The Thing That Walked on the Wind Short Guide

The Thing That Walked on the Wind 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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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

"The Thing That Walked on the Wind" is one of Derleth's early efforts to give shape and continuity to the Cthulhu Mythos, the term he invented for the mysterious, ominous universe invented by H. P. Lovecraft. The title of the story is itself evocative, hinting of the spectral and eldritch. The story tells of strange events in Manitoba, Canada, where the entire population of Stillwater disappears overnight.

The Royal Northwest Mounted Police are confounded by the mystery and embarrassed that they cannot find any of the townspeople. In "The Thing That Walked on the Wind," one police officer uncovers the sinister implications of a town that had worshiped an "elemental," a spirit of one of the forces of nature.

About the Author

August William Derleth was born in Sauk City, Wisconsin on February 24, 1909, to William Julius Derleth and Rose Louise (nee Volk) Derleth.

He attended school in Sauk City, was writing fiction by the age of thirteen, and began selling short stories to pulp magazines at the remarkably young age of fifteen. He became acquainted, probably while still in his teens, with H. P. Lovecraft, author of science fiction, supernatural tales, and horror stories. Lovecraft was very generous with his time and advice to young writers, and he helped Derleth become a thoroughly professional writer. Derleth was establishing himself by his early twenties as a master of several types of fiction, including the genre of supernatural horror for which young adult readers best know him today.

When he wrote "The Thing That Walked on the Wind," he sent a copy of the manuscript to Lovecraft, who thought it "remarkably good" and heartily approved of Derleth's borrowing elements from the older writer's own fiction.

Derleth received a bachelor's degree in 1930 (about the time he was writing "The Thing That Walked on the Wind") from the University of Wisconsin. He took a job as an associate editor at Fawcett Publications in Minneapolis in 1930, but he left the next year to become a professional writer, which he remained until his death. When Lovecraft died on March 15, 1937, Derleth began the task—a labor of friendship as well as authorial admiration—of organizing Lovecraft's writings for a collected edition. Publishers, however, were not interested in producing a massive collection of writings by someone who had been primarily a contributor to pulp magazines. Derleth and his friend Donald Wandrei then created Arkham House (in Sauk City) for the purpose of publishing Lovecraft's works. Derleth assumed full control when his partner left several years later, and he expanded its publications to other writers of supernatural fiction. Even though the first editions of Lovecraft's works did not sell well, Derleth himself became a famous writer, and as his fame grew so did interest in his friend Lovecraft. Derleth discovered two unpublished novels by Lovecraft: The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath (circa 1926), which he published in 1939, and The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (circa 1927), which he published in 1941 (revised and expanded in 1943; see separate entry, Vol. 5). Derleth's efforts helped Lovecraft reach a large and primarily young audience with whom his works have been popular ever since.

Derleth's interests were many and varied. He was the literary editor and a columnist for the Capital Times of Madison, Wisconsin. He was the director of the Sauk City Board of Education from 1937-1943, and he was a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin. He received a Guggenheim fellowship in 1938 to conduct research that resulted in The Sac Prairie Saga, a series of historical novels about Wisconsin. In addition to writing supernatural and historical fiction, he wrote mysteries, westerns, and biographies — some for adults, some for young adults, and some for children. He was also an avid collector of stamps and comics, and when he died he reputedly had the world's largest collection of comics. He married Sandra Evelyn Winters in 1953, and they were

divorced in 1959. This fairly late marriage for him produced one son and one daughter. When Derleth died on July 4, 1971, he was one of the most esteemed writers of mystery, horror and supernatural fiction, beloved by a large contingent of readers who had first read his writings for young people and then continued on to read his adult publications. All of his supernatural fiction continues to be popular among young adults.

Setting

The events of the story take place primarily in the towns of Navissa, where three people mysteriously fall from the sky, and Stillwater, a more remote town farther north, in the Canadian province of Manitoba. Passersby on a road near Stillwater have often remarked on strange nocturnal doings involving large bonfires in the forest close to the town. Then on February 25 a fierce, cold storm struck; a few days later a traveler noticed that the town was empty. The Navissa Daily reported, "It is said that no single inhabitant can be found in the village, and that travelers coming through the district can find no signs of anyone having left it." A year later, Constable Robert Norris is visiting Navissa when "the wind seemed to rise, and abruptly it grew strikingly cold." He looks up and "a black spot came hurtling down at me, and I ran back toward the house. Before I could reach it, however, I found my path blocked; before me, the figure of a man fell gently into the snow banks. I stopped, but before I could go to him, another form fell with equal softness on the other side of me and, lastly, a third form came down; but this form did not come gently—it was thrown to the earth with great force."

