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James Machin

WEIRD FICTION

IN BRITAIN 1880–1939

Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Weird fiction as both a term and genre brings with it a fair amount of baggage, much of it American. It immediately evokes a certain creepy yet popular aesthetic from 1920s and 1930s America, where authors such as Clarke Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and, of course, H. P. Lovecraft, not only loom large² but were often admirers of and even collaborators with one another.³ This is, of course, a flawed assumption. All manner of authors dabbled in the genre, beyond these usual suspects and outsiders. For example, Tennessee Williams cut his teeth on the lurid short story, “The Vengeance of Nictoris,” first published in a 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*, the pulp magazine often seen as one of the key publications of the sub-genre.

Moreover, as this new book by James Machin demonstrates, weird fiction was neither exclusively American, nor even a particularly American movement. Indeed, it is easy to ‘recognise’ what Weird is, but like its latter-day cousin, ‘hauntology,’ it is harder to properly and formally define it the more one tries to.⁴ Both, after all, concern themselves with ‘reality,’ and how tenuous it is the closer we study it, hinting at far darker possibilities as a result. Weird fiction is, rather, something felt, rather than understood. One knows

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2 Christopher Sharett, “The Haunter of the Dark: H. P. Lovecraft and Modern Horror Cinema,” *Cinéaste* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 24.

3 Tyler L. Wolanin, “New Deal Politics in the Correspondence of H. P. Lovecraft,” *Lovecraft Annual* 7 (2013): 15.

4 Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 19.

precisely when one is reading it, but defining it poses an altogether more difficult challenge. Machin himself makes this clear in his usage of the term, covering texts that can be read as ‘weird fiction,’ as opposed to one with an absolutely concrete definition.

Spanning the period between 1880 and 1939, the book covers often neglected yet influential British weird fiction authors, such as William Hope Hodgson, whose “Carnacki the Ghost-Finder” stories (first collected in part during 1913, and in full in 1948) and the novel *The House on the Borderlands* (1908) were praised (and copied) by Lovecraft himself.⁵ We are also introduced to authors such as the Welsh mystic Arthur Machen (1863–1947), whose novel *The Great God Pan* (1890) was not only weird fiction in tone and feel,⁶ in that it combined both the uncanny and the transgressive, but was quite deliberately so, as its authorial tone and atmosphere demonstrate. Tellingly, it was published in the year of Lovecraft’s birth; Machen himself outlived Lovecraft by a decade, yet his works now languish in relative obscurity.⁷

However, Machen was not the only British author to choose this path, not least because the Weird is, in the words of China Miéville, a “radicalized sublime backwash,”⁸ or as Machin himself puts it, “a mode rather than a genre.”⁹ Indeed, Machin argues, weird fiction’s heyday wasn’t the 1920s and 1930s, but the fin de siècle and pre-World War One era. This was in turn a product of changes and shifts in publishing and printing technology, and the spread of mass literacy, circumventing ever more censorious paid library systems, in favour of cheap magazines and novels. Here, shock and scandal sold, the line between the Weird and the Decadent remaining stubbornly blurred, which also risked censure in an age of moral panics typified by the Wilde trial. Authors responded by developing a style which walked a tightrope, or, perhaps, tentacle, balanced uneasily between artistic and commercial impulses. Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, Arnold Bennett and Arthur Conan Doyle, amongst others, wrote in the middle of this tension. As Machin rightly argues, the Weird was therefore a mode of writing rather than a genre.

Machin also argues to great effect that the post-World War One period, which took the lives of Hodgson and Saki, and brutalised the likes of Kenneth Grahame and Tolkien in terms of loss, battle stress and PTSD, did not dim British weird fiction, but fuelled it, in part due to the trauma of war, and

5 Timothy S. Murphy, “Labor of the Weird: William Hope Hodgson’s Fantastic Materialism,” *Science Fiction Studies* 46, no. 2 (July 2019): 236.

6 Gabriel Lovatt, “From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen’s ‘The Great God Pan’ and ‘The Inmost Light,’” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 1 (2016): 32.

7 Damien G. Walter, “Machen Is the Forgotten Father of Weird Fiction,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

8 China Miéville, “Weird Fiction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould (London: Routledge, 2009), 511.

9 Machin, 16.

in part the rapid urbanisation of post-war Britain creating a newfound sense of alienation. This marks British weird fiction apart from the American experience, which did not suffer so grievously during the Great War (Lovecraft, for example, never made it past his medical, despite attempts to enlist in the trenches).¹⁰ Walter De La Mare's bleak short story, "Seaton's Aunt" (1923), with its decadence and personal horror, is a case in point: skewering the pre-War era and yet traumatised by it. The career of John Buchan, who wrote "The Thirty-Nine Steps" in 1915, but also weird short stories such as 1932's "The Gap in the Curtain," Machin argues, also typifies these many tensions, producing a weird fiction that stopped short of the mode/genre's excesses. There is a paradoxical anxiety at the heart of his work, where civilisation is both too fragile and yet its collapse is yearned for.¹¹

Machin's argument concludes at the point where European decadence and the American sense of 'weird fiction' collided, fittingly, in the pages of *Weird Tales*. Here, in this and other such publications, success of sorts could still be found as a writer, but respectability was now out of the question, as demonstrated by Lovecraft alienating mainstream publisher Alfred A. Knopf, amongst others,¹² with his needy antics.

The problem here, of course, is that Machin falls into the trap outlined above, where all discussion of weird fiction leads to the American experience, even though, as his book argues, this is an over-simplification. A valid point is made about how *Weird Tales* tried to claim credit for saving weird fiction from oblivion, despite evidence to the contrary, alongside presumptuous claims to the 'throne' of Edgar Allen Poe: a *Goth*, certainly, but no *Weird-o*. Yet this still amounts to an unfortunate tangent.

The other flaw in Machin's argument is that he ends his timeline in 1939, just when the topic gets interesting, and, as Machin himself says, "the New Weird" has taken hold in recent years. This is not for any reason other than, in the author's words, the late 30s are seen as "the culmination of the 'high phase' of weird fiction," though this is not fully qualified as a concept, or a cut-off point.¹³ Indeed, weird fiction in the British Isles never went away, as the novels of John Wyndam, Michael Moorcock, Clive Barker and, more recently, Mieville himself make only too clear. *Doctor Who*, the *New Worlds* magazine, the *2000 AD* comic, and even movements towards literary and mainstream respectability, personified by J. G. Ballard and Doris Lessing, can all be considered weird fiction too.

10 Robert H. Waugh, "'The Rats in the Walls,' the Rats in the Trenches," *Lovecraft Annual* 2 (2008): 153–54.

11 In that sense, it has parallels to modern 'Zombie Apocalypse' narratives.

12 David E. Schultz, "Whaddy Make Them Eyes at Me For?" *Lovecraft Annual* 12 (2018): 51–64.

13 Machin, 40.

This is not to reject the key argument altogether. It is, after all, based in Machin's PhD thesis, and so, by necessity, reflects a narrower focus, though whether notions of aesthetic or 'feel' ended around this point, or lingered—and indeed, continue to linger—afterwards is not made clear. As said, it also makes a compelling case for British weird fiction to be considered in its own right. And yet, even here, a Lovecraft-shaped shadow falls over the enterprise. Weird fiction scholars will find much here to consider, but also a few too many loose ends, or perhaps, writhing tendrils. □

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