

Alan Moore's Providence Explores the Horror of Reality



As *Providence* gears up for NecronomiCon, a semi-annual gathering to celebrate the life and work of one of Rhode Island's most influential, revered and let's face it, controversial writers of weird fiction, H. P. Lovecraft, an overview of a new comic series from comics legend Alan Moore titled, appropriately enough, *Providence*, seems in order. Alan Moore's *Providence*, from publisher Avatar Comics, acts as a prequel to his earlier comic work, *Neonomicon*, possibly Moore's darkest and most explicit work. The idea behind *Neonomicon* was, in Moore's words, to "put back some of the objectionable elements that Lovecraft himself censored ... Like the racism, the anti-Semitism, the sexism, the sexual phobias that are kind of apparent in all of Lovecraft's slimy, phallic or vaginal monsters [Moore, in an interview with Bram Gieben]." Moore received some criticism for *Neonomicon*, and many felt the explicit sex, gore and rape went too far. Moore has taken some hits in the comics world for what many perceive to be his over reliance on rape as a trope. Moore famously conducted a long interview with Pádraig Ó Méalóid in which he both defended his work and announced he was quitting comics. Since then, of course, *Providence* has hit the shelves, so make of Moore's resignation what you will, and though I don't really want to rehash all of the drama here, I felt it needed to be acknowledged.

Only three of the planned 12 issues of *Providence* have hit store shelves as of this writing. The new series avoids the excesses of *Neonomicon* (so far) and does so while being much more deft in terms of characterization and plotting. *Neonomicon*, to its credit or detriment, was a work of crass, pop excess. *Providence* is a work much more in the Lovecraftian tradition, the underlying horror of reality being revealed subtly, with occasional bursts of terror.

Providence is set in 1919, but is not set in Providence, the city. The first two issues take place in New York City, where Lovecraft lived for a time. Of course, this being a work in the Lovecraftian vein, the work is filled with allusions to Lovecraft's life and fiction, as well as allusions to other writers of weird fiction, like Robert Chambers and Edgar Allan Poe. A website, "Facts in the Case of Alan Moore's

Providence” has sprung up to annotate these allusions.

The central protagonist of *Providence* is Robert Black, a reporter who begins his investigations into the occult because he sees the secretive ways of occult practitioners as a possible metaphor for writing about his own outsider status as a gay man and a Jew. In an interview with Hannah Means Stanton, Moore said, “I decided that I wanted somebody who provided an example of the ‘new American man’ around about 1919. I wanted somebody who was young, who had a sense of purpose, but who was an outsider. Somebody who was not related to the mainstream of American society, whatever that was. I chose some parts of Robert’s character specifically because they resonated interestingly with some of Lovecraft’s prejudices.”

Issue one relies heavily on Lovecraft’s story “Cool Air” about a scientist who keeps himself alive, (in a sense) through refrigeration. The issue also borrows heavily from Robert Chambers’ book *The King in Yellow*, which was corralled into the Lovecraftian Mythos by Lovecraft and others. Chambers’ mythology was referenced extensively in season one of the HBO series “True Detective,” which has led to a revival of interest in Chambers’ work.

We open in the offices of the New York Herald, where Robert Black works as a reporter. With half a page to fill in the newspaper due to the last minute withdrawal of an advertisement, Black decides to investigate a book that, “sent everybody crazy,” a reference to Chambers’ *The King in Yellow*, about a play that drives anyone who reads it mad. Meanwhile, Black’s lover, Jonathan Russell, visits an “exit garden,” a government sponsored Lethal Chamber, to commit suicide. Lethal Chambers are mentioned in another Robert Chambers’ short story, “The Repairer of Reputations.”

The relationship between Black and Russell, which had to remain closeted and secretive due to societal prejudice against homosexuality in 1919, is told in flashbacks. Black, in his writing, refers to Jonathan as Lillian, and is cautious in his use of pronouns to avoid writing about his secret life as a gay man. In the most heartbreaking sequence in the book, Black learns of his lover’s death as his co-workers gossip about the motives for Russell suicide, unaware of the relationship.

Black’s reaction, which he must hide from his co-workers lest they somehow ferret out his truth, is understated and painful. The horror isn’t Lovecraftian, and the reasons for Russell’s death aren’t supernatural. Instead we are subjected to the everyday horrors of life as a closeted and persecuted minority in all its mundane banality.

Issue two takes as its inspiration the Lovecraft short story “The Horror of Red Hook,” also set in New York. The protagonist of Lovecraft’s story, an Irish policeman named Tom Malone, is revealed to be gay in this issue, and he and Robert Black flirt a bit. The secret world and codes of the closeted homosexual are explored. Neither Black nor Malone is free to announce their interest or orientation openly, so there is a dance of words and glances. When Malone touches Black’s hand in the diner, the moment is allowed to linger, and fill with meaning and import, before Black leaves to pursue his investigation.

Of course, to Lovecraft, the real horror of Red Hook, a section of Brooklyn, is, as he puts it in a letter, the “gangs of young loafers and herds of evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere in New York.” Prejudice and xenophobia is a recurring theme or subtext in Lovecraft’s work, one Moore explores in this issue and the next.

In issue three, Robert Black journeys to Salem, Massachusetts. In Lovecraft’s work, Salem is called Innsmouth. Moore introduces Black to several characters who have what Lovecraft called the

"Innsmouth look." In general, the inhabitants look like what happens when people breed with fish, an overtly racist metaphor for miscegenation. In Moore's hands, Lovecraft's story becomes the basis for more humor than horror, though there is a general tenor of unease throughout the issue. One disturbing sequence is Black's dream, in which the Lethal Chambers from issue one have become the Nazi gas chambers of the not-too-distant future.

Three issues in, Alan Moore's *Providence* still hasn't ventured into the city that gives this comic its name. There are allusions to the city: in issue one Black says he may one day write a novel "If Providence allows," and issue two ends in mid-sentence, just before the word Providence would be written. In Moore's handling, Providence seems an inevitable destination on a road paved with the best of intentions. But Providence has other meanings. It means the protective care of God, (perhaps even dark Gods) and the timely preparation for future eventualities. I suspect Moore is exploring the word in all its various meanings.

I can't leave off before saying a word about the art. It is the best art of Jacen Burrows' career, and perfectly suited to the story. Barnaby Evans, creator of Waterfire, put a great deal of effort into wooing Avatar, the publisher of *Providence*, to showcase some of the art from the series at this year's NecronomiCon and to Jacen Burrows to speak at the event. Alas, the publisher was too swamped by the regular comic convention schedule to squeeze us in this year. That's not to say that a local event cannot be organized for the artist and the series in the future, as an event separate from NecronomiCon Providence.