

# Robert E. Howard

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
**Robert Ervin Howard**



**Born:** January 22, 1906  
Peaster, Texas, U.S.

**Died:** June 11, 1936 (aged 30)  
Cross Plains, Texas, U.S.

**Occupation:** short story writer, poet, novelist,  
epistolean

**Genres:** Sword and Sorcery, Westerns, Boxing  
stories, Historical fiction, Horror

**Influences:** Thomas Bulfinch, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Arthur Conan Doyle, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Harold Lamb, H. Rider Haggard, Alexandre Dumas, père, Clar Ashton Smith, H.P. Lovecraft, G. K. Chesterton

**Influenced:** Poul Anderson, Leigh Brackett, Ramse Campbell, L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, David Drake, Steven Erikson, David Gemmell, Laurell K. Hamilton, John Jakes, Paul Kearney, William King, Henry Kuttner, Fritz Leiber, Richard Lupoff, Brian McNaughton, Michael Moorcock, C. L. Moore, Andrew J. Offutt, James Reasoner, Charles R. Saunders, S. M. Stirling, Matthew Woodring Stover, Harry Turtledove, Karl Edward Wagner, Robert Weinberg

**Robert Ervin Howard** (January 22, 1906 – June 11, 1936)<sup>[1]</sup> was a classic American pulp writer of fantasy, horror, historical adventure, boxing, western, and detective fiction. Howard wrote "over three-hundred stories and seven-hundred poems of raw power and unbridled emotion"<sup>[2]</sup> and is especially noted for his memorable depictions of "a sombre universe of swashbuckling adventure and darkling horror."<sup>[3]</sup>

He is well known for having created — in the pages of the legendary Depression-era pulp magazine *Weird Tales* — the character Conan the Cimmerian, a.k.a. Conan the Barbarian, a literary icon whose pop-culture imprint is rivaled by only a handful of other literary characters, such as Tarzan of the Apes, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond.<sup>[4]</sup>

Between Conan and his other heroes Howard created the genre now known as sword-and-sorcery in the late 1920s and early 1930s,<sup>[5][6]</sup> spawning a wide swath of imitators<sup>[7]</sup> and giving him an influence in the fantasy field rivaled only by J.R.R. Tolkien and Tolkien's similarly inspired creation of the modern genre of High Fantasy.<sup>[8]</sup>

A full century after his birth, Howard remains a seminal figure,<sup>[9]</sup> with his best work endlessly reprinted.<sup>[10]</sup> He has been compared to other American masters of the weird, gloomy, and spectral, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne,<sup>[11]</sup> Herman Melville,<sup>[12]</sup> and Jack London.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Biography

- 1.1 Early years
- 1.2 First writings
- 1.3 Depression and suicidal tendencies
- 1.4 Professional writer
- 1.5 The birth of Sword and Sorcery
- 1.6 The Lovecraft Circle
- 1.7 Oriental Stories
- 1.8 Conan
- 1.9 New markets
- 1.10 Novalyne Price
- 1.11 Western Writing
- 1.12 Death
- 2 Writing
- 3 Legacy
  - 3.1 Glenn Lord
  - 3.2 L. Sprague de Camp and the Howard Boom
  - 3.3 Critical appreciation
  - 3.4 Novalyne Price Ellis
  - 3.5 Howard Days
  - 3.6 2006 World Fantasy Convention
- 4 In popular culture
- 5 See also
- 6 References
  - 6.1 Sources
  - 6.2 Notes
- 7 External links
  - 7.1 Biography

- 7.2 Bibliography
- 7.3 Scholarly Sources
- 7.4 Online Texts
- 7.5 Conan

## **Biography**

### **Early years**

Robert E. Howard was born in Peaster, Texas, the only son of a wandering country physician, Dr. Isaac Mordecai Howard, and his tubercular wife, Hester Jane Ervin Howard. Both sides of the family had longstanding roots throughout the American South, with various ancestors owning plantations and fighting for the Confederacy in the Civil War. Thus a postbellum mindset of loss, anger, and pride would dominate Howard's later fictional works.

The author's early life was spent wandering through a variety of dusty Texas cowtowns and boomtowns: Dark Valley (1906), Seminole (1908), Bronte (1909), Poteet (1910), Oran (1912), Wichita Falls (1913), Bagwell (1913), Cross Cut (1915), and Burkett (1918). Talking to aging Civil War veterans and Texas Rangers, listening to

grisly ghost stories told by his grandmother and various ex-slaves, and visiting old forts and historical sites all had a strong influence on his personality. By the time he reached his teens, Howard had soaked in the dying of the Frontier, the bloody history and legendry of the American Southwest, and the art of the tall tale.

During Howard's youth his mother Hester had a particularly strong influence on his intellectual growth. Known throughout her family as a kind and giving woman — she had selflessly spent her early years helping a variety of sick relatives, contracting tuberculosis in the process — it was she who instilled in her son a deep love of poetry and literature, filling his ears daily with recited verse, and who supported him unceasingly in his efforts to write. Howard never forgot her many kindnesses both to himself and his extended family, and her growing sickness and invalidity did much to cement his view of existence as heartless, unfair, and ultimately futile.

Other themes began to appear at this time which would later seep into his prose. Howard loved reading and learning, but found that school, jobs, and most bastions of authority were to him hated prisons filled with stultifying rules and endless

boredom. Experiences watching and confronting bullies revealed the omnipresence of evil and enemies in the world, and taught him the value of brute physical strength and violence. Firsthand tales of gunfights, lynchings, feuds, and Indian raids developed his distinctly Texan, hardboiled outlook on the world.

