SGF
Studies in Gothic Fiction

Winter Tide, *Tor*, 2017, 368pp and *Deep Root*, *Tor*, 2018, 352pp, by Ruthanna Emrys

by Richard Mooney

Book Review DOI: 10.18573/sgf.55

Acceptance date: 29 June 2021

Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

ISSN: 2156-2407

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Lovecraftian themes have constantly resurfaced since the original writer's impact on Weird Fiction in the 1920s and 30s. H. P. Lovecraft has inspired video games and prog-rock albums, modern silent films, and novels beyond count as other writers dive eagerly head first into the madness inducing scope of cosmic apathy for humanity. Among those inspired is Washington D. C.'s Ruthanna Emrys and her *The Innsmouth Legacy* (2017) series. What separates her from many of her sycophantic peers is her desire to acknowledge the inherently racist, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic works of Lovecraft and subvert them into a tale of acceptance. Emrys sees the flaws (and there are many) in Lovecraft, where others simply see an opportunity to shove nameless tentacled shapes into their story. Both books of her series so far, entitled *Winter Tide* (2017) and *Deep Roots* (2018) respectively, create a *niche* voice for the "outsider" that Lovecraft regarded with such disgust and tried to convince us all to fear.

Of all the Lovecraftian homages that perforate the modern creative sphere, I feel like Lovecraft himself would despise Enrys's reworking of his mythos tales the most. Considering Lovecraft's attitudes, that is quite the moral victory. It has been refreshing to read a Lovecraftian story that does not have the tortured male antagonist or be devoid of women in any meaningful capacity. Instead Emrys presents a diverse (and predominantly female) cast led by female protagonist Aphra Marsh. The story takes one of Lovecraft's most popular and influential stories, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1931), and turns it around so that, rather than acting as a telescope allowing us to glimpse the darkness and cruelty aeons away in impossible cosmic plains, it is in fact a mirror, reflecting the very darkness and cruelty of humanity.

The inspiration for Emrys is written clear as day on the opening page of Lovecraft's famous story which discusses the government raids on the seemingly suspicious eponymous town of Innsmouth, as:

> Keener news-followers, however, wondered at the prodigious number of arrests, the abnormally large force of men used in making them, and the secrecy surrounding the disposal of the prisoners. No trials, or even definite charges, were reported; nor were any of the captives seen thereafter in the regular gaols of the nation. (504)

Instead of looking at the people of Innsmouth as monsters that should be feared or despised, something Lovecraft was very prone to when he eluded to race, Emrys gives the spotlight to them, showing the side never given a voice. Aphra Marsh and her brother Caleb are the only two survivors of the government raids on Innsmouth and are now trying to live their own lives, but in an ironic twist of fate, are asked by the very same government that annexed them, to help protect the United States.

While the story and concept are fascinating, the writing sadly lets the novels down at times. The narrative, told in two forms: the first being Marsh's first-person narrative, the second being the third-person omniscient narrator, varies wildly in style. Marsh's description of the scenes are conveyed in a very down to earth manner, which when coupled with her own feminist insights, creates a refreshingly blunt style. But in the third-person, we see Emrys try and capture some of the dense literary style of Lovecraft himself. It is these scenes which tend to remove the reader from the narrative.

The first book of the series is weaker than its predecessor in most departments. It has enough substance to ignore its lack of style, but even at that, the plotting is amateurish. The first novel involves Marsh and her brother returning to Miskatonic University to try and figure out if Russian spies have discovered an Eldritch spell of body swapping. Set against a backdrop of Cold War paranoia, such a prospect would be considered a genuine threat to national security. Yet such promise is not built upon as new narrative threads join the tapestry. No body swapping takes place, no Russian spies press themselves upon the plot, and national security is never threatened. Mrs. Trumbull, a professor taken over by an ancient cosmic cataloguer, known as the "Yith," is the only example of one conscious taking over another, but it becomes clear that this is unconnected to the plot, merely an extremely lucky coincidence. Another character introduced is Audrey, a University student who becomes Marsh's apprentice of sorts only to discover she is the descendent of the "Mad Ones Under the Earth." Again, a pleasant coincidence. Sub-plots add more meat to the bones of the story, but the skeleton has to be able to stand on its own, and in *Winter Tide,* it does not.

