

New Worlds Order

If you've read TRIPWIRE for any period of time, you know of our editorial fondness for Michael Moorcock. He's the English writer who helped bring Science Fiction out of the rocket lab and into the real world via his magazine *New Worlds*. He has published dozens of novels of both genre and literary fiction, written songs for the likes of Hawkwind and his own bands, edited magazines and fanzines, composed countless essays, reviews and other articles, penned comic strips and basically left his mark on the world of fiction for a half century; his literary accomplishments could fill these pages. We recently got a chance to interview him again, and as our remit is to dig further into topics than most of our glossy competitors can do, we explored his past and the roots of his works that are often overlooked. Born of the Blitz, distilled in the swinging London of the sixties and now splitting time between Rightwing Texas and Leftwing Paris, Michael Moorcock was kind enough to reply to us with the answers we were seeking.

WORDS: ANDREW GROSSBERG

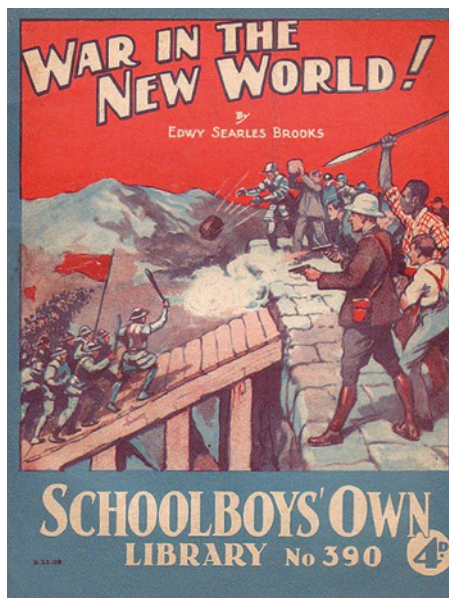
TRIPWIRE: Where did you grow up? What was your home life like? How do you think it helped shape your early writing? What was the environment like? Was it conducive to creativity and writing?

MICHAEL MOORCOCK: My dad ran off pretty much the day VE was announced and my mother didn't mind much. Neither did I. I liked him well enough but I think his leaving was one of the best things that happened to me. My mother got a job in the office of a timber company and her boss became my mentor. He was actively tolerant and had gone in and out of Germany and Austria before the war 'buying' Jews from the Nazis. My grandmother was also very tolerant especially for the culture of the day, so I grew up with a strong sense of justice

14 TRIPWIRE



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and egalitarianism. I knew I wanted to be writer from the age of 9 and they both encouraged me in a million ways. They didn't stop me when I left school at 15 and began working as a courier for a shipping company. Our part of London had sustained the worst V-bombing of the war and I'd become used to houses and shops just suddenly 'disappearing' – there one day replaced by a heap of rubble the next. As kids, we'd go out hunting for bits of shrapnel and the big prizes were complete pieces of German planes (joysticks, instrument casings, wing recognition symbols and so on). It was a time of high excitement for kids who were, of course, protected from the reality of things by our parents. When the war was over, it wasn't just soldiers who missed the adrenaline rushes, it was kids like us. Peacetime was incredibly boring and you rarely got time off as I had when they bombed our elementary school, which made my first experience of school about as short as I liked it.

After the war came the austerity years when nobody had that much or seemed to



care. My first job was in the City, with clear views from the river to what remained of the 18th century buildings like St Paul's and the Mint because the great Wren buildings had survived better than the ordinary warehouses and offices which were mostly from Victorian times. This gave me a great sense of London's history. It also gave me a sense of impermanence, as I'd become used to whole streets disappearing and I think this translated into my penchant for malleable landscapes. I didn't get much formal education but I think I was pretty thoroughly educated in many of the useful experiences for a writer. I was pretty thoroughly indulged and sent to Pitman's, a secretarial college, to learn shorthand and typing, since these were the main skills considered necessary for someone who wanted to be a writer. I was doing a fanzine at 10 and writing stories and articles for that (it was called *Outlaw's Own*). Everyone encouraged me. Otherwise I had a very happy childhood and had few bad experiences. Maybe that's why I find 'rites of passage' stories crashingly boring. I liked girls, got on well with them and they seemed to like me, so I had little of the trauma most boys report. I feel almost guilty...

