

## **The Leg an ambiguous allegory by David J. Keffer**

"The Leg" is a short story about an amputee and his severed leg written in a Kafka-esque vein.

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"The Sutra of Reverse Possession" is a novel of non-idiomatic improvisation and features the historical Chinese dwarf, "Earth Traveler Sun", who lived at the transition from the Shang to Zhou dynasties circa 1100 B.C.

"The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath (Revisited)" is a modern adaptation of the original story told by H.P. Lovecraft in 1927. It has been described as the literary result of Italo Calvino crashing in Lovecraft's Dreamlands.

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### **About the Author**

David Keffer is a professor at the University of Tennessee and an autodidact in the realm of world literature. He has currently published 8 novels and 3 illustrated stories at the Poison Pie Publishing House.



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## **The Leg An Ambiguous Allegory**

By David J. Keffer  
written: January, 2013  
Knoxville, TN

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They cut off my leg just below the hip, my right leg, one of my two favorites legs, after my wife's. I do not rightly understand the particulars behind why they cut off my leg, although the doctors have explained it to me many times. They use words, big and small, that I do not understand, perhaps intentionally. Sometimes these words sound like other words that I do know, and when I reconstruct their sentences in this manner, I get messages which can only be interpreted as profound prophecies of an alternate future in a parallel universe, which are altogether interesting of themselves but do little to help me understand why they amputated my leg.

The hospital chaplain provided the most direct explanation, “It had to go, or it was going to take you with it.”

That prospect didn't sound so bad since my legs had always taken the rest of me along with them where so ever they trod—and many fine places we had been together—but, once the chaplain observed that he wasn't getting through to me, he made it sound much less pleasant by adding in the reek of brimstone and the pain of fire licking at my toes. Apparently, the chaplain thought my leg had gone to Hell, but he was mistaken, as I was soon to find out.

I lay in the hospital bed for the better part of the morning, trying to ignore the insensible blather of the television mounted between the two beds in the room. I intentionally refused to steal a glance at my comrade in medical misfortune, as I did not want to establish anymore connections than necessary between myself and this abysmally white room where my leg was not only taken from me but where I was, by all appearances, expected to be grateful for it.

My wife entered on her two legs, garbed in loose fitting jeans. She pulled the pale blue curtain forward separating me from the other patient then along the rounded track so that I was freed from at least the sight of the television.

We exchanged pleasantries. She exclaimed that I was awake and I agreed. She leaned over and gave me a peck on the lips and I pecked back. She asked me how I was feeling and I explained that I was feeling rather poorly about the decision to have my leg removed. Although my grandfather told me that the secret to a happy marriage was keeping my mouth shut, I further inquired of my wife whether, since I had no recollection of authorizing the removal of my leg, she had given the approval for the operation. Oh, I hurt her feelings, just as I knew I would. She

left and coincidentally the nurse arrived shortly thereafter and increased the dosage of my pain medication, which knocked me out for the rest of the day.

As I lay in a morphine-induced haze, I understood that people did things that they didn't really want to do. Take for example hurting my wife's feelings. I had not wanted to hurt her feelings. However, I had wanted to know who was responsible for the absence of my leg. I knew very well that asking her would upset her and yet I did it all the same. Why had I done that? Who was to blame? What did that make me? I freely admitted that it was my fault and I had done it because I was a weak and small man. This admission of vulnerability was not intended to evoke sympathy or to cast me in a sensitive light; it was rather a factual recognition of my continued failure as a human being and an indicator of my predisposition to dwell morbidly on my own shortcomings.

I bet my leg was having a better time of it than I was.

“Free at last!” my leg cried, hopping barefoot across a smooth lawn of dewy clover and wild strawberry as the sun poked above the tree line hiding the eastern horizon.



I could not escape the nagging fear that all of this had happened some time ago to someone else and I was mistakenly following the path of another. However, the throbbing pain in my hip provided a continuous reminder that indeed it was me here without my leg. I had, it seemed, no alternative but to proceed further down this path.



When I arrived home, I found my leg waiting for me in the front yard. My wife pulled in the driveway and there it was balanced upright, pale and naked in the chill of the morning light. My own leg had never looked so good to me.

