



Songs of a Dead Dreamer

Thomas Ligotti

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Songs of a Dreamer was Thomas Ligotti's first collection of supernatural horror stories. When originally published in 1985 by Harry Morris's Silver Scarab Press, the book was hardly noticed. In 1989, an expanded version appeared that garnered accolades from several quarters. Writing in the Washington Post, the celebrated science fiction and fantasy author Michael Swanwick extolled: "Put this volume on the shelf right between H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe. Where it belongs."

The revisions in the present volume of *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* have been calculated to make its stories into enhanced incarnations of the originals. This edition is and will remain definitive.

For those already familiar with the stories in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, an invitation is extended to return to them in their ultimate state. For those new to the collection, it is submitted to engage them with some of the most extraordinary tales of their kind. In either case, this publication of *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* offers evidence for why Ligotti has been judged to be among the most important authors in the history of supernatural horror.

Songs of a Dead Dreamer Details

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Author : Thomas Ligotti

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From Reader Review Songs of a Dead Dreamer for online ebook

Julianne (Outlandish Lit) says

This is by far one of the best collections of supernatural horror that I've ever read. At first I was a little off put by Ligotti's flowery often-gothic language, but I got used to him playing with styles and using it to his advantage in exploring old horror tropes with new breaths of imagination. I got a lot of The King in Yellow vibes in that a frequent topic was whether or not madness was actual insanity or knowledge of a different plane of existence. Ligotti's stories are so original, that it was hard to guess where their dark paths were leading. **Very creepy, very otherworldly.** Definitely the kind of horror that I'm into. I'd highly recommend it to any horror fan who's tired of reading contemporary haunted house kinds of stories.

I read these out of order over a long period of time (shortest first, because I read them aloud over a campfire while camping in the summer). When I started reading them again from the beginning, I learned that the first story (The Frolic) about a criminal psychologist and his patient packs a huge, creepy punch. **It's not gory, but it's not for the faint-hearted.** Prepare to be all SORTS of startled.

FAVORITE STORIES: Vastarien, The Music of the Moon, Drink to Me Only With Labyrinthine Eyes, The Frolic

Full review: Outlandish Lit - 3 Startling Short Story Collections

Nate says

Creepy as fuck and wonderfully written. Ligotti's stuff is extremely refreshing, as he's less about scares and gross-outs and more about instilling a sense of existential dread. It took me forever to get through these stories because I couldn't get too far into the collection without starting to feel unsettled as hell (and also because I'm not used to prose as challenging and rich as this.) *Dream of a Manikin* has to be one of the most disturbing and macabre stories I've ever read, it was like I could feel my brain chemistry being fucked with and poisoned as I read it. I recommend Ligotti for those looking for a change of pace from the usual horror stories, but be prepared for, uh, unorthodox content and style.

Anthony Vacca says

Reminiscent of the music of Swans, in that much of its power is realized through its relentless adherence to the repetition of themes and imagery, this claustrophobic collection of horror stories from odd duck Thomas Ligotti features twenty tales that strive to demonstrate a view of reality as an absurd and purposeless existence, one in which the individual's autonomy is no more than the illusion of life that a marionette may enjoy at the end of its strings. No enlightenment awaits Liogtti's procession of anonymous narrators and improbably named protagonists as each encounters an aspect of unreality before the incomprehensible forces at play swipes them aside like a discarded toy. Naturally, puppets and manikins populate the majority of these stories, where they act as heralds of the imminent loss of life or sanity. Naturally, asylums abound as well, as do unknown towns with uncanny festivities, in which everyone reveals themselves to be more details in the deception that is objectivity. Though no mythos emerges over the course of these stories (such as the

tenuous one celebrated in the works of Lovecraft, the author that Ligotti is most often favorably compared to), there is a singular vision at work in every well-worded and carefully placed sentence on the page. Lucky for the reader that Ligotti even includes two essays barely veiled as short stories, both of which expound on his philosophy and how horror fiction best illustrates it.

