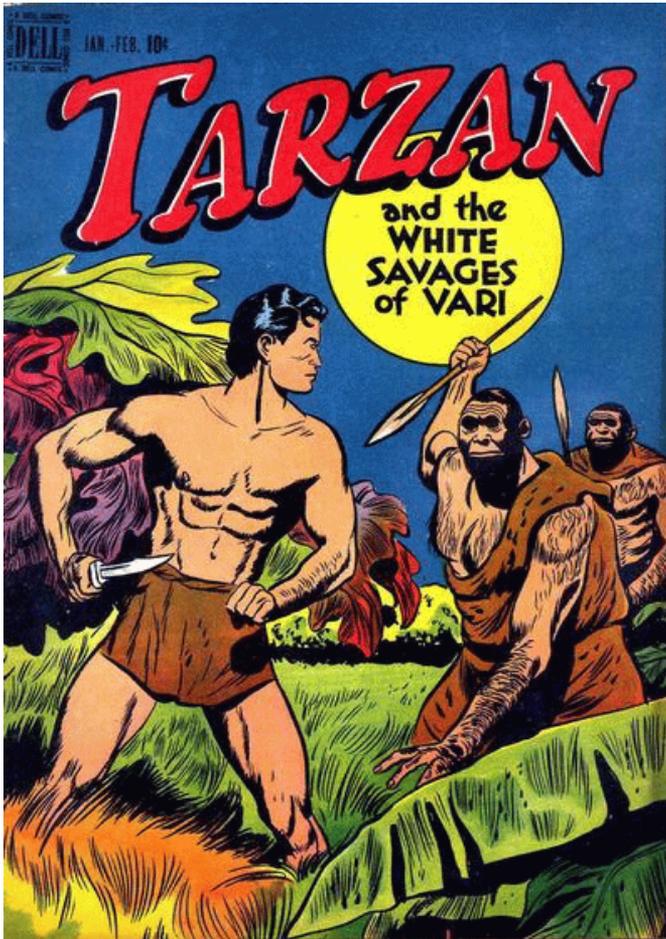


HARK THE THARK - AN ERBMANIA! COLUMN
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Importance of Comic Art As Related to Tarzan of the Apes

Don "Tars Tarkas" Bearden
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Early Jesse Marsh Cover - Dell Comics

Editor's Note: During a series of lengthy discussions at ERB-List regarding Tarzan in media other than the books written by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tangor (David Bruce Bozarth) posted the following query: *How important are the comic book visions of Tarzan? Do they form the basis of most movies and the public consciousness? Why does it appear the public likes the comic Tarzan over the book Tarzan? We know the film Tarzan is popular simply because of the saturation and availability of film over books.*

HARK THE THARK columnist Don Bearden sent the following reply, which I have footnoted and illustrated as an article for Don's *ERBmania!* Column.

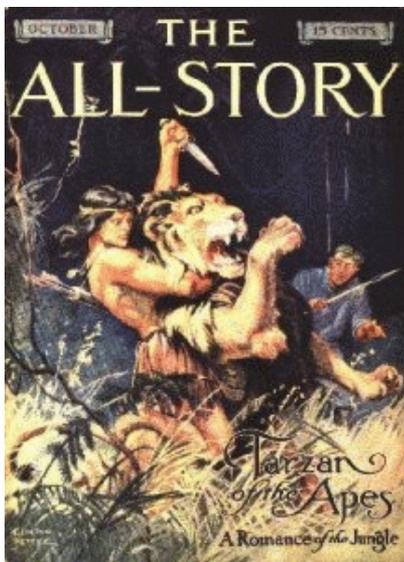
David Bruce Bozarth, *ERBmania!* editor

Bruce,

Below is the answer I started writing to your query. As you can see, I got carried away. I invite you to use this where you see fit. It might work as a short HARK THE THARK or it might be good if you pass it on to the group as it was intended. It is your choice. You have my permission to post it either place or both if you wish. Sorry I got wound up. I may not have answered your question, but you got me thinking. Thanks.

Don

I'LL GIVE MY answer to your query, if you wish. It's really rather simple and complicated at the same time. Ed Burroughs began writing virtually on a dare if the stories are to be believed. He said he could do a better story than the ones in the magazines he



THE ISSUE THAT STARTED IT ALL

was selling in the Burroughs store in Idaho and someone said "Prove it."¹ —so HE DID.

