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Edgar Rice Burroughs

John Carter, *The Land that Time Forgot*, Tarzan – Sean Egan remembers the many creations of the larger-than-life adventurer and writer...



By 1911, Edgar Rice Burroughs had been a cavalry officer, a cowboy, a goldminer, a store proprietor and the manager of a large Sears catalogue office, among other ventures. Born in Chicago in 1875, he was at the time attempting to make a living as a pencil sharpener agent. The business wasn't going well and he found he had empty hours to fill. He had dabbled with writing before but never attempted to sell anything. Now he decided to try his hand at writing something for the "pulp" fiction magazines that, in an era before movies and TV, were massively popular.

Under the Moons of Mars was written on the backs of pages carrying the mastheads of a previous failed Burroughs business. Its protagonist John Carter is, on Earth, merely a mustered-out Civil War soldier turned gold prospector. On Mars he becomes a fearsome warrior through the lighter Martian gravity, which enables him to make 20-yard leaps over the heads of the brutal six-limbed green men he soon finds himself in battle against on the side of the planet's more cultured red race. Carter ludicrously finds his way to the titular planet by the simple manoeuvre of wishing himself there and learns the language of Mars preposterously swiftly. Nonetheless, Burroughs's first foray into his new profession – printed in *All-Story* magazine in February 1912 – saw him exploiting superbly the then still widely held belief that Mars was inhabited (or had been) by creating an evocative and intricately imagined picture of a planet whose culture was of a decaying majesty.

Burroughs had finally found a career that didn't make him restless. It was a

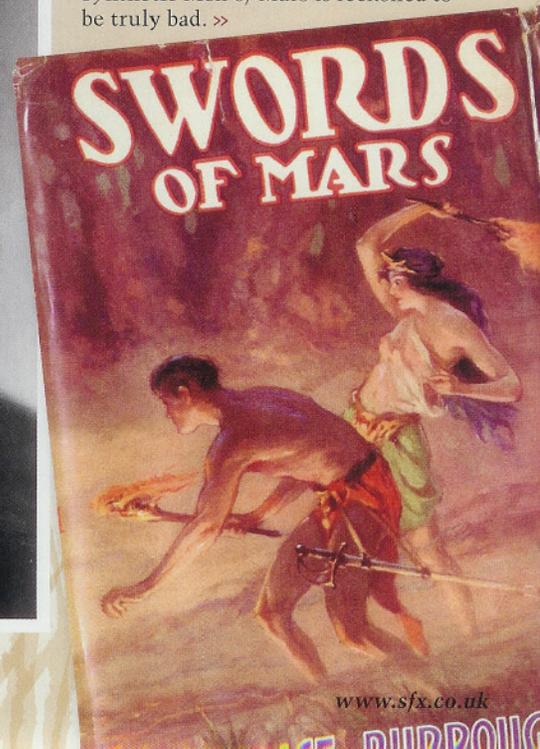
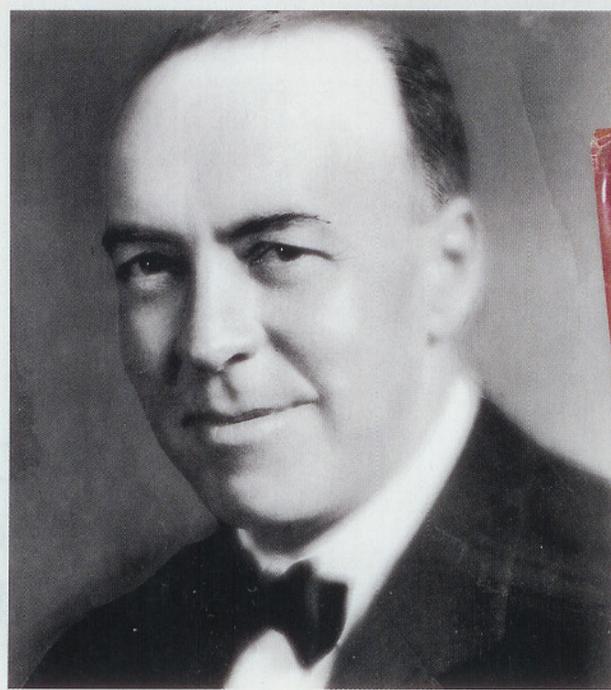
career that would ultimately see him hailed as a pioneer of science fiction and fantasy, become one of the most popular authors of all time and create the imperishable cultural icon Tarzan. Danton Burroughs of ERB Inc says: "He was unique. He combined the science fiction with romance and you really took the part of his heroes and heroines. My grandfather could describe action so vividly that the reader literally couldn't

