Lonesome Places Short Guide

Lonesome Places by August Derleth

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Except for one, the protagonists of the stories in Lonesome Places are male. Women are usually evil, often the cause of the evil in the story; when they are not, they are at best misled or they are the victims. And through his male protagonists, Derleth makes it clear that those who have imagination enough to believe in ghosts or other supernatural manifestations are superior beings, although frequently they are outsiders in their society. Often they are children; at other times they are outcasts; sometimes, however, they are clearly heroes in a world where others refuse to believe the evidence of their senses. In all cases, they know what others refuse to believe.

In three of the stories, "The Lonesome Place," "The Place in the Woods," and "A Room in a House," children know of danger at specific sites while their elders discount it. When the male children are grown and have themselves discounted their childhood knowledge, a tragic event calls their attention to it. In all three cases, the adults who remember their childhood knowledge take steps to rid the infected place of its psychic residue. In "Pikeman," "Sexton, Sexton, on the Wall," and "Potts' Triumph," people recognize the supernatural reality of strange events about them because they have especially active imaginations.

The ordinary, everyday people who live by the left sides of their brains cannot be convinced. Sometimes it is the imaginative person who suffers from his inability to communicate the danger; sometimes it is the person who discounts weird happenings; but never is the person who acknowledges the possibilities wrong.

Social Concerns

Lonesome Places is a collection of short fantasy and ghost fiction, many of which were first published in the magazine Weird Tales. Written as entertainment only, few of the stories espouse anything that could be considered a social cause, but careful observation reveals some concerns that must have been Derleth's. In two of the stories, Derleth's characters encounter "psychic residue," and in several others they are plagued with elements that could well be the same. "Psychic Residue" is the stuff of evil that can remain in a place if it is not cleaned out. Repeatedly, in Derleth's tales, warning signs of danger from another dimension are ignored until somebody dies an untimely death at which time city fathers or property owners "clean out" the area. Such is the case in "The Lonesome Place" in which children are plagued by a sense of danger adults find purely imaginary. Then the death of a child reminds city leaders of their own childhood when they "knew" the danger of the Lonesome Place; finally, the fearsome structures are razed and the area renewed. "A Room in a House" is similar, except the grown children remember the danger that lurked in a room used for punishment and clean out the room before a child dies.

In "The Closing Door," psychic residue from an unsolved murder is cleared by exorcism; and, in "The Slayer and the Slain," psychic residue from accounts of evil in a library archive is dealt with simply by not allowing researchers access to the archive after hours.

While psychic residue is always evil, ghosts by no means are. They usually have a purpose in appearing: to see that guilty parties in unsolved murders are punished, to see that property goes to its rightful owner, to bring together potential lovers destined for each other. In "Kingsridge 214," "House — with Ghost," and "The Disk Recorder," for example, unpunished murderers are brought to justice through the auspices of ghostly manifestations. In "The Ebony Stick," a ghost sees to it that her estate is rightfully divided among her heirs; and in "Twilight Play," "The Extra Child," and "The Dark Boy," ghosts assure that deserving people come to a satisfying denouement.

Techniques

The most prominent device by which Derleth tells his tales is the direct chronological narrative. His stories move directly from the earliest event in the story to the culmination, usually a surprise ending. By demanding nothing of his readers in the way of working out technical complications, Derleth assures the stories are read rapidly from beginning to end, thus assuring that the surprise ending has maximum effect. One endearing technique that he uses frequently is second-person commentary. Derleth addresses his audience as if he were speaking with them and calls their attention to their own similar experiences. In stories featuring imaginative children, for example, he calls on readers to remember when they "knew" the danger in "lonesome places" that adults could not fathom.

In a variation on this technique, Derleth asks readers of "The Slayers and the Slain," to reconsider why libraries have strict rules about permissible places and hours for research.

Themes

Derleth has two basic settings for his weird fiction. If the place is essentially good and pastoral, the story is set in the Sac Prairie region. While there may be an evil doer in their midst, the people in the rural regions are basically good and their intentions are just. It just takes a ghost, psychic residue, or essentially otherworldly events to set right a temporary evil manifestation.

When the place itself is bad, it is usually urban or suburban, and it is not even in the United States. Like many other writers of ghost stories, Derleth often sets his evil places in England, usually in the nineteenth-century fog of London. "Hallowe'en for Mr. Faulkner" is a prime example. An American researching his family tree in London finds himself at the center of the "Gunpowder Plot" and fills the role of his ancestor Guy Fawkes. In "Who Shall I Say Is Calling?" Count and Lady Dracula crash a party in a restored country estate somewhere in a vicinity unmistakably British. And the evil characters in "House — with Ghost" deliberately rent a haunted house from a firm in Piccadilly, and thus one of them finds that "ghosts" see to it that crimes do not go unpunished.

Literary Precedents

Although Derleth criticism never mentions precedents for Derleth's "Weird Stuff," the work of Edgar Allen Poe is obviously influential in all who practice the craft of ghost stories. Derleth has used Poe's declared principles of keeping his stories brief so that they can be read in a single sitting; often featuring the death of an attractive person (for Poe it was usually a beautiful woman; for Derleth more frequently a child); and using graphic description to set up a place where horror is likely to happen. The other logical precedent for Derleth's weird fiction is his mentor, H. P. Lovecraft. While Derleth wrote much in direct imitation of Lovecraft, critics agree that his mentorship worked best when Derleth wrote as himself in the Lovecraft tradition — as he did in Lonesome Places and the related titles listed below. While these are not precedents, it should be mentioned that Derleth has television "brothers" in the series created by Rod Serling and Alfred Hitchcock, and of course, Weird Tales throughout its history is the best source for other writers in the tradition of Derleth's weird fiction.

Related Titles

Related collections include Someone in the Dark, 1941; Something Near, 1945; The Mask of Cthulhu, based on H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu concept, 1958; Not Long for this World, 1948; Mr. George and Other Odd Persons, 1963; Harrigan's File, posthumous collection, 1975; Dwellers in Darkness, posthumous collection, 1976.

While all these titles are related in that they are collections of Derleth's ghost and fantasy fiction, there is no clear development from one to the next and no particular organizing principle that binds any one collection together.

While all the stories in Lonesome Places find characters discovering the supernatural in a lonesome place, characters in every story could be said to "dwell in darkness" just as characters in each story in Dwellers in Darkness also make their discoveries in lonesome places.

Derleth's collaborations with H. P. Lovecraft and Mark Schorer should be mentioned here. During the summer of 1931, Mark Schorer and Derleth rented a cabin together and collaborated on "weird tales" while they worked days at the local canning factory. Even holding a full-time job apiece, the two managed to produce about one tale a day, twenty-four of which were later published usually in Weird Tales. In 1966, Derleth collected the best of these stories in Colonel Markesan and Less Pleasant People. Derleth's weird "collaborations" with Lovecraft were somewhat different. After his mentor's death, Derleth used Lovecraft's notes and sometimes mere ideas to develop one novel, The Lurker at the Threshold, and several stories for which he always gave Lovecraft credit as collaborator.

The Lovecraft-Derleth stories were collected by Arkham House between 1957 and 1977.

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