprague deCamp writes:

In those days, ethnic prejudice was so rife that it seemed the natural order of things. Barbed ethnic jokes, usually directed against the Negro, the Jew, and the Irishman, were a staple of humorous magazines, the vaudeville stage and party conversation. Ethnic stereotypes were the stock in trade of practically all popular fiction writers. The writers and their readers took it for granted that all Scots were thrifty, Irishmen funny, Germans arrogant, Negroes childish, Jews avaricious, Latins lecherous, and Orientals sinister. Popular writers like John Buchan and Cutcliffe Hyne took sneering digs at the Jews as a matter of course.

At many pulp houses, Algis Budrys reminds us, things were so arranged that, assuming some freak chance resulted in the arrival of a manuscript with a sinister villain named Johnson, "the editor would
meticulously—except for the occasional oversight—change that character to Rubinoff, or some similar archetypal appellation drawn from the free-floating pool of ethnic groups suitable to unAnglo-Saxon behavior." By 1940, when Brackett’s first story was published in Astounding, the more overt forms of pulp racism were fading. One reason was that during the 1930s unpopular Nazi Germany provided most Americans with an object lesson in the ugliness of racial hatred. World War II, though, brought renewed xenophobic hysteria, with the Japanese a favorite pulp target for vengeance and ridicule.

The degree to which Brackett’s early pulp fiction is free of racist overtones remains admirable. She was neither anti-Negro nor anti-Semitic, had a real fondness for Celtic names and lore, and—as in "Citadel of Lost Ships" (1943) and "The Vanishing Venusians" (1944)—often portrayed minorities, refugees, and the politically dispossessed sympathetically. Other stereotypes, however, remained unaltered. Her protagonists are invariably given names like Matt Marker, David Heath, Jon Ross, or Rand Conway. Indiana Jones would blend indistinguishably into their company (although none of Brackett’s heroes routinely slaughter truckloads of evil foreigners).

Need I point out that it is foolish to dismiss as hopelessly dated the jingoistic and racist conventions of the pulp magazines? Millions of contemporary movie-goers still respond excitedly to the blood-spattered triumphs of one-dimensional, All-American heroes over arrogant Germans, treacherous Arabs, or brutal Russians. That these conventions survive is regrettable, but that they are an effective means
of selling popular entertainment is undeniable. I repeat, Leigh Brackett deserves our respect for avoiding them.

Racist and violent the pulps might be, but they were very timid in their treatment of sex. The host of scantily clad, seductively posed cover girls were misleading; once past the temptress on the cover a reader generally found an old fashioned Victorian sexual decorum to be the norm. Sex might be implied, but was never described. For the most part, editors frowned at the hint of sexuality, while writers knew even a mildly realistic portrayal of adult sexual behavior to be out of the question. For the love pulps, the invariable rule was: no touching below the neck. In westerns, the upstairs of a saloon, where presumably the bar girls had their rooms, was forbidden territory to a hero. There was only one permissible reason for him to ascend those stairs; it had to be transparently obvious that his mission was to shoot somebody. As for science fiction, a hypothetical Martian subscriber to Astounding would no doubt have been himself astounded if told humans possessed genitals and a strong sexual drive. Sprague deCamp confirms the stiffness of pulp sexual mores:

As for sex—well, sex was handled with kid gloves or not at all. There was, it is true, a small group of pulps called the "hots"—magazines like Spicy-Adventure Stories—but compared to magazines on the stands today, their treatment of sex was innocuous indeed. In the rest of the pulps, sex might be hinted at when the hero bore off a comely maiden at the end of the story, but nothing was ever written about their private adventures after the story ended.

Along with everyone else, Leigh Brackett conformed to prevailing sexual taboos and pruderies. Her prose was sensuous, hero and heroine...
would gaze longingly or knowingly at one another, logical development of story situation might demand sexual contact, but in vain. A rigidly puritanical code of sexual morality held unchallenged sway.

At this point a reader might fairly ask how any writer's talent survived such stringent and arbitrary restrictions. My answer starts with an observable though neutral fact. Many writers of obvious ability did work in the pulps. I also wish to restate some admitted truisms about human behavior, with my excuse being that the obvious is sometimes the hardest to see. Oppression often encourages creativity. The artistic impulse is as perennial a part of human nature as the sexual impulse and may well be as independent of rational control. Human beings seldom act solely for rational economic reasons.

The real difficulty for a writer with any ability would lie in always writing to a minimum standard, or so at least it seems to me. Nor is it hard to find pulp writers who talked of feeling pride in their work and finding pleasure in ingeniously overcoming its difficulties, although typically they spoke in terms of craftmanship and professionalism rather than art. Leigh Brackett saw a clear difference between a hack and an honest professional.

[a hack was] one who will write anything at all for money, without love, without joy, without pride . . . . But if the writer is sufficiently skilled in his craft to accept the dictates of length and subject and within those limits to shape a story with love and pride and pleasure, he can turn out a gem. . . . I call this being a professional in the best sense of the word; an artist who has control of his talent, rather than being always subject to its whim.
For Algis Budrys, to consider "how much magazine text from that period [i.e., the pulp era] now still yields fresh editions and academic studies" suggests that "much chain-mode writing was a labor of some love." He believes that what are commonly supposed to be pulp limitations "were actually attractive to persons of high intellectual ability." I feel Hamilton and Brackett to have been two such people. Budrys’s good advice is to "seek the roots of pulp art within the parameters of the milieu that occasioned it."

In the first place, a manuscript that in the name of pulp conformity was subjected to all of the editorial mutilations I have described represents a worst possible case. A pulp magazine did not have to be edited mindlessly, nor did all pulp houses insist that a writer be so tightly bound by mechanical formulas. It is a mistake to think of the pulps as a monolithic entity; rather, they varied enormously in quality and in what they required of their writers. The worst were probably the "shudder" pulps, horror fiction with a strong subliminal dose of sex and sadism. The best were the great adventure magazines (such as Argosy, Blue Book, Short Stories, and Adventure) and the science fiction and detective pulps. No one disputes that in their lower reaches the pulps could be dreadful. It is, however, pulp writing at its best that concerns me.

*Argosy et al* were the flagships of the pulp line. Any writer who consistently appeared in them had arrived at the pulp version of the big time. Many (including the young Leigh Brackett) longed to break into their pages, but that was hard to do. Few succeeded. Since
these magazines paid four to five times as much per word as their lesser brethren, from 1900 to 1940 they published the best known of the popular writers: H. Benford-Jones, Arthur D. Howden Smith, Talbot Mundy, Harold Lamb, J. Allan Dunn. Jack Williamson and E. Hoffmann Price both write rather movingly of long struggles to sell to this prestige market. Williamson came close with *Golden Blood*, his early Thirties fantasy-adventure novel, but in the end was denied. *Golden Blood* appeared instead in *Weird Tales*.30 Ed Price spent a dozen years of concentrated effort becoming, as he terms it, a "graduate fictioneer." His pride and pleasure in finally attaining "the authenticity and craftsmanship which *Adventure* demanded" are clearly evident in recollections written forty years after the fact. "Few pulpists could meet that magazine's standards,"31 states Price triumphantly.

Although they paid far less, the science fiction and detective pulps were home to what seems in retrospect an unusual number of strong, able editors. For science fiction, a select grouping of the best might include John Campbell, Mick McComas and Tony Boucher, Horace Gold, Sam Merwin, Fred Pohl, perhaps F. Orlin Tremaine and Malcolm Reiss. Capable and ambitious editors are a second reason why, despite publisher imposed restrictions and generally poor pay, first rate fiction appeared in the pulps. As mentioned, editors were a good deal higher in the pulp hierarchy than writers; an editor who understood the creative scope his role afforded could exert tremendous influence. The best pulp magazines faithfully reflected the personalities of those who edited them, as *Astounding* did Campbell's.
Notes Fred Pohl: "It is a curious thing that the editors of the magazines were in some ways more important and individual in science fiction than the authors."32

Editorial dominance was not necessarily harmful to writers; in fact, a coherent set of editorial requirements might be helpful. Leigh Brackett, for one, was probably helped in her long fight to master plotting by the insistence of her pulp markets that she tell a story with a clear—and closely related—beginning, middle and end. Other writers found pulp editors unexpectedly discriminating. In the last interview of his life, fifty years after he began a career as a pulp writer, Ed Hamilton was asked the extent market conditions and editorial pressure had limited his own work. He replied:

[of course] you must bend to the editor's will . . . but I've met very few editors, even of the old hardboiled pulps, who really wanted the writers to defer too much. They were pleased when they could get something different but effective. Only the very poorest and cheapest of the [SF] pulp magazines had an official story line and rules of an artificial cardboard sort, and all that. They [editors] were surprisingly intelligent men—and a few women too—and they had what most people would find to be a surprising amount of appreciation of somebody who is trying to tell a good story.33

Hamilton claimed unfailingly to receive positive feedback from editors when he turned in a good story; interestingly, he also comments that "editors [would] on occasion remark about some piece of tripe I've knocked out that it was too pulpy."34

The power the pulp system gave to editors enabled the creative and energetic ones to have substantial impact on a field. Writers submissively sought to adapt to any editorial requirements, including more demanding and challenging ones. The better writers, in fact,
eagerly met higher standards. To be a "Campbell writer" in the 1940s—a decade when *Astounding Science Fiction* changed the nature of magazine science fiction—was a matter of considerable prestige. A decade or so earlier, first Phil Cody and then Joseph T. "Cap" Shaw worked a similar transformation at *Black Mask*, in the process defining what modern detective fiction was to be about and developing such writers as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. To be a *Black Mask* writer was likewise a badge of pride. Campbell's influence on science fiction through his role as gifted teacher has been well documented, most extensively perhaps by Isaac Asimov in his various autobiographical writings. As for Cap Shaw, a recent anthology of *Black Mask* fiction describes his editorship in these terms:

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To Joe Shaw, the editor's job became very personal. From the outset, he functioned as a potent, ever-helpful father figure to his authors. He offered them practical advice and wise counsel, encouraged their goals, cheered them on in times of stress, and sought, constantly, to bolster their confidence, to draw out their best work.
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Such editorial work is of a different order entirely from the tiresome chore of bringing *G-8 and His Battle Aces* up to minimum standards of literacy. It gives the lie to the erroneous view of pulp editing as the application of puerile conventions to hastily ground out hackwork. Shaw and Campbell were well above the usual run of editors, of course, but each was the beneficiary of long established pulp practice accustoming writers to compliance with editorial policy. Ability to make the most of the opportunities the system provided is the true source of Campbell and Shaw's fame as teachers.
The influence of fandom is a third reason for the continuing growth of magazine science fiction, but here we move outside the pulp tradition. Although intimately connected to the science fiction pulps, fandom was something new. Begun in the 1920s, when avid SF readers met through magazine letter columns, then exchanged letters, formed clubs, joined discussion groups, and through these groups made contact with their peers nationwide, fandom was a literary phenomenon unique to science fiction. There were no more than a few hundred (later a few thousand) participants in (loosely) organized fandom. Initially, they were very young and mostly male. Some devoted a good chunk of their lives to reading and commenting on the magazines and playing an active role in the social life of fandom. These dedicated fans ran the clubs, held conventions ("cons" in fanspeak), invited writers to these conventions, and travelled to visit cons held by other clubs. Although its members—remember, they were very young—were often naive in their literary tastes, fandom was nonetheless a place where science fiction was taken seriously.

The fans were psychologically important to writers. They were a cultural force acting to separate science fiction writers from their counterparts in other pulp categories. Never more than a miniscule part of the readership of the science fiction magazines, the fans had an impact all out of proportion to their numbers. Interaction with fandom gave depth and dimension to the professional publishing world of the magazines; the fans provided a forum where stories were appreciated, criticized, compared and remembered. Pulp fiction ordinarily was consigned to instant oblivion when the next month's
issue appeared. Suddenly this was no longer true of science fiction. Meanwhile, the cons and clubs and parties and visits helped make American science fiction a true community, where a writer could expect to know most fellow writers, have personal contact with editors, and hear from and often meet his or her most interested readers. Science fiction writers of the 30s, 40s and 50s might be unknown to the world at large, but in the microcosm of fandom they were important people. Fans discussed favorite writers and hotly debated relative merits. After a time, fandom began to vote on and award prizes to stories and books it especially liked.

Like all other pulp genres, science fiction in the 1930s was a low paying field that most of the public dismissed contemptuously. Unlike any other type of pulp writer, however, the writer of science fiction could through fandom regularly meet people who knew who he was, had read his stories, and were knowledgeable about his career. It must have been a heady experience. Fandom, I believe, first encouraged science fiction writers to think of themselves as different and special, and then supported them in that belief.

As time went by, the magazines came to be largely dominated by writers who wrote little else but science fiction and who thought of themselves as science fiction writers. When this occurred, the SF magazines broke away from the rest of the pulp world and embarked on an evolutionary path of their own. A pulp science fiction writer was now recognizably separate from a pulp writer. They differed in self-image and in job requirements. It was possible for the science fiction writer to think that what he did mattered; no longer must he
see himself as a subcontractor mass producing words for a factory. Moreover, science fiction itself had become a pulp form different from all the others, and different in ways that were proving stimulating. Frank Cioffi explains:

Unlike the other pulps, the science fiction magazines had as their subject not so much a particular body of specialized knowledge—all the accoutrements, complete with language, artifacts, and characters, of one specific subculture (the cowboy, the detective, the aviator, the spy, and the ingenue are figures around which other pulp fiction resolves)—as a way of perceiving the world that cut across all such superficial features of subcultures.37

By the late 1930s, acquiring a specialized set of skills was becoming a necessary requirement for writing science fiction, while the writers themselves increasingly were "home grown," no longer drawn from the common pool of pulpsters. The new talent reservoir tapped by the SF magazines was fandom. For the next several decades nearly every year would see one or more new writers make the transition from fan to writer. Fans tended to be articulate and literate. As a hobby, many published small home-made magazines which circulated among other fans. These fanzines, as they were called, offered the fledgling writer ready-made opportunities to sharpen his skills while receiving feedback from a lively and reasonably supportive audience. Thus, amateur enthusiasms often resulted in a professional career; Ray Bradbury and Fred Pohl are two of many who began this way. Unwittingly, the science fiction magazines had created what was in effect a minor league farm system, where talent was nurtured and developed until capable of making the jump to the pros.
Fandom was by no means unflawed. Enthusiasm easily turned to excess; the constant feuds, in particular, became notorious. Immature fans (of all ages) went beyond zany, past silly, and well into ridiculous. Frederic Brown's *What Mad Universe* (1949) brilliantly parodied the loonier side of fandom. Other SF writers (Harlan Ellison, Barry Malzberg, Charles Platt) denounced the narrowness of the fan world and the harm fannish admiration did writers seduced by its uncritical warmth. On balance, though, the intimacy, literacy, and missionary zeal of fandom did pulp science fiction a great deal more good than harm.

