

# THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

I HAVE JUST DISCOVERED a boy of seventeen who promises to develop into something of a fantaisiste. He is August W. Derleth . . . & turns out to be a veritable little prodigy; devoted to Dunsany & Machen, & ambitious to excel in their chosen field.”

In writing the above words to one of his correspondents in 1926, H. P. Lovecraft could not have realized that he had just encountered the single most significant figure in the advancement of his posthumous renown. August Derleth soon became a member of the legendary Lovecraft Circle of writers, who contributed Mythos-related stories to *Weird Tales* magazine, but more importantly, after Lovecraft's death in 1937 Derleth founded the publishing firm of Arkham House to preserve the darkly enduring legacy of his great friend.

In recognition of August Derleth's lifelong dedication to H. P. Lovecraft and his work, all of Derleth's own noncollaborative contributions to the Cthulhu Mythos are collected in the present volume. The opening Derleth Mythos section presents the author's idiosyncratic interpretation of the Mythos as forces of good versus evil; *The Mask of Cthulhu* section includes a story, "The Return of Hastur," that was partly read and critiqued by Lovecraft himself shortly before his death; and *The Trail of Cthulhu* is an

interconnected five-part novel featuring Derleth's most intriguing contribution to the Mythos, Dr. Laban Shrewsbury. No one but August Derleth could have captured so skillfully the mood and design of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and yet done so in a manner all his own.

—JAMES TURNER

1996

## INTRODUCTION

H. P. LOVECRAFT AND THE Mythos he created are among the pinnacles of the weird tale. That they are now widely appreciated as such is due in a number of ways to the efforts of his friend and literary pupil August Derleth.

Let me start with Lovecraft. For the two decades preceding his death in 1937 he set about trying to create the perfect form for the tale of supernatural terror. His seminal essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* records his exploration of the classics of the genre, particularly British and American. Among the writers he praises most highly are Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and Lord Dunsany, and he learned from all of them, thus becoming the first writer to unite the British and American traditions of the field. Poe showed him singleness of effect and how to suit one's prose to it; in Blackwood he admired the sense of alien beings and dimensions invading our own, while from Machen he borrowed the notion of an inhuman past lurking in the present. At the same time he did his best to avoid the failings which he found in even his favourite writers—in Poe, what Lovecraft saw as a lack of cosmic vision; in Blackwood, too much Victorian occult jargon, no doubt deriving from Blackwood's membership in the Order of the Golden Dawn. Occult commonplaces which explained too much

and tied up too many loose ends had no imaginative appeal for Lovecraft, and so he followed Dunsany's example and invented his own myths.

It was by no means a systematic process. His most famous creation, the *Necronomicon*, only gradually takes shape in various tales. Cthulhu, the best-known (though in no sense the leader) of his pantheon of alien beings worshipped by human cults, makes its only appearance in "The Call of Cthulhu," halfway through Lovecraft's career as a writer. From that story onward Lovecraft developed the kind of weird tale for which he is best remembered, a fusion of supernatural horror and science fiction, each story a fresh attempt to communicate the indifference and awesome otherness of the universe around us. He seldom felt even close to success, and he was particularly disparaging of the myths he created—"Yog-Sothothery," as he called his concept, never "the Cthulhu Mythos." In 1937 he died, apparently convinced he was a failure. Very few of his stories had seen the light outside pulp magazines. Although Dashiell Hammett had anthologised one tale, various publishers had rejected a collection of his tales in hardcover.

August Derleth was then a writer, not only or primarily of weird tales, and a correspondent of Lovecraft's. The day he heard of Lovecraft's death he walked through his beloved Wisconsin countryside and sat by a brook to decide how a memorial anthology of Lovecraft's stories could be published. Having edited it with Donald Wandrei, Derleth sent the massive book on the rounds of New York publishers. Their reactions convinced him that he should publish the book himself, and so between them he and Wandrei financed the first volume under a new imprint, the most famed publisher of the fantastic in the world—Arkham House.

The book was *The Outsider and Others*, and was followed in 1943 by a massive compilation of the rest of Lovecraft's fiction, *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*. Less than thirteen hundred copies of each were printed, and even those took years to sell, so limited was Lovecraft's reputation then. Nevertheless there was an audience, however small, which was eager for more of the same, and Derleth was their man.

Lovecraft had seen the earliest work Derleth had written along his lines. On 11 September 1931 he wrote to Clark Ashton Smith: "Little Derleth is getting cleverer and cleverer in his weird ideas. Some of his new tales are really remarkably good—especially such specimens as *The Thing that Walked on the Wind . . .*" [*italics Lovecraft's*]. He also read an early draft of "The Return



of Hastur” and made suggestions for revision. It isn’t clear if he saw how Derleth planned to develop his mythos. What Lovecraft had conceived in fragments, as a way of giving glimpses of the cosmic scope of his imagination, Derleth rationalised into a system.

