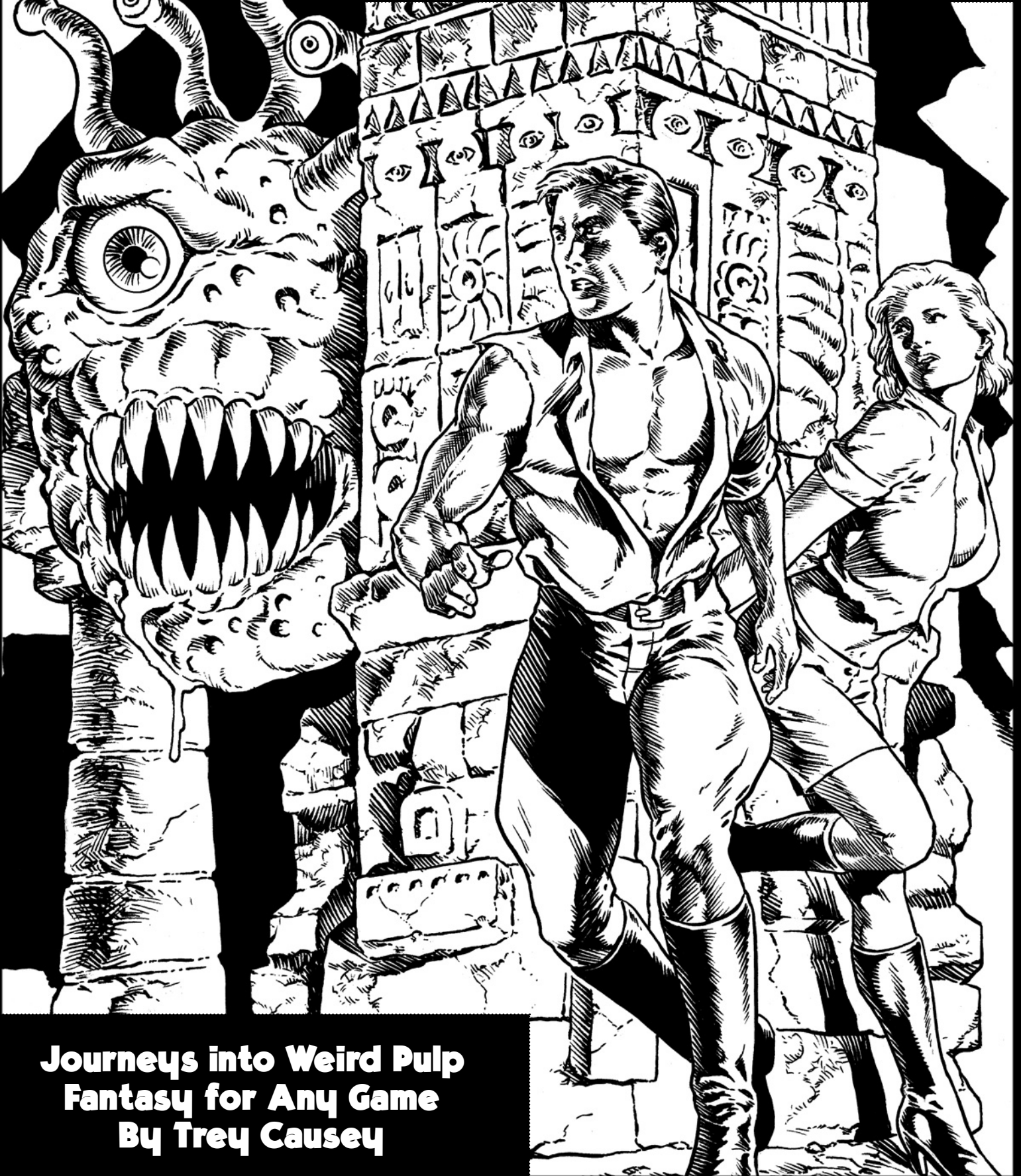


STRANGE TRAILS



**Journeys into Weird Pulp
Fantasy for Any Game
By Trey Causey**

STRANGE TRAILS

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<http://sorcerersskull.blogspot.com/>

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INTRODUCTION

The contents of this volume are eclectic essays describing a fantasy world. It's not the traditional sort of pseudo-Medieval fantasy world, but is instead, more like world presented in the more *outré* adventures of pulp heroes like the Spider or the Shadow, or occult detectives like Carnacki and John Thunstone.

The City (no other name for it has been revealed, as yet) and its Strange New World differ from the setting of those stories in two important ways. First, theirs is a "secondary world," not fictionalized version of our Earth. It's parallel in some ways, but distinct. Secondly, it's a fantasy gaming world, created in the shadow of decades of fantasy game worlds. It was conceived with an eye toward supporting "typical" fantasy adventure gaming, with high magic and diverse monsters.

Once these two elements came together, "typical" becomes a relative thing, as the essays here will show.

The City and its world continue to be built on my blog, *From the Sorcerer's Skull*, which was the source of most of the material here. There you can find out about this Yian the *S.S. Venture* was bound for, the secret magics of hobo-goblins and the dangers of the Dustlands.

And, of course, the setting book *Weird Adventures* looms on the horizon.

For newcomers, enjoy this free preview. For those who are already fans, thanks for your support. Hopefully, this appetizer will hold you over for the main course.

SOMEWHERE IN THE CITY...

"I knew you wouldn't be doing anything, old boy."

I shrugged. What could you possibly say to a man who thought staring at a blank piece of paper in a typewriter while listening to the incessant creaking of an arthritic desk fan nothing? What exactly did he make of the ashtray full of butts? The quarter of Gentleman Loser whiskey absent from the bottle on the desk?

"What can I do for you, Heward?"

Heward Kane was a private detective of the occult variety, but looked more like a film star. He was tall, dark, and the rest of it--though the lines of his face were a little too smooth for a paragon of masculinity. He was handsome, though, and he knew it better than anybody. He never met a mirror he didn't make eyes at long enough for it to flatter him. He was dressed all in a particular shade of gray, and mostly in silk except for an opal tie pin. I think he used the same face cream as those Heliotrope starlets, too.

