# The Whippoorwills in the Hills Short Guide

## The Whippoorwills in the Hills 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". 

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". 

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# Overview

Abel Harrop, a loner neither close to his family nor any neighboring farmers, lives in an isolated farmhouse in Harrop's Pocket without electricity and with an old partyline telephone. When Harrop suddenly disappears, those first on the scene are perplexed because they can find no signs of preparation for his departure. Indeed, what evidence there is suggests a hasty exit. A book is even open on a table in the dining room he had turned into a study, as if he had been in the middle of reading it when he left. The lamp he had been reading by seems to have burned out on its own after his disappearance. His cousin Dan, who had sometimes played with Abel at the farmhouse years before when they were children, comes to stay at Harrop's Pocket to try to discover what happened to the vanished Abel. The sheriff's department is both baffled and embarrassed by their inability to find any clues to Abel Harrop's whereabouts. The neighboring farmers are hostile and want Abel's cousin to go away.

They even imply that Abel was responsible for a couple of mysterious deaths prior to his leaving.

# 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, wrote fiction by the age of thirteen, sold short stories to pulp magazines at the remarkably young age of fifteen, and, while probably still in his teens, became acquainted with H. P. Lovecraft, author of science fiction and works of horror and the supernatural. Lovecraft was very generous with his time and advice to young writers, and he helped Derleth become a completely competent professional writer. Derleth had begun to establish himself in his early twenties as a master of several different genres of fiction, including that of supernatural horror for which young adult readers best know him today. Derleth sent a copy of his short story "The Thing That Walked on the Wind" 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 from the University of Wisconsin. He took a job the same year as an associate editor at Fawcett Publications in Minneapolis, but he left the job in 1931 to become primarily a professional writer, which he remained until his death. When Lovecraft died on March 15, 1937, Derleth began the task of organizing Lovecraft's writings for a collected edition; his labor of friendship as well as admiration eventually had important results for both writers. Since publishers were not interested in putting out a massive collection of writings by someone who had been primarily a pulp magazine contributor, Derleth and his friend Donald Wandrei created Arkham House (in Sauk City) for the purpose of publishing Lovecraft's works. When his partner left the firm after a few years, Derleth assumed full control and expanded its publications to include works by 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 DreamQuest 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). Derleth's Arkham House publications helped Lovecraft gradually reach a large, primarily young readership, a group with which he has 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. In 1938, he received a Guggenheim fellowship 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 renowned as an avid collector of stamps and comics, and when he died he reputedly had the world's largest collection of comics.

He married relatively late in life, wedding Sandra Evelyn Winters in 1953. They had a son and daughter before they divorced in 1959. Derleth died on July 4,1971, a beloved

figure among science ficton, horror, supernatural, and mystery writers. He is still much read by a large audience whose members often have grown up reading his books for young people and then continued on to read his publications for adults. His supernatural fiction is especially popular with young adults.

# Setting

The setting of "The Whippoorwills in the Hills," typical territory for one of Derleth's supernatural tales, is a rural New England where people speak an archaic diction, as in "him as was Abel Harrop, was took off by Them from Aoutside. He called 'em an' They come." Abel Harrop's farmhouse is nestled among some hills in a hollow called Harrop's Pocket, with the nearest neighbor more than a mile away over a hill and down a ridge. Abel's property is itself a bit unusual; it may once have been a farm, but Abel plainly did no farming and kept no livestock. The farmhouse's dining room has been converted into a study and "was filled with books—on crude, home-made shelves, on boxes, chairs, a secretaire, and a table. There were even piles of them on the floor, and one book lay open on the table, just the way it had lain when my cousin disappeared." According to the sheriff's office, "nothing had been disturbed." Upstairs between stacks of boxes, facing a window with a broken pane, is a chair with an odd pile of clothes, as if "somebody had been sitting there and just been pulled out of his clothes, as if he had been sucked out."

Aylesbury, the town nearest Harrop's Pocket, is where Abel Harrop made some purchases before he disappeared. It is also where sheriff's officers come from when they go to the farms near Harrop's Pocket to investigate the bizarre occurrence there, but the Harrop house, where Abel's cousin is looking for scant comfort, is miles away.

