

AUGUST DERLETH SOCIETY

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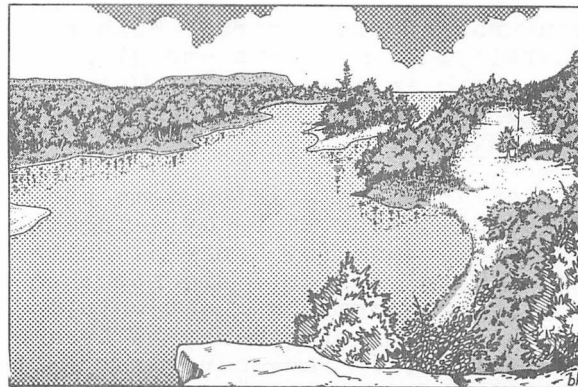
VOL. 1 NO. 2

NEWSLETTER



AUGUST DERLETH: ©
A GIANT REMEMBERED

by Basil Copper



It began in the late twenties and early thirties when I, a very young schoolboy, first became aware of the harsh, pungent aroma of American pulp-fiction. These publications have long since disappeared from British bookstalls, but I can close my eyes and smell them now, plunge again in memory into the already yellowing pages.

For the American pulp magazine had invaded Britain in a big way and the gaudy yellow, purple and scarlet covers were stacked carelessly in large mounds in Woolworths and in racks at railway bookstalls. The cowboy and gangster magazines, notably Black Mask, which contained the early short stories of Chandler, interested me not at all.

My mind had already been entrapped by the fantastic, the macabre and the terrible, and along with the imaginings of such writers as Wells, Bierce and Blackwood, I was immediately taken by the statuesque nudes and Laocoon-like writhings of squamous, blasphemous creatures from the lower depths which enlivened or perhaps disfigured - it is

impossible to make judgement now at this seemingly vast distance in time - the covers of Weird Tales.

Amazing to recall that they were available to every corner then at the counter of my particular Woolworths in Kent for an incredible threepence apiece and I had dozens of them in my pulp fiction collection. All gone with the wind, alas, and not one single copy remains to romanticise my shelves.

At about the same time I began desultorily collecting the famous Not at Night series of horror stories, edited by Christine Campbell Thomson and published by Selwyn and Blount at the amazingly low price of two shillings. They had first appeared in 1925 but it was not until much later that I discovered them, probably around 1935 when their price had not risen by as much as a penny.

If I remembered correctly there were twenty volumes in the original series, they sold in stupefying quantities -

tens of thousands - and these volumes, together with the Weird Tales editions, first introduced me to some writers who were later to make giant reputations. Strangely enough, I recall only a few titles from this period. One Weird Tales opus was FORCES MUST BALANCE by someone called Ed Earl Repp, though the story itself sounds more like science-fiction than the macabre.

For by now the macabre had taken firm hold and I devoured every book, classic or otherwise, that I could get hold of between the ages of ten and eighteen. Slowly, favourites began to emerge; I remember once, at about the age of twelve, being terrified by a story in Weird Tales which concerned a thing which was disem-bowelling sheep on a lonely hillside.

I rediscovered the piece, graced by good paper, decent type and between hard-covers many years later; it could only have been H.P. Lovecraft's celebrated THE DUNWICH HORROR which chronicled the terrible adventures of the immortal Wilbur Whateley. Names were emerging now, both in the pages of Weird Tales and in the Not as Night series.

One of them had written some stories which took my fancy. Together with Lovecraft, Henry S. Whitehead, Hazel Heald (I did not then know of Lovecraft's ghost-writing) and a handful of others, he became my favourite. Remember, that in the thirties and even the fourties, good macabre writers were few and far between and their work had to be sought in the pages of the anthologies that were issued sparsely and at long intervals over the years, or in the occasional single-writer collections. All in hardback, for there were few paperbacks then.

Some titles remained in the mind, began to reappear as anthologies became more frequent. A particular favourite was PRINCE BORGIA'S MASS. Another was THE TENANT. A third THE EXTRA PASSENGER. Their author was a man named August Derleth.

In the pulp magazines, sandwiched among advertisements for trusses and cures for acne, it was difficult to take even the best macabre fiction seriously. Given the dignity of hard-covers and graceful type these writers began to emerge as serious literary figures, even in the small, specialised niche they had chosen.

