



BOOK REVIEW:

*Weird Talers: Essays on Robert E Howard
and Others*

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Derie, Bobby. *Weird Talers: Essays on Robert E Howard and Others*. Hippocampus Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1614982586.

In *The Secret Life of Puppets* Victoria Nelson describes pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* as the “Ur-source of modern American popular literature and film” (103). If this slightly bold statement may be accepted, it is odd that *Weird Tales* is so often discussed (as in Nelson’s book) within the context of scholarship on H. P. Lovecraft, whose wordy evocations of abstract existential peril were atypical of the magazine’s content. Although Bobby Derie’s book is a collection of essays of literary biography rather than of literary or cultural criticism, it arguably corrects this oddity by the simple virtue of the fact that Derie has chosen to place Robert E. Howard at the centre of his discussion of the contributors to the “unique magazine”.

The sections of the book in which Derie ventures into literary criticism are some of the best. In “The Shadow Out of Spain”, for example, he goes into detail on Howard’s discussions with Lovecraft about race, interestingly withholding his own judgement and letting the less sensible aspects of this discourse speak for themselves via extensive block quotations. Derie then examines the downstream effect of these racial ideas on Howard’s writing in regard to his depiction of Mexico and Mexicans in his Western stories such as “Pilgrims of the Pecos” (1936) and “The Horror from the Mound” (1932). Derie therefore demonstrates these two writers never “re-examined their fundamental prejudices”, not by clutching his pearls, but by examining the impact of their unenlightened attitudes on their (and centrally Howard’s) work. This approach successfully covers an inflammatory issue in a measured,

undramatic way, showing that Howard's racism manifested itself primarily in stories focalised by "casually racist" characters such as Steve Brill. This is a constructive way of approaching an unpleasant elephant in the room, and *Weird Talers* might have benefitted from more material in this vein. That the other essays in the book follow other approaches, however, should not be taken as a fault. This is not a work of literary criticism per se but an effort to place Howard in the role Lovecraft so often fills – the centre of an epistolary network of *Weird Tales* contributors – and to examine how this coterie functioned through their professional and personal relationships.

In this pursuit Derie records some of the nuts and bolts of life as a professional author in the second quarter of the 20th century. In his essay "Conan and the OAK: Robert E. Howard and Otis Adelbert Kline", he examines Howard's working relationship with the author-turned-agent who helped him crack markets such as *Action Stories* and *Strange Detective Stories*. This relationship was "so-so" (165), with Kline earning his commission handily in some instances but not at all in others. The essay reveals how a hardened professional like Howard went about his business. This combines to good effect with other essays showing that, while Howard may have abjured Lovecraft's mannered intellectualism, he was a shrewd autodidact who carefully researched the matters about which he presumed to write. The opening essay of Derie's collection, for example, retells the famous story of how Howard and Lovecraft became acquainted after the former author caught the latter out on an obscure point of linguistics. Derie ably evokes the dynamic between Howard's care about doing a quality job and the necessity to get that job done at a rate of "one to two stories a month" (164). It is to Derie's considerable credit that he portrays this matter as a dynamic rather than a tension. Unlike S. T. Joshi lambasting the "aesthetic ruination" (424) of Robert W. Chambers's mimetic fiction, Derie never judges Howard for exploring genres other than the fantasy on which his reputation chiefly rests. This agnosticism of genre provides a fuller, and perhaps more accurate, portrait than would have been possible if Derie had simply set out to study the creator of Conan. The aforementioned discussion of "The Shadow Out of Spain" is one case in point. Meanwhile, Derie's essays "That Fool Olsen" and "Conan and the Dweller: Robert E. Howard and William Lumley" are sprightly, entertaining demonstrations that speculative fiction writers have been pestered by lifestyle fantasists since the early days of the tradition.

Unfortunately, *Weird Talers* also has some significant flaws. The essays have been only lightly re-edited into their collected forms, and there is a fair amount of repetition of material. Some block quotes reappear in multiple chapters over the course of the book. A little extra work might have streamlined things, perhaps imparting some shape or overall thesis to the content, which could have then sharpened the impact of individual pieces. Derie's discussion of Howard's interactions with Clark Ashton Smith concludes with a "Conjectural Timeline of Correspondence" that aids the reader in thinking through the essay. No such guide helps the reader through the other essays. This is a sometimes frustrating omission, as in the case of the essay "The Two Bobs", in which Derie tackles the relationship between Howard and Robert H. Barlow, a figure whose importance in the development of American fantasy has yet to be fully elucidated. The absence of any appendix on exactly who was who within this circle is also regrettable. A non-specialist in the field, looking to this

book for an introduction to the Weird Talers, could be forgiven for needing explicit explanations for who Barlow, Frank Belknap Long, or Seabury Quinn were. Although Derie does provide *in situ* introductions to some of these people (the one on Quinn is praiseworthy), some sort of explicit list of dramatis personae or body of author notes, such as that found in Douglas Anderson's *Tales Before Tolkien* (2003), would have been useful. The absence of expository addenda pushes the focus of the book back towards Howard, who assumes a much clearer shape than the overall *Weird Tales* circle Derie takes as his titular subject matter.

The ratio of reproduced correspondence to Derie's discussion thereof is another issue. Derie presents a series of essays, but there are times in which it seems he would have preferred to annotate a collection of letters. There is a three-page section of *Weird Tales* in which he offers only eight lines of commentary on three enormous block quotes. Annotations to the letters of literary figures are – depending on the subject – noble things. The *Weird Tales*, writers acquainted with each other predominantly by mail, would be appropriate subjects for such treatment. One could easily imagine multiple volumes of annotated letters, perhaps one each focussing on a major member of the circle, in the manner of Hippocampus Press's existing collections of the essays of Lovecraft. Hippocampus would be the obvious publisher to handle such a project, and Derie the obvious writer to produce it for them. This would possibly have been a more rewarding project for author and reader alike. Although there is plenty of creditable material in Derie's current book, the curation of the individual parts into a collected whole seems lacking.

This being the case, *Weird Tales* is nevertheless an interesting look at a group of imaginations who stand – per Victoria Nelson – as forerunners to contemporary speculative fiction stars like George R. R. Martin and Suzanne Collins. Derie's book provides a serious, non-judgemental look at an easily trivialised or overlooked episode of cultural history. Although Howard perhaps unduly dominates the discussion, the shift of focus away from Lovecraft and towards the other *Weird Tales* offers a fresh and potentially highly valuable perspective on the topic. Derie also offers some insights into the professional life of one of modern fantasy's more kinetic imaginations, demonstrating how Howard worked and how his work brought him into contact with other writers. Although sometimes frustrating, the book is a worthwhile addition to fantasy studies that merits consideration by those researching both Howard and the American fantasy tradition in general.

Biography: Dr. Joseph Rex Young lives and works in Dunedin, New Zealand, where he pursues research interests in the intellectual history and formalistic structure of the modern fantasy narrative. He has produced various publications in this field, most notably the book *George R. R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* (Routledge, 2019).

Works Cited

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