



## The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre

*H.P. Lovecraft, August Derleth (Editor), Robert Bloch (Introduction)*

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Zu Lebzeiten, als er in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren einen ganzen Kosmos mythischen Grauens zusammenfabulierte, war H. P. Lovecraft gänzlich unbekannt. Erst posthum wurde dem "Meister der unheimlichen Literatur", der so raffiniert mit der Materie des Schreckens hantiert, Weltruhm zuteil. Seine besten Erzählungen sind in diesem Band versammelt.

## **The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre Details**

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# From Reader Review The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre for online ebook

## Michael says

Every Lovecraft fan would have their own opinions of what would constitute the “best” of HPL’s work. To a large degree, however, this collection does include the most important “essentials” of his oeuvre, without which any review of his work would be incomplete. I have reviewed each story separately, except those which appear in other books I’ve already covered.

The introduction by Robert Bloch seems a bit dated today, as it tries to promote Lovecraft’s literary merits at a time when little academic work had been done to support the claim. Some of what Bloch claims appears to go too far – as when he excuses Lovecraft’s early racism by implying that “everyone was that way then” – but in other places he is quite right – as when he notes the Lovecraft grew away from his earlier views as he matured. In general, it’s a quite good essay, despite its flaws and a rather overblown conclusion.

“The Rats in the Walls” is the first story in this collection, and it’s a somewhat less-well-known example of his short story work. I think it tends to get discounted as a somewhat unimaginative Gothic horror piece, but it holds surprising treasures for those who are paying attention. Today, it’s also undermined by Lovecraft’s use of the N-word in the name of a beloved black cat – this is probably an example of HPL not intending any disparagement of non-whites, but being blind to the consequences of his language.

The second story, “The Picture in the House” is a ghoulishly humorous piece. I was actually surprised to find it wasn’t included in any of the other Del Rey releases I’d already reviewed – I feel like I’ve read it oftener than only when I return to this volume. Lovecraft almost seems to be parodying his own “forbidden volume” motif, but still manages a good shudder among the chuckles. Probably this story is easier to appreciate when you are already familiar with other HPL works.

Third is “The Outsider,” which appears in “The Lurking Fear and Other Stories,” and I have discussed it in my review of that work.

“Pickman’s Model” is a wonderful case of Lovecraft bringing a traditional gothic horror element into the modern world and updating its gruesomeness in the process. His concept of “ghouls” and their society continues to influence, and may have contributed to the modern phenomenon of the Zombie Apocalypse (the “zombies” in “Night of the Living Dead” are actually described as “flesh-eating ghouls” in the original script).

“In the Vault” is an example of HPL’s variety of black humor. It’s a fairly predictable story, on the surface, but the use of irony and gentle mockery of rustic stereotypes raise it to a different level. It winds up being one of the most memorable of his shorter stories.

“The Silver Key” appears in other volumes, I have reviewed it in my review of “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath.” No “best of” volume would have been complete without this to contrast the straight horror tales.

“The Music of Erich Zann” is a classic HPL story about a musician who discovers the notes that open the gates to other dimensions, and the things that are attracted by them. It has a certain thematic similarity to “The Haunter of the Dark” or “The Dreams in the Witch-House,” but a very unique flavor, in part because

Lovecraft sets it in Paris and in part because music and sound are such unusual motifs for him.

The next story is “The Call of Cthulhu” – probably Lovecraft’s most famous tale, if not his best. The opening line is one of the great sparks of genius in the Lovecraft canon, and the monster is easily his most iconic creation. The story has the wonderfully detached narrative following an innocent scholar as he pieces together evidence of a monstrous threat to the world that has already caused madness and death.

This is followed by “The Dunwich Horror,” which is probably even more popular among HPL’s fanatical following, if less well-known by those outside of it. If Cthulhu was a menace, it is described in the story as merely a “Priest” of the Elder Gods and appears to be at least partly material in nature. Yog Sothoth, the adversary of this tale is not only a true god, but perhaps the foulest and most powerful of them. It is permitted to break through a threshold and breed with a human woman due to the machinations of a wizard, and the story involves the doings of their spawn in the world. Yog Sothoth is less iconic than Cthulhu first and foremost because It is indescribable and thus largely invisible, but the descriptions of his children are wonderfully imaginative.

Next is “The Whisperer in Darkness,” at 50 pages I believe the longest in the book (although “The Shadow Out of Time” is more substantial). This is a highly original story about a race of fungous creatures from Pluto that travel on membranous wings to establish a colony on Earth. The one man who knows about them is an old recluse in a remote area of Vermont near one of their mining operations, and his increasing menace is seen through correspondence with an erudite professor of folklore who disbelieves at first but is ultimately lured to the place and his own experience of horror. This is one of the more science-fictional of HPL’s mythos stories.

The melding of sci fi and horror reaches a new level, however, in “The Colour Out of Space.” This is my personal favorite Lovecraft story. It is essentially a story of a radioactive meteor that strikes the Earth and causes localized sickness and decay...but it also suggests a certain alien consciousness behind that radiation which has some elements in common with vampirism.

“The Haunter in the Dark” is a simple story of a young man who ventures where he shouldn’t and disturbs a mysterious thing that tracks him down and kills him. The young man is based on Lovecraft’s friend Robert Bloch who would go on to write celebrated horror fiction himself, including the book that “Psycho” was based on.

“The Thing on the Doorstep” is something of a combination of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” that gives HPL a chance to improve on both of them. A young man marries a woman from Innsmouth who turns out to be the incarnation of an evil wizard with designs on his body. Somewhat more efficiently told than other examples of the genre, it still gives HPL a chance to bring in various occult ideas.