His work was published in pulp magazines. Pulp sold cheaply and were available throughout this country and similar books were available

¹Mrs. Konkle, in her reminiscences, recalls that while her father, Frank, was in the stationery business, presumably the Champlin-Yardley Company, he had offered Ed scratch paper and a corner of his office. "It seems that Ed had read some yarn just released, and throwing it down in disgust said, 'If I couldn't write better than that, I'd go—(do something or other)'—to which he was challenged, 'Why don't you?' Ed accepted the challenge and the offer of paper and desk space, and not too many moons later he was launched on his writing career." From Porges, Irwin, *Edgar Rice Burroughs: Creator of Tarzan*

around the world (some still are). The pulps were on really cheap paper and faded easily so the life span was much less than that of books printed on better paper and bound in hard-cover. The pulps were also read by several—usually young boys and men— then passed around until the pages were falling apart. Few pristine pulps from ERB's days remain for our pleasure.

The only way that stories published in pulps could stay in print was to be picked by a publisher for hardcover editions. This happened regularly and Ed Burroughs was one of the fortunate ones chosen for hardcover editions. This gave him his first real successful career, but he wanted more and who can blame him.

With his books selling well, Ed was given the chance to expose his characters more through the young motion picture industry. Tarzan was the character the movies wanted. The first few movies



were fairly close to Ed's writings but soon Tarzan was being shown as a much simpler character.

1934 — CONSIDERED BY MANY AS WEISSMULLER'S BEST TARZAN FILM

In 1932, Tarzan began speaking in Pidgen English in the movies *ie.* "Ug, Me Tarzan, You

Jane".² I imagine that the real fans of ERB were probably as appalled as most of us are today at the effect. Tarzan became an ignorant muscleman who was always good. It was sort of like the way actors like Lon Chaney Jr. would have played a lovable mentally challenged man— we usually said *retarded* a few years ago. To us watching Johnny in those movies, we saw a big lovable guy without too much smarts doing all these wonderful muscular things. He became extremely popular.³



In 1868 young Lord Greystoke and his bride of three months sailed from Dover on their way to Africa. He had been commissioned to investigate alleged atrocities on black subjects in a British West Coast African colony. Lord Greystoke never made the investigation; in fact, he never reached his destination.

FIRST HAL FOSTER PANEL

There was also another place where we could see Tarzan and that's where he was treated with much more respect than the movies ever gave him. The newspapers had both a Sunday and daily Tarzan

² The phrase was "Tarzan—Jane" repeated several times in the MGM Tarzan the Ape-Man, though parody has given us the present conception.

³ *This is a real Tarzan picture. It breathes the grim mystery of the jungle; the endless, relentless strife for survival; the virility, the cruelty, and the grandeur of Nature in the raw.* From letter by Edgar Rice Burroughs to W. S. Van Dyke, director of the 1932 *Tarzan the Ape-Man*, Source: Porges

comic strip signed by Edgar Rice Burroughs even though it wasn't written by him. Some of the people who did the strip were good and some were bad. Hal Foster did the strip for a while, then moved on to his own creation, *Prince Valiant*, and developed his style and skill to become one of the greatest newspaper artistic storytellers of all time. Burne Hogarth did the strip for a long time and put the best atmosphere in the strip.



Then came the comic books. Originally published to cash in on the popularity of Tarzan in the movies, the art was done by Jesse Marsh. Not a fantastic realistic artist, Marsh did not try to emulate Hogarth or Foster. Instead, he put a feeling into his Tarzan that few have been able to come near since. You could tell that Jesse Marsh loved the feature. He did other strips, but it was on Tarzan that Marsh's fame depends. It's impossible to explain what he did, but we loved it and read it over and over. Besides, after World War II, Marsh's comic book stories were the only ones many of us had available between movies. Some of us didn't get Tarzan in our funny papers, and *where could you find Ed's books?*

After the War, Ed's books went out of print fast, partially maybe because of his failing health and lack of energy to keep pushing them. After his death in

1950, it seems that all copies of his books disappeared from many libraries and book stores. By the mid-fifties, you had a real job most of the time to find *any* of his books. Yet, we still had Gordon Scott as an intelligent movie Tarzan and we had Jesse Marsh's intelligent Tarzan comic books.

At the same time, people had decided that Tarzan was a kiddie character. People didn't read the ape-man anymore. That wasn't the Tarzan they knew in the movies, which was aimed at the adolescent boy more than anything. Burroughs was largely ignored in those productions. Sure we loved the films, but they weren't ERB.

Still, Jesse Marsh continued drawing stories using places and people only seen in the novels even when he had to modify them a bit to suit comic books. Cathne, Pal-ul-Don, and other lost cities and forgotten lands appeared regularly. His books had evil men who wore crocodile suits and rode in crocodile boats. And, among my favorites were the two giant eagles Tarzan rode though the skies and the giant lion, Jad-bal-ja.

So, how important are the comic book visions of Tarzan? They are the glue that held Tarzan together during the 1950s waiting for the ERB boom of the 1960s. Though not necessarily the best artist to draw Tarzan, Jesse Marsh kept enough of ERB in his work to keep the ape-man and his creator connected.