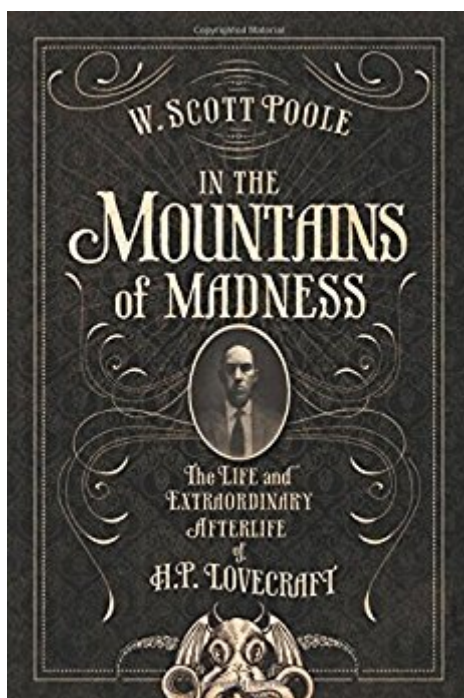


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In The Mountains Of Madness: The Life And Extraordinary Afterlife Of H.P. Lovecraft



Synopsis

In the Mountains of Madness interweaves the biography of the legendary writer with an exploration of Lovecraft as a phenomenon. It aims to explain this reclusive figure while also challenging some of the general views held by Lovecraft devotees, focusing specifically on the large cross-section of horror and science fiction fans who know Lovecraft through films, Role Playing Games, and video games directly influenced by his work but know little or nothing about him. More than a traditional biography, In The Mountains of Madness will place Lovecraft and his work in a cultural context, as an artist more in tune with our time than his own. Much of the literary work on Lovecraft tries to place him in relation to Poe or M.R. James or Arthur Machen; these ideas have little meaning for most contemporary readers. In his provocative new book, Poole reclaims the true essence of Lovecraft in relation to the comics of Joe Lansdale, the novels of Stephen King, and some of the biggest blockbuster films in contemporary America, proving the undying influence of this rare and significant figure.

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Customer Reviews

There seems to be an idea that what is needed is a Lovecraft biography aimed at the general public. Paul Roland tried it, in *The Curious Case of H. P. Lovecraft*, and made a hash of it. Charlotte Montague tried it, in *HP Lovecraft: The Mysterious Man Behind the Darkness*, and managed better, though still with more than a few flaws. Even S. T. Joshi, who wrote the definitive H. P. Lovecraft biography *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (Two Volumes) made a go at a "pop" biography, with *H. P. Lovecraft: Nightmare Countries* (The Master of Cosmic Horror). So what does W. Scott Poole have to offer? To be honest, I'm not sure. Poole has obviously put a reasonable amount of work into this, consulting various collections of Lovecraft's letters and other materials held in various university libraries, but it's still by and large a stripped-down version of Joshi's mammoth biography, only without citing all of its sources so you can't trace back any particular fact or quote unless you know where to look in the first place (the endnotes are woefully inadequate); Poole actually includes an entire chapterette on his sources which, for all that it includes many excellent critical sources, also includes utter tripe like Roland and Steadman's *H. P. Lovecraft and the Black Magickal Tradition: The Master of Horror's Influence on Modern Occultism*. Of the larger body of criticism on Lovecraft's life and work, Poole is notably ignorant - the two and half pages devoted to Lovecraft's sexuality would have benefited immeasurably if Poole had read *Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos*, for example. Poole's greatest contribution seems to be a deliberate effort to place Lovecraft in the context of his own time, and to address some of the materials and individuals he inspired. This is generally entertaining, and helps provide a bit of color which a dry distillation of Lovecraft's previous biographies might be missing; it continues after Lovecraft's death to follow briefly the life of R. H. Barlow, to describe how Lovecraft fandom spread and grew, how the fake Necronomicons were published and flourished - unnecessary, in a strict sense, but far from useless and fairly accurate. Poole's worst additions are his personal analyses and opinions, most of which are presented without much support, such as the suggestion that Lovecraft's marriage ended in part because Lovecraft's aunts discovered she was Jewish. This is not a statement in any way justified by any surviving letter or anecdote; certainly Sonia Davis, the former Mrs. Lovecraft, never mentioned anything of the sort. Is it bad? Yes. Certainly, it is better than Roland's, but that is damning with faint praise. Once again, I'm just struck as to wondering who the audience of this book is supposed to be - scholars and students would prefer Joshi's *I AM PROVIDENCE*, fans might prefer *LORD OF A VISIBLE WORLD* or *VISIONARY IN RESIDENCE*. The only people that would really buy this book are completionist collectors or those who don't know better - or, perhaps, just want a cheaper option than *I AM PROVIDENCE*. If

you find yourself in the latter category...buy a used copy of Joshi over a new copy of Poole.

