

The Cimmerian Chronicles

Volume 4, Number 3.

April, 1999

In partial fulfillment of REHupa requirements

Notes from a frenzied situation...

I feel like I should apologize for not keeping up with the Howardophiles who populate this place. Your pace and pressure is extraordinary. I simply couldn't keep up; something had to give.

Yet in a way, what snapped was not so much the publishing pressure as the need for release. I felt as though I'd said about as much as I needed to say. There was no volcanic flow welling up, pushing for release.

It wasn't as though I stopped writing, either. I continued to publish magazine columns and other editorial content. My Howard gland was drained, and didn't seem to refill like it used to. If the passion wasn't there, then the quality wouldn't be either; and so I swooned.

- Garret Romaine

Purpose Statement:

This publication is dedicated to the characters, creatures, countries and cultures created by Robert E. Howard.

*Produced by Garret Romaine
18100 SW Pheasant Court
Aloha, Oregon 97006
(503) 591-8622
gromaine@aol.com*

Confessions of a crippled critic

How pulling together a monthly publication drained the very life from a writer and left him gasping

It took exactly 30 issues. That's how many times I published *The Hyborian Review* before I hit some kind of wall. Thirty months, then >poof< the thrill was gone.

What started out as an innocent little internet 'zine took on it's own monstrous life, until it became much less fun and much more work. Every thirty days I was publishing what seemed, to me, to be more drivel and less insight.

While I was gaining experience in the publishing technology of the 'net -- Adobe and ASCII and Outlook, oh my! -- the ability to

pump life in seemed to be taking my own life out.

What I was left with was a realization of how hard it must be to live a life as a writer. Even doing the *Review* part time was challenging. This was numbing. Howard kept it up for more than a decade before he stopped.

Actually, I learned several lessons. Here's a numbered list:

- 1) publishing cycles seem to compress with time
- 2) creativity, passion, and deadlines don't always mix
- 3) doing it for love means you can stop any time

I'm going to spend a bit of time going over each one, hopefully with something of interest under each heading. Hop on or skip ahead...

Compressed Cycles

My first few *Reviews* almost rushed off the keyboard, as though some urge to wordsmith were being released. I found I had much to say, and did so. There was an entire Howard universe to opine over -- every story was up for grabs.

Coincidentally, I began to flesh out a very meager Howard library, until I had a good set of tools to work with. Many writers, all better than I, had plowed the fertile topsoil of Robert E. Howard.

Yet more could be said about Howard, I believed, by simply applying some good scholarship and newcomer's zeal. I never hoped to match scholarly swords with the best of the Howard experts -- first of all, they had access to original manuscripts and unpublished letters, and more impressive, had put in decades in the trenches. Second, I wasn't looking for a fight. I didn't need, or expect, to make some kind of mark by pulling the beards of the exalted elders. I appreciated their criticism and candor -- Rusty Burke being the most patient of a fractious lot.

Since I was on a 30-day cycle, I wasn't so much trying to join an exclusive fraternity as simply looking for a creative outlet to do some writing. I tried hard not to antagonize anyone -- which I immediately ended up doing by reviewing the dreaded Tor pastiches. Non-Howard, non-interesting, and barely recognizable Conan, came the outcry. Cease and desist, was the message, or nobody would take the 'zine seriously.

What I worried about was running out of material. As far as I knew, there weren't enough Conan stories to keep me going, and I wasn't really into Howard's poetry.

So it wasn't going to be very easy to mine the mother lode for very long. That was the rationale for including Tor, Marvel and even the abominable TV show. It was a symptom of the 30-day itch, and resulted in some of the worst versions of the Review that were published.

Another ploy to put off the incessant turn of the calendar's pages was to invite fellow Conan freaks into the ranks of author-hood. I had a cousin who grew up with the Cimmerian, read every publication, memorized the lines of the movie, and was dying to get into print.

Unfortunately, he was dying, period. Once cancer got ahold of David Romaine, he was a goner in 20 months. He and I shared a couple of Reviews, and had some good fun with it. Toward the end, he just didn't have the energy. And after that, dragging in guest writers to grace the pages wasn't very easy, so I began to suggest it less and less.

I next hit upon a scheme to stretch out the better stories to two and sometimes three issues for a single title. This worked in some ways, and didn't in others. It economized on the jewel-like pure Howard work, and it allowed more depth for some of the more obscure points. In addition, it gave some suspense and an element of salesmanship to the 'zine, kind of like the old Saturday serials.

Better yet, it gave me a breather in finding new material. I was reading hundreds of pages of Tor trash every month in order to put together a review of an entire novel. Now I could stretch a single short story over a quarter of a year!

Predictably, I felt greedy, selfish and ashamed, as though I had sold out. My moral compass was spinning wildly now; one minute, I'd wonder if I could charge five bucks a year for twelve issues and do a big tax write-off.

The next minute I'd be rolling my eyes at the thought that anyone would expend any more energy than it took to double-click the icon in their mail.

The End of Passion

There was a time when I would have paid good money just for a single dream about Robert E. Howard. Once I'd published twenty or so *Reviews*, I came to feel a kind of kinship with the man. I'd analyzed and poked and prodded in places where it was dangerous to tread -- and still, I wanted more. I began to pay more attention to the Letters -- Bob talking, not writing. I devoured *One Who Walked Alone* and the movie that came from it. Yet every single time I would end up leaning forward at key moments, wishing with all my heart that those two star-crossed young adults could put down their shields and embrace. Every time it didn't happen I hurt inside.

