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*About ten years ago, Ben Szumskyj asked me to review the Robert E. Howard collection *The Moon of Skulls* for REH: Two-Gun Raconteur when Damon Sasser allowed Ben to guest edit an issue. Ben specified a 1,000 word piece. Well, I really got into it and ended up writing over 5,600 words. I worked hard to cut more than 1,000 words over two revisions. I realized that only heavy re-writing and a new approach was going to get me near 1,000 words. I eventually completed a 1,131 word review for Ben. Since I put so much work into it, I wanted someone to read my 4,589 word version. (Of course, the current word count is going to be different since I made some slight revisions for its use here.) I first published this long review in *The Dalriadic Chronicles* #42 which ran in SSWFT, a sword & sorcery and weird fiction amateur press association, for the Autumn 2005 mailing.*

Scott

The Moon of Skulls by Robert E. Howard, Wildside Press, 2005. 216 pages. Edited by Paul Herman with an Introduction by Mark Finn. H.C.

Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) is one of the fantasy genre's most important writers. Howard, a native Texan and proud Southerner, wrote and published tales set in created fantasy worlds before Tolkien's *The Hobbit* appeared and decades before *The Lord of the Rings*' success. Howard's fantasy, often called sword & sorcery, is grittier than the high fantasy of Tolkien's imitators. Also, Howard favored the short story form for his fiction rather than trilogies of novels. Howard created a slew of memorable characters including Conan, Kull, Bran Mak Morn, and Solomon Kane. Though Howard scholars cringe when people add Red Sonja's name to that roster, she's an adaptation of Howard's Red Sonya from "The Shadow of the Vulture."

Over the years, editors and posthumous collaborators have tampered with Howard's work. Also, Howard's heirs have heavily licensed his creations. Other authors have written far more words about Conan than Howard did. Most of these efforts strayed far from Howard's vision. This gives readers a misleading picture of Howard's contributions. Recently, Howard fans and scholars have had an opportunity to correct the tampering and collaboration problems. Readers can see the results in the Del Rey/Wandering Star collections of Howard's Conan, Solomon Kane, and Bran Mak Morn stories and here in Wildside's Weird Works series. Editor Paul Herman's goal is to present texts as close as possible to what Howard intended. Herman opts for the final published version of works published in Howard's lifetime though whereas the Del Rey/

Wandering Star editions use Howard's typescripts when possible. Both approaches have merits. With the typescripts, there is no editorial interference or typesetting mistakes. With the published texts, we get the final version. It may be tampered with, but at least it was with Howard's knowledge. (Not that Howard approved of such tampering. He complains at least once in the Howard letters published by Necronomicon Press.) Wildside also strives to put a lot more Howard in print than the other publishers.

Besides fantasy, Howard mastered many other genres, but *The Moon of Skulls* is the second in a series collecting Howard's "weird" fiction, an umbrella under which all of his fantasy falls. The closest *Moon* gets to sword & sorcery though are a pair of stories featuring Howard's dour, 16th century Puritan - Solomon Kane.

Whereas the Del Rey collections have stuck to single characters (an arguable point in the Bran Mak Morn collection) and printed the stories (of those characters at least) in the order Howard wrote them, Herman presents Howard's weird fiction and poetry in the order it was originally published.

Mark Finn's introduction explores Howard's fusion of Gothic and exotic elements. Finn makes a minor mistake or two. For instance, the Romans didn't exterminate the Picts. The Picts thrived for centuries after the fall of Rome and eventually merged with the Scots. Finn correctly points out that *The Moon of Skulls* contains the first appearance of "The Fearsome Touch of Death" in book form since its original pulp publication. I think it worth noting that it has been reprinted in fanzines though, like Joe Marek's *The Howard Reader*. Since Herman restores Howard's text to the original published version, I think each volume should run a note discussing some Howardian spellings which contemporary readers might think are mistakes but which were acceptable alternative spellings in Howard's time. For instance, Howard uses "surprize" in place of "surprise." Readers unfamiliar with simplified spelling should be informed about it so they don't think these occurrences are typos. Speaking of which, there are a few typos in the introduction and in the first story. When it comes to the first story, I don't know how many of these are reproductions of mistakes from the original publications and how many simply slipped past the Wildside folks.

Two stories, "Skull-face" and "The Moon of Skulls" dominate this collection.

