

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

LOVECRAFT'S FIRST FOLIO

Imagine a world without *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *Julius Caesar*; and thirteen more of Shakespeare's thirty-six plays. It could have happened, but for the devoted work of a couple of Shakespeare's colleagues, the actors John Heminges and Henry Condell, who in 1623 published a massive volume containing all but one of the generally accepted plays of the greatest playwright in the English language, along with his only known portrait. This is the famous book known as the *Shakespeare First Folio*, of which 235 of the original 750 copies are known today, prized by libraries and collectors everywhere. Individual editions of eighteen of the plays had been published before, though Heminges and Condell regarded them as "stol'n and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by frauds and stealths of injurious imposters." They offered corrected versions of those, and eighteen more that otherwise would quite probably have been lost forever.

H.P. Lovecraft was no Shakespeare, but he did write some of the greatest works of fantasy and horror that we have—"The Rats in the Wall," "The Dunwich Horror," "The Color out of Space," "The Call of Cthulhu," and many others—and even two magnificent science fiction novellas, "The Shadow Out of Time" and "At the Mountains of Madness." These stories would not have been lost, as the uncollected plays of Shakespeare almost certainly would have been, but until 1939 they existed only in the pages of such pulp magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*, known just to a small coterie of fans and collectors, and it is altogether likely that they would have remained obscure to readers in general as those old magazines grew increasingly fragile and rare. Instead, thanks to the work of two men who played for Lovecraft what Heminges and Condell did for Shakespeare, they were collected in a substantial omnibus volume that gave them true permanence and set Lovecraft on the path to fame that steadily increases as the years go by.

Lovecraft, an eccentric and somewhat reclusive native of Providence, Rhode Island, was born in 1890. An early interest in science led him to study chemistry and astronomy as a boy. And when he was thirteen he began publishing a small hectographed magazine, *The Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy*, which lasted six years and sixty-nine issues. But the quirks of his curious mind drew him also toward fantasy and the occult, and as a young man he began to write stories of alien beings and elder gods, at first merely for his own amusement, and then—with the founding of *Weird Tales* in 1923—for publication. He quickly became one of that magazine's most popular authors, a prolific contributor for the next dozen years. Only when he ventured into science fiction with the brilliant novellas "The Shadow Out of Time" and "At the Mountains of Madness" did *Weird Tales* turn his work down, but the stories found a home in a surprising venue for Lovecraft, *Astounding Stories*, the dominant science fiction magazine of the day, where the readers, though at first puzzled by his presence there, were quickly won over by the dazzling inventiveness of the two long stories.

Though he rarely left Providence, Lovecraft was an industrious correspondent, and gathered about him a circle of friends who were also active in the fields of fantasy and science fiction and regarded him with an almost religious awe. This group included such writers as Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert E. Howard, some of whom would write stories borrowing characters and themes from

Lovecraft's own fiction, with his full encouragement and enthusiasm. Two young writers who were part of the ever-expanding Lovecraft circle were August Derleth of Wisconsin and Donald Wandrei of Minnesota, both of whom had come to Lovecraft's attention in 1926 after publishing a number of stories in *Weird Tales*. Derleth and Lovecraft would exchange letters virtually on a weekly basis for the next ten years, and his friend Wandrei maintained similar contact with the master throughout the same decade.

Lovecraft died of cancer in March 1937, only forty-seven years old. His death sent a shock wave through the circle of his disciples, and before long Derleth and Wandrei had resolved to keep Lovecraft's work alive, Derleth suggesting the publication of a memorial volume of his best short stories, Wandrei expanding that into a project for collecting all his work, including his numerous essays and a selection from his vast correspondence. Together they assembled a bulky volume of stories and offered it to two prominent publishing houses, Simon & Schuster and Charles Scribner's Sons. They both turned it down, noting that the stories were of considerable literary interest but that short-story collections did not sell very well, and a huge collection of esoteric work by an obscure writer like Lovecraft had very poor commercial prospects.