Heward sat in the old chair on the other side of my desk, and tossed something he'd been carrying in my direction. A package wrapped in brown, waxed paper landed on my desk with a dull sound. It slid a bit toward me before finally coming to a stop. It looked like meat from a disreputable butcher.

"Open it."

I reached over and unwrapped the paper.

"I'm no palm-reader," I said, "but I think this man has lost something close to him."

Heward lit a cigarette, took a dramatic puff and blew smoke from his nose. "Funny. Now what is it?"

I put it back on the table. "It's somebody's hand...Somebody's left hand."

And it was. Dried--mummified, maybe. The skin was the color of parchment. Long, dessicated veins crossed and twisted like the corpses of worms beneath its surface. It was human left hand with the addition of a narrow, greenish candle between the first and second fingers, held as careless as if it was a cigarette. From the looks of it, the candle had burned a long time. Solidified wax rivulets ran down the hand. The wick was black and coiled back on itself.

"I know that," Heward said. He sounded impatient. "But what is it really?"

"It looks like a hand of glory."

Heward beamed. I'd fallen into his trap, apparently.

"Aha! Yes, that's what it looks like," he said. "That's what I thought at first, too. But it's not just some grisly magic lockpick. It's something unique."

"So what is it?"

"It's a key. A very special key."

I put the hand back in the wrappings. I didn't much like touching it, and I wasn't sure the feeling only came from its appearance.

"A key to what?"

Heward leaned forward, and lowered his voice like he was imparting a secret. "A key to a crypt. A crypt where, I believe, there is a something of particular value."

"'Was,' you mean." I pointed to the hand. "That thing looks like it's been used."

"True enough." He flashed me an even bigger grin, like he was posing for a publicity photo. "But I just happen to know who got that something of value, and where it's been taken."

And so, the point emerged. I still wasn't inclined to make it easy on him. "And you came here to tell me so we could giggle over it like school girls? Should we find a drugstore and have a malted?"

"Yes, well, I need your expertise." Heward shifted in his chair like that was an uncomfortable admission. "And I'll pay for it."

I smiled. "That's good, but you know you're talking about theft."

Heward crushed out his expensive cigarette in my ashtray. "Would it help if I said they were very bad people? That they trafficked with things that most assuredly should not be trafficked with?"

"Not particularly."

"Would I help if I said Rose has already agreed to join this little venture?"

I had leaned forward in my chair before I knew I was doing it. After all this time, I could still be conjured with her name. "Rose is out of the game. She said so. "

"She has apparently reconsidered. I recall something about time and the healing of wounds that would be apropos, here. Then, of course, there's money."

Heward leaned back and crossed his legs. His expression said he knew he had me. This had been his endgame all along. Everything else was just maneuvering.

"So what do you say, old boy? Once more into the breach?"

MALICE IN SLUMBERLAND

NOTES

This article was posted on June 13, 2010. It was the twelfth City-related post.

1 The land of Nod is a land "east of Eden" to which Cain flees after killing Abel, as recounted in Genesis 4:16. Its punning use to refer to the land of sleep is first attested in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

2 That is, the far side of the Moon—the side permanently turned away from the Earth.

3 Implying *oneiros* (dream) + *electronics*, analogous to John Campbell's coining of "psionics."

4 The Sandman of folklore makes his literary debut in Hans Christian Andersen's *Ole Lukøje*. A more sinister version of the character is referenced in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1816 horror short-story, *Der Sandmann*.

5 G. Benedicto at the now defunct *Eiglophian Press* blog first proposed bringing the RPG bugbear back to its nightmare origins.

6 One of the names for underground, pornographic comics produced in the U.S. (despite the name) starting in the twenties but having their heyday in the Depression.

Nightmare Bugbears

Beings of condensed nightmare with furred, hunched ape or bear like bodies and heads like deep sea diver helmets with antennae and chillingly empty face-plates. They feed off the fear of humans and use strange machinery to siphon dream energy to incubate their young. Presence of a bugbear nest within a 5 mile radius causes poor sleep. Individuals suffer subsequent -1 to rolls until restful sleep is restored after spending more than one night in the area of effect. Bugbears can hide in spaces that appear too small for their physical forms and move uncannily silently, giving them a heightened ability to take others by surprise.

#Enc. 1d4; HD 3+1; AC 5; Save F3; Atk: claw (1d3), or by weapon type
Special: Has the ability to cause fear as per spell once per encounter. 50% chance of surprise. They can cause sleep as per spell once per day.

All humans (and human-like beings) dream. Like thought balloons in a comic strip, clouds of dreamstuff float "upward" from the dreamer into the Astral Plane. There they form bubbles in the astral substance, tethered to the dreamer until waking. These bubbles are permeable with—and ultimately dissolve into—the Dream Realm, more commonly called Slumberland or Dreamland, or sometimes "the Land of Nod."¹ Given their nature, dreams represent the easiest portal for humans to cross the transitive plane of the Astral and move into the Outer Planes.

Slumberland is ruled (or perhaps merely managed) by a being known by many names, but often called the Dream Lord, or Dream King. He appears as a robed, humanoid figure wearing a bronze, mirrored mask. He doesn't create dreams—these come from mortal (and perhaps immortal) minds, themselves—but he does monitor and maintain them. His castle, with its strangely-angled, expressionistic, dream-logic architecture, sits on the border between the material and immaterial worlds, existing both in Slumberland and on the dark side of the Moon.² From there, the Dream Lord maintains the oneironic³ devices and monitors the content of the flow of dreamstuff. He strives to ensure virulent nightmares don't readily infect other dreams and that idle fantasies don't spoil and bloat to become perverse obsessions.

It's a big job, and the Dream Lord doesn't do it without help. Gnome-like creatures called Sandmen⁴ serve him. They carry pouches of silvery, glinting powder made from desiccated, and alchemically treated, dreamstuff. They use this oneiric dust to induce sleep in mortals, or to cause waking dreams, or even to cause multiple beings to share the same dream. This is their primary tool for observing or even entering dreams—supposedly for the purposes of monitoring and testing.