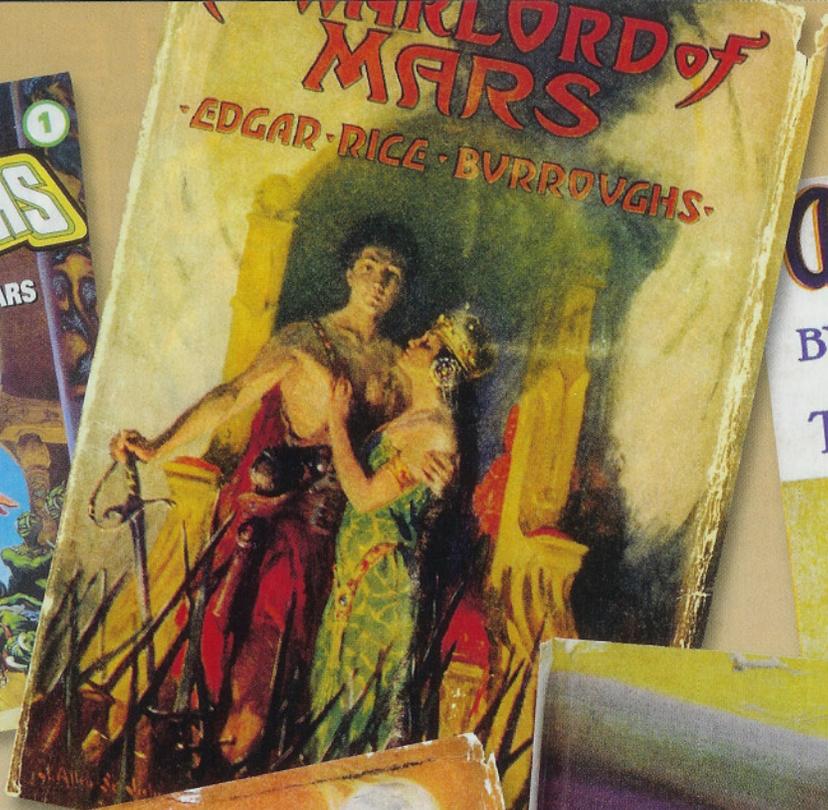
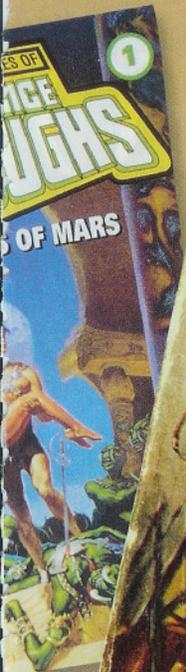
put the book down." Danton is biased of course, but his comments reflect those of many with no blood link to ERB.

LIFE ON MARS

There would eventually be ten Mars tales printed in Burroughs's lifetime. The initial trilogy – the first story was printed in book form as *A Princess of Mars* in 1917 and was followed by *The Gods of Mars* and *Warlords of Mars* – are the strongest. Burroughs arguably demeaned the series by writing less interesting sequels, but only 1939's *Synthetic Men of Mars* is reckoned to be truly bad. >>

