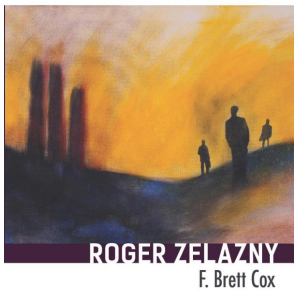
Roger Zelazny, by F. Brett Cox

Bruce Lindsley Rockwood

F. Brett Cox. *Roger Zelazny*. University of Illinois Press, 2021. Modern Masters of Science Fiction. Hardback. 224 pg. $110.00. ISBN 9780252043765. Paperback. $27.95. ISBN 9780252085758. Ebook. $14.95. ISBN 9780252052668.



Roger Zelazny is a thorough and sympathetic review of the life, career, and work of one of the seminal creators in science fiction and fantasy of the last half of the 20th century. It takes into account the prior work of reviewers, critics, and biographers as well as commentary by his peers and fans, from every period of his sadly shortened life and since. It includes an interview with Zelazny (152-161) conducted by Jeffrey D. Smith and Richard E. Geis reprinted from *The Alien Critic: An Informal Science Fiction and Fantasy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 4 (November, 1973). There is a comprehensive bibliography of all his fiction, selected poetry, non-fiction, and interviews. The list of secondary sources (193-198) notes that the author also made use of the archives of Zelazny's papers at Syracuse University and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in pursuit of completing this work.

The only omission of note is any reference to the audio books that Zelazny recorded of his own work and that of others, including his performances of the *Amber* novels, *Eye of the Cat*, and *A Night in the Lonesome October*. These recordings provide a memorable sense of the vibrancy of these stories and the man who wrote them that merits further inquiry.

Cox divides his book into five chapters covering the early life, education, initial publications, and the arc of Zelazny's career until his death (146), as well as posthumous publications and reprints of his works. Chapter 1, "*Out of Nowhere Beginnings—1963*," focuses on Zelazny's early life, initial interests, losses, and the creation of his first great short story, "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," which he wrote in 1961 at the age of 24, and sold to *Fantasy and Science Fiction* in 1962 (14-19). Cox comments, "This story... may have been fueled in part by a young man's heartbreak, but it also emerged from the combination of artistic ambition and commercial goals that marked Zelazny's entire career" (14).

Chapter 2, "*Everybody Loves a Winner: 1964-1968*," Chapter 3, "*Do Quit Your Day Job: 1969-1971*," and Chapter 4, "*A Series of Different Endeavors: 1972-1979*," track the variety of

short stories, novellas, and novels that Zelazny produced during these periods, their artistic and thematic differences, and the reaction of his peers, critics, and fans. Commenting on some of Zelazny's early stories, Cox notes, "If 'The Graveyard Heart' stands as an early consideration of one of Zelazny's main preoccupations---immortality---'The Furies' offers an early glimpse of two recurrent concerns of Zelazny's later work: the outlaw-terrorist whose violence emerges from the collision of human and alien cultures, and classic mythology as a template for the science fiction story" (27).

Already there were differences of opinion concerning his work: Theodore Sturgeon "called 'The Furies' a 'tour de force,'" while Frederik Pohl rejected the story for *Galaxy* "on the grounds that . . . it was simply confusing" (27-28). Cox cites this as emblematic of a "a long-term debate about Zelazny's fiction. Was the author fully, and brilliantly, in control of his materials, or not?" (28). Cox explicates his next stories: "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth"(1965) (28-30), and "He Who Shapes" (1965) (32-33), commenting "The miraculous year of 1965 concluded with the serial publication of *...And Call Me Conrad*" (1965), his "first novel... a far-future tale of a ruined Earth, interplanetary politics, exotic aliens, and a hero who may or may not be i mmortal" (33).

