

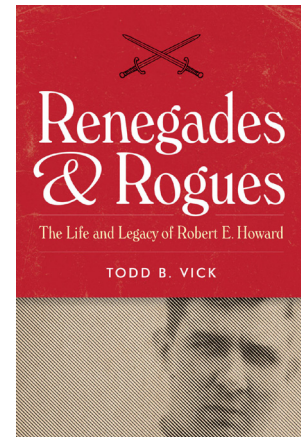
Renegades and Rogues: The Life and Legacy of Robert E. Howard, by Todd B. Vick



William Perpétuo Busch

Vick, Todd B. *Renegades and Rogues: The Life and Legacy of Robert E. Howard*. University of Texas Press, 2021. Hardcover. 266 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9781477321959. Ebook ISBN 9781477321973

In this book, Todd B. Vick manages to offer a biography of Robert E. Howard that marks a new phase for academic scholarship about Howard. Previously, the main reference for Howard's life was the biography written by L. Sprague de Camp, Catherine Crook de Camp, and Jane W. Griffin, *Dark Valley Destiny: The Life of Robert E. Howard* (1983), which was problematic for a number of different reasons. Mark Finn's book about Howard, *Blood and Thunder* (2006), pointed out the mistakes of the early biographers and how they tried to fit Howard into a psychoanalytic narrative that justified their own interpretations. Vick's work extends the road that was paved by Finn, but this is not done with just the addition of a mere series of events that are described. On the contrary, Vick employs a vast array of sources to establish the details of Howard's life. This is the strong point of the book, as Vick does not try to hide his own interpretation of Howard's work. The narrative is sensitive to the interaction between context and the literature. Organized in 14 chapters, the book starts with Howard's mother and father's life and recounts how they were constantly moving and traveling. This documentation of Howard's early life as one of constant movement allows the reader to understand how Texas was important in the development of Howard's personality and literature. In the second chapter, Vick reveals how Howard's later stories were inspired by the lives and experiences of people that told him their stories when he was young. Two of these were former slaves: Mary Bohannon and Arabella Davis.



The first twelve chapters explore Howard's life; the final two explore its aftermath and Howard's father organizing the material left by his son. Vick posits an amateur phase (1919-1923) for Howard's career that was mostly reconstructed from Howard's correspondence with a small circle of friends. The defining element of this phase is the circulation of his stories in school newspapers. The second phase covers his early fiction (1924-1928), in which Howard experimented with different genres in a moment where most of his work was rejected by the more prestigious magazines, or the *slicks*. Swift acceptance into the *pulps* was achieved with "Spear and Fang" for *Weird Fiction* in 1925 and opened the way for a new market.

The third phase (1928-1932) opened with the creation of characters such as Solomon Kane and Kull of Atlantis, as Howard's fantasy worlds converged, sharing a similar historical and mythological background. The correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft that started in 1930 revealed their shared interest in history while at the same time served to connect Howard with other authors and editors. From this new network, Howard managed to establish a position as a writer and gradually expanded his stories to the final period (1932-1936), where adventure fantasy would slowly open the way for the production of westerns. The transition point was "Beyond the Black River" (1935). Vick identifies the development of this western story with a barbarian as the main character as advancing Howard's argument that barbarism was not negative but the final triumph and the natural state of man.

After the twelve chapters close with the aftermath of Howard's death, the following chapter offers an analysis of some stories. Since most of the material was already covered in the book, it's interesting to see the development of Vick's interpretations. However, the problem is the final chapter, as it tries to deal with a different question that demands by itself a whole new book. The chapter centers on the circulation, publication, editing and appropriation of Howard's work by other authors (including de Camp), and also the adaptations of the stories to different types of media. Different from the rest of the book where the literature was understood with a sensibility to the context of its production, the shift is dramatic.

Robert E. Howard was a racist. Vick acknowledges that by showing how Howard's views were different from those of Novalyne Price, who was a teacher of English in Cross Plains High School and a writer. Price confronted Howard, revealing his racist and sexist view of society. This brings into focus the early comments about the impact of Bohannon and Davis, the former slaves from whom Howard heard stories. The story "Black Canaan" that appeared in *Weird Tales* (June 1936) was racist and revealed Howard's view that slavery was wrong because it was responsible for practices of miscegenation that produced a "mongrel race." However, Howard's racism is contextualized by pointing out that Howard was born into a racist society. Vick tries to discuss the topic of race by pointing out that racist stereotypes are common in stories of the period.

It's important to point out that Vick doesn't want (or try) to justify Howard's racism. His objective is to propose the relevance of Howard's work to American Literature. However, because he does not face the issue of racism on the first page, the result is problematic. The names of Bohannon and Davis serve as tokens that put into evidence the problem of how a white man created a narrative from black experiences and didn't credit them in public. Howard's racism was central in his network of relations and played an important role (the case of Novalyne Price is exemplary), but Vick avoids it. This implies that there is not a very deep exploration of how Howard's racism changed (if it did) in his works. This could serve as a connection to the material of the final chapter—when Howard's work influenced the rest of the twentieth century, did this racist content change? Does Conan in the magazines and movies share these stereotypes? How have they impacted the constitution of the genre of sword-and-sorcery? I ask these questions as a Brazilian scholar—from a country that structured itself by reacting to the process of miscegenation

with a eugenic politics of "branqueamento" [whitening] that lead to the reinforcement of structural racism. In Howard's view, I'm the "mongrel." So these are not "political correctness" inquiries but ones not only important to the future of Howard's scholarship but also that must be answered.

Willian Perpétuo Busch is a Brazilian Ph.D. Candidate in Universidade Federal do Paraná working on the history of Science Fiction in American Academia.