

The Unlikely Reanimation of H.P. Lovecraft

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American history is filled with writers whose genius was underappreciated—or altogether ignored—in their lifetime. Most of Emily Dickinson’s poems weren’t discovered and published until after her death. F. Scott Fitzgerald “died believing himself a failure.” Zora Neale Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave. John Kennedy Toole won the Pulitzer Prize 12 years after committing suicide.

But no tale of posthumous success is quite as spectacular as that of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the “cosmic horror” writer who died in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1937 at the age of 46. The circumstances of Lovecraft’s final years were as bleak as anyone’s. He ate expired canned food and wrote to a friend, “I was never closer to the bread-line.” He never saw his stories collectively published in book form, and, before succumbing to intestinal cancer, he wrote, “I have no illusions concerning the precarious status of my tales, and do not expect to become a serious competitor of my favorite weird authors.” Among the last words the author uttered were, “Sometimes the pain is unbearable.” His obituary in the *Providence Evening Bulletin* was “full of errors large and small,” according to his biographer.

Nowadays, it’s hard to imagine Lovecraft faced such poverty and obscurity, when regions of Pluto are named for Lovecraftian monsters, the World Fantasy Award trophy bears his likeness, his work appears in the Library of America, the *New York Review of Books* calls him “The King of Weird,” and his face is printed on everything from beer cans to baby books to underwear. The author hasn’t just escaped anonymity; he’s reached the highest levels of critical and cultural success. His is perhaps the craziest literary afterlife this country has ever seen.

Which isn’t to say Lovecraft’s reanimation is simply a feel-good story. His rise to fame has brought both his talents and flaws into sharper focus: This is a man who, in a 1934 letter, described “extra-legal measures such as lynching & intimidation” in Mississippi and Alabama as “ingenious.” On the 125th anniversary of Lovecraft’s birth on August 20, 1890, the author’s legacy has never been more secure—or more complex. Stephen King calls him “the 20th century’s greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale,” and yet Lovecraft was also unarguably racist—two distinct labels that those studying and enjoying his works today have had to reconcile.

Lovecraft wrote hundreds of poems and scores of essays, the most famous beginning, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” He wrote tens of thousands of letters—nearly 100,000, according to some estimates. But it’s Lovecraft’s fiction—70 stories, plus a number co-written with other authors—that provide the basis for his reputation. The spirit of these tales is perhaps most aptly conveyed by the meme with his face and the caption, “AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFT—JUST KIDDING, THEY’RE ALL DEAD OR INSANE.”

Everyday scenarios held little allure for Lovecraft. “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them,” he once wrote. And so, he wrote about the bizarre: cannibalism, reanimation, self-immolation, murder, madness-inducing meteors, human-fish hybrids, aliens, and, in the case of “The Festival,” a “horde of tame, trained, hybrid winged things that no sound eye could ever wholly grasp, or sound brain ever wholly remember.”

Lovecraft sold these stories for paltry sums to pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*. He also made a bit of money revising the work of other authors. But it never amounted to much. Leslie Klinger, the editor of *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, describes him as the “quintessential starving artist.” And, though Lovecraft developed a devoted cult following—he corresponded with a young Robert Bloch, decades before Bloch wrote *Psycho*—critical acclaim eluded him, too. A few years after he died, the *New Yorker* critic Edmund Wilson wrote, bluntly, “Lovecraft was not a good writer,” adding, “The only real horror in most of these fictions is the horror of bad art and bad taste.”

But even as Wilson derided his work, the author’s fans and friends hustled to get his work into print. As the Lovecraft biographer S.T. Joshi recounted in a 2013 speech, one young fan took a bus ride from Kansas to Rhode Island after Lovecraft’s death to ensure that the author’s papers were donated to Brown University. Other friends launched a publishing house, Arkham House, with the express purpose of publishing Lovecraft’s stories.

