

Swords Against Death

Fritz Leiber

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In the second instalment of this rousing series, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser journey from the ancient city of Lankmar, searching for a little adventure and debauchery to ease their broken hearts. When a stranger challenges them to find and fight Death on the Bleak Shore, they battle demonic birds, living mountains, and evil monks on the way to their heroic fate. Fritz Leiber's witty prose, lively plots, and superb characterizations stand the test of time.

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Swords Against Death Details

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From Reader Review Swords Against Death for online ebook

Joseph says

More escapades with Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, a surprising number of which still take place far from Lankhmar, the City of Sevenscore Thousand Smokes. Now that the origin stories have been dispensed with (in the previous volume), we can finally see Fafhrd and Mouser as the (mostly) inseparable comrades we've been expecting. Chronologically speaking, the stories are a mixed bag -- most date from the 1940's (including "Jewels in the House", a.k.a. "Two Sought Adventure", their first published outing) and a couple date from the early 1970's ("The Circle Curse" and "The Price of Pain-ease", both of which tie off narrative threads from the previous volume's "Ill-met in Lankhmar").

There are some fine, fine stories in here. If forced at the point of Scalpel or Graywand (Mouser always calls whatever sword he's currently using Scalpel, and Fafhrd recycles the name Graywand) to pick just one I'd be tempted by "Bazaar of the Bizarre", the story of a peculiar shop selling most intriguing wares. But really, you can't go wrong with any of them.

Again, one of the great joys is Leiber's elegant, sardonic prose. I almost feel like I can follow a through-line from James Branch Cabell to Leiber to Terry Pratchett. Or have I had one too many jugs from the Silver Eel?

S.E. Lindberg says

Leiber's Mouser and Fafhrd are the Scooby and Shaggy Of Sword and Sorcery

Atmosphere and Style: Fafhrd and Mouser are two rogues who are braver and smarter than Scooby and Shaggy, but form as legendary a duo in many ways. The pair were chronicled over ~5 decades by the man who termed the genre "Sword & Sorcery" (Fritz Leiber) in separate short stories (covering ~40 stories, published over 1939 to 1991). Their adventures in the City of Lankhmar and World of Nehwon were captured in seven books. *Scooby Doo Where Are You?* was a Hanna-Barbera production, broadcast from 1969 to 1978 (notably the same time many of Leiber's work was compiled into novels.)

Scooby Doo (and its reboots) were known for **juxtaposing scary atmospheres with acceptable silliness...in episodic form**. This is exactly what *Swords against Death* delivers, and presumably represents the other Fafred and Mouser novels. A possible exception is the chapter "Ill met in Lankhmar" (the last story in Vol-1 "Swords and Deviltry" in which the scary-silly style is presented, but the outcome more dire than anything in this second volume.)

Fafhrd and the Mouser float from one independent adventure to the next. Each chapter is an enjoyable episode, but there is an apparent lack of an overarching conflict for the duo. Ostensibly the chapters are linear in chronology, but they really seemed stand alone and could be read in any order. From the opening (and the end of the first Volume *Swords and Deviltry*) I expected the pair to be haunted by their past loves, but these haunts were only addressed in only one chapter later.

Varied perspectives and controlled revelations keep each narrative fresh. The stories are indeed fortified with literate prose and abundant vocabulary, but just when you think Leiber may take his milieu too seriously, you will be treated to a ludicrous robbery by fishing pole, a grand displacement/theft of a house, an assault from

giant snowballs, or a hunt from bad guys skiing in an apparent satire to a Bond film. But, the silliness does not detract from enjoyable adventure. Just like the original Scooby Doo cartoon.

Emotive Oil Painting: Oil paintings will forever inspire emotion of fantasy media. For Scooby Doo, background stylist Walt Peregoy created some truly scary paintings worthy as any cover art. During the same years, Jeff Jones illustrated the first five of the ~1970's editions for Fritz Leiber (Michael Whelan did the sixth). Check out the series:

1970; 1970; 1968; 1968; 1968;1977; 1988

Evgeny says

Plagued by the nightmares they saw in Lankhmar in the last book *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* flee the city and gave their word never to come back only to meet a mysterious figure who predicts they will come back - several times. From this point on the plot became very sketchy with a lot of exploits by the dynamic duo just briefly mentioned. Time passes and the friends have to return to the great city as predicted. From this point on their adventures are described in greater details.

