

## APL Volumes

Season 1, Episode 2: *THE BALLAD OF BLACK TOM*

*This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.*

### BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

MADDY: Hello and welcome to APL Volumes, a new podcast from the Austin Public Library. In this first season, we're exploring the horror genre and its six main subgenres: Cosmic, Gothic, Humor, Paranormal, Psychological, and Visceral. This episode is all about the Cosmic subgenre.

We read *The Ballad of Black Tom* by Victor LaValle, a reimagining of H.P. Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook". I'm Maddy, your eldritch host for the season, and an Adult Services librarian at APL's Central library.

Later this episode I'll be joined by my APL co-worker Genn Mehalik, a Library Associate in Central's Circulation Department, as we discuss the novella and try not to wake the Slumbering King.

### MUSIC

Cosmic horror follows on the chronological heels of Gothic horror. While Gothic crept into the early years of the 1900s, Cosmic came out of the cultural, social, economic, you name it, shift that occurred after World War I ended and 1919 marked the true beginning of the twentieth century.

The Western world experienced a blurring of class distinctions, particularly in Britain and the US, and this was reflected in literature of the time. *Horror Literature through History* notes: "the polite, elegant ghost story for upper-class audiences—and featuring upper-class characters—began to merge with something a bit earthier and less sophisticated. In Britain this meant the appearance of lowbrow anthologies as well as novels of occult horror. In America, it meant pulp magazines."

The first in English and the most important weird fiction pulp magazine is *Weird Tales*, which started in 1923 and published H. P. Lovecraft's short story "Dagon" in the same year.

A brief note – weird fiction and cosmic horror are different but closely related types of supernatural horror, and both were codified by Lovecraft. Weird fiction may come up in our readalikes at the end of the episode, but we won't focus on it here.

From this point on, the history of cosmic horror is unable to be separated from HP Lovecraft and his influence, particularly once "Call of Cthulhu" was published in 1928. Cosmic horror upends conventional notions of human life by introducing space-time ruptures, otherworldly appearances, and by illusive threats to reality as we know it. Lovecraft's stories achieved this partly by using modern, shocking developments from across scientific fields – such as astronomy, geology, physics, and psychology – pulling horror's traditional focus from run-ins with old-fashioned superstition to confrontations with an uncaring, unknowable, and lawless cosmos. Literally cosmic horror.

The beings that came from Lovecraft's cosmos are usually referred to as the Great Old Ones (which, if you're like me, you know as the warlock patron in *Dungeons and Dragons*), and the collection of stories that involve them are collectively called the Cthulhu Mythos. This Mythos centers the idea that not only can the human race no longer claim to be the top sentients in the universe, we can no longer even claim that spot on our own planet. I love this quote from *Horror Lit through History*: "Humanity is at best the inconsequential and accidental by-product of life-forms completely beyond its comprehension."

This is something that is central to the idea of cosmic horror, as is the idea that these creatures should exist separately from traditional folklore and superstition – many cosmic horror stories continue to create beings whole-cloth from the author's imagination.

Some of Lovecraft's immediate successors were Ray Bradbury, Shirley Jackson, and Richard Matheson. Ray Bradbury also published stories in *Weird Tales* and so helped give horror fiction a broader appeal through cosmic horror and weird fiction, and his modern style of writing and unflinching way of addressing emotions head-on still resonate in the writing style of cosmic horror today.

Cosmic horror, and its pulp magazine era, paved the way for modern horror, and you can still see it in some early works of modern horror, like the wasps in *The Shining*. And even though horror then branched more into the visceral and psychological subgenres, cosmic horror outside of Lovecraft's works has found its niche and there's lots of it if you want it.

So what makes Cosmic Horror cosmic?

**Plot:** The plot of Cosmic horror stories works in tandem with the mood-slash-atmosphere, but it ultimately pretty easy to break down. Person arrives in a new place, discovers something they shouldn't, releases or summons a cosmic horror beyond their comprehension, a chase or similar action sequence occurs in order to find a way to send the horror back, then the cosmic horror leaves at will or is temporarily banished. The cosmic horror cannot be defeated, and there is the lingering promise of its return.

**Pacing:** The pacing of a cosmic horror story can vary, but it will usually speed up in the second half or last act, as the characters (and the reader) have to come to grips with the idea that this cosmic horror is really happening and is closer than it may appear.

**Writing Style:** The writing style can also vary, as cosmic horror draws its inspiration from all techniques. Lovecraft's influence means that most cosmic horror, particularly in the pulp era, used a first-person narrator who was slightly aloof and refined, as well as a more hyperbolic, surreal tone to describe the cosmic horrors themselves.

Cosmic horror also tends to use, quote, "verisimilar writing techniques" which make fictional stories appear true – this helps undermine the idea that humans have the best and largest grasp on knowledge, and places the educated and wordy narrator in a situation where that education fails to describe the eldritch horrors in front of them. Long descriptions are common, but the writing itself is typically straightforward, so readers can expect a literary fiction vibe.

**Mood/atmosphere:** Cosmic horror's most important appeal aspect is mood-slash-atmosphere. Lovecraft himself emphasized the importance of mood over plot—to him, the most essential element is the creation of a, quote, "certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread" and the suspension, if not violation, of "fixed laws of Nature". Reality itself, and what we believe to be true about it, will be eroded or suspended; and with it, the characters' ability to square with what they are experiencing. There will also be a lot of foreshadowing, which will make the mood even more full of dread once the reader recalls all the hints.