Of course I understood that, if I told my wife that I saw my dismembered leg standing by itself in the front yard, I was inviting a whole new kind of trouble. My plate was already full of challenges, like getting use to getting around on only one leg. I did not need to complicate my schedule with visits to a psychiatrist. So, I said nothing. I pretended not to see the leg at all. Oh, I hurt my leg's feelings. Here we were, reunited after a painful separation, and I refused to even acknowledge its existence. I heard it weeping as I turned my back to it and hobbled through the front door on crutches. Oh, leg, I am sorry.

Inside I sat in the lazy boy. My children crowded me, one on each side. They hovered so close I was in a continuous state of flinching because I feared they would butt heads with me. My daughter informed me that now I only had one leg, to which I whole-heartedly agreed, refusing to claim that other leg out in the front yard as my own. My son asked me how it felt to be a one-legged man, to which I answered that it might take some getting used to. He nodded sympathetically. Next they tried skipping around on my crutches, which were much too tall for them. Eventually they decided that the best way to get around with them was to flap them like giant pterodactyl wings until they knocked over the lamp on the end table next to the couch and shattered the bulb.

It was usually my role in the family to shout on occasions such as this, but I suppose the departure of my leg was having a bigger effect on me than I had let on, because I simply could not gather the necessary energy to upbraid the kids for their carelessness. My wife confiscated the crutches and chased them out of the room. I reclined in the lazy boy while my wife swept up the broken glass.

Despite my better judgment, I hazarded a glance out the front window. I was unpleasantly surprised to find my leg perched on the front porch leaning up against the glass. Steam rose

from the open wound at the top of the thigh and condensed on the glass. I hurriedly turned away. I had always been squeamish about blood, especially my own. I managed to tend to my children's cuts and scrapes when my wife wasn't to be found, but make no mistake I took no satisfaction from it and chose to leave the room when blood was spilt if at all possible. It was another signature characteristic of my uselessness. Damn that leg. It was like an albatross, reminding me of my own failings. I closed my eyes and lay as still as I could with my one good leg on the lazy boy, but even in this self-imposed darkness I could feel the cold steel of the bad leg's gaze upon me.

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Sometimes I liked to imagine, when I was overwhelmed by the suffocating blanket of meaninglessness to the extent that I was unable to perform the duties required of me and instead engaged in other, unproductive activities (such as writing these notes to myself), that I was responding to a higher calling from an unfathomable source, perhaps Jesus. I liked to think it was Jesus. That thought made me feel better, though if I shared it with anyone, I expect that they would either have gotten angry with me for my irreverence or laughed at me for my stupidity, depending upon the particulars of their own individual relationship with Jesus.

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That first night at home, after my children were put to bed and my wife had fallen asleep on the couch in the living room in front of the television, I climbed out of bed and quietly ventured out into the front yard. The night air was cold in my lungs and my jacket did little to ward off the chill. I found my poor leg covered in goosebumps that cast tiny shadows on the skin in the moonlight.

I contemplated the possibilities. Either I was insane or dreaming or my leg had come into a life of its own. I understood that the likelihood of each these three explanations were not equal. There was at least one front-runner, probabilistically speaking, and my leg was not going to like it, since that alternative denied it a real existence.

Once or twice in my life, I had been visited by a dream that seemed incredibly, unbelievably life-like. At those times, I had resorted to feeling the texture of things around me in an attempt to prove to myself that I was locked in a dream. I could think of no better option now. I had five senses and I could use these senses to verify or disprove the existence of my leg.

I could certainly see it, though I did my best to avert my gaze from the exposed wound at the top. That was one sense in favor the leg. I couldn't smell it, though. Perhaps, it smelled like me and that smell didn't register since I was suffused with it. Nevertheless, I was claiming that sense on my side. I thought I couldn't hear it as it stood silently and forlornly before me but then I remembered it weeping earlier that morning. Two for the leg. I wasn't about to taste it, so that left only touching it. The best I could hope for was a tie. I leaned forward on my crutches and ran one hand along the raised flesh of the leg. Did my hand pass through the leg? Was it insubstantial, incorporeal? Or did my hand meet with the firm resistance of flesh? I don't know. That horrible bloody stump got the better of me, or maybe I just lost my balance with the crutches, but I fell over on the cold lawn before I reached a conclusion. I lay eye to eye with the pale purple blossoms that rose in the late winter from the same places where wild strawberries would appear in the spring.

