

The Hyborian Review

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Make mine Howard...

Great REH Quotes

From Swords of Shahrazar, copyright 1934 by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., for Top-Notch, October 1934. This is one of Howard's Kirby O'Donnell adventures, set amidst Arab intrigue.

A dozen steps from the edge of the ravine O'Donnell drew rein, glimpsing turbans among the rocks, and called out a greeting in *Pashtu*. A deep bellowing voice answered him, and a vast figure heaved up into full view, followed by half a dozen lesser shapes.

"Allah be with thee!" roared the first man.

He was tall, broad, and powerful; his beard was strained with henna, and his eyes blazed like fires burning under gray ice. One massive fist gripped a rifle, the thumb of the other was hooked into the broad silken girdle which banded his capacious belly, as he tilted back on his heels and thrust his beard out truculently. That girdle likewise supported a broad tulwar and three or four knives.

"*Mashallah!*" roared this individual. "I had thought it was my own men who had taken the dogs in the rear, until I saw those fur caps. Ye are Turks from Shahrazar, no doubt?"

[Here, O'Donnell embroiders a bit]

"Aye; I am Ali el Ghazi, a Kurd, brother-in-arms to Orkhan Bahadur. You are Ahmed Shah, lord of Khurk?"

There was a hyena-like cackle of laughter from the lean, evil-eyed men who had followed the big man out of the gully. "Ahmed Shah has been in hell these four days," rumbled the giant. "I am Afzal Khan, whom men name the Butcher."

Brace Yourself - Kull is Coming...

I want you to look in this man's eyes and tell me truthfully – would you take up a sword and follow him to battle serpent men? I hope I'm pleasantly surprised, but fear grips me.

Kevin Sorbo as Kull the Conqueror



There is just something wrong here, in my mind. I guess the film company is more interested in milking Sorbo's fame as Hercules than it is in capturing the look and feel of the old pulps that spawned Kull. Too bad.

Page Four: A new web site for Howard fanatics

Want to berate Sorbo online? see page 4

Book Review

by Garret H. Romaine

Conan and the Death Lord of Thanza

Author: Roland J. Green

Tor; 1997 267 pages. Cover Art by Keegan

Sometimes, a treat is where you look for it. And sometimes, it's *how* you look. Even the most wretched excuse for heroic fantasy can be a bit fun if you just try.

Death Lord of Thanza may be the worst Tor offering ever. It may also be the last – there is nothing new scheduled for 1997 as found on the Tor web site. How fitting that Roland J. Green has what may be the final word.



In a word, *Death Lord* is bad. Oh, there were parts I liked. There is an older drill sergeant character named Rog who kind of grew on me. There's a little romp in the hay with a warrior woman. And the opening had some vigor and excitement. But by and large, I churned through the book as fast as I could and let it lay there, steaming. I like Conan, and I'll read anything. Once.

Anyway, why not have a little fun and in the course of the review, compare this thing with the Conan that Robert E. Howard brought to life? Is there any similarity? Is it even the same hero? 'Cause it most definitely ain't the same writer.

Let's Get Ready to Rumble

First, we'll set the table. Roland J. Green had written six Tor books about Conan before *Death Lord*:

Conan the Valiant

Conan the Guardian

Conan the Relentless

Conan and the Gods of the Mountain

Conan at the Demon's Gate

Conan and the Mists of Doom

None really stand out; and maybe that's a point worth considering. They're all fast-paced Conan stories, good for a fleeting Conan buzz. But of all the current stable of Tor writers, Roland J. Green is probably the weakest. While Robert Jordan is acknowledged the best, and John Maddox Roberts did nice early work, none really stand out like Howard himself did in his days of toil. And, as has been argued, Howard wrote for magazines, keeping his action brisk and his dialogue crisp. Writing a novel, especially for a '90's market, is different. But we've gone over all that. You either read these things or you don't. Nobody should have to apologize, in my humble opinion. It's just another episode in the Conan tale. Half the fun is in the mental picture you create, in your own imagination, and a curling up with a new book – yes, even this one – is another opportunity to send Conan the Barbarian striding across your consciousness. Where's the harm?

Keep in mind that Howard was launching a genre, making this stuff up as he went, so there was a freshness to the stories. It was a style just a-borning, with a wide-open future. By now there are very few original possibilities to toss a well-muscled Cimmerian hero into. Having said that, Shakespeare faced the same problem and he seemed to triumph.

Joseph Campbell, one of my patron saints, argued that all great hero stories are essentially the same, with the main man going through a rather predictable set of challenges and transformations. Even though *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* has been subjected to countless variations on that single theme, by using intricate metaphors, interesting transformations, and modern reprises of ancient settings, any competent author can retell the hero tale in their own style.

Green, however, seems set on using the same recipe for a Conan yarn. Hero overcomes ancient curse. Hero overcomes ugly demon. Hero beds warrior woman. He rarely seems to change much of the support around Conan.

Howard, on the other hand, seemed to relish setting Conan into new situations. Reading through the set is to watch an author mature right along with his main hero.

