



The Croning

Laird Barron , Rubén Martín Giráldez (translator)

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Strange things exist on the periphery of our existence, haunting us from the darkness looming beyond our firelight. Black magic, weird cults and worse things loom in the shadows. The Children of Old Leech have been with us from time immemorial. And they love us...

Donald Miller, geologist and academic, has walked along the edge of a chasm for most of his nearly eighty years, leading a charmed life between endearing absent-mindedness and sanity-shattering realization. Now, all things must converge. Donald will discover the dark secrets along the edges, unearthing savage truths about his wife Michelle, their adult twins, and all he knows and trusts. For Donald is about to stumble on the secret...

...of The Croning.

From Laird Barron, Shirley Jackson Award-winning author of *The Imago Sequence* and *Occultation*, comes *The Croning*, a debut novel of cosmic horror.

The Croning Details

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From Reader Review The Croning for online ebook

Carmen says

[to a Satanist. Or perhaps to a demon itself

T.E. Grau says

Laird Barron made me gain five pounds.

No, he didn't hold me down and shovel deep fried butter wedges into my gaping yapper (although, dare to dream). What he did was write a colossal piece of fiction that was nearly impossible to put down, even at the gym, where I do much of my reading every morning. As I hazily recall, just before cracking open Barron's debut novel *The Croning* some weeks back, I marched my happy ass off to the local garishly lit LA Fitness, eager to absorb a few pages in between moving weighted objects from one place to another. Forty-five minutes later I found myself on the floor, sprawled in some lazy stretching pose, peering at the pages in front of me with wide, slightly twitching eyes while sadly oblivious meatheads preened in front of mirrors around me. I was hooked, boated, and clubbed, and stayed that way until I closed the last page some blurry span of time later. As I became doughier, I also became more willing, suppliant. I was fattened and ready for the provender plate of dear Old Leech. Just like They wanted it.

Barron's storytelling has that rare power of grip, weaving a particular strain of beautiful, sinewy prose that somehow possesses enough tiny microfibers to pick up the grit and sharp things swept into the corners of forgotten history. Both beautiful and monstrous, his evocative imagery lures you into the forest with the cadence of lost eons, leaves you in expectant silence, and then rips back the shading canopy, exposing you to the terrible realities that lie waiting under the thin veneers of bullshit "civilization".

Not surprisingly, the writing is a reflection of the writer and his unique experience set. Barron grew up in the wilds of Alaska and spent several years fishing the murderous Bering Sea and racing the Iditarod on arctic tundra like some goddamn throwback to a time of brawnier, more road-tested scribes, who could lay down some poetic verse before laying you out in a pool of your own teeth for spilling his drink. Papa Hemingway. Jack London. Dashiell Hammett in a parka. All sitting in the corner booth of the Bar on the Borderland, waiting for their Weirddling pals from the Pulp to show up and swap stories of the violent and strange.

Indeed, his meaty, imaginative style is an amalgam of all of these rough and smooth elements, taking shape as a barrel-chested ballerina, a professional wrestler moonlighting as an ice skater. A pagan ninja hopped up on blood saki, beautifully weaponizing the sublime and stuffing horror into documented and geological mysteries long buried for a reason. Barron respectfully nods his heads to his forebearers, but is truly his own man, blazing his trail through the wild, untamed places to find the haunted ruins. The cryptic mounds. The dolmens... This is Weird fiction boiled hard.

Unfairly or not, Barron is often compared to (elder)godfather of cosmic horror H.P. Lovecraft, but in many ways, Barron's work is far more bleak than the Gentleman from Providence. In Lovecraft's Mythos, profoundly alien Great Old Ones and Outer Gods were mostly oblivious or apathetic to our meaningless existence. The horror often came from the realization of unimaginable truth. Much like Barron, HPL's protagonists reflected the man, and as such, were bookish and aloof, ghosts in the coal powered machine, sneering strangers in the hated crowd. In Laird's "Barronic Mythos" (an increasingly legitimate construct that I may or may not have just given a name), the unearthly entities not only know where we are and what

we're doing, they pop in from time for a bite, and/or to continually fuck with us just because they can. His characters ARE the crowd, reflecting all strata of life, from the aristocratic elite to the shithouse dogs. Barron understand them all, and spares none. All are claymation figurines caught up in a Game Unutterable organized before the beginning of time. All of them are doomed, and Barron allows us a front row seat to the slow, excruciating execution.

The Croning, Barron's first full-length novel after making his bones and racking up accolades as a conjurer of short fiction, is a perfect reflection of what he does as a writer, while serving as a stage one culmination of much of his storytelling from the past decade. Characters, artifacts, and even families that were introduced in such short stories as "Mysterium Tremendum" and "The Men From Porlock" reappear in The Croning ready to cast off their potential and reveal their dreadful destiny. After a prologue of sorts, which serves as more than just a pitch-black origin story of Rumpelstiltskin, we are lead through three life stages of the affable geologist Don Miller, and together, we follow Don as he follows his brilliant and headstrong wife Michelle, forever living in her secretive shadow as she chases arcane anthropological discoveries around the world, when not locked away in her study researching her family tree, obsessing over the hard-to-find root system buried impossibly deep in the antediluvian loam. As Michelle pursues her own path that occasionally intersects with her husband, Don is left to reflect on his own life barely lived, and in doing so, starts to unspool – with the help of off-the-grid intelligence agencies, old money eccentrics, and even his own son – the mind shattering reality of what has been slithering around his ankles and through his home for decades, and his role in ongoing Outer Machinations older than the cosmos and twice as dangerous. Cults and conspiracies. Secret societies and powerful bloodlines with grand designs forged through unwholesome alliances dating back to the Stone Age. Mind snuffing dread born beyond the reach of time and space. This is the world of The Croning, and this is the writing of Laird Barron, who effectively synthesizes science fiction with science fact, creating a New Kind of Truth that can be as mortifying as it is wondrous. And it all works. Perfectly, it works.

