

The Hyborian Review

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If you'll keep listening, we'll keep talking...

Great REH Quotes

From *Red Nails*, by Robert E. Howard, a lengthy story featuring two of Howard's best characters.

Conan and Valeria have just entered the ruined city, only to be ambushed in the Halls of Silence.

Techotl was rising from the twitching figure of the last Xotalanc, shaking red drops from his dagger. He was bleeding from the stab deep in his thigh. He stared at Conan with dilated eyes.

"What is all this?" Conan demanded again, not yet recovered from the stunning surprise of finding Valeria engaged in a savage battle with these fantastic figures in a city he had thought empty and uninhabited. Returning from an aimless exploration of the upper chambers to find Valeria missing from the room where he had left her, he had followed the sounds of strife that burst on his dumfounded ears.

"Five dead dogs!" exclaimed Techotl, his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation. "Five slain! Five crimson nails for the black pillar! The gods of blood be thanked!"

He lifted quivering hands on high, and then, with the face of a fiend, he spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in his ghoulish glee. His recent allies eyed him in amazement, and Conan asked, in the Aquilonian tongue: "Who is this madman?"

Valeria shrugged her shoulders.



Dark Horse to the Rescue?

According to a source in the Portland, Oregon comic book industry, there may be more truth to the rumor that Dark Horse comics is interested in reviving the Conan comic series.

Remember that Barry Windsor-Smith is now working for Dark Horse on several series. He has several stories in the works, and his connection with Conan the Barbarian 1-24 would be a natural progression.

However, Smith is said to be vitally interested in his own projects, and may not have time right now to pen anything under Conan's name.

Still, given Conan's devoted following, and Dark Horse's reputation for growing into a leader in the industry, there is a chance that Conan may ride again.

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A Movie about Robert E. Howard? See page 4.

Book Review

by Garret H. Romaine

Conan the Swordsman

Authors: L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, and Bjorn Nyberg

Ace

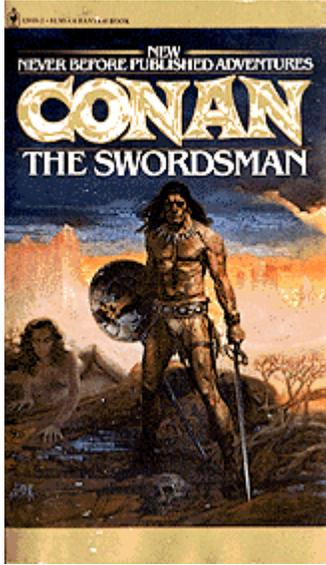
216 pages

It is well known that Robert E. Howard personally created the Conan character, using his own fertile imagination and augmenting it with local bullies and acquaintances from his Texas home.



But long after Howard penned his final Conan story, other authors have picked up the gauntlet and let their own creativity reign. This issue, The Hyborian Review will begin a series of investigations into each of those authors, offering up distinctions and similarities with Howard and his legion of followers.

My all-time favorite L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter collaboration is *Legions of the Dead*, a short story set in Conan's youth.



Now found in the collection entitled *Conan the Swordsman*, this story was published for the first time in 1978. Other stories found in the book:

The People of the Summit, by de Camp and Bjorn Nyberg (rewritten from an original by Nyberg published in 1970)
Shadows in the Dark (de Camp and Carter)
The Star of Khorala (de Camp and Nyberg)
The Gem in the Tower (de Camp and Carter)
The Ivory Goddess (de Camp and Carter)
Moon of Blood (de Camp and Carter)

de Camp and Carter try to resurrect a long-time Howard staple, the short poem, in *Legions of the Dead*. But they fail to capture Howard's greatness – the meter is wrong, and the poetry lifeless. The story itself is classic Conan. A mere youth, he has fallen in with an Aesir tribe intent on recapturing an abducted princess. The Hyperborean slavers are known and tracked to their castle, where 30 Aesir scouts sent ahead of Conan's band now dangle helplessly from the parapets, to be tortured to death in plain view of the attackers. Frustrated by inaction, without enough of a force to lay siege, the Aesir band awakes the next day to find Conan has disappeared. Figuring the youth lacked the stomach for a frontal assault, the band begins planning their doom, only to notice wisps of smoke snaking from the castle. Minutes later, Conan appears with the young girl at his side, having rescued her.