Sports, especially boxing, became a passionate preoccupation. At the time, boxing was the most popular sport in the country, with a cultural influence far in excess of what it is today. Jim Jeffries, Jack Johnson, Bob Fitzsimmons, and later Jack Dempsey were the names that dominated Howard's dreams during those years, and he grew up a lover of all contests of violent, masculine struggle. Specifically, he focused in on a type of boxer he called Iron Men, tough battlers who had little skill but made up for it in the sheer ability to take punishment that would kill a lesser man. Inspired by these heroes, Howard lifted weights, practiced boxing and wrestling with friends, and read everything he could find on the subject — most notably in exciting, somewhat lurid magazines such as *The Ring* and *The Police Gazette*.

In 1919, when Howard was thirteen, Dr. Howard

moved his family to the Central Texas hamlet of Cross Plains, and there the family would stay for the rest of Howard's life. That same year, sitting in a library in New Orleans while his father took medical courses at a nearby college, Howard discovered a book concerned with the scant fact and abundant legendry surrounding a group of barbaric tribesmen in ancient Scotland called the Picts. Named for the tattoos they decorated themselves with and bitter enemies of encroaching Roman legions, the Picts fired Howard's imagination and crystallized in him a love for barbarians and outsiders from civilization who lived lives of great hardship and struggle but also great freedom and verve. From then on, the Picts became a muse of sorts, appearing in various guises throughout all the many genres Howard wrote in, and helping to thematically tie his work together.

## **First writings**

Voracious reading, along with a natural talent for prose writing and the encouragement of teachers, conspired to create in Howard an interest in becoming a professional writer. From the age of nine he began writing stories, mostly tales of



historical fiction centering on Vikings, Arabs, battles, and bloodshed. One by one he discovered the authors that would influence his later work: Jack London and his stories of reincarnation and past lives, most notably *The Star Rover* (1915); Rudyard Kipling's tales of subcontinent adventure and his chanting, shamanic verse; the classic mythological tales collected by Thomas Bulfinch. Howard was considered by friends to be eidetic (i.e. had a photographic memory), and astounded them with his ability to memorize lengthy reams of poetry with ease after one or two readings.

At fifteen Howard first sampled the popular world of pulp magazines, especially *Adventure* and its star authors Talbot Mundy and Harold Lamb. Like a lightning bolt striking, his fate was sealed — come hell or high water, he was going to be an adventure writer. The next few years saw him creating a variety of series characters: El Borak (a Texan cross between John Rambo and T. E. Lawrence), a cowboy hero named The Sonora Kid, the puritan avenger Solomon Kane, and the last king of the Picts, Bran Mak Morn. Soon the fifteen-year-old was submitting stories to pulps such as *Adventure* and *Argosy*. Rejections piled up, and with no mentors or instructions of any kind to aid him, Howard became a writing autodidact,

methodically studying the markets and tailoring his stories and style to each.

In the fall of 1922, when Howard was sixteen, he temporarily moved to a boarding house in the nearby city of Brownwood to complete his senior year of high school, and it was in Brownwood that he first met friends his own age who shared his interest not only for sports and history but also writing and poetry. The two most important of these, Tevis Clyde Smith and Truett Vinson, shared his Bohemian and literary outlook on life, and together they wrote amateur papers and magazines, exchanged long letters filled with poetry and existential thoughts on Life and Philosophy, and encouraged each other's writing endeavors.

Howard also spent his late school years engaging in a self-created regimen of exercise and sparring, eventually building himself into a muscled, burly specimen. He began boxing locally in seedy drinking and gambling venues such as the local Cross Plains icehouse, gaining a reputation for toughness and seldom if ever losing a fight. All of this real-life experience with physical struggle began factoring heavily in his stories, giving them a frighteningly realistic aura and power seldom

seen in literature.

## **Depression and suicidal tendencies**

It's clear from Howard's earliest writings and the recollections of his friends that Howard suffered from severe depression from an early age. Confidants such as Tevis Clyde Smith and Novalyne Price Ellis found Howard to be an agreeable companion most of the time, full of life and good humor — but always with an underlying simmering melancholy.

These bouts of depression haunted him throughout his life. In later years, Howard and others would attribute this to a variety of reasons: the inherited gloomy disposition of the Irish; his poor treatment at the hands of locals who derided him for staying at home as a writer rather than getting a respectable blue-collar job; the natural lonely, somewhat outcast existence of writers; a shyness and lack of self-confidence exacerbated by frequent moves during his youth; the mental and emotional pressures of caring for his increasingly sick mother.

Spurred on by the suicides of several schoolmates and by his increasing belief in reincarnation,

Howard conspired to go out while young and in the prime of health. Friends recall him defending the act of suicide as a valid alternative as early as eighteen years old, while many of his stories and poems have a suicidal gloom and intensity that seem prescient in hindsight, describing such an end not as a tragedy but as a sweet, soothing release from hell on earth. At his lowest times he insinuated to friends that the only thing keeping him from attempting suicide was the effect it would have on his ailing, tubercular mother, who by now was mostly bedridden and increasingly relied on her husband and son to get through daily life.

