

The Hyborian Review

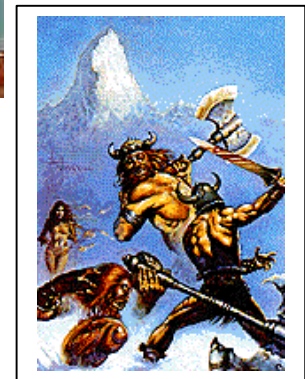
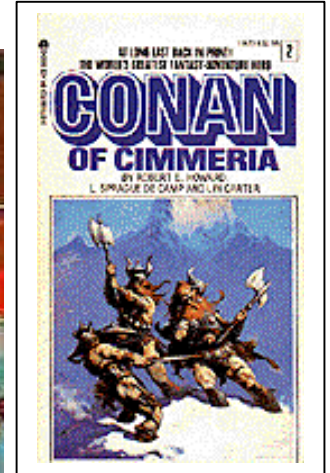
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If Jesse Ventura can be a governor, Conan of Cimmeria would make a great President ...

Great REH Quotes

From *The Frost Giant's Daughter*, a snip from the '76 Grant hardback *Rogues in the House*. Conan has been led into a trap... "Brothers!" cried the girl, dancing between them. "Look who follows! I have brought you a man to slay! Take his heart that we may lay it smoking on our father's board!" The giants answered with roars like the grinding of icebergs on a frozen shore and heaved up their shining axes as the maddened Cimmerian hurled himself upon them. A frosty blade flashed before his eyes, blinding him with its brightness, and he gave back a terrible stroke that sheared through his foe's thigh. With a groan the victim fell, and at that instant Conan was dashed into the snow, his left shoulder numb from the blow of the survivor, from which the Cimmerian's mail had barely saved his life. Conan saw the remaining giant looming high above him like a colossus carved of ice, etched against the cold glowing sky. The axe fell to sink through the snow and deep into the frozen earth as Conan hurled himself aside and leaped to his feet. The giant roared and wrenched his axe free, but even as he did, Conan's sword sang down. The giant's knees bent and he sank slowly into the snow, which turned crimson with the blood that gushed from his half-severed neck. Conan wheeled, to see the girl standing a short distance away, staring at him in wide-eyed horror, all the mockery gone from her face. He cried out fiercely and the blood-drops flew from his sword as his hand shook in the intensity of his passion. "Call the rest of your brothers!" he cried. "I'll give their hearts to the wolves! You cannot escape me—"



Reprint info - See page 4.

The Babes of Xuthal

The end of a review of "The Slithering Shadow, part 3 of 3"
By Garret Romaine

The Slithering Shadow, copyright 1933 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, September 1933.

This issue marks part 3, and the end (for now) of the investigation into *The Slithering Shadow*. We looked at the way the story served as a precursor to *Red Nails* in Part 1. In Part 2, we explored Howard's basic belief in the inevitable triumph of barbarianism. This issue, we look at the wily women-folk of this story, and draw some final conclusions that we wish could close the loop. To do so requires some snooping around on the seamier side of the pulps wherefrom Conan sprang.

Why, you might ask, should a free e-zine stoop to such naked commercialism?

Good question. By blanketing its pages with provocative shots of whippings and torture, doesn't *The Hyborian Review* risk sinking into wretched excess? Skeptics might wonder, "Is expanded circulation really worth exploiting women, representing them as objects, and pandering to the depravity in all of us?"

Ah, but there's a saving grace to this discussion. Hold the tar and feathers and the PC righteousness; there's a point to prove. Much wasted ink has been spilt proclaiming that Howard was either gay and didn't know it or hung up beyond belief over his mother. To hear some say it, he never stopped nursing. If it takes projecting scantily-clad babes in these pages to once and for all refute the eediots, emphasizing that Howard had no sexual deficiencies -- well, that's a price I'm willing to pay. Bring on the babes...

This essay will divide naturally into three parts:

- 1) *The Kiss of the Lash* - Howard's recurrent use of scenes with lesbian overtones;
- 2) *Closet Whispers* - How idle musings can ruin an author's legacy; and
- 3) *Negative Evidence* - What his writings say about his own personal demons.

The Kiss of the Lash

Bondage and discipline, sadomasochism, Pierre Loueys, London leatherboys...popular culture has long had a lot of fun with the depraved side of sex. The Rolling Stones even had a song entitled, "When the Whip Comes Down." For Robert E. Howard, the true sign that a civilization is sinking is when the rich, lazy nobles lose their sense of normalcy and resort to such exotic practices.

As Howard must have known, Germany in the pre-war Bauhaus days was infamous for tawdry, leatherbound depravity. Centuries earlier, the capitol of the Roman Empire was carnally consumed by the rule of Caligula, who seemed to encourage immoral excess. Howard correlated such outrages with imminent collapse and held such practices up as a barometer of the health of the society. The kinkier the sex, the more rotten the realm.

