

SOLOMON KANE

Solomon Kane is perhaps Robert E. Howard's first great adventure hero. Though Bran Mak Morn was created earlier, the few stories featuring him did not see print until after Kane, who debuted in the August 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*. The story (now titled "Red Shadows," but at the time appearing simply as "Solomon Kane") introduced readers to a grim Puritan wanderer who viewed himself as God's instrument of justice and vengeance against evildoers.

Howard, of course, was the creator of Conan, King Kull, and dozens of other characters. Despite the similarities among these heroes, they are hardly carbon copies of each other. We've written about Conan and Kull in previous issues, but to summarize: the Conan tales are essentially action-driven, whereas the Kull stories have a strong introspective bent. What they both contain—as with all of Howard's good fiction—is an ability to bring the reader *into* the action. One gets the sense that Howard isn't so much writing *about* these characters as he is living through them. This brings a vibrancy to the tales lacking in so much fiction (particularly science fiction and heroic fantasy). In the recent film *The Whole Wide World*, Vincent D'Onofrio, playing Howard, has several scenes in which he mesmerizingly portrays the writer composing his works by immersing himself into the fantasy world. Some of this may be dramatic license, but it captures the intensity of Howard's work.

The Solomon Kane stories are quite different from the usual heroic fantasy fare. The character himself is immensely fascinating. Kane is a master swordsman and fighter living during the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. Born in Devon, England, he spends most of his life outside the country—in part to escape the persecution of Queen Elizabeth upon the Puritans, and in part because of his innate restlessness. Many of his adventures take



Barry Windsor-Smith's Solomon Kane

"moody, dream-like quality." The moodiness of the Kane work is not dreamy; instead, it has an intense, unrelenting atmosphere that is rare in fiction. Whereas the themes of Kull are metaphysical puzzles and conspiratorial intrigue, Kane is about obsession.

The obsession is presented immediately even in "Red Shadows." In one of Howard's most harrowing scenes, Kane is wandering through the French countryside when he finds a girl near death who has been raped and stabbed by Le Loup, "the Wolf," whose men burned and pillaged her town. As she dies, Kane gives himself a mission:

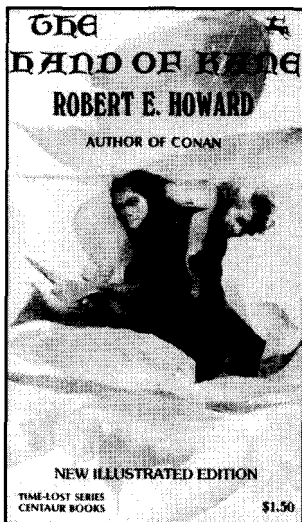
Slowly [Kane] rose, mechanically wiping his hands upon his cloak. A dark scowl had settled on his somber brow. Yet he made no wild, reckless vow, swore no oath by saints or devils.

"Men shall die for this," he said coldly.

It takes several years for Kane finally to kill Le Loup—eventually tracking him down in Africa. Indirectly, readers easily recognize Kane's fanatical drive to obtain justice. But Howard also states Kane's sense of mission directly:

A hunger in his soul drove him on and on, an urge to right all wrongs, protect all weaker things, avenge all crimes against right and justice. Wayward and restless as the wind, he was consis-

'Robert E. Howard, "Red Shadows," *Solomon Kane* (New York: Baen, 1995), p. 26.



Above (l-r): three Centaur/Peter Haddock paperbacks; the 1978 Grant hardback. All cover art by Jeff Jones.

tent in only one respect—he was true to his ideals of justice and right. Such was Solomon Kane.²

Kane himself understands his role, yet here the character is different from Howard's other heroes because of the basis of his passion for justice. Kane explains,

"[A]lone I am a weak creature, having no strength of might in me; yet in times past hath God made me a great vessel of wrath and a sword of deliverance. And, I trust, shall do so again."³

And later:

"I work the will of God. While evil flourishes and wrongs grow rank, while men are persecuted and women wronged, while weak things, human or animal, are maltreated, there is no rest for me beneath the skies, nor peace at any board or bed."⁴

As king, Kull would occasionally have to face some matter of dispute presented to him, but he usually found these concerns tiresome and distracting. Moreover, his sense of justice was founded on essentially common-sense principles of general agreement. Solomon Kane is quite different. His mission of justice is all-consuming and an integral aspect of his understanding of himself as a Puritan. This gives the Kane work an underpinning of moral absolutism that is missing from the adventures of Kull and Conan. Kane attributes the evil around him to the machinations of Satan, and Kane sees himself as God's emissary to battle such wickedness.

