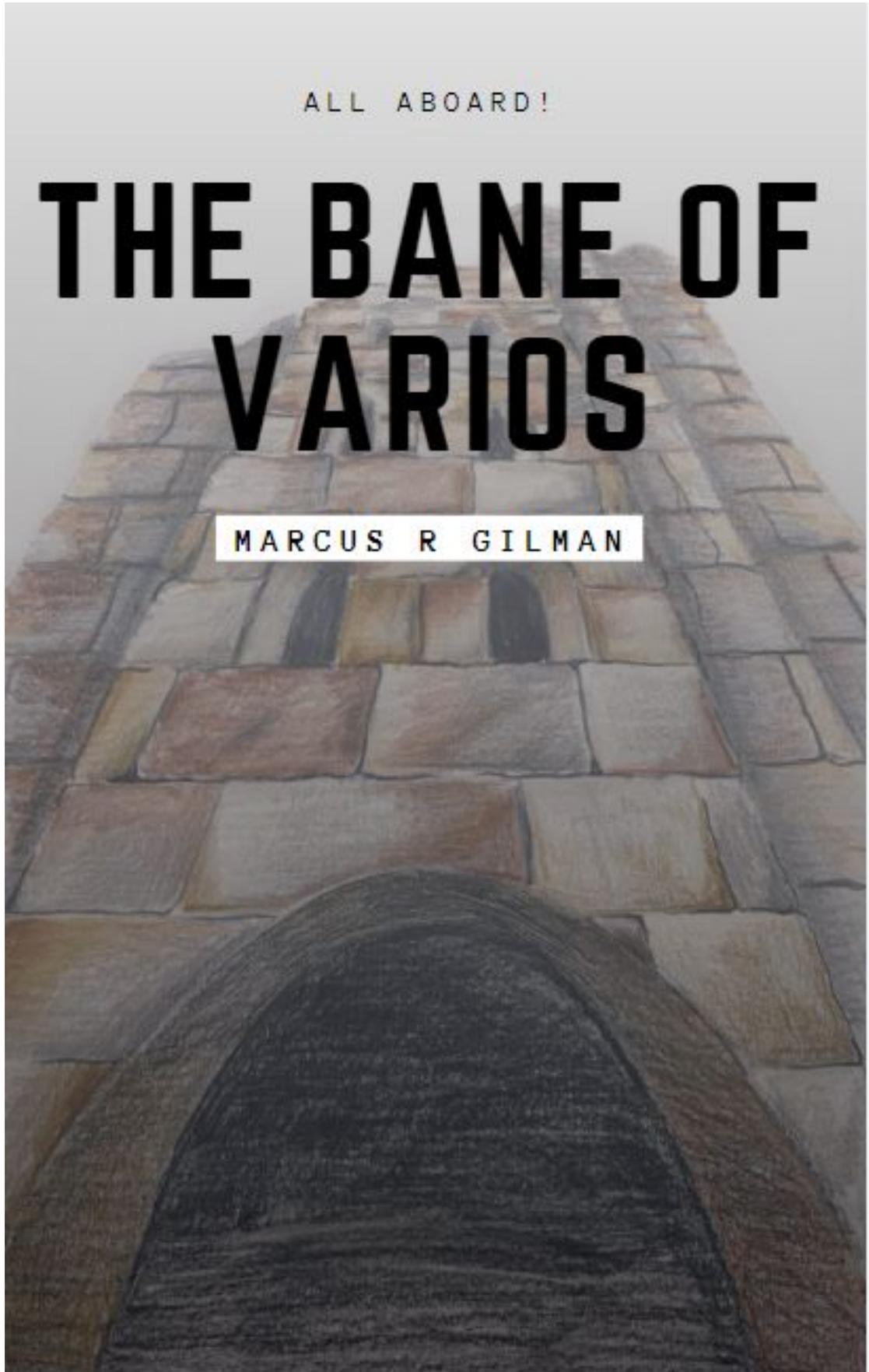


ALL ABOARD!

