

Ten Forgotten or Ignored Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels that Inspired  
My Writing

<http://flavorwire.com/391301/10-forgotten-fantastical-novels-you-should-read-immediately>

by James P. Blaylock

Why these novels turned out to be inspirational is a long story, too long to recount here, and in fact sometimes I can't quite say: a sensibility, maybe, that seemed to me to be True in some regard, a sense of humor that was also a sense of proportion, wisdom of a whimsical variety, an evocative atmosphere, intriguing characters, a level of eccentricity that was somehow made perfectly plausible, a giant cephalopod. All of that is very murky, of course. One thing: I'll admit that I'm not cut out to be a rationalist, although I'm skeptical of people who say things like that, which means I'm skeptical of myself, which is either a good thing or else it's not. I've read all of Charles Fort and I believe he was a great genius. I've always had a particular fondness for people who take the marvelous seriously, who are certain they've seen ghosts or flying saucers, who are intrigued by the idea of desert mummies or the mysteries of Atlantis, who wonder what's really going on beneath the slowly revolving seaweed surface of the Sargasso Sea. I'll freely admit that the extent to which these books are forgotten or ignored is debatable. We could take a poll if we had the time. Here's something: If because of your age you're offered discount tickets at movie houses or have an eccentric idea of what constitutes good reading, then you might remember them well enough. Good for you. If you're younger than that, then you might find a few books on the list that are worth looking into.

Finally, in case you're ever asked to make up a list of this sort, set aside significant time to do it. If you've been fortunate enough to keep your favorite books, you'll gather them up from various rooms in the house, pile them up on the floor and desktop near your keyboard, and then spend hours rereading bits of them instead of actually compiling the list you've agreed to compile. Why choose one of William Hope Hodgson's novels and not another? The impossibility of answering that question makes it imperative to at least glance at *The Ghost Pirates* and *The Night Land* and *House on the Borderland* before you can make an informed choice, which consists, finally, of closing your eyes and pointing. Right now the floor of my study is a lumber of strange books, half of which I've by now decided to reread, a task that should take me a good six months.

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1. *Phantastes*, by George MacDonald

This one begins with a young man finding the key to an old, oak secretary in a secret library in a house that sits at the edge of things. He opens the door of the secretary only to discover that what seems to be the back wall is a false panel with a hidden pin that keeps it locked in place. He shifts the pin, draws out the panel, and finds... Published in London in 1858 by one of the world's great fantasy writers, and originally illustrated by Pre-Raphaelite painter Arthur Hughes, *Phantastes* is a seriously beautiful and creepy book, always dream-like, often a strangely compelling nightmare. C.S. Lewis bought it when he was sixteen years old. Years later he wrote, "I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*." I felt that same way when I read it. I had never read a book more fanciful, and had never read a book more Real. You might have read MacDonald before – "The Day Boy and the Night Girl," or *On the back of the North Wind* – but I can assure you that *Phantastes* is no sort of children's story. The book was republished in 1970 as one of the brilliant Ballantine Adult Fantasy series (buy them all if you get a chance) and by Everyman's Library in 1983 and no doubt by other publishers. It's especially of interest to anyone who wonders which giants C.S. Lewis was standing on the shoulders of.

2. *Masters of Atlantis*, by Charles Portis

When I turned in my novel *The Digging Leviathan*, my editor called on the telephone with an understandable complaint. "I thought you were going to write a hollow earth novel," she said, "but your characters never get out of Glendale." I was okay with that, and so was she in the end, but it was the first time I became aware that I wanted to write about a certain sort of character, and that it made little difference to me whether he descended into the center of the hollow earth in order to engage in dinosaur adventures, or stayed home in Glendale dreaming the dream of the hollow earth. Writer Lew Shiner took a liking to my book, and when we met some time later and became friends, he recommended *Masters of Atlantis*. "Somehow I think you'll like this," he said. It turns out that I did. In the book, Lamar Jimmerson becomes a member of the Gnomon Society, dedicated to preserving the arcane wisdom of Atlantis. They meet in trailer parks. They wear pointy hats called Pomas. They're sensitive to Telluric Currents. Their temple is in Burnette, Indiana. They fall in love, but it doesn't go too

well. A Senate subcommittee is formed to investigate them.... Portis's *True Grit* gets all the press, but my heart is with Lamar Jimmerson and the Gnomon Society.