TW: Were you around creative people like artists, musicians and writers as a child? Were your parents supportive of your creativity? How did schooling and creative writing interplay?

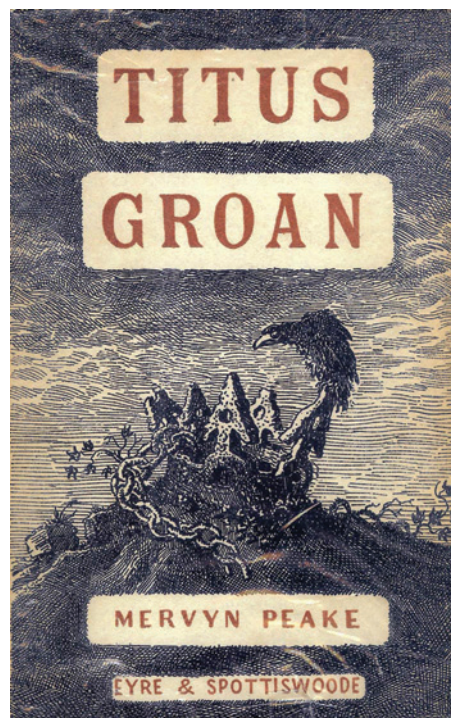
MM: I did several fanzines long before I realized there was a whole fanzine culture out there. My first after *Outlaw's Own* was *Burroughsania* (mostly based on my enthusiasm for ERB.) My first great loves as an author were P.G.Wodehouse and Richmal Crompton, both humorous writers.

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Through them I discovered the world of 'story paper' collectors. These were similar to pulps – actually a bit closer to dime novels.

Through these I became an enthusiast for a writer called Edwy Searles Brooks, mostly because he was strongly influenced by PGW. I discovered he lived a couple of streets away from me (in the same street as one of my aunts), so he was very helpful and kind, as was Mervyn Peake, who also lived near to where I was living. I corresponded with T.H.White and others, sometimes because I wanted to interview them for my fanzines. So while there were few artists or writers in my family, I soon came to know a lot by the time I was 17, which is when I was offered the job of *Tarzan Adventures (TA)*, a national weekly juvenile paper which ran the Tarzan strip and various text stories and articles. I had been contributing to it from the age of 16.

Schooling always took second place to creativity. For some reason everyone seemed to take it for granted that I'd be a writer. I did well in exams when I 'tried' as they put it. They seemed frustrated by my lack of interest and I was always getting lectures about how I should settle down and pass exams. I am lousy at formal exams and



used to get through most of them if I could find a narrative in the questions which I could turn into a story.

TW: You mentioned in our previous interview (*TRIPWIRE Annual 2008*) that you were in a skiffle band at 15. Did your interest in music and writing run parallel or was one stronger than the other?

MM: Parallel. I concentrated on writing and editing mainly because it was more comfortable than travelling around in the back of a van for small or no payment. Later, in the 60s, I had time to do both and formed various bands before I realized personalities were as important as musicianship. For a short while I had a band called The Popular Music Ensemble with Lang Jones, Charles Platt and others. Those two also worked on *New Worlds*. But I didn't get back to professional music until Hawkwind invited me to write and perform with them, then I was offered a contract by United Artists. The Deep Fix was the title of an early novella for Science Fantasy and then the name of Jerry Cornelius' band. By that time, living as I was in Ladbrooke Grove, almost everyone I knew was in a band – it was the UK equivalent of Haight/Ashbury.

TW: How did you get the gig editing *Tarzan Adventures* at such a young age? What was it like working for them? Did you have trouble being treated as an adult or taken seriously at all?

MM: I was cheap, probably, but I never remember being condescended to. I got

the job after contributing to the magazine. The editor then suggested I apply for the job of assistant editor, tipping me off that he was planning to leave shortly and I'd then be editor. So that's what I did. I had a huge pool of talent, since by then I was part of SF fandom. I wrote a lot of fantasy stories (*Sojan* for instance which is published this year by Paizo for the first time in complete form).

TW: For people not familiar with *TA*, what was the mag like?

MM: It was really like a kind of sf pulp for kids, with various departments – editorials, reviews, readers' letters. The circulation shot up so nobody much wanted me to stop. I eventually stopped because I wanted to travel.

