

THE MAN WHO NAMED THE LOBBLIES HAS A “BOND” WITH MARSHALL

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Quiz time: Name three former Marshall students who have, or have had, their own formally-organized fan clubs.

Hal Greer? Possibly.

Soupy Sales? Probably.

Nelson Bond? Definitely.

But who is Nelson Bond?

If you are a fantasy fan or science-fiction buff, you already know the name. But, even if you're not, there is a strong probability you have read, or heard, or watched some of his stories. For ever since his departure from the Marshall campus in 1934 Bond has been a professional freelance writer, author of more than 500 short stories and articles, a half dozen novels, 300 radio plays, 50 television dramas, and three stage plays.

If you are over 40, you may have listened to some of Nelson Bond's plays being performed on radio in the late 1930s or during the 1940s --on the "Lights Out" series, "Dr. Christian," or Bond's own weekly detective series, "Hot Copy."

As a reader, you may have escaped everyday cares by reading his pieces in *Unknown Worlds*, *Weird Tales*, *Astounding Stories*, or some of the other popular "pulp" magazines.

Or if you're a trifle younger, you may be more familiar with Bond's work through television. Bond carved his own niche in television history in 1947 with "Mr. Mergenthwirker's Lobblies," the first three-act play ever telecast by network television. Numerous Bond stories were dramatized for television on such programs as "Studio One" and "Playhouse 90."

And if you are quite young, you were exposed to some of Bond's stories, now "required reading" in school textbooks, or in the numerous anthologies which have reprinted them.

Bond's writing falls into many categories: humor, science-fiction, detective, sports, even an occasional light romance. But, he is best known for his fantasy. And it is because of his reputation in this field that he has a large and very active fan club: the Nelson Bond Society. Members of the club range from teen-age admirers of "Star Trek" to college professors and collectors of Bond's books.

The group is based in Roanoke, Va., where Bond has made his home since 1939, but there are members from many states of the Union and from as far away as England, Australia and The Netherlands. The Society publishes a regular periodical, *The Jinnia Clan Journal*, and each year sponsors a science-fantasy convention.

"The local chapter," said Bond, "meets monthly. They discuss my work and show my old films, and make a great to-do about me which is very flattering, but, also a bit embarrassing. I am reminded of the man of whom Mark Twain wrote: the one who was tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. Someone asked him how he felt about all this, and he replied that it would be 'darned uncomfortable except for the honor of it."

Except for brief periods here and there, the Scranton, Pa., native has lived in Roanoke for the past 40

years where he is in contention for the Most Colorful Character award. He might also have won such an award at Marshall College, had they had one when he attended in 1932, 1933 and 1934.

Bond's friends from those days remember him as a dashing fellow who arrived on campus with a knapsack. Retired *Charleston Daily Mail* editor Jack Maurice said, "I think I was among the first to see him whence arrived on campus. He looked kind of like Lord Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts. He was most debonair and dashing and he was given to reciting long passages of Chaucer."

Sam McEwen, Bond's fraternity brother in Phi Tau Alpha (now Sigma Alpha Epsilon), remembered that Bond was older and more mature than most students, had one of the few mustaches on campus, and was a good bridge player.

"He was always nattily dressed, leaning toward plus-fours and wearing an Ascot scarf with dash and flair," McEwen said.

Bond explained his knapsack arrival thus. After high school he had taken several jobs compatible with what then was his intention -- to pursue an engineering career. But when the Great Depression hit the Western world, Nelson Bond hit the road.

He packed his knapsack and took off to visit his paternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. After a summer landfall in Canada, he went to Philadelphia to spend Christmas with his parents, after which he planned to head south to Mexico.

But he never got to Mexico. In Philadelphia he met an old friend, Harry Wildsmith, who had heard of a small school called Marshall College.

"I'm going to go look it over," said Harry. "Route yourself through Huntington. If I don't like the school, I'll go to Mexico with you."

When Bond arrived in Huntington a few weeks later, Harry met him and said enthusiastically, "It's a great little school. I've decided to stay, and I think you should, too. The tuition's dirt cheap."

Bond checked with the bursar's office.

"How much?"

"It's \$38.75 a semester if you're from out of state, and \$18.75 if you're a West Virginian," he was told.

Bond went downtown, paid his poll tax, and returned.

"I'm a West Virginian," he announced. "Where do I sign?" Harry lasted in Huntington less than three months. Bond stayed for three years.

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Marshall College changed the course of Bond's life. He abandoned plans for an engineering career and gravitated toward The Parthenon, where he fell in with a group which he still recalls with admiration and affection.

“It was a marvelous little coterie of individuals, each of whom had talent,” Bond said. “It was most unlikely that such a group should come together at the same place at the same time. But every one of us was so motivated by the companion-ship that each of us subsequently made his living by writing.

