



Berserkers: The Beginning

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Gigantic intelligent machines are set loose to destroy all life, with only one branch of humanity, descended from a world called Earth, to stand in their way.

Berserkers: The Beginning Details

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From Reader Review Berserkers: The Beginning for online ebook

Chris Gager says

I'm coming to the end of Alice Munro's "The Beggar Maid" and will be stuck with "War and Peace" if I don't start something else. This book collects the earliest of the Berserker stories. I think I may have read some of this already in an anthology the author collected called "Machines That Kill." He included one of his own stories. I just started last night I'm enjoying it.

So far so good as I've read "Without a Thought" and "Goodlife," the latter being the story from the above referenced collection. Both good... FS seems to be a very capable sci-fi writer. No Jack Vance perhaps, but who is? A berserker is like one of those humongous Death Star-like contraptions from sci-fi space war movies only without any organic being(s) controlling it from on board. Each is controlled by a sort of random, mostly unpredictable program. Some do have living captives on board. They like to "study" them. Ouch!

Next up: "Patron of the Arts" and "The Peacemaker" as FS shifts to various takes on the berserker "problem" and how humans respond. And now I'm in the middle of a longer story: "Stone Place" - great, classic sci-fi stuff!

"Stone Place" - big defeat for the berserkers. By the way... berserkers are something out of Norse mythology.

"What T and I Did" and "Jester": two less-than-stellar entries which try to focus on humor with not-great results. I guess they can't all be winners.

Ah! Back to some solid sci-fi action. The hard-core stuff if you will. "Masque of the Red Shift"! The Big Hero has disappeared into some kind of space hole with a berserker in pursuit. Will either of them(or both) emerge in a later story? I very much like how the author gives the machine enemies "personalities". They are very Borg-like in fact. The berserker mission(destroy life) is very similar to that Star Trek episode with V'ger(can't remember the title) and the first ST movie, which was based on that episode(I think). "The Changeling"???

Moving along through "Sign of the Wolf" and "In the Temple of Mars" - All these are stand-alone stories but also chapter-like in their arrangement, much like "Pninn," "Let Me Be Frank with You" and "The Beggar Maid". Karlsen is back(as I suspected he would be) and the game is on. The berserkers aren't the only baddies to contend with either.

- More connections: "The Fifth Element"(the movie), Anne McCaffrey's Pern books, "Heirs of Empire" etc.

Moving on through "The Face of the Deep" and "The Smile" as the author is basically alternating between the main story line with recurring characters and other stories that are more separate context-wise. Still solid sci-fi and fun-to-read.

- In "The Smile" - connections to "Alien," "The Thing(from Another World)" and "Forbidden Planet."

Over the weekend: "Pressure," "The Annihilation of Angkor Apeiron," "Inhuman Error" and "Some Events at the Templar Radiant" and the berserkers actually get to win one finally in that last one. I was wondering if that'd happen!

- Wikipedia in space! ("The Annihilation ...") is used to defeat a berserker, but in a unique way.
- Sometimes logic is a secondary consideration in a story - in "Pressure" one would think the berserker would be more on top of things.
- Some of the berserkers seem kind of Dalek-like!

Finished up last night with "Starsong," "The Game" and "Wings Out of Shadow" - all solid and typical sci-fi stuff. In many of these stories what saves the humans from the berserkers is some quirky, tricky bit of knowledge or some fatal berserker giveaway based in humanness (and an inadequate berserker understanding of it) that turns the tables against the powerful foe. All of these are inventive and entertaining.

- "Starsong" - a re-telling of Orpheus and Eurydice.
 - "Smasher" - kind of like "Attack of the Killer Shrews" - one of the worst movies of all time.
 - "Wings Out of Shadow" - a bit of a suggestion of "Ender's Game" in this one as the berserkers get out-manuevered again.
 - "The Game" - once again a logically superior human mind out-thinks a berserker (they never quite get the hang of not giving themselves away when they try to "be" human). There's always a fatal "tell" ...
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Dave says

Sidelined by a foot injury I picked this as distraction reading. Not a novel as I'd thought but a collection of interconnected short stories. The main conflict is the long battle between robotic ships programmed to destroy all organic life and the sentient species of the galaxy working more or less together to defeat the Berserkers. Only humans have capacity for actual violent resistance. The stories are a mixed bunch, some much better than others. Interesting allusions to myth, history and the human capacity for both heroism and villainy. I found the stories uneven. Since the stories appeared in magazines each of them recapitulates the back story of the Berserkers. That could have been edited out of all but the first couple of stories in the collection.

Hugo says

A collection of pulpy short stories where the heroes are brooding, the women are beautiful and headstrong and the villains are cold, calculating and indescribably inhuman. Originally written between 1967 and 1979, some of the stories show their age, but they are written in the classic "magazine" tradition, often with a twist and with a good dose of (usually rather morbid) humor.