A fourth and most important reason for the continued evolution of magazine science fiction was the unanticipated potency of the form. Put simply, SF offered writers more scope for their imagination, a greater variety of exotic settings, and more opportunity for serious thought. Even the Hammett/Chandler brand of detective fiction, the only pulp genre truly comparable to science fiction as art, settled early on into specific and quite narrow parameters. (While the hard-boiled school flourishes today, those parameters have hardly changed in fifty years. Thus—picking two of hundreds of possible examples—John D. MacDonald's Florida "salvage consultant" Travis McGee and Robert Parker's Boston-based private eye Spenser both closely resemble Chandler's Marlowe. They face problems similar to his, which they solve using his methods; their characteristic self-mocking, tough/tender style also originates with Marlowe.) The love pulps, sports pulps, sea stories, etc. were from the start a great deal more restrictive still in their basic assumptions, and so
offered little room for originality and creative development. Budrys speaks of "the unique susceptibility of SF under these circumstances to the impulses of art. It seems clear that the conceptual milieux of all other chain forms are more confining."^38

All pulp forms could be written well or badly, but well-written SF was based on significantly more substantial and wide-ranging foundations. Pulp science fiction, writes Cioffi, took "cultural change as its subject matter"^39 and so came eventually to differ from all other types of pulp fiction. No matter the specific focus of a SF story—be it time travel, social satire, speculation about the future, or adventure on other worlds—at the core was a belief in change as the only constant in an ever mutating universe. (H.G. Wells had given that belief a powerful literary expression in his late 1890s novel The Time Machine; and two generations of American science fiction writers had grown up reading Wells, whose work Hugo Gernsback frequently reprinted in the 1920s Amazing.) Sf writers and readers alike accepted this unsettling but dynamic insight on the inevitability of change, which the average pulpster—lost in the timeless, changeless worlds of Tarzan's make-believe jungle or the wild west as it never was—rejected as too disturbing. As a consequence, magazine science fiction became a genuinely imaginative, even revolutionary literature.

Science fiction of course neither began in the pulps nor ended with them. American science fiction, however, grew up in the SF magazines, took shape within their pages, and through them became an organic community. Those days are gone, but their influence remains.
No critic can fully understand contemporary science fiction without coming to terms with its past. Leigh Brackett, too, began in the pulps, was shaped there, and then left them behind. She did not leave behind, though, either the friends she made their or her affection for the form. The discipline and narrative skills she learned as a penny a word pulpster remained of use throughout her career.
CHAPTER TWO: NOTES

1 I wish to give credit here to Algis Budrys, whose ideas on the nature of pulp writing have greatly influenced my own.

2 Peter Nicholls, gen. ed., The Science Fiction Encyclopedia (Garden City: Dolphin-Doubleday, 1979), p. 485; hereafter cited as SFE.

3 SFE, p. 484.


5 SFE, p. 485.


8 Harold Hersey, Pulpwood Editor (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1937).

9 Cioffi, p. 22.


11 Hersey, pp. 105-106.


14 Algis Budrys, Non-Literary Influences on Science Fiction (Polk City, Iowa: Chris Drumm, Publisher, 1983), p. 4.


26 de Camp et al., *Dark Valley Destiny*, p. 270.


32 Pohl, introduction to *SF of the 40s*, p. 9.


34 Hamilton, Schweitzer interview, p. 37.
35 see especially Before the Golden Age, ed. Asimov (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974)


38 Budrys, Non-Literary Influences, p. 22.

CHAPTER III
LEIGH BRACKETT: PULP WRITER

Should they discover the full extent of her career, most of Leigh Brackett's current readers would be surprised. She was extremely versatile. Brackett wrote five detective novels, half a dozen major film scripts, a novelization of a movie screenplay, television and radio scripts, a contemplative, idea-centered science fiction novel, a science fantasy trilogy and an award-winning western. She also edited two anthologies, published critical essays on scriptwriting and science fiction and—at least twice—produced scripts for Batman and Superman comic books. Her present reputation, however, rests almost completely on the roughly two score space operas that originally appeared in now vanished pulp magazines. If she had not written these pulp fantasies, she would very likely today be remembered only by film scholars, who would think of her as a favorite scriptwriter of Howard Hawks in the latter half of his illustrious career. What was the source of Brackett's interest in space opera, an interest she kept throughout her life? And what separates her work in that genre from thousands of now forgotten stories?

The answer to the first question is, I think, relatively simple. Her space opera—by which I mean the colorful fantasies she set in the
stylized pulp solar system—allowed a creative freedom Brackett enjoyed; also, she had an emotional commitment to the subject matter. Although she had to master various formulas of plot and content before she could market her work successfully, these pulp stories are among the most personal of her writings. From childhood, Brackett’s imagination had been taken by the idea that humanity would one day leave the Earth to explore other planets and travel to the stars. Late 1980’s science fiction finds human migration into space a potent concept still, though by now a familiar one; half a century earlier the idea had a visionary appeal to those few writers and readers who saw it as a real possibility. Brackett wanted to write romances of the future. The pulp conventions she worked under were restrictive and sometimes ridiculous, but Brackett nonetheless took seriously the tale of a hero who encountered marvels and found adventure on other, stranger worlds.

Since Brackett had to support herself (and, in the 1940s, her family) with the income from her writing, it is not surprising she sought work in fields where the pay was better than the miserable wages offered by the science fiction magazines. She was proficient at adapting what she wrote to a market, and did not feel doing so compromised her talent and integrity. She was proud of her reputation as a reliable professional. In particular, she became an excellent scriptwriter, adept at shaping a story by another writer to the demands of a different medium, all the while writing and rewriting to suit the views of a Hawks, an Altman, or a Lucás. Scriptwriting was lucrative; more, it was clearly something Brackett liked to do.
Writing her own stories, however, was a very different psychological experience and was in fundamental ways more rewarding. Brackett pinpointed the all-important distinction: "Writing for the screen is a team effort and there's only one boss [emphatically not the writer]."¹ She was a very independent woman. The pay from Planet Stories or Ace Books was ludicrously less than what she made in Hollywood, but there was a sense of freedom that had its own appeal. A professional, after all, is not the same as a puppet. Brackett had her own preferences and enthusiasms. She wrote:

The novelist works alone, in a room with a door shut, and he is God at his own typewriter. The scriptwriter does a great deal of his work in conference with other people and he isn’t God anywhere. He must learn to think on his feet, to advance ideas and not be wounded when they’re turned down, to do the best he can with material he doesn’t always exactly love...[moreover] he must learn to cope with all the extraneous facts of life connected with film-making that do not concern the novelist ... such a budget, the personalities and capabilities of the actors who will clothe his characters with flesh; such as the practicalities of locations and why a scene that ought to have been a night scene will have to be a day scene because of production difficulties, etc., etc. Plus the personality of the producer and his taste in story telling.

The chief satisfaction of scriptwriting, she claimed, lay "in doing a good job of putting all the pieces together and making it look as if it grew that way."²

Thus, scriptwriting was challenging and financially rewarding, but Brackett often found it artistically confining. On the other hand, science fiction and fantasy had from the first appealed to her because "they were so splendidly free and 'other' ... [so] removed from the
mundane and boring world in which I lived my daily life." She had loved the Martian romances of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Burroughs set the mold for the extravagant interplanetary romances which flourished in the pulps. Brackett was a pulp writer in the Burroughesian tradition, though she would also significantly refine and add to the model he created. Throughout her adult life Leigh Brackett returned now and again to space opera, calling it her favorite kind of writing. At each return she would use the raw materials of space opera with increasing sophistication.

For as long as they lasted, Brackett wrote primarily for the three science fiction magazines in which she had first made a name for herself—Planet, Thrilling Wonder and Startling Stories. To an extent she is still associated with these magazines, and this association has hurt her critical reputation. Brackett, it turned out, excelled at a sub-genre of science fiction that accidents of history and taste have made unfashionable. As American science fiction has become increasingly respectable, it has also grown uncomfortable with its origins in the gaudy and escapist pulps. Space opera was the pulpiest of the varieties of science fiction that evolved in the magazines. Many writers and critics unfairly equate space opera with hastily conceived and poorly written melodrama, and of course do not have to search far for examples proving their point. Still, space opera did not have to be hackwork, and not all of it was.

Pulp was an unpretentious literature. Successful pulp writers learned to produce fast-moving narratives centered on dramatic, easily
grasped situations. Their intent was not to examine the world of
everyday life but to take the reader as far away from the ordinary as
possible. The science fiction name for this became sense of wonder.
Exotic locales, larger than life characters and life or death
situations were pulp staples. At the same time, pulp editors
generally held low opinions of the capabilities of their readers, and
instructed writers to avoid even the suggestion of challenging
intellectual content.

The situation was markedly different for the science fiction
pulps, but even in this small and unusual field some magazines
remained closer to the pulp norm than others. The least "pulpy," John
Campbell's Astounding, differed most from an old-fashioned magazine
like Planet Stories precisely on the matter of content. Campbell held
strong views on many matters himself and was a ready market for
writers with strong views who could express them vividly as
speculative fiction. He enjoyed debate and encouraged it in his
magazine's letter column and stories. Robert Heinlein, the
quintessential Astounding writer, practically forced readers either to
agree with the author's beliefs as expressed in a story or else rebut
them. (Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle occupy the same niche in
contemporary science fiction.4) In a larger context, Campbell
believed strongly in science fiction's usefulness as a vehicle for
introducing and examining ideas. He demanded that his writers think
hard about potential futures and what they might actually be like. In
essence, he sought out and purchased stories that explored the
implications of continued technological change. In his history of science fiction, *Trillion Year Spree*, Brian Aldiss comments on Campbell's influence:

So the magazine Sf writers became able to do many things that the writers outside the field could not do. Above all, they could depict a technological culture as a continuing process—often continuing over thousands of millions of years. Although the writers (optimistically or blindly) neglected the vital factor of depletion of Earth's mineral and other resources, they perceived that Western civilization rests increasingly on a non-random process of innovation.

Campbell asked for reasonably accurate science in stories; he wanted detailed and internally consistent future settings as well. The result was a revolution in American magazine science fiction, with *Astounding* becoming the cradle of what is often called modern science fiction. Aldis writes of this period:

There were times when *Astounding* smelt so much of the research lab that it should have been printed on filter paper.

Nevertheless, the research lab approach generated ideas. No popular magazine has ever been such an intellectual delight. Many later problems were foreshadowed in general terms and chewed over excitingly.

Science fiction writers in the older pulp tradition, like Brackett, were in a way at odds with Campbell's preference for overt intellectual content. For example, Brackett's intent in a pulp story such as "Enchantress of Venus" (1949) is to make the narrative a featherbed, easy to fall into, hard to wake up from. Though quite capable of producing crisp, tight prose, Brackett often wrote in
strongly rhythmic, image-laden periods:

Beneath the surface Stark could see
The drifts of flame where the lazy currents ran,
And the little coiling bursts of sparks
That came upward and spread
And melted into other bursts,
So that the face of the sea was like
A cosmos of crimson stars.

(line division and capitalization mine)

This prose flirts with a regular metrical beat; its chantlike quality
aims at lulling readers into receptiveness as they hear and respond to
rhythms of which they may not be consciously aware. The typical
Campbell writer wanted to make you think; Brackett wanted to make you
dream.

Modern science fiction is rationalized fantasy, written to highly
specialized rules. Plausibility matters, as does scientific accuracy,
at least to the point of avoiding silly mistakes like placing a
helicopter on the moon. Natural laws must be taken into account, not
be suspended randomly or arbitrarily. Writers for Astounding might
imagine futures that were strange indeed but implicit in the
background was the premise that these futures were the inevitable and
logical consequences of a given series of events. Campbell asked his
writers to create societies that seemed workable and felt lived in. A
matter of fact and believable presentation of his imagined futures was
perhaps the early Heinlein's greatest skill and the area in which he
was most influential. On the other hand, writers for Planet were free
to envision otherworldly societies that seemed to be composed
exclusively of warriors, kings, mad priests and naked temple girls,
along with a stranded Earthman or two. Nobody on such worlds ever did the dishes or took out the garbage, or worried about how the turnip crop was doing.

The heroes of Astounding stories could handle themselves well enough in a fist fight but their triumphs were due to their wits, not their biceps. For Campbell and his writers science was important. It was the key that would unlock the gates of the universe. The use they made of science made men heroes, gods or monsters. Like the older kinds of science fiction, Campbellian science fiction sought to take a reader away from the ordinary and everyday. It used, however, fundamentally different methods. Two core perceptions shaped modern science fiction: a scientific view of the universe, and a sense of the endless, partly predictable flow of change. Extrapolation—the convincing projection of present day trends or potentialities into the future—was its key technique.

