

Challenges and New Directions in Adaptation Studies.” ---: 1-16

Elliott, Kamilla. “Theorizing Adaptations/Adapting Theories.” ---: 19-45.

Hanssen, Eirik Frisvold. “Imaginary Museums: André Bazin on Adaptation.” ---: 133-153.

Ingvarsson, Jonas. “Literature Through Radio: Distance and Silence in The War of the Worlds, 1938/1898.” ---: 265-286.

Derie, Bobby. *Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos*. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2014. Print.

One could be forgiven for not taking this book seriously based on the cover, which is a humorous comic of a Lovecraftian horror flashing a matronly woman and her small dog. This would be a grave error. Despite its cover, this work is a serious examination of the sexual elements of the Cthulhu Mythos—the universe and pantheon of gods created mainly by Howard Phillips Lovecraft. In doing so, Bobby Derie takes on an ambitious project, spanning the work of many different authors across multiple media. His aim is genealogical; he traces contemporary echoes of Lovecraftian literary elements to their source, both in Lovecraft himself and the stories that he wrote, then explores the myriad ways that later authors have appropriated, changed, and challenged Lovecraft’s fictional universe. Many have written about Lovecraft, but few have tied his work to the extensive secondary mythos literature and none have taken such a serious look at the sexual aspects of these works.

Derie opens his work by considering how Lovecraft’s life and attitudes may have influenced his fiction. Although one can generally separate the author from the literature, Lovecraft’s life has spawned considerable

speculation. He was married for only two years, and some speculated that he may have been a closeted homosexual or that he had syphilis. Derie refutes these allegations in great detail and explains that one inspiration for this book was the errors of previous biographies (187). Drawing on an impressive array of letters, essays, and interviews, Derie lays the foundation for the book by examining Lovecraft's attitudes on such issues as love, sex, pornography, homosexuality, and miscegenation. In doing so, he argues against the prevailing attitude that Lovecraft was a prude, suggesting that he was simply conforming to the constraints of publishing in the 1920s and 1930s. Still, he was a product of his time and viewed homosexuality as a perversion, although Derie notes that this seemed to have little influence on his friendships with homosexual writers. He also suggests that some of Lovecraft's more troubling personal views, such as his racism and xenophobia, are more than simply personal beliefs; they play a central role in his fiction and help to explain his use of cosmic miscegenation as a plot device.

The next section examines the sexual aspects of Lovecraft's fiction which, with some exceptions, is often limited to miscegenation between supernatural entities and humans. After all, most of the sex in Lovecraft's work is largely implied. Derie provides close readings of the stories and then breaks down specific themes, such as sexual symbolism, the role of women in Lovecraft's fiction, and the gender and sexual orientation of the alien beings. This section also provides important literary context for Lovecraft's work by examining vital influences such as Arthur Machen and Edgar Allen Poe. Derie suggests that Poe's tales "are likely to have influenced Lovecraft's use of sex and gender" and provided him with the twin narrative structure and the "metaphor of the ancestral manse, often in neglect or ruined" (59). Machen, he argues, was a stronger influence, with the figure of Pan in "The Great God Pan" directly or indirectly inspiring Lovecraft's *Yog-Sothoth*, *Shub-Niggurath*, and *Yig* (63) and "The White

People” laying the foundation for Lovecraft’s stories of monstrous hybrids “of daemonic paternity” and inspiring the character of Nyarlathotep (65).

