The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

In this opening paragraph of “The Call of Cthulhu”, first published in the pulp fiction magazine *Weird Tales* in 1928, H P Lovecraft set out a view of things that animates pretty well everything he wrote thereafter: the human mind is an accident in the universe, which is indifferent to the welfare of the species. We can have no view of the scheme of things or our place in it, because there may be no such scheme. The final result of scientific inquiry could well be that the universe is a lawless chaos. Sometimes called “weird realism”, it is a disturbing vision with which Lovecraft would struggle throughout his life.

Born in 1890 in Providence, Rhode Island, Howard Phillips Lovecraft was well acquainted with the fragility of the human mind. When Howard was three years old his father was confined in a psychiatric institution after a breakdown, probably linked to advancing syphilis, and died there five years later. Lovecraft’s early life was shaped by his grandfather, two maiden aunts and his mother, Sarah Susan Phillips Lovecraft, with whom he formed what may have been a

**BOOKS**

**Creatures of the deep**

HP Lovecraft’s philosophy of horror

*By John Gray*

Phantom menace: Lovecraft peopled his mythical realms with slippery, palpitating creatures to escape a worse prospect – a human world.
his most enduring relationship. A precocious, high-strung child, he was often unwell and suffered from attacks of nervous anxiety. After years of mental illness, Sarah spent time in the same hospital, where in May 1912 she also died.

At a meeting of would-be journalists in Boston that same year, Lovecraft met Sonia Haft Greene, a Russian-Jewish woman some years older than himself, whom he married in 1924. They seem not to have been unhappy but it was not long before they drifted apart. Financial insecurity must have had a part in the break-up, along with opposition to the marriage from Lovecraft’s aunts and his own intense dislike of New York. The two went on to separate lives, Sonia moving to California, remarrying and dying there in 1972. Lovecraft returned to Providence, where he lived with his aged aunts, in strained circumstances and increasingly ill. He died from cancer in 1937 convinced that his work – which had received only slight recognition in his lifetime – would soon be forgotten entirely.

Lovecraft’s life was spent on the margins of society, eking out a small inheritance and scraping an uncertain living from journalism and amateur publishing. Some of his attitudes may have come from his experience of downward social mobility. His wealthy grandfather lost most of the family fortune in a business failure in 1900. For Lovecraft, his mother and his aunts, the years that followed were a long decline from what they liked to think had been an aristocratic lifestyle. The aunts’ opposition to his marriage to Sonia – at the time a successful milliner – may have been rooted as much in the family’s social snobbery as in the anti-Semitism that was rife in the US in the early decades of the 20th century. Despite his marriage, Lovecraft’s own animus ran more deeply. There can be no doubt of his racism, which underpinned his denunciation of what the narrator in one of his stories described as “the polyglot abyss of New York’s underworld”. Some of his letters invoke explicitly racist theories of cultural degeneration.

It has been suggested in Lovecraft’s defence that in later years his attitudes mellowed. It is true that, under the impact of his experience of the Great Depression, he expressed some sympathy with Roosevelt’s New Deal, mocking the right-wing American obsession with free markets and arguing that a measure of economic planning was needed in order to combat mass unemployment. That, however, does not make him any kind of liberal. Arguments of this kind were widely current, and not only in circles that would now be regarded as progressive. Nazism and fascism were hostile to capi
talism, at least in their rhetoric, precisely because many of their supporters believed that capitalism promoted liberal values. In the 1930s, racism and anti-capitalism of
ten went together. For all his scorn for the age in which he lived, Lovecraft embodied some of its ugliest (and most commonplace) beliefs and attitudes.

Fortunately, the core of his work has nothing to do with his social and racing re
tsents. His real subject is the inhuman
ty of the cosmos. As he wrote:

... all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes must have human qualities. These must be handled with unsparring realism (not catch-penny romanticism) but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown – the shadow-haunted Outside – we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold.

The American writer August Derleth, a friend and correspondent who played a pivotal role in collecting Lovecraft’s fiction and bringing his work to a larger public, suggested that Lovecraft viewed his stories as vehicles for a newly invented mythology. It is an astute observation. Throughout his adult life Lovecraft was an unswerving atheist and materialist. In a letter of 1918, he declared: “... the Judaeo-Christian mythol
gy is NOT TRUE.” At the same time he had nothing but scorn for the rival mythology of his day, the belief that humankind – “the miserable denizens of a wretched little flyspeck on the back door of a microscopic universe”, as he described the species in the same letter – was at the forefront of cosmic evolution. For him the cosmos was a trap, and human beings the prey of blindly me
canical forces. His “Chthulu Mythos” – a fictional alternate reality containing godlike minds far more powerful than those of hu
man beings, and also utterly different from theirs – was a response to this vision.