He was beginning to do so in “The Thing that Walked on the Wind.” Lovecraft left Blackwood’s occult notion of elementals alone, but you’ll find it in this Derleth story, and before long he set about dividing Lovecraft’s beings into categories, making Cthulhu into a water elemental on the basis that its habitat was inundated. More to the point, while Lovecraft was an atheist, Derleth was a Catholic (“albeit,” as he once wrote to me, “a generally anti-clerical one”). It was this philosophical difference which led him to turn Lovecraft’s expression of awe and terror at the vastness of the universe into a confrontation between good and evil.

“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 statement, often cited as Lovecraft’s by Derleth but to be found only in a letter from the late composer Harold Farnese—who seems either to have misremembered a comment of Lovecraft’s or quoted him as having said what Farnese felt he should have said—fits the stories in the present book far more snugly than it does Lovecraft’s own work. (What Lovecraft did write in 1927, to the editor of *Weird Tales*, was “All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large”; I leave the reader to decide if the two statements are compatible.) In *H. P. Lovecraft: Some Notes Toward a Biography*, Derleth describes the Cthulhu Mythos as “basically similar to the Christian Mythos, particularly in regard to the expulsion of Satan from Eden, and the power of evil to survive,” which suggests that he had come to view Lovecraft’s creation in terms of his own use of it. In “The Shadow over Innsmouth,” the nearest Lovecraft came to writing a suspense story, stones carved with magic signs are said to be able to protect humans from an amphibious race, but those are the only defences Lovecraft provides.

Nobody except Lovecraft would have been entitled to insist that Derleth use his concepts slavishly, of course, any more than one would expect fidelity of a movie based on Lovecraft’s work. These stories demand to be

seen as a tribute to Lovecraft and to the power of his original concept, and a demonstration of the creative fun Derleth had with them.

In “The Dweller in Darkness” he states a Lovecraftian motif which he was to make peculiarly his—the inhuman creature passing for human—and brings an abundance of italics to the task of equalling the power of Lovecraft’s prose. Like too few of Lovecraft’s imitators, he was aware of Lovecraft’s roots in the genre, so that the next group of stories in this book—“Beyond the Threshold,” and especially “Ithaqua” and “The Thing that Walked on the Wind,” a title which all by itself was enough to evoke a sense of awe when I first encountered it in my early teens—are touched by Blackwood’s nature mysticism. An unexpected calm has fallen on the subsequent pair of stories, for all that they were written twelve years apart. Perhaps in “The Passing of Eric Holm” (originally published under the pen name “Will Garth” in the pseudonym-riddled pulp magazine *Strange Stories*) Derleth had in mind the New England supernatural writer Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, whose “quiet, unadorned prose style” he praises in his 1946 book on writing fiction. I rather think that the author of *Cathedrals in England*, the book cited in “Something from Out There,” is meant to be M. R. James, the English master of the ghost story, and this tale of Derleth’s has a touch of Jamesian reticence.

Curious it is—damnably odd—that none of these tales found a place in Derleth’s first collection of his Mythos tales, the 1958 *Mask of Cthulhu*. Hastur returns afresh, and so do echoes of Lovecraft’s prose. While “The Whippoorwills in the Hills” is a kind of sequel of Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror,” the final paragraphs are a deliberate parody of the ending of another Lovecraft tale—I leave to my reader the experience of discovering or rediscovering which. “Something in Wood” is a case of the kind of fun many fictionists have when writing about critics, and was there a wicked gleam in Derleth’s eye when he suggested that the music of Roy Harris reached back before the human race? “The Sandwin Compact” begins by letting the narrator and his cousin express the boyishness underlying the fiction and ends by celebrating an image from “The Whippoorwills in the Hills.” Readers familiar with Innsmouth may be expected to appreciate the fishy redolence of “The House in the Valley” and the self-discovery which the narrator of “The Seal of R’lyeh” is bound to make.

As for *The Trail of Cthulhu*, it proves that you can’t keep a good proto-

plasmic monster down. Just as *The Lurker at the Threshold* (a novel by Derleth incorporating two short passages by Lovecraft) was compared to the detective fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers, so Everett Bleiler rightly compares *Trail*, a fix-up of five stories published in *Weird Tales* from 1943 to 1952, with Sax Rohmer, whose arch-villain Fu Manchu was forever to be heard of again. Given the eagerness of horror movie fans these days to have their favourite monsters rise from the dead, we might conclude that Derleth was ahead of his time. As in many serials, each episode contains a resumé of previous events.

Derleth was a jealous guardian of the Cthulhu Mythos in his lifetime, but he encouraged the present writer to add to it thirty-five years ago—he handed on his torch to me, and the public must decide if I proved myself worthy. For that start to my career in professional print I can never be too thankful, and writing this tribute doesn't begin to say how much. Today's admirers of Lovecraft have many reasons to be grateful to Derleth, and so do those who can't get enough of the Mythos.

