

DOC SAVAGE: THROUGH THE CIRCLES OF WOLD

By Art Bollmann

In his seminal article, “WoldNewtonry” Peter Coogan has given us a way of thinking about many of the conflicting approaches to Wold Newton research. Briefly he has urged us to think of the Wold Newton Universe as a series of concentric circles, with each circle adding more elements to Philip Jose Farmer’s original Wold Newton theories. One interesting way of playing with Coogan’s metaphor of concentric circles might be to take Doc Savage, one of the central figures in the Wold Newton Universe, and see how he looks in each of the circles of Wold that Coogan has identified.

In his smallest circle, Wold-RW (Real World) Coogan lists those figures from the real world who have inspired fictional characters. In this circle, we see, instead of Dr. Clark Savage, Jr, Richard Henry Savage, the actual 19th century adventurer, explorer and novelist who is believed to have been the actual inspiration for the pulp magazine character Doc Savage.

Coogan’s next circle of interest is Wold-Prime. In this circle, which he models on Farmer’s biography “Tarzan Alive”, we are to accept the idea that a number of fictional heroes were actual people, but that their exploits were greatly exaggerated by their “biographers” who published novels loosely based on their lives. In this circle, Doc Savage’s adventures might have been more like the exploits that were recounted in the late 1940s, when his magazine was briefly retitled “Doc Savage: Science Detective.” Here, Doc is a noted surgeon who seems to function as a sort of unpaid private detective, solving mysteries and tangling with postwar gangsters. This version of Doc Savage does not have the exotic gadgets and vast abilities he possessed in the rest of his pulp run. He fights conventional criminals rather than world-threatening supervillians. He doesn’t even seem to have a headquarters in the Empire State Building.

Fans of the traditional Doc Savage can feel much more at home in the next circle of Wold, Wold –Pulp/Science fiction. Here, Coogan includes a higher level of technology, lost civilizations and other elements of pulp fiction. In this circle, the 181 Doc Savage novels can be viewed as almost literal transcriptions of Doc’s adventures. The Doc of the circle has been detailed in Farmer’s “Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life” Rick Lai’s “Chronology of Bronze” and Win Eckert’s “Doc Savage Chronology.”

I have, however, been forced to add another circle to Coogan’s schema to account for almost a decade of additional speculation about Doc by Wold Newton researchers. Here, we can see a Doc Savage whose father, founded the Centre that was featured in the television series “The Pretender” and who is related to Sydney Savage of Danger Girl. Doc seems to have been quite active as an adventurer prior to the canonical adventures recorded by Lester Dent, even having met Fu Manchu. These adventures have been recorded by various people, who called him Doc Ardan. As a man called McReady, he fought the Thing from Another Planet. In this Wold, Doc’s son faked his death and

became the paperback hero “The Death Merchant.” Most interestingly, in this circle, Doc Savage apparently had to travel back in time from 1990 to 1950 and live under an assumed identity in order to preserve the timeline. (This was actually done to reconcile conflicting chronologies in different Doc Savage sequels.) This circle should probably be called Wold-PSF2.

Further speculation about Doc can be found in the next circle, Wold-Great Wars Cabals. This circle is featured most prominently in Dennis Power’s “Secret History of the Wold Newton Universe” website, and Doc is represented here by the figure of Doc Caliban. Caliban, a character from another Philip Jose Farmer, is a thinly disguised version of Doc Savage who is the pawn of a sinister group of immortals called the Nine. Doc ultimately rebels against them. Power has argued that Caliban is not actually Doc Savage, but was rather an imitation created by the Nine. Chris Carey has argued in a series of interesting article that Caliban actually is Savage. In both interpretations, the sense that secret societies and unknown forces are manipulating our hero is prevalent. Here the original work of Dent can be seen as, not exaggerating the truth, but rather as hiding the full truth.

In Wold-Planetary, explored mostly by Jess Nevins, we find another Doc doppelganger, Doc Brass. Brass is a character in the comic book Planetary, and is a crippled pulp hero who helps the heroes of the book defeat a worldwide conspiracy. Brass was intended by the creator of Planetary to be Doc Savage. However, Nevins has discovered that he was actually Jim Anthony, an obscure Doc imitation from the 1940s.

In Wold-Superhero, Coogan includes works that have expanded (perhaps beyond recognition) Farmer’s concept to include superheroes. It is in this circle that we find the comic book version of Doc from the 1940s, who had a magic ruby that gave him hypnotic powers and super-strength. Here, also, we find the comic book character “Liberty Girl” who, it is strongly implied is the daughter of Doc Savage.

Since comic books are heavily intertextual, (i.e. they have a lot of crossovers) it is possible to deduce the presence of Doc in a number of comic book universes. For example, Doc’s teamups with Spider-man and the Thing seem to indicate that Doc is a figure in the Marvel Comics Universe. His role as the father of Liberty Girl indicates that he is a figure in the crossover universe that will be featured in the upcoming “War of the Independents” series.

Doc can even be glimpsed in Coogan’s final circle, Wold-Future, where he includes most future histories. Here, we see the Doc of “Spock Savage” a Star Trek article that speculated that he was a Vulcan. We can also see the Doc who had a cameo in Zelazny’s “Roadmarks” where he traveled the Highway of Time, a road connecting all past, future, and alternate realities.

For me, what stands out from all of these differing interpretations of Doc is that there is no correct version of Doc Savage. If you prefer Doc as a conventional detective, as a sort of Craig Kennedy with muscles, you might like the Doc of Wold-Prime. If you

prefer to view Doc as the half-Vulcan son of Jack the Ripper, cruising down the Highway of Time with a magic ruby and with Liberty Girl at his side, that is fine, too. It's a free country.