Campbellian science fiction tended to take itself seriously. Planet never pretended to be anything more than fun. The element of pure fantasy was much stronger in a Planet Stories tale. Fantasy elements mixed, in odd and surprising (and sometimes comic) ways, with the conventions of science fiction (spaceships, other worlds, powerful machines, lasers, aliens). The result was science fantasy. On the surface it resembled science fiction but it was not a literature of change, or ideas, or informed speculation about the future. At bottom, it was fairy tales set among the stars. According to science fiction editor and critic Terry Carr, space opera "catapults us into
worlds of wonder and swift action, where good and bad are clearly understood even where they take strange forms.® Brian Aldiss summarizes the virtues of the best of such work:

Nostalgia aside, these stories are one of the repositories of narrative art; furthermore, they say a great deal about fundamental hopes and fears when confronted by the unknowns of distant frontiers, in a tradition stretching back at least as far as the Odyssey. They are, in a way, abstracts of the same impulses that lie behind the traditional fairy tale.®

What was the source of Brackett's superiority at this type of science fiction? With its heroic quests across symbolic landscape, Leigh Brackett's space opera is often close kin to romance and myth and partakes of their power to move readers.

Brackett had left the pulps for Hollywood in mid-1944; she reappeared in their pages in 1948. Popular when she left, on her return she became a star. Nearly all of her best pulp fantasies were written between 1948 and 1955, a period during which she was widely known in fandom as the "Queen of the Space Opera." Planet Stories in particular became "her" magazine, for Brackett was both its most popular and most representative author. The magazine would eventually publish 20 of her stories. Her brand of space opera—vivid and evocative, sensual, quasi-mystical, always literate (even, on occasion, poetic)—exemplified what Planet was all about, romantic tales of adventure made more glamorous by their otherworldly settings. By 1948, too, Brackett had matured as a writer, becoming more sophisticated and more skillful. Artistic growth brought no corresponding loss of enthusiasm for magazine science fiction. Her
space opera was still written with love and without condescension, but Brackett now wrote with a subtlety, individuality and power that had not been there four years earlier. Work in Hollywood had not so much changed her approach to space opera as refined it.

Brackett's work was more than popular; it became influential. Malcolm Reiss was Planet's editor-in-chief and general manager throughout its sixteen year history. Science fiction critic and historian Algis Budrys believes the Reiss/Brackett relationship to have been as significant in defining Planet's essential nature as the Campbell/Heinlein interplay had been at Astounding a decade earlier. Budrys told me: "They [Reiss and Brackett] were editor and star author. There was no question about it. If you wanted to make a hit with the Planet audience, if you wanted to have great attention paid to you by Planet's editors, you got as close to writing like Leigh Brackett as you could. That was it. She was the standard by which everyone else was measured." Ray Bradbury and Poul Anderson are two writers whose work for Planet shows clearly the influence of Brackett. Decades later, Marion Zimmer Bradley's popular Darkover series would owe a great deal to Brackett's Martian stories, a debt Bradley acknowledges. Contemporary science fiction author George R.R. Martin has also written a number of acclaimed stories--among them Dying of the Light, "A Song for Iya," and "Bitterblooms"--that are very similar in style, mood and subject matter to Brackett's work in the pulps.
Within the science fiction field of her day, Leigh Brackett was perhaps most highly regarded as a stylist. Her prose was markedly more lyrical and metaphorical than the pulp norm. Here, for example, is a passage Brian Aldiss quotes approvingly, taken from the opening scene of *The Sword of Rhiannon* (1953):

Jekkara was not sleeping despite the lateness of the hour. The Low Canal towns never sleep, for they lie outside the law and time means nothing to them. In Jekkara and Valkis and Barrakesh night is only a darker day.

Carse walked beside the still black waters in their ancient channels, cut in the dead sea-bottom. He watched the dry wind shake the torches that never went out and listened to the broken music of the harps that were never still. Lean lithe men and women passed him in the shadowy streets, silent as cats except for the chime and whisper of the tiny bells the women wear, a sound as delicate as rain, distillate of all the sweet wickedness of the world.12

Brackett managed to write a particularly lush space opera while remaining for the most part in firm control of her adjectives and images. She described her dramatic settings with a suggestive richness that seldom became overly ornate or florid. I think it certain that Brackett was influenced in this by the half dozen "Northwest Smith" stories her contemporary (and friend) C.L. (Catherine) Moore wrote for *Wierd Tales* during the 1930's. Moore also wrote emotionally charged, symbol-laden interplanetary adventures cum fairy tales; she remains one of Brackett's few equals at space opera of this sort. Unlike the 1930's C.L. Moore, however, Brackett was capable of turning a lavishly decorated fantasy world bleak and grim and narrate events in a prose suddenly appropriately spare, so that
unexpectedly one saw the additional influence of Hammett, Chandler, and James Cain.

Space opera, of course, can be combined with hard core science fiction of the Campbell/Astounding type, as Frank Herbert showed with Dune. Brackett's pulp work, though, is nearer the fantasy end of the sub-genre's spectrum, and as mentioned, is more properly termed science fantasy. Science fantasy surrounds a core of pure fantasy with an outer shell of more or less (usually less) plausible science fiction. For her science fantasy Brackett adopted pulp conventions about the make-up of the solar system that had been in place for decades. Consequently, her Mercury has a narrow twilight zone where life is marginally possible; Venus is a watery, misty world rife with elemental savagery; and Mars is an old and dying planet, bone dry and cold, full of ancient menace. Brackett set the majority of her pulp stories on Mars. The influence of Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter stories is obvious; Brackett's heroes also set out on quests and encounter a similar odd mix of barbarism and super science, sword fights and high energy weapons. Lost races and forgotten, rose-red cities older than time are also plentiful. Equally clear, however, is that Brackett improves on her model in every way, especially in style, theme and emotional depth.

The history of stories set on Mars is a lengthy one. Ever since Percival Lowell's visions of Martian canals caught the public fancy at the turn of the century, Mars had been important terrain for science fiction writers. Many an imagination was captured by fantasies of intelligent life on the red planet. In this context two very popular
magazine stories from the 1930's, the decade before Brackett began publishing, have a historic importance: C.L. Moore's "Shambleau" and Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey." With them, the already longstanding traditions of stories set on Mars reaches a crossroads.

Moore's story makes use of Mars only as a far away place where one might legitimately expect to encounter mythological monsters. In this, she followed accepted practice among pulp science fiction writers. While Africa, the Gobi and other wild parts of the earth were becoming too familiar, too well-explored, the public knew very little about the other planets of the solar system. They were inaccessibly remote and mysterious, and so exactly right for the beautiful queens, hidden cities, elder races, and fabulous monsters that could no longer plausibly populate the too well-mapped Earth. "Shambleau" shows no interest on the author's part as to what Mars might actually be like; for C.L. Moore's purpose it is enough that it be a distant and unknown place. "A Martian Odyssey", on the other hand, offers something new in its treatment of the Martian setting. Weinbaum's Mars is derived from what the science of the time knew of the real planet, and his story presents an encounter with not a being from Earth's mythological past but an intelligent alien whose behavior is shaped by a complex and carefully described ecology. Weinbaum's story in effect claims Mars for modern science fiction.

"A Martian Odyssey" made its author famous among the readership of the science fiction magazines, and with the help of five decades' perspective it is not hard to see why. As Isaac Asimov has pointed out, Weinbaum was a "Campbellian author" who arrived a few years too
early. His stories represented the future of magazine science fiction, a portent of the kind of fiction soon to find a home and a champion in the Campbell-edited Astounding. By 1940, Astounding would dominate the science fiction world. The stories it published set on Mars depicted the planet with evergrowing scientific sophistication.

Brackett's first sale, appropriately entitled "Martian Quest," came in 1939; she made a somewhat incongruous debut in Astounding. The incongruity lies in the fact that it was soon obvious that here was a writer who belonged to the older pulp tradition. Her Mars was a world of the imagination and so independent of the laws of physics and orbital mechanics. It had as much in common with Oz or Atlantis as it did with the real fourth planet from the sun. This was not what Campbell was looking for, so after a promising start Brackett never again had any luck selling to him. No matter; Astounding was not a natural home for her talents. In 1940 Brackett made a first sale of more significance, to Planet, thereby establishing a mutually beneficial relationship. She later wrote:

Of course Planet wasn't Astounding; it never pretended to be Astounding, and that was a mercy for a lot of us who would have starved to death if John W. Campbell, Jr. had been the sole and only market for our wares ... we who wrote for Planet tended to be more interested in wonders than we were in differential calculus ... Astounding went for the cerebrum, Planet for the gut, and it always seemed to me that one target was as valid as the other. Chacun a son gout.

Brackett had a personal, not scientific, vision of Mars, making it a world of high romance that happened to be dotted with invading rocket ships. Though she wrote good stories set elsewhere in the pulp
solar system, she returned to Mars again and again. Initially this may have been due to nostalgia for childhood memories of the exciting Mars Edgar Rice Burroughs had conjured. I think it also highly likely that some element in the Martian setting appealed to Brackett and made it easy for her to conceive of stories that took place there. Over the course of two decades she made the pulp Mars she had inherited into a somber and desolate place, perfect for moody fantasies. It was a dying world, whose harshness set off nicely the pockets of hidden magnificence that Brackett scattered about. Years after the demise of the pulps Ace Books would publish The Coming of the Terrans, a 1967 paperback bring together five Martian stories written years earlier. Brackett's foreward to this retrospective collection shows her well aware that her favorite planet's reality was always metaphorical, not physical. She wrote:

To some of us, Mars has always been the Ultima Thule, the golden Herperides, the ever-beckoning land of compelling fascination. Voyagers, electronic and human, have begun the business of reducing those dreams to cold, hard, ruinous fact. But as we know, in the affairs of men and Martians, mere fact runs a poor second to Truth, which is mighty and shall prevail. Therefore, I offer you these legends of Old Mars as true tales, inviting all dreary realities to keep a respectful distance.15

The Coming of the Terrans in many ways resembles a far better known work, Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles. Both books collect stories which originally appeared in pulp magazines. The writers set these stories on a fantasy Mars they knew bore little resemblance to the actual planet. These fantasy worlds, however, are quite similar to each other. In fact, Brackett and Bradbury are writers who have a
good deal in common. Each achieved success by bucking the dominant
trend of the 1940s, for neither wrote science fiction as the term was
understood at Astounding. Neither writer had any gift for problem
solving stories aimed at an audience of future engineers. Instead,
the best stories of each have a fable-like quality and appeal to the
emotions, not the intellect. Literal-minded readers accustomed to a
different tradition of science fiction have sometimes criticized
stories set on this literary Mars as being scientifically impossible,
or else see them as having been made obsolete by later discoveries
about the planet. Such criticism misses the point. The pulp Mars
remained a splendid locale for fantasies, parables, allegories,
romance and adventure long after both writer and reader knew such a
world did not exist. Indeed, critic Brian Stableford thinks
Bradbury and Brackett gain emotional impact from the artful way they
exploit the "tension which existed between Burroughs' fantasy Mars and
the astronomical evidence which has eroded Lowell's speculations and
brought the fantasy under sentence of death."

Brackett's best pulp stories are collected in three volumes: The
Coming of the Terrans (1967), The Halfling and Other Stories (1973),
and The Best of Leigh Brackett (1977). Of these, the best is The
Coming of the Terrans, whose chronological format makes it almost a
progress report on her career, showing her growing mastery of form and
increasing artistic self-awareness. The collection also shows the
wide variety of artistic effects it is possible to obtain and still
write space opera.
The Coming of the Terrans opens with a fast-moving adventure, "The Beast-Jewel of Mars" (1948), on the surface very much the kind of Martian story Edgar Rice Burroughs might have written. A rocket ship captain leaves his command and the safety of the Terran trade city (the daylight world of reason and common sense) to venture by night into the Martian hinterland (the shadowy world of the unconscious, which is creative, chaotic, and teeming with the lurking monsters of uncensored emotions). Our captain is in search of—what else—a vanished lady love. The moonlit ruins of vanished Martian greatness provide a background for the action; there is a (half-naked, of course) Martian princess acting as the villainess, though one admires and pities her far more than the spoiled and useless Terran girl who is the nominal heroine. Scenes of public humiliation and bondage add an intense sado-masochistic sexuality to the otherwise routine adventures; both sides seek to strip the other of their humanity as well as their clothes and dignity. The beast-jewel of the title is itself a device for allowing the body to revert pleasurably back to the purely animal by throwing off the mind and its restraints.

The hero—Burk Winters, ex-captain of the Starflight—is surprised to find himself tempted by the curious appeal of regression to the bestial; his struggle with temptation, not the surface plot involving Jill, the Terran girlfriend, is the emotional core of the story. Having embarked on the road of "Shanga" (Martian for "the return" or "the going back") as a ruse, Winters now wants the release from the hurts of his humanity that addiction to the beast-jewel offers. A
long fleshy fall down the evolutionary back trail awaits him, and
Winters is both repulsed and fascinated.

The first sweet deadly thrill of the ray touched his flesh. He felt the waking hunger in him, the deep lust, the stirring of the beast that lay so close under his own skin. He thought of the lake, and wondered how it would be to lie in its wetness, breathing through the gill slits that had once opened in his own flesh when he was an embryo in his mother's womb.

The palace has two gardens. One is stately and formal; the other is "wild and tangled," set in the ruins of an amphitheater, and surrounded by high walls. Cruel rituals are enacted in the walled garden. Terran addicts of Shanga are summoned by a bell and given their dose from a great crystal jewel. These addicts—guilt gone with thought and will—collapse in a twitching heap of polymorphous sexuality. An orgy of mindless rutting follows. From the safety of the wall watch sadistic Martian spectators, alien reincarnations of the old Roman mob, amused by the human debasement below them. Shaken anew by the mixed nature of his reactions, Winters loathes and lusts after what he sees.

Predictably, Burk Winters resists, rescues, is revenged, and survives to return to the world of rocket ships, but unlike the ordinary pulp hero is not left untouched by his experiences. His story illustrates Brackett's success in manipulating the conventions of pulp fiction to her own ends. "Beast-Jewel of Mars" recharges a familiar plot, the chivalric rescue by a muscular male of a damsel in distress. Burroughs dispatched his heroes on such quests with monotonous regularity. Although the heroine's virtue was invariably
threatened, some way would always be found for her to escape the proverbial "fate worse than death;" meanwhile, the hero was sure to slay plenty of lions.

