

The Weird: To the Edge of Normal and Back

For as long as I can remember, I have been captivated by monsters. Every notebook I've ever had is doodled with dragons, giants, and sea serpents. My childhood bedroom was practically a shrine with the sheer number of drawings and figurines that dotted it. As I grew older, my passion kept pace. Monster and horror flicks, both old and new. Mythology, folklore and legends also accumulated on my bookshelves, and I was especially fond of collecting as diverse a collection as possible. These were the real lifeblood of my passion in those days, not only stunning in their variety but also their narratives. The dragon was fascinating enough to my young self. But stories of Filipino vampires detaching their heads to fly about, or Baba Yaga flying in a giant mortar, felt like they blew the back of my head open.

But for every monster in the old stories, there was always a hero to match them. This, I realized, is what began to draw me to explore mythology in the first place. To see the human match the power of the monster, no matter how overwhelming or esoteric. To read of Susanoo drugging the great dragon Orochi instead of trying to match his endless strength. Thor and the Giants match strength and illusion in the drinking hall of Utgard Loki. What excitement could be derived from defeating a werewolf, when I already know silver will work? Or that it's close enough to sunrise that the vampire's bound to lose? It was a monster's capacity to excite, to surprise, and to challenge the character that gave real impetus and power to a story. Robbed of that, they're just shadow play.

But there is a pattern in mythological stories just as there is in any other, and I began to be disappointed by too many formulaic stories drawing from their images but without the weight of history to make their tales interesting. It was in a small all-fiction bookstore in Edinburgh that I found an even smaller section labeled "Weird Fiction". I figured an explanation would only

worsen the experience, and promptly bought a thick green paperback titled “Perdido Street Station”. On our 11-hour plane ride back, I spent 9 of them reading that book. It depicted the most vividly imagined and described city I had ever read, and a tremendously affecting story besides. I’ll leave further praise to my bibliography, but suffice it to say that my collection began that day.

With my newfound discovery of seemingly an entire *genre* to explore, I first had to understand what precisely Weird Fiction is. Fortunately, the prologues to the many anthologies in this collection never wasted an opportunity to further explain the development of the genre. It has its roots in the Gothic fiction of the 19th century, channeling the same kind of unease that underpinned its ghost and zombie stories. But many authors of that time began to tire of the traditional ghouls and goblins that had defined their genre, and began to branch out in stranger forms of adversaries. Plays that drive the reader insane, great gods whose very *presence* endangers mankind, and strangers besides. That same creativity that drove them to abandon gothic fiction also often led to unconventional stories that pushed the boundaries of storytelling at the time. Stories nested within stories, epistolary thrillers told entirely in letters and unusual shifting perspectives also became hallmarks of Weird fiction. It became an umbrella under which horror, fantasy and authors of every stripe could experiment in style and content. In *The Weird*, the Vandermeers, after reading and collecting over 100 stories, finally define Weird fiction as, “purposefully cultivating an aura of unease”. While this may seem infuriatingly vague, one must remember no genre has a truly airtight definition, and the Weird’s belies the stunning variety of methods that can achieve its effect.

This is what makes the Weird truly fascinating to me. How so many authors can concern themselves with a single phenomenon, the moment of contact between the mundane and the

Weird, and reap so many unique stories from that fount. The Weird has become a focus of the collection because I think short stories and monsters are both at their most powerful when they truly challenge and surprise the protagonist. When they force the reader to confront their thoughts for themselves, and through that makes their thoughts stronger and stranger. Never are they stranger or more powerful, beautiful or grotesque, than the stories The Weird delivers.

Bibliography:

1. Bartholomew, Henry. *Dangerous Dimensions*. (The British Library, 2021)

I adore anthologies with very specific themes, it allows often unnoticed editors to flex their creative choices in such narrow conditions, and creates unique anthologies that are all the more valuable for collating such uniquely focused stories. The British Library excels in this regard, and this collection is especially special in its narrow focus. Hallways that twist into infinity, formulae that drive its maker insane, this is a great illustration of how the Weird can eschew any idea of a traditional monster, yet still intrigue.