In 1966 Ace Books published his first novels *...And Call Me Conrad* as *This Immortal*, and *He Who Shapes* as *The Dream Master*, followed by his first collection of short fiction in 1967 (38). *…And Call Me Conrad* tied with *Dune* for the Hugo as best novel at the 1966 World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, greatly impressing Samuel R. Delany. Cox notes the enthusiasm Zelazny met when he was introduced at the convention (38-39). He goes on to discuss the place of Delany and Zelazny as contributors to the 1960s New Wave in SF, citing their contributions to Harlan Ellison's Dangerous Visions in 1967 (38-39), and how Zelazny's remarriage and full-time work at the Social Security Administration (SSA) provided him with the stability to write 19 new "well developed, fully resonant stories," two of which contributed to his novels *Lord of Light* (1967) and *Damnation Alley* (1969) (40-41). Cox describes in detail the creation and complex plot of *Lord of Light* as a "science fantasy novel that blurs genre lines" (47-55), and the creation of the loner anti-hero Tanner in *Damnation Alley* (57-58). By May, 1969 Zelazny and his wife felt comfortable enough to quit their SSA jobs, and he devoted himself to full time writing (60).

Each subsequent chapter in Roger Zelazny follows the same pattern of detailed and thoughtful assessment of the works produced in the period, their critical reception and often contrasting popular appreciation by his fans. Chapter 3, "*Do Quit Your Day Job: 1969-1971,*" examines *Creatures of Light and Darkness* (1969) and the first *Amber* novel, *Nine Princes in Amber* (1970), which Cox's research indicates was written between April, 1966 and February, 1967 and reflects "a deliberate shift toward more commercial writing" (62). Zelazny's next major novel in this period was *Isle of the Dead* (1969), a contribution to the "renowned series Ace Science Fiction Specials edited by Terry Carr" (63). The protagonist is Francis Sandow, who was born in 1965 but due to time dilation from space travel and medical advances is nearly a thousand years old, and a practitioner of an alien religion that allows him the telepathic "power to modify and create

new worlds" (63). Cox finds the novel more "pared-down and under the author's control," and "Zelazny's most nuanced treatment to date of the theme of immortality" (65) with suggestions of environmental concerns that emerged more clearly in his later work (67). Its critical reception was again mixed, with one review condemning its "mediocre plot" and another praising it as his "finest work to date" (68).

Cox then discusses the Egyptian-based mythology and the plot of *Creatures of Light and Darkness* (68-73), and its mixed reviews: James Blish disliked his "application of myth to science fiction," while Algis Budrys's review in *Galaxy* called it "full of adventure and poetry," with "nearly a perfect clarity," although Zelazny later suggested it was a parody of New Wave or even a "self-parody" (72-73).

Cox suggests that at this time Zelazny was trying to establish his identity as a writer, "whether he [was] fundamentally a wordsmith or a storyteller," and that the 1970 publication of *Nine Princes in Amber* seemed to answer this question in favor of storytelling, even though it had been written earlier (73). Cox gives a detailed plot summary of the novel (73-78). Blish this time praised the novel "as an adventure story with real originality and zest" and observed that Zelazny's "mixture of poetry and slang . . .is not jarring here" since it matches Corwin's "double life" in the real and fantasy world (75). The last novel in this period, *Jack of Shadows* (1971), was less well received (78-83), featuring a self-interested loner comparable to *Damnation Alley*'s Hell Tanner. Cox cites Jane Lindskold's discussion of these two as "More Villain than Hero" (81). Zelazny later commented in a 1989 introduction to a reprint of *Jack* that "This was not one of my experimental books... This was a more workmanlike job in that I knew exactly what I wanted to do and how to do it," which Cox suggests could be an epigraph for the next phase of his career, "with an increasingly mixed critical response" (83).

Chapter 4, "*A Series of Different Endeavors: 1972-79*," continues the close analysis of Zelazny's career and creative choices, including his focus on novels over short fiction for commercial reasons, and his engagement with a Writer's Workshop in Baltimore called the Guilford Gafia (84-85). His publications included the next four sequels in the *Amber* series, which Cox assesses in detail (92-101), *My Name is Legion* (1976), and a collaboration with Philip K. Dick, *Deus Irae* (1976). Zelazny and his family moved to New Mexico, and a film version of *Damnation Alley* was made, which, while not true to his story, helped pay for his house (86-87). *To Die in Italbar* (1973), a "straightforward adventure tale" (89), was followed by four more novels: *Today We Chose Faces* (1973), *Doorways in the Sand* and *Bridge of Ashes* (1976), and *Roadmarks* (1979). All were open to criticism for "incompleteness" while showing Zelazny's continued interest in "experimenting with narrative structure" and "outbursts of lyricism" (101). His interest in science fiction continued despite his increased commitment to fantasy (101 & 108). Cox notes that *Bridge of Ashes*, one of the first novels written after the move to New Mexico, addresses environmental concerns while also returning to Zelazny's theme of political violence to protect the earth (106-107). Concluding

with an exegesis of *Roadmarks*, Cox asserts that Zelazny was still committed to pursuit of his "feelings... toward narrative" while "even eager, to write for the market," which would reflect his priorities in the decade to come (121-122).

