

# The Hyborian Review

Volume 2 Number 7

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***Make Marvel Get A Clue...***

## Great REH Quotes

From *The Phoenix on the Sword*, originally published in *Weird Tales*, December 1932. This is from my Lancer edition. *The opening paragraph of the first Conan story ever written.*

Over shadowy spires and gleaming towers lay the ghostly darkness and silence that runs before dawn. Into a dim alley, one of a veritable labyrinth of mysterious winding ways, four masked figures came hurriedly from a door which a dusky hand furtively opened. They spoke not but went swiftly into the gloom, cloaks wrapped closely about them; as silently as ghosts of murdered men they disappeared into the darkness. Behind them a sardonic countenance was framed in the partly opened door; a pair of evil eyes glittered malevolently in the gloom.

“Go into the night, creatures of the night,” a voice mocked. “O fools, your doom hounds your heels like a blind dog, and you know it not.” The speaker closed the door and bolted it, then turned and went up the corridor, candle in hand. He was a somber giant, whose dusky skin revealed his Stygian blood. He came into the inner chamber, where a tall, lean man in worn velvet lounged like a great, lazy cat on a silken couch, sipping wine from a huge golden goblet.

“Well, Ascalante,” said the Stygian, setting down the candle, “your dupes have slunk into the streets like rats from their burrows. You work with strange tools.”

“Tools?” replied Ascalante. “Why, they consider *me* that. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from the southern desert, I have been living in the very heart of my enemies...”

## Yes, A Mailing List!

The best thing to happen to my computer in a long, long time is the creation of the Robert E. Howard mailing list this summer.

I could list several reasons why I enjoy it so much. There's the fact that Patrice Louinet and Rusty Burke are arguing about Howard arcana right in front of my eyes. There's the fact that details I never dreamed about are coming to life in a timely fashion. Or, that I get jolted into thinking about “Two-gun Bob” every day or so.

But best of all is the bulging mail folder I've stuffed with snippets of Howardian lore. It's the kind of stuff that you don't know when you might need to look it up, but just having it there is comforting. For example, do you suppose that the Donald Grant editions of various Conan tales are pure Howard? It turns out they're not...

To subscribe to the mailing list, simply send a message with "subscribe" in the body. As in:

To: REH-fans-request@xenite.org

Subject:

subscribe

If you have questions, contact Patrice Louinet at [plouinet@inext.fr](mailto:plouinet@inext.fr).

*Howard hardbacks for sale – page 4*

**Reprint information is also on page 4.**

## Comic Review

by Garret H. Romaine

*Conan the Barbarian #1 & 2*

Author: Roland Green; Art: Dan Castellini

Marvel Comics, July 1997.

Ugh.

I'm usually a very positive guy, and I like to think that any glass with plenty of water in it is half full. But I am so irritated at the return of Conan in comic form that I wince even starting this review. I put it off until July 29<sup>th</sup>, so that right there is a good indication of how frustrating these issues were to deal with.



What follows is a negative, peevish, critical and unhappy review. I may never again utter those classic words – Make Mine Marvel!

## Cover Art: Conan the Pinhead

I didn't even like the cover, so I'll start right there. The depiction was a steroid-enhanced, overly muscular World Wrestling Federation torso topped by a teeny little cranium. “It looks like a raisin on a popsicle,” to paraphrase Mike Meyers in “So I Married An Axe Murderer.” The perspective was totally off. The right shoulder was bigger than the left, his calves were outrageously overdone, and he had on way too much armor. More on that later.

Marvel elected to keep the old Conan logo that dominates the top of the cover, but they made changes to the sword underneath his name, and they re-did the icon in the upper left box. That Conan, too, is not well done, as though it were rushed out. The muscular proportions are wrong, and the look on Conan's face is almost evil. It just makes you wonder if the folks churning out these pages really know where Conan came from, of his history in *Weird Tales*, or anything else about him other than his Schwarzeneggerian instance?

Elsewhere, the cover has a silhouette of a body pierced by a pike and hanging there. At first glance, it could almost be a woman. To me, that's a mistake, for the art to not immediately convey what it means to. But it isn't the first mistake, and it isn't the last. No, the work here has hardly started.

### ***Howard is Spinning in his Grave***

I really doubt sometimes if this team ever read the Howard stories. I've never read an interview with Roland Green, nor found an e-mail address for him, so I can't ask him point-blank. He probably has a few books in his personal library, or I hope he does. But these other newcomers, do they know what they have here? If you go back and look at the original Smith/Thomas comic work, for example, they frequently sent Conan out with scant armor and light weaponry. The Brundage Conan of the original *Weird Tales* magazine was likewise long on skin and short on metal. But the Conan of the '90s is 180 degrees different. His armor in this mag consists of the following:

- metal lashings around his boots, with gnarly knobs
- dirk at his waist
- huge belt with enormous buckle
- crotch protector
- long broadsword across his back
- overly mammoth two-edged axe in his hands
- right wrist-guard with enormous spikes
- left wrist-guard with knuckle and elbow protector
- right bicep ring
- left bicep band

What did they leave out? Metal teeth? A hooked earring? A helmet with a spike? What would Conan's fellow Cimmerians think of him, to see him decked out in all that foolishness? They'd make fun of him as an effeminate civilized girlie-boy, and he'd have to bash a few heads.

