

Paint's Master

In this article, Tanith Lee explores the work of Wayne Douglas Barlowe, who is an American science fiction and fantasy artist and writer. He has created images for book covers, films and art galleries, and has also written a novel, 'God's Demon'. Barlowe provided the cover art for several of Tanith's books. His work may be viewed at <https://waynebarlowe.wordpress.com/>

The great masters in any age have a touch of God. The smallest button interests them as much as the mightiest crag. They are concerned with the hurricane, but also with the fall of the sparrow. They have care for both.

My first meeting with the painting of Wayne Douglas Barlowe came when I saw, in 1990, the covers he had done for two of my Paradys books. Living in England and seldom latterly reading Fantasy or Science Fiction, I hadn't discovered his work. Doing so, I was overwhelmed. The two books were *The Book of the Damned* and *The Book of the Beast*. I was lucky enough that he subsequently painted the covers of two other Paradys tracts, *The Book of the Dead*, (which shows his remarkable ability with pure black and white), and *The Book of the Mad*.

I have had some good covers executed for my books, a few bad ones, and a few exceptionally fine. Barlowe's covers were – are – astonishing and wonderful. Along with the perfect draughtsmanship and surreal, disturbing, beautiful use of colour – virtually the right colours, too, as carefully detailed in the novels – he displayed an unusual awareness of the writer's mind. I have never seen Paradys portrayed so exactly, just as, it seemed, evolved and imagined by me. Yet there had been no correspondence between the artist and myself. He had “simply” read my books – mind you, something that not every artist troubles to do.

The latter two covers, when they arrived in due course, had all the same hallmarks. Especially the last cover (*Mad*), conveys, with a sinister playfulness reminiscent of Magritte, the book's aspects within aspects, the illusions that are real, reality that is not.

Evidently, I am a total, and grateful, fan. So when I received

Barlowe's Guide to Fantasy, I was excited and full of anticipation. Nor was I disappointed.

Although I don't know all the works that Barlowe has delved into here, I confess to certain personal delights. Such creatures are depicted as Beowulf's Grendel, the Shrowk for Lindsay's fabulous-in-all-senses *Voyage to Arcturus*, and the unnerving Nissifer from Vance's glorious *Dying Sun*. I frankly admit that books I might not spontaneously incline to read now tempt me, due to the glamour – and sometimes terror – of their representatives on Barlowe's pages. And of course I turned to the image of my "own" Chuz with bated breath – which then escaped in a shout of applause. Wayne Barlowe has caught exactly, (what else?), the marvel and horror of Chuz, dressed him ideally for his role, and added the asses' jawbones which I, lover of the elegance and mystery of bones that I am, had felt him to be equipped with. This is definitely Chuz. How does Barlowe manage this? Surely other authors will recognise herein their inner monsters and demons, with an amazement similar to mine?

Good fantasy art is far from a facile medium. The exponent of fantasy – both artist and writer – has an added need to make the subject more than normally real. Where one can believe easily enough, and with slight delineation, in a horse, there must be added assistance when summoning a unicorn. And where a lovely woman requires only to be shown – if she is immortal and ageless, then some other music must play about her. (See the completely believable ageless and immortal Lirazel on page 57. The lines and agonies of long life are all there, under the smooth complexion. The eyes each see a different vista. The tension of her limpid hands holds the serene *stress* of eternity, for which there is no cure.)

Not wishing to tend to psychoanalysis of the artist, still I feel that Wayne Barlowe, along with the largesse of talent, possesses an unusual nerve-end sympathy, even empathy, with the worlds and beings he illustrates. He has, I rather think, an intuitive flair for penetrating deeply into, and profoundly understanding, their natures – just as must the writer. Even the most wonderful artist may not have this gift or be unable to wield it to such a fulfilled extent. Barlowe's psychic muscle, as well as the gleaming musculature of his genius, is well-honed, limberly exercised, and at

its peak.

But all this would falter, if not married, as here, to a flawless technique. Metal glimmers, flashes, jewels glow and spark, velvet looks velvet enough to stroke, a woman's skin divine enough to caress, scales harsh enough to set the teeth on edge. Swords that cut, warriors who humble with their eyes, landscapes that run to horizons of ozone and oxygen; these are the always-components of Barlowe's art. His figure-drawing is of the highest standard, and the sense of gesture-in-abeyance – a persona caught between one movement and the next – is very strong. In some there is the feeling of speed snatched by a camera, and in some a stony waiting.

