STRANGE PLACES AND THE CREATURES THAT TAKE US THERE

BY SETH MACBETH

I love spooky stories. The more heart-rattlingly terrifying the better. Ghosts, monsters, Victorian gothic houses with nefarius tendencies. Can't get enough. Many a night I've spent clutching yet another bone-clattering ghostly thriller, as my hand trembled with every page turn. I'm not afraid to admit that even an episode of *Scooby-Doo* here or there has lingered with me in the past, making me check twice before I turn off the lamp after dark. There's a certain draw calling from the eerie and macabre that I have never been able to ignore. A good old-fashioned scare beckons us into the darkness like the monsters in the tales themselves, encouraging us with a gnarled, undead hand to linger a while in the shadows and see how long we can last.

It was inevitable then, that this weird addiction of mine would of course lead me straight to Mike Mignola. His work is dripping with influence from all the right haunted places. But there's also a chunky deep vein of inspiration derived from the older heroes of spook, such as Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and M.R. James. And at its heart an abundance of folktale and mythology that gives his comic book creations a real foot in the past and another effective level of eerie resonance that comes with all things old. His work is like an echo in a long unopened crypt—a new addition to the surroundings, yet somehow belonging. And just as spooky.

When I first stepped into his domain and greedily drank in those first few pages, I felt that familiar thrill. The call of a far-reaching mystery packed with well-loved staples of old-world horror: imagery of skulls, vacant-eyed statues, and crumbling graveyards promising to chill my spine. Each panel and page trickled so effortlessly into the next with a unified composition and palette of deliciously shocking hues. Seemingly effortless and beautifully simplified imagery swathed in a heavy cloak of foreboding black shading promptly lured me in. Instant and unquestioning, I readied my spook-o-meter and plunged into the gloom of this noir-esque mystery—with a big, red, demon-ape for company.

Hellboy. This hulking, looming demon in a trench coat with a sailor's thirst and a mean right hook. Instantly, we love him for what he is. He packs a heavy punch, knows his stuff, and does it all with just a few choice words. If only more retail staff shared a few of his finer traits, the world would be a better place. We take his hand and join him on his

OPPOSITE PAGE: **KAREN ALCAZAR** • Tijuana, Mexico

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journey through creative tales rich in atmosphere and guileless aesthetic that wholly absorb our every attention. We can't quite tell where it will lead us, but we're happy to come along for the ride.

And sure, we love to watch him smash and pummel the nasty nightmare creatures that haunt his every step. It's amazing fun to stand with a hero with so much wallop and who delivers it with a hilarious lack of finesse. Obviously some of our favorite things about Hellboy is his frank, sarcastic quips and refreshingly chill, unflappable demeanor in the face of—often literally—giant adversity.

For most of his adventures, we follow Hellboy's aimless wanderings across the globe as he struggles with demons, both real and within. At first trying to avoid his fate—of becoming Anung Un Rama, beast of the apocalypse—he roams with a freedom we all envy but is always ultimately confronted by what others want him to be. A predetermined fate, and an inescapable confrontation. Offered to us in both long, weighty tales of destiny and lighter short stories that make our bellies laugh and our hearts melt, Mignola's rhythmic pacing allows us to enjoy each story as it comes, big or small. The artist's ever-balanced pages often place panels of motionless, seemingly insignificant details between action, creating a stillness and unnerving sense of dread throughout. Within the simplicity of his compositions, our eyes are encouraged to wander and explore outside the linear structure of a story. He creates a clever timelessness that mirrors Hellboy's unanchored drifting from place to place and problem to problem. And we can't help but drift along with him, deeper into his world and further from our own. This unmoored roving and happenstance way of telling the stories as Hellboy stumbles upon them connects us to a larger cosmology and builds a universe for our hero that seems bigger than our own, helping us believe that mystery truly still exists, just beyond the borders of what we choose to see.

But aside from the killer punches and intriguing adventures, there's something else that keeps us in this dark and melancholy world, affixed to our large red guide. Working in tandem with dazzling artwork and exceptional storytelling, there's something more that makes us want to linger on these lonely planes with Hellboy and accompany him to all these strange places. For me, it was knowing I had done some travelling in those places of my own. Mignola has given us a hero we connect to at a deeper level than we would imagine. Hellboy's vulnerabilities and battles stretch much further than just his latest clash with a big beastie, and in his struggles and solitary meanderings we find our sympathy latches us to him, because we've been there before.

There have been times in my life—like most of us, I'm sure—when I have roamed across that all too familiar ground, combating demons of my own and searching for a version of myself that I can get along with. The haunting voices of imaginary versions of myself tug me in so many directions. I fight against them and their constant reminder of all the achievements, the titles, and accolades I should be working towards. Lost dreams, failed attempts, and unreached goals. Monsters telling me I'm not good enough, and never will be.

Many a time I have been lost in the fog-hung shipwrecks of my bad decisions and unfulfilled potential. Is this really the path I have to take? The person I have to be? Sometimes the pressure can be unbearable, and I look in the mirror and see a stranger. Someone that just couldn't line themselves up alongside a hero.

But then, there was Hellboy.

What really hitches our wagon to Hellboy's proverbial train is less about fighting colossal fiends with a big rock hand—though obviously, that is a lot of fun—and more about that loose, wandering journey he takes to better understand himself. Not the self that is destined and pushed upon him by others, but the self he chooses to be.

Most of my favorite moments from the comics come from those few glimpses we see of Hellboy's very human vulnerabilities—snippets of his early life with the professor, like his hilarious discovery of "pamcakes" and that heartbreakingly adorable first Halloween costume of his hero, The Lobster. The little tyke expresses his character and emerges as an individual separate from the destiny thrust upon him. As soon as the Hellboy is scooped into his arms, he becomes what the professor has always seen him as and treated him as: an innocent. A vulnerable creature in need of guidance and care—as we all are, deep down.

Our struggles with our own sense of self can devastate us. So often we worry that our background, our experiences, or even who our parents are can drastically damage the person we want to become. We get bogged down by the people we think we ought to be, which is

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how we find ourselves so often wandering those desolate and haunted planes of a world full of nasty things.

Which is why we're glad Hellboy is by our side. Because he chose another option, he shows us that those alternatives always exist. As long as we're moving towards a force for good, and fighting on the side of things we know to be right for us and our world, we can all make a difference in our lives and the lives of others around us. We can choose our influences and the person we want to be. And there is real power in those choices.

Me, I choose to be a spook-loving weirdo that has travelled long and far to understand the person she wants to become. As our friend the shaman said, "All your roads lead to strange places." I highly recommend the journey, and I know just the right guy to take you.

As a multi award-winning writer, illustrator, and artist, ***Seth Macbeth*** *tells stories in many mediums. Following an adventurous spirit, she moved from England to Vancouver, Canada, where she writes poetry, drinks tea, collects pictures of old ships, and makes collages at the base of a mountain of books.*