Half an hour later my wife discovered my absence and, after scouring the house, raced out on to the porch, where she, in an indignant panic, spotted me collapsed on the lawn and dragged me back inside. Although she demanded an explanation, I said nothing of my leg.

It seemed that, in her eyes, I was almost as guilty of being crazy for wandering outside when it was just above freezing and laying down in the grass as if I had admitted to seeing my amputated leg hopping around the front yard. She not so discreetly closed the door to the master bedroom, while she called the hospital’s emergency line to report my misbehavior. If you guessed that their suggestion was to increase the dosage of my pain medication, you have a winner.

As I wandered off into la-la land, I thought of the Heart Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom, in which the Bodhisattva proclaims the untrustworthiness of all six senses, not just the physical five but ‘mind consciousness’ as well. Since the sense of touch had not been able to even the odds in my favor, I thought perhaps mind consciousness might. I asked my mind consciousness if it could perceive the leg, to which it readily replied that the leg shone like a supernova, its gravity influencing the trajectories of all manner of celestial objects in the realm of mind consciousness.

Disappointed with that reply, I thought instead of my sister, the great disparager of all religions. She had once pointed out to me that the Buddha got his start by abandoning his wife and child and, thus, hardly served as a credible role model. Take that, leg! Though you may be king of the realm of mind consciousness, your citizens are all deadbeat dads and nogoodniks. On that note, my one good leg and I succumbed to the siren’s song of morphine and slept.

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It took a few months, a long time by my judgment, to get the prosthetic leg right. There were fitting and refitting sessions. My hip simply did not take to it and generated quite a fuss throughout the ordeal. Then there were physical therapy sessions where people, with the rare combination of being both well-educated and well-meaning, trained me how to walk with the leg. At first, I fell over a lot. I was worried that they would get exasperated with me, but they did not. Once, when I lay on the padded mats after a tumble, I told the therapist, who reminded me in her gruff mannerisms of the kindness of my late aunt, that I had fallen over on purpose, just because I liked her taking care of me. She laughed and told me that I had made her day. I felt good because I so rarely was told that I have made someone’s day. In fact, lying there, I could not recall a single previous instance during my entire life of having been told that. What a pity!

When I finally wore that new leg home, my old right leg was mighty depressed. The past few months of living entirely out of doors had not been kind to it. That leg was filthy and ragged around the edges. An unhealthy pallor seemed to have come over it. The wound was raw and infected, lined with pus. To make matters worse, a new set of scabs had formed around the ankle. And there was I with my shiny new leg made of space-age composite materials, tough and durable, light-weight and forgiving. It was like rubbing salt in a wound.

The first thing I did was get on my bicycle and ride about a dozen loops around the boulevard in front of the house. The exhilarating rush of the air past me as I sped down the street under a canopy of opening leaves reminded me that I was still alive. And each time I passed the leg, its expression of abandonment deepened. There was to be no friendship between my leg and its prosthetic replacement. I should have expected no less from the leg, coming as it did from someone like me. I tried hard not to allow the leg to spoil the joy of riding a bicycle again, but I was not entirely successful. By the time I had finished and went inside, I felt like going to bed, burying my head under a pillow and disappearing. “You over-did it,” said my wife.

Needless to say, I never gave any thought to the necessity of protecting my new leg from the vengeance of the old.

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I awoke to a calamitous racket emanating from the front yard. In the darkness, I grabbed my crutches, which I had not entirely abandoned, and made my way out to the porch. There I was witness to a most unlikely combat. My leg danced and leapt around the prosthetic leg, which of course was only a collection of well-designed but inanimate mechanical pieces. It lay there on the green lawn, while my leg proceeded to stomp on it and kick it and grind it underfoot. I winced when I heard the knee joint snap. In a matter of minutes, the prosthetic leg was reduced to several pieces of rubbish held together by bent strips of metal, which had been reluctant to entirely give way. I covered my mouth, agape, with one hand. Then returned inside and went back to bed. I could already imagine what would come to pass when news of the destruction of my prosthetic leg reached my wife.