Saberhagen uses only the bare minimum of description and exposition to make the story come through, like many of the "classic" sci-fi authors. I find it quite refreshing after reading a lot of "modern" sci-fi lately, and in this particular case it is interesting to compare him to Alastair Reynolds, whose *Inhibitors* are very much inspired by the Berserkers. Where Saberhagen can get his point across very efficiently in about 150 pages, Reynolds needs three full volumes to finally arrive at a... um... not really satisfying point at all.

Ricky Penick says

This was an experiment. I downloaded this audiobook from the library without having any idea what to expect. First of all, this is a collection of short stories masquerading as a novel. This wouldn't be so bad if they were actually connected by narrative or characters or location or theme, but unfortunately there is not much that binds them. In the end though, it doesn't matter because they are universally awful.

Jon says

If I could, I'd rate this between three and four stars. It was very good, slightly dated, but very good because it deals more with the psychological aspects of the characters than with the specifics of the science. There are some great character studies and inventive situations that keeps each of the vignettes fresh and interesting.

Andrew says

Overall I Did Enjoy It and Would Recommend It.

The book itself I had been meaning to pickup for a while. I enjoyed the anthology style of stories, giving the read a glimpse around the universe of the effect the Berserkers were having.

Andrew says

This is a strange book to comment on (you know me by now about reviews). The reason why I this is a strange book is that it is in fact two books re-edited in to one. The basic premise is that a narrator has a reason to visit and "view" each of the separate and unrelated (and in some cases non-linear) stories and turn then in to a new narrative not present in the two individual books.

Now in general I am against such things as I find it lazy - why create a new story when you can take old ones and reformat them so they make something new and yet is inherently the same as before.

That said there is a theme to the stories used in this book and they do follow a theme which was not really present in the individual books - hence why I have not out and out slated this book. This can be seen by the fact that the book takes the anthology format and turns it in to novel with distinct chapters - (no wonder when I was reading it I kept on feeling deja-vus)

Now I find the whole Berserker series enjoyable although after a while it does feel as though salvation is always pulled out of the bag at the 11th hour. But considering how old this concept is (first appears in the 60s I seemed to remember) the idea has opened all sorts of possibilities which I think modern books and tv have thoroughly explored and in the process stolen some of the mystery from it is a fascinating idea and one I will certainly explore some more (once I find the rest of the collection in my shelves)

Joshua says

I enjoyed re-visiting these stories that I probably last read 30+ years ago. Some of the ideas explored here were still relevant, and the basic concept of these stories - giant implacable machines, bent on destroying all life - has been interwoven into the general fabric of SF storytelling. Taken as a whole, the overall structure of the stories became a little similar - plucky humans overcome world-destroying alien robots - and the role relegated to women in these stories is laughably dated, but I think the exploration of the human psyche and overall tone let me overlook any shortcomings my somewhat jaded outlook found.

Diana says

I am so addicted to the Berserker series. For one, it proclaims on the front cover "your galaxy is toast, monkey boys"....how can you not read a book with a statement like that on the cover - it's insulting AND apocalyptic!

I think what I like is the idea of those dark killing machines (even scarier than Daleks) out there using humans to betray us and calling them Good Life (which means a nice clean death when they're done with you)...I admit I giggle at the Good Life fitness franchise regularly now.

Walt O'Hara says

Berserkers: The Beginning is a repackaging of much older short story collection set in Fred Saberhagen's Berserker universe, a setting where an ancient warfare between two forgotten races spawned the Berserkers-- once thought to have been autonomous killing machines designed to be "ultimate weapons" but time and a long ago scrambling of their code has warped their programming to declare war on all life. Berserkers are the progenitors (or perhaps the heirs) of science fiction plot devices like "The Doomsday Machine" on Star Trek.

I would rate these much higher, normally, however they are not a new read. This novel is a collection of stories from two sources: **BERSERKER** (the first collection) and **THE ULTIMATE ENEMY** (the fifth collection). In the old days, I would have rated it at least "Really liked it" but I'm not that kind of reader any more. I enjoyed Fred Saberhagen when I was a teenager for his cool ideas and his excellent plotting. As an adult, he still has cool ideas and excellent plotting-- it's just that I keep seeing the same themes throughout his stories: the Berserkers can't fathom humans at some level, this always leads them to make some critical error. The humans exploit this error and the story usually ends on an up note as the author reveals the "big trick" the humans used to fool the berserkers yet again and win some victory large or small. It's not that I have grown tired of the pattern, but I'm starting to recognize it.

Berserkers: The Beginning is a larger collection of short stories, and that is the creative space where Saberhagen was in his element. I've read many of his long form novels and liked them (particularly the Swords series) and my big criticism is that the plot meanders and repeats itself from time to time. Not so with his short stories from the 70s era. They are crisp, they execute quickly and they don't have much in the way of ambiguity. I enjoyed this collection. In particular, each of the previous collections contains a couple of my favorites. **GOODLIFE**, from the first collection (**Berserker**) is an amazing story of a man born inside a

Berserker, who has only experienced life as a "goodlife" servant of the Berserker. This might be the ONE story where we actually catch a glimpse of what might have been the race that created the Berserkers, via archive tapes. WINGS OUT OF SHADOW is a story from Ultimate Enemy and maybe my favorite. A historian with a collection of human "persona" that are stored digitally is captured by a goodlife collaborator and a Berserker and forced to wire the personae into a collection of fighters for the Berserkers. The Berserkers don't realize that the personae are actually of World War I fighter aces....