One critic has counted seventy-six threatened rapes in ERB's output of four years (1912-1915), without a single consummation.... That these scenes take place on Mars or Venus signifies little. Any strange place would do. But "Mars" provided a kind of license for the monstrous variations of humanoid and animal creation that ERB's sense of wonder required.19

Brackett's vision is darker and more original. Formula appeals, Brian Aldiss reminds us, because it "allays anxiety by showing us that the world is what we expect."20 Brackett uses the trappings of a tried and true formula to involve readers in an unexpectedly different story. Not sword-swinging Martians but rather his own nature is Winter's true foe. Winters comes to Mars to save a lost lover, but stays to fight for his soul, a rather more compelling predicament.

As the plot summary shows, "Beast-Jewel of Mars" is a sensational, sometimes lurid melodrama, but beneath its shiny surface lies a Martian version of The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Brackett uses our anxieties about sexuality, doubts about our nature, and fear of our hidden desires as the emotional fuel that makes the plot run. We are given a long look into the heart of a man who now must live in fear of himself, unsure at the end whether he is ape or angel.

Writing in the Edgar Rice Burrough's tradition, Brackett dutifully and cleverly observes the well-known trademarks: Winters kills his chief Martian male foe in a swordfight; the Martian temptress/
villainess/princess, sinfully desireable and endowed with "the fascination of all things that are at once beautiful and deadly," meets a suitably awful fate partly of her own devising; the good girl gone astray is rescued and the den of iniquity destroyed. But these things are surface decorations and disguises. The formalities of the rescue plot are of little importance to the true story. At its deepest level this story is concerned with the terrible fluidity of human nature. It exemplifies this theme with a change of the most surprising sort: a pulp stereotype (rock-jawed, iron-willed, indomitable, capable, courageous, etc.) abandons his certainties and moves into the human condition.

The next story, "Mars Minus Bisha," is very different. It is understated in style, slow-paced, muted in emotions, a story of mounting psychological tensions. What action there is occurs off stage. It recounts the relationship between a lonely man—a sensitive and humane scientist from Earth, not a two-fisted bralwer—and the small abandoned Martian girl he comes to see as a daughter. Unfortunately, the scientist's hard-edged, rational world view causes him to misunderstand all that happens. His prejudice against Martian "superstitions" means that his heroism, though real, is misguided, making what is already a tragedy still worse. With its quietness, sentimentality, lack of dramatic external action, and general air of wistfulness and loss, "Mars Minus Bisha" is as much in the Bradbury vein as its predecessor is a sophisticated reworking of a Burroughs' plot and situation.
The best story in *The Coming of the Terrans* is "The Last Days of Shandakor" (1952), which is very much Leigh Brackett's own and not derived from any other writer about Mars. In a sense it is a personal statement, a writer's farewell to the pulp Mars and an elegant lament for cherished dreams overtaken by "cold, hard ruinous fact." The Mars of the pulp magazines was rapidly becoming a thing of the past and no doubt Brackett regretted it. Brian Stableford, noting that Brackett "was most prolific in the period 1948-55—the period which saw the death of the pulps," says her work is "redolent with a kind of nostalgia for the exotic that reflects the decline of a way of writing and a way of dreaming." But "The Last Days of Shandakor" does more than say an affectionate sad goodbye; it is a powerful and universal fable.

Jon Ross, Terran planetary anthropologist, is drawn to the legendary Martian city of Shandakor. "Shandakor? [he thinks] It has a sound of distant bells." Ross is held captive there by the inhabitants, whom he finds to be an elder Martian race, beautiful as elves, proud as devils, contemptuous of humans. Their city once ruled half the planet, but now its founders are dying and their dominion has vanished.

Once around that valley there were great peaks crowned with snow and crags of black and crimson where the flying lizards nested, the hawk-lizards with the red eyes. Below the crags there were forests, purple and green and gold, and a black tarn deep on the valley floor. But when I saw it, it was dead. The peaks had fallen away and the forests were gone and the tarn was only a pit in the naked rock.

In the midst of the desolation stood a fortress city.
Outside the walls wait envious barbarian tribes, kept back only by old fear and superstition from a sack of the city. To the eye, Shandakor appears rich and teeming with life, although all outside is barren. 'This vitality is an illusion. A magical device from a forgotten science ("But they [our wise old men] found at last the invisible light that makes the stones give up their memories") enables the remnant of the elder race to live amidst a perfect—though soundless—visual recreation of past glories. In effect, the last citizens of Shandakor are surrounded lifelong by moving holograms of their days of power and splendor.

The lights burned, many-colored—not the torches and cressets of the Mars I knew but cool radiances that fell from crystal globes. The walls of the buildings that rose around the marketplace were faced with rare veined marbles and the fluted towers that crowned them were inlaid with turquoise and cinnabar, with amber and jade and the wonderful corals of the southern oceans.... The tall silver-crested ones drank wine under canopies of dusky blooms and in the center a score of winged girls as lovely as swans danced a slow strange measure that was more like flight than dancing.

Jon Ross, kept as a chained slave by Duani, youngest of the survivors ("a girl-child with slender thighs and little pointed breasts") is set to tending the "queer squat globe" creating the illusion that both protects the city from those outside and makes life worth living for those within.

Though a captive, Ross soon falls in love with the perfection of Shandakor's past. He is also in love with Duani. With her he walks the crowded/empty streets of the city.

We went up among the ghostly solidery and the phantom banners. Outside there were darkness and death and the
coming of death. Inside there were light and beauty, the last proud blaze of Shandakor under the shadow of its doom.29

Jon Ross does not want his mistress to go to the "Place of Sleep" with the rest of her people; he wants to take her away "to my world, to Earth."30 She refuses:

"No, don't be sad, JonRoss. You will remember me and Shandakor as one remembers a dream." She held up her face, that was so lovely and so unlike the meaty faces of human woman, and her eyes were full of somber lights.31

Desperate to win her, the Earthman destroys the device that cloaks the dying city in protective glamour.

The lights of many colors that had burned there were burning still but they were old and dim, cold embers without radiance. The towers of jade and turquoise rose up against the little moons and they were broken and cracked with time and there was no glory in them. They were desolate and very sad. The night lay clotted around their feet. The streets, the plazas and the market squares were empty, their marble paving blank and bare. The soldiers had gone from the walls of Shandakor, with their banners and their bright mail, and there was no longer any movement anywhere within the gates.32

Duani laments the sight, her people with her. Revolted, they turn from Jon Ross—not bothering even to take vengeance—and, the dream shattered, move to the racial death that awaits them.

They were going to die and there was no pride in their faces now. There was a sickness in them, a sickness and a hurt in their eyes as they moved heavily forward, not looking, not wanting to look at the sordid ancient streets I had stripped of glory.33

Jon Ross realizes the folly of his act too late. He suddenly sees
himself as just another human animal, little more than a beast, slave to selfish desire.

In the fate of Shandakor Brackett provides a bitter metaphor for the poisoning of the soul that follows hard upon the failure of the imagination. Without the transforming quality of the imagination, the story tells us, life is a desert, beauty has fled, and men are barbarians. The vision is austere, and no happy ending is pulled out of a hat.

Critic Anthony Boucher gave the next story, "Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon" (1964), its name. He made up the intentionally silly title as an example of the kind of tale that Brackett did better than anyone, a somewhat left-handed compliment. She in turn wrote a story around the title and sold it, to Fantasy and Science Fiction, a magazine Boucher had co-founded. The result is a fable of another sort about the potency of the imagination, one that cuts more sharply and is more satire than fantasy. Harvey Selden, a tidy-minded team player from the Bureau of Interworld Cultural Relations, has his progress up the organizational chart interrupted by a trip to Mars. Selden is an academic "expert" on Mars, though he has never been there. He is also a timid man, used to surrounding himself with forms and memos and reports, a builder of paper walls against the power of night and darkness. As one might expect, the trip to Mars goes badly for Selden. He is kidnapped and forced to confront a demon, who is evil incarnate. Selden is then released, physically unharmed but emotionally traumatized. He can neither forget nor come to terms with
the memory of his experience. The not so buried implication is that he has encountered a repressed fragment of his own nature, a theme "Beast-Jewel of Mars" also employs. After returning to Earth (a statement that can serve both as plot description and metaphor), Selden obsessively attempts to deny the validity of his fantastic experience, evoking psychological cliches to exorcise the terrors of the imagination.

"The Road to Sinharat" (1963) is the final story in The Coming of the Terrans and the weakest; it is no coincidence that of the book's five stories this is the closest to conventional science fiction and the farthest from fantasy. The story sounds an ecological warning on the uselessness of hasty solutions imposed from above and comes complete with a dreadful example from the remote Martian past. A key character is Howard Wales, "Earth's best man in Interpol" and a firm believer in helicopters, technology and methodical police work. Wales is not badly drawn. He is, however, jarringly out of place against a background of Martian romance; at times he seems to have wandered in by mistake from a police procedural. "The Road to Sinharat" is in many ways a rewrite of a much earlier Brackett story, "Queen of the Martian Catacombs" (1949). Both have as the central conflict the prevention of an impending jihad by Martian desert tribesmen against the Terrans, and both make use of the Ramas, an ages old race of near-immortal psychic vampires, to provide a touch of the fabulous. Fantasy, though, is of only marginal importance to either work. Straightforward adventure stories both, they seem only incidentally
set on Mars and would work nearly as well set in tribal Arabia or the Indian Northwest Frontier of Talbot Mundy. In terms of consistency of mood and potency of the fantasy elements, the earlier is the better.

*Planet Stories* ceased publication in 1955, along with *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and the day of the pulp magazines came to a close. Brackett returned to Hollywood and writing screenplays for Howard Hawks. She wrote very little science fiction during the next fifteen years—only the atypical *The Long Tomorrow* and a few rather minor short stories—and no space opera at all. Her work for the magazines did not vanish into the science fiction past, however. Ace Books, a paperback publishing house edited by longtime SF fan Donald Wollheim, began a long term project of reprinting the best of her pulp stories. As a consequence, Brackett's space opera remained familiar to a generation of science fiction fans who never knew *Planet*. *The Coming of the Terrans* was an Ace book. Ace published in addition seven Brackett short novels, all as Ace Doubles (a publishing format in which two novels were bound together back to back). These were all stories written years earlier for the magazines; Brackett revised them only slightly for paperback publication.

Four were science fiction adventure stories: *The Galactic Breed* (1955; an abridged version of the 1951 English hardcover *The Starmen of Lyrdis*); *The Big Jump* (1955); *The Nemesis From Terra* (1961); and *Alpha Centauri—Or Die!* (1963). They are very much alike, from their common roots in the pulps to their common theme of liberation, three
of them liberation via space travel. All have as heroes hard-nosed, two-fisted nobodies who become somebody on a grand scale. All end with a marriage, to heroines who are virtual clones of each other. In all four, those elements closest to fantasy are the most successful. Unfortunately, the science fiction aspects of these books are taken from the conventional pulp space-going "future," circa 1939, and show little imagination or serious thought.

Since these science fiction adventure novels follow a common pattern, a close look at one will give a sense of the flaws and strengths shared by all. The Starmen of Llyrdis is an uneven adventure story, uneasily balanced between fantasy and science fiction. Michael Trehearne, alienated Earthman, is its hero. Trehearne, it turns out, is actually of the blood of the Vardda, mercantile overlords of a galactic empire. The Vardda alone possess the secret of interstellar travel and they aren't telling. Trehearne's Vardda blood, however, earns him adoption into their ranks, and after that there is no stopping him. He plunges into Vardda society as a half breed outcast and emerges as a galactic liberator. His is the key role in the culmination of the thousand year struggle between the conscience-stricken Vardda underground and the elitist Authorities, with the idealistic underground seeking to share with all intelligent life the secret of the Vardda spaceflight mutation. Along the way, Trehearne meets, loves and at the end of the story marries the beautiful and spirited heiress to the greatest of the Vardda trading fortunes.
The plot is pure wish-fulfillment, of course. Trehearne enacts a science fiction version of the poor boy from the sticks who goes to the big city and makes good: Trehearne, the despised Earthman, defies an empire, frees a galaxy, woos a princess, and finishes by ascending to the throne. Many hundreds of pulp science fiction stories used this reassuring plot; more recently the novel *Dune* and the *Star Wars* film trilogy have enjoyed enormous commercial success by employing slight variants of it. But in *The Starmen of Llyrdis* Brackett is unable to find the mythic overtones that sometimes give dimension or lend splendor to this cosmic daydream. In her hands the old plot merely creaks and strains unconvincingly. Trehearne's implausible, assured success makes for easy but cheaply earned reader identification.

In any case, no very convincing picture of the evils of Vardda repression is ever given. They practice strict non-interference in the affairs of other planets and are content with their de facto trade monopoly, which has for a thousand years—and without war—spread goods and knowledge around the galaxy. Brackett's arguments against the status quo are sentimental only: not one but two naively idealistic youths dreaming of star flight stow away on the incredibly sloppily guarded Vardda ships, only to meet gruesome ends in the arms of the two key figures in the underground plot. Such contrivances give a theatrical air to much of the action. A less routine argument could have been constructed for keeping galactic affairs as they are, but then arguing a case was never Brackett's forte as a writer.
Brackett's science fantasies handle the quest motif of the hero who fights to relieve an oppressed people much more adeptly. In the more science fiction oriented *The Starmen of Llyrdis* she is not successful. Trehearne is unable to give coherent reasons for his actions; perhaps because of this, the author is unable to unite the potential power of her plot with her ostensible theme of liberation, both personal and social. The emotional underpinnings of the novel—the story of the rise of Michael Trehearne, a nobody, to the status of hero and Arbiter of Destiny—never connect very plausibly with the novel's realistic content, the creation of a galactic civilization faced with a monumental ethical problem. The fantasy aspects of the book are not integrated with the science fictional.