Conan would be running from a pride of lions in one story, then grow tired of native women in the next. Howard tossed Conan into new settings each time – from wanderer to thief to pirate to kozak chief. Finally, Conan became a general and then King of Aquilonia. And each time, Howard seemed to grow as a story writer, as he bounced from a battle story to palace intrigue and then to something different yet again.

Green, however, has thoroughly mined Conan's middle years, until the chronology is almost spent. Perhaps one or two more epics can be mined from a spare weekend here or a chance evening there, but if Green is to write much more, he should leave Conan's life before becoming King and try a new period in the hero's life. I'd prefer the younger days, but there is a stunning amount of material to be developed in King Conan's later years as he started on the path of empire, once he embraced the "Best Defense is a Good Offense" theory.

Okay, Okay, The Story

Green's *Death Lord* tale is reasonably complex. Conan is adrift in the borderlands between Aquilonia, Nemedra and Ophir along the famed Tybor River.

Chronologically, the story takes place just after his adventure in de Camp and Nyberg's *Star of Khorala*, and before Howard's *The Devil in Iron*. Queen Marala has taken flight back to Aquilonia, leaving King Moranth in his struggle to 'guard life and crown from enemies who sought both.'

With a price on his head set by King Moranth at 1,000 gold coins, the Cimmerian is in a great hurry to leave Ophir and try his luck in Aquilonia. But as he pauses on the riverbank, he sees a signal light wink across the Tybor. An answering signal blinks back. River pirates! Conan manages to break up their sloppy, canoe-borne ambush on a fat merchant vessel by swimming out, leaping the rail, and taking charge:

He gripped the railing, vaulted over it, and crouched on the deck as the next arrows whistled by.

"Ahoy!" came a shout from aft. "Who in the name of Erlik's chamberpot are you?"

Conan remained crouching. "A friend who'd rather fight for you than with you. Or swim alone." He looked about him. "In Mitra's name, get the men up from the sweeps. Your deck's bare as a tavern dancer and the pirates are coming up from astern!"

And we're off. With a price on his head, Conan has to use a different name – he is briefly Sellus, a Northerner. This ruse lasts one day too few, and to keep ahead of a howling pack of bounty hunters, Conan joins the Thanza Rangers, a newly forming group of soldier-wannabes. Their task is to clear the Thanza wilderness of ruffians. So desperate is the need to cleanse the frontiers, that by enlisting, Conan is forgiven of all crimes.

Here, he meets a grizzled old veteran named Tharmis Rog, master-at-arms and the poor soul tasked with training these fools. Only 200 or so have signed up, and after a test of wills and saving the sergeant's hide, Conan soon takes his place at Rog's side, whipping the frontier plow jockeys and bean pickers into some semblance of a fighting team. The more he trains the men, and learns to like Rog, the less his earlier plan of desertion seems acceptable.

Meanwhile, two of the foes of the Thanza Rangers are at work. One, the fetching she-bandit Lysinka, seeks to ambush a valuable chest that is being sheperded through her forests. She is a handsome warrior lass, with intensely blue eyes "set above a high-arched nose in a tanned, thin face that few ever called beautiful but fewer still readily forgot." And she sleeps nekkid! Since this is a book written in the '90's, here's some Political Correctness tossed in:

She unwrapped herself from the layers of oiled leather cloaks and woolen blankets in which she had slept cocooned from the mountain weather. She wore nothing within her sleep cocoon, but the man holding the bowl of porridge did not look away as she emerged nude into the gray morning.

That was the law among her band - a woman might be bare without being willing. Men - even one woman - had died for breaking the law.

Lysinka's ambush fails and the chest magically sails, without wings, to the stronghold of Grolin, another bandit chief sought by Conan's Rangers. A power-mad fool, Grolin makes a deal with a largely unseen wizard to capture the chest. At one point, Grolin and Lysinka even merge forces, but Conan's band crushes them and the Cimmerian strikes a deal with the girl:

Before she could withdraw this time, Conan was on top of her, bearing her to the ground with his weight, kneeling with one leg to either side of her, and pressing the spear firmly against her throat.

"Well, Lysinka of Mertyos," Conan said. "I have won, but perhaps you need not lose. We can sing the song of this battle together."

The thin face twisted in what would have been an attempt at a smile. "My voice is no better than yours, Conan. We would drive all life from the forest."

God help us, but we've just been induced to picture Conan singing in the forest, perchance with a knapsack on his back...if for no other reason, the reader is free to hate Green at this point.

Despite the problems, we have a fast-paced, action-packed adventure unfolding. A romantic interlude now intrudes as Conan and Lysinka escape to a solitary cave to discuss battle plans:

"...Conan, I am still cold." Her tongue crept out over her bottom lip.

Conan lifted both hands and stroked her bare shoulders and breasts until he was caressing her throat. "Then perhaps I can warm you, Lysinka of Mertyos."

She had finished disrobing by the time Conan had spread blankets and furs. She gripped him with hunger and fierce joy; and when she cried out, the echoes from the rocks made sweet listening.