"Supposedly" because there is some evidence for the existence of Sandmen, or at least breakdowns within their system. Regrettably common are the condensed nightmares called bugbears⁵, or sometimes "bogies" or "bogeymen." These creatures emerge from dark, foreboding places—like "haunted" houses, abandoned subway tunnels, ancient ruins, or even children's closets! They're variable in size but usually appear slightly larger than humans.

Their bodies are described as "bear-like" or "ape-like," but their heads are something like deep-sea diving helmets, albeit with blank face-plates and strange antennae. Bugbears, as nightmares given flesh, torment humans to feed off their fear. They then employ electronic devices or machinery—with an appearance both nonsensical and menacing—to siphon oneiric potential from the minds of their victims to incubate bugbear pups.

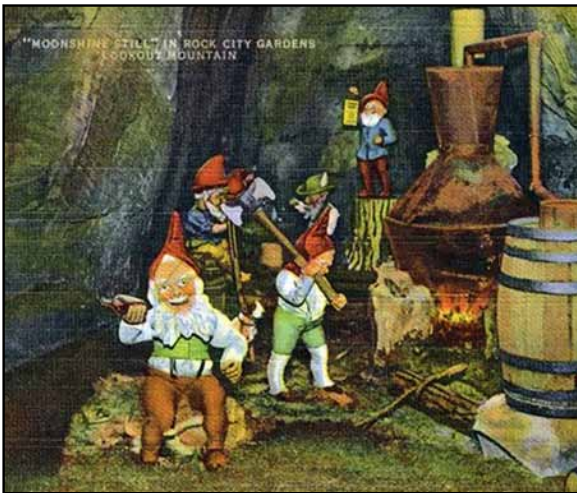
Bugbears aren't the only evidence of corruption in Slumberland. There are persistent rumors of Sandmen on the take, selling blue dreams to Hell Syndicate incubi and succubi to slip to unsuspecting marks. There are also rumors of black-market Tijuana bibles⁶ produced from the concentrated salacious dreamings of certain celebrities being peddled on the streets of the City and possibly elsewhere.

SEE ROCK CITY...IF YOU DARE!

There are stories from the southern end of the Smaragdines about a strange place atop a mountain inhabited by extraplanar beings. It's become something of a legend across the rural South. Many barns or abandoned shacks along dusty roads and lonely highways are adorned with cryptic references to its wonders, or exhortations to "See The Rock City."

The Natives of the land told stories of this place, and made visits to pay superstitious homage. Early explorers from Ealderde described a natural fortress of rock, with its components arranged so as to form the semblance of "streets" and "alleyways"—and then there were oblique references to reclusive inhabitants. By the time the area had been well-settled, stories began to circulate of disappearances, and strange lights and music in the city of rock. Some Old World immigrants began to whisper about entrances to Fairyland.

Scientific thaumaturgical inquiry toward the end of the last century appears to have solved the mystery. In the heart of the rock city, reached only after passing through a maze of unusual rock formations, is a cave. The cave is the domain of a clan of ultraterrestrial¹ entities called gnomes.



Gnomes² are elementals of earth. On the surface, they often appear as statues, as their experience of time isn't ours, and they sometimes stand immobile for long periods of time before springing to sudden action. They travel from the subterranean depths via veins of minerals. Their purposes are often inscrutable. In the rock city, they appear to be attempting art.

The gnomes look like statues of bearded little men, often with comical expressions, and have shaped some of their substance to look like human clothing—brightly colored through the expression of mineral pigments. This is not unusual gnomish behavior. What is unusual is that in the rock city, they have turned grottoes in their cave complex into dioramas, glowing with eerie, otherworldly light³. These dioramas are scenes from Old World fairytales and nursery rhymes. The gnomes, it seems, have some knowledge of their audience.

It's for these strange and whimsical dioramas that people visit the rock city. But before making the trip yourself, consider where the non-gnomish statues in the dioramas come from. Some experts hold these are gnomes, just assuming different forms. Others point to the unusually high number of disappearances in the area and suggest that the gnomes may sometimes need human stock for their quaint designs.

NOTES

This article was published on June 18, 2010. The Rock City of our world is a kitschy, roadside attraction in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. The real place is almost as weird but nowhere near as threatening as its doppelgänger in the Strange New World.

1 A term coined by Fortean writer John Keel (1930-2009), to cut through the separation of paranormal entities of the scientific age (like UFOs) and those of early ages (like faeries). He suggests these entities are of a different order of being, and take many forms to interact with humankind.

2 The occult works of Paracelsus (1493-1541) list gnomes as elementals of earth.

3 In our world's Rock City, this is achieved through the use of black-light. In the Strange New World, it's no doubt something more exotic - radioactive rare earths, perhaps?

Strange New World Gnomes

2-3 ft. tall elementals of earth, that appear as bearded, colorfully dressed little men. They normally move so slowly they are taken for statues, but can move rapidly, if the need arises. They move through stone or earth with no more difficulty than air. They may (or may not) have the ability to petrify once per day.

#Enc. 1d8; HD 2; AC 2; Save F2;
Atk: 1 punch (1d6) or by weapon
Special: as above

TRAMP STEAMER TO YIAN

NOTES

This article was posted on September 26, 2010. It was our first glimpse of the southern hemisphere of the City's world.

1 Newsreels were short documentary films shown at movie theaters. They were eventually supplanted by television in our world.

2 In the fiction of our world, a tramp steamer named the *S.S. Venture* makes a fateful trip to Skull Island in the 1933 and 2005 films *King Kong*. Any relationship between those *S.S. Ventures* and this one would be purely conjectural.

3 Sea Devils are evil, aquatic humans who can be represented by that SRD and old-time favorite the sahuagin, though I'd ditched the tail they picked up in illustration of the modern age, and lower their intelligence a bit. Of course, one could just as easily simulate them with Lovecraftian Deep One stats.

4 I'm told OGL stats for lava children appear in Necromancer Games' *Tome of Horrors* (2002).

5 Crabmen are apparently also featured with the other wallflower monsters in *Tome of Horrors* (2002).



In 5886, as part of Gillam M. Bezoar's Exotic Port's O'Call newsreel¹ travelogue series, writer Dan Carmody and a camera man shipped out from San Tiburon on a tramp steamer, the *S.S. Venture*², bound for Hyaishang, Yian. Here are excerpts from the notes Carmody made on the journey.

