

LITERATURE

August Derleth and
Arkham House

by Peter Ruber

August Derleth was one of the principal forces that established science fiction as a legitimate literary genre. He was a product of the "pulp" era, who founded a unique publishing company in 1939 called Arkham House. He had no long-range agenda for his progeny other than to rescue the writings of his late friend and mentor H.P. Lovecraft, a writer as strange as the stories he wrote, who had toiled in the poor-paying pulp magazines for several decades without gaining a wide readership.

Derleth, who was emerging then as a promising writer of regional literature, made a strong effort to persuade Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Chas. Scribner's Sons, to consider the stories of H.P. Lovecraft. When he was rejected on what Perkins said were purely economic considerations, an excuse he heard from other editors he knew, Derleth decided to take on the responsibility of publishing Lovecraft. Using the greater portion of a \$5,000 fee that *Red-book* magazine had paid for one of his novels, Derleth and fellow *Weird Tales* writer Donald Wandrei established Arkham House, the name taken from Lovecraft's place-name for legend-haunted Salem, Massachusetts.

What Derleth knew about the business side of publishing and selling could be summed up in a few sentences, though he often told his own publishers how to market his books. Derleth's first Lovecraftian collection was *The Outsider and Others*, a 553-page book that was published in 1939. That was followed in 1943 by *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, and in succeeding years such classics as *Marginalia*, *The Lurker at the Threshold*, and *Something About Cats and Other Pieces*. When he had exhausted Lovecraft's slender output, he began a series

of posthumous collaborations based on his mentor's notes and unfinished manuscripts, even using plots suggested in Lovecraft's letters, always sharing the credit even if he did 90 percent of the work.

In 1941, two years after publishing the first Lovecraft book, Derleth began to see the possibility of using the Arkham House imprint as a vehicle for some of his own and Wandrei's writings, and for resurrecting the careers of other *Weird Tales* writers, as well as some British writers he admired. And so began a lifelong odyssey to preserve the best of a literary genre that had launched Derleth's own prolific career in 1927. In time, commercial publishers began knocking on Derleth's door for reprint rights and to assemble new anthologies.

Derleth had a great fondness for science fiction. He wrote a few "pure" science fiction stories, but they weren't always successful in execution. His sympathies lay in the past, not the future. Where he did excel was as an editor of science fiction anthologies. He had an uncanny ability to sniff out the best of the old and new and assemble them into some remarkable collections for Pellegrini and Cudahy. In a space of five years, from 1948-1953, Pellegrini and Cudahy published seven of Derleth's science fiction anthologies, and in 1954, Farrar & Rhinehart published his last two—*Portals of Tomorrow* and *Time to Come*. Almost all had overseas publication in Great Britain and have been widely reprinted by paperback publishers.

For some reason the market for science fiction anthologies dissipated in the mid-1950's. Readers were demanding novels, and soon the paperback market was glutted with originals and reprints and a succession of pulp-type sci-fi magazines like the *Magazine of Science and Science Fiction* and *Analog*, and several years passed before anthologies began to cycle through again. By that time, too, other writers and editors had begun to use their influence in the publishing world, and Derleth lost interest. He liked being a trailblazer. When he had popularized a movement or a genre, he moved on to other projects.

When Derleth published an Arkham House chapbook in 1962 entitled *100*

Books by August Derleth, a small section listing a dozen or so books that were "Awaiting Publication" went almost unnoticed except by fans and collectors of the author. It listed a science fiction anthology called *New Horizons*, the manuscript of which was presumed lost after his death because it never turned up in his papers at the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Last year, when I acquired from his daughter April Derleth a mountain of unpublished manuscripts, I was pleased to find *New Horizons* intact and immediately arranged to have it published in 1998 by Arkham House. *New Horizons* is aptly named because it contains science fiction stories culled from the early decades of this century and more or less showcases the genre in a variety of fields, ranging from weird science to space travel. It is an interesting collection that contains stories by a few well-known writers and some who are known primarily to madcap collectors. Since Derleth had not included any of his own stories, I added an interesting novelette he had collaborated on with Mark Schorer called "In the Kingdom of the Sea," which is loosely associated with Lovecraft's "Cthulhu Mythos" and time travelers from another dimension. It was written in 1930 or 1931, but had never been published.

In recent years some upstart collectors of Lovecraft's writings have found it good sport to deride Derleth's motives behind creating Lovecraft's literary reputation. They have claimed on various Internet websites that Derleth made a small fortune off Lovecraft. This is nonsense, and those who knew Derleth during the years he guided Arkham House are well aware that the publishing company would not have survived if he hadn't infused it with large sums from his own writing income.

