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What Lurks Beneath – Human Fear of the Unknown

Ashley, Mike, ed. From the Depths and Other Strange Tales of the Sea. The British Library, 2018. pp. 317.

From Homer's Odyssey and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe to Jules Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea and Herman Melville's Moby Dick, the sea has always featured prominently in Western literature. Stories of voyages over (or under) boundless oceans, tales of mutiny and piracy, of treasure and adventure, have all become an integral part of our literary tradition. And while it was frequently admired, the sea's capricious nature and fathomless depths have often led to it being feared in equal measure. Compiled and edited by Mike Ashley, From the Depths and Other Strange Tales of the Sea is an anthology comprising fifteen lesser known stories taken from other collections and pulp magazines dating back to the early 20th century, which ably illustrates that period's fascination with the sea, especially with its more fantastical and uncanny aspects.

The collection opens strongly with an invitingly horrific, if somewhat traditional ghost ship story. Albert A. Wetjen's "The Ship of Silence" draws heavily both from legends like the Flying Dutchman and real-world mysteries like the Mary Celeste. An abandoned ship's fate is revealed through the frenzied screeching of a parrot, the ship's sole survivor, as it repeats the words of the doomed crew in their final moments. Bearing more than a passing resemblance to many of H. P. Lovecraft's stories, the horror here lies not so much in what is shown, but in what is left to the reader's imagination. Morgan Robertson's "From the Darkness and the Depths" continues in the same vein and also features a ship assailed by invisible terrors. It is one of a number of stories from the

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period which emphasize, and often overestimate, the power of science and its ability to combat forces unfathomable to the human mind.

The next two stories, “Sargasso” by Ward Muir and “Held by the Sargasso Sea” by Frank H. Shaw, both make reference to the popular legend about the Sargasso Sea, whose seaweed-clogged waters were said to be home to numerous floating derelicts that had become mired there over the centuries. Yet despite drawing form the same source, they manage to weave two very different tales. Muir’s is a more traditional story of a stranded ship beset by a sea monster and of a crew slowly losing their sanity when confronted with the horror of their predicament. Presented in the form of a ship’s journal, it paints a potent picture of the crew’s descent into madness and of their utter helplessness before the terrors of the deep. Shaw, on the other hand, tries to limit the number of supernatural elements and instead centers his tale on a mutinous crew turning against their ill-tempered captain.

Herman Sheffauer’s “The Floating Forest” is another story featuring a ghost ship, but instead of focusing on forces beyond human ken, the author places human greed at the front and center of the tale. It is a sea captain’s thirst for wealth that precipitates tragedy and dooms those around him. This theme of a soul tormented with guilt as well as the general style of the story clearly hark back to the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. C. N. Barham’s “Tracked: A Mystery of the Sea” is also very reminiscent of Poe’s work. The only story in the anthology published in the 19th century, it gives a glimpse into that period’s fascination with clairvoyance and hypnotism. It is nevertheless one of the weaker entries in the collection as it offers little in terms of horror or suspense but focuses instead on showcasing the supposed power of mesmerism and its rather fanciful application in the locating of lost ships.

William Hope Hodgson is certainly one of the more renowned authors to feature in this anthology. He made his name at the dawn of the 20th century with a series of fantasy, horror, and science fiction stories, and while his entry in this collection, “The Mystery of the Water-Logged Ship,” certainly has some elements of horror, it reads more like a mystery as a group of sailors try to unravel the secrets of a derelict ship and its missing crew. The resolution is as unexpected as it is satisfying, especially for those who seek more plausible explanations for some of the mysteries of the sea.

"From the Depths" by F. Britten Austin is an interesting variation on the theme of vengeful ghosts as the drowned victims of torpedoed ships use Morse code to wreak revenge on a German U-boat captain. James Francis Dwyer's "The Murdered Ships" is also a tale of vengeance played out among the lapping of the waves, but in this instance, it is the ship that comes back to haunt its mutinous crew. John Gilbert's "The Ship That Died" seems at first to be another such story featuring a vindictive phantom ship, but it quickly evolves into one of the strangest and most lurid tales in the collection. The sheer weirdness of the story's imagery – a ship virtually melting into the sea – makes it an interesting read despite the abrupt and somewhat unsatisfying ending.

Although it shares the same nautical backdrop as the other stories in the collection, Izola Forreseter's "Devereux's Last Smoke" would have functioned just as well in any number of other settings. The author nevertheless makes excellent use of an ocean liner's journey over a fog-ridden sea to weave an intricate and very atmospheric tale of a jilted husband's ghost coming back to haunt his unfaithful wife. Rupert Chesterton also spins a tale of vengeance and haunting in "The Black Bell Buoy." The rivalry of two sailors over a woman and a ship has tragic consequences, and a captain's almost maniacal obsession with capturing a wayward buoy brings to mind imagery from Melville's Moby Dick. "The High Seas" by Elinor Morduant is yet another tale of rivalry on the sea, this time between two brothers. Love is once again at the root of the problem, and even though the author forgoes any fantastical or supernatural elements, she still manages to tell an eminently enthralling story of two brothers overcome with hatred for one another having to deal with the caprices of the unruly sea.

Much like "Devereux's Last Smoke," Morgan Burke's "The Soul-Saver" is also a story only tenuously connected with the sea. A captain's violent temper and his propensity for collecting white mice are revealed to share a dark and disturbing link. Though featuring an interesting premise, the story is too rushed to adequately develop a genuinely original idea. The anthology ends on a strong if somewhat unexpected note. Eschewing suspense and horror for fantasy and mystery, Lady Eleanor Smith's "No Ships Pass" offers a delightful twist on more traditional castaway stories like Robinson Crusoe. Shipwrecked on what seems to be a tropical paradise, a castaway soon discovers that he is not alone and that there is more to the island and its inhabitants than first meets the eye.

Although at times uneven in quality, From the Depths and Other Strange Tales of the Sea is nevertheless an excellent collection of eerie, weird and sometimes downright horrifying stories certain to make you think twice before venturing out into the offing again. Whether it be ghosts, monsters, phantom ships or something even more uncanny, all of these tales share some link with the sea and remind us of its inscrutable mysteries and of the terrors that could be lurking just beneath its surface.



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