Recommended Reading

Role-playing is an imaginative hobby, where through discussion and sometimes negotiation an imaginary world is created and explored. No wonder that literature forms the basis of inspiration for the entire hobby.

It is important to remember that many of these authors have had their work adapted to film. In every case the film greatly changes the story, and thoroughly destroys the essence of the original as often as not. Do not miss the opportunity to read a story just because you've seen the film. An expert filmmaker with a budget in the hundreds of millions of dollars can equal neither the spectacle nor the depth of what the humble writer accomplishes with mere words.

Many of the authors on this list have appeared on many other such lists. It can be easy to assume that if you hear so many people talking about a thing, you come to know that thing yourself. This is not so. If you have not yet personally investigated the works of these oft-championed authors, whatever are you waiting for?

(This is not a rhetorical question. What *are* you waiting for?)

You will notice that most of the authors recommended here are quite old. This is no accident. Modern authors, even when writing of other times, tend to use modern thinking and modern language in their work, which makes everything seem so mundane. While the authors noted here surely did the same in their time, reading these stories after so much time brings the double wonder of the ideas as well as the expression of those ideas. The unfamiliar, and perhaps antiquated, language enhances the atmosphere of the whole.

Surely the fact that many of these here authors were originators, and the shining lights of their time, helps, whereas history has not yet dimmed the lights on today's imitators and faddish authors who won't be remembered tomorrow. Exploring yesterday's treasures is an endless, and endlessly satisfying, task. Sorting through today's published work is tedium. Surely the same was true in 1850, 1900, and 1950, and surely it will still be true in 2050 and 2100.

The experience of reading a good story surpasses most others in life. All you have in life is time. Spend it wisely, and under sufficient lighting.

Clive Barker

A British-born, California-resident author and artist. His fantasy-horror stories are strongly informed by his openly homosexual orientation and rich visual imagination.

Alienation is perhaps the classic Barkerian theme, recurring often enough to act almost as identifying hallmark. In a Barker story the protagonist typically feels dislocated from the workaday world even prior to the intrusion of the supernatural into their life. This alienation may stem from unhappy personal or working relationships (*Sex, Death and Starshine*), physical or mental health issues (*The Life of Death*, *Cabal*), ennui and a hunger for ever-greater sensation (*Down, Satan!*, *Coldheart Canyon*, *The Hellbound Heart*), or simply a nagging discontent with the world they know (*The Forbidden*, *Midnight Meat Train*).

Fundamental to many tales is an active and positive amorality, perhaps best presented by the recurrent theme of the deliberate transgression of taboos cultural, social, or biological, as path to revelation and self-realisation. The changes subsequently experienced may be dislocating, disorienting, and horrific in form, but are ultimately painted as both fact of life and personal necessity. Even in manifestly horrific stories changed circumstances are often regarded as liberating or redemptive in nature. Restoration of a cozy, mundane *status quo ante* is neither expected, nor necessarily desirable.

Recurring motifs in Barker's stories include the celebration of classic Americana (*Coldheart Canyon*, *The Great and Secret Show*, *Son of Celluloid*, *Revelation*); talismanic objects with hallucinogenic or hypnotic characteristics which act as portals between worlds (*The Hellbound Heart*, *Weaveworld*, *Coldheart Canyon*); baroque bodily transformation allied to an almost pagan reverence for the carnal (*The Madonna*, *The Body Politic*, *In the Hills*, *the Cities*, *The Life of Death*); and the sense that there

is no strong delineation between the mundane and the supernatural (*omnia opera*).

The situations and subject matter used to explore these recurring themes and iconic motifs vary widely, ranging from intimate and macabre vignettes in many short stories, through affectionate literary homages (as in the horrific *Pig Blood Blues* and *Scape-Goats*, or the darkly comic *The Yattering* and *Jack*), to an American Gothic family saga involving squabbling old world godlings (*Galilee*) or a semi-satirical reworking of Tinseltown mythology and haunted house clichés (*Coldheart Canyon*), up to secret mystical wars and world-hopping odysseys (*Imajica*, *The Great and Secret Show*, *Weaveworld*).

Mr Barker's works for younger readers (notably the *Abarat* series) skirt the more carnal elements of his adult horror fantasies, while retaining in full the characteristic Barker combination of wonder, menace and phantasmagoric visual invention.