I reviewed the next story, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” in my review of “The Lurking Fear and Other Stories.” It’s a super-important Lovecraft story, that had to be included in any “best of” collection.

After this comes “The Dreams in the Witch-House,” which I reviewed in “At the Mountains of Madness.” It is shorter than “Innsmouth,” but still a substantial work that is seminal to the Lovecraft mythos.

“The Shadow Out of Time” was the last of Lovecraft’s long works, and arguably the most esoteric, complex, and original. In a way, I think it is his “best” story, although it’s not my personal favorite (see “The Colour Out of Space”). It involves a man whose body is possessed by bizarre alien time travelers, and his attempt to

piece his life together after they have departed. The “Great Race” are among the best defined, and most truly inhuman, of all his creations.

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## **Cbj says**

This is a book that tested me as a reader. I have had a relatively easy reading year consisting of many popular fiction novels that were great page turners. But this collection of stories by H.P.Lovecraft gave me a real workout. At times I had to reread many of the intricately composed sentences and quite often found myself checking words in dictionaries. It took me almost a month to finish this book.

I enjoyed most of the stories in this collection. But The Call of Cthulhu, The Whisperer in Darkness and The Shadow Over Innsmouth were a cut above the rest. In The Call of Cthulhu, the description of the religious cult in a forest in New Orleans was very cinematic. I loved how the Cthulhu myth is slowly pieced together from various sources – the dreams of a student sculptor and his grotesque creation, the account of a police inspector who leads a raid on a religious cult in a New Orleans swamp and an article in an Australian newspaper about an abandoned ship with a sole survivor. Lovecraft uses the epistolary format to great effect in The Whisperer in the Dark. The correspondence between the narrator who is a skeptic and a man who lives on an isolated farm (and establishes contact with an alien race) was riveting. The Shadow Over Innsmouth – well, this might well be the greatest small town sci fi short story of all time and features a great chase sequence. I am surprised nobody has undertaken cinematic adaptations of these stories.

But after a point, I found the structure of the stories and the nature of the horror to be quite repetitive. At the beginning of almost every story, the narrator would announce that something horrible had taken place. Then he would proceed to piece together the horror in detail with the help of accounts of other people (usually talkative old drunkards or social outcasts), letters, newspaper articles etc. The twist or revelation at the end of each story would always be very satisfying.

Lovecraft reveals himself to be a bit of a misanthrope especially with regard to the way he viewed the modern world. Here is the narrator of Pickman’s Model – “and I tell you, people knew how to live, and how to enlarge the bounds of life, in the old time! This wasn’t the only world a bold and wise man could know – faugh! And to think of today in contrast, with such pale-pink brains that even a club of supposed artists gets shudders and convulsions if a picture goes beyond the feelings of a Beacon Street teatable!”

He also has no interest in the mundane and the mediocre. Or the things that motivates other human beings. Michel Houellebecq rightly pointed out in his essay that Lovecraft’s heroes hardly ever seemed to struggle with economic concerns or sexual motivations. The following lines from “The Dunwich Horror” perfectly describes the Lovecraftian hero – “Everyone seemed to feel himself in close proximity to phases of Nature and of being utterly forbidden, and wholly outside the sane experience of mankind.” Most of the heroes in Lovecraft’s stories undergo fantastical and other worldly experiences that are beyond ordinary men. And not just that, these heroes often endeavor to hide their experiences from ordinary humanity who are deemed to be too stupid or gullible to learn about the demons or entities that lurk within the various dimensions.

But the Lovecraftian heroes are also bound to feel lonely at times. Here is a description of Derby, the tragic scholar in “The Thing on the Doorstep” – “he mingled very little with the other students, though looking enviously at the daring or Bohemian set – whose superficially smart language and meaningless ironic pose he aped, and whose dubious conduct he wished he dared adopt.”

I think I enjoyed Michel Houellebecq's essay on Lovecraft's life and work more than Lovecraft's stories. But I intend to check out more of Lovecraft's work ..... after a break.

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## Ted says

**I recently read** a review by Glenn Russell of a Lovecraft short story called *From Beyond*. (In his review Glenn provides this link to a Guttenburg Australia site titled the Collected Stories of Lovecraft.)

### **H.P. Lovecraft, 1934, age 43. ~3 years until he passed on to ... what?**

These are horror stories dating back close to a century now, from one of the stranger American fiction writers. The fictional worlds that Lovecraft created are located in temporally shifting realms which intersect with everyday reality in usually horrific ways, inhabited by ancient creatures having no relation to the life forms familiar to us. The stories generally involve an interaction between the “other” (these worlds and creatures), and a human being who has somehow come into contact with this “other”. (The contact often happens through some type of portal, likely in an old abandoned house or castle, perhaps simply in an outdoors location miles from normal human traffic.) The results of such contacts are always pretty unfortunate for the human, resulting in death or, just as frequently, insanity.

The “other” that Lovecraft created is often referred to as a “mythos”, specifically as the “Cthulhu Mythos” (from a series of stories which refer to one of these ancient beings by that name).

(view spoiler)

If you enjoy horror stories, you are certainly familiar already with Lovecraft. **No?!** Then surely you *must* get on board.

Lovecraft's writing style is definitely dated, not too different from Poe's to an untrained ear like mine. But he really is the preeminent horror writer of the early twentieth century. See his Wiki article [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.\\_P.\\_Lovecraft](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._P._Lovecraft) and his biblio article [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.\\_P.\\_Lovecraft](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._P._Lovecraft) which gives a good idea of the range of writing that this man did, without ever really being able to support himself from it.

