

## The Library of America interviews Peter Straub about American Fantastic Tales

In connection with the publication in October 2009 of the two-volume collection *American Fantastic Tales: Terror and the Uncanny from Poe to the Pulps* and *American Fantastic Tales: Terror and the Uncanny from the 1940s to Now*, both edited by Peter Straub, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

Sign up for the free monthly e-Newsletter at [www.loa.org](http://www.loa.org).

*The two volumes of American Fantastic Tales collect 86 classic stories written between 1805 and 2007 in categories we are used to describing as “tales of horror” or “of terror” or “of the supernatural or uncanny,” or as simply “weird tales.” Is “fantastic” a better way to describe these quite varied works? What connects them?*

The common thread linking these 86 stories is the willingness on the part of their authors to think and imagine in ways other than the resolutely realistic and literal. None of these writers disdain or fear the unreal, although some—Poe, Lovecraft, Carroll, and King—embraced it throughout their careers, and others—Capote, Cheever, Singer, and Oates—also wrote realistic fiction. Even writers whose reputations are thoroughly based on mimetic fictions, including writers of crime and mystery stories, have been moved at various points in their writing lives to venture beyond realism: Raymond Chandler, Walter Mosley, and Donald Westlake wrote fantastic tales; E. M. Forster, E. B. White, Paul Theroux, Doris Lessing, and Margaret Atwood now and again have turned, with varying degrees of commitment, to fantasy and science fiction.

The brilliant, always useful critic of science fiction and fantasy John Clute proposes the term “Fantastika” to designate the literature made up of these genres, along with horror. I support the proposal because it speaks of an underlying unity. *American Fantastic Tales* is a generous gathering of Fantastika as it has developed in this country. There is a tremendous gulf in style, content, and authorial assumptions between our first story, “Somnambulism: A Fragment,” first published in 1805, and our last, “Dial Tone,” published in 2007,

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

but a tough and elastic integument links them: their shared interest in and fascination with the untoward forces that have the power to disrupt and destroy our lives.

*The stories in these volumes are arranged chronologically and that may be how most people will read them—but I wonder whether you could map some different paths readers might take through such a rich collection. Say someone wanted to focus on unreliable first-person narrators—or time travel—or transformations.*

Readers could soak themselves in the go-for-broke, weird, doom-enchanted flavor of 1940s pulp magazines by starting with a pulp story written well in advance of the pulp magazines, Edward Lucas White's "Lukundoo," then progress through Julian Hawthorne's wonderful "Absolute Evil," and finally hit the main vein with David H. Keller's defiantly loopy "The Jelly-Fish," Robert E. Howard's glorious "The Black Stone," and the story I think is H. P. Lovecraft's masterpiece, "The Thing on the Doorstep."

It would be interesting to read stories paired by theme or plot mechanisms, and see how identical elements can evoke violently different effects. John Kendrick Bangs's "Thurlow's Christmas Story" and Henry James's "The Jolly Corner" both confront their protagonists with unpleasant variants of themselves, undesirable secret sharers. Paul Bowles's sinister "The Circular Valley" and Ray Bradbury's charming "The April Witch" share the central device of a capricious spirit-possession but are otherwise nothing alike.

I like the idea of seeing what can be done with the perhaps by-now-banal trope of the vampire by reading through Mary Wilkins Freeman's chilling "Luella Miller," F. Marion Crawford's conventional but ornate "For the Blood Is the Life," moving on to one the most striking stories in this anthology, John Cheever's ominous "Torch Song," and finishing up with Robert Bloch's magnificently engineered little rat-trap, "The Cloak."

*You write in your introduction to Volume II that you see the central theme in the American literature of the fantastic to be "the loss of the individual will" and "the terror aroused by the prospect of this loss." Over the 200 years spanned by these stories, the forces that threaten the individual change radically. Nature poses an ominous threat in the early stories, technology in the later ones. What changes do you see in how writers approached this genre as it evolved down generations of practitioners?*

You could stretch a point and say that every story in this collection deals with the loss of the self, and the terror or anguish that accompanies that loss. "Misery is manifold," as Poe informs us in the first sentence of "Berenice," and

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

the forms it takes are determined by both authorial imagination and cultural forces that vary decade by decade. In the beginning, our authors were completely conscious of the traditions they had inherited from English and European writers—then they created the benchmarks that would guide younger writers.

