

The Hyborian Review

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If you'll keep reading, we'll keep writing...

Great REH Quotes

From *The Frost Giant's Daughter*, by Robert E. Howard, set in the cold northern mountains.

Conan is the sole survivor of a fierce battle, when a wondrous woman appears out of the snows. He inquires about a relief column that is overdue.

"Tell me woman, have you seen the flash of mail out across the snow plains, or seen armed men moving upon the ice?"

"I have seen the hoarfrost glittering in the sun," she answered. "I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting snows."

... "Lead me to your tribe, if you are of Asgard, for I am faint with blows and the weariness of strife."

"My village is farther than you can walk, Conan of Cimmeria," she laughed. Spreading her arms wide, she swayed before him, her golden head lolling sensuously and her scintillant eyes half shadowed beneath their long, silken lashes. "Am I not beautiful, O man?"

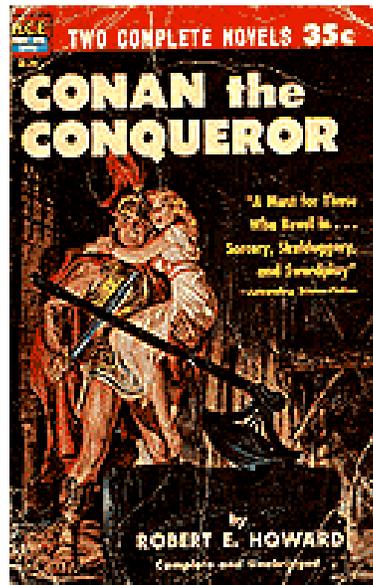
"Like dawn running naked on the snows," he muttered, his eyes burning like those of a wolf.

"Then why do you not rise and follow me? Who is the strong warrior who falls down before me?" she chanted in maddening mockery. "Lie down and die in the snow with the other fools, Conan of the black hair. You cannot follow where I would lead."

With an oath, the Cimmerian heaved himself up on his feet, his blue eyes blazing, his dark, scarred face contorted. Rage shook his soul, but desire for the taunting figure before him hammered at his temples and drove his wild blood fiercely through his veins. Passion fierce as physical agony flooded his whole being, so that earth and sky swam red ...

Looking for Cover Art?

On September 15, Masa Kiyoi once again updated his stupendous web site, The Fan's Club of Robert E. Howard in Japan, and if you haven't seen it, you definitely need to check it out. Masa, whose online art collection is keeping pace with Staale Gismervik (<http://www.intercom.no/~savage/conan/menu.html>) has scanned the covers of countless old Howard printings, and continues to update the growing list. Here's an example of a 1953 cover from *Conan the Conqueror*, just to whet your Cimmerian appetites:



Here's the URL:

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

Book Review

by Garret H. Romaine

Conan and the Amazon

Author: John Maddox Roberts

Tor, 1995

266 pages



In his eighth addition to the Conan collection, Roberts puts Conan into the service of a pair of soft city dwellers who claim they seek to loot the long-ruined city of Janagar. This fabled capital was once the envy of the world, but it was abandoned one day by hysterical hordes.

Surely a treasure must lie hidden under its cobbles?

Or, more likely, the curse that drove those citizens screaming from their beds continues to lurk amid the ruins. Conan of course knows naught of this tiny footnote; and even if he did, he has joined forces with a beautiful Amazon queen, the legendary Achilea, outcast from her lawful throne.



All of which is a reasonable premise for a good Tor story. After all, the table is set with wizardry, loot, battle, lust, and a lengthy journey. Conan will be joined by the good Queen's diminished retinue: two lovely warrior women and a squat dwarf. The dwarf seems to be present mostly to continue Tor's '90's tradition of hiring the handicapped.

Earlier Conan Tales by Roberts

Before we start, Roberts has written these books:

Conan the Valorous
Conan the Champion
Conan the Marauder
Conan the Bold
Conan the Rogue
Conan and the Treasure of Python
Conan and the Manhunters
Conan and the Amazon

Generally, Roberts sticks with basic themes to chronicle the adventures of the Cimmerian. He tends to weave in wizards and women, then as with most Tor storytellers, builds everything up to a rousing finale. It is a familiar pattern, and up to the author to present something of interest while bringing the reader along.

In *Conan the Champion*, Roberts gave us Totila, an evil king with outsize aspirations, who wore a cloak quilted together from the scalps of his victims. Naturally, Totila seeks to add a patch of straight, black hair to the garment; just as naturally, Conan foils him.

