

Lovecraft's Works are fantasies of terror

By Bram Eisenthal

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is a name as synonymous with writings of the strange and macabre as that of Edgar Allen Poe.

Born on August 20, 1890, in Providence, Rhode Island, Lovecraft spent most of his life in the New England area, which lends itself to the settings, both imaginary and real, of his stories.

As a boy, Lovecraft loved the dark. He would sit in his room, by candle-light, and read or write stories. In fact, at the age of seven he was found by his mother reading a copy of Welles' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. She confiscated the book, not wishing her son to read such gruesome tales.

Little did she know that he would one day write stories which would make this, by comparison, not much more than a fairy tale. The seeds had taken root.

Howard, instead of playing with other boys, would sit in his room and write. This passion for seclusion earned him the name "The Rhode Island Recluse," one which stayed with him until his death in 1937.

Lovecraft spent his professional life as a writer for *Weird Tales*, the classic pulp magazine, and had very little of a following in his lifetime. It was only after his death that August Derleth, a writer of some distinction, (and Lovecraft's closest friend and collaborator) promoted his writing, and brought Lovecraft the acclaim he deserved.

The other two-thirds of the "Three Musketeers of Weird Tales", Robert E. Howard (of Conan fame), and Clark Ashton Smith, also campaigned to have their friend recognized for his vast contribution to the world of literature.



Howard Phillips Lovecraft

A good informative beginning to your education would be *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*, put out in two volumes by Ballantine Books.

Cthulhu is the greatest Lovecraft creation, the cyclopean entity residing in sunken R'lyeh, and originating from beyond time and space.

From his threshold, Cthulhu is very anxious, as wrote Lovecraft; "All my stories, unconnected as they may be, are based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race, who, in practising

black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled, yet live on outside, ever ready to take possession of this Earth again."

This particular novel contains short stories by many known writers, including the aforementioned Derleth, Howard, and Smith, but it is Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, written in 1928, which caused others to name his writings the "Cthulhu Mythos". The basic principles of this mythos are such; in space and time, there exist forces of good and evil.

There are the Elder Gods, nameless save Nodens, Lord of The Great Abyss. These gods are benign entities, representing the forces of good, and rarely intervening in worldly affairs. They exist somewhere near Betelgeuze in the constellation Orion.

Then, there are the Great Old Ones, or Ancient Ones, the Elders' evil counterparts. Su-

preme among them is Azathoth, an "amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity", to describe him graphically. Yog-Sothoth shares Azathoths dominion, and both are not subject to the laws of time and space.

Those who answer to them are infamous Cthulhu, the messenger Nyarlathotep, Hastur the Unspeakable; half-brother to Cthulhu (would you believe half-thing?) and Shub-Niggurath, "the black goat of the woods with a thousand young."

The above compose the original Great Old Ones, but Lovecraft later added other deities, lower in rank, such as Hypnos, god of sleep, and Dagon, god of the deep. A good knowledge of the Mythos is paramount to appreciation of Lovecraft's works.

One extremely interesting aspect of his tales are the seemingly true origins of the fictional books mentioned. Primary among these is the ancient *Necronomicon*, written in AD 700 by the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred. This book supposedly tells of beings living in man's pre-history, and those reading it risk going mad themselves.

In his tales, Lovecraft's characters involved with this text of titilating terror end up splattered in other millenia, or worse.

It's difficult for a fan to choose what he feels are the elite of Lovecraft tales. There are many excellent pieces, but two particular stories are recommended for the layman who wishes to taste superb wine in words.

One is the novelette *At the Mountains of Madness*, which is probably Lovecraft's most frightening piece. The story is the narrative of the lone survivor of the expedition from Miskatonic University to the fabled plateau of icy Leng, the ancestral home of the Great Old Ones. Such places are nervously hinted at in the *Necronomicon*, but the expedition discovers first hand what others went insane merely reading about. You, too, may never fully recover, so be forewarned!

The other is a piece of ghost writing (how apt) which was completed in 1924 for Harry Houdini, the escape artist whom McGill did in. It is entitled *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*, and can be found in *The Doom That Came to Sarnath*, and other stories.

The story is unique in the Lovecraft canon, in that it is a combination of romance, adventure, and shuddering horror. It also displays Lovecraft's fondness for antiquity. The tale is that of Houdini, and a trip taken to Egypt. He encounters love, and sinister occurrences. Then, in several of the more fright-filled pages ever written, he finds himself wandering aimlessly through the chambers beneath the Temple of the Sphinx.

Lovecraft parties and séances have also been held on the anniversaries of his death. On the night of March 20, 1970, a trio of professors from the Rhode Island School of Design held a "lurk-in", which over 150 persons attended.

Which brings to mind one timeless warning should someone, somewhere hold similar ideas; "Never invite him that lurks at the threshold!"

It would be foolish, indeed.

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