Nature never really loses its capacity for threat, but soon after the beginning of the twentieth century, our writers are looking for exotic locales in which to set their tales. Africa serves Edward Lukas White and Henry S. Whitehead very well in “Lukundoo” and “Passing of a God,” another pair of stories united by a common theme; Lafcadio Hearn finds exactly what he needs in Japan (“Yuki-Onna,” delicate and beautiful), and earlier, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Herman Melville’s stark “The Tartarus of Maids” and Harriett Prescott Spofford’s maniacal “The Moonstone Mass” follow Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein to Arctic wastes, a signature gothic topos.

Pulp writers sought to evoke the bizarre, the florid, and the mysterious as the atmospheric framework for stories of dark investigations, familial curses, reckless scientists, haunted interiors, ancient races and ancient rites. Robert E. Howard piles on effects in the above-mentioned “The Black Stone,” August Derleth gives the ghost story a canny spin in “The Panelled Room”; Lovecraft’s “The Thing on the Doorstep,” also mentioned above, subverts gender in a way that must have been particularly disturbing in 1933, and in “Genius Loci,” Clark Ashton Smith, who would greatly influence Fritz Leiber and Ray Bradbury, uses the relationship between painting and landscape to conjure a malevolent demon.

More contemporary writers used the fantastic as a means to comment upon or depict social issues particular to their times. Fritz Leiber’s “Smoke Ghost” deals directly with the anxiety and depression of a brutally industrialized world; Jane Rice’s “The Refugee,” a delightful story, draws upon the fears, shortages, and constant hunger of life in occupied Paris; Isaac Singer’s masterly “Hanka” dramatizes an aspect of the Holocaust’s emotional cost; M. Rickert’s “The Chambered Fruit” draws on the Persephone myth as the sturdy skeleton for a haunting story about the perils of the Internet and the dangers posed by our own capacity for hope.

*In his famous essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” H. P. Lovecraft wrote that tales of “cosmic fear” would always find an audience among those of “requisite sensitiveness” but that “relatively few are free enough from the spell of the daily routine to respond to tappings from outside.” By contrast, Joyce Carol Oates has explained the addictiveness of “tales of the gothic-grotesque” by noting that “readers of genre fiction, unlike read-*

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

*ers of what we presume to call 'literary fiction,' assume a tacit contract between themselves and the writer: they understand that they will be manipulated, but the question is how? and when? and with what skill? and to what purpose?" Are they talking about the same readers? How would you characterize the audience for American Fantastic Tales?*

Lovecraft supposed that his tales would find their best audience among the imaginatively refined, while Oates wishes to remark the inherent superiority of realistic literary fiction over hypothetically cruder, more compromised genre work. It does not seem likely that they are speaking of the same readers. Over Lovecraft's supposition hovers the flavor and atmosphere of Decadence, of *The Yellow Book* and Swinburne and Ernest Dowson; Oates's position is more daylit and reasonable, but both positions are radically divisive. Lovecraft's assumptions about his audience are completely personal to him, and of interest primarily for psychological reasons. Oates expresses a deeply familiar literary opinion, one with wide general acceptance. For that reason, it is worth looking at.

All fiction, literary or genre, seeks to manipulate its readers. Every novel is an effort to present a completely formed and coherent view of the way its particular world works, and every novelist is doing her best to make her case persuasive. As Marilynne Robinson once remarked, novelists are always standing on top of a hill, shouting, "No, you're all wrong, *this* is how the world works." In this regard, there is no essential difference between the writer of a literary novel and the writer of a crime novel. The differences have to do with matters other than manipulation: open-endedness, psychological acuity, formal beauty, the quality of the prose, depth of feeling, alertness to ambiguity, suggestions of the world's depth and richness, supple transitions, and a hundred other things. A writer of the fantastic may or may not possess the kind of writerly authority implied by these considerations, but if she does, her work might as well be called "literary." It won't be, though; the fences are too high. However, to be completely frank, work of this kind is always as good, in a literary sense, as most "literary" efforts, and often better than most.

To see what I am talking about, a reader could turn to John Cheever's "Torch Song," Shirley Jackson's "The Daemon Lover," or M. Rickert's "The Chambered Fruit." Kelly Link's "Stone Animals" is one of the greatest stories of the past two decades, worthy of a dozen rereadings. To answer your final question, the audience for these stories is open-minded, imaginatively playful, and interested in complicated, richly rewarding pleasures.

