

The Hyborian Review

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Late as I wanna be...

Great REH Quotes

From *Skull-face*, copyright 1929 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, Oct-Dec 1929.

The beginning of Chapter 2: Hashish Slave.

My dream of the skull-face was borne over that usually uncrossable gap that lies between hashish enchantment and humdrum reality. I sat cross-legged on a mat in Yun Shatu's Temple of Dreams and gathered the fading forces of my decaying brain to the task of remembering events and faces.

This last dream was so entirely different from any I had ever had before, that my waning interest was roused to the point of inquiring as to its origin. When I first began to experiment with hashish, I sought to find a physical or psychic basis for the wild flights of illusion pertaining thereto, but of late I had been content to enjoy without seeking cause and effect.

Whence came this unaccountable sensation of familiarity in regard to that vision? I took my throbbing head between my hands and laboriously sought a clue...



Plenty o' artwork inside... Reprint info - See page 4.

Conan, by Raffaele. From Lord of the Spiders #2

Marvel Comics: Third Time's the Charm (part 1) *By Garret Romaine*

The Lord of Spiders

Written by Roy Thomas.

Marvel is still sucking wind, trying to get its financial house in order, desperately working every angle to keep out of bankruptcy court. One might expect that the Conan comics that keep coming out would be worse than ever, but luckily, that isn't the case. 'Spider', while suffering in many ways, at least isn't a step backward. Such is the state of Marvel today that even average efforts are good just in comparison to the rest of the rot coming out.



In July 1997, we suffered through the first color Conan comic in quite awhile, now immortalized as "Conan the Pinhead" (reviewed in vol. 2). It was notable for ridiculous cover art and the awful story by Roland Green. Many longtime fans were ready to give up. Then came Conan the Usurper, which was possibly worse. We'll look at that second series only briefly, before getting to the good news as a reward.

Series #2, Conan the Usurper: Ugh

Where to begin; the art by Steve Lieber was crude and rushed; the colors were far too bright. And the story, by Chuck Dixon, was a hack job of a tale Howard only hinted at – Conan's ascension to the throne of Aquilonia. What you might not notice is that the Marvel team apparently lost a battle of some sorts with Conan Properties Inc. (CPI). For the name of that slain king, Numedides isn't even mentioned!

Here's part of the Marvel marketing of Conan the Usurper: "The bronze barbarian returns in an all-new three-issue limited series! Conan rages into battle once again as a hired mercenary for a ruthless warlord, but what will Crom's #1 son do when the band's next target is Cimmeria, Conan's own homeland?! Chuck Dixon and Klaus Janson (two-thirds of the team that brought you the acclaimed first story of PUNISHER WAR ZONE) unite with Hawkman artist Steve Lieber to unleash Robert E. Howard's legendary creation."

The Adventures of Conan was not yet on television when the first three-part comic series began, but by Conan the Usurper (CTU) Marvel was already aping the Adventurer party line. Here's what Marvel started putting into every comic, using a three-page foldout starting with CTU #1: "Born in a time of swords and sorcery, the Cimmerian known as Conan battles the forces of evil in a valiant effort to right the wrongs of his world. Using his brain as well [sic] his brawn, he fights the good fight as Conan the Barbarian!" [The missing "as" was fixed by book 2.]

Compare and contrast Howard's own assertion that Conan was "the damndest bastard who ever was...Drinking, fighting, whoring – that's what he did." (page 201, *One Who Walked Alone*, Novalyne Price) Where does "right the wrongs of his world" come in? Howard's hero works to save his own skin most of the time, to put coin in his purse or a crown on his head whenever possible.



I pulled this graphic off the Marvel web site. We now know the transition to keep in mind, apparently. Notice how it features an early pinkish barbarian, not the cleaner lines of the wasteland as Barry Windsor-Smith depicted in "The Coming of Conan." Then comes the Castellini nightmare, followed by His Schwarzeneggerianess and finally old Euro buddy Rolf, the biggest barbarian yet.

The true Conan has to be toned down a bit for the politically correct, double-hyphenated nineties. Thievery and murder probably aren't what the advertisers are looking for – they're especially not interested in the customers who practice such crafts. But saving the world each time out is hard work. 'Saving the girl' works better all the way around. The hero that always does will live commercially for a long time, as Bob correctly foresaw. What he couldn't know is how difficult it would be to keep control.

Cimmerian Rage: A Sole Bright Spot

Marvel does succeed every once in awhile. Generally, the whole Usurper series was forgettable save for the cover art on #2, "Cimmerian Rage." It rocked. Of the last nine covers, this has to be my favorite. The only explanation I can deduce is that Steve Mitchell joins the art team for issues #2 and #3 – he even merits mention on the cover for #2. The other explanation is that the eyes are not open on this cover – perhaps that's the trick...Sometimes, when I cover the head through the rest of the book, I see the torso I expect. The proportions from the neck down often worked. It was that face that ran me off, especially the eyes.

All in all, it's a thuggish, cartoony Conan with a dumb-ass chin and dull eye. The face is squat and ill-proportioned, and the cheeks and chins intimate a low IQ. CTU also has far too much imperial gold on the Romans. All those accoutrements from an expensive element that's nineteen times as heavy as water implies olive-eaters on steroids. Yet they are routinely portrayed as decadent, arrogant and effete. Still, what you'll remember most from CTU is clunky, brutish, and childish art. The fact that it isn't as ridiculous as the over-muscled Conan the Pinhead is no compliment.