Much like Bloch, Carter, Lumley, Campbell, Klein, and even Ligotti before him, and with the curiously scarred crone looming protectively behind him, Laird Barron has emerged as the new poster boy of cosmic horror, thankfully without a shred of pastiche anywhere in the shot. The Croning shows an already masterful writer fully in the throws of his own, unique style somehow getting better, and that bodes well for us, his readership, which grows by the hour. We are the Children of Old Leech, and we love you.

In the end, and after all of this convoluted blather, I supposed the highest compliment I can pay The Croning is that it's the sort of novel I wish I had written had I not first read it. It's a gift of cosmic naturalist horror that will force you to re-examine everything and everyone around you, if only slightly. The X-Files in print, only infinitely scarier and hitting far closer to home. It will make you fear the trees. It will make you check for zippers.

I reckon that's not too shabby for a first novel.

Layton says

Initial Review Before I Was Able To Gather My Thoughts:

This is the best book I've read in years. I'm in awe of Laird Barron.

My friends who have this marked as to-read, move it up your list for lord's sake. I'll try to write a more comprehensive review at a later time but for now I'm just going to let it all sink in.

REAL Review:

I finished The Croning two days ago and I am still thinking about the epic scope and terror this novel is packing.

Cosmic horror never has really scared me. Lovecraft never has, I just enjoy the whole mythology aspect of his stories. The Croning is everything that Ligotti or Lovecraft ever hoped that their stories would be, and more. It's a novel that filled me with dread and terror on an unsurpassed level. It made me feel how small and unimportant I was in this universe, a feeling Lovecraft always set out to convey in his stories but, in my honest opinion, was never truly successful at doing.

The Croning is also at its heart about a marriage and that marriage acts as the frame from which the whole story is based around, with the husband, Don, being the protagonist.

And whilst this marriage is important, the story is truly frightening because it is Don's story more than his wife Michelle's. It's a story about how at over eighty years of age Don's world, and his sanity along with it, begins to fall apart because everything he has ever known, his marriage, his successful career, his family, they all turn out to be lies in some respect. And it is brutal because I can't imagine what this character was going through.

The story wasn't just scary based on these psychological aspects though, it also packed a punch with some creepy old school monsters, but I'm not going to give much away because that could ruin the whole story for you. I'll just say that some portions of this story, like when Don's son tells a story about when he worked at a department store as a teenager, kept me awake at night. They were just that creepy.

I also really liked the characters especially Michelle, Don's wife. She is one of the most complicated and complex characters I've read about in years and I think it is just perfect that she was featured on the cover. That scar on her face comes to later define her in this book, so it just naturally works that the cover gives us a good look at it.

The one thing about this story that truly amazed me is how Laird Barron managed to write the damn thing. There is just no way a writer should be able to set up a story like this and plan it out and make it so complex. It really defies logic.

This is a great story and for any seasoned fan of dark fantasy, cosmic horror, weird fiction, or just straight up horror, this is a must read. And I mean that in the most serious way.

My Highest Recommendation:

5 hollowed-out-by-the-children-of-old-leech stars out of 5 and best book of the year so far.

Jon Recluse says

Like straw into gold, Barron spins words into a palpable darkness, weaving a tapestry of old gods and modern madness in this masterful work of literary horror. From it's horrific re-imagining of Rumpelstiltskin that out-grims the Brothers Grimm, the story unravels with the logic of a nightmare, as a forgotten evil reaches out from the dim past into the present day.

Barron brings an unspeakable allure to horror, creating a beautiful dark gem, it's facets beckoning us with the cold caress of fear sweat that sets one's skin crawling, and the promise of a sweet insanity that will haunt our

dreams for all the nights of our lives.

Highest possible recommendation!

Char says

I thought if I waited a few days, I would have the time to give this book the review it deserves, but I was wrong.

It deserves something though, so here it is: I think this book was outstanding. The prose, the imagery, even the vivid retelling of an old fairy tale-all converged to produce this "out of this world" novel.

It's literary, it's scary, it's darkly beautiful. You should read it.

That is all.

Kimberly says

WOW! Review to follow, after I can get my thoughts straight.....
In the meantime, READ THIS BOOK. :)

Okay....

THE CRONING, by Laird Barron is quite possibly the most hauntingly, beautiful novel I have read all year. I would consider this work "literary-horror" at its absolute finest.

We begin Chapter One with a "different" version of the Rumpilstiltskin fairy tale that we learned as children.

The adult version, undiluted. ***"... There are frightful things, Groom. Time is a ring . . . We who crawl in the dark love you . . ."***

Barron then takes us to a modern-day family: Don Miller and his beautiful wife, Michelle (Mock). The scenes go back and forth from various snippets of past events in their lives, to their current one--after celebrating being married for 60 years. At one point, we learn of their twins, Holly and Kurt (now around 50 years of age).