Years passed but the name of August Derleth continued to emerge in a variety of spheres; as editor; as anthologist; as the champion of Lovecraft. I also became enamoured of an excellent writer of ghost stories, whose delicate-hued narratives had something in them of Algernon Blackwood and Lord Dunsany (whom I knew and met many times as a journalist).

The ghost tales were written by a man named Stephen Grendon and again it was a long time before I learned that he and August Derleth were the same person. I discovered Arkham House in the first two or three years of the war when rare copies found their way to British shores; and when serving aboard a motor torpedo boat engaged in fighting German E-boats in the Channel during some of the most bitter winters of the war, I found off-duty consolation in the philosophy of Thoreau and his remembered tranquility of Walden Pond.

Again, there was a connection with Derleth; for I discovered he was an essayist, a fine nature writer, a biographer of Thoreau and he himself had often walked the shores of Walden Pond. Peace came, more years went by but still Derleth was a name in the background and gradually he began to permeate my consciousness in many different fields.

I pursued a career in journalism, became a newspaper editor, collected books, travelled and amassed a collection of historic films. When I was struggling to establish myself as a professional writer of novels, non-fiction studies and macabre stories nearly two decades ago his name again came before me on the fly-leaf of a book. He was an author and a publisher, was he not? But it was not until some time later that, on impulse, I wrote to him.

He replied in most cordial terms, asking to see my work. Some of my tales had already seen publication in Pan Books and I was astonished to learn that he had already heard of me. His encouragement, long and enjoyable letters and his patronage when he offered to publish my first American hardback under the imprint of his famous Arkham House, formed one of the warmest and most delightful strands of my writing life.



Unfortunate indeed that our correspondence was to last only five or six years, for his chats on paper, in which he was incredibly frank about his financial and other difficulties, were a constant example to me of honesty and courage in the face of great odds which bolstered my own resolution in times of discouragement and financial difficulty.

I have already paid public tribute to August on both sides of the Atlantic in my own non-fiction studies, so I would prefer to paint a more intimate picture of a good-humoured, generous and loveable human being in these random recollections. I am on record as saying he was a Renaissance man. This was literally true and his huge appetite for literature and life kept him at his desk under an incredible work-load that would have consumed lesser men, for decade after decade.

A great deal of his work was slipshod and careless, of course; what of that? He wrote too much, turning out nearly 200 books as well as thousands of pieces of journalism. Agreed. But at his best he could write beautifully, and much of his work will last. Surely his ghost story MR GEORGE is one of the finest things of its kind in the language.

He was in turn poet, essayist, pasticheur of Sherlock Holmes in his famous SOLAR PONS series; broadcaster; Hollywood script-writer; journalist; newspaper columnist; macabre writer, both in the novel and the shorter form; champion of Lovecraft; publisher and founder of the world's finest macabre imprint, ARKHAM HOUSE; regional novelist with massive historical sagas like WIND OVER WISCONSIN; book column editor; anthologist; nature writer; great walker and tireless collector of comic strips, of which he had possibly the world's largest collection; collector of morels, a delicacy in the mushroom line in his search for which he tramped miles through his beloved Wisconsin woods.

He was humorous; incredibly generous, often paying one for work which would not see print for literally years. He was the last of the all-round litterateurs; the complete man of letters, as he often proclaimed himself. He had a huge zest for life; loved wisely and unwisely; was himself greatly loved. A man of enormous physique and enormous appetite, both for food and the good things of this life, his fall was like that of a giant oak.

I had only recently received a letter from him in hospital one beautiful summer morning in 1971 and was reading it at breakfast when I was called to the phone at 8.30 a.m. It was my old friend Richard Davis and the news he imparted was like a physical blow. Certainly the small literary world which embraces the macabre and the fantastic was shaken to its foundations. Yet not one English daily or evening newspaper saw fit to chronicle his death.

Like Lovecraft he passed almost unnoticed except for the gigantic ripples in the small, rather esoteric world he had chosen to make his own. So celebrated a writer as Sinclair Lewis had once in public proclaimed a great future for the young Wisconsin writer; perhaps he did August a disservice, for ever after he drew on the quotation and basked in the kudos it had brought him.

Understandable, perhaps, yet the rainbow he sought somehow always eluded him; year after year he toiled on, sometimes working against mountainous debts, supporting his family of two small children and his aged mother; his home; the publishing house he had founded; and still finding himself able to make the generous gestures toward friends and struggling writers who would perhaps never have found publication at all except within the covers of The Arkham Sampler, the small magazine issued as a corollary to the Arkham House imprint.