²Howard, "The Moon of Skulls," *Solomon Kane*, p. 107.

³Ibid., p. 138.

⁴Howard, "Blades of the Brotherhood," *Solomon Kane*, p. 175.

Howard suggests that to some extent Kane is using his Puritanism as a cover for his natural desire for battle and adventure—Howard describes him as "a knight errant in the somber clothes of a fanatic."⁵ Nevertheless the truly surprising aspect of the Solomon Kane stories is that the character is not treated in a condescending way by the writer. Howard seems to admire the man, even though Howard's theology did not match those of his character.⁶ This fact makes these stories all the more amazing, at least when read in the present day. One can imagine a current writer—if conceiving of the character and setting at all—treating the stories as allegory, or as excuses to make snide comments about sincere (even extremely sincere) beliefs. (Nowadays, nihilism, cynicism, and ironic distance are the only protected ideologies; everything else presuming to assert absolute truth is considered to be "dangerous fanaticism.") But Howard will not condescend to his cre-

⁵Howard, "The Moon of Skulls,"* p. 107.

⁶Marc Cerasini and Charles Hoffman describe Howard as neither Christian nor atheist, but probably somewhere in-between—a deist or agnostic. See their book *Robert E. Howard* (Mercer Island, Wash.: Starmont House, 1987). p. 27.



The first comic adaptation of a REH Solomon Kane story: "Skulls in the Stars" from *Monsters Unleashed!* (Art by Ralph Reese)

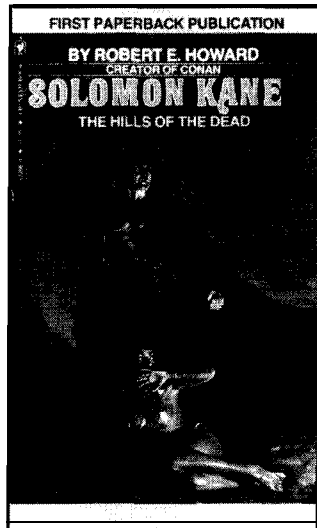
© 1973 Marvel Comics Group

ation—even a creation with which he does not share an ideology. All of these—the fascinating character, the setting, the unrelenting moodiness, and Howard's passionate, active writing style that propels the reader into the story—make Solomon Kane an engrossing read.

Kane appears in sixteen of Howard's writings, ranging from uncompleted story fragments to short stories to poems. A general history can be worked out for the character. The probable close of the saga appears in a haunting, melancholy poem entitled "Solomon Kane's Homecoming,"* which finds the hero returning to Devon after years of travel, intending to settle down and rest. But such does not come easy for a born wanderer who sees his life as an instrument of Gods calling.

Solomon Kane in Print

Most of the Kane stories were published by *Weird Tales* during Howard's lifetime. *Skull-Face and Others*, a Howard anthology published by Arkham House in 1946, contained four Kane stories. It was not until Howard's revival in the sixties, however (with the publication of Lancer's Conan paperbacks) that REH material became readily available. Because of the success of Conan, much of Howard's other work hit the presses. For Solomon Kane, that came in the form of a book published by Donald M. Grant in 1968. Beautifully illustrated with Jeff Jones color paintings, *Red Shadows* contained all of the Kane material except one fragment. (Another edition came out in 1978 containing all new Jones paintings.) Later the work was collected in three paperbacks (with Jones covers): *The Moon of Skulls*, *The Hand of Kane*,



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Above (l-r): the Bantam and Baen paperbacks. Art by (unidentified); Bob Larkin; C. W. Kelly



Alan Weiss and Neal Adams's stunning art from *Kull and the Barbarians 2*

and Solomon Kane. A few years later, Bantam again collected the stories in a pair of paperbacks, but this time the unfinished stories were completed by Ramsey Campbell. Finally, in 1995, Baen Books reprinted these two editions into a single volume as part of their "Robert E. Howard Library" series. This book is still in print.

When Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian* comics became popular in the seventies, other Howard characters were bound to end up with their own publications. *Kull* came first (see *Spectrum 11* for the details), and Solomon Kane soon followed. His first appearance was in one of Marvel's black-and-white monster magazines, *Monsters Unleashed! 1*, in July 1973—an adaptation of "Skulls in the Stars" by Roy Thomas, with art by Ralph Reese. Three months later, Kane popped up in *Dracula Lives 3*. In this strange, original story by Thomas and Alan Weiss, Kane finds himself in Transylvania and soon ends up fighting



Bemí Wrightson's Kane from a moody illustration in *Kull and the Barbarians 2*.

Count Dracula. It's a disappointing story saved by some fine artwork.

Weiss would return to provide some stunning art for an adaptation of "The Hills of the Dead" in *Kull and the Barbarians 1* (May 1975). Aided by beautiful Neal Adams inks, this story remains to this day the finest comic book portrayal of the Puritan adventurer—and one of the finest portrayals in any medium. (Later that year Weiss would provide some extraordinary Kane illustrations for the Howard fanzine *REH: Lone Star Fictioneer*: 7)

After Weiss's work, the Kane adaptations have been extremely hit-or-miss. Perhaps the most bizarre interpretation of the character was by Howard Chaykin in *Marvel Premiere*, where he gave Kane a black-and-yellow striped shirt and other odd attire. In *Savage Sword of Conan*, Steve Gan, Mike Zeck, and Chaykin contributed interesting Kane interpretations, but the situation deteriorated quickly as a string of lesser-talented artists gave the character a shot. (In issue 26 from January 1978, Don Glut even wrote a forgettable sequel to the Kane/Dracula story from five years before in which the two fought a rematch.) One bright spot appeared in *SSOC 162* (July 1989). In addition to a wonderful Conan/Kane cover by Dorian, the issue featured a lengthy adaptation of "Solomon Kane's Homecoming" by artists Steve Carr and Al Williamson.

Solomon Kane's only solo series was published in 1985-86 and turned out quite well. Of the six issues, four adapted Howard's stories, and two contained original stories by Ralph Macchio. With art by Steve Carr, Bret Blevins, Mike Mignola, Jon Bagdanove, John Ridgeway, Sandy Plunkett, and Al Williamson, every issue was a treat. (And fine covers by Kevin Nowlan, Bill Sienkiewicz, and others didn't hurt, either.) Perhaps the real surprise was issue 4, "The Prophet," an interesting,

7REH:LSF 1 (Spring 1975) contained a Kane cover by Steve Fabian, a Kane illustration by Herb Arnold, and a Kane fragment. Issue 2 (Summer 1975) contained a Weiss double-page pin-up from "Red Shadows." Issue 3 (Fall 1975) contained a Weiss wrap-around cover of Kane and a "Wings in the Night" portfolio inside, plus a Kane illustration by Arnold Fenner.



Kane meets Count Dracula in *Dracula Lives! 3* (Art by Alan Weiss)

original story with exceptional artwork by Mignola and Williamson.

A beautiful piece of Solomon Kane art was created by Barry Windsor-Smith in 1975 as part of his "Robert E. Howard Portfolio." Kane, Conan, Bran Mak Morn, Thoth Amon, and Valeria of the Red Brotherhood were depicted in a set of limited

edition color prints. The Kane piece not only displays Windsor-Smith's mastery of design and composition but also perfectly captures the character's grim determination. His ornately-carved staff in hand, eyes slightly downcast but gazing ahead, and walking along against a backdrop of a starry night, Kane's moody disposition is clearly evident.