TW: You were publishing fanzines at the time. Did you continue with that and if so how did you balance it against the paying work?

MM: I continued for a while with *Book Collectors News* (mostly about story papers and their characters) and *Burroughsania* (increasingly about fantasy in general) but eventually stopped when I was 19 or 20, having put out so many I think I'd exhausted ideas for them, but I still contributed to them until I was around 25.

TW: *Tarzan Adventures* is where you first published *Sojan*. What went into the genesis of that character? Is it more a testament to your already developed skills as a young writer or a commentary

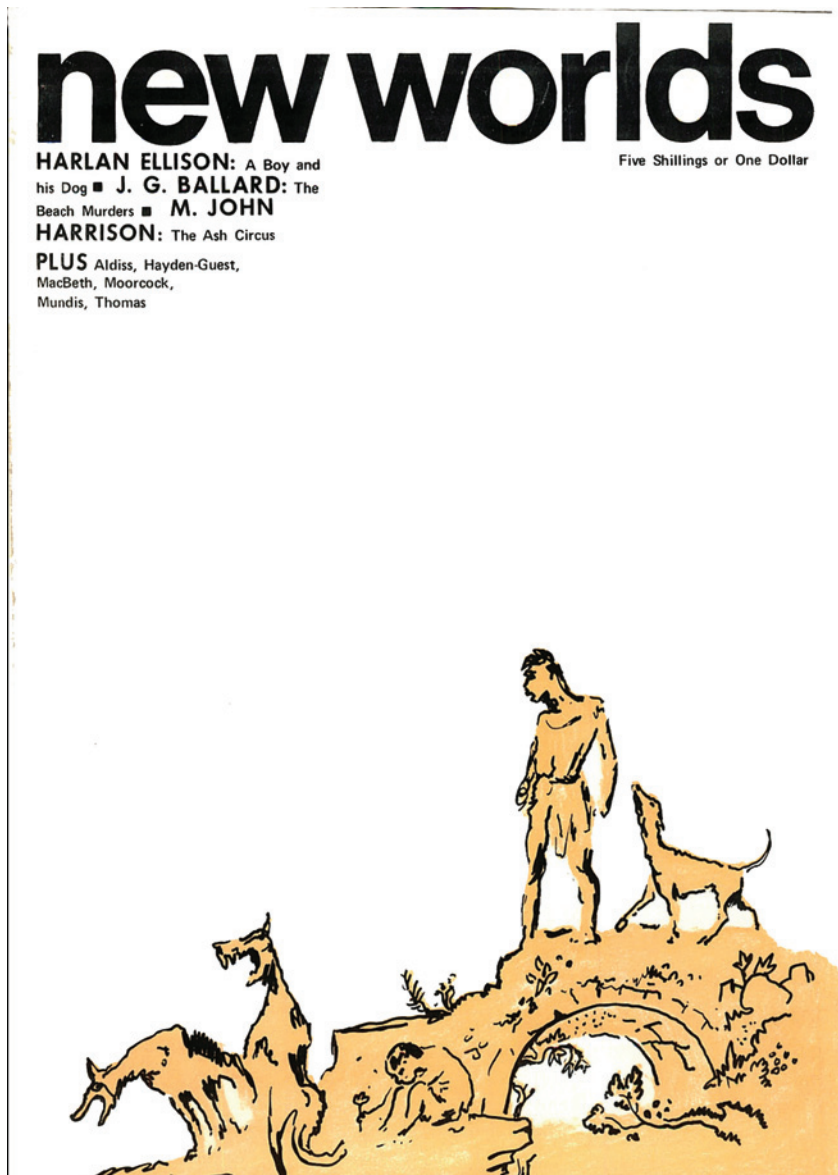


on the casualness of the *Sword and Sorcery* genre that *Sojan* is still quite readable? Do you still have any affection for that character and world and will you ever revisit it?

