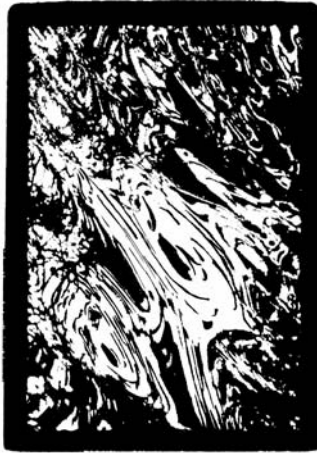


STRANGE TALES Volume II

by

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PREFACE

The Strange Tale and other genres. . .

Mainstream publishing has a requirement for volume sales, and therefore prefers tried and tested formulae if it is to publish genre fiction. There is a perception (despite the best efforts of J.K. Rowling) that this kind of writing only sells to particular, limited audiences, and therefore there is less scope for experimentation.

In the 1980s horror dominated bookshops with shelf after shelf of shiny black dustjackets where the titles were picked-out in raised gold printing. Almost overnight these disappeared, and presumably this was because readers had stopped buying them. Many general readers, I suspect, moved to detective fiction, which was veering away from fusty old gentlemen solving murders, towards bright but troubled young things agonising over improbably intricate and unpleasant serial killings. Detective fiction has long been popular with academics and critics, and ‘series’ detectives continue to be lucrative for publishers. But what happened to dedicated fans of horror? And had horror writers simply given up writing? Those who were left had to rely on the small presses for their sustenance, and there now appears to be a growing activity among them.

As a genre popular Fantasy has stood firm, despite critical indifference, and has defined itself (again thanks to mainstream publishers) into a form that requires at least a trilogy of giant volumes, and insists that unicorns and orcs are staple fare. There has always been other, more innovative fantasy written, but it still has to take its opportunities where it can; occasionally it emerges as popular literary fiction, or in books for children. Science Fiction has fared similarly, albeit with a little more freedom allowed in its form, but it is still a genre, and is therefore ghettoised.

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Ghost stories have continued to be the poor relation of the other genres, although tired classics are repackaged every Christmas and have a few weeks' space on bookshop shelves. As a necessity there has long-existed a busy and vibrant small community of ghost-story aficionados (a community that might lose its impetus if it suddenly became popular?)

There are other genres, of course, overlapping those already mentioned. 'Slipstream' fiction was in vogue for a while, and there are sub-genres, often based around an admiration for a certain author (as is the case with H.P. Lovecraft) which, inevitably move in and out of fashion.

But what of the Strange Tale? Is it even a genre? It is a term borrowed from Robert Aickman, whose own writing is popularly but incorrectly labelled as 'ghost stories'. An upsurge in Aickman's popularity has led to an increase in the discussion of the Strange Tale, but can it be defined as a form or genre without direct reference to Aickman himself? With this second volume of *Strange Tales* from the Tartarus Press (the first was published in 2003, and was itself preceded by our *Tales from Tartarus* in 1995) we would like to suggest that it is a form that explores a fantastic idea, supernatural or psychological, with the intention of causing, through its own logical development, uncertainty or unease about that which the reader takes for granted. The outward appearance of the story can vary infinitely from the traditional to the experimental, from the serious to the comic, but in each case the assumptions of the reader are undermined to a degree that they find uncomfortable. The Strange Tale is a form that moves effortlessly between the various genres (as all good fiction should).

Whatever your opinion, we believe that within this collection you will discover a range of new, contemporary 'strange', 'weird' and 'curious' tales, which should cause you to wonder just what worlds exist beyond the apparent reality we take for granted.