

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIMOTHY TRUMAN

“Martin has assembled an impressive array of writers... . Progressing through the decades, Wild Cards keeps its momentum to the end ... I’m looking forward to the next episodes in this saga of mutant Americana.”

-Locus

“Well written and suspenseful and a good read... . The authors had a lot of fun rewriting recent American history.”

-Aboriginal Science Fiction

“Commendable writing ... a zany premise ... narrated with rueful humor and intelligence.”

-Publishers Weekly

Editor GEORGE R.R. MARTIN was born September 20, 1948 in Bayonne, New Jersey. He began writing very young, selling monster stories to other neighborhood children for pennies, dramatic readings included. Later he became a comic book fan and collector in high school, and began to write fiction for comic fanzines (amateur fan magazines). Martin’s first professional sale was made in 1970 at age 21: “The Hero,” sold to Galaxy, published in February, 1971 issue. Other sales followed.

Four-time winner of the Hugo Award, two-time winner of the Nebula Award, and six-time Locus Award winner, Martin is the author and editor of over two dozen novels and anthologies, and the writer of numerous short stories. His New York Times bestselling novel A Storm of Swords-the third volume in his epic fantasy series “A Song of Ice and Fire” -was published in 2000. Martin lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

To Len Wein and Chris Valada, my four color friends

INTRODUCTION

That the Wild Cards series is still alive and kicking after over 15 years might be a surprise to some, but not to me. Then again, I’m the creator of James Spector, aka Demise, who died from the Wild Card virus but still managed to stay alive long enough to wreak havoc through several volumes of the series. The book you’re getting ready to read, Deuces Down, is not only the first new Wild Card opus in quite some time but also proof that the story ideas and concepts nurtured by the series’ writers have a way of coming to fruition eventually.

Let me digress for a moment to explain how I was lucky enough to become a Wild Cards author in the first place, since it bears to some degree on Deuces Down. When George R.R. Martin, Melinda Snodgrass, and the rest of the New Mexico writers and gamers were creating the foundation for the series, George cleverly decided to expand his group of participating writers beyond the borders of the Land of Enchantment. Being either incredibly insightful or a masochist, depending on how you look at it, one of the first people George turned to was his long time buddy Howard Waldrop, who wrote “Thirty Minutes Over Broadway!” the lead story in Wild Cards. To know Howard is to love him, but his artistic temperament can best be described as inflexible, so it doesn’t make him ideal for team projects. Howard’s plan was to write his one story and jump ship, which he did. Master agreements and consortium points weren’t part of his game plan.

At that time, Howard lived in Austin (of which I’m a native and current resident) and was one

of the Turkey City writers. Turkey City was, and is, a writers conference where friends sit around reading and then dismembering each other's stories in turn. Given its Texas location, Turkey City was a bit more of a rock-em, sock-em affair than some of the more genteel writers conferences, but to date no fatalities have been reported among even the more brutalized participants. Another then-Austinite and Turkey Citizen was Lew Shiner, who George also quickly got on board for Wild Cards. Lew loved comic books and was an up-and-comer on the science fiction scene, being (with Bruce Sterling, also an Austinite and a Turkey City writer, I'm sure you're getting the general drift of this by now) one of the core group in the newly formed cyberpunk movement. Lew's character Fortunato, along with his antagonist, the Astronomer, was an integral part of the first Wild Cards triad. Lew, Howard, and I hung out a lot, including going on a weekly comic-buying run. Since I was also a Turkey City regular, Lew knew I could write, and sold George on giving me a shot at Wild Cards. How hard a sell he had to give George, I'm not sure. George had met me several times, read one of my early (unpublished and unpublishable) stories, and agreed to see what I could do. I wasn't entirely without credentials, having done some work for DC Comics that eventually showed up in *World's Finest* and *House of Mystery* as well as having a short story or two published.

Incidentally, I did the comic book writing under the name Bud Simons, which is what everyone calls me, although I'd been using Walton Simons for my fiction. This created mistaken assumptions about my true identity later on, but how was I to know? In any case, I was completely psyched to be on the Wild Cards team. The notion of being in the same book as Roger Zelazny filled me with glee, but I was going to have to earn it. The first book Wild Cards was already full, so I went to work on a Demise story for *Aces High* that I cleverly tied into Lew's Fortunato yarn. George bought it and I've been lucky enough to be a Wild Carder ever since.

Now in those days, if you got a couple of Wild Cards writers together, sooner or later (usually sooner) the conversation would drift to aces, jokers, and upcoming story ideas. The exception, as always, was Howard, who was far too busy for all this folderol, other than to explain (in consummate Waldropian logic) how his piece of the Wild Cards pie would keep getting bigger over time. Lew and I, on the other hand, spent a lot of time bouncing ideas off each other. In the process, we came up with *Kid Dinosaur* and most of the Astronomer's ace cronies.