THE BANE OF VARIOS

MARCUS R GILMAN



For my family and friends.

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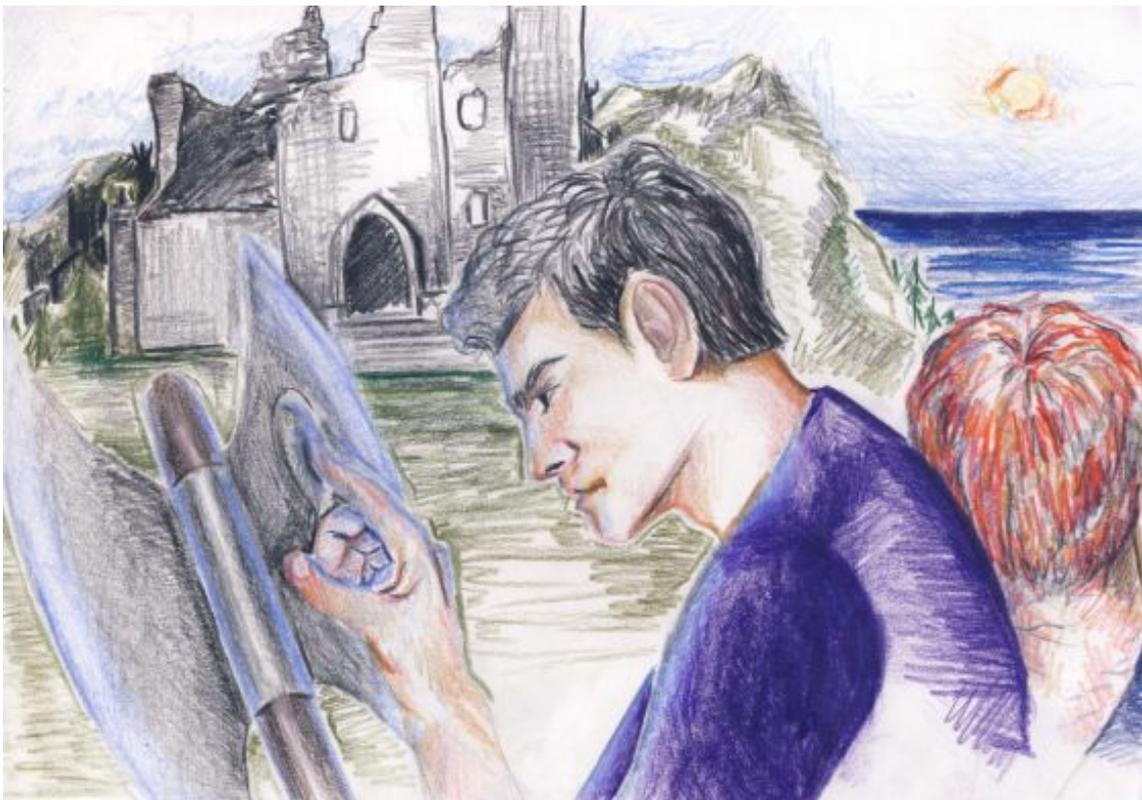
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Moonlight danced on the gentle waves brushing against the hull of the trading vessel. Bornt, the captain, looked on, as the little boat was lowered down into the water and his two passengers, both mercenaries and adventurers of the worst kind, climbed in. „The gods be with you. I come past here again in two days. If I do not see you on the shore, I sail on.“ „We will be there, Bornt.“ the taller one answered, a black-maned beast of a man who went by the name of Gorth, with a chest like a bear and an ax slung over his back. „The ghosts of the past won't scare us.“ declared the other one boldly. His short hair was the color of fire, and fire was also the source of the scars on his hands and face. But it was no misfortune or cruel torture which had caused those scars: This man, who had never revealed his name to Bornt, was a rune-smith of Cyth. He bent fire and metal to his will to perform his magic, but fire always demanded a price. And with that, the two started rowing towards the shore where Vairo, the fallen city of the slain witch-king Syrces, slumbered in the dusk as it had done for the past three hundred years.



