



THE GREAT OUTER DARK

DAVID NEIL LEE

**THE
GREAT
OUTER
DARK**

ALSO BY DAVID NEIL LEE

Young Adult

The Midnight Games

The Medusa Deep

Fiction

Commander Zero

Nonfiction

The Battle of the Five Spot: Ornette Coleman and the New York

Jazz Field

Chainsaws: A History

Four-Wheeling on Southern Vancouver Island

Stopping Time: Paul Bley and the Transformation of Jazz

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– Book 3 of the Midnight Games trilogy –



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To Adam Christopher Strom (1978–2023)
We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.

As a boy I'd been afraid of the dark –
or, more specifically, of monsters.
– T.E.D. Klein, “Children of the Kingdom”

PROLOGUE SPRING

MEGHAN: WHERE IS NATE? He told me he'd be back here "soon." Back from where? "The BC coast"? Why is he on the BC coast? How is what's happening there more important than what's happening here?

MEHRI: I thought he wouldn't mind being the only guy in the Furies. But there's been no contact. My brother doesn't know anything either.

MEGHAN: The Resurrection Church of the Ancient Gods is back, looking less like a church than ever. I watched one of their "new day is coming" ceremonies at the construction site downtown, across from the GO Centre. What is that thing? The building. I saw the Church's logo on it.

MEHRI: Nate's theory was a zillion-storey condo tower funded and controlled by the Church. Now it looks finished, but it's only six storeys high. It's taken over the whole block across from the GO Centre – even the Timmies is gone!

MEGHAN: Big crowd around it the other night – they had the cops out. It was like that awful night at the stadium last fall, except this time people seemed happy, like the Ticats had won the Grey Cup. And since it went up,

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there's a weird vibe in the city. A very weird vibe. Like even the air itself is trembling with rage. Can you feel it?

PART 1
DR. ELDRITCH
AND HIS COSMIC
WONDER CIRCUS

Mystery takes concrete form in monsters.

– Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*

CHAPTER 1

THE FLIES

I stumbled out of the airship into the city's North End, its rusted roofs, torn chain-link fences and crumbling pavements still radiating the heat of the dying day. As usual, the continuum threshold that had popped *Sorcerer* out into earthly skies had ignited a thunderstorm, but the clouds were already blowing away to the south. As the sky cleared, waves of mist blew the fresh-blood smell of hot metal across the stained asphalt landscape. I was home.

Okay, I'd been away, I get it. A place called . . . a place . . . I scratched my head . . . Hardly Any Goth? Sounds like a doomed clothing store. But, whatever, I'd been there for ages . . . days and days that felt like years. I was yearning so hard to get home.

And what had I found in that place? Fog, night . . . danger . . . a mass of hostile creatures swirling around us like fog . . . winged figures in the distance, soaring into black canyons between mile-high cliffs . . . an alien voice calling, "Nashthinan Shwishfa!"

Hardly any . . . I remembered the name: R'lyhnygoth. More than just another place, it was a whole other planet.

Now I was home . . . but my head was buzzing. Why the hell would I want to come back to *this*? I squinted at my world through a red haze.

As *Sorcerer* descended, the idea was that, when we touched

down, we'd stay on board and not rush to get outside. Tobias would listen to the radio for updates.

Listen to the radio? "Tobias," I'd said, "we *will* be getting back into cell networks and, you know, there *is* this thing called the internet . . ."

"The radio still works perfectly well," Tobias said. "News is still news." One way or another we'd make a plan. But the closer we got to the surface, the antsier I got. As we began to make out details on the surface – downtown Hamilton, the stadium and, in the barren North End, the derelict warehouse that served as *Sorcerer's* hangar – I felt rage radiating like summer heat from the city under us. I could relate to the feeling; as we got closer, I was getting angrier and angrier myself.

"Get me outta here." I'd had it with this place and these people. I got louder and louder about my need to get off the ship – until finally, once the vessel landed, my fellow crew members couldn't wait to get it moored and secured, open the doors and put me out along with the trash.

