



an extinct race to run about the galaxy treating life as a disease to be exterminated. Isn't this just another re-working, maybe extracting the last bit of salability of a shop-worn idea?

Hah! What an ideal! Literally, life versus death. Death is embodied and anthropomorphised--not through fantasy or myth, but honest-to-Gernsback *hard science*. A series with all the possibilities of all combinations of people forced to re-evaluate their existence when forced to face Death personified and unevadable. Ayn Rand, eat your heart out for a device like this!

And that is what the Berserker stories are. I'll never forget that sweeping battle of Johann Karlsen leading the Terran armada against the Berserker killer fleet, being the space opera fan that I am, but all the other stories were far more on the level of a shipload of characters with contrasting value-systems forced to come to grips with meaning and stop blanking out when they run up against...the Berserker! In *Berserker's Planet*, those of us who were raised on Saberhagen can quickly agree with the evil high priest of death who serves--not Thorun, for whom he publically works--a real machine god, whose mere mention of the true name will wipe the confident smile off the lips of the self-sufficient business executive.

*Schoenberg, unimpressed, sat down.*

"How do you mean to terrify me, then?" he answered.

"By saying a few words."

"Andreas, my respect for you is fading. If the threats you have already made have not had their desired effect, neither will any mutterings about some great unnameable terror. You are not going to scare me that way. In fact you are not going to scare me at all, not in the way you seem to want."

"I think I can. I think I know what a man like you is truly afraid of."

"What?"

"Perhaps I can do it by saying to you only one word." Andreas clapped his hands together playfully. Schoenberg waited.

"The one word is his name."

"Thorun. I know that."

"No. Thorun is a toy. My god is real."

"Well, then. Utter his terrible name." Schoenberg lifted his eyebrows in almost jaunty inquiry. Andreas whispered the three syllables.

It took Schoenberg a little while to grasp it. At first he was merely puzzled. [You have got to have read this far to understand the suspense breaking at this point. Saberhagen underplays it right to the end!] "Berserker," he repeated, leaning back in his chair, his face a blank. Andreas waited, confidently, for his god had never failed him yet. [Come on, Fred, drop the other shoe!]

Schoenberg said: "You mean...ahhh. I think I begin to see. You mean one has really been here for five hundred years, and you--serve it?"

"I am going to offer the god of Death a special sacrifice, consisting of some people we no longer need. I can show you. You will be convinced."

"Yes, I believe you can show me. I believe you. Well. This puts a different face on things, all right. If I wouldn't help you in a local war, I'm not going to help you in a mass extermination."

One by one the other characters must choose: a pacifist must kill to stop Death incarnate, a worthless playgirl and a sadomasochistic bodyguard are sacrificed on an altar facing their own value, and...

And the ending is literally slam-bang. The way Saberhagen sets it up to have the Berserker go by its own nature...when's the next, Fred, when's the next!...?