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H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and their correspondence.

A thread.

H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard corresponded from 1930 until 1936, when Howard committed suicide. Lovecraft would die the next year. Two of the most renowned authors at WEIRD TALES, their correspondence shaped both men's lives and legacies.

First, before they got acquainted:

Howard was 16 years younger that Lovecraft; he had first read HPL in the early issues of WEIRD TALES in 1923-1925, and aspired to write for the pulp magazine himself - which he did. Lovecraft later claimed to have noticed REH's initial efforts

but did not comment them on his letters. The start of their correspondence in 1930 came after the reprint of Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls," which involved a line lifted from a certain Scottish genderqueer author. Details here:

https://t.co/ttacvolUJP

Lovecraft's letters were often frequent and lengthy; 10 or 20 handwritten pages wasn't uncommon, and 70 and 100 page letters are known. To new correspondents, this could be incredibly intimidating. Robert E. Howard appears to have taken it as a challenge, and sought to match him.

From the beginning, the subject matter of their conversation was broad. Lovecraft's travels, Howard's travels, gossip about the markets, history ancient and modern, politics local and international. While initially formal, the letters become increasingly informal over the years.

Howard scholar Rusty Burke noted that while REH was one of Lovecraft's major correspondents, HPL was Robert E. Howard's MAJOR correspondent. Their letters mark the bulk of REH's surviving correspondence, cover the most ground and in the greatest depth. It's through these letters

that we "know" so much about Robert E. Howard - and that's sort of a crucial set of quotation marks. Because when you read these letters, especially at the beginning when REH is being so diffident and trying to be scholarly, he is writing to HPL

not as a friend or even as a peer

You wouldn't write to your mother, your boss, and your best friend the same way, and the same kind of rhetoric applies to letters - those first couple of years, Lovecraft and Howard were very much feeling each other out, gauging their interests, presenting themselves.

Which is really critical because Lovecraft was talking to many of his friends ABOUT Howard (REH was doing the same thing about HPL, but as mentioned he had far fewer correspondents). A good chunk of REH's initial legend was built in part because of all the good thing that HPL

said about REH - and not a few misconceptions as well! I talk about this in a long article:

https://t.co/pbKtc6Vhn5

It was Lovecraft that gave Robert E. Howard his various nicknames: Arh-Ei-Ech, Two-Gun Bob, The Terror of the Plains, Brother Conan, Our Master of Massacre...

It was also through Lovecraft that Howard was introduced to the wider weird community, having exchanges of letters with August Derleth, Clark Ashton Smith, R. H. Barlow, and others (I think C. L. Moore reached out to REH and HPL independently).

So when you read these letters - and you really should read these letters, they've been collected in A MEANS TO FREEDOM by Hippocampus Press - you should try and think about the context in which these two men in very different parts of the country were writing to one another.

Not all of these letters are easy reading. Howard was relatively liberal, in terms of social politics, compared to his section - but this was a point in time where no black people were allowed to remain overnight in his county. REH was one of Lovecraft's few correspondents who

shared most of Lovecraft's racial prejudices, and this is very clear when discussing the various Hispanic populations they encountered (Mexicans for REH; Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and others in Florida & New York for Lovecraft), the Massie Case, & the wars in Manchuria and Ethiopia.

Even this is not without interest: remember what I said about how REH and HPL were tailoring their letters to present themselves to each other in the best light? How much of the racism in these letters is the two men's true feelings, and how much of it is each man trying to

conform to what they THINK the other one wants to hear? It's a bit difficult to say with REH, because we have so few other letters on these subjects; but HPL at least seems to have been a bit harsher on some of those subjects to REH than he was to his other correspondents.

One thing that becomes clear is that Lovecraft had a fairly high opinion of Robert E. Howard after the first few letters, and while he might be less-positive about the Conan stories in letters to Clark Ashton Smith & co, HPL was always positive about REH's fiction in his letters

More than that, Lovecraft encouraged Howard's historical writing. Many of REH's letters to HPL are filled with stories about Texas and the Southwest, which is a bit in the Texas tall tale tradition, are nonetheless stark and powerful.

For scholars, the story of Lovecraft and Howard's correspondence goes beyond what's in the letters themselves. I've talked about how HPL would mention REH in his letters to others, and vice versa - that's one part of it. Yet their correspondence is tied up in the context of their

lives and writing; I go into one such anecdote about Islam, Prohibition, and the WEIRD TALES companion magazine ORIENTAL STORIES, which Robert E. Howard wrote for:

https://t.co/AYQMc7X6qe

And another about an individual that may or may not have been a mutual correspondent of Lovecraft and Howard: https://t.co/qTDwpWi78s

In both of these cases, it's not just the Howard-Lovecraft correspondence that is of interest, but how it fits into both men's lives and fills in some of the gaps in our understanding of how the pulps worked.

Robert E. Howard likely never read Lovecraft's final letters; his suicide was a shock to HPL, who quickly spread the news. Writing swiftly, Lovecraft's lament began swiftly, but grew with each correspondent, lengthening and deepening as HPL came to regret the loss of his friend.

This is another part of the building of REH's legend - Lovecraft was still remembering Howard in his final letter, incomplete at the time of his death, not a year later.

Howard's heirs were less dedicated to publishing his letters than Arkham House was; so that the Selected Letters of H. P. Lovecraft came out twenty years before the Selected Letters of Robert E. Howard...but scholars were keenly aware of the connections between the two men.

Scholars and fans, I should say. As both Lovecraft and Howard achieved mythical proportions, their real-life interactions were sometimes fictionalized and expanded - into real-life meetings, by some authors and artists. Their literary afterlives remain entwined.