"I'm gone!" I yelled. No one tried to stop me, offer a word of caution or kick me in the ass (probably their first reflex). Through LOAD/EVAC, I exited into what seemed like a dark, stuffy basement, littered with weeds and broken cement. Hot drafts from the waning turbulence of the ship's huge turbines wafted through the corrugated steel shell they called Hangar Central.

I stumbled and swore in the darkness, then pushed through a crash door to stagger into a summer sunset.

What the hell was even happening? The last time I'd been here, by my personal calendar, was a little over one week ago, at night in a March blizzard. I'd thought I was sneaking into an old

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warehouse, but it wasn't a building, it was an airship – *Sorcerer*. The next thing I knew, we were hovering over a Pacific inlet on the west coast and then shortly afterwards, to get us out of a jam, *Sorcerer* had opened up a thing called a continuum threshold which had taken us to another planet – R'lyhnygoth, home of the Great Old Ones.

Right, that was the key. Dammit, brain, start working! The hub-rim differential. All I could remember was that at this other place, R'lyhnygoth, time ran differently – in the space of one minute there, forty minutes went by on Earth. Now I was back, but because the week I'd been gone included a few days on R'lyhnygoth, it was three months later on Earth. I'd left during a blizzard and, coming back, fallen through a door that dumped me into Hamilton's North End in thirty plus degree heat. I felt like a shrimp in a barbecue.

The old factory's outdoor receiving area was separated from the railroad tracks by a gated chain-link fence. I tried to picture it at night, covered in snow, the way I'd last seen it. Which way had I come in? I was facing the setting sun, so the tracks on my left must lead south into town. I could walk to the right, where a lane of broken asphalt presented an easier walk around the corner of the building. But the hangar was enormous – it had to be, to fit an airship. Path or no path, no way was I taking the long way in this heat.

I took a run at the fence, jumped, hooked my fingers through the mesh straddling a fence post, climbed, then swivelled over the top and dropped to the ground. I looked back at the hangar. Its domed "roof" was actually *Sorcerer's* gasbag, its front end sheathed in the silvery material of the re-entry nacelle. I started down the track.

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I was agitated, and so was my phone. Since *Sorcerer* had returned to Earth in a burst of thunder, my phone had been buzzing like a wasp nest. Finally, I silenced it. A nagging voice in my head told me I should go home and give Dad – and his brother, and his brother’s wife, and his brother’s young kids, my cousins – some idea of where I’d been for the last few months. Before we’d landed, I’d spent time rehearsing how I would fess up all that news. Now, who cared?

With the summer heat, plant life in the North End had exploded, wildflowers creeping like wildfire along both sides of the track. Dandelions, milkweed, lilacs, daisies, buzzing with the smug hum of pollinating insects. Stomping along in gumboots and hockey socks, my progress was much faster than it had been when I’d searched here in a blizzard and when, at the moment my quest had looked hopeless and I was ready to turn back, I seemed, through sheer willpower, to summon out of the storm *Sorcerer* and its ramshackle hangar.

So far, it looked like business as usual in the city. I waited at the light on Burlington Street – coming up here through a blizzard, it had been so deserted that I’d hardly noticed it. At Beach Road, I stopped in a little playground to peel off my hoodie. I shoved my phone into my jeans, eager to get home and change – even a pair of jeans felt like too much in this weather.

At the underpass, two sets of tracks crossed. Above me, a freight train rocked and moaned on the tracks that headed from Toronto through Hamilton to Niagara and then over the border to New York. Even if I’d just crossed a galaxy, New York seemed so far away.

Something was hanging off the bridge like a joke, a Halloween leftover pinned over the railway underpass. Before walking

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under it, I backed up and took a good look. This was more than a prank or a funny costume. The world around me went silent, then out of the silence rose the buzzing of flies. My nose wrinkled. What a stink! In the heat, a big mess of something had gone very bad. Then it began to take shape before my eyes.

I'd never called 911 before. I pulled out my phone and got a busy signal. I looked at the atrocity hanging off the bridge and called again.