One final comment, on the story *From Beyond*. It's quite an impressive tale looking at the horror fiction aspect of *an idea* which has been taken up by many philosophers, particularly Kant, and (more recently) evolutionists. That is, that we humans are prisoners of our senses. Not only are we locked *into* a prison which makes us interpret the world through the common sensory abilities which we are all born with; but (as Lovecraft points out) we are, at least possibly, *locked out* of perceiving things in reality of which we have no idea ... *perhaps to our good fortune?*

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**Previous review:** Rage to Live *great bio of Richard & Isabel Burton*

**Random review:** The Numbers Game

**Next review:** The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest

**Previous library review:** Arrowsmith

**Next library review:** The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

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### **Yasiru (reviews will soon be removed and linked to blog) says**

The Allen & Unwin edition I bought The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Tales That Truly Terrify from the Master of Horror is a rather uneven selection of stories, but some of the author's most important work appears, including The Call of Cthulhu, Rats in the Walls, The Dunwich Horror, and the novellas At the Mountains of Madness and The Shadow over Innsmouth. I've since found the editions introduced by S T Joshi (I think from Penguin) more informative and balanced in the selections.

Among Lovecraft's influences, Poe and Dunsany are prominent, and we might perhaps trace much of the unique character of his world directly to these two. From Poe there is the unrelenting descent to madness and doom, which Lovecraft has latched on to the whole world outside of the mind and human movements so crucial to Poe. This gives Lovecraft's work a kind of empirical disposition, which, combined with his penchant for rather rational and expedition-minded protagonists, makes almost all of his stories read like science fiction.

The trace of Dunsany's influence is found in the mythological ambition of the fictional universe. Though the evils are unimaginably potent and bear down mercilessly on the protagonist(s) (and the reader) in every mark of a story's atmosphere like a rolling juggernaut against which any human defiance thrown is shredded to insignificance, behind this mechanical horror is a vast lore whose tantalising indications in the stories suggest more than the apparent malevolence at work. With Dunsany however, the essential character of the gods is symbolic and ostensibly fixed, and human endeavour for meaning (as in Time and the Gods) begets new myths. For Lovecraft on the other hand, symbolism in the mighty forces of his mythos almost always disintegrates over the course of a narrative, and what remains as truly horrific is the relative powerlessness experienced by balanced and rational men of integrity (optimal in some way in modern society's eyes) in a world where the relations themselves are difficult to fathom in everything more fundamental than the thin human layer of sanity.

That Lovecraft's horror is based on the supposition of a will (or a multitude of such existing in an unstable, dynamic equilibrium) beyond human comprehension and everyday perception (and how its actions press on humanity's very survival) may be why he is at once a unique and very much modern author. Where the more realism-inclined write about social alienation and the individual's struggle, Lovecraft is concerned with cosmic alienation as we press ahead as a species as best we can, and when you pit the endless nothing against the human host, the one becomes horror and the other tolerable.

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### **christopher says**

Mountains of Madness still is my favorite sci-fi story of all time. This book makes you feel less scared of life.

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### **Nicole Barrell says**

I felt like a dolt due to the number of words I had to look up, but I'm better for it, and it was worth it.

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### **Ayla Zachary says**

H. P. Lovecraft is a peculiar writer. His stories are extremely predictable. The first-person narrator, a sober man of reason and science, will halfway through the story start noticing something odd about his surroundings: "It was almost as though [horrifying revelation from the end of the story], but I knew that could not be the case." And then, at the end, when all his reason has been denied, "It was then I knew the terrible truth: [horrifying revelation that we all guessed thirty pages ago]!" He also tends to use the same handful of adjectives over and over again: "ancient," "blasphemous," and "cyclopean" occur far more often than is really necessary.

But for all that, there is still some strange magical property to his writing. A personal example: the first time I read Lovecraft, I was visiting my sister on spring break. I wanted something to read before going to bed, so I picked up *The Best of H.P.L.* and started reading "The Call of Cthulu." Halfway through the story, I was thinking "Wow, this is really kind of hack-y and predictable." I was starting to feel rather afraid, though what of I couldn't tell you. Then, I went to sleep, and had scary effed-up nightmares all night about undersea cities and evil giant monsters. Which, I think, is rather the point of reading H. P. Lovecraft.

He's not a terribly good writer, but his stories have a strange way of getting into your subconscious and taking root.

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### **Ruthie Jones says**

I love these classic horror stories. Lovecraft was a very odd man, and that oddness shines through in his work. In other words, he battled a lot of issues such as immigrants "invading" his territory, and he pretty much lacked social skills on all levels. I learned his bio after reading the tales in this book, and that information illuminated many aspects of his stories such as race, gender, madness, etc. While many tales are reminiscent of Poe and Hawthorne, many are pure Lovecraft. I like all the works in this book, but I really like "The Outsider" because it is very different from the rest and "The Whisperer in the Darkness" because the building tension to a frenzied level reminds me of the classic 1950s film "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" - even though Lovecraft wrote his tale about 20 years earlier. I'm trying to verify if the movie adaptation is really happening. Hope so!

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

I know, I know . . . the diction is unnecessarily latinate and the prose is frequently overwrought, piling up the adjectives like "shambling" and "eldritch" to the point where certain passages are laugh-out-loud funny.

And yet . . . Lovecraft has fashioned from the New World's New England a land so very old, a world in touch with realities so alien, that Christianity--albeit peripherally present--is completely irrelevant, and mere sanity--the best one can reasonably hope for--depends upon a few ancient formulae and extraordinary personal luck. The precisely imagined landscape convinces the reader, even though the prose often fails.