When judged by the standards of realistic science fiction, *The Starmen of Llyrdis* shows other weaknesses. The Vardda are poorly imagined. Both their ships and their shipboard customs seem taken directly from the tramp steamers of the early 20th century. The ships have bridges and bulkheads, bows and sterns, portholes and First Officers and wireless (or in this case, ultra-wave) operators. The future, apparently, will be without new amusements, rituals, social organizations or shifts in personal relationships; it is worth noting that it is taken for granted that no woman will man, er, crew the interstellar trading vessels. There is no sense that starflight would alter a race or be different from ocean travel. Vardda ships have spanned the galaxy for a millenium. Who can believe their culture would be a carbon copy of our own?
Some of the science in the book is conveyed in pulp formulas that must have seemed rather comically dated even in the early 1950s. Take, for instance, Brackett’s explanation of the principle behind faster than light travel: "Anyway, a really functional ship, whether it plies water, air, or space, must get its motive power by reacting against the element it travels in. And so, right now, the big atomic-powered generators in the stern are producing fifth-order rays which react against the fabric of space itself."35 Some of the dialogue is likewise comic. Pursued by an enemy cruiser, the captain of the fleeing spacecraft snaps: "Keep a damn sharp lookout astern."36 It is no wonder Brackett could not sell to Campbell.

It would not be fair to call The Starmen of Llyrdis a complete failure, for the unimaginative or non-existent extrapolation is balanced by well-handled adventure and spectacle. Brackett’s prose, particularly her descriptions of the exotic settings, is as smooth as ever. Two plot episodes were alive, both situations where action, emotion and setting are united in their effect: a near murder on a visit to a nightmarish planet of mutated fungi, inhabited by a suffocatingly evil spirit; and an equally nightmarish scene where Trehearne is chased by a hunting pack of giant weasels through a crystal forest on a heavy gravity planet where he can move only with dreamlike slowness. Brackett is also aware of the romance of spacefaring across the universe.

The great cluster of Hercules grew from a patch of hazy brilliance lost in the blaze and crash and thunder of the universe, to a monstrous star-swarm, blinding even through a
darkened port—a swirling hive of suns, white, red, yellow, peacock blue and vivid green, booming across the eternal void with the rush and roar of a cosmic avalanche toward some unknown destination, guided by the evil blinking eyes of the Cepheid variables.37

The Starmen of Llyrdis expresses, though in considerably more heated prose, an enthusiastic attitude towards the marvels awaiting humanity in space that is reminiscent of Carl Sagan or the Arthur Clarke of 2001. It is Brackett’s misfortune that her imagination was not suited to the task of plausible social extrapolation. All of her science fiction adventures suffer from this flaw. As a consequence, all have become period pieces, mementos of yesterday’s future rather than living works of fiction. They remain energetic, readable stories, competently written, but they have not aged well. They lack the flair and emotional resonances of the author’s science fantasies.

Three of these science fantasies were also published as Ace Doubles: The Sword of Rhiannon (1958), The Secret of Sinharat (1964) and People of the Talisman (1964), the last two being bound together. The Sword of Rhiannon, and enlargement of "Sea Kings of Mars" (1949), recreates the Mars of a million years gone by, a planet sparkling with oceans, forests, and vitality, menaced by evil serpent beings and graced by the presence of a repentent god. Brian Aldiss has called it "the most magical sub-Burroughs of them all, the best evocation of that fantasy Mars we would all give our sword arm to visit."38

The Secret of Sinharat and People of the Talisman are tales of Eric John Stark, Brackett’s best-known pulp hero and her own favorite character. The Secret of Sinharat is an expansion of a 1949 novella,
"Queen of the Martian Catacombs," which has been discussed earlier in connection with "The Road to Sinharat"; though a well-constructed adventure it is the weakest of the strong Stark series. (In all, Stark appears in four stories and a novel.) On the other hand, People of the Talisman (originally "Black Amazon of Mars," 1951) belongs with Leigh Brackett's finest work. It contains what may be the best prolonged action writing Brackett ever did, a splendid narrative set piece depicting the fall of a walled city to the assault of a barbarian army. For nearly 10,000 words she maintains a furious pace, achieving such visceral intensity that narrative time seems simultaneously compressed and endless. This long passage reads quickly but seems to take forever. The novel also contains the most compelling of Brackett's female characters: a woman neither haughty temptress nor her opposite, the sweet girl next door, but instead a charismatic warrior cut from the same fierce mold as C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry. The Lady Ciaran leads the conquering army, sacks the city, and beats Stark himself in a hand to hand duel. At story's end, Stark and she form a partnership, the only relationship of equals he ever finds. A final reason for admiring People of the Talisman is that it is perfectly wrought pulp fiction, exemplifying the maxim of concentrated unity of effect for maximum emotional impact. Every aspect of the work is connected: the fates of the twin cities; the fates of the major characters, and most minor ones; the perfect placement of incident in the narrative; and the accomplished interweaving of plot and subplots so that all demonstrate a common
theme—the necessity for individuals to be self-created and self-reliant, and the illusionary nature of most things that humans give their belief to or their lives for.

Leigh Brackett had several strengths that set her apart from the run of pulp professionals. From the start it was obvious that her prose was more literate and assured than most. Here, for example, is her quiet, almost incidental description of an unimportant Martian village her narrator happens to be passing through.

The town was not old as they go on Mars, but the mud brick of the walls had been patched and patched again, fighting a losing battle with the dry wind and the scouring dust. There were few people abroad. They looked at Fraser and passed him by, swarthy folk, hot-eyed and perpetually desperate. The canal was their god, their mother and father, their child and their wife. Out of its dark channel they drew life, painfully, drop by drop. They did not remember who had cut it, all the long miles from the polar cap across the dead sea bottoms, across the deserts and through the tunnels underneath the hills. They only knew that it was there, and that it was better for a man to sin the foulest sin than to neglect the duty that was on him to keep the channel clear. A cruel life, and yet they lived it, and were content. 

She was a highly visual writer, good at detailed descriptions. She had an ear for dialogue and learned to write action scenes of convincing grimness. She had as well a flair for the apt metaphor that was probably her most striking quality as a stylist. Consider the opening passage of "Mars Minus Bisha."

It was close on midnight. Both moons were out of the sky, and there was only blackness below and the mighty blaze of stars above, and between them the old wind dragging its feet in the dust.... [the narrator thinks of] the one hundred and forty-six centuries of written history gone into the dust that blew and tortured his sinuses, and after a while he saw
the shadow, the dark shape that moved against the wind, silent, purposeful, and swift.

Out of the northern desert someone was riding.41

At bottom her stylistic gifts defined Brackett as a pulp writer. Her action was skillfully presented but always subordinate in importance to her emotionally charged images and settings; indeed, the action was mostly a way of getting from one image or setting to another. In a Brackett story, it is seldom what the protagonist does that counts most, but what he feels, sees, and experiences.

Her stylistic gifts enabled Brackett to create a powerful sense of atmosphere. As her writing became more sophisticated, her landscapes often took on a dreamlike quality, mirroring the protagonist's emotional state. This in turn gave her a long head start over most others at what has been defined as the key requirement of effective space opera, "the writer's ability to evoke the beauty of scenes on other planets, [or] the chill sense of evil in a half-seen creature."42 Stark, sailing through a desolate waste of hellish red fog on a boat crewed by totally silent phantoms, hears all around him a directionless despairing wail. It echoes inside his head, seeming to be nothing less than the voice of "the hot blue night of Venus, crying out of the mists with a tongue of infinite woe."43 The phantoms move silently to the attack.

Brackett's best pulp fantasies—my list would include "The Last Days of Shandaker" (1952); "Enchantress of Venus" (1949); "Black Amazon of Mars" (1951); "The Lake of the Gone Forever" (1949); "The
Moon That Vanished" (1949); and "Shannach—The Last" (1952)—are without exception moody, intense and sad. As their titles tell us, they are filled with endings and dreams that vanish and drenched with regret and loss. She excelled at this type of space opera; her work became the model of how it should be done. That model has been often imitated but I think has yet to be improved on.
CHAPTER THREE: NOTES


2 Walker, p. 380.

3 Walker, p. 382.

4 Niven and Pournelle dedicate their 1981 novel Oath of Fealty "for Robert A Heinlein, who showed us how."


6 Aldiss, Trillion Year Spree, p. 225.


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16 see Roger Zelazny, note to item 189, "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," in *Amber Dreams*, compiled by Daniel J. H. Levack (Columbia, Pennsylvania: Underwood/Miller, 1983), p. 119. [Zelazny comments on the influence of space opera on his own early work, in particular his desire to write stories set on a Mars and Venus derived from the SF pulps]


37 Brackett, The Starmen of Llyrdis, p. 74.
38 Aldiss, Billion Year Spree, p. 263.
39 "Enchantress of Venus" (1949), "Queen of the Martian Catacombs" (1949), "Black Amazon of Mars" (1951), "Stark and the Star Kings" (1973) [written in collaboration with Edmond Hamilton and delivered to Harlan Ellison for his Last Dangerous Visions anthology, which has yet to appear], and The Book of Skaith (1976).
41 Brackett, "Mars Minus Bisha," p. 49.
The Book of Skaith (1976) is very much a work of the last years of Leigh Brackett's life. She was already well into a long struggle with cancer when she began the project and would have less than two years to live when the final volume appeared. The novel marks Brackett's return to her earliest roots as a writer. The Book of Skaith is undeniably science fantasy cast in the tradition of the old pulp magazines. It is also true that a close reading reveals that Brackett has made many substantial changes in her original model, the Planet Stories brand of romantic space opera that won her an initial reputation.

Brackett's return to science fiction after many years of inactivity was a surprise. Her last significant piece of magazine science fiction was seventeen years in the past. Repackaged as Ace paperbacks, the best of her pulp work, some stories three decades old, had continued to appeal. In her persona "Queen of the Space Opera," Leigh Brackett sold briskly to succeeding generations of science fiction readers. Within the field, however, Brackett herself was typecast, more often regarded as a living piece of science fiction history than as a contemporary writer. With the sole exception of The
Long Tomorrow, her work also met with condescension. Her pulp stories were dismissed with faint praise as admittedly superior examples of a now dated sub-genre, the fantasy-flavored planetary romance. The entry on Brackett in The Science Fiction Encyclopedia, for example, concludes by calling her "a highly professional writer, working with extreme competence within generic modes that did not always, perhaps, sufficiently stretch her."

As her interviews repeatedly show, Leigh Brackett was scornful of such criticism and protective of the worth of earlier kinds of science fiction. I also believe she saw certain possibilities for artistic development in that curious blend of science fiction and fantasy that had been the specialty of the SF adventure pulps. She chose to spend the working capital of her final years writing space opera, and she was a woman to whom work was important. Such a decision would not have been made lightly. It is obvious, too, that financial considerations had little to do with the genesis of The Book of Skaith. For one thing, Brackett had no urgent need of money. By the early 1970s her work for Hollywood and for television had made her moderately wealthy. Moreover, there was little likelihood the novel would prove a commercial bonanza. As expected, its sales were respectable but no more. What profit Brackett made was negligible compared to the potential return a similar investment of her time in other fields might have yielded. Brackett must have had compelling reasons for returning to space opera after many years, but—always a private person—she did not discuss them. Nonetheless, one is free to
speculate.

Leigh Brackett had done a good deal of writing for hire in her life. In her career as a scriptwriter, especially—and scriptwriting had been the major part of her working life for nearly twenty years—her usual task was revising and reshaping a story by another writer until it met the needs of an all powerful director like Howard Hawks. Hawks (or Robert Altman or George Lucas) had the final creative say in everything that mattered. In contrast, The Book of Skaith was a personal project, conceived by Brackett, written to please herself. She was paid for her efforts, of course, but I think the book can fairly be called a labor of love.

Whatever her motives, Brackett’s "The Ginger Star" appeared in If: Worlds of Science Fiction, January/February and March/April issues of 1974. And "The Ginger Star" proved to be only the first section of a new novel that would eventually reach nearly 500 pages in length. Commercial considerations dictated that this very long story be published in three installments rather than as a single huge, unwieldy and expensive paperback. Hence, The Ginger Star (1974), The Hounds of Skaith (1974) and The Reavers of Skaith (1976). However, its thematic unity, continuous storyline and characters, and many plot parallelisms indicate unmistakably that Brackett planned the work as a novel, not a trilogy. This became obvious when the Science Fiction Book Club gathered the three shorter works beneath a single set of covers and released it as The Book of Skaith. Brackett’s last novel was, by far, her longest, and in my opinion it is probably her best.
The book is a skillful and successful mix of elements from many genres—adventure fiction, science fiction, fantasy, the historical novel and myth. Brackett is adept at blending these elements into an artistic whole that reflects a personal vision. The novel is also a commentary by Brackett, writing as an artist at the top of her career and nearly at the end of it, on the materials of her early pulp fiction.

The Book of Skaith is in fact an ambitious attempt by Brackett to revitalize a seemingly moribund tradition. On Skaith she recaptures what was appealing about the Planet Stories tale of exotic otherworldly adventure—narrative vigor, spectacular settings, the occasional spookily effective moment when an archetypal pattern emerged and one felt the power of myth beneath the conventions of space opera—and she presents these elements in a context cleansed of most of the crudities and excesses that marred pulp work. Long-time Brackett readers encounter on Skaith many familiar things: tramp spaceships, ancient civilizations that have outlived their time, a friend in trouble, a larger than life hero, a quest across an isolated world of marvels, monsters and magic, and a score of fights along the way. Brackett, however, moves this particular story away from its pulp frame and closer to the common origins in myth and legend of all hero stories. She does not soften a hard world nor sweeten her rather depressing theme.

