

The Hyborian Review

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Howard Rules...

Great REH Quotes

From *The Phoenix on the Sword*, originally published in *Weird Tales*, January 1932; copyright 1932 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. This is from my Ace reprinting.

The exiled Stygian wizard Thoth-Amon is 'guarding' Dion, a fat Aquilonian noble, to make sure the well-fed oaf doesn't reveal Ascalante's plans for murdering Conan in his chambers. Thoth has been enslaved due to the fact that a Shemitish thief stole the centerpiece of his power, the magical serpent ring. Thoth's story reminds Dion of a curious coincidence, so he rummages around in his jewelry drawer for a bauble a wandering Shemite once sold him. "Ah, here it is!" He triumphantly lifted a ring of curious make. It was a metal like copper and was made in the form of a scaled serpent, coiled in three loops, with its tail in its mouth. Its eyes were yellow gems which glittered balefully. Thoth-Amon cried out as if he had been struck, and Dion wheeled and gaped, his face suddenly bloodless. The slave's eyes were blazing, his mouth wide, his huge dusky hands outstretched like talons.

"The Ring! By Set! The Ring!" he shrieked. "My Ring -- stolen from me --"

Steel glittered in the Stygian's hand, and with a heave of his great dusky shoulders he drove the dagger into the baron's fat body. Dion's high thin squeal broke in a strangled gurgle and his whole flabby frame collapsed like melted butter. A fool to the end, he died in mad terror, not knowing why. Flinging aside the crumpled corpse, already forgetful of it, Thoth grasped the ring in both hands, his dark eyes blazing with a fearful avidness.

"My Ring! he whispered in terrible exultation. "My power!"

Design a Logo, Be a Star

[From www.conan.com] The "Conan the Adventurer" television series is now cleared in fifteen countries and 75% of the U.S. market. It will be released in or about January 1998, and will begin shooting twenty-two episodes starring Ralf Moeller as Conan in June 1997 in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The producers are seeking original designs for the "Conan" logo for the series. There is one prize award.

"Design-the-Logo" Contest

1. First prize is a guest appearance on an episode of the "Conan the Adventurer" television series, all expenses paid, or alternatively \$1,000.00. The winner must sign a consent form and a general release attesting to the fact that he or she is the rightful owner of the submission, and a complete and absolute assignment of the submission to the Producers.

2. Entries may be submitted either via electronic mail to: Crom@conan.com or through U.S. Mail (see address below)

3. Include your name, age, address, home phone number and e-mail address with your submission. You must be at least eighteen years old. Submissions are exclusive to Conan Properties, Inc. and shall not be returned. Producer is not responsible for lost or misdirected submissions.

4. There is no limit on the number of entries per person.

5. What we are looking for are logos that elicit a sword-and-sorcery feel combined with a modern, "cyber" feel.

Official Rules/Logo Contest

Conan Properties, Inc.
461 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10017

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Story Review

by Garret H. Romaine



The Tower of the Elephant

Author: Robert Ervin Howard

Donald M. Grant; 1975. Art: Richard Robertson

I took it with me to lunch and I read it on my breaks. I bought two more copies and then found a third, the Grant oversized edition. I read it, and I read it again, and then I'd just pull out snatches of text whenever I could find the time. Whenever I'd come up for air, I'd be looking around for one of the copies I'd stashed.

The Tower of the Elephant is so good, so well written, that it almost defies a good review. How do you write up a critique of an author that is so much better than you? How do you honor, without fawning? I can't be very objective, but I *can* list the many reasons why this story is one of my favorites.

Here, then, is my first-ever review of an REH story. I've warmed up, I've paid penance, and I've paid a few dues, tramping through the Tor offerings. Always, I sought to compare back to a Howard story, but until now, I had not deigned to study him. After much perusal, let me take a few pages to describe the many reasons why I may be a budding Howard purist at heart.

There are two main groupings to my compliments:

1. **Story Teller** -- The pure and obvious genius of a natural born yarn-spinner, in a genre-jumpstarter;
2. **Word Smith** -- Howard's ability to coin a phrase, turn a verse, string together words and practice his craft.

These can be broken down even further, as we'll soon see. So hang on, and let's go!

Story Telling 101

First, let's look at the story telling talent of Robert E. Howard. This drama is simple enough for a one-sentence treatment -- a young man encounters strange sorcery in his attempt to steal a fabulous jewel. Behind that overview are wheels within wheels, however. A young barbarian from the hill country strives to make good in the big city. A poor thief is learning his craft. Or, a young hero learns how to be heroic. Like any good writer, Howard has layered his work well.