Its secrets were guarded by scorpions and darker things. Gods willing, he and his Cythian friend would bring an end to the darkness. In the very center of the abandoned city stood an ancient watchtower of basalt, almost untouched by time. The pair climbed it swiftly, and on its platform, high above the streets of scorpion-infested Vairo, they rested until the break of morning. With the first beams of light reaching over the horizon, Gorth, who never slept more than two or three hours, woke his companion, then took a look around. To the north lay the ruins of the place his father had told him about: The palace of Syrces, where his accursed line began three hundred years ago in the womb of a fleeing slave girl. He knew some of the palace's secrets and today would purge the darkest. When the vile sorcerer had been slain, his palace had been plundered and razed, and yet, there were secrets left to be discovered. Secrets hinting at treasures of gold and magic which had led many brave souls to their doom.



As they reached the outer wall of the palace, the rune-smith raised his hand, cautioning his companion to not take another step. „Something is waiting for us, here. It feels like a spider, lurking in her web.“ he declared. „It is as we were expecting, friend. Some demon of the past still haunts this

ruin.“ Gorth took his ax in one hand and traced the sigils on its head with his finger. Then he whispered to his weapon as one lover to the other: „You have slain many a foe in my hand, today, our greatest battle awaits.“ As if in answer, the sigils gave a faint, silver-blue shimmer.

The web is closing around us, great Gorth.“ the Cythian announced with a wave of his hand, indicating the shambling forms that had appeared among the ruins. They were dried-out, shriveled and gaunt things, shambling forward but instilled with a terrible purpose, still bearing the wounds which slew them. „Look, the ones who came here before us!“ Some brandished weapons and gave hollow and meaningless cries of challenge. Others rushed at the adventurers with their bare claws. Lesser men might have been frozen in shock of the sight of the undead horde, but not Gorth and the Cythian. They stood back to back. Fire scorched the first undead, and those who escaped the wrath of the smith’s magic met the cold steel of Gorth’s mighty ax. The black-maned warrior clove their undead flesh, and a single blow was enough to relieve them of their pitiful mockery of life, yet, they kept coming at him. The Cythian burned them with his fire and flames jumped from one withered husk to the next.



They fell and yet, the smoking ruin of shattered bones and mangled corpses kept coming, driven by an unholy, iron will. „There are too many.“ said the rune-smith breathlessly, exhausted. „No, they are always the same, coming again and again! We cannot slay them for long.“ remarked Gorth coldly, cleaving through yet three more shambling warriors. „So it is true, the one your father has told us about controls them still!“ The Cythian reached into a pouch on his belt, withdrawing a small lump of iron inscribed with a single arcane rune, the sign of the Sun-Father’s wrath. „This will buy us the time we need! You owe me for this, Gorth Black-Mane!“

I swear by my lineage, I will repay you!“ the warrior hissed between yet more blows he struck with his ax, shattering bodies. „Your lineage is what brought us here.“ the rune-smith commented dryly. He cupped the lump between his palms, then choked in pain as the iron glowed red hot before he hurled it into the air.



It turned into a giant ball of flame that burst with the heat of a thousand bonfires, scorching everything around except for the warrior and the spellcaster, and in doing so created a wall of fire that encircled the two and shielded them from the undead haunting the city. They hurried deeper into the ruins of the palace, to a place that had been described to them by Gorth’s father. Their path was littered with charred husks, scorched by the elemental fire the Cythian had summoned. These now rested forever, but other ones killed by lesser means were sure to rise in their stead. Behind a half-crumbled

wall, they found the remains of an iron table. The top was supported by three beasts: An elephant, a horse and a rhinoceros.