Leigh Brackett's science fantasies for the pulps were often moody and sad; The Book of Skaith is downright grim. Its long narrative
alternates scenes of flight, travel and battle with short meditations on inevitable loss, change and death. The austere, time-eroded world of Skaith—dominant colors faded reds and browns and everywhere a hint of the oncoming ice age—is well-suited to the chilly emotional landscapes of its story. Brackett makes the novel’s fantasy elements, which in any case play a relatively minor role in the plot, savage and murderous rather than glamorous. Likewise, Skaith contains much that is picturesque and exotic, but—unlike in her work for the pulps—Brackett consistently underplays this aspect of her story. Gone completely are the extended lush descriptions of the dream-like allure of the unknown and the fantastic that were the hallmark of her Planet Stories successes. Instead Brackett makes Skaith a cold, dry, sluggish sort of world. Her narrative repeatedly personifies the planet, turning it into a brooding, maliciously senile entity. Life on Skaith rewards toughness but offers little reason for hope, still less for joy. Brackett’s story celebrates the essential but rather cheerless virtues of endurance and fortitude, especially fortitude in the face of defeat or despair or disillusionment. Her protagonist (she gives him the evocative name of Stark) is a resourceful and relentless man; his ceaseless efforts to achieve his goals carry us through this long novel. As one might expect, Stark is admirable but not easy or pleasant company, and not intended to be.

Conventional sword and sorcery science fantasy uses the barbarian hero as a vehicle for reader wish fulfillment, but Stark is a genre hero with a difference. His experiences on Skaith have little to do
with the joys of monster-bashing or princess-rescuing. Rather, the narrative focus is held tightly on his exhausting struggle with a demanding environment, and the lengthy event-filled plot is virtually without scenes of contentment or repose. Stark wins many victories but finds them compromised and tinged with futility. His true triumph is that, despite everything, he endures to face the demands of another unforgiving day. The novel makes it clear that survival is not to be equated with happiness or personal fulfillment.

Consider the story's ending. A major character does find peace of a kind but only through her acceptance of a preordained (and terminal) Fate. Stark's consort, the Lady Gerrith, thus becomes the novel's chief example of a central Skaithian trait, pride in a willing submission to destiny. Gerrith, Wise Woman of Irnan and prophetess, first foresees, then accepts calmly her fate as human sacrifice, knowing her death will win her people new life. The ritual murder achieves its purpose, and we see that Gerrith's decision was the right one. Life and death are balanced in a powerful symmetry beyond the reach of logic and the novel is the stronger for it. Brackett wisely offers no explanation as to how accurate prophecy or efficacious human sacrifice is possible; such things are simply part of the fabric of life on Skaith. Science must accept these remnants of old magics.

Stark, however, is not at all an accepting man. As readers, we have come to know him and so are prepared for his angry response to Gerrith's death. Stark is a frighteningly autonomous individual, solitary and self-motivated. He cares very little for an abstract
entity like the people, nothing at all for prophecy. Tragedy finds
him true to his nature. After a bitter parting, he refuses even to
watch "Gerrith [as she] walked to the bier, a sacrifice going proudly,
consenting." Outraged and dismayed, Stark sees not sacrifice but
surrender. At the center of Stark's being, his deepest self, is a
primal, purely animal, quite amoral rage to live. For reasons that I
will explain later, Brackett gives this core self the name N'Chaka.
The novel offers many instances of superhuman stamina and
preserverance lent to Stark by this inner torrent of energy. For
example:

Far down beneath the dark mass of fear that destroyed all
[of Stark's] human courage, another mind spoke. Cold
beast-mind, not thinking or reasoning, mind alive and
desperate to live, mind feeling self as bone and muscle, cold
and pain, a hunger to be fed, a fear to be endured. Fear is
life, fear is survival.
The end of fear is death.
The cold beast-mind said, "I am N'Chaka."
The blood beats, hot with living, hot with hate.
Hate is a fire in the blood, a taste in the mouth of bitter
salt. (p. 134)

Stark might spend his life for a person or cause but he can never
give it away. He cannot comprehend Gerrith's self-surrender, and so
is tormented by it. On Skaith, Stark is by now a planetary smybol of
human refusal to accept doom, his career a virtual hymn to achievement
made possible by unbending will and unflagging energy. Stark is his
novel's symbol of change, in both its creative and devouring aspects,
but Gerrith's decision to die on behalf of her folk is something he
cannot change. He tries, but is told flatly, "This is our world. You
can have no part in it, nor in its customs." A bleak parting, not softened by Gerrith's cool and measured goodbye: "Remember all the long way we had together, and be glad for it, as I am." (p. 416). Stark's response is to turn and walk away, "alone with his grief and anger into the barren hills." (p. 417).

The remainder of the story is on the surface an unbroken string of victories, but we view events through Stark's eyes and he finds successful generalship cold comfort. Pain from his betrayal colors all that he does. At novel's end, Stark is the most powerful man on the planet, unquestioned leader of a Skaithian cause he cares little for, though he as served it well.

Brackett's concerns in this novel are symbol and story, imagined setting and society, not nuances of individual character. Consequently, her characterization, though more realistic than the pulp norm, is still quite limited. Her central characters, Stark and Gerrith, are a tight-lipped couple, never seen daydreaming, gossiping, flirting, or making small talk. Gerrith, in particular, I found wooden, too much a symbol and not enough a woman. She and Stark have no relationship outside of their roles as Wise Women and Dark Man. It is typical of the novel that Brackett is far more convincing at portraying an isolated Stark's loss and emotional pain than at showing him and Gerrith in love. Perhaps this is because Eric John Stark is in all ways a more original creation than his lover. Brackett makes him both more than human and simpler than human—in other words, he is first and foremost a Hero—but she gives him the very human affliction
of loneliness, an effective touch.

The success of the story is not, however, dependent on readers seeing Gerrith cranky in the morning or discovering Stark's hobbies. Rather, it is the characters' larger than life roles that Brackett must portray credibly if *The Book of Skaith* is to work. My feeling is that she is successful in her use of the pair as symbols. The mythic aura that surrounds Stark, for example, is the more effectively realized because of the quite believable contempt and irritation with which Stark himself regards the whole matter.

A novel of this length naturally throws up other significant figures. Brackett's technique is to present them to us accompanied by concise, often shrewd sketches of their various personalities. The emotional focus, though, never really leaves Stark. No other character in the story, not even Gerrith, is developed much beyond his or her initial presentation. They do not grow thereafter, only harden into themselves. Such characters— one thinks of Pedrallon, or Ferdias, or Kell a Marg—are introduced, assigned a role, and can be trusted to remain true to those roles.

The nature of Brackett's story demands that most Skaithians stay a part of the background, extras in a disaster movie. Those minor characters who do stand out are types, not discrete individuals, and can be divided into two categories. They are either stock figures from the history of the genre, role players who would also be familiar to Edgar Rice Burroughs or Robert E. Howard, or else they are living emblems of their people, signifying in their dress and behavior
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typical aspects of their culture.

Halk of Irnan, one among Stark's companions, is a good example of Brackett's use of a pulp stereotype. A tall, aggressive, powerful swordsman, Halk is an assembly-line version of Conan. As such, he provides a bit of local color and carries out plot functions, but plays only a small part in the many events of the novel. The routine 1940s pulp adventure story would have (mis)cast Halk as hero. Instead, Brackett modifies the Conan prototype and emphasizes Halk's unremarkable intelligence and unlikeable truculence. In her hands this generic Conan becomes a boorish, brutal man who through luck and circumstance ends the novel alive and on the winning side. Halk (i.e. Hulk) is an excellent foil for Stark, who seems in contrast pleasingly complex and original.

Brackett is less successful with another of the novel's pulp carryovers, the Yur. They are a Skaithian race created through the genetic wizardry of the planet's nominal rulers, the Lords Protector. The masters have programmed their client race to obey without question; hence, the Yur are more androids than true humans. They are biological robots and nearly as interchangeable as clones. To be a Yur is to be a tool, and Brackett wants readers to abhor them. Thus, her initial description:

--Beautiful men, beautifully proportioned, with aquiline faces almost too perfect, and they were so much alike that it was difficult to tell one from another, except for the color of the hair. This ranged from black to a reddish blond, but all had copper-colored eyes. The eyes were too wide apart and too long for the faces, and there was something odd about
them. As they came closer, Stark saw what it was. They were like the inlaid eyes of statues, startlingly lifelike but without life, showing brilliance but no depth. (p. 106)

Lest any reader miss the point that the Yur are not to be trusted, Stark adds that "They smelled like snakes." (p. 109). Ominously, all female Yur are sequestered from the rest of the world and are seen by no one.

At a later point in the story, Stark and a native army successfully besiege and sack the home city of the Yur (Brackett, rather unimaginatively, names it Yurunna.) In a moment of overdone melodrama, Stark's "men found the great walled house of the Yur women and battered down its doors. Instead of the orgy of pleasure they had anticipated they found creatures like obscene white slugs that stared at them with empty eyes and screamed without ceasing, clutching their unnatural young like so many identical blank-faced dolls." (p. 232). Repulsed by "these degraded things" (p. 232) the tribesmen self-righteously kill them all. Brackett is usually less black and white in her portrayal of life on Skaith. In making the Yur mere spear fodder, unreal creatures without redeeming traits, she is uncharacteristically heavy-handed.

Other minor characters serve as emblems of an entire people or culture. This category included the mercenary captain Kazimni of Izvand, the trader Ammir of Komrey, the nomad chieftan Yatko the Harsenyi, and a score of others. I have already mentioned the use Brackett makes of the sharp contrast between Stark and Halk. Another excellent example of planned contrast between character types is
provided by Baya the Wayfarer and the Ironmaster of Thyra. A Farer is
a kind of Skaithian "hippy," supported lifelong by the welfare state
bureaucracy of the Lords Protector, who in turn use the roving Farer
mobs as one instrument—others are the Yur, a small army of
mercenaries, and support from client states—of their rule. The more
prosperous areas of Skaith are crowded with drifting Farers.

A conglomerate of all the [Skaithian] races, dressed or
undressed in every imaginable fashion, trooping about, lying
about, doing whatever happened to occur to them at the
moment; the careless itinerant children of the Lords
Protector, who neither toiled nor spun, but blew lightly with
the winds of the world. (p. 7)

Their representative, Baya, is a pretty girl, "stark naked except for
body-paint laid on in fanciful loops and spirals and her hair, which
hung over her shoulders like a cloak." (p. 10). The Farers consider
their existence idyllic and free—Baya doesn't "care for rules, any
rules" (p. 11)—but productive Skaithians forced to support these
indolent drifters hate them and think of them as vermin. What Stark
thinks of the Farers can easily be imagined.

The Thyrans, who must support themselves in the desolate barren
lands of Skaith, make a nice contrast with the childish and
undisciplined Farers. Here is the Thyrans first appearance in the
novel.

Stark estimated the Thyrans at half a hundred men, including
pipers and drummers and cymbal-clashers. All were armed with
iron weapons. All wore iron caps, and iron-studded back-and
breast-plates over their furs. Iron-bound targes were slung
behind the left shoulder. Banners and pennons lashed in the
wind above them, barred scarlet and black, with the device of
a hammer. They were short broad men who had a look of power about them, and they marched with a driving purposefulness that had in it something chilling, like the march of army ants. They were not, one felt, accustomed to defeat. (p. 88).

The Thyrans' discipline and organization makes them a formidable people, the Romans of Skaith. Once committed to a goal, they advance inexorably, in Brackett's phrase, "as merciless as time." (p. 96).

The outer iron that armors their bodies is an apt reflection of the iron-hard Thyran character. Fittingly, their ruler is known only as the Ironmaster. His palace, a dark and drafty hall, is lit day and night by fires burning smokily in pits.

At the far end of the hall was a dais, with a high seat and several places of honor. The high seat was made of iron, strong, square, without grace or ornamentation. A man wearing an iron collar and pectoral sat in it; he was also strong and square and without grace. The pectoral on his barrel chest was in the form of a hammer. (pp. 102-103).

Note the use Brackett makes of these details of costume, behavior and character. Most obvious of course is the striking visual opposition between the naked, long-haired, quicksilver, petulant Farer girl and the squat, dark, controlled and powerful Ironmaster, and between the ordered Thyran columns and the chaos of a Farer mob. Perhaps more important is the artful way Brackett turns image into metaphor. The opposing habits, temperaments and destinies of Wayfarers and Thyrans mirror the central (and most unpulplike) theme of the novel: the necessity for a pragmatic, goal-oriented spiritual toughness if one is to survive with dignity (Brackett does not say anything about enjoy) an uncaring and dangerous universe.
The Thyrans are crude and unlovely but adult. Able to accommodate inevitable change, they migrate, conquer, survive. Their toughness of character is much like the inner strength that makes Stark such a forceful figure. In contrast, the Farers are children who babble about blowing with the winds of the world, only to collapse when those winds turn cold. Lacking either inner or outer strength and victims of their own irresponsible natures, the Farers are consumed by the planet-wide conflagration that destroys the established Skaithian social order. Their transition at novel's end from pampered pets to helpless prey is brutal and devastating and—Brackett is quite clear about this—deserved.

The novel abounds with other examples of contrasting value systems leading to appropriate destinies. Indeed, a chief virtue of The Book of Skaith is the consistent way its many subplots exemplify a common theme. This theme is most dramatically illustrated by the novel-long struggle between the two figures who dominate the narrative, the hero Stark and the sick and dying world of Skaith. Stark and Skaith are protagonist and true antagonist. As such, the two opponents merit detailed discussion. All other story concerns reflect this central combat, which at bottom is a struggle between elemental forces of life and death.

Before becoming the hero of The Book of Skaith, Stark was Leigh Brackett's favorite pulp character, the only one she used in a series of stories. He appeared in three magazine novellas, two of which were later revised and slightly enlarged for reissue as (very short)
Brackett's other pulp heroes—Hugh Starke; Burk Winters; Jon Ross; Michael Trehearne; John Damien Greene; the splendidly named Judas Goat; and all the rest—are lesser versions of Stark, who to an extent transcends the limits of genre characterization. Brackett sought to elevate Stark above the common run of pulp heroes. His adventures are designed to celebrate human courage, loyalty, resourcefulness and endurance. In Brackett's view, these are qualities necessary for confronting an essentially tragic existence, and Stark possesses them in a purified form. Mixing animal vitality and a sharp human mind, he seems at times more an embodiment of the life force than a person.