He is there without electricity, he has only lamps to stave off the dark, and his only weapon for defense is a club Abel kept underneath his bed.

# Social Sensitivity

Derleth's depiction of external and internal evil accords well with Christian teachings and is unlikely to cause fear and trembling to any but a reader already deranged.

The story offers mystery more than dread, and its fantasy world is more fun than frightening. This fantasy realm also harbors pagan and non-Christian elements. The success of H. P. Lovecraft's stories that began the Cthulhu Mythos, expanded on by Derleth and others, depends in part on animistic religious beliefs, spiritual perceptions practiced in some form by most past cultures at some point in their development. Animism holds that natural phenomena such as the wind or fire—as well as animals, plants, and inanimate objects— may have spirits, and it also posits that the universe has many free floating spirits that can sometimes be accessed by human beings. Humans are insignificant in animistic beliefs, about as important as ants or snails in the great doings of the universe, and the spirits of the universe hold little interest in the doings of humanity. Lovecraft uses these animistic beliefs to create a hairs-rising-onthe-back-of-the-neck tone for his supernatural stories. He often puts—as Derleth does in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills"—modern and civilized Western minds in fatal opposition with the powers of the cosmos; he especially draws on science to create credible backgrounds for his works.

Derleth's views, more comfortable for modern readers, make his stories a little more tame but also more polished than Lovecraft's stories because their narratives are more logically organized. As "The Whippoorwills in the Hills" exemplifies, Derleth holds his characters personally accountable for their actions; blaming outside forces is no excuse for committing crimes. Separating the good people from the evil people can be difficult and sometimes unsettling in the worlds created by Lovecraft and Derleth, but there is a moral center to "The Whippoorwills in the Hills" and most of Derleth's other works in which murder and other criminal acts are plainly wrong. Dan's rationalizations seem pathetic and are unacceptable in the world of the novelette.

# Literary Qualities

"The Whippoorwills in the Hills" is what in literary terms is called an apology, which means it is a formal justification of actions taken by someone. In this case it is the firstperson narrator who becomes locked into a logical justification of what he has done, meaning that he must detail events as objectively as he can in an order that will be readily understood by his audience. The apology is doomed to fail if his readers cannot follow his logic. In "The Whippoorwills in the Hills," the apology is meant to be ironic; readers are supposed to draw conclusions other than those that the narrator draws because we see different meanings in the events he describes than he does.

This irony helps build the tension of the novelette because there remains until the conclusion the possibility that the narrator will break from his preconceived notions about his neighbors and about the supernatural and take action to save himself.

That Dan fails to take such action does not mean that the tale is unsatisfying; events pursue their own logic in spite of Dan's misinterpretations, and the conclusion logically resolves the issues raised by the events.

There is also comfort in knowing that the agents of civilization, the sheriff's officers, are able to impose order on the disorder created by Dan. His boast that the jail cannot hold him seems empty because if he could leave, why does he remain where he will be imprisoned and punished? This question is not really a question since the answer has never been in doubt: when jailed he will remain in jail. Readers see that Dan, even at the end of the story, still refuses to acknowledge the reality around him.

# Themes and Characters

Dan Harrop, cousin of the vanished Abel Harrop, is the protagonist and first-person narrator of the story. His narrative seems written to explain why he came to Harrop's Pocket and to describe the events that transpired after he arrived there. He notes that "my cousin Abel had always been somewhat apart from the rest of the family" and that "he had had a reputation since his adolescence for being queer." Dan Harrop comes to investigate his cousin's disappearance not out of love or familial affection but as "a matter of principle." He hopes to find out what happened to Abel and then leave.

He discovers that Abel "had bought five pounds of coffee, ten pounds of sugar, some wire, and a large amount of netting" a few days before someone realized that he had disappeared. Judging by the amount of coffee and sugar that had been used, Abel probably had disappeared the day after he made his purchase. The netting is a puzzle since it appears not to have been put to use.

It was a kind of netting used to catch fish in rivers, but Abel may have had other quarry in mind.

