

677 words

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INTRODUCTION to
PEOPLE of the CRATER

From the time I could understand what was being read, it was always fantastic tales that drew me more than any other kind. My mother herself read, and told, stories, and they never concerned everyday experiences: When I was very young, I would bring my little chair to where she was ironing, settle myself comfortably, and order: "Tell me about Uncle Wiggily and the Boy Scouts!" Having absorbed all the available *Uncle Wiggily* books, I wanted that dauntless rabbit to enter another field of endeavor, and Mother obligingly spun for me a whole series of new adventures.

At the age of seven, I came down with the measles and, according to the medical protocol of the day, I was imprisoned in a very dark room in order to preserve my sight. But a vision of a whole new world was opened at that time to the eyes of my imagination, for the second Oz book was just then being serialized in the Cleveland paper, and my mother read each

installment to me while seated in the hall under a light. Then daydreams about the country "over the rainbow" began.

When I was in my teens, *A Princess of Mars* fell into my hands--a literary encounter that proved a significant influence on my writing career. At that time, one could buy Burroughs' works in hardcover editions for the sum of seventy-five cents, and I had his titles on my permanent Christmas list for some years thereafter.

However, the major "find" for me in imaginative fiction was the discovery of *The Face in the Abyss*. Merritt covered, superbly, all the points I enjoyed most in a story. His exotic backgrounds and characters--what reader could ever forget the Snake Mother?--were visited with delight over and over. I longed to create my own Abyss, but some quirk of fate defeated me.

In that era, the only market for speculative tales was for short stories. Unfortunately, my pattern of thought has always made it difficult for me to compose brief tales; my efforts generally read like outlines for novels. So for the time being I kept to my familiar field of adventure, spy, or historical

books. But my imagination constantly groped after the fantastic. *Witch World*, for example, grew out of an attempt to write a historical tale about the Knights of Outremer.

With the advent of the atomic age in 1945, science fiction--formerly symbolized in the minds of the reading public by "pulp" with jackets depicting the flight of scantily-clad maidens from monsters of varying vileness--began to become not only respectable but sought after. New publishing houses were actually founded that were dedicated to the genre.

"Hard science" stories were those most officially approved, but publications such as *Weird Tales* wanted Merrill's type of fantasy. I therefore ventured to work out *People of the Crater*, a piece in the tradition of *The Face in the Abyss*. I still did not believe I had written anything that was marketable, but William Crawford, a beginning publisher, took the novella for his *Fantasy Book* magazine. Later, with the addition of extra material, it was offered as a full-length novel.

For a long while thereafter, *Crater* and two other shorter stories--
"The Gifts of Asti" and "All Cats are Grey"--were my only achievements in
the field of fantasy. To my continuing surprise, the latter two tales have been,
and still are, reprinted from time to time in anthologies. *People of the Crater*
has, as I noted, also made a second appearance, expanded as *Garan*
the Eternal.

The kinship of the latter piece with the work of Merritt is very apparent;
it also contains foreshadowings of the *Witch World* to come. I can read it even
now with some small pride. It has always been my contention that I write
stories to amuse and, hopefully, to excite wonder; and I believe that,
dated and naïve though this tale may be, it does a little of both.

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