Eric John Stark is a dark, blunt, grim man always seen standing apart from the rest of humanity. By birth a Terran, he was orphaned as an infant on Mercury, then found and raised by a band of sub-human ape/aborigines, and named by them N'Chaka, The-Man-Without-a-Tribe. Stark survives that hard life, caught as his foster folk were in arid mountain valleys delicately posed between extremes of fire and ice. Next to Mars, Mercury was the world Brackett evidently found most congenial to her imagination. In his Introduction to The Best of Leigh Brackett, after first noting that his wife had based her view of Mercury on the best scientific evidence then available, her husband Edmond Hamilton comments:

... Leigh's concept of a world where tremendous mountains went up literally beyond the sky, where the cliff-locked valleys were racked by violent storms and sudden rockfalls, and life was a precarious thing beset by heat and cold, thirst and starvation, is a nice little view of Hell. It was this world that molded Eric John Stark.
Hell also has demons, in the form of murderously cruel human miners who are the young N'Chaka's first introduction to humanity. The humans first slaughter the "hairy aboes" for sport, then capture and cage the wild boy for their amusement. At this point an agent of Earth Police Control, Simon Ashton—later to be the friend whose disappearance brings Stark to Skaith—happens upon the scene. Ashton sees:

A naked boy, fierce and proud in the cage where he was penned. His skin was burned dark by the terrible sun, scarred by the accidents of daily living in that cruel place. His shaggy hair was black, his eyes very light in color—the clear, innocent, suffering eyes of an animal. The minors had tormented him with sticks until he bled. His belly was pinched with hunger, his tongue swollen with thirst. Yet he watched his captors with those cold clear eyes, unafraid, waiting for a chance to kill. (p. 154).

A good man, Ashton rescues the boy and to a limited extent fathers him and sponsors his entrance into humanity. Emotionally, though, Stark never fully completes the transition from pre-human primitive to star traveller. Stark is at heart a wild thing, a hunter, an acute observer of human affairs but not quite a full participant. He has no domestic self and, though knowledgeable, is not civilized. His is a solitary nature. Science fiction editor Terry Carr called him "the eternal outsider." Stark is, however, a loyal friend. Not a warm or demonstrative man, neither is there anything false or petty about him.

Stark's lineage and actions link him with other, earlier heroes from the worlds of popular culture. He can, for example, be seen as a
scaled down, moodier version of Superman. Stark's fostering in the wild by subhumans, his extraordinary physical powers, and his unceasing animal alertness show an obvious kinship with Tarzan. Unlike Tarzan, Stark is not a noble savage. When sufficiently provoked or threatened, Stark is ruthless, not at all fettered by late-Victorian codes of conduct. Stark is also a close cousin of Robert E. Howard's Conan, whose *Weird Tales* adventures Brackett read and admired in the 1930's. Stark and Conan are both taciturn, unsmiling and dangerous men, openly contemptuous of civilized softness and hypocrisy. Unlike Conan, Stark can be eloquent when he chooses. As his name implies, Stark's nature is such that it is impossible to imagine him whimsical or playful, though he is not humorless and both appreciates and uses irony. Finally, Brackett's conception of Stark also shows the influence of Raymond Chandler's famous private eye, Philip Marlowe. Like Marlowe, Stark gains in complexity by being an essentially romantic figure presented with grittily realistic detail.

In creating Stark, Brackett also drew upon her lifelong interest in myth. She had from the beginning been aware of the mythological underpinnings of her brand of space opera. Her 1975 Introduction to an anthology of *Planet Stories* fiction makes this clear. In it, she speaks of her love for "The tale of adventure—of great courage and daring, of battle against the forces of darkness and the unknown." She summarizes its history: "[from the start] interwoven with magic and ritual ... The tales grew into religions. They became myth and legend." Finally, she offers her own opinion that: "The so-called
space opera is the folk-tale, the hero-tale, of our particular niche
in history.\textsuperscript{13}

Her work for the pulps shows that Brackett practiced what she
preached. Consider, for example, the earliest of the Stark stories,
1949's "Enchantress of Venus." In an article for Extrapolation.
"Myth-Adventure in Leigh Brackett's 'Enchantress of Venus,'" critic
Terry Hansen speculates that "Many readers will be unconsciously
attracted to the story's mythological dimensions ... [and that Stark's
story] is essentially the adventures of an Odysseus, an Aneas, a
Quetzalcoatl, or a Buddha." Hansen points out that the structure of
"Enchantress of Venus" is similar to the archetypal pattern for the
hero-story as described by Joseph Campbell in The Hero With a Thousand
Faces, that is, separation-initiation-return. Hansen then quotes
Campbell's account of the standard path of the hero-quest;
interestingly, we see that the quote serves equally well as tight and
accurate plot summary for Brackett's pulp story.

\begin{quote}
A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a
region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there
encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes
back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow
boons on his fellow men.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The connections between myth and the space opera Brackett wrote
for the pulps can thus be seen to be real but buried, that is, they
are implicit in the story but unlikely to be noticed by the casual
reader. However, in The Book of Skaith Brackett is explicit. Myth,
legend and prophecy touch on every aspect of Skaithian life, and
Stark's alleged mythic status is openly debated by nearly everyone he meets. Depending on the point of view, Stark is either Bringer of Doom or Savior, both accurate descriptions of the role events and circumstances force Stark to play. In his journeys he is both helped and hindered—and to an unguessable extent controlled—by this widespread prophecy. Stark himself rejects the supernatural, actively resenting the belief he encounters for "forcing shackles on him, shackles of duty that he had not himself choosen and did not want." (p. 78). At a more basic level, Stark's nature will not allow him to tolerate the thought that he is an actor in a drama scripted by another. His purpose on Skaith is to search for his foster father, Simon Ashton, and he acknowledges no other goal. There is no doubt, however, that Stark has come to a world in urgent need of a savior, with or without the capital "S".

On Skaith itself, on Ice Age is near at hand; or, as Brackett sometimes puts it, the Dark Goddess Cold and her consort My Lord Darkness walk the worn land, followed by their daughter Hunger. The old ways are passing, with every probability there will be no new. The dominant emotional tone is similar to that of the Scandanavian myth of Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods. Humans have had many different reactions to this long dying of their world. Some Skaithians, the Nithi for example, accommodate the coming Death, even celebrate it. The Nithi pray for extinction:

Old Sun goes down in darkness, may he never return. Old Sun dies, may he never live again. May the hand of the Goddess strike him, may the breath of the Goddess shrivel him. May the peace of the Goddess be upon Skaith, may it be upon us all. (p. 342).
Others deny warnings, omens, and the evidence of their senses and fight to defend the ages-old status quo. This group includes the Yur, Wayfarers, and Wandsmen (all tied to the administration of the state under the Lords Protector), as well as many allied states such as the Ochar. Still other Skaithians—the city-states of Irnan and Iubar, the Ssussminh (seal-folk), the Fallarin (eagle-folk)—struggle passionately for the chance to break free from the prison their world has become. For all that they once had a high technology, the Skaithians never achieved—or perhaps wanted—spaceflight, and so in the days of their decline are trapped on their cold, dim execution cell of a planet. Into this confused, desperate and often dismal setting comes Eric John Stark, in search of the vanished Simon Ashton, and all unbeknownst to himself the Dark Man of Skaithian prophecy.

Though he denies it, Stark cannot shake his mythic dimension; he moves against a background of the supernatural and the inexorable workings of Fate, whose chosen instrument he unwillingly is. Second Sight is commonplace on Skaith, so those he meets constantly remind Stark of his assigned role. For example, early in his travels across the barren Wastelands, Stark encounters Hargoth, chief and high priest, who rules his people as Corn King (Stark thinks: [How] strange to find a Corn King here, where no corn has grown for centuries.") Hargoth gives Stark the disconcerting greeting that his arrival has been seen "in the entrails of the Spring Child that we give each year to Old Sun." (p. 70). Stark acquires many Skaithian
names—Houndmaster; Herder of Runners; Starborn; also, he is repeatedly termed Demon—but the most important is Dark Man. The Dark Man has as consort his Lady Gerrith, herself a Wise Woman born to wear the Robe and Crown of her people’s fate. The living couple is set in opposition to the old, old human foes of Cold and Darkness. If Stark and Gerrith can overcome these venerable enemies, then their union wins for Skaithians the freedom of the stars; should they fail, then the future holds only hunger and final despair. All across the planet people await the coming of the Dark Man, the promised leader from the heavens, the guide, as Hargoth says, "who will lead us into the far heavens, into warmth and light." (p. 70). Stark does not enjoy his unasked-for burden.

Besides being a figure from myth, Stark plays another—and complementary—role in the novel. He is the personification of Change, the New sent to destroy the Old. Everywhere he travels Stark’s arrival signals the breakup of the old order of things; paradoxically, he brings with him a hope of new life but always chaos and death follow on his heels. Thus, few Skaithians can accept Stark wholeheartedly. As Stark’s friend, Alderyk, gloomily tells him: "You are the future standing there, a strange thing, full of distances I cannot plumb. A black, whirling wind to break and scatter, leaving nothing untouched behind you ...." (p. 208). Brackett makes Stark a hurtling missile, who collides head on with every element of Skaithian society. The consequences of this collision are seen on a planetary scale. The trail of desolation that follows Stark is indication of
the mixed blessing star ships and access to the universe will be for Skaith. Jofr, taken hostage by Stark and Ashton, attempts to betray his captors with this anguished and partly truthful cry: "Slay these men! Slay them! They are demons, come to steal our world!" (p. 193). Stark is the future incarnate in a man, which adds depth and emotional complexity to the tale of his struggles and conquests.

A persistent concern of the three volumes is the plight of those in the path of drastic and unavoidable change. In addition to their other disasters, Skaithians must suffer from a massive dose of future shock. Naturally, few welcome the inevitable. Though the wisest or most desperate seek accommodation, most Skaithians resent change and struggle to preserve the familiar. Thus, Stark meets with hatred rather more often than love. Nor are Stark’s motives in any sense selfless, as his ally Pedrallon bitterly reminds him:

No one of you [off-worlders] has come here out of any love for Skaith. You come for your own reasons, which are selfish. And you [Stark] above all have done incalculable injury to the only system of stable government my sad world possesses.... [Stark has destroyed the Lords Protector] not for the good of Skaith, but for the good of yourself and Ashton. The good of Irnan and Tregad and Iubar is merely an accidental factor that you use for your own advantage. (p. 282).

Skaith and its predicament are explicable in rational terms, but an element of the fabulous is nonetheless associated with the dying planet. In the shadow of human clashes and combats there are conflicting archetypes. At bottom, the novel is built around a primal opposition between the energies of life and the death wish. As
mentioned, Stark himself is under stress more truly the primitive N'Chaka, consumed by a mindless devouring will to live. This more than human vitality and resilience make Stark a virtual embodiment of the life force. Stark’s enemies, on the other hand, are under one guise or another also opposed to change. The Nithi, who have realized that the true changeless state is death and so have become its worshipers, provide the novel’s most extreme example of this fundamental opposition. Perhaps the most subtly drawn of Stark’s opponents, however, are The Children of Skaith-Our-Mother, perfectly adapted via a long forgotten science of genetics to a secure underground life in enormous caverns beneath a mountain range.

The Children are no longer human but neither are they wicked or deformed. Instead, they are scholarly and courtly, lovers of ritual, semi-magical creatures with voices like "chiming bells," bodies "covered in fine white fur," and "not unpleasing" faces with "huge and dark and glowing" eyes. (p. 111). They have turned their home into a vast museum/shrine/library, and are as obsessed with the preservation of the past as an Egyptian pharaoh contemplating his pyramid. Their world is a maze of torch-lit corridors, off which open chambers with "magnificently carved doorways" and interiors that give "an astonishing impression of richness." (p. 115). Their underground life is in its way rather appealing, but the Children have become too much one with it, are now frozen into it. The Children are brave and spirited, as attackers of their home soon find out, but they accept calmly the death and racial suicide that the ice is bringing. They
have no wish to escape by abandoning their relics and leaving the womb of Skaith-Our-Mother. Proud as Samurai, the Children are beaten by Fate, not broken by it; Brackett allows us to see for ourselves both the nobility and the uselessness of the choice they make.

As the above example show, Brackett has created a multifaceted world for Stark; indeed, Hero and World are the two dominant figures of the narrative. Although Skaith itself is very old, for readers it is a brand new world. It is also a new canvas for Brackett, one immensely far away from Earth and the rest of the solar system. Edgar Rice Burroughs’ fanciful visions of Mars had fired Brackett’s imagination when she was eight years old. She later wrote: "I cannot tell you what a tremendous effect that idea of Mars, another planet, a strange world, had upon my imagination. It set me firmly on the path toward being a science-fiction writer." Skaith became Brackett’s Mars for the 1970s. The change was an imaginative necessity, the dream worlds of the old pulp solar system no longer having even pseudo-scientific credibility. Moreover, Skaith could be totally Brackett’s world, not half-inherited as the pulp Mars had been.

The new Mars bears a family resemblance to the old one, but there are significant differences. One is that Skaith’s climate and scenery are more varied. Brackett’s Mars seemed to consist almost entirely of dried-out and undifferentiated wasteland. Stark, on the other hand, travels up and down the breadth of Skaith, from ocean and jungle to rare fertile valley to tundra to mountain range to ice sheet down to high, cold desert through the fertile lands to the sea again. A more
important change in the Burroughs model is Brackett's presentation of Skaith as an interlocking series of systems, both economic and ecological. In that sense, Skaith is more a "real" world and Mars more a stage-set where fabulous events occur.

From the start Brackett was able to think of Skaith as a whole entity, world and story both. In the pulps, she had borrowed a pre-existing Mars as the general setting for a dozen unrelated stories. Her practice in these stories was to focus attention on a particular part of Mars and let the rest of the planet fade away. A reader, of course, can easily build a composite picture of Brackett's Mars. Stories often shared a common background, and by the end of the pulp era Brackett had created a number of customs, traditions and vices for her Martians to hold communally.

