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Roger Zelazny, Fred Saberhagen

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As children, Perry, Annie, and Edgar Allan Poe met on a mystical beach out of space and time. Fifteen years later, Perry discovers that he is living the stories written by his alter ego, Edgar Allan Poe, as he encounters a world of reality gone mad.

The Black Throne Details

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Alazzar says

I probably would have given this 3.5 stars (and rounded it up to 4), but after reading a few Goodreads reviews I sort of came to agree with them on some matters. (Particularly about the ending being sorta lackluster.)

On the one hand, I loved seeing all the Poe references because I like Poe. On the other hand, there were times during which I felt like we were straight-up reenacting a Poe story without any real change; this made the book, unfortunately, a little predictable. (And it sorta made it feel like work, at times, because I knew where things were going and it was just a matter of wading through the text to get there.)

However, I also liked how certain of Poe's stories were linked together, when I otherwise never would have considered them taking place in the same time or location. So, that was neat.

Also, some of the allusions are less obvious (there's a line or two from "Ulalume" and "The Raven" sprinkled in there, though there's no particular attention drawn to them), which makes them very fun and pleasing to spot.

Overall, I'd say this is one of Zelazny's better collaborations (coming in just behind his other Saberhagen collaboration, *Coils*), though that's not necessarily saying much because his collaborations were generally considered to be much worse than his solo efforts. It's definitely better than *If at Faust You Don't Succeed*, and everything ever written is better than *Flare*. I may have even liked this book more than *Deus Irae*, though I gave *Deus Irae* four stars, which is surely the *only* time my rating system has ever been inconsistent. Ever.

Surely.

Stuart says

The concept is good, but unfortunately the book isn't. It initially promises to be something like a Tim Powers story, but never really achieves either the clever world-building of Powers, or much of anything else.

There's a bit of ingenuity in the way that the authors manage to pack in so many references to Poe stories, but unfortunately none of these develops into anything. The characters whose peculiar backgrounds are drawn from Poe never go beyond being plot devices, the scenes that allude to memorable ones in Poe stories have none of the atmosphere of the originals, and the whole thing is just a sequence of interesting ideas that are rapidly shuffled through without ever being thoroughly explored.

One last thing that I'll mention is the strange pacing - the authors seem in a hurry, but waste many pages on dream sequences that don't advance the plot and then seem to absolutely rush the last scenes. The story finally ends so abruptly that it's startling.

It's a fairly short book, and the shout-outs to Poe did keep me interested for most of it, but it was a disappointment in almost every way.

Daniel says

I admit that I struggled some with this book at the beginning, but I believe that this is because Zelazny tends to start a story right in the middle, forcing the reader to catch up to him.

I am not at all familiar with Fred Saberhagen, so I'm not sure what his influences are with this book.

Once I was caught up with the story, this was the type of read that is difficult to put down. I always wanted to read 'just one more chapter.'

Although the book managed to hold my interest through to the end, the last quarter or so seemed to get bogged down. I actually wondered if perhaps the authors traded off chapters and each wanted to add his own mark to the tale, although they both lacked necessity in telling the tale.

Some chapters spanned a few minutes ... the action being 'real time' and some chapters took place over several months. The inconsistency was always jarring.

I liked it well enough... reading Zelazny is like luscious, literary fruit ...but it failed to tell the story cohesively for me.

Elliot Fleming says

I hated reading this. I'm a fan of Saberhagen's Berserker stories and Dracula series, but I gave up on the Swords series. I loved Zelazny's early writing and the Corwin half of the Amber books, and thought the Merlin stories disappointing. So this is two inconstant geniuses writing a pastiche of a third inconstant genius, Edgar Allan Poe. It serves no one well, especially the reader. Others have commented on the story, the characters, and the writing, roundly berating all. This reads as though the collaboration had fallen apart before a final edit, and the publisher wanted to salvage something from the mess. The cover of the paperback edition has less than a paragraph *from the story* continued on the first page. No critical praise, no mention of the author's awards. A miserable mess. The more I think about this book as I try to evaluate it, the lower sinks my opinion of it. I started with 3 stars, because it was written by Saberhagen and Zelazny.