The first book consisted of four stories dealing mostly with the origins of the pair and circumstances of their meeting, some of which are fairly boring to be honest. In this book the stories are shorter: there are ten of them at practically the same page count. This forms works much better as none of the single stories is boring or bad. For the trivia fans: young Glen Cook had some influence on some stories; looks like it was a good one. The pair stumbles from one adventure into another one driven by treasure hunt in most cases, or just a simple restlessness. Most of the time they end up with just enough part of the treasure to get by (read - spend it in a nearest tavern), or just with their lives. Sword fights and last minute escapes are aplenty. This is a classic sword and sorcery book and this time I do not hesitate to call it such.

The final rating is 4 stars. This one is the best out of the first three.

This review is a copy/paste of my BookLikes one: <http://gene.booklikes.com/post/979431...>

Gary says

I did enjoy the classic fantasy element of this book. Understanding where a genre began and understanding the influences is important to me. That is why I chose this series.

I found my mind wandering at times and needed to reread sections. Quite often, really. I commented on this to my 13 year old daughter (who is a sometimes voracious reader) and she promptly informed me that her mind wanders when a book bores her and she quits it.

Maybe she was right. Maybe this book did bore me. It shouldn't have. It had all the elements of an interesting plot, developed characters, bizarre villains. But my mind did wander and it was a struggle. Hence three stars rather than four.

Maybe I need a break from this. I need to read something immersive for the sake of reading rather than

trying to understand a genre. Maybe I am just over complicating this and this book bores me a little.

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

Ho, Fafhrd tall! Hist, Mouser small!
Why leave you the city Of marvelous parts?
It were a great pity To wear out your hearts
And wear out the soles of your feet,
Treading all earth, Foregoing all mirth,
Before you once more Lankhmar greet.
Now return, now return, now!

Swords Against Death is the second collection of stories about Fafhrd, the big northern barbarian, and The Gray Mouser, the small thief from the slums. For the past three years, the two have grown so close that they are now (as Neil Gaiman suggests in his introduction to the audio version) like two halves of the same person. They've been traveling the world together in an effort to forget their lost loves.

During their travels "they acquired new scars and skills, comprehensions and compassions, cynicisms and secrecies — a laughter that lightly mocked, and a cool poise that tightly crusted all inner miseries," but they haven't been able to assuage their guilt or lessen their feelings of loss outside of Lankhmar, the city which they swore never to return to.

But as Sheelba of the Eyeless Face prophesied ("Never and forever are neither for men. You'll be returning again and again."), Fafhrd and the Mouser are persuaded to return to Lankhmar where, it turns out, they have not been forgotten, and soon the duo is back to their old tricks and dealing with their former enemies in these stories: "The Circle Curse," "The Jewels in the Forest," "Thieves' House," "The Bleak Shore," "The Howling Tower," "The Sunken Land," "The Seven Black Priests," "Claws from the Night," "The Price of Pain-Ease," and "Bazaar of the Bizarre."

Some of the stories are better than others (my favorite was "Bazaar of the Bizarre") but all are "classical rogue" (Neil Gaiman's term) and all are worth reading simply because they're written in Fritz Leiber's gorgeous prose, which is thick with alliteration, insight, and irony.

I listened to Swords Against Death on audio. It was produced by Audible Frontiers, introduced by Neil Gaiman, and read by Jonathan Davis who does a terrific job with this series. His voices for Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are perfect — Fafhrd sounds pensive, intellectual, and introverted while Gray Mouser sounds a bit greasy and common. I highly recommend this format; it adds an extra dimension to these fun stories. More Leiber reviews at FanLit.

Karl says

This hardcover is numbered 40 of 300 produced and is signed by:

Fritz Leiber (Facsimile)
Steve Rasnic Tem (Introduction)
Dominick Saponaro (Artist)

Bill Kerwin says

In this collection, our two rogues journey from Lankhmar, seeking to avoid this city which holds painful memories of the deaths of their two beloved "girls," and are led instead to encounter death in two other forms ("The Bleak Shore," "The Price of Pain-Ease") before finally banishing the ghosts of their loves.