**Setting:** Since Cosmic stories deal in monster and eldritch horrors that are massive in physical scale, these stories often take place in isolated settings – somewhere the cosmic horror can hide when not wreaking havoc. This can be a small isolated coastal town, where the ocean provides endless cover. Or, since Cosmic horror is often released during an investigation, like a scientific experiment or an archaeological dig, this can be a separate setting, like a desert or a large lab, that is still remote but large enough to hold the horror when it appears. The setting is also usually contemporary, to highlight how deeply ancient or literally alien the horrors are.

**Characters:** Cosmic horror stories are not character-driven – the main role of the characters in a cosmic story is to uncover and then be driven mad by the cosmic horror they face. The characters, as in any horror story but particularly in cosmic, exist to show how insignificant humans are before horror we cannot comprehend – and what will happen to us if we try.

So what does a cosmic horror story look like nearly one hundred years after Lovecraft defined the genre?

Victor LaValle grew up in Queens, New York, and still lives and works in the city, both as a writer and as a professor in Columbia University's Writing Department. He's an incredibly prolific writer, with multiple awards under his belt; in addition to many nonfiction articles and essays, he's written a short story collection titled *Slapboxing with Jesus*, which I am definitely giving my grandparents for Christmas, four novels – *The Ecstatic*, *Big Machine*, *The Devil in Silver*, and *The Changeling*; two comic books – *Destroyer* and *Eve*; and two novellas – *Lucretia and the Kroons* and *The Ballad of Black Tom*. I'm not exactly sure when this episode will launch, but his next novel is called *Lone Women* and is coming out in March and looks absolutely fantastic. I've already placed a hold on it, so get in line.

LaValle's harrowing stories almost always take place in historical New York City, combine inventive horror of the unknown with literary prose, and their themes are of race, class, faith, madness, and our relationship with the unseen and the uncanny.

Victor LaValle was an avid HP Lovecraft fan and reader growing up, and his thorny relationship with Lovecraft is woven throughout this novella.

Lovecraft was also racist, something noted even by his peers in the 1920s and '30s, and his xenophobia is perhaps never more on display than in "The Horror at Red Hook." Ruthanna Emrys and Anne Pillsworth did a great overview and contemporary analysis of Red Hook over at [Tor.com](http://Tor.com).

I'm not going to go into too much depth here, because I want to focus on *The Ballad of Black Tom*, but I'll briefly sum up Red Hook, since *Ballad* is a retelling and a reclamation of it.

Red Hook was written in 1925 and published in 1927.

It opens with the protagonist, Detective Malone, having a screaming nervous breakdown in a small Rhode Island village due to his newly developed phobia of large buildings, a result of a harrowing case in Red Hook, Brooklyn. From there, the story backtracks to explain what happened in Red Hook: Detective Malone was federally ordered to patrol the Red Hook neighborhood, whose "gangs" and "crime" and "unsavory elements" (I am doing air quotes around all of these) are described in detail.

Malone is also keeping an eye on Robert Suydam, a white man known to be a recluse living in genteel poverty; Suydam's public demeanor changes noticeably, as he suddenly looks younger, appears more in public, and gets engaged to an heiress. A police raid reveals nothing except for some strange markings; but Suydam's social connections are suspect and a string of kidnappings occur at the same time as his engagement. After his wedding, the newlyweds board a ship.

That night, a scream is heard, and the crew finds both dead, with claw marks on the wife's body; later, some strange men board the ship and leave with Suydam's body. After this news, Malone searches Suydam's apartment for clues; he finds a door in the basement, which suddenly opens and sucks him inside, to a hellish other world full of human sacrifices and a ritual that reanimates Suydam's lifeless body. Malone is later found alive in the basement, with the apartment caved in above him, having killed everyone else inside. After he is found, the underground tunnels and chambers connected to the apartment are filled in, but Malone mentions that the threat is already returning to Red Hook.

Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* turns this story on its head. Described in one review as both a hug and a middle finger to Lovecraft, *The Ballad of Black Tom* kicks off with a dedication to Lovecraft, quote, "with all my conflicted feelings." I can't touch on every beat of this story, because it is so finely woven that I would just have to read the whole thing out loud, but this is a general synopsis.

Set in the 1920s, *The Ballad of Black Tom* follows a young Black man named Tommy Tester, who works as a hustler while pretending to be a street musician. He does odd jobs across the city for strange not-quite-human people, which leads him into contact with Robert Suydam, who hires Tommy to play at a party at his home. Inside the

house, Tommy experiences visions of cosmic horror, specifically of Cthulhu, and Suydam decides to keep Tommy on payroll. In between errands and meetings, Tommy is harassed by Malone and a private investigator named Howard, who are following the leads set up in “The Horror at Red Hook.” Howard fatally shoots Tommy’s father during this, quote unquote, investigation, and in the face of such intentional evil, Tommy turns wholly to the dark side.