Yet he was not a tragic figure; he enormously enjoyed his life and the literary acclaim he found inside and outside his home state, and by any standards his was a gigantic achievement in so many fields. Better, perhaps, to have specialized more; to have written less; and published fewer poor writers. Yet he could not have done other than he did; for he was August Derleth, a proud, generous, kindly man, whom I shall always be glad to have known, even through the medium of the many lengthy and sometimes hilarious letters we exchanged.

It was true, though, that August did care about the neglect of his more serious work as an important regional novelist and he greatly regretted, as he often told me, that such books as EVENING IN SPRING, RESTLESS IS THE RIVER and SHIELD OF THE VALIANT had never been published in England or Europe. Ironically, though, this will probably prove to be only a matter of time.

His Solar Pons stories have been widely paperbacked in America and in addition to the two-volume hardback edition being issued by Arkham House -- (I little thought in 1935 as a small child that 40 years later I would spend some eight months editing and revising the entire Canon for Arkham) -- plans are now afoot to publish the tales in England.

I have myself so far written some four volumes of Solar Pons stories, following August's original model, and this has been one of the most pleasing tributes I could have paid to his memory and to the long and fruitful collaboration I have enjoyed with Arkham and its Editor, James Turner.

Volumes of anthologies edited or presented by August are now in print on a world scale; in hardback from such distinguished English publishers as Gollencz; and in paperback from such diverse imprints as New English Library, Panther and Mayflower. His reputation can only increase and appreciate as the years go by while Arkham House itself in its prosperous and steady continuance is a living memorial to his courage and his life-work.

Let me end by selecting a few typical extracts from his letters -- (and I hope one day that perhaps Arkham might issue a selection chosen from the thirty-odd years that August was in charge).

In 1967 he wrote, "I am sorry, though, that my work in England seems to be limited to entertainment -- none of my serious work has been published over there, and that is a matter of great regret because, for one thing, it is after all my best, and, for another, I've always been a profound Anglophile."

And in the same letter, "I suppose that MR GEORGE is one of my better tales of the macabre. I am also rather fond of MRS MANIFOLD, LONESOME PLACES, A ROOM IN A HOUSE and THE PANELLED ROOM... Like yourself, I admire the work of Robert Aickman and Roald Dahl. Dahl is rather more in a class with John Collier, while Aickman seems to me more in the tradition of M.R. James and Wakefield."

On a postcard the same year, "I've been off teaching for a fortnight and now face all the accumulated mail -- and that never comes in small amounts, often averaging 50 letters a day."

Again, a wistful note is struck a little later, in August, 1967, "It is gratifying to know that my paperbacks are well displayed and selling well over there. But I confess I would be more gratified at publication of such a book as WALDEN WEST, which is a considerably more solid creative achievement."

On a writer "drying up". "But dry periods come to us all, really. I know many writers, old and young, and these periods are as natural as anything in a creative individual's life. They are difficult for one-type writers, but of little moment in the case of a more versatile writer. They've never really troubled me, and I mention the instance in 'Lovecraft as Mentor' solely because it was so unusual in my experience. It is less so now, of course, since I've lived a much longer time -- 30 years longer, to be exact."

On the macabre, "I suppose it is inevitable that I should be identified primarily as a writer in the domain of the macabre, though only a quarter of my work (including detective fiction) could be so classified, and I look upon that writing as rather an entertainment..."

On publishing, "I'm putting up a warehouse this coming year (1969), probably in the summer; that will slow up my book production a little, but no matter... I have a jr. novel to do directly I finish the revision of the biographical memoir -- for it is that of HPL, rather than a biography, which I wouldn't undertake until all the Lovecraft letters have been brought out".

"Yes, of course, I have a master file of the Arkham House books. I suspect there must now be about 100 of them. But warehouse or not, I do expect to do more selective publishing beginning in a few years; I publish too many slow-moving books, and that leaves me perpetually running a hand-to-mouth business, with just enough money for the bills and none with which to enjoy myself; and, since I'll turn 60 2/24 (1969) I do feel I'd better set up a savings account, instead of just a checking account, so that I won't be caught disastrously short in the event of an economic recession of major proportions, which, in these inflationary times, is not an improbability, no matter how much our respective governments fancy they've hedged against that possibility".