"No operators are available to take your call, but if you're in a situation that you can't take care of yourself, we're here for you. Stay on the line. Remember that Oracle knows the gate. Oracle is the gate. Oracle is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in Oracle."

What the . . . ? I hung up and phoned 911 again. This time, I got a person.

"Police, ambulance, fire or vengeance?"

Whatever. I told them where I was and what I was looking at. "Just south of Beach as you go under the railway bridge. Someone's been killed, and . . . well, they hung the body off the bridge."

"Did you try CPR?"

"Look, it's somebody . . . they've been dead a long time."

The 911 operator sounded like a guy – older than me, of course, in his twenties or thirties. He laughed. "Just messing with ya. That's our girl Marty. She's been up there all month."

"It's your . . . *What?*"

"She was *not* getting with the program. But look, bud, everyone knows this. What's your problem?"

"Problem? She's a dead person. I'm reporting a death."

"That's not death you're looking at, buddy. That's justice.

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Marty had all the options; she made her own choices. Remember that Oracle knows the gate. Oracle is the gate –”

I hung up, took a quick look at the corpse again and slunk against the wall of the underpass until I got to the other side.

“Oracle is the gate”? This sounded like the sort of thing that one of those Resurrection Church numbnuts would say.

Ahead of me a car thumped over the tracks, heading from Markle Avenue into the potholed parking lot of the old chain factory/Resurrection Church headquarters where I’d been locked in the basement with a dying Interlocutor – now I knew it as a *bihyagbi* – and where Cody and I had come face to face with a *dritch*. I had to laugh – had someone moved into that place? Wait till they found the burrow in the basement and came face to face with what lived in that burrow.

Another car thumped over the tracks. Then another.

The chain-link fences around the old factory were new, glinting silver in the morning sun. Except for the open gate of the front driveway, they ran around the property uninterrupted; the railway gates leading to the loading dock were gone, the tracks blocked by the new fencing reinforced by concrete barricades. Chinks in the building’s brick wall had been patched. The front doors were fixed, and over them a white illuminated sign showed a symbol I’d hoped never to see again, its LED and scrolling text bright and perky against the orange sunset.



TOLD YA THEYD BE BACK
AND GUESS WHAT?
YA BETTER BELEIVE IT!

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I stopped to look – had to stop, so many cars were bouncing over the tracks on their way into the refurbished compound. In the parking lot, a CHCH crew was setting up a tripod, checking sound levels. As the light faded, cellphones flashed as people took selfies.

What was going on? My first thought was that the Church had gone into direct competition with *Sorcerer*, erecting their own airship hangar, a hasty construction of billowing blue plastic. But it wasn't a hangar; it was a circus tent. These people were here for a show. They entered the tent by skirting the old warehouse building and passing under white arches that sported that ubiquitous logo and a proud sign:

SEE THE WONDER!!! BE THE WONDER!!!
DOCTOR EL AND HIS
COSMIC WONDER CIRCUS!!!
AS SEEN ON TV

On each side of the entrance a long white-painted 4x4 timber had been pounded into the ground, and crowned by some kind of shapeless artifact or artwork. I didn't pay much attention to these three-metre posts, letting myself be swept between them as I drifted into the centre of the excited crowd. Then, just like back at the underpass, I heard the buzzing of flies.

CHAPTER 2

IN THIS UNIVERSE OF MIRACLES

The darkness deepened, and lights went on all over the property. I saw that a halo of flies surrounded the top of each post – there on each of them, hung a human head; each with a long gutter spike driven through its protesting mouth into the top of the timber. Shocked, I looked around to see if anyone else was seeing this. But nobody in the crowd seemed to take much notice, except to point and hoot insults as they thronged by.

What the hell was going on here? The 911 operator had told me that a corpse hanging off a railway underpass was business as usual – the only weird thing was that someone would think it was a problem.

Suddenly I cheered up. I chuckled to myself as I walked past. Hey, losers, you screwed up, no second chance! Below each head bloodstained signs read, TRAITOR, UNBELIVER (the Church’s sign-maker clearly had a hard time with “believe”), et cetera.

Then I stopped: What was I thinking? This shit was horrific.
What’s happening?