### 3. *Looking for the General* by Warren Miller...

...is one of the greatest and strangest conspiracy novels. It was written in 1964, right after the Kennedy assassination. Howard Waldrop called it "...a collaboration between Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the Coen brothers." I'm going to randomly choose three sentences from the book, eyes closed, which I'll transcribe for you. "Behind the altar in the grotto, a door (Protestant dream of sinister Catholic mysteries): the general's HQ." "If I were your average missionary and had a Christian pygmy who spoke English I can assure you that I'd be very careful who I lent him out to." "We have had messages from our people in that area: descriptions of a great luminosity in the northern skies, of curious localized turbulence in the air, erratic migrations of birds; of enormous clouds appearing suddenly in a cloudless sky, clouds the wind did not move." Okay, Lew Shiner gave me this book, too. My own books must be more self-revealing than I know. If you've already read it, congratulations. If not, then read it at your own peril: be ready to deny you've read it when the authorities knock on the door.

### 4. *Doom* by William Gerhardie

Once again, if you already read Gerhardie's novels, then skip this entry. I have to say, however, that in the 30 years I've read and reread his books, I've yet to find anyone else who did the same, or who read him at all. Probably there's a William Gerhardie Society out there that has thousands of members and hundreds of chapters, although why they haven't contacted me, I can say. Gerhardie was an Anglo-Russian writer, considered a genius by Vladimir Nabokov, Evelyn Waugh, Edith Wharton, Grahame Greene, Katherine Mansfield, H.G. Wells, and a heap of other writers with whom it is difficult to argue. *Doom* might or might not be his best book (I'd argue that *The Polyglots* wins that prize) but *Doom* is certainly science fiction, of a sort: "The huge propellered car ran swiftly and imperiously down the deserted Fleet Street and, suddenly, spread out wings in front and behind and left the ground, clearing the roofs of Fleet Street houses, flying Piccadillyward." And so the book proceeds from flying automobiles to the destruction of the earth due to science-run-mad. Don't miss it.

### 5. *That Hideous Strength* by C.S. Lewis

How can C.S. Lewis's name possibly find a place on a list of forgotten books? Probably it cannot, but it's here anyway, and I'll bet half a pound of Velveeta cheese, in a jar or wrapped in foil, that you haven't read it. (If you have, by the way, I'm not going to send you any cheese.) I'm calling it the best novel that Lewis wrote, and one of the five best fantasy novels ever written. Certainly it had an outsized influence on my writing, especially in books like *The Last Coin* and *All the Bells on Earth*. John Ruskin once wrote, "Our full energies are to be given to the soul's work – to the great fight with the Dragon." I've always thought that for most of us, the great fight with the Dragon takes place close to home, in seemingly quiet neighborhoods and often under sunny skies, and also that the Dragon will return and return no matter how often its slain, and we'll have to pick up the cudgels with every new dawn if we don't want to go down to defeat. That's what I got out of *That Hideous Strength*, an Arthurian novel that takes place in the modern English countryside at a small, pleasant university that sits right at the edge of nightmare.

#### 6. *Lud in the Mist* by Hope Mirlees

Tim Powers gave me a copy of *Lud in the Mist* back in the 1970s, assuring me that it was quite likely the best fantasy novel ever written. I think he's correct. (Neil Gaiman has said something of the same thing recently, and so perhaps all of us are in agreement, and there's no point in going on here. Even so...) *Lud in the Mist* was published in 1926, and then again as one of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series in 1970, this time without permission of the author, who was assumed (conveniently) to have died, although she had not. Upon its original publication, Hope Mirlees was pronounced a genius, and, according to Virginia Woolf, "rather an exquisite apparition." Mirlees inherited a fortune from her engine-building father and saw it as an opportunity never to have to write again. Too bad for us. She died in 1978, ostensibly never having learned that her novel had been republished. *Lud in the Mist* evokes Faery and Faeryland in all its dangerous attractions like no other novel, with the exception, perhaps, of MacDonald's *Phantastes*.

