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STRANGE RELICS AND EERIE EXCAVATIONS

Review by Kerry Dodd

Thornton, Amara and Katy Soar eds. *Strange Relics: Stories of Archaeology and the Supernatural, 1895-1954*. Handheld Press, 2022, 195 pp.

Featuring twelve varied and intriguing tales of supernatural archaeological encounters, *Strange Relics* brings together fiction from both iconic authors and hidden gems. These stories are not purely focused on artefacts, however, and in their introduction Amara Thornton and Katy Soar note how “the settings are significant and add immeasurably to the eeriness of these tales” (viii). Discussing the contexts and themes that run throughout the chapters, Thornton and Soar provide an illuminating coherence to the collection and are open about their editorial commitment of including tales written by women authors as well as avoiding racisms and other form of Othering. While the editors note that they have not been completely able to avoid the latter, this discussion is well-considered in its frankness and emphasises the importance of further editorial work in this area.

The tales are arranged in publication order and begin with “The Shining Pyramid” (1895) by Arthur Machin. The story revolves around mysterious inscriptions of eyes, bowl, and a pyramid found on a stone wall that leads to the discovery of ‘the little people’ and their ritual in the hills of the Welsh countryside. The last of Machen’s ‘Dyson’ tales, the disappearance of a local girl believed to have “gone off with the fairies” seemingly acts as a frame narrative through which the main character Vaughan entreats his pseudo-detective friend, Dyson, to work out the origins of the strange signs appearing outside his property (3). The tale’s threat of burglary and foreign sailors slowly transforms into a fascination with the historicity of the local hills and the objects they contain before both finally witness the titular pyramid and “what lay bound in midst of them was no longer fit for earth” (28). While the concluding terror may not be as effective as other contemporaneous writers of supernatural or Weird Fiction, “The Shining Pyramid” evidently reflects a host of late Victorian anxieties and sets the scene perfectly for the other upcoming stories.

Following with another iconic author, “Through the Veil” (1911) by Arthur Conan Doyle may be one of the shortest tales in the collection but still effectively conjures a sense of the archaeological imagination. The story focuses on a couple who visit the excavations of a Roman fort at Newstead, near the Scottish border, on their first anniversary. During their excursion of the ruins, Mr Brown’s wife Maggie remarks of “the queerest feeling, this place, as if I were not myself, but someone else” in which the building’s history and the lives of those that lived there seem to become real in front of their very eyes (31). While the tale’s concluding revelation, that the couple are reincarnated souls and Mr Brown killed Maggie’s former lover, is rushed and would have benefitted from further exploration, “Through the Veil” is a classic example of the fantastical visions often associated with archaeological encounters where the past can be visualised through the remnants of material culture.

"The Ape" (1917) by E. F. Benson meanwhile is an unsurprising tale of male desire set against the artefact trade of the early twentieth century, but more broadly is a fantastic example of Egyptomania and its fervent cultural appeal. Discovering a supernatural amulet that allows him to control apes, Hugh Marsham's avariciousness leads to a sinister conclusion when this power is turned on a woman he feels has played with his affections. While the tale's nature is unsurprising for anyone interested in the genre, the larger picture it represents of Egyptomania and the gendered framing of control makes this a compelling inclusion. H. D. Everett's "The Next Heir" (1920) continues the obsession with classical antiquity by returning to Roman roots and a "respect for antiquity" that "is too great" (81). The tale recounts Richard Quinton's revelation that he is a potential inheritor of the family estate from his second cousin. Ancestry and historicity are infused throughout the tale, as Richard travels to the Quinton estate and is haunted by spectres of the family's past. He learns also of his second cousin's "great desire to – call back into life, I may say – associations from the dead past of an earlier period still" of the god Pan, who many readers are likely to be familiar with (81). Indeed, the horned god's introduction brings a sinister twist to the tale, which, despite being the longest in the collection is still infused with enough ghosts, visions, and shadows to keep the reader entertained to its fiery ending. "Curse of the Stillborn" (1926) by Margery Lawrence meanwhile returns to Egyptomania in perhaps the weakest story of the collection, especially given its loose archaeological connection. Centred on a parson and his wife, the tale is rife with colonialism as the duo insist that an Egyptian baby is buried according to Christian tradition and not local custom. The supernatural retribution of a "terror unspeakable; a Thing swathed and clumsy and vague, shapeless, yet dreadfully, appallingly powerful, a blind Horror seeking vengeance" is consigned to the latter end of the tale and does not sufficiently engage with the imperialistic attitudes that it is evidently seeking to critique (132).