While it is gratifying to see that the Old Gentleman from Providence has become popular enough to make even poorly researched and reasoned accounts of his life profitable, I see very little in Mr. Poole's book that is original. He has simply regurgitated what S. T. Joshi, and to a lesser extent L. Sprague de Camp, have written in previous biographies. He ignores a number of recent works of scholarship while apparently giving credence to pseudoscholarship on Lovecraft's relationship to the so-called "Magickal" tradition: something that he, as an avowed materialist, would have found ludicrous. There are a number of sloppy errors that could have easily been corrected, for instance reporting that the "long-lost" holograph manuscript for "The Whisperer in Darkness" was donated to the John Hay Library, whereas it was actually "The Shadow out of Time:" a story with a much-more convoluted textual history than "Whisperer." (WEIRD TALES published "Whisperer" without making editorial changes; ASTOUNDING STORIES, which published both "Shadow" and "At the Mountains of Madness," made unauthorized changes that in HPL's opinion ruined both stories.) Whenever Mr. Poole strays from the strict facts and interjects his personal opinions, he almost always fails to convince me that his opinion is anything other than poppycock. After reading Mr. Poole's effort, I can't say that he has made any contribution to Lovecraft scholarship. It is hack work pure and simple, intended only to make a quick buck. The best "popular" biography remains *H. P. Lovecraft: Nightmare Countries (The Master of Cosmic Horror)*, followed by *HP Lovecraft: The Mysterious Man Behind the Darkness*

Professor Poole has written one of the most readable and intelligent books on American literary culture since *LOVE AND DEATH IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL*. Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937), the focus of this knowledgeable and spot on study, was an important fiction writer of the period 1917-1937, a specialist in science fiction and horror stories, generally short in length, ranging from a few pages to around a hundred pages. But Lovecraft died at 46 without publishing a single book in his lifetime. The task of gathering and promoting the hundred odd tales, together with miscellaneous poems, essays, and journalism fell to a closely knit group of disciples lead by August Derleth, the Wandrei brothers, and the youthful Robert Bloch, who would later write the Psycho trilogy. Lovecraft eventually attained cult status becoming the darling of graphic novelists, a number of great directors, and such prominent authors as Michel Houellebecq and Stephen King. He also attracted the attention of critics like Edmund Wilson, who hated his work and tried to destroy his reputation, and the Chelsea House critic S T Joshi, who has devoted a good part of his life to the

promotion of Lovecraft's work, including his vast and wonderful correspondence. Today Lovecraft has achieved a degree of mainstream critical recognition, but a lot of his best work consists of ideas and sketches for things that were never fully realized by the master in his short career. Lovecraft's tales were just the beginning of an achievement that had to wait for other writers to bring to maturity, e g the Anne Rice of INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE, the Valis trilogy of Philip K Dick, and the early tales and novels of Stephen King. And perhaps this is the chief flaw, almost the only flaw, of Scott Poole's informal and discursive study of Lovecraft's life and work. Professor Poole sees more actualized achievement in the Lovecraft canon than is really there. Lovecraft, like John the Baptist, was a great inspirational catalyst and prophet. Jesus came after John and Rice and King came after Lovecraft. This said, Dr Poole has written a wonderful and charming interpretative biography which, in some ways, is the best of the many studies of Lovecraft. There is some political bias which finds its way into the book, but that is not inappropriate in a study of Lovecraft who was, in many ways, a cesspool of religious and racial bigotry. He was a nativist and anti semite who married a Russian immigrant who also happened to be Jewish. He was an atheist who had inspired visions of beings that often seemed supernatural. Yes, Lovecraft was not afraid to be controversial and certainly not afraid to contradict himself. A real artist is controversial. A real artist contradicts himself (see what Walt Whitman has to say about that). Dr Poole is more successful than most of his fellow Lovecraftians at capturing the flux and flow of the Lovecraft universe. This study seems to be the real McCoy and I think it will become a modern classic of culture criticism.

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