Start with: the short story collections *Books of Blood* (6 vols), or *Abarat*
Follow with: any longer work. *The Great and Secret Show*, *Weaveworld*, etc.

Robert E Howard

Robert Ervin Howard (1906-1936) is a giant of sword and sorcery, heroic fantasy, and pulp adventure. His greatest, and best known creation, Conan the Barbarian, is practically a household name. Conan has been immortalized in short stories by Howard himself, and several other writers since, and in varied other media, such as cinema, comic books, and games. Several of Howard's other creations, such as the grim puritan Solomon Kane, King Kull of Atlantis, and the Pictish king Bran Mak Morn are also widely known. It is safe to say that Howard's huge body of work is one of the foundations upon which a whole literary genre rests.

Howard was born and raised in a small town in Texas. His father, Isaac Howard, was a country doctor, a profession that entailed frequent lengthy absences from home. His mother, Hester, had tuberculosis and was ill of

health for most of Howard's life. Howard was a very bookish and intelligent child, but also (perhaps surprisingly) a fan of boxing, even taking up amateur boxing himself. He had dreamed of becoming a writer since childhood, but didn't have any real success until the age of twenty-three. In his time he was published in a wide selection of magazines, journals and newspapers, but his main outlet was the pulp magazine Weird Tales.

Howard was successful in several literary genres, and was on the verge of publishing his first novel when he committed suicide at the young age of thirty. When he learned that his terminally ill mother had entered a coma from which she was not expected to wake, he, for reasons unknown, walked out to his car and shot himself. The suicide and the circumstances surrounding it have led to varied speculation about Howard's mental health. The truth of the matter remains undiscovered.

Of Howard's creations there are a few which merit special mention.

Conan the Cimmerian, the dark-browed, mighty-thewed barbarian, is the epitome of the sword-wielding fighting-man, and yet he is also so much more. During his long and illustrious career he becomes a mercenary, a thief, a pirate, a warlord, a general, and eventually, the King of the Aquilonia, the mightiest empire of the Hyborian age. Far from being just the muscle-bound brute he's sometimes portrayed as, Conan is the quintessential adventurer, a man who makes his own fortune by blade, guile, will, and pure might. Every adventuring character since has at least some of Conan in him. The Hyborian Age, the fictional pre-historic era Howard created for his characters, has also had a huge influence on fantasy settings, and especially role-playing settings since. It is a hybrid of varied influences, borrowings from history and myth, all thrown into a melting pot. Foremost, the Hyborian Age is created specifically to be a playground for fantastic storytelling, with enough familiar elements for anyone to relate to, to enable the reader (or in the case of role-playing games, the player) to relate to the protagonist.

The rapier and pistol wielding puritan Solomon Kane also deserves mentioning. Like Conan, Kane is a man who lives his life sword in hand,

facing danger at every turn, and besting insurmountable odds. Kane is characterized by his drive to protect those he sees as innocent and good. He is a civilized man living in an age that has turned its back to the light. The Kane stories are set in our own history, with a supernatural twist. Delve deeper and you will discover a world shrouded in darkness, populated by secrets, and infested by evil in all its forms. If you're looking for literary equivalents of the Lamentations of the Flame Princess' definition of weird as something out of place in an otherwise familiar seeming setting, then look no further than Robert E. Howard's Solomon Kane.

In a career that spanned barely twelve years, Howard wrote well over a hundred stories for the pulp magazines of his day. He created thrilling, vividly realized adventures populated by larger-than-life characters. His writing has a powerful dynamism which has enabled his stories to stand the test of time. So enduring is the appeal of his work that over seven decades later he continues to gain new fans, and inspire subsequent generations of fantasy writers. To this day Howard remains a highly read author. He has been compared to such American masters of the weird as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Jack London. The dynamism of his writing, and the strength of his characters have been compared to Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Chandler. Among writers of heroic fantasy, Howard has no equal.

FRITZ LEIBER

Born in Chicago in 1910 to professional stage and screen actor parents, Fritz Leiber's half-century writing career covered horror, fantasy, science fiction and nonfiction. His first book, the horror novel *Conjure Wife*, has been adapted for the screen three times, and a fourth version is in the works. *Our Lady of Darkness*, however, was his last and probably greatest horror novel, and the one that has garnered the greatest acclaim. Leiber's science fiction novels include *The Big Time*, *A Spectre is Haunting Texas*, *The Wanderer*, and the humorous *The Silver Eggheads*. Leiber often wrote about apocalyptic and alternate timeline settings.