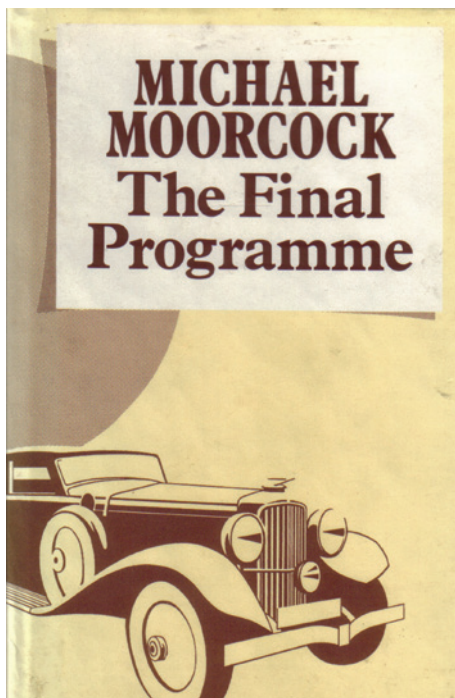
MM: I talked to the then-editor Alistair Graham. We were saying it was a shame we didn't have an ERB-type series for the text pages. I'd already done the first part in 1954 or 5 for the first issue of *Burroughsania*. On the basis of that, Alistair commissioned a series. I'm surprised people still seem to find it readable. It's very unlikely I'll ever revisit Zylor (*Sojan's* home planet)!

TW: Your early career included journalism and reviews. Was there anything you weren't writing? Let's talk about the comics you did for *Fleetway*. What was that like?

MM: I started as a newspaper 'stringer', picking up small news stories and phoning them in mostly to *The Evening Standard*, one of the three London evening newspapers then published. I wrote features for various magazines, especially *Fleetway* publications because I knew a lot of people there. I wrote a few strips for



Hitting the write spot: Moorcock attracted a cross-section of literary talent to *New Worlds* including Mervyn Peake, JG Ballard and Harlan Ellison



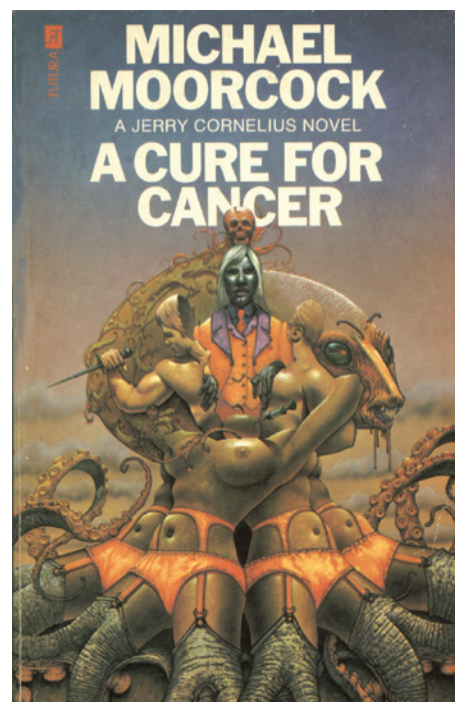
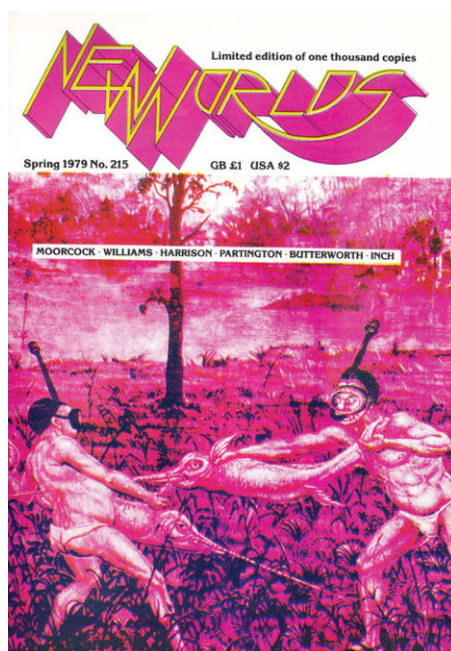
Fleetway before I was invited by Bill Baker to join *The Sexton Blake Library*. Those were mostly Robin Hood stories for *Thriller Picture Library*. A Dick Turpin or two. On staff, but still doing freelance work for other papers while on staff for Blake and the annuals. I was one of the few who could turn out text and also knew how to set it etc. One of the reasons I worked on the annuals was because of my experience with text on *TA*. I also did Buck Jones, Dick Daring of the Mounties and a whole raft of characters in the weeklies like *Lion* and *Tiger*. Some were original characters and some were established. Skid Solo and Zip Nolan were already going. I started The Man from T.I.G.E.R., Danny and his Time Machine, African Safari (non-fiction) and a whole bunch of others. I enjoyed working with the Embletons, Don Lawrence, Bob Forest and several others on various Western and 'historical' characters. My favourite single job was a full-colour Karl the Viking with Don Lawrence. It's hard to remember them all. I eventually burned out on comics and went through a period of hating them. As *New Worlds* took up more time, I did fewer and fewer comics and more features. I mostly did stuff for *Look And Learn* until I began writing fiction primarily for educational papers on science, history, literature and so on. I didn't do any comics until the 'underground' stuff of the late 60s and early 70s (the Jerry Cornelius strip).

