

# The Hyborian Review

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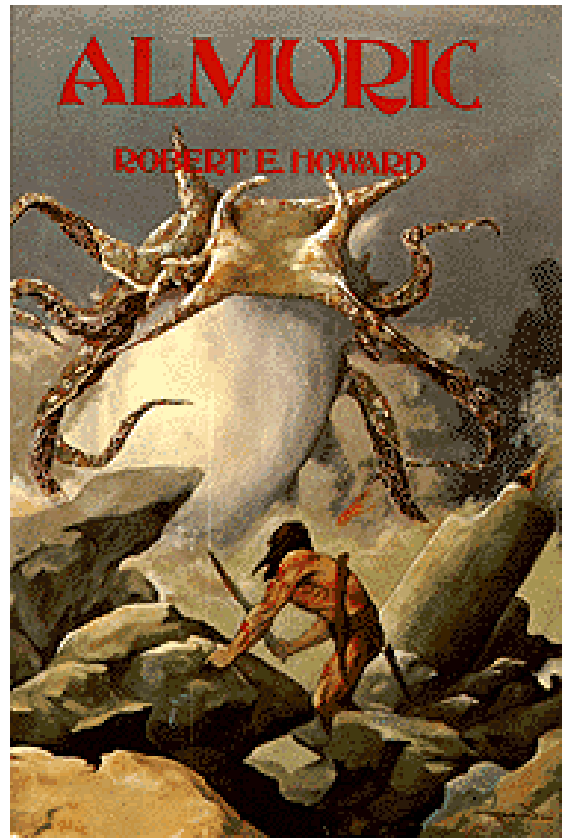
July 31, 1998

*Yeah, a little late...*

## Great REH Quotes

From the start of *Almuric*, Howard's classic science-fiction/fantasy book, copyright 1939 for *Weird Tales*, May, June-July, August 1939.

It is an awesome sensation to be suddenly hurled from one's native world into a strange new alien sphere. To say that I was not appalled at the prospect, that I did not shrink and shudder in spite of the peaceful quiet of my environs, would be hypocrisy. I, who had never known fear, was transformed into a mass of quivering, cowering nerves, starting at my own shadow. It was that man's utter helplessness was borne up in me, and my mighty frame and massive thews seemed frail and brittle as the body of a child. How could I pit them against an unknown world? In that instant I would gladly have returned to Earth and the gallows that awaited me, rather than face the nameless terrors with which imagination peopled my new-found world. But I was soon to learn that those thews I now despised were capable of carrying me through greater perils than I dreamed.



Reprint info - See page 4.

## Robert E. Howard's *Worms of the Earth*

### Part 2 of 2: Passion, Pacing and Poetry

*A Review, By Garret Romaine*

*Worms of the Earth*, copyright 1932 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, November 1932.

When last we left, Bran Mak Morn was about to seal his pact with the witch woman by giving her a night of love. We are spared the gory details; all Howard needs to communicate is found in the "involuntary shudder" that steals through the king as he begins to fulfill his vow. This is how he keeps his pacing hurtling forward.

The story pauses only briefly for this interlude; once Bran has the information he needs, he hurries to complete the setup. He steals a sacred object from the worm people, and hurls it into a lake for safekeeping. Then he returns to the witch and demands a meeting with the loathsome creatures, where he will negotiate their intervention in his bloody feud with Rome.

The taut story line stretches through this phase, even while the symbolism is familiar. Howard's pacing is epic -- he moves from crucifixion to murder to escape in the blink of an eye, and then Bran *really* gets busy...

To fetch the object, a large round rock, he must journey deep into the earth, into Hell itself. This is the phase of a typical heroic adventure tale referred to as "The Belly of the Whale" by Joseph Campbell. In his book *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell tracks the typical progression of a hero from innocent to warrior and further through a transformation into a powerful, mystical being. Yet Howard rarely followed the *Hero* mythos closely; his heroes never undergo any mystic transformation. They became kings, perhaps, such as Conan, Kull, and Bran Mak Morn, but that was the end of the "re-creation", and some rebelled at even that much change.

