

A Red Sun Also Rises

Mark Hodder

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Mark Hodder, author of the Philip K. Dick Award-winning steampunk series featuring Burton & Swinburne, takes a somewhat different tack in this stand-alone novel.

The framing story should seem familiar enough to any fan of Lovecraft: a mysterious manuscript salvaged from a shipwreck seems to hint at Dark Rites through which sinister savages open menacing gateways to Worlds Beyond the Sky (but only when the Stars Are Right.)

Once past this construct, we find ourselves in the mind (and journal) of a character who fits comfortably into steampunk's alternate-Victorian setting. Aiden Fleischer, an English clergyman suffering from a crisis of faith, intellect, and boredom, meets a physically disfigured but intellectually brilliant young lady with an advanced technical education. After sundry domestic misadventures, including a close encounter with an infamous murderer, they embark on a missionary expedition to the far side of the world. Stationed on a remote Pacific island, they find that the natives have some mighty strange religious beliefs, and that weather and electrical fields behave in very odd ways. For a time it seems we are in the Cthulhu Mythos after all.

But where Lovecraft famously left his monsters unseen, with their shrieking victims spirited away to a horrible fate that no narrator could perceive and afterward remain coherent, Hodder takes this as the jumping-off point for a completely different type of tale: an old-fashioned planetary romance. Like John Carter on Barsoom, Hodder's protagonists find themselves under a strange sky on a strange planet, facing strange creatures with a strange society and even stranger ecology. The inhabitants of the world of Ptallaya (like the nattily dressed fellow on the cover of the book) find their new human visitors and their culture to be fascinating and compelling. But cultural influences don't always work out as intended, especially in a world that periodically undergoes radical changes when the red sun rises.

Hodder is a ferociously genre-savvy author, and one of the delights of this novel is spotting the ways in which he plays with and occasionally subverts his readers' expectations of various genres and their well-known tropes. But it's not necessary to appreciate all the author's genre allusions or cultural commentary in order to enjoy the book, any more than it's necessary to understand the questionable astrophysics and biology behind Ptallaya's strangeness. *A Red Sun Also Rises* is both a clever mashup of genre conventions and an old-fashioned, ripping yarn of otherworldly adventure.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (Winter 2013)

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