

INTRODUCTION

I was celebrating my coming of age by a tour of New England—sight-seeing, antiquarian, and genealogical—and had planned to go directly from ancient Newburyport to Arkham, whence my mother's family was derived.

—H.P. LOVECRAFT, "THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH"

Welcome to the *Tour de Lovecraft: The Tales*. This book is pretty much what that title conveys, a tour through all fifty-one of H.P. Lovecraft's mature works of prose fiction. We're skipping the poetry, the collaborations and ghost-writing and revisions (except for "Through the Gates of the Silver Key"), the travel writing, the artistic and literary criticism and all the other things Lovecraft wrote instead of horror stories. It is my contention that the tale's the thing, and although some of Lovecraft's other works are interesting or fun or valuable, they're not what any of us really signed up for. Like most tours, we'll stay a little longer at the good spots, and try our best to hustle past the weedy, overgrown patches. Hopefully I can point out one or two scenic overlooks along the way, letting you perhaps see some familiar landscape from an angle you hadn't noticed before.

Should you not immediately be familiar with the work of H.P. Lovecraft, it is the general consensus among everyone whose opinion need be listened to that HPL (as we call him on occasion) was the most important and influential horror writer of the twentieth century. The consensus is only slightly less overwhelming that Lovecraft was the second-greatest horror writer in American letters, the first being (of course) Edgar Allan Poe. Not all of Lovecraft's tales are great, though. (Not all of Shakespeare's plays are keepers either, frankly. *Timon of Athens*? *Henry VI, Part III*? Pfah.) More damage has been done to Lovecraft's

reputation by the ill-considered overprinting of his lesser works than by almost any other factor. Even the vaunted Library of America (“publishing, and keeping in print, authoritative editions of America’s best and most significant writing”) decided to present Lovecraft from a historical, rather than an aesthetic, perspective, a decision that preserves on acid-free paper and between sewn bindings such malarkey as “Herbert West—Reanimator,” the weak and predictable “Thing on the Doorstep,” and Lovecraft’s most overrated tale, “The Outsider.” This decision, a consequence of the general trend of Lovecraft scholarship and criticism over the last thirty-odd years, doesn’t make the life of even we amateur Lovecraft critics any easier.

What, you may then ask, are the great works? In my considered opinion, Lovecraft’s reputation can rest on seventeen tales:

Absolutely Perfect: “The Colour Out of Space”

Vanishingly Close To Perfect: *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, “The Call of Cthulhu,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, “The Dunwich Horror,” “The Shadow Over Innsmouth”

Masterpieces: “The Whisperer in Darkness,” “The Rats in the Walls”, “The Music of Erich Zann”

Great: “The Dreams in the Witch House,” “The Haunter of the Dark,” “Pickman’s Model,” “The Shunned House,” “The Shadow Out of Time,” “The Strange High House in the Mist,” “The Doom That Came to Sarnath,” “The Cats of Ulthar”

The rest are not great, although some of them are quite enjoyable.

Whether any of this makes Lovecraft “literature” is a question rather more fraught, and one we don’t really have space for. But that said, Lovecraft has been, and can be, read critically and analytically. Every so often in this Tour, we do that, amid the general ruck of aimless commentary.

Which leads me, elliptically, to the question of how this Tour came about in the first place. Every winter in my LiveJournal,¹ I do a little

1. At <http://princeofcairo.livejournal.com> should you be interested, and feel free to drop by if you are.

devoted long-form serial, usually an entry a day (or as close as I can get) on a specific topic. From March 2 to June 27, 2007, I posted one entry on each story included in the three recent Penguin Classics Lovecraft anthologies edited by S.T. Joshi, in their table of contents order, calling it the “Tour de Lovecraft.” Over the course of that Tour, I received a number of gratifying comments asking if I planned to collect the Tour into a single volume.² After enough such had built up, I decided to go ahead and do that.

For this publication, I re-ordered the Tour to set the tales in the order that Lovecraft wrote them, and tweaked the text of the entries to reflect that decision. I occasionally pulled clever things I said in the individual entries’ comment threads up into the main text where they deserved it. Sometimes I said those things in response to quite clever remarks from my readers. I have tried to indicate other people’s ideas where I could, but the pseudonymous nature of LiveJournal, and the exigencies of clear writing, mean that I might not have been able to do so. If I have lifted your thoughts, I hope you’ll forgive me, or at least take comfort in the notion that I’ve also stolen a great deal from George Wetzel, Northrop Frye, S.T. Joshi, and Peter Cannon, among other critical heavyweights.

I also polished up the prose somewhat, although it retains the vulgar glister of its informal beginnings rather more than my usual work does. And finally, to give people who loyally read the whole thing for free in my LiveJournal a reason to feel like they should buy this compilation, I added a few thousand words of additional insight, commentary, and thought that occurred to me as I went through and copy-edited the text. Finally, to help put this amateur, not to say haphazard, effort at Lovecraftian criticism into some sort of context, I wrote “A Brief Survey of Lovecraftian Criticism,” which immediately follows this Introduction.

2. I also received an invitation from an editor at *Weird Tales* to present a similar Tour in those hallowed pages; should that proceed as intended, we may return to this well for *Tour de Lovecraft 2: The Settings* in about a year from now.