Maurizio Manco says

"Mentre noi urliamo e periamo la Storia si umetta il dito e volta pagina." (p. 183)

"Se la vita non è un sogno allora nulla in essa ha senso poiché in quanto realtà la vita non è che un supremo fallimento." (p. 184)

"Quando dolore e piacere formano una corrotta alleanza contro di noi, il paradiso e l'inferno non sono che semplici dipartimenti della stessa mostruosa burocrazia." (p. 185)

Benjamin Uminsky says

SONGS OF A DEAD DREAMER (SoaDD) is now my second Ligotti short story collection and while I enjoyed it immensely, I feel as though GRIMSCRIBE (his later collection) is a bit stronger, story for story. I also think overall, Grimscribe's brightest embers (such as Harlequin, Shadow, etc...) smoldered a bit brighter than some of the best stories in SoaDD... but really... SoaDD was intensely enjoyable.

Some key themes, explored by Ligotti, are of course directly related to the void regions of unreality. This type of theme is really played out in one of my favorites stories from this collection, "Vasterien". The imagery that Ligotti is able to paint for us is a deeply disturbing portrait of the abyss. I understand that the artist who did the front cover for SoaDD (Aeron Alfey) was inspired by the imagery in "Vasterien". The story in upon itself is Lovecraftian, in that we have a loner character who travels to the void in his dreams and is ultimately compelled by those dreams to search after an esoteric means (a recondite text) to permanently get to this dark piece of unreality.

"Dream of a Manikin" is another outstanding piece in which the theme of dark dreaming is again explored by Ligotti. In this case, Ligotti further leads the reader down the rabbit hole by presenting the possibility in the reader's mind that perhaps our reality is nothing more than an unreality and the unreality of a manikin's dreaming is the very source of our own reality/consciousness... absolutely bizarre but distressing!!

And without doing a summary of every single one of my favorite stories from this collection, a few thoughts on this last one... "Dr. Locrian's Asylum". Naturally, as many of Ligotti's stories deal with the intermingling of reality and unreality... and very much the blurring of the lines... in this sinister tale, we have a case of unreality attempting to invade and ultimately corrupt reality as we know it. Ligotti delivers us a wonderfully blighted asylum, in which the former director was not actually trying to cure madness but create it and spread it to the rest of the world. In this story, it is through the chaotic impulses of lunacy (and not dreaming) that our own reality is subsumed by something from the void. Quite the delightful piece...

Ligotti is such a wonderful writer who has been doing things with prose and thematic exploration that I have not seen many of his peers be able to do or even attempt. While this brand of horror may not "scare"

the reader on an emotional level nor through common genre plot devices... Ligotti's horror and madness strikes the reader in a deeply intellectual fashion, ultimately menacing the reader in its ability to challenge the basic fundamentals of our own understanding of reality as it exists (or doesn't exist).

Highly recommended!!

J.M. says

Because it's out-of-print (although a new edition, combined with *Grimscribe: His Lives and Works*, is due out in October), I paid \$75 to own a copy of this-- the most I've ever spent for a book. Was it worth it? Hell yes. Did the price deter me from marking it up? Hell no; I've dog-eared and underlined like a maniac. My copy must have spent time incarcerated in a library, as it's laminated, stamped and tagged, making it look like I stole it. I like that. Now, to begin my long review of the twenty relentlessly bleak stories contained within: I'm not going to merely cite favorites or tediously attempt to argue which are better or worse than the others. I will pull a single more-or-less representative sentence out, and offer a capsule review for each of them. Right this way...

The Frolic-- "Less fathomable are his memories of a moonlit corridor where mirrors scream and laugh, dark peaks of some kind that won't remain still, a stairway that's 'broken' in a very strange way..."

The collection starts off, appropriately, with an aggressively unsettling story about a prison psychiatrist and a singular 'patient' of his. It is straightforward and exploits one of humanity's most ancient and powerful fears. Its position, and its potency, made me think of someone who starts a fight by punching you in the throat.

Les Fleurs-- "Some stars, coloured from the most spectral part of the spectrum, blossom in the high darkness."

The first in which the horror is off-stage, more implied than shown, and for that reason all the more horrifying. It's a story in diary form, with a very dark artist/sculptor narrating a romantic misadventure, with a certain fellowship of murderers playing a supporting role.

Alice's Last Adventure-- "Since when does reading a story constitute an incantation calling up its imagery before the body's eyes and not the mind's?"

The gloom thickens. This one features an aging, alcoholic children's author, haunted by visions seemingly culled from her own works. Introduces a favorite theme of Ligotti's, that of false and/or fractured identities, masks in the mirror.

Dream of a Mannikin-- "Love and terror are the true realities, whatever the unknowable mechanics are that turn their wheels, and our own."