*An anthology of the "best" American fantastic tales seems likely to have several by Poe, Lovecraft and King yet your anthology has one and only*

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

*one story by each writer selected. Why did you adopt this approach and why did you pick “Berenice” for Poe?*

I would have loved to include other stories by the authors you mention, as well as by Henry James, Ray Bradbury, and a few others, but matters of space confined me, as well as my counselors and editors, Max Rudin and Geoffrey O’Brien, to one story by each author represented. Geoffrey suggested “Berenice” as our Poe selection over my original choice, “The Domain of Arnheim,” and he was dead right. “Arnheim” is too oblique for our purposes, and really was just me showing off by going for something truly off-center, obscure, and entirely descriptive. “Berenice” is a great horror story, and has the advantage of being much less well-known than any of the other stories of Poe’s core library such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Cask of Amontillado.”

*I expected to find tales in these volumes by Charles Brockden Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, and James but was quite surprised to find entries from Melville, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Willa Cather in Volume I and, in Volume II, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, John Cheever, and Vladimir Nabokov. What drew these major writers to this genre?*

They were drawn by the possibilities inherent within the fantastic. It’s worth noting that, with the possible exception of the Melville and the Frank Norris, these stories are among the best their authors ever wrote. Capote’s “Miriam” allowed him to deal with the unease aroused by the unassuageability of certain children at certain times by means of pitching the child’s persistence and refusals at the level of extremity; Cheever’s “Torch Song,” on the other hand, confines the extraordinary by placing it in a familiar urban setting and populating it with ordinary characters, who surround the extraordinary without recognizing it as such, and therefore give it the power to work its dire powers on them.

*Volume II covers the period from the 1940s until now and includes some classic science fiction writers: Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, Richard Matheson. Yet 40% of the stories included were published in the last 20 years—and you say you found it difficult to not include more. How do you explain the sudden explosion of talented work in this field? Who are the young writers we should watch?*

I wish I could explain it, but I can’t, not really. All I can do is describe what I think happened. It was not one thing, either, not a single movement. But let’s begin with this observation that some writers born in the 1940s found it possible, and perhaps necessary, to address the material of the fantastic in their own

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

idiosyncratic ways. I'm speaking of T.E.D. Klein, John Crowley, Jonathan Carroll, Steven Millhauser, Stephen King, Thomas Tessier, and, well, me. Everyone in this group adapted the tones, themes, methods, and stances of their genre ancestors from Poe and Lovecraft through Bradbury, Matheson, and Leiber according to their own individual goals—and then added to these influences those of the mainstream and “literary” writers. (In the cases of writers not directly known by me, I'm just guessing, but I think we could cite Hemingway, Fitzgerald, de Maupassant, Twain, Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Shane Stevens, John Barth, John Hawkes, Beckett, and Robert Coover.) Though you can detect a sort of common voice in the pulp writers of the 1930s, the writers who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s are very difficult to see as a group or to mistake for one another. Then, of course, there appeared the next wave, writers born in the 1960s who when in high school inhaled the work of King, Crowley, Carroll, etc., and absorbed the implicit message that the literature of the fantastic could take on any topic, method, or style, and do with it whatever the individual writer felt like doing. These younger writers could write genre fiction utterly free of constraint. And this, I think, had to happen. Without this sort of expansion, *Fantastika* would have dried up into a series of imitative and increasingly irrelevant exercises.

In my opinion, the writers to watch are Kelly Link, Joe Hill, M. Rickert, Brian Evenson, and Benjamin Percy. If we look beyond the borders of this anthology, I would also name Christopher Barzack, Jedediah Berry, Glen Hirschberg, Dennis Mitchell, Margo Lanagan, Elizabeth Hand, Sarah Langan. I wish I could remember the names of another worthy dozen people now momentarily forgotten.

*In an anthology like this, where space is so precious, the longest stories have to be great. I presumed Henry James's "The Jolly Corner," which runs 33 pages, would be the longest in either volume—but the three longest stories are in Volume II: T.E.D. Klein's "The Events at Poroth Farm," Kelly Link's "Stone Animals," and Thomas Ligotti's "The Last Feast of Harlequin." What makes these stories the heavyweight contenders?*

You are right to mention that space was always a consideration, which meant that longer stories had from the beginning a strike against them. There were occasions when I really loved a long story by a writer but in the end replaced it with something just as good but quite a bit shorter. (How thoughtful of Thomas Tessier and Jeff VanderMeer to have written “Nocturne” and “The General Who Is Dead,” stunning tales remarkable for their brevity.) The three stories you mention simply struck me as so impressive, and so important in their contributions to the fantastic, that they had earned the space they occupied.