In *The Slithering Shadow*, the citizens of Xuthal "live only for sexual joys" in the words of Thalís, the Slut-in-Chief. Hardened by her initiation into the sect of Derketo, one of Howard's more intriguing cults, Thalís is essentially a sex machine, satisfying the drug-induced urges of the citizens in serial or parallel mode.

It is Thalís, later, who kidnaps Natala and lays the lash to the young Brythunian's soft white skin. The illustration for the cover of *Weird Tales* by Margaret Brundage was a fantastic image of lethal lesbian loveplay. Purely by accident, of course...here's Brundage's take on the cover: [The following interview was conducted in Chicago on August 23, 1973 by R. Alain Everts. Its initial publication was in *Etchings & Odysseys* #2. It appears on the web at <http://members.aol.com/weirdtales/brundage.htm>]

Everts: Do you recall the most controversial *Weird Tales* cover?

Brundage: We had one issue [the September, 1933 issue] that sold out! It was the story of a very vicious female, getting a hold of the heroine and tying her up and beating her. Well, the public apparently thought it was flagellation and the entire issue sold out. They could have used a couple of thousand extra.

Everts: Did you choose that scene to illustrate?

Brundage: You see, I would submit about three different pencil sketches. And they would make the selection of the one I was to do in color.

Once in a while I would suggest a little color in my sketches, but most of the time [pause] well, they were very rough. And yes, they chose the scene. I didn't. Having read the story, the thought of flagellation never entered my head. I don't think it had theirs either. But it turned out that way.

Whatever the hell that means? Howard steered everything in that yarn to his whipping scene. Give him credit.



Howard chose the cover, I'd say, but Brundage gets the most praise for her '30's touches – the long legs, the pert super-structure, the saucy haircuts. Brundage said she rarely used models and stroked from memory by and large, but she

certainly captured the spirit of what Howard intended.

If you conjure up an image of Natala, you could do worse than Brundage's image. Here's how Howard painted Conan's consort:

"At his feet rested a girl, one white arm clasping his knee, against which her blond head drooped. Her white skin contrasted with his hard, bronzed limbs; her short silken tunic, low-necked and sleeveless, girdled at the waist, emphasized rather than concealed her lithe figure." (*Conan the Adventurer*, p. 104)

To me, those are the words of a pretty normal male.

Another classic Brundage cover touched on a similar girl-on-girl violence theme in *A Witch Shall Be Born*. In the story, an evil twin sister returns to claim the throne from her kinder, gentler sibling. The cover did their relationship justice. Here's the scene as Howard wrote it:

"With a cruel laugh Salome caught her wrist and jerked her back. The magnificent suppleness of the queen was helpless against the vindictive strength that steeled Salome's slender limbs." (*A Witch Shall Be Born*, Grant; p. 24)



Finally, in July 1936, we got the grimmest Conan story ever, *Red Nails*, and depiction yet again of woman's cruelty to woman. There in the city-state of Techotl rules Tascala, another Stygian sex goddess who has found the fountain of youth: she slides a dagger into a young woman's

heart as she steals her vitality through a kiss. Another classic Howard inspiration on the immortality theme, and fodder for another great Brundage cover:



Here's Howard's own take on *Red Nails*, from a letter to Lovecraft:

"The last yarn I sold to *Weird Tales* – and it well may be the last fantasy I'll ever write – was a three-part Conan serial which was the bloodiest

and most sexy weird story I ever wrote. I have been dissatisfied with my handling of decaying races in stories, for the reason that degeneracy is so prevalent in such races that even in fiction it can not be ignored as a motive and as a fact if the fiction is to have any claim to realism. I have ignored it in all other stories, as one of the taboos, but I did not ignore it in this story. When, or if, you ever read it, I'd like to know how you like my handling of the subject of lesbianism." (*Robert E. Howard: Selected Letters 1931-1936*, p. 72)

Closet Whispers

L. Sprague de Camp made a considerable pile of money through his association with Robert E. Howard. Instead of being grateful, the engineering background in de Camp was apparently appalled by the emotional instability he believed Howard's storytelling required. At turns de Camp intimated Howard was sex-starved, Oedipally challenged, or otherwise pre-occupied. Here's a particularly annoying passage:

"For all his brave bluster, Howard did fall victim to a woman, one who destroyed him as surely as the fangs of Cabell's Evadne would have destroyed Gerald Musgrave had he not disposed of her first. And that woman was his mother." (*Dark Valley Destiny*, p. 222)

Such musings can prove enormously harmful. When told, retold, respun and recast, such harmless mental meandering can take on a life of its own. The result is that a long-dead author, with no living relative to defend his honor, is relegated to the back shelves because he was perceived as mentally unstable.

What gives? Edgar Allen Poe drank himself to death, but his work lives on. Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, Curt Cobain...the list of artistically gifted individuals who have committed suicide is long and respected. It ain't easy livin' with a brain that conjures up the images these artists hatch; but to dance on the grave and snicker about homosexuality and Oedipal urges is simply wrong.