Derie then moves beyond Lovecraft into the secondary mythos fiction by Lovecraft’s contemporaries and collaborators, as well as those who have simply adopted elements of the mythos. Shifts in the publishing environment, as well as society in general, allowed for more sexually adventurous works as niche presses began publishing mythos literature without the restrictions of outlets like *Weird Tales* or Arkham House. As such, these works were often much more explicit while still drawing on themes established by Lovecraft, such as miscegenation, the pitfalls of seeking for forbidden knowledge, and his pantheon of gods and occult tomes. Many of the names covered—Ramsey Campbell, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, August Derleth—would be familiar to those with an interest in what many have referred to as “weird fiction,” along with lesser known figures. There are also nods to works that specifically explore the potential connection of sex and the mythos, such as *Eldritch Blue*, *Cthulhurotica*, and the *Cthulhu Sex* magazine. In this section, Derie weaves together various strands of the mythos that can sometimes be disjointed and even contradictory. He demonstrates how various authors have paid homage to Lovecraft through pastiches of his work while others challenged Lovecraft’s attitudes and style and pushed sexual themes well beyond where Lovecraft would have been able or willing to go. Some of these challenges include Caitlín R. Kiernan’s use of strong female protagonists, including lesbian characters, in contrast to Lovecraft’s androcentric storytelling, authors in *Cthulhu Sex* who emphasized the sensuality of sexual union with otherworldly beings rather than the horror, and those who explore themes of rape, incest, necrophilia, pedophilia, and other paraphilias that would have certainly been censored by Lovecraft and his editors. Derie leaves no stone unturned as he draws on an exhaustive range of sources, including stories of limited circulation and works created with different pen names. Rather than making a specific

argument about these stories, most of which he mentions only in passing, Derie seems content to create the definitive bibliography of sexual themes in the Cthulhu mythos.

Finally, Derie examines how the mythos has infiltrated art, comics, film, anime, and even occult practices. The discussion of how Lovecraft borrowed from the occult and how several occultists, such as Kenneth Grant, Donald Tyson, and others, have borrowed from Lovecraft was particularly interesting and unexpected. Other elements, such as Lovecraft-inspired webcomics and films, get much less discussion, but Derie still manages to cover a wide range of works ranging from the well known to the obscure.

For the serious Lovecraft scholar, the overall value is to be found in his close reading of Lovecraft's stories and the biographical sketch found in the first half of the book. The second half of the book seems geared more toward those interested in Lovecraftian literature generally, functioning more as a starting point for the interested reader in contrast to the detailed criticism of the first half. The extensive breadth of works covered in the second half is, paradoxically, one limitation of this book. Derie moves through the material at such a breakneck pace that it would likely be difficult for those less familiar with the literature to follow his arguments. As someone who has read all of Lovecraft's fiction and a considerable amount of the secondary mythos literature, I still found myself wishing for at least a short synopsis of some of the stories under consideration. Moreover, because he covers such a vast array of literature, he sometimes glosses over important authors, although this is something that Derie readily acknowledges (289). Authors must sometimes sacrifice depth for breadth, and Derie chose to focus deeply on Lovecraft while covering the secondary literature as broadly as possible, trying to give each author's work at least a mention. As such, this is a work best suited for scholars already familiar with the broader Cthulhu Mythos beyond Lovecraft's work.

Even with these limitations, this is an excellent exploration of sexuality in the Cthulhu Mythos that demonstrates just how far Lovecraft's tentacles have reached into literature, film, and popular culture in general. I can see this becoming the definitive work on sex in Lovecraft's literature and a starting point for all future explorations of sex in the mythos overall as the literature continues to expand and evolve. This book is essential reading for those studying Lovecraft's works and, because of the broad influence of Lovecraft's work, researchers in horror studies will likewise find this work useful.

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Stevens, J. Richard. *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015. Print.

With *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*, author J. Richard Stevens offers a comprehensive and altogether definitive look at the history of Marvel Comics, though one that often overshadows his analysis of his primary subject. Stevens sets out to discuss the transformations the character of Captain America has undergone since his first appearance in March 1941, and how these changes subsequently reflect America's shifting ideals and values. Stevens begins his examination by correctly observing that the struggle over popular culture often reflects an attempt to renegotiate prevailing ideologies, which mass culture frequently simplifies for easier consumption by members of the working class. Perhaps more than any other mass culture text, superheroes exemplify this idea; they reflect