Now we're getting more of that cosmic, metaphysical horror, dreams-within-dreams which then corrupt or poison waking life. It has another psychiatrist character seemingly being pranked by his spouse, all to prove her own exotic pet theories. As you might surmise from the title, a lot of the horror element in this one hinges on the blank, uncanny expressions of dolls or mannikins. Ever see a doll's face twitch in the dark?

The Chymist-- "It's fascinating, you know, how an obsolete madness is sometimes adopted and stylized in

an attempt to ghoulishly preserve it."

This, to me, is the first truly terrifying story in the collection. I don't want to give anything away that might ruin the pay-off for someone else, so let's just say that at least the harmful drugs we all know about are simply destructive instead of nightmarishly *creative*.

Drink to Me Only with Labyrinthine Eyes-- "Death is the consummation of mortality and-- to let out a big secret-- only heightens mortal susceptibilities."

Lyrical, chilling, the story of a freakishly talented hypnotist and his assistant, giving the crowd what it wants: "...thrill the daylights out of them."

Eyes of the Lynx-- "I can take you places where the stories of tortuous romance and the storms never end."

Another one that slowly builds steam for a pay-off at the climax. For a while this little S/m-themed tale might seem like just a tableau of the weird, something Chuck Palahniuk might write, if he were even more twisted, but it nevertheless turns into something with quietly uncanny horror in its heart.

Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story-- "Come home to a pain so great that it is bliss itself."

I love this story, truly. It was the first Ligotti I was exposed to, when I listened to Poe's Children: The New Horror, and it was by far the best of that collection. Whether you have ambitions of writing supernatural fiction or just enjoy reading it, this is absolutely essential. In the first part he telegraphs what he's doing, misdirects you with an analysis and examples of three different styles employed by horror writers, then... well, read it yourself.

The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe-- "The colors bled into the fog and were sopped up as if by a horrible gauze which drank the blood of rainbows."

Alright, so in "Alice's Last Adventure" we had Halloween make an appearance, while this one seems to be a legitimate (and successful) attempt to write a scary Christmas story. As if Christmas weren't stressful enough. It's a ghost story, too, nothing like Dickens' but a lot like... well, a lot like Ligotti. It seems to center on a ghost that can absorb memories, absorb *you*. Need I say more?

The Lost Art of Twilight-- "I felt as if there were a chasm of infinite depth within me, a great abyss which needed to be filled-- flooded with oceans of blood."

I read Dracula, read a lot of Anne Rice's stuff, listened to The Passage and its sequel, and attempted to read (DNF) Salem's Lot, but this instantly became my favorite vampire story. Calling it that immediately destroys any chance I have of describing it as "original," but believe me, it is: what happens when a vampire's pregnant, and she gives birth soon after being destroyed? What happens to the half-breed child, the child between worlds? Here's one bleak answer.

The Troubles of Dr. Thoss-- "The dark-paned windows along either wall confused all time, bending dawns into twilights, suspending minutes in eternity."

Oh, man. Getting a little more Lovecrafty now. This reads, probably intentionally, like folklore, like the dark factual heart of myths and legends. Let's just say the good doctor cures someone of insomnia, just not in the way he expected to be cured.

Masquerade of a Dead Sword-- "Henceforth, all things will be in your eyes a distant play of shadows that fretfully strive to impersonate something real, ghosts that clamor to pass themselves as flesh, masks that desperately flit about to conceal the stillness of the void behind them-- henceforth, all things will be reduced in your eyes to their inconsequential essence."

From Lovecraft to Poe. This had so many disturbing lines, I was conflicted over which to highlight there. Suffice to say, it's about a true, cosmic, *sentient* madness. "There are eyes within our eyes," and for the sake of our own sanity we should all hope they are never opened.

Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech-- "Death is always the best thing, Mr. Veech, but who would have thought you could appreciate such a view?"

Possibly the most surreal piece, and that's saying something. This one recalls that whole "uncanny valley" idea which we could just as easily apply to dolls and puppets as to androids. Cheev, aka Mr. Veech, approaches Dr. Voke for help with a romantic problem, and takes regrettably little issue with the form its solution takes. This one is suitably creepy, but also has touches of a black, gallows humor in it, too.

Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror-- "And, ultimately, we must admit it: horror is more real than we are."

