

# INTRODUCTION

## Ann and Jeff VanderMeer

A 'weird tale', as defined by H. P. Lovecraft in his nonfiction writings and given early sanctuary within the pages of magazines like *Weird Tales* (est. 1923) is a story that has a supernatural element but does not fall into the category of traditional ghost story or Gothic tale, both popular in the 1800s. As Lovecraft wrote in 1927, the weird tale 'has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains'. Instead, it represents the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane – a 'certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread' or 'malign and particular suspension or defeat of ... fixed laws of Nature' – through fiction that comes from the more unsettling, shadowy side of the fantastical tradition.

With unease and the temporary abolition of the rational, can also come the strangely beautiful, intertwined with terror. Reverie or epiphany, yes, but *dark* reverie or epiphany – not the lightness of 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' but the weight of, for example, seminal early twentieth-century weird writer and artist Alfred Kubin's sensation of being 'overcome ... by a dark power that conjured up before my mind strange creatures, houses, landscapes, grotesque and frightful situations.' The Weird can be transformative – sometimes literally – entertaining monsters while not always seeing them as monstrous. It strives for a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood, and acknowledges failure as sign and symbol of our limitations.

Usually, the characters in weird fiction have either entered into a place unfamiliar to most of us, or have received such hints of the unusual that they become obsessed with the weird. Whether *It* exists or not, they have fallen into dialogue with *It*; they may pull back from the abyss, they may decide to *unsee* what they saw, but still they *saw* it. Such stories can be terrifying, but do not always rely upon the scare central to horror fiction, nor the twist ending common to, for example, classic *Twilight Zone* episodes. They remain universal because they entertain while also expressing our own dissatisfaction with, and uncertainty about,

reality. In a context wherein the monsters stand first for themselves, their visceral physicality convinces us, at least while reading, of the existence of The Weird.

As a twentieth and twenty-first century art form the story of The Weird is the story of the refinement (and destabilization) of supernatural fiction within an established framework but also of the welcome contamination of that fiction by the influence of other traditions, some only peripherally connected to the fantastic. The Weird, in a modern vernacular, has also come to mean fiction in which some other element, like weird ritual or the science fictional, replaces the supernatural while providing the same dark recognition of the unknown and the visionary. The best and most unique supernatural writers from prior eras, like Arthur Machen (his best short fiction written before 1910), would leave their mark on this newer weird, but not a boot print.

Because The Weird often exists in the interstices, because it can occupy different territories simultaneously, an impulse exists among the more rigid taxonomists to find The Weird suspect, to argue it should not, cannot be, separated out from other traditions. Because The Weird is as much a *sensation* as it is a mode of writing, the most keenly attuned amongst us will say 'I know it when I see it,' by which they mean 'I know it when I *feel* it' – and this, too, the more rigorous of categorizing taxidermists will take to mean The Weird does not exist when, in fact, this is one of the more compelling arguments for its existence.

In its purest forms, The Weird has eschewed fixed tropes of the supernatural like zombies, vampires, and werewolves, and the instant archetypal associations these tropes bring with them. The most unique examples of The Weird instead largely chose paths less trodden and went to places less visited, bringing back reports that still seem fresh and innovative today. The Weird is also darkly democratic: you can be a weird writer like Thomas Ligotti, in all that you do, or, like James Tiptree, Jr. and Karen Joy Fowler, you can feel the pull of The Weird in only some of your fiction; it doesn't matter, authenticity exists in the words on the page, on the shared *frisson* that rises from them. Authenticity in The Weird, increasingly throughout the twentieth century, also meant stories that, even if just subtextually, engaged the problems of modern life, and more so than past supernatural fiction, at times engaged with the extremes of that life, including the horrors of war.

Similarly, influences on The Weird in the twentieth century, streams of fiction that fed into its watershed, included many traditions: surrealism, symbolism, Decadent Literature, the New Wave, and the more esoteric strains of the Gothic. None of these influencers truly defined The Weird, but, assimilated into the aquifer along with Lovecraftian and Kafkaesque approaches, changed the composition of this form of fiction forever.

## The Early Years

The story of The Weird is often seen as the story of the rise of the tentacle, a symbol of modern weird. The tentacle and all it represented metastasized in *Weird Tales* and The Lovecraft Circle – the group of writers surrounding Lovecraft that included Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Clark Ashton Smith, Howard Wandrei, and August Derleth. Although female contributors to *Weird Tales* were rarer, the Southern-US writer Mary Elizabeth Counselman had a significant impact, as did Francis Stevens (the pen-name of Gertrude Barrows Bennett, included herein with ‘Unseen – Unfeared’). It is important to remember that although many of these writers would spawn imitators and thus render some of their visionary qualities more ordinary to a modern reader, in their day they, and *Weird Tales*, represented a revolution of sorts against old ideas about supernatural fiction. (In Europe, the *Weird Tales* equivalent was *Der Orchideengarten*, which translates as ‘The Orchid Garden’, established 1919.)