At the start of Chapter 5: *"Nothing on Spec But Still Some Joy: 1980-1995*," Cox reports that on July 31, 1980, Zelazny "incorporated himself as the Amber Corporation." (123). Other SF writers have also incorporated (Asimov and Ellison, for example), and Cox notes this reflects Zelazny's careful attention to his finances and recognition that the *Amber* novels were a significant source of his commercial success. He published 23 books between 1980 and his death, "only two" of which were adult stand-alone novels: *Eye of the Cat* (1982) and *A Midnight in the Lonesome October* (1993) (123). He wrote five more novels in the *Amber* series, and approximately 30 short stories (123-124). Zelazny collaborated with Fred Saberhagen on the novels *Coils* (1982) and *The Black Throne* (1990), and with Thomas T. Thomas on *The Mask of Loki* (1990) and *Flare* (1992) (124), and produced the *Dilvish the Damned* stories (1982), a sword-and-sorcery series that he said was "easy to write... when I might need a story in a hurry" (125). His most significant work in this period was the second *Amber* series, starting with *The Trumps of Doom* (1985). He had many fan requests to continue the series, had more *Amber* tales to tell, and was partially motivated by a substantial advance from Avon Books to continue the series (125). Cox explicates the plots of these stories and critical response in great detail (125-132), pointing out, as "Lindskold and Khanna have noted, that the women in the second series are more prominently featured and operate with significantly more agency" than in the first series (130). The series was and remains a popular success and subgenre of fandom that continues to this day.

Cox then assesses *Eye of the Cat* (1982), concluding that "William Blackhorse Singer is Zelazny's most emotionally mature protagonist, and *Eye of the Cat* may be his most emotionally mature novel" (132-136). It involved more research than his "straight adventure books" and permitted him to "use all the tricks" he had as an artist, despite being received to mixed reviews at the time (136-137). Critical reception of his next novella, "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" (1985), was much more positive, and featured a female protagonist as "a direct response to criticism that the main characters of his longer works were always men," as he wrote in a letter to Lindskold in 1989 (139). The story is informed by a knowledge of Japanese art and literature, while its use of computers, data nets, and "the projection of a human consciousness into virtual landscapes" reflects an awareness and appreciation of the cyberpunk movement of the era, coming out a year after the publication of William Gibson's Neuromancer (138). Cox points out that Zelazny was not just jumping on a bandwagon and had made use of computers, artificial intelligence, and virtual landscapes in many earlier stories, such as "He Who Shapes" and *Lord of Light* (139).

Zelazny's last stand-alone book, *A Night in the Lonesome October* (1993), made use of characters, stories and tropes associated with Hallowe'en, Jack the Ripper, H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, and more, presented in 32 chapters (an introduction and then one day for each day in October), and came with illustrations by Gahan Wilson (140-144). While the book was not widely

reviewed at the time, George R. R. Martin saw it as Zelazny's "last great novel," and Cox suggests that it supports Neil Gaiman's comment that in the "late eighties and early nineties he got his joy back" (144). Cox concludes by describing Zelazny's support of the arts in Santa Fe, travel, personal life, and the shock felt in the writing and fan community at the news of his untimely death (146). An afterword summarizes his posthumous publications and reprints of his work, including *The Great Book of Amber* (1999) and the 2009 *Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny* in six volumes (147-152).

For a relatively short treatise, *Roger Zelazny* is a comprehensive and insightful presentation of his life and works, a resource for anyone interested in further research, and a reading list for those who came to him from Amber and now realize how much more there is to explore. Highly recommended for general readers and library collections alike.

Bruce Lindsley Rockwood, Emeritus Professor of Legal Studies at Bloomsburg University, Pennsylvania, is a long-time member of SFRA, having served as Vice President (2005-2006), and regularly writes reviews for *SFRA Review* from his retirement home in Midcoast Maine. He has taught and published on law, literature, climate change and science fiction, and attends SFRA and WorldCon with his wife Susan when possible (most recently in Montreal, Spokane, and the June, 2021 virtual SFRA).