

## books

**The phantasmagorical H.P. Lovecraft**

Among the host of writers who have used horror and terror as their art form, two names stand head and shoulders above the rest.

Edgar Allen Poe took important steps in the original development of the modern terror story. He wrote before 1850. In the following 75 years or so, other authors used the genre more or less successfully.

Between 1920 and 1938, the second American giant appeared in print. Howard Phillip Lovecraft took ideas and styles from the earlier writers and added his own techniques. The result was some of the best horror fiction ever, and definitely the most influential.

Much of his work has been out of print for many years. Recently, American publishers, inspired by Lovecraft's European popularity, have released new editions of all Lovecraft's stories. Apparently his stories haven't dimmed with time, as there is now a full scale Lovecraft revival in progress.

Lovecraft himself was a man with very unusual habits, very fitting to his themes. From his early childhood, he was alienated from children his own age. In later years, this tendency grew to the point where, except for a brief unsuccessful marriage, Lovecraft was a recluse, rarely leaving his large old house in Providence, Rhode Island.

Lovecraft's efforts were almost all short stories, and they can be divided very neatly into two cycles. His most famous and influential work is contained in the Cthulhu cycle. Lovecraft developed a self-consistent mythology all his own; in some ways close to the Christian ideas of God and Satan. The core of the mythos is that sometime in earth's dim past, before man existed, the world was ruled by the Old Ones — beings of frightful power and horrible shapes. They were the primal evil in Lovecraft's stories. The entire set of stories is named for Cthulhu, the monstrous water elemental who is imprisoned beneath the Pacific in the ancient sunken city of R'lyeh. Some of the other notables include the walker of the star winds, Nyarlathotep; Shub-Niggurath, "the black goat of the woods with a thousand young"; and (my personal favorite) Azathoth, the blind idiot god who yammers and bubbles at the center of all infinity. Before the dawn of man, another group of gods, more powerful than the Old Ones, banished the Old Ones and imprisoned them throughout the universe. These were the nameless Elder Gods. The Old Ones still retain their power, and through subtle manipulation of men's dreams or with mystic tokens, they plot to free themselves from their cosmic prisons.

The backdrop also includes books about these gods authored by ancient scholars who were usually described by the adjectives "mad" or "unspeakably degenerate."

Perhaps the best remembered prop of the whole mythos is the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred and his dread book the Necronomicon. The book supposedly had a dark and bloody history. In modern times, only a few copies were rumored to exist and it was a common gambit in the stories for someone to come across a copy of one of these forbidden books or mystic charms and thereby inadvertently summon one of the Evil Ones.

All of these background props were carried over from story to story. The background was so carefully woven that many people actually tried to locate the fictional Necronomicon through rare book dealers. This ad appeared in the "Antiquarian Bookman":

Alhazred, Abdul. The Necronomicon. Spain 1647. Calf covers, rubbed and some foxing, otherwise very nice condition. Many small woodcuts of mystic signs and symbols. Seems to be a treatise (in Latin) on Ritualistic Magic. Ex. lib. stamp on front fly leaf states that the book has been withdrawn from the Miskatonic University Library. Best Offer.

But this imaginative background wasn't what made Lovecraft's reputation. His greatest ability was creating subtle terror out of eerie descriptions. Lovecraft could manufacture an atmosphere, a mood of dark foreboding. This passage is from his "The Call of Cthulhu":

At the end of the passable road they alighted, and for miles splashed on in silence through the terrible cypress woods where day never came. Ugly roots and malignant hanging nooses of Spanish moss beset them, and now and then a pile of dank stones or fragments of a rotting wall intensified by its hint of morbid habitation a depression which every malformed tree and every fungous islet combined to create. At length the squatter settlement, a miserable huddle of huts, hove in sight; and hysterical dwellers ran out to cluster around the group of bobbing lanterns. The muffled beat of tom-toms was faintly audible far, far ahead; and a curdling shriek came at infrequent intervals when the wind shifted. A reddish glare, too, seemed to filter through the pale undergrowth beyond endless avenues of forest night.