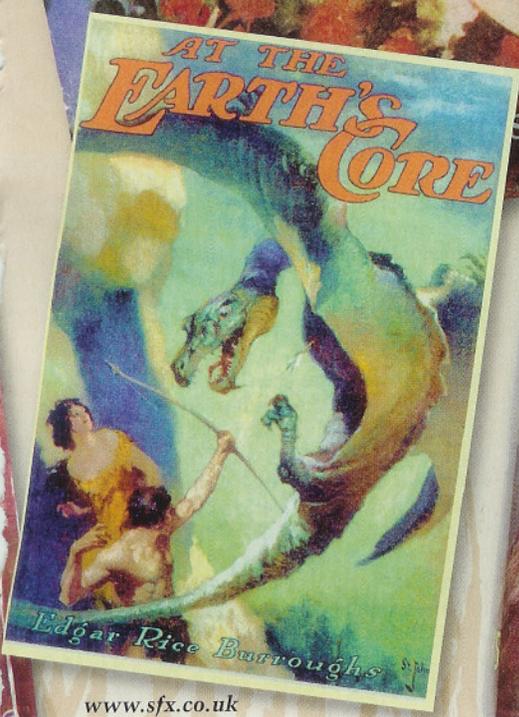
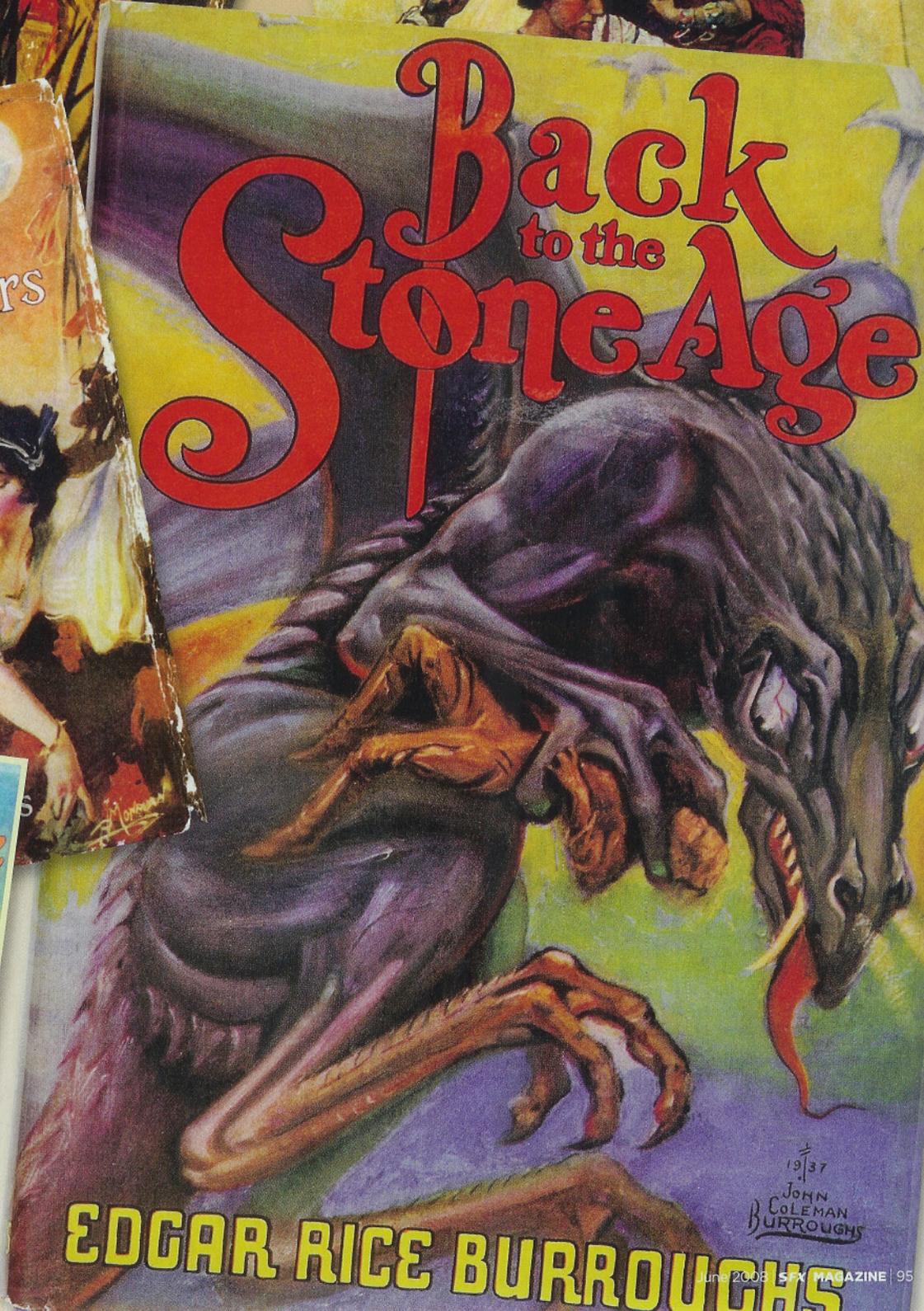
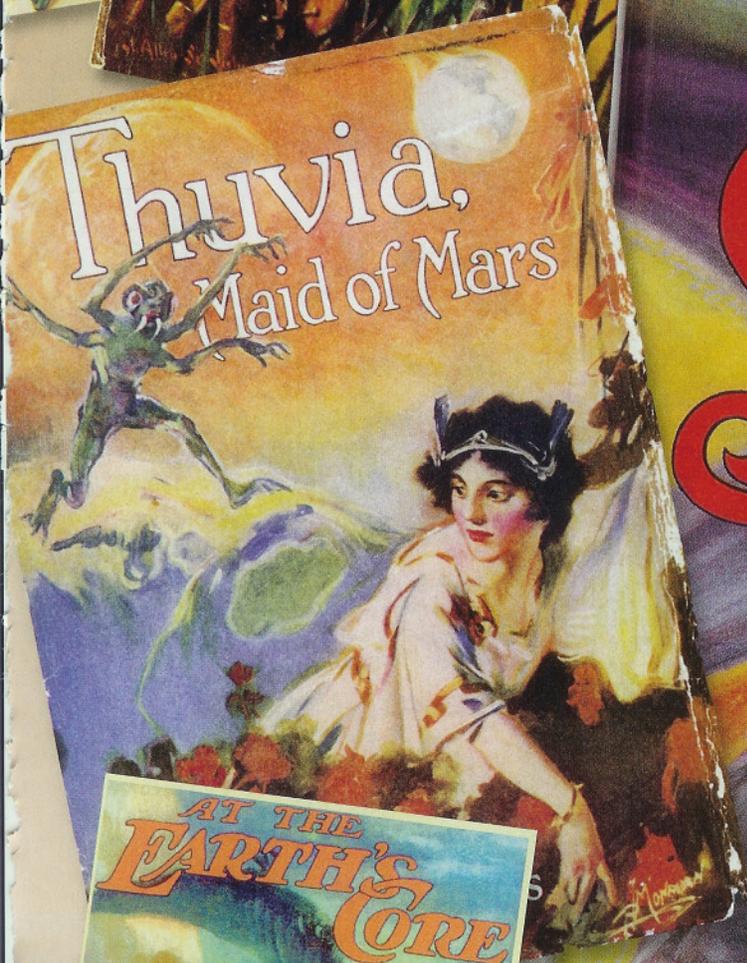
Below: Man of many talents, the ultra-prolific Edgar Rice Burroughs.