“Who were they? Sam McEwen, who went into public relations. Chuck McGhee, who became a newspaperman. Chet Anderson, for many years with the Christian Science Monitor. Jim Comstock, who won renown for his West Virginia Hillbilly. And of course Jack Maurice, in whose reflected glory we all shone when he earned a Pulitzer Prize for his writing.

“It was a great bunch. . .if somewhat uncontrollable. As I recall, Page Pitt spent half his time praising us and the other half giving us hell,” Bond said.

And well Professor Pitt might give his charges a blast or two at times. For at The Parthenon, Bond and his companions occasionally stretched things a little to come up with a good issue. One evening in January, 1933, the assembled fledgling journalists realized they had no lead story. So they invented one.

At that time Marshall President M.P. Shawkey happened to be ill. So The Parthenon staffers called William Cassius Cook, then superintendent of West Virginia schools, and asked if it were true that Cook wanted Shawkey's job.

Cook denounced the rumor as preposterous, which gave the ingenious newshounds the lead story they needed. The January 27, 1933, issue of The Parthenon was boldly headlined: “Cook Flays Presidency Rumor,” and the text crackled with Cook's vehement denials.

In addition to his reportorial work, Bond edited The Parthenon's literary supplement for which English professor J. Paul Stoakes was adviser. The supplement carried stories and poems written by students, “including some of my own early efforts,” said Bond, “one of which briefly won me a notoriety I could have done without.”

Bond's reference is to a short story, “Elaine the Unfair,” in which a female character is slightly referred to as a “slut.” The word would pass unnoticed in today's permissive culture. But its use in Depression-era Huntington created something of a furor. However, Stoakes leaped to Bond's defense, pointing out that by dictionary definition a slut was simply an untidy woman, rather than an immoral one.

A search for the story in the James E. Morrow Library and elsewhere proved futile. “If the story caused such an uproar, I wouldn't be surprised if it were not included,” said Cora Teel, Marshall archivist. “The librarian at that time was very conservative.”

Today Bond considers the entire incident ludicrous.

“It was a tempest in a teapot. In over 40 years I have never written anything that could be considered vulgar. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite is true. Quite often, when seeking a theme for a new story, I went to the Bible for my ideas.”

“Cunning of the Beast” is Bond's science-fiction

interpretation of the Adam and Eve story. “To People a New World” retells the story of Cain and Abel. “Uncommon Castaway” offers a logical explanation for the legend of Jonah and the whale.

Bond gleefully reported, “Once at a science-fiction convention the question was raised, ‘If you were cast away on a desert island what ten books would you want to have with you?’ Someone, of course, proposed the Bible. Someone else promptly offered the amendment, ‘The Bible as rewritten by Nelson Bond.’ The conventioners happily voted in this suggestion, and went on to the next selection.”

Bond, after attending Marshall for three years, left without earning a degree. Asked about this, he responded, “Why? Because I had no desire to earn a degree! I was simply sitting out the Depression, taking whatever courses appealed to me.”

His transcript reads like an adviser's nightmare. Because of his grades, an indulgent administration permitted him to take as many hours as he could comfortably handle, so he carried loads of 21, 22 and 23 hours a semester. “And never bought a book,” chuckled Bond. “Fortunately I have a retentive memory and almost total recall. Textbooks were a dispensable luxury.”

Bond took all the English courses he could schedule, all the French, and when he had exhausted the roster of French courses, he took one in German. He took every philosophy course offered by Professor Homer Dubs “because he was a great teacher,” said Bond.

But his chief delight was in taking “offbeat” courses, such as geology and interior decorating. “I also signed up to take a course in child care one semester,” he recalled, “but the class was full. The entire football team was taking it!”

With a list of such courses, it should come as no surprise that Bond was called in one day by William Eben Greenleaf, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of biology.

“You're not getting everything you need to graduate,” the dean said, and insinuated that Bond's avoidance of science courses indicated fear of them. This nettled Bond.

“What's the toughest science course being offered?” demanded Bond

“Botany!” replied the dean.

“I'll take it!” Bond declared.

Not only did he take it, he got straight A's and “aced” the final.

In Pilgrimage II, a special edition magazine published in November, 1976, by the Nelson Bond Society, Bond told about that botany course.

“The professor didn't trust me at all. He couldn't believe I could cut so many classes and still come up with the right answers. For the final exam he wrote the questions on the board then came and stood directly behind my chair. I answered all the questions in rhymed couplets and handed them to him over my shoulder.”

The year 1934 was a turning point in Bond's life. In that year a Huntington girl, Betty Gough Folsom, enrolled at Marshall and the pair met. “And now at last I knew why I had come to Huntington,” Bond said. Sitting out the Depression in college no longer was his aim. More important things beckoned. By sum-

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mer he and Betty were engaged. In October they were married. They moved to Philadelphia where Bond went into public relations.

