Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows, *Providence*
(Illinois: Avatar Press, 2015-17)

Alan Moore's *Providence* is a twelve-part graphic novel, begun in May 2015 and completed in March 2017. Moore's latest graphic work is a collaboration with artist Jacen Burrows, exploring and meditating on the horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft. *Providence*'s creative team is completed by Juan Rodriguez and Kurt Hathaway, who were responsible for colouring and lettering respectively. Moore, author of such seminal works as *The Watchmen* (1986-87), *V for Vendetta* (1982-89), and *From Hell* (1989-96), is often hailed as perhaps the most influential comic-strip writer in the past thirty years, winning multiple Eagle[1] and Kirby awards.[2] Moore takes an accessible but often (but not unjustly) derided medium and, through realism and innovative use of storytelling, character, symbolism, and semiotics, backed by detailed subject research, crafts unique narrative experiences. His works are rich, meaningful, multilayered, and intellectually entertaining. They knowingly deconstruct narrative and offer new perspectives on familiar subjects. There can be little argument that he raised the form of the graphic novel to a level of critical recognition and commercial success that few others have achieved.

Moore first turned his attention to the works of Lovecraft when approached by Oneiros Books to contribute to their 1994 themed anthology *The Starry Wisdom: A Tribute to H. P. Lovecraft*.[3] Moore, familiar with the author from his teens, developed the idea of 'culturing' stories from 'cuttings' of Lovecraft's work, and letting them grow and develop freely.[4] While the book went ahead, much of Moore's material was lost and never retrieved.[5] Moore, disenchanted by the major publishing houses, published *Glory*, an exploration of the metahuman, with Avatar Press, Inc. in 2000. This led to William Christensen of Avatar approaching Moore with the idea of collaboratively revisiting the lost material, resulting in the 2003 anthology publication *Alan Moore's Yuggoth Cultures and Other Growths*.[6] Longer narratives were developed in Antony Johnson's *Alan Moore's The Courtyard* (2009) (an adaptation of a prose story by Moore), and in *Neonomicon* (2010) for Avatar. Each work took

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[1]<http://web.archive.org/web/20070527002925/http://www.eagleawards.co.uk:80/results.asp?year=1985>
[accessed 20 April 2017].
[2] See <http://www.hahnlibrary.net/comics/awards/kirbysum.php> [accessed 20 April 2017].
[3] D. M. Mitchell, *The Starry Wisdom: A Tribute to H. P. Lovecraft* (London: Creation Oneiros, 1994).
[4] Alan Moore interviewed by William Christensen, 'The Story Behind the Stories', in *Alan Moore's Yuggoth Cultures and Other Growths*, ed. by William Christensen (Urbana: Avatar Press, 2003), p. 29.
[5] Christensen, p. 30.
[6] Scott Thill, 'Alan Moore Gets Psychogeographical With Unearthing', in *Wired*, 8 September 2010 <www.wired.com/2010/08/alan-moore/> [accessed 25 August 2017].

Moore's ideas about the intrinsically paradoxical and shocking nature of Lovecraft's mythos and developed them, moving the material forward narratively and philosophically by grounding it in a more realistic world. Characters in Moore's tales possess more agency than is often found in Lovecraft's writing, resulting in a complex mélange, rich in detail and Kafkaesque alienation, yet dramatically shot through with existential bloody horror.

Alan Moore's The Courtyard and *Neonomicon* serve as prequels to *Providence*, and it's impossible to consider *Providence* properly without setting it within this context. In fact, all three works can be read as a unique, prolonged, and meaningful exploration of Lovecraft's work and life. This collection is not for the faint hearted, taking many of Lovecraft's 'unspeakable acts', which lurk in euphemism and shadow in his original texts, and bringing them shockingly, but never glibly, into the light. Moore skilfully erodes the margins between fact and fiction — between his creations and those of Lovecraft, and between fictional and historic or literary figures — and depicts largely forgotten but historically accurate early-twentieth-century events side by side with horrific fiction. He takes events from Lovecraft's copious diaries and letters, and subtly injects them into the world conjured up by Lovecraft's fiction, thereby undermining the demarcation between author and character. Each issue dramatises the dread and abjection at the heart of Lovecraft's work in a way that is realistic and, frequently, genuinely disturbing.