I never had that dream; I never met Bob Howard in my sleep, never talked with him, never shared tortillas and Tecate'. I willed it to make it so; I pretended to jump start my reveries by imagining the conversations, but they never came. Some other image would flit by and I'd be running with wolves, choking a boss, or waltzing naked 'neath the stars. I never dreamed I was Kull or Bran or Conan; never hewed through limbs and sang songs of battle. My imagination seemed stuck; I couldn't make some fantastic leap to where I wanted to be.

After awhile, I began to wonder if perhaps Bob Howard wanted nothing to do with me. "I'm not worthy," I told myself. "Ten more years -- no, twenty -- then I'll be chosen." The feeling remained that I was unimportant in the galaxy of Howard fans; I had earned no spurs, no stars, and no Howard appearance in my slumbers.

Passion and zeal drove the first twenty issues; routine and frenzy drove the rest. I liked the passion better; it may have caused crazed thoughts to escape once in awhile; but there was no arguing with the force of the emotion. My hope is that taking a brief siesta can energize the more important batteries.

One thing that I began to fear was that I was beginning to hang my self-worth on where I stood in the pantheon of Howard pros. Some folks seemed to have found a way to wind Howard into their professional lives, selling books, publishing paid periodicals...was that where I was headed? I couldn't bear the thought, personally -- I wanted my professional and private lives kept separate. I didn't want to have my dinner bowl depended on my passion. I liked Howard as a crusade, not a meal ticket.

I noticed that Howard became the only version of the genre I was interested in, and that concerned me as well. I figured it was the time thing -- there was no time to read anything else. I'd only feel guilty anyway. It made my critiques and reviews that much more one-dimensional, but I couldn't help it.

Finally, my zeal hit a low point at the end of 1998. I couldn't write any more. I had been defending Howard, arguing against those who darkly suggested he had a major flaw, a dirty little tabloid secret. That I had to expend that much energy to protect a dead poet was appalling, and it began to take a toll on me. I can barely re-read the last two *Reviews* I wrote; it just didn't seem fair to have to talk about such ridiculous things. And it hurt, too; the attention should have been on the man and his writings.

It was about that time that I dropped out of all things Howard that I had plugged into. It wasn't all that hard to do, at first.

I let go of REHUPA and put myself on the waiting list; I stopped worrying over *The Cimmerian Chronicles*, stopped posting much of anything on the REH-fans mailing list, and stopped writing the *Review*. It was as though I'd snapped. The passion had evaporated and it just seemed like work. While I told myself it was the new job, and starting to teach at the university, and my volunteer load, I knew in my heart it wasn't that. I just wasn't getting that much of a buzz anymore talkin' 'bout Bob...

I Can Stop Whenever I Want

So I dropped out. Oh, I had lots of excuses. I watched the REH-fans mailing list devolve into the most wretched examples of cyber-drivel, and I got out. I barely skimmed over my last REHUPA mailing, and wasn't moved at all to comment on anyone else's work. I felt like someone who needed lithium or a slap in the face. I was flat-lined.

What was interesting was that I received, at most, one e-mail from a concerned subscriber. People really don't care that much about a free 'zine. If it shows up, great; if it doesn't, that's less drivel clogging the mailer. It was humbling, but there just wasn't that much of a hue and cry for my work.

Most likely, that's because I didn't really say all that much that was new. I said it my way, and I had fun with it, but I didn't really advance the Howard world very much. If any.

Yet truly, it was a great time to be a Howard fan. Or it could have been. *The Whole Wide World* was a splendid movie, touching and forceful. Yet it was distributed in the most clumsy way, and received very little fanfare. The Conan television show was adolescent and pedestrian, cheesy and boring. I found things to like about it, but the distribution was so spotty that I had to scour the TV listings just to find it. Half the time it was on at 11:00 at night, and the other half it was on at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday afternoon.

Then came *Kull the Barbarian*, which could have been major but was yet another Hollywood ripoff. Sorbo was a surfer-dude barbarian, a California beach bum cast into a moody, mercurial persona. It was wretched.

Add to that the mindless Marvel drivel and the end of the Tor line, and far from being a cornucopia of Conan, it was a flood of filth. What could have been the glorious renaissance of Howard was a commercialized crescendo of crap.

Well, there's more alliterative literature where that came from, but the point is made. Far from taking a hand in spreading Howard to the masses, I was in danger of being part of the problem, not part of the solution. Everywhere I looked, I soured. I didn't like the quality of half the REHUPA zines; they seemed amateur and clumsy. The arguments and fury on the mailing lists made me wonder why we couldn't even agree on anything amongst ourselves. And my own level of quality was dropping.

I began to wonder if there was something about Howard that seemed to invite profligate profits over purity of essence? I blamed the current rights-holders, who aren't even remotely related to Howard, and seem to be the worst kind of money-grubbers possible. They just want a buck -- they have no allegiance to the essence of what Howard was trying to do with Conan, and they don't care a whit for any of the ideals and warnings that drove REH to write. No wonder the state of the estate is so dismal. Did I really want to be a part of that?

I decided, ultimately, that this was one of those "journeys of re-discovery" and that I did want to play a role. I liked reading Howard and I liked writing about him. And who knows? Someday, in my dreams and hallucinations, I may still get to meet him...

- END -