

"Howard's writing seems so highly charged with energy that it nearly gives off sparks."

—STEPHEN KING

ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE COMING OF

CONAN

THE CIMMERIAN



THE ORIGINAL ADVENTURES OF THE GREATEST
SWORD-AND-SORCERY HERO OF ALL TIME!

FULLY ILLUSTRATED BY MARK SCHULTZ

The Coming of
CONAN
The Cimmerian



Robert E. Howard

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For Al

Mark Schultz

Foreword

Well. It's been a long haul.

As I sit here, reviewing the drawings and paintings I contribute to this book, the work of well over a year and a half – I must admit to mixed emotions.

It's easy enough to know that you are up to the job of capturing the visual essence of the most famous creation of one of your favorite authors, a literary lodestone that has repeatedly drawn you back since childhood, so long as you don't actually have to execute those visuals. Believe me, there have been many, many times in the last thirty plus years when I've indulged in the "what if" game – and every time been very impressed with the perfect phantom illustrations of Conan misting through the world behind my eyelids.

But when it comes time to belly up to the bar, put your money where your mouth is, and actually make concrete all the notions and grand designs that have previously flitted through your happily uncommitted mind – aye, there's the rub...

Robert E. Howard's Conan has not been so easy to illustrate as I imagined he would be. I think this is in part because, while Conan and his Hyborian Age are nominally works of epic heroism, featuring hosts of brave warriors, fields of savage battle, and deeds of strength and bravery and derring-do as is the tradition of heroic fantasy, what makes them great is a deeper, darker context. Howard wrote them in a personalized style that is very post-heroic, is very much a part of a twentieth-century literary tradition which eschews the floridity, gallantry and nobleness of cause associated with the epic.

Howard took the nominal elements of heroic fiction, but he did not write them with the genteel sensibilities typically associated with the form. Hell no – he took those elements as sheep's skin under which to fit his own agenda, which included railing at his personal circumstances; letting loose with a literary snarl and bark at the limitations and frustrations of the world he knew – isolated central Texas post oak scrubland and oil field.

What I'm trying to get at is that while Howard's Conan stories live in the framework of classic heroic fantasy, their guts – the heart that drives the beast – is a much more personal sensibility. They are engineered and pushed forward at Howard's famous driving pace by a gritty directness and stripped-down, take-no-prisoners attitude that is unique to Howard; an expression of his rage at his immediate world. Howard's writing is not fast and furious and grim merely because he liked it that way, rather it is fast and furious and grim because that was a true expression of who Howard was. Howard's genius was that he took literary forms that appealed to him and added to them and subtracted from them and molded them into entities that darkly reflected his deeply felt personal beliefs; his view of life as unending struggle and ultimate futility. But providing one hell of a ride along the way, if you were lucky.

We are lucky because we get the Old World tradition of the heroic epic as interpreted through the sensibilities of a Texan steeped in the lore of his home state –

the violent history of its blood feuds and Indian wars, as well as its rich Southern United States folk storytelling tradition, with all its ghosts and swampy horror.

That mix made for something new, and for one hell of a ride, but it has also, for me, made Conan a bit difficult to visually interpret – to get back to my original chain of thought. On one hand I'm drawn to Howard's vivid descriptions of pageantry and stateliness, the awesome sweep and grandeur of the Hyborian Age, Conan's story as epic, and my desire is to do all that justice by hewing to the finest traditions of classic illustration. On the other hand, it is Howard's New World spontaneity, his white-hot emotional explosiveness and relentless pacing that make these stories tick, that give them life far beyond that of their contemporaries, and to properly capture that calls for visuals that are bold, immediate, and raw.

There is no mistaking a Howard story. No one will ever write Conan, or any other sword and sorcery creation, with the ferocity and terrible beauty of Howard. There will never be a true Conan that was not written by Howard. Conan is too personal a creation, all wrapped up in Howard's own strengths and foibles and idiosyncrasies, and that makes it easy to see why Conan is by far Howard's best known creation.