Lovecraft makes us believe in his world, and his world is genuinely terrifying.

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### **Lee Foust says**

"Pickman's Model," like E. A. Poe's "The Oval Portrait," implies that art, in order to be safe, must be imaginative. It's too much reality that scares us, that drains the life from life and makes art a kind of repository of a life taken, like a ghost or zombie. Also interesting question and answer format--just like the Lydia Davis story I also read yesterday, "Jury Duty." I might try a form like it for my current book of tales connected by a frame-narrative. Love me some experiments in form.

"In the Vault" was great, perverse, even if the revelation at the end was telegraphed way too soon. I had to skip "The Silver Key." I just can't stand the tone of fantasy--what's supposed to be wonder and awe sounds condescending to me. Imagination is sacred, yeah, yeah. Yadda yadda yadda--only if you can make it feel real and not like a bad children's book.

"The Music of Erich Zann" was lovely and really kind of unexpected. Interesting after "Pickman's Model" since here, abandoning oneself to the trans-formative power of art seems the danger. Letting oneself go. Perhaps the only way we can ever conceive of a real beyond is to imagine it as death--maybe that's what art and religion have in common.

"The Call of Cthulhu." Fun, but sensationalist/adventure more than really creepy or subtle as his better stories tend to be--at least in my opinion. There is some of the Lovecraft racism here--the word "mongrel" used several times. Still, we did see a degenerate, cannibal Yankee/New Englander in "The Picture in the House." Inside and outside blend--all is fodder for horror, although each thing is only horrific when seen from its other side. "Everything is its opposite," says a friend of mine. Perhaps that's what terrifies us, the inability of language to adequately differentiate.

"The Dunwich Horror." The master's best. Since I'm currently writing my opus magnum of short stories I've been obsessed with the form and this tale is so inspiring. Its genius is the slow revelation, giving the reader just the information necessary at each small step. After part VI it gets kinda silly and more sensationalist than truly scary or subtle (my favorite attributes of Lovecraft) but, what the hell. The "mongrels" of the last story gave way to incest and inbred new Englanders here. Made me think that what's really evil to HP is biological life itself. What do his monsters ever do except live, eat, reproduce--all very grossly, clumsily, in an exaggeratedly sloppy biological way. Filthy breeders.

"The Whisperer in Darkness." Another masterful tale. As it says itself, its "frightful effect on me was one of suggestion rather than revelation." Indeed. Well set up. A tad silly in the explanations, but concluded masterfully--a terrific revelation, finally, capped it off to perfection.

"The Colour Out of Space." The story that ruined me for spelling for ever more. Considerably more believable than the previous "old ones" tales, but also somehow less chilling because somewhat more believable--I guess that's the trade-off with the sci fi explanation. The threat is slightly more domesticated.

Still quality. Really enjoying revisiting old H. P. after so many years.

"The Haunter of the Dark." Perfect fodder for an essay: age-old Gothic theme of forbidden knowledge: Curious write/artist penetrates dark library in evil church gazes (illumination) into window to unleash power that exists only in the illuminated darkness, a world where light is dark and dark light, that eventually comes to claim him. Dedicated to fellow writer Robert Bloch, of course. This is a real good un.

"The Thing on the Doorstep." Ha! 200+ pages before we had a female character and she turns out to be evil/from outer space/actually a man. Another really well crafted tale, despite the fear of female, fear of biology, fear of all things wholesome and homey. It all strikes such a deep chord in this protesting demon flown from a California suburb. I always felt safer on NYC's Lower East Side. Go figure. Distrust home. (Good T-shirt slogan.)

"The Shadow over Innsmouth." Well, rather weak. If you're looking to skip a story to shorten this rather long collection I would recommend skipping this rather long, and a bit silly tale. Although I enjoyed the chase scene and, as always, the atmosphere. The narrator's about-face at the end is silly, plus fish are just not that scary. (Although, in the end, in retrospect, what I'm remembering most about these stories are the landscapes, the farmhouses, the dilapidated buildings, caves, etc. and that particular aspect is best evoked here--the smelly, seaport of Innsmouth is Lovecraft's best realized description of place.)

"The Dreams in the Witch-House." A great tale if a bit verbose and over explained. Perhaps he was being paid by the word here, or had an anxious editor making sure he spelled everything out for the children and mental deficient who read *Weird Tales* magazine. At any rate, a collegiate tale with a nice mix of history and science--and a reminder not to stay up too late studying.

"The Shadow Out of Time." VERY long-winded, but not without its charm. The ending was well written (and satisfying) except we saw it coming 10 miles off. Was also about to skip after the first four chapters were ALL exposition. Still it contains a startling truth: Gothic boils down to fear of the past. Even death is only a metaphor, I think, for the mind's sadness and inability to return to experience a second time. Perception is a jealous god.

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### **Lisa Reads & Reviews says**

To the best of my recollection, this may have been my first reading of H.P. Lovecraft. Seems unlikely, I know. What I found is that Lovecraft is as familiar as meat on a stick, seen at carnivals and malls everywhere. I feel as though I know Lovecraft's work, for I've read those who influenced him (Edgar Allan Poe and Algernon Blackwood), and I've read or seen films by multitude of writers influenced by him, such as Steven King and Brian Lumley, for example. I wasn't aware until now that Lovecraft created the Cthulhu Mythos which you'll find in music, comic books, video games, and who knows what else in modern culture. Lovecraft is everywhere -- shocking! During my brief research, I discovered that a fictional book Lovecraft refers to often in his stories, "The Necronomicon," is believed by some Christian fundamentalist groups to be a real book. Amazing, isn't it, how writers' imaginations can create generational uproars? Therefore, although I have no memory of reading a Lovecraft story before this book, I probably have, either directly or indirectly, because I'm a child of a culture with a deep thumbprint of Lovecraft upon it.