Skaith, however, is a more thickly textured creation, a world more densely imagined and with far more interlocking parts than Mars. In Skaith, Brackett achieves the most complex portrait of a world in all her fiction. Stark travels among people who talk naturally of political alliance, trade routes, harvests; Brackett places these people in societies and she gives them specific and distinctive dress, customs and beliefs. Similarly, Brackett provides differing natural resources for these societies, then works out economic systems for distributing those resources. In the third volume, her narrative jumps back and forth across the world, linking events separated by thousands of miles. Stark himself journeys across half the planet, and what he does has profound repercussions for the other half. The
catastrophe dooming life on Skaith is global, its causes the natural physical processes of the planet and an inadequate human social and technological response. All fates are linked on Skaith; everyone is affected by what happens.

Skaith does resemble the earlier Mars of Burroughs and Brackett in that it is also a drained and dying world, resources running out, greatness a thing of the past, sciences forgotten. Skaith, however, takes us a giant step farther down the path whose end is frozen quiet. Skaith is emitting its death rattle. Inevitably, human psychological processes reflect the physical facts of the surrounding world. The convincing correspondence she creates between individual psyche, Skaithian art and religion and world view, and the actual planet is perhaps Brackett's most impressive achievement in the novel. Skaith is a world obsessed with death and the proper response to death; its scattered cultures tremble just an eyeblink away from collapse. It is the perfect opponent for Stark.

When Stark arrives on Skaith, he senses immediately the "rich ripe stink of decay. Skaith was dying, of course, but it did not seem to him that it was dying well." (p. 8). From each pole walls of ice crawl steadily forward, while life stagnates in the thin belt of warm lands around the equator. Skaith has an ocean, but one is not tempted to think of it as a symbol of renewal or rebirth. It more closely resembles an enormous pond slowly being covered over with scum than a true ocean. "Skaith had no moon, so there were no tides to stir it [the sea], and there was a milky, greasy sheen to the surface."
Skaith's old ginger-colored sun was going down in a senile fury of crimson and molten brass, leaving streaks of unhealthy brilliance across the water." (p. 6). Stark lands at the sole Skaithian spaceport, a town with the unattractive name of Skeg. The place smells of mud and vegetables and "sea water, salty and stagnant," and is watered by a river grown thin with age, "too weak to do more than trickle through a narrow passage where the silt of centuries had all but closed its mouth." (p. 6). Nearby a ruined fortress stands futile guard on a vanished harbor.

Skeg, we discover, is a prosperous town set in the richest part of Skaith's strongest civilization. Life is much harder farther north, in the arid wastelands that lie between the feebly fertile inner belt and the glaciers. Stark journeys in a wagon train with a heavy guard of armed and mounted men. They travel across a desolate plain dotted with the extensive ruins of a richer past. The great plain is inhabited, sometimes by peoples who live in a savage state of barbarism, sometimes by those who have degenerated into monstrous, inhuman creatures. Brackett describes an attack by these feral predators.

Twice the wagons were attacked in force, and by day. It seemed that the squat ferocious shapes emerged from the ground itself, rushing forward in the rusty twilight, hurling themselves at anything that lived, all teeth and talons and wild harsh screamings. They impaled themselves on lances, spitted themselves on swords, and their fellows tore them to bits and devoured them while still they screamed.... The creatures did not stop eating even long enough to die. (p. 68).
Thyra, a ruined city inhabited by a metal-making culture, is the strongest and richest power in this frozen world. Feeding off the rusted wealth of the past, the Thyrans have grown rich enough "that they no longer have to eat each other." (p. 66). When he reaches it, however, their city reminds Stark "of a community of rats living in the biggest junkyard in the world." (p. 102). The gloom of life in the Barrens is reflected in the form of greeting its people commonly use. One party says: "May Old Sun give you light and warmth." The ritual reply: "Here there are only my lord Darkness and his lady Cold, and their daughter Hunger." (p. 70). Overhead a huge star, known as The Lamp of the North, sits "like a burning emerald" (p. 64) solitary in an otherwise black sky.

A desolate scene, but given a certain grandeur by Brackett's descriptions. We view the world of Skaith through a wide lense. As Brackett's narrative takes us all across the world, witness to the human events of its collapse, she uses the panorama of its landscapes to reinforce with image and metaphor her theme of mortality struggling with time. The nuclear furnace that is Skaith's sun is burning low; from afar the natives of Skaith see it to be a flickering, gutted candle.

Old Sun seemed to pause on the rim of the mountain wall as if to rest and gather strength for the final plunge. In spite of himself, Stark felt a passing fear that this descent might be the last one and that the ginger sun might never rise again, a common phobia among Skaithians which he seemed to be acquiring. (p. 160).
Skaith is a world of muted twilight colors, and Brackett sometimes describes a setting as if it were lit from within by embers of a dying fire. For example,

The short days of the darklands were little brighter than the nights. Old Sun’s dull gleaming stained the sky rather than brightened it. The white snow turned the color of rust, and the vast plain, strewn with the wrecks of abandoned cities, tilted upward to a distant wall of mountains all dabbled in the same red-ochre. (p. 64).

Or: "Old Sun smeared the southwestern sky with a dull red-ochre, and when that had faded the green star [The Lamp of the North] shone hugely, almost as bright as a little moon, in the northwest." (p. 89).

One notices how often Brackett makes of Stark a small figure in a large frame, as in this description of his setting out on a lonely journey across the ice fields at the top of the world:

Old Sun was below the peaks, and the northern face of the Witchfires was gray and ugly, a sheer frowning wall at his back. The mountain shadow made a long darkness across the plain. The wind was a knife, a scream, a madness bewailing eternal winter. The flogged snow-devils danced in desperation to appease it. (p. 131).

This depressing landscape, of course, exactly mirrors Stark’s dark and driven frame of mind. Such synchronism of the inner feelings of her characters with the outer world they move through is a favorite Brackett technique. Everyone in the novel unselfconsciously anthropomorphizes Skaith, since Brackett intends us to regard the world as a major character in the book that bears its name. We feel the world as a presence in the story and know that it is life’s foe.
Brackett makes it impossible for readers not to agree with a conclusion voiced early in the work by a minor character: "It [Skaith] has lived too long. It is senile and mad, growing madder with every generation." (p. 29). Brackett permits us to sympathize with those Skaithians (revealingly, their own name for themselves is usually some variant of Children of Skaith-Our-Mother) who deny this reality, but does not allow us to forget that this self-delusion, although understandable, is also tragic and foolish.

The Book of Skaith is Leigh Brackett's most successful novel. It is certainly the best mix of science fiction and fantasy she ever achieved. Its scope is large. The story takes Stark across an entire planet and makes him the center of a worldwide struggle. His decisions and actions determine the fate of everyone. The peoples of Skaith are varied. Brackett gives all of them customs, histories, legends, gods, devils and problems of their own. She maintains throughout the novel an impressive unity of style, setting, mood and theme. In particular, Stark's harsh nobility of character is well-suited to the bleak landscapes of Skaith.

It is true that Brackett's story has its roots in the pulp past, but she tells it with a most unpulplike stress on economic and political realities. Her battles and sieges are realistically and tersely portrayed, and all the more effective for being somewhat understated. She is unsentimental in her presentation of hardship and defeat. The suffering in her book is credible, which lends a certain dignity to the adventure it contains. Moreover, Brackett possesses a
refreshing awareness of the moral ambiguities that surround great events. In the final battle, for example, Stark finds himself saddled by harsh necessity with a number of unsavory "allies," among them savages, cannibals, and the killer of the woman he loved. This mixed lot fight for survival, self-interest, loot and revenge. Their superiority over their opponents is tactical and strategic, not moral. Those who oppose Stark and his army are for the most part not evil, merely mistaken. They have remained loyal to the past and refused to accommodate an unsettling future, and so condemned themselves to death. Stark's great foe, of course, is the elemental doom awaiting all life on Skaith in the form of the relentless and impersonal ice.

The Book of Skaith is narrated with a convincing grimness. Those around Stark often die, even those characters one comes to like. Everywhere Stark goes he brings ruin and slaughter; the whole of Skaithian society is falling apart; war, defeat and despair trail Stark like a cloak he must wear. Leigh Brackett does a thorough, persuasive job at creating the late autumn bleakness of Skaith, a world that is fading and running down before the reader's eyes. Everything—the dim red sun, the growing coldness, the bloody rituals, the prevalent fatalism—shows the immense weight of time and stale custom that is crushing life on Skaith as surely as the ice.

The conclusion to book three resolves the long novel's many plot threads. The last battle at the capital city of Ged Darod brings together nearly all important characters and peoples and settles their
fates. In that battle Stark crushes his adversaries. The merciless Thyrans are among his allies, come down from their Wastelands home "a moving shield-wall bristling with swordpoints." (p. 446). The city falls to the rebels, and the Farers whom it had sheltered are slaughtered without pity. Bodies litter the temple pools, while "the proud Wandsmen of the palace died like seals under the spears of the barbarians." (p. 451). Amid the universal destruction we catch a last glimpse of Baya, the seductive Farer girl who greeted Stark upon his arrival on Skaith. She is no longer seductive. "The faint traces of body paint were gone from her skin. The bones showed through it, and her hair was matted. Her eyes, like her soul, were now completely empty." (p. 457). Baya dies a suicide, setting herself on fire rather than face the uncertainties of life in a world turned upside down.

Life on Skaith has won a temporary respite, though much of value has perished forever. Stark's Phryric victory is complete. His responsibilities discharged at last, Stark is free to leave. Without ceremony, he does.

The Book of Skaith is Brackett's most autobiographical work. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, she was ill when she began the lengthy project, and seriously ill when she finished. Her husband's health was also deteriorating. Edmond Hamilton would die only months after the final volume was published; Leigh Brackett survived her husband by barely a year. The dying world of Skaith, filled with struggle and images of ruin and decay, was the perfect stage for Brackett's imagination. Over and over her novel asks these
questions: what is the proper way to face death? what is the proper response to change. The answers given are not simple. Change, Brackett tells us, is essential to survival and growth but often destroys all an individual holds dear. Peoples and cultures that live unchanged too long become introverted, neurotic and fossilized. So death, it seems, is not only inevitable but also necessary for life’s renewal. Yet Stark, the novel’s center, resists death with all his force, and Brackett seems to approve of that, too.

In this way, The Book of Skaith reflects not only Brackett’s own struggle with her mortality but also dramatizes in its story some of her most deeply held personal values. The events of the novel and those of the final years of Brackett’s life run parallel to each other. Brackett kept the details of her final illness private, maintained an unruffled front for the outside world, and did not complain or seek sympathy even from intimate friends. She went on with her life. The majority of her friends and acquaintances, in fact, were hardly aware she was sick. Brackett finished a last major piece of work only a single day before entering the hospital where she spent the final three weeks of her life. The self-reliant Stark, with his belief in the work ethic and stoic courage in the face of adversity, is in these ways the true child of his creator.

Life’s triumph at the end of the novel is real but conditional; Stark’s foe—the universe indifferent to human suffering and desire—can on occasion be beaten but is never truly vanquished. Stark, a hero for adults, finds his victories all generously mixed
with pain and sorrow. The *Book of Skaith*, Leigh Brackett's homage to the enthusiasms of her childhood, ends this way:

Ashton was waiting for him [Stark] in the airlock. They went together into the ship and the outer hatch clanged shut. In a little while, the flame and thunder shook the air again and set the ground a-tremble. The shining hull sprang upward into the sky.

Old Sun watched it with a dull, uncomprehending eye until it disappeared. (p. 460).
CHAPTER FOUR: NOTES


4 The Ballantine paperbacks have gone through several printings over the last decade, while The Book of Skaith edition from the Science Fiction Book Club has remained steadily available since 1976.

5 Leigh Brackett frequently expressed her frustration over this relative powerlessness — to her friends, in interviews, and in writing. For example, her friend Ruby Artman told me in both our interviews how "mad" Leigh was at Howard Hawks over their disagreement on the script of El Dorado (1967). Though she respected Hawks’s ability, Brackett increasingly despaired over his reliance on previously proven formulae. Brackett says much the same thing in response to question 14, p. 5 of Rene Pennington’s questionnaire (11 Jan. 1976).

6 English critic Brian Stableford writes "Brackett was perhaps the gaudiest of all the sf pulp writers, and at times her purple prose almost rivals that of Merritt in its sickly luxuriance." He adds, however, that Brackett differs from Merritt in not having his "unreasoned infatuation" for the exotic. Merritt, says Stableford, was "genuinely ... an escapist." Brackett "persistently denied the real value of the insistent temptations of her fantasies." Stableford notes: "Among her later works are several stories -- especially "The Last Days of Shandakor" (1952) and the last of her Martian stories "The Road to
Sinharat" (1963) — whose manifest subject matter is the death of dreams and the crushing of the ancient and the exotic by the irresistible pressure of time and common sense." (p.13). Brian Stableford, "Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett: An Appreciation," in his Masters of Science Fiction (San Bernardino, California: Borgo Press, 1981). [Brackett, of course, returns to this theme of her later pulp years to offer a still darker version of "the death of dreams and the crushing of the ancient and the exotic" in The Book of Skaith (1976)]

7 Brackett, The Book of Skaith (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), p. 417. All further references to this work appear in the text.


9 respectively "Lorelei of the Red Mist" (1946), "The Beast-Jewel of Mars" (1948), "The Last Days of Shandakor" (1952), "The Starmen of Llyrdis" (1951), "The Halfling" (1943), and "The Veil of Astellar" (1944).


14 Terry Hansen, "Myth-Adventure in Leigh Brackett's 'Enchantress of Venus,' " Extrapolation 23 (Spring 1982), pp. 77-78.

16 The Sword of Rhiannon (1953) is an obvious exception. In it Brackett sends readers back a million years to a green and fertile Mars whose oceans are dominated by Viking-like Sea-Kings and their fleets.

17 My picture of Leigh Brackett’s last years is based on more than twenty interviews with her friends and neighbors (see especially interviews with Ray Bradbury, Ruby and Milton Artman, Harold and Nancy Fenn and Marion Zimmer Bradley), as well as the air of surprise that accompanied the reports of Brackett’s death in the science fiction press.
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