

Book Reviews

Joshi, S. T. *The Recognition of H. P. Lovecraft: His Rise from Obscurity to World Renown*, Hippocampus Press, 2021.

<https://www.hippocampuspress.com/h.-p.-lovecraft/about-hp-lovecraft/the-recognition-of-h.-p.-lovecraft-by-s.-t.-joshi>

S. T. Joshi's latest contribution to the field of Lovecraft Studies, a field to which he has tirelessly and notably dedicated his publishing career, offers a concept that is an invaluable addition to the Lovecraftian critical oeuvre—an overview of the way in which Lovecraft has been received and recognised over the past century, including both critical and academic voices alongside the response of lay readership. Indeed, Joshi presents a chronologically organised narrative of Lovecraft in print and (eventually) media, detailing Lovecraft's own publication history as well as reviews and letters connected to Lovecraft. Joshi covers roughly a decade in each chapter and pulls from a large variety of sources in order to construct this history of Lovecraft's writing. As a matter of fact, this chronology of Lovecraft in print is the real strength of Joshi's book, and the most cogent aspect of his work in general. It is certainly meticulously researched, with an impressive attention to detail in terms of dates, names, locations and general information pertaining to each publication Joshi includes. However, the sheer volume of information included within the work leads it to feel, at times, little more than an annotated bibliography.

In the preface, Joshi lays out the aims of this book as both an attempt to “chart both the dissemination of H. P. Lovecraft's work during and after his lifetime” as well as to “assess the discussions of his life, work, and thought” (7). The book is undeniably successful in achieving the first point; however, it struggles with the second aim. Joshi suggests in the preface that the book

may seem uneven in its attention to detail, with the early portions being “excessively detailed” and the later portions “cited with almost insulting brevity” (7). This is understandable and even to be expected; it is fairly well-known within Lovecraft Studies that the bulk of critical and even commercial attention paid to his life and works happened during the latter half of the twentieth century, proliferating into the ubiquitousness of Lovecraft in the twenty-first century, particularly within popular culture. However, whilst Joshi manages to reflect the gradual increase in the momentum of Lovecraft’s popularity over the years throughout the book, his study lacks the assessment he promises in the preface. Large portions of each chapter merely list every appearance or publication of Lovecraft without comment or analysis. When Joshi does make assessments, his personal bias indubitably shines through.

The first chapter, “Beginnings (1905-1922),” details much of Lovecraft’s early interest in amateur meteorology and the letters and poems he published during his high school career, including initial controversies in small publications such as the *Argosy* in 1913 (12) and Lovecraft’s first publication, a letter on astronomy. Whereas there could be an interesting narrative emerging here between Lovecraft’s burgeoning scientific interests and the eventual formation of his distinctive brand of “cosmic horror,” Joshi makes no attempt to forge any links between Lovecraft’s life and his work. He instead dedicates time to disparaging “the yawning gulf in education and critical judgement between Lovecraft and his opponents” even at this very early stage (17). This pattern continues into the second and third chapters, “The Pulp Era (1923-1937)” and “Arkham House: The Early Years (1937-1945),” whereby Joshi dismisses any negative responses to Lovecraft and instead seems to center only critical or fan commentary that matches with his own level of devotion. Even so, a particularly insightful aspect of the book is the—admittedly, overlooked and perhaps even unintended—narrative of “fandom” that seems to be at

the heart of Lovecraft's level of recognition over the last century. During each chapter, Joshi takes care to mention fan responses to Lovecraft in journals and serial publications alongside academic or critical works. I was also excited to see by Joshi's inclusion that one of the earliest responses to the publication of "The Call of Cthulhu" in *Weird Tales* in February 1928 was a letter in "The Eyrie" (*Weird Tales*'s correspondence section) by one "R. E. Howard," already a published author in *Weird Tales* and a name that would eventually be one of the most important contributors to the wider Cthulhu Mythos (45-46). Again, the gradual formation of the "Lovecraft Circle" and how it is visible through correspondence—both personal and in publication—is a concept that could make for an insightful and useful work. Joshi, however, glosses over both this and the importance of "fandom" to the promotion of Lovecraft, offering only superficial analysis of both topics.

