



# The White People and Other Stories

*Arthur Machen , S.T. Joshi (Editor)*

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The haunting title story of this volume was considered by Lovecraft to be the second greatest horror tale ever written. One of the stories, 'The Angel of Mons', was so coolly reported during the Great War that millions of people believed it to be true.

## The White People and Other Stories Details

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# From Reader Review *The White People and Other Stories* for online ebook

**Bettie? says**

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**Jennifer says**

In this second volume of Chaosium's Machen trilogy we start to see a lot of also-rans in terms of content. Fully a quarter of the book is given over to the author's novella "A Fragment of Life," which is about as weird fiction as my stories of changing the cat box, and another thirty-odd pages to what Joshi charitably refers to as prose-poems, which read like an artist's warm-up sketch.

Thankfully, there are a few of the more known works collected here, including "The Red Hand" (which I enjoyed) and "The White People" (which I did not). Joshi's introduction is a bit dismissive of the works collected in the section on the Angel of Mons, but I personally found Machen's introduction of the stories enough to bring a sort of contextual fascination to the pieces, as it offered a bit of insight into the desperate psychological needs of the British during WWI. The volume ends (I choose to ignore "The Happy Children") with "The Coming of the Terror," an abridged version of Machen's novel *The Terror* wherein the animals of Britain get mad as hell and decide they're not going to take it any more. It's good stuff, but given that the full novel is included in the next volume, you may decide to skip the short-short version given here.

Machen's still got an edge, and his better works are enough to give you a frisson of horror, but that effect is sadly diluted here by the inclusion of too much material that's frankly uninteresting. While this series is fascinating for completists, I suspect the average reader would have been better served by one volume of the best of the best.

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**Simon says**

As I read through these collections of Machen's weird tales the themes that he was pre-occupied with become more readily apparent. Perhaps it's because, as he went on, he got increasingly frustrated by society's refusal to heed his word, and made his points in more heavy handed and explicit ways.

In this collection, increasingly under attack is the rational materialism that Machen feels too completely dominates his contemporary society. Our spiritualist side is dwindling and, as a consequence, our understanding of the world around us is becoming more superficial and our lives becoming more hollow and unfulfilling.

In "The Red Hand" we see the wonderful, lateral thinking Dyson investigate another mystery on the fog cloaked streets of London. In "The White People", the true nature of evil and sin is explored as we follow a young girl's unwitting descent into demonic union. Not all of the stories here are concerned with horror or the supernatural. "A Fragment of Life" portrays a man's awakening to the hollowness of modern life and rediscovery of his true heritage. Also included here are the story vignettes collectively referred to as

"Ornaments of Jade" but are all quite different. They explore similar themes and illustrate Machen's prose at its finest.

Later on, WWI comes to dominate most of Machen's fictional writing. Stories of miracles occurring on the battlefield that save the beleaguered English army from certain defeat at the hands of the Germans (some of which were taken as factual accounts by some readers). In "The Coming of the Terror", a strange series of horrific and unexplained deaths sweep the countryside that many suspect are the results of some form of secret German weapon. This story once again becomes a tool to attack society's rational materialism. The animal kingdom itself rises up and turns against us due to our loss of spiritualism.

As good a writer as he is, he's not up there with the likes of his best contemporaries such as Algernon Blackwood and Lord Dunsany. In my opinion both of these were superior wordsmiths, wrote to a more consistently high standard and were more varied in their use of themes. Unlike these two, who I would happily pick up and read anything I could find by them, I feel one needs to be more selective with Machen.

I'm very pleased to have read this volume (and the one preceeding it) but I doubt if I'll seek out anything else by him.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

This collection makes for both an inspiring and a melancholy reading experience, for here we see Machen first at the height of his powers and then at the beginning of his decline.

The pieces that begin this collection are worthy of high praise. "The White People"—although not as viscerally terrifying as some of Machen's earlier tales—is superb in its subtle use of a naïve narrator to evoke, by degrees, a sense of existential menace. The prose poems in "Ornaments in Jade"—experimental attempts to forge a new style free of the influence of Stevenson—are both sonorous and original in their language, and delicately suggest—with a hint of sexuality and a dash of horror—the existence of doors to other worlds. "A Fragment of Life," though much greater in length, is in its mood much like these prose poems. Similar to his masterpiece "The Hill of Dreams," it is written in Machen's finest style, and suggests—although admittedly not much happens in the course of the narrative—the existence of shining doors to hidden worlds, a pulsing life of sensuality and beauty and possible terror lurking just beneath everyday existence, and shows how this magnificence can sometimes be released by the transformative power of something as simple as a walk.