The Lovecraft Circle is represented in the early pages of this volume, but not to the exclusion of all else. Why? Because in other places a similar impulse was arising. At roughly the same time Lovecraft penned tales like ‘The Dunwich Horror’ and ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, Jean Ray in a Belgian prison, wrote stunning and sophisticated stories like ‘The Shadowy Street’ and ‘The Mainz Psalter’, Japanese poet Hagiwara Sakutarō composed the hallucinogenic strangeness that is ‘The Town of Cats’, and Polish writer Bruno Schulz mythologized his childhood in weird stories like ‘Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass’.

These non-Anglo versions of The Weird were not aberrations. In the 1910s, Ryunosuke Akutagawa published the Japanese *contes cruel* ‘The Hell Screen’ and Franz Kafka, still to remain relatively unknown for decades, wrote the classic of weird ritual ‘In the Penal Colony’, while in India Rabindranath Tagore wrote his most supernatural tale ‘The Hungry Stones’ and in Italy Luigi Ugolini penned ‘The Vegetable Man’, a tale of weird transformation.

Also near the start of the twentieth century, the writers Alfred Kubin, Algernon Blackwood, and F. Marion Crawford, in very different ways, helped usher in the modern era of The Weird: Kubin as a representative of symbolist and decadent writers; Blackwood as a forerunner of Lovecraft; and Crawford as the early manifestation of an impulse toward the more commercial weird tale as later exemplified by, among others, Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber, and Robert Bloch. Kubin, in particular, chose a path that would be echoed and amplified by Kafka, Schulz, and others, and taken up in the modern era by writers like M. John Harrison, Leena Krohn, and Michael Cisco. (William Hope Hodgson’s novel *The House on the Borderland* in 1908 had a profound influence on weird science fiction and the classic weird tale but was too long to include in this volume.)

These writers came from vastly different backgrounds, but were bound together by some common impulse in their imaginations, some need to make sense of ‘the fearful and fascinating mystery’ that is life, in a particular way. For their efforts, a disproportionate number of them died in poverty and were marginalized as outsider artists or hacks – with the strangest (read: the most imaginative) ignored or misunderstood, even within the already cast-out genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. Some were shot or sent to death camps during times of war. Too many committed suicide, sometimes driven there by an impulse closely tied to the unique nature of their creativity. A lucky few gained popularity and a wide readership for their efforts.

What all of these writers and the writers who would come after them shared was some element of the visionary in their writing, some impulse or worldview that catapulted them beyond the everyday. In some, it is expressed in their writing as just a glimmer or glint from a deep well. In others it is a great, raging fire at the center of their work. In either instance, subtle or bold, *The Weird* acknowledges that our search for understanding about worlds beyond our own cannot always be found in science or religion and thus becomes an alternative path for exploration of the numinous. Did these writers believe in the supernatural elements they described? In some cases, the evidence would suggest, yes. In the majority, the impulse to entertain combined with the impulse to remind readers of the strangeness of the world and the limits of our understanding of it. A few simply saw the world so differently that what to them seemed normal strikes readers as deeply weird. In some strands, *The Weird* represents a clear quest not just to understand the inexplicable; it represents a *fascination* that at times embraces the inexplicable, eschewing the terror of such a search. Many of these stories hold up to repeat readings for this reason.

### **Modern Weird**

Three events created a kind of cut-off point between the early manifestations of twentieth-century weird and modern weird: Lovecraft’s passing in 1937, World War II, and the widespread translation of Kafka into English in the 1940s (which created webs of influence still existing to this day).

The 1940s and 1950s were in a sense a period of expansion of *The Weird* in the US and UK. The rising popularity of horror and fantasy in major magazines like *Playboy* provided high-profile markets for the Bradburys, Leibers, Beaumonts, and Blochs – who, as Michael Moorcock documents in his foreword, attracted a wider audience by consciously wedding the visionary aspects of surreal weird fiction to more traditional storylines, modern subject matter, and a less ornate style. Women writers entering *The Weird* in the US found more opportunities for their work, too,

including (on the genre magazine side) Margaret St. Clair and (on the 'literary' side) Shirley Jackson.