The book shifts to Malone’s point of view for the last half of the book, further lining up with Red Hook, as he attempts to track down Black Tom, Tommy’s alter ego, as he has taken control from Suydam and has moved forward in the plot to unleash Cthulhu and wield dark magical forces. But Malone cannot accept that Black Tom is the true mastermind, rather than the white Suydam, and this new truth sends him into the beginnings of the madness he is plagued by in Red Hook. A final shootout occurs in Suydam’s mansion, with Malone, Howard, and multiple officers firing upon Black Tom, who is armed with only his father’s razor and a portal to the depths of the ocean. Malone is the only survivor found of the collapsed building, and his last narrative chapter details what happened in that house before it fell.

Tommy has the final chapter, and the final word, briefly returning to Harlem and his friend Buckeye before disappearing into the city, never to be seen again.

Something I find super interesting about *Ballad* is that it is actually much more cosmic horror than *Red Hook*. Lovecraft wrote *Red Hook* as an attempt to widen his own markets and cross genres into the detective story pulp magazines, but he couldn’t sell it and ended up publishing it also in *Weird Tales*. The sinister cult worships a bog-standard devil, rather than the cosmic threat of the Cthulhu Mythos, though his experience plagues Detective Malone as cosmic horror often plagues its protagonists.

*Ballad* pulls the story back into Lovecraft’s own Cthulhu Mythos, invoking the Sleeping King (who fans of cosmic horror will know to be Cthulhu) and placing the depths of the ocean outside of Suydam’s mansion more than once.

And rather than following *Red Hook*’s vague ending, *Ballad* uses a version of the Supreme Alphabet of the Five-Percent Nation to thwart the cosmic plot – using complex, radical, and relatively modern symbols as Lovecraft did, but pulling them from the beliefs of a Black nationalist group to battle back both Cthulhu and Lovecraft. Even Ma Att, an ancient woman in Queens who trades in artifacts, is Ma’at, the Egyptian goddess of truth – following the cosmic tradition of ancient beings unearthed or called upon often through archaeological digs, and further grounding the story in its setting – the same decade Howard Carter dug up King Tut’s tomb. Who knows what he could have set free in his quest to excavate cultures that weren’t his own?

But LaValle also takes the Cthulhu Mythos, and cosmic horror, to task. After Tommy comes home from a day learning about the Sleeping King’s plan to carelessly wipe out humanity to find his elderly father shot to death by police, he reckons with the horrors humans themselves can commit. Page 54 says: “A fear of cosmic indifference suddenly seemed comical, or downright naïve... What was indifference compared to malice? “Indifference would be such a relief,” Tommy said.” *Ballad* consistently asks what, exactly, makes a monster, and what confluence of intentions, actions, and reactions have to come together to produce evil.

**Plot:** The plot is propelled and shaped by both cosmic and human horrors, by both cosmic and human worlds. Every new encounter Tommy has, practically every time he steps off the subway, and even when the narrative isn’t following him specifically, drives the plot forward – the plot is a series of meticulously timed dots along a line from A to B. It’s a little Jeremy Bearimy while you’re in the middle of it, but it all ties together at the end.

**Pacing:** The pace is not really noticeably fast or slow. What is noticeable, and clever, about it is that the pacing follows Tommy learning about and doing errands for Ma Att, Suydam, and the Sleeping King, and then in the second half, follows Malone following Tommy; by keeping the pacing tied to the cosmic horror, it allows for plot twists tied to the human world to surprise the reader, such as the murder of Tommy’s father, Otis.

Writing Style: The writing style of *Ballad* is sharp, to-the-point, and literary, with knifelike precision in every sentence. Great immersive descriptions, particularly of the setting and Tommy's inner thoughts and emotions, as well as Malone's increased desperation, and there is a solid throughline of foreshadowing, which also follows the classic Cosmic style.

Mood/atmosphere: Where *Red Hook* starts off with an atmosphere of dread because we already know how it ends, and it doesn't really change (in my opinion), *Ballad* starts off almost joyously. Where Lovecraft had described New York's immigrant neighborhoods as adding to the sinister occult atmosphere via, quote, "a hundred dialects", among other things I won't repeat, LaValle uses these dialects to create an opening mood and setting of Harlem that is bursting with life and magic. As the story continues on, the dread and feeling of inevitability grows and grows, usually tied to plot points.

But the mood and atmosphere is not tied just to dread; grief, rage, confusion, and even deep shock feed into the book's mood. After all, you cannot limit the experience of horror to just one emotion – horror draws on all of them.

Plus, experiencing cosmic horror is something that characters never truly recover from – it pervades all their senses, suspends reality, and makes them forget their humanness. *Ballad* is so good at this, and this quote on 51 about Tommy reacting to his father's murder mirrors how people react to cosmic horror in other stories: "Outwardly Tester took the news with great calm. Inwardly he felt the sun close its distance from the earth; it came near enough to melt the great majority of Tommy's internal organs. A fire ran through his body, but he couldn't show it. He couldn't open his mouth to ask what happened to Otis, because he'd forgotten he had a mouth."

Setting: Both *Ballad* and *Red Hook* upend the traditional Cosmic horror setting. While Cosmic is often hidden in small towns or other isolated areas in order to show how well the monster and/or horrors can be hidden, here it is the opposite – with a city as populated as New York, cosmic horrors can hide in plain sight. Set in the 1920s, *Ballad* takes us across boroughs and neighborhoods, and the city itself becomes a cosmic entity.