After that, though, the quality of the work falls off. The short pieces written during WW I are sentimental and conventional in conception, the "Great Return" (Holy Grail returns to Wales) is subtle and evocative but lacking in force, and "The Terror" (the creatures of the earth revolt against humankind) is original—take that, Daphne du Maurier!—but unfortunately, at least in its present form, not very interesting. (This is the 1917 short story Century Magazine abridgement of the serialized short novel which appeared in the Evening News the year before.)

What is most dismaying about these last works is the almost complete absence of Machen's characteristic style. The rhythms and melodies of this prose are virtually indistinguishable from the work of any British journalist of the early '20's.

My theory is that Machen's strength—his absolute conviction that a world more real than ours lurked behind the veil, filled with beauty and terror—was profoundly shaken by the Great War. The veil had indeed been rent, revealing the terror, but beauty was nowhere to be found, and whatever horror might subsequently be unleashed was greater than anything Machen wished to imagine. He contented himself with journalism and reminiscence, and the once magnificent style was no more.

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### **Juushika says**

This is one of those collections which earns a lower rating through no fault of its own: it does the best it can with what it has, but the limitations of the material occasionally drag it down. This second, later collection of Machen's works begins brilliantly. "The Red Hand" is a murder mystery with a sinister paranormal bent, as readable as a mystery should be but in no way insubstantial. The prose-poems of *Ornaments in Jade* are remarkable: their brevity and style make them hugely consumable even though they demand considerable attention—but they pay that attention back tenfold with haunting, ambiguous, beautiful vignettes. "The White People" is a vivid dream, fluid and inexplicit, richly atmospheric while avoiding the clichés of the horror genre; its demands revisiting, and I plan to reread it soon. Those selections alone make this collection worthwhile—which is a good thing, because the rest of the volume flags. It's by no means bad—Joshi admits to editing out what's not worth reading, and what remains is perfectly consumable. *A Fragment of Life* and "The Coming of the Terror" are both beautifully paced revelations of old secrets which haunt the fringes of modern life, and I'll readily admit that my mixed response to the rest of the selections (most of which focus on World War I) may largely be an issue of personal taste. But on the whole, the second half of this collection lacks the vibrancy of the first: some stories have sour endings, some run too long, and none of them feel like essential, truly satisfying reading. That they're grouped together only exacerbates these flaws.

As a volume, *The White People and Other Stories* is as much about exploring Machen's oeuvre as reading his best work, and it balances coverage against accessibility. Joshi is a fantastic editor and he selects wisely, as well as providing a solid, authoritative introduction (although I wish there were also footnotes). So on that note, this collection is a success—but it isn't a must-have for the average reader. *Ornaments in Jade* and "The White People," however, certainly are, and a bit more Machen (like the other stories mentioned in this review) wouldn't hurt. At his best, Machen writes with deceptive fluidity: either gently poetic or unassumingly straightforward, his prose flows along so smoothly that the reader may almost—but not quite—miss what's happening in the shady corners; in careful time he builds strong suspense and comes to the brink of revelation without treading so far as to lose the magic, and the effect is fantastic. This was my introduction to Machen, and I like what I see and intend to seek out more. He as an author I enjoy and recommend; this collection I can give or take.

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### **Russell Shaddox says**

An excellent followup to the first volume of Machen's works. Though the collection becomes less formalized or genre-oriented as it progresses, this volume is definitely worth reading not only for the disturbing title story but for the genre-defying "A Fragment of Life," which could well be required reading for early-20th century English genre fiction. Machen treads closely the line between the mundane and the supernal, managing to make the connection between the two more facile and sympathetic than in E.M. Forster's works, for example. Though he will remain a substrate of the tectonic shift defined mythically by Lovecraft and dynamically by Robert Howard, Machen's works still are interesting and thought-provoking stories that stand

the test of time.