Only a couple of hours out from the port of San Tiburon.

Capt. Clanton points out the islands called "**The Teeth**"--no doubt a name given them due to their appearance, or perhaps it's because of the sharks that infest the waters around them. The Captain reports a story he's many times heard in a waterfront dives that the isles are a sacred spot to sea devils³ who rise from the depths on moonless nights to worship their demon god-fish--some gigantic, prehistoric shark, the tales reckon--in gruesome rites.



Four days out and we arrive in **Pyronesia**. This archipelago is every bit the tropical paradise it's often made out to be. We were there for two days, and I managed to make a trip (as close as I dared) to the volcanic peak of the Big Island. I glimpsed a lava child⁴ rising from the flows beneath; my native guide suggested we give them wide berth. They're rarely hostile, but given their size and nature, it isn't hard to see how their simple-minded playfulness could be dangerous.



Capt. Clanton's skirt-chasing got him into trouble on one of the nameless islands of Oceania. A tribe of Amazonian women seeking help from the spirits in their incessant warfare with the crabmen⁵ of the neighboring atoll decided to offer up Clanton and a crewman as sacrifices to their tiki idol. Only timely intervention of the first mate saved them.



On the subject of the crabmen: these odd humanoids are a common sight on the smaller islands throughout the South Seas. The belligerence between them and the human islanders is total; crabmen and humans attack each other on sight. No islander I met even knows if the crabmen are capable of speech. Certainly, the crabmen never initiate negotiation themselves. Strangely, neither I nor any of the crew has ever seen a crabwoman. I *have* seen odd wooden idols among the natives carved in the form of voluptuous human females with crustacean claws for

hands. In contrast to the almost obscene detail lavished on the bodies of these fetishes, the faces are carved smooth and featureless. Clanton (always one with a sea-story) says that he has heard that these idols are images of the goddess of the crabmen, brood mother to them all, who is also held in superstitious dread by the natives.

A sailor off a Yianese junk traded me this print of a rather contemplative Demon Islander for a pack of Djinn⁴ cigarettes. We didn't visit (for obvious reasons) the so-called **Demon Islands**⁵. The red-skinned, horned humanoids inhabiting the archipelago live in a warrior-based society still ruled by the sword. Barely beyond a medieval level of technology, their raiding parties are only dangerous to their closest neighbors--though grim stories are told of the fate of those shipwrecked on their shores.

NOTES

6 Djinn is a popular brand of cigarettes in the City. Its slogan is: "*Your wish for flavor is granted.*"

7 The Demon Isles and its inhabitants received further coverage in the post "Beasts from the East" on October 15, 2010. Since the Demon Islanders somewhat resemble the Asian-flavored illustrations of hobgoblins in some popular role-playing games, I'd say they'd make a suitable SRD stand-in.

THE DEVIL'S JUKEBOX

NOTES

This article was posted on August 15, 2010.

1 The word "joke" has some devilish connotations all on its own. It appears in English first in "joke joint" or "joke house," meaning a cheap roadhouse or brothel. The phrase derives from the Gullah creole word meaning "disorderly" or "wicked." It's related to modern words in some Western African languages, like the Bambara word *dzugu* meaning "to live wickedly" and the Wolof *dzug*, "wicked."

2 In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, Lapsit Exillis is a mysterious and mystical stone which is also the Grail. Lapsit Exillis is nonsensical Latin, but may be a corruption of *lapis ex coelis* meaning "stone from the heavens." Make of this what you will.



The so-called "**Devil's Jukebox**"¹ is a malign, arcane device that may be encountered in shabby dance-halls, two-bit gin-joints, or lonely roadside bars from the outskirts of the City to the coast of Hesperia. Its presence often heralds some sort of tragedy or misfortune; it has been seen in farm towns just before devastating floods and captured in the background of crime scene photos of gangland massacres. Often, though, the Devil's Jukebox causes its own tragedy.

The device is supposedly the only Schreckwalder Lapsit Exillis² model jukebox in existence, the last model personally designed by company co-founder Wolfram Schreckwalder before his seclusion--and the tragedy that followed. No one knows how the device came to be imbued with magical power, though there

are always tales that it was made on commission for some extraplanar power.

It plays standard 78rpm shellac records, though no one has been able to change out the records in this machine. Attempts at removal lead to another copy of the record in question re-appearing in the device, and the removed one crumbling away to dust with a hint of brimstone in the air. The jukebox does change its own records from time to time, though no one can predict when this will happen. It can hold up to twenty platters, though no one has ever heard more than a handful of the songs in its repertoire and lived to tell about it.

Here are a few of the songs that have been heard played by the machine and the magical effects that occur when they play. Effects last as long as the song does (4 minutes or less) unless noted otherwise. The jukebox seems to play these songs at random, and it starts or stops as it will. Songs may be selected by number, but few are foolish enough to actually *make* it play:

1. "Devil's Blues" by Springheeled Jack Jamison: The attentions of an infernal entity are drawn to one of the people present -- or perhaps them all. The length and nature of the attention is variable, but it is always troublesome in character.

2. "Take My Soul" by Wendell Clavinger: One person present has his soul trapped *elsewhere*--likely in some item at some remote location. His body functions normally but appears to be in a coma.

3. "It'll Come Back Around" by Billy Barrow and His Jazz Revenants: Ghosts of dead enemies/foes materialize and attack or otherwise bedevil those present. Additionally, any dead bodies present will rise as undead.

4. "Don't the Time Just Fly?" by the Legendary Smaragdine Mountain Boys: While only enough time for the song to play seems to pass for those present, 100 hours pass outside--possibly even longer.

5. “Gallows Swing” by Los Hermanos Acuna Western Orchestra:

Within an hour of the song playing, a lynch mob of 10-30 will seek out one of those present and attempt to deliver swift justice for a violent murder they are sure the individual committed.