*Ballad* also uses the setting to achieve what modern cosmic horror stories have to grapple with, whether they take place in the past or present: the increasing interconnectedness of society, which Lovecraft, from his place of privilege, did not include.

Characters: Unlike *Red Hook*, *Ballad* gives its characters depth – even Malone is given more dimension, and more knowledge of the cosmic, in his own point of view narrative in the second half of the book. This story is more character-driven than you might expect, but the main characters are still tied to the plot in interesting ways – Tommy's alter ego, Black Tom, is allowed to seek revenge, cosmic power, and other advantages of being morally grey and untouchable – a power that comes at the cost of morality and his own humanity, but that effectively removes him from being susceptible to the systems that disenfranchise him constantly. The supporting characters of Suydam, Ma Att, Buckeye, and Howard are layered, if mysterious in their own ways, and work to show the depth of both cosmic and human horror throughout the city and its social systems. Suydam also acts as a Lovecraft surrogate, sometimes reciting lines lifted straight from the text of *Red Hook*; Lovecraft himself does appear in a reference to him and his wife, which I won't spoil because it's hilarious and based in fact.

*The Ballad of Black Tom* is a fascinating work of Cosmic Horror, and its appeals all work together to look at the intersection of the human and the nonhuman and the inhuman; and to explore how horror breaks down the human structure of morality and how that structure in turn creates horror. After all, as page 62 reminds us, "Mankind didn't make messes; mankind was the mess."

MUSIC

MADDY: Hi, Genn, welcome to Volumes to talk about *The Ballad of Black Tom*.

GENN: Hi! So excited to be here.

MADDY: Yay! So let's kick it off with your favorite piece of horror, if you have a relationship to horror, if you don't.

GENN: I actually don't have any relationship to horror at all, but I feel like reading this was, it got me really interested in the genre in general. Like I think I'll probably be reading several other of his books that I happen to hear about while I looked it up and stuff. Not just Victor LaValle but I'm interested in a lot, what's out there now.

MADDY: That's great! That's the point of this podcast, and you've done the assignment.

So what part of this book really grabbed you? Was it the human monsters? The monster monsters? The visuals?

GENN: More the symbolism. When you told me it was a retelling of a Lovecraft novella, and that made me want to read the other, which I did start to read it before I read this book. And it's way more interesting after reading this book because then I could then see all the nods to that, which I didn't pick up on if I had started it the other way.

The symbolism, and just the whole way that he retells it from a completely different point of view obviously. That's what I found the most interesting.

MADDY: Yeah, I love, my favorite thing that he does with it is, in *Horror at Red Hook*, the original Lovecraft, he talks about the city as being full of noise, but he talks about the noise as being evil and incomprehensible in a bad way. The city is still full of noise in *The Ballad of Black Tom*, but it is full of joy and light magic and all of these cultures coming together.

GENN: Like, actually one of the first notes I made in the book, actually the first note I made, was I wrote "hilarious" because, you wouldn't think that, but it's when the main character's stopped by some detectives or somebody because he's not in Harlem, he's not in the area where he's supposed to be. They are sort of like, "You shouldn't be in this neighborhood" or whatever. And he like kind of puts their words back at them.

They say, "You shouldn't be in this neighborhood when the sun goes down," kind of cryptically. And he's like, "I'll be back in Harlem before lunchtime. I wouldn't suggest you visit there day or night." Oh god, that's really good.

MADDY: Power play for sure.

So you mentioned loving the symbolism. What symbols spoke to you most in this story?

GENN: Well, actually, I've never read Lovecraft. I know everybody talks about that he's really racist. There are a lot of people who defend his writing because of what it means to so many people.

MADDY: And it defines a large piece of horror.

GENN: Yeah. Like, he invented cosmic horror. So because of this assignment, I ended up reading a lot about him. And like it's just so interesting to go into that part of the internet that sort of compares his life. Like, he really wrote, a lot of what he wrote had a lot of reflection of himself in it.

And not just his views, but all of the monsters are like portrayals of him feeling like powerless in his life.

MADDY: Oh, interesting.

GENN: Yeah. It's interesting because reading about Victor LaValle, he grew up reading Lovecraft and was too little to see the racism and stuff. But then you know when he got older and he realized, it was sort of a betrayal, because that's one of his favorite authors that got him into the genre. He's now a writer. It really meant a lot to him. And then it was just hurtful, obviously, to realize your idol doesn't like something that defines you.

MADDY: Who you are.

GENN: Exactly.

MADDY: Yeah, they actually changed, there is an award, I think they renamed it, the Lovecraft Award, that you got to bust a Lovecraft and they changed it. I believe a year before this book actually came out, to be a more general cosmic horror kind of shape. There was a huge push because a lot of horror for a long amount of time, which we talk about over this podcast, was, like many other genres, defined and dominated by white American men who have enough money to support themselves through their writing, usually.

And so being able to take that influence that they have over such a long stretch of time and such a big genre and retell it and recapture it and use it to tell the story from the "other side" and really twist that sense of monstrosity around. Yeah, I loved this story. I can't wait to read his other stuff.

He's got a new one coming out in March, which is very exciting.

