



## The War Hound and the World's Pain

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Lured to the dead kingdom while traveling Europe's ravaged landscape, the War Hound von Bek is entranced by the beautiful and strange Lady Sabrina. But in return for her love, he must meet her master ... Lucifer!

## The War Hound and the World's Pain Details

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Author : Michael Moorcock

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## From Reader Review The War Hound and the World's Pain for online ebook

### Mel says

I enjoy this book, even though Von Bek is an idiot. It's amusing to watch him accept everything that Lucifer tells him as the truth without any questions at all. The book is typical Moorcock fantasy, complete with the sardonic hero, the loyal sidekick, the dandy that may or may not be an ally, and a war between gods. Still, the (mostly) real world setting makes it more interesting to me than the made-up settings of Elric, Corum, and other Eternal Champions.

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### Shannon Appelcline says

A nice bridge book, lying between Moorcock's older swords & sorcery and his newer, more philosophical novels. This provides some interesting orthogonal looks at his multiverse and also rather amusingly is a rejection of all things fantastic.

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### Charles Dee Mitchell says

Captain Graf Ulrich von Bek is a scholarly German aristocrat of the 17th century whose military career has devolved into the role of mercenary in the Thirty Years War. Disgusted by his participation in the massacre and torching of the city of Magdeburg in 1631, and detecting the early signs of plague among the remnant of his forces, he strikes off on his own. He finds himself in a forest eerily absent of all animal life. On a mountain in the forest he discovers an immaculately maintained castle, and spends some time there enjoying its well-stocked larders, wine cellar, and library. On the day he decides to leave he encounters an entourage of decomposing corpses leading a carriage that holds Sabrina, one of Moorcock's frequent "raven-haired beauties with snow white skin." She must be quite a looker, because von Bek asks few questions about the corpses that protect her. Von Bek and Sabrina return to the castle, which belongs to her master. They become lovers, and on the day he determines to depart, she insists he stay to meet her master. Her master is Lucifer.

This is a philosophical Lucifer, pained by the silence of a God whose will he can no longer clearly discern. He gives von Bek a tour of Hell, which is grimmer but not nearly so flashy as what you get in most depictions of eternal damnation. He also assures von Bek that he is among the damned, but offers him a possibility of salvation. Lucifer wants to solve the problem of humankind's suffering, and to do so he would send von Bek on a quest for the Holy Grail. Once von Bek gets Lucifer to throw Sabrina into the salvation bargain, he accepts the quest. His journey through both a war torn Europe and into the supernatural realms of the Middle Marches, make up the rest of the novel.

As with all of Moorcock's embodiments of the Eternal Champion, that being whose manifestations throughout the Multiverse comprises dozen's of Moorcock's novels, von Bek will do much searching of the soul he knows he has already lost. After accepting the commission he states

I had always claimed to welcome the truth; yet now, in common with most of us, I was resentful of the truth because it called upon me to take an unwelcome course of action. I longed for the grim innocence I had so recently lost.

His adventures for the bulk of the novel are not consistently up to the complex frame story Moorcock has created. His self-reflection grows darker.

It had been some years since I had lost my Faith, save in my own capacity to survive a world at War, but evidently in the back of my mind there had always been some sense that through God one might find salvation. Now, as I journeyed in quest of the Holy Grail...I not only questioned the possibility that salvation existed; I questioned whether God's salvation was worth the earning. Again I began to see the struggle between God and Lucifer as no other more than a squabble between petty princelings over who should possess power in a tiny, unimportant territory. The fate of the tenants of that territory did not much seem to matter to them; and even the rewards of those tenants' loyalty seemed thin enough to me...I had received positive proof of the existence of God and the Devil and my Faith in them was weaker now than it had ever been.

The resolution of the story comes as no real surprise and will seem perfectly reasonable to all but the most orthodox Christians, but those readers probably wouldn't make it to the end in any case.

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## Jim says

We all have our strange little rituals. Mine is, at the beginning of every year, to read nothing but authors with whose work I am unfamiliar. (Occasionally, I have sinned; but mostly, I keep to this.) A few weeks ago, I read a laudatory review of Michael Moorcock in the **Times Literary Supplement**. The only one of his books that caught my eye at the local library was *The War Hound and the World's Pain*, so I took it out not knowing quite what to expect.