6. “Poor Me” by the Gentlemen of the Road: One person present (at random) will lose all their wealth and non-magical possessions by a series of seemingly coincidental misfortunes over the next week.

7. “Sea of Tears” by Tic Doloureux³ and his Orchestra: All present are struck with intense sadness. Those who fail a saving throw will become suicidal and attempt to end their lives unless the song ends before they can do so or unless they are prevented by others.

8. “Must Have Been the Moonlight” by Irena Dubrovna⁴: One person (at random) present when the song plays is stricken with lycanthropy, though this will not necessarily be evident until the next full moon.

9. “You Make Me Crazy” by Hugh Strange and the Bedlam Orchestra: Everyone hearing the song is struck by an unreasoning frenzy wherein they attack each other in a murderous rage. They take no actions requiring forethought or planning (like casting spells) but will employ available weapons.

10. “Missing You Missing Me” by Jonny Favorite⁵: Everyone hearing the song becomes permanently amnesic regarding some important memory in his or her life. This varies from forgetting a single important fact, to complete loss of identity. Occasionally (30% of the time), someone present will have memories replaced with ones not their own.

NOTES

3 Mr. Doloureux shares his name with the condition *tic douloureux* (also known as “Suicide Disease”) which is a neuropathy of the trigeminal nerve, manifesting as intense pain in the face.

4 There was an Irena Dubrovna who suffered from an ancient, familial curse causing her to turn into a panther if aroused by the touch of a man, as depicted in *Cat People* (1942). Probably a completely different person, though.

5 Coincidentally, some works from our world have mentioned a later era crooner by this same name who disappeared mysteriously. See the film *Angel Heart* (1987) and *Falling Angel*, the novel by William Hjortsberg upon which the film was based, for more information.

THE NIGHT MAIL

NOTES

This article was posted December 12, 2010. The title is a reference to the Rudyard Kipling science fiction story "With the Night Mail" (1905).

1 A form of entertainment popular in the 1920s, wherein troupes of travelling pilots would perform airplane stunts.

2 In our world, there's a famous (or infamous) photo of a thunderbird that it has been claimed was published in the *Tombstone Epitaph* in 1890. Many have claimed to have seen the photo, but despite years of searching, no one has been able to locate it. Perhaps it was a bit of epherema from the Strange New World?

3 Sylphs, according to Paracelsus (who apparently discovered them), are elementals of air. Depictions of them as winged, scantily clad fairies are purely fanciful.

4 A harrowing encounter with such stratospheric fauna is described in "Joyce-Armstrong Fragment," related to us by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the 1913 shortstory "Horror of the Heights."



The New World depends on the timely delivery of mail over large distances. Unfortunately, large swathes of the continent are mostly unsettled, only cut by lone railways or haphazard auto-trails. Bandits, hostile Native tribes, and wandering monsters still harry travellers in much the West, while malevolent storms and ravenous zombies menace the Dustlands. The skies have often become the best option.

The Union has a postal service, but it relies on private contractors to carry air mail. Many of these companies are small operations or even sole proprietorships. The pilots are typically recruited from the ranks of barnstorming¹ daredevils or veterans of the Great War. Their planes are often rickety and aging, held together by paint and wishful thinking.

The larger, or more reckless, operations run night and day. Coast-to-coast routes can be flown by most carriers in around 30 hours, pilots staying awake with black coffee and alchemical stimulants. Larger (and much more expensive) planes can make the trip in less than twenty. The smaller planes go from the City to San Tiburon in jumps--making deliveries in the Steel League, Lake City, and some Western cow-towns along the way.



That's assuming the planes make it safely. Aviation is a dangerous business in the best of conditions, and conditions are seldom the best. Thunderbirds² hunt western skies, wings crackling with St. Elmo's fire, riding the storms their presence invokes. Air-bandits strike from mountain hideouts or (it's rumored) cloud-hidden flying fortresses to down and loot commercial planes. The whispered come-ons of sylphs³ seduce lonely aviators to their doom. Elemental storms smash aircraft out of spite.

Then there's the strange fauna of the upper air--eerily translucent, gelatinous predators³, like something out the ocean depths, which drift downward in response to air vibrations and, almost certainly, magical energies.

Thamaturgical enhancements can, and have, improved aircraft engines and systems, but their use is limited for safety reasons. Magical energies tend to attract dangerous para-elementals of lightning (or electricity)--entities called gremlins or "glitches" by those in aviation. Their very nature disrupts electrical equipment; and their chaotic anti-potential can disrupt mechanical devices and react with thamaturgical equipment in unpredictable ways.

Their presence interacts with the human mind, too. Pilots who have suffered gremlin attacks often report hallucinating outlandish, colorful, diminutive creatures--if they survive the encounter.

LIES YOUR MUMMY TOLD YOU



Far to the west of the City, within the great Stoney Mountains, there are remote places where ancient ruins dot the hardpan, high-desert landscape. From these ruins sometimes come unusual artifacts, none more so than the so-called dwarf mummies¹.

Dwarf (sometimes pygmy) mummies look just as their name suggests: they are wizened figures little more than a foot tall, usually in a seated pose. Despite having none of the usual signs of life, the mummies are endowed with the magical semblance of life at least, and though they don't move (usually) they are aware, and interact with their environment.

The susurrations of the mummies can be heard by all, if conditions are quiet enough, but only the one "owner" of the mummy will be able to understand their desiccated whispering, which will sound as if spoken

directly into their ear even if they are as much as ten feet away.

The mummies' utterances will fall (either randomly or at the GM's whim) into the following categories:

01-02: Pained, *non sequitur* reminiscences, possibly related to their long ago lives. These are related to times far too remote for modern hearers to relate to them in any useful way.

03-04: Cryptic foretellings of the future (anywhere from 1 week to 10 years hence) which will relate to the owner.

05-06: An exact and surprising statement about some predicament currently vexing the owner. The mummy will not elaborate.

07-08: A cryptic statement which *seems* to be about some predicament vexing the owner, but is in fact just nonsense.