GENN: Yeah, I think this is a good, I mean for anybody who is not into horror, it's so short you can read it in one sitting. And I do think a lot of the value of reading this book, or the enjoyment for me at least was being able to compare.

MADDY: Certainly.

GENN: I don't think you have to read the other. *The Horror at Red Hook*. But I feel that knowing more, looking up Lovecraft's life and sort of his themes and stuff, that's what makes it really interesting.

And also like some of the interviews with the author, Victor LaValle, those are very interesting too.

MADDY: Yeah, I loved those. The NPR one you mentioned earlier was a lot of fun to read after reading this book.

So one of the big things that this book does is that it takes the first half of it and puts it into the perspective of someone totally unrelated to the first story.

What did you think of the switch halfway through back to the detective?

GENN: Yeah, I actually loved that. I read that he did that sort of because it was like an easier way to kind of not have to get into the depths of how did the character transform.

MADDY: Tommy? Yeah.

GENN: And when he switched perspectives it just sort of forced the audience to be like, "Oh, he had that transformation. It already happened." Not, how did it happen, because that's not important.

I like books like that. I remember in high school we read a book that every chapter switched back and forth between two, and I loved it. And then my favorite band, Tegan and Sara, they have their memoir, and the chapters go back and forth. And they don't even like specifically say it. It's sort of like, it's just obvious. It's interesting. I think you have to be a good writer to kind of make that obvious.

MADDY: Yeah. And this certainly, I was reading this really interesting discussion, and I'll mention the name of it later, but they were saying how much the switch in perspective was jarring. One, it works on a really great level because you get the first half and it's motive for how Tommy became Black Tom and unleashed the horror onto this world. And then switching to Malone's point of view shows the implications of that choice.

So you need Tommy's perspective to get the motivation, and then you can have Malone's what happens next, the wider implication for other people.

But they were saying they had this great line where it was so jarring because “LaValle had taken away our only friend in the book and forced us to spend time with a deeply unpleasant person, someone who doesn’t know the story we know.” Because we are basically shunted back into the Lovecraft story looking through the eyes of this detective who has truly no idea what’s going on. Very single minded, focused, narrow focus.

GENN: Yeah, something I really liked about the Malone character was, he had the other detective, whose name was Howard, I think, which was like on purpose after Lovecraft, that person outwardly treated people of color horribly, said really racist things. And Malone was more like a silent bystander who perpetuates racist...

MADDY: But also know that there was magic in this city.

GENN: Yeah, you can sympathize with him in some ways. You don’t hate him. When it switches to his perspective fully you do sort of realize like his implications in kind of everything. Like Tommy is a villain, but really like ...

MADDY: Is he really a villain?

GENN: Yeah, if you are going to go protagonist/antagonist.

MADDY: And certainly from Malone’s perspective.

GENN: Yeah. And yet if you think about the characters, the person who introduced, not just like the motivation for Tommy’s...

MADDY: Transformation?

GENN: Yeah. But the person who introduced him to this environment was also like a white person. And that’s interesting too. I love that.

MADDY: What did you think of Robert Suydam, who, a lot of his dialogue in this book came directly from the original story.

GENN: That was so cool.

MADDY: It was pulled, the nondialogue prose of *The Horror of Red Hook* became Suydam’s very lofty, aspirational supremacist kind of thing.

GENN: And he gives a speech to, well, he’s practicing this speech to Tommy, and this speech is like words that were in *The Horror at Red Hook* but they weren’t his words. They were Lovecraft’s descriptions of immigrants as degrading.

MADDY: Bad. Yeah.

GENN: And he’s giving this speech to the people he’s recruited to help him open the portal to hell or whatever. “You’ve been forced to live in squalor,” basically. “Join my forces.” It’s just like using somebody’s words back at them the same way that he did in the part that I thought was funny. I loved that.

MADDY: Yeah, there are a lot of good, LaValle is such an incredible writer obviously, but especially once you pair it, go back and read *The Horror at Red Hook* and you go, “Oh, I see what he’s done.” The Easter eggs throughout are just fantastic.

GENN: Yeah, there was even the epigraph of *The Horror at Red Hook* at the very beginning it says, “And it is my belief that an awful lore is not yet dead.” And so I don’t quote, he says that later in *The Ballad of Black Tom* and they are talking about evil or a monster, or whatever. But the fact that it is the epigraph in the first book. And he reused it because it is so obviously, that the awful lore is like you know racism and violence. I love that.



MADDY: Yeah, he is so good. And the symbolism on every level is, the meta-level all the way through, the actual cosmic horror symbolism with the Supreme Alphabet and Ma Att, who is supposed to be Ma'at, the Egyptian goddess of truth.

GENN: I didn't know that.

MADDY: I'm a huge nerd. That's why. I was like, Oh, OK.

GENN: Wow. That makes so much sense.

MADDY: There's like a throwaway line about a woman from Karnak, from the small town of Karnak, and Karnak is a town near a bunch of tombs in Egypt. She's supposed to be like this goddess living in Queens, I guess.

What did you think of the role of women in this story? How the characters changed across? So the first short story, *The Horror at Red Hook* has Lilith is the devil's wife and that's who they are trying to bring back. Which says again a lot about Lovecraft.