How to describe it? Imagine something like Milton's **Paradise Lost** set in Europe during the Thirty Years War. A stout warrior named Graf Ulrich von Bek visits a strange uninhabited castle in a deserted wood where no birds chirp, no animals roam, and no insects ply their ways. Eventually, he meets a beautiful young woman who arrives at the castle with a strange guard detachment. Apparently she is a minion of Lucifer. The castle is Lucifer's. Anyone who comes into this wood and this castle can be presumed to have already lost his soul.

Eventually Lucifer shows up in person. He is a very attractive person of great warmth, strength, and beauty, with gold and copper glints from his body. Apparently, he wants to use von Bek's services to reconcile himself with God. The way to do this is to find the Holy Grail, which would thereby end the world's pain and allow the Devil to negotiate with God.

Ah, but this is only the beginning. Von Bek rides through strange, magical lands scattered across the Earth, all parts of Mittelmarch. He is pursued by other demons who do not want him to succeed, because they do not wish to be reconciled to the deity.

Along the way, von Bek picks up two sidekicks, Grigory Sedenko and the hermit Philander Groot. Moorcock tells a brilliantly inventive tale that kept me in thrall. At one point, his hero ponders:

I had fallen into the habit of deriving a kind of joy from the irony of my position, from the paradoxes and contrasts of my Quest. It led me to contemplate the most horrible crimes which could be committed by me in the name of the Grail Search. Was I strong enough, I wondered,

to commit them? What kind of self-discipline was involved in forcing myself against one's own nature, towards vice? My inner debates became increasingly complex and unreal, but perhaps they served to take my mind off unwelcome actualities.

I am not a frequent reader of fantasy, but I think that reading Moorcock can make me one.

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### **Antonio Ippolito says**

<http://heroicfantasyitalia.altervista...>

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### **Simon Mclish says**

Originally published on my blog here in May 2001.

The seventeenth century Thirty Years' War was a forerunner of devastating twentieth century conflicts. Disease and famine followed direct casualties and atrocities were carried out on a huge scale (the sack of Magdeburg an example) as bands of mercenaries rampaged out of control across the countryside. The religious background to the war was not reflected in Christian virtues during it.

Von Bek is a mercenary captain in the war. He has lost what faith he had, but has not descended to the depths of depravity of many soldiers. He flees his men when he detects signs of the onset of plague, and finds himself in a strange but peaceful wood. He stays at a deserted castle, and there meets a beautiful woman who conducts him into the presence of a being who claims to be fallen angel Lucifer. Von Bek doesn't believe him at first, but is taken on a tour of hell. He is eventually asked to undertake a quest for the Holy Grail, the Cure for the World's Pain (von Bek being the Warhound of the title). This, Lucifer says, will make it possible to be reconciled with God and escape from an existence he finds miserable.

The story of his quest is one of Moorcock's best fantasy novels, let down a bit by an unsatisfying ending. It is unusual in his work for its treatment of Christianity, which is rather different from the sort of adolescent desire to shock which seems to lie behind *Behold the Man*, or from the invented religion of his more fantastic works. It is cynical, with supernatural beings taking no interest in humanity, but has an interesting portrayal of Lucifer as world-weary and disillusioned.

The beginning of the novel is the best part, with the description of the encounter with Lucifer being especially fine; the depiction of hell clearly owes something to C.S. Lewis but has been made Moorcock's own. After the meeting with Queen Xiombar - the name being an interesting connection with the Corum adventure *The Queen of the Swords* - the setting becomes more magical and the storytelling loses its focus; very unfortunate in what could easily have been one of Moorcock's best novels.

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### **Adam says**

While it doesn't quite transcend expectations like some of Moorcock's books, this moody adventure that reads a little like *Vance meets Bunyan* has some interesting speculations on theology. Gruesome violence of the 17th century setting also helps keep this memorable. Fans of Phillip Pullman's fantasies should search it out. What was up with the giant cat? I love his books for inexplicable weirdness like that.