Leiber was a multiple Hugo, Nebula, Derleth, Lovecraft, and World Fantasy Award winner. He is credited with coining the term 'Sword & Sorcery' and for creating two of the genre's most recognizable and enjoyable characters: Fafhrd the barbarian and his nimble companion, the Gray Mouser. The two appeared in Leiber's first published story, *Two Sought Adventure*, in the August 1939 issue of Unknown. The last Fafhrd and Gray Mouser tale, *The Knight and Knave of Swords*, was published in 1988. These stories and these characters have had an enduring influence on fantasy roleplaying, and for good reason.

Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser tales are almost prototypical Sword and Sorcery— stories in which magic works and gods are real, and where stalwart warriors find themselves in direct conflict with supernatural evil. Leiber's works share these same elements with the stories of Robert E. Howard. Leiber's stories also owe a great debt to Lovecraft's weird tales, which is unsurprising, as Leiber was a great fan of, and advocate for, Lovecraft's writing. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are constantly confronting or being confronted by malign supernatural forces, be they murderous practitioners of the black arts (*Ill met in Lankhmar*), vile cults (*The Cloud of Hate*), malevolent, sentient towers (*The Jewels in the Forest*), or incomprehensible beings from outside space and time (*Bazaar of the Bizarre*). In each of these stories and many others, it is a combination of skill, daring, luck and determination that sees the pair through.

As a genre writer, Leiber stands midway between two of his own literary icons: Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft. Leiber's detached, wry writing style is considered polished compared to some of the writings of Howard and Lovecraft, which can at times be stylistically over the top, but the main difference between the three lies in the fact that Howard always wrote from the gut, and Lovecraft from the head, while Leiber tended to write from the heart. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are heroes, warriors and adventurers, but they are also thieves, womanizers and drunkards. They are human, complex, fallible and humorous—and extremely likeable because of it.

Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories have been collected into a two volume set in the Fantasy Masterworks series published by Gollancz. Look for The First Book of Lankhmar *and* The Second Book of Lankhmar.

HP Lovecraft

Howard Phillip Lovecraft (1890-1937), the gentleman from Providence, is one of the most influential writers of speculative fiction of the 20th century. Though his stories are relatively little-known and have not directly given birth to any Hollywood blockbusters (though not, horribly, for lack of trying), his influence is today nearly everywhere, from literature to music to movies to roleplaying games. Stephen King credits him as a primary influence, Neil Gaiman, Clive Barker and Alan Moore have all tipped him their hats, and his extensive correspondence with other writers of weird fiction in his time ensured that his legacy not only lived on but was built upon and developed by those who survived him. The name of Cthulhu has entered the popular lexicon, and references to Lovecraft's work are practically everywhere, if one knows what to look for.

The Man

He was born in Providence, Rhode Island, and spent most of his life there, with the exception of some two years in the mid-1920s that he lived in New York City during his ill-fated marriage. He was an eccentric personality, perhaps even neurotic, and spent long periods of his life practically as a hermit. Though Lovecraft never went to university, he was well-read, keenly intelligent and possessed an exceptional memory. He also never learned a trade, making money by selling his stories to pulp magazines and revising the work of other writers. He died of colon cancer at the age of 46.

H.P. Lovecraft was a prolific writer. During his life, he wrote over sixty short stories and novellas, a few hundred poems, another few hundred articles on science, literary criticism and other miscellaneous topics, and,

according to the Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi, nearly 100,000 letters – and he was not given to sending short notes, either.

While the Cthulhu Mythos that nowadays suffuses popular culture so thoroughly originated with Lovecraft, its modern form is the result of adding, lifting and collaboration between many writers from the 1920s to this day. The original Lovecraft Circle, writers who corresponded with Lovecraft, includes names such as Robert E. Howard (the creator of Conan the Barbarian and Solomon Kane), Robert Bloch (*Psycho*), Fritz Leiber (the "Lankhmar" tales) and less well known but still significant writers such as Frank Belknap Long, August Derleth (largely responsible for keeping Lovecraft in print after his death), Clark Ashton Smith and Henry Kuttner.