I don't have all the references, but other Howard aficionados (not *fans*--after the recent rhubarbs on the REH-fans mailing list, I'm more judicious with the term "REH fan") have related snippets where Howard is almost sneeringly referred to.

One conjecture was that Conan is so buff and hunky because Howard was secretly gay. The ignorance of such a stance is weighty indeed; Howard's image of Conan was not the steroidally enhanced version of John Buscema, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tor novels. Howard wrote of Conan as lean and lithe as a youth; he never wrote of Conan as a weightlifting oaf. So here's an instance where Howard is depicted wrongly, almost slanderously, based on fiction from fifty years after his death. This is not a Steve Reeves movie, OK?

Even the new Frazetta book *Icon* dances on Howard's grave. Editor Arnie Fenner says "much of his work showcases REH's insecurities, paranoia, and emotional insecurity." (p. 58) Fenner then intimates that the 10 million paperbacks sold were for the art, not the stories.

Switching gears, much has been made of Howard's affection for his mother. "Sick, sick, sick" you can almost hear de Camp cluck in *Dark Valley Destiny*, his ham-handed biography of Howard.

Yet Novalyne Price, whom Howard dated extensively, and upon whom final authority should rest, explained that in those days, folks had an instinctive duty to their kin. Howard did what had to be done, and there isn't any evidence that he liked it. There was never any evidence of mother-son abnormalcy -- and frankly, it's sickening that we should even have to debate it. But that's what whispers from the closet do. They intimate, insinuate, and imply, with no evidence and no intent other than to destroy.

Negative Evidence

How do you prove something is false? How do you refute an untruth when the only evidence is anecdotal, circumstantial, and inferred in hindsight?

First, you build a case. So to the absurd idea that Howard was gay, I give you:

1) None of his friends, correspondents, associates, relatives, acquaintances, or neighbors ever mentioned it. No long lost lover has surfaced. No anguished diary entries, boastful letters, or friendly asides or acknowledgements are known to exist.

2) Howard enjoyed women. He dated Novalyne Price, obviously fell in love with her, and claimed, indirectly, to have had relationships of a carnal nature, with other women. Those may have been prevarications, of course. But there is no evidence from any of his letters that Howard was turned off by women. Vexed, maybe; but not repelled.

3) Most important for this essay, I give you the Brundage covers. The images that Howard gave his readers, that Brundage deduced and recreated, are not the images of a woman-hating, closet-lurking homosexual. In his persona of Conan, Howard gave us a lusty, virile man's man who made the girls cry and the ladies sigh. I simply cannot believe that Howard could have created the images he did, especially with Conan, if he were a closet, er, queer.

I don't want to tread too heavily here; I'm as PC as anyone on the Left Coast. I respect everyone's right to his or her lifestyle. I just see no way in Hades that Howard could ever buy into it. Howard gave us many purring palace wimps to depict his image of men of that persuasion. No Howard fan can imagine him as anything but a boxer, a swashbuckling pirate, or a warrior. So for me, the case is closed.

Refuting the supposed hang-up for his mother isn't as easy, except to say, again, that there is no evidence, anecdote, eye-witness account, or any other shred of proof for a supposed *improper* relationship. Howard recognized how staying with his mother would interfere with his dating. He devoted himself to caring for her on several grounds. First, he felt that she was the inspiration who believed in him as a teenager struggling to learn the writing game. She gave him strength when he needed it as a youth; she encouraged him and gave him space.

Second, there's that devotion to kin that rural Texans in the Depression years could truly relate to. The Howards were not rich. They exhausted their savings caring for Mrs. Howard, who had never been well during Robert's entire life. All he knew was a sick mother who needed care in ever-escalating portions. But he couldn't just abandon her - someone had to be there. If his writing suffered, he was even willing to endure that. It pained him, but he loved his mother and paid the price.

Howard played with the concept of duty, devotion, and responsibility often, particularly with Bran Mak Morn. Bran even entered into an unholy alliance with the unspeakable worms of the earth in order to wreak vengeance on the Roman invaders. Compared to a journey to the bowels of the earth, what's care for a sick mother?

Summary

In his 1975 essay "Women and Robert E. Howard," Harold Preece noted two of young Bob's infatuations: The Carnival Girl and The Sunday School Girl. They both had young Bob in knots, even if they were from opposite ends of the feminine mystique. There is evidence that each of them served as occasional models for female leads in his stories. There are also hints that Howard and his friends frequented houses of ill repute on the border, no doubt in the name of artistic investigation. So can we finally put to bed the ideas that he was a sexual deviant and move on?

The *Slithering Shadow* offers glimpses into what Howard stood for and who he was. We who admire Howard so much understand completely how even a lesser Conan tale could have caused such a stir when it was published. Howard understood his market, and his readers, as well as any other author in the lineup. Too bad, after all these years, there aren't more that understand him. --GR

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

NEXT Issue: *Something cold and icy.*

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