The second set of stories concludes with this treatise, to which I'd also previously been exposed, at least in part, by reading *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. It's hard to argue with "Professor Nobody," and there are few seminars out there more relevant than this little one. Other authors may be praised for their acumen in describing human beings, fleshing out characters, but no one can beat Ligotti when it comes to describing the human condition, the nature of this woeful so-called reality we find ourselves inhabiting.

Dr. Locrian's Asylum-- "The result was something as pathetic as a puppet and as magnificent as the stars, something at once dead and never dying, a thing utterly without destiny and thus imperishable, possessing that abysmal absence of mind, that infinite vacuity, which is the essence of all that is immortal."

Prompt: what if the director of a sanatorium, instead of trying to cure his patients, willfully attempted to drive them even more insane? To drive them *beyond* insanity? Another ghost story, featuring the ghosts of madmen, with their eyes reflecting the perfect tranquility of the abyss, this one can haunt you... It wants to...

The Sect of the Idiot-- "Even the infinite nights above the great roofs of the town seemed merely the uppermost level of an earthbound estate, at most a musty old attic in which the stars were useless heirlooms and the moon a dusty trunk of dreams."

Evidently this was meant as an elaboration on or an extension to Lovecraft's work, another "cautionary tale" about knowledge too horrible to share space with sanity in your mind. Quite an effective one, too, if you ask me.

The Greater Festival of Masks-- "Perhaps a similar need could explain why the buildings in this district exhibit so many pointless embellishments: doors which are elaborately decorated yet will not budge in their frames; massive shutters covering blank walls behind them; enticing balconies, well-railed and promising in their views, but without any means of entrance; stairways that enter dark niches... and a dead end."

So if you've ever read *House of Leaves* (and if you haven't, what are you waiting for?!) you'll understand just how disturbing *impossible architecture* can be. Our minds seek the rational; they crave it. While this story

isn't exactly about that, it certainly exploits it. The story is more about slippery identity again, blank faces trying to grow features, but what stuck with me were these touches of "wrong" geometry, false notes, where reality doesn't come together neatly at the edges.

The Music of the Moon-- "Soon there was no space remaining for silence, or perhaps music and silence became confused, indistinguishable from each other, as colors merge into whiteness."

In chess, when the center of the board is locked up, you attack on the flanks. That's what this story seemed to be: an assault from a different direction. If the previous stories weren't doing it for you, this one might. It features unearthly music as a kind of toxin, something weaponized, something that can imprison you... permanently.

The Journal of J. P. Drapeau-- "It was those stars, I knew that now: certain of them had been promised specific parts of my body; in the darkest hours of the night, when one is unusually sensitive to such things, I could-- and still can, though just barely-- feel the force of these stars tugging away at various points, eager for the moment of my death when each of them might carry off that part of me which is theirs by right."

Great, gothic, diary-form ruminations and weirdness. Answers the call (put forth in the initial, "external" part of the story) for a writer profoundly detached from typical human experience. Why not spend some time in his head?

Vastarien-- "For he dreamed of strange volumes that turned away from all earthly light to become lost in their own nightmares, pages that preached a nocturnal salvation, a liturgy of shadows, catechism of phantoms."

I don't think I'm wrong to call this one autobiographical, to an extent. It seems to reflect Ligotti's own desire for truly weird literature, something absolutely beyond convention, a book too horrifyingly strange to read without emerging insane. And that's essentially the story-- the main character discovers a book which at first mirrors his most vividly bizarre dreams, then spawns them, then finally confines him to them. Mad world...

Whew! Well it's been quite a ride, my lovelies-- my rarest book has earned my longest review. I hope you can find this at your local library... or wait until October, Halloween season, and pick yourself up a copy of the new edition. I dare you.

Glenn Russell says

This is the first published collection by contemporary American horror fiction writer Thomas Ligotti (born in 1953). To provide a sense of the richness of the author's style and plot development, here are my comments on one of my favorite tales from the collection - as convoluted and multifaceted as an intricate Chinese box puzzle, *Dream of a Manikin* features a psychoanalyst writing a letter to his psychoanalyst wife regarding one of his patients, a young lady by the name of Amy Locher, the same name as one of the dolls his wife had when she was a little girl. Also, the narrator lets his wife know that Amy told him directly that she, his wife, recommended him as a therapist.

The narrator conveys the details of their session: Amy, a loan processor for a bank, tells him about her

recurrent dream: how she works in a fashionable dress shop, has a complete biography as a dress shop employee and how she feels herself a slave to dressing and undressing the shop's manikins, manikins that become the focal point of her animus.

