



Under Your Skin: A History of the Necronomicon and Skin-Bound Books

I'm going to start with the bad news first: There's no such thing as an evil book. Now, I can see you readying your pitchforks of ∞ , actually ∞ and lighting the torches of pedantry, but hear me out. Books are benign objects. Though they might contain thoughts and ideas that are undoubtedly evil incarnate, those words are placed there by an author with the intention of spreading their vile rhetoric. The book itself has no agency, no intent, no will of its own. The context of its creation and its provenance, coupled with wild rumors and hyperbole, leads us to assume the worst. We assign morality to an object regardless of the fact that it is the product of human beings from the moment ink meets paper to the final press of gold leaf into the cover. It simply exists as an extension of its author's mind to be interpreted by readers until society collapses and we drive around Mad Max style through the wastes of civilization searching for the repositories of the long-long-ago and far-far-away.

I give us another decade, two if I'm feeling generous.

And I'm not here to debate the ethics of purchasing the works of people we know to be problematic. If you want to buy books that financially enable living authors and encourage them to spread hateful ideas that affect real people in the real world, then that's on your conscience, pal. I hope your patronus keeps you warm at night.

But rejoice, dear reader, for I bring you good tidings as well! The absence of evil books in real life hasn't stopped us from imagining them in all manner of genres both past and present. And we love a good evil book, don't we? Whether it's Mister Babadook demanding entry into your home, the King in Yellow bringing carnage and ruin to the stage, or the Spirit grimoire manipulating a young magician in *The Care Bears Movie*, our fascination with malevolent tomes and nefarious publications continues to thrive. One of the more popular, if not *the* most popular, versions of this trope is the *Necronomicon*, a book as notorious as it is fictitious.

You might be scratching your head at that last line because you, an intellectual, know that of course the *Necronomicon* isn't a real book. Well I hate to be the bearer of yet more confusingly bad news, but there are still people in our current, modern age who believe the book to be a very real thing or something they can exploit for profit because, ya know, CAPITALISM. The concept of the *Necronomicon* and its relationship with readers, however, has been one of awe-inspired horror and the tantalizing lure of possibility given that one of the most memorable aspects of the book's origin is

that it's bound in human skin.

But is it actually bound in human skin or have we assigned that descriptor because popular culture and collective memory led us down this particular road? Do we want the *Necronomicon* to be a skin book because it makes it more evil? Does the use of human skin as binding material only conjure images of madmen and murderers because we can't fathom any other person capable of creating such a horrific thing?

Seems like something worth exploring.



The Real Ghostbusters

The original concept of the *Necronomicon* was created by everybody's favorite founder of cosmic horror and ultra-racist grandfather H.P. Lovecraft. The first reference to the book was in Lovecraft's 1924 short story, "The Hound", wherein two white men who've been grave robbing cultural artifacts – like ya do – come across a jade amulet that brings about their comeuppance. Lovecraft writes:

"Immediately upon beholding this amulet we knew that we must possess it; that this treasure alone was our logical pelf from the centuried grave. Even had its outlines been unfamiliar we would have desired it, but as we looked more closely we saw that it was not wholly unfamiliar. Alien it indeed was to all art and literature which sane and balanced readers know, but we recognised it as the thing hinted of in the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred; the ghastly soul-symbol of the corpse-eating cult of

inaccessible Leng, in Central Asia. All too well did we trace the sinister lineaments described by the old Arab daemonologist; lineaments, he wrote, drawn from some obscure supernatural manifestation of the souls of those who vexed and gnawed at the dead.^[1]

As you may have noticed, the *Necronomicon*'s author is Abdul Alhazred, aka the Mad Arab, in case you needed another reason to go spit on Lovecraft's grave, which you can do if you happen to be at Swan Point Cemetery in Providence, Rhode Island. Alhazred was a name Lovecraft made up for himself as a boy when he read Andrew Lang's collected *Arabian Nights* stories, which means they were edited with care, sources cited, and not at all censored.^[2] So with all of the cultural respect and sensitivity he could muster as an adult, Lovecraft decided to use the name for the creator of a "blasphemous scripture" from a region he knew little about and made it a central point of focus for his world of dark magics and alien beings from another dimension. Solid xenophobe work there, Howard.