While it can be a bit disorienting to change the scene/year/events so often, there was never a moment when I wanted to peel my eyes away from those written words. For in every section, there was *something* worth savoring, no matter what the current subject. ***"... dread compelled him, the way it compels a man to look into an abyss, to entertain the notion of leaping in ..."***

Very methodically, little connections are made without regard to the order they appear in the characters' lives. ***"I blend in when I want to . . . I'm the hidden figure in the grotesque of a tapestry . . ."*** Some of my favorite scenes were of the patches we are given of Don's life through the years:

"... An entire reservoir of suppressed memories could easily await him, burbling and seething below the surface of his placid consciousness . . ."

"Don figured the low-grade amnesia was also equal parts self-preservation. . ."

The complexity of the novel was one of its most compelling attractions. The thought-provoking, often lyrical prose was something that I couldn't ignore. Simple statements often left me contemplating the implications long before the final scene was shown. ***" . . . to gaze into that nullity and to comprehend its scope was to have one's humanity snuffed . . ."*** Over and over, the key to the puzzle kept bringing us back to the subject of time: ***" . . . Yes, time is a squirming, hungry ring that wriggles and worms across reality. It eats everything . . ."***

When I--almost regrettably--came to the last few ages of this brilliantly-woven novel, all of the separate threads (scenes) suddenly lined up, and I was able to fully see the entire picture as a whole. . . The characters, their actions and reactions, the journeys and vacations--all played off each other perfectly! This was something I was simply not able to appreciate until looking back--and what makes this book even more remarkable and ultimately, memorable, to myself.

I'll leave you with two last quotes to think upon.

"Cowardice tastes like fear, and they enjoy the taste of fear very much . . ."

" . . . Monsters go wherever monsters wanna go."

Highest possible recommendation!

Jason Parent says

My first read of Laird Barron, and I can guarantee I'll be lining up more. What seems to be a popular motif at the moment (until the bandwagon tips over), Barron gives his take on a classic fairy tale, modernizes it, and makes it oh-so-enjoyably full of dread.

I am convinced this story was inspired by the poet and apparent knight, Sir Mix-A-Lot, when he opined: "ooh, rumple smooth skin. You say you wanna get in my Benz?"

Yes, Rumplesmooth... ahem... Rumpelstiltskin provides little more than an anecdote, this yarn spinning a new tale from the loin cloth of the universe! Or at least from the honeycomb of Laird Barron's mind.

There was a mention on like page 2 of someone spinning gold. After that... Watch out for "The Conqueror Worm". "Ouroboros comes in view. Ouro comes in view..." - and that was a very bad joke no one will get.

Hey, I write these things for me. Now, where was I? Oh yeah, the book.

Well, I didn't read the book. I bought the audiobook. A woman narrates, and I am pleased to say she was my first... uh... woman... narrator. She stunk at male voices just as all the males stink at female voices (of all I have experienced to date - can't they work in pairs?). But her narration was pitch and otherwise perfect, Adam DeVine-style. And she nailed the women...er... voices.

Aside- hey my review, I'll be as random as I want. I loved the dog in this story. Three stories in a row with good dogs, I've read (and in Yoda, I talk). The last two had scenes from the dog's point of view. Not sure how I feel about that...

(taking ADD meds)... Okay, The Croning is beautifully written and it is obvious Barron takes his time choosing each and every word carefully (a trait I should practice when choosing Bangkok prostitutes)

... and, after the initial Miller's tale, he takes a bit too much time, creating a lull in the story with lots of description and a rambling ghost story with very little point...

But from then on, yay books! I was going to try to describe the mood of the tale in emoticons but I only know how to make three and this one :P is not very accurate. So I will simply describe it thus: you're like "meh", then you're like "meh, aw Thule", then you're like "read in bed", then "read in bed, check closet", then "read in bed, check closet, under bed, and tighten lightbulbs" then "fuck reading in bed", then you're like "Heh, that one guy does kinda remind me of Vincent D'Onofrio in Men in Black", then "only an idiot would go into the woods", then "only an idiot would go into the cave," then "only an idiot would hike up a mountain", then "you're an idiot, but that's awesome, oops I pee'd a little" then "woah."

I can't believe you just read that.

Anyway, to sum up, this book has pages.

It also happens to have some damn fine writing on them... 4.5 stars

Brett Talley says

Note: I received an ARC copy of The Croning.

It's rare that I read a book and think to myself, I could never have written this. Call it hubris, pride if you will. It just doesn't happen.

I could never have written Laird Barron's The Croning, and I consider that the ultimate compliment.

I'm a naturally optimistic guy, and it shows in my writing. I like keeping hope alive, and so even when I write horror, it tends to have a hopeful tone. The Croning is not hopeful. It is not sunny. It's dark man, way dark.

Don and Michelle are what I suppose might be the typical academic couple. He's a geologist who spends most of his time doing boring things with rocks, while Michelle is a globe-trotting anthropologist, searching to the ends of the earth for lost civilizations and ancient, hidden knowledge of world's beyond our knowing. Michelle's curiosity threatens to kill the cat, however, as she and Don find themselves in a world of nameless cults that worship the god known by many names, though his friends call him Old Leach.