#### 7. *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* by William Hope Hodgson

Another Ballantine Adult Fantasy novel, which I searched out and read after being given a copy of Hodgson's *House on the Borderland* by Tim Powers. As is true of all of the Adult Fantasy novels, the book is worth buying for the cover alone. (And by the way, you want ink and paper copies of books like this; they have magic in them that is missing from the electrons swirling

around in your e-reader.) The writing in the book is purposefully archaic, as if it were written in 1757, when the story takes place. Critics have suggested that the language is inaccurate, but to my ear it has its own charm. If you're a fan of Sargasso Sea stories, giant cuttlefish, squid men, fungi the size of small trees, and other such glories, then you'll go for this one. Here's a question: Is this a better book than Hodgson's brilliant *House on the Borderland*? Probably not. Buy that one too, if you can find it. (Immense old house besieged by pig men that come up out of a ravine.) I've got it on good authority that *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* has been read or forgotten by 28.3 percent more people than *The House on the Borderland*, hence *Boats* being included in this list.

#### 8. *All Hallows' Eve* by Charles Williams...

...or anything by Charles Williams. Like C.S. Lewis, Williams doesn't qualify as being obscure, forgotten, or ignored, and like *That Hideous Strength*, the book was immensely inspirational when I was writing contemporary fantasies in the late 1980s. Despite Williams's literary reputation, however, and his stature among members of the Mythopoeic Society, I rarely run into people who have read him. I've read *All Hallows' Eve* several times, and have discovered that the second chapter, titled "The Beetles" is more deeply unsettling each time I read it. Stevenson said that with age "we no longer see the devil in the bed curtains," and I remember having lain awake in terror when I was six years old, convinced that the white t-shirt heaped on the chair in my bedroom was a human skull, and too frightened to get out of bed in order to flatten the life out of it. Those days are long past, thank heavens. That being said, I wouldn't choose to read the first chapters of *All Hallows' Eve* before falling asleep at night.

#### 9. "The Great Dark" by Mark Twain

This unfinished novella, which might, I suppose, have become a novel if it *were* finished, qualifies as the strangest, darkest, most fantastical thing that Mark Twain wrote – a lucid nightmare that might or might not be a dream. It's included in the volume titled *Letters from the Earth*, which scarcely qualifies as obscure, but it's true that the first third of that book gets most of the attention. "The Great Dark" reads a little bit like Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, to my mind, but with Mark Twain's voice and sense of humor. Here's an example of the sort of sentence that particularly attracted me to the story when I read it 35 or 40 years ago: "Between seeing

the squid, and getting washed off her feet, and losing the children, the day was a costly one for Alice.” The squid, I can tell you, is worth seeing (as are pretty much all squids).

10. “The Fabulous Baron Munchausen” and “The Fabulous World of Jules Verne,” two films by Czech director, animator, and special effects genius Karel Zeman,

Not nearly enough people know that Karel Zeman is the Great God of Steampunk and that his films are enormously cool. My favorites are the two I mention here, which I saw either in the late 1950s or early 1960s, around the time when they first came out. I had read plenty of Jules Verne by that time, and so was custom-built to go crazy for “The Fabulous World of Jules Verne,” (plenty of cephalopods) but “The Fabulous Baron Munchausen,” which I hadn’t read, caught my imagination by surprise. Since then I’ve read every version I could find of the Baron Munchausen story, and am a big fan of the Terry Gilliam film. Terry Gilliam, of course, was a big fan of Karel Zeman, which brings me back to these two films, which (as I’ve said more than once in various interviews) are the only two films that I’ve set the alarm to see when they (*very rarely*) show up on late night television. Now I own DVDs of both films, thank goodness, and can watch them when I choose. They’re indescribable and literally wonderful.