Sidebar: "Animus" is a term used in the psychotherapy developed by Carl Jung, animus representing the masculine inner personality of a woman. By this specific term and others cited in Ligotti's tale, it becomes clear both the narrator and his wife are Jungian analysts.

Amy tells the narrator/therapist how she is overwhelmed by anxiety when dressing the manikins and when she, as dress shop employee, returns to her apartment in the evening and has a dream where she retains her identity as manikin dresser and dreams her bedroom is transformed into a archaically furnished hall the size of a small theater. However, one of the walls of the theater is missing; instead, there is a star-filled blackness. In the supercharged silence, peering in the direction of this starry blackness, she senses an unseen demonic presence. Icy coldness envelops her and she grasps how she cannot look behind her - and something is definitely behind her!

However, no sooner does she become aware of this fact than she realizes she is, in fact, dreaming. With this heightened awareness, she now thinks of herself in the third person. And not only does she have this realization but the words "she is dreaming" becomes more pronounced and insistent, almost as if these three words were a legend written at the bottom of her dream, three words she hears repeated as if on an old phonograph record.

Then, all of a sudden, Amy's weird dreams becomes weirder: As if a flock of birds settling on a statue, all those repeated phrases "she is dreaming" settle on a phantom statue, a statue she can't see but she can certainly feel standing directly behind her. At this point, she wants to scream but she can't since the statue's firm right hand covers her mouth. Then, the statue's left arm stretches out and its left hand dangles some filthy rags, making the rags dance before her eyes. The statue speak, telling her "It's time to get dressed, little dolling."

Amy can only move her eyes; she looks away from the dancing rags and sees for the first time her room is filled with people dressed as dolls, their bodies collapsed and their mouths wide open. The people do not look as if they are still alive, not at all - some of them instantly become actual dolls while others occupy a stage between humanness and doll-ness.

With horror, Amy realizes her very own mouth is open wide and will not close. Also, at this very moment, she realizes she can turn around and look at the menacing statue behind her. And she does: in the dream Amy wakes up to her very real loan processor self in her very own bed. In a state of bloodcurdling shock and as an attempt to completely and totally break the spell of her nightmare, Amy turns around to look at the chalk white bedroom wall behind her. To her wide-awake astonishment, she sees the face of a female manikin, a face that very smoothly, very slowly, recedes back into the bedroom wall. Amy screams so loudly several of her apartment neighbors become alarmed.

The narrator notes how Amy's dream has much in common with his wife's own exploration of the occult and Jungian depth analysis. For example, he tells her how she is continually classifying extrasensory pockets of hidden realities as "little zones" or "cosmic static." Then, acknowledging how such occult studies are truly bizarre, he warns his wife she is taking the discipline and science of psychology too far.

Returning to his patient, the narrator relates Amy's reaction to her recurrent dream, how the dream is so powerful she begins to question her very own identity: Is she a loan processor or is she really an employee of

a dress shop? Or, some other identity? Amy's newly acquired sense of "unreality" is causing her serious emotional instability. The narrator then links Amy's emotional instability and sense of multiple selves with his wife's theories on this subject, especially her theory of a "bigger Self," that is, a cosmic transpersonal masochistic jumbo self that enjoys tormenting all its little splinter selves.

The narrator tells his wife he finds her theories and such ancient notions of life as nothing but a dream both boring and absurd, notions reminding him of that famous Chinese story of a man who has a dream where he is a butterfly and then wakes, prompting him to question if he is a man who dreamed he was a butterfly or if he is a butterfly who is now dreaming he is a man. Totally ridiculous, even silly.

After listening to her recurrent dream, their therapy session continues and Amy practically demands that he, the therapist, put her under hypnosis. The narrator acquiesces to her plea and what he discovers and relays to his wife is not pretty. Turns out, by his patient's testimony under hypnosis, he uncovers something extremely unsettling: Amy relays how there is a hidden, unseen presence in the background of her recurrent dream, a deep, undercover agent: the domineering boss of the clothing store, a boss who is played, as if within a theatrical play, by a certain lady psychoanalyst. And Amy gives the name of that lady psychoanalyst – his wife's name!

