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TWO-GUN MUSKETEER: ROBERT E. HOWARD'S *WEIRD* *TALES*, by Mark Finn

The history of *Weird Tales* magazine is written not by the editors, but by the authors who appeared in its pages. Of all the celebrated authors that have seen print in “The Unique Magazine” “. . . That Refuses to Die,” the most influential and important writers to call *Weird Tales* their literary home were the “Three Musketeers:” H.P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert E. Howard.

The youngest of the trio, and also the last one to break into *Weird Tales*, Howard brought his own strengths to the magazine’s pool of talent. Smith was already gaining popularity as a poet of some renown. Lovecraft’s work, even prior to “The Call of Cthulhu,” wasn’t like anything else being done at the time; imaginative and thought provoking.

Howard was full of clever and interesting ideas, and he was himself an accomplished poet, it would be easy to say that he was a kind of amalgamation of the two authors. However, Howard turned those traits on the axis of something that would become a trademark of his writing: his flair for action. No one could write stirring, visceral action like Howard, whether it was two men fighting a duel of honor or rival armies clashing for glory. His deftly penned prose and poetry made him one of the most popular writers in the magazine.

And it’s no wonder, considering that Howard created his most famous characters and brought them to life for the *Weird Tales* audience: Solomon Kane, King Kull, Bran Mak Morn, and later, the most famous of them all, Conan the Cimmerian. Howard invented the sword and sorcery tale as we define it with his genre-breaking Solomon Kane, and he continued to refine his idea of a good story—fast

action, supernatural goings-on, and compelling characters to hang his plots on—with each new manuscript, each new series.

“You gave me my start in the racket by buying my first story—‘Spear and Fang,’” wrote Howard to editor Farnsworth Wright in 1931. “I was eighteen years old at the time.” He sold the story to Wright in 1924, but it didn’t see print until the following year. Howard kept trying to write for other markets, but no one was willing to take a chance on the young, unknown writer from Texas. Wright, however, kept buying Howard’s work, and wrote encouraging things to him. Soon, Howard had three stories scheduled to appear in the magazine—but no money to show for it, as *Weird Tales* paid on publication, not acceptance.

Howard grudgingly returned to college in nearby Brownwood, seeking a diploma in bookkeeping. While at Howard Payne University, he cranked out several humorous sketches for the college newspaper, *The Yellow Jacket*. He also wrote numerous poems and the occasional story, many of which were submitted to *Weird Tales* and other pulps. During the time Howard attended college, his stories and poems were finally appearing in print. Encouraged, he started working on the stories that would later catapult him to the top of Wright’s stable of writers—stories of Solomon Kane and King Kull.

With the publication of “Red Shadows” in 1928, Howard became a literary force to be reckoned with. Who was this Solomon Kane, anyway? A sword-wielding Puritan, fighting pirates and witch doctors in the 17th century? Such a story had never been done before. Horror stories were cheap and plentiful in *Weird Tales*. Wright reprinted classics from the likes of Poe, in addition to buying new stories from authors writing contemporary horrors. And the historical adventure was certainly nothing new, either. The historical romance was alive and well in the 1920’s, both in classic literature and more modern fare, and even at the movies.

Howard invented sword and sorcery (or if you prefer, heroic fantasy) by combining the two genres. It seems simple and elementary now, but at the time, Howard was stepping out into uncharted territory by taking his love of history (a love shared by Farnsworth

Wright) and sprinkling in strange and unexplained events with the intent of having them directly engage the characters. The results were dynamite. Howard had a hit on his hands.

As well liked as the stories were, Wright didn't publish all of the Solomon Kane yarns that Howard sent him. A capricious editor, he rejected Howard's offerings as often as he accepted them. Rather than be discouraged by this, Howard took it in stride and reworked the stories and submitted to different pulps. If they came back again, Howard simply changed tactics and wrote about new characters.

Taking the sword and sorcery concept one step further, Howard then created King Kull in the story, "The Shadow Kingdom." This time, he completely removed any semblance of the world we know and set the tales so far in the past that Atlantis was alive and kicking (and a tribal, barbaric continent boot). Kull is himself an Atlantean, and a usurper of the throne of Valusia. With a detailed, if fictitious setting and a strong, savage character, Howard crafted several stories of court intrigue, wizardry, and breathtaking action. Even fewer Kull stories were printed in *Weird Tales*, but they are a vital link to the Conan stories that followed.

Weird Tales was the mainstay of Howard's career, a place where he could experiment with new story forms and ideas. Howard frequently crossed genres, and because of the magazine's loosely defined theme and generous reader comments in every issue, he was able to get a sense of what worked and what didn't. Many of those readers who commented about Howard's work were fellow authors, and the ringleader of these *Weird Tales* writers was H. P. Lovecraft. A recluse living in Providence, Rhode Island, he kept a voluminous correspondence with authors, poets, and fans, and through this correspondence was a tremendous influence on a generation of writers, including Robert E. Howard.

Their correspondence and friendship is legendary. Through the initial fan letter that Lovecraft sent Howard, Howard was able to meet and correspond with Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, and other members of what would eventually be known as "The Lovecraft Circle." They traded poetry and drawings, shared stories with