There are many entertaining individual tales here, my favorite being the two stories about towers ("The Jewels of the Forest" and "The Howling Tower"), and Leiber's affectionate--although not slavish-tribute to the Cthulhu mythos of his mentor Lovecraft in "The Sunken Land."

J.G. Keely says

This was much better than I was expecting. I enjoy a good pulp now and again, but this nearly reached the mirth and derring-do of Dumas' Musketeers. Many of these stories were written before those of the first collection. They were short magazine submissions, and it was only later that Leiber thought to write introductory stories.

Being written in the early part of Leiber's career at different times and places, the stories show a great deal of pleasing variance. Each short tale presents its own setting, its own locations, and its own feel. They are all loosely connected into a grander arc, and the reader is invited to draw connections and conclusions about the interstitial parts, evoking real historical accounts.

It's not difficult to see how, writing these stories without a clear path, at many times throughout his life, we get a grander scope of his world, from vibrant, rough stories to more complex, idea-driven ones. This somewhat piecemeal approach is engaging and unpredictable, especially in comparison to Leiber's later work on the series, which is unfortunately repetitive and narrow in scope.

There are a few sections which grow a bit silly and stilted, but it is altogether quick and enjoyable, with the vivacity, wit, and creativity to keep the reader occasionally surprised and often amused.

My Fantasy Book Suggestions

Eric says

"So you think a man can cheat death and outwit doom?" said the small, pale man, whose bulging forehead was shadowed by a black cowl.

The Gray Mouser, holding the dice box ready for a throw, paused and quickly looked sideways at the questioner.

"I said that a cunning man can cheat death for a long time."

The Silver Eel bustled with pleasantly raucous excitement. Fighting men predominated and the clank of swordmen's harnesses mingled with the thump of tankards, providing a deep obbligato to the shrill laughter of the women. Swaggering guardsmen elbowed the insolent bravos of the young lords. Grinning slaves bearing open wine-jars dodged nimbly between. In one corner a slave girl was dancing, the jingle of her silver anklet bells inaudible in the din. Outside the small, tight-shuttered windows a dry, whistling wind from the south filled the air with dust that eddied between the cobblestones and hazed the stars. But here all was jovial confusion.

The Gray Mouser was one of a dozen at the gaming table. He was dressed all in gray-jerkin, silken shirt, and mouseskin cap-but his dark, flashing eyes and cryptic smile made him seem more alive than any of the others, save for the huge copper-haired barbarian next to him, who laughed immoderately and drank tankards of the sour wine of Lankhmar as if it were beer.

"They say you're a skilled swordsman and have come close to death many times," continued the small pale man in the black robe, his thin lips barely parting as he spoke the words.

But the Mouser had made his throw, and the odd dice of Lankhmar had stopped with the matching symbols of the eel and serpent uppermost, and he was raking in triangular golden coins. The barbarian answered for him.

"Yes, the gray one handles a sword daintily enough-almost as well as myself. He's also a great cheat at dice."

"Are you, then, Fafhrd?" asked the other. "And do you, too, truly think a man can cheat death, be he ever so cunning a cheat at dice?"

The barbarian showed his white teeth in a grin and peered puzzledly at the small, pale man whose somber appearance and manner contrasted so strangely with the revelers thronging the low-ceilinged tavern fumed with wine.

"You guess right again." he said with a bantering tone. "I am Fafhrd, a Northerner, ready to pit my wits against any doom." He nudged his companion. "Look, Mouser, what do you think of this little black-coated mouse who's sneaked in through a crack in the floor and wants to talk with you and me about death?"

The man in black did not seem to notice the jesting insult. Again his bloodless lips hardly moved, yet his words were unaffected by the surrounding clamor, and impinged on the ears of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser with peculiar clarity.

"It is said you two came close to death in the Forbidden City of the Black Idols, and in the stone trap of Angarngi, and on the misty island in the Sea of Monsters. It is also said that you have walked with doom on the Cold Waste and through the Mazes of Klesh. But who may be sure of these things, and whether death and doom were truly near? Who knows but what you are both braggarts who have boasted once too often? Now I have heard tell that death sometimes calls to a man in a voice only he can hear. Then he must rise and leave his friends and go to whatever place death shall bid him, and there meet his doom. Has death ever called to you in such a fashion?"