One of the important elements of the setting is its remoteness from large cities; singular events like people falling from the sky can happen with scarcely any witnesses. The setting also reflects Derleth's personal fascination with nature and wildlife, a passion which lead him to write numerous stories that dramatize the interaction between human beings and the natural world. Northern Manitoba towns far from the well-traveled main roads are both a perfect location for strange events to take place almost unwitnessed and an excellent arena for the confrontation between an elemental being who represents a force of nature and humans dwarfed by the world around them. In this second instance, the setting aids the symbolism because the story is about the helplessness of people when faced with furious natural powers such as the wind.

Social Sensitivity

The mentioning of pagan religious rites and human sacrifice in "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" may be bothersome to some, although such matters are a routine part of the tradition of supernatural fiction in English.

In"The Thing That Walked on the Wind," these themes heighten the tension of the story by emphasizing a threat posed to people by powerful forces poorly understood by human beings. The story also mentions religious rites, more the product of Derleth's imagination than reality, in parts of the world that seem remote from America. Although these religious practices may be cruel ones, they are shared in the story by the people of Stillwater and by implication other worshipers of elemental beings in North America; their primary purpose in the narrative is to create a background of arcane supernatural intrigue and to symbolically represent the universality of the power of the forces of nature.

Literary Qualities

Derleth uses sophisticated layers of narrative to create simultaneous impressions of immediate personal danger and coolly detached observation, and these qualities largely provide the sense of verisimilitude that is essential to the story's success. The use of a frame narrator is common in fiction; often, as in "The Thing That Walked on the Wind," the frame narrator is someone who can fill the gaps in a story after the main narrator—in this case Norris—has perished. Dalhousie provides the narrative perspective of the hard-nosed professional police officer who has discovered what caused the death of one of the men in his command. Derleth takes this basic frame structure and extends it. Dalhousie's narration also serves as a frame for the account by Peter Herrick, whose observations are essential to establishing the veracity of Norris's report. Norris himself becomes a frame narrator who offers his own keen observations that support the story related by Wentworth. Wentworth's bizarre account, the core of the explanation of the mystery of Stillwater, is therefore filtered through a rational observer, also an eyewitness to some of the bizarre events, and then filtered through Dalhousie, who offers a more detached view of the evidence. This enables Derleth to play with perceptions of truth; people might reasonably disbelieve the story of a nearly insane man, but they might be more inclined to believe a police officer who witnessed strange events. Even allowing for an inherent bias towards accepting police testimony, it is certainly possible that onlookers could believe that an officer like Norris was so close to the events and so in fear of his own life that he might have exaggerated his descriptions of what happened, but his division chief seems a very levelheaded man, and he found evidence to support the stories of both Wentworth and Norris. This stamp of truthfulness aids in the suspension of disbelief crucial for very deep involvement in and enjoyment of the menace, suspense, and danger created by the plot.

Themes and Characters

John Dalhousie, a division chief for the Royal Northwest Mounted Police and Constable Robert Norris's boss, is the "frame narrator"—a character whose opening and concluding comments frame the central story by putting its events in a larger, enclosing context. Dalhousie functions to explain to readers that Norris is a police officer investigating a mysterious case, to tell them that the mystery of Stillwater is true and embarrassing to the police, and to assure them that Norris is a conscientiously reliable policeman. Dalhousie also serves as the skeptical and level-headed observer whose observations seem honest and comforting. He is the wary watchman who represents our own skepticism and who provides a context of reason and stability in which people may seem to have control over their environment, in spite of the disquieting disorder of the story's plot.

Roberts Norris is the narrator of the central story. He tries to maintain the detached observational tone of a police officer who has a mystery to solve, even after three forms drop from the sky in front of him. The event is disturbing: "I looked up into the sky, and saw that many of the stars had been blotted out. Then a black spot came hurtling down at me . . ." We have here a case of the rational observer witnessing something irrational and then trying to tell his audience what he thought of it: "You can imagine my amazement. For a moment, I confess that I did not know just what to do. In that brief space of my hesitation, the sudden wind went down and the sharp cold gave way to the comparative mildness of the early evening."

The suspense of "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" is built through the gradual introduction of small details such as the air becoming mild after being cold; because Norris is a trained investigator the presentation of such details do not appear forced, they are what a police officer would routinely notice.