Gorth quickly knelt down and pressed the eyes of the elephant. Mechanical groans could be heard from beneath their feet, then, the ground shuddered slightly and the table turned aside, revealing a hole in the ground, „This was far too easy.“ observed Gorth. „Yes.“ agreed the rune-smith. „This passage was meant to be found. Something below wants us to descend.“ „It would be rude to keep it waiting!“ declared the black-haired warrior, lit a torch, then flung it into the darkness below. It hit the ground after only a short fall. The tunnel was only slightly higher than Gorth himself, he now saw, and jumped down. The Cythian followed more cautiously.

The dank passage wound its way deep into the rock Vairois was built on. It was devoid of any signs of unfortunate adventurers having met their end here, as these had all crawled out again in unlife to guard this place or herd others here. The air was stale and tasted of old death. Still, Gorth Black-Mane and his nameless friend pressed on. They had not come for treasure or for arcane knowledge hidden among the ruins. Gorth had now drawn a short sword and held a small round shield in his left. His ax was on his back, since the passage was too narrow to use it. The Cythian held the torch, his magic making it brighter, so they could see clearly.



„This leads to his lair, this is the path to Syrces‘ inner sanctum.“ Gorth observed. „Just like your father said it would be.“ The Cythian added. Soon, the passage split into two, both still leading further down but away from each other. The Cythian muttered something under his breath, than approached the left tunnel. The torch suddenly flared brightly for an instant. „That tunnel is a death trap.“ he declared, turning his attention to the left. Here, too, the torch flared.„So they are both death traps.“ Gorth observed.

Indeed, friend. Another secret passage is what we have to find.“ Following an instinct honed by years of experience, the Cythian ran his hand along the sides of the tunnel they had come down, and sure enough, his fingers found a gap in the wall. He traced it, ran the torch along it, it did not flare. This was the safe path. „Stand back, Cythian.“ Gorth demanded, then drove the edge of is ax into the gap, pushing it deep with all his might, and with the sound of stone grinding stone, the black-maned warrior levered the secret door open. It swung inward, revealing another passage.



The burnt sorcerer took an iron coin and flipped it. It glowed as it spun in the air and hit the ground with the side showing a skeleton facing up. „Our adversary lurks at the end of this passage.“ he declared with a grin. Gorth hefted his ax in both hands and grinned back at the rune-smith: „Let’s go friend.“ The newly discovered passage soon led them into a chamber, so vast, the light of the torch could not reach the end, even with the Cythian’s magic. „Death awaits.“ the sorcerer whispered. „No, not death, friend. Something older, darker.“ Something shambled in the darkness. „He is here, let us see him.“ Gorth told his friend. The Cythian lit another torch from the one he was holding and hurled it beyond the ring of light they were standing in. Guided by magic it found its mark and surrounded it with a faint red glow. A hulking, misshapen thing, formed from the bodies of many unfortunate mortals fused into one, awaited them. This dread guardian was the last thing, the witch-king Syrces had summoned before the final battle, when this city and his palace fell. The demon had come too late to turn the tide, but it had lurked in this chamber ever since, using the undead thralls above to do its bidding. It laughed with the sound of a thousand tortured souls and strode towards the intruders of his cave with long steps. „Puny mortals. Have you come to meet your fate by my hands?“ it mocked. „Do you think so highly of

yourselves as to be too good to be slain by my minions above? Then so be it. I will devour your souls like exquisite morsels, for fools such as you are a rare delicacy.“ „Heed me Ayretheriar, for I know your True Name!“ Gorth bellowed and the beast shuddered upon hearing it. „I am Gorth Black-Mane of the accursed lineage of Syrces who summoned you from the black abyss between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. And I have come to destroy you for eternity!“

