

Dead Letters: Spirits and the Sea

While the sea is a place to cool off, its real pull comes from its quixotic nature: it is beautiful and formidable; it is punishing and redemptive; it is comforting and terrifying. This makes it a worthy backdrop for ghostly tales—especially ones that involve revenge from beyond—or from beyond the grave.

Remember the albatross-burdened sailor in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*? If you've not read it since high school, you've probably forgotten how creepy that poem really is. After a mariner kills an albatross—the kind bird of good omen—he and his crew suffer all sorts of supernatural peril. While the rhyming might get on your nerves, what gives this poem its haunting quality is its use of sound and imagery. Consider the journey through the South Pole:

The ice was here, the ice was there,

The ice was all around :

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound !

There are vivid renderings of tongues withering at their roots, a death ship with gossamer sails, a parched ocean bed writhing with slimy creatures, and decks covered with dead men. This is a poem that isn't read—it's envisioned.

A scholarly paper argued that Poe's "Descent into the Maelström" alluded strongly to *Mariner*, but "Descent" focuses more on punishment from the Heavens above. In this story, a fisherman is driven by greed to fish grounds avoided by his peers. And he pays for it, while the specter of the moon broods over his demise. What he discovers at the bottom of that "wide waste of liquid ebony" is disturbing and disorienting. The fear in this piece, though, comes from Poe's use of sibilance and alliteration that makes you feel as though you're on that doomed ship. If you're prone to seasickness, I'd avoid this one.

If you're a Ring fan, chances are you've heard of *Dark Water*—not the film, the book of short stories also by Koji Suzuki. In fact, the story the film was based on is not called *Dark Water*—it's entitled "Floating Water" and is the first piece in the book. But in this collection—which is framed by a seemingly unrelated prologue until you finish the volume—there are several that are top-notch beach-fright reading. The real winner, though, is "The Hold". To say anything of the plot would ruin it—that's how meticulously crafted this piece is. I will tell you that it begins shrouded in Suzuki's characteristic murkiness and the tension builds until its shocking ending. For some real fun, take a copy of it down to the beach—or onto a small boat—at night and read it with a flashlight. I guarantee you'll have difficulty when it's time to dip your toes in the water.

The sea is a keeper of secrets and, in that way, is not unlike our own subconscious. Some of our secrets, when revealed, are as precious as *Sea Glass*; some are part of who we are, like creatures both harmless and toxic. And others, the shameful ones we try to cast away from us, or tie weights to in the hope they'll never surface again, are the ones that always seem to wash ashore somewhere.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

http://etext.virginia.edu/stc/Coleridge/poems/Rime_Ancient_Mariner.html

"A Descent into the Maelström", by Edgar Allan Poe

<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/maelsb.htm>

"The Hold" ~ *Dark Water*, by Koji Suzuki

http://www.amazon.com/Dark-Water-Koji-Suzuki/dp/1932234101/ref=pd_bbs_8?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1210617082&sr=8-8

(Hey! You can get used copies for as little as under a buck!)

*KP's note: Poe wrote several tales with the sea as a backdrop. Two of my personal favorites are "The Oblong Box" and his last tale—unfinished because he died in the middle of writing it—dubbed by scholars as "The Lighthouse". You can read either of those by accessing these

links:

<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/ooboxb.htm>

<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/lightha.htm>

If you're super-ambitious and you can afford to spend either forty or two hundred bucks, editor Christopher Conlon put together the anthology *Poe's Lighthouse*. This brilliant collection takes twenty-two stabs at finishing Poe's last-known attempt at short fiction. It was published in 2006 by Cemetery Dance Publications in a limited edition of 1000 copies (yes, of course I own one—and Earl Hammer's "A Passion for Solitude" alone is worth the change!). Order it here: <http://www.cemeterydance.com/page/CDP/PROD/conlon01>