A Princess of Mars

BY EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS
Author of
TARZAN OF THE APES



EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

1937
JOHN
COLEMAN
BURROUGHS

Monkey Business

Elmo Lincoln in *Tarzan of the Apes*.



Though "Me Tarzan, you Jane" is a myth – you won't actually hear it in any Tarzan movie – this famous phrase does capture the inaccurate flavour of almost all of the Tarzan films. The chivalrous knucklehead depicted by screen adaptations of Tarzan gives no indication of the multi-lingual sophistication of Burroughs's character.

Nonetheless, Tarzan on the silver screen has always been successful. Elmo Lincoln may have been ludicrously beefy as the first cinematic Tarzan in *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918) but as Hillman points out, it was "One of the first million-seller movies". The dozen pictures starring multi-medal-winning Olympic swimmer Johnny Weissmuller from 1932 to 1948 provided the iconic movie image of Tarzan. The worst Tarzan movie was probably John Derek's *Tarzan The Ape Man* (1981),



which was used purely as a vehicle for his missus, sex bomb Bo Derek, who played Jane. Ironically, it provided in Miles O'Keefe possibly the most convincing looking celluloid Tarzan of them all. It took fully 66 years from the first Tarzan film for a screen adaptation even halfway faithful to Burroughs's original vision to make it to celluloid when Hugh Hudson's classy *Greystoke* was released in 1984. Christopher Lambert starred.

A couple of Tarzan books nodded toward their own movie spin-offs. "Is dat Johnny Weissmuller?" mutters a character in 1947 book *Tarzan and the Foreign Legion* when encountering the ape-man.

Burroughs's most enduring creation made his debut in *All-Story* in October 1912. "Tarzan of the Apes" initially fetched Burroughs the sum of \$700, but the story's hero would ultimately become a multi-million dollar industry. The magazine version of the story saw Burroughs incorrectly place tigers in Africa but otherwise it was an amazingly convincing tale of a child brought up by an undiscovered type of giant ape in the jungle after his parents are stranded and subsequently die there. Christened "Tar-zan" – ape-speak for "white-skin" – by his simian family, he grows up to discover that he is in fact John Clayton, an English Lord.