With a mighty battle-cry that echoed in the chamber, he lunged at the abomination, ax raised high, but the monstrosity, too, now rushed at him and caught the warrior's weapon in its vile paw, blocking the strike aimed at it. Gorth stood firm, gripped the ax-handle tightly with one hand while he swiftly drew his short sword and cut the monster across its abdomen, but Ayretheriar paid this wound no heed. Now, the Cythian joined the fight, holding the torch aloft. Living flame snaked forth, reaching for Ayretheriar. The creature roared in pain, its other paw reaching for the Cythian with unnatural speed and knocked him aside. But this distraction was all Gorth Black-Mane had needed. He yanked his ax free, its runes and sigils now glowing brightly, and swung it in a powerful wide arc. It bit deep into the hip of the demon and its howl of pain and rage became almost too much to bear. Indeed, the creature stumbled and cowered, raising its paws in a plea of mercy. Gorth felt a sudden sense of pity threaten to overcome his desire to rid the earth of this fiend. He did not strike another blow, but instead lowered his weapon and approached cautiously. „Gorth Black-Mane!“ the Cythian cried out. „Beware its foul sorcery! Don't let it charm you! Don't let the demon charm you!“ The voice of his friend reached the warrior as from a vast distance. It was almost only a whisper. He blinked. All the pity he had just felt was gone, washed away by a rising tide of rage. Yet, this one instant of uncertainty which had engulfed Gorth was all Ayretheriar had needed. It threw its unholy form against the warrior, almost crushing him between itself and the chamber's wall. Gorth could feel all wind leaving his lungs and tasted blood in his mouth. „Now, I shall feast on your soul and feeble flesh, mortal.“ it raged. „Your suffering for wounding me shall be legendary among my kind.“ „Not so, abomination.“ he replied between clenched teeth, a red fog of blood, pain, and rage clouding his vision, and drove the sharp tip at the end of

his ax's handle into Ayretheriar's flesh. The beast jerked back, giving Gorth enough space to free himself. Seeing his friend had gotten away from the beast's grip, the Cythian again conjured flame from the torch, this time searing the monstrosity's back. It howled once more and turned to face the rune-smith, but before it could do any more, its head was cleft asunder by Gorth's ax and the might of the blow felled it then and there. „Ayretheriar, Bane of Vairo, I, Gorth of the line of Syrces, banish you and destroy you forever.“ Gorth declared and hewed each limb from its body, before the Cythian burned it with his magic. „Our quest here is finished Gorth. Now we have earned our reward!“ „There will be little in this chamber, but now that the demon is slain, it should be safe to search this cavern.“ The Cythian mumbled another incantation and drew a circle with the torch. Some sparks flew, but none found a mark. No other beast or demon was lurking in the darkness. Alas, the only treasure they found was a chain of silver on the skeleton of the only other hero who had ever found his way down here, but this one had succumbed to the might of the skulking abomination that had lurked there. So, with a mighty foe slain but little compensation for their pains save the knowledge of their victory, the pair of heroes left the vault and returned to the ruins of Vairo above.



The dead did not stir as they walked past, weary and sore from the battle they had fought. On the beach, they rested until late the following afternoon, when the trading vessel returned. The captain was almost disappointed to see them, but the first mate was happy. „Well, you made my first mate a richer man, but it is good to see you both survived this place. Did you find what you came for?“ „We did indeed.“ answered Gorth and left it at that.

SŁOWNICZEK:

