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AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS

H. P. LOVECRAFT



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H. P. Lovecraft : At The Mountains of Madness before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised At The Mountains of Madness:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Lovecraft had great ideas but was a terrible writerBy tqwert1This is a frustrating book. Most of it reads like a boring, overlong encyclopedia entry explaining mythical creatures with no action whatsoever. The detail gets mindnumbingly stupid. Do I really want to read about how the Old Ones arranged the furniture in their houses? No, I certainly do not. The overall background given for the ancient creatures is pretty great, though, but then almost nothing is done with it. The narrator misses almost all the limited action and only

describes the aftermath aside from a momentary bit of excitement at the end. The general structure is also annoying, but it seems to be how Lovecraft does things in the small number of stories of his I've read. The book is not a description of things as they are happening but instead presented as an after-the-fact recollection of events that happened some time ago. Why does Lovecraft do this? It certainly seems to worsen the flow of things. In this case, it also comes off as kind of idiotic. It's supposedly a plea not to explore further the things he discovered, but if this actually happened and was described this way, there would be a thousand expeditions underway immediately to find out more. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Clearly he's in a contest with himself to see how many times he can use the word "Cyclopean" whether it fits or not.

By Michael Battaglia

Continuing Arkham House's valiant attempt to collect every scrap of fiction Lovecraft ever committed to paper (in some cases not having any original manuscripts to work from and thus forced to use the text from whatever pulp magazine published it), the second volume of three contains pretty much all the long stuff, with the story count about a quarter of what the first volume was but still like fifty pages longer. Three of the stories clock in over a hundred pages, which raises the question that you have to ask of any writer who seemed to primarily function as a short story writer . . . can they pull off an entire novel? Judging by the evidence here, the answer is a slightly shaky yes. Lovecraft actually seems almost tailor made for at least novella length as what makes his stories work is the gradually increasing sense of dread and uneasiness that creeps into the tales almost when you're not looking, where a narrator who starts out near-hysterical and makes you think, "Geez buddy, chill out, it's only slime creatures from beyond" by the end has you convinced to start looking over your own shoulder for cities with weird geometries. In short bursts, he doesn't have enough time to establish the mood and while that works better for the EC Comics style horror tales with the twist ending, for a concentrated dose of Lovecraftian terror you need to let the situation play out a bit and go from "this is kind of bad" to "make your peace with your God but there is no God only pitiless oblivion" in terms of atmosphere. For the most part, he nails it in "At the Mountains of Madness", which features an Antarctic expedition that somehow discovers new mountains taller than anything anyone has seen before and goes downhill from there. The frozen setting feels alien from the get-go and as our intrepid professors explore further and find a new city and the frozen bodies of previous inhabitants it starts getting extremely eerie. What it does here is play to Lovecraft's best strength as a SF/fantasy writer in creating a situation where the rules of morality as understand them simply do not exist and good and evil can't be defined easily or at all. He gives us a glimpse into a drama that has been going on for millions of years without our involvement and then shows why we have no place being anywhere near it. By piling on stranger and stranger events and letting his characters become more unhinged by what they witness it raises the urgency to a near fever pitch so that by the time the weird looking penguins show up you're about as ready to get out of there as the characters are (presumably with your sanity intact, though that isn't a requirement). What's fascinating is how he fits all these extraterrestrial entities together, often calling back to his own works (Cthulhu gets name checked at least once) and giving a real sense that what we see of the universe is only a fraction of what really goes on. Still, he can get carried away and the section where the narrator sees the entire history of the city and its alien inhabitants sketched on the walls more or less stops the story cold. Maybe it reads better in serial form but it feels like the story nearly stops in the process. But as good as that story is, it really feels like a very long Lovecraft short story, in which a series of slowly escalating events keeps occurring until something inevitably terrible happens. The other big story "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" functions more like an actual novel, moving back and forth in time, developing its characters (even if they seem to be going from confused to more confused) and giving us an actual mystery to puzzle through as a local doctor attempts to figure out why young Charles Dexter Ward seems to have started acting so strangely, giving up all the stuff he used to like, taking on strange mannerisms and keeping some odd stuff in his lab, among other details. Could it have anything to do with his interest in the occult, perhaps causing him to tap into and awaken forces better left alone? Well, it isn't a case of bad fish, let's put it that way. This one is intriguing because you're basically finding out what's happening at the same time the doctor is, although you have the benefit of being able to jump to the more likely conclusion long before he does only because you know you're reading a supernatural story and thus aren't expecting a normal explanation. The cat and mouse game between Dr Willett and Ward (or whatever Ward's become) with the former trying to figure out what is going on and what it means while the latter attempts to get everything together for whatever bizarre plan he has in mind, is creepy, at least until it becomes clearer to the reader what's happening before Willett has quite gotten there, meaning that the book feels like it runs a little longer than it needs to. It doesn't help that some of it is told in letters written in an extremely archaic style, which can be tiring. But the setpieces pretty much sell this one, the biggest being the exploration Willett takes into the house where Ward is staging his experiments. He outdoes himself in the freaky department here and it almost makes up for the rest of the book at times making you mutter "get to the point already". The story is also notable for having an actual ending instead of simply trailing off into the ether with a vague sense of disquiet. With the big guns out of the way, the rest of the collection is a slight mixed bag. I liked "The Dreams in the Witch House" (even if no one else seems to) simply for its combination of really strange events that border on the insane (do you like crazed witches? do you like crazed witches that have giant evil rats as best friends? do you like it if both those things try to sacrifice children?) and the escalating sense of doom on the part of the protagonist as you and he realize that he's completely out of his league and simply walking away isn't going to get him

