

AN INTRODUCTION TO ROBERT E. HOWARD AND CONAN

– Bill Ward

Conan the Barbarian belongs to an elite club of fictional characters, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan, Frankenstein's Monster and Dracula, Batman and Superman, and even that famous WWI flying ace, Snoopy. All of them have enjoyed levels of global mega-success that bridge language and culture, all are instantly recognizable in an iconic way, and all of them, for the vast majority of their audience, completely eclipse their creators. For every person familiar with Edgar Rice Burroughs or Mary Shelley, millions know only Tarzan or Frankenstein (even the fictional creator, Victor Frankenstein, has been supplanted by the monster that took his name). And the same is true for Conan, a character so iconic he has been imitated, pastiched, parodied, rebooted, digitized, Frazzetta-ized, and merchandized across a variety of media in such a bewildering array that it is easy to lose sight of a time when such a character did not exist.

Robert E. Howard was born in 1906 and grew up in rural Texas, in a time only a generation or two removed from an era of pioneer settlements and Indian raids, in a world very different from the urbanized East Coast of Howard's friend and fellow writer, H.P. Lovecraft. Howard attended the local schools, but his real education came in the form of listening to the tall tales of his elders, and reading as much as he could get his hands on, especially works of history, drama, and poetry. He trained himself physically, learning to box, making himself stronger through exercise and labor. The passion with which he threw himself into these endeavors found its highest outlet when Howard, still in his teens, discovered the world of magazines and decided that he, too, would be a writer of pulp fiction. The pulps were the cable TV of their day – lurid, plentiful, and emphasizing thrills and twists and action and, above all, movement. Howard threw himself into producing saleable stories, selling his first story at 19, and, throughout his short but furious career, he never lost sight of the needs of the market and tailored his work accordingly. Conan was the product of a mature Howard who had refined his art over years of explosive productivity that had seen the creation of many successful and famous characters: Solomon Kane, Bran Mak Morn, King Kull.

Having started out writing historical adventure, much in the vein of Harold Lamb, Howard ended up creating not only a host of memorable characters and stories, but an entirely new sub-genre of fantastic fiction: Sword-and-Sorcery.

This new kind of story was the invention of Howard's necessities: he needed something he could write quickly that would appeal to the markets of his day. Historical fiction required a lot of research for someone who cared to get things right, but an invented, anachronistic Hyborian Age – Howard's fantastical pre-historical setting for Conan – could provide both a familiar anchor for the audience and an unlimited playground for the author. Place names like Aquilonia, Stygia, and Zamora were evocative enough of real world settings that the audience would understand the kind of landscapes or cultures being hinted at without need for detailed exposition. What emerged was a kind of shorthand still used in fantasy fiction to this day: proper nouns that are at once exotic and new and yet suggestive of real places and times. Howard's Conan stories range through time and space, from Medieval France to Ancient Egypt to the American Frontier, but all take place in an "Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars - Nemedra, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold."

But Howard wasn't writing for a purely adventure market, but rather targeting those pulps that featured the fantastical and horrific. *Weird Tales*, the most famous of these magazines and the home for Conan fiction during Howard's lifetime, had very specific editorial demands, which Howard labored to satisfy. What he came up with were adventure stories in a pseudo-historical landscape featuring elements of the fantastic. Sometimes this was as simple as injecting a monster or sorcerer into the proceedings but Howard, artist that he was, let his imagination roam to include the debased remnants of long-lost civilizations, strange narcotic visions and prophecies, imprisoned elder gods and resurrected wizards – all of this percolating right along with the traditional elements of adventure: pirates and princes, mistaken identity, wars and rebellions, imperiled damsels, cross and double-cross.

Beyond all of these elements, Howard wrote with passion and belief. He could make us believe in the Hyborian Age and Conan because he himself did – not in some crude literal sense, but in the sense of the underlying truth of what he was writing. Howard believed in the setting because he believed in history. He could feel the reality of the past; of past struggle, of past triumph and loss, of rolling ages of human conflict and the never-ending cycle of rising civilizations crushed back into barbarism and chaos. Conan might occupy a role as old as Odysseus, but his character was more particularly modeled on real men Howard had known and observed, the hard, desperate men of the frontier and oil boom towns. And it was this union of the fantastic and the realistic that was at the heart of Howard’s innovation as a writer: he wrote of the weird and fantastic in direct, powerful, visceral language, he spun tales of heroes and villains at once larger-than-life and yet somehow also recognizably human, and gave us a world full of deep legend and incomprehensible mysteries where, nonetheless, victory could take the prosaic form of a full wineskin and a dancing girl on your arm. The juxtaposition of these ancient elements of epic adventure, the darkly weird tradition of imaginative fiction of the prior century, and the realistic and unsentimental strain in American letters emerging out of the pulp era gave us something extraordinary – stories where the fantastic elements are actually rendered more believable, more vivid, by contrasting them with the hard-boiled, the pragmatic, and the real.

Bill Ward talks about books he likes, and sometimes writes fiction. His short stories are available on kindle