Howard spent his late teens working a variety of hated odd jobs around Cross Plains: picking cotton, branding yearlings, hauling garbage, working in grocery stores, office work, jerking soda, public stenography, packing rods for a surveyor, and writing oil-field news, all while taking courses at Howard Payne Academy in Brownwood (an adjunct of the college) and trying mightily to break into the pulp markets. After years of rejection slips and near acceptances, he finally sold a short caveman tale titled "Spear and Fang", which netted him the princely sum of \$16 and introduced him to the readers of a struggling pulp called *Weird Tales*.

Nicknamed "The Unique Magazine" due to its strange and macabre content, it was destined to become one of the classic, best-remembered pulps, largely due to the influence of Howard and his two contemporaries, H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. Further story sales to *Weird Tales* were sporadic but encouraging, and soon Howard was a regular in the magazine. His first cover story was for "Wolfshead", a werewolf yarn published when he was only twenty.

## **Professional writer**

As he found his footing in the market, Howard became increasingly attracted to the concept of series characters. A gloomy, action-packed story rejected by the more popular pulp *Adventure* was salvaged and submitted to *Weird Tales*, and the result was "Red Shadows," the first of many stories featuring the vengeful Puritan swashbuckler Solomon Kane. Appearing in the August 1928 issue of *WT*, the character was a big hit with readers, as was Howard's increasingly grim and intense worldview — a bloody, dark, fatalistic outlook fueled by suicidally intense depressive tendencies and wide-ranging studies in history, warfare, philosophy, and poetry.

Six more Kane stories followed over the next four years, but Howard was already expanding his horizons. In conjunction with his friend Tevis Clyde Smith he dabbled heavily in verse, writing hundreds of poems and getting dozens published in *Weird Tales* and assorted poetry journals. The best of these efforts remain classics, conjuring up the same blood-splattered, dark, mythic visions of war and rapine that his best stories do. Efforts to get a book of poems accepted by a mainstream publisher failed, however, with several editors recoiling at the brutal imagery and macabre subject matter.

Ultimately Howard judged the writing of poetry to be a luxury he couldn't afford, and after 1930 he wrote little verse, instead dedicating his time to short stories and higher-paying markets. Nevertheless, as a result of this apprenticeship, his stories increasingly took on the aura of "prose-poems" filled with hypnotic, dreamy imagery and a fantastic power lacking in most other pulp efforts of the time.

During the same period, Howard took his first stab at writing a novel, a loosely autobiographical book modeled on Jack London's *Martin Eden* and titled *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*. Of interest to Howard

scholars for the personal information it contains, the book was otherwise of middling quality and was never published in the author's lifetime. Stymied by the poetry and novel fields, Howard kept plugging away at *Weird Tales*, filling its pages with Kane stories and verse. He also did his best to expand his markets, submitting a bewildering array of tales to a variety of pulps.

After several minor successes and false starts, he struck gold again with a new series based on one of his favorite passions: boxing. July 1929 saw the debut of Sailor Steve Costigan in the pages of *Fight Stories*. A tough-as-nails, two-fisted mariner with a head of rocks and occasionally a heart of gold, Costigan began boxing his way through a variety of exotic seaports and adventure locales, becoming so popular in *Fight Stories* that the same editors began using additional Costigan episodes in their sister magazine *Action Stories*. The series was Howard's first foray into humor and first-person narration, and has been compared to the humorous work of such writers as Damon Runyon and P. G. Wodehouse. With three solid markets now all buying up his stories regularly, Howard quit taking college classes, and indeed would never again work a regular job. At twenty-three years of age, from the middle of nowhere in Texas, he had

become a full-time writer.

## **The birth of Sword and Sorcery**

As Kane and Costigan stories were rattling off his typewriter, Howard began audacious experiments with the entire concept of the weird tale as defined by practitioners such as Edgar Allan Poe, A. Merritt, and H. P. Lovecraft, mixing elements of fantasy, horror, mythology, and swordplay into thematic vehicles never before seen. After two years of successive drafts, rewrites, and world creation, he finished "The Shadow Kingdom," which for the first time richly blended elements of horror, history, barbaric adventure, high fantasy, and philosophy into a new style of tale which ultimately became known as Sword and Sorcery. Featuring King Kull, a barbarian precursor to later Howard heroes such as Conan, the tale hit *Weird Tales* in August 1929 and received much fanfare from readers. Several more Kull stories followed, but enough of them were rejected by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright to convince Howard not to continue the series.

With his own interest in Solomon Kane dwindling and his Kull stories not catching on, Howard



applied his new Sword-and-Sorcery template to one of his first loves: the Picts. His story "Kings of the Night" depicted King Kull conjured into pre-Christian Britain to aid the Picts in their struggle against the invading Romans, and introduced readers to Howard's king of the Picts, Bran Mak Morn. Howard followed up this tale with the now-classic revenge nightmare "Worms of the Earth" and several other tales, creating horrific adventures tinged with a Cthulhu-esque gloss and notable for their memorable use of metaphor and symbolism.

## **The Lovecraft Circle**

In August 1930 Howard wrote a letter into *Weird Tales* praising a recent reprint of H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" and discussing some of the obscure Gaelic references used within. Wright forwarded the letter to Lovecraft, who responded warmly to Howard, and soon the two *Weird Tales* veterans were engaged in a vigorous correspondence that would last for the rest of Howard's life. By virtue of this, Howard quickly became a member of "The Lovecraft Circle," a group of writers and friends all linked via the immense correspondence of HPL, who made it a point to introduce his many like-minded friends to

each other and encourage them to share stories, utilize each other's invented fictional trappings, and help each other succeed in the pulp field. In time this circle of correspondents has developed a legendary patina about it rivaling similar literary conclaves such as The Inklings, the Bloomsbury Group, and the Beats.