Later critics have often attacked Lovecraft for being racist, and not entirely without justification. Certainly, a kind of passive racism was quite prevalent among the white middle class of the age, but Lovecraft, at times, went above and beyond the norm. During his two years in New York City, he consistently failed to find work and blamed this on the immigrant populations, in a classic case of "darned foreigners coming here and taking our jobs". This is especially visible in his short story "The Horror at Red Hook", written during his stay. Then again, he also married a Jew. The topic of Lovecraft's racism is a complex one, and a deeper examination is beyond the scope of this essay.

The Tales

H.P. Lovecraft's reputation primarily rests on his horror stories, which number 51, and of those, on a core of some two dozen tales of the weird. Lovecraft worked almost exclusively in short fiction and most of his weird tales are short stories, with a handful of novellas and one novel-length work, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, which did not see print until after Lovecraft's death. His most famous tale, however, is "The Call of Cthulhu", which later lent its name to the roleplaying game *Call of Cthulhu* in 1981, itself a classic that is still popular today.

The premise of Lovecraft's horror is that of an uncaring universe, where humanity is insignificant and ultimately doomed. It is populated by unknowable and monstrous creatures and their even stranger gods, all alien in every sense of the word. When they exhibit any interest toward mankind at all, it is malicious. To gaze upon them is to court madness, and brushes with the supernatural usually end badly for mere mortals. However, while Lovecraft's fiction has a reputation of being nihilistic and hopeless, it is somewhat exaggerated. While the fate of many of his protagonists is to die gruesomely or lose their mind, in several of his stories the darkness is not only held back for another day but decisively defeated. Victories, though, never come without sacrifices.

Lovecraft's most common setting is his native New England and the fictional towns he set therein – Arkham, Kingsport, Dunwich and Innsmouth, though he is not confined to these locales. His settings play a great role in his stories, brought alive by his vivid and lavish prose. In Lovecraft's New England, evil lurks in the deep forests and in the uncharted rolling hills, and reaches forth its hand from the history of the region, from the Salem witch trials and from ancient times beyond the reckoning of man.

The archetypical Lovecraft protagonist is an academic, perhaps a professor at Miskatonic University in Arkham, whose studies lead him to uncover things that should have been left alone. Archeology and history are especially dangerous areas of study, though higher mathematics is not without its hazards. In Lovecraft's stories, learning is dangerous and ignorance is bliss – this from a scholarly author who himself quite valued learning and whose writing rewards the educated reader.

One recurring theme in his stories is ancient books of mystic knowledge that may cost the reader their sanity or soul. The most iconic tome of forbidden lore in his works is the Necronomicon, written by the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred. Though wholly a creation of a Providence pulp writer, there exist a number of actual published works by that name, at least two of them hoaxes claiming to be actual spellbooks, a pair of art books by H.R. Giger, and novelty items. It is also the name of at least one Lovecraft anthology.

As with many writers of the pulp era, Lovecraft's writing is partially in the public domain and partially owned by who-the-hell-knows. The copyrights of many of his stories are uncertain, and thus a large portion of his work, especially the important stories, can be legally found online, on websites such as Wikisource (http://en.wikisource.org) or the Australian Project Gutenberg (http://gutenberg.net.au). H.P. Lovecraft's works are also being constantly reprinted and are easy to find.

For a good introduction to Lovecraft, a reader could do worse than begin with the short stories "The Call of Cthulhu", "The Colour out of Space", "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Rats in the Walls", the novellas *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, and the novel *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Other popular works are the novellas *The Shadow out of Time* and *The Whisperer in Darkness*, and the short stories "The Dreams in the Witch House", "The Haunter of the Dark", "The Music of Erich Zann", "Pickman's Model", "The Shunned House", "The Statement of Randolph Carter", "The Temple" and "The Thing on the Doorstep". He also wrote a number of more fantastical stories, strongly inspired by Lord Dunsany, set in the Dreamlands. By far the best of these are "The Doom That Came to Sarnath" and "The Cats of Ulthar" and the novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. Finally, he is the author of the essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature."