So that's the prosaic description. It's inaccurate. Don't believe it. In fact, ignore it all together. The book descends into beautifully written insanity from the first page, and it never lets up. Barron writes like Hemmingway might have if he weren't so boring. (Though I did like For Whom The Bell Tolls, but I digress). The Croning isn't a novel; it's an amusement park ride. You read the first sentence and the bottom falls out. Good luck holding on to the end.

But if you survive, you will have experienced something special. A twisting and spiraling descent into madness, The Croning is the kind of book that burrows into your brain and has you jumping at shadows. Laird Barron has managed to create a universe as black and uncaring as any since H.P. Lovecraft. Not for the faint of heart, but if you can bear to step out of the light, The Croning will teach you why all men fear the

darkness.

Gabrielle says

Don Miller is missing some memories. Now that he is about to celebrate his sixtieth wedding anniversary, people shrug it off as an early onset of senility, but these blanks started a long time ago, before old age could be considered a factor of memory loss. It doesn't bother his beloved wife Michelle, but then, she is pretty unflappable: a world-famous anthropologist, she still travels the world to attend conferences and conduct field research on mysterious lost civilizations, with no indication that she plans on slowing down or stopping. But eventually, the fog in Don's mind lifts enough for him to realize that certain things, such as secret occult societies, conspiracies that span millennia and the strange powers of old bloodlines might just be best left forgotten.

That's all you need to know about the plot. I was lured in with what I first thought was a simple retelling of the Rumpelstiltskin folk tale, but after just a couple of pages, the tone changed and I was hooked. The narrative structure puts us right in Don's shoes: slightly confused, aware of something dark just at the periphery of our perception. "The Croning" is weird, ominous, and bizarrely sensual in just the right way: you couldn't have pried the book out of my hands, and the images it evoked are still seared into my brain. The different strands of the story are brought together perfectly at the end, and that final view of the whole tapestry made me appreciate how brilliant Barron is, and how carefully he assembled this novel. What a beautiful spiral of monstrous insanity!

This is my first Laird Barron book, and I think I am a little bit in love. His gorgeous, chilling and atmospheric prose, the way he lays out his creepy story, the intriguing characters he summons... Wow! His style obviously appeals to the Lovecraft fan in me, but honestly, this is just amazing writing that goes beyond genre. It's dark, beautiful, blood-soaked and irresistible. He's also not quite as nihilistic as my buddy H.P., which makes his universe even creepier. Cthulhu and the Elder Gods don't care about humanity and never have, but the Children of Old Leech love us...

How did he cram so much awesomeness into such a short book?! But then again, I might have exploded if the book had been any longer. If you like literary cosmic horror and have been looking for a rich treat, get this book. Highly, highly recommended!

Katy says

Book Info: Genre: Horror Reading Level: Adult Read: started 5/17/12; re-started 5/20/12 and finished 5/21/12

Disclosure: I received a free eGalley (eBook ARC) from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Oops, forgot to rate this!

Synopsis: Strange things exist on the periphery of our existence, haunting us from the darkness looming beyond our firelight. Black magic, weird cults and worse things loom in the shadows. The Children of Old Leech have been with us from time immemorial. And they love us.

Donald Miller, geologist and academic, has walked along the edge of a chasm for most of his nearly eighty years, leading a charmed life between endearing absent-mindedness and sanity-shattering realization. Now, all things must converge. Donald will discover the dark secrets along the edges, unearthing savage truths about his wife Michelle, their adult twins, and all he knows and trusts.

For Donald is about to stumble on the secret...of *The Croning*. From Laird Barron, Shirley Jackson Award-winning author of *The Imago Sequence* and *Occultation*, comes *The Croning*, a debut novel of cosmic horror.

My Thoughts: An author whose work I really like – Brett Talley of *That Which Should not Be* fame – wrote in his review of this book: “Barron writes like Hemmingway (sic) might have if he weren’t so boring.” He has a good point – Barron writes lush, evocative prose – for instance the phrase: *The deepest cavern in the world is the human heart*. – and is not afraid of creating portraits with words. I especially liked the drug-addled trip down the Yukon Don took in a rubber Zodiac in 1980. While it can seem a bit dense, especially if one is trying to read whilst sleepy, it is also very readable. I sometimes had to read something more than once – often because I was trying to skim through it as quickly as I normally read – but it was more because of the need to really revel in the beauty of the words than because it was hard to understand.

Let the dark blind you on the inside, Don. There are frightful things. Don has severe memory problems, and has tended to forget many of the most traumatic events of his life – as well as more prosaic things. I have similar problems and know how difficult it can make life. Don, once fluent enough in Spanish to have written in his journal in that language, has completely forgotten it – likely as a result of the events in the first chapter, events that took place in 1958 in Mexico City, seven years after he married Michelle. Most of the book, however, took place between “now,” when Don is in his 80s, and 1980, weaving the action back and forth between the present and the past. We eventually learn why Don has these troubles with his memory – and it’s creepy, just like so much else in here...

They Who Wait love you...: the whisper of a dying man. There are some seriously creepy moments in this book, which built slowly through the book, gradually increasing in tension; but I also loved the wry humor that went throughout the book. When Don was in Mexico looking for Melissa and sent to two mysterious, retired policemen named Ramirez and Kinder, and the two were described (which I won’t tell you about ‘cause that would be a spoiler), I laughed like crazy. Ramirez was also the first to reference Old Leech and an ancient Celtic tribe that worshiped him. I loved the character development as well, which tends to give us just enough information to form an opinion of the person and their character without it becoming overwhelming.