With *Providence*, Moore has used the techniques of blending obscure, but well-researched, historic fact with convincing realistic fiction that were so effective in *From Hell*, and has woven a mesmerising and, at times, psychologically unsettling tale, focusing on the New-England horror writer. *Providence* shows a depth of research which is academically impressive, linking well-crafted fiction with social trends and subcultures, historic events, and literary personages contemporary to Lovecraft, to produce a hypnotising, compelling, and persuasive representation of Lovecraft's life and literature. Moore builds his vision carefully, establishing a vivid world which seems similar to 1920s America, but with some subtle but distinct differences. This vision of the United States has been shaped by Robert W. Chamber's writing (such as his collection *The King in Yellow* (1895)), much in the same way that Chambers influenced Lovecraft. This mixture of familiarity and strangeness draws in and yet unsettles the reader. Into this milieu, Moore places original characters who on the surface seem consistent with Lovecraft characters like Dunwich's Old Whateley, or Herbert West, or Wilcox from 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928), but who possess sensibilities, attitudes, and behaviours which Lovecraft could never have written since, at that time, they were

considered transgressive. Moore's original characters are very effectively intertwined with characters and events recognisable from Lovecraft stories, such as the visit to the Wheatley farm and encounters with Leticia and Willard Wheatley, who are more realistic versions of Lovecraft's characters Lavinia and Wilbur Whateley from 'The Dunwich Horror' (1929). Moore uses these moments to throw Lovecraft's original ideas into sharp relief, revealing a deep alien quality, a genuine 'weirdness' in Lovecraft's characters and their situations.

The subtle forces coalescing in the narrative find focus in the experiences and 'commonplace' notebook (a kind of early-modern diary-scrapbook hybrid) of an aspiring young writer, Robert Black. Black, like all the characters in *Providence,* is a blend of historic and fictional figures, a hybridisation derived from the life and work of Robert Bloch, but injected with unique qualities, characteristics, and experiences created by Moore. Black desires to make his name as a writer, and to reveal what he suspects might be the hidden 'truth' of humanity; seeking inspiration, Black starts a search for a legendary book so unique that it unbalances the minds of all who read it — that is, Moore's version of Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*. As readers familiar with Lovecraft's work will be unsurprised to hear, in doing so, Black searches out the mysterious secrets behind the façade of everyday America and, to his eventual regret, finds them.

Moore stages his story ingeniously, utilising Lovecraft's 'The Statement of Randolph Carter' (1920), 'Herbert West — Reanimator' (1922), 'Pickman's Model' (1927), 'The Horror at Red Hook' (1927), 'Cool Air' (1928), 'The Dunwich Horror', 'The Dreams in the Witch House' (1933), 'From Beyond' (1934), 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' (1936), and 'The Thing on the Doorstep' (1937). Each episode takes elements from the core of Lovecraft's fiction and re-presents them as real-world events with cause, effect, and consequence. This re-fictionalisation treats them in the same manner as the obscure but historically accurate events that Moore has interlaced through the work, making them read as if they were also little-known but horrific real-life events on which Lovecraft based his fiction. This technique makes the reader treat the narrative as a cohesive story-world, blending fact and fiction; this shift energises the horror and shocks the reader, intellectually, emotionally, and sometimes even morally.

Lovecraft travelled New England and wrote horror fiction based on the places he visited: Salem, Athol, and Manchester thinly disguised as Arkham, Dunwich, and Innsmouth. Moore inverts this conceit by having Black visit identifiable, historically accurate towns, but in these realistic settings, Black encounters individuals and events recognisable from

Lovecraft's work. Black searches for the 'hidden reality' which he suspects lurks beneath everyday existence, unexpectedly experiencing one horror after another, and, in the second half of each issue, recording them in his commonplace book. This again is a storytelling technique that Moore has made good use of in the past (such as in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, 1999-present), where the first half of each issue has a traditional comics panel layout, but the second half is set with text similar to a novel, diary, or periodical. Each distinct portion of the issue is used to tell a different aspect of the same story and the overall narrative gains depth and resonance as these texts complement and harmonise with one another.