Edgar Allan Poe

Called 'the first truly American writer' by William Carlos Williams, Edgar Allen Poe was a poet, fiction writer and essayist of special genius. He was a master of literary structure and tone. Credited with the creation of the detective story and with being a strong influence on early science fiction writers such as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, Poe is best known for his horror stories and dark poetry. It is generally agreed that he single-handedly redefined the American Gothic genre with his tales of mystery and macabre.

Though he also occasionally wrote satires, 'fantasies' and humorous tales, it would be difficult to overstate Poe's influence on the horror genre.

Whether writing stories of psychological horror and madness (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Cask of Amontillado*), supernatural horror (*The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*) or superficially 'straight' detective fiction (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*), Poe imbued his stories with an eerie, compelling and utterly controlled atmosphere of weirdness and doom that has lost none of its power over time.

Poe's personal life was a difficult and a poor one, marked by tragedy and failure. His actor father abandoned the family when Poe was a year old, and his mother died of tuberculosis a year later. His (much) younger wife also died of tuberculosis. The disease and death of his wife had a deep effect on Poe, who turned to drink. Her loss marked his poetry and prose, already rather dark to begin with.

Poe's death might have been a mystery he himself wrote. On September 27, 1849, Poe left Richmond, Virginia for New York. He disappeared for a week. On October 3 he was found delirious on the streets of Baltimore, wearing clothes that were not his own. He died in a drunk ward of Washington College Hospital on October 7, never having gained enough lucidity to explain what had happened to him. The cause of death is still debated.

Robert Louis Stevenson said of Poe's work that it had 'a certain jarring note, a taint of something we do not care to dwell on or even find a name for.' While that may or may not have been true when Stevenson wrote it, not too many more decades would pass before H. P. Lovecraft would find a name for Poe's macabre story type—the weird tale. And as the success of pulp magazines of the time proved, people not only cared to dwell on such stories, they had a near-insatiable appetite for it. They—we—still do, as the multi-billion dollar horror film and book industry proves.

From a role-playing perspective, the works of Edgar Allen Poe offer a master class in the creation of a macabre, oppressive tone and atmosphere. For readers new to Poe, at a minimum they should read the short stories *The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The poems *The Bells*, *The*

Raven, *A Dream Within a Dream* and *Annabel Lee* should also be considered required reading. For those intrigued by Poe's end, the 2006 independent film *The Death of Poe* may be of interest.

Clark Ashton Smith

In 1893, the year that Clark Ashton Smith was born, railroad chronometers went into common use, and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair featured electric lights. The mystery of the frontiers was being standardized, and technology was firing the first shots in humanity's war against the darkness of night.

Into this world of change, Smith was born into California cabin life and had only eight years of formal grammar school education. His precocious and astute mind allowed him to become his own teacher, learning other languages and continuing to absorb epic amounts of reading. Writing his own stories at an early age, Smith's imagination was influenced by classic fantasy, adventure, and horror stories, and his first published work was pieces of poetry. Although known primarily as a writer, he was gifted in several visual arts, including painting and sculpture. His ability to conceptualize visual narratives was instrumental in bringing the otherworldly and exotic into believable and readable written stories. This kind of writing, focusing on the strange, fantastic, and otherworldly was shared with fellow writers H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard. The three wrote for Weird Tales and served as Furies waging a war of vengeance against the dry conservatism of fiction writing at a time when frontiers were vanishing, the adventure of global colonialism was ending, and even the fear of darkness was under seige by advances in technology. Weird Tales gave Smith a stage upon which he could renew a readers fear of the dark, remind them of the wildness of the exotic, and rekindle their lust for adventures to the far away.

His contributions to role playing games are invaluable just in terms of imaginative storytelling: bringing the spanning vistas of the alien and heroic to the masses, showing that light isn't enough to fight darkness, introducing readers to worlds and strange entities that are beyond comprehension, describing characters confronting evils that are beyond

negotiation, and more. Beyond these literary elements, Smith put forth a visual lexicon and descriptive method of handling text that have not just inspired role playing game development, but created a method of textual description and visual storytelling that is currently used today. His influence extends beyond stories into not just role playing, but also graphic novels, comics and computer games. The symbolic language of fantasy, horror, and adventure owes a great debt to the efforts of Smith and his contemporaries.