The collection of stories I've read was put out by the Carlton Publishing Group, not by Createspace which has a cover by the same name, but of poorer quality and fewer stories, or so I'm told. So, be careful out there. Here are the titles in the Prion copy:

Herbert Wesst - Reanimator  
The Rats in the Walls  
The Call of Cthulhu  
THe Dunwich Horror  
The Whisperer in the Darkness  
At the Mountains of Madness  
The Shadow over Innsmouth  
The Shadow Out of Time  
The Haunter of the Dark  
The Case of Charles Dexter Ward

Quite a nice selection, as it turns out. Most of Lovecraft's works are public domain, but, as expected, lots of legal wrangling went on after his death (he died young! Only 47!). I loved that he was generous with his work, encouraging others to borrow from his stories, etc. In fact, the more I read about Lovecraft, the more I would have liked to have known him.

Almost forgot that I was here to write a review. Overall, I was enthralled, but the ideas are so ingrained, that they felt familiar rather than fresh. I could accurately anticipate much of the plot and was only surprised two or three times in over 600 pages--that is how deeply I've been seeped in Lovecraft's influence!

The benefit of this was that it allowed me to think outside the plot. I could ask myself, why is this or that so frightening? What cosmology has Lovecraft created here? Etc. This led to explorations of Cosmicism, which is Lovecraft's philosophy (from Wiki) "that there is no recognizable divine presence, such as a god, in the universe, and that humans are particularly insignificant in the larger scheme of intergalactic existence, and perhaps are just a small species projecting their own mental idolatries onto the vast cosmos, ever susceptible to being wiped from existence at any moment." I see now why Lovecraft has such ardent supporters. His philosophy resonates and can displace the notion of a man-centric universe that requires a personal god with a notion that we don't know what the hell is out there. I imagine, for that, Lovecraft was discredited and a bit feared.

Fear. That is what we go to horror for, isn't it? We love to fear without real danger, but Lovecraft doesn't let us off the hook so easily. You are an insect, he says, and there are things that go slop and slurp in the shadows that will eventually destroy you, and you will never see or understand them. That, folks, is cosmic horror, and it doesn't need gore to send chills. Reading Lovecraft can be pretty amazing if you have courage, entertaining if viewed on merely a plot level, but quite disturbing, perhaps, if you are of a highly sensitive nature. Reading it is your choice, of course, but Lovecraft has most likely worked his way in your psyche already.

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### **SheriC (PM) says**

This is my first Lovecraft, so I can't judge whether this particular collection has all his "best". It did have the stories that were recommended to me as being representative of his work: The Dunwich Horror, The Colour Out of Space, The Shadow Over Innsmouth, and of course, The Call of Cthulhu. I enjoyed all of these. The

quality of the other stories was variable.

Rather than trying to review the stories individually, I'll just offer a few random thoughts. Yep, now that I've read the source material, the influence of Lovecraft on several of my favorite modern authors is pretty obvious, especially Stephen King. Lovecraft does seem to have a wide variance in style, with stories ranging from so floridly verbose that they're almost unreadable (a la EA Poe) to more straightforward, but still atmospheric, little horror stories. I like his monsters, which seem to run from mundane creatures acting in supernatural ways, to crazy mixes of various creature parts, to creatures who aren't even entirely corporeal. One common choice of style that I don't care for is how the narrator always seems to be telling you a story of something that happened a while ago – this puts too much distance between the reader and the horror experienced, IMO.

Last, and specific to this edition, is the truly excellent foreword by Robert Bloch. I learned something about the author, who is interestingly defensive on the subject of moral hygiene and authors. I also learned a bit about the evolution of the horror genre.

### **Updates:**

#### Foreword 1/24/15

Although I've read plenty of fiction inspired by Lovecraft, I don't think I've ever actually read anything of his, so this book seemed like a good place to start. Which I haven't done. That is, I've only read the foreword, written in 1982 by Robert Bloch. It's interesting, containing a little bio, history of the publication of his work, and a minianalysis of recurring themes in his stories and the history of the public appetite for horror fiction, relative to the public and political events of the day. I found his assessment of his own best-known work pretty amusing: *"Viewed in retrospect, The Exorcist was scarcely a literary landmark, and the film that followed was illogical and prolix. Few members of the audience could clearly explain the origin of the demon, why this entity took possession of a child, or exactly how it met its final fate. Nor was their interest a religious one. The spectacle of the little girl whose face was transformed by makeup into an unreasonable facsimile of Harpo Marx's 'gookie' grimace, spewing obscenities and green pea soup or rotating her head a full 360 degrees, seemed the chief attraction. Nevertheless, it was clearly stated that the Devil made her do it. And the statements of box-office receipts convinced both filmmakers and publishers that doing it was profitable. Hell had become hot property."*

I have to disagree with him though. I still think *The Exorcist* is the scariest movie I've ever seen, and it isn't because of the now terribly dated special effects.

#### Pg 33/406 10/4/17

Well, it didn't take long for me to see why everyone points out that Lovecraft was a racist. However, I'm certainly expanding my vocabulary:

**Antediluvian:** "the time period referred to in the Bible between the fall of humans and the Noachian Deluge (the Genesis Flood) in the biblical cosmology. ... The term found its way into early geology and lingered in science until the late Victorian era. Colloquially, the term is used to refer to any ancient and murky period."