Nevertheless, like many Howard tales, the symbolism in *Worms of the Earth* is striking and recurrent. Of the descent into Hell to fetch the sacred object, Howard writes:

Groping downward, he felt his feet slip and stumble on steps too small for human feet. With one hand pressed hard against the side of the well he steadied himself, fearing a fall into unknown and unlighted depths. The steps were cut into solid rock, yet they were greatly worn away. The farther he progressed, the less like steps they became, mere bumps of worn stone...What beings, Bran wondered, had slithered up and down this slanting shaft, for how many centuries?

Nice foreboding there. Nice alliteration in *slanting shaft*, as well. But it's the symbolism that truly leaps out. Isn't Howard simply restating the obvious, that the further down you go, the less human are the beings? What a great metaphor to toss in, the usual fare for Howard fans. As a craftsman, Howard just used foreboding, alliteration, symbolism and metaphor in one small paragraph. Yet with the hairs on the reader's neck standing straight by now, it's the foreboding that weighs heaviest. For, we may soon meet Them...

...ahead a faint witch-fire gleam tinged the abysmal blackness. He grinned savagely and without mirth. If They he sought came suddenly upon him, how could he fight in that narrow shaft? But he had put the thought of personal fear behind him when he began this hellish quest. He crawled on, thoughtless of all else but his goal.

What a hero! Howard reinforces the passion and nobility of Bran's act, the idea that he is sacrificing much for his people. Some have conjectured that the Picts paid heavily for Bran's pact with these devilish hero, but my own considerable gut tells me that Howard did not mean to leave that impression. By now the Picts are already losing power in the face of the Roman expansion. Bran has rallied them together, but he is the last pure-blood ruler they will ever see. As Howard was scrupulous about the notion that all civilizations rise and fall, the clue that Bran represents the last true racial stock is all true Howard scholars need to know, right?

After depositing the Black Stone into the purifying waters of a nearby lake, Bran again dirties himself with a second encounter with the witch, to set up another descent into Hell to do his talking. Here's how she greets him:

"You! And alive! And sane!"  
"I have been to Hell and I have returned," he growled.

Bran convinces her to take him to the Worms; but she toys with him at the entrance to the cave.

"A door to those you seek, O king!" her laughter ran hateful in the gloom. "Dare ye enter?"  
His fingers closed in her tangled locks and he shook her viciously.  
"Ask me but once more if I dare," he grated, "and your head and shoulders part company! Lead on."

This relationship is doomed. The haughtiness of the witch is not subtle. She fears Bran Mak Morn, yet she has used him even as he used her. She mocks him and dares him every step through his labor, to the point finally of threatened violence. Even now, she continues to laugh "like sweet deadly venom" and to challenge him repeatedly. Whatever woman Howard had in mind as he wrote of this creature, we can only hope she's dead...

Now Bran is about to meet the worm people. This confrontation is our first introduction to the worms of the earth, and Howard might be expected to lay it on thick here, to get in our face about these foul abominations; are they not smelly and repugnant? What do they look like? How gruesome are they? What devolution has occurred here? The enormity of Bran's plan begins to finally sink in, yet notice that Howard never actually describes the beasts precisely, for that would mar his pacing:

The darkness was filled with stealthy noises not like those made by any human foot. Abruptly sparks began to flash and float in the blackness, like flickering fireflies. Closer they came until they girdled him in a wide half-moon. And beyond the ring gleamed other sparks, a solid sea of them, fading away in the gloom until the farthest were mere tiny pinpoints of light. And Bran knew they were the slanted eyes of the beings who had come upon him in such numbers that his brain reeled at the contemplation --

### ***A Taunt for the Ages***

Howard stretches the fabric yet some more; pulls at the story's interwoven threads until the rip is about to crash down. (What threads, you ask? Here are two "subthreads"; the slowly unfolding image of the worms; and will he kill Atla in the end?) For not only does Howard deliver the hero to the very pit of Hell, but now this man must make a speech! Bran badgers the worms, promises them cold steel if they seek to pull him down; it is one of the best taunts, one of the best challenges, Howard ever wrote:

Bran laughed, and the closing ring of fire shrank back at the savagery of his laughter. Drawing his sword with a soul-chilling rasp of steel, he set his back against what he hoped was a solid stone wall. Facing the glittering eyes with his sword gripped in his right hand and his dirk in his left, he laughed as a blood-hungry wolf snarls:

"Aye," he growled. "I am a Pict, a son of those warriors who drove your brutish ancestors before them like chaff before the storm! -- who flooded the land with your blood and heaped high your skulls for a sacrifice to the Moon-Woman! You who fled of old before my race, dare ye now snarl at your master? Roll on me like a flood, now, if ye dare! Before your viper fangs drink my life I will reap your multitudes like ripened barley -- of your severed heads will I build a tower and of your mangled corpses will I rear up a wall! Dogs of the dark, vermin of Hell, worms of the earth, rush in and try my steel! When Death finds me in this dark cavern, your living will howl for the scores of your dead and your Black Stone will be lost to you forever -- for only I know where it is hidden, and not all the tortures of all the Hells can wring the secret from my lips!"