In addition, Moore carefully blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by effectively presenting Lovecraft as a recognisable historic figure who also performs as a fictional character. Indeed, Moore's version of Lovecraft is revealed as the messianic focus for the earlier writer's own stories. Black, in his explorations, unwittingly acts as an avatar for Lovecraft, eventually bringing the breadth of his horrific experiences to the New England author, who then uses it as the basis for stories which change the world. Moore uses this cyclic motif as both a horrific and philosophical point. He weaves a complex web of fact, fiction, and meta-fiction. This metatexuality is compounded when Black's narrative world itself becomes altered by Lovecraft's stories, one fiction undermining another, typifying Moore's philosophical approach, which suggests that fiction and reality are perceptual constructs and therefore, interchangeable.[7] While, at times, this may seem somewhat self-indulgent or even solipsistic, it is never used in a facile way, and is employed by Moore to fashion moments of great conceptual horror, such as when Black realises that, far from fleeing the horror, he has been carrying it towards its goal, or when, battered and shocked, he's stunned to see himself passing in a vehicle, glimpsing a younger version of himself on his way to encounter the horror from which he has just escaped. These motifs, like a Moebius strip, signify an inevitability, an inescapable cycle of horror. The alienating, existential circularity ably demonstrates, in narrative form, the 'non-Euclidean' ideas regarding space and the fabric of 'reality' that Lovecraft often mentioned in his fiction.

Moore's writing is fiercely well crafted, carrying an originality and depth that many prose writers would envy. Burrows's drawing is crisp and clear, every frame carefully composed and delineated, filled with significant and foreboding detail, including accurate renditions of buildings from Lovecraft's era, the depiction of the shocking riots during the

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[7] Peter Bebergal, 'Alan Moore [WRITER]: "Hey You Can Just Make Stuff Up"', in *The Believer Magazine*, June 2013 <https://www.believermag.com/issues/201306/?read=interview_moore> [accessed 25 August 2017].

1919 Boston Police Strike, or the glimpse of tiny bottles that just might hold trapped human souls. Juan Rodriguez's colours accentuate and enhance the mood, and Kurt Hathaway's lettering delivers dialogue and Black's musings with varied inflection but without interruption. That said, Moore struggles with the climactic issue, as the closely woven story strands finally converge and reality is rearranged along Lovecraftian lines. The characters horrifically come adrift from their normal lives, roles, and personalities, but this seems to lessen the peril felt rather than heighten it. The cataclysmic changes affect the characters, but rather than resist, they enter a fugue state, as identity, and to some extent their motivating agency, begins to drift away from them. This somewhat dissipates tension, resulting in a conclusion which delivers a more abject apocalypse than is common in popular culture: an alienated whimper rather than any narratively satisfying upheaval. Perhaps Moore's refusal to have the story conform to narrative custom makes the tale all the more representational of a Lovecraftian world that has left humanity behind, one chaotically indifferent to humanity's conventions or even its very existence.

Providence is a considerable and unique narrative achievement, delivering original and genuinely disturbing horror at a time when horror is much more widely consumed than in previous decades, and is more commonplace in the media at large. Jowett and Abbott convincingly argue for recognition of how horror iconography and conventions have permeated popular, mainstream culture, in forms ranging from children's cartoons, through hospital dramas, to forensic crime serials.[8] Yet against this background, Moore, Burrows, Rodriguez, and Hathaway deliver a fresh narrative experience, one that relies on the use of text and image, a story that could only be conveyed through sequential art. They imaginatively and sensitively handle horrific themes and genuinely shocking ideas that, I would argue, simply could not have been executed as meaningfully in any other medium.

Gerard Gibson

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[8] See Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott, *TV Horror: Investigating the Dark Side of the Small Screen* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012).