On moving house, "I should hate to think I might have to do it some day - what with my many thousands of books, to say nothing of the stock of Arkham House - yet this latter will have to be moved this summer when my new warehouse is up, out of the basement and one gable room of this spacious house, and into the new quarters for a more efficient operation. That is a prospect I view with horror, esp. since I must...prepare two books for the printer, teach two weeks, and then go into hospital early in August (1969) - my gall bladder must be removed, they tell me".

On his family, "Yes, thank you, the children are well. April Rose will be 15 August 9, and Walden 13 August 22. April already helps with Arkham House, entering books so that I can pay royalties when they fall due, without delay... My major work, -i.e., that I want most to do, must now wait upon my return from hospital".

On his illness, (3rd November, 1969). "Yes, my silence has been due to illness. I am just back from hospital - 87 days on my back, 4 operations, pneumonia, peritonitis, pleuritis, a collapsed and punctured lung, hepatitis - well, you name it. Had I been a heavy smoker or drinker, I'd have been planted by now; being neither, and keeping myself in good condition saved me. One dr. described me to another as 'a tough old bastard' which I took as a compliment. For a month my condition was critical, but now I'm back at the old stand - v. weak, learning to walk... I face 500 letters to answer".

One could go on quoting. Several things stand out from all this. Great physical courage; lion-heartedness in adversity; good humour; optimism; generosity and probity in business dealings. Any one of these things would outweigh the debit side of most men.

Before I forget I should add a few more things to the list of his achievements; devoted father and family man; the writing of children's books; the filming of his works for TV and the cinema; a new venture, the recording of his own poems, read by himself; his prolific lecturing stint at universities in Wisconsin, where he conducted seminars; walking; swimming; the writing of detective stories, which included the Judge Peck series; chess; and the collecting of a library of over 12,000 volumes, with special emphasis on fantasy and the macabre, of course.

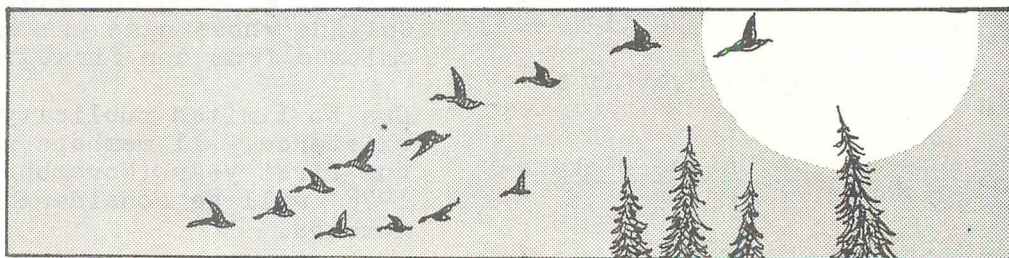
Among his many honours were the award of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1938 and recognition from a large number of universities and organisations followed. He received the Apostolic Blessing of Pope John for his Wisconsin Books series in 1959.

In my mind's eye I still see him, a kindly and gigantic figure, striding along beside the shore of Walden Pond or giving up the whole of May every year, wandering the woods in search of his beloved morels. And his cheerful salutation, at the end of his letters, in which one seemed almost to hear the voice; All best, always. Cordially yours.

These are cliché's, I know, but true just the same. We shall not see his like again. He will be missed through the years, not only by me to whom he was a friend and an encourager, but by countless thousands whom he had helped by his generosity, his example, his courage and his talent. All best, always, August.

This article, written especially for the August Derleth Society Newsletter by Mr. Copper, is copyrighted 1977 by Basil Copper and may not be reproduced without permission of the author.

Illustrations are by Bill Hartwig



SOURCES

Works of August Derleth mentioned in Mr. Copper's article may be located as follows:

Short stories of the macabre

From Mr. George and Other Odd Persons Arkham House, 1963. *

"Mr. George," pp. 3-34.

"Mrs. Manifold," pp. 225-239.

"The Extra Passenger," pp. 152-162.

"The Extra Passenger," may also be found in The Night Side, August Derleth, Editor, Rinehart & Co., N.Y., 1947. pp. 59-68. OP

From Lonesome Places, Arkham House, 1962. OP

"The Lonesome Place," pp. 3-12.

"A Room In A House," pp. 68-79.

From Someone In The Dark, Arkham House, 1941. OP

"The Panelled Room," pp. 228-244.

From Not Long For This World, Arkham House, 1948. OP

"Prince Borgia's Mess," pp. ?

"The Tenant," pp. ?