By Lovecraft's own admission, his two favorite story elements are strangeness and antiquity, so he naturally placed most of his stories in his own New England. Many of the characters lived in backwater isolated towns and were born from rotting blood lines, generations inbred. Characters of malevolent stares and evil bearing, the towns of New England, all are described with dark adjectives. Shadows and strange noises appear throughout the stories to punctuate the eeriness, and even more important, give the characters points around which they could drive themselves crazy with fear and worry. Poe's horror was psychologically created, Lovecraft provided us with a tangible focus for fear.

While he was sure to supply lots of atmosphere and careful description, Lovecraft left most of the true horror to your imagination. The shape and aspect of the Evil Ones was described in the most nebulous terms possible. The acts of horror — rats devouring live humans, a man melting in the August heat, ghouls munching on human remains — all are talked about in just enough vague detail to create the atmosphere of terror that was so important to the mood Lovecraft so skillfully imagined.

Some of his stories contained the dark "atmosphere" but didn't depend on the "Old Gods" theme for a plot structure. These stories, like "Pickman's Model," "The Terrible Old Man" and "Rats in the Walls," were sometimes anthologized into readings for the mainstream fiction market, which presumably didn't like monsters. As a result, these are Lovecraft's best known works.

The second, lesser known cycle of Lovecraft's work was written at the very beginning of his career. Influenced by the English writer Lord Dunsany, these earlier stories didn't have the heavy accent on the dark and foreboding feeling that Lovecraft developed later. Here his prose is crystal clear, again with an emphasis on description. Perhaps the culmination of this is the novelette "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath." In 140 pages, Randolph Carter sleeps and, dreaming, walks through the Gates of Deeper Slumber down seven hundred onyx steps to travel through and explore the dream world. Carter's adventures are detailed without a sentence of dialogue. Lovecraft delights here in colorful descriptions of unearthly and magnificent scenes.

Lovecraft's style became the standard style for the horror story genre. Writers since then have borrowed his techniques and his plots. His pantheon of evil gods has been used and added to by other writers right up to the present.

Lovecraft corresponded with other major horror writers of his day, notably Frank Belknap Long, Robert Howard and Clark Ashton Smith. They liberally alluded to each other's stories and happily used each other's ideas quite often. August Derleth used Lovecraft's style, and was so successful that it's hard to tell them apart. They collaborated on several works, and after Lovecraft's death, Derleth finished many of his incompleting stories.

Derleth owns Arkham House publishing company, named after Lovecraft's favorite Massachusetts setting (Arkham was a small town patterned after Salem). This company was responsible for keeping Lovecraft in the public eye after his original publishers folded.

Lovecraft stories usually first appeared

in a pulp magazine, *Weird Tales*. This was somewhat similar to the 50-cent sci-fi magazines available today. Many people reject him out of hand by referring to the "low grade" of talent appearing in the pulps. Lovecraft's popularity faded after 1940, but there was always a small devoted group of fans in the United States. Their devotion is evidenced by the fact that an original H.P. Lovecraft manuscript could sell for about a hundred dollars. In recent years his works have appeared in Europe and have been very popular. Taking the hint, U.S. publishers have come out with new editions of Lovecraft's efforts, and anthologies of other writers' contributions to the Cthulhu mythos are now available. Paperback editions are published by Ballantine and Beagle.

Perhaps the strangest part of the Lovecraft story is this (unsubstantiated) story of his death. Towards the end of his career, Lovecraft was carrying on a huge literary correspondence with many of his fellow writers to the tune of 10 or 20 letters a day and many typewritten pages for each letter. Apparently he had no time to write stories to make a living. H.P. Lovecraft supposedly starved to death.

Bob Klein



Classical guitarist Ronald Murray will appear in the Kresge Little Theatre on March 1st at 8:15pm, sponsored by the MIT Classical Guitar Society. Mr. Murray's program will include music from the 16th to the 20th centuries, by composers such as Bach, Sanz, Scarlatti, Albeniz, Ponce and Tarrega. Admission will be \$1.00.