09-10: Veiled suggestions that someone the owner is close to is in fact conspiring against them. This may or may not be true, but the mummy will have details that make it seem so. Details will only be delivered in a way that makes the mummy seem reluctant to talk about the issue.

The longer a person owns a mummy, the more uncritical they will become about its statements. After a week or more in their possession, the owner will react to the mummy as if it has a Charisma of 18. After a month, a failed save will mean the owner acts as if *charmed* by the mummy. He or she will believe everything it says, and treat it as if it is a trusted confidant.

No one knows who the dwarf mummies are, nor their purposes. Any answers the mummies' give in this regard will certainly be lies.

NOTES

This article was posted August 13, 2010. It was immediately preceded by "The Devil's Jukebox" also in this volume.

1 A similar mummy (in appearance, at least) was found in the San Pedro Mountains about 60 miles southwest of Casper, Wyoming, in 1932. It was 7 inches tall sitting, and estimated to be 14 inches tall if it was standing. The mummy ended up in the possession of a used car salesman named Ivan Goodman, who used the in advertisements for his dealership. Goodman died in 1979, and the mummy's whereabouts after that point become uncertain. Perhaps it slipped away, back to a world other than our own.

CRIME & AMUSEMENT

NOTES

This article was posted December 9, 2010. It's the first post to deal with a specific area of the City.

1 Fortune-telling machines featuring automata first appeared in penny arcades in our world in the 1890s. They're sort of creepy here, too.

2 Coincidentally, Chax (or Shax) is said to be the name of a Marquis of Hell in some works on demonology. Johann Weyer in his *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* (1577) says he is "like unto a storke, with a hoarse and subtile voice."



A covert war is being fought along the boardwalk, and in the places of amusement, on Lapin Isle on the southeastern coast of the City. The war is between two lords (or one lord and one lady) of petty crime. The stakes are the illicit earnings from all the beach's pick-pockets, quick-grab artists, petty confidence tricksters, and part-time prostitutes. Neither of these would-be kingpins is human, but is, in fact, a coin-operated fortune telling machine¹.



In the middle of the boardwalk, a penny arcade is the domain of Mister Chax, the All-Knowing Homonculus. Inside his glass case, Mister Chax² appears as a ventriloquist's dummy in a natty suit with dead (yet still too-knowing) eyes, and a leering, plastered grin beneath a pencil-thin moustache. His communications come on cards, neatly printed and filigreed. Chax's gang is mostly scruffy urchins who seem innocuous when encountered singularly, but sinister in packs. They speak in a ridiculous child-argot never completely intelligible to adults, without magical aide. Some of them are very large for their age.

Chax also has been known to employ inky spider-things the size of wharf-rats with almost human faces and derisive, whispering voices. Their bites cause painful pustules and nightmares.

Mister Chax's rival can be found in a novelty shop near the entrance to Lunar Rabbit Park. Her glass case gives her name as Grisselda, but her followers--her "ducklings"--call her "auntie" or "great aunt." Grisselda³ appears as an old woman, like an Old World grandmother. She tells fortunes by the use of playing cards, and this is also the way she communicates with her followers. These are mostly young girls, either in their teens or early twenties, who dress like prim young ladies, perhaps on a church trip. Their dainty purses hide switchblades, and maybe pocket pistols, and nasty, back-alley magic items. The cryptic meanings of Grisselda's cards are interpreted by an oracle. She's a girl a little older than Auntie's standard soldier, with eyes older still, and porcelain skin. She typically dresses like an aspiring torch-singer and smokes a cigarette through a holder. Her name is always "Esme."

Chax and Grisselda try to keep their war *sotto voce*. They have no wish to attract the authorities, but also no wish to draw the interest of the malign godling of Lapin Isle, the dark personification of the rabbit in the moon⁴; the thing like a man in a bunny suit that is not a man.

NOTES

3 The Monkees recorded a novelty song called "Your Auntie Grizelda" in 1966. That's probably another coincidence.

4 In our own world, East Asian folklore holds that a rabbit lives in the moon, derived from *paredolia*. In the City, this rabbit is associated with madness, or...*lunacy*.

OUT OF THE VOID

NOTES

This article was posted, as Halloween approached, on October 28, 2010.

1 This article describes dire events in the Strange New World. Some sources have suggested its account is apocryphal, or at least exaggerated. Readers may draw their own conclusions.

2 Astute readers will note parallels with the Zarkov expedition, chronicled by Alex Raymond beginning in 1934.

3 The second day of the month of Erefrost.

Salvaged photographs all show the same thing: beings in strange suits, with face-plates empty but for the absolute black of the void. There's an alien presence stalking the west of the Strange New World...¹

In the summer of 5880, news of an approaching rogue planetoid swept the globe. The greatest scientists and thaumaturgists worried over charts and formulae, and made dire predictions. From the streets of the City, to the savannas of Ebon-Land, and across the half-ruined cities of Ealderde, people watched the skies, and faced the fearful prospect that the end of the world was near.

The world obviously didn't end that summer, perhaps thanks to the actions of a renegade scientist and two less than willing companions². The scientist had constructed a rocket and planned to guide it into the planetoid, altering its course. This plan was doomed to failure, according to accepted theory. Thaumaturgists had long been aware that the alien, and hard to placate, elementals of vacuum and radiation were perturbed and driven to madness by the movement of large bodies like the planetoid. Also, astral projection had detected malign energies emanating from the planetoid. Was this the psychic death-cry of the world propagating backwards in time...or something else?

The scientist averred he had novel approach to thaumaturgic shielding. His rocket could run the gauntlet. In retrospect, it may be that his thoughts in this regard were not entirely his own.



The three man rocket blasted off one a summer night on an apparent suicide mission. The planetoid's course altered and the world was spared. Those who knew of the rocket assumed it had succeeded in its mission, and would never be seen again.

That was before last year, the falling star on Revenant Night³ (when tradition holds the dead can walk), and the reports of three beings in singed pressure suits, proclaiming the dawn of a new world. That was before towns were found emptied but for shadow imprints burned into walls or sidewalks where their inhabitants had been disintegrated.

