

The Hyborian Review

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Welcome! Here it is -- the premiere issue.

Great REH Quotes

From *The Treasure of Trancos*, by Robert E. Howard, a long story that takes place shortly before Conan becomes king; Conan is arguing with Count Valenso after dropping unbidden into his hall:

“What would you here? [Valenso] demanded. “Did you come from the sea?”

“I came from the woods.” The Cimmerian jerked his head toward the east.

“You have been living with the Picts?” Valenso asked coldly.

A momentary anger flickered in the giant’s eyes.

“Even a Zingaran ought to know there’s never been peace between Picts and Cimmerians, and never will be,” he retorted with an oath. “Our feud with them is older than the world. If you’d said that to one of my wilder brothers, you’d have found yourself with a split head.”

Barbaric Web Sites

Try these URLs:

<http://pages.ripco.com:8080/~bbb/howard.html>
for some poems, stories, etc. from Robert E. Howard.
<http://www.geopages.com/SiliconValley/1133/conan.html>
http://www.intercom.no/~savage/conan_a.html
<http://www.calpoly.edu/~conan/conan/conan.html>
<http://pages.ripco.com:8080/~bbb/howard.html>

Movie Talk

There have been rumors of a second Robert E. Howard character springing to the screen: King Kull.

One of the Web sites listed here has a jump that supposedly ends up at Universal Studios, reputed producer of the project. But other sources doubt the story. One comics store in Seattle said there were no reports on the ‘upcoming events’ list.

In honor of even a glimmer of hope that an REH tale can get proper treatment from Hollywood, is offered this snippet from “By this Axe I Rule!” Kull has just fended off Ridondo the poet and his cohorts:

“I am king, state, and law!” he roared, and seizing the wand-like sceptre which lay near, he broke it in two and flung it from him. “This shall be my sceptre!” The red axe was brandished aloft, splashing the pallid nobles with drops of blood. Kull gripped the slender crown with his left hand and placed his back against the wall; only that support kept him from falling, but in his arms was still the strength of lions.

“I am either king or corpse!” he roared.

(see page 4 for more about the fabled Atlantean)



Book Review

by Garret H. Romaine

Conan: Lord of the Black River
Leonard Carpenter; TOR, 1996 274 pages

The Conan paperback series continues to churn out books at a breathtaking rate. The eternal question: are they any good? Read on to find out!

First, however, a warning – much of the tale is revealed here. If you haven’t read the book, and you want to savor it to the fullest, the main spoiler paragraph is highlighted below. Then you can gather your own ammunition and fire back. You’ll get a fair fight.

The Story

In *Lord of the Black River*, an old flame reprises from Conan's past, namely Queen Rufia of the Shemitish city-state of Baalur. She enlists the aid of the Cimmerian to save a dying princess and her witch-bedeveled city. Feeling faint fatherly affinity for the lass, Conan's task is to travel to the uncharted upper reaches of the River Styx to its headwaters, the only patch of earth where the Silver Lotus antidote grows. If he can successfully bring a few bales back, he will earn much gold, win some hot kisses from his old lover, and in the bargain, save the life of a young princess whose black hair and blue eyes suggest some paternal link to the barbarian.

<WARNING: SPOILER ON>

In truth, the end of the story gave an appearance of being rushed. In the final thirty pages, after slaying Zeriti's demonic ally and gathering bales of silver lotus leaves, Conan sails down a flood-swollen Styx, successfully battles a squadron of Stygian war ships, traverses the entire Styx River, sails north to Asgulan, destroys Zeriti's hidden lair (but perhaps not her – no body was found!) and saves the city. [ByTheWay: this spoiler crap is BS. The whole story is written all over this review.] The action was dizzying after the languorous pace during the first three quarters of the book. Perhaps the publisher demanded wholesale cuts in the back of the book to keep it under control?

<SPOILER OFF>

Like most Conan books, I read 'Black River' quickly, consuming it in just less than two days. And like most recent Conan books, I'll put it aside; I rarely read them twice. This one is probably no exception, but it is a good story. It was worth the price, and a good read, just not destined for immortality.