Very often books that had been announced were delayed because of Arkham's financial situation. Derleth ran the publishing company by himself (with a part-time secretary) for the better part of 20 years, typing invoices, packing orders, keeping the laborious financial records, and writing late into the night to pay the bills. It was not until the early 1960's that he could afford a part-

time helper to take the physical work of fulfilling orders off his shoulders. Then, too, when Arkham's inventory ran out of space in his basement and attic, he borrowed from the bank to build a climate-controlled warehouse.

In addition to extracting a physical toll on his health, the demands of running Arkham House affected Derleth's writing career during the last 20 years of his life. Instead of devoting time to his creative writing and his *Sac Prairie* Saga, he ground out a lot of commercial work for his New York publishers—histories, contract biographies, historical novels he cared little about writing, junior mysteries. To gain some measure of creative satisfaction he self-published books of poetry and spent odd hours writing mystery stories and working on such monumental works as *Walden West* and *Return to Walden West*, the latter published only a year before his death in 1971.

Another little-known fact is that Derleth sponsored the books of many young writers like Ramsey Campbell, among others, who have mined Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and expanded it into new and interesting dimensions. He believed Lovecraft would have approved,

because during the decade that the two men corresponded, Lovecraft encouraged the younger writer to experiment with the mythos, as he did with others in his inner circle. And when Derleth and Donald Wandrei began collecting as many of Lovecraft's letters as they could in the late 1930's, they set in motion a whole cottage industry of scholars who today continue to analyze and write about Lovecraft as minutely as a forensic scientist.

Today, Arkham House has a number of rivals who are determined to carve out a share of the market that Derleth spent a lifetime cultivating. That was to be expected. But it is harder now to make a go of it because of the distribution dynamics within the publishing industry. Derleth saw that happening long before his death, and he fully expected Arkham House to perish soon after him. He didn't realize how much momentum he had created with his unique editorial policy, or that Arkham House had developed a life of its own. Even legal and editorial bungling in later years could not derail the enterprise. In the past year, his daughter April has taken over the editorial as well as the business responsibilities of Arkham House with a fresh viewpoint and enthusiasm that I expect will move the publishing house into the next century.

While Derleth's regional writing has been plowed under the avalanche of time, it too is on the verge of a renaissance through a serious publishing effort that is reprinting his major books and bringing out many recently discovered manuscripts including many novels, short stories, poetry, journals, literary criticism, and miscellaneous nonfiction. In this group will be new collections of fantasy and mystery stories, some featuring his detective Solar Pons, a pastiche-series of Sherlock Holmes that ran to more than 70 stories.

Whatever history doles out for August Derleth, most historians and critics of the science fiction and fantasy genre will no doubt recognize his enormous contribution in legitimizing and preserving some of the best stories and writers of his time. Few writers have had such a strong sense of loyalty to their mentors and to a literary genre.

Peter Ruber was one of August Derleth's last publishers and will be editing the two dozen manuscripts recently discovered at Derleth's home in Sauk City, Wisconsin.

CRIME

The Politics of Hate Crime Statistics

by Joseph E. Fallon

The FBI's "Hate Crime Statistics"—preliminary figures for 1995 were released in November—are highly suspect because of the agency's flawed methodology. The problem is that, in recording and identifying the perpetrators of hate crimes, there are no strictly defined categories for thugs of "European-American," "Hispanic," or "Middle Eastern" descent. The term "Hispanic" has already been officially defined by Public Law 94-311 and Directive Number 15 of the Office of Management and Budget as "a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race." Employing the category "Middle Eastern" would probably be more convenient and less confusing than the heading currently used—"North Africa and Southwest Asia"—to identify anyone from that region of the world. And regarding the term "European-American," it has not been officially recognized by the federal government. It is essential that this last category be implemented and defined as "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe—i.e., the British Isles, Iceland, and the European continent as bordered by the Pyrenees, the Caucasus, and the Ural mountains." This definition conforms to the standard already established by the federal government for defining Americans with origins in the Middle East and Asia, while avoiding the possibility of mistakenly including Hispanics in this category.

The FBI's current methodology for determining hate crimes is based on Public Law 101-275, the "Hate Crime Statistics Act" of 1990, which was enacted by Congress on April 23, 1990. This legislation mandated that the U.S. Attorney General establish guidelines and collect data "about crimes that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, including where appropriate the crimes

LU/ENGLISH NEWSLETTER

All the latest news from
Lagado University
Annual Subscription \$5.00

Four issues per year.
LU/English Newsletter
11 Llewellyn Place
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____