

INTRODUCTION

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I've had a love-hate relationship with Clark Ashton Smith's work for as long as I can remember. His beautiful visions of other worlds and other places linger in my memory but so do the hyper-elevated prose style, the grimly formal dialog, and the sometimes stiff, ritualistic scenes. In rereading *Lost Worlds*, however, I'm struck by how little these latter tendencies interfere with my enjoyment of many of the stories. Smith's fiction does not always succeed—nor am I convinced that Smith's aesthetic is the result of conscious intent—but the attempt makes for interesting writing. Some of these tales have only historical significance now, but many others still hold great imagistic power.

Lost Worlds gathers Clark Ashton Smith's "lost world" stories, set in places as diverse as Hyperborea, Atlantis, Zothique, and Averogne. The collection immerses the reader with a sensibility that is foreign but also familiar. Readers will recognize these settings from the works of other pulp writers and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as well as countless movies, although Smith has a somewhat different take on the subject matter. Unlike most other approaches to lost worlds, Smith's fiction eschews the framing structure in which modern-day people discover a "lost" place. Instead, there is no outside world at all, and for this reason these tales might be classified as "secondary world" in nature.

Smith treats his settings as vibrant, living locales populated by picturesque, oddly ritualistic characters. The descriptions in these stories are more useful than those in the tales Smith sets in the real world—their intensity does not seem as out of place, and their length seems appropriate to describe milieus whose existence depends so much on the stuff of myth and rumor.

"The Tale of Satampra Zeiros" exemplifies this approach. Like many of the *Lost Worlds* stories, it is told almost entirely

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in summary with a few attempts at half-scene. As the narrator embarks on his quest, the layering of description seems excessive. The reader waits for the story to begin . . . then starts to understand that the description *is* the story. This method is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is unusual. It works for Smith due to his pseudo-poetic stylings:

There were no birds nor animals, such as one would think to find in any wholesome forest; but at rare intervals a stealthy viper with pale and heavy coils glided away from our feet among the rank leaves of the roadside, or some enormous moth with baroque and evil-colored mottlings flew before us and disappeared into the dimness of the jungle. Abroad already in the half-light, huge purpureal bats with eyes like tiny rubies arose at our approach from the poisonous-looking fruits on which they feasted, and watched us with malign intention as they hovered noiselessly in the air above.

Some may note the carelessness of the vague “evil-colored,” among other examples, but on the whole the intensity of such prose serves Smith well. The reader has little choice but to believe in the world described, even if the reader may not always believe in the story being told. Less lush prose would cause the descriptions to crumble, leaving the reader with the banal rendered in turgid summary.

However, Smith falters badly when his prose gives way to the undigested, vague hyperbole so common of Lovecraft’s work. Later in “The Tale of Satampra Zeiros,” for example, tentacles come into play: “What unimaginable horror of protoplasmic life, what loathly spawn of the primordial slime had come forth to confront us, we did not pause to consider or conjecture. The monstrosity was too awful to permit of even a brief contemplation; also, its intentions were too plainly hostile, and it gave evidence of anthropophagic inclinations.” Critics of Smith’s prose style may miss the mark when they call it purple. I think it is more that he writes at such an elevated, poetic level that when called upon to put special emphasis on an event, Smith has no option but