Howard was all about story first and foremost – there's no dishonor in that – but with Conan he seems to have arrived at a point in his growth as a fictioneer where he appreciated the importance of developing a fully-rounded lead.

The general public will enjoy a particular literary concept, featuring an imaginative world revolving around a well-turned plot, once or twice, but if the author wants them to return again and again to that world, he needs it anchored by an attractive and unique character who is more than just a construct. Howard got that with Conan, pulling personality from the Texas country roughnecks he well knew, and created a series of stories that in popularity have eclipsed all his other fine worlds.

In Conan we get that rarity in fantastic literature, a hero who actually changes and grows from story to story. The teenage, insecure Conan who kills a man for taunting him in *The Tower of the Elephant* is not the same headstrong bully who has his heart broken in *The Queen of the Black Coast* is not the same veteran mercenary who begins to understand that maybe he has it in him to go all the way in *Black Colossus* is not the same Conan who as king patronizes the arts (the arts, for Crom's sake!), recognizing that poetry will live long after he is gone, in *The Phoenix on the Sword*.

Conan grows and matures, and more's the pity that the popular view of the character is largely restricted to that of a scowling, jaw-clenched, muscle-bound killing machine. Howard wrote him as so much more. Yes, he brawls and slays, but he also reflects and laughs – at himself as well as others – loves and loses, doubts and falters, acts altruistically and empathizes with alien beings. He is, above all, totally charismatic; no outsider comes to command armies and nations without inspiring trust and loyalty and devotion. He's no simple brute; he's a multi-dimensional character, and I've done my best to reflect that, depicting him in a variety of moods and attitudes.

Not every one of the stories in this volume is great. Howard was writing for monthly publication at a white-hot pace, and perfection is never possible under those circumstances. Even so, even such minor efforts as *The Vale of Lost Women* offer

passages of wonderfully turned prose – check out Livia’s view of the slaughter in the village for as compelling and compact a portrait of the horror of massacre as is seen in fiction, or the description of ghostly lunar beauty in Livia’s descent into the haunted vale.

But the bulk of these stories are great, and *The Tower of the Elephant* and *The Queen of the Black Coast* are indisputable classics of fantastic short fiction, richly deserving recognition and appreciation outside the genre.

The man could write, and Conan is Howard at the top of his game. My hope is that, if you do not care for my interpretations of his words, you are able to look beyond them, and enjoy Conan and his world, and Howard’s stirring prose, from the perspective of your inner eye.

Mark Schultz
2002

Introduction

When the December 1932 issue of *Weird Tales* appeared on newsstands, Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) probably didn't imagine that he was making history. The *Phoenix on the Sword*, introducing his new character, Conan of Cimmeria, had been written in March of that year, and even if editor Farnsworth Wright thought the story had "points of real excellence," it was not enough to warrant making it the cover story. The first Conan story was simply one tale among others in that particular issue of *Weird Tales*.