Early the following morning, she found its remains in the front yard and confronted me in the master bedroom while I pretended to still be asleep. She held the pieces in her hands, as if they were the body of a lamb that had been slaughtered as an offering for gods who had long ago forgotten what it meant to be human. She asked me if I knew how much this leg had cost? Abandoning the ruse of sleep, I assured her that I was familiar with the formidable price of the leg. She asked me what in the world possessed me to do such a thing?

What could I say? If I admitted that it had not been me, but my old leg that had smote the ruin of this hapless prosthesis, she would not have believed me. I lay there without speaking, though my wife demanded that I speak. Having nothing to do, I outlasted her and she left after throwing the leg down on the floor in disgust. She slammed the door and I heard the children outside in the kitchen asking her what was the matter with their father. She told them, “He doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”

I will not deny my wife’s pronouncement, though I will insist that I did not destroy my prosthetic leg, with which I was in truth quite pleased. I have long been aware that I have been much too self-absorbed for my own good. The influx of attention that I expect greatly outweighs the expenditure of attention that I distribute to those around me. Parenting had improved the ratio but not to the point where the scales were balanced. I had made resolutions to alter this pattern of behavior, but as my wife’s word indicated, they had apparently come to naught. The conclusion was that, like Popeye the Sailor Man, I am who I am and that’s all that I am. Having a well-defined precedent for my failure made the acceptance of this unpleasant fact only slightly more palatable.

The insurance agent refused to replace the leg, which upon examination, he judged to have been the subject of willful and deliberate abuse. Without the support of the insurance company, we were unable to purchase a replacement leg, a solution which seemed for the best given the continued predatory lurking around the neighborhood of my feral leg.



I returned to work. There were bills, both ordinary and extraordinary, to be paid. No one at work seemed to notice my leg hopping along beside me, waiting patiently in the corridor outside my cubicle as I typed away at the keyboard. In fact no one at work mentioned anything about my leg or lack thereof; it was I suppose an uncomfortable topic, difficult to broach and promising little in the way of potential entertainment value.

Even when the smell of putrefaction began to emanate from the leg, no one gave it the merest notice, but it was difficult for me to concentrate on the work at hand. It began, in my opinion, to stink to the high heavens. Finally, I resolved to take matters into my own hands. I took an afternoon off and encouraged my leg to get in the passenger seat of my truck (yes one-legged men can still drive pick-up trucks). I rolled down the window and drove it out to the country, a

beautiful, isolated wild place. In the winter, the land was used for hunting but in the spring and summer it was a wildlife refuge. I parked the truck at a gate barring further progress along a rutted dirt road and opened the door for my leg to get out.

We hiked as best we could down the path, under the shade of tulip poplars, birch, sassafras and Virginia pine. A few birds called from unseen heights. The telltale tapping of a woodpecker sounded off in the distance. Neither one of us were much good at hiking, what with me trying to navigate along the uneven terrain with my crutches and my leg hopping along over stone and root. We descended into a valley, where the green of the forest climbing the surrounding hillsides encircled us. I led my poor leg down to the edge of a swampy sinkhole where the ground was soggy and over-run by a thick layer of kudzu. It struck me that it was a miserable looking place despite the serene aspect of the utter isolation.

I had a few choices laid out before me. I could sacrifice the old leg as God had asked Abraham to do to Isaac before relenting at the last moment. I considered that option for a good long while, before admitting that I could not decipher the theological ramifications and conceding that I simply didn't have the stomach for it anyway. I could abandon the leg in the forest like the woodcutter had abandoned Hansel and Gretel. This choice seemed to contain less moral turpitude than a sacrifice, but it also seemed less likely to be effective. The leg had an uncanny knack for getting around. It had managed to get from the hospital to my home without any outside aid (at least none of which I was aware) and it made the commute to work and back on its own by means unknown to me. Abandoning it in the forest was no sure way of getting rid of it. The only other thing I could think of was having a good, long talk with it and explaining that we had to part ways. As is probably apparent by now, my skills as a communicator left something to be desired, so this choice too was a far cry from a sure thing. Nevertheless, I attempted to strike up a conversation with the leg and make it see the light.