This superficiality continues into the next chapters, "The Beginnings of Worldwide Dissemination (1946-1959)" and "Paperbacks and Movies (1960-1971)." Joshi's treatment of negative reviewers throughout shows his own feelings towards them; such critics merely "ramble" or are generally uneducated in some way, Joshi claims (131). He also dismisses the Lovecraft criticism in the 1960s as "astonishingly hostile" (151), with British critic Colin Wilson's opinion dismissed as "a childish whine against a writer with whose philosophical outlook (which, in any case, he fundamentally misunderstands) he does not agree with" (155). This is a common criticism of Joshi's, it appears: if a critic or fan does not view Lovecraft positively, it must be because they simply do not understand his work. Joshi's personal biases also become apparent through his repudiation of the importance of the horror genre, claiming that the 1970s saw horror becoming "for the first time since the Gothic novels of the later eighteenth century, a popular commodity" (164) in "The Revival of Scholarship (1971-1979)." This is simply an incorrect assertion that ignores the importance and popularity of the Penny Dreadful, publication of enduring works such

as *Dracula* (1897) and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and even the horror cinema boom characterised by the Universal Monsters movies of the 1930s, and unfortunately undermines Joshi's point.

In the final three chapters—"Looking Toward the Centennial (1980-1990)," "The Road to Canonisation (1991-2005)," and "Dissemination and Controversy (2006-2020)"—Joshi's own contribution to the field becomes central to the chronology of works pertaining to Lovecraft's life and writings. At first, Joshi seems to show a degree of awareness towards his personal bias towards Lovecraft. Again, in the preface, Joshi acknowledges that people might question the decision for him to write this particular work, "given [his] own intimate involvement in the propagation of Lovecraft's texts and in the critical analysis of his life and work over the past four decades" (8). He continues to admit that "it could well be asked ... whether [he has] anything new to say on this subject" and also that his ability to be objective about his own contributions may be brought into question (8). This apparent self-awareness was refreshing and Joshi's initial honesty about his own connections to Lovecraft and the growth of Lovecraft Studies as a whole put any initial reservations I had about him as the author of this book to rest. However, it soon became disappointingly clear that this was, indeed, something Joshi was unable to do. The importance he places upon his own work at the expense of others, dismissing critics such as Clive Bloom, Roger Luckhurst, and Michel Houellebecq, amongst others, as lacking in research or evidence, restricts the real functionality of this book and emphasises his own personal bias. Joshi's response to Timo Airaksinen's *The Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* (1999) as having minimal "utility to the Lovecraft devotee" (254) raises the question: is Joshi's book for the Lovecraft fan, or the academic?

I must finish this review as Joshi finished his book by discussing the uncomfortable topic of Lovecraft's racism. I was disappointed, but not surprised, to find that Joshi left any real

discussion of the subject of Lovecraft's personal views until the very last chapter and the Epilogue. Joshi's dismissal of "fads" in academia such as "race, class and gender" and his questioning of "whether such work really constitutes literary criticism or is merely amateur sociology" (273) shows clearly and with finality that Joshi is not the most appropriate author for such a text as this. Lovecraft's racism, and his treatment (or complete ignorance) of women in his writing, is undeniable and an important aspect for any Lovecraft critic to take into consideration, especially one that claims to be charting his rise "from Obscurity to world renown" as in the subtitle of this book. For Joshi to characterise discussions of these topics as being "recent kerfuffles" or "virtue signalling" (305) is, regrettably, par for the course for Joshi. Any insightful or worthwhile points Joshi makes about Lovecraft, or any important contributions he makes to the field, will always be lessened through his staunch refusal to accept the significance of Lovecraft's views and the way they impact his work. It also makes me wonder, as Joshi himself did in his preface, why we continue to amplify the voices of those who cannot themselves offer an objective opinion on Lovecraft and his "transcendentally brilliant fiction" (313).

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