When I glanced up, I got a shock like being grabbed in the dark. The closest head was looking at me, mouth open in a scream, spike protruding like a devil’s tongue. The face looked

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right into my eyes and for a moment I thought it was my own face – some young guy, someone like me, someone . . . I recognized the face.

It was Cody. The head belonged to Cody, my schoolyard nemesis since childhood, the last person I'd been to this building with, months ago, when it was still just an abandoned warehouse with a ditch in the basement. Cody, who told me, "The Old Ones were on our side." Cody, who spent all his young life in a state of rage and now was pinned in rage forever. Cody, terrified in his last moments, staked like a vampire before the setting sun to warn others not to go where he went, say what he said, do whatever it was he did.

I pushed back a wave of nausea as the crowd swept me through the tent's welcoming entrance. Why were they all so happy? Inside my head a lot of shouting was going on:

Serves him right! / No one deserves that!

Righteous payback for that loser, Cody! / Why would anyone . . . ?

Next time that happens, I want in! / Those are human heads – *heads!*

Inside the tent were bleachers and the scents of popcorn and sawdust, overlaid with a stranger smell that made me think of dank tunnels to dark places, and a creature dying, leaving, in place of its life, streaks of fading phosphorescence and words.

The hihyaghi called the Interlocutor had shown me "something that must be seen" – the stars. She'd said, "Sorcerer, too, is a *thing* . . . not a *thing* like me." What did she mean?

I found a seat on the highest bleacher, at the back in the corner. I watched the crowd that was pouring in, vying with each other to get as close to the front as possible. Sure, they

were assholes and losers but . . . As soon as I started to get alarmed, my thoughts would be drowned out by waves of anger – righteous, satisfying anger – and a dead certainty that this was all, in the end, for a good cause. It was all worthwhile, it was all for Oracle.

Oracle? Who or what was Oracle? I took my head in my hands, wanted to open a door and shine a light into my skull: Who's in there?

I heard a clatter of steel tanks, and loud *whoomps* of igniting gas sent hot gusts of propane stink across the tent's dirt floor. A gridded steel barrier was being folded back to each side of the stage, and around a cavernous trap door that had appeared in its centre half a dozen men with tiger torches had positioned themselves, avoiding the yawning darkness below and trying gingerly not to burn themselves, or each other, or set fire to the tent.

Jimmy, who I knew as the Proprietor's right-hand man back in Raphe Therpens's better days, took the floor, microphone in hand, glancing back nervously at the dark opening behind him. A short, heavy-set, dark-haired man, I had to admit Jimmy was looking good in a dark tie and a blue pinstripe suit. He tapped on the microphone, and the noise gradually subsided as people found seats. Then he began.

"I knew this was going to be a special day." Jimmy paused for dramatic effect. "These are happy days. Life has never been better for us. But we still haven't got everyone on board. There are always people who just want to wreck everything – that's just what they're like.

"Who here isn't scared of ditches?" Jimmy asked the crowd. They murmured back at him. "But who hasn't seen us bend

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dritchies . . . befriend dritchies . . . make them our buddies . . . command dritchies as attack dogs, turn these magnificent creatures into assault weapons to destroy our enemies and defend our faith?” The crowd cheered.

“*Because we’ve got God on our side.* Because the family of God has come to Earth. Because we know they’ve come to help us. To save us. Because they’re here beside us.”

I looked beside me. On one side, the end of the bleacher and on the other side, a balding dad in a sleeveless shirt bickered with a little girl over a bag of Cheezies.

On cue, at the edge of the stage, a dozen or so people began singing softly.

“All these years I’ve kept on hopin’
That a change is in the wind.
Someday soon the sky will open
To let the old gods rule again.”

I was getting a headache. There was something too familiar about all this. What was a dritch again? The word made me think of Cody. Where *did* I know him from? And why was all this so hard? What was the matter with my head?

I’d heard this song before, but now it segued into something else. The crowd started clapping hands, and a chorus somewhere in the bleachers started up something more rousing.