out of the woods. It may not add up to much except sheer madness but boy, is that interesting imagery. Speaking of interesting imagery, the rest of the book is taken up with stories about Randolph Carter, who is supposed to stand in for Lovecraft in some form. The best one is probably "The Statement of Randolph Carter" which seems to be taken from one of the author's dream and is actually short. Meanwhile, "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath" is the exact opposite of short and on some level is his attempt to out-Dunsany Lord Dunsany himself (who, according to T.E.D. Klein's introduction in the third volume, Lovecraft at one point had a big manly author-crush on) as Randolph Carter engages on a quest in the world of dreams that takes him through a variety of adventures in strange places.

Unfortunately, I found the story more or less tedious . . . he doesn't have the sense of the mythical that Dunsany was able to convey (the closest contemporary equivalent I can think of is John Crowley), nor is his prose as effortlessly adorned as his hero's. Which means that Carter careens slowly from fantastic city to fantastic city without really getting involved anywhere, constantly getting rescued and with none of it adding up to all that much. If this was twenty pages it would be one thing but he insists on chugging on with this for over a hundred pages, with the theme not really even changing. He tries to go to a place, gets to a place and then it's over. That leaves "The Silver Key" and "Son of the Silver Key" (just kidding, it's really called "Through the Gates of the Silver Key"), both of which feature Carter. The former seems to behold itself a bit more to dream logic, its contemplative as Carter drifts through scenes that may or may not be from his childhood . . . it's a nice mood piece and sets up the next story where a bunch of people are getting ready to divide up his estate while a swami tells everyone that he's still alive and explains what he's been up to. The framing device gives a bit more weight to the anchorless scenes set in the world of dreams and even if the whole thing doesn't have the heft the real mythos stories do, its also not a hundred pages so I can live with it.

Overall, this one is for the people who read volume one and wanted more, with the caveat that the best stuff was definitely in there. Lovecraft is an acquired taste, his prose is even more archaic than other writers even from that time tended to be and a lot of the stories tend to succeed more on atmosphere than anything else. However, that's hard to sustain and doesn't make them real memorable, even when a bunch of tales on the same theme are read right in a row. The title story and "Charles Dexter Ward" are probably essential, with the crazed witch house story and the Randolph Carter stuff acting as nice bonus material. Still, after a reading a number of them you may find that your day is not complete unless Yog-Sothoth is the gate. Which is fair.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. "Such things did not happen in any normal world" By Jefferson The disturbing implication of H. P. Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931/36) is, of course, that our world is abnormal. From its great opening line ("I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why") to its closing shrieks of "Tekeli-li!" Lovecraft's story powerfully explores existential horror marked by the following: -monstrous forbidden books-opalescent skies-imminent marvels-secrets beyond human penetration-grotesque squawking penguins-curious configurations of dots-tentacles, wings, and obscene odors-careful butchery and inexpert dissection-an appalling account of the creation of life on earth-a pre-human megalopolis-disturbing gigantism-alien geometry-blasphemous antiquity-communicative bas-reliefs-cosmic beauty and cosmic horror The novella is the attempt by Dyer, a professor of geology at Mistaktonic University, to dissuade future scientific expeditions to Antarctica by telling what really happened to the disastrous one he led there in 1930. Dyer begins with practical details about supplies, personnel, and goals, scientific facts about longitude, latitude, temperature, and geology, and generally benign poetic impressions: "Distant mountains floated in the sky as enchanted cities, and often the whole white world would dissolve into a gold, silver, and scarlet land of Dunsanian dreams and adventurous expectancy under the magic of the low midnight sun."