—RAMSEY CAMPBELL  
 Wallasey, Merseyside  
 19 May 1996



# **THE DERLETH MYTHOS**

THE DWELLER IN DARKNESS

BEYOND THE THRESHOLD

THE THING THAT WALKED ON THE WIND

ITHAQUA

THE PASSING OF ERIC HOLM

SOMETHING FROM OUT THERE





*Searchers after horror haunt strange, far places. For them are the catacombs of Ptolemais, and the carven mausolea of the nightmare countries. They climb to the moonlit towers of ruined Rhine castles, and falter down black cobwebbed steps beneath the scattered stones of forgotten cities in Asia. The haunted wood and the desolate mountain are their shrines, and they linger around the sinister monoliths on uninhabited islands. But the true epicure in the terrible, to whom a new thrill of unutterable ghasliness is the chief end and justification of existence, esteems most of all the ancient, lonely farmhouses of backwoods regions; for there the dark elements of strength, solitude, grotesqueness, and ignorance combine to form the perfection of the hideous.*

—H. P. LOVECRAFT



**U**NTIL RECENTLY, if a traveller in north central Wisconsin took the left fork at the junction of the Brule River highway and the Chequamegon pike on the way to Pashepaho, he would find himself in country so primitive that it would seem remote from all human contact. If he drove on along the little-used road, he might in time pass a few tumble-

down shacks where presumably people had once lived and which have long ago been taken back by the encroaching forest; it is not desolate country, but an area thick with growth, and over all its expanse there persists an intangible aura of the sinister, a kind of ominous oppression of the spirit quickly manifest to even the most casual traveller, for the road he has taken becomes ever more and more difficult to travel, and is eventually lost just short of a deserted lodge built on the edge of a clear blue lake around which century-old trees brood eternally, a country where the only sounds are the cries of the owls, the whippoorwills, and the eerie loons at night, and the wind's voice in the trees, and—but is it always the wind's voice in the trees? And who can say whether the snapped twig is the sign of an animal passing—or of something more, some other creature beyond man's ken?

For the forest surrounding the abandoned lodge at Rick's Lake had a curious reputation long before I myself knew it, a reputation which transcended similar stories about similar primeval places. There were odd rumors about something that dwelt in the depths of the forest's darkness—by no means the conventional wild whisperings of ghosts—of something half-animal, half-man, fearsomely spoken of by such natives as inhabited the edges of that region, and referred to only by stubborn head-shakings among the Indians who occasionally came out of that country and made their way south. The forest had an evil reputation; it was nothing short of that; and already, before the turn of the century, it had a history that gave pause even to the most intrepid adventurer.

The first record of it was left in the writings of a missionary on his way through that country to come to the aid of a tribe of Indians reported to the post at Chequamegon Bay in the north to be starving. Fr. Piregard vanished, but the Indians later brought in his effects: a sandal, his rosary, and a prayerbook in which he had written certain curious words which had been carefully preserved: "I have the conviction that some creature is following me. I thought at first it was a bear, but I am now compelled to believe that it is something incredibly more monstrous than anything on this earth. Darkness is falling, and I believe I have developed a slight delirium, for I persist in hearing strange music and other curious sounds which can surely not derive from any natural source. There is also a disturbing illusion as of great footsteps which actually shake the earth, and I have several times encountered a very large footprint which varies in shape. . . ."



The second record is far more sinister. When Big Bob Hiller, one of the most rapacious lumber barons of the entire Midwest, began to encroach upon the Rick's Lake country in the middle of the last century, he could not fail to be impressed by the stand of pine in the area near the lake, and, though he did not own it, he followed the usual custom of the lumber barons and sent his men in from an adjoining piece he did own, under the intended explanation that he did not know where his line ran. Thirteen men failed to return from that first day's work on the edge of the forest area surrounding Rick's Lake; two of their bodies were never recovered; four were found—inconceivably—in the lake, several miles from where they had been cutting timber; the others were discovered at various places in the forest. Hiller thought he had a lumber war on his hands, laid his men off to mislead his unknown opponent, and then suddenly ordered them back to work in the forbidden region. After he had lost five more men, Hiller pulled out, and no hand since his time touched the forest, save for one or two individuals who took up land there and moved into the area.

One and all, these individuals moved out within a short time, saying little, but hinting much. Yet, the nature of their whispered hints was such that they were soon forced to abandon any explanation; so incredible were the tales they told, with overtones of something too horrible for description, of age-old evil which preceded anything dreamed of by even the most learned archaeologist. Only one of them vanished, and no trace of him was ever found. The others came back out of the forest and in the course of time were lost somewhere among other people in the United States—all save a half-breed known as Old Peter, who was obsessed with the idea that there were mineral deposits in the vicinity of the wood, and occasionally went to camp on its edge, being careful not to venture in.

It was inevitable that the Rick's Lake legends would ultimately reach the attention of Professor Upton Gardner of the state university; he had completed collections of Paul Bunyan, Whiskey Jack, and Hodag tales, and was engaged upon a compilation of place legends when he first encountered the curious half-forgotten tales that emanated from the region of Rick's Lake. I discovered later that his first reaction to them was one of casual interest; legends abound in out-of-the-way places, and there was nothing to indicate that these were of any more import than others. True, there was no similarity in the strictest sense of the word to the more familiar tales; for, while the

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