

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CLEAR CREDIT

“The ‘How’ of Hastur” appears here for the first time anywhere. I ran across the Clark Ashton Smith quote that sparked the whole piece in David E. Schultz’ “Notes Toward a History of the Cthulhu Mythos” in *Crypt of Cthulhu* #92. Likewise, “The Man Who Shot Joseph Curwen” is original to this book. I discovered the connection between *Call of Cthulhu* and the Western on my own, but very profitably mined Donald R. Burleson’s “Lovecraft: An American Allegory” in *Crypt of Cthulhu* #78 while constructing this piece.

Portions of the essays on Dagon, Irem, the Shunned House vampires, Dunwich, and H.P. Lovecraft appeared in different form in *Pyramid* magazine. I’d like to thank the editors and readers of *Pyramid* for their support and feedback. Check it out, along with a lot more of my pointless rambling, at <http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid>.

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Throughout this entire book, I have leaned without regret on S.T. Joshi’s magisterial biography of Lovecraft, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life*, and on his annotated and corrected editions of the tales in three volumes for Penguin Books. That’s why “Imprisoned With the Pharaohs” appears here as “Under the Pyramids,” for example.

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# THE “HOW” OF HASTUR: RUMINATIONS ON APPLIED YOG-SOTHOTHERY

*“[T]here is something that secret histories give you that is very different, because you are trying to uncover the histories of groups and forces that always avoid history. In order to narrate those stories, you must become a little paranoid, though not in the sense that They are out to get you. I mean you must become a little paranoid as a critical method. You must start jumping across vague and shadowy realms of ambiguous data, weaving patterns that won’t hold up in court, pointing out strange synchronicities that occur, names that reappear. Suddenly possibilities that exist outside of what we can conventionally narrate start to cohere, many of them bordering on the incorporeal and the imaginal. Patterns resonate in ways that seem to undermine conventional historical thinking itself.”*

-- Erik Davis, April 1997

Much as a Lovecraft narrator might begin with the assurance that he is not mad, let me begin with the assurance that this is not another “what is the Cthulhu Mythos” essay. From a literary-critical perspective, I’m happy to adopt S.T. Joshi’s basic definition, that a “Cthulhu Mythos story” is one featuring a location, entity, or book created (or significantly adumbrated) by Lovecraft or his circle. From a thematic perspective, you can hardly do better than to read John Tynes’ chapter “The Cthulhu Mythos,” in the d20 adaptation of the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game. Just one irresistible quote: “[The Mythos is] so alien and strange that it’s like mental plutonium: get too close, and your mind sickens and dies.” From a historical perspective, thanks to the careful research of David E. Schultz, we even have a pretty good idea of who invented the Mythos as a concept, and when. Although Frank Belknap Long wrote the first Mythos story not by Lovecraft, “The Space Eaters” in 1928, it took until May of 1931 for August Derleth to suggest that Lovecraft’s invented gods and monsters were a unified myth cycle. He proposed that Lovecraft call it “The Mythology of Hastur.” The bemused HPL pointed out that Hastur was Ambrose Bierce’s

No, this essay attempts to answer, even if fitfully and sketchily, the perhaps more immediate question “How?” How do you detect the Cthulhu Mythos, how do you construct it in a roleplaying game or campaign? This tentative exploration of that question seeks to tease out some techniques for adding the Mythos to something, or building the Mythos into something, or perhaps merely for accustoming your mind’s eye to the dimness and training yourself to see the Mythos where it already exists. It’s about adapting the frame of mind, or the narrative perspective, that Lovecraft jocularly called “Yog-Sothothery,” and applying it to your game. (Or, I suppose, to any narrative construct, be it RPG adventure, short story, novel, film, what have you.) The Mythos is as much a way to look at phenomena, a perspective or parallax or lens, as it is a set of phenomena. Applying Yog-Sothothery is like switching on Crawford Tillinghast’s “detestable electrical machine” and seeing things previously invisible.

*“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”*

-- H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”

So how does Lovecraft do it, first of all? The secret lies, as might be expected, in the seed story of the whole Mythos, “The Call of Cthulhu.” Indeed, in the opening lines of that tale, quoted above. How do you see the outlines of the Mythos? You correlate the contents of your mind, or of your library at any rate. You “piece together dissociated knowledge,” rather like solving a jigsaw puzzle. Instead of putting all the blue pieces together to reveal the sky, you put all the “Mythos-colored” pieces together to reveal the “terrifying vistas of reality.” From within, discovering the Mythos is like any other problem in detection, but the evidence can come from anywhere. In the story, Angell pieces together not only his own experiences with the sculptor Wilcox, but Inspector Legrasse’s police report from New Orleans, theosophical pamphlets, press clippings of all sorts, and a ship’s log. This approach works not only for elderly anthropologists but for us, as well.

It’s important to remember, at the outset, that Angell wasn’t building up a picture of the “Cthulhu Mythos.” He was uncovering the activities and nature of what he called “the Cthulhu Cult,” specifically centered on the images of Cthulhu created by Wilcox and discovered by Legrasse in Louisiana. Like Angell did, then, it makes sense for story designers to build one piece of the Mythos around something -- either a person, a phenomenon, a place, whatever you can use to focus the attention of the story. And once you pick your starting place, you’ll start to see it everywhere. We’re all familiar with this common phenomenon. Let’s say your birthday is the 15th of September. Your whole life, you’ll be more alert to other things that happen on that date. Robert Anton Wilson famously ran riot with the number “23” in the *Illuminatus!* trilogy, and everybody who reads it is guaranteed to notice that arcane integer from then on. Sometimes it happens without a specific stimulus; if you’ve suddenly noticed a specific symbol, or font, or graffiti tag, you’ll start seeing it everywhere. You may have run across an obscure poet or musician or painter -- and suddenly you seem to see their art a lot more often. All those data -- dates, numbers, symbols, art -- were always there, but your interest make them jump out at you, from the cognitive background to the cognitive foreground. This kind of data sorting is second nature to us; it probably evolved with us monkeys in the forests when the ability to spot nuts or smaller animals was a strong survival trait. Data sorting is key to what psychologists call “pattern matching.” Our monkey eyes take that blurry shadow under the leaves and turn it into a cluster of nuts.