## music

**Louden Wainwright III is an improbable star**

Louden Wainwright III does not have the appearance of a star. He looks more like a big, over-grown kid, with a voice that is very high and sometimes squeaky. This is the impression he gives on his records; when he appeared at the Passim Coffeehouse this weekend, his performing style matched this image rather closely.

Basically, Wainwright deals in humor. A lot of it is straightforward, but quite a bit of it is the ironic, black type of humor, to which your initial reaction is a smile; but the long-range feeling is one of great sadness or wonder. The lyrics are often very haunting, very stark, strongly existentialist. It sounds as if he is straining to get the words out, and, in person, you can see him pretend to strain. His whole act seems to be, literally, an act. But he lets up so rarely (and even his serious songs have funny lyrics) that it's hard to tell just how much of what he does is really a put-on. A large part of his material sounds autobiographical, and, at Passim, he often described the circumstances under which he wrote the song or the inspiration for it.

He plays the part of a rock-and-roller

## media

**Firesign Theatre on radio (on record)**

Dear Friends — The Firesign Theatre (Columbia)

The Firesign Theatre have been known mostly for their work on the record medium (at least on the east coast). Their four records made special use of the effects that could be employed on a disc, such as special sound effects, musical selections, and of course, the bag of tricks involved with stereo recording, such as fancy echoes and spatial effects. Most of these things are not reproducible live, naturally, and the Firesign Theatre is put into a class of comedy artists different from such nightclub and television "standup" comedians as Flip Wilson and Bill Cosby, whose records are often made from live performances.

This classification is made without even considering the completely different styles. Most solo comedians use monologues and stories. Some soloists (David Frye, sometimes George Carlin) and many comedy teams like Ace Trucking Company, Bob and Ray, and so on act out scenarios with one or more characters portrayed therein. Firesign on record did this on a grandiose scale, involving multiple, intertwined plots and complex references, with each of the four members taking many parts with different voices. They are pretty well associated with a frantic pace, often hard to keep up

with an obvious lack of subtlety. He pretends to try to be a big star, but his whole attitude and appearance are radically different from that whole scene. He may have trouble avoiding the fame, however, because he really is that good. So many solo songwriters take themselves so seriously that it is a great change to hear one who doesn't, even when his subject matter deserves it. He has two highly-praised albums out on Atlantic (though he has since signed with Columbia) which are equally good. He uses the barest of accompaniments, but they are highly imaginative for their simplicity. You can't hear him without cracking a smile or without being a little frightened when he's finished.

Louden Wainwright III would probably not be as effective in front of a large audience (such as a star would attract). He recreates the mood of his records by making faces and forcing his vocals, which would most likely be missed by many in a large audience. The small club (like Passim) is a much better atmosphere for him to work in, but he may not be able to enjoy it much longer. He may or may not be avoiding great popularity but he won't last much longer as such an unknown.

Jay Pollack

with.

However, for several years now, the Firesign Theatre has also had programs on the radio (mostly in Los Angeles). They can still do multiple voices, but they are severely limited with respect to other effects in a live situation (even "Nick Danger," their recorded radio parody, exceeds the actual limits of radio towards its end). *Dear Friends* is a generous helping of selections from shows, cut into short (one to five minutes long) segments with an extremely helpful program explaining just who speaks each voice (which has probably puzzled some of their fans for a while). Much of it is radio talk show style, complete with several great commercials. The limitations on the style are not serious impairments, though. Practically every cut has something to recommend it and some of the bits rank with their best material (the small amount of throwaway stuff appears to have been added for the sake of a little extra variety; there is enough variety without it). You can always be sure that the next word to be said on any of their records is just the word you weren't thinking of. And it is reassuring to know that they suffer very little when they work live. This album should be more popular with their fans (and the radio stations) than the more abstruse (though excellent) *I Think We're All Bozos On This Bus*. Now, if we can just get them to make tours...

Jay Pollack