Fafhrd might have laughed, but did not. The Mouser had a witty rejoinder on the tip of his tongue, but instead he heard himself saying: "In what words might death call?"

"That would depend," said the small man. "He might look at two such as you and say the Bleak Shore. Nothing more than that. The Bleak Shore. And when he said it three times you would have to go."

This time Fafhrd tried to laugh, but the laugh never came. Both of them could only meet the gaze of the small man with the white, bulging forehead, stare stupidly into his cold, cavernous eyes. Around them the tavern roared with mirth at some jest. A drunken guardsman was bellowing a song. The gamblers called impatiently to the Mouser to stake his next wager. A giggling woman in red and gold stumbled past the small, pale man, almost brushing away the black cowl that covered his pate. But he did not move. And Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser continued to stare-fascinatedly, helplessly-into his chill, black eyes, which now seemed to them twin tunnels leading into a far and evil distance. Something deeper than fear gripped them in iron paralysis. The tavern became faint and soundless, as if viewed through many thicknesses of glass. They saw only the eyes and what lay beyond the eyes, something desolate, dreary, and deadly.

"The Bleak Shore," he repeated.

4 1/4 stars

Stephen says

4.0 to 4.5 stars. These stories are a ton of fun. If you like the Dying Earth by Jack Vance and the Conan stories by Robert E. Howard, you will love these stories. Highly Recommended!!

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1. "????????????? ??" ("The Circle Curse") 1970
2. "????????????? ? ??????" ("The Jewels in the Forest") 1939
3. "????? ?? ??????????" ("Thieves' House") 1943
4. "????? ??" ("The Bleak Shore") 1940

- [illegible]

[illegible]

I love everything about this series of books!

The writing remained in the same style and I was impressed by the true friendship that develops, along this volume, between the two unusual heroes.

There are some dramatic moments along some of the stories and the stakes are higher than ever.

In this one the writer had more time to expand the personalities of the two characters and to engage them in a lot of fresh adventures.

If you have enjoyed the first one, then this is a must!

Another indispensable installment in one of the most important sword & sorcery series ever.

Interestingly, most of the stories contained in this volume take place far from the city of Lankhmar. Instead we're given a wide-ranging tour of many distant locales scattered across Nehwon. While it was written much later than most of the stories contained here, "The Circle Curse" provides an interesting justification for Fafhrd and The Gray Mouser to quit Lankhmar (to free themselves of ghosts from their past) while promising that they'll inevitably return. It also introduces the pair's wizardly patrons, Ningauble of the Seven Eyes and Sheelba of the Eyeless Face. The two wizards are absent from most stories that follow, which I found interesting. My--apparently spotty--recollection had them providing the impetus for a much higher percentage of Fafhrd and The Gray Mouser's adventures.

The stories included herein are all entertaining, but some are better than others. Leiber exhibits a frustrating tendency to step back into a vague, impressionistic style at the climax of the story. "The Bleak Shore" is one example of this. Most of the story (involving a curse driving the heroes to the titular Bleak Shore, where death awaits) is presented with a great deal of detail, but when it becomes time for the heroes to dispatch the cause of the curse, the narrative suddenly becomes much more fuzzy and indistinct.

Most of the stories are incredibly fun, however. "The Seven Black Priests" involves religious hermits' incredibly dogged pursuit of the heroes' mostly inadvertent theft of their sacred artifact. "Claws from the Night," a story about jewel-filching birds, benefits from unlikely schemes, humorous characterization, and some vivid Lankhmarese worldbuilding.

This volume concludes with two of the strongest stories in the entire Lankhmar canon: "The Price of Pain-Ease" and "Bazaar of the Bizarre." "The Price of Pain-Ease" begins with one of the most audacious and memorable heists in the series--our heroes steal a house--and concludes with their journey into the underworld in an effort to literally rid themselves of ghosts from their past.