Eleanor Scott's "The Cure" is a stronger return to form, focusing on Erik Storm who becomes obsessed with Scandinavian relics. In classic excavational horror fashion "he opened tombs and things ... and he found odd things, and heard – dreadful things," from which he returns to Britain haunted by his finds (137). Erik's fear and fascination with archaeological objects is a perfect encapsulation of the materialistic desire that runs throughout the collection with a cautionary conclusion that such pursuits often lead to a dark ending. Certainly, many of the stories focus on humanity's material relationships, whether this is a downfall from avaricious excess or a careful respect for antiquated relics. The opening of "Ho! The Merry Masons" (1933) by John Buchan opening notes that "we do not know what queer intricate effects the human soul may have on inanimate things" (156). While the tale opens with a frame setting that ruminates on the potential for human events to leave a mark on the surrounding ether, the majority of the story is based around a historic house (potentially built by the Masons) that drains inhabitants with phantasmal visions until they perish with a "shortness of breath" (174). This haunted house – with its old furniture, twisted staircases, and convoluted halls – demonstrates the power that such historical artefacts can have upon humanity, which may be the source of wonder or horror depending on antiquarian interests.

The collection closes with four shorter tales that compellingly summarise the core themes encountered thus far. Algernon Blackwood's "Roman Remains" (1948) recalls two previous entries,

as the protagonist visits an eerie Welsh countryside reminiscent of “The Shining Pyramid” with an intrusion upon a ritual to Pan akin to “The Next Heir.” The second World War looms in the background of the story alongside “an unreasonable terror” and “nameless fear” that pervades through the landscape (181). Yet despite the historicity suffused throughout, it is the landscape and the broader setting here that provides the antiquarian supernaturalism rather than any principal object or relic. “Cracks of Time” (1948), by Dorothy Quick invokes Pan as well, as the narrator Sheila begins to recognise the god’s visage within the cracks of the tiles within their house’s sunroom. As Sheila falls deeper and deeper into Pan’s embrace, she begins to hear his music and becomes so entranced by his allure “that I couldn’t think of anything else. I was completely lost to the music, hypnotized as any snake by a master piper” (197). Offering a variance on the powerful attraction of antiquated mysteries, desire combined with fantastical visions offer an effective contrast to the more suspenseful tones of “The Next Heir.”

Meanwhile, “Whitewash” (1952) by Rose Macaulay is a brief tale focused around contemporary revisioning of historical figures who “have the whitewash buckets poured over them and emerge saints, or victims of circumstance, more sinned against than sinning” (199-200). The tale posits this retrospective transformation alongside a spectral encounter within caves near Roman ruins. Yet, while the story’s brevity leaves both dimensions undeveloped, their intersection does draw attention towards how the past itself is perceived. Finally, “The Golden Ring” (1954) by Alan J. B. Wace returns to an artefact-driven tale, which revolves around a Greek ring inherited from a deceased soldier. Offered by three wool-spinning women, who bear many similarities to the Fates, the original owner is instructed to never sell or lose the ring and to not cut the threads that entwine it. The artefact itself perplexes a multitude of experts and museum curators, while also seemingly cursing any who breach the rules that govern its ownership. Its contested Grecian history alongside the evident appeal and danger that such an object represents is a fitting conclusion for both the allure of such central objects and these tales themselves.

Strange Relics is a carefully curated anthology full of eerie landscape, supernatural talismans, and the shades of antiquity. For genre enthusiasts this is a compelling mix between classic tales and new discoveries, while excavational initiates will find this an enticing springboard for further excavations. While some of the latter tales do invariably repeat previously explored themes or aspects, this tight focus helps to provide a coherence to the collection. Certainly, as ever with such anthologies, there is a multitude of other tales concerning spectral excavations worthy of consideration for future, similar entries. *Strange Relics* therefore is an excellent primer on the appeal of such tales and exposes the importance of further, more diverse collections.

Bionote

Kerry Dodd completed his PhD at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis, entitled “The Archaeological Weird: Excavating the Non-human,” examined the intersection between archaeology and Weird fiction. Focusing on the cultural production of the artefact encounter, his thesis explored how archaeological framings can offer a re-conceptualisation of object ontology through the Weird. He

is currently working on a monograph that explores the representation of materiality and objects in archaeological fiction. Kerry also works more widely in the fields of: Science Fiction (particularly Cosmic Horror and Cyberpunk), the Gothic, and glitch aesthetics.