**Nepenthe:** "fictional medicine for sorrow, literally an anti-depressant. ... In the *Odyssey*... nepenthes pharmakon (i.e. an anti-sorrow drug) is a magical potion given to Helen by Polydamna the wife of the noble Egyptian Thon; it quells all sorrows with forgetfulness."

#### Pg 98/406 10/4/17

Ahhhh, finally we have us some Cthulhu!

*It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.*

And more new (to me) vocabulary words:

**Theosophist colony** (donning white robes in California): “Theosophy is a collection of mystical and occultist philosophies concerning, or seeking direct knowledge of the presumed mysteries of life and nature, particularly of the nature of divinity and the origin and purpose of the universe. Theosophy is considered part of Western esotericism, which believes that hidden knowledge or wisdom from the ancient past offers a path to enlightenment and salvation.”

**Cyclopean architecture** (apparently Cthulhu’s city): “Cyclopean masonry is a type of stonework found in Mycenaean architecture, built with massive limestone boulders, roughly fitted together with minimal clearance between adjacent stones and no use of mortar. The boulders typically seem unworked, but some may have been worked roughly with a hammer and the gaps between boulders filled in with smaller chunks of limestone.”

**hysterical Levantines** (who were mobbing NYC policemen): the Levant is the eastern Mediterranean region.

**Antiphonal responses** (to a “braying, bellowing, and writhing” ritual by an “indescribable horde of human abnormality”: Alternating call and response style singing

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## **Werner says**

Not well-appreciated in his own time, reclusive and eccentric New England writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft became a household word in the world of weird fiction after his death. His prose style was greatly influenced by Poe, and like Poe, he preferred natural causes for his horror (“supernatural,” in one of the alternate titles listed above for this collection, means “uncanny” or “unearthly,” not supernatural *per se*). While his genre was science fiction, he was wholly outside the optimistic and technophilic hard SF tradition that dominated the genre pulps of his time, publishing instead mostly in venues like *Weird Tales*. Much of his work is based on what has come to be called his “Cthulhu Mythos” (a term coined by August Derleth): a vision of malevolent alien races who supposedly ruled the primeval Earth, and whose remnants are still very dangerous. A number of the stories here are part of this body of work (which is often internally inconsistent in details from story to story), and some others foreshadow aspects of it. Several of these are set in his imaginary town of Arkham, MA, seat of Miskatonic Univ. --an interesting place to visit, but not one you'd want to live in. :-) (And nearby Innsmouth isn't even a place you'd want to visit!)

Unlike Poe, Lovecraft's horror is existential rather than situational; an atheist and an uncritical Darwinist (in “The Rats in the Walls,” for instance, investigators probing below the sub-basement of Exham Priory find numerous bones of “Piltdown Men” --some trick, since the species was a hoax!), he regarded the universe as a bleak, meaningless place hostile to humanity, and presents his “Great Old Ones” or “Elder Gods” as the

embodiment of that hostility. Awareness of their existence is treated as a knowledge that forever annihilates any conception of meaning or rationality in the universe for those unfortunate enough to stumble on them. For Christians, of course, versed in the concept of Satan, the idea that the universe contains super-powerful and evil entities hostile to mankind evokes no surprise, or fear --but readers with a worldview like that of early 20th-century bourgeois materialism probably would find it soul-shattering. Lovecraft fans fall into two groups: those who find this perspective the best part of his writing and eat it up with a spoon, and those (including myself, and apparently Derleth) who don't, and who may even consider it a defect. But his originality, his story-telling ability, his mastery of style and plot, and powerful evocation of atmosphere make his work highly readable and fascinating despite this.

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## J.G. Keely says

*"There are my 'Poe' pieces and my 'Dunsany pieces' – but alas – where are any Lovecraft pieces?"*

*-H.P. Lovecraft, 1929*

What really makes Lovecraft interesting is the degree to which he was a student of the Horror genre. As his influential essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* shows, Lovecraft was a voracious reader who went far afield in his search for interesting Horror authors. If Lovecraft hadn't been such an odd recluse, and instead pursued an academic career, we might not have had to wait a century for scholar S.T. Joshi to drag the genre into the sphere of literary criticism.

Due to his vast knowledge, Lovecraft was able to pick through influences and styles when he wrote his stories, but instead of synthesizing all of those disparate inspirations into a new vision of his own, Lovecraft was more likely to work in bits and pieces, creating recognizable, sometimes formulaic story types in which we can easily trace the ideas he drew from Dunsany, Blackwood, Hodgson, Chambers, or Bierce.

Beyond that, his style was not always engaging, relying as he did on rather purple prose and extended explanations of his characters' innermost thoughts, instead of letting the actions and subtle cues speak for themselves. As such, his stories tended to lack the power and poetry of the great Horror authors who influenced him, but Lovecraft was such a prolific author, and so invested in his genre on a conceptual level that he did create a number of classics.

He also had a considerable influence on other writers through the vast correspondence which he kept up throughout his whole life with lasting, notable authors such as R.E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Derleth, Clarke Ashton Smith, and numerous others, not only introducing them to the many ideas and authors Lovecraft had collected, but opening himself up to the thoughts and experiences of all those young, up-and-coming authors.