Howard Chaykin's Kane

Also in 1975, Jeff Jones turned in a pen-and-ink drawing of Kane for some Middle Earth portfolio. We don't know if the portfolio was ever published, although one plate (number 4) ended up in circulation.

Solomon Kane has been fortunate over the years to have an astonishingly high quality of illustrators. Now, in 1998, Gary Gianni tosses his artistic hat into the arena. It is a worthy successor to the tradition of exceptional Solomon Kane art.



Gary Gianni's Kane

Solomon Kane Index

BOOKS

SKULL-FACE AND OTHERS

(General Howard anthology)

1946; Arkham House: Hannes Bok dust jacket art

1975; Neville Spearman
Skulls in the Stars/Rattle of Bones/The Hills of the Dead/Wings in the Night

ALWAYS COMBS EVENING

(Anthology of poetry)

1957; Arkham House

1977; Underwood-Miller
Solomon Kane's Homecoming

RED SHADOWS

all editions Donald M. Grant

1968; 1971; Jeff Jones dust jacket and interior art

1978: new Jeff Jones dust jacket and illustrations

THE MOON OF SKULLS

1969; Centaur Press: Jeff Jones cover

1972; Peter Haddock Ltd.: Jeff Jones cover

THE HAND OF KANE

1970; Centaur Press: Jeff Jones cover

1972; Peter Haddock Ltd.: Jeff Jones cover

SOLOMON KANE

1971; Centaur Press: Jeff Jones cover

1972; Peter Haddock Ltd.: Jeff Jones cover

SOLOMON KANE: SKULLS IN THE STARS

1978; Bantam

SOLOMON KANE: THE HILLS OF THE DEAD

1979; Bantam; Bob Larkin cover

SOLOMON KANE

1995; Baen: C.W. Kelly cover

COMICS

(We aren't positive that this list is one hundred percent complete, though it should be fairly close. All published by Marvel Comics unless noted. An asterisk *preceeding a title means that the comic adapts a Howard Solomon Kane story)

BLACKTHORNE 3-D SERIES

#60 Blackthorne Publishing

Solomon Kane in 3-D (probably a reprint, but we don't have a copy of this on hand)

DRACULA LIVES!

#3 October 1973

Castle of the Undead by Roy Thomas, Alan Weiss, and the Crusty Bunkers

KULL AND THE BARBARIANS

#1 May 1975

Kane illustration by Neal Adams

#2 July 1975

**The Hills of the Dead* by Roy Thomas, Alan Weiss, and Neal Adams

Kane illustration by Berni Wrightson

#3 September 1975

**Into the Silent City* ("The Hills of the Dead") by Thomas, Weiss, and Pablo Marcos

Kane/Kull/Red Sonja cover by Michael Whelan

MARVEL PREMIERE

#33 December 1976

**The Mark of Kane!* ("Red Shadows") by Roy Thomas and Howard Chaykin

#34 February 1977

**Fangs of the Gorilla God!* ("Red Shadows") by Roy Thomas and Howard Chaykin

MARVEL PREVIEW

#19 Summer 1979

**The Footfalls Within* by Don Glut, Will Meugniot, and Steve Gan

MONSTERS UNLEASHED!