But also you have the bride of Suydam who perishes almost immediately but is used, has kind of a power leverage. And in this the only really living, speaking woman we have is this woman selling artifacts out of her creepy old home in Queens.

What did you think of the new character and her role?

GENN: I'm curious. I want to hear about what you... I mean, I thought about it but I haven't had my own theories about it. Normally that's what interests me is coming up with why these things exist in this way or whatever.

I love the fact that they vaguely sense that she is larger than she is.

MADDY: I love that.

GENN: I would like to go back and look at who notices that. Maybe why that might be. Maybe the other people don't notice. I don't know.

MADDY: Yeah.

GENN: I remember that Detective Howard or whatever being like horrified by her. But also like wanting money from her. Demanding something in return. Whereas other people were running away.

MADDY: I know. I'm always curious about stories that mention women who are like catalysts in the story, but they have no speaking lines. The next episode after this is about an Edgar Allen Poe story where the woman also has no real speaking lines but is pivotal to the story.

And Lovecraft was hugely influenced by Poe so maybe that's part of that.

So I was always so curious about the role of the wife who brings Suydam respectability in *The Horror at Red Hook*. That's how Malone tracks him down again, because suddenly he's doing all these engagement celebrations and they get married and they get on a boat and they both immediately die, and are killed by this weird clawed monster.

And so when I got to *The Ballad of Black Tom* I was like, "Oh, maybe we'll see her in some other capacity." And she does not exist in this book.

GENN: Unless you think she is, you know. I mean, they are both like the only woman.

MADDY: Yeah. I don't know. I can keep clawing at it. I'm just so curious about it. If LaValle was in front of us I'd be like, "Tell me more about the other characters outside of Black Tom." And his father was phenomenal and his

friend. They were all great. I loved the minor characters and the supporting cast. They all had more going on and you could tell that they had really rich lives that we didn't, you don't need to see them.

GENN: Yeah. There was this part that I made a note of in the book where they were talking about Ma Att. I'm trying to see whose viewpoint it is. It's really just like the writer, the narrator talking. But it says, "Some great bulk trailed behind her off into the distance of the gloomy great hall. Nearly anyone else, ones not so sensitive, so attuned, would have dismissed this as a trick of the shadows, a bit of bent light."

And then the part that I loved was, "Insensitive minds always dispel true knowledge. But Malone couldn't ignore the sense of her length of largeness."

MADDY: I love that! I wanted to go into her spooky house so badly.

GENN: And yet didn't.

MADDY: Oh yeah. If I go in, I'll never leave.

GENN: I mean, I don't know about you, but I was kind of freaked out.

MADDY: I also had a feeling of a kind of Baba Yaga hut, cultural folklore hag vibes. Which is also a really interesting interpretation of that.

GENN: Yeah, I read about the Lillith character being based off the original, basically Eve. That was all very interesting too. I didn't realize that.

MADDY: Yeah, the devil's first wife who came, and Adam's first wife? Yeah, religion is fascinating. Especially in cosmic horror because obviously Lovecraft used the occult as evil and through his writing you can tell he grew up religious or in a religious household.

And so watching horror and specifically his horror and then all horror that is based on his horror kind of interplay with that. It's so interesting because it is all devils and things we can't comprehend but who are here to punish us.

GENN: Yeah, the fact that evil in Lovecraft writing is pretty much like what you don't know. That's not just Lovecraft, I guess, but from what I can think of, when I think about horror, because I don't really read it, but I think about movies like *Nightmare on Elm Street* or something just like classic, it always comes back to that. You are afraid of what you don't know. Or in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, the kids' way of defending themselves, the only way they muster is to basically ignore, be like, "you're not real, you're not real."

And that protects them. But only temporarily.

Which is another theme in this book. It's a lot about, obviously spoiler, but his eyelids being cut off, Malone. That's like, now you can't turn away. That's the message. That's true in everything. Like there are so many sequels to *Nightmare on Elm Street*. And it's because you can't really get rid of anything by ignoring it.

I love that part too about this book.

MADDY: Right. It asks you to face it head on at every turn and every horror you encounter, which I loved so much.

GENN: It also made me think of that book *Annihilation*, which then had a show, I think, or a movie maybe. The whole monster in that book is something like amorphous, they can't really, they don't even know what it is. And that's what's so scary. And that actually transforms each of them.

That's the kind of stuff that made me think about it. Like I do love movies like that. Thrillers or psychological thrillers. I was thinking a lot about movies when I read this.

MADDY: Well, did you think of, we can move straight along into things that this made you think of. So for people who either like this or like general cosmic horror, what other kind of movies or pieces of media were you thinking of?

GENN: I thought about the movie *Us*, but I didn't give it too much thought. I don't know. I want to think further about it. I feel like there is parallels.

MADDY: Sure.

GENN: In the sense of like *Us* and maybe a lot of stuff by Peele. If you are making an analogy, it's Lovecraft is like a classic horror film, and *Us* would be the response, retelling, right? It sort of turns it around. Black characters because a lot of times there's only one character and it's like the mystic.

MADDY: Or they are the first to die right away.

GENN: It's a trope, you know?

MADDY: Well, I think, well, cosmic as we talked about already has so much, it came about through Lovecraft pretty much in the 1920s. But the influence is so huge that it is hard to escape regardless.

