

GOTHIC NATURE



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Mike Ashley, ed., *From the Depths and Other Strange Tales of the Sea*

(London: British Library Publishing, 2019)

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From the chthonic monsters of H.P. Lovecraft's 'Dagon' (1919) to the monstrous mermaids of Mira Grant's *Into the Drowning Deep* (2017), the sea may be ecohorror's most enduring symbol. The oceans surround us with our own anxieties, resurfacing the consequences of plastic pollution, Holocene extinction and global heating for us to confront. 'There is so much that is both frightening and awesome about the oceans of the world', explains editor Mike Ashley, 'Little wonder that over the years there have been stories of monsters, ghost ships, and the plain inexplicable at sea' (p. 7).

Published as a part of the British Library's *Tales of the Weird* series, *From the Depths and Other Strange Tales of the Sea* (2019) collects fifteen ocean-centric stories. Ranging chronologically from 1891 to 1932, these tales resonate with contemporary ecological concerns, such as Darwinian evolutionary theory and the consequences of global warfare. While most of the stories share numerous formal similarities, including the liberal use of nautical jargon and (often multiple) framing narratives, *From the Depths* demonstrates a range of approaches towards ecohorror. From the hostile environment of the Sargasso Sea to the undiscovered creatures dwelling beneath the waves, Ashley's collection shows the malleability and legacy of the sea as a narrative tool that challenges human exceptionalism.

The opening tales, Albert R. Wetjen's 'The Ship of Silence' (1932) and Morgan Robertson's 'From the Darkness and the Depths' (1913), imagine what lurks upon the unexplored ocean bed. Providing only slight suggestions of 'something which could not be shot!' (p. 31), Wetjen adopts a restrained approach to the trope of the sea monster. In contrast, Robertson revels in his invisible, vampiric, giant squid, as it slowly lays claim to a ship's crew. Although the latter story is bogged down by excessive scientific spiel, these works challenge humanity's conception of itself as alpha predator.

Published in 1908, both 'Sargasso' by Ward Muir and 'Held by the Sargasso Sea' by Frank H. Shaw engage with the contemporary mythology of the Sargasso Sea, a supposedly

haunted seascape where a vast collection of weed trapped any sailors unfortunate enough to cross its path. Echoing Wetjen, Shaw opts for suggestion over showing, teasing the descent of a motley crew of mutineers entrapped within the weeds. Much more effective, however, is Muir's haunting epistolary tale, as the weeds lay home to something far greater. Playing to Darwinian notions of evolution, in these stories the human protagonists become trapped in an environment within which they are ill adapted to survive.

Offering contrasting images of Nature's power, 'The High Seas' (1918) by Elinor Mordaunt and 'No Ships Pass' (1932) by Lady Eleanor Smith, imagine the divinely violent alongside the insidiously serene. Coming late in the collection, these tales refreshingly digress from what begins to stagnate as a well-trod narrative formula. Indeed, together they show the tonal variance possible in manifestations of ecohorror.

Echoing the story of Cain and Abel, Mordaunt's tale is a family drama about two feuding, sea-faring brothers. One brother possesses murderous intent, and the sea eventually smites him for his sin, 'the immense bulk of the incoming wave [...] like the hand of God outstretching above him, dropping to snatch' (p. 264). 'No Ships Pass', meanwhile, resonates with the television series *Lost* (2004-2010), as a moving mirage island rescues the shipwrecked and entraps them within purgatory. Despite the sinister undertones of their prison, the landscape remains Edenic, as 'the island's beauty seemed more exotic than the radiant plumage of the parakeets darting to and fro' (p. 295).

Hybridising the natural with the material, 'The Floating Forest' (1909) by Herman Scheffauer and 'The Ship that Died' (1919) by John Gilbert unfix the security of man-made constructs. In Scheffauer's tale, a lost ship named the *Serapis* plays host to a vast woodland, 'like some ancient barge of state, a fragment torn from the rich, primeval forest' (p. 117). Meanwhile, in 'The Ship that Died', the man-made *Carnivordshire* succumbs to rapid natural decay: 'the sagging deck slowly forced the boat apart and she flattened out upon the water in a great mass of scum' (p. 211).

A remarkable number of these stories present the sea as a haunted place, laying host to human secrets. Examples include: Rupert Chesterton's 'The Black Bell Buoy' (1907), William Hope Hodgson's 'The Mystery of the Waterlogged Ships' (1911), James Francis Dwyer's 'The Murdered Ships' (1918), and the titular 'From the Depths' (1920) by F. Britten Austin. In these

various tales, scuppered ships and betrayed crews linger in the waters, seeking revenge from beneath the waves. Far from swallowing humanity's sins, however, the sea makes them visible for all to see.

Izola Forrester's 'Devereux's Last Smoke' (1907), meanwhile, offers a more traditional ghost story. A widow's husband allows her to pursue her true love on the condition that she wear violet for a year following his death. Breaking this vow, Devereux comes back to collect his wife. However, despite this simplicity, the sea remains omnipresent, housing a haunting fog 'so thick on deck you couldn't see your own hand' (p. 220). Lastly, Morgan Burke's 'The Soul-Saver' (1926) echoes Lovecraft's 'The Rats in the Walls' (1924), showing that escaping the sea does not mean that you escape the nonhuman's wrath. A murderous captain finds the souls of his victims become enclosed within little white mice.

From the Depths may favour tales of the ship to tales of the sea, but it offers an interesting insight into how this symbol was interpreted in ecohorror fiction of the 1890s to 1930s. Favouring 'lesser known stories, covering the whole range of the mysteries of the sea', Ashley's collection introduces a variety of lesser-known and underappreciated authors (p. 7). Indeed, despite the century-long gap, these stories often prove anticipatory of the ecological concerns of today, echoing ongoing ecocritical discussions surrounding nonhuman agency and anthropocentrism. For a scholar of ecohorror, this collection provides a valuable touchstone and comparison point to the fiction of today.