When Bran emerges from the negotiations, he is sweat-slicked and grateful for the fresh air and true light above ground. The imagery is pretty obvious; Howard has no need for subtlety here. The foul earth-burrowing creatures below; the pure, wind-blown goodness above. Indeed, the taint of the underworld and the purity of the sun and stars is a well-understood cliché. Far from detracting one iota, the reader is freed to continue devouring the story without pausing to rub a chin or scratch at an ear.

Howard gives us another clue about the worms, right before the end of the scene, if we are still curious about the shape of these disgusting people:

Their low hissing speech floated up to him, and he shuddered as his imagination visualized, not a throng of biped creatures, but a swarming, swaying myriad of serpents, gazing up at him with their glittering, unwinking eyes.

Then Howard pulls on the poetic threads he has set up here. Before Bran and Atla can exit the cavern mouth, Bran admonishes her to keep the torch lit, as he doesn't want to step on an adder in the dark. Atla, suspecting that the King is still somewhat shaken, mocks him yet again; her "sweetly hateful laughter rose maddeningly in the flickering gloom." Almost every word has an 'L'...a sentence-long alliteration, just to add effect.

### **Hurling Toward A Gruesome Ending**

Now events are propelled forward at an incredible speed. Bran fetches the Stone from where he stashed it in Dagon's Mere. Of course it is no easy task -- he is nearly swallowed up by some Loch Ness monster. Yet all Howard does is allude to "a curious stir in the waters" and "a dim, gigantic shadow hovering there" beneath the surface, rather than subject the Pict to a distracting fight.

A lesser tale might have needed the added drama, but not this one. Howard leaves it at this: "He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon's Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster..." Hell, yes, 'discounted', for the pace is picking up and there is no time!

There have been dozens of poetic passages and splendid word tricks up to now; too many to count or list. In just a few short paragraphs, Howard tosses us these:

He saw the waters swirl and subside  
He waded up the shelving shore  
The desolate crimson of the sunset's afterglow  
His heart was hot  
A sullen circle

There are many, many more. Howard slides them in craftily, never interfering with the pacing or the narration. The cadence to the story flows inexorably.

At midnight, Bran is racing on horseback to the Roman fortress, where the Tower of Trajan stands. It is here that the worms will abduct the haughty Roman Titus Sulla. But when Bran arrives upon the scene, the Tower is no more.

### **Try A Little Tenderness**

Instead, Bran finds the ruins of the fort, its stones and timbers lying about. Amidst the rubble Bran finds a surviving Roman, who conveniently retells the tale of the destruction while subtly switching the passion of the tale.

This scene serves more than one purpose. First, of course, it offers Howard a method of delivering the details of the climatic scene. But Howard also shows a side of Bran that the reader might not have suspected.

The king bent down to the legionary, who lay in a sticky red pool of his own blood. A single glance showed the Pict that the man, horribly crushed and shattered, was dying.  
Lifting the bloody head, Bran placed his flask to the pulped lips, and the Roman instinctively drank deep, gulping through splintered teeth.

There was a scene toward the end of the movie *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, where Clint Eastwood bends down to some poor dying Confederate soldier to offer one last pull on a lit cigar. The young rebel breathes in the tobacco and is obviously grateful; yet the second puff is the man's last breath. The smoke trails out suggestively. Clint even puts his coat on the youth; after all, he seeks treasure, not revenge, and the Civil War is just one long, annoying distraction for him. He's no soldier; in fact, he's the Good Guy in the tale. Through all the killing and the desperate times, Clint hangs on to his basic dignity and can find the time to comfort a dying man.