Did you have any other kind of readalikes, watchalikes, things that...?

GENN: Well, I was just thinking, one of the first things when I started learning about Lovecraft was *Stranger Things*. I thought of that pretty quickly because basically he invented these creatures that are basically representative of like anything you can make it.

And so throughout time, since Lovecraft, all of these people who were introduced to horror through him, especially mostly white males, wrote all these stories that everyone knows and they are just retold and reimagined. And it's all based on monsters as a symbol of ...

MADDY: What we don't know?

GENN: Yeah. And like, I love the fact that when you really get to the heart of it, it's existential dread. The fear of what you don't know. It's a way to show the fear of not being known. That's the ultimate fear. And I think that's Lovecraft, that was kind of his fear. His powerlessness. He considered himself part of the superior race or whatever. But I think that a lot of this book and his original story was sort of a nod, not a good nod, but an anti-nod, to racial mixing.

And it was such a fear of his that it is in every part of his writing. Like the way he looks at every, not just Black people, but it's like Jewish people. Italian immigrants. Irish immigrants. He literally can't stand any of these people.

And yet he, in his real life even, spent time living in New York. He hated it, obviously.

MADDY: There's a great reference to him and his wife in *Ballad of Black Tom*. Towards the end. About a well-to-do young couple who fled the city.

GENN: I do remember that.

MADDY: So that's about him and his wife. It was like a good throwaway line.

GENN: And Malone was like, not forced but kind of forced to go live in this town. I forget what the town was called.

MADDY: Some tiny town in Rhode Island.

GENN: He actually lived in that town.

MADDY: Yeah!

GENN: That was interesting.

MADDY: Yeah, it was pretty funny. The treatment that Lovecraft himself as a character gets as well.

Other things that you might recommend to people who like this book? I have some too, if you want to keep thinking.

GENN: Go ahead.

MADDY: So the book discussion I was talking about earlier was from ComicsXF, and all of the things we're talking about we'll put in the show notes and you can check them out and read and watch them from the library, which is pretty cool.

So if you are looking for books that are also retellings of Lovecraft or kind of subvert the Lovecraft mythos while still paying homage to cosmic horror, *Winter Tide* by Ruthanna Emrys is set in Innsmouth, which is from *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*.

As well as *The Dreamquest of Vellitt Boe*, by Kij Johnson, is a retelling of Lovecraft's *Dream Cycle*.

I put both of those on my TBR immediately.

GENN: That first one I started reading actually. But it was not the whole thing. There is, part of it published before the book came out. It was like a preview, and I read that. But it was good!

MADDY: Good to know.

Well, also in this kind of vein is *Ring Shout*, by P. Djèlí Clark, an amazing novella. It's so fantastic. Great, great cosmic horror in the same vein as *The Ballad of Black Tom*, where monsters are monsters but also humans are monsters.

A great Lovecraftian video game, *The Sinking City*, is a lot of fun.

GENN: Is that the one you play?

MADDY: I didn't play it, but I did buy it. Which is the crisis of every person who wants to play video games or read more books anywhere, is that you buy it, but you haven't done it yet.

And of course Lovecraft's influence extends so far outside of books and everything. *The Call Of Cthulhu* roleplaying game. Especially *Berlin*, *The Wicked City*, which we have the handbook upstairs, which is pretty cool. It looks great. It's set in a similar 1920s. It's fun. It's a great way to explore horror in the first person.

GENN: Which actually our escape room, like the one at the library, it's like themed too.

MADDY: Yeah, I did one at the last staff development day.

GENN: I didn't realize I had already done it. So I did it twice.

MADDY: You are just a pro now.

GENN: But it was still hard. It was harder the second time. A couple of years had passed.

MADDY: Some of our amazing librarian staff across the system have come up with really cool escape rooms for patrons to do, and they brought them to the staff development day.

And there's one that based all on Lovecraft and cosmic horror. It was really hard. But it was a lot of fun.

GENN: And now that I have read this and looked into this, I understand it a lot better. I was just like, oh yeah, we have to look for symbols. But now I understand. It's sort of like in this book, what's the alphabet called?

MADDY: Oh, the Supreme Alphabet.

GENN: The Supreme Alphabet. It's like the symbolism from Cthulhu or whatever. I don't know. Like the thing where he has to write that one last thing in blood.

MADDY: And the Supreme Alphabet is actually, I say it in the first part, but I'm going to forget the name of it. It's from a Black nationalist group, so this alphabet has importance as symbols to a Black nationalist group but the idea of writing out symbols in blood is extremely Lovecraftian. So it's like this great combination. I know the zig zag zig at the very end.

And then I'm just going to list a couple of more if you want to check it out.

*Monstrous*, by Marjorie M. Liu. Which is a graphic novel series, which is a lot of fun. Very steampunk cosmic horror. So again like historical cosmic.

*The City We Became*, by N. K. Jemisin. We love N. K. Jemisin here at the library. It's also set in New York City, also about cosmic horror. So if you like the setting of *The Ballad of Black Tom* and want to see more about how the city responds as an entity to other evil cosmic entities, that's a great choice.

And then Hailey Piper's *The Worm and His Kings*, which I could recommend just on the title alone. The cover is pretty cool, too. But yeah, those are mine.