TW: What was it like working at *New Worlds*? You've said before that you paid

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out of pocket to authors with money you earned writing novels and such. Why did your personal budget go into the running of the magazine? Did you in any way have actual ownership of the title? Given the opportunity would you ever revisit *New Worlds (NW)*, or would you take up a semi-permanent editor position on another mag with a similar remit?

MM: Originally *NW* was owned by the Golds, primarily publishers of soft porn and 'Hank Janson' – hard-bitten sex and blood thrillers. They paid me a regular fee out of which I paid authors. Frequently there wasn't anything left over for me. When the Golds faced bankruptcy they didn't want to go on running anything but porn which paid them better, so they let me and a partner (also an ex-Golds exec) take it over. The Arts Council was persuaded to give us a grant but this wasn't enough to pay authors and printers. I wrote novels to fund the magazine which was more expensive to print (art paper, large 'slick' size and so on) but it went into profit after the fourth or fifth issue, when my partner baled to take a job in Scotland. He signed over his interest to me. Since then I've been sole owner of the title. From then on I became increasingly



ambitious and this took more money. We started to make a decent profit after about the fourth of the large 'slick' issues.

We were doing fine until WH Smiths attempted to blackmail us into not running various stories, such as Jones's "The Great Clock" and Spinrad's "Bug Jack Barron." We refused. They stopped distributing us. A press campaign got us 'taken back' but it was strategy on Smith's part to take the boxes of magazines and then not actually distribute them to their retail branches. It took time to realise what had happened; I'm sure they calculated we'd be unable to pay printers or authors and we'd go under. Smiths and Menzies became actively antagonistic and it's very hard in the UK to get to newsstand readers without those two who effectively form a monopoly. So I had to write some more quick fantasy novels to keep us all going. Without Smiths or Menzies stocking and displaying issues, it again got rather hairy until I was paying all bills without a lot of money coming in.

I wasn't interested in publishing a 'little magazine' like *Ambit* or *Transatlantic Review*, though I had nothing against them and was on very good terms with the editors (we shared contributors frequently). Eventually I couldn't keep my family and the magazine going on a regular basis, so we went quarterly with Corgi publishing us and I began to do irregular issues designed to keep moving forward while the Corgi editions were a sort of consolidation of what we'd done up to then. Other editors gradually took over as, by the mid-70s I

concentrated increasingly on more ambitious work rather than fantasy novels which I could write very quickly. You can see this in the mid-70s with books like *The Condition of Muzak* and *Gloriana* taking more energy. I still enjoyed doing those quirky irregular issues and let other editors do some issues.

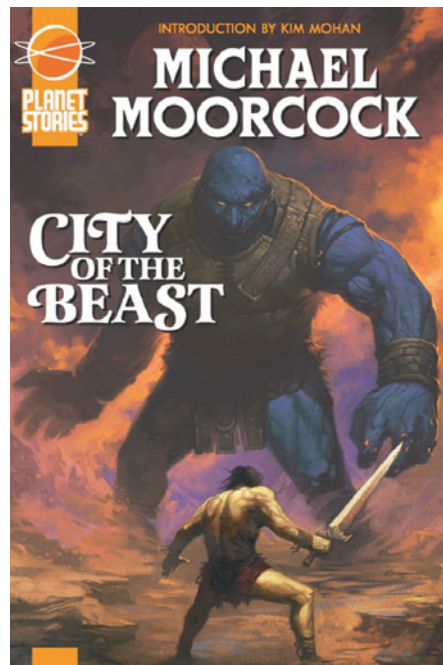
I wouldn't mind doing some more issues if there were a number of good new writers (not SF writers as such) who didn't have a platform. But that would be the reason for bringing it out again — that always was the reason for publishing. I know a number of international 'literary' writers who are still addressing contemporary issues in contemporary terms who find it hard to get widely published and I would like to give them a forum. But that takes a lot of time and money and of course energy and I'm not sure at the moment I could find the time and energy even if my nearest and dearest let me find the money! I've a lot of books still to write and I'm an old geezer. I've tried to be a consulting editor on other magazines but they had too much of an SF bias in the end. SF was always a means to an end for me. I looted its best elements. Most people want to 'improve' SF/Fantasy and although I support that, it isn't really what I want to be doing.