B:TB collects these short stories from Volume 1:

"Without a Thought" (first appeared as "Fortress Ship" in Worlds of If, Jan 1963)
"Goodlife" (first appeared in Worlds of Tomorrow, Dec 1963)
"Patron of the Arts" (first appeared in Worlds of If, Aug 1965)
"The Peacemaker" (first appeared as "The Lifehater" in Worlds of If, Aug 1964)
"Stone Place" (first appeared in Worlds of If, March 1965)
"What T and I Did" (first appeared in Worlds of If, April 1965)
"Mr. Jester" (first appeared in Worlds of If, Jan 1966)
"Masque of the Red Shift" (first appeared in Worlds of If, Nov 1965)
"Sign of the Wolf" (first appeared in Worlds of If, May 1965)
"In the Temple of Mars" (first appeared in Worlds of If, April 1966)
"The Face of the Deep" (first appeared in Worlds of If, Sep 1966)

and these from Volume 5:

"The Smile" (first appeared in Analog, Summer/Fall 1977)
"Pressure" (first appeared as "Berserkers Prey" in Worlds of If, June 1977)
"The Annihilation of Angkor Apeiron" (first appeared in Galaxy, Feb 1977)
"Inhuman Error" (first appeared in Analog, Oct 1974)
"Some events at the Templar Radiant" (first appeared in Destinies, May-Aug, 1979)
"Starsong" (first appeared in Worlds of If, Jan 1968)
"Smasher" (first appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Aug 1978)
"The Game" (first appeared in The Flying Buffalo's Favorite Magazine, May-June 1977)

To sum up, I love SF short story collections with a lot of action and this collection delivers that requirement nicely. There's a notable progression in style between the first "Oh what a twist!" original stories written in the Sixties to the Ultimate Enemy stories written in the Seventies. The later ones are more mature, with better characterization and with less reliance on Deus est machina endings.

Good fun. Not the most complex read, but for what it is, it surely delivers.

Bill says

AUDIBLE BOOK

Berserkers. death machines from a long ago war. Berserkers goal is to destroy all life.
These are collected tales.

Paris Chávez says

This book was just ok. It was a bunch of loosely connected stories, similar to I Robot or Martian Chronicles. And like I Robot, a lot of the stories dealt with sort of logical or ethical problems encountered during a conflict with an entirely mechanical foe. I think one of my favorite stories was a warship encounters 2 little ships. One is carrying a bit of technology vital to the war effort. Both ships insist they are human. How do you determine which one is telling the truth?

However most of the stories do not come close to the quality of I Robot. In addition, it is an older science fiction book, so the female characters....are pretty terrible. I enjoyed the book, but I don't think I will be looking for any of the sequels anytime soon.

Edwin says

Lots of short stories about a distant future where self-replicating machines are out to destroy all life

I have read this mainly because I really liked the Greg Bear stories "Forge of God" and "Anvil of Stars" where the same theme appears (but is worked out differently). One of the premises is that if you are an advanced civilisation, you become aware of how fragile you are for intruders and as a pre-emptive strike send out killer machines to defeat all life that might threaten you in the future.

Anyway, the Saberhagen stories are an early example of this idea and some of the stories had really nice ideas. However, the writing was not that great and quite a few stories were not very interesting. I don't want to spoil it for you so you have to find out yourself :-)

Christopher says

A collection of short stories spanning several decades covering the beginning of Saberhagen's "Berserker Wars." The wars are about self-replicating war machines built as weapons for a long ago battle between two alien species that has long since ended but the machines don't know it and their programming is all that remains.

That programming is to "destroy all life." The stories are very hit or miss, with some being very entertaining examinations of how a completely inhuman intelligence deals with this rigid programming and how certain humans try to outsmart it.

But because it's a collection of short stories, there's less of a coherent narrative and some of the character-based stories suffer for it.

Clay says

These short stories reminded me of Asimov's "I, Robot" stories because most of them have humans defeating the Berserker or its agents with some little trick of illogical reasoning, humanity or history that is unknown to the Berserker fleet. Asimov's robot stories were like solving logic puzzles against the Three Laws while Saberhagen's stories don't always equip the reader with enough "future" history or background on the characters involved to "solve" them on their own. Even so, the stories are engaging and the humans don't always win each of the encounters.

One of the interesting highlights for me was the retelling of the "Eurydice and Orpheus" myth using a Berserker controlled nebula as Hell. There is also a continuing arc in the first half of the book through several stories that follows several characters and different encounters with the Berserkers. I'm interested in seeing how Saberhagen teases out a full novel in this universe.