Any final thoughts? We didn't even talk about the ending.

GENN: I know. There are so many good things.

MADDY: I know. We each have like tons of paper spread in front of us with all our notes.

Let's do like final thoughts. I loved the ending because he's released, like, Cthulhu. He's released like these giant cosmic horrors, and it doesn't feel like a tragedy. I wasn't mad about it. It kind of felt like righteous, in like a holy kind of way rather than like the rock on way. It felt good.

What did you think of the ending?

GENN: Oh, I know I wrote something, like the world is a horrible place and that's what really turns Thomas Tester into Black Tom. It's a response. In fact, that's something we didn't talk about. In the original Lovecraft story the antagonist is a monster that just exists.

MADDY: Yeah, it's like a devil.

GENN: But in this book you have a transformation of somebody that you can relate to into a monster. And obviously that's a response to a lot of things that happened in the book.

MADDY: And a response to other monsters.

GENN: And what happens in real life. Like it is very real, you know.

Your question. What did I think of the ending?

MADDY: What did you think of the ending? Did you think Tommy was really a villain at the end, you know?

I don't know if I believe that Black Tom was a villain.

GENN: No, you were saying you weren't mad about it. I feel the same way. I'm not. It's a justifiable reaction. It makes sense. It doesn't leave you angry.

I actually loved the fact that it ended Malone's perspective, or just like the whole idea. The visual that I get is him walking down an empty road in this desolate town that he's been like, he makes it in his head feel like it's his choice, but it's really not his choice. He's like banished, basically.

It sort of makes it seem like he's good with retiring. But really like his life was his job, and you know he is kind of miserable.

MADDY: And he also saw like this eldritch horror and comprehended it.

GENN: And he doesn't have eyelids.

MADDY: Yeah. And he doesn't have eyelids.

GENN: And they even talk about how he has to wear like certain glasses so people don't get scared basically when they look at him on the street.

MADDY: Which is a great commentary back on the beginning of the book.

GENN: And that's what I love, is that the ending of this book, it's like the beginning of *The Horror at Red Hook*. When he's walking. And he sees a tenement building. And then literally freaks out because it's so terrifying. That's very cool.

MADDY: The fact that it was written in 1920-whatever, and I can't remember if the Empire State Building had been built by then, but it was at the time the tallest building in the world. But he sees a building in Rhode Island that's four stories.

This library that we are in right now is taller than the building. So that always gives it a little bit of a fun little comic spin for the readers, contemporary readers.

GENN: I have pictures. I was curious. You have your visual landscape, like your mental landscape. But I wanted to see, what did Red Hook look like in the twenties? I looked at a lot of pictures. It's really like how I imagined. But I think that's fun, the fact that you can see. It's not an imaginary place. It's a real place.

And it is history. A lot of it is actual history. So you can look at pictures of immigrants in the twenties in Red Hook. The kind of shacks that they lived in. And there are a couple buildings like the ones in the story. It's very realistic. You know?

MADDY: It's so clear, the bias and the lens that Lovecraft is describing it through.

GENN: I read that it was actually the busiest port in the world at that time.

MADDY: I didn't know that. Having that context really helps, doesn't it?

GENN: I mean, even if you've just ever been to Brooklyn in the summer, you can imagine the things. It's just so hard for me to imagine someone hating those things. Those are what make it such a cool place.

MADDY: Everyone there is connected to each other in some way. To find that to be a bad thing is just, you know, so fascinating to me. As someone who can't ever see it that way.

GENN: Yeah. And that leaves me with one more thought that I want to share.

MADDY: Go ahead. Go for it! Our wrap-up!

GENN: I'm like you. It's hard for me to see it that way. And I'm trying to get to know this author that is so significant in this genre. Ultimately what I realized was, and I actually read this somewhere, Lovecraft was basically afraid of other cultures or mixing races or whatever because it threatens his experience as a white person, being the most relevant experience.

That's my final thought. That is so interesting. It goes back to the main theme, which is the fear of not being significant. It is his ultimate fear.

And that's where his writing all comes from.

MADDY: Yeah. That's such an interesting way to look at it.

Well, thank you so much, Genn. It was really lovely having you here.

MUSIC

Thank you for listening to this very cosmic episode of APL Volumes, Season One.

You can find a list of all the media we discussed in the show notes, and copies of them are available to borrow through the Austin Public Library. If you want even more recommendations check out our Personal Picks service and get a personalized list from our expert librarians.

Thanks to my guest Genn Mehalik. If you see them out on the floor here at the Central Library, give them a big old tentacled wave.

APL Volumes is recorded and produced in the Library's Innovation Lab, a part of the APL Innovate Digital Maker Space. The Austin Public Library is currently putting together a very cool digital maker space, which will offer not only recording equipment and hardware, but all kinds of audiovisual software for 3D modeling, graphic design, animation and much more. We are really excited to bring it to the public, so keep an eye out for it in the future.

Many thanks to the APL Innovate team for their guidance and input on this podcast.

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This podcast is all library, all the time. Our next episode will be on the gothic subgenre. We're reading *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allen Poe and *What Moves the Dead* by T. Kingfisher.

Thanks for listening and for supporting your local public library.

MUSIC