One thing that puzzled me was the frequent usage of British-English language – bloody, telly, old chap, jolly good, etc. – in a book that is set in Washington state and revolves around Americans. While it is true that there are those of us who affect Britishisms, due to one thing or another (overabundance of Britcoms in my wasted youth, for one thing), it’s not common here.

I was curious as to how they would eventually show a croning. In the traditions I follow, a croning is usually when a woman moves into menopause – transitioning from Mother to Crone in her lifecycle. I say “usually” because there are some women who move straight from Maiden to Crone, if they decide they don’t want to become a Mother, for instance, or if health circumstances occur, such as an early hysterectomy. The hints given early in the book seem to point to a much darker version of this being exemplified in this story. However, the ritual is never shown in any detail – just hints and winks. I found that to be much more satisfying, truth to tell – you could create the thing in your own head, which is generally scarier than anything a writer can explicitly state.

The text itself played tricks on my eyes – whenever I would defocus my eyes I would see pentagrams and flames and spikey-looking things. And this would happen a lot, since a) I was forced to read the book on my

computer and b) I was often forced to re-read a passage more than once. It's not that the book was necessarily hard, it was just dense and I really needed to focus, which brings me back to a) and the fact that incoming email or random thoughts of things I wanted to Google kept interrupting me. I wish I had received the proper Kindle file from NetGalley. Fortunately my computer decided it didn't like the network connection and the WiFi wouldn't work, so when it came time for me to try again to read the book (after taking a couple days to read some other books), I was able to focus without that distraction.

This is perhaps the point that it would be appropriate to complain about that. Generally once I see the file name on my Kindle list, I "accept" the title from NetGalley. Since it is difficult for me to remember to go back and post reviews on Amazon, I like to wait until close to or soon after the book release to read and review it, so I hadn't actually opened the file on my Kindle until I sat down to read the story. As I read the first chapter, I was quite confused. "I thought this was horror, not epic fantasy?" I queried to myself. Finally I went to the book's cover and saw that, while the file name from the menu at the top of the screen said *The Croning*, same as it did on the main list of titles, the text of the book itself was *Scourge of the Betrayer*. Probably not as different as it may seem, especially with the beginning of *The Croning* retelling Rumpelstiltskin, but still – not what I expected. Fortunately I had later downloaded the file to my desktop, Adobe Digital, and got the correct one that time. Still, I'm two for two on bad NetGalley files this weekend! And speaking of things that irritated me

At one point Kurt is bitten by a rat while sleepwalking, at which point he is said to need "X-rays, tetanus and rabies shots." This is spreading the misunderstanding that rats can carry rabies, which is untrue. Rats are small and have a very swift reaction to things – in the event of being bitten by a rabid creature, rats are most likely to be killed outright. If they were to survive, somehow, then the fast spread of the disease through their system would kill them too rapidly for them to become infectious. Additionally, rabies is spread through saliva being injected into a bit, and rats – due to the structure of their mouth – deliver a "dry" bite; there is no saliva present in a rat bite, so even in the extremely unlikely scenario where a rat would survive a rabid-animal attack, and live long enough with the disease to become infectious, the chance of a bite causing rabies is very remote. That was your public health information for the day, you're welcome! ?

However, overall this was a wonderful horror novel – creepy, spooky, atmospheric – psychological rather than gore, which is what I prefer. Nothing wrong with a gorefest, but I don't find them particularly scary or spooky, whilst a psychological horror book will tend to leave me sleeping with the lights on. Highly recommended.

Melki says

". . . all serve the Great Dark, each in his or her own way; some with enthusiasm, some with reluctance; but completely and without mercy. Our cult is monolithic with tentacles in every human enterprise throughout history, into *prehistory*."

Well . . . okay, then.

Laird Barron knows what scares you: dark cellars, scratching sounds from under the bed, and nervous dogs growling at unseen things. This one made the hairs stand up on my forearms, even though I was reading it in the daytime. I'll be diving into more by this author, even though I'll no doubt regret it the next time I'm alone at night.

Ctgt says

The deepest cavern in the world is the human heart.

Laird Barron is my favorite contemporary weird fiction author. I love his short stories but let's face it, many times weird and or horror fiction does not fare very well in a longer format, it's just too difficult to maintain the feeling of dread/horror/unease over an extended period of time. Needless to say I was a bit worried about this book before I started and honestly, I did a decent amount of bitchin' as I read through the story.....things like 'what does **that** have to do with the narrative?' or 'there is no way he would do that, just doesn't fit his character'.

Mea culpa Mr Barron, I should have trusted you.

We follow Donald Miller, geologist and academic, jumping back and forth in time as he relates many strange incidents that have occurred throughout his lifetime. As the story unfolds, there are quite a few moments that don't make much sense(see above bitchin') but what I discovered is that not only were these questions answered in the end but I believe Barron used these moments to help maintain the unease on the readers part. These scenes combined with the overall strangeness of the story itself really helped to create an atmosphere that seemed just a bit off....not quite right....and contributed to my edginess throughout the story. And the last few lines of the book? Talk about a gut punch.

The cold impassive stars didn't bother him so much as the gaps between them did.