First, Howard sets the scene that, with few changes, could come from any oil field boom town in the 1920s:

Torches flared murkily on the revels in the Maul, where the thieves of the East held carnival by night. In the Maul they could carouse and roar as they liked, for honest people shunned the quarters, and watchmen, well paid with stained coins, did not interfere with their sport. Along the crooked unpaved streets with their heaps of refuse and sloppy puddles, drunken roisterers staggered, roaring. Steel glinted in the shadows where rose the shrill laughter of women, and the sounds of scuffings and strugglings. Torchlight licked luridly from broken windows and wide-thrown doors, and out of those doors, stale smells of wine and rank sweaty bodies, clamor of drinking jacks and fists hammered on rough tables, snatches of obscene songs, rushed like a blow in the face.

Ever been in a town like that? Would you want to? It sounds like just the place a young man might wander into. Change 'torches' to streetlights and 'wine' to beer, and you have any wild frontier town in the western U.S. But keep in mind that Howard has created, in one paragraph, an entire world. In a few more paragraphs, he will people it as well.

Young Conan has not yet acquired the stately arts of negotiation, intrigue, or manipulation which marked his later years. He is uncouth, untrained, and prone to violence. Conan is listening as a pompous Kothian kidnapper speaks of his next victim: "I know lords in Shem who would trade the secret of the Elephant Tower for her." At this, the young barbarian steps forward to introduce himself to the reader:

A touch on his tunic sleeve made [the Kothian] turn his head, scowling at the interruption. He saw a tall, strongly made youth standing beside him. This person was as much out of place in that den as a grey wolf among mangy rats of the gutters. His cheap tunic could not conceal the rangy lines of his powerful frame, the broad heavy shoulders, the massive chest, lean waist, and heavy arms. His skin was brown from outland suns, his eyes blue and smoldering; a shock of tousled black hair crowned his broad forehead. From his girdle hung a sword in a worn leather scabbard.

Every clue pounds home two points -- Conan is strong, and he is poor. His tunic is threadbare, his leather scabbard worn. He is a young thief, and not too good at it yet, apparently. He parleys with the Kothian for a space, until the drunken fool goads him into a slip and then takes offense.

"What!" [the Kothian] roared. "You dare tell us our business, and intimate that we are cowards? Get along; get out of my sight!" And he pushed the Cimmerian violently.

"Will you mock me and then lay hands on me?" grated the barbarian, his quick rage leaping up; and he returned the push with an open-handed blow that knocked his tormentor back against the rude-hewn table. Ale splashed over the jack's lip, and the Kothian roared in fury, dragging at his sword. "Heathen dog!" he bellowed. "I'll have your heart for that!"

Not too likely. Nice foreshadowing, though. Even with the lights out, Conan's sword finds a mortal spot on the man, and soon Conan is wandering near the Tower.

Howard has just given us more clues than we can really digest in one setting. We know now about the temperament of the young barbarian. He will stand his ground in a fight, and he will kill when pushed. Howard has described him, has easily depicted the lawless nature of the times, and has set in motion events that will propel the young barbarian through his storied life. And he has done so with stereotypes we could recognize in any modern setting, which is why the stories work so well even 60 years after they were written.

But Howard has just begun. He next tosses out a paragraph describing the ridiculous rituals and decayed theology of a Zamorian civilization that has "lost most of the pristine essence in a maze of formulas and rituals." Howard was ever thus in his description of peoples who had lasted a long time. Time equaled decay in his mind; anything ancient was decrepit. He will mine this vein over and over, but he flings it out here almost casually.

By contrast, Howard offers up a rich description of Conan's religious leanings:

His gods were simple and understandable; Crom was their chief, and he lived on a great mountain, whence he sent forth dooms and death. It was useless to call on Crom, because he was a gloomy, savage god, and he hated weaklings. But he gave a man courage at birth, and the will and might to kill his enemies, which, in the Cimmerian's mind, was all any god should be expected to do.

With that, Howard has laid out most of what we need to know about our young hero.

By now, you're either with Conan or you put the story down. In the heroic fantasy realm, this is as good as it gets. The reader knows that Conan is going to keep moving toward the Tower on this night. Howard, though, can't resist dropping more portent and foreshadowing. He next tells a story Conan overheard from a drunken court page, about how Yara, the mystical wizard who rules the Tower, was able to turn a haughty young prince into a spider, before he crushed it with his boot heel. And yes, gentle reader, there will be another spider along, soon. For just as surely as you knew that the fat Kothian kidnapper would die under Conan's blade, Yara and a spider and the jewel will soon be intertwined.