This is not unfamiliar territory for those aware of the criticism surrounding Lovecraft and his works. As Ifran Ali states:

"Alhazred is supposed to have lived in the Middle East in the 7th Century; the book initially having the Arabic title *Kitab al-Azif*. Within the Cthulhu Mythos, the *Necronomicon* is still followed by a number of cults made up of dark-skinned folk who worship those monstrous entities in their hideouts in places like the slums of Red Hook and under the Pyramids of Giza. During Lovecraft's lifetime, Islam was, from an American perspective, a mysterious fringe religion, followed by only a handful of poor, coloured folk at home or by the dark-skinned masses in European colonies abroad. Lovecraft's monster worshipping cults and Alhazred himself were clearly the author's grotesque caricatures of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, who also lived in the Middle East during the 7th Century."^[3]

Obviously, Lovecraft's influence on the horror genre can never be erased, but it's worth noting how modern creative endeavors have reclaimed the much beloved Cthulhu Mythos, including the *Necronomicon*, without perpetuating its racism and xenophobia. See the above referenced *Lovecraft Country* by Matt Ruff, Sylvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*, and the updated *Call of Cthulhu* RPGs from Chaosium Inc.

But back to the *Necronomicon*!

While Lovecraft mentioned the *Necronomicon* in several of his short stories and novellas he was deliberate in providing as few details as possible. He understood that the imagination of the reader was far more powerful than anything a specific description could provide. On the one hand, this plays into the fiction of the universe that the *Necronomicon*, by its very nature, drives people to madness and ruin so to even provide a description of appearance or dimensions could inadvertently invite those dangers to the reader. On the other hand, the lack of description also allowed Lovecraft's circle of fellow pulp fiction writers for *Weird Tales* magazine to reference and expand upon the book's influence and history, which he did in his works for other "terrible and forbidden" books.

Oh, remember when I said up top that evil books donâ€™t actually exist, well hereâ€™s Lovecraft kind of agreeing with me in a letter to Willis Conover, saying:

â€œAs for seriously-written books on dark, occult, and supernatural themesâ€”in all truth they donâ€™t amount to much. That is why itâ€™s more fun to invent mythical works like the *Necronomicon* and *Book of Eibon*.â€^[4]

This might be my favorite thing Lovecraft has ever written. I like imagining him getting his hands on supposed occult books, thumbing through them, rolling his eyes and thinking, â€œI can do better.â€ Your mileage may vary on whether he did.

What is agreed upon, for the most part, is that the *Necronomicon* is a hefty tome of well over 700 pages, copied and translated multiple times, and bound in leather of various types with metal clasps. Itâ€™s unclear if other horror writers, in expanding the lore of the *Necronomicon*, added the idea of it being bound in human skin. What is clear is that it was not part of any initial description by Lovecraft when he created the tome, but he wasnâ€™t likely to dissuade people from making that assumption either.



The Evil Dead 2

For my part, the most well known visual depiction of the *Necronomicon* as a book bound in human skin actually comes from Sam Raimiâ€™s *Evil Dead* trilogy where the inspired, but legally distinct, *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis* becomes the primary antagonist to the dimly unlucky Ash Williams (played to

perfection by Bruce Campbell). Whereas Lovecraft and his ilk left room for the imagination through the written word, the demands of visual mediums like movies and television require much more striking imagery. Raimi's decision to depict the *Necronomicon* with a cover sporting a mangled, tortured face and pages filled with bloody ink and terrifying drawings has probably had more influence on later visualizations of the *Necronomicon* but also on the idea of "evil books" in general. You can't tell me that Harriet Sanderson's skin-bound grimoire in *Hocus Pocus* wasn't at the very least inspired by the *Evil Dead's Necronomicon* because I wouldn't believe you. All they did was add a wandering eye. That's like putting a new hat on Malibu Stacy!^[5]

When we start to think about "evil books" and books bound in human skin, there's a cognitive dissonance where we imagine them as authorless. The *Necronomicon* and the *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis* have authors and additional lore, but we tend to forget those aspects of their histories because we want to imagine the book as an inherent force of evil instead of an object constructed by human hands. Making the "evil book" the mcguffin that needs to be found and destroyed sans its author provides an easy and effective solution to the story's problem without requiring the audience to think about the complicity of authors and readers in such evil works.

We can't conceive of real people creating these books and yet real world rumors, urban legend, and actual skin books would prove us wrong.