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

I have already said that I think “Stone Animals” is one of the greatest stories of the past twenty years, and I was intent on including it here from the beginning. The other two were less obvious choices, but equally worthy of inclusion. Both the Klein and Ligotti stories grow very clearly out of their authors’ fascination with H. P. Lovecraft, and stand therefore as proof of Lovecraft’s powerful and enduring influence over this wing of American literature. T.E.D. Klein uses the Lovecraft influence to create a truly involving and cumulatively unsettling story of an isolated rural demesne and a scholar of gothic literature who seeks a quiet place to get a lot of reading done. Its length is the product of Klein’s great patience and sense of timing as he intersperses details of the narrator’s daily occupations and concerns with his sense that the little world around him is getting stranger and stranger, more and more threatening. It’s very scary, and not a word longer than it should be.

Thomas Ligotti’s story is a real marvel, a whiz-bang, a whirligig. Like the Klein story, it uses the familiar Lovecraftian device of sending an innocent scholar into a demented world in which his curiosity and partial knowledge expose him to gathering perils. As it unfurls, it gets darker, stranger, more mysterious, and less actually knowable. It’s a really remarkable piece of fiction.

*I was delighted to find so many stories about time travel, from Jack Finney’s “I’m Scared” to Stephen King’s “That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French” to “Benjamin Percy’s “Dial Tone.” Is this characteristic of the genre or your preference as editor?*

I have to conclude that this happened by accident. At the time, my concern was only to select great stories by authors known and unknown, not to concentrate on any particular theme. Maybe this means that I have a great interest in time travel, but if so, it’s news to me. The three stories you mention really are extremely interesting, though, when considered together. Going chronologically from Finney to King and then to Percy, you can see the author’s idea of what is possible in works of the fantastic growing, evolving, getting richer as it proceeds. Technically, the King and Percy stories are very daring – they take huge risks. It would never have occurred to Jack Finney to write in that darting, all-out manner, it just wasn’t in him. Even if it had been, the conventions of the period would have forced him to keep this experimental capacity to himself.

*Do you have any favorites among the stories? Which writer has influenced you the most and why?*

My personal favorites, for today at least, are Julian Hawthorne’s “Absolute Evil,” written in 1918 and the first story in this collection to speak

## **Straub on *American Fantastic Tales***

with a completely modern voice; James's "The Jolly Corner," which has always meant an enormous amount to me; Conrad Aiken's "Mr. Arcularis," a beautiful and richly psychological take on "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"; Cheever's "Torch Song," with its extraordinary last paragraph; John Crowley's "Novelty," for its absolute gorgeousness of thought; George Saunders's "Sea Oak," which is written with extraordinary, pinpoint precision and is also wildly funny; and of course Kelly Link's "Stone Animals," about which I really cannot say enough.

My actual influences were by writers not included in this book, but I could certainly claim to have been influenced by both Henry James and Stephen King.

*You contributed a story, "A Short Guide to the City," to this collection but are best known for writing novel-length works in this genre. How does writing a short fantastic tale, like the ones in these two volumes, differ from writing a novel?*

There are great differences between writing short stories and writing novels. Some people are capable of one but not the other: the muscles required are different, as is the attitude toward one's material. A short story demands sharp focus, efficiency of means, an interest in and love for vignettes, for eloquent fragments of experience. I was past forty and the author of eight novels before I wrote my first short story. This one, "A Short Guide to the City," was written in response to having just read Joseph Brodsky's wonderful essay "A Guide to a Renamed City." I immediately saw that I could do a stranger but more guide-booky story about Milwaukee.

Novelists, on the other hand, must be open to digression, to unforeseen highways that appear in the midst of dense jungles, to characters that change shape when looked at closely. They must also be the sort of persons who are capable of squandering great amounts of time, years, on private projects that may turn out in the end to be worth nothing. I am not at all a gambler, but sometimes it occurs to me that my entire adult life has been one long crap shoot.