More About The Author

Carpenter's 11 other works include: *Conan the Renegade*, *Conan the Warlord*, *Conan the Hero*, *Conan the Great*, *Conan the Outcast*, *Conan of the Red Brotherhood*, and *Conan the Gladiator*. [In truth, that is a long list, and I should have given him an opportunity to respond to any criticisms here. So should he deign to respond, his entreaties are welcomed. *ed.*]

Carpenter lost a few fans with his *Conan the Gladiator*, which put Conan in a traveling circus as the strong man and ended with a great gladiatorial extravaganza that defied belief. In 'Black River', Carpenter did it right: Conan is in a familiar position that he has been in before -- a leader of men, on a quest, against tall odds and directing both naval and land-based battles. The result is much more satisfying than some of Carpenter's earlier efforts, and possibly his best work yet, although that is certainly a whole 'nother argument.

Conan's Resume

One of the contributing factors to a good Conan tale is the way the author weaves in references to Conan's past. First here is **Rufia**, a former slave wench whom Conan rescued in Robert E. Howard's "Hawks Over Shem", a tale fixed up for publication by L. Sprague de Camp and published in "Conan the Freebooter." Also included are Zeriti and Mazdak, other acquaintances from the earlier Howard story. *Lord of the Black River* also contains numerous references to Conan's past as Amra, and to his work in the desert with the Zuagirs.

Zeriti is, as Carpenter writes, the 'ill-famed Stygian witch-queen of Asgalun, Shem' who fought with Conan in the earlier tale. Although Zeriti took a yard of steel in her guts courtesy of General Imbalayo, she survived and slew the Kushite. But she lost her rank in Asgalun, and her king. Plotting revenge on Rufia and Conan, Zeriti has conjured up a new and powerful ally to eventually rule the world. But first, she must conquer Queen Rufia's city-state of Baalur, which she works to do by invading the dreams of the citizens until they fear to sleep.

Mazdak was the Hyrkanian cavalry commander who was an old partner of Conan's, but is now King of Asgulan. He took the crown from an insane King Akhirom, who was wed to Zeriti. At the time, Rufia was just a slave owned by Mazdak, but when the mad king took a liking to Rufia and spurned Zeriti, the witch-queen's jealousy erupted and has smoldered ever since. In the end, Conan made off with Rufia on his way out of town, with Mazdak's blessings.

Howard vs. Carpenter

Perhaps comparisons to Howard are unfair, but if an author is going to borrow Howard's hero, comparisons are inevitable. Besides, they're a lot of fun to write about, and you can quote the Master Chronicler, Robert E. Howard, as much as you want.

First and foremost, Howard would be aghast at one facet of this story: there is a legitimate question as to whether or not the big barbarian ever got laid once in this entire book! Oh, he was kissed a few times, but not enough to make his (or my) temples throb. How was he rewarded when he rescued two slave wenches from a small, castled city-state that his rebel army took over to start the tale? The wenches seemed to be sleeping fully clothed when the big barbarian fought off unseen attackers in his dreams and nearly brained one. The two were kind of forgotten as the book rolled on. One of them should have been able to figure out that this was a barbarian with a future. He'd been a general already, and traveled most of the world. Instead, both slaves disappeared. This is one chaste barbarian, and we have no idea why. Certainly he isn't saving himself for Rufia, as her King is a good and honest man -- although there were those 'nightly visits'. Still, even those were only hinted at.

Similarly, there was a brash young officer who continually questioned Conan's orders, not only while marching across deserts but while sailing up the Styx past Stygian patrols. In a Howard tale, a younger barbarian would have doubtless brained the insolent cur. Carpenter's Cimmerian swallows hard and lets it ride, showing leadership, or budding kingsmanship. The inclination is to remark, 'Gosh, how mellow! Perhaps he will next inquire as to the officer's dietary habits, or look into a disadvantaged childhood as reasons for such behavior challenges?'

Granted, Conan needed the whelp when he split up his forces at one point. But it doesn't seem implausible to assume any other junior officer would be promotable. Even Darth Vader never seemed to have trouble finding a new #2. Conan instead suggests the whelp for a promotion upon return to Baalur! Without so much as a fat lip.

Carpenter's strength is in his ability to bring the required characters to life quickly using dialogue that suggest the motivations behind them. He is also able to set a brisk pace with enough Cimmerian clichés to keep the action going. Where Howard would describe a person's characteristics, going into detail about hair, eyes, nose, or clothing, and perhaps tossing in a few comments that almost seem racist now, Carpenter is content to use a few sparing adjectives and then reveal more characteristics through spoken words. When we first meet Carpenter's Rufia, he describes her thusly: "A statuesque woman, red-haired and anxious." Compare this to Howard's initial description of Rufia in "Hawks Over Shem" -- "As for the woman, she was not conventionally pretty, but still good to look at: red-haired, with a broad, slightly freckled face, and brown eyes sparkling with intelligence. She was rather broadly built, with shoulders wider than average, a big bust, and full lips. She gave the impression of great physical vigor."

