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The Cthulhu Casebooks: Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities by James Lovegrove.

Titan Books, London, 2017. 459pp.

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James Lovegrove's *The Cthulhu Casebooks: Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities* (2017) continues the Weird/detective fiction mash-up of pairing Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson with Lovecraftian ultra-strangeness. However, while juggling both the horrors beyond all human conception and the cocaine-addled logical deductions of Holmes, Lovegrove's book struggles to really do justice to either. Instead, what we are left with is a collection of pastiches that is more distracting and disastrous to fans of either Holmesian or Cthulhian *mythos*. Beyond merely organizational and tonal issues in his text, Lovegrove also inherits the same cultural backwardness of the authors he attempts to ventriloquize. In a market that is packed with Lovecraftian interpretations and reformulations, Lovegrove's *Miskatonic Monstrosities* does little beyond recapitulating the rhetoric of abhorrent racism and colonialism featured within the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century canons.

However, to give Lovegrove some credit, the two authors he fuses requires an extensive knowledge and command of an array of literary themes and tropes. In this way, *Miskatonic Monstrosities* shines. Clearly Lovegrove is an avid reader of both Doyle and H. P. Lovecraft and convincingly capitalizes on that knowledge, allowing the two universes to collide in a way that seems so natural. It is an ambitious project that will, at the end of the day, span across three books. The premise of Watson and Holmes secreting off to battle and match wits with Outer and Elder gods is fantastic and blends great with the undercurrent of occultism that is on the periphery of canonical Sherlock Holmes. This is to say that at the onset I was primed to like the mash-up, hoping to add this to a collection of other standalone Lovecraft adaptations, but as I continued past the found-narrative preface and the early chapters introducing the mystery of Zachariah Conroy, my anticipation quickly fell away to bored confusion.

Organizationally the plot of *Miskatonic Monstrosities* falls apart in the last third of the novel when Watson and Holmes discover and read Conroy's journal. While this is a nice nod, in theory, to Lovecraft's penchant for plots-within-plots, it seems stretched and oddly placed, distracting from the tension that peaks right before in Watson and Holmes's case. As a reader, I had more trouble caring about Watson and Holmes when presented with a hundred and sixty-three-page side story. Yet, this digression is where some of the best Lovecraftian moments happen, and I could see this being a fantastic standalone short story. But as it upsets the main narrative, readers may be less receptive and more critical in the shift from the hybrid voice of Doyle-Lovecraft to pure Lovecraft. Once we get back to the reveal of the text—the return of Sherlock's nemesis—we have lost the tension of Watson and Holmes awaiting their doom, chained next to a half-eaten corpse and sleeping ghoul. Instead of playing off that tension to amplify the ending twist (which has its own problems), Lovegrove interrupts it so that by the time we get back on track our attention is fractured.

While Lovegrove's own need to peddle the Lovecraft-found-document trope does disrupt, it is perhaps the jarring banality of the eldritch horrors that ruins the point and power of such literary borrowing. Instead of blissfully being unable to correlate the contents of our minds, as Lovecraft often intends through pseudo-descriptions of cosmic beings, readers of *Miskatonic Monstrosities* are rewarded with easily digestible explanations of the Weird. From the diadem that Holmes and Watson use to control their slithering underlings and casually speaking unutterable tongues, to the literal death of the Crawling Chaos itself—Nyarlathotep—in favor of a certain professor to not only ascend to godhood, but still retain the mortal infatuation with his nemesis, readers continually have the shambling terrors of *mythos* laid bare to them. The result from such literary alchemy is often bemused resignation. By the ending explanation of the events, the puppet master of true cosmic horror is nothing more than the very knowable and predictable human-like villain. Instead of taking advantage of the mystery, the sheer unknowability of Lovecraft's deep forms of terror, Lovegrove cements humanity at the center of a trite cosmic battle against good and evil. The game is predictably afoot.

Yet, readers could excuse such revision if Lovegrove was completely engaged in overhauling the entire Doyle-Lovecraft canon. This is far from the case, however, as Lovegrove seems to transplant into the twenty-first century maligned racial and colonial philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth. Case in point is a troubling scene describing Watson's moment of tyrannical power and desire to rule over a nest of snake men, deemed "Irregulars," to the point of submission "as [is done] with a horse" (137). Who then better to guide and goad but the English war-veteran doctor with his "judicious application of whip, spur and rein" (137)? To credit Lovegrove, Watson does relent and begrudgingly frees those "Irregulars" in a scene that plays out the entire history of British colonialism in mere paragraphs. Perhaps, then, this was a minor moment to demonstrate the sickness of the old rhetoric. And I am sure that would be the case if such instances only happened once throughout the text. Sadly, however, Lovegrove seems to revisit the politics of the past, often without much commentary, knowingly or

otherwise creating characters in the same vein as Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook" (1927). From maligned and cultist Sikhs, to the brain transplantation of a white racist into a black body, turning the innocent exterior into a form of performative monstrosity who must be destroyed by the "Red Indians," Lovegrove perhaps copies too much from those he wishes to emulate without enough of an overt purpose to showcase just how backward and harmful these ideas and ideologies were.

"'Well, old friend,'" Holmes asks Watson after reading Conroy's journal, "'What do you make of it?'" (Lovegrove 405). Tellingly, Watson answers honestly and in a brief moment of what I would isolate as metacommentary with his literary critique: "A grueling read . . . Gruesome, too. There are passages where, in spite of Conroy's somewhat florid and ungainly turn of phrase, the vivid horror of the scenes depicted gave me chills" (405). And this is pretty much where I fall as a reader and lover of Lovecraftian fictions and retellings. *Miskatonic Monstrosities* is at times compelling and the tone does indeed often capture the feeling of reading Conan Doyle's prose. As Holmes pesters Watson shortly after this critique of literary style and not simply content, I, too, am obliged to follow the good detective's command. My issues with the novel are not solely with its style, but rather its content. James Lovegrove's project is ambitious, and perhaps the final installment of *The Cthulhu Casebooks* will revise the devotion to both the style and *ethos* of long-dead authors. I hope that this is the case. Yet, if this middle text is a marker of what is to follow, then I can honestly say it might be better to leave such literary alchemy to those who may be more fit for such experimentation.

About the Author

Kyle Brett is a PhD candidate at Lehigh University studying nineteenth-century American literature and Transatlantic Romanticism. His dissertation project focuses on sentimental writers' engagement in the nineteenth-century literary market. His other critical interests are American horror and weird fiction in relationship to traditional Gothic conventions.