TW: Do you find that your motivation to write now is different than it was in your early career? If you could tell your past writing self anything from now that would benefit you then, what would it be?

MM: Not to write so many 'quickies' maybe and concentrate more on ambitious books. But they were the means to an end. For some reason I always saw my own interests shared by other writers (like Ballard, say, or Harrison) and so much of my energy was spent on publicising and publishing those writers.

People said I should have used pseudonyms for my quickies but that always felt slightly hypocritical to me. Maybe I should have used my middle initial (as I'd originally done when writing *Sojan!*) like Iain Banks. But I just couldn't bring myself to disown in any way that early work. It suggests I'm ashamed of books which I still regard as decent journeyman work, at least. I'm a great believer in a warts and all approach to my career, if you like, even though it muddied the water a bit when someone who'd enjoyed reading *The*

18 TRIPWIRE



Brothel in Rosenstrasse, or say, picked up *The Distant Suns*.

Some like Jimmy Ballard warned me about doing too much fast work, but they benefited from that work, too. I offered a platform to some fine writers who might never have done their best work if *NW* hadn't encouraged them. I commissioned his 'condensed novels', encouraged him to write at his full stretch. It meant I could pay writers without them having to make commercial compromises. Tom Disch said, for instance, that he would never have made books like *Camp Concentration* as ambitious if he hadn't known he was working for *NW*. It was a conscious decision on my part to do work which supported the group. I'm proud of that. Self-interest was involved, of course. We raised standards while getting readers used to reading in a different way.

TW: What's your favourite book you wrote from say the period before 1970? Do you have a favorite book from your early career? And of course, why?

MM: Probably *A Cure for Cancer* is my favourite pre-1970 book, but I also have a soft spot for *Stormbringer* and *The Final Programme*. The early Cornelius shorts, too, I think contain some of my best writing of that time. Why? Because with Cornelius I'd found a technique for confronting the contemporary world, something which Elric was hard put to do...but I still like the sheer madness of that first Elric novel.

TW: Do you ever compare your early work with what you're writing now? Although that's usually the job of the critic does it ever benefit you to turn your focus inward? Do you see a progression in your work, more than just polish and growth as a writer but a possibly intentional changing of styles in your prose or themes you explore?

MM: Not really. I've done a bit of retrospection in the Jerry Cornelius story "Modem Times" (published in *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction Volume 2*) rewritten as "Modem Times .2". With Cornelius I created a technique as much as a character and he's still very useful, I find. I'm also writing about my past more in almost everything I'm doing (except the *Doctor Who*) and I've had to find ways of doing that without becoming self-indulgent or boring. A story I wrote recently for the Gaiman-

Sarrantino anthology *Stories* attempted to give a faintly noir-ish flavour to the prose, to suit the change from the real *NW* and the invented mystery magazine *Mystery*, which stands in for *NW*. These stories ("Stalking Balzac" is another, not yet finished) and stuff like the Alsacia novels I'm currently writing for Tor make far more use of my past experience, friends and so on, mainly because I can now write about people who are dead, therefore there's no danger of hurting anyone's feelings. I know Jimmy, Iain Sinclair and others think (thought) I should be writing more about London and be living back in London but I am writing about London more now, in retrospect, however. And Paris, where we spend more and more time, is also an inspiration.