Now the narrator has substantial evidence that points to how perhaps Amy and his wife are in a conspiracy against him. Or, then again, perhaps his wife as psychotherapist is using Amy as an unknowing subject for her own psychological experiments with post-hypnotic states or questionable forays within the realm of dream therapy. The session ends and our narrator/psychiatrist prescribes a tranquilizer and then sets a time for Amy's next session. However, the following week, when Amy fails to show up for her scheduled appointment, the narrator conducts his own secret investigation of Amy's background, and to this end, drives to the address she provided as her home address.

Turns out, the address is not residential but commercial, specifically, the address is of a fashionable dress shop, a dress shop that has in the window, to the narrator's horror, a manikin with the same exact plaid dress Amy wore to her one and only session with him. And the eyes, oh, those manikin eyes, have an eerily familiar gleam. Alarmed beyond belief, thinking more conclusive evidence must be gathered, the narrator disguises his voice on a phone call to the store. Horror of horrors - the narrator discovers this fashion shop is exactly the very one where his wife purchases her cloths!

At this point the narrator feels a vague sense of paranoia coming on. In subsequent nights, he begins experiencing a series of horrible nightmares, a repetition of seeing the hallways of his own house lined with either people dressed up as dolls or dolls dressed up as people, all with that eerily familiar fixed gaze. Still in his dream, he returns their gaze and wonders if his own eyes are equally fixed. One of the doll-people beckons to him: "Become as we are, sweetie, Die into us." He wakes with a start and begins to scream.

The tale continues, the strangeness and eeriness is ratcheted up again and again. Was Amy a manikin all along? Is he a real human psychotherapist or only a sophisticated human-looking doll manipulated by a higher sadistic intelligence? And this is but one of eighteen penned by Thomas Ligotti in this fine collection. If you are a fan of Poe, Lovecraft and tales of horror, this book is for you.

Nicole Cushing says

I was tempted to give this book only four stars, because it's not quite as strong as later volumes like GRIMSCRIBE or NOCTURARY. But the fact remains that even when he's not at his best, Ligotti's work is head and shoulders above the vast majority of authors. Hence, five stars.

I believe the stories in this collection can be roughly grouped in three tiers.

At the top, I place "Vastarien" and "Masquerade of a Dead Sword"...two tales that can go toe-to-toe with anything else Ligotti's written.

In the middle, I place "Music of the Moon" and "Alice's Last Adventure". (The latter is particularly remarkable, as it manages to eke a solid chill out of an absurd premise involving a Ligotti-esque middle grade book series character, Preston...star of such fictional children's books as PRESTON AND THE STARVING SHADOWS).

Then we have everything else. The remaining stories in the collection are not, for the most part, outright failures, but I found their effectiveness to be relatively limited. In "The Frolic" Ligotti takes on serial killers. In "The Lost Art of Twilight", vampires. These stories are so very *different* from Ligotti's later work. They're fascinating, from a historical perspective, but I really didn't enjoy them as much as I did the stories I placed in my top and middle tiers. Several others stories take us into the more "Ligottiesque" realm of the hideously insubstantial / hideously mutable, but somehow didn't quite work 100% for me.

Anyway...I think this review gives you a sense of what to expect if you can get your hands on a copy of SONGS. Alas, I just looked at Amazon and saw that copies are selling for around \$200 (and no ebook, yet).

The good news is two of Ligotti's other two collections: GRIMSCRIBE and NOCTURARY *are* now available for Kindle (not sure about other formats, but probably worth checking out). My hope is that the inexpensive availability of the ebooks will enable folks to take a glance at Ligotti's stuff. IMO, if you've never read Ligotti, you're not seeing horror fiction at its best.

Chris_P says

Ligotti is a master with words. He creates the mood he wants and lets you gently sink into the black waters of his stories rather than force you down. His writing is captivating, while the very nature of his subjects is haunting. Clearly influenced by Lovecraft and Poe, he doesn't seem to merely imitate them but takes the best of them and reshapes it into a form of his own. But...

Apart from 2-3 of his stories, most of them were mediocre. Not bad, not exceptional. This tired me at some point, which led me to haste through a portion of the book and also made me feel like it's a shame. Ligotti clearly has the ability. So what could possibly be the problem? Maybe this wasn't the right time for me?

If I had to single out one story as my favorite, it would certainly be "Dream of a Manikin", an excellent

example of Ligotti's potential, which could well go side by side with the greats of the genre. "The lost art of Twilight" was also very good, although vampires rarely manage to impress me.