A large part of Smith's appeal is his treatment of characters, even ancient, evil beings of godlike presence. The relentless worm Rlim Shaikorth, and the elk goddess Yhoundeh hunting the sorcerer Eibon. The arachnid Atlach-Nacha, astride a web linked to the Dreamlands of H. P. Lovecraft. The heroic valor of Gaspard Du Nord, wielding alchemic mastery against Colossus of Nathaire the necromancer. The simple and stark narrative of the explorer Satampra Zeiros, adventuring in the temple of the grotesque Tsathoggua, and the questing of the luckless Ralibar Vooz.

The people and places in the works of Smith have heavy influence over role playing game development, in particular the Averoigne Series and the Zothique Cycle story The Dark Eidolon. The wonder, horror, mystery, and revelation in Smith's stories has inspired a generation of game masters and players of numerous role playing games to create similar worlds of dying decadence, expansive unknowns, ancient evils, and exotic madness. The Hyperborean, Averoigne, and Zothique cycles together seem to form an answer to the question of the Sphinx, describing worlds crawling in innocent terror like the newly born, standing wise and strong against ancient evil, and lurching, corrupt and exhausted, towards the void.

Smith's fantasy writing ended after the death of his friend H. P. Lovecraft in 1937, and his focus turned towards sculpture and other artistic pursuits. By the time of his death in 1961, heroism and frontiers had changed. It was the year a man from Earth plunged into the sea in a Mercury space capsule, and an era of comic books was started by four characters who were astronauts exposed to radiation who would become elemental themed superheroes. The darkness surrounding the cabins of California was kept at bay by electric lights, the exotic colonies were becoming

nations, frontiers were standardized by clocks and maps, and Smith's extensive works rested gracefully in attics and on bookshelves, quietly whispering an adventurer's call to another generation.

JRR Tolkien

JRR Tolkien is a writer so famous, his work so well known, that it almost seems wasteful to use space to list him as an influence. Undoubtedly the most influential fantasy writer of modern times, Tolkien's work presents the definitive version of a great many fantasy standards: Dwarfs, elves, halflings, the "big quest," the adventuring party, dungeons, wizard towers, evil humanoids, and a dozen other things I'm overlooking because they are so prevalent it's hard to imagine that one person was responsible for the creation of the archetype.

But you know this already. Tolkien's ideas are so pervasive, so assumed, that using elements of Tolkien's rich work, being directly inspired by his unending imagination, is so commonplace, that a Tolkienesque fantasy world is considered "vanilla" by many commentators.

But read The Lord of the Rings again, and put away any thoughts of how "epic" it is, and don't view it as an adventure story.

Think of Frodo's journey, from the flight from Hobbiton, dealing with malign trees, nearly captured by ringwraiths, stalked by a mutant psychopath, taken by a giant spider, and the final push through Mordor and the final temptation of the Ring. This is a horror story full of many dark things.

The Fellowship was guided by Gandalf and aided by many. But what if a random traveler, without previous connections or an epic quest, happened upon Bombadil, or Beorn, or stumbled into Rivendell? Perhaps there would be no friendly reception.

And there is no happy ending to The Lord of the Rings. It is a bittersweet tale, and even as victory is achieved, all that everyone had fought to save had already been lost just from the fact that it had to be fought for.

Not just simple adventure, then.

Many stumble by looking to Tolkien's Silmarillion as a how-to for role-playing world-building. The history of Middle-Earth is entrenched in every description and location that the Fellowship visits. There are lessons to be learned here, but where the stumbling occurs is that Referees attempt to front-load all of that information. A richly detailed world with an extensive history is the result of a long campaign, not its beginning.

Jack Vance

Jack Vance may be the most famous name in RPGs not attached to an artist or designer. Born in 1916, his early adult life was a series of misadventures and near-escapes. He worked for a time in numerous odd jobs before attending UC Berkley where he bounced from major to major for six years. Necessity sent him to Pearl Harbor, working as an electrician, only to leave a mere month before the Japanese bombed it in 1941. Poor eyesight kept him out of the military, but attempts to learn Japanese in an Army Intelligence program were met with failure. He finally published his first professional story in 1946, while living in the bohemian community of San Francisco. Like Robert Howard, he wrote what he knew, and so his books are full of characters down on their luck, scoundrels and odd sorts lost but thriving (after a fashion) between society's cracks.

