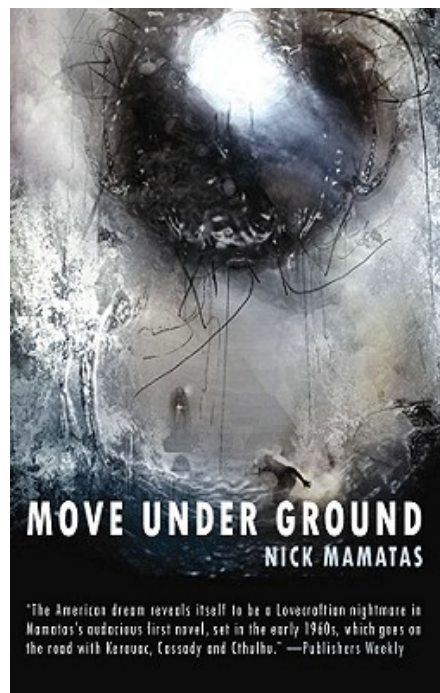




Move Under Ground

Nick Mamatas

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The year is nineteen-sixty-something, and after endless millennia of watery sleep, the stars are finally right. Old R'lyeh rises out of the Pacific, ready to cast its damned shadow over the primitive human world. The first to see its peaks: an alcoholic, paranoid, and frightened Jack Kerouac, who had been drinking off a nervous breakdown up in Big Sur. Now Jack must get back on the road to find Neal Cassady, the holy fool whose rambling letters hint of a world brought to its knees in worship of the Elder God Cthulhu. Together with pistol-packin' junkie William S. Burroughs, Jack and Neal make their way across the continent to face down the murderous Lovecraftian cult that has spread its darkness to the heart of the American Dream. But is Neal along for the ride to help save the world, or does he want to destroy it just so that he'll have an ending for his book?

Move Under Ground Details

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Author : Nick Mamatas

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From Reader Review Move Under Ground for online ebook

David says

I may be the wrong person to review this book. I've never read any of the Beat writers who Nick Mamatas lovingly imitates and appropriates in this book, not even Kerouac's *On the Road*.

I have, however, read plenty of Lovecraft, and other authors treading in Lovecraft's mythos. And, umm, I grew up in California. Albeit not in the 60s. So I kinda know what Mamatas is playing with here.

Move Under Ground was Mamatas's debut novel, and it's quite a trippy read. It really is about Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady trying to save the world from Cthulhu.

R'lyeh rises in the Pacific, and Cthulhu hangs as a ghostly specter over the West Coast. The world starts going mad. San Francisco is flooded. So Jack Kerouac hits the road heading East. He hooks up with his buddies Bill and Neal and they try to outrun the end of the world, even as Azathoth is absorbing the East Coast. There are cameos by Allen Ginsberg and probably a bunch of other people whose references I missed.

So, is this a Beat novel or a Lovecraft mythos novel? It's both! As I said, I have not read any of the Beat writers, but Mamatas sure has a compelling and convincing style here, and at the same time, he captures the hopeless, alien madness of encountering the Elder Gods like few Lovecraftian authors I have seen. As Kerouac and his blitzed, boozy buddies drift through the blasted Midwest, a Shoggoth-infested Chicago, and on to a post-apocalyptic New York, it's not so much an adventure as a road trip through a hell that would make Virgil piss his pants.

Great Chicago glowed red before our eyes. We were suddenly on Madison Street among hordes of cultists, some of them sprawled out on the street, elongated chitinous scythes where their hands used to be dragging across the ground, hundreds of others gathered around storefront churches or crowded onto corners, all waiting and buzzing. "Wup! Wup! Neal approaches! The Man Of Two Worlds, chosen one of Azathoth! All hail Neal!" I cut the wheel hard and proceeded to downtown Chicago, but there wasn't a true human on the streets anymore. Only mockeries of life: flatulent mugwumps in clouds of swampgas, children oozing along the streets on a mass of thick cilia, hawking newspapers of human skin scrawled with unspeakable blasphemies, letters you couldn't even trace upon a page without the madness coming for you. And those were the remnants of our sweet race, the folks who were people once before R'lyeh rose and the missiles tore their way up from the deserts--there were plenty of pretty girls with a smile for our dream car and swarthy working stiff, chests broad as barrels and V-shaped torsos leading to chinos and black boots, but there were not women, they were not women, they were not men. Shoggoths to a being they were, phalanges, avatars of insanity and destruction mocking me with human form and countenance.

It's a bleak, bleak trip, man. Full of shoggoth orgies and rivers of shit and unspeakable blasphemies.

It may be hard to follow the narrative since Kerouac is narrating like Kerouac and he's stoned most of the time (who can blame him?). Images are nightmarish and surreal. Cthulhu filling the sky as a new feature in the celestial firmament. A man pinching stars out between his fingers. **Shoggoth orgies.**

The plot is barely there, though there is a climax.

I nearly gave it all away, but under the world I made, I saw the one Neal made: drowned coasts, the dead everywhere, clicking beetlemen working in their dark, satanic mills, illusions of gilded trade laid bare. Was it any less beautiful? Of course not--misery is mayfly, beauty dross. Only the spirit, ineffable, remains eternal. There was a choice though; I was given a coin and just had to flip it. And there was a choice for me too.

To be Buddha, to embrace bliss, and leave the world as I'd left it after my travels, in ruins. Or to cut loose the silver chord, to set the world alight by offering up my own divine spark, my chance for escape from suffering. Psychic suicide, that's what it was, nothing less. I'd pour every single joy I ever had into Creation, or it would collapse back into Neal's nightmare. Or I could wring myself dry like a dishrag, and walk the earth dead inside, the neighborhood dog-catcher or the blocked writer in front of an eternally blank and unspoiled page, without even the buzz of sweet Marie in my ear anymore.

What's the difference between having no desire and having desire for nothingness? Neal didn't know; that's why he threw his lot in with late-night poker games and cross-country chases for his own tail. He loved his own Nealness too much to lose it without wanting to take the rest of us with him. He desired nothingness, but thought he had no desire. How could the Dark Dreamer not awaken from his feverish sleep and embrace the poor boy? I wasn't too clear on the distinction between the two choices myself, really, but rational thought isn't the key to answering the irrational question, is it?

For all that it's an absurd concept, *Move Under Ground* is a brief little aberration with literary chops, written by an MFA-ish writer who embraces genre fiction and gives it a big sloppy kiss with tongue, then adds tentacles and glue.

That said, I can't say this book really made me want to read *On The Road*. Not my style, Daddy-O. But if you are into either Beat prose or Lovecraft, even if the mixing of the two sounds bizarre, then you should certainly check out this unique work. 3.5 stars, which I'd like to bump to 4 but despite my bemusement by the concept and my appreciation of Mamatas's literary stunt-writing, the story ended up being too much a vehicle for the style and the author's cleverness.

Chris "Stu" says

It's a really spot-on imitation of Jack Kerouac's style and a pretty well-researched portrayal of Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and William Burroughs, as well as an interesting look at the Cthulhu mythos. However, as an actual plot, waaaaay too much gets resolved by random magic and coincidence and deus ex machina--a point that gets explicitly addressed by the narrator (Jack Kerouac) but not actually resolved in a satisfactory way.

In the end, it feels a bit too dreamlike and consequence-free for me to fully recommend it. But it was a good enough read while it happened to say that I'm glad I read it.

Matt says

I liked the general feel of unconsciousness and the dark and eerie hallucinatory visions of the main protagonist but at times I lost the main story line and what these