

The Hall of the Dead



Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp

*If any one name is synonymous with heroic fantasy, it's Conan, the larger-than-life creation of Robert E. Howard. The storyteller from Cross Plains, Texas, gave us an enduring figure when he published seventeen tales of the barbarian swordsman in the pages of *Weird Tales* in the years of 1932-1936. One might even say that Conan is now governing the state of California in the person of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who portrayed the character in two 1980s films.*

But it's worth noting that Conan did not stride boldly across the twentieth century the way his nobly savage progenitor, Tarzan, did. Robert Howard's early death in 1936 (at the age of thirty) stunted his publishing career and through the 1940s and 1950s, Conan might best be called a cult hero. It was only in the late 1960s that Conan really began to come into his own as an icon of popular culture, due largely to the efforts of Glenn Lord, L. Sprague de Camp, and Lin Carter in reviving efforts to publish stories of the barbarian swordsman, completing unfinished Conan stories, and organizing the original tales.

"The Hall of the Dead" dates from that period, specifically early in 1967. Its original form was a 650-word outline about Conan's early life that turned up in Howard's papers. It was fleshed out by L. Sprague de Camp, whose own work in the fantasy field includes the lovely Harold Shea's "Incomplete

Enchanter” stories that first appeared in the 1940s and other classic fantasies such as The Goblin Tower and The Tritonian Ring. Mr. de Camp died in 2000 at the age of 93.

Various writers have written tales of Conan in the past twenty-five years—including Poul Anderson, Karl Edward Wagner, Roland J. Green, and Robert Jordan—but for me, Robert E. Howard’s work still packs the biggest wallop. Which makes me happy to note that his original stories are being reprinted; The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian is the first volume making these stories available again.

Incidentally, for anyone interested in more about Robert E. Howard, I recommend Dark Valley Destiny, the biography written by L. Sprague de Camp along with Catherine Crook de Camp and Jane Whittington Griffn. The 1996 film about Howard’s romance with Novalyne Price Ellis, The Whole Wide World, is also recommended highly.

The gorge was dark, although the setting sun had left a band of orange and yellow and green, along the western horizon. Against this band of color, a sharp eye could still discern, in black silhouette, the domes and spires of Shadizar the Wicked, the city of dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery—the capital of Zamora.

As the twilight faded, the first few stars appeared overhead. As if answering a signal, lights winked on in the distant domes and spires. While the light of the stars was pale and wan, that of the windows of Shadizar was a sultry amber, with a hint of abominable deeds.

The gorge was quiet save for the chirping of nocturnal insects. Presently, however, this silence was broken by the sound of moving men. Up the gorge came a squad of Zamorian soldiers—five men in plain steel caps and leather jerkins, studded with bronze buttons, led by an officer in a polished bronze cuirass and a helmet with a towering horsehair crest. Their bronze-greaved legs