Not Long For This World was also published by Ballantine Books, N.Y. 1961.

The Solar Pons Series

In RE: Sherlock Holmes - The Adventures of Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, 1945. OP

The Memoirs of Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, 1951. OP

Three Problems For Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, 1952. OP

The Return Of Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, 1958. OP

The Reminiscences Of Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, 1961. OP

The Casebook Of Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, ? OP

Mr. Fairlie's Final Journey, Mycroft & Moran, 1968. *

A Praed Street Dossier, Mycroft & Moran, 1968. OP

The Adventure Of The Unique Dickensians, Mycroft & Moran, ? OP

The Chronicles Of Solar Pons, Mycroft & Moran, 1973. *

This latter work contains "The Adventure of the Unique Dickensians."

Awaiting publication: The Solar Pons Omnibus.

The Solar Pons series has also been published by Pinnacle Books, 275 Madison Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10016

Book Length Works

Walden West, Duell, Sloan & Pearce, N.Y., 1961. OP

_____, Stanton & Lee, Sauk City, Wisc. *

Evening In Spring, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1941. OP

_____, Stanton & Lee, Sauk City, Wisc., *

Restless Is The River, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1939.

_____, Stanton & Lee, Sauk City, Wisc. *

The Shield Of The Valiant, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1945.

_____, Stanton & Lee, Sauk City, Wisc. *

OP - Out of Print

* - available

macabre works and Solar Pons books from Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisc. 53583.

other works from, Stanton & Lee, Sauk City, Wisc., 53583.

NEW SOCIETY MEMBERS

Robert S. Dennison	Patricia C. Anderson
James Foster	Mrs. Cecil Burleigh
John Martens	Mrs. Orilla Blackshear
Lisa Mulcahy	William A. Gromko
Peter J. Relton	Mrs. K.E. Neumann
Malcolm Ferguson	Robert K. Searles
Steve Misovich	Harry O. Morris Jr.

Special mention and apologies to Tom Collins whose name was accidentally omitted from our first list. Sorry Tom.

Due to limited publicity of the Society's existence, all members who join during our first year (November 1977 to October 1978) will be considered as charter members.

DIOGENES, SHELVE YOUR LANTERN!

That August Derleth was an extraordinary person is hardly an arguable point among members of this Society, but did you know that: On May 21, 1958 August Derleth wrote a book review for the Capitol (Wisc) Times? Not a very extraordinary event, you may argue. But wait, there's more to come.

The book review in question was written by Derleth on the occasion of the publication of one of his own books; he reviewed The House On The Mound.

A bit irregular, perhaps, but so what?

Ready!

He panned it! Yes, August Derleth said some very unkind things about his own book!

Derleth wrote: "THE HOUSE ON THE MOUND ...might serve as an object lesson for would-be writers in how not to write a novel and it demonstrates depressingly - now that I see it in print - how faithful adherence to history and biography, when the author elects to use real people under their own names in his work, can stultify his imagination and such fictive skill as he may possess. In my considered judgement (I have never been particularly noted for false modesty), THE HOUSE ON THE MOUND emerges as a dull and rather tiresome novel." *

Charles A. Pearce, of Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Derleth's astounded publishers, countered with the following: "...an engrossing major work by one of America's most important and versatile writers". *

Mr. Pearce added: "This is the first time we have known an author to bludgeon his own work. Fortunately, he did it with a blunt and dull instrument and, for the most part, he missed his aim, and he did have the saving sense to call his review a 'Minority Report'. *

Who was right, publisher or author? Read the book and decide for yourself. Share your opinions with the newsletter and we'll publish the results of this "members poll" in a future Newsletter.

Whatever the outcome of our poll, August Derleth certainly has to be classified as "one of a kind".

*From the Capital Times, Madison, Wisc. May 21, 1958. Permission to reprint granted by Elliott Maraniss, Exec. Editor

TAVERN BILL

by
Steve Eng

Time-feast:

The ghouls are all gobbling the years,

Space-beast

Is drinking Eternity's tears -

At least

The Death Angel pays for our beers.

"Tavern Bill" is copyrighted by Steve Eng, Mr. Eng has also appeared in the Arkhem Collector - see issue #9, p. 264. "May Eve"

RECOMMENDED READING

This issue we are pleased to recommend four works to our members, two old, two new.

EVENING IN SPRING has been recalled by August Derleth as one of his favorite works. He once stated that it was almost completely autobiographical.