Perhaps it is the pace that is wrong in this tale, for it is all too brief. Taking only 18 pages in a paperback, the story jumps forward maddeningly at places. Conan's entry into the castle, by aid of a rope and by leaving much of his hide on the sides of a narrow arrow-slit, runs past quickly, as does his search for

the imprisoned wench. His retreat is also brief, as he slays a few Hyperboreans and climbs back down his stashed rope.

Howard would have given us a tale more like the *Tower of the Elephant*, where the young barbarian encountered sorcery and horror before vanquishing an evil wizard. In that famous tale, the young would-be thief comes on one mission but leaves on another; the pace is steady, building up into eerie, frightening wizardry. In a fitting conclusion, the entire tower crashes into splinters.

In *Legions*, Conan's rescue of the girl only serves to set up the final battle, in which those 30 dead comrades, plus others killed in the fire set by young Conan, are now propelled by sorcery to battle their former friends. "Men cannot die twice" is the eerie refrain. And in fact, hacking them up is tough work, for which the Aesir are not prepared. Conan, ever chivalrous, is able to spirit the young lass onto a horse and send her back to her people; but he is too unaccustomed to the ways of the civilized world to cut down a wizardess, and he spares the life of Queen Vammatar, who whips his naked young back every step of the way back to her castle, where he winds up in the Hyperborean slave pens.



In the next story, notice the difference adding Bjorn Nyberg to a tale makes. In *The People of the Summit*, Conan and a companion are ambushed by Turan-hating Khozgarians and forced to flee. At a water hole, they abduct a local

chieftain's daughter, who not only warns them against their plans to escape through the Misty Mountains, but gets herself re-abducted just as Conan's friend is killed by a boulder. Soon, Conan is forcing his way through a dark, narrow mountain pass, enveloped by a thick misty mass that seems to claw at him.

Now this is sword and sorcery! "Never had Conan battled in such eerie surroundings. His enemies disappeared into the misty whirls, only to return again and again, like insubstantial ghosts." And what of those ghosts, who felt his sword strokes? "It was no human being who sprawled there with small, sightless eyes and flaring nostrils." No, it was an ape from the jungles so far to the south. And what of Shanya, the chieftain's daughter? Imprisoned!

“She lay upon a divan draped in a rough black cloth. No fetters bound her, but she had been deprived of all her clothing. She stretched her supple body upon this strange bed...”

What a difference an author makes. Substituting Nyberg for Carter we get women with fewer clothes and magic sorcery with more sting.

With Nyberg as co-commander, the story reaches more memorable levels. Conan is finally able to free the girl and kill the monstrous entity the People used as the source of their power. As he lifts her naked body to his horse to return to civilization, her haughty tone is replaced by warmth and knowing smiles, and Conan leaves us with this thought:

“By the bones of Crom! Perhaps dallying a few days along the way will be worth a week in the guardhouse!”

In *Moon of Blood*, Conan finds himself in time-tested environs for a rousing story: the Aquilonian border with the Pictish Wilderness. Leading a column of mailed and helmeted Aquilonians, Conan’s instincts save them from a frontal assault when he infers trouble simply by noting that the birds and insects have stopped making their usual jungle noises.

Conan hastily forms a defensive square and sends Aquilonian arrows into the Pictish onslaught. However, on regrouping, the Picts use sorcery to drop serpents from the overhanging jungle, and only Conan and his young recruit Flavius are able to escape. They soon are witness to an Aquilonian turncoat paid off in stolen booty. And once the traitor leaves the premises, the two survivors witness the required Pict victory party:

“By the time a few stars appeared through the canopy of leaves, the dance had become a savage thing of leaping, shadowy figures.

“Maddened by the liquor of victory, the Picts cast off restraint, reverting to the beast that sleeps within all men. As the roistering became obscene, Conan grunted in disgust.”

What a passed-up opportunity. All well and good, mostly, but a bit tame by Howardian standards. Picts reverting to ‘the beast that sleeps within all men’ seems flavorless and matter-of-fact. Howard relished the primal depravity of the Black Man, using it not as a racist, as some have charged, but as a metaphor for the lizard-brain that sleeps in us all, white, black or red.