Dan eavesdrops on conversations on his party-line telephone and learns that "my cousin had apparently not been very well liked, having a surly nature," although he insists that Abel was gentle and would not hurt people or animals. Despite this opinion, his neighbors were afraid of Abel, thinking that he was doing something dark and supernatural, and his cousin reasons that "out of such primitive fear could very easily rise the decision to kill in order to escape that fear." We therefore have the situation of a modern man of rational thought who places himself in the middle of superstitious people in order to solve a mystery involving a relative he has seen little of since childhood. Dan has a rational mind capable of ordered thought and logical deduction, as in the above conclusion that fear could motivate someone to kill another.

Dan's voice is the voice of reason for nearly all the story; he is rational while others are not. This in itself is a clue as to what has and will happen.

A classic method to create suspense is to place a cool-thinking and determined character like Dan Harrop under intensifying stress. The stress should suggest danger or at least something of extraordinary unpleasantness, and the character should show enough resolve that readers realize he will stick around when his life is put at risk as events turn from ominous to dire. In Dan's case, his uncomfortable situation becomes decidedly unusual his first night at his cousin's house: "Beginning a half hour after sundown, in mid-twilight, there was such a calling of whippoorwills as I have never heard before." Whippoorwills fly in from the hills to sit on house, sheds, and ground.

Their cries keep Dan up all night. "I used to think that the call of the whippoorwill was a sweetly nostalgic sound, but never again," he says.

The secondary characters in the tale serve primarily to heighten the isolation of Dan and to introduce menacing ideas such as "Somebody's a-goin' to die—an' soon."

Those familiar with the Cthulhu Mythos will recognize what is meant; others will grasp the idea when it is explained that "they're a-waitin' to ketch somebody's soul."

Whippoorwills are harbingers of death, and they try to catch human souls before they can escape. Their presence serves to heighten suspense and give the plot a sense of direction—Dan's survival becomes the focus.

The most important secondary figure is Amos Whateley (one of several references to H. P. Lovecraft's 1928 story "The Dunwich Horror" in which the Whateley family appears). Amos knows about the Ancient Ones and about Abel Harrop's books. "I tell ye to burn 'em—burn 'em all before it's too late!," he cries when Dan questions him. Amos explains that "him as was Abel Harrop, was took off by Them from Aoutside. He called 'em an' They come." Amos serves to give the menace around Dan some shape because he knows what the threat is, but the tale might be less fun to read if Amos told all, so he issues dark warnings about matters best left unknown.

Amos has also given Dan's investigation a direction; Dan has learned that the books may hold clues about his cousin's whereabouts. He examines the open book left by Abel and realizes that "the manuscript, which had no title, was bound in human skin." This unpleasant revelation leads to the discovery that he can almost read the parts of it that were written in English in a very awkward hand. There are passages about Yogge-Sothothe, one of the Ancient Ones. He struggles with a hard passage that his cousin had apparently marked; he makes no sense of it, "then I slowly read it aloud"— one of the great taboos of supernatural fiction, but one which protagonists seem doomed to repeat. This is the key moment in the development of Dan's characterization. A frequent sign of good characterization is a character's growth as he or she is tested with new situations and ordeals.

Sometimes the character does not grow but, as in Dan's case, deteriorates under the heightened pressures. As if the nightly cries of the whippoorwills were not enough to drive a sane person crazy, "some malign force seemed to possess the entire valley." Dan feels surrounded by evil from the moment he reads the passage aloud, but he is more than surrounded, and even worse awaits.

In addition to the whippoorwills, he hears at night an ominous chanting—"Llllll-nglui, nnnnn-lagl, fhtagn-nah, ai Yog-Sothoth!"—to which the whippoorwills respond "in rhythmic song." Increasing Dan's disquiet is the belief that "these sounds came from somewhere in the house." This aspect of Dan's experiences develops the novelette's theme of two forms of evil. Dan recognizes one, but he fails to recognize the other, which leads to mayhem and murder. Dan is so exhausted by lack of sleep that he is eventually able to fall asleep in spite of his fears and the noise, and his dreams feature "earthshaking steps moving into the heavens" and "titanic and illimitable depths." These are visions of another reality apart from everyday human experience, but he does not realize this because the dreams are within him.