It is an interesting idea, but certainly not as horrifying as the collection of pickled heads found at the end of *Red Nails*. The sight of all his brothers and male friends was enough to drive at least one man insane in the Howard story. Roberts gives us more sedate touches, perhaps not original, but new to Conan tales.

One of the mistakes Roberts made in *Conan the Champion* was a total lack of chemistry between the imperious Queen and her bravo. Conan saved her hide countless times, and in return got only the opportunity to whack her on the bare ass a couple times. In *Conan and the Amazon*, the situation improved.

First, of course, was Conan's raw lust. He had never been able to hide his admiration for a woman's form; remember Valeria's short speech in *Red Nails*:

"Haven't I made my admiration clear from the first time I saw you?"
"A young stallion could have been no plainer," she answered disdainfully.

The first time the Amazon queen stepped into a rogue's tavern, Conan was entranced. Roberts sets the table well: "Her eyes lingered upon Conan for a moment, then swept on. He felt a rush of blood from his heart to his extremities, and he hungered for the woman as he had hungered for few things in all his years."

A drunken lout that Conan stared down earlier now speaks up, tossing some copper coins at the Amazon's feet as if to pay for sex. Since the shopkeeper has strict rules against swordplay in his halls, and the roof is too low anyway, the fight is taken up outside. While Conan watches, she disrobes further, to reveal a warrior's hard body and a woman's warm curves. "...despite her incredibly developed musculature, to Conan's eyes she was not in the least masculine. Upon their squarish base of chest muscle, her breasts were full and womanly, as were her sleekly rounded hips and buttocks... Conan's heart thudded within his ribs."

All well and good, but pause here to re-read Howard's description of when, in the middle of a deadly sword fight, Conan met Bêlit off the Black Coast:

“Invulnerable in his armor, his back against the mast, he heaped mangled corpses at his feet until his enemies gave back panting in rage and fear. Then as they lifted their spears to cast them, and he tensed himself to leap and die in the midst of them, a shrill cry froze the lifted arms. They stood like statues, the black giants poised for the spear casts, the mailed swordsman with his dripping blade.

“Bêlit sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. She was slender, yet formed like a goddess; at once lithe and voluptuous. Her only garment was a broad silken girdle. Her white ivory limbs and the ivory globes of her breasts drove a beat of fierce passion through the Cimmerian’s pulse, even in the panting fury of battle. Her rich black hair, black as a Stygian night, fell in rippling burnished clusters down her supple back. Her dark eyes burned on the Cimmerian...

“Who are you?” she demanded...

From there, of course, Bêlit danced her mating dance and they turned the seas red until their disastrous cruise up the Zarkheba River.

That Was Then, This Is Now

To be fair, Roberts has a good ‘90s style, while Howard was plying his trade in the bloody ‘30s. Where Howard was almost crazed in his relentless keyboard pounding, he also had the luxury of writing short stories, not entire books. Howard was competing for readers within the same publications, and the force of his writing shows the effects of that competition. Roberts can afford a more leisurely pace, as long as there is a battle every 5 pages. Indeed, the Kothian outlaw Amram, a minor character introduced halfway through *Amazon*, sums up the Roberts philosophy thusly: “Be not so impatient! The savor of a tale lies in its leisurely unfolding, not in its hurried and ill-considered pouring forth, like water from a great aqueduct.” Thus it is with the relationship between Achilea and Conan.

After the Queen won her duel, one of the drunk’s friends tried for revenge, only to receive a yard of the Cimmerian’s steel across his throat. In gratitude, Conan is allowed to join her band for dinner, and soon afterward, a strange pair of Zingaran aristocrats enlisted the Queen’s now enlarged retinue for an old fashioned looting of a city far to the south.

By magicks and brute strength, the party winds across Zamora, and once Conan is securely in command in all military matters, they are relatively safe.

Not to say the journey isn’t interesting. Conan routs a band of roaming bandits in typical style. Achilea is angered when Conan’s Hyrkanian friends chase the retreating survivors, to feather their backs in, to her, a cowardly display. But after all, as Conan reminds her, “There is no fairer sight beneath the Everlasting Sky than a foeman’s back within arrow range.”

Meanwhile, since this is the sword *and* sorcery genre, Conan and his band are being tracked by a wizard, who of course has his own idea of what to do with someone who can survive a journey to the fabled city. Roberts then traps the entire band in a subterranean realm, captive of nocturnal, sun-fearing slaves.