Seventy years later, the character has achieved international fame. Virtually every country in the world has published the Conan tales. One success leading to another, the character has been featured in motion pictures, comic books, cartoons, pastiches, television series, toys and role-playing games. In the process, Howard's creation has been diluted to the point that it is often nearly impossible to recognize Howard's character in the iconic image of the fur-clad, hyper-muscle super-hero he has become in the public's mind. Such a phenomenon is not rare in the history of popular culture. When a fictional character becomes such an icon, it is bound to escape its creator and take on a life of its own, the character taking precedence over the creator. Dracula, Fu Manchu and Tarzan are instantly recognizable figures, while creators Bram Stoker, Sax Rohmer and Edgar Rice Burroughs enjoy a popularity both inferior to and dependent upon these particular creations. As an example, many Burroughs readers had their first exposure to Tarzan by way of the movies or comic strips and were subsequently led to buy the original books. They could then judge for themselves whether the adaptations were faithful to the original. In Howard's case, however, this has been impossible: until the present publication, Howard's Conan stories had never been published as Howard wrote them, in the order in which he wrote them, in a uniform collection.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea of establishing a character's "biography," no Sherlock Holmes scholar ever entertained the idea of repackaging Conan Doyle's original stories in the order of their occurrence in Holmes' life rather than the order in which they were written, or inserting pastiches amidst the established canon. This was, however, exactly what was done with the Conan stories: not only were they presented following someone else's reconstruction of the character's "biography," but pastiches of arguable quality (to say the least) were interpolated among Howard's tales. Further, some of Howard's own stories were rewritten, other non-Conan Howard tales were artificially transformed into Conan ones, and Conan stories that Howard thought too little of to finish were completed by other writers. This whole concept of "posthumous collaboration," as it was termed, made it very difficult for the casual reader to determine what was genuine Howard and what was poor aping or rewriting in those volumes. In other words, people lured to Howard's Conan stories after encountering adaptations or pastiches simply found more of the same, not having detailed information to separate the wheat from the tares. This has made critical assessment of the Conan stories a difficult thing: the Texan has often been judged on writings that were either not his or had been tampered with.

Howard himself suggested why the stories should not be presented in the order they occurred in the character's life: "In writing these yarns I've always felt less as creating them than as if I were simply chronicling his adventures as he told them to me. That's why they skip about so much, without following a regular order. The average adventurer, telling tales of a wild life at random, seldom follows any ordered plan, but narrates episodes widely separated by space and years, as they occur to him." Consequently, the stories in this volume are published as they "occurred" to Howard, in the order they were written and as they were written by Howard – no pastiches, no changes for the sake of "consistency," no rewriting. Such a presentation not only respects Howard's intentions, it also casts a very different light on the character and his evolution, and provides us with new insights to some of the major themes of the series.

At the time the December 1932 issue of *Weird Tales* went on sale, Howard was becoming one of the magazine's pillars. The magazine had published the Texan's first professional story, *Spear and Fang*, in July 1925, and over the years his tales had been appearing with increasing frequency between its covers. He had won his first cover with *Wolfshead* in the April 1926 issue and had introduced the fan-favorite character Solomon Kane with *Red Shadows* in August 1928, again featured on the cover. A year later Howard had won the admiration and respect of his peers, most notably Howard Phillips Lovecraft, with his two stories about Kull of Atlantis, *The Shadow Kingdom* and *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*, published in the August and September 1929 issues.

It can be said that Robert E. Howard had been a protégé of *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright. Wright nurtured the young Texan's burgeoning talent and would later describe him as one of his "literary discoveries," as well as a "genius" and a "friend." Wright was indeed an unusual editor. In a world of formula and cliché-ridden pulp magazines, *Weird Tales* often lived up to its subtitle, "The Unique Magazine," walking a fine line between the magazine's commercial imperatives and Wright's literary inclinations. While Lovecraft would often have his tales rejected, unable or unwilling to submit to Wright's editorial requirements or suggestions, Howard was more flexible. Studying and anticipating his editors' needs, he had no problem turning out dozens of formula stories – with the occasional gem here and there – for such generic magazines as *Fight Stories* or *Action Stories*. On the other hand the Texan had genuine literary leanings, most evident in his poetry, but for which there was no viable market. *Weird Tales* came at the right time for the young writer. This atypical magazine published a large number of Howard's poems as well as the cream of his fiction: the tales of Solomon Kane, Kull, Bran Mak Morn and Conan the Cimmerian. Not coincidentally, of all his rather numerous characters, Howard wrote poems about only those four (if we accept *Cimmeria* as a poem about Conan's homeland). The Texan was evidently more involved when writing Conan tales than he was when writing for more generic markets.

It is significant to note that the first Conan story was a rewrite of a Kull story, *By This Axe I Rule!*, completed in 1929. Like the Conan tales, the Kull stories were centered around the exploits of a barbarian adventurer in exotic countries of Earth's mythical past, but there ends the similarity: between 1929 and 1932, Howard had