## Clay says

Fascinating look at the 30 Days War before the Dawn of Reason. The battle between Lucifer and God is played out across war scared Europe as The fallen One vies for a return to Grace enlisting the aid of doomed mortals in a deadly chess match.

I can't recall a book where both God and Satan are portrayed this way and it is amazing. The Devil is not all bad and God is not all good. Put that in your pipe and smoke it...

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## Francesco Manno says

<http://panopticonitalia.blogspot.it/2...>

The Hound of the war is a novel of sword and sorcery, belonging to Trilogy von Bek (the others remained unpublished in Italy), written by Michael Moorcock and published in our country from the North in 1984. Unlike what happens in the saga of Elric of Melniboné, the English author chooses this time the historical setting, leading us in the middle of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), first religious conflict (between Catholics and Protestants) and then political (between France and Asburgo), which has ravaged the whole of Europe.

The author makes a perfect blend of history and fantasy, describing, in addition to the territories of the Old Continent (Germany, Italy, Ireland, etc ...), Hell, the place where all beings are condemned to eternal damnation and have lost always their freedom to act.

But not only.

Michael Moorcock also depicts, in detail, the Mittelmarch, a middle ground beyond the tangible reality in which fantastic creatures and the supernatural are the masters; without falling into clichés typical of the genre.

As usual, the characters sketched by the Author English can not be called good or bad a priori, nor pigeonholed into predetermined categories, as each has complex psychological profiles.

Stands out among all the protagonist of the story: Ulrich von Bek, a German mercenary who is appreciated from different points of view. First, it is ruthless and cynical: does not hesitate to make the brutality against the population and, being a mercenary, offers his sword to anyone who can offer a generous compensation. In spite of this, Ulrich is caught; it has received an enviable education since it belongs to a noble German family. The Captain is also an adventurer, as he decided to abandon their vast landholdings to devote their lives to the war. It is also an atheist, which however today may seem unimportant but which at the time would have caused a sensation and even convictions.

But these certainties of Ulrich falter when planted himself in front of Lucifer, who asks him to serve him to find the Grail, or the cure for all the suffering in the world, which would allow all men the damned, the demons and the same hell to redeem himself and get divine salvation. Such offer becomes a real obligation since the Captain is aware that his soul is damned and therefore already destined to Hell.

Lucifer is presented to us as being a beautiful and terrible, whose charm has a magnetic effect on Ulrich that fails to enforce against any resistance and that it is at once attracted. But the Devil also presents aspects purely human, because Moorcock manages to highlight the sadness of this infernal creature, doomed to eternal damnation and intent on finding a solution that can redeem it.

I will not say more because I do not intend to do spoilers, but I can guarantee that the Hound of the war is an extraordinary book, a masterpiece of fantasy with which Michael Moorcock has revitalized the genre.

## Wendy Bousfield says

WAR HOUND opens in 1631, during the Thirty Year War. A mercenary, committed neither to Protestant nor Catholic factions, von Bek led his soldiers in the looting and burning of the city of Magdeburg. When some of his men contract the plague, von Bek abandons them.

Von Bek finds himself in an (ecologically impossible) forest: flourishing trees and plants, without insect or animal life. He arrives at a beautiful castle—clean, well provisioned, and empty. Recognizing that he and his horse need to recover from the stress of battle, von Bek moves in. After a few days, a coach, guarded by reanimated corpses, arrives. After von Bek has dispatched many zombies, a beautiful woman emerges and commands her dead servants to desist. Von Bek and the beautiful witch, Sabina, fall in love.

The master of the castle is Lucifer, who tells von Bek that he is tired of his war with God and wishes to regain angelic status. Since the rape, looting and carnage von Bek routinely engages in as a soldier have damned him, Lucifer offers to release von Bek's soul, as well as Sabina's, if von Bek finds the holy Grail—a cure for the world's pain. Curing the world's pain (the meaning of this evocative term is never explained) will, Lucifer believes, restore him to God's favor.