2. Blackwood, Algernon. *Roarings from Further Out*. (The British Library, 2019).

Algernon Blackwood's magnificent name reflects his position as one of the old guard of horror writers, his work entering publication at the turn of the 20th century. His style also reflects the same cerebral, detailed storytelling from ghost stories turned to nature. His focus in this collection is on pieces that find nature as beautiful and frightening as the stars or alien life, inhuman in ways we often don't contemplate.

3. Danielewski, Mark. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books, 2000.

Weird fiction, almost by definition, eschews genre. This book spits in genre's eye. It is about a house which is bigger on the inside. Well, that's what *The Navidson Record* is about, a

collection of stories on the titular house being discussed in a handwritten monograph by Johnny Truant, analyzing and decoding the writings of Zampanò. There are at least 3 nested narratives in this book, and they weave around each other in a dizzying dance for every page this book is given. It demands a lot of its readers. Some footnotes are several pages long in their own right, others are subject to syntax changes, and overlapping editing notes from several others. Some passages are redacted, others require you to rotate the book to read them as they snake around the margins. But the reward is nothing other than one of the most disquieting, not terrifying, novels I've ever read. There is no other book that challenges a reader to untangle its narrative so decisively, and I felt like a detective slowly peeling back layers of narrative to the titular house at the center of the maze. Passing authors, documentarians, passerby and dozens of others who have been touched by the madness of the house. They are never unscathed for long.

4. Evenson, Brian *Song for the Unraveling of the World*. Coffee House Press, 2019

This collection embodies everything I love about short fiction. The magical ability to create a work that, with a few sparse pages, sits in a reader's head for weeks. His short, punchy prose delicately sketches stories of delusion and paranoia, and slowly unspools the intricacies of human nature that are revealed in encountering the terrifying.

5. Enriquez, Mariana *Our Share of the Night*. Granta Books, 2023.

Gaspar is a boy who inherits his father's ability to commune with spirits, and finds himself targeted by the same people who exploited his father's ability to death. Don't let my flat synopsis deter you from a supremely nuanced book. The pinpoint prose often unfolds into lush beauty, and the blends of the occult with critiques of the Argentinian government exemplify the blend of styles and influences that make *Weird Fiction* so fascinating.

6. Langan, John *The Fisherman*. Word Horde, 2016.

This book had long been on my list, but as it is with many weird books, its printings and availability were limited. I found this copy crushed under a stack of cookbooks on Dauphine street, and after reading it I'm inclined to think of that as a sin. This novel belongs to a sub-genre or facet of weird fiction commonly called "cosmic horror", their thesis that the universe is not only strange and unknowable, but mankind is particularly vulnerable and miniscule in the face of it. The most famous contributor to this style was H.P. Lovecraft, perhaps the most famous of any weird fiction authors. He also, to my great disappointment, relied on channeling his own bigotry and prejudice into the fear of the alien that made his work so powerful. In a collection meant to present weird fiction to the public, I wanted to show that the style and stories of cosmic horror (which I greatly enjoy) could be achieved without Lovecraft. This novel is a superb example of cosmic horror that nonetheless possesses a compassionate heart. It is, at its core, about grief. About how it can make a familiar world into a completely alien landscape, and the lengths we'll go to plumb some kind of meaning from the depths, ignorant of the leviathans that wait at the bottom of the world.

7. Ligotti, Thomas. *Songs of a Dear Dreamer and Grimscribe*. Penguin Classics, 2015

There is a consistent philosophy in Thomas Ligotti's writing, across both works collated in this collection. It is distinctly nihilistic, amid grotesque and frightening stories. But the philosophical depth of his writing and vividness of his imagery creates stories that have an aura of reality. Of a world just as complicated and varied as ours, seen through a darker set of eyes. Almost meditative in effect, these stories are best read in the midst of a lightning storm, ideally lit by a single candle.

8. Machen, Arthur *The Great God Pan*. Wildside Press, 2005.

One of the oldest stories in my collection, this piece was first published in 1894, and was widely denounced at the time for its implied sexual content and grotesque storyline. But it has been very much reevaluated as a classic of horror, and for good reason. Weird fiction's roots in gothic and science fiction are very much on display here, as this tale clearly has its roots in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. A mad scientist, meddling with things beyond man's purview, inviting doom on himself. But the implications in this tale are deeper than a simple rivalry between the man and his creation. Instead, Machen masterfully steeps the reader in an aura of dread, the full implications of the scientist's dread experiment slowly revealing themselves in the wake of men, women and whole communities driven to madness. A masterclass in horror storytelling, and a superb example of the atmosphere that distinguishes weird fiction from its individual sci-fi, fantasy, and horror counterparts. This was the first weird book I ever read, when I discovered it in a used bookstore in high school, and its narrative and prose still sit with me in the weeks after an inevitable rereading.