Early in 1936 Bond was named director of publicity for the province of Nova Scotia. He and his wife spent the spring, summer and fall traversing the peninsula in search of interesting stories and acting as guides to such celebrities as Babe Ruth.

“When winter came, they sent me home,” Bond said. They told me to continue writing articles about Nova Scotia and place them in magazines. The province would pay me a bonus for every one I placed.”

When The Canadian Home Journal paid \$400 for an article Bond had submitted for free, he decided to forget public relations and concentrate on freelance writing. “Within three months I became totally independent,” he said. “I’ve never worked for anyone else since.”

Bond shifted to fiction, winning almost instantaneous recognition. In 1937, after a few modest sales to minor periodicals, he sold a short story to Esquire. A month or so later Scribner’s magazine purchased his fantasy, “Mr. Mergenthwirker’s Lobblies,” which immediately was selected by anthologist Edward O’Brien for inclusion in “The Best Short Stories of 1938.”

That sale was followed swiftly by a second Scribner’s story, “The Sportsman,” and Bond’s career as a story-teller was established. After that he rarely wrote non-fiction.

The April 1937 issue of Astounding Stories carried his first science-fiction tale, “Down the Dimensions.” This was followed by many others.

“But, actually,” said Bond, “I never really thought of myself as a science-fiction writer, like Asimov or Heinlein. Sci-fi is hardware: ray guns, space ships. I did write some of that sort of thing. But my field is fantasy, in the fashion of Stephen Vincent Benet, or John Collier, or Saki.”

Fantasy combined with humor is the hallmark of many Bond stories. “The Remarkable Talent of Egbert Haw” was the first talking horse story, long preceding “Mr. Ed.” “The Gripes of Wraith” is the story of a ghost who is afraid of humans.

And Bond’s most famous tale, “Mr. Mergenthwirker’s Lobblies,” concerns the adventures of a shy little man who is accompanied everywhere by two invisible familiars who can foretell the future.

“The Lobblies is not my own favorite story,” said Bond, “but it is certainly the one for which I am best known. It goes on and on. It was first published more than 40 years ago, but the book is still in print. And within the past year I have received royalty checks for a radio broadcast in Australia and a TV production in Germany.”

How long Bond might have continued to write mainly for the science-fiction magazines will never be known, for in 1940 he was “kicked upstairs.” A novel, “Exiles of Time,” written on assignment for Amazing Stories as a sequel to his earlier Atlantis novel, “Sons of the Deluge,” was rejected by the editor as being “too sophisticated for our readers.” Bond’s agent sent the novel to Donald Kennicott at Mc-Call’s Blue Book which promptly purchased it for nearly three times the amount Bond expected to

get from Amazing Stories.

“The sale of this story marked the beginning to a long, warm, and wonderful relationship,” said Bond. He considers Kennicott “the greatest editor of all time.” Until Blue Book’s demise in 1954, Bond was a contributor on practically a monthly basis.

During World War II Bond was a member of the War Writers’ Board headed by Rex Stout. His assignment was to write “patriotic stuff” for radio. He wrote a nationally-broadcast “Prayer and Pledge for Peace,” which was signed by millions who pledged never to allow themselves to be involved in another war. “Unfortunately, the politicians didn’t go along,” he said.

Learning to write for radio opened a whole new field to Bond, who began adapting previously-written tales for such shows as “Lights

Out” and “Johnny Presents.” When in 1943 his adaptation of his story, “The Ring,” won the \$2,000 “Dr. Christian Award,” Bond became a regular contributor to that series and a year later had his own show, “Hot Copy,” on NBC.

Earlier, in 1938, Bond’s short story, “Mr. Mergenthwirker’s Lobblies,” had been serialized on the WOR-Mutual network, but Bond had not written the scripts for the series. However, much later Bond expanded and rewrote “Lobblies” as a stage play. When it was purchased for television broadcast on a new show called “Broadway Previews,” it became the first full-length play ever broadcast on a television network.

“Which is an historical fact,” said Bond, “but no big deal when you pause to consider that the entire network at that time consisted of three stations: Washington, New York, and Boston!”

Bond continued to write for television during what is now generally referred to as the “Golden Age” of live shows from New York. He was a frequent contributor to such shows as “Philco Playhouse,” “Kraft Theatre,” and “Studio One.” One of his dramas, “The Night America Trembled,” based on actual happenings the night of the famous Orson Welles radio broadcast “War of the Worlds,” won the highest rating of any “Studio One” show ever produced.

“Those were the good old days,” sighed Bond. But they were not to last. Television, which opened a new and lucrative market to authors, destroyed the magazines for which the writers previously had written. “Then, when television moved from New York to California, it destroyed itself,” Bond said. That’s when Bond and TV parted company.