Commentators often compare "Skull-face" to Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu stories. The Fu Manchu stories are about an evil Chinese genius bent on world conquest. The villain of Howard's story is an evil Atlantean sorcerer who uses Fu Manchu's methods. In fact, in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, Fu Manchu disguises himself as an ancient veiled prophet raised from the dead who seeks to establish an empire. Howard's protagonist, Kathulos, is an ancient veiled sorcerer who seeks to reestablish an Atlantean empire. The sorcerer rising from the dead to revive an ancient and evil empire reoccurs elsewhere in Howard's fiction. Howard reused the idea in the Conan stories "Black Colossus" and *The Hour of the Dragon*. Thugra Khotan from "Black Colossus" even goes around veiled just like Kathulos. Kathulos is skull faced (hence the title) like the Kull villain Thulsa Doom. In the Kull story "Delcardes' Cat," Thulsa Doom uses the alias Kuthulos and wears a veil for disguise.

"Skull-face" reflects beliefs which modern society has thankfully rejected, but which shaped earlier generations, including Howard's. White supremacy was widely accepted and even institutionalized in Howard's lifetime. In the 1920s when this story first appeared, white Europeans, believing themselves racially superior, ruled much of Africa and Asia courtesy of conquest and colonization. The United States and other countries enshrined white supremacy by law and custom. Literature and the other arts often promoted this status quo. Though Howard hated Nazis

and the Ku Klux Klan, he subscribed to the era's widespread racial beliefs. Thus, in "Skull-face," Howard's heroes defend white supremacy. On page 59, one of the heroes, John Gordon, warns of Kathulos, "if he has his way, the governments of the white races will be honeycombs of corruption - the strongest men of the white races will be dead. The white men's secrets of war will be his. When it comes, I look for a simultaneous uprising against white supremacy . . ."

The theme of racial war and revolt appears elsewhere in Howard's fiction. Howard studied the American South's history and tradition. Before The Civil War, Southerners feared that the region's slaves would revolt, massacring whites. This fear continued after Reconstruction gave way to Jim Crow. Indeed there had been a number of slave rebellions, and when white supremacists rolled back Reconstruction, some blacks fought back. Late in his career, Howard explored this fear in "Black Canaan" where he narrowed it down to a localized setting. In "Skull-face" and in the earlier story "The Last White Man," Howard used racial revolt on a world-wide scale. Howard places corrupted whites (often in positions of power) within Kathulos' organization. Modern neo-Nazis label such people "race traitors." Howard probably saw them more like scalawags - white southerners who supported Reconstruction.

Though the heroes' white supremacist sympathies are horrible by modern standards, the villain Kathulos doesn't strive for equality or justice either. He would replace a world dominated by whites with a world dominated by blacks, and he wants to rule the new empire. Kathulos himself is neither black nor white. In this story - the Atlanteans are brown skinned instead of being white like in Howard's Kull and Conan mythos. Kathulos will enslave the few whites he doesn't exterminate. In what may be a jab at northern white paternalism or even specifically at Abe Lincoln, Kathulos sees himself as a father figure to blacks.

The "bad" guys unify different races and creeds. The "good" guys wonder what unites these groups. (You know, I would've thought it was hatred for the common oppressor.) Turns out to be Kathulos' hypnotic powers.

Howard plays on fears of racial overthrow accomplished by conspiracy. This paranoia emerged historically. Segregationists thought Civil Rights was a Communist conspiracy. Neo-Nazis still hold this view. Discussing Kathulos' Egyptian guise, one character says that Egyptians are despised almost as much as Jews. (pg.67) I suppose we should be thankful that Howard didn't disguise Kathulos as a Jew thus implicating Jews in this secret conspiracy against whites.

Howard drums up sympathy for Steve Costigan, the narrator. Costigan battles drug addiction. The impulsive love that Costigan and the girl, Zuleika, share brings him into Kathulos' organization, but Costigan attempts to win freedom for them both.

The name Steve Costigan appears elsewhere in Howard's fiction. Howard used the name for himself in his Roman a la clef novel *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*. Howard also named the hero of his most prolific boxing series Steve Costigan. Although the boxing stories are less known than Howard's fantasy today, during his career, Howard sold more Sailor Steve Costigan stories than Conan stories.

Howard's dialogue and characterization isn't as good here as it was in later stories or even a few of his earlier ones. Neither is the atmosphere as powerful as it would be in later works.