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### **Jim Smith says**

This second volume of the series contains the rest of Machen's essential short fiction from the 1890s, including the majestic tale *The White People* and his stunning *Ornaments in Jade* pieces, along with his often less impressive, though still likeable, wartime material.

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### **Nikki Madigan says**

To be clear, I rated this based on my own inability to understand and/or appreciate what Arthur Machen was writing about. Some of the stories made sense, my favorite being *The Coming of the Terror*. But others were too vague for me to understand, and that interferes with the likability of a story to me.

Also, I don't suggest this as a first book of Machen's work. Perhaps his other works will make more sense to me.

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### **Ian Casey says**

The second volume of *Chaosium's* three collecting most of Arthur Machen's novellas and short stories features another couple of the 'heavy hitters' of his bibliography in the title story and *'The Bowmen'*, infamous of course as the source of a cultural meme that still has legs over a century later. As before, the layout is fairly spartan, the text densely packed, and Joshi's intro mildly informative though inessential.

The longest work here is *'A Fragment of Life'*, which I'm inclined to think is too easily dismissed by others. Some have even suggested there's nothing weird about it, in which case I'd go so far as to say their reading comprehension is defective. If anything, I'd regard this as a highlight of Machen's output and perhaps the point at which his personal mystical and folkloric outlook on life appeared most organically in his work.

We also have the divisive micro-pieces of *'Ornaments in Jade'*. Joshi calls these prose poetry, but that strikes me as tenuous. They may be called vignettes, or what we now call flash fiction, but in any case they're worthwhile experiments in economy of language. They do, in fact, largely manage to tell complete narratives in the space of a few hundred words. I find it hard to compare them to anything else in the field other than the final section of Thomas Ligotti's *Noctuary*.

Then there's *'The Coming of the Terror'*. Given that this is, in effect, a substantially abridged version of the novella *'The Terror'* which forms the main attraction of the third volume from *Chaosium*, its inclusion may seem like overkill. Nevertheless it works in itself and it can be fascinating to compare and contrast different versions of a work. Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* and Jon Padgett's *20 Simple Steps to Ventriloquism* spring to mind. Incidentally, a scan of its original 1917 magazine appearance is available online and it allegedly hadn't been reprinted in this abridged form again until this volume.

There are some neat little odds and ends here, like *'The Great Return'* with its musings on the Holy Grail somehow finding its way to Wales. Really though, I suspect the title story is the biggest draw. The content

might be standard folk horror mystical witchcraft mumbo jumbo, but the delivery by way of a young girl's journal, albeit bookended with a frame story, is brilliant. In fact, Robert Aickman's famous 'Pages from a Young Girl's Journal' strikes me as near kin and I should love to see someone compare and contrast the two in depth.

I shan't say it's all solid gold but this is nonetheless essential work for any student of the Weird.

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### **Michael DiBaggio says**

I rate The White People as one of the greatest supernatural horror stories of all time, and, along with The Willows, the most frightening such story I have ever read. Even the philosophical discussion in the framing story very nearly causes me to tear up with dread.

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### **Jeannie Sloan says**

Frankly, I was bored by this second installment of Machen. I think because the first book was so good I am very let down by this one. I also didn't bother to finish it because of one of the stories dragging on into everyday home life. Frankly, there was nothing very weird going on and I found that I just couldn't finish the story or the book. I will probably try to read it again because I know that the reviews were pretty good and maybe I am being impatient. I tend to want something to be going on that captures my interest. So far a big letdown.

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### **David Davis says**

Some of these stories like The Novel of the Black Seal, The Novel of the White Powder, The White People, and The Inmost Light I really enjoyed. Others I didn't care so much for like A Fragment of Life. Overall, I like Machen's righting because they aren't outright horrific--instead, they build in ominousness and horror. They are very subtle. Overall, I've come to really enjoy this sort of writing as it's very different than most contemporary writers like Stephen King.

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### **Patrick.G.P says**

The White People and Other Stories:

The Red Hand – What if a primitive man walked upright in London and murdered citizens as part of some obscure pagan ritual? Thus, is the basis for this tale that follows a somewhat familiar deductive plotline to catch a murderer lurking in the streets of London. Although the tale is somewhat derivative at the beginning it is nonetheless very engaging and suspenseful and the ending and payoff in the story are worth waiting for.

