

Adventuring in the Worlds of H.P. LOVECRAFT

Part I: The Cthulhu Mythos

By Keith Herber

Illustrated by Reed Stover

H.P. Lovecraft was born in 1890 and, with the exception of a short stay in New York, lived his entire life of forty-seven years in his native Providence, Rhode Island. Dwelling with one or the other of his two aunts—his only living relatives—he passed a near-pauper's existence, subsisting on a dwindling patrimony and earning most of what little money he did as a free-lance revisionist for other authors. Over a period of twenty years (1917-1937) he produced, under his own name, a mere fifty stories of varying lengths, a number of which did not even see publication until after his death. Relegated to the pages of the 'pulp' magazines of the era—such as *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*—Lovecraft found difficulty pleasing even those editors. Discouraged by their frequent 'rejections,' he wrote less and less as he grew older, at the same time continuing to critique the work of other, less experienced authors while maintaining a regular correspondence with over fifty individuals including Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert Bloch, August Derleth, Fritz Leiber, C.L. Moore, Frank Belknap Long, Henry Kuttner and others. Many of these younger writers had first written to HPL as fans praising his work and while a number of them went on to far greater heights of fame and success, they have all at one time or another acknowledged their debt to his work. Even successful authors of the day such as Stephen King and Ray Bradbury speak of their regard for the "Rhode Island recluse." Nearly fifty years after his death his collected works are still published by Arkham House and have been frequently reprinted in the paperback collections and anthologies of horror as his posthumous fame continues to grow. While disparaged by such notable critics as Edmund Wilson and Isaac Asimov, Lovecraft has also been hailed by figures as eminent as Jean Cocteau and Stephen Vincent Benet. In Lovecraft's own opinion, he wrote but one "good" story in his entire career, that single tale "The Colour Out of Space." Despite the wide variance of opinion regarding his work, to writers and aficionados of the weird, the phrase is: "Poe and Lovecraft."

In 1981, Chaosium released the adventure role-playing game *Call Of Cthulhu* designed to allow its players to explore the eerie worlds created by H.P. Lovecraft and to uncover the mysteries surrounding what has come to be known as the Cthulhu Mythos. Adventure has a different meaning in this game and refers not

only to action and physical risk but also to the danger that comes from delving too deeply into mysteries perhaps forbidden to the knowledge of mankind. There certainly exist many possibilities for excitement while prowling about ancient and sinister houses or while uncovering a secret and degenerate cult armed with the latest weapons, but the

potential for a terrifying confrontation with the unknown may lie in a situation as innocent as the reading of a moldering book recently discovered in the locked, rare-book collection of the local university's library.

Knowledge of the situation facing someone in a *Call Of Cthulhu* adventure is of primary importance, as many of the *outré* beings and monsters are so powerful as to be nearly indestructible to 'normal' means. A cryptic spell may be required to hurl the being back to its outer realm, or a specific object needed to destroy the thing. More often the investigators will simply learn how to avoid the worst of the situation and may be able to do no more than seal off the beasts' lair or destroy only the smallest, most active part of an insane and inhuman cult. To gain this necessary information the individuals may find it necessary to refer to such ancient and ungodly tomes as the dread *Necronomicon*, written in 730 AD by the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred; or the forbidden *Book of Eibon*, attributed to a great wizard thought to have once lived in now lost and forgotten Hyperborea. Still darker secrets may lie hidden in the questionably-translated *Phanotic Fragments*, hinted at by some to be of pre-human origin. These books hold some of the vague and near-incomprehensible secrets of the Cthulhu Mythos—rumors of alien races and beings that roamed the planet before the coming of human life and prophecies that hint these things will once again claim the Earth their province, slaughtering and destroying all of mankind in a not too distant future "when the stars are right."

This knowledge, while invaluable to those who would explore the Mythos, does not however, come without its price. As an individual learns more and more of the frightful secrets hidden in blasphemous books and among the shards of collapsed, non-human civilizations, the devastating truth of mankind's infinitesimal role in the cosmos and his ultimate fate in time and space begins to impinge upon the person's mind, ultimately affecting his sanity.