Carpenter quickly describes the two wenches in the beginning of the book as "a pair of silk-gowned women cowering on a divan". Later, the two women interrogate Conan as to why he didn't simply set himself up as lord of the castle. This is classic Carpenter -- relishing the motives, the scheming, the hidden agendas in the games people play. By describing what the women were thinking, they gain some depth as characters, revealing themselves as clever conspirators, among other things. Later, at Baalur, they simply disappear from the story, because as Conan puts it, "in a month's time they'll possess a fat merchant or two."

One last note [not necessarily a gripe] about Carpenter's writing of Conan is the way this author seems to abhor blood. His description of sword play and fighting is usually fairly sanitized -- no Howardian stumps spurting blood, no entrails, no dripping gore. When Howard kills a man off, the wretch staggers and struggles, stares at a sword point poking from his breast, or screams in unholy terror. There is an edge, a crackling tension to Howard stories. Carpenter's sword and sorcery seem watered down sometimes, not foul enough or frightening enough, just brisk and thorough.

Conclusion

Is this then, the Conan of the '90's? – chaste, clean, and sober? Twice, Mazdak tried to induce Conan into a night of carousing into the wee hours, but the responsible barbarian would have none of it.

If Conan starts flossing, I say we gut Carpenter like a dog and toss him in the Vilayet Sea. Otherwise, we will simply have to make further observations as the author bravely makes entries into the hallowed volumes.

Incidentally, long ago someone was looking for a posting of the complete crop of novels. Here's what Tor lists in the front of Conan the Gladiator in 1995:

Conan the Bold	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Champion	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Defender	by Robert Jordan
Conan the Defiant	by Steve Perry
Conan at the Demon's Gate	by Roland Green
Conan the Fearless	by Steve Perry
Conan the Formidable	by Steve Perry
Conan the Free Lance	by Steve Perry
Conan the Gladiator	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan .. Gods of the Mountain	by Roland Green
Conan the Great	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan the Guardian	by Roland Green
Conan the Hero	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan the Hunter	by Sean A. Moore
Conan the Indomitable	by Steve Perry
Conan the Invincible	by Robert Jordan
Conan the Magnificent	by Robert Jordan
Conan and the Manhunters	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Marauder	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Outcast	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan the Raider	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan of the Red Brotherhood	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan the Relentless	by Roland Green
Conan the Renegade	by Leonard Carpenter
Conan the Rogue	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Savage	by Leonard Carpenter
Scourge of the Bloody Coast	by Leonard Carpenter
Treasure of Python	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Triumphant	by Robert Jordan
Conan the Unconquered	by Robert Jordan
Conan the Valiant	by Roland Green
Conan the Valorous	by John Maddox Roberts
Conan the Victorious	by Robert Jordan
Conan the Warlord	by Leonard Carpenter

Since then have been:
Conan and the Emerald Lotus by John Shockley
The Lord of the Black River by Leonard Carpenter

Obviously, this list does not include the earlier paperback series that was numbered, nor any of the Howard novels.

Got a Fight You Want to Pick?
A Question to Answer?
Trivia to Stump the Experts?
Ask away!

Keep the faith! Do your part to keep the alt.fantasy.conan newsgroup alive! Check out the AOL forum for Howard and Sword and Sorcery. Take quill from holster and apply it to paper made from the skins of dead Stygian mummies and originate your own treatise. Get your work published! Send any and all feedback to:

gromaine3@comcast.net

Our plan here is to release new Reviews as often as possible. The only thing stopping us is more copy. We need all we can get.

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Eleven Tales of Kull

Exile of Atlantis
The Shadow Kingdom
The Altar and the Scorpion
Delcardes' Cat
The Skull of Silence
By This Axe I Rule!
The Striking of the Gong
Swords of the Purple Kingdom
The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune
The King and the Oak
The Black City

NEXT Issue: Point-Counterpoint. A guest author crosses swords while reviewing *Conan and the Emerald Lotus*. Plus: How a determined gamer finally beat Virgin's 'Conan' game

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