Howard was given the affectionate nickname "Two-Gun Bob" by virtue of his long explications to Lovecraft about the history of his beloved Southwest, and during the ensuing years he contributed several notable elements to Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos of horror stories. He also corresponded with other weird tale writers such as Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, and E. Hoffmann Price.

His Mythos stories include: The Cairn on the Headland [1] , The Black Stone , The Children of the Night [2] and The Fire of Asshurbanipal [3]

## **Oriental Stories**

With the onset of the Great Depression, many pulp markets reduced their schedules or went out of business entirely. Howard saw market after market falter and vanish — *Fight Stories*, *Action Stories*

— and his savings was wiped out when the local Cross Plains banks failed. Yet even during the worst of these times, he kept plugging away at the writing game and breaking new markets.

When Farnsworth Wright started a new pulp called *Oriental Stories*, Howard was overjoyed — here was a venue where he could run riot through favorite themes of history and battle and exotic mysticism. During the four years of the magazine's existence, he crafted some of his very best tales, gloomy vignettes of war and rapine in the Middle and Far East during the Middle Ages, tales that rival even his best Conan stories for their historical sweep and jewelled splendor. In addition to series characters such as Turlogh dubh O'Brien and Cormac FitzGeoffrey, Howard sold a variety of tales depicting various times and periods through the Middle Ages.

## **Conan**

Early 1932 saw Howard taking one of his frequent trips around Texas. In Fredericksburg, while overlooking sullen hills through a misty rain, he conceived of the fantasy land of Cimmeria, a bitter hard northern region home to fearsome barbarians.

Going back home he developed the idea, fleshing out a new invented world — his Hyborian Age — and populating it with all manner of countries, peoples, monsters, and magic. His Cimmerian hero, Conan, derived from a host of influences, including the previous Kull and a character also named Conan from a reincarnation story he wrote earlier called "People of the Dark".

Conan first appeared in *Weird Tales* in December 1932's "The Phoenix on the Sword", and was such a hit that Howard was able to place seventeen more Conan stories in the magazine between 1933 and 1936. The character had a wide and enduring influence among other *WT* writers, including C. L. Moore and Fritz Leiber, and over the ensuing decades the genre of Sword and Sorcery grew up around Howard's masterwork, with dozens of practitioners evoking Howard's creation to one degree or another.

## **New markets**

Ever on the search for new markets, in late 1934 Howard took a character conceived in his youth, El Borak, and began writing mature, professional tales that landed in *Top Notch*, *Complete Stories*,

and *Thrilling Adventures*. As with Kull/Conan, he also created other characters in the same vein such as Kirby O'Donnell. Howard also dabbled in a variety of new genres: "Strange Detective" stories, reincarnation stories, Cthulhu-themed horror tales, pirate stories, and much more. By the end of his life he had contributed to pulps as varied as *Action Stories*, *Argosy*, *Complete Stories*, *Cowboy Stories*, *Dime Sport Magazine*, *Fight Stories*, *Ghost Stories*, *Jack Dempsey's Fight Magazine*, *Marvel Tales*, *Oriental Stories*, *Spicy-Adventure Stories*, *Sport Story Magazine*, *Strange Detective Stories*, *Strange Tales*, *Super Detective Stories*, *Thrilling Adventures*, *Thrilling Mystery*, and *Top-Notch*.

## **Novalyne Price**

In 1934 Howard met Novalyne Price, a local schoolteacher who was interested in becoming a writer. Through much of the next two years they dated on and off, spending much time discussing everything from writing and philosophy to religion, reincarnation and much else. In an effort to improve her memory and writing, Novalyne began recording all her daily conversations into a journal, in the process preserving an intimate record of her time with Howard.

Their relationship was a series of on-again, off-again encounters, with one falling in love while the other one stepped back. When Novalyne began dating other people behind Howard's back (notably Howard's close friend Truett Vinson), their friendship was irrevocably scarred, but they continued visiting with each other until May 1936, when Novalyne left Cross Plains for LSU to get a graduate degree.

Years later she wrote of their relationship in a book called "One Who Walked Alone", which was the basis for the 1996 film *The Whole Wide World* starring Vincent D'Onofrio as Howard.

## **Western Writing**

In the years since Conan had been created, Howard found himself increasingly fascinated with the history and lore of Texas and the American Southwest. Many of his letters to H. P. Lovecraft ran for a dozen pages or more, filled with stories he had picked up from elderly Civil War vets, Texas Rangers, and pioneers. His Conan stories began featuring western elements, most notably in "Beyond the Black River," "The Black Stranger," and the unfinished "Wolves Beyond the Border."

By 1934 some of the markets killed off by the Depression had come back, and *Weird Tales* was over \$1500 behind on payments to Howard. The author therefore stopped writing weird fiction and turned his attentions to this steadily growing passion.

Howard began appearing once again in *Action Stories* (which the Depression had killed off a few years earlier, but which had now started republishing) in March 1934, this time using a new humorous character in the place of Sailor Steve Costigan, a nineteenth-century hillbilly woodsman named Breckinridge Elkins. Written as tall tales in the vein of Paul Bunyan and Bret Harte, the series became immensely popular in the magazine, which published a new Breck story every month without fail until well after Howard's death.

