



The Knights of the Cornerstone, James P. Blaylock (Ace 978-0441016532, \$23.95, 304pp, hc) December 2008. Cover by Sam Montesano.

Anchorwick, Jeffrey E. Barlough (Gresham & Doyle 978-0-9787634-1-1, \$14.95, 372pp, tp) November 2008. Cover by Caspar David Friedrich. [Order from Gresham & Doyle, PO Box 45797, Los Angeles CA 90045; <www.westernlightsbooks.com>]

Liberation: Being the Adventures of the Slick Six after the Collapse of the United States of America, Brian Francis Slattery (Tor 978-0-7653-2046-9, \$14.95, 304pp, tp) October 2008. Cover by Ross MacDonald.

The Autopsy and Other Tales, Michael Shea (Centipede Press 978-1-933618-371, \$95.00, 566pp, hc; ill. John Stewart) October 2008. [Order from Centipede Press, 2565 Teller Court, Lakewood CO 80214; <www.millipedeypress.com>]

Michael Shea is another prose master, one who has far more mileage than Slattery but shows no signs of wear. His latest collection **The Autopsy and Other Tales** should be worth every penny of its deluxe price, and even my truncated galley (missing two novellas, only one of which I could look up in its original form) is a stunner.

Early on, Shea may have been known primarily for fantasies in the vein of Vance and Leiber, like his sly, elegant tales of Niffit the Lean, but it wasn't long before he found H.P. Lovecraft and began to reinvent the Cthulhu Mythos in a manner very much his own. Even his horror not directly associated with the Mythos can draw upon the wilder flights of Lovecraftian prose, as exemplified in this not-strictly-chronological selection's opener, "The Angel of Death". In a '70s setting that may now seem "period" but is no less vivid for that (and very different from HPL's New England), the mingled scholarship and sometimes comical misunderstandings of a visiting alien alternate with the wild rantings of a homicidal maniac whose initial pride gives way to paranoid dismay when he comes up against That Which Should Not Be.

The narrator of "The Horror on the #33" uses a more formal version of Lovecraftian baroque that stands in high contrast to his tale of a bus with a long route in a desert city, a wino, and a monstrous facsimile of a bag lady. Several stories later in "Fat Face", Shea applies an even more ornate style to the world of low-life hookers in sunny Hollywood, a crazy transplantation seen in lines like: "The breeze was combing buttery light into the waxen fronds of the palms, while the Hollywood Hills seemed most opulently brocaded – under the sky's flawless blue – with the silver-green of sagebrush and sumac." In the next paragraph

a pimp walks in, and the one after that features the second hooker, disturbed by occult intimations so that the day's "very clarity took on a sinister quality of remorselessness."

Even when the reader can't (and isn't meant to) keep an entirely straight face, there's enough genuine horror to give such tales a disturbing kick. Shea maintains the balance in other ways in a work like "Salome", where a creepy mix of pornography and possession never quite conceals the sly humor that lies beneath. He can also mix the terrible and uncanny with science fiction in a variety of ways, never abandoning the element of human response. "Fill It With Regular" imagines a prolific fungus that thrives on hydrocarbons, then shows the ordinary people whose lives it drastically affects. "Polyphemus" takes place on an alien planet where the colors are as intense as the dangers. Title story "The Autopsy" may turn into the monolog of an almost standard villain, but along the way there's plenty of visceral horror mingled with pity, humanity, philosophy, lyrical prose, and SF.

Anyone who has lost touch with Shea over the past decade or two needn't worry that he's lost any of his intensity or eloquence. "The Growlimb" (2004) deals with a hermit-like eccentric who works as a message-runner for the company Humanity Incorporated in Sonoma County, California. Years ago a "revelation" led him to abandon a regular life with a wife and children for an existence that consists, as much as he can make it, of "absolute solitude" in the rural land on the county's borders. Touched by the supernatural in ways that promote ecstasy as well as darker forms of madness, he never descends into absolute villainy, and he may be possessed of a fascinating power.

Death appears in various personas, aside from the occasional murderous human. In the fantasy world of "The Rebuke" each person encounters his or her own specific manifestation, and what starts as the tale of a bargain that will grant vengeance from beyond the grave matures and changes into something far less single-minded. "For Every Tatter in Its Mortal Dress" is more of an intriguing parable that involves a rather crass salesman, an old man, and Death. Both stories represent 21st-century Shea, perhaps a little more psychologically subtle than he once was, and standing apart from his radical variations on Lovecraft.

But there's no sense of regression when this collection ends with a novella that's almost a quarter-century old, "The Color Out of Time" (Shea's response to HPL's "The Color Out of Space").

Lovecraft himself shows up as past mentor to a now-elderly woman who joins with two men to oppose the Enemy that manifests as an otherworldly color and a spreading curse at what used to be a beautiful lake in the New England countryside. Though the horror of inchoate despair gets its due, amid mutant transformations of local flora and fauna, some passages can seem more like a crazy vision from Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoons. Here's a pleasure boat in the aftermath of an Enemy visitation:

The reeking mass that clogged the after-deck was a tangle of inanimate objects, and yet the whole spoke of human agony with a hideous, instantaneous eloquence that a jumble of actual corpses could scarcely have surpassed. The card table had been torn from its footings in the deck, and shattered; the chairs were tortured knots of metal tubing; the deck was garishly smeared with guacamole and bean dip, crushed potato chips, abundant glass shards and puddled whisky – and with other, more pitiful and repulsive substances as well.

A navigator transformed to a blackened husk, aside from his "bright floral print shorts," provides a finishing touch. Should we laugh or weep?

America the crass, America the beautiful, with its crazy-quilt of inhabitants – whether Shea mocks, celebrates, mourns or some combination of all three, he manages to do it in just the right words.