

Into the World of the Dead: Astonishing Adventures in the Underworld

Michael Boughn

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There are a variety of ways into the underworld—through a door, across a river, via a hole in the earth—and in nearly every culture brave souls and reluctant victims have paid a visit to this unearthly and ghastly realm. Often depicted as a world of the dead lying beneath one's feet, the ugly underbelly of the underworld is deftly revealed in these stories, which will both frighten and fascinate.

The author, who has a doctorate in English literature and has written several books, including a sports biography series, begins by portraying the underworld “deeply connected with sin and punishment”) with various cultural versions such as Naraka, the Hindu place of punishment, and Mesopotamia's underworld, Ganzir.

The rest of the chapters, which include titles such as “The Way In,” “Getting Back,” and “Guardians and Monsters,” are lush with beguiling legends and gloriously gory descriptions. “The monsters of the lower realm were terrible in an astonishing variety of ways ... decked out in earth's finery—tatters of rotten flesh, skulls, eyeballs, maggots and worms.”

The book is also rich with color photographs and illustrations of various underworlds and their inhabitants, such as Gustave Doré's exquisite drawing of furies, and cartoonish renderings of creatures like Ah Puch, ruler of the Mayan underworld.

Boughn summarizes the ancient tales for easy grasp by an upper elementary reader, yet they remain detailed enough to engage adults as in the tale of Mictlín and his wife, the rulers of the lowest level of the Aztec underworld, described as “skeletons with crowns of skulls, protruding teeth, and organs hanging from their rib cages.”

The book is also well-researched, and includes both little-known legends such as the story of a Tartar girl who travels to the underworld to retrieve her brother's stolen head to the travails of the Welsh hero Arthur who journeys to the end of the earth to retrieve a “magical cauldron.”

These tales of hellish worlds where demons and grotesque monsters lie in wait to claim hapless souls will rivet all but the most squeamish readers.

CYMBRE FOSTER (October 5, 2006)

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