He shines too with the light of the great portraitist in that the faces of his subjects differ markedly – a need that is not always adhered to in fantasy and SF art. Contrast for example, the independent boy-girl arrogance of Lackey's Kerowyn with the melancholy lush beauty of Dunsany's Lirazel. Kurtz's scholastic Camber with the almost-Steerpikeness (see *Gormenghast* by Mervyn Peake), of Pratchett's Mort. Note the baleful dignity of the terrible rending Grendel, (after all, although the Danes were heroes, he was there first), with the blind evil of the swine-thing, or fearful insectile Nissifer, shown elsewhere in disguise, and looking womanly, just as Vance described her. While Burton's vampire catches exactly the leering, mocking, tricky funniness of this macabre creature, it manages to look wise as well as unconscionable, amused by all mortal things, in the tradition of its kind. Or consider the Griffin – complete with its skull – which is myth incarnate.

Then too the detail in some of the paintings begs and rewards use of a magnifying glass. Add the colour, which is now dreamlike, now earthbound, ethereal, harsh, or almost excised to unbeatable effect – White Lady, Mr Toad. The compendiums are visions that – very nearly – walk and breathe and think. With Barlowe's art there is never need to suspend disbelief. Miracles are made easy.

Behind the magical painting is the final bonus of this handsome volume. A top artist's notebook is always fascinating, and Barlowe's is a treasure-trove. Carcë, on its witch-fanged crag, a parable of bleakness and grandeur, desolation, threat. Moorcock's warrior, whose velocity almost carries him off the

page!

The carbon pencil sketches, exquisite in themselves, form instructive insights into work in progress. This is Barlowe's *A Pilgrimage to Hell*, whose title alone has such a sombre Dantean overnote.

Here in the heart of Hell to work in Fire

Paradise Lost: Book One

-Milton

A Pilgrimage is not a work for the faint at heart. The imagery is partly fuelled, says Barlowe, by Milton. And the granite splendour and fireflights of Milton seem indeed to uphold the texts of the pictures. While one scents flavours and tinctures not only of Gustave Dore and John Martin, but also of Breughel, Klimt, Blake, and even Turner at his most savage. (And personally, I felt only a Wayne Barlowe is entitled to quote the influence of Albert Speer – a being of the Third Reich – but as Barlowe notes; ‘What better inspiration for the monumental architecture of Hell?’)

However, the paintings are unique to themselves, and demonstrate the artist at his most sublime – and terrifying.

Barlowe has said that many found this project to be “disturbing”, (a word I’ve had recourse to already.) And so it is. Disturbing, appalling, dismaying, overcast by the darkling of horror, lit with quivers that unsettle the nerves of the watcher. Demons clad in human skin and jewelled with eyes. Suffering souls, (their sins must truly have been unforgivable), slowly enmeshed in pregnant globes of darkness as they twist like dying plants.

Barlowe’s Hell stands four-square and three-dimensional in glamour and majesty and is as properly Awful as any devised by the Mediaevalists, or the antique saints of the Church Militant. I venture to say, worse. For at Barlowe’s command are the modern understanding of psychology and the awareness of the Id, which, I suggest, have added enormous and alarming acuity both to the paintings and to the viewer’s response.

A Pilgrimage to Hell is far from a book to be trifled with. Although it will ornament any collection of the rare and eccentric, and any gallery of great paintings, it would be wise to beg the protection of

one's good Angel before opening its covers.

Barlowe's panoply of ideas, proving yet again he is not only artist, but writer, vibrate through these apocalyptic scenes. Spun from a palette of soot and scarlet, grey, lilac ash, amber and gold... a flesh-clad presence like a decaying orchid, an avenue of carven, riven tenements, the palace of that celebrity, the Horseman of Pestilence. Monumental in every way, an epic canvas, are the mountainous Wargate towers, hung with a black heart that beats like a drum, while lava streams, and flame-crowned statues stand ready with their bows. A colossal warrior rides a beast of the pit, exalting in the *Right* of downfall – Barlowe's demons are proud of their fight and suffering, like any brave and conquered people. Overall their pale golden sigils float like heraldic insects. Depicted too, is the Guide of Barlowe's hapless anti-hero. No cool Virgil this, such as led Dante through the circles of the Doomed. Sargatanas is clad as a prince, richly and dramatically. He is a paragon of glorious dreadfulness, of sheer dread, behind whom quaking huge skies of sulphur seethe and boil.

On fine scales, the artist has balanced exactly sights that bewitch, with the most chasmic shadows. The reader and observer needs not only a taste for wonder, but courage...

The complete work will be a Feast of Beauty and Terror, the nightmare triumph of a genius, himself quite unafraid to play with fire.



Barlowe's Guide to Fantasy, was published by HarperPrism in 1996. *A Pilgrimage to Hell* was published under the name *Barlowe's Inferno* in 1998 and is now out of print. Other books collecting Barlowe's fantasy and science fiction art are available.