Conan the Archeologist

Roberts displays here a lack for the feel of Howard’s keen sense of archeology. “The city was a spectacular apparition in the trackless desert...” Roberts writes. Well and good, but a bit brief. When Conan first spied the dreaded castle-city featured in *Red Nails*, he noted the ruined irrigation canals, remnants of an agricultural lifestyle. Upon further investigation, Conan then deciphered the hieroglyphics, appraised the jade walls, and also recognized the race of the figures in the friezes.

Roberts gives us none of that. It is a city, and that is that. But Howard relished his own considerable ability to give us clues as he described the fallen cities Conan encounters.

Remember that at the time Howard was writing, English archeologists were discovering Egyptian mummies, lost pyramids, and great tombs. In Mexico and the Yucatan peninsula, explorers were encountering the ruins of the Mayan civilization. All over the world, tales of lost cities and fallen civilizations fired the creative juices of dozens of writers. Edgar Rice Burroughs frequently introduced vine-covered stone structures in his tales from darkest Africa, for it helped readers gain a sense of mystery.

In *Queen of the Black Coast*, Howard sends Belit and Conan up the River of Death to a lost ruins:

"It was but the ghost of a city on which they looked when they cleared a jutting, jungle-clad point and swung in toward the incurving shore. Weeds and rank river grass grew between the stones of broken piers and shattered paves that had once been streets and spacious plazas and broad courts. From all sides except that toward the river, the jungle crept in, masking fallen columns and crumbling mounds with poisonous green. Here and there buckling towers reeled drunkenly against the morning sky, and broken pillars jutted up among the decaying walls. In the center space, a marble pyramid was spired by a slim column, and on its pinnacle sat or squatted something that Conan supposed to be an image until his keen eyes detected life in it.

Only the brave or the greedy would set forth here. But Janagar, as Roberts describes it, is almost neat and tidy. Somehow, this makes the subsequent destruction and escape anticlimactic, but Roberts casts a few twists in to keep it interesting.

Besides, at this point the reader has to be wondering if Roberts is going to send the Queen and the Cimmerian off in different directions at the end? They are alone at last (save for Achilea's surviving attendant) on a large raft, gliding down a tributary of the Styx.

Achilea came to stand beside him. "Payna," she said, "tend the fire. Should the raft drift too close to a wall, fend it off with one of the poles. Conan and I have matters to attend to in the hut here. Do not disturb."

Payna looked the Cimmerian up and down without favor. Then she delivered the longest speech he had heard pass her lips. "My queen, I honor this great, ugly beast for the services he has done you, but as I have said to you before, you are far too soft where men are concerned."

They went into the little hut. It was crude and unfurnished, but they cared nothing for that. Achilea unbuckled her swordbelt and her weapons fell to the logs along with his. She tugged at the thongs fastening her skimpy garments.

"Three days," she said. "How much can we accomplish in three days?"

"More than any ordinary man and woman," he replied, performing the same actions. "As Amram said, we are heroes!" Then they lunged for each other like mating tigers.

Thus does *Conan and the Amazon* end. The barbarian would journey to Shem, where fighting never ceases, while the Queen seeks only to return north to see the son that cost her the throne. "Farewell, my queen," he mumbles as she trudges north. And she is gone.

Achilea the Amazon queen was no Bêlit – she was far too regal. She was no Valeria, either – she didn't live for battle, and never pirated. She was closer to Red Sonja, but not as full-featured, and not as lonely. Sonja had a spirit to her that made her a great foil for Conan. Achilea, for all her prowess with a sword and her regal bearing, was simply a passing fancy. A pretty one, but temporary. Would Roberts dare to resurrect her, sending the Cimmerian north to seek her out? Doubtful. But if there were another son...

- GHR

HO HO, HEY HEY, I JUST READ THE U.P.A.

A gentle e-mail from a certain Howardophile has recently turned me on to the REH UPA. It's a fanzine with up to 20 devoted Howard worshipers that publishes input from the fans on a regular basis. On a goad from a sword-wielding Gunderman, this 'zine will soon be included in those pages. I will continue to publish *The Hyborian Review* monthly. I haven't decided what format to include in the REHUPA, which is quarterly. I may include all-new material, or I may just send them regular *Review* issues as deadlines approach.

Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net

NEXT Issue: Conan: The Road of Kings

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