In spots, "Skull-face" seems to boost civilization over barbarism. In contrast, Howard usually sided with the barbarians. "Skull-face" really doesn't boost civilization though. Although the heroes believe they defend civilization from barbarism, Kathulos views the heroes as barbarous. Plus, Costigan calls himself a primitive throwback.

There are many other themes and plot elements which Howard used elsewhere. An apparently

doomed warrior determines to take a toll before dying. There are time lost civilizations destroyed in worldwide cataclysms when the seas drank the land. Costigan refers to inhumanly old things. Kathulos' serpent like description evokes the serpent men from "The Shadow Kingdom." Kathulos slept for centuries in a case the way the sons of Set slept in "The God in the Bowl." Zuleika pledges to take her life if Steve dies. We're told of cities and sleepers under the sea and gulfs of horror.

Although Costigan says grim horror lurks, the story ends on a happy note. In Howard's stronger weird story endings, even when the hero wins, the sense of triumph is muted and the reader left haunted as if by a strange dream. Stories like "The Phoenix on the Sword" and "The Tower of the Elephant" exemplify this.

The collection's first poem, "Dead Man's Hate," follows "Skull-face." Like the other poems published here, it's traditional in that it follows a rhyming pattern. It's a narrative poem. It tells a story. It's a tale of hate from beyond the grave. Howard also examined this theme in stories like "The Rattle of Bones" and "Skulls in the Stars."

"The Fearsome Touch of Death" is a typical creepy-crawly story with a twist ending. It would be right at home on *The Twilight Zone*, *The Night Gallery*, or in an old EC comic book. This isn't a typical Howard story, but plot elements like the dead, angry old hermit reoccur in stories like "Dig Me No Grave."

In the poem "A Song Out of Midian" a king tries and fails to win the heart of his bride. In the end, he bids her to return to her people and her freedom.

Another poem "Shadows on the Road" follows. It's set in the early Dark Ages. People ask Nial, a traveler, what he's seen on his trip to Rome. They expect the Rome of old, the Rome idealized in story. Nial tells them the grim reality. Barbarians have sacked Rome. They ask about Rome's wonders and riches. He tells them those things are gone, replaced by ruin and destruction. Nial ends in a black mood knowing that all man's accomplishments are futile, that,

"Kings and kingdoms and empires fall,
"And the mist black ruin covers them all."

This sense of futility and fall of civilization is a theme Howard explored repeatedly throughout his writing career.

"The Moon of Skulls" is the second of the two stories which dominate this collection. It bears much resemblance to the first, "Skull-face." Along with Kull, Solomon Kane, the protagonist in "The Moon of Skulls," is one of Howard's best known characters after Conan. In fact, some *Weird Tales* readers like Robert Bloch, the author of *Psycho*, liked Kane better than Conan. The Kane stories occur in the 16th century. Kane is a Puritan, a do-gooder, and a righter of wrongs. He's not as super-human as Conan. He's an expert swordsman and a crack shot. He lacks Conan's sharp wilderness bred senses although, in "The Footfalls Within," Howard said Kane learned American Indian woodcraft. While Conan often shows a rude chivalry toward women, he usually has ulterior motives. Kane's chivalry is pure hearted. In "Red Shadows" he goes on a quest covering many years and thousands of miles to avenge a peasant girl he found dying in the road. In "The Moon of Skulls" he goes on a similar quest to rescue Marilyn Taferal, wanting no reward of any kind. At least in this case, Kane previously knew Marilyn and was a family friend. Marilyn, by the way, seems stronger of will and intellect than the stereotypical REH damsel in distress. Note, I'm not talking about the Bêlits and Valerias here.

Like the Atlanteans of "Skull-face," the Atlanteans of "Moon" are brown skinned, and they ruled an empire which included Africa. Interestingly, names like Valka turn up from the Kull

stories. Nakari, the black queen of the lost city of Negari, proposes unifying Africa and dreams of world conquest much as Kathulos did in "Skull-face." Nakari's scheme doesn't come in the form of a revolt, but racial revolt erupts during the backstory. Kane rejects Nakari's proposal on racial grounds and because it distracts from his quest. Like Costigan in "Skull-face," Kane tries to prevent human sacrifice. A tower, blacks, and a full-moon rising over the tower factor in both stories' sacrifices. The tower and moon reoccur in "The Voice of El-Lil" which closes out this collection. In what may be yet another cross-pollination between "Moon" and "Skull-face," an Atlantean wizard's skull sits high on the tower beneath which the sacrifice will occur. The wizard is a hero to the blacks who revere him much like Kathulos. Also, Howard uses the same Chester-ton verse as a chapter heading on pages 71 and 147. The last Atlantean, like Kathulos, views both whites and blacks as barbarians.