Other magazines asked Howard for similar characters, and soon the author had three different western series in play, as well as penning other more serious westerns for other pulps. By 1936 almost all of his fiction writing was being devoted to westerns, a book of Breck stories titled *A Gent from Bear Creek* was due to be published by Herbert Jenkins in England, and by all accounts it looked as if Howard was finally breaking out of

the pulps and into the more prestigious book market.

## **Death**

Throughout all of this time, Howard continued to be dogged by fits of increasingly unbearable melancholy and depression, and he maintained his belief in the validity of suicide as an escape from the nightmarish pain. All of his close friends had married and were immersed in their careers, Novalyne Price had left Cross Plains for graduate school, and his most reliable market, *Weird Tales*, had grown far behind on payments.

Most importantly, his home life was falling apart — after decades of struggle, his mother was finally nearing death, and the constant interruptions of care workers at home combined with frequent trips to various sanatoriums for her care made it nearly impossible to write. Several times in 1935 – 36, whenever his mother's health precipitously threatened to give out, he made veiled allusions to his father about planning suicide. Both parents made efforts to convince him to reconsider. In June 1936, as Hester Howard slipped into her final coma, her son maintained a death vigil with his



father and friends of the family, getting little sleep, drinking huge amounts of coffee, and growing more despondent — perhaps, given his exhaustion, deliriously so.

On the morning of June 11, 1936, told by a nurse that his mother would never again regain consciousness, he walked out to his car in the driveway, took a borrowed .38 automatic from the glove box, and shot himself in the head. His father and another doctor rushed out, but the wound was too grievous for anything to be done. Howard lived for another eight hours, dying at 4 p.m.; his mother died the following day. They were both buried on June 14, 1936 in a double funeral in Greenleaf Cemetery in Brownwood, Texas.

Howard's death sent shockwaves of grief through the weird fiction community, vividly documented in the pulps and fanzines of the era, and marked the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of *Weird Tales*. H. P. Lovecraft was severely affected by the death of his friend, and would die himself of intestinal cancer within a year. Clark Ashton Smith (the third member of the triumvirate of *Weird Tales* ), was stricken by the deaths of Howard and Lovecraft as well as those of his own parents, and soon stopped writing fiction himself.

## Writing

Howard wrote stories in many genres, but his most famous were sword and sorcery, a genre of fantasy based on war, fighting and magic. Indeed, many consider him the father of the genre in the same way that J.R.R. Tolkien is considered the father of epic fantasy. Howard created one of the most popular of all fantasy characters in the barbarian warrior Conan, whom he based on a Celtic warrior, drawing inspiration from his own Scottish Gaelic descent. Conan first appeared in December 1932. To add realism and depth to his new character, Howard developed the fictional Hyborian Age. His other characters include the Atlantean King Kull, the Puritan adventurer Solomon Kane, the Pict Bran Mak Morn, drawn from the pre-Celtic people that inhabited Scotland till the early medieval period, and the female warriors Dark Agnes de la Fere and Red Sonya of Rogatino, the latter the prototype for the better known Red Sonja of Marvel Comics fame. Another barbarian hero, an Irishman named Cormac Mac Art, was descended from Kull and had a Dane friend called Wulfhere the Skull-Splitter.

Another field in which Howard was successful was supernatural horror, where he influenced and was in turn influenced by his peer and correspondent H. P. Lovecraft, adding his own trademarks of quickly paced action and strong characterization. His original creations, like the forbidden tome *Nameless Cults* by Friedrich von Junzt, are now considered to be integral parts of the Cthulhu Mythos. Howard and Lovecraft shared a love of the same "weird" writers, chief among them Ambrose Bierce and Arthur Machen, the latter being very important to both authors in the construction of their Cthulhu Mythos tales. Howard's true source of inspiration came from folklore and tall tales that he absorbed from various storytellers at an early age.

Howard also wrote in other genres:

- Fantasy/horror based in the American South and South-West. For example, "Pigeons from Hell", and other stories featuring sheriff Kirby Buckner.
- Historical fiction. For example, his story "Gates of Empire" involves a fictional character in the struggles between Shirkuh, Shawar, and Amalric for the control of

Egypt, the story culminating in one of Saladin's famous early battles in the spring of 1167 AD. His El Borak stories concern a former Texas gunfighter now adventuring in the Middle East during World War I.

- Boxing stories. Especially the tales of Sailor Steve Costigan (sometimes known as Sailor Dennis Dorgan).
- Westerns. Especially the humorous yarns featuring Breckinridge Elkins.
- Howard also wrote a John Carter-esque science fantasy story called "Almuric", detailing the struggles of a boxer from Earth being teleported through space and time to the far-off world of Almuric, where the people are barbaric and savage and the women goddesslike in their beauty.

Howard envisioned almost all of his sword-and-sorcery stories to take place in the same literary "universe", starting with the prehistoric adventures of James Allison's pre-incarnations, evolving in the Valusian saga of Kull, then moving forward to the times of Atlantis and Lemuria (from where Kathulos/Skull Face comes), onward to the Hyborian Age of Conan and then to known history.

Howard engineered his tales so that a great cataclysm always came to seal and divide each era

from the next one, so each civilization was barely conscious of the ones that came before, and even then only in myths and legends (for example, Allison's slaying of the "Great Worm" provided us with the myths of Siegfried and Beowulf).

