

FRITZ LEIBER

by Ramsey Campbell

“Nor will science ever be able to kill the feelings of wonder in the human spirit. The mystery of the black outer gulfs, and of the deepest cognitive processes within us, must always remain unplumbed – and against these imagination must always frantically pound...”

So wrote H. P. Lovecraft to his young correspondent Fritz Leiber on 19 December 1936, somewhat less than three months before his own death. Lovecraft had sought to educate his new friend in the classics of the various imaginative genres, from M. R. James through Lord Dunsany all the way to Olaf Stapledon. Like Lovecraft, Leiber (1910-1992) would base his writing on this study and use the knowledge to unite British and American methods in developing – what exactly? Quite a few of his tales seem to occupy a territory that is purely his, not least in its combination of the macabre and the erotic.

He was one of the most honoured writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror – fields in which he was equally adept, not a common achievement. It has been argued that the solitariness and austerity of his later years, when he occupied a single room with so little space that he had to sit on his bed to write with a typewriter on his lap, simply demonstrated that he preferred to spend his income on travel. Nevertheless the feeling persists that he seldom received the appreciation he deserved, and I suggest that his contribution to horror fiction has yet to be fully celebrated.

“It is the American metropolis, jammed with iron and stone, that sets off my sense of the horrible and beautiful... Things like the buzz of a defective neon sign, the black framework of the elevated, muttering of machinery one cannot identify – there are terrors in the modern city, in comparison to which the darks of Gothic castles and haunted woods are light.” In writing this Fritz had his first collection, *Night’s Black Agents*, in mind. It’s a statement of his radical approach to the genre – decades later, in his introduction to Kirby McCauley’s *Frights*, he was to champion “something new, something utterly startling, something undreamed of” as the essence of the tale of terror – but equally important is its insistence on beauty as part of the horror. His *Frights* piece, paraphrasing Horatio, is entitled “Wonder and Terror”. Like all the greatest writers in the field, he strives for awe.

Radicalism combined with his knowledge of the field to produce one of his earliest and most important tales, “Smoke Ghost”. Instead of being invaded by the supernatural, the mundane setting – forties Chicago – is now its source, and the grubby half-glimpsed spectre its genius loci. Here and elsewhere he revives the reticence of M. R. James in a contemporary fashion, while “Diary in the Snow” suggests Blackwood’s “The Willows” reimagined in more explicitly science-fictional terms. In Leiber’s fiction, as in Lovecraft’s, science and horror often overlap; indeed, his earliest (posthumously) published tale, *The Dreams of Daniel Kesserich*, achieves this synthesis.

His first full-length novel, *Conjure Wife* – expanded from its original appearance in *Unknown Worlds* – explores their opposition. A college professor and champion of rationalism discovers that his wife is practising witchcraft to help his career. He insists she stop, only to learn that her spells protected him from the powers of other campus wives. This can be read as fantastic satire of the kind that John W. Campbell encouraged contributors to *Unknown Worlds* to deliver, but Leiber reaches beyond it to genuine terror. His view of women as mysterious and magical informs stories throughout his career, from “The

Girl with the Hungry Eyes” – a highly contemporary late forties variant on vampirism, in which the psychically voracious title character is a celebrated fashion model who feeds on male desire – through “A Deskful of Girls” a decade later, where a crazed psychiatrist keeps spectral essences of his female patients filed in his office until they take revenge, all the way to the late “Horrible Imaginings”, which introduces a ghostly female harbinger of death.

Some of his tales invent modern archetypes: “The Man Who Made Friends with Electricity” lends sentience to that power, while “The Black Gondolier” floods a dream version of the American Venice with oil and creates a new Charon out of the medium. “Gonna Roll the Bones” goes further in a sense, sketching a future where space flight is mundane but is still manipulated by magic and haunted by the oldest personified fear. Leiber was never above reinventing the traditional, and frequently acknowledged the roots of his work. Eventually, having at Lovecraft’s suggestion excised references to that author’s mythos from his early tale “Adept’s Gambit”, he even wrote an explicitly Lovecraftian story, “The Terror from the Depths”, which revisits his theme of inspiration and the unwanted powers it may invoke.

The grand summary of his themes, though, is the intensely autobiographical novel *Our Lady of Darkness* (which at several points points makes clear its debt to M. R. James, however much that author would have disapproved of its perverse eroticism). Franz Westen, the protagonist, is – like the author – an ex-alcoholic widower who lives in the same San Francisco building as Leiber (but in a similar apartment immediately above his). Having acquired almost the only surviving copy of a book about the psychic essences of modern cities and their occult manipulation, he becomes haunted by a presence that may be composed of his yearning for his lost wife, his pulpish inspiration as a writer and the dark spirit of the city. It is finally overcome by the spell of his young female neighbour, who invokes the order of music, philosophy and science.

One last tale for this essential but by no means exhaustive list: “A Bit of the Dark World”, in which Leiber set himself the task of discovering whether cosmic terror could be achieved in a contemporary (seventies) setting. Once again his method – using a succession of images as a single metaphor to its own convey the indescribably alien – has its origin in “The Willows”. In terms it’s worthy of Blackwood at his finest. Like Lovecraft, Leiber learned from the best in the field, which he then developed and enriched. He is the father of the urban tale of supernatural terror, and one of the last century’s great masters of the weird.