Lucifer gives Von Bek a map that shows, not merely Europe but the "Mettelmarch," areas on the borders of hell, which only those already damned can enter. He travels to a series of appointments with beings, each of whom guide him to the next stage of the journey. Von Bek is joined by Sedenko, an exuberant young Kozak soldier, who, like von Bek's, has is damned through war atrocities. Sedenko left his master, a "soldier-priest," because he found Klosterheim's mission to kill Jews and burn witches cowardly. Klosterheim, however, has bigger fish to fry. He is in league with forces of hell that oppose Lucifer's reconciliation with God. Klosterheim, therefore, seeks at every turn to thwart von Bek's quest for the Grail. In rapid succession, von Bek and Sedenko meet more reanimated corpses; predatory eagles as large as ponies; Philander Groot, a hermit who dresses as a dandy and travels in a chariot pulled by birds; Tartars on mechanical horses; and other exotic beings. Of course, von Bek completes his mission by finding the Grail. For me, however, the grandiose, Miltonic conflicts among celestial beings were not very interesting. The quest for the Grail is a springboard for a series of lively conflicts with exotic beings.

What makes THE WAR HOUND stand out from run-of-the mill sword and sorcery, however, is von Bek's narrative voice. Ulrich von Bek appeared for the first time in WAR HOUND (1981), but von Bek and his family are found again and again in Moorcock's subsequent fiction. A sequel to WAR HOUND, CITY IN THE AUTUMN STARS (1986) follows the adventures of one of Ulrich's descendants, Manfred von Bek. In WAR HOUND, Ulrich Von Bek is a self-serving, tactical, pragmatic, ruthless survivor, who considers atrocities against civilians a necessary tool of war.

A child during World War II, Moorcock survived the German bombing of London. He has stated that the blitz shaped his fiction. While much of THE WAR HOUND is escapist fantasy, its descriptions of wartime devastation ring true.

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## William says

THE WARHOUND AND THE WORLD'S PAIN wasn't part of the Eternal Champion cycle when I first

read them back in the '70s, not coming along until 1981, but Von Bek is most definitely a manifestation in the same ranks as Erechon, Elric, Corum and Hawkmoon despite being rooted in a historical rather than fantasy context, at least to begin with.

Von Bek is a typical tortured Moorcock hero, but less tortured than some, a battle hardened veteran, having come to terms with his base nature. After being shown the Hell that awaits his soul, he makes a deal with Lucifer to take on a quest, not in search of enlightenment, but to heal the pain of the World

Ostensibly this is the story of a grail quest, but it's classic Moorcock, so things are never simple. All of his trademark flourishes are in evidence here, with wild rides through shifting reality, musings on the nature of humanity and its place in the many faceted universe, and simpler matters, like the nature of comradeship, and the power of a man to make his own reality through force of will.

Reading this I was transported again to my first Moorcock readings in the very early '70s, and felt the same sense of awe and wonder at the force of his vision that I did back then.

This is sword and sorcery at its finest, and, by Arioeh, I love it.

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## **Old-Barbarossa says**

1st read in the '80s, just re-read it.

I think on re-evaluation this is one of my favorite Moorcock books (this and The Brothel in Rosenstrasse: An Extravagant Tale, incidentally another Von Bek book).

Recently been reading a load of Arthurian texts and this is a grail quest too. But unlike a load of the Arthurian stuff it actually has a conclusion and, for Moorcock, a happy ending.

It has all the standard Moorcock stuff (apart from the gender bending/time traveling JC stuff): Law vs Chaos; nearly every page has "sardonic" or "ironic" somewhere on it (not "entropy" though); most of the standard archetypes he uses and continually cross refs in his work (scenery chewing villain; loyal henchman; introspective hero who may not be so heroic). And running through it a commentary on humanity and redemption and the nature of religion.

Another reviewer claims Von Bek is an idiot for buying Lucifer's tales and promises...don't get that from the book...after all, it is the Lord Of Lies so you'd kind of expect him to be good at telling giant porkies and folk believing them, but are they actually lies?..also the way these scenes are played leave you in no doubt that Von B is overwhelmed by the "glamour" and he later starts to question all he saw and experienced.