In her book *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*, Megan Rosenbloom turns a critical yet empathetic eye towards anthropodermic bibliopeggy as she takes the reader through the process of how a book could be bound in such a way. The most shocking revelation of the entire narrative isn't the presence of books bound in human skin, but the era in which it generally occurred and the people who initiated the practice.

Now, dear Reader, if your first thought about the who and when of creating skin books starts and stops with Nazis, then I hate to tell you this but out of all the atrocities committed by the Third Reich, making books bound in human skin isn't one of them. At least, nothing that can be confirmed or proven. Rosenbloom, however, understands the need for people to imagine history's greatest villains as the responsible party for something so horrific. She writes:

It's easier to believe that objects of human skin are made by monsters like Nazis and serial killers, not the well respected doctors the likes of whom parents want their children to become someday.^[6]

As Rosenbloom states early on, the typical perpetrators of anthropodermic bibliopeggy were doctors in and around the late 18th to early 19th centuries. There are definitely outliers that precede and postdate the era, but this is the mostly agreed upon time period in which human skin was utilized. But why this particular time period and why this material? The answers are industrialization, the professionalization of the medical field, and access to bodies. Though not necessarily in that order.

In the modern era, we're conditioned to think that doctors should have a certain amount of professionalism and empathy for their patients. It's a fine line that doctors walk between clinical detachment and actual human emotions, which has been at the forefront of the profession since it emerged in and around the Industrial Revolution. To become a doctor at the time, one needed to understand human anatomy and the only way to do that was to dissect a body. Unfortunately, bodies

were hard to come by from an ethical standpoint and donating ones body to medical schools wasnâ€™t the standard practice of the time. While the Resurrection Men of the era often get the lionâ€™s share of the spotlight regarding abhorrent crimes committed, we tend to forget about the doctors who profited or turned a blind eye for the sake of â€œscienceâ€•.

This is largely Rosenbloomâ€™s point throughout *Dark Archives*. The skin obtained from bodies that bind the currently 50 confirmed existing skin books wasnâ€™t done with malicious intent. It was done with a certain amount of detachment and passivity that appears far more horrific in hindsight. And yet the morbid fascination we have with skin books, perpetuated by popular culture and hyperbolic storytelling, continues to blind us to the fact that real people (often the poor, destitute, and sickly) were treated as no different than a cow or pig; that their bodies were desecrated under the knives of men who sought respectability but saw nothing unconscionable about their actions.



Hocus Pocus

Why do we love evil books? Ironically, thereâ€™s safety in the knowledge that an evil book is easily identifiable and, though formidable, can be destroyed. Any connoisseur of Cthulhu or Deadite enthusiast will recognize the *Necronomicon* and understand the need to carry a flamethrower while

reciting the phrase *Klaatu barada nik*— but in real life skin books are not self-aggrandizing barkers waiting to be thwarted. In real life, skin books pre-date Lovecraft’s *Necronomicon* by a century, nestled among the stacks and shelves of libraries and archives wrapped in the benign evil of their creation.

Skin books are not the product of madness or overt villainy, but they are the result of indifference, desensitization, and ambition. On any given day you can find more information on the doctors who had the skin books created than on the person who had their skin posthumously removed. The *Necronomicon* has more websites dedicated to it than there are records of the persons whose skins sheath books in reputable institutions of higher learning. And that, dear Reader, is more evil than anything Lovecraft and his ilk could ever concoct.

[1] Lovecraft, H.P. “The Hound.” *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*. 25 Dec. 2022, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/>.

[2] This is an example of the author’s sarcasm because Andrew Lang heavily censored and sanitized his collected editions of the Arabian Nights stories.

[3] Ali, Ifran. “Why I’ve Been Waiting for Lovecraft Country.” *Open Book*. 12 Jul. 2020, <https://open-book.ca/Writer-in-Residence/Archives/Irfan-Ali/Why-I-ve-Been-Waiting-for-Lovecraft-Country>.

[4] Lovecraft, H.P. Letter to Willis Conover. 29 Jul. 1936. *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*. <https://www.hplovecraft.com/creation/necron/letters.aspx>.

[5] Congratulations if you got my reference to *The Simpsons* episode “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy”.

[6] Rosenbloom, Megan. *Dark Archives: A Librarian’s Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, pp 176-177.

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