Union officials have plotted the course of the harbingers (as they have come to be called). Moving from the Stoney Mountains, they've passed through only small towns, some barely worthy of the name. They've passed into the Dustlands where strangely the tornado overlords have given them wide berth. Ahead, lies the heart of the Steel League, and beyond that, who knows?

The crater left by the falling star has since been examined. It was found to contain the remains of a rocket resembling the one launched by the renegade scientist eight years ago.

IT CAME FROM THE SRD!

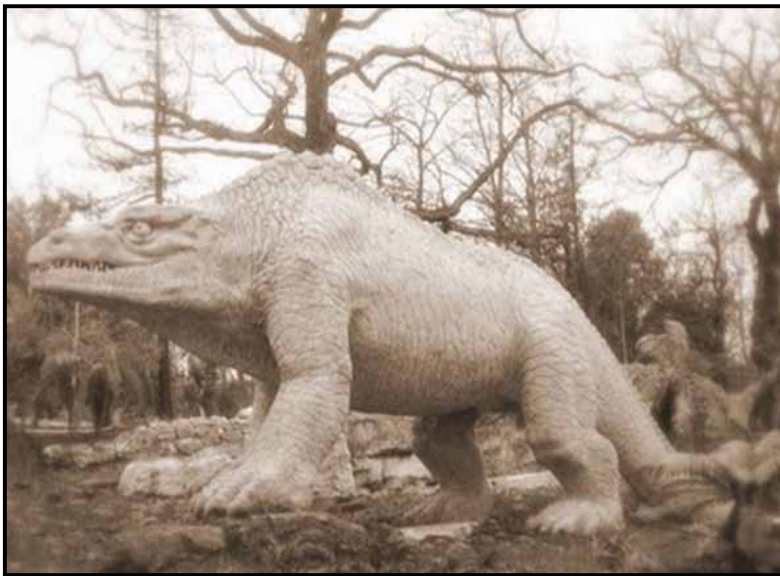
In working on *Weird Adventures*, I've been taking a look at the monsters in the d20 System Resource Document and thinking about how they might fit (or not) into the Strange New World of the City.

Some general principles come into play. One, The Strange New World tends to be more a place of pulpy "one-off" monsters, than recurrent species. Two, demi-humans and humanoids aren't common; with a few exceptions, they tend to be "lost race" sorts of encounters if they're encountered at all. Three, if an interpretation of a monster makes it more like pulp fiction (or horror or science fiction movies from the '50s or earlier) it's probably better than the standard one.

Other articles in this book have already "re-imagined" some monsters. Let's take a look at several more choice examples:

Assassin Vine: Tropical parts of the world (like the Grand Cinnamon River Basin in Asciana¹ or parts of Ebon-Land, or some islands in the South Seas) are probably full of these things. There's at least one in some eccentric botanist's collection in the City, too--or maybe in some unassuming florist shop.

Basilisk: Native to Ebon-Land, but possibly now extinct. A basilisk, petrified by its own gaze reflected back on it by a clever adventurer's pocket mirror, is on display in Empire Park in the City.²



Bulette: These have been known since the reports of early Ealderdish explorers, but they're rare enough now that some experts have pronounced them extinct. Still, grizzled prospectors and old Natives in the Western Desert tell stories about a predator that moves underground.

Centaur: Tragically, these Ealderde natives are now extinct. There was a small preserve of tamed and inbred centaurs in the private forests of the Sultan of Korambeck, but they are no more. A few taxidermied specimens or skeletons can be seen in Ealderdish museums, though many of these may have been damaged or destroyed in the Great War.

NOTES

This article is based on two posts (July 30 and August 1, 2010), but has been largely reworked and expanded here.

1 See "Green Hell," posted October 21, 2010.

2 See "More Images from the City," posted November 12, 2010.

NOTES

3 See "The Red Menace," posted June 7, 2010 for more information.

4 "Hogzilla" was the name given to an unusually large hog shot in Alapaha GA in 2004. It was initially claimed to be 12 feet long.

5 These are, for the record: salamander (fire), gnome (earth), sylph (air), undine (water).

6 See the post of the same name from July 16, 2010.

7 Or so suggests bluesman Robert Johnson in "Hell Hound on My Trail," recorded in 1937.

Derro: Distorted tales of the Reds³, told by unfortunates driven insane by their fiendish psychic torment.

Dire Animal: Yokels are always telling stories about oversized animals (the recent Hogzilla⁴ might be a good model). Sometimes they wind up being true.



Dryad: Tree spirits are known to exist, but tend to stay in unspoiled forests. They can sometimes cause trouble for logging operations in more remote areas. Sometimes such beings become troublesome "invasive spirits" after their tree is transported to a non-native environment.

Elemental: Primary elementals are of the type described by Paracelsus⁵, but the SRD variety exists, too. Since the Great War, the elements have become mixed and somehow tainted. The black dust elementals of the Dustlands are one horrifying example.

Fungus: From the walls of the underground areas of the City to the jungles of Asciana, all manner of exotic fungi are found in the Strange New World.

Gnoll: There are hyena-folk in Ebon-Land that would resemble gnolls, stat-wise. Their clans are female-dominated.

Goblin: The Old World Goblin that appears to be extinct. The hobo-goblin⁶ of the Strange New World may be a relative.

Hag: Perhaps these creatures are former human witches who bargained with infernal powers or the degenerate and spiteful remnants of forgotten goddesses. Either way, they can be found in remote places in the world.

Hell hound: Also called black dogs, these supernatural creatures have been known to haunt certain cursed families from the Old World. They are creatures of vengeance, which can be called up by aggrieved witches or conjure-folk to hunt down an offending party and drag his soul to hell. Particularly powerful sorcerers might be able to bind a hell hound to their service for a time as a guard dog, though the spiritual price is no doubt high. They may sometimes stalk the sinful on dark nights, in remote places.⁷

Kraken: These intelligent members of squid-kind were once a menace to human ocean-travel, but advances in weaponry have made them more wary. They still lurk in the depths of the cold waters of the North Meropic Ocean, though they now only tend to strike at small or crippled vessels.