I'll definitely be checking out more of Ligotti in the future.

Bill Kerwin says

Ligotti was still learning his craft when this early anthology was published, and he had not yet perfected his cold, eccentric narrative voice or his talent for selecting only the most evocative and terrifying details.

Many of these stories are pretty conventional, with just a hint of extra nastiness and a whiff of the terrors of the abyss. "The Frolic" and "Alice's Last Adventure" are examples of such transitional stories.

Toward, the end of the book, however, Ligotti shows us some pieces in the mature style, such as "Dr. Locrian's Asylum" and "Vastarien," which are masterpieces of the genre.

Waffles says

Ligotti is an acquired taste - sort of like Joy Division. The first time I read him I didn't think he was any thing special. Now, he's my favorite horror writer. He exemplifies the Lovecraftian ideal of atmosphere first, everything else second. Imagine a horror story about how to write a horror story - "Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story". "Dream of a Mannikin, or the Third Person" is one of the first stories I read by him and had to reread several time before I got hooked. "Les Fleurs" and "The Troubles of Dr. Thoss" are also my favorites.

Jim says

I had seriously thought that all the great horror classics had already been written years ago, until I ran into Songs of a Dead Dreamer by Thomas Ligotti. This collection of horror stories has a strange expressionistic slant, as if all the places of which the author writes resembled the sets of Robert Wiene's **The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari**.

Although Ligotti is an American, the stories can almost be set anywhere at any time. There is not the fruitiness of Lovecraft's style -- though Ligotti has often been compared to him.

I look forward to reading other works by this superb writer.

Horace Derwent says

A Modern American Horror Classic

A Gem

Rodney says

What can I say about this book that hasn't already been said? Songs of a Dead Dreamer is a heady dose of atmospheric dread, characters grasping onto sanity as they traverse the line in and out of reality. Forces in their locales often push them toward uncertainty and paranoia. If Songs of A Dead Dreamer were music, it would be the intricately heavy stuff that takes a few listens to get through the layers for the reward.

Andy says

I gave "Teatro Grottesco" and "Grimscribe" both five stars and thought the former was the best short story collection I read all last year. I can't rate this one quite that highly, but it's still an excellent first collection.

There's a little of everything here, one can see Ligotti's dark philosophy throughout most of these stories, sometimes outright, sometimes around the edges. Having read two later collections however, some of these feel like "dry runs" of ideas that would be better-developed later. Ligotti's later stories show more variety of palette generally, especially in terms of setting and plot. These are often focused around freakish architecture, decaying urban landscapes, puppets and almost all are nocturnal affairs. *("...the streets were sinuous entrails winding through that dark body, and each edifice was the jutting bone of a skeleton hung with a thin musculature of shadows." ("Vastarien").)*

This collection taken on it's own is still great. There's a handful of masterpieces here like "Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story," "The Frolic," "The Troubles of Dr. Thoss" and perhaps "Dream of a Mannikin" and "Vastarien." But there's a number of stories that aren't overly individual like "Drink to Me Only with Labyrinthine Eyes" or "The Lost Art of Twilight." These have the Ligottian mood, but in other ways they don't stand out.

The tone here is consistently dour and bleak, quiet and muted. Some of the early stories feel like more realistic horror stories, but as the collection progresses they become increasingly dream-like. There's greatness in terms of base ideas lurking in all of these stories, I just think in some cases it's not conveyed as effectively as it might have been.

The Frolic (1982) - Oh my gods, this was really eerie, this is a very early Ligotti story of course, however one can see his philosophy within it to some extent already. A prison psychologist tells his wife about a child murderer who claims to be taking children for a "frolic."

Les Fleurs (1981) - This story is full of imagination, but I didn't pull a lot out of it, although it certainly has an other-worldly, almost "Erich Zann" flavor to it. A strange artist and member of a plant cult tries to make an uninitiated girl see what he does.

Alice's Last Adventure (1985) - A weird horror story, I didn't care too much for it, but it has some moments, a good autumnal atmosphere and theme on aging. An author of children's books finds herself increasingly haunted after the death of the man on which her books were based.

Dream of a Mannikin (1982) - I thought this was a prime Ligotti story, creepy and full of Ligotti's pessimistic philosophy as anything written later -- and this is from 1982! A psychiatrist writes to a fellow psychiatrist about a patient who she referred to him, who he believes she has infected with a strange philosophy to terrorize him.