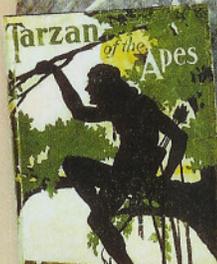
The savagery of jungle life is thrillingly depicted by Burroughs but he is equally adept at the touching love story he devises between Tarzan and Miss Jane Porter of Baltimore. The tiger references were corrected when *Tarzan of the Apes* became Burroughs's first published book in 1914. Though Burroughs had little trouble placing work with book publishers from hereon, he – ever a canny businessman – still ensured his works appeared in the pulps first for the extra remuneration. He unashamedly wrote for money, playing hardball over fees and measuring out a story's worth in the time it took him to

Tarzan's superhero qualities are no lesser than those of Batman – who also relies on reflex and muscles

complete it more than any aesthetic consideration. Nonetheless, not all Burroughs's stories made the transition from pulp to book in his lifetime, which is why all first appearance dates given in this article are for magazine publication, unless otherwise stated.

For those who'd claim a discussion of Tarzan is out of place in a sci-fi magazine, it should be stressed that not only are Tarzan's superhero qualities no greater or lesser than those of, say, Batman – who also relies on reflex and muscles rather than special powers – but many of the Tarzan novels featured science fiction elements. In *Tarzan the Terrible* (1921), Tarzan stumbles into Pal-Ul-Don, a forgotten and isolated land in which triceratops and men with tails roam. *Tarzan and the Ant Men* (1924) is a Lilliputian yarn. 1933's *Tarzan and the Lion Man* depicts gorillas that through genetic experimentation, speak English. In two stories – *Tarzan's Quest* (1935) and *Tarzan and the Foreign Legion* (book: 1947) – Burroughs gives his ape-man artificially extended life, via a cache of longevity pills and a witch doctor's spell respectively.

Tarzan at the Earth's Core (1930) sees Burroughs dovetail the Tarzan series with the third franchise he had created as the lord of the jungle visits Pellucidar,



Above: Burroughs's most famous creation Tarzan debuted in 1912.

the physically inverted world he imagined (far) beneath our very feet whose rising horizons are ruled over by repulsive winged reptiles.

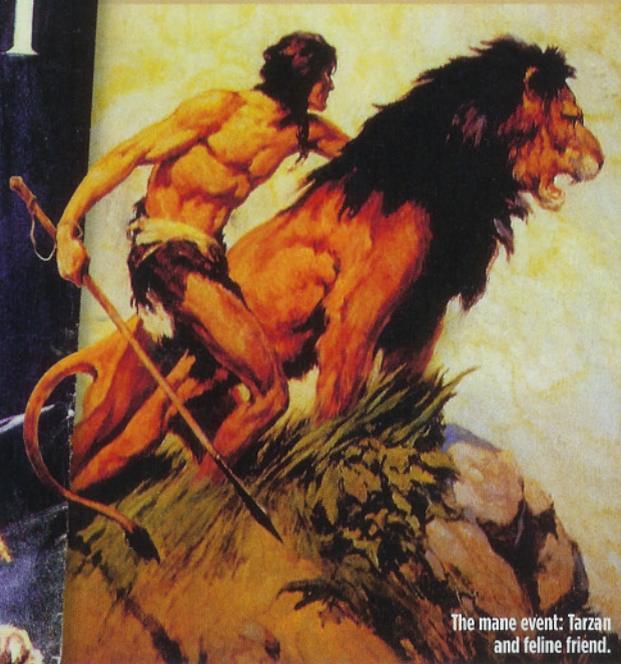
THE PREHISTORY BOYS

The first of seven Pellucidar books – *At the Earth's Core* (filmed in 1976) – appeared in 1914. Burroughs's fourth series was Caspak, better known after the title of the first novel in its sequence, *The Land That Time Forgot* (1918). Though clearly inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, Burroughs's own land in which dinosaurs still place their thunderous steps also features real originality in the form of an ingenious truncated internal evolutionary system spanning not millennia but an individual's lifetime. A film appeared in 1975, with a sequel in '77.

These series and others have garnered Burroughs the title the Grandfather of Science Fiction, though Burroughs fan and supervisor of the official ERB website Bill Hillman says, "I've always qualified that by saying American science fiction." As well as being the first major US SF novelist, Hillman says of Burroughs, "Science fantasy or science fantasy adventure – somewhere in a niche there you could put him as a pioneer, as a first." Burroughs was never

RY

Jungle



The mane event: Tarzan and feline friend.



Burroughs the Cavalry officer.



With Tarzan actor Glenn Morris.



Above: Burroughs carried on writing until late in his life – completing nearly 70 novels before his death at the age of 74.