Society, biology and culture loom large in his novels. Even his science fiction tends to focus more on anthropology and less on anti-matter reactors. In *The Languages of Pao*, where a sorcerer, an usurper, and a tyrant-in-training vie for the soul of a world through manipulating the languages of its people, the line between sorcery and technology is blurry. Things are even more so in his Dying Earth novels, set in the distant future where our sun has shrunk to an angry red orb, and the promise of our future has been squandered into a bitter inheritance for a doomed humanity. Onto this stage prance, creep, and crawl a motley collection of scoundrels, broken souls, and sorcerers.

The sorcerers are especially noteworthy for RPGs. The system for magic used in the Dying Earth novels was adapted for use in Dungeons & Dragons. Vancian magic, as it's called, involves memorizing spells which are then "forgotten" as they are cast and remains a popular choice in RPGs still.

Of equal importance to gaming is the style of his stories, which tend to combine the picaresque with caper-like hijinks. The quest for new spells, the backstabbing and treachery, the sardonic humor and moody locations that give Vance's worlds their style and flavor are now well known to gamers who have never read his works. His characters are not superheroes, but flawed, sometimes tragically so, some with "vacuums" in their minds and others utterly incapable of experiencing pleasure. Where science and technology mingle, where certain doom is faced with a wry quip, and where "heroes" are known for their greed and duplicity, the tone was set by Vance.

The richest flavor is probably found in his Dying Earth novels*: The Dying Earth*, *The Eyes of the Overworld*, *Cugel's Saga*, and *Rhialto the Marvellous*. For a slightly more Science Fantasy style, try his novels of the Demon Princes: *The Star King*, *The Killing Machine*, *The Palace of Love*, *The Face*, and *The Book of Dreams*.

Jules Verne

The French counterpart to HG Wells, Verne is credited, along with Wells, with inventing the modern genre of science fiction. More than that, he is probably the steampunk novelist par excellence. His novels, written during the 19th century, include such modern conveniences as air conditioning, television, tasers, and, of course, submarines, all described with a Victorian flair. Every clockwork golem, electrified trap, or steam-powered doomsday device found in the annals of fantasy RPGs owes a tip of the hat to Verne.

Verne was born on February 8th of 1828, a full 38 years before Wells and less than ten years before Victoria was crowned. His father wanted him to be a lawyer, but from a young age Verne was drawn to words. He wrote

poems, songs, and stories in his youth, but didn't have his first novel published until he was 35, and one of his novels, *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, didn't see print until 130 years after it was written.

Verne was inspired by the dark, macabre writings of Edgar Allen Poe. He even penned a fan-fic sequel to Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket.* Like Poe, Verne was fascinated by the darkness in human souls and minds and his novels are laced with the more sinister aspects of human nature.

Unfortunately for Verne, his publisher insisted readers wanted lighter fare and happy endings. For the most part, Verne accommodated these demands and his popularity certainly didn't suffer from this. Still, some works (like *Paris in the Twentieth Century*) were apparently beyond anyone's ability to "fix" and Verne's grim pessimism remained on the page of even his most celebrated novels. In Verne's stories, technology doesn't bridge gaps so much as bring them into clear focus. The heroes in *Around the World in Eighty Days* struggle with the odd and often barbaric customs of those they meet, thwarting human sacrifices and narrowly escaping enraged natives. Captain Nemo doesn't use his wondrous submarine to regale the world with Jacque-Cousteau-like images of undersea animals and ecologies, but to wage a war of vengeance upon the British Empire. When scientists undertake *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, in spite of encounters with ravening dinosaurs and errant orbs of electrical phenomena, they are most unsettled by an encounter that throws a warped, fun-house mirror reflection upon their own concept of what it means to be human.

This then is Verne's universe; a place of infinite mystery that even science cannot render utterly tame or knowable. While his vision is not nearly as bleak or horrific as Lovecraft's, it's no less darkly alluring or explicable in its mystery.

To get a taste of Verne's dark travelogue style, the best place to start is *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*. *The Mysterious Island* offers classic mystery and suspense to the usual tale of castaways making the best of things on a tropical island. For a bleak dystopian "future" where the arts

exist only as government-sponsored swill for the masses, try his *Paris in the Twentieth Century.*

HG Wells

H.G. (Herbert George) Wells was born in Bromley, Kent, England in 1866. Growing up in a family that was constantly teetering on the brink of financial ruin, Wells turned to reading at a young age as a means of escape. Wells published *The Time Machine* in 1895. The book was an overnight sensation and firmly established Wells as one of England's leading authors. Although his literary career went on to span five decades, he is chiefly remembered today for his early works, a series of "scientific romances" that, along with the novels of Jules Verne, laid the groundwork for modern-day science fiction.