However, after his party reaches "the great unknown continent, and its cryptic world of frozen death," things start getting creepy: "On the barren shore, and on the lofty ice barrier in the background, myriads of grotesque penguins squawked and flapped their fins." And when Lake, a Professor of biology, finds a fossil footprint of some advanced life form from a period of earth's history when no advanced life forms existed and becomes obsessed with finding more, things become horribly strange. Lovecraft's writing may at times strike one as overwrought, with absurd names like Yog-Sothoth, over-used words like mad/ness (34 times in this novella), horror/s (31), strange/ness/ly (29), primal (24), and nameless (21), and plenty of excess verbiage. And those bas-reliefs are too conveniently comprehensible.

Nevertheless, if you get into his rhythm, Lovecraft builds a disturbing intensity as Dyer provides more details, leading us through a series of gateways into the ineffable alien past of earth. I found myself writing down whole passages, amused by their outr quality and awed by their rhythm and imagery. *At the Mountains of Madness* is an excellent story because it builds terror through gradual revelation, so that, though we guess much of what's going on much earlier than Dyer tells us, the point is that he has to nerve himself up to be able to say what he has to say. It's difficult for him. He

doesn't want to inflict spiritual torment on humanity and doesn't want to relive his own Rubicon crossing into the madness lurking in the inner reality of life and the world, which "marked my loss, at the age of fifty-four, of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external nature and nature's laws." If you stay patient and journey with him through his past expedition, you may experience, if not the same hair-graying terror that Lovecraft is trying to evoke, a compellingly beautiful, disturbing, and strange experience: science fiction horror sublime. (Only Lovecraft could make into figures of horror that comment on the human condition six-foot tall, albino, eyeless penguins living in tunnels leading to the abyss.) If you become irritated when characters in

horror movies enter places they should know better than to enter, Dyer and Danforth may drive you crazy, but they do what they do because of curiosity, and this novella is largely about that human trait: "Half paralyzed with terror though we were, there was nevertheless fanned within us a blazing flame of awe and curiosity which triumphed in the end."

Ah, Dyer should know that the more he tries to convince scientists not to explore Antarctica by telling them of his experiences, the more they will flock there. Fans of sf horror in the vein of John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There" and John Carpenter's movie version of it, *The Thing*, should enjoy *At the Mountains of Madness*. However, most of the action in which Hollywood movies over-indulge is described after the fact in the story, and Lovecraft is more into psychological than physical action. I'd only read a few H. P. Lovecraft stories, ignorantly scorning his work for its pulpy purple prose, nameless, eldritch obsessions, and phobias about size, age, and tentacles. I figured that the worst evil in this world is done by human beings, not by lurking protoplasmic blasphemous alien entities. But the novella knocked off my soul-socks, and made me keen to read all of Lovecraft's stories. A note on this kindle edition of the novella. I bought it cheaply in order to cheaply get the Blackstone audiobook version of it splendidly read by Edward Herrmann. The kindle version seems fine, coming with an interesting overview of Lovecraft's life and career and a typical navigable table of contents, but without artwork, and with perhaps one or two typos.

At the Mountains of Madness

One of the greatest short novels in American literature, and a key text in my own understanding of what that literature can do. MICHAEL CHABON Lovecraft's fiction is one of the cornerstones of modern horror. CLIVE BARKER From the Trade Paperback edition. From the Inside Flap A complete short novel, *AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS* is a tale of terror unlike any other. The Barren, windswept interior of the Antarctic plateau was lifeless--or so the expedition from Miskatonic University thought. Then they found the strange fossils of unheard-of creatures...and the carved stones tens of millions of years old...and, finally, the mind-blasting terror of the City of the Old Ones. Three additional strange tales, written as only H.P. Lovecraft can write, are also included in this macabre collection of the strange and the weird. About the Author Howard Phillips Lovecraft, August 1890 - March 1937, was an American author who achieved posthumous fame through his influential works of horror fiction. Virtually unknown and only published in pulp magazines before he died in poverty, he is now regarded as one of the most significant 20th-century authors in his genre. Lovecraft was born in Providence, Rhode Island, where he spent most of his life.