In one of the most memorable Howardian tales ever ("Kings of the Night"), a cross-over between different sagas is presented as the Pictish chieftain Bran Mak Morn magically conjures Kull the Valusian from his time to aid him in battle against the Romans and their allies.

Contemporary readers may take issue with what could be seen as a distinctly anti-modernist and racist (or even racist) worldview in much of Howard's ideology and literature:

The ancient empires fall, the dark-skinned peoples fade and even the demons of antiquity gasp their last, but over all stands the Aryan barbarian, white-skinned, cold-eyed, dominant, the supreme fighting man of the earth.<sup>[14]</sup>

Howard's prose is straightforward, colorful, and exciting more than subtle and literary, and it attempts to entertain rather than instruct, but it is

not without sophistication. Howard tells of worlds where violence is usually the best solution to problems, and where gold, jewels, and beautiful women are often the hero's reward; yet, distancing himself from his inferior imitators, Howard's works have a shade of macabre, even malignant humour in contrasting his square-jawed heroes' efforts with their ultimate futility in the greater picture of things. And yet, as true Nietzschean heroes, they accept their toil of suffering, bloodshed, passion, and pain without even lamenting or complaining about it, thus achieving ultimate freedom from it.

Although he had his faults as a writer, Howard was a natural storyteller, whose narratives are unmatched for vivid, gripping, headlong action. His heroes...are larger than life: men of mighty thews, hot passions, and indomitable will, who easily dominate the stories through which they stride. In fiction, the difference between a writer who is a natural storyteller and one who is not is like the difference between a boat that will float and one that will not. If the writer has this quality, we can forgive many other faults; if not, no other virtue can make up for the lack, any more than gleaming paint and sparkling

brass on a boat make up for the fact that it will not float. -- L. Sprague de Camp

## Legacy

In the decades following Howard's death, he often suffered at the hands of genre critics disdainful of Sword-and-Sorcery, such as Damon Knight, but nevertheless his fame has grown exponentially, fuelled largely by the character of Conan. Arkham House, a revered fantasy publisher started by *Weird Tales* regulars August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, started the trend by publishing *Skull-Face and Others* (1946), one of only four deluxe omnibus volumes in the company's history.

## Glenn Lord

In the 1950s, a young fan named Glenn Lord began methodically scouring the country for hundreds of lost Howard stories and poems, and as he found them began doing what he could to publish and popularize them. Arkham House printed Lord's book of Howard's poetry *Always Comes Evening*, and from 1961 – 1973 Lord published a journal called *The Howard Collector* that today fetches high prices and is much revered by fans and

scholars. In the early sixties, Lord became agent for the Howard heirs, and used his incredible collection of original Howard typescripts to help publishers expose readers to a mountain of unknown Howardiana, bringing much of it into print for the first time.

## **L. Sprague de Camp and the Howard Boom**

Also in the fifties the prominent science-fiction and fantasy writer L. Sprague de Camp, who had become a fan of Howard on reading the Gnome Press edition of *Conan the Conqueror* (*The Hour of the Dragon*) was commissioned to edit a few Conan tales for publication in the Gnome Press series. He subsequently converted unpublished non-Conan stories by Howard into Conans and edited the first outright Conan pastiche, by Swedish Howard fan Björn Nyberg.

In 1966, de Camp made a deal with struggling Lancer Books to publish the existing Howard and non-Howard Conan corpus in paperback, along with additional material contributed by himself and his colleague and collaborator Lin Carter. Together they completed recently discovered Conan



fragments by Howard and wrote several pastiches to fill out the picture of Conan's career. The Lancer Conan series became a publishing phenomenon, selling millions of copies and spawning a host of imitators. Sporting a set of now-classic covers painted by Frank Frazetta, the success of the Lancers created a decade-long "Howard boom" in the 1970s which saw not only the birth of popular Conan comics (*Conan the Barbarian*, *The Savage Sword of Conan*, et al.) and movies (*Conan the Barbarian*, which made Arnold Schwarzenegger a star), but also the reprinting of virtually every word Howard ever wrote in a bewildering variety of hardcovers, paperbacks, chapbooks, and fanzines.

During this same period de Camp popularized Conan, Howard, and fantasy in general in a number of books (*The Spell of Conan*, *The Blade of Conan*, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers*, et al.) and magazines such as *Amra*, culminating in his writing of the first full biography of the Texan, *Dark Valley Destiny: the Life of Robert E. Howard* (1983). His success in making Howard a subject of serious scholarship led to the erosion of his own reputation, as fans who had been happy to see anything by or about Howard began to give way to Howard "purists." As a result de Camp has become a divisive figure in Howard studies, with

proponents praising his decades of service to the Howardian cause and detractors accusing him of promoting his own interests on the back of Howard's work and denigrating what they consider his infelicities with the facts and lore surrounding Howard's life and writings.

## **Critical appreciation**

Early appreciation for Howard's work came more from fellow writers than from critics. In his book *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, de Camp describes an interview with J. R. R. Tolkien in which he "indicated that he *rather liked* Howard's Conan stories."

The 1980s saw critical respect begin to come to Howard, in the form of *The Dark Barbarian* (1984), edited by noted critic Don Herron, who earlier had penned a seminal essay, "Conan vs. Conantics", which took de Camp to task for what he regarded as the pollution of Howard's reputation with substandard stories by himself and Lin Carter. *The Dark Barbarian* was the first critical volume on Howard to appear by an academic press, and has since been followed by a 2004 sequel titled *The Barbaric Triumph*.