Solid 4 stars.....8/10

We are far older than you can imagine and have haunted you since you were protoplasmic slime bobbing on the tide line.

Ignacio Senao f says

Tras leer los 2 primeros capítulos pensé que era una recopilación de relatos ¡Pues no!, es una historia, pero su principal característica es que cada capítulo es como un relato de terror, pues tiene algo de esto.

Un juego entre pasado y presente, con un protagonista con lagunas. Hay algo en este planeta, las cosas en su casa desaparecen, y lo que desaparece son objetos peligrosos. Tienen que ser enanos, o seres de algún lugar extraño. ¿Quizás habita monstruos con eones, o es su cerebro que no riega?

Una mezcla entre Lovecraft y Stephen King, se nota mucho la influencia de estos dos. Del primero su mundo y del segundo su psicología y protagonista con problemas en su interior.

El final no me ha convencido, esto hace sacrificar media estrella, que lo redondeo en 1. Siendo el 75% impecable, puro terror sin parar. Este autor no necesita cocinar a fuego lento la atmosfera y el personaje, no. Este va a cascoporro y lo consigue.

El 2º mejor de esta nueva subcategoría de Valdemar tras el de Graham Masterton. La edición como siempre impecable, pero este color azul me ha encantado. Valdemar sigue y sigue demostrando porque es la mejor

editorial.

Dan Schwent says

Don Miller has been married to his wife Michelle for 60 years and has been in the dark as to what goes on on her mysterious trips most of the time, beginning with a trip of theirs to Mexico decades ago that saw him beaten, scared, and out of his mind. What has she really been up to all these years and will Don survive the knowledge if he ever uncovers it?

Benoit Lelièvre of Dead End Follies has been singing the praises of Laird Barron for the last couple years. When this popped up on the cheap, I couldn't say no.

While I heard Laird Barron wrote cosmic horror, I immediately thought he'd be mining the H.P. Lovecraft vein, Cthulhu, shoggoths, and such. I was wrong. The vein he's working is all his own.

I had no idea what to expect with The Croning. It started with a very dark retelling of Rumpelstiltskin. At first, I was scratching my head but the book does a great job of establishing the Children of Old Leech as something that's been on earth a while. It also does some foreshadowing of events yet to come in the main tale.

The main tale tells of an ill-fated jaunt to Mexico that was Don's first brush with the horrors that lurk in the shadows. From there, it bounces back and forth between Don in his middle age to Don as an octogenarian, with Don walking the line between normalcy and sanity-blasting cosmic horror the entire time. When Don figures out what his wife's anthropology trips are really all about, it's far, far, far too late.

The odd structure does a lot to let the reader experience a lot of the disorientation Don normally feels. He's forgetful in the extreme and kind of a doormat. Although, being a doormat is probably the best one can hope for after sanity-testing revelations in a cave in Mexico. For my money, Old Leech and his children are more horrifying than Cthulhu ever as been. Earth is already in their clutches and it's only a matter of time.

Laird Barron's writing has a poetic flourish to it. I highlighted quite a few quotable lines on my kindle. He definitely a pulp author with a poet's heart, like Raymond Chandler or Robert E. Howard at times.

What else is there to say? The writing was fantastic, the story was compelling, and the horrors were horrifying. I'm glad I have a few more Barron books on my kindle. Five out of five stars.

Kaisersoze says

Okayyy. *deep breath* This could be a bumpy ride ...

A number of people whose opinions I greatly respect loved **The Croning**. They point to its impeccable prose, its incredible imagery, and the darkness that readily gets under the reader's skin. Which is to say, they summarise **The Croning** as true literary horror.

And I agree with them. Precisely 25% of the way.

The first 15% of Laird Barron's first full novel drew me in expertly. Starting with the "true" version of an old fairy tale, it then moved on to begin the tale of geologist Don searching for his wife Michelle in Mexico circa 1958. Both of these chapters were excellent, and set the tone for what I was sure was going to be an incredible read.

More fool me.

At the exact point **The Croning** fast-forwards to the present and takes up the story of 80 year old Don and Michelle, the pacing grinds to a screeching halt. There is a great deal of prosaic description, a fair amount of standing around, and scenes of dialogue that taken together do not add enough to propel the plot forward. Even the first flashback to 1980 continues to set the scene with overly-detailed parties and Don's forgetfulness and Michelle's pseudo-bipolarity and a whirlwind of side-characters, only some of which bear more than a passing relevance to the plot.

It isn't until the last 10% of the book that - finally! - Barron gets all his ducks in a row and ratchets up the horror. And oh my, if it isn't spectacular with a capital "F%\$k me." In the last 30 or so pages, Barron proves beyond a doubt what a master of cosmic horror he really is.

Ironically, he also proves he's not yet mastered how to write an engaging full-length novel.

There is simply too much filler and not enough substance to **The Croning**. To my mind it would have been a far better work had it been novella length and all the flotsam was culled by an editor with a truly mighty pen. Even the opening fairy tale that Barron twisted so delightfully connects in only the most incidental of ways to the main narrative, and could have been edited out without any impact on the story at all.

So how to score something that bored me so completely for the bulk of its page length, yet opened and closed (especially) so awesomely? It wasn't an easy decision, but I settled on a middle-of-the-road score with the pledge to read one of Barron's collections of short fiction to see if that corrects the issues I had with the this one.