"Bazaar of the Bizarre" is, for my money, one of the best sword & sorcery stories of all time. It has a deliciously intriguing and baroque setting in Lankhmar's Plaza of Dark Delights, a unique threat in the form of the extra-dimensional merchant Devourers (with a bit of pointed commentary about consumerism), a memorable battle between Fafhrd and the Iron Statue, snappy prose, and grin-inspiring characterization. If a friend wanted an introduction to the sword & sorcery subgenre, this single story is what I'd hand them, passing over even Conan and Elric.

All fantasy fans owe it to themselves to read these stories.

Brian says

This book is fantastic. Really, I could stop there, along with an exhortation to go read it immediately, but that's hardly an actual review, so I'll continue.

As I mentioned in my review for *Swords and Deviltry*, the first half of that book before Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser met was pretty boring, but the second half was much more engaging. In this book, the two companions start together and stay together for the entirety (or nearly so) of the book, neatly avoiding the long build-up time before the action really gets going.

The plots of the short stories are pretty standard sword and sorcery fare, usually driven by the greed of the protagonists or by the meddling of some sort of external sorcerous agency, but the plot isn't the most obvious reason to read this. I think the main thing that makes it stand out for me is the sense of humor. I've read

plenty of the Conan stories, and while he occasionally finds reason to laugh, far more common is for the gigantic melancholies to be emphasized over the gigantic mirths. Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser aren't like that in the least. They're constantly joking with each other, commenting sarcastically on the situations they find themselves in, and otherwise seem to take themselves rather less than seriously. As a tabletop roleplayer, I can definitely see where the inspiration for Dungeons and Dragons came from in Leiber's books--take any generic pen and paper RPG session and the characters will have a greater-than-average chance to be acting like one of the pair.

The thing that really sets the book apart, though, is the description. As I said previously, Leiber was a devotee of H.P. Lovecraft, and while it shows, he manages to walk edge of the cliff of description without falling into the abyss of purple prose. For example:

"For we did not like the strangely rounded basalt crags of the Bleak Shore; we did not like it that we saw no gulls or hawks or birds of any kind in the leaden air, no seaweed on the beach. And we all three began to catch glimpses of something shimmering at the summit of the cliffs."

If you replaced "strangely" with "curiously" there, it could be something that came straight out of a Lovecraft story, though Lovecraft would have made it twice as long and used "cyclopean" or "rugose" a few times for good measure.

The best example comes from the best story in the collection, *The Bazaar of the Bizarre*:

In the Plaza of Dark Delights, which lies seven blocks south of the Marsh Gate and extends from the Fountain of Dark Abundance to the Shrine of the Black Virgin, the shop-lights glinted upward no more brightly than the stars glinted down. For there the vendors of drugs and the peddlers of curiosa and the hawkers of assignations light their stalls and crouching places with foxfire, glowworms, and fire-pots with tiny single windows, and they conduct their business almost as silently as the stars conduct theirs.

That is *amazingly* evocative. I read that and I immediately get an image in my head of what it looks like, and it makes me want to read more. The Grey Mouser's invocation of auspicious days in reference to Lankhmar's animal-themed calendar functions the same way, in that it makes me want to learn more about Lankhmar and its society, and as I've said before, I love worldbuilding and everything to do with it.

That's really what it comes down to. Much of fantasy is focused on the plot, the fight against the dark lord, or the lone hero finding his (and it's almost always a he) destiny, but the stories in *Swords Against Death* are just the stories about what happened in Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser during their lives. All of these stories build images in my head and make me want to know more about Nehwon, and that's really the best thing I can ask for in a book. I cannot recommend this highly enough.

Previous Review: *Swords and Deviltry*.

Next Review: *Swords in the Mist*.

Stuart says

Swords Against Death: Sword and sorcery's most famous duo are in top form

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

This is the second collection of stories in the FAFHRD AND THE GRAY MOUSER series, but the majority

of the stories were written well before the stories of the first book *Swords and Deviltry*. Again Fritz Leiber took a group of independent stories written in the early 1940s and added connective and framing material to make the book more cohesive. As a result, I think some the best stories are the earliest ones, written for the pulp magazines like *Unknown*, though the final story is also excellent.