Kathy says

Roger Zelazny writing about Edgar Allan Poe? These are two of my favorite authors, so I figured what the heck? I appreciate the unique approach of suggesting that Poe based his stories on actual events in some kind of alternate universe. And it almost works, but not quite. At least not for me.

Michael McClung says

I don't know if I can do this. It was painful to read; how much more painful will it be to write about? But my

conscience tells me I must, lest someone else accidentally picks up this book under the impression that it might actually readable. Do not, I beg you! Learn from my mistake!

You would think that when Roger Zelazney and Fred Saberhagen get together to write a book it would be worth reading, I mean, these are two of the biggest names in science fiction and fantasy. Zelazney rose to immortality on his Amber series, and Saberhagen's Berserker series is one of the biggest sci-fi franchises on the shelf. Both have been critically acclaimed.

The premise of The Black Throne is... well, I guess that's where the trouble starts. The premise is rather muddled. It has to do with Edgar Allan Poe (a man whose writing I was raised on, which probably explains a lot) and multiple universes and a girl named Annie and her Kingdom by the sea and a fellow who is much like Poe, except his name is Edgar Perry and he's not mad or an alcoholic or much of a writer. He's like Poe's healthier, less exciting alter ego. He's Poe if Poe was more like Kipling, except not so smart.

Poe, Perry and Annie meet in a kingdom by the sea throughout their childhood, apparently. And then something happens and Annie and Perry are thrown into Poe's world, and Poe is thrown into Perry's (our) world, where things are less magical. While Annie and Perry muddle through various adventures, Poe seems to keep some sort of connection to the two and writes of their adventures in garbled fashion. Thus Murders in the Rue Morgue, Mask of the Red Death, etc are born. It all sounds rather interesting, except it isn't.

Here is an excerpt, and it illustrates both what I mean by the muddled feel of the whole book and also what I mean when I say imitation has its limitations:

"Walking on that gray, warm morn through fogs which entombed his world in near-viscous whiteness, perfect as snow, quietening as cloak or shroud, the boy moved with a certain deliberation, wordless voice within his head, veiled forms swaying about him, avoiding cobble and branch in passage through the wood behind the school, oddity back of a place once known well, occurring mystery somehow situated to hold his soul chrysalis for a vital season, somehow special, personal, and marking a passage distinctive as scar or tattoo upon his life and forever."

Can someone please buy these guys a period? Or trade two for one for a comma? Look, I know what they're trying to do. But Only POE could get away with that sort of crap, because only POE could come up with the sort of macabre, fascinating idea that would make putting up with that sort of crap worth it. We read Poe despite the twisted run-on sentences, not because of them.

I was going to go through all the terrible bits of the book, but I just don't have the strength. Here are the highlights:

1) When Poe's alter ego Perry writes poetry:

These recent days be bloody stuff
and also recent dreams.
I seem to hear a phthisic cough
by life's eternal streams.
Death lurks and laughs his ass off.
At least that's how it seems.

At first I thought this was meant to be a little light humor. Then I realized it wasn't. Then I gagged.

2) The 'Plot' (not to be confused with the premise): Annie is a powerful supernatural woman who has been manipulated by three 'mesmerists' to shift the Edgars around in their worlds so that she can build up some sort of a psychic charge and power an alchemical transformation of lead into gold. Huh? Well, a LOT of lead into a LOT of gold. Oh. Well, at least there's a lot of gold at stake. Perry trails after her and her kidnappers from Richmond through Paris, parts of Spain, the Antarctic and New York. And in the end, she doesn't even need his help to be rescued.

3) The south pole is actually a big drain in which all water drains through the center of the earth and gets spat up through the north pole. Sort of a constant flush. Perry's ship gets sucked in, but 'just by chance' they had rescued a Dutch balloonist sometime before. They ride the balloon to NORTH AMERICA with only one brief stop.

4) Perry digs a trench in the middle of the villain's fortress and hides it with a piece of tarp. Never mind that the room is actually a room, not a dirt-floored hovel, or that one of the many henchmen would have noticed him, or that the writers, who yet again badly damaged our willing suspension of disbelief then don't even bother to use the offending trench in the plot. Just never mind.

