

Probably the most widely known bit of Lovecraft is his doggerel from the Necronomicon, "That is not dead which can eternal lie, and in strange aeons even death may die." That couplet has graced tee shirts, coffee mugs, illustrations, and probably cross-stitches throughout the English-speaking world. It could apply very easily to the work of Lovecraft, himself, which has shown remarkable durability over the decades since his untimely death nearly a century ago. Especially over the last twenty years the dark bard of Providence has experienced a Renaissance, spurred by scholars such as S. T. Joshi and loving disciples as diverse as Stephen King, T.E.D. Klein, and John Carpenter. Richard Corben's Rat God #1 features, so far, neither a rat nor, as far as we can see, a god. It is, however, solidly in the tradition of Lovecraft. In fact, it is more than solidly in the tradition of the master, it is a direct pastiche of the him. Most of the modern imitators of Lovecraft adopt his sensibilities but do not include his attitudes in their literature. Not to split hairs, Lovecraft was racist even by the standards of the 1920s, much less by the mores of our age. Therefore, it's understandable that the inheritors of his mythos want to leave the less acceptable aspects of their literary heritage to the side. For stories set in the modern era, this works quite well. However, for tales that try to truly partake of the Lovecraftian tradition, including the 1920s setting, ignoring racial attitudes and social conflicts rings false. Although Lovecraft may have been extreme even by the understanding of his age, he was nevertheless a man of that era, a strange aeon indeed by our standards, and trying to avoid facts in the service of modern sensibilities creates distortion at best. Corben is braver than that. His main hero is straightforwardly racist, if not outright racist, in a casual manner that fits with the truth of the period. Corben also embraces themes of racial destiny and memory that moderns find uncomfortable but that were completely true to Lovecraft's own art. Unfortunately, the story moves too slowly for the power of this bravery to truly manifest. Lovecraft, more than perhaps any other author, is a perfect example of the maxim that the horror genre is more about atmosphere and incident than plot. However, in giving us an issue that is essentially all incident and prelude, Corben fails to impart any kind of momentum to his story, raising the question of why readers should return to meet the rats and the gods. Corben's art does not invite any more than his prose. The style here is simple to the point of primitivism. At it's best, this might be suggestive of folk art, or some varieties of art comics. In this case, however, it merely seems unreal, as if the reliefs on the friezes of a Maya temple had begun to move and speak. Such an effect might eventually have great power. But in the absence of a story with true motive force, the art fails to impress or enthrall. The post Rat God #1 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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