Then there is the lasting effect of the 'Mythos' (sometimes called the 'Cthulhu Mythos'), that interconnected set of ideas and approaches that became a sort of 'shared world' for other authors to explore--whit are still being explored in an unabated string of short-story collections published every year despite the fact that all the stories in them tend to be terrible. But the Mythos was not quite Lovecraft's original invention, it was instead an attempt to take the worlds of the previous great Horror authors and combine them into one grand setting.

Probably the most unique aspect of Lovecraft's work was his combination of the chilling, aloof alienness of Dunsany's elves with the otherworldly, interdimensional terrors explored by Hodgson to produce that characteristic 'Cosmic Horror' which, while not invented by Lovecraft, was brought to a higher lustre in his works.

Though the Lovecraft stories that I find most interesting are not his 'Poe pieces', his straight Horror works-- which should not be surprising, since I'm not especially fond of Poe--but his Dunsany-inspired Fantasies, such as *The Silver Key* and several other entries in his *Dream Cycle*, which tend to be rather less formulaic recreations of the styles and forms of earlier authors, than explorations of the mind, and of possibility. Beyond that, Lovecraft's very deliberate, thoughtful style seems to work better in a world of waking dreams than one of world-hopping adventure and monster attacks.

However, in the end, I would suggest that the most lasting effect of Lovecraft's work was born in his intense dislike of seafood, which gave his monsters and beasties their shapes, and proved a much more effective choice than Hodgson's odd distaste for pig. Indeed, Lovecraft's disgust must surely rank among the most influential gustatory preferences in the history of literature.

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### **Felicia says**

Well, I don't watch a lot of horror films, but now I see where they all rip off everything from: Lovecraft!

I didn't read EVERY one of these stories, they got a bit repetitive after a while, but the stories were chilling and seeing how influential the storytelling is on modern horror is really interesting. Fascinating how much suspense can be put into a 10 page story.

Yes, I had nightmares of tentacle-things after I finished. Don't make fun of me.

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### **Billy says**

some of the stories were great, but all his protagonists were the same characters and it just got old after a while...

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### **Jonathan says**

Not having read him before, I was surprised to find these rather enjoyable. Not remotely disturbing or frightening to the modern mind, of course, but it is interesting to see the fears engendered by the scientific revolutions at the start of the 20thc. Also interesting to see how much of contemporary sci-fi/horror is simply a regurgitation of his ideas.

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### **Jonathan Terrington says**

It was only last year that I discovered the joy of short stories thanks to Anton Chekhov and Edgar Allan Poe (although it seems longer since time is a "great ball of wibbly wobbly timey wimey stuff"). Since then I have been interested in the great short story authors of all time (as well as writing my own short stories), among whom Lovecraft is often mentioned. So I was very optimistic about this volume of stories when I started to read it - particularly in regards to the 'infamous Cthulhu Mythos.'

This volume opened with a brilliant foreword by Robert Bloch which described why Lovecraft deserves to be among the greats of horror writing and short story writing. When I read his stories I found them to have a similar effervescence and mellifluous beauty to Poe and in some parts the simplicity of Chekhov, yet clearly the work was one hundred percent unique. What Lovecraft has done with his short stories is create a world that focuses on the unknown. His terror is not simple blood and gore shock tactics to scare the audience, it is the horror that requires a deeper level of skill, to creep the audience out by linking the narrators to mysterious and creepy terrors. I found the supernatural and science fiction elements of his horror unique to him as while his language may have been similar to other short story artists the themes were completely unique and specific to his work. Very few other short story writers have written short stories that constantly link while telling different stories.

What are the themes of these short stories? Well Lovecraft deals in a variety of themes such as: dreams, mirrors and hence the self, the 'other', the unknown, the danger of cults and occult powers, corpses, tombs, old ruined houses, cannibalism, science vs. religion, the cosmos, monsters vs. men, crawling and slimy creatures, insanity and psychology.

It seemed to me that Lovecraft believed not in deities as such or had a personal religion but was more a scientist who believed in the power of the cosmos. His view seems that the universe is strange, chaotic and hence unordered by the power of one supreme being but perhaps there may be old powers that exist in the "black seas of infinity" and will exist after people. Of course while my beliefs are very different it was interesting to note this in his fiction. He seemed to still hold a concept of black and white morality despite there being very much a greyness about his stance on human life and the powers in the universe. Curious...

The thing I also loved about the stories was pointed out to me by the foreword. Where most novels and short stories have either an unreliable\* or a reliable\*\* narrator Lovecraft wrote stories that had both at once in some strange way. The way he did this was to write first person narratives with characters who had the information but also some kind of flaw to make you doubt where the reliability was or was not. For instance this particularly occurs in the first story in this volume. (view spoiler)

I strongly recommend also that anyone interested in Lovecraft check out the essay he wrote called Supernatural horror in literature. It provides several unique insights and perspectives. I also naturally recommend his tales if you're into short stories or gothic horror fiction that meets a kind of supernatural science fiction horror.

\*That is you're never quite sure whether what they're telling you is all the facts or 'the truth' such as in the case of Dracula for instance.

\*\*~~Work it out from my definition of unreliable narrator~~ That is a narrator who you believe to be telling all the facts or at least enough to trust his perspective. Think Nick from The Great Gatsby.

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## Adam says

Beautifully written horror that many imitate (ahem, Stephen King) but few can pull off. The real horror of

Lovecraft isn't the scariness of the monsters or the gore, but concept that we are pointless blips of dust on the gaping maw of a chaotic, ageless, indifferent universe that constantly destroys itself for no reason at all. Each story reminds you of how puny and ignorant you are but that's a good thing because every character finds out a little too much and goes crazy, gets eaten, sacrificed, has his face ripped off, teleported to another dimension or wakes up as a rotting corpse. Good stuff!