The three forms that drop from the sky are two men and a girl—she is the one who struck the ground hard. Norris has been visiting Dr. Jamison, and they bring the figures into Jamison's home. The girl is quickly identified as Irene Masitte, a resident of now-deserted Stillwater. She appears to have frozen to death. The other men take longer to identify but turn out to be two travelers who stopped for lodging at Stillwater on the day of the fateful storm. One of them, Wentworth, lapses in and out of lucidity. Norris, wanting to learn about the mystery of Stillwater, stays at his bedside and records what Wentworth says: "DeathWalker . . . God of the Winds, you who walk the wind . . . adoramus te . . .

adoramus te . . . adoramus te . . . Destroy these faithless ones, you who walk with death, you who pass above the earth, you who have vanquished the sky." Wentworth babbles about Baghdad, Tibet, Africa, and other places, providing details of religious rites that Norris later discovers are not to be found in published books. Wentworth's semi-lucid state enhances the suspense of the novel because he reveals just enough to indicate that something very weird has happened without being able to explain exactly

what he means.

He says that "a sacrifice must be, yes must be made . . . Chosen one, Irene."

Readers accustomed to supernatural fiction will pick up on this line; Irene was a human sacrifice! Norris finds as he pursues his investigation that "It seems that the inhabitants of Stillwater to a body performed a curious worship—not of any god we know, but of something they called an air elemental!" Derleth draws here on the world's mythologies; many, probably nearly all, have had traditions about spirits that represent aspects of nature such as wind, fire, earth, air, and water. It also significant that a story written in the early years of his development as a writer should feature an elemental, because elementals are subjects that will recur in many of his writings throughout his career as he shapes his supernatural writings into a coherent "mythos."

The elemental featured in "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" is a wind elemental, a supernatural being that controls winds and temperatures.

The being is "Ithaqua, the wind-walking elemental," also known as "DeathWalker or Wind-Walker." Derleth ties in Ithaqua with Lovecraft's stories by having Norris suggest that "something of incredible age . . . rose out of hidden vastness in the far north, from a frozen and impenetrable plateau up there"— meaning "Plateau of Leng, where the Ancient Ones once ruled." The Ancient Ones are the monstrous beings that in Lovecraft's stories once ruled the earth but whose evil practices caused the Elder Gods to drive them into another dimension. The Ancient Ones can return to earth if someone opens a door to their dimension—worshipers not only in Stillwater but in Tibet, Africa, and other isolated areas of the world have opened such dimensionaldoors for Wind-Walker by practicing religious rites that include human sacrifices: "The people of Stillwater made human sacrifices to their strange god!"

Wentworth and his companion slowly die, with Wentworth passing into permanent delirium. The not entirely credible explanation for this (and the story's only weakness) is that "a year with the Wind-Walker had so inured the men to cold, that warmth like ours affected them as extreme cold would affect us normal men."

How this would work is unexplained.

Norris pulls together what he can from Wentworth's testimony to try to fashion a coherent story of what happened. The people of Stillwater had apparently become hostile toward Wind-Walker, and afraid of WindWalker's revenge they decide to practice their rites of worship the day that Wentworth and his friend arrive at the inn for lodging. Irene, the daughter of the innkeeper, begs them to help her escape because she is to be killed in a religious ritual. As they flee down a nearby trail, they are snatched up .

Then "there emerged from Wentworth's distorted speech a graphic and terrible picture of a giant monstrosity that came into the village from the forest, sweeping the people into the sky, seeking them out, one by one."

The menace becomes a personal one for Norris when, during a lucid moment, Wentworth says, "You saw the thing that walked on the wind? . . .

Then He will return for you, for none can see Him and escape." Derleth here ties together the broad idea of a natural world vastly more powerful than human beings with the immediate concerns of his main character.

We all know that human beings outside must suffer the vagaries of the weather—cold and wind may chill anyone to the bone—and now all the forces of nature as symbolically concentrated in Wind-Walker become focused on Norris. The fate of Norris in this context represents what almost always happens to people who do not take the vast powers of nature seriously: he is swept away by the wind.

Norris's investigation, according to the frame narration of John Dalhousie, is continued by Peter Herrick, who discovers ". . . in a line with the wandering footsteps of the three travelers"—Wentworth, his friend, and Irene —"a huge imprint, closely resembling the foot of a man— but certainly a giant—which appears to have been made by an unbelievably large thing, and the foot, though like that of a man, must have been webbed!" When Norris's body is discovered later, Dalhousie takes an airplane to Navissa: "As I flew over the spot where the body was found, I saw far away on either side, deep depressions in the snow. I have no doubt what they were." He also finds artifacts in Norris's pockets that show that he had traveled to very remote places around the world. The story thus concludes with concrete evidence of the universality and power of the wind.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" nightmarish? Will you sleep well even though you have read what is a frightful story?