Well leg, I told it, you're not a part of me no more.

I hadn't thought it possible for the leg to look even more forlorn in its haggard and bedraggled state than it already did, but my words seemed to cause part of it to sink inward upon itself, wrinkling the flesh, emphasizing the deterioration of the muscle and the outline of the skeletal structure beneath.

Oh, leg, I said. I am sorry it has come to this. I felt as if a part of me has died, which should have been an appropriate feeling in most circumstances of amputation, but in this particular instance the leg refused to die, and thus that feeling was entirely misplaced.

The leg stood still as a statue. Flies hovered around the sores on its feet and larvae wriggled in the wound at the top.

Poor leg, I said. You gotta stop following me around. I know that you've been very discreet about it and haven't drawn any undue attention to yourself, but I'm afraid people are starting to wonder. And the thing is they are not wondering about you, they think something is wrong with me, the one-legged guy. They have cut me some slack but I fear that they are about to start reeling that slack in. It's going to trip me up, I'm afraid.

I don't want you to come back home with me, I told my leg. Lay down here in the woods. Let a coyote come and eat you up, if you're still in a state fit to be eaten.

Oh my poor leg did not look like it wanted to be eaten by a coyote or any other varmint of the wild woods.

I offered to bury my leg, though I had not thought to bring a shovel with me. I could come back with a shovel, I suggested.

My leg did not look like it wanted to be buried, especially in the soft mud of this desolate marsh.

I’m just going to have to rely on your good nature, I said, not to follow me home. I turned and left the leg, standing as still as an abandoned child, resigned to its fate as dusk settled over the forest.

I got home late and told my wife I’d been at work. She had no reason to believe me since I never worked late, but she could see that I was shaken up and did not immediately question me. I ate dinner with my family, a daily ritual that I had always insisted upon, and for which I should have been grateful at having things just as I wanted, but that night it brought me little satisfaction. During dinner, I looked out the window expecting to find the leg having defiantly returned to the yard, but it was empty. I suspected that one or another of my words had proven sufficient to break its spirit.

After dinner, I helped my daughter with her math homework. This should have been a cause for joy since I had a keen mastery of elementary school mathematics and could exercise it expertly in such situations, but I satisfied myself with simply helping her arrive at lowest common denominators and failed to admonish my daughter when she left her answers as improper fractions.

I lay down on the floor and played a game with my son, a paper game, in which actions were depicted on a sheet of paper in a drawing which grew increasingly more complex with each subsequent move. On this evening, the drawing represented a battle between a party of elves and a party of goblins. The goblins were massacred to a man. I helped massacre them with an elvish cunning that surprised and delighted even my own son. I looked down at the final drawing and saw only an incomprehensible explosion of squiggles. I repressed an urge to feel sick.

My wife put the children to bed. A few minutes later she came out and joined me on the living room couch. The television was off. I had fixed myself a whiskey. She asked me what was bothering me and at this point, having finally gotten rid of the leg, I was damned if I was going to confide in her that the horrid thing had been following me around for months on end, every confounded day since the operation had taken it from me. I tried to think up something else that could be realistically bothering me, but I couldn’t think of anything. Finally, I told her that I was just thinking about my leg.

She scooted over and snuggled up next to my good leg and told me it was just a leg.

I admitted that I had never understood why I had had to get rid of it. She said that that must make it awful hard to get over, to which I agreed. If it had been chopped off in a combine accident or something, I told her, it would be easier to understand.

My wife told me that she still loved me. And instead of telling her that I loved her too, I asked her if she still loved my leg too, and she thought that was an awfully queer question and I pretended I had never asked it, so eventually she let it go, but the mood was spoiled and she went to bed.

When I was alone in the room, a hazy, pale blue luminescent angel of my old leg appeared hovering in the living room. It let me know that it was going away. It bid me farewell. It had only ever wanted for me to be whole, but I would not have it and it had deteriorated in my neglect. There was nothing to be done for it now. It was leaving and I would have to adjust to circumstances on my own as best I could.

I called out to my leg that I really should not be blamed for the way things turned out. I had never been able to see that there was another, potentially better, alternative. My leg drifted up



through the ceiling and into the sky and presumably into outer space after that; I really don't know.