Most of the innovations I wanted to see in fiction from 1960, say, have been made but there are still things that need doing, I think and I'm trying not only to do them but to explain them to some degree. My own feeling is that Ballard, for instance, reached a high point with *The Atrocity Exhibition* and work done in the decade between the mid 60s and mid 70s. Ironically he fell back on exposition later. We wanted to do work without explication and that's now an accepted method. Most of Ballard's books after *Empire of the Sun* are rather conventional science fiction in essence (informed, of course, by his idiosyncratic genius) and I tended to feel he didn't altogether develop technically as much as I'd



hoped. It made him more approachable to the general reader, though. I'm not sure I want to go in that direction. I'd like to develop the method I used in *Blood and War Amongst the Angels*. I'm disappointed they're not in print at the moment.

TW: Does it ever seem like people tend to focus too much on Elric and *Behold the Man*, possibly at the expense of your other work?

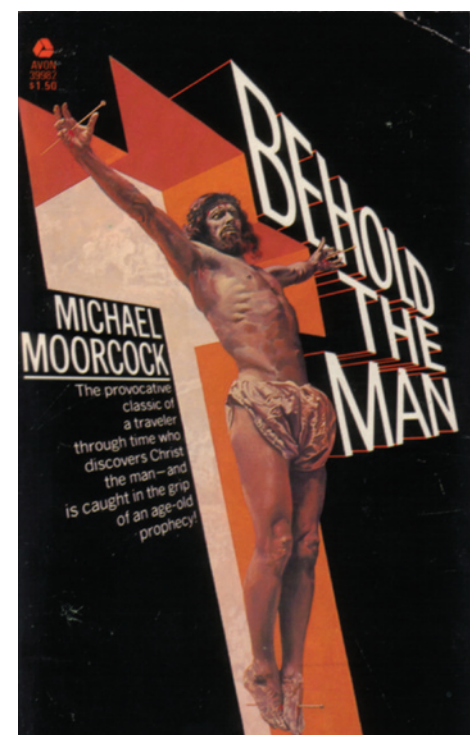
MM: All the time, especially in the US. Though this doesn't always happen, particularly these days. Quite a lot of readers now scarcely know my fantasy but really like stuff like *The Brothel In Rosenstrasse*, *Mother London* and so on. As someone once said, I've written so much different stuff the reader can always find something of mine to hate.

TW: In a strange blast from the past, you've written a Doctor Who novel (*The Coming of the Terraphiles* from BBC Books.) It can be seen as an iconic writer writing an iconic character. What was it like to take on The Doctor, someone else's character who's played an important part in shaping the culture and psyche of science fiction both in the UK and the rest of the world? Was there any sense of responsibility or a special gravity or was it just another world to have fun with? What can we expect from the book?

MM: In some ways I'm reclaiming the elements which came from my stuff originally – not ripped off but generic elements which have been unconsciously absorbed. I greatly admire the best of the DW writers, especially Steve Moffat. What I've tried to do was what they wouldn't be

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able to afford to do on TV – i.e. a big space spectacular. Also I've done much of it as a sort of homage to P.G. Wodehouse, whose style of humour often informs the Doctor Who stories – indeed DW could be readily seen as a Psmith character. Psmith is my favourite PGW character. I have to say that it was harder to write than a book wholly conceived by me. I had no access to the Matt Smith episodes but was asked to write the Smith character. I did my best with what little