2. What aspects of "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" resemble elements of dreams? Why would these dream-elements be in "The Thing That Walked on the Wind"?

3. How does Derleth try to help you keep track of the story's different narrators? Which narrator is most believable?

4. Why does Dr. Jamison not tell more people what he knows about Stillwater?

5. In what ways does Wind-Walker represent the forces of nature?

6. Why is Irene dead but the two men alive when they fall to earth?

7. Does Norris react in a realistic way to what he sees and hears?

8. Could Dalhousie have made the whole story up? Would he have reason to?

9. What does Wind-Walker look like? Would this enable him to travel all over the world and not be recognized?

10. Whose testimony is most important: that of Dalhousie, Norris, Jamison, Wentworth, or Herrick?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are elementals? What religions are they a part of? What are the variations of the wind elemental in different cultures?

2. Are there any groups of people in the United States or Canada that worship forces of nature? Who are they?

What are their beliefs? What are their religious rites?

3. Have there ever been instances of entire villages or towns of people disappearing in North America? If you find one, give an account of what people know of its disappearance. (Hint: There was a seventeenth-century colony whose entire population disappeared. You many find other such instances by emphasizing frontier settlements.)

4. What are the aspects of "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" that Derleth derived from Lovecraft? What Lovecraft stories resemble "The Thing That Walked on the Wind"? Does Derleth slavishly follow Lovecraft's lead, or does he create his own brand of fiction in "The Thing That Walked on the Wind"?

5. Why would Lovecraft admire "The Thing That Walked on the Wind"? Identify those aspects of the story of which he would have approved and explain why he would have liked them.

6. Do nature beings like Wind-Walker show up in fiction by authors other than Derleth and Lovecraft? If you identify such an author, explain how he or she presented elemental beings and compare that presentation with how Derleth depicts them. (You may find mention of such writers in Lovecraft's 1927 book Supernatural Horror in Literature.)

7. Are elemental beings always malign in literature? Do they always demand ritualistic sacrifices? Are they always remote and unknowable?

8. According to Derleth and Lovecraft's writings, what is the history of the Ancient Ones on earth? How are they related to the Elder Gods? How are they related to humanity?

9. Do Canadians have any folk tales about mysterious beings living in the far north? What are these stories? Are there any from Manitoba?

10. How does the Plateau of Leng figure in other stories by Derleth?

Does it appear in anything written by Lovecraft?

11. When one writes a story imitating another writer's work, it is called a pastiche. Writing a pastiche can be fun.

Write a story about Wind-Walker or another elemental that would be an Ancient One like Wind-Walker.

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Related Titles

Derleth wrote a great deal of fiction that fits within the realm of the Cthulhu Mythos. The first collection of his Cthulhu Mythos short fiction was Mask of Cthulhu (1958). The Trail of Cthulhu (1962) is a collection of short fiction featuring Dr. Laban Shrewsbury. Previously uncollected Cthulhu Mythos short fiction and all the stories from the Mask of Cthulhu and The Trail of Cthulhu were included in The Cthulhu Mythos (1997). "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" appears in this compilation. The story collections The Survivor and Others (1957) and The Watcher Out of Time and Others (1974) include Derleth's completions of stories begun but not finished by Lovecraft and stories based on fragments by Lovecraft. The novel The Lurker at the Threshold (1945) derives from two fragments by Lovecraft.

Derleth sought to give form and consistency to the frightful universe created by Lovecraft, and in this he differed markedly from the older author. Lovecraft sought to reveal a universe that was indifferent to human beings, a universe in which human accomplishments and suffering were largely inconsequential and irrelevant in the grand order of things. In his work, the Ancient Ones and other supernatural beings care little about people; we are like bugs to most of them. Furthermore, their thoughts and desires are so alien to human beings that to share either would drive a person insane. Derleth, on the other hand, viewed the universe as one defined by a conflict between good and evil, perhaps a reflection of his Roman Catholic beliefs. Though confused disorder in Lovecraft's work is part of the point he wishes to make, it did not suit Derleth, who saw the universe as orderly; thus it is he who creates a mythos, an ordered arrangement of figures and events that create a history of conflict pitting good against evil. In Derleth's version of the mythos, human beings are still small and usually insignificant, but they are part of a vast fabric of conflict in which they may sometimes choose sides.

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