Set during the horror show that was the 30 years war in the early 1600s it still drips with fantasy elements: Xiombarg has a walk on part; Arioeh lurks in the wings; friendly maggots; giant cats; demonic pacts; chariot drawn by mechanical birds...great stuff.

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## **Tim Pendry says**

An early fantasy classic of war and of dealings with the forces of darkness [though with Moorcock's usual ambiguity]. The violence of early modern central Europe and the reality of knightly values pulls the fantasy-fascism of Elric down to earth and sharpens the sense of what cruelty really is. Certainly an early high point in Moorcock's fluctuating canon. The first of the long Von Beck cycle which weakens with time.

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## Traumachine says

For about 15 years now I've been a huge fan of Moorcock's *Elric* series. I've read the original series several times, and I'd recently thought about reading the "new" *Elric* books (hey, '89 and '91 are new compared to the 60s and 70s). But for some reason I decided to give one of his other series a shot, and I'm really glad I did.

*War Hound* is the first book in a series centered on the Von Bek family. Unlike most fantasy I read, this was set in Europe during the 30 Years' War, so I didn't expect much magic. But since the plot behind the book is that Ulrich Von Bek makes a deal with Satan, magic does indeed exist. As usual for Moorcock, he's a little light on standard character development. I find his characters to be deep, introspective individuals, as Moorcock often gives you the inner monologue of the hero, and he often sticks them with moral conundrums. To me, this is great character development, but I've read criticisms of his books in this area.  
\*shrug\*

Another way this book fit into typical Moorcock style was that it was thick with social commentary. Like his *Elric* books, the lead is an anti-hero who is so without hope for a world with moral fortitude that he's beyond despair. Both Elric and Ulrich simply accept the fact that the world is this way, but circumstances have forced each of them to enter into a quest to change it, despite the fact that they don't even believe successfully completing their quest will affect the status quo. This futility of the quest (from the hero's perspective) is a twist I haven't read in any other fantasy. I'd imagine that it's very difficult to pull off, but Moorcock's unusual writing is why I enjoy him so much.

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## Troy Rutman says

The hot cover lured this prepubescent boy in. What he found was his reflection, pained by rejection.

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## Ulrich Krieghund says

Look at the beautiful figure on the cover. Doesn't he look striking? Angelic perhaps? Would his words soothe your soul, comfort you? Perhaps you should give his story a listen. You won't be disappointed. You might even discover the source and cure for the world's pain.

This story focuses on the fantastic adventure of a professional soldier named Ulrich Von Bek. He has captured/killed many enemy soldiers and proven so excellent at waging war that he he has earned some measure of fame and a nickname: Krieghund.

This is an almost perfect fantasy story. The only minor criticisms would be how quickly a man named Sedenko joins Von Bek and also how rapidly a man named Klosterheim goes from a petty soldier-priest to the commander of a legion of unusual forces.

Spoilers below

Interesting Places/People...

Middle March--A realm connected to ours and to other worlds. It is full of both ordinary and extraordinary

things. Similar to the Celtic Otherworld, I believe.

Sedenko--A bored soldier of the Kazak steppes who joins the quest out of curiosity mostly.

Philander Groot--a philosopher mage who has rejected both Heaven and Hell.

Klosterheim--a soldier priest who joins forces with Duke Arioch of Hell to stop Von Bek from finding the Holy Grail.

Plot Discussion...

Von Bek rides alone in 1631 Europe through a quiet, seemingly cursed forest devoid of life. Von Bek finds an abandoned castle in the middle of this forest. He spends a few days at the castle bathing, reading books in the library and speculating as to who might own the castle. He wonders if some rich prince uses the castle as retreat.

Preparing to leave, Ulrich Von Bek is stopped by a patrol of undead soldiers pulling a carriage. After a short battle, a woman inside the carriage halts the fight between Von Bek and the undead soldiers.

This woman and Von Bek make love and she introduces him to the master of the castle and her Master--Lucifer. Von Bek is naturally skeptical. When he meets Lucifer it is not some red, scaly beast or a man with a goatee and pitchfork, but rather a beautiful being with lovely skin, silvery hair and copper eyes--like an angel fallen from the heavens.