### ***The Story: Man-Eating Trees in Bossonia***

Roland Green, whose Tor offerings have been almost universally despised by most True Believers, probably never had much of a chance to do right by the new Conan series. Such is the power of a poor reputation. But he does little here to show promise in a new task. Rather, he commits many of his same mistakes.

Boiled down, the story is this: Conan saves a Bossonian village from being wiped out by man-eating trees. He also comes between a bitchin' Babewatch blonde and her sulking warrior boyfriend.

But in reality, the story is enormously complicated. The man-eating trees are controlled by a mysterious sorcerer whose goals are a bit murky, to say the least. The wizard that reports to him is a fool. The goofy F-Troop bandits that report to the wizard are hapless. Where the power of the sorcerer comes from is a mystery, and how he can control trees is likewise unknown.

Should it matter? I don't know. Sorcery is a touchy subject, because it isn't always explainable. But a good story doesn't suffer so many loose ends and conveniences.

One of Green's worst habits is to dwell on the thoughts of the participants. There are more bubbles in this comic than Pia Zadora's bathtub. Thought bubbles dominate the second book especially. The bulging blonde wench that belongs to the Bossonian village strongman is always thinking of Conan, to her betrothed's chagrin. Wizards make pronouncements, and underlings secretly doubt those words. Heroes stride through village streets, and urchins wonder in amazement. It goes on and on and on.

Too much of this smacks of psychiatric drivel. I don't really care what others are thinking, as a rule. Show me, don't tell me. I truly believe, with all my heart, that Green simply writes too much. He leaves little to the imagination, and makes me work when I don't want to, then makes it easy for me when I want a challenge. His story lines are generally adequate, but his mechanics are forced and unbalanced. I guess I wish he would read more Howard.

Here's a typically ridiculous exchange. The villagers are whipping themselves into a fever to go out and take on the man-eating trees. They're doing everything an Afghanistan zealot would do, just short of hollering "Allah Akbar!" and smoking hashish. Off in the distance, Conan is standing there, looking fiercely handsome, with the buxom blonde behind him.

She thinks, “*All* the women are staring at Conan. Will he stare back?” To which Conan responds, in his own bubble: “The gods spare me jealous women! I can fight sorcerers myself.”

Truly bad stuff. Good writers make sure the artist puts a couple of painted wenches in the background, leering at Conan’s physique, waving or displaying their wares. A swoon or two makes the same point. Bad writers inject this tripe themselves.

Green managed to get his trademark phrase “witling” into the story, which I expected. But when it came to a comic writer’s hardest chore, recreating the sounds of battle, he literally fell apart. Here are some of the noises made:

SPLUTTT!  
CHNNGG!  
HSSSSTT!  
WHUKKK!  
THUKKK!  
WHMMMPFFF!

Now, mix and match those noises to various battle sounds you might expect. Which one is whacking off an arm? An arrow in the chest? I can’t help thinking of the old Adam West Batman series when I see this list...

But enough spewing at Green. Let’s whack on Dan Castellini for awhile.

### ***Panels to Make Your Guts Heave***

I have a Superman #27 around somewhere, and some old Detective Comics from the 1950s. On each page except the title page, the panels are evenly ordered, six per page, and you could read safely from left to right. Then, probably in the “Break all the rules” 1960s, comics began to take on the appearance of a jigsaw puzzle. You started needing arrows and intuition to follow the tale.

Not that all this is bad. The early days of comics reflected an orderly, civilized world of “Father Knows Best” and “Leave it to Beaver.” Now, our comics reflect the dysfunctional family, made famous by *The Simpsons* and *Roseanne*. But Marvel has managed to take that to a truly ridiculous level.

I literally had to read these Conan rags twice to get the story straight. I was in constant fear that I’d lost the thread, got things backwards or out of order. And, truly, I was out of order several times.

Then there was the case of whiplash I suffered. Panels would shrink and bob and weave and leave me with my eyes rotating.

As for the use of color, there were great patches, I have to admit. Castellini may not have much discipline, but his full-page depictions had plenty of power. He has a great knack for making a whole page with a blue, or orange, or green sub-tone, and keeping it all “of a piece.”

But other times, he’d get lazy and I’d be shaking my head. There would be so much flesh tone, for example, that I’d be confused as to where one arm left off and other one started. Great for a scene at a Roman orgy, but not really appropriate here.

Also, the art suffered from a habit that I remember from the Buscema days. Occasionally, Big John would get in such a hurry to pack the back of his panels with bandits that they looked uncannily like Conan himself – long, dark hair, moody face, firm chin. More than once I would think I’d just seen Conan disemboweled, only to look closer and find that it was a bad guy. It often took a second look, which really slows down a story.

One thing I started to pick up on that I hoped was intentional, and which I will give enormous credit to, and that was Castellini’s homage to other great Conan artists. Every once in awhile I’d see a Barry Smith touch, some art nouveau traces. Or a Richardson side shot of Conan’s face, complete with blue tinting. And if you looked closely, you could see that Castellini would ape Neal Adams or Alcalá.