2.5 to 3 Slightly Ajar Cellar Doors for **The Croning**.

Sheila says

5 stars--amazing book.

I've loved all of Laird Barron's short stories I've read, so I was eager to read this novel. And I wasn't disappointed. This is a non-linear book of connected stories, about a man whose memory is flawed and for whom time slips and skips around. For reasons he can't quite remember, he's terrified of the dark. This might be due to his family history--or it might be from his wife's involvement in an ancient, evil cult.

That's a simple explanation for a deep and fascinating story of cosmic horror. I can't wait to read more Barron! His writing is fabulous and the mythos that's interwoven in his stories is exactly my cup of tea.

Aidan Fortner says

First off, I hadn't read any of Barron's short fiction prior to picking up his debut novel. However, I read a rave review of "The Croning" in my favorite horror culture rag, Rue Morgue, and thought there was no way they could steer me wrong. What a naive, misguided fanboy view...

Barron's prose is dull. He relies on crude swearing and very tired cliches much too much to be interesting. His characters are rather one-dimensional and also seem cut from a cliched cloth. I'm sure he thought he was being suspenseful, or perhaps Tarantino-esque by jumping around in the story, but really he only succeeded in muddling his own plotline. Ok, we get it, Laird--you're edgy because you use a lot of dirty words, you masturbate to H.P. Lovecraft, you have an eyepatch. But your narrative skills need some honing.

In short, if you absolutely must read this book, save yourself some cash and check it out from the library (like I'm glad I did), because this manuscript definitely needed a lot of work before it hit the presses.

Heidi Ward says

The Croning is a perfectly horrible book, and I mean that in high compliment.

It's rare that a horror story actually scares me these days (and more's the pity), but Barron's first novel is wrong in all the right ways, leaving behind a caul of unease, and a wicked dose of the cosmic heebie-jeebies. (I'm thrilled to admit that when I finished it last night, I left the lights on.) Also? Un-put-downable. *The Croning* sustains the poisonous adrenaline level of one of Barron's short stories over almost 250 pages; once you open the cover you are done for. But the faint-of-heart be warned: this is a seriously dark and unpleasant ride, with a sucking black hole where some might prefer redemptive resolution.

With each tautly descriptive and hallucinogenic page, the dread level ratchets up another notch, for both the reader and our "hero" Don Miller. Don, a former geologist and cave-expert now in his early 80s, has recently come to suspect that his notoriously unreliable memory is finally going for good. As Don settles into uneasy retirement in his wife's ancestral family home in the woods of the Pacific Northwest, he reviews his apparently charmed life: moderate wealth, adventurous travel, family and a 50-plus-year marriage with love of his life, the still-vivacious -- and still-successful -- archaeologist Michelle Mock.

But there is something wrong. Don feels a creeping dread about the house and the Mock family's mysterious history, as well as Michelle's long absences, unreliable itineraries, and violent mood swings. Now, Don's fears begin to coalesce into a pattern of nagging inconsistencies and memory-repression so terrifying as to indeed resemble dementia. This challenging timeline structure leaps back and forth across more than half a century of Don's life, methodically revealing the horrors that have been conspiratorially hidden from him until now, and unveiling the truly nightmarish source of Don's dis-ease -- his brushes with a cthonic cult that has flourished from before the dawn of time, and demands unimaginable sacrifice from its chosen acolytes.

In *The Croning*, Barron has fleshed out the rumors of "Old Leech" and his minions, who have appeared in certain of his short stories, creating an ancient and bloodthirsty mythology of Lovecraftian scale, but with a stench of cosmic horror that is entirely his own. It's sick, but I want more.

Benjamin Uminsky says

As a caveat to this overly long review... full disclosure...I have an odd aversion to horror fiction in the long form. Hard to say why, but my preference in my weird fiction is for the short form, and to say that Laird Barron excels at this length is mildly understating it... the man is a modern master of the cosmic horror short story. Not to prattle on too much, but while I was of course very excited to hear about Barron's debut release of his first novel, my initial thoughts were: NOOOOOO!!! Don't chance it man... leave well enough alone... your short stories are so damn good. You don't need to pull a Stephen King for christ sakes.

Its not often that you come across a horror/weird tale novel that is capable of sustaining the tension, terror, horror, or weirdness over its entire length. More often than not, a typical horror novel simply loses steam and the end of what could have been a great story can't come soon enough (bloated plot lines, useless secondary characters, etc.)

For THE CRONING, not only is Barron's nightmarish cosmic horrors fully sustained (and ultimately build up a head of steam like a runaway freight train) over the length of 245 pages, but the the vile darkness that he exposes the reader to lasts well beyond the merciful shutting of the book. This is a lean-mean-primeval-terror-invoking-machine of a novel. In fact, Barron never really provides the reader with that sweet release of a nightmare coming to an end and fading into oblivion. I still get the willies looking over at that crone staring right through you from the front cover of the dustjacket (my hats off to Cody Tilson for that vicious portrait of what I believe is Michelle Mock, one of our key characters).

After having devoured this novel in a weekend, I now realize how Barron sunk his hooks into my imagination and why I can't stop thinking about all sorts of nightmarish visages and chitinous talons click-clacking in the darkness and from the slinking shadows. Naturally, one may credit the incredible imagery of terror incarnate that Barron so easily conjures with a few brush strokes of his distinct prose style. And while those images have been tainting my consciousness for the last 4 days, I think this novel goes well beyond the imagery.