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I'm still here, though, a one-legged man glued to Earth by gravity. I accept that I am incomplete but, in truth, this sensation stems more from the lack of a meaningful explanation than from the absence of my leg.

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“A phantom limb describes the sensation that an amputated limb (or even a removed organ, like the appendix) is still attached to the body and is moving appropriately with other body parts. Approximately 60 to 80% of individuals with an amputation experience phantom sensations in their amputated limb, and the majority of the sensations are uncomfortable. The missing limb often feels shorter and may feel as if it is in a distorted and painful position. Occasionally, the pain can be made worse by stress, anxiety, and weather changes. Phantom limb pain is usually intermittent. The frequency and intensity of attacks usually declines with time.”

—adapted from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phantom\\_limb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phantom_limb)

## **The Sutra of Reverse Possession** a novel of non-idiomatic improvisation by David J. Keffer

People routinely explore a variety of peculiar avenues, many of which are spiritual in nature, in the pursuit of purpose and meaning in their lives. One should therefore not be taken completely by surprise that Poppy Hortie too opted to invite spirits inside himself in his goal of becoming a better husband and father. The remarkable thing about Poppy Hortie was his questionable choice of guiding spirits. He first entertained a spirit of violence in the form of "Earth Traveler Sun", a Chinese dwarf who lived during the transition from the Shang to Zhou dynasties circa 1100 B.C. When that arrangement failed to yield the desired fruit, Poppy Hortie invited inside a spirit of apathy, "The Unmothered Son", the echo of a child who witnessed the massacre of his family in a genocidal act of tribal retribution and who was damaged beyond all repair. Finally, Poppy Hortie encountered the spirit of improvisation, "the ghost of Charlie Ankleyard", the grandfather of non-idiomatic improvisational music. It was through a culmination of his interactions with each spirit that Poppy Hortie came to a better understanding of his role in the world. These were cases of reverse possession because the man intentionally trapped the spirits within himself. This book is called a sutra because we allow the possibility that some worthwhile message might be gleaned from the reading of it.



### **About the Author**

David Keffer is a professor at the University of Tennessee and an autodidact in the realm of world literature. He has currently published 8 novels and 3 illustrated stories at the Poison Pie Publishing House.

## **The Sutra of Reverse Possession**

a novel of non-idiomatic improvisation



**by David J. Keffer**

**available now at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)  
in paperback and ebook formats**

**ISBN: 1481039008  
length: 124,000 words (360 pages)  
written: December, 2010-May, 2012  
in Seoul, Korea & Knoxville, TN**

# **Poison Pie Publishing House**

**[www.poisonpie.com](http://www.poisonpie.com)**

## **The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath (Revisited)**

a modern adaptation of the H.P. Lovecraft novella  
by David J. Keffer

In this version of a story originally written by H.P. Lovecraft in 1927, a father and his young son travel together through the Dreamlands in search of Unknown Kadath, not to recapture the happiness of a lost youth (as was the case in the original story) but rather to find the path by which the son can avoid the traps that have led his father far from happiness.

In the Dreamlands, fantastic dreams are a form of currency, traded for goods and gaining one admittance through city gates. The father initially relies on descriptions of imaginary cities taken from literary sources as his currency. However, upon losing the book, the father must describe cities from his own experience in order to enlist the aid of various individuals that they meet along their journey to Unknown Kadath.

This retelling works on three levels. First, it is a fantasy novel describing the extent to which a father will go to prepare his young son to find happiness in the world that awaits him. Second, it is a contemplation of cities and the manner in which travel enlightens us about others and ourselves. Finally, this novel is an honest celebration of the dream-cycle of Lovecraft, which showed him in a contemplative light, outside the typical Cthulhu-inspired horror for which he is more widely known.



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A Modern Adaptation  
of the Novella by H.P. Lovecraft



by David J. Keffer

available now at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)  
in paperback and ebook formats

ISBN: 1479275115  
length: 65,000 words (188 pages)  
written: summer, 2012  
in Knoxville, TN

# **Poison Pie Publishing House**

[www.poisonpie.com](http://www.poisonpie.com)