Follow the Money

Remember that Howard wrote this piece for a magazine, and imagine that he probably hoped to be able to use the character for quite some time. So this story serves not only to entice a first-time reader who may have missed *Phoenix*, it will also serve to refuel anyone who already met Conan, or read Kull, or otherwise knew of Howard.

I sent a quick e-mail to Rusty Burke to get some of the Howard timeline down, and I'm glad I did. I thought that since this was chronologically Howard's first Conan story, it was the first one he wrote, even if published later. Here's what Rusty told me:

"The Phoenix on the Sword" appears to have been the first Conan story written. It was a rewrite of an unsold Kull, "By This Axe I Rule!" From all the evidence I have, "The Frost-Giant's Daughter" was written after the first drafts of "Phoenix." But both were submitted to Farnsworth Wright in early 1932. My guess is that these two stories were written in December 1931-January 1932. The poem "Cimmeria" was written in February 1932. In early March, Howard received a letter from Wright rejecting "The Frost-Giant's Daughter" outright ("I do not much care for it"), and suggesting some changes to "Phoenix." Howard set about making the changes to "Phoenix" right away. In the meantime, he had also written "The Tower of the Elephant," and perhaps "The God in the Bowl."

The point being, Howard was still pulling in new readers with this second story. He continually drops more tidbits concerning this Hyborian world as Conan progresses toward Yara's Tower. "All men knew what liars were the men of Shem," Conan thinks at one point, as he contemplates what he has been told about elephants. At another, he recalls that the ruler of Zamora keeps himself drunk all day because the knowledge of Yara's control is too terrible to withstand when sober. Thus does Howard relate again how uneasily weighs the crown on a king's head. He developed this theme often enough in his stories of Conan, Kull, and Bran Mak Morn. So there is some recycling, and some new stuff.

Soon, Conan has blundered straight into Taurus of Nemedias's scheme to steal the jewel known as The Heart of the Elephant. But Taurus laughs *with* Conan, not *at* him, and likes Conan's "grit." They tackle the adventure together, and for good cause, as Conan slays a lion that charges them without roaring first -- "as close a call as I've had in a life no ways tame," says the hero. A reader in 1932 would have no way of knowing about Conan's role in the sack of Vanarium, his adventures among the Aesir, or other details. All that could be inferred is that Conan is far from home, and had to fight most of the way. "A life no ways tame," is one big understatement for the adventures Conan will be put through (by subsequent pastiche writers, anyway!)

Picking Up The Pace

Then ensues the ascent -- "We must climb this cord;" Taurus tells Conan -- "little need to ask a Cimmerian if he can." Combined with the ease in which Conan scaled the wall surrounding the Tower, Howard is drumming into our heads that Cimmerians are the best climbers in the world. But he *shows* us -- he doesn't *tell* us.

The story is moving at a great pace now. Howard gets the two men up and over the top, but before long an oversized spider drives three nail-like teeth into the upper shoulder of The Prince of Thieves, and Conan watches his new friend die. Sword raised, and with no thought of turning back, Conan traces the steps of Taurus, and after a quick game of deadly tag, Conan hurls a huge chest of riches full onto the body of the beast. On he pushes, and thus begins one of the most powerful scenes ever penned by Howard:

As Conan came forward, his eyes fixed on the motionless idol, the eyes of the thing opened suddenly! The Cimmerian froze in his tracks. It was no image -- it was a living thing, and he was trapped in its chamber!

Immediately, Conan sees that this misshapen man-thing with the head of an elephant is blind, and has been mercilessly tortured into constant pain. "Oh, Yag-kosha, is there no end to agony?" the thing wailed to itself as it feared the return of the wizard.

"I am not Yara," [Conan] said. "I am only a thief. I will not harm you."
"Come near, that I may touch you," the creature faltered, and Conan came near unfearingly, his sword hanging forgotten in his hand. The sensitive trunk came out and groped over his face and shoulders, as a blind man gropes, and its touch was as light as a girl's hand.
"You are not of Yara's race of devils," sighed the creature. "The clean, lean fierceness of the wastelands marks you. I know your people from old...There is blood on your fingers."