Perhaps the subject of this work may prove a bit too sentimental for some reader's tastes, but for those who can recall the bitter-sweet memories of teenage romance, and how very important it all seemed then, EVENING IN SPRING is so faithful a reproduction of the pangs of first love that it almost hurts to read it. It is a sensitive work; a fine example of Derleth's versatility as a writer.

100 BOOKS BY AUGUST DERLETH, originally published by Arkhem House, is available in a paperbound reprint from Stanton & Lee and well worth the modest price of \$3.00. It is an invaluable reference for Derleth fans since it contains a list of not only his first one hundred and two works with detailed publishing histories, but a list of his works filmed for television, a list of magazines and periodicals in which his writings have appeared, information on recordings, lectures, and appraisals of August Derleth's writing.

The information in 100BOOKS is, of course, incomplete since August Derleth went on to write many more books, and achieved numerous other literary accomplishments. Perhaps the members of the August Derleth Society would be interested in updating the information in this work? One place

we might begin is with the list of August Derleth stories filmed for television. Does anyone have an up-to-date list?

New releases from Arkham House include, AND AFTERWARD, THE DARK by Basil Copper, and IN MAYAN SPLENDOR by Frank B. Long. Both are well worth the reader's investment of a few hard-earned dollars.

Mr. Copper continues to exercise his mastery of plot and mood as he presents five deadly tales for the reader's enjoyment. "Dust to Dust" is a delicious example of the author's abilities. The plot, handled by a lesser writer, would come off as nothing; presented with Mr. Copper's usual mastery and skill, it commands the reader's attention from mundane beginning to awful and inevitable end. Something about the last story in this collection, "The Flabby Men," recalls the short stories of William Hope Hodgson, nor does Mr. Copper's work suffer from the comparison.

IN MAYAN SPLENDOR is a collection of Frank B. Long's early poems. This slim volume should provide fans of Mr. Long with moments of pleasant reminiscence. The title poem "In Mayan Splendor," is worth the price of the book.

MEMBERS' CORNER

We are indebted to Emmarie T. Blum for sharing a very personal moment with us.

"It was May, 1955, and it was my first visit back to my home in Sauk City, Wisconsin after leaving the cloister a short two months before. Uppermost in my mind was to visit Augie in his home, Place of Hawks. My cousin, George J. Marx, one of Augie's close friends, took me there. I was ushered into Augie's study on the second floor, where he was seated at his circular desk. His first action typified his sense of humor. Rising from his chair, he beckoned me to come close, then ran his fingers through my still wavy red hair and said: 'Why, it's real after being hidden under a veil all these years.'"

"What better way to break the uncomfortable tension clinging to an ex-nun when meeting a friend of years gone by. I shall always remember Augie as a person with whom I could feel comfortable."

EDITORIAL

Since Basil Copper's fine article represents the focus of this Newsletter, it is appropriate that we use it as a starting point for editorial comment.

Mr. Copper provides several quotations from August Derleth's letters which indicate those works rated highest by Derleth himself.

It was while reading one of these books, WALDEN WEST, that the necessity for forming an August Derleth Society became obvious. Here was a writer of major stature deserving of the highest position among American men of letters. To suggest that Derleth's overall work was uneven and only occasionally reached this level of excellence is, to my mind, beside the point. He and no one else wrote WALDEN WEST. Had John Steinbeck never written another book, his GRAPES OF WRATH is a work any writer would sell his soul to equal. Anyone who reaches this level even once in a lifetime can let the sour grapes bounce off his hide for the rest of his days.

Steinbeck had the ability to make his characters live and often to hold them up as a mirror in which we could see our own reflections, with all the humor, sadness, goodness and stupidity (to name just a few of many human qualities) that this action suggests. It was something of this quality that I found in WALDEN WEST. A rare talent, the ability to write about ordinary human beings with feeling and understanding.

I suspect that August Derleth knew his subject so well because he cared about people, because he took the time to listen and to watch the people and the world around him. We could all take a lesson from this. Stop for a moment on our headlong rush through life - look around for a moment, and listen.

For the record, the second issue of the August Derleth Society Newsletter is released February, 1978. Membership dues are \$1.00 per year. Please make checks payable to: RICHARD H. FAWCETT
61 TEECOMWAS DRIVE
UNCASVILLE, CT. 06382

If you own letters written by August Derleth that would be of interest to Society members, we would appreciate photocopies of same. The editor will pay for xeroxing, but please write in advance. Our funds are limited.