Lucifer informs Von Bek that his soul already belongs to him. He shows him Hell. The place of damnation is not a fiery pit but rather a collection of strange but not too extraordinary cities and realms. The "Hell" the damned souls experience is the knowledge that Heaven is forever out of reach. This is the Milton notion of Hell from Paradise Lost, where the mere knowledge of Heaven being forever forbidden to Satan is an eternal punishment unto itself. "The Hell within me, for within me Hell".

To save his soul and that of the woman from the castle (Sabrina) he goes upon a most curious quest on behalf of the devil. He is to search the world for the Holy Grail. Lucifer hopes to somehow cure the World's Pain with the holy cup and once more be allowed to speak with God. He has been denied any communication with God and Heaven since being cast out of paradise. Lucifer only designed Hell as such because he thought that to be his role in the Universe--for God left him no instructions.

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## **Michele (Mikecas) says**

Da:

<http://www.webalice.it/michele.castel...>

*Di Moorcock avevo già parlato presentando le raccolte dei racconti del suo eroe più famoso, Elric di Melniboné. Da quella presentazione appare evidente che io non abbia mai apprezzato molto Moorcock, pur riconoscendogli una certa originalità nel mondo dell'eroic fantasy, ed una qualità di scrittura che lo pone un gradino più sù dei suoi contemporanei e precedenti. Perché allora questo ritorno ad un autore non tanto amato?*

*Perché sul blog Plutonia Experiment di Alessandro Girola, che leggo abbastanza frequentemente, è recentemente apparsa una recensione decisamente positiva di un romanzo di Moorcock, proprio il qui presente Il Mastino della Guerra. Romanzo definito ormai introvabile ma che ha il suo bravo posto nella*

*mia libreria. Ho voluto rileggerlo, dato che non ne era rimasta traccia significativa nei miei ricordi, per vedere quale sarebbe stata invece la mia reazione ad una rilettura fatta oggi, quando sono molto diverso per sensibilità individuale, per esperienza di lettura ma soprattutto per sensibilità alla qualità di scrittura. Dopo questa rilettura devo osservare che condivido solo parzialmente il giudizio positivo di Girola, perché l'innovazione di tema che Moorcock sembra introdurre in questo romanzo a me sembra solo apparente. Il tema principale di tutte le serie migliori di Moorcock è la lotta del Bene contro il Male, attraverso l'azione di campioni umanamente imperfetti, che lottano per il Bene anche se spesso a loro insaputa ma sono essi stessi un groviglio di contraddizioni, con aspetti che possono facilmente essere ascrivibili al Male. Quindi perché non portare il meccanismo logico al suo estremo e pensare al Male estremo, il nemico di Dio per autonomasia, che ha un conflitto interiore e si pone lui stesso le domande che i vari campioni di Moorcock si sono posti sul significato delle loro azioni? E quindi la possibilità che il Male possa alla fine richiedere il perdono e la riammissione nel Bene?*

*Ovviamente non tutti gli esponenti del Male sarebbero consenzienti a questa richiesta, e ci sarebbe lotta per impedire la richiesta stessa, che se assume la classica espressione di una Quest da parte di un eroe umano dedito al Male, ma anche lui interessato a liberarsi del fardello che ciò comporta, specialmente in vista di poter conquistare una vita in comune con una splendida fanciulla, forma l'argomento dell'intero romanzo. Scritto nel classico stile semi aulico di Moorcock, è indubbiamente una rottura della struttura tipica dei romanzi eroic fantasy, ma fino ad un certo punto, riproducendo sostanzialmente le stesse dinamiche solo trasportate ad un livello superiore, dove il Bene e il Male sono rappresentati dai loro assoluti, anche se con tanti, troppi, aspetti di debolezza umana. Non c'è quindi nessuna tematica veramente innovativa, nessuno stile diverso dal solito, ma semplicemente una trama semplice ma ben sviluppata nel solco delle problematiche tipiche di Moorcock.*

*Tutto sommato, poche ore di lettura piacevole ma senza particolare significato, e anche le trovate della trama non vanno molto oltre la normalità del genere, seppure con qualche piccolo tocco innovativo che è sempre stata la caratteristica di Moorcock.*

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## Daniel Stephens says

I have read very little Moorcock, but have recently decided to rectify this by reading through the Eternal Champion series. This is the first novel in the first Omnibus "Von Bek" - and what a great place to start it is! A brilliant, multilayered tale of a man with no choice but to serve Lucifer, and his psychological musings on the nature of life as he travels across war ravaged Germany, and then an increasingly bizarre other world. As an Atheist, I was particularly tickled by the ending, and it's implications for the dawning Age of Reason. I am very much looking forward to the other entries in the Von Bek families series.