One could argue that this shows weakness, that an artist is unsure of his own talent and is copying others. But I choose to take it as a sign of strength, and confidence. I also think it’s clever. I only hope I’m not reading too much into something that isn’t there.

### ***Are Other Comics This Bad?***

On a whim, I also picked up the comic “Death Dealer,” which is apparently based on the Frazetta painting. I wanted to see if I had just taken too many years away from the genre.

The art in Death Dealer is by Liam Sharp, and other than the exaggerated nipples and what Hollywood calls “full frontal nudity”, I noticed that I had the same problems with this comic that I did with the Conan effort. I kept losing the story line, and wondering what was going on.

On the plus side, besides the fetching women warriors, who fight naked, many of the panels were full-page efforts. The coloring was dark, somber, and consistent, and when there was blood, it was red and plentiful. The book had much less of a deadline-driven feel to it, more of a “it’ll be ready when it’s ready” look. And far less advertising or pace-breaking “Bullpen bulletins.”

Obviously, this wasn't a Marvel-the-Corporate-Giant, we've got massive debt to pay off effort – it was brought out by Verotik, mostly to whip up enthusiasm for Frazetta's work, I guess. If memory serves, the Great One has some pressing medical problems, so perhaps more of his paintings will soon spawn comics? A Frazetta museum is opening soon, according to one of the few ads in the book.

## Summary

I used to think I'd read anything once about the hero I consider Robert E. Howard's greatest creation. And as a collector, I felt compelled to toss these rags into plastic bags, stick in a backer board, and tape them up. But there wasn't much joy in it. In fact, all it did was drive me back to the first 24 Marvel efforts that grew even further in stature.

It just so happened that on a recent trip to Powell's book store (see next story) I found a pair of paperbacks Marvel put out that contained some of the Smith/Thomas work. I was only able to pick up volumes 4 and 5, and I don't even know how many there are, just that I should look for them. The art was spruced up a bit from the comics, and since the paperbacks only cost \$2, and Conan the Barbarian #1 is going for a good \$150 in mint condition, I liked being able to paw through these.

Even in those limited pages, I could see how Thomas and Smith progressed in their storytelling. The art got finer and there were fewer rushed panels or throwaway pages. Heads that might have been fuzzy or incomplete in earlier editions were now fully detailed. It was as though Barry Windsor-Smith found a pace and got better at pouring himself into the effort. Perhaps this was what drove him away after just two years, of course...

The other thing that came through in Smith's work was his passion. It was as though Smith's art was coming from the same well-spring that birthed Howard himself. Smith's interpretation of Conan was uncannily close to the way earlier *Weird Tales* artists depicted the Cimmerian – lean, lithe, and handsome. It was so clear that he had done his homework. This was verified by Roy Thomas, by the way – they both pored over Howard tales to get the right feel for the youthful barbarian.

My belief is that even though Thomas took some huge liberties with some of the Howard tales, liberties that a purist wouldn't have bothered with, he preserved the look and feel for Howard's Conan. He had to fit novels and short stories into a comic book format, which is never easy, and thus cut and whacked his way through, but he did it in the right spirit.

In the current comic, the cut corners make the hero worse, not better. Conan's face would become less distinct at times, rather than hardened. Proportions would be lost as if the effort was wasted. Instead, Castellini would resort to tiny inserted boxes of art that would sit at odd angles and positions all over an otherwise full page of art. The distraction was overpowering, and it felt flat and forced.

Steroidal muscles and outlandish costumes aside, the effort just isn't there. This is a strip-mine effort, a board meeting where someone asks how we can get another few thousand books out, and a middle manager mentions this barbarian character sitting on the shelf with a devoted following. This is a milking. - GR

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## Looking for Howard Hardcover?

Whenever I'm depressed, lonely, blue, or otherwise deserving of a pick-me-up, I head for downtown Portland, Oregon. There, nestled next to the heady, hops aroma of the Henry Weinhard's brewery, is an epic bookstore – Powell's.

Until you've been there, you can't really appreciate. They take up a full city block, and have an amazing collection of new and used books. I've augmented my Howard collection there repeatedly, but lately, some really fine gems have shown up – hardcovers. Grant editions from the 70s, first editions, wonderful artwork, some of Glenn Lord's best work.

If you aren't within driving distance, don't despair. They have a web presence - <http://www.powells.com/>. The search engine is adequate, but it didn't seem to find the books I knew were there. I've discussed this with the marketing department and the webmaster, but I don't know what resolution to expect.

Meanwhile, the shelves are bulging with every Ace, Lancer and Berkeley edition, duplicates of all the Tor offerings, and lots, lots more. I pulled up 287 matches when I entered simply "Conan" in the search, but that included a bunch of Sherlock Holmes entries.

Powell's is noted for customer service, so if you're determined to add some books to your collection, and you're patient, this is the place for you. Just don't come complaining when your bank account runs low...

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NEXT Issue: *Rogues in the House*.

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