“The lord is here again
Gonna get us to the top and then
If you got any doubts, my friend
Just ask O-oh-oh-ra-cle!”

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The clapping spread through the crowd; the rhythm was irresistible but I resisted it and tried to concentrate. The crowd parted as a man in a black top hat and black cape made his way up the aisle, shaking hands as he reached the open gate and took the stage. For a chilling second, I thought it might be the Proprietor, newly recovered from the raving dipstick in a wheelchair I'd seen in the street a few months ago.

Up on stage, Jimmy gestured at the approaching figure. The house lights went down, and for a few moments there was only the glow of the fading sunset filtering through the blue plastic roof.

“And now” – Jimmy’s voice raised excitedly – “you’ve seen him on CHCH’s After Sundown sessions . . . you’ve loved him online so much that Blog for the Gods gets a million hits a day. Let the performance begin. I give you, ladies and gentlemen – the incredible Doctor Eldritch and His Cosmic Wonder Circus!”

Dr. Eldritch took the stage, throwing his glistening cape over his shoulder and doffing his top hat to the audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, and those of you who, in this universe of miracles, preserve and express your own unique identities, welcome. We all know that we’re seeing the dawn of a wonderful new age. Wonderful, but evil has not been vanquished; we haven’t managed that. Instead, with your help, with your work, with your love, evil is coming under our control. The monsters of your nightmares are now our willing servants and slaves. Tonight, I’ll show you the vicious Stipley Devil – but don’t worry, this devil is my apprentice, my accomplice, my willing fellow performer in tonight’s show. The dritch, long a favourite of Church followers – barring, of course,

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occasional mishaps – the dritch, in my hands, is really just a big eager-to-please puppy dog. And at the urging of management, another new, uh . . .”

Dr. Eldritch missed a beat, as if he really wasn't all that crazy about the new attraction, but he shook himself and continued his patter for a crowd who seemed to regard him as a genuine celebrity.

“Give 'em hell, Doctor El!” someone shouted from the back.

“But what's this?” Dr. Eldritch had turned to wave to his fans and when he turned back, an assistant had pulled a drop cloth off a tall wicker basket in the middle of the stage. Continuing his stage patter – “Demon-haunted avocations of the mysterious east . . . dwellers in mystic domains long hidden from Western eyes . . .” Dr. Eldritch pulled from a pocket a plastic recorder like the one I used to play in school, and began to play some kind of tune so badly that I couldn't figure out what it really was. Notes broke and went flat, he took breaths at all the wrong places, but he did it swaying in rhythm, and in response to that rhythm, something emerged from the wicker basket.

From seeing similar scenes in a zillion old movies, I expected a cobra, but this thing was more like a periscope – jointed like a leg rather than sinuous like a snake, and instead of a head it ended in a dull bony point with no visible eyes or mouth. Nevertheless, the audience fell silent, fascinated by Dr. El's snake-charming act.

The “snake” swayed to Dr. El's rhythm, and the audience picked up on the spirit of the performance. “I wanna pet that snake!” someone yelled. “Wannit to be my pet doggie!” yelled another.

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After a minute or so, Dr. Eldritch's hopeless recorder playing came to an end, his last phrase trailing off into a musical death rattle. The stage shuddered beneath him. Suddenly the wicker basket toppled, the floor heaved and, bony feelers rattling and wagging, the armoured head of a dritch erupted from the floor.



The UK blog Bookhype calls David Neil Lee “one of Canada’s most distinctive contemporary authors.” David has written the novels *Commander Zero*, *The Midnight Games* and *The Medusa Deep*, as well as the international bestseller *Chainsaws: A History* and the acclaimed jazz books *The Battle of the*

Five Spot and (with jazz pianist Paul Bley) *Stopping Time*. In 2016, the City of Hamilton awarded David’s Lovecraftian young adult novel, *The Midnight Games*, the Kerry Schooley award for “the book that best conveys the spirit of Hamilton.” Originally from British Columbia, he has lived in Mission, BC; Toronto and London, Ontario; and Madeira Park, BC, and currently resides with his wife Maureen in Hamilton. His website is davidneillee.com.