In 1987, *Robert E. Howard*, by Marc Cerasini and Charles Hoffman, was published. Mr. Hoffman was the author of the seminal essay, "Conan the Existentialist," published in the 1970s in the *Journal of Popular Culture*. *Robert E. Howard* was the first book-length critical study of the author's entire literary output. Now out of print, a revised and updated version of this groundbreaking work will be released in 2007.

Another academic press, Bison Books (University of Nebraska), has recently released five hardcover volumes of Howard's work featuring introductions and textual restoration by Howard scholars.

A host of journals and magazines have also contained much criticism. In 1972 The Robert E. Howard United Press Association (REHupa) was born, and for thirty years its members have contributed new scholarship in the field. In recent years Howard's stories have been meticulously restored and republished by various editors and presses such as Wandering Star and Wildside Press, and a journal called *The Cimmerian* has become the first paying market for Howard criticism, publishing twenty issues in three years.

## **Novalyne Price Ellis**

Fifty years after Howard's death, a now-retired Novalyne Price Ellis, upset by Howard's portrayal in de Camp's *Dark Valley Destiny*, wrote *One Who Walked Alone* (1986) to counteract its influence. Ten years later, the book was made into a critically acclaimed film called *The Whole Wide World*, starring Renée Zellweger and Vincent D'Onofrio.

## **Howard Days**

Howard's hometown of Cross Plains, Texas, has restored his home and converted it into a museum that has been added to the National Register of Historic Places. Cross Plains celebrates Robert E. Howard Days annually on the second weekend in June, hosted by a local civic organization known as Project Pride. This mini-convention attracts over a hundred fans yearly; events include tours of Howard's home and special postal cancellations, and the Cross Plains Library displays a selection of original Howard manuscripts.

## **2006 World Fantasy Convention**

The theme of the 2006 World Fantasy Convention in Austin, Texas was celebrating the centennial of Howard's birth. Two books published to correspond with the convention were *Cross Plains Universe: Texans Celebrate Robert E. Howard*, edited by Joe R. Lansdale and Scott A. Cupp, and *Blood and Thunder: The Life of Robert E. Howard* by Mark Finn.

## In popular culture

- Four movies have been based on Howard's works: *Conan the Barbarian*, *Conan the Destroyer*, *Red Sonja*, and *Kull the Conqueror*.
- Several further movies are in development: *Conan: Red Nails*, an animated version of "Red Nails" (which appears to have run into funding difficulties); a revisioning of *Conan the Barbarian* written by Boaz Yakin; *Solomon Kane*, written & directed by Michael J. Bassett; Peter Berg is directing a film based on and titled Bran Mak Morn and *Vultures*, based on the novella *The Vultures of Wahpeton*.
- In 2003, a short film adaptation of Howard's short story "Casonetto's Last Song", directed

by Brenda Dau and Derek M. Koch, was featured as an official selection of the H. P. Lovecraft Film Festival.

- Howard's story "Pigeons from Hell", along with some imagery of Ambrose Bierce, seems to have inspired the horror film *Dead Birds*, starring Henry Thomas. "Pigeons from Hell" was also adapted for TV on the series "Thriller" airing in 1961.
- The British metal band Bal-Sagoth is named after Howard's story "The Gods of Bal-Sagoth."

## See also

- List of horror fiction authors

## References

### Sources

Blosser, Fred (1997). "The Star Rover and 'The People of the Night'". *The Dark Man* #4: 16-18.

Clareson, Thomas D. (1990). *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction*. Univ of South Carolina Press. ISBN 0-87249-870-0.

Clute, John and Grant, John, ed. (1999). *The*

*Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. St. Martin's Press. ISBN 0-312-19869-8.

Grin, Leo (January 2006). "Birth and Death". *The Cimmerian V3n1*: 13-18. ISSN 1548-3398.

Grin, Leo (2004). "The Reign of Blood". *The Barbaric Triumph*: (Don Herron, ed.) 141-160, Wildside Press. ISBN 0-8095-1566-0.

Herron, Don, ed. (2004). *The Barbaric Triumph*. Wildside Press. ISBN 0-8095-1566-0.

Herron, Don, ed. (1984). *The Dark Barbarian*. Greenwood Press. ISBN 0-313-23281-4.

Herman, Paul. Howardworks. Retrieved on 2006-09-13.

Joshi, S. T. and Dziemianowicz, Stefan, ed. (2005). *Supernatural Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press. ISBN 0-313-32774-2.

Knight, George (2004). "Lands of Dreams and Nightmares". *The Barbaric Triumph*: (Don Herron, ed.) 129-140, Wildside Press. ISBN 0-8095-1566-0.

Tompkins, Steve (2002). """. *The Black Stranger typescript*: cover flap essay, Wandering Star.

Tompkins, Steve (June 2005). "letter in The Lion's Den". *The Cimmerian V2n3*: 37-38. ISSN 1548-3398.

Westfahl, Gary, ed. (2005). *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders*. Greenwood Press. ISBN 0313329508.