Where de Camp and Carter gloss over the Pict ceremony, Howard often used such scenes, whether they be in Zimbabwe or Kush, to show just what Conan was up against. He filled villages with great bonfires, leaping savages, a shaman surrounded by bleached bones, and throngs of warriors full of blood-lust.

Then he contrasted the mud-thatched villages full of naked hordes with chivalrous Aquilonia. Yet in those fabled cities, Howard would take great pains to show the debasement and depravity of the noble class. And many times, he would give the nod back to those villages, who spoke the truth, treated Conan fairly, and kept their honor intact even as primitives.

In the other Nyberg-de Camp tale, *Star of Khorala*, Conan finds himself in possession of an enchanted ring that will help the deposed Queen Marala regain her throne. He offers it to her under a tree, on the run:

Marala took the ring and gazed upon the gem, from whose oval, sapphire eye, firelit, burst the beauty of the star within.

“You put me under vast obligation, Conan. How can I repay you?”

Conan’s burning gaze roved up and down Marala’s sweetly curving body. With queenly dignity, she moved away from his embracing arm to signal disapproval of his unspoken suggestion.

Looking away, he said, “You owe me naught just now, my lady. If you regain your throne and I attend your court, you might offer me a generalship.”

Marala looked a question at Garus, who nodded. “He is the man for it my queen. Mercenary captain, chief of a band of wily nomads, guard commander - a clever strategist and skilled with sword and dirk. He saved my life and gained you your liberty.”

“So be it,” said Marala.

Not the chaste, pure barbarian of the 90s, this Conan. Still, the gods play with jest in the lives of men, and Conan’s grand scheme to make a queen into his mistress while leading men as a general is washed away when the ring slips from the young woman’s finger. He rides instead north to Cimmeria. “Say that I go to visit an old woman. Who she is, is my affair,” he says.

In many ways, the stories compiled in *Conan the Swordsman* serve to fill in holes in the entire Conan saga, as they jump around from time to time. They take up slack in undocumented times of his youth,

and complete the fabric of his wandering years before he ascends the throne of Aquilonia.

In their way, these stories are good, rousing tales, but they seem rushed, almost written for the black and white Savage Sword series, rather than for the short story or novelle genre.

Where Howard would lavish attention on the smallest details of a man or woman, describing their dress, the dents in their armor and the scars on their skin, most modern authors seem to rush through to their story, forgetting to give the reader credit for creating their own mental images. The richness of Howard's descriptions were what set him apart from most writers, and those that follow in his footsteps would do well to focus on his strengths.



Robert Erwin Howard (1906-36)

For Howard was not just a good storyteller in the sword and sorcery genre - he was a good storyteller, period. His forays into westerns, humor, and other paths sometimes pale in comparison to his work with Conan, Kull, Bran Mak Morn, and Solomon Kane, among others. But every time Howard set himself to a story, his strengths shone through.

- GHR

Vandals Mar Conan Web Site

Why anyone would want to risk having their arm torn out of its socket is beyond most of us, but Staale Gismervik ('Savage' to his e-mail friends) reported that earlier in August, somebody managed to hack into his Conan web site.

You may have checked in at <http://www.intercom.no/~savage/> and noticed that things weren't quite right; the Stygian invaders wiped out his most recent work. Staale reports that all is back in action, but he'd like to find the culprits and educate them on the finer points of a frontal attack with a scimitar.

Check This Web Site

Last issue we listed several of the top Howard/Conan web sites found on the Internet. Well, here's one that ranks right up with Staale's effort. If you want to find a ton of clip art, text files and other barbarian details, check out this site:

<http://www.bekkoame.or.jp/~pancra/reh/reh.html>

Brought to you by: Masahiro Kiyoi

The Fan's Club of Robert E. Howard in Japan



A Robert E. Howard Movie?

From Pathfinder's entertainment page

(<http://pathfinder.com>) A new movie due for December: THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD

"How we got a film with no sex or violence made is a f---in' miracle," says director Dan Ireland. His adaptation of Novalyne Price Ellis' memoir about her relationship with suicidal pulp fiction writer Robert E. Howard (Conan the Barbarian) can claim other miracles: It cost just \$1.3 million, was shot in 24 days, and snagged Tom Cruise's next leading lady (Jerry Maguire's Renee Zellweger) when pregnant costar Olivia d'Abo had to be replaced. (Dec. 25)

Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net

NEXT Issue: Conan and the Amazon.



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