One of many Kane stories set in Africa, the plot is reminiscent of "Red Shadows," the earlier Kane story where he spends years chasing a bandit. Here though, Howard only uses flashbacks to cover events that happen outside of Africa. Kane pursues information about Marilyn from source to source before finally reaching Africa and plunging deep into the interior. Kane learns about a white girl enslaved in Negari, a legendary city where no white man has ever been.

Like in other REH stories involving black dominated civilizations, the blacks get no credit for the civilization. The city was actually founded by a lighter skinned race. Like Opar in Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan tales, Negari is a lost outpost of sunken Atlantis. At one point in the backstory, Negari sounds like the idealized antebellum South. The downfall of Negari's brown skinned Atlanteans is that great bane of white supremacists, miscegenation - interracial breeding. The Atlanteans brought blacks into the city as slaves. The black population grew, and the descendants of the Atlanteans began intermarrying. The descendants of the Atlantean/black liaisons were regarded as black. They invited more and more blacks into the city. Then the blacks revolted and slaughtered everyone with a trace of Atlantean blood except the priestly class. The last Atlantean attributes the priests' downfall to intermarriage which the priests resisted longer than the general population did.

Even when REH has Kane and blacks conversing in a black language, Howard still has the blacks unable to speak properly. Maybe when Kane speaks an African language, he should sound like an idiot while the Africans sound smart. Again, a slave, Nakari, revolts against lighter skinned masters. The rebellion's origins reflect a theme in other REH works. In too many Howard stories, when blacks achieve equality or respect, the civilization this occurs in goes down in ruins. For many of us brought up after the groundbreaking changes of the Civil Rights Era, this theme is reprehensible and ridiculous. It does reveal the sorts of beliefs Howard and his contemporaries were exposed to growing up, which they then internalized, and passed on to others. While blacks have lived in Negari for thousands of years without discovering the secret passages, Kane discovers them immediately. There's the old stereotype of natives possessed by devils, but to be fair, this is more Kane's Puritan opinion than REH's. For his part, Howard establishes that the Negarians' sanity hangs by a thread. Hmmm . . . Negari - Negar - sounds close to the infamous N word. When Howard writes, "the foul black empire," you wonder if he means black as in evil or black as in black people. The disturbing racial component - the tribalism - adds an emotional fire to Howard's writing.

Though Howard admired barbarism, he often portrays black barbarians as murderously treacherous and prone to assassinations. Howard gives his white barbarians super keen senses, meanwhile the civilized Kane can sneak up on black barbarians. Not only that, he can slay them

without other nearby black barbarians noticing.

In “Moon,” blacks view whites as gods. Nakari lusts after Kane because he’s white. You almost expect her to shout, “Where are all the white men at?” Kane feels angry about having to treat a black man with respect like an equal. The Negarians are likened to monkeys in the English Court.