Other Burroughs SF and fantasy novels, almost all worth checking out, are: *The Moon Maid* trilogy (1926), an anti-communist alien invasion story; *Beyond Thirty* aka *The Lost Continent* (1915), a rare Burroughs future-set story; *The Eternal Lover* aka *The Eternal Savage*, a high quality story concerning a primeval man who awakens in modern Africa, published in two parts in 1914 and 1915; *The Monster Men* (1913), a cross between *Frankenstein* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* with a romance thrown in; *The Resurrection of Jimber-Jaw* (1936), a battle of the sexes story featuring a reawakened preserved caveman.

Towards the end of his life, a certain fatigue began to set in in both his writing and his private life. His Tarzan books particularly had become increasingly formulaic. When he returned to civilian life after World War

“In his own way, Edgar Rice Burroughs was a great writer” BILL HILLMAN

II, Burroughs's publishing company – which he had set up in 1931 because his hardball-playing had cut his previous publishers' profit margins to counter-productive levels – issued three more books, one each in the Tarzan, Mars and Venus series, before he passed away in 1950. However, a new generation of SF writers who had idolised Burroughs as kids were already making a mark.

His swashbuckling blend of fantasy and SF is evident in the works of Robert E Howard,

Ray Bradbury and Michael Moorcock. HP Lovecraft and Isaac Asimov were also devotees. Meanwhile, Philip José Farmer has written what is almost Burroughs fan fiction throughout his career with several novels featuring Tarzan-esque characters.

Burroughs even influenced hack Western writer JT Edson, who wrote a series of novels about Bunduki, Tarzan's adopted grandson.

21ST CENTURY MAN

Burroughs's imagination continues to enthrall. ERB Inc is planning deluxe new editions of all Burroughs's series. Meanwhile, a movie based on the Martian series is in pre-production at Pixar, Angelic films is discussing an adaptation of the Carson Napier series and Warner Brothers are preparing a new Tarzan movie. On top of this, the Tarzan musical is successfully making its way around the world. Danton Burroughs – who still has vague but fond memories of sitting on his grandfather's knee – says, “It's never ending. It still keeps us busy.”

Burroughs's brand of SF and fantasy may seem old-fashioned to some today,

ERB's Non-Fantasy and SF Works

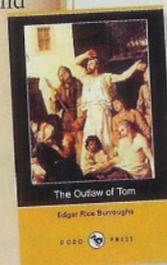
The prolific Burroughs tried his hand at virtually every writing genre going.

The least interesting of his non-fantasy fare are jungle-set Tarzan variants like *The Cave Girl*, *Jungle Girl* and *The Lad and the Lion* (though in 1917 the latter became the first Burroughs fiction to be filmed) and realistic works such as *The Oakdale Affair*, *The Efficiency Expert*, *The Girl From Hollywood*, *The Girl from Farris's* and *Marcia of the Doorstep*. The latter, a novel with an ingénue protagonist written in 1924, even Burroughs could not bring himself to publish. Though it was by far his longest piece of work, it only saw the light of day in 1999.

In the so-so category are *Prisoner of Zenda*-homage *The Mad King*, the play *You Lucky Girl!* (published in 1999) and 13th century England-set *The Outlaw of Torn*. *I Am A Barbarian* was also historical but its narrative of a slave of Caligula was high quality. Also impressive was the uncategorisable (and possibly intentionally parodic)

The Mucker, the story of a no-good bum who discovers an inner moral fortitude when he is swept up in high sea adventure.

The Wild West was no mythological place to ex-cavalryman Burroughs so it's unsurprising that his westerns are the most interesting of his non-fantasy works. *The War Chief* (1927) and *Apache Devil* (1933) are not only fine reads but predate *Dances With Wolves* by a good half-century in their sympathetic portrayal of native Americans.



featuring Victorian morality, an over-reliance on coincidences and a frequent flamboyancy of dialogue, but he can teach a thing or two about captivating, pacy narrative, leavening of futuristic visions with romance, and worlds imagined to the tiniest detail to contemporary writers of speculative fiction who may feel a sense of superiority about their more edgy styles. Moreover, a patina of age has not precluded much of Burroughs's work being immortal: who of his disciples has created the likes of Tarzan and John Carter, characters so iconic that they are still the subject of adaptations nearly a full century after they first captured the imaginations of readers in a world barely recognisable as our own? **SFX**

Thanks to: Bill Hillman and Danton Burroughs. See www.erbzine.com for all the latest ERB news.