There are ten stories altogether in *Swords and Deviltry*, though seven of them first appeared in a collection called *Two Sought Adventure* published in 1957. All of the stories are filled with the rough-and-tumble adventures of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, two rogues, swordsmen, con-men, and treasure-hunting adventurers. Having suffered tragedy at the end of the previous novel, they continue to mourn this loss and initially vow to never return to the teeming city of Lankhmar, but in the initial story “The Circle Curse”, they discover that even after three years of restless questing they have still not assuaged their pain, and decide this path is fruitless.

All the stories in this collection are written with swift, deft touches of humor, amazing descriptive passages, and exciting but tightly-written action sequences. The quality of writing is vastly superior to later books in the genre that merely try to recreate the flair of these originals. Among them, I found the following four stories to be standouts:

In “The Jewels in the Forest” (1939) the two adventurers are lured by obscure references written in the margins of a book that point to a mysterious treasure located in a tower in a forest. They journey in search of this, also making a stop at a peasant’s house to entertain for their food (which recalls but contrasts sharply with a similar stop-over by the Hound and Arya in *Game of Thrones* Season 3). When they arrive at the tower, they discover it to be a tomb built by a madman to lure treasure-seekers, but seemingly undefended. This soon turns out to be wrong, and the duo has to battle a terrifying monster to escape.

In “Thieves House” (1943), our two heroes steal a jeweled skull but are then double-crossed by the Thieves Guild member who hired them for the job. Despite their earlier vow to never return, they find themselves again trying to infiltrate the Thieves House in order to exact revenge. They find themselves again entangled with their hated rival Kroval, the head of the guild, but even the Thieves’ Guild itself has not bargained with the eldritch powers protecting the jeweled skull, and it falls on Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser to put things to rights or face the wrath of the undead. The whole Thieves’ Guild concept has certainly influenced *Dungeons & Dragons*, not to mention the long-running shared-world Thieves’ World anthologies edited by Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey.

In “The Price of Pain-Ease” (1970), Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are still mourning the loss of their lovers, and settle down in their former lover’s abodes and get a bit maudlin and indolent. So they consult with Ningauble of the Seven Eyes and Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, who essentially cut a deal with them that if they pledge their service then these wizards will grant them a reunion with their lost loves now dwelling in the Shadow Lands. So they are tasked with the impossible mission of stealing Death’s Mask. It’s a great concept, and the idea of Death becoming a character has also been humorously explored in Terry Pratchett’s *Mort*, and in very different fashion in Piers Anthony’s *On a Pale Horse*. My only complaint is that the story ends fairly abruptly, and I wanted more involvement from Death (how often can you say that?).

The final story, “The Bazaar of the Bizarre” (1963), is suitably strange and fantastic. Our two rogues are summoned by their patron wizards to infiltrate a strange shop peddling curios in The Plaza of Dark Delights. The Gray Mouser shows up early and is enchanted by the various goods that he perceives to be the objects of his greatest desire, including a series of golden cages with beautiful maidens hanging from the ceiling. Fafhrd, on the other hand, is given a spider web blindfold of true-seeing and cloak of invisibility by his patron, and thus sees through the illusion to discover the bazaar is selling worthless trash and the situation is

far more sinister than at first glance. He must do battle with various formidable foes to win free and save the Mouser, who is blissfully unaware of any danger and hilariously interferes with Fafhrd's desperate swordfights with skeleton warriors.

This story really reminded me in tone of the opening of Jack Vance's *The Eyes of the Overworld*, in which Cugel the Clever enters the tent of a curio seller, and first learns of the treasures held by Ioucounu the Laughing Magician, since he too cannot resist the allure of magic talismans just like the Mouser. The only difference is that Cugel does not have a faithful companion like Fafhrd the Barbarian to bail him out, but I'm quite certain they share a kindred spirit.

Overall, this collection of stories is an excellent introduction to the *FAFHARD AND THE GRAY MOUSER* series, more so than the previous book *Swords and Deviltry* (with the exception of the initial meeting story "Ill Met in Lankhmar"). If any of it seems to ring familiar to other sword and sorcery adventures you have read, that is merely the greatest form of flattery to the legacy of Leiber's archetypal adventurers.