There are other plot elements that reoccur elsewhere in REH’s fiction. Kane battles a giant snake. In some ways, Kane is another throwback character. Howard writes that Kane had a touch of the pagan about him though Kane himself would be shocked by such an assertion. There’s an invocation of cosmic time and space. The last Atlantean has been imprisoned like Yag-kosha in “The Tower of the Elephant” by a usurper who tortures him for his secrets. Like Yag, the priest seeks vengeance through the hero, dying even as the hero departs on his mission. Unlike Yag though, the last Atlantean doesn’t awaken sympathy. Kane follows the Atlantean’s instructions only because they’ll save Marilyn. This story also prefigures the Conan stories, particularly those of the commercial period, with their naked, sexy babes. There are hints of lesbianism and girls whipping girls which would factor into some of the Conan stories and not just the commercial ones, but also some of the best like “Red Nails.” Howard was fond of describing cities and structures of horrific antiquity. He often tells of things that were old when (substitute something very ancient and mysterious) was young. Thus we’re told of things that were old when Babylon was young and things that were old when Egypt was young, etc. etc. There’s a reference to racial memories on page 138. Racial memory was a reincarnation idea that Howard used many times. Some of his best stories such as “The Valley of the Worm” were racial memory stories. Howard later recycled Nakari’s line, “Am I not beautiful?” for another deadly temptress, Atali in “The Frost Giant’s Daughter.” There’s a scene of Nakari’s face framed in a red glow that is reminiscent of Salome in “A Witch Shall Be Born.” Like the Picts who overthrew the Hyborian Age, the blacks who overthrew Negari’s Atlanteans only learned the ways of war from civilization. Again, we have cities under the sea, cataclysms, lost civilizations, and decaying civilizations. Nakari also seems like the black Queen from the “Snout in the Dark” fragment. In fact, the theme of a wicked woman dominating a dying civilization reoccurs a lot in REH. See “Red Nails,” “Xuthal of the Dusk,” and the “Snout” fragment for other examples. I wonder what the Howard’s mom/Oedipus complex crowd would think? The Tower of Death ultimately collapses like the Tower of the Elephant. The Star Maidens evoke “The Vale of Lost Women”. “The Moon of Skulls” and “The Voice of El-Lil” both seem to owe much to H. Rider Haggard stories like *She*. Kane and other REH characters tend to have anthropological expertise. (Well expert as far as the science had advanced by the late 19th to early 20th centuries.) “The Moon of Skulls” seems like a “captive” tale ala Cynthia Ann Parker or Colonial American literature. REH used the theme again in “The Vale of Lost Women.” According to Patrice Louinet, Howard was fascinated with the Parker story.

At times, “The Moon of Skulls” is brilliant weird fiction with excellent atmosphere. It has weaknesses though. Too many coincidences occur, especially in the conclusion. For instance, of all the people in Negari, the black warrior who has the pistol Kane needs at just that moment happens to stand near Kane’s hiding place. Kane credits God for the luck. Another flaw is that Marilyn and Kane recap in excruciating detail things we already know. Kane tells the story of how he followed all the twists and turns on pages 135-136. Marilyn then repeats all the information that we and Kane already know. (And having already heard Kane’s story, she knew he knew it. Arrrgggghhh!!!) Of course, hard work and experience allowed Howard to continue

improving his writing. He got even better as time went on eventually producing work like “The Black Stone,” “Wings in the Night,” and “Beyond the Black River” among others. Howard used “rapped” as a speech attribution once too often in “Skull-face.” It appears here too, but it’s not annoyingly overused.

Shades of *Queen of the Damned*, this story starts off with Nakari apparently being a black vampire queen. We never see her drink blood though, and she dies in a quite human manner. Perhaps she was called a vampire in insult or exaggeration.

The ending is happy, but with a bittersweet tinge for we’ve seen the final ruin of an old and legendary civilization. Moved by the destruction, Kane quotes from Isaiah 24:18, 25:2, 29:5, and 29:9.

Another Solomon Kane story follows “The Moon of Skulls.” Real vampires populate “Hills of the Dead.” The vampires differ from most fictional vampires, but, being zombie like, they bear some resemblance to the bestial vampires of Richard Matheson’s *I am Legend*.

In “Hills” we get a different look at race relations. In “Red Shadows” Kane gained a black blood brother named N’Longa. Other than the fact that N’Longa took Kane’s side, there wasn’t much to recommend him in that story. N’Longa was motivated to help Kane through self-interest. Kane’s enemy was N’Longa’s enemy. N’Longa seemed bloodthirsty and horrible. In “Hills,” N’Longa seems as stereotyped as ever in the early going. Even when he and Kane speak in a dialect that passes for a common language, N’Longa’s grammatical dexterity is childlike, while Kane sounds normal. N’Longa says stuff like, “Me N’Longa.” One senses a certain disdain from Kane towards the witchdoctor, but that’s probably as much religious as racial. Despite this disdain, and despite religious misgivings, Kane accepts the ju-ju staff which N’Longa gives him. (In “The Footfalls Within,” Howard revealed that the ju-ju staff was the staff of Moses and King Solomon.) We’ll see N’Longa in a different light later though.

Kane wanders deep into the African interior. He rescues a brown skinned young woman who, like the girl from the Tombalku Conan fragment, has run away from home. Kane vows to bring her back. When they stop for the night, two vampires attack Kane. Kane learns that the ju-ju staff and fire can slay the vampires when other means fail.

Again there is female nudity, but it makes sense in the hot climate. Some might claim nudity isn’t sexual, but leaving aside Playboy and other men’s magazines, in 1920s small town America, nudity sure was sexual. Howard strives for titillation.