Unlike Verne, and despite his educational background in the sciences, Wells often hand-waived the technical explanations underlying his tales of gentleman inventors and mad scientists. Verne himself, while maintaining that he had " the highest respect for [Wells'] imaginative genius," opined that Wells' fiction "belong[s] unreservedly to an age and degree of scientific knowledge far removed from the present, though I will not say entirely beyond the limits of the possible." It is in this willingness to look beyond the simply plausible and to imagine what is merely *possible* that Wells distinguished himself as a writer of great influence over the next generation of weird fiction authors.

Wells often used his fiction as a vehicle for his beliefs about human nature, evolution, and politics, and most of his classic works are distinguished by meditations on social class and mankind's fate. Although he was a committed believer in Utopian societies, works like *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) refuted the contemporary Victorian optimism, faith in technology, and belief in the primacy of mankind.

The Time Machine follows the narrator as he visits a future ruled by two degenerate strains of humans, descendents of the upper and lower classes. The narrator then travels to a time far in Earth's future and witnesses the last inhabitants of the planet, red crab-like creatures, die off as the Earth

hurtles towards a dimming Sun, thus making *The Time Machine* one of the first "dying Earth" novels. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is an even darker tale of dark science run amok and the bestial nature of man. Although it was part of an emerging genre of "invasion novels," *War of the Worlds* (1898) was the first such work to cast the invaders as extraterrestrials, establishing an enduring sub-genre of science fiction.

From invasions of grotesque aliens to savage hybrid mutants to battles against degenerate subterraneans to tales of the dying Earth, Wells has passed down an entire lexicon of ideas germane to weird/horror gaming. Lastly, no gaming-centered biography of Wells would be complete without mentioning *Little Wars* (1913), a set of recreational wargame rules considered the first "modern" miniatures game rules; their significance for the development of RPGs can be appreciated by the fact that Gary Gygax saw fit to pen a foreword to the 2004 reprinting.

Others

Anderson, Poul (The Broken Sword, etc)
Bierce, Ambrose (everything!)
Blackwood, Algernon (The Willows, etc)
Bradbury, Ray (Something Wicked This Way Comes)
Carroll, Lewis (Alice in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass)
Chambers, Robert W. (The King in Yellow)
Doyle, Arthur Conan (The Lost World, etc)
Dumas, Alexandre (The Three Musketeers, etc)
Hodgson, William Hope (House on the Borderlands, The Night Lands, etc)
Homer (The Iliad, The Odyssey)
Joshi, ST (The Weird Tale, The Evolution of the Weird Tale)
King, Stephen (Eyes of the Dragon, Cycle of the Werewolf, the Dark Tower series)
Lord Dunsany (most everything)
Malory, Sir Thomas (Le Morte d'Arthur)
Merritt, A. (The Moon Pool, The Ship of Ishtar, etc)
Moorcock, Michael (Elric stories, Von Bek stories, Corum stories, many, many others)

Orwell, George (1984, Animal Farm)
Shakespeare, William (MacBeth, Hamlet, etc)
Shelley, Mary (Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus, The Last Man)
Stephenson, Robert Louis (The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Treasure Island)
Stoker, Bram (Dracula, Lair of the White Worm, etc)
Swift, Jonathan (Gulliver's Travels)
Wilde, Oscar (The Picture of Dorian Grey)

HP Lovecraft's Supernatural Horror in Literature remains the greatest reading resource for those interested in Weird tales.

Credits: Introduction, Tolkien, and Others by James Edward Raggi IV, Fritz Leiber and Edgar Allan Poe by Michael McClung, HP Lovecraft by Jukka Särkijärvi, Clark Ashton Smith by Scott S., HG Wells by David Larkins, Jack Vance and Jules Verne by James Murphy, Clive Barker by Chris Hogan, Robert E. Howard by Juhani Seppälä. Illustration by Dean Clayton. Proofreading by Maria Kyytinen.