These efforts kept his legacy alive and, as Joshi describes, events over the next half-century gave it even more weight. The French embraced Lovecraft, just as they had previously embraced his idol, Edgar Allan Poe; and Lovecraft’s work found increasing favor among filmmakers and academics. In 1999, Penguin published its first “Penguin Classics” collection of Lovecraft’s work, and, in 2005, the Library of America published its own volume. This, Joshi says, marked the author’s “ultimate canonization” in American literature.

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But Lovecraft’s critical comeback is only half of the story. The other is his conquest of popular culture. Lovecraft ranks among the most *tchotchke*-fied writers in the world. Board Games. Coins. Corsets. Christmas wreaths. Dice. Dresses. Keychains. License-plate frames. Mugs. Phone cases. Plush toys. Posters. Ties. Enterprising fans have stamped the name “Cthulhu” (Lovecraft’s most famous creation; a towering, malevolent, multi-tentacled deity) or other Lovecraftian gibberish on nearly every imaginable consumer product.

But, more broadly speaking, Lovecraft’s ascendance has also brought an uncomfortable truth into the spotlight: He was a virulent racist. The xenophobia and white supremacy that burble beneath his fiction are startlingly explicit in his letters. Flip through them and you’ll find the author bemoaning Jews, New York’s black population, and New England’s “undesirable Latins—low-grade Southern Italians and Portuguese.” In 1922, he wrote that he wished “a kindly gust of cyanogen could asphyxiate” New York City’s Chinatown. In another letter, he wrote, “In general, America has made a fine mess of its population.”

These writings leave Lovecraft fans in an uncomfortable spot. Leeman Kessler, who plays Lovecraft in the popular “Ask Lovecraft” YouTube series, has written an essay, “On Portraying a White Supremacist,” in which he says, “As long as I take money for playing Lovecraft or accept invitations to conventions or festivals, I think it is my moral duty to stare unflinchingly at the unpleasantness.” Last year, a petition demanding Octavia Butler replace Lovecraft as the face on WFA trophies received more than 2,500 signatures. A counter-petition soon followed, titled, “Keep the Beloved H.P. Lovecraft Caricature Busts (‘Howards’) as World Fantasy Award Trophies, Don’t Ban Them to be PC!” Similar exchanges play out regularly on the many social media pages dedicated to Lovecraft.

But as vexing as Lovecraft’s racism is for fans, his views are also one of the most useful lenses for reading his work. In March, Leslie Klinger delivered a lecture on Lovecraft at Brown University’s Hay Library, home to the world’s largest collection of Lovecraft papers and other materials. Toward the end of his remarks, Klinger—without excusing or defending Lovecraft’s racism—refused to separate it from his achievements. Lovecraft “despised people who weren’t White Anglo-Saxon Protestants,” he said. “But that powers the stories ... this sense that he’s alone, that he’s surrounded by enemies and everything is hostile to him. And I think you take away that part of his character, it might make him a much nicer person, but it would destroy the stories.”

The comics writer Alan Moore picks up this subject, as well, in the introduction to Klinger’s book. But first he reminds readers of the seismic social changes that occurred during Lovecraft’s life: women’s suffrage, advances in mankind’s understanding of outer space, the Russian revolution, new highly visible LGBT communities in American cities, and the largest wave of migrants and refugees the U.S. had ever seen. Moore writes,

In this light it is possible to perceive Howard Lovecraft as an almost unbearably sensitive barometer of American dread. Far from outlandish eccentricities, the fears that generate Lovecraft’s stories and opinions were precisely those of the white, middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant-descended males who were most threatened by the shifting power relationships and values of the modern world.

My feelings on Lovecraft, [particularly] as a Jew, are complicated. At their best, his tales achieve a visceral eeriness, or fling the reader’s imagination to the furthest depths of outer space. Once you develop a taste for his maximalist style, these stories become addictive. But my admiration is always coupled with the knowledge that Lovecraft would have found my Jewish heritage repugnant.

I haven’t made peace with this tension, and I’m not sure I ever will. But I have decided that perhaps he’s the literary icon our country deserves. The stories he conjured, in many ways, say as much about his bigotry as they do his genius. Or, as Moore writes, “Coded in an alphabet of monsters, Lovecraft’s writings offer a potential key to understanding our current dilemma.”