This is supposed to be after Conan's white-hot romance with Bêlit, and Green tosses in an obligatory moment of angst that, perhaps, a '90's hero might endure, but which seems a bit forced:

... the Cimmerian had no wish to be free of memories, even those that brought no joy, if it meant forgetting Bêlit altogether. Indeed, Lysinka had much in common with the late queen of the Black Coast, being also lithe, deadly, and the unquestioned leader of a band of cutthroats.

Rest assured, there the similarity ends. Remember how Bêlit made the plans, and Conan was content to carry them out? Nay, this is no Bêlit.

Let's Get It Over With

Finally, Conan takes up a group of men to seek out the Soul, crush Grolin, kill some snakes, and restore hope to the world. To do so, he has to climb the Death Lord's mountain and journey far within, where he comes up against the most laughable excuse for sorcery I have read about in a Tor novel - an army of skeleton men.

Howard had Conan battle more than one skeleton in his time. It's a time-tested, safely scary illusion - shiny white bones, a grinning skull, and animated into life. But Howard left his skeletons with wisps of flesh clinging to their ribs, or a necklace of gold nuggets around their throat. Remember *The Thing in The Crypt*, the very first Conan story (by deCamp, from notes), where he pulled the fabled sword from a dead king...

Slowly, jerkily, the cadaver rose from its great stone chair...Grinning jaws moved open and shut in a fearful pantomime of speech. But the only sound was the creaking that Conan had heard, as if the shriveled remains of muscles and tendons rubbed dryly together.

Green gives us Casper, the friendly skeleton:

At last the leader stepped forward, crossing his arms over his ribs with a marvelously human gesture. It hinted of a man who had been brave and shrewd when he had flesh and blood on his bones.

At length, Conan talks with the small army of skeleton men, fights with them, mourns their fallen comrades, and does everything but crack open a cask of Aquilonian wine with them. Where's the sense of macabre? The horror? Isn't there a rule in *Sword & Sorcery* – if you introduce a skeleton, it must be a frenzied death machine? Or is this '90s sensibilities again – Be Nice To Skeletons Month?

Finally, there's the getaway, better known as 'Leaving the Wench.' But Green just can't get it right. How many times has Conan been dumped on by a woman he saves? They take the next rogue with a bag of gold, or return to run their kingdom when he's lucky. They steal him blind, or even turn him in if dumb enough. Howard varied the circumstances well, but in the end, Conan got the girl for a brief time, and they would never show up again.

Well, here, after four days of romance, Conan slinks away in the middle of the night leaving only a note on the pillow, wishing her well. She then dreams...

A boy toddled down a dusty garden path, a boy with her dark hair but much of Fergis [her loyal friend] in his face... Conan stood with a tall, dark-haired woman, of surpassing beauty and far younger than he. They gazed fondly at a boy, playing on a tile floor. Squatting beside the boy was the young man who had once toddled down the garden path, now with a bushy mustache and scars on face and arm.

I guess this means that Lysinka's son would help train Prince Conn? >Yawn< Or it is yet another premonition that Conan will be a king some day, although Lysinka won't be around? Don't know, don't much care...

This is the end...

So, we're done with new Tor offerings for awhile. The only likely answer for their lack of future plans is that sales were off. Who knows how many of these they print and sell...50,000? 100,000? Whatever the number, interest must have fallen off, or Green, Moore, Roberts, et.al would be hard at work. You might argue that sales are tied to quality, and that if the writing was better, the sales would rise. What a concept!

- GR

Web Update: Discussion, and a new site

Staal's Savage web page now has a discussion area to stir up debate among fellow Hyborians. Use this URL: <http://www.intercom.no/~savage/conan/menu.html> There's talk of a QUIZ coming some day...brush up on your trivia now.

Also, the REHUPA has a new web page up. The URL is <http://www.sure.net/~aguaman/rehupa>

As you may or may not know, the UPA is devoted to Robert E. Howard, offering scholarly tracts on Howardian arcana as well as grandiose discussion. These guys really know their stuff; they'll tell you the edits de Camp made on original Howard pieces and more. There's a great Howard history essay.

Seen it yet?

The reviews for *The Whole Wide World* are all pretty favorable. But Portland, my nearest big city, had the movie just one night, for a film festival, and then it was gone. Guess it'll be another Blockbuster vigil...



Howard nails Price with a frontal assault.

TELL KULL WHAT YOU THINK!

Now, at last: a use for those AOL disks piling up in your den. Load up a free copy and get ready to unload on Sorbo...Chat LIVE with The Man Who Would Be Kull on America Online. Chat is TENTATIVELY scheduled for Friday, March 14, 9PM Central Standard Time

Go to keyword OLDSMOBILE

This is a change from the original date of 3/7.

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net. Try <http://www.intercom.no/~savage/conan/publications/menu.html> for reprints and links to other sites.

NEXT Issue: Nervously, we ask: are we worthy, now, having paid penance, to review a real, honest-to-Crom Howard story? Nope; close, though. *The Thing in the Crypt*, in 30 days.

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