Bran Mak Morn is similar; by pouring wine into the Roman, he is doing more than providing the author with a convenient story voice. Bran is still human; he doesn't torture the dying Roman, or taunt him. There is something of the warrior's respect for another warrior here, and this actually signals a change in Bran that has been happening for several paragraphs. For Howard tells us "in that moment the dying Roman seemed to him almost like a brother." For now the passion of a King is fading...

The change started when the Pict tore off on horseback to the Tower. He had been thinking about Atla's eagerness to see him torture his Roman captive. Yet Bran wanted no part of such a scene; instead, he envisioned a manly duel to the death, with Titus fighting with Bran's own sword. Yes, Titus was the greatest swordsman in the northern Roman armies; yet Bran would beat him in an honorable duel. It would be clean and dignified that way.

As the dying Roman legionary described the collapse of the Tower, Bran became convinced that he had crossed some secret line. He shuddered as he heard the tale. When the Roman died, Bran stood up and mechanically tried to cleanse the blood from his hands, but of course he cannot. Howard just drops this in almost casually; yet in re-reading the tale, hints such as these pop up repeatedly.

### ***Ransom for a Roman***

Now Bran races toward the rendezvous to ransom Titus, and the Black Stone has become the "weight of a foul nightmare on a mortal breast." Howard puts Atla there at the ring of stones, "her sinuous body swaying in a serpentine manner." She has rubbed phosphorous on the altar, so that it glows in a ghostly light.

Hell, she probably rubbed some on herself. She is fairly ecstatic over the impending torture; she hates Romans even more than she despises Bran, it seems. It is Atla, more than anyone else, who is enjoying the unfolding of events, who continues to laugh at Bran and mock his human tendencies. Howard inserts her not because she has to be present, but because she wants to be!

But this is still a Bran Mak Morn story, after all. Atla's pleasures are besides the point. Bran flings down the stone as though he were ridding himself from a loathsome disease, or lifting a curse. He seeks the Roman captive, and soon, Titus Sulla is produced.

Or, what has become of Titus. For the Roman is beyond the reach of mortal man; even as Bran hears a human voice tittering and gibbering in the distance while the worms part to let him pass, the Pictish King "stiffened, the shadows of a horror clawing at his soul." What horror has he unleashed on a fellow man? What soul-blasting suffering has he begot?

For the Roman is not what he expected:

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There was a stir, a seething in the writhing shadows, and from the darkness crept, like a four-legged animal, a human shape that fell down and groveled at Bran's feet and writhed and mowed [sic?], and lifting a death's head, howled like a dying dog. In the ghastly light, Bran, soul-shaken, saw the blank glassy eyes, the bloodless features, the loose, writhing, froth-covered lips of sheer lunacy -- gods, was this Titus Sulla, the proud lord of life and death in Eboracum's proud city?

[Note: The Baen text has "writhed and mowed" but that doesn't sound right; could it be moaned, or mewed? Oh, to have those *Weird Tales* texts on disk!]

Bran then cheats himself, and Atla, of a good long torture; out comes his sword. "I had thought to give this stroke in vengeance," he said somberly. "I give it in mercy -- *Vale Caesar!*" With that, the Roman dies, and the passion ebbs.

Like fighting lovers, Atla and Bran now trade barbs; he takes the Stone and hurls it into a thicket of worms, killing some. He now catches a glimpse of a worm; Howard has kept the description to himself for this long, but he cannot let the story end without baring all. Bran catches

a fleeting glimpse of the thing... only a brief impression of a broad, strangely flattened head, pendulous writhing lips that bared curved, pointed fangs, and a hideously misshapen, dwarfish body that seemed -- mottled -- all set off by those unwinking reptilian eyes.

Finally, who will get the last word? "King of Pictland," Atla cried. "King of Fools! Do you blench at so small a thing? Stay and let me show you the real fruits of the pits! Ha! Ha! Ha! Run, fool, run! But you are stained with the taint -- you have called them forth and they will remember! And in their own time they will come to you again!" You can see her, bosom heaving, passion aflame, as she taunts the Pictish king for the last time.

Bran finally strikes her savagely on the face, bringing blood to her lips. She has asked for it all story long, mocking him, riding him, forcing him into unnatural acts. He knocks her down, but it isn't enough. As he rides away, her laughter follows him across the heather, haunting him through the rest of his days. -- **GR**

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NEXT Issue: A critical look at one of the few Conan stories that had problems: *The Slithering Shadow...*

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