gentle - delikatny	sigils - symbol magii
hull - kadłub	weapon - broń
vessel - statek	shimmer - migotanie
lowered down - opuszczać	lineage - pochodzenie
mercenaries - najemnicy	repay - odpłacać, spłacać
shore - brzeg	hissed - syczeć
black-maned - czarnowłosa	shattering - druzgocąc, roztrzaskując
slung - rzucić	dryly - sucho, oschle
boldly - odważnie	cupped - trzymać w dłoniach
source - źródło	lump - bryła
cruel - okrutny	palms - dłonie
revealed - ujawniony	choked - zakrztusić się
demanded - żądany	hurled - ciskać, miotać
rowing - wiosłowanie	flame - płomień
slain - zabity	burst - pękać, wybuchać
guarded - strzeżony	scorching - skwarly, upalny
willing - chętny	spellcaster - czarownik
abandoned - opuszczony	encircled - otaczać
ancient - starożytny	littered - zaśmiecony
untouched - nienaruszony	charred - zwęglony
swiftly - natychmiastowo	husks - plewy, łupiny
above - powyżej	scorched - spalony
infested - opanowany, opanować (forma przeszła)	elemental - żywiołowy
rested - wypoczywać (forma przeszła)	summoned - wezwany
beam of Light - promień światła	rise - wzrastać
companion - towarzysz	stead - zamiast
accursed - przeklęty	crumbled - rozpadnięty
womb - łono (u kobiety)	remains - szczątki
fleeing - uciekać, uciekanie	supported - utrzymany
slave - niewolnik, niewolnica	knelt down - uklęknął
purge - oczyszczać	pressed - przycisnął
vile - wstrętny	groans - jęczenie
sorcerer - czarodziej	beneath - pod
slain - zabity	shuddered - zadrżał
plundered - obrabowany, okradziony	slightly - delikatnie, nieznacznie
razed - zburzony	revealing - odkrywając
led - forma przeszła od „lead” - prowadzić	Hole - dziura
doom - śmierć	passage - korytarz
cautioning - ostrzegając	descend - schodzić
lurking - przyczajony	Lit a torch - zapalić pochodnię
traced - namierzać (forma przeszła)	flun - rzucić
	cautiously - ostrożnie

dank passage - wilgotny korytarz
devoid - pozbawiony
signs - ślady, oznaki
unfortunate - niefortunny, nieszczęśliwy
crawled - wyczołgać się
unlife - nieżywe
guard - strzec
herd - stado, tłum
stale - nieświeże
arcane - tajemny/na
knowledge - wiedza
among - wśród, między
narrow - wąski
death trap - śmiertelna pułapka
summoned - wyzwany
misshapen - zniekształcony
fused - połączeni, zmieszani
strode - **stride** – chodzić zamasyście
puny - mizerny, żaloszny
abyss - otchłań
eternity - wieczność
abomination - obrzydzenie
monstrosity - potworność
wound - rana
heed - uważać
stumble - potknąć się
overcome - przezwyciężyć
engulf - pochłaniać
feeble - marny
conjure - wywoływać
banish - wypędzić
cavern - jaskinia
succumb - poddawać się
compensation - odszkodowanie

Marcus R Gilman

Fiction and Non-Fiction Writer

Marcus Rauchfuss is the author of the Traveler's Steampunk Blog, and central coordinator of the European Steampunk Convention. He is also a minor Cthulhu Mythos scholar and his final thesis at Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich, was on the Cthulhu Mythos.

Born in Germany, he thinks of "Nottingham" as his hometown, and is pan-European when it comes to promoting the steampunk scene.

A life-long zeppelin enthusiast, Marcus first made contact with what he would later know as steampunk in the summer of 1992 through "A Nomad of the Time Streams" by Michael Moorcock. He became more immersed in steampunk after discovering music group, Abney Park in June 2008.

In July, 2008, the Traveler's Steampunk Blog was set up, originally intended to be a steampunk-themed travel blog. Marcus' involvement with the community has only grown ever since.

Through the blog, he has made contact with steampunks around the globe and has become involved in several other projects. Marcus is a regular contributor to the Gatehouse Gazette and has also written articles for El Investigador, Dieselpunks.org, and the Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences.

On the 28th of September, 2012, just one day before the first European Steampunk Convention, he celebrated a personal milestone: the publication of a non-fiction book on steampunk, "Steampunk- kurz & geek", which he wrote together with Alex Jahnke of Clockworker.de. "Kurz & geek" is the first German non-fiction book on steampunk.

Dwukrotny laureat nagrody "Deutscher Phanta