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From the Depths
A Review of *From The Depths; And Other Strange Tales of the Sea* (2018)

Review by Daniel Pietersen

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FROM THE DEPTHS

Review by Daniel Pietersen

Ashley, Mike, editor. *From The Depths; And Other Strange Tales of the Sea*. The British Library, 2018. Short Story Anthology.

It is curious to think that the stories we most often describe as being stories of the ocean - pirate yarns, perhaps, or naval epics - are not necessarily actually about it. They take place on the ocean, of course, and the ocean's whims may well influence their narrative flow but, very often, the same story could quite equally happen elsewhere. A tale of high-seas buccaneers is little different from one of highway robbery, for example, whilst massed naval battles translate almost too neatly to war between the stars. It would appear to be a problem that most nautical narratives suffer from; they treat the ocean as a setting when it is more properly a character.

Anyone who has lived in proximity to any large body of water, especially looking out to the open ocean, knows this for a fact. The ocean is not just a simple background but is teeming with life and, given that it causes change in its surroundings, has a life in itself. It is this almost vulgar vivacity of the ocean, however, that makes it an environment so inimical to our inevitably all-too-human concept of life. We know less about its extremities than we do about the near-sterile gulfs of space and yet there is a strange irony in that we often find the dead void above us less strange, less weird, than we do the teeming life of the ocean below us.

Which is precisely the point. The ocean 'is' weird. If, as Mark Fisher claims in his landmark work *The Weird And the Eerie* (2016), the weird is a piercing-in of things that should not exist in our reality then we need only look at the presence of the creatures which the ocean nurtures at pressures, temperatures, and toxicities that would kill us in an eye blink for proof of this. Even more fundamentally, we stare up at the other planets in our solar system to see only bare rock, soup-thick atmospheres, or blankets of frozen gas. The presence of liquid water, let alone the vast array of life born from it, suddenly seems vanishingly rare, nauseatingly weird.

And if the ocean is weird then only the Weird can tell stories that are oceanic. Only the Weird can fully allow the piercing-in of the otherness that the ocean demands. Only the Weird can use the language of the ocean - fo'c'sles and mizzentops, sloops and barks - as surely as any guttural denizen of Zothique or Leng mutters their own arcane argots.

In *From The Depths* (2018), editor Mike Ashley, himself author of *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine* (1974) amongst many other works, has done a superb job in bringing together a collection of over a dozen 'strange tales of the sea' to showcase this weird nature of the nautical.

Like the other collections in the British Library's *Tales of the Weird* series, most of these stories were written by now largely lesser-known authors (and not all of them men, which is an uncommon but welcome sight in collections such as these). In it you will find stories of abyssal monsters, of inhuman revenge, of murder, and of madness. A handful of stories stand out, worthy of separate mention.

Ward Muir's "Sargasso" tells the story, in an epistolary format, of how the tramp steamer *Wellington* becomes trapped in the vast tangle of weed that is supposed to clog the northern Atlantic and of what her crew encounter there. Pre-dating the "slimy expanse of hellish black mire" of Lovecraft's "Dagon" by almost a decade, Muir has the *Wellington* come to ground on the uncanny island of the Sargasso, where fast-growing weeds hold it fast, and the increasingly hysterical crew become aware of some kind of creature scraping at the hull (*Necronomicon* 5). As the unnamed narrator clarifies, its approach is accompanied by "the sound of gentle touching - the touching of a tentacle" (76).

In "No Ships Pass," first published in 1932, Lady Eleanor Smith invokes a hint of Science Fiction as she describes the unnamed limbo-island that haunts the seas, looking for lost souls to sweep into its nets. The chilling blankness of the mongrel group that Patterson, her narrator, finds himself part of illustrates not only the stark horror of the never-dying but also the stifling, mask-like decorum that Lady Eleanor, an early member of the decadent Bright Young Things, must have found formal English society to be.

In what many readers would recognise as a more obviously Weird tale, perhaps because it deals with one of the genre's repeated concerns, Morgan Burke tells us of "The Soul-Saver," known to the narrator as the cruel but charismatic Captain Morbond. Morbond, as he reveals early in the story, has found a way to capture dead men's souls in the forms of white mice familiars – similar, loosely, to Lovecraft's tale, published six years before Morgan's, of how the Terrible Old Man "talks to these bottles, addressing them by such names as Jack, Scar-Face, Long Tom, Spanish Joe, Peters, and Mate Ellis" (*Eldritch Tales* 128). Why, or how, Morbond captures these souls is never fully explored but Burke paints the picture, briefly but succinctly, of a man used to controlling his sailors' corporeal existences and who sees no issue with extending it to their spiritual essences.

Finest of all, though, is the exquisite, implacable chill of F. Britten Austin's titular "From The Depths." When the *SS Upsal* heads out into the North Sea, former hunting ground of World War One's early submarine packs, it receives an unexpected message that chatters up, staccato and impossible, "from the depths." The nature of this message, delivered through terse Morse Code, is both as heart-stoppingly horrifying and as accusatory as the voice that barks suddenly from the hidden telescreen, revealing Winston and Julia's conspiracy, in Orwell's 1984. Of all the tales in this collection, this one chilled me the most.

Not every story works as well as these. C. N. Barham's "Tracked," the only story in this collection originally published prior to 1900, is a tedious advert for credulous clairvoyance and William Hope Hodgson, in "The Mystery Of The Water-Logged Ship," allows his tale to fizzle out

with a disappointingly mundane reveal – choosing this story over other nautical explorations of Hodgson's, some of which S. T. Joshi's *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares* (2006) describes as containing "giant fungi and trees that howl," seems to be a singular misstep for Ashley (460). Yet, as a whole, this is still an excellent collection, dredging rare gems from a largely-ignored source of the Weird.

In fact, and it is a revelation that only really hits once the collection is finished, the only genuinely disappointing aspect of *From The Depths* is how difficult it is to find other work from the authors without delving into vintage collections. F. Britten Austin's *On The Borderland* (1923), which contains his weirder fiction, is only available from specialised sellers and at not inconsiderable cost whilst Morgan Burke seems to have faded into nothingness. In some ways, though frustrating for a modern reader, this even echoes the conflicting nature of the sea - both permanent and impermanent. The individual elements of the sea never stand still, ebbing and flowing to rhythms more fundamental than we can understand, and yet the sea itself always remains to haunt us with its strange tales.

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BIONOTE

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