Dan, as a representative twentieth-century thinker, is quick to suspect external evil like murdering neighbors or kidnappers. He also has little patience for "there's some things better left alone." When he hears that "the death of Laban Hough's wife was laid at my cousin's door," he logically suspects that this belief could be a motivation for murder. Abel could have been a victim of the "primitive superstition which haunted the waking and sleeping hours of these remote and earthy people," which he attributes to "their limited capacity for thinking." He is so confident in his superior, educated, and logical way of thinking that he believes his neighbor's suspicions are products of their ignorance, because Abel "had always been essentially gentle." He rejects ideas that are outside of his external, objective experience.

Part of Derleth's achievement in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills" is his success at keeping the focus of the narrative on Dan's objective reality, even while building the details that support the tale's conclusion.

Dan objectifies his inner experience when he declares, "It was that night, the night of the full moon, that the horror struck the Pocket." This statement amounts to a grossly warped perception of the nature of events since Dan has actually taken an interior part of his personal experience and insisted that it has come from outside of him. He is unwittingly projecting inner evil outward, though he thinks the evil is completely external. His discovery of what are likely Abel's clothes is a good piece of misdirection by Derleth —"somebody had been sitting there and just been pulled out of his clothes, as if he had been sucked out"— that is, some external force had been applied to Abel.

Dan soon finds that the "cacophonous chorus which invaded and tore every fibre of my being" is too much for him to control.

He takes his cousin's club, dashes outside, and bludgeons as many whippoorwills as he can. The majority of them have made their nests on the hillsides facing Harrop's Pocket, indicating that Harrop's Pocket is the focus of death. The next day one of his neighbors is found dead and mutilated, like some cows drained of blood nearby, and "the graound's all tore up, like as if thar was a fight." Dan's neighbors seem sure that they know who is responsible, but they must be wrong by rational views of the evidence; even so, they suspect Dan. One of them quotes Amos Whateley as saying, "Ain't nothin' es bad es a fool whut don't know whut he's got!"

A weaker man or one with less physical boldness might leave when his neighbors, strangers all, believe that he is a murderer, but Dan insists that "opposition has always strengthened me." His persistent rationalizing of external experience prevents him from understanding what is actually going on. When evidence builds in support of a supernatural explanation—evidence that readers are likely to have noticed—he insists that "there is a perverted kind of logic to all superstition." Dan, in other words, denies the logic of his own experience, calling it perverted as he clings to the rationalism which has been pounded by days and nights of bizarre happenings that have no place in his organized and logical mind.

All evidence by the end of the story points to Dan as a murderer, but he denies what has happened even though caught in the act. The chanting of wickedness was not only in the house and not only in his bedroom; it had by stealth even entered his body. Dan has internalized evil by inviting it to take possession of himself, though he refuses to accept the idea of an internal spiritual evil that is the companion or correlative of the external evil he willingly acknowledges. He declares, "I was a Chosen One, proud to serve the Ancient Ones."

Dan, still not understanding that the evil he sought was within him, insists that outside forces were responsible for the crimes he has been caught committing: "It was the whippoorwills, the incessantly calling whippoorwills, the damnable, lurking whippoorwills waiting out there, the whippoorwills, the whippoorwills in the hills ... " In the context of "The Whippoorwills in the Hills," the rational mind must not be wedded to the logical analysis of external events; it must be adaptable and able to look inward—to be introspective—if it is to survive events outside its experience.

# Topics for Discussion

1. What do Dan's nightmares signify? Does he understand them? Do you understand them better than he does? Why would Derleth present nightmares that readers could interpret differently from the character who has them?

2. Is "The Whippoorwills in the Hills" itself dreamlike? What qualities does it have that are like dreams?

3. How surprising is the ending? Did Derleth manage to keep you expecting a different ending until the conclusion?

What techniques did he use to try to misdirect you?

4. Why does Amos Whateley not come out and tell Dan what he thinks has been happening? Why is he sorry that he told Dan what little he did when he realizes that Dan has not read the books and is unfamiliar with the supernatural lore they contain?