In the 1960s, the British New Wave created an opposite and equally useful renovation to that exemplified by Bloch and Bradbury by mixing the best of science fiction and fantasy with mainstream and experimental influences, some of which also referenced the decadents and surrealists. Out of this period came such giants as Michael Moorcock (whose work only peripherally touched on weird fiction), M. John Harrison (the most significant twentieth-century critic of the weird tale through his fiction), and J. G. Ballard (whose surreal science fiction often reads like weird fiction). Harlan Ellison<sup>®</sup> provided a visceral, passionate American counterpart to the London-based Brits with early tales like 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream' and the later story 'The Function of Dream Sleep' included in this volume.

Outside of the US and UK several new manifestations began to put forth fungal tendrils of influence during this time period. The phantasmagorical in *The Weird* was kept alive, although with a thready pulse, through the works of Mercè Rodoreda, Amos Tutuola, and Olympe Bhêly-Quénum, whose 'A Child in the Bush of Ghosts' received the blessing of no less than André Breton. The Latin American Boom, presaged by the work of Jorge Luis Borges, provided *The Weird* with fine works by Augusto Monterroso, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Julio Cortázar, that stretched the weird tale by bringing to it magic realism and an appreciation for the surreal and political. In France, Claude Seignolle repurposed French folktales to create elegant and sophisticated supernatural stories.

Another tradition feeding into *The Weird*, Gothic literature, began to be substantially overhauled and repurposed, first through the phantasmagorical work of Mervyn Peake in the 1940s and 1950s, followed by the thoroughly modern stories of Daphne du Maurier in the 1960s and 1970s. In the UK, du Maurier did for the weird tale, through her Gothic influences, what Bradbury, Bloch, and Leiber had done in the US through the influence of Lovecraft: popularized it without losing the elements that made predecessors so compelling and strange. A frequent contributor to *Weird Tales*, Tanith Lee also made a splash within genre circles around this time, penning a number of classics with Gothic antecedents.

During the 1960s and 1970s, two important and eccentric works of weird fiction bloomed like strange orchids feeding on rich, rare soil. Frenchman Michel Bernanos came out of seemingly nowhere to write the short novel *The Other Side of the Mountain*, perhaps the finest weird tale of the 1960s. Bernanos managed in just this one cult classic to combine the traditions exemplified by Jean Ray and Algernon Blackwood with his own brand of surreal existentialism. In the 1970s, the utterly original US writer Eric Basso, entering *The Weird* through a kind of avant-garde

approach to the Gothic, combined with surrealist and modernist influences, produced one of the most unique of all modern weird tales, the short novel 'The Beak Doctor'. Like a three-dimensional version of Kubin's stylized *The Other Side*, 'The Beak Doctor' used Joycean technique combined with clinical detail to create a dreamlike phantasmagoria about a strange sleeping sickness.

The rise of female writers outside of genres like Gothic fiction (including the traditional ghost story) starting in the 1970s also influenced The Weird, as it did many other forms of fantastical fiction. Several of these writers wrote weird fiction, even if they did not self-identify as writers of The Weird. James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), Angela Carter, Jamaica Kincaid, Joanna Russ, Leena Krohn, Octavia Butler, Elizabeth Hand, and Joyce Carol Oates all published significant weird tales during this period. Their diversity of approaches, taking in every possible influence, would enrich non-realistic literature for decades to come.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Stephen King's success created a new market for supernatural novels and a new naturalistic approach to American horror. T. E. D. Klein and Karl Edward Wagner also contributed to American horror, riffing off of their wide knowledge of weird fiction. In England, the publication of Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* in the 1980s provided a new and different model: transgressive stories that went beyond the scare to examine views of the body, alienation, and the nature of monsters. Barker's influences seem so various as to be useless to list, and in his monumental masterpiece 'In the Hills, the Cities' the visions of Bosch and the surrealists are integrated with the character detail more common to stories from the New Wave era. As importantly, American Thomas Ligotti would begin to publish dozens of stories that could be considered classics of weird fiction, taking his place alongside Kafka and Lovecraft as one of the most gifted weird short story writers of the twentieth century.