Ornaments in Jade – Beautiful prose poems about unexpected intrusions of beauty, mysticism, and spirituality in various peoples lives. Machen's dreamlike prose evokes intense images of beauty almost to a point where it becomes unbearable. A truly remarkable piece of work.

The White People – A young girl's innermost secrets and mystic thoughts are discovered in an old battered notebook, and the account of her journey into occult sin and witchcraft is a startling and excellent tale. Machen's blend of fantastic imagery, natural beauty mixed with a sense of dread and familial occultism makes this one a very memorable story. Machen's fantastic prose makes the accounts of the girl's rituals and journeys into an occult landscape both beautiful and disturbing at the same time.

A Fragment of Life – A happily married couple struggle with the small mundane things that make up life, but in the periphery a hidden world, filled with wonder and beauty awaits discovery. Machen makes a strong statement at the end of the first chapter of this tale when he compares a mundane ordinary life to death and man's refusal to acknowledge beauty and nature to madness. This tale is so beautifully written, and I really become invested and fond of Darnell and his wife, and as I read this a second time I am yet again awestruck at the moments where Darnell seems to behold true beauty in everyday life and is so struck by it that he is unable to convey his feelings to his wife and world around him. A walk through the park at dusk, a balcony bathed in moonlight or the intricate details of a manor house opens a vista of beauty and mysticism around us if we are just willing to stop up and take in the details of our surroundings now and again. This is easily my favorite of the tales featured in this collection.

The tales that make up "The Angels of Mons" are tales surrounding religious miracles manifesting themselves to British soldiers during WWI, and I do enjoy these small fables even though they are perhaps not the most interesting stories in this collection. Machen's introduction to these tales is a fascinating read, and how one of his tales (The Bowmen) became accepted as fact is a queer and puzzling occurrence that Machen himself can't quite grasp.

The Great Return - tells the story of a journalist investigating strange occurrences that take place in a small town of Llantrisant in Wales. Machen fully delves into the religious mysticism of the Sangraal here and the effects the miracles have on the inhabitants of the small town. The prose and imagery in this tale are lovely as with the other stories and it is an interesting read to see Machen explore his own beliefs on the holy grail.

Out of the Earth - is another journalistic tale that deals with deranged children who terrorize a small Welsh community. A creepy little story about the little people and their dark ways. The ending to this tale is truly excellent.

The Coming of The Terror - is an abridged version of the longer serialized novel The Terror. I found the novel to be a bit dull, to be honest, and the abridged version makes it a bit easier to read, although I am still a bit perplexed about the ending and statement of the story. This is my least favorite of the stories in this collection.

The Happy Children - Machen's journalistic alter ego travels to a remote English town in the Midlands during Christmas, where amidst antique buildings, a great number of children are out and about, frolicking and singing carols. A short ghostly tale set at Christmas has a nice blend of evocative prose on the surroundings of the small English town and a creepy, mystic ending.

Through these stories, Machen presents the scientifically minded skeptic as one who has missed the point and portrays them as people who have an awakening when confronted with the mysterious and ethereal. It is very clear that Machen dearly wished more people to share his view on the world through mysticism and religion and wrote these stories as a cry against the increasing materialism of his age and the dwindling importance of the mystic and the aesthetic in people's lives. Absolutely brilliant when he is at his best, which is the majority of the tales in this collection. An absolute must for those with a taste for the mysterious, fantastic and other-worldly ecstasy.

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**David Massengill says**

Essential reading for any Machen fan. My favorite of the pieces in this collection is the 1904 novella *A Fragment of Life*, which is a precursor to the suburban angst narratives that would multiply throughout the 20th century. Also fascinating is the tale "The Coming of the Terror." Set during World War I, the story shows how society desperately seeks meaning--and an antagonist--when traumatized by random acts of horror. Machen is a master of atmosphere and a mystic in his own right.

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**Timothy Boyd says**

Another of the four writers that H. P. Lovecraft states greatly influenced his work and writing style, I like Machen much better than most of the others. The stories are still not high on my list of favorites though. Recommended if you are a Lovecraft fan.

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