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## Apatt says

“Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn”

Try saying that backward (or forward, which is equally challenging).

H.P. Lovecraft is definitely the granddaddy of “Cosmic Horror” and Weird Fiction. He is often mentioned in science fiction/fantasy/ horror related websites and forums, not to mention myriad other kinds of websites. Reading fans raving about his works and seeing the numerous fan arts online make many of us genre fiction enthusiasts want to start getting into his fiction to see what the fuss is all about. I suspect a lot of first-time readers of Lovecraft are disappointed at what they find. The way he goes about telling his stories is very idiosyncratic, he has a tendency to overwrite and is often ridiculously verbose. This can be very disappointing and off-putting if you choose the wrong story to start with and you were expecting a quick thrilling read.

This is where the unwieldy titled *The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre* comes in. This is a “greatest hits” type of anthology which is ideal for the uninitiated and of course fans who want their favorite stories all in one book. It does not include the novellas *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which is just as well as these are not so suitable starting places. I think it is better to get used to (and forgive) the author’s verbiage and appreciate the otherwise awesomeness of his stories.

A lot of the stories tend to be supernatural / sci-fi hybrids with witches and wizards summoning aliens from another planet or dimension by magic. Here is my quick run-through of the stories in this collection:

*Introduction by Robert Bloch* - Best known for *Psycho*, one of his protégés. A good intro to Lovecraft the man and his fiction. Don’t skip it.

*The Rats in the Walls* - As your very first Lovecraft story his convoluted prose style may take a while to get used to. The climax is spectacular but also a bit of a mess in the narrative department. The story is great though, worth a reread later on.

*The Picture in the House* - The book that drips blood; where the useless protagonist runs away just when things are heating up to a critical point, next time stay at home old chap! Nice, short and atmospheric though.

*The Outsider* - A story of self-discovery. Great twist at the end. Awesome in a most eldritch way.

*Pickman’s Model* - You are in for a treat with this one. Classic Lovecraft, one of his most popular and enduring stories. The colloquial writing style is rather unusual for Lovecraft I think. Possibly his most accessible story and a great starting point for new readers.

*In the Vault* - Break a leg! An amusing and rather inconsequential little story.

*The Silver Key* - Time traveling shenanigan featuring some Lovecraft's patented awful faux-hillbilly dialog. A Twilight Zone-ish story.

*The Music of Erich Zann* - Featuring a man who is attracted by weird music. Next time just buy a Yoko Ono album. Actually one of HPL's most popular stories. Doesn't really do much for me, unfortunately. The bloody protagonist does a runner again just when things are getting interesting.

*The Call of Cthulhu* - The narrative is a little fragmented and the story is rather incohesive, but there is some tremendous world building going on in this story. The creepy atmosphere is very well done and for once the monster actually shows up in all its glory (HPL's monsters generally prefer to lurk and mess with your head). This story is also often cited as evidence of his racism. According to Robert Bloch Lovecraft did become more mellow and tolerant of foreigners after marriage.

*The Dunwich Horror* - This is what newcomers to Lovecraft are probably looking for. A great, thrilling and creepy tale. That Wilbur Whateley reminds me of Damian in the Omen movies a bit to begin with. He changes later on though (not for the better of course)

*The Whisperer in Darkness* - Gives new meaning to “the Kodak moment”, talk about product placement! A very creepy story featuring weird floating monstrosities and a whispery ET.

*The Colour Out of Space* - This! Ladies and gentlemen. This! Lovecraft's best story (IMO). For a change, the story is pure sci-fi, no chanting monks, witches, voodoo or Cthulhu. The poor Gardners' family literal disintegration thanks to a meteor falling on their farm will surely give you the heebie-jeebies.

*The Haunter of the Dark* - Set in Italy. The story of a weird black church. If you spot a copy of the *Necronomicon* by “Mad Arab” Abdul Alhazred in a church head for the exit immediately.

*The Thing on the Doorstep* - This also! What a great body swap story, much better than Freaky Friday. Featuring the eponymous Thing on the Doorstep whose catchphrase is “Glub!”. Brrrr!

*The Shadow Over Innsmouth* - Oh my Gawd! A blasphemously amazing story of some very fishy folks. Set mainly in the creepiest town ever. Featuring a very cool twist.

*The Dreams in the Witch-House* Featuring a witch, a rat with a man's face and a sort of hyperspace bypass. The narrative is a little rambling for my taste, but a great story is embedded in there.

*The Shadow Out of Time* - Another story of involuntary body swap. The Great Race aliens are almost benign by HPL's standard, unauthorized body swap notwithstanding. It is a longish story (70 pages or so), it starts off very fascinating, but then Lovecraft goes into his rambling mode in the second half of the story; an example of his overwriting. Still a great story though, one that will stay with you.

Due to his verbiage, thin characters and appalling dialogs Lovecraft's dissenters often dismiss him as a bad writer. IMO he was not “bad” as such, but his literary ambition exceeded his ability, or perhaps he is the most excellent bad writer of all time. The thing about his writing is that while some of the stories will have you nodding off while wading through the long winded prose, but once you get to the end of the stories you realize that they are actually quite good. Also when he is on top form, such as in *The Colour Out of Space* where the narrative is very evocative and the story is just right, he is unbeatable.

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Notes:

The website Cthulhuchick has kindly put together a free e-book of the Complete Works of H.P. Lovecraft in several formats. The download link is on the main front page.

You can read any and all of Lovecraft's stories online at Dagonbytes.

Download links for free Lovecraft audiobooks.

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