The Chymist (1981) - This was another impressive story, also early 1981, but with a definite flavor of later Ligotti. It's implications are quite horrific. A chemist who has a strange philosophy about nature being a state of decay which works through all things, has some masochistic intentions for a prostitute he picks up at a bar.

Drink to Me Only with Labyrinthine Eyes (1982) - If I didn't know this was by Ligotti I doubt I would have attributed it to him. It's a good, decadent and climactic weird horror tale, but not overly individual. However it does have a certain misanthropy in it's philosophy that is familiar. A master hypnotist convinces a group of men at a party that his assistant is the most beautiful woman they've ever seen, but she's far from it.

Eye of the Lynx (1983) - This feels like a story Ligotti wasn't prepared to make fully comprehensible. Later stories are even stranger, yet far less vague in their implications. A man explores the cosmically strange house of a Gothic dominatrix.

Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story (1985) - A truly mind-bending story of impressive depth, which becomes increasingly eerie until it's shocking conclusion. An author attempts to explain the process of writing horror fiction, with an example taken from his own life, which turns into a confession of his evil alter ego.

The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe (1983) - A good, nostalgic Ligotti weird tale for Christmas! Who knew? It has a neat theme to it, even if it's not the longest most substantial story. A young man recalls a tale his aunt told on Christmas Eve, of a young man entering the house of a dead man, and finding his soul switched.

The Lost Art of Twilight (1986) - Not a bad vampire story, certainly it has a sort of florid, vivid language to it, but at base it's just that -- a vampire tale. A man who's mother turned into a vampire while he was in the womb and was delivered after she was staked through the heart prepares to meet his ancestors who killed her.

The Troubles of Dr. Thoss (1985) - This is certainly one of the best in the collection. It's got an interesting idea at it's base, some scary parts and a nice atmosphere. A hermit, insomniac artist becomes interested in a Dr Thoss who once lived in his seaside town, and was rumored to engage in the black arts.

Masquerade of a Dead Sword: A Tragedie (1986) - I understand some aren't too impressed with this story, but I enjoyed most of it, however it does take some time to get off the ground. It's a bit more philosophical than many other stories here, and feels like a very doom-laden Clark Ashton Smith story. A man who has been cursed to see the true soul of what animates the world is given a pair of spectacles which make reality bearable. But things go awry when he is asked to attend a masquerade to help steal a man's lover.

Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech (1983) - Another good story, this could easily appear in a later collection as a

somewhat minor episode. Still, this story packs a lot into its rather brief length. Mr Veech seeks out the mysterious Dr Voke who seemingly has powers to give puppets life, asking him to separate his lover from another man, with tragic consequences.

Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror (1985) - Brief philosophical lectures on horror in literature, why it has an appeal and how it reflects on the state of being alive.

Dr. Locrian's Asylum (1987) - I wouldn't call this a bad story, but a lesser one by comparison to everything else here. Predictable, but God I love the atmosphere of it. A town brings a curse upon themselves after they dismantle a cursed asylum that has loomed over their horizon for generations.

The Sect of the Idiot [Azathoth] (1988) - This is a moody story of dark description with a good idea at its base, but I feel like more could have been done with it. A man finds an attraction to a silent, old rotting town, until he has a vision of the beings which direct all life within it.

The Greater Festival of Masks (1985) - I didn't get much out of this one, it has some eerie moments and creative ideas, but is a brief, minor story. A man explores a town in the midst of a strange masquerade, and entering a costume shop discovers that some oddly-shaped masks in fact DO fit the wearers.

The Music of the Moon (1987) - Another short story, but making the most of its length. It has an effective building of suspense and an unpredictable end, although its meaning rather escapes me. An insomniac wanders the streets and happens upon a sinister musical performance.

The Journal of J.P. Drapeau (1987) - Lots of ideas here, with a self-referencing ending. An author muses on various macabre observations -- at base of these is the belief that, "the strict order of the visible world is only a semblance, one providing certain gross materials which become the basis for subtle improvisations of invisible powers."

Vastarien (1987) - Another great one. It's full of beautifully dark prose and has a very original idea at its core. Its focus on dreams reminded me of Lovecraft's own preference for dreams to reality. A man is convinced that the world of his dreams reflects the unreality behind the real world, he finds a strange book which invites another, sinister figure into that world.