In both Kane stories, there are long time periods where Kane or someone else goes around with a loaded musket. Wouldn’t it be easy for the musket to go off or otherwise lose its contents?

Again, Kane becomes an anthropological expert. There are a number of racial jibes. Then something interesting happens. N’Longa’s knowledge and intelligence saves the day. Speaking in the dialect of the river tribes, N’Longa speaks well and gives a strong, humanizing speech. No longer is he a witch doctor stereotype. He pokes holes in many of Kane’s assumptions and prejudices. He appears Kane’s equal. Howard never explicitly states this equality though it reemerges in later Kane stories. For that moment, REH had left his era’s white supremacy behind.

The poem, “Black Chant Imperial” seems to be about a war between the angels.

The final story, “The Voice of El-Lil” has multiple narrators who both are amateur anthropologists.

One textual change I noticed from an earlier publication is that Page 192 has, “said my Saxon,” whereas Page 2 of *Beyond the Borders* published by Baen in the mid-90s has, “he said.”

We have two protagonists. One’s an expert on people; the other’s an expert on bugs. This is

another story set in Africa. All but one of the stories in *The Moon of Skulls* is either set in Africa or has an African connection. (“Skull-face” has backstory set in Africa.)

Again, white supremacy appears, although it’s not as ideological as in “Skull-face.” There are comments like “dog-toothed breed.” Like N’Longa, the biracial Selim is proud of his mongrel English. It’s said that the pride of Selim’s “white blood” prevents him from fleeing in terror like the other blacks do. Selim meets an unfortunate end though when warriors descended from and armed and garbed like ancient Sumerians storm the camp. Apparently, the Sumerians have harsh anti-miscegenation laws and kill the off-spring of interracial couples.

Again Howard borrows from Burroughs. In “The Moon of Skulls” Howard used a lost Atlantean colony like Burroughs’ Opar. In other Tarzan stories, Burroughs utilized lost colonies from various civilizations. These colonies remained on their ancestors’ technological level. We have ancient Roman colonies, Crusader cultures etc. etc. Howard uses ancient Sumerians in this story. Many of Burroughs’ lost colonies consist of rival twin cities. Howard doesn’t follow that practice. In the Solomon Kane fragment “The Children of Asshur,” Howard also experimented with a lost Sumerian colony in Africa. In that effort, Howard stuck closer to Burroughs’ formula though he still didn’t use twin cities.

Like in “Skull-face” and “The Moon of Skulls,” there’s a tower and sacrifice when the full moon rises over the tower. This sacrifice is a bit different. It’s enlivened by Naluna’s dance which rivals Bêlit’s dance from “Queen of the Black Coast.” Also, daggers were the sacrificial weapons in the other stories. Here, sound is the weapon. It’s interesting to note the role sound and gongs play in other REH stories like “The Skull of Silence.”

“El-Lil” contains some of Howard’s favorite themes and plot elements. There’s Howard’s love of anthropological theories. There’s the degeneration of civilizations. Mentions of Turanians and Sons of Aryan are reminiscent of the Conan stories where Howard altered the latter to “the Sons of Aryas.” There’s the sweet girl in the enemy camp who falls in love with and aids a protagonist. Not only did this occur in “Skull-face,” but Naluna even strikes a pose similar to one which Zuleika used. Zenobia plays this role in *The Hour of the Dragon*. There’s reversion to the primitive. There’s music that was old when Babylon was young. There’s reincarnation. Like Bêlit, a strange otherness creeps into Conrad as he becomes obsessed with a quest which leads him to a lost city.

Like in “Skull-face,” Howard overdoes the stereotypical English accent, using the word “blooming” far too much. While Naluna’s death is sad, it’s also too convenient considering Conrad’s fiancée. There’s a patronizing comment about love blooming in the east. I liked the use of “time and eternity.” “El-Lil” has a powerful and haunting ending which leaves afterchills ala “The Phoenix on the Sword” and “The Tower of the Elephant.”

Though Howard’s development can’t be traced as accurately as it could if these stories were presented in the order Howard wrote them, one can still see Howard’s growth from the first story through the last. *The Moon of Skulls* lives up to its goals to put more accurate REH texts on the market. Howard completists, especially those who’d like his stories collected in order of publication will want this. People new to REH and who prefer hardcover editions should check this out.