#1 July 1973

**Skulk in the Stars* by Roy Thomas and Ralph Reese

SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN

#13 July 1976

**The Right Hand of Doom* by Doug Moench and Steve Gan

#14 September 1976

The Silver Beast Beyond Torkertown by Moench and Mike Zeck

#18 April 1977

**Rattle of Bones* by Roy Thomas and Howard Chaykin

#19 June 1977

**Castle of the Devil* by Don Glut, Alan Kupperberg, and Sonny Trinidad
Kane illustration by John Buscema

#20 July 1977

'Solomon Kane's Homecoming by Virgilio Redondo and Rudy Nebres

#22 September 1977

The Dragon at Castle Frankenstein by Glut and Sonny Trinidad

Kane illustration by Howard Chaykin

#25 December 1977

The Cold Hands of Death by Glut, Steve Gan, and Dino Castrillo

#26 January 1978

Retribution in Bloody by Glut and David Wenzel

#33 September 1978

**Blades of the Brotherhood* by Glut, Wenzel, and Duffy Vohland

#34 October 1978

**Moon of Skulls* by Glut, Wenzel, and Bill Wray

#35 February 1979

**Moon of Skulls, Part 2* by Glut and Wenzel

#39 April 1979

**Moon of Skulls, Part 3* by Glut and Wenzel

#41 June 1979

**The Return of Sir Richard Grenville* by Wenzel

#52 May 1980

Kane illustration by Ernie Chan

#53 June 1980

**Wings in the Night* by Glut and Wenzel

#54 July 1980

**Wings in the Night, Part 2* by Glut and Wenzel

#61 February 1981

Kane illustration by Gene Day

#62 March 1981

**The One Black Stain* by Wenzel

#83 December 1982

Red Seas by Mary Jo Duffy and Danny Bulanadi

#162 July 1989

**Solomon Kane's Homecoming* by Steve Carr and Al Williamson

Conan/Kane cover by Dorian

#171 March 1990

Shattered Innocence by John Arcudi, Carr, and Williamson

SOLOMON KANE (The Sword of-)

1 September 1985

**Red Shadows* by Ralph Macchio, Steve Carr, and Bret Blevins

Cover by Bret Blevins

#2 November 1985

And Faith, Undying.. by Macchio and Blevins
Cover by Kevin Nowlan

#3 January 1986

**Blades of the Brotherhood* by Macchio, Blevins, and Al Williamson

Cover by Bill Sienkiewicz

#4 March 1986

The Prophet by Macchio, Mike Mignola, and Williamson
Cover by Mignola

#5 May 1986

**Hills of the Dead* by Macchio, Jon Bogdanove, and Williamson

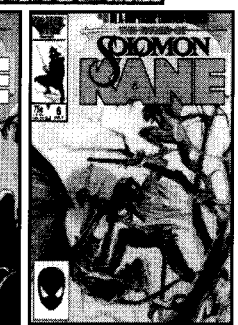
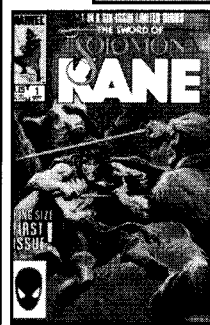
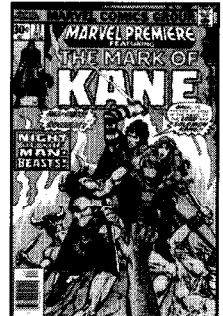
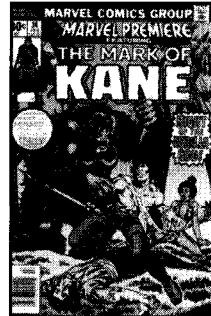
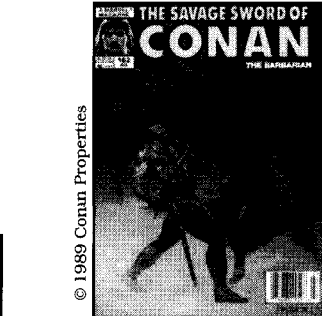
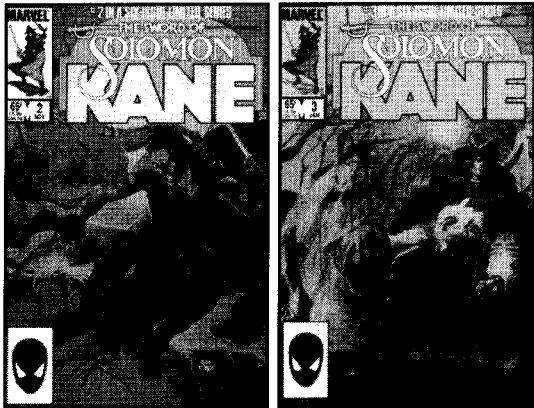
Cover by Frank Cirocco

#6 July 1986

**Wings in the Night* by Macchio, John Ridgeway, and Williamson

**Solomon Kane's Homecoming* by Sandy Plunkett and Williamson

Cover by Dan Green



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