The urban horror or urban weird that took root during the 1970s and 1980s was also exemplified perfectly by the claustrophobic stories of Ramsey Campbell, a clear descendent of Lovecraft who diverged from his influences in part by focusing on gritty working class English settings. Yet one byproduct of this new emphasis on naturalistic horror was a partial estrangement from the weird tale. By the early 1990's US-horror boom, non-supernatural tales of serial killers and the extremes of sex and violence portrayed by the Splatterpunks had fewer commonalities with The Weird. (Influential writers like Peter Straub tended to reserve The Weird for novel-length works.) However, even as the US-horror community increasingly turned away from the idea of surreal or visionary horror, a handful of writers like Jeffrey Osier, Jeffrey Thomas, Kathe Koja, Poppy Z. Brite, and Caitlin R. Kiernan continued to write recognizably weird fiction. Kiernan in particular would become perhaps the

best weird writer of her generation.

The final significant development for The Weird came in the early twenty-first century with the emergence of the New Weird movement initially discussed online by, among others, M. John Harrison, Steph Swainston, China Miéville and, in initial opposition, Jeff VanderMeer. The term New Weird came to be applied to those writers as well as, most notably, K. J. Bishop, Michael Cisco, and Brian Evenson. In a sense, the New Weird was a re-enquiry into approaches and issues raised by the New Wave of the 1960s – bringing along all of that movement’s associated influences – but in this case primarily from the perspective of The Weird rather than science fiction or fantasy. Miéville in particular managed to reinterpret, rewire, and overhaul The Weird in novel form, synthesizing the tentacle horrors of Lovecraft with the intellectual rigor of the New Wave. A ghostly counterpart who has never truly received his due, American Michael Cisco also has created an amazing oeuvre of novels, perhaps more influenced by Kafka and Eastern European literature. K. J. Bishop’s contributions came primarily with a decadent slant to them, while Swainston re-imagined heroic fantasy for The Weird.

Since then, The Weird has again fragmented, perhaps in preparation for a future coalescing of a Next Weird or perhaps not. Late period examples by Stephen Graham Jones, Reza Negarestani, Micaela Morrissette, Brian Evenson, and K. J. Bishop demonstrate an intimate knowledge of both the Kafka and Lovecraft strands of weird fiction, but recombined in strange and exciting new ways. Others, like the work of Laird Barron, seem more traditional but through their unique style and vision still manage to surprise.

What The Weird holds next for readers is unclear, but given the past manifestations, we can be sure it will be adaptable, idiosyncratic, and involve some of our best stylists. It will also continue to be at times discredited, misunderstood, and denigrated for being unapologetically transgressive, imaginative, and strange. Nonetheless, The Weird will endure.

### **Organizing Principles and Enhancements**

A compendium like this one is neither as complete as an encyclopedia nor as loosely organized as a treasury. Our purpose is to showcase the wealth, depth, and breadth of The Weird over the past 100 years while also mapping certain tendencies and preoccupations. We have arranged the book chronologically from earliest story to latest story as the best way to show the evolution of and diversity of The Weird. Translated fiction is ordered in the anthology by when it first appeared in print, not by date of first translation into English. This preserves the ‘chain of evidence’ while pointing out the possibilities of initial influence across non-Anglo writings.

Among the interwoven threads in The Weird you will find a dedication to

showcasing what one might call traditional weird, mainstream (or commercial) weird, weird science fiction, weird ritual, surreal weird, feminist weird, and avant-garde weird. 'International weird' is a meaningless term given the longstanding and complex literary traditions of the countries represented in this volume. However, we have tried to chronicle a clear tradition of Japanese surrealism and horror that feeds into The Weird, strong examples of Eastern European weird, evidence of weird fiction from India, African-nation weird, and those samples from Latin America that fall somewhere beyond magic realism. A few stories were unavailable to us because of rights issues, but we see them as an extension of this anthology as well: Philip K. Dick's 'The Preserving Machine' (weird science fiction), J. G. Ballard's 'The Drowned Giant' (New Wave weird), Gabriel García Márquez's 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings' (Latin American weird), Otsuichi's 'The White House in the Cold Forest' (Japanese weird). Because this anthology is so vast (over 750,000 words), we were able to include novellas and even short novels, including these important works: Michel Bernanos' *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Eric Basso's 'The Beak Doctor', Leena Krohn's *Tainaron*, and Brian Evenson's *The Brotherhood of Mutilation*.

In pursuit of certain stories, we were also able to commission original translations. These translations include such major stories as Ryunosuke Akutagawa's 'The Hell Screen', Michel Bernanos' *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Dino Buzzati's 'The Colomber', Julio Cortázar's 'Axolotl', and Georg Heym's 'The Dissection'.

# THE WEIRD

A COMPENDIUM OF STRANGE AND  
DARK STORIES

EDITED BY  
ANN AND JEFF VANDERMEER



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this collection are either products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

THE WEIRD

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