## Notes

1. ^ Grin (January 2006) contains facsimile reproductions of both Howard's birth certificate and death record.
2. ^ Grin (2004) p. 141
3. ^ Herron (1984). p. xvi
4. ^ Herron (1984). p. 149: "Robert E. Howard of Cross Plains, Texas, created one of the great mythic figures in modern popular culture, the Dark Barbarian... [which] put Howard in the select ranks of the literary legend-makers: Ned Buntline, Alexandre Dumas, père, Mary Shelley, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Dashiell Hammett, H. P. Lovecraft, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ian Fleming."
5. ^ Joshi and Dziemianowicz (2005) (entry written by Don Herron) Vol. 3, p. 1095: "Critical consensus, however, unfailingly places the birth of sword-and-sorcery with the publication of 'The Shadow Kingdom' (August 1929), in which Howard introduced the brooding figure of King Kull, ruling over the fading land of Valusia in a Pre-Cataclysmic Age when Atlantis is but newly risen from the waves."
6. ^ Westfahl (2005) (entry written by Charles



Gramlich) Vol. 3, p. 780: "The term 'sword and sorcery' was coined by Fritz Leiber but the genre was pioneered by Robert E. Howard, a Texas pulp writer who combined fantasy, history, horror, and the Gothic to create the Hyborian Age and such characters as Conan the Conqueror and Kull."

7. ^ Tompkins (June 2005). p. 38: "True, the era during which drugstore racks were a Muscle Beach of Khandars, Kothars, Thongors, Wandors, Odans, and Orns is long gone, but is S&S in trouble?" Tompkins then presents a series of quotes from modern fantasy writers who claim a strong Howardian influence, including David Gemmell, Matthew Woodring Stover, Charles R. Saunders, Karl Edward Wagner, Paul Kearney, Steven Erikson and William King.
8. ^ Clute and Grant (1999). p.483: "[REH] remains of central interest in the field of fantasy for his sword and sorcery; the templates he established for that mode have remained influential for most of the 20th century."; p. 39: "The combined success of Howard's Conan books and J.R.R. Tolkien's *LotR* in paperback had resulted in unprecedented interest in heroic and high fantasy."
9. ^ Clareson (1990). p. 14: "Between 1932 and 1936 *Weird Tales* also provided Robert E. Howard an outlet where he could create the Hyborian world of Conan the Barbarian, thereby begetting the "Sword-and-Sorcery" motif which not only dominates much of contemporary heroic fantasy but has remained a principal ingredient of

science fiction itself."

10. ^ See Herman (2006) for a comprehensive listing of past and present Howard volumes.
11. ^ Tompkins (2002) cover flap: essay discusses the influence of *The Scarlet Letter* on Howard's "The Black Stranger" and touches on many similarities of style, characters, and tone.
12. ^ Knight (2004) p. 129: "In his portrayal of the natural world Robert E. Howard follows in the illustrious footsteps of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. He designed a thematically resonant geography over the course of his career, worlds worthy of scarlet letters and white whales and great dark rivers — mythic talismans glittering under a velvet night sky. At his best, Howard transforms nature into a brilliant illuminating dreamscape deserving of a place among the great *mise en scenes* of classic American literature."
13. ^ Blosser (1997). p. 16: "'The Children of the Night' and 'People of the Dark' also display the influence of another author whose robust, adventurous personality forms a striking contrast to the introverted, reclusive *personae* of Lovecraft and Machen. This progenitor was Jack London." The article goes on to describe how REH "skillfully blended the very elements of primitive action and supernatural horror" that London also specialized in. Also see Grin (2004) pp. 144-146.
14. ^ Howard, Robert E. (1932). *Wings in the Night*. Weird Tales.

## External links

### Biography

- *Blood & Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard*, Monkeybrain, Inc., 2006 (ISBN 1-932265-21-X)
- A Short Biography of Robert E. Howard by Rusty Burke
- Robert Ervin Howard from the *Handbook of Texas Online*
- *The Whole Wide World* (1996) A film relating his relationship with Novalyne Price
- Howard Museum in Cross Plains, Texas
- Robert E. Howard pages at Reality Ends
- *Dark Valley Destiny: the Life of Robert E. Howard* (1983), ISBN 0-89366-247-X (with Catherine Crook de Camp and Jane Whittington Griffin)
- *The Miscast Barbarian: a Biography of Robert E. Howard* (1975) A chapbook biography, later expanded into *Dark Valley Destiny*.

### Bibliography

- A comprehensive bibliography of Robert E.

Howard's works

- A document on the copyright and ownership status of Robert E. Howard's works (including list of works in the public domain)

## Scholarly Sources

- The Robert E. Howard United Press Association
- *The Cimmerian* — a Howard journal (the website also has an REH blog)
- *The Dark Man: The Journal of Robert E. Howard Studies*
- *REH: Two-Gun Raconteur: The Definitive Howard Journal*

## Online Texts

- Robert E. Howard at Project Gutenberg Australia
- *The Hour of the Dragon*; Howard's full-length Conan novel at Wikisource.
- Black Mask Collection of free Howard ebooks
- Robert E. Howard Archive

## Conan

- Conan's official website
- Conan the Barbarian at AmratheLion.com

Retrieved from

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_E.\\_Howard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_E._Howard)"

Categories: American fantasy writers | American short story writers | Conan the Barbarian writers | Cthulhu Mythos writers | Deaths by firearm in the United States | Fantasy writers | American historical novelists | People from Abilene, Texas | People from the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex area | Pulp fiction writers | Robert E. Howard | Scottish-Americans | Suicides by firearm in the United States | Texas writers | Writers who committed suicide | 1906 births | 1936 deaths | Howard Payne University alumni | Mythopoeic writers

---

- This page was last modified 11:30, 20 July 2007.
  - All text is available under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License. (See **Copyrights** for details.)
- Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a US-registered 501(c)(3) tax-deductible nonprofit charity.