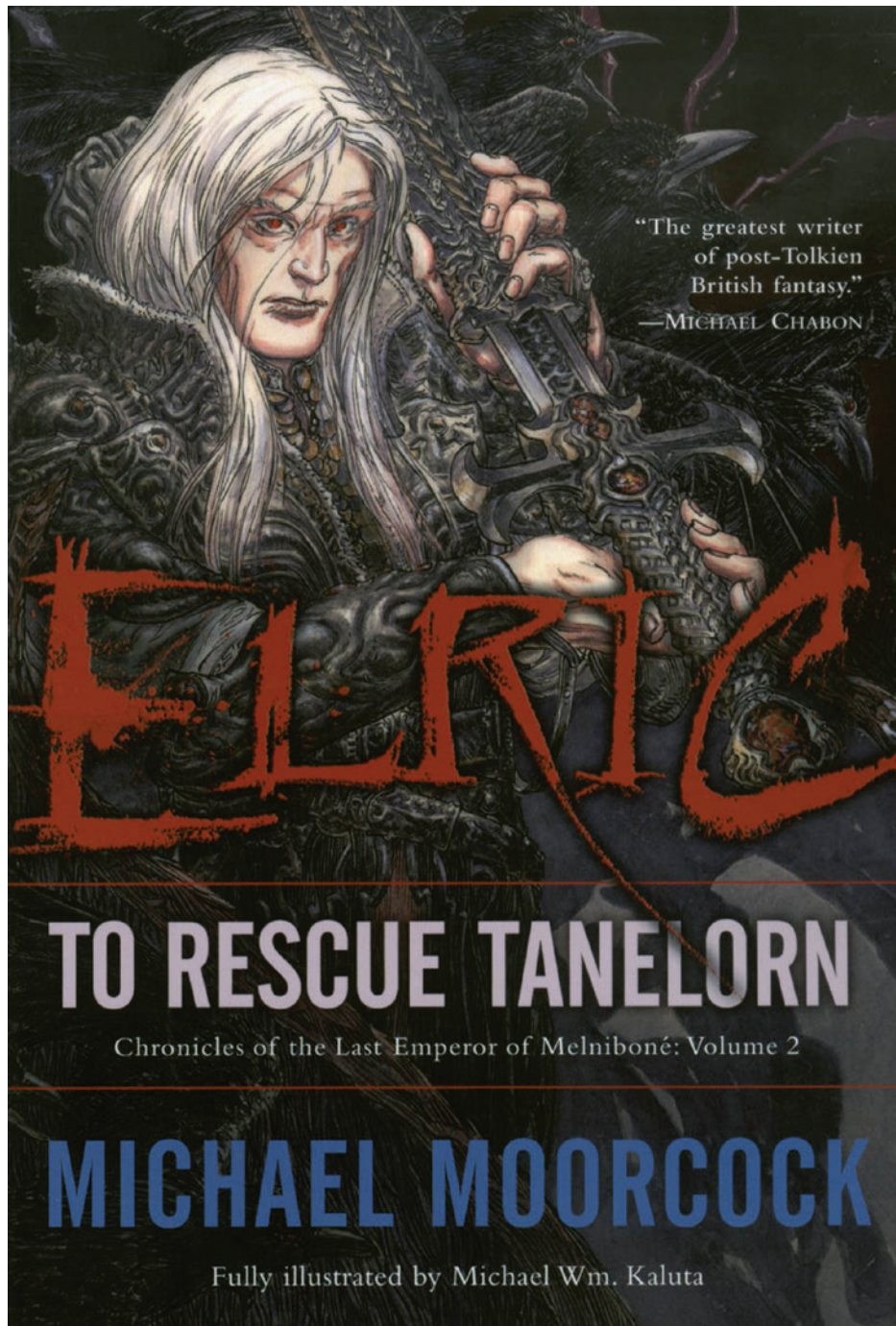


I knew. I saw one episode towards the end of my finishing the first draft and a couple more afterwards. I think I had Amy pretty much as she's depicted.

Also I had somehow missed the Agatha Christie episode, which I didn't think very good on most levels but which used a couple of elements I riffed off in *Terraphiles*. I hope I've deepened the 'mythos' a bit and I have deepened the connections between Who and the Eternal Champion which already existed. It is, I hope, a big, often funny, space opera with a serious undertone. It's not for eight-year-olds, I have to say. I was asked to write 'a MM book about Doctor Who rather than a DW written by MM' and that I hope is what I did. But at time of speaking, in spite of the book being advertised and sold, I have had no response from anyone at BBC Books or BBC Wales.

One odd thing that happened was that 'dark flow' was discovered while I was in the middle of the book (which had black holes and dark matter in it) and I had to incorporate that into the story. None of it, I have to say, is very scientific. It's more *Thrilling Wonder Stories* than *Astounding*... True space opera, I hope. Greg Benford or Larry Niven would raise at least one eyebrow at the 'scientific' rationales. Not that I had any time at all to absorb the implications of 'dark force', though in some ways I anticipated all of this in my first ever SF novel *The Sundered Worlds* and *Terraphiles*, by 'reclaiming' my original notions of the multiverse, was almost accidentally helped. I do feel that if the book was for some reason not done by BBC Books it would stand on its own feet as an EC space opera. I am, I'm glad to say, now back on *The Whispering Swarm* and feeling a lot less pressure. It's still hard to write about established characters not my own. □

Thanks to www.multiverse.org for images



Behold The Man: a photo of Moorcock circa 1970 (centre with champagne bottle)

