

# REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

## I DIDN'T WRITE IT

These are the opening paragraphs of one of the most famous fantasy novellas ever written:

\* \* \*

The weather beaten trail wound ahead into the dust racked climes of the baren land which dominates large portions of the Norgolian empire. Age worn hoof prints smothered by the sifting sands shone dully against the dust splattered crust of earth. The tireless sun cast its parching rays of incandescence from overhead, halfway through the daily revolution. Small rodents scampered about, occupying themselves in the daily accomplishments of their dismal lives. Dust sprayed over three heaving mounts in blinding clouds, while they bore the burdensome cargoes of their struggling overseers.

“Prepare to embrace your creators in the stygian haunts of hell, barbarian!” gasped the first soldier.

“Only after you have kissed the fleeting stead of death, wretch!” returned Grignr.

\* \* \*

All that is strictly *sic* unless our copy editor is unable to resist filling in the various missing hyphens and correcting the spelling errors. And, no, I didn't write it, not even in my ambitious early teens when I was scrawling undistinguished imitations of the pulp stories I was reading in *Amazing Stories* in my school notebook. (I always got top marks for spelling and grammar.) Nor did George R.R. Martin write it when he was nine years old, nor is this some juvenile effort of J.R.R. Tolkien, nor is it what it most resembles, one of the tales of Conan the Conqueror written in the 1930s by Robert E. Howard. No, it is the work of a writer you have never heard of, James F. Theis (1953-2002).

Why, then, do I call it one of the most famous fantasy novellas ever written?

Because, year after year for many decades now, science fiction fans have gathered late at night at SF conventions to read it aloud, performing it with great intensity to eager groups thrilling to every word. It has been reprinted time and again, most recently in 2022 in a handsome paperback edition published by Fantastic Books of Brooklyn, New York, under the title of *The Eye of Argon and the Further Adventures of Grignr the Barbarian*. And it is easily found, I'm sure, all over the Internet. *The Eye of Argon* is an extraordinary work, which connoisseurs of fantasy fiction have almost unanimously agreed is the worst work of its genre ever written. I've recently re-read it and I can concur with that dark accolade—adding the proviso that I found it, once again, immensely entertaining in its strange way. I commend it to you now.

Jim Theis, the author of this remarkable story, was just sixteen years old when he wrote *The Eye of Argon*. It was published, copied verbatim from his barely literate text, in August 1970, in a fan magazine called *Osfan*, the publication of the Ozark Science Fiction Association. Somehow a copy of the magazine found its way to the science fiction writer Thomas Scortia, who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, and he told his friends about it, reading choice sections of it aloud to them. Copies of the story fell into the hands of other SF fans after that, leading to the late-night ritual reading of the story at many science fiction conventions. Fan journalist Dave Langford describes the ritual this way:

"The challenge of death at SF conventions is to read *The Eye of Argon* aloud, straight-faced, without choking and falling over." Strict rules include not laughing and reading all mistakes exactly as written. Making it through three quarters of a page is considered an extraordinary accomplishment. Scortia's copy of the original Ozark magazine was missing the final page of the story, which left it to various readers to invent their own endings to the saga of Grignr the Barbarian, but in 2005 a copy of the magazine turned up in the Jack Williamson Science Fiction Library at Eastern New Mexico University, and great was the excitement when the wonderfully gory climax of the tale was at last revealed.

This was dismayed at first to learn that this work of his teen years had become the subject of annual mockery at gatherings of fans, but gradually he came to accept the distinction of having written the worst fantasy story in history in good humor, and even began showing up at some of the readings himself. He wrote only one other fantasy story, "Son of Grafan," published in 1972, but went on to get a degree in journalism and worked successfully in that field until his early death at the age of forty-eight.

*The Eye of Argon* is a marvel of misspellings, malapropisms, mispunctuations, and other follies that mark its author as a teenager who has not been paying much attention in his English classes. I could quote all day, like any other fan of the story, from my favorite goofs. The brilliant jewel around which the plot revolves is described as "a scintillating, many fauceted emerald." The final scene tells us how the Eye "slithered from the stygmatic pool of time, only to degenerate into a leprosy of avaricious lust." And when the Eye ultimately is destroyed, "All that remained was a dark red blotch upon the face of the earth, blotching things up." And there is more, ever so much more. Ian Randal Strock, the publisher of the recent Fantastic Books edition, has provided interleaving pages that attempt to correct the multitude of grammatical and lexical errors of the story, telling us that "swlived" should actually have been "swiveled" and "ulations" is really "ululations," but even he is defeated by such Theisian verbal novelties as "expunisively," "scozscetic," and "appiesed."

It's easy to make fun of *The Eye of Argon*—all too easy, shooting fish in a barrel. But the interesting and surprising thing about the story is that if one can filter out the myriad illiteracies of its teenage author, one sees that he was actually quite a capable storyteller, who keeps the action moving along steadily and gives us quite a vivid view of the world of his barbarian hero. In this he is a worthy disciple of his obvious master, Robert E. Howard, whose Conan stories are, as the critic Damon Knight put it, "preposterous," but which somehow have tremendous narrative power that holds even sophisticated readers to the page. Knight notes that "Howard never tried, or never tried intelligently, to give his preposterous saga the ring of truth . . . but [the stories] have a vividness, a color, a dream-dust sparkle, even when they're most insulting to the rational mind. Howard had the maniac's advantage of believing whatever he wrote."

So too with Jim Theis. Howard was a vastly superior writer, of course, which is why the Conan stories still delight an immense audience ninety years after they were written—but Jim Theis, the hapless author of a story that has made him a laughingstock for fifty years, had some of Howard's lunatic narrative conviction, and—dare I say it—might well have produced some really significant heroic fantasy once he had learned the rudiments of English spelling and grammar. Grignr is in fact an interesting character, a ruthless barbarian through and through in the authentic Conan manner, and in a weird way we care about him as he navigates one peril after another on his path to his rendezvous with the deadly Eye of Argon. It's easy to laugh at the comedy of errors that Theis produced, back there in 1970, but underneath all the absurdities lies a real story, silly but strangely compelling.

It is possible to see that in the new edition by reading the various Argon pastiches that have been appended to it. One of them is the real thing, Hildy Silverman's "The

## January/February 2024

Return of the Eye of Argon,” which is a perfectly good little fantasy story that replicates Theis’s innumerable errors with remarkable accuracy, but which also deftly catches the music of his imagination. Another, “Oanna’s Rock” by Jean Marie Ward, is likewise a nicely plotted heroic fantasy, but unlike Hildy Silverman she was unable to make herself strew her tale with spelling errors and goofy grammatical absurdities, so it is essentially Theis played straight, somewhat of a different kettle of fish. The other stories that fill out the book tend to mock Theis’s work rather than augment it; most of them are heavy-handed parodies, nudge-nudge, full of deliberate literary blunders but lacking Theis’s narrative strengths. One wonders what he might have achieved had he paid more attention to what the teacher in his English class was trying to tell him when he was fifteen.