The idea of an individual's sanity is unique to the *Call Of Cthulhu* game and is particularly effective in simulating the growing feeling of lurking dread and fear that so strongly pervades all of Lovecraft's stories. As the players discover more and more of the secrets of the Mythos their sanity begins to decrease proportionate to the specific amount of knowledge they have gained. Large sudden losses of sanity can cause a player to lose his mind, the possible results of this running the gamut from temporary insanity—expressed as mildly as a short spell of fainting—all the way up to a major psychotic break. Permanent residency in a padded cell is the only possible future for a character who suffers this last described mental breakdown. Some other, milder forms of insanity are long-lasting but can be cured by the successful use of psychoanalysis, one of the many skills available to investigators of the Cthulhu Mythos.

One of the major precepts employed by Lovecraft to his own writing was that the "weird" story should reflect a very normal situation with the sudden and unexpected intrusion into this setting by a single violation of natural law. The characters of *Call Of Cthulhu* live in such a world. Set in the 1920s, the players take the roles of reporters, journalists, scientists, or others, each possessing a range of personal and professional skills that are, to an extent, chosen by the player himself. Such characters are usually drawn from the Mythos by a variety of devices—an archaeologist may chance upon a fragment from a pre-human culture as yet unrecognized by science; a reporter called to the scene of a murder may discover startling evidence ignored by the police in the form of a slimy track that leads to the edge of a nearby wharf; an old friend disappears suddenly then turns up a raving lunatic that must be confined for his own safety; a character discovers an old family diary that hints of certain 'oddities' in his or her own blood line. Beginnings such as these will usually lead the adventurers to uncover deep mysteries and begin for them careers that will lead them to discover dark secrets as yet unguessed at by the vast majority of mankind.

There are no material rewards for those who choose to risk their lives and

minds discovering the eldritch horrors hidden in the darkest corners of the world. There are no caches of treasure that await discovery by fearless and intrepid explorers, nor does fame and glory come to those who should defeat some being from 'outside.' Those individuals who would speak publicly of what they have learned will soon find themselves ridiculed or even worse. Exploring the Cthulhu Mythos is a more or less solitary pursuit, small groups of adventurers only rarely coming into contact with others who may have some knowledge of the Mythos' secrets. Even these individuals are usually unwilling to speak too freely of what they know and some, having lost their minds, may prove to be actual worshipers of the hideous Other Gods or Great Old Ones. Those who would choose to learn too much about the Mythos are driven mad, anyone gaining near complete knowledge losing all of his sanity permanently. The only motivation to continue the exploration of these mysteries is that of



human curiosity; a desire to know the truth, regardless of the cost. This motivation is common to both the players of the game and the protagonists of the stories.

As mentioned before, actual confrontation with the awful beings of the Mythos can be extremely hazardous—even the least of the 'terrestrial' monsters being a fair match for the average single, armed adventurer. Greater horrors exist in the form of highly intelligent alien beings of terrible aspect and native dimensions outside our own, a circumstance that often renders them nearly immune to earthly weaponry. The most terrible entities include the Great Old Ones, extra-terrestrials of cosmic age and immense power, so awful that all one can hope to do is escape from them with some of his mind left intact. Direct conflict with the monsters of the Mythos is not only dangerous physically, but also psychologically as sanity losses, similar to those charged for gaining actual knowledge of the Mythos, are often suffered when facing these things. These lost

sanity points can be regained by defeating the being confronted, but this is not always possible and those who insist on continually trying to solve these adventures strictly by force will be short-lived. There is room—and a definite need—for the individual skilled in firearms as insane or otherwise devolved humans are often encountered within the course of an adventure; but unless the characters are backed up with a certain amount of appropriate knowledge and preparation, they will be ill-equipped to deal with the awesome, unfathomable horrors that usually lurk near the center of the mystery.

Lovecraft regarded his writings as excursions into what he called "cosmic horror" as opposed to the type exemplified by the term "Gothic horror." Although adventures involving werewolves, vampires, ghosts, and other such 'normal monsters' can and have been incorporated into *Call Of Cthulhu* adventures, the game is perhaps best when confining itself to exploring the particularly unique creations of H.P. Lovecraft and the growing number of writers who continue to contribute stories, ideas, and various gods and creatures to the Mythos. A confrontation with one of the more earthly and mundane creations of horror fiction might be frightening—or truly terrifying—but, in the tradition of this type of fiction, the adventurers may be expected to act in a heroic manner, destroying whatever great evil has confronted and threatened them. This is not so in *Call of Cthulhu*—the greatest of the beings of the Mythos are so powerful and so alien as to nearly transcend human understanding. They are certainly inimical to mankind, but distant, perhaps without any real conception of our existence at all. Additionally, it is difficult to appear heroic while running, screaming, from a dark, hidden hole in the side of a hill; or when discovered curled up in front of a decaying tomb, in a fetal position, drooling and babbling nonsense. Lovecraft's horrors are far stronger and less easily-faced than those monsters faced in the stories of many other authors.