Barron's delivery of this incredible tale is simply monstrous in its ability to shake the reader to his very core. How was this so easily achieved? I think it really comes down to Barron's masterful use of the unreliable narration device in combination with vivid flashbacks to the past, all mixed together with his dark musings of a cold and bleak cosmic philosophy.

Our key character, Don Miller, is developed in such a way that we are left frustrated for the poor doddering old fool who has swiss cheese for memory banks, but knows deep down that something is terribly amiss with his life. Barron pulls us in through Don, and when Barron puts Don through the meat grinder in very vivid descriptions of torturous scenes from his past, we are left struggling through Don's cobwebs when we zip right back to the present day and watch Don teeter about struggling with an odd sense of dissatisfaction with the wind down of his career and the loneliness and alienation of having a superstar academic wife who is out and about still pursuing her goals. The juxtaposition between the clear vivid past with Don's maddening inability to remember those scenes because his current memory is fogged over in the present, really gets under your skin. You feel for the poor guy, and so badly wish that he would just have a single epiphany, remembering something of the most basic clues that may illuminate how dangerously close he is to being yanked into the void along with his family. Barron tortures Don (and the reader) with little present day clues that trigger something deep down that is itching to surface and scare the bejeezus out of Don. Those little clues guide the reader in thinking about the layers of this story as it unfolds.

This plot device aside, I really also appreciated how Barron got this story started with a brief but vicious take on the Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale that I don't think the Grim brothers could ever imagine. Barron of course brings the telling of this tale full circle by the end of the story, but with the tie in to the names of Mock and Miller, this reinterpretation of an already twisted tale nicely sets a nasty foundation for the rest of the novel.

Imagine if you will, a vile alien presence that has been with mankind since the beginning of time, since we were nothing more than primordial ooze. Hints of this presence makes its appearance in various cultures and mythologies/fairy tales, but the "truths" have been hidden away and who better to follow the bread crumbs than by anthropologists who have an inkling of what to look for. Barron of course does a wonderful job here with giving us an outstanding female lead, Michelle Mock, creepy family and all, to explore these "truths" while her husband Don is bumbling along trying to just keep his head above water.

I credit Barron for giving us a wonderful portrait of a powerful, intelligent, and ambitious woman who does truly love her doddering and cuckolded husband (I say cuckolded because unbeknownst to poor Don, Michelle has been off cavorting with the outer darkness for years).

Anyways, not to overly spoil things, but I certainly loved the ending (although I do agree with some of the reviews that Barron may have erred in illuminating things too much in the end, but then again, maybe Barron is just preparing us for further shocking developments of his mythos). His take on why us puny humans are nothing more than play things to a cold cosmic darkness, was very reminiscent of Michael Shea's "The Autopsy", which was equally chilling in his rift on how humans are nothing more than insignificant ants, simply capable of offering up their terror and dark emotions as nourishment and mana for the unrelenting and cruel appetite of an unknowable alien presence. Barron's similar approach is a bit darker and crueler in his exploration of this philosophy than Shea. This idea, at its core (made great by one HP Lovecraft) is what fuels the engine of cosmic horror... humanity's own insignificance.

One last minor thing...for those of you who have read Barron's other short story collections, he does a wonderful job in tying in key elements from some of his other short stories (Mysterium Tremendum, The Broadsword, etc). There is a ton of cosmic conspiracy theory here and occult worshipping that leaves one to wonder where else Barron can go with this. Perhaps another novel or maybe more short stories/novellas to further spread his already bleak world of darkness and unreality. I'm definitely along for this wild ride.

David Brian says

Having finally sat down to write this review of The Croning by Laird Barron, I find myself still with something of a conundrum. Having spent a couple of weeks mulling over what rating to award this novel, I'm still currently struggling to reach a decision.

Here's the thing: The Croning is a very good book. A very, very good book...but still, it isn't without problems.

Don and Michelle (Mock) Miller are educated professional types now headed towards the twilight (no, thankfully not that twilight!) time of their lives. Don has spent his years working as a corporate geologist. While his has been a career of moderate renown, it seems dwarfed by everything surrounding Michelle, who appears to be something of an academia darling with a lifetime largely spent focusing on lost/missing races and tribes - particularly a long extinct race of 'little people.'

The book shifts back and forward among different periods of time, and we learn that for many years Don has

been blighted with instances of lost time/memory. As an older gentleman, his powers of recall appear to be at an all time low. Poor Don. Some things are best forgotten.

The Croning opens with the re-imagining of a well known fairy tale, and this was a truly memorable beginning. The next chapter delivers us to Mexico in 1958, and we begin to understand the true nature of the ills waiting to afflict Don's life. This too was a very powerful section of the book, and these opening chapters more than guaranteed I would finish reading.

We then jump forward in time, and here we are introduced in great detail to an abundance of peripheral characters. I'm guessing so many names were thrown into the arena so as to offset just 'who' may be a villain of the piece. I did find this section tough going, particularly as many of those introduced barely garner a second mention.

I did enjoy The Croning a great deal, and it is eminently readable. It is one of those books you start and then don't want to set down. However, it is obvious from early on where the root of Don's woes reside, and the book moves towards a highly predictable closing scene. So, I feel compelled to mark down what is still a genuinely fine novel.

4.5 stars.