9. Mains, Johnny *The Scotland Strange, Weird Tales from Foreign Lands*. The British Library, 2023

Once again my appreciation for folklore, speculative and weird fiction are richly rewarded in this collection. This collection of stories leverages Scotland's ancient history and rich folklore to engineer collisions between the ancient and modern, the mundane and normal and find what aspects of Scotland are true across both.

10. Mieville, China *Perdido Street Station*. Pan Books, 2011.

The first scene of this book describes a mad scientist making love to his wife, a woman with a scarab for a head. Believe me when I say by the end of its 800 pages, this will feel positively mundane. Giant moths that devour minds, water spirits boycotting their wages, and

sentient spiders all await eager reading, but the real star of the show is the city of New Crobuzon itself. I have read authors who have described the cities of their own birth with less energy, with less imminent life and character oozing from the page, much less a completely invented city. Neighborhoods thrive under the bones of old monsters as across the river an enclave of cactus people tends to the giant greenhouse their district is built in. Clockwork robots begin to evolve consciousness of their own, while the eponymous Perdido Street Station beats with the life of its bizarre passengers. New Crobuzon is lovingly imagined, meticulously crafted, and studded with characters deserving of their own novels. It has earned its title as capital “W” Weird, by both consistently surprising me and giving me 3 questions for every one it answers. If the ending didn’t rip my heart out every time, I’d reread this every month. As it is, I still find myself pulled into its pages once a year, even knowing it will hurt. That’s as great an endorsement of a novel as I can give.

11. Soar, Katy. *Return of the Ancients*. The British Library, 2025.

My interest in Weird fiction has its roots in my readings of mythology, and I relish any opportunity where the two overlap. This collection marries the histories of the divine with more modern conceptions of Gods. In the first story an old Italian god of love washes ashore, and town’s romances begin to twist until by the end, true monstrosities come about. This collection interrogates what it would really be like to be a God among men, and the terror that absolute power of any kind can create.

12. Vandermeer, Jeff & Vandermeer, Ann. *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*

The Vandermeer’s are dearly beloved to me as anthologists, as their determination and sincerity in attempting to define the genres their anthologies explore is second to none. But how to go

about defining a genre that, by its nature, defies categorization? Their solution is to pull from a stunning variety of times and countries to compile no less than 110 weird stories. Every short story in this collection is through-provoking and creative, in its totality they are nothing short of breathtaking. The most determined and deliberate effort I have yet seen to truly define the Weird, this book could likely classify as a collection leagues beyond mine all on its own. At least once a month I pull this book from its shelf, flip to a random page, and my evening's free time dissolves to ash.

13. Vandermeer, Jeff & Vandermeer, Ann. *Dr. Thackery T. Lambshead's Cabinet of Curiosities*. Harper Voyager, 2011.

Another anthology by the Vandermeers, this one has a very Weird organizing structure. All of the stories are meant to be on items in a "Dr. Thackery T. Lambshead's" famous collection of mysterious items. This entire collection revels in cultivating mystery in every page. Every story seems to be giving you a different glimpse of a vast and fascinating world, and snippets of the eponymous doctor's life. Every piece is so interesting as to engender a million more questions, but in the end the *Cabinet* makes it clear only you can answer them.

14. Vandermeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

This novel's sometimes inscrutable story and strange perspective would seemingly make it hard to read, but the lyrical prose and strange cadence make it incredibly easy to read, even if you don't understand how. 5 scientists conduct an exploration into a mysterious area X, an expanding zone where the laws of physics seem to break down. The story is a puzzle box that just turns in my brain when I read it, pulling apart the layers of unreliable narrators and uneasiness only to find more. Incredibly well paced, I can read this book in an evening and reap enough contemplation for weeks.