Among HPL's numerous creations were the Deep Ones—scaled amphibious beings that live in offshore colonies, the most significant of these located on a dark reef off the coast of the decaying Massachusetts town of Innsmouth. The people of this town are possessed of blood tainted by that of a degenerate cult of Polynesians, brought back to this place decades ago by a local sea-captain who had made strange discoveries around the distant island of Ponape. As these individuals pass maturity they begin to develop the scales and gills of the aquatic Deep Ones, eventually returning to the sea where they may reside, without dying,

awaiting the time when the black city of R'lyeh will rise from the slime of the ocean's floor and dead Cthulhu will awake to stride forth once again. Lovecraft also wrote of the ghouls—dog-like beings that inhabit the older cemeteries of the world where their fetid and stinking tunnels lace the ground beneath the graves from which they obtain their unwholesome fare. He also wrote of the Old Ones who somehow, in a distant past, winged their way across the aether of space to arrive on the barren planet of Earth, here to begin the creation of a race of slave beasts and other life-forms which, through evolution, may have given rise to the human species. Dark gods, such as Nyarlathotep, have visited the Earth at different times and places, sometimes to head a cult in ancient Egypt in the form of Thoth, or another time in the guise of Satan, to persuade and lead the witch-cults that once proliferated in Europe; and still later, in the 20th century, where it is said that he has revealed certain 'secrets' to specific individuals—all in response to the wishes and desires of the blind god, Azathoth.

Lovecraft obtained much of his inspiration—and occasionally even a complete story—from exceptionally vivid dreams that he had been subject to ever since childhood. Beings such as the rubbery and faceless Nightgaunts

were the product of childhood nightmares while some adult, complete tales, such as the "Statement of Randolph Carter," came to him in his sleep. Before Lovecraft came to write the stories later known as the Cthulhu Mythos, he penned a series of tales dealing with his dreams finally culminating in a novel called *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*. In this story a sleeping Randolph Carter enters and explores the Dreamworld, a place wherein live many creatures of fantasy and myth. While exploring the darker corners of this land he encounters a number of the deities later made famous by the Cthulhu Mythos stories. The world of dreams has so far been only lightly explored in the *Call Of Cthulhu* game but Chaosium promises in the near future to produce a game—or supplement—that will allow adventurers to enter this enchanted and oftentimes nightmarish world.

H.P. Lovecraft, though perhaps still not as well known as other, more prolific writers, still stands as one of the major contributors to the body of weird fiction. Although the end of his life found him in poverty and near-obscure, his singular understanding of what may truly frighten an individual has influenced much of the horror fiction and film produced since his time. The novels of Stephen King, Peter Straub,

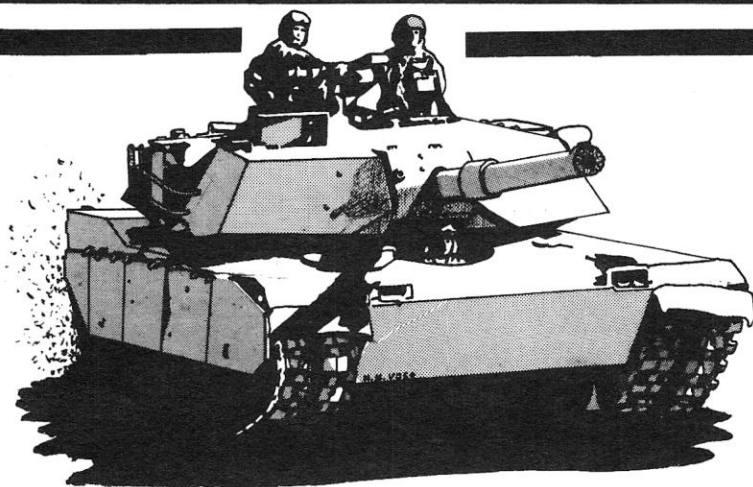
and others, along with such latter-day classic movies as *The Thing* and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, all owe much of the terror they convey to the original conceptions and unique viewpoint of Howard Phillips Lovecraft. □

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