During one of the early sessions, I went off on an absurd tangent and made up characters like Sign Girl, who could stand up in front of a neon sign or billboard, look like one of the letters, and disappear, Grow-Grip Man, whose hands became enormous when he grabbed someone, and Puddle-Man. Puddle-Man looks like ... well if you've read Bradbury's "Skeleton" you know what he looks like. If you want to find out how that might actually be useful, read "Walking the Floor Over You" later in this book.

Which brings us back to *Deuces Down*. As writers, we've been talking about doing this particular book in the Wild Cards canon for a long time. After all, for every alpha ace power like those of Fortunato, the Turtle, and Golden Boy, there has to be an omega. Might not the effect on those lives be as dramatic as those fortunate enough to receive more profound abilities? We always thought so, and you hold the result of that notion in your hands. *Deuces Down* has another advantage in that its stories aren't all contemporary. The first book covered the history of the Wild Cards universe during its first forty years or so, but since that time the stories had remained firmly in

the here and now. With Deuces Down those first four decades are opened up again to the possibilities of the storytellers herein. We hope you enjoy the results.

Just for the record. Walton Simons is not a pseudonym for the wonderfully talented comic book artist/writer Walt Simonson. Not that I wouldn't give a lot to be able to draw as well as he does. "A lot" doesn't include being a Wild Cards writer, which I don't think I'd trade for much of anything short of world peace.

Walton Simons, February 22, 2002

STORMING SPACE

By Michael Cassutt

“WOULD THAT be Mr. Cash?” the voice behind me said, surprising the hell out of me. I was in Haugen’s Bakery on Highway 14 getting my morning cup of coffee, though that’s not why I stopped there. I didn’t even like coffee much; it made me jittery, and made my heavy lifting tricky at best, almost impossible. The owner, a joker of indeterminate gender named “Fran,” was hard on the eyes and nerves.

But Haugen’s had this waitress named Evelyn. Well, her name was pronounced Evelyn: on her nametag it was written, no fooling, “Eva-Lynne.” She was tall and slim and blond and about 25 years old, and my purpose in life, that unseasonably hot day in October 1968, was to find out what mistake she made in a past life that dumped her into a bakery in Mojave, California. Until then I, like the truckers passing through, continued to come by for some really bad coffee, questionable pastries, and just a whiff of her perfume. Perhaps a throaty, “Thanks for coming in. Good to see you again.” (She always seemed on the verge of remembering my name.)

You certainly didn’t come to Haugen’s to have strange foreign men loom up behind you without warning.

“Hmm?” I said, or something equally articulate.

“Mr. Cash Mitchell?” The speaker was a man about forty, thin, dark. Indian, I judged, from the lilt to his voice. Not a joker, either.

“Speaking,” I said, foolishly, as if we were on the telephone. (I was moving closer to my encounter with Eva-Lynne.)

“Ah, good. I am Tominbang. I wish to speak with you on-a matter of great urgency.” He shook my hand a bit too enthusiastically.

And I took another step forward. The customer in front of the customer in front of me—a busy-looking woman of 35, almost certainly a real estate professional—suddenly launched a complicated series of orders at Eva-Lynne, no doubt nosh for some morning meeting. I was trapped.

“I’m listening,” I said to Tominbang. If you saw me, medium height, overweight, glasses, you would not be intimidated. But I had had a good couple of months lifting various items for Mr. Warren Skalko of Lancaster, Las Vegas, and other municipalities, so I felt smug. I could not imagine why this foreign man would be talking to me; more precisely, I suspected that any association between us was not going to make me rich. (This turned out to be painfully true.)

“Mr. Warren Skalko recommends you to me,” Tominbang said.

I lost probably a third of my attitude at the mention of my mentor. “I’m always happy to meet a friend of Mr. Skalko’s,” I said, summoning as much enthusiasm as I could. Just to be safe. “Where do you know him from?” Mr. Skalko had several sorts of associates, some from his noted (and legitimate) charity work, others from his country club, and a few from being what that same popular press called “the crime lord of the southwest.”

“We were introduced on the first tee at Riviera,” Tominbang said, naming Mr. Skalko’s Los Angeles country club, and nicely slipping into the second category of Skalko associates. “He mentioned your specific abilities as a mass transporter—“

He was interrupted by a commotion not five feet away. Real Estate Woman was giving my beloved Eva-Lynne a hard time. “What the hell do you expect me to do? Carry it all by myself?”

The customer in front of me, sensing a longer-than-usual wait for bad coffee, shook his head