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## Stephen says

### Behold the Man...

Who else but **Michael Moorcock**, in all his **devious craftiness**, could employ **Satan**, Heaven & Hell, **souls**, damnation, and a quest for the **Holy Grail**, as tools for a story whose **central premise** is a call for humanity to **eschew religious belief** and embrace scientific discovery and secular self-determination. I mean...damn...regardless of which side of the God debate you place yourself, Moorcock deserves some major kudos for having both the sack and the creativity to use plot elements completely antithetical to his message...and having the ability to make them serve his purpose.

Tis genius, no?

## **PLOT SUMMARY:**

Part of Moorcock's iconic "Eternal Champion" saga, this novel introduces us to Ulrich von Bek, a character that I understand becomes an important figure in the mythos (I need to read more eternal champion books). Set in 17th century Europe, during the Thirty Years' War, when we first meet von Bek he's commander of a group of mercenaries fighting for the Catholic forces against the Protestants. Disillusioned, faithless and cynical, von Bek travels through a Germany ravaged by war and religious persecution, until he comes across an idyllic, isolated castle whose owner just happens to be Lucifer.

The fallen angel is shown as a romanticized, tragic figure, very much in the spirit of Milton, and Moorcock's portrayal reminded me quite a bit of Anne Rice's in Memnoch the Devil.

Sad, remorseful and looking to get back into God's good graces, Lucifer enlists von Bek to help him "cure the world's pain" by locating the Holy Grail. He hopes that by accomplishing this rather daunting goal, God will speak to him and welcome him back into heaven.

## **THOUGHTS:**

Moorcock uses no blunt tools in this story, and it was not until very near the end that I really started to grasp what he was trying to accomplish. Most of the story is a pretty standard Moorcock adventure in which we follow von Bek on his quest. During his search for the Holy Grail, von Bek faces a usual cadre of both natural and supernatural adversaries, all leading to a final showdown with the archvillain.

What sets this apart is the common thread of religion running through the set pieces. Everywhere you look, Moorcock is highlighting some evil perpetrated in the name of religion. Catholics raze protestant cities, protestants burn catholic villages, Jews are persecuted and killed, pagans are butchered and raped. All manner of atrocity is forgiven because it is in adherence to some doctrine of faith or in service to God.

His message is delivered piecemeal, in small doses, throughout the story, but the final picture is a wallop. Whether you ultimately agree or disagree with Moorcock's conclusion, I thought the journey he created was skillfully handled and raised wonderful topics to ponder over and debate.

Rather than arguing from the tired refrain of God exists/God does not exist, Moorcock takes the path less travelled to denote his position. He admits and embraces the existence of God/Satan/Heaven/Hell, and then artfully establishes why humanity must blaze its own trail, without God's help or the Satan's interference. I found his approach fascinating...probably more so than I did the execution of that approach.

Overall, I was very impressed with Moorcock's originality and the artistry of what he accomplished, though I can't say my enjoyment ever got beyond "I like it" territory. The beginning was terrific and the end was stellar, but there were chunks in the middle that lost a bit of the momentum and dragged.

I think if I were to re-read this now, in light of my full understanding of what Moorcock was doing, my opinion of some of these slower parts may improve. I may just test that hypothesis at some point.

For now, a strong 3.5 stars and a HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

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**Erik Graff says**

Moorcock is usually classed as a science fiction/fantasy author. This book might be classed as a theological fantasy as the major character is Lucifer. As ever, I appreciate fresh takes on old symbols and I like historical novels.

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