In a thumbnail autobiography for another publication, Bond commented acidly upon this transitional period. “Now creativity was placed in the hands of the money-grubbers. . . I wrote for Hollywood for a year and hated every minute of it. Writers could not do their own thing. . . but were pressed into the mold of writing for stock characters in series shows. I said the hell with it and returned to Roanoke.”

With “the magazines and radio dead, and TV sick,” Bond abandoned creative writing and reverted to one of the earlier loves of his life—the antiquarian book business. This decision was based on the portion of his youth spent in Philadelphia’s famous Centaur Book Shop.

“The Centaur was a unique bookshop--the meeting place of such

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authors as H. L. Mencken, Christopher Morley, Joseph Hergesheimer and James Branch Cabell,” Bond recalled. “It was an awesome haven to a young lad there permitted to rub shoulders in a genial atmosphere with these literary greats.”

Bond feels his exposure to this milieu contributed greatly to his own easy transition to a literary career. “Writing generally is thought of as an arcane way of life,” said Bond. “But having actually met these name authors, and having learned they simply were human beings like myself, made it easier for me to become one of the fraternity.”

Bond recalled once having heard Joseph Hergesheimer wrote for 15 years before he made his first sale. “This, too, was encouraging to a young writer,” said Bond.

An early admirer of the writing of James Branch Cabell, Bond later became the Virginia author’s friend. Cabell wrote the prefatory verse to Bond’s second book, “The Thirty-first of February.” Although Cabell died some years ago, Bond maintains his friendship with Cabell’s widow and serves as adviser in handling Cabell’s literary estate.

As a book dealer, Bond specializes in Cabell’s books. His personal collection of Cabell’s works, second only to Cabell’s own, was donated to the Cabell Memorial Library at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Bond is a member of the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America, an organization so exclusive that a bookman cannot even be proposed for membership until he has served five years apprenticeship in the business. To be elected he had to be approved of by the entire membership, without a dissenting vote.

As a dealer, Bond buys and sells books both here and abroad to some 1,000 customers through catalogs which he issues about four times a year. “Oddly enough,” he said, “even my flair for writing plays a part. Because I fill my catalogs with quips and comments and even verses, they have become collectors’ items in themselves.” His list of customers includes many old friends from his active writing days, such authors as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Manly Wade Wellman, Hal Clement, and Philip Jose Farmer.

As a writer, Bond is, today, almost totally inactive. However, he did turn to his typewriter once within the past few years. At the re-quest of Harlan Ellison, science-fiction writer turned editor, Bond wrote a new short story, “Pipeline to Paradise,” for Ellison’s anthology, “Last Dangerous Visions.”

The book’s publication has been so long deferred that Bond said his fans are now beginning to refer to it as “Lost Dangerous Visions.” But when the anthology is published it will contain the

latest Bond effort, a story which the writer says is “more or less typical Bond.” Although he hesitated to disclose the plot, he did say it opens with the central character’s being awakened by a phone call. On the other end of the wire is a friend who has been dead for several years.

Betty and Nelson Bond have two sons and four grandchildren. Of his wife, Bond proudly proclaimed, “She’s just as talented as I am, and probably more so.” Mrs. Bond had her own television show in Roanoke for six years and then became advertising director for Sidney’s, a chain of women’s apparel shops, one of which is in Charleston. She retired last year and they now spend much of their time traveling.

Their older son, Lynn, is owner of Bond Tire Service, a Goodyear franchise with outlets in Danville and Bedford, Va. Their younger son, Christopher (“Kit”), is with American Theatre Productions. A technical specialist, he currently is stage manager for the road show of the Broadway musical, “Eubie.”

Although neither of Bond’s sons ever showed any inclination to write, the family talent has surfaced again in Lynn’s 18-year-old son, Rick, who writes poetry. “It’s about as good, or as bad, as mine was when I was his age,” his grand-father said. “But, as I enjoyed doing it, so does he. And that is all that really counts.”

And the future? Will there be more stories from the typewriter of the namesake of the Nelson Bond Society?

“Unlikely,” said Bond.

“I am entirely happy in the book business,” he said. “I work at my own pace, with people I like and with commodities I love. There is no hassle, no rat race, no pressure. And I no longer have to prove my writing ability--even to myself. The royalties are still rolling in from stories written 40 years ago. That must mean something.”

What it means is that the Nelson Bond Society is merely one indication that the Bond boom is still in full swing. Further evidence is the reprinting of Bond stories. His stories were reprinted in a half dozen new anthologies last year and three more have been scheduled for republication this year. Overseas, the Dutch are preparing a book of his stories under the title, “The Best of Nelson Bond.”

“It’s really amazing,” said Bond, “as fantastic as anything I ever wrote about. I think I’ve been very lucky. All my life I have done what I liked, and liked what I’ve done. What more could a man possibly ask?”

What, indeed?