Roy Thomas: The Savior

To the rescue rides Roy Thomas, who at least has a vision of the hero closer to Howard's. True believers know that whatever his faults in the name of commercial comics, Roy understands Howard.

Some fans may object to the fractured story line. The truth is, you don't get to 500+ issues with Conan on the cover by retelling the original Howard legends over and over. New stuff has to be made up. The challenge is to do it right, taking off in directions Howard would have approved. Because this hero's fans just keep buying.

We're left with playing the "degrees of separation" game, by plugging in how far away from Howard a story line ends up. A comic from a Tor or Lancer pastiche would be twice removed, which is probably as far as one should get.

Here's the Marvel marketing spiel for the 'Spiders' series, lifted right from Marvel-dom:

"The Tower of the Elephant has always been writer Roy Thomas' favorite Conan story, even before he and Barry Windsor-Smith adapted it in 1971 for CONAN THE BARBARIAN #4. Its spider-haunted citadel, which was the prison of the elephantine alien Yag-Kosha, was the most memorable of the many towers in Robert E. Howard's sword-and-sorcery fiction."



[Enter L. Sprague de Camp; he always pops up eventually where CPI is involved. Go ahead and boo now. Let it out...]

"In 1980, fantasy author L. Sprague de Camp wrote a novel entitled "Conan and the Spider God," set in Yezud, a Zamorian city ruled by priests who worshipped a giant arachnid. In it, de Camp gave the Cimmerian a youthful romance and a priestly foe named Harpagus. By the end of the novel his first love was dead, Yezud had been leveled by fire, its "spider-god" Zath had been killed, and Harpagus had wandered off, amnesiac." [Hence, Conan: Lord Of The Spiders (or, for simplicity, CLOTS).]

"In The Savage Sword of Conan #207-210 (1993) Roy and artists John Buscema and E.R. Cruz adapted de Camp's novel into comic form. Intrigued with the villainous Harpagus, Roy at once wove plans to bring back the changeling form he takes in this three-issue series. However, it's taken four years, and the intercession of editor Joe Andreani, for Harpagus to resurface as "Lord of the Spiders," complete with awesome art from Stefano Raffaele and Ralph Cabrera."

To me, that's both good news and bad news. The bad news is that it didn't get published the first time around, so is possibly not first-string material. But the good news is that of all of the various scripts and ideas Roy undoubtedly had spawned and backed up in the queue, this one was good enough to survive a four-year hiatus. So once again, the glass is half-full.

Here's a quote from the comic's hype slot that intrigued me the most; whilst so happy to have Thomas on board, they brag: "He brought Conan to Marvel, wrote some of his most epic comic book exploits and co-produced several of the new Adventure of Conan TV Shows -- now Roy Thomas closes the latest chapter in the legendary life of one of the adventuredom's greatest heroes!"

What's that mean, "closes the latest chapter"? No more comics from Marvel? Intriguing thought. It would be nice to have another publishing house take over for awhile, to put some darkness and pain back into the hero's tale. This happy-go-lucky, you know he's going to come out without a scratch hero just doesn't cut it. I don't know how many more of these over-hypes I can take:

"Conan and Hilliana [sic], side by side, take on the lethal threat of Zath and his murderous minions! Will this tremendous tag team achieve victory, or will the mighty Cimmerian be transformed into a mindless slave of the Lord of the Spiders?!" (CLOTS #2)

Conan, with the help of the red-haired thief known as Helliana, fights his final battle against the dreaded Lotus and Harpagus -- the wizard who can transform himself into a gigantic venomous spider! (CLOTS #3)

We'll get back to Helliana, I promise. She's a '90's kinda heroine, able to fend for herself but bearing a victimized grudge. Her hard body is suitably pierced and her short, butchy haircut sets off nicely her certain nomination for the "Tightest Ass in a Conan Comic" award.

Conan on the Cover

Before I delve deeper into the last of the Marvel series, I want to show two covers that do a lot more for me than eight out of nine current Marvel offerings.



The Slithering Shadow

Just try to find a mint condition copy of this *Weird Tales* edition. Talk about a definition for the word “priceless”. And this isn’t even one of the better stories. That Brundage cover art, however, is the stuff of legend. That foreign erotica Howard dipped into sure paid off in a vividly depicted whipping scene. I’d say the artist captured it nicely.

The *Savage Tales* cover, from forty years later, is equally stark and spare in its compassion. It resounds with elemental fury and pitiless, barbaric vitality. Yet you would be hard-pressed to name the scene from Howard’s writings where Conan handles a human head thusly.

Summary

Sure, expectations are high. Due to the quality of the historical work already in place, Conan fans have a right to demand a lot from any new work. Many an excellent artist has put a unique spin on Amra; a worthy effort is awaited each time out.



Savage Tales #1

It’s a given that the stories won’t be written as well as Howard would. The art, however, can be fresh, and good comic writing can cover for the degrees of separation. These are the kinds of efforts expected by the faithful. It’s asking a lot, but that’s just the height of the bar. Some giants have tread in the Hyborian gardens. Hopefully, more will arise some day. We’ve seen how Marvel had nowhere to go but up to start the CLOTS series. Fortunately, they brought in an old pro and passed most of the tests.

We’ll look closer in Part II. And I promise to bring Helliana in. - GR

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Back issues - <http://www.prosalg.no/~savage/conan/publications>

NEXT Issue: Part II of the Marvel round-up, including a lengthy list of the different Conan comic titles along the way.

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