5) The villain of the piece makes Perry the sole beneficiary of his last will and testament. Why? Nobody knows. Well he may have been Perry's father. But that's just speculation. "Perry. I am your father, Perry. Join me on the dark side of the force, where we kidnap young girls and make them turn lead into gold. C'mon, Perry, you know you want to.'

6) There is no black throne in the entirety of The Black Throne. There is however a black chair. A 'shiny black chair'. So that's okay, I guess. As long as it's shiny.

I'm tired now. Let me sleep. Maybe the pain will subside. It's not enough that I suffer from literary poisoning, but you people make me talk about it too? Go read the Black Throne for yourself, then!

No I don't mean it. It's only the pain.

Mike S says

This was a good story, it would have been better if it had been all Zelazny, but it was worth reading. It was much more slow-paced and plodding than a Zelazny story would be, it was pretty easy to see Zelazny's contributions, he is brilliant and complex and fast-paced and exciting. I wish he could have lived longer and written more, he's one of my top favorite sci-fi authors.

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Joel Flank says

The Black Throne by Roger Zelazny and Fred Saberhagen is a quirky book by two of science fiction's masters. The story is based around the question, "What if all of Edgar Allan Poe's stories and poems were based on fact?" In this case, the book features a Poe that is from an Earth that has elements such as trained orangutans, mesmerism, magic, alchemy, pits and pendulums, masques of the red death, and more. Unfortunately for Poe, he is switched with his real world Earth analog, a soldier named Edgar Perry. This puts Poe into our Earth, but linked to Perry and able to see all of Perry's adventures, which 'coincidentally' all mimic Poe's most famous stories, and suggest that Poe was actually basing them on actual events.

Perry first has to make sense of the strange Earth he find himself in, and then chase after his (and Poe's) lost love, Annie, whom they both met in childhood dreams that the three of them shared. This quest take Perry from the shores of America, to France, Spain, and the high seas, and back again. While his encounters and adventures are all based on Poe stories, Zelazny and Saberhagen weave them together into a single tale that doesn't feel like a mish mash of separate stories at all. This novel concept, combined with the unique setting of a 19th century where all of the pseudo-science believed to be real at the time is in fact real, makes for a memorable fantasy adventure that strays far away from swords and sorcery and high fantasy tropes.

Morgan Lewis says

Reasonably good science-fantasy book (dealing with psychic powers and parallel worlds) interspersed with a lot of Edgar Allan Poe references. (Poe even features as a character in the novel and is the thematic inspiration). Entertaining, and has a lot of hallmarks of both Zelazny's and Saberhagen's styles.

William says

A rather bizarre novel featuring Edgar Allan Poe, a goldbug, a raven, Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether, a pit and a pendulum, a cask of amontillado, etc.

Martin says

What a mess. Much of the book takes place in dreamlike settings because characters are moving back and forth between 3 or 4 planes of existence. Much of the action is propelled without an engine, it just sort of happens, characters just know things, when its convenient they magically communicate across miles and dimensions, sometimes as vague feelings and sometimes as full conversations. Some steampunks will probably like it anyhow, as it has inexplicable steampunk elements.

The Zelazny co-authored books I've read have not been very good. He was so very good flying solo. I

wonder if any of his friends told him, "stop diluting your talent with co-authors" while he was alive.

Also, terrible book jack design. Who leaves a back jacket completely blank? The marketing manager should have been fired.

Jon Norimann says

One of Zelazny's worst books. Very slow moving and generally boring. Best to stay away.

Paradoxhorizon says

It's a weird adventure that uses settings, characters and events from the works of Edgar Allen Poe and weaves them together into something fun and strange. I cannot help liking it.

Ty says

I am starting to wonder if reviewing fantasy paperbacks is even worth it. Just about every single one I have ever picked up has suffered from the same problems.

A band of some sort, complete with a short ugly strong guy, a thin, sexy woman, an animal or two and a protagonist of some sort come together and discover whatever maguffin they need to retrieve. What follows is several hundred pages of barely (or not at all) connected vignettes that must contain violence and magic of some sort, each conveyed in a faux-flowery prose that drowns in its own self importance. Make sure at least one minor but lovable character dies, throw in a dash of deus ex machina, and the entire incoherent mess, thin plot and totally uninteresting characters come together in the final ten pages, and the maguffin is obtained.

And the reader is angry.

That fits this mess to a tee.