"A spider in the chamber above, and a lion in the garden," muttered Conan.
"You have slain a man, too, this night," answered the other. "And there is death in the tower above. I feel; I know."
"Aye," muttered Conan. "The prince of all thieves lies there dead from the bite of a vermin."
"So--and so!" the strange inhuman voice rose in a sort of low chant. "A slaying in the tavern and a slaying on the roof -- I know; I feel. And the third will make the magic of which not even Yara dreams -- oh, magic of deliverance, green gods of Yag!"

Howard then launches into a two-page narration of the history of those green gods, of their travels through space to earth, their nearly immortal lives, their time in the southern jungles. He is also filling in more details about the Hyborian world, naming countries and peoples still unknown to the reader. The length is just right -- longer, and he could have lost the pace. The elephant-men watched as man evolved, and just as the Prime Directive forbid Star Trek's Captain Kirk from interference in a distant planet, so it was for Yag-kosha. "All this we saw, neither aiding nor hindering the immutable cosmic law..." But young Yara tricked Yag-kosha and entrapped him. Tonight, the torture ends.

There is only one way to rid the world of the evil Yara; Conan must cut out the heart of the Elephant God and sprinkle the drops of blood onto the surface of that gem known as the Heart of the Elephant. Unsure at first, Conan finally carves out the alien organ and performs his grisly task. Then he awakens Yara from a lotus slumber, completing the spell. He watches Yara shrink in size, consumed by the gem, and he sees the triumphant return of Yag-kosha in his healthy form, deep inside the jewel, to claim victory. And as Conan flees into the streets, the Tower of the Elephant topples to earth, to "crash into shining shards."

Conclusion

What is the sum value of Conan's adventure? Naught but his life, only his most treasured asset. It isn't the last time Howard will bring the hero home without one copper piece more than when he started. Thievery is a risky business, after all, and any morality plays aside, it ain't easy work. But how else to spur a young man to greater glory?

When Conan confesses his station in life to the tortured Yag-kosha, he admits he is just a thief. Something there always caught at me. Conan's honesty is refreshing in this '90's world of victims searching for ever more lucrative victimhood. He doesn't lie, he doesn't mince words, he doesn't dance with the truth. He readily admits his status. Nor does he deny the killings at his hand, though he doesn't volunteer the tavern brawl.

For a man who would be king, he has a long way to go. But then, that's how the American Dream works - it takes time. Howard didn't just pound out a quick, shallow story about his new hero. He breathed even more life into a character that he claimed seemed to charge, full-grown, into his consciousness. The truth may be that he worked harder to create this world than ever before. Patrice Louinet's article "The Birth of Conan" to be found in the upcoming DARK MAN (which, according to Rusty, should be in the summer Necro Press catalog) makes that plain enough. In about the same time frame, Howard crafted his Hyborian map, wrote the Nemedian Chronicles, penned his epic poem *Cimmeria*, rewrote *The Phoenix on the Sword*, and reworked *The Frost Giant's Daughter*. No wonder King Conan is working on a map of the Hyborian world in the opening of *Phoenix*. It was as though Howard were showing that he was doing the work necessary to create a world out of whole cloth, and a hero to match. He had attempted the same with Kull in 1929, yet only two stories were published. This time, the hero was right, the background consistent, and the writing was better.

In fact, I'm not ready yet to let go of *Tower of the Elephant*. The superb storytelling, to me, is only half of the reason why Conan took off while Kull remained so obscure. In Part II, I want to look at the pure beauty of the writing. So until then, watch for spiders. - GR

Return of Conan to Marvel Slated

From Ed Waterman's *Barbarian Keep* Web page [http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/6570/index.html]
From a recent 'Adventures in the Bullpen' page (found in Marvel's comics): "Meanwhile, the newest editor on the block, Joltin' _Joe Andreani_, is just raving about the new CONAN project he's got in the works. "We're trying to revamp the Conan character, and we're really excited about what we're doing! We've got _Roland Green_, who's a CONAN novelist, and _Claudio Castellini_ is penciling with _Mark Farmer_ on the inks!" -Thanks to Anthony Sabatini

Roland Green, huh? Poor Marvel; he was probably cheap. I give it 10 issues...

FAQ is Ready

Don't miss the alt.fantasy.conan FAQ put together by michaelm@swcp.com (Michael Martinez). He's done a fantastic job of pulling together the printing history and assorted factoids concerning Conan and Robert E. Howard.

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net. Try <http://www.intercom.no/~savage/conan/publications/index.html> for reprints.

NEXT Issue: **Tower of the Elephant, Part II: Word Smith.**

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