Part mountain, part octopus or dragon, Cthulhu is portrayed as being beyond the reach of words: “The Thing cannot be des
cribed – there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.” In “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, published in 1936, he depicts more fully the creatures of his “shadow
daunted Outside”:

I think their predominant colour was a greyish-green, though they had white bellies. They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes claw-like. At the side of their necks were palpitating gills . . .

Whether they resemble worms, amoebae or bubbling slime, the creatures have one thing in common. None of them is remotely hu
man. It’s as if Lovecraft invented these horri
dible phantoms in order to escape a worse horror – the human world itself. The precise role of Lovecraft’s mythology is a continuing subject of controversy. In his erudite and witty foreword to The New Annotated H P Lovecraft, Leslie Klinger notes that Derleth saw the new myth as having at its centre a conflict between good and evil, while “Lovecraft did not see life as a strug
gle between good and evil or light and dark forces” – which is surely correct. Klinger goes too far, though, when he goes on to suggest that the “Chthulu Mythos” exists only as Derleth’s invention. Certainly there is nothing to suggest that Lovecraft aimed to establish a fixed pantheon of imaginary deities. But the Lovecraft scholars S T Joshi and David E Schultz seem to me to get clos
er to the writer’s motivations when they describe the Cthulhu stories as forming a type of “anti-mythology”. The paradox of Lovecraft’s writing is that although he believed myth existed in or
der to shield the human mind from reality, his own myths seems to do the opposite: the “Outside” is more frightening than the world in which human beings live. The paradox is unlocked when we realise that this reality is what Lovecraft was trying to escape. In an essay on his own work, “Some Notes on a Nonentity” (1933), he wrote:

The “punch” of a truly weird tale is simply some violation or transcending of fixed cosmic law – an imaginative escape from pulling reality – hence phenomena rather than persons are the logical “heroes”. Horrors, I believe, should be original – the use of common myths and legends being a weakening influence.

Since Derleth collected Lovecraft’s writ
ing there have been many anthologies.
 Debunking the Tudors
Suzannah Lipscomb

Thomas Cromwell: the Untold Story of Henry VIII’s Most Faithful Servant
Tracy Borman
Hodder & Stoughton, 464pp, £25

The Hollow Crown: the Wars of the Roses and the Rise of the Tudors
Dan Jones
Faber & Faber, 480pp, £20

It cannot have gone unnoticed by any careful observer that the history of five centuries ago has become part of the cultural zeitgeist. Hilary Mantel’s two Man Booker Prize-winning novels, Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies, have been produced as sell-out stage plays and are being filmed for television with Damian Lewis and Mark Rylance in the lead roles. The epic, gorgeous sweep of the US TV series Game of Thrones has, at its core, the rivalry between two families whose names, Lannister and Stark, patently echo their real-life 15th-century counterparts, Lancaster and York. And just as history has informed fiction, so now, in a pleasingly circular fashion, fiction has inspired history.

To capitalise on the success of Wolf Hall or perhaps, less cynically, to seek to offer an accurate historical account of Mantel’s fictionalised character, there have been four recent or recently reissued biographies of Henry VIII’s first minister, Thomas Cromwell (by Robert Hutchinson, John Schofield, David Loades and J Patrick Coby), and Tracy Borman’s narrative adds a fifth.

She tells the story of a “man of wit,” whom Cardinal Thomas Wolsey thought “an admirable writer” and whom the imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys considered more talented and more able than Wolsey. This Cromwell is garrulous, irreverent and loyal, but also ruthless, business-like and pragmatic. Borman writes admirably; her prose trips along merrily and is full of intriguing titbits: he spells his surname “Crumwell”; this man of virtue loved to gamble and suffered huge losses at dice; he worked, if his assistant Ralph Sadler’s schedule is anything to go by, 20-hour days.

It is an uphill battle to humanise Cromwell – by an accident of history (or possibly by deliberate intention), most of the sources that would have given historians a complete view of the universe have disappeared. There is no intrinsic reason why a universe in which people are marginal should be a horror-inducing place. A world vastly larger and stranger than any the human mind can contain could just as well evoke a sense of excitement or an acceptance of mystery.

Lovecraft’s anti-mythology of slimy, inhuman creatures reflected an unresolved struggle within himself. He firmly rejected religious mythologies that accorded human-kind a special place in the scheme of things, but he could not accept the implication of his materialism, which is that human life has no cosmic value or meaning. Rejecting any belief in meaning beyond the human world, he also rejected the meanings human beings make for themselves. He had no interest in the lives of most people, and from his early years seems to have believed his own would count for very little. He was left without any sense of significance. So, obeying an all-too-human impulse, he fashioned a make-believe realm of dark forces as a shelter from the deadly light of universal indifference. John Gray is the New Statesman’s lead book reviewer. His next book, “The Soul of the Marionette: a Short Inquiry Into Human Freedom”, will be published in spring 2015