5. How important are the whippoorwills to the success of the plot? How do they affect events?

6. Why does Dan deny his guilt even when he knows that he was caught in the act? Who is at fault?

7. Are Dan's responses to his experiences reasonable? Are they like what most intelligent, sensible people would have?

8. If Dan is insane, how much of his story should we believe?

9. What did Dan's reading aloud from the book do?

10. One of Dan's neighbors takes her children and herself away to Boston to escape the evil in Harrop's Pocket, what Dan calls "the horror." Why do the other neighbors also not run away?

11. Are there really matters that human beings should not know?

12. Does Dan approach his investigation in a logical way? Is his approach familiar to you from other sources? (Hint to teachers: think of police procedurals where officers verify that a crime has been committed, examine the physical evidence, methodically search for witnesses, and take testimony from those who might know something about the case at hand.)

13. If you found a book bound in human skin, would you read it? Would you read it if the circumstances were the same for you as they are for Dan? Will you sometimes read aloud a passage in a book you have trouble understanding? Is what Dan does understandable?

14. Dan mentions a great city and that there are servants who go into the woods to find food for their master. Is that what Dan does? How would the food get to his master?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare "The Whippoorwills in the Hills" to H. P. Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror." Which characters do the stories have in common? What is similar about their settings? Does Derleth use his setting in the same way Lovecraft does? Which is the better story?

2. How closely does Dan's psychology approximate that of a serial murderer? Are his rationalizations typical?

3. Derleth alludes to Lovecraft stories in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills." For instance, the window in the attic is a reference to a particular story, and the Whateleys allude to another story. What are the stories that Derleth alludes to? Why would he drop such allusions into his narrative?

4. Explain who the figure Yogge-Sothoth is and how Lovecraft and Derleth developed him in their fiction.

5. What is the significance of books in Derleth's Cthulhu Mythos fiction? Do they appear often? In what works are they important? How do they figure in plots? What do they symbolize? Are they good or evil?

6. Is Derleth's depiction of rural New England diction authentic? Where might such speech be found? What does Derleth get right? What does he get wrong? Be sure to give examples that illustrate what you mean.

7. Many writers for young adults include references in their fiction to books and authors that they liked when they were young adults, just as Derleth does in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills." Who are the authors that Derleth mentions in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills"? How might they have inspired stories like "The Whippoorwills in the Hills"?

8. Another approach to topic number seven would be to select one of the authors mentioned in the novelette, read some of his works, and then describe what sort of writer he was.

9. A great monolithic city is mentioned in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills." Where else in Derleth's writings is this city mentioned? What city is it? Who lives in it?

10. Write the story of "The Whippoorwills in the Hills" from the point of view of a sheriff's officer. What would he or she investigate? When would he or she know that a crime has been committed?

How would he or she gather evidence?

Who would be the suspects? What action would he or she take to solve the mystery? What obstacles would he or she need to overcome?

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# Related Titles

Derleth wrote a great deal of fiction in the Cthulhu Mythos, and his first collection of stories in this realm was the 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 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 Lurker at the Threshold (1945) is a novel derived from two Lovecraft fragments.

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 cosmos of uncaring chaos so indifferent to man that human values, sufferings, and accomplishments were inconsequential and irrelevant to the universe-atlarge. His work shows the Ancient Ones and other supernatural beings scarcely caring at all about humanity; we are like bugs to most of them. Furthermore, the thoughts and desires of the Ancient Ones are so alien to humans that to share either would drive a person insane. Derleth, in contrast, viewed the universe as one defined by a conflict between good and evil, perhaps a reflection of his Roman Catholic beliefs. Where confused disorder in Lovecraft's work is part of the point he strives 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. Human beings, in Derleth's version of the mythos, are still pygmy creatures of little universal significance, but they at least are part of a vast fabric of conflict in which they may sometimes choose sides. Hence, in "The Whippoorwills in the Hills," there are implied relationships between humans and the Ancient Ones, and some people seem to have an understanding of what the Ancient Ones are like and what they want.

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**Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction**

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP



Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996