Lizardfolk: A couple of species of reptilian primitives are found in the New World. Gator-Men are found in remote swamps and wetlands of the South, like the Mirkwater Swamp and the Great Pahayokeye Marshes. These areas serve as reservations for them, though constant vigilance is required to keep them in line, particularly when their natural surliness and propensity for violence has been

increased by alcohol. In the Southern New World continent of Asciana, vast areas of riverine jungle belong to fierce tribes of caimen, a smaller, more nimble species. They are sometimes headhunters and perhaps outright anthropophagous.

Mummy: The giant-sized Ancients left mummified members of their race in crypts and burial mounds throughout the Strange New World, waiting for would-be tomb-robbers to wake them.

Naga: An ancient race of human-headed snakes is found in the Orient but not in the New World. Some wilder speculation links them to Hollow Earth—that is, if the earth is indeed hollow.

Ogre: The degenerate, inbred ogres of the Smaragdine Mountains⁸ are somewhat smaller and more malformed than the usual type.

Ooze: Industrial alchemical wastes, thaumaturgically weaponized slime molds from the Great War, and subterranean, corrosive mineral slimes all add up to various sorts of gelatinous hazards.

Remorhaz: Beasts like these have been rumored in the cold deserts of Eastern Eosa.⁹

Rust Monster: Traditional rust monsters aren't found in the Strange New World, but there are rust beetles to bedevil industry.¹⁰

Salamander: The salamander raised in the industrial heart of the New World is an elemental of fire and a relatively less dangerous creature than the SRD variety.



Shambling Mound: There are probably a few of these in the swamps of the South.

Troglodyte: Another refugee of the Hollow Earth? Or the fallen, prehuman rulers of the world nursing a grudge?

Undead: Mummies were mentioned above. Most forms of undead might be encountered. There are somewhat different zombies found south of the border in Zingaro¹¹, and the ghouls of the City aren't undead at all.

Vampire: The City's vampires are similar to SRD staple, but as essentially blood addicts, they operate a little differently.¹²

That's just a sampling. More SRD monsters exist in the City's world, and more might exist in one isolated place or the other. Adventurers are always finding things unknown to science.

NOTES

8 See "The Hills Have Eyes...And Teeth," posted July 29, 2010.

9 The continent east of Ealderde. Often thought of as "the Orient."

10 For more on the rust beetle problem and the industrial uses of salamanders, see "Cities of Steel," posted June 10, 2010.

11 See "Something to Do With Death," from July 15, 2010.

12 Eludicated in "Vampires and the City," posted September 20, 2010.

STRANGE SOURCES AND WEIRD INSPIRATIONS

The following works have been inspirational and influential on the development of the City and its world. This is just a sampling; there are many, many others that have found their way into *Weird Adventures* one way or another.

Literature:

L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*: American fantasy at its most quintessential. W.W. Denslow illustrations help, but the classic film versions are probably influential, too.

Dashniell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*: It's got tough guy dialogue, a *femme fatale*, and double-dealing, all to get a valuable artifact.

China Mieville, *The New Crubozon* series, *King Rat*, and *Kraken*: The weird fantasy of Mieville tends toward modern settings (New Crubozon is roughly Victorian). Every one of his books boasts several interesting, gameable ideas.

Damon Runyon, *Guys and Dolls and Other Writings* (Penguin Classics): Runyon has a very distinctive voice and a humorous touch with gangsters and other lowlife types. A few stories from Runyon and a few from Fritz Leiber might be key foundational reading for a City campaign.

Manly Wade Wellman, the Silver John, Judge Pursuivant, and John Thunstone stories: Fantasies that draw on American traditions--but also aren't afraid to make things up.

Nonfiction:

Kenneth Hite, *Supressed Transmission* and *Supressed Transmission 2: The Second Broadcast* (Steve Jackson Games, 1999 and 2002): Essays, at once erudite and fast-paced, about a variety of topics mainly focused on alternate history and conspiracy and how they can be applied to gaming. Highly recommended.

Don Hutchinson, *The Great Pulp Heroes* (Mosaic, 2010): Provides an overview of several hero pulp icons (Doc Savage, the Shadow, G-8, Operator #5, and others) with a chapter on each—giving just enough detail to whet the appetite and fire the imagination.

Robert Damon Shneck, *The President's Vampire: Strange-but-True Tales of the United States of America* (Anomalist Books, 2005): A collection of Fortean essays on such topics as Andrew Johnson's pardon of a blood-drinking killer, dwarf mummies of Wyoming, and an attempt by a religious cult in 1854 to build a machine messiah in Massachusetts.

Comics:

Max Collins and **Terry Beatty**, *Johnny Dynamite* limited series (Dark Horse, 1994): A private dick out of Mickey Spillane takes on a criminal Faust in a psychotronic yarn.

Alan Moore and **Rick Veitch**, "Greysheet," appearing in *Tomorrow Stories* (ABC/Wildstorm, 1999-2002), collected in two volumes; and Veitch's solo effort *Greysheet: Indigo Sunset* (2001-2002, collected in 2003). A homage to Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, "Greysheet" has more weirdness in its knowing pastiche of pulp and crime fiction.

Eric Powell, *The Goon* (Dark Horse): The title character and his sidekick fight zombies and other weird menaces in a fictional (and somewhat surreal) American city in a period vaguely between the Depression and the 1950s.

E.C. Segar, *Popeye*: Fisticuffs, quirky characters, a Sea Hag, and a Goon (no relation to the above). Fantagraphics Books began reprinting a complete library in oversized volumes beginning in 2006.

Animation & Film:

Baccano! (Funimation Entertainment, 2007): anime (based on the light novel series by Ryohgo Narita) about warring criminal families, immortal alchemists, and a host of other quirky characters vying for an elixir of immortality in the 1930s.

Carnivale (HBO, 2003): TV series created by Daniel Knauf about a secret, centuries-old battle between Manichean forces coming to its resolution in the Depression-era dust bowl.

7 Faces of Dr. Lao (MGM, 1964): George Pal directs this tale of the arrival of a fantastic circus run by a mysterious Chinese man to a small, Southwestern town. Strangeness ensues. Based on the book *The Circus of Dr. Lao* by Charles G. Finney.

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