The reason it falls so short of an interesting story is despite the threat of body swapping, the Yith, and even mention of the "Mad ones under the Earth," the majority of the novel is spent accessing books confiscated from Innsmouth during the government raids. Countless scenes are spent in the libraries and the Halls of the University. It took 150 pages before anything of significance happens, when Aphra returns to Innsmouth for the first time since the raids and meets her grandfather, the amphibious humanoid known by Lovecraft fans as "Deep Ones." At this point I straightened up, ready for the plot to take off, but after a heartfelt reunion, lots of superfluous dialogue, Aphra was back in the

library. My frustration with the plot in the first novel was summed up by a moment near the end where all the reading of diaries and textbooks reveals a potential lead on a Russian who has learned the body swapping spell. Rather than take this information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – who are employing her in an uneasy alliance – she decides it is better left unsaid as it may potentially escalate tensions between her community and the United States' government if the latter believes that the Russians are already aware of the spell. By this point in the book, Aphra has developed a longing to rebuild Innsmouth and is willing to sacrifice the mission to protect her new agenda. But in doing so it essentially makes the plot the novel begins with obsolete. A bold move indeed, and one that does not pay off for me personally due to how the narrative was built so strongly around this early plot device.

However, these narrative threads carry through into the second novel, *Deep Roots*, which despite taking place in a totally different setting and under entirely different circumstances does actually follow through and build upon the narrative the story begins to build. Aphra, now fully committed to rebuilding Innsmouth, is searching for those who might have some connection to the now desolate coastal town. Her search takes her to 1960s New York, normally a common literary setting trope, but one that works well after the dull scenery of Arkham and Massachusetts in general. Here she does in fact encounter some distant relatives, as well as a Lovecraftian faction, the Mi-Go.

Although the two books in the series vary in quality, one thing strongly unites them: the acceptance of the Other and the fallacy of unbiased views towards them. Aphra is an outsider to humans as she belongs to the Deep Ones – who, in an almost Kafkaesque way, will eventually transform into amphibious creatures and return to their true home beneath the sea. Until that time comes, however, she must deal with the prejudices of "men of the land" (139). In her motley group of followers, friends, and allies we have: Neko, who met Aphra in an internment camp not because she was an Innsmouth resident, but because she was a Japanese native living in post-World War Two United States; Audrey, a young headstrong woman with a bloodline that relates her to the enigmatic "Mad Ones under the Earth"; and a professor whose body was the host of the Yith throughout most of the first novel. As "outsiders," they stand in opposition to the insiders, who the book foregrounds as being white men. From the Dean of Miskatonic University to its students, the novels are not shy in showing these groups to be worse than the entities which humanity does not understand.

Most men in the series beyond the inner circle of Marsh are portrayed as sexist on varying levels, but always plain to see. The Dean of Miskatonic University, a relatively powerful man believes "study interferes with the development of feminine faculties" (29) while introducing Mrs Trumbull. Some way through the second novel, a chance meeting with a character's brother sees his "eyes linger on each of us – no. On the women with a little frown completing his assessment of each" (15). Such quips perforate the book and although set in the 1950s where attitudes towards women were far less progressive than today, they highlight the subtle sexism women still deal with in everyday situations. The truth of this notion is more horrifying than depictions of Lovecraftian races beyond our understanding.

Emrys's handling of the Other in the second book is what really showed off the improvement of plotting as Marsh presents an incredible bias towards the Mi-Go because of the Deep One's historical distaste for them. She reveals herself to be as bad as those who showed her disdain, but instead of religiously sticking to that prejudice towards the Mi-Go, she instead learns about them, understands their differing perspective, and comes to accept them for who they are. This gradual enlightenment is expertly played out by Emrys across the novel and the competition between the Deep ones and the Mi-Go for the future of Innsmouth residents worked so much better as a main narrative for the other subplots to weave around. Though there are still some scenes dominated by dialogue that neither progress the plot or give particularly interesting insights to characters or the world they inhabit. Emrys has definitely grown as a writer to handle the plotting much better.

Taken collectively, Ruthanna Emrys's *Innsmouth Legacy* novels present us with a pleasant alternative to Lovecraft, one devoid of the toxicity that makes his presence in mainstream culture so problematic for the twenty-first century. Her handling of interesting characters and well-established lore in an entirely new direction have made her one to watch out for in the future. Her feminist and anti-patriarchal leanings drape over the novel as a defiant stand against Lovecraft and gives us hope for the future, even if we ourselves have no eternal city beneath the waves that calls to us like Aphra Marsh does.

Works Cited

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About the author:

Richard Mooney is a writer who graduated from the University of Glasgow with a Master's Degree in Literature with Honours. He is best known for writing the comic *Daughter of Titan*.