Abraham Merritt’s The Drone:
a Forgotten Classic of Entomological Fantasy

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Recent analyses of entomological influence in classic literature have included well-known authors such as Emily Dickinson (Rutledge 2003), John Donne (Cohen 2002), Robert Frost (Cohen 1999), and Vladimir Nabokov (Johnson and Coates 1999). However, it would be interesting to examine lesser-known contributors to entomological fiction. Having done much of my doctoral work (Coelho 1989) on drone honey bees (Apis mellifera L.) and having an ongoing interest in cultural entomology, recently I was surprised to stumble upon Abraham Merritt’s The Drone. Upon seeing the title, I thought most surely it would involve a mechanical device, such as an unmanned flying machine. It turns out to be entomological and an entertaining short story by an author who has been largely forgotten because he has slid into obscurity.

Abraham Grace Merritt (1884–1943) was a descendent of James Fenimore Cooper (BlackMask Online, 2004). If potential writing skills have a heritable component, then perhaps Merritt carried some of these genes from his more famous ancestor. Though trained for a time in law, Merritt (Fig. 1) spent most of his life as a journalist, ultimately becoming editor of The American Weekly (Clute and Nicholls 1995). It might seem surprising that such a background would prepare him to write tales of fantasy with large doses of embedded biology, but apparently he had a passion for botany and was even a co-discoverer of the psychodelic properties of certain plants, such as datura. (The University of Adelaide 2004, Jeffery 2006). Furthermore, The American Weekly seems to have been what we would today call a tabloid (see Bleiler 1985).

Merritt published during the era of pulp fiction, and his work could perhaps be dismissed out of hand on that basis; however, his contemporaries who were writing in the fantasy genre, such as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, achieved renown and sustained it. Merritt once had their level of name recognition. He briefly had a magazine named after him, and two of his works were made into films (Clute and Nicholls 1995). Seven Footprints to Satan (Merritt 1928) was made into a silent movie of the same title in 1929. Burn, Witch, Burn! (Merritt 1933) was adapted as the film Devil-Doll in 1936. But his works suffered under later critical analyses, and his reputation faded (Bleiler 1985).

The Drone Man was originally published as a short story (Merritt 1934) and later included in various collections (Merritt 1936, 1945, 1948) as The Drone, but it is probably best known from the Merritt anthology The Fox Woman and Other Stories (1949). In fact, the first half of The Drone is not even about bees, but about a tribal shaman who turns into a hyena. The second half of the story is the tale of a man who metamorphoses into a bee.

Merritt reveals a keen eye and relatively thorough understanding of bee biology in The Drone. The character Ferguson begins his transformation by growing short, yellow fur—the pubescence of a bee. His eyes change, and his voice is tinged with a buzz. Yet these superficial changes could be predicted by nearly anyone with some familiarity with bees. Merritt shows more insight when Ferguson says, “You die in the heart of the ecstasy,” which suggests that Merritt knew that a drone dies following copulation.

In his spare time, Merritt wrote detailed, descriptive fiction, primarily in the fantasy genre. Most of his books are contemporary: The Moon Pool, 1918; The Metal Monster, 1920; The Face in the Abyss, 1923; Dwellers in the Mirage, 1932 (Merritt 1919, 1946, 1931, 1932, respectively), wherein the characters travel to unexplored regions and encounter fantastical creatures and lost races of people with unusual abilities. The heroes of some of his works are botanists or other scientists. Merritt reveals a modest understanding of science in most of his stories that are plausible for their time.

Fig. 1. This drawing of A. Merritt, with some of his fantastical creations, bears a strong resemblance to photographs of the man, though in life he was said to be short and chubby. From Las Pulps web site: http://www.dreamers.com/lospulps/pag4c.html.
of them, might alter the motivation of the description, even if Merritt were aware were known at the time (Bishop 1920), but many of these gruesome details were known at the time (Bishop 1920), but their description, even if Merritt were aware of them, might alter the motivation of the character Ferguson.

Obviously, a human-sized drone would be unable to fly. Merritt deals with this problem handily at the end of the story. Merritt’s science fails him in other details, however. Ferguson chooses the perceived carefree life of a bee, in a manner strikingly similar to Dickinson’s “Could I but ride indefinite” (No. 661 in Dickinson 1960), drinking nectar from flowers. Drones do not forage at flowers. Furthermore, it is ironic that we now know that the lives of worker bees are far from carefree, as they appear to make sophisticated foraging decisions and essentially work themselves to death (Neukirch 1982, Schmid-Hempe1988). Merritt and Dickinson allude to ecstasy. Merritt is clearly alluding to the sexual variety, whereas Dickinson’s allusion may be more spiritual.

Merritt made some errors of fact in his writing, although much of his science holds up well and enriches his stories, especially in comparison to other authors. This pattern is consistent with Merritt’s treatments of other areas in which he was interested but not an expert, such as religion (Bleiler 1985). It is a shame that his works are not better known today; they provide very entertaining reading. Fortunately, because much of Merritt’s work is out of copyright in some countries, it has been digitized and can be easily accessed at various online sites. The Drone is available at http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/aut/merritt_abraham.html. Some of his books are also available at memoware.com in formats suitable to a personal digital assistant.

References Cited

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