It did not seem to occur to Derleth and Wandrei to offer a smaller group of Lovecraft's stories to one of the New York publishers. Instead they chose to publish the omnibus, and perhaps later volumes, themselves. They formed a company that they named Arkham House, Arkham being the fictitious Massachusetts city, patterned somewhat after Salem, in which Lovecraft had set much of his work. Though neither man had much money—very few people did, in the Depression year of 1937—they scraped together whatever they could, Wandrei providing four hundred dollars and Derleth dipping into funds he had raised to build a house for the rest. They talked a local printer, the George Banta Publishing Company of Menasha, Wisconsin, into doing the book, hired the celebrated artist Virgil Finlay to do a jacket illustration, and by the fall of 1939 they were offering the imposing volume, under the title of *The Outsider and Others*, for sale at five dollars a copy. The monumental book, 553 pages of very small type, contained both of Lovecraft's great science fiction novellas, most of his best weird tales, and his long, erudite essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature."

Five dollars was a big sum for the time, and Derleth and Wandrei were under no illusions of swift and eager sales. They did get advance orders from Lovecraft's most ardent admirers for 150 of the 1268 copies printed, but the rest moved slowly despite general critical acclaim and it took four years for the whole edition to sell out. Gradually it achieved some success in the aftermarket. I think I paid twenty-five dollars for my copy, no small amount for me at the time, somewhere in the 1950s, but the price rose steadily thereafter, and by now a copy in good condition sells in the thousands of dollars. Even as the Heminges-Condell First Folio kept eighteen of Shakespeare's most significant plays from vanishing, the Derleth-Wandrei omnibus of Lovecraft preserved his most important work and made it available not only to a new generation of readers, but also to other publishers. Shepherded by Derleth, who remained his chief advocate and continued to stir interest in his work, two volumes of his stories were issued by one of the pioneering paperback houses in 1944 and 1945, a small hardcover collection appeared also in 1945, and in 1944 two of his best stories, "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Rats in the Walls," were included in a notable Modern Library anthology, *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*. Since then his work has been reprinted in hundreds of anthologies and any number of hardcover and paperback collections. That first Lovecraft omnibus had removed him from the world of moldering pulp magazines and launched him properly into the arena of general fiction publishing.

Wandrei went into the armed services when World War II began, but Derleth remained in civilian life and continued to issue books under the Arkham House imprint—a collection of his own short stories in 1941, Derleth never being averse to promoting his own work, and then a book of stories by Clark Ashton Smith in 1942, and, in 1943, a companion to *The Outsider and Others*, another jumbo volume that brought together most of Lovecraft's lesser stories under the title of *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*. In the years that followed, Arkham produced dozens of other books of weird and fantasy fiction, including just about every scrap of Lovecraft's writings, and work by Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber, A.E. van Vogt, Robert E. Howard, and many another notable figure of the field. Even after Derleth's death in 1971, Arkham House continued under other editorial auspices, going on into the twenty-first century and publishing books by such modern writers as James Tiptree, Jr., Lucius Shepard, Greg Bear, and Barry Malzberg.

But its great achievement was to put Lovecraft on the map, in a way that Lovecraft himself would scarcely believe. During his lifetime he was published only in low-paying magazines that allowed him to exist barely above the subsistence level. Today he is not only represented by stories in innumerable weird-fiction anthologies, but has become a major literary figure with a firmly established reputation in the world outside that of weird and horror fiction fandom. It would surely amaze him to discover that there is a Lovecraft story collection in the Library of America, a distinguished series of books that includes work by the likes of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Saul Bellow, and another in the Penguin Classics series, where he keeps company with Homer, Tolstoy, and Marcel Proust. He would be further surprised to see his novella "At the Mountains of Madness" included in the Modern Library Classics series, but doubtless he would be utterly astonished to learn that in 1967 a heavy-metal rock group came into being under his name and released several songs based on his stories. Since then a group called Black Sabbath recorded songs based on "The Call of Cthulhu" and "At the Mountains of Madness," and he has made other inroads into the world of rock as well. There are also Lovecraft video games such as *Call of Cthulhu* and *Dark Corners of the Earth*, and in 2020 came a television series, *Lovecraft Country*, in which a young man traverses the country in search of Lovecraftian secrets pertaining to his family.

All this, and much more, because a pair of Lovecraft's disciples refused to let his work be forgotten, and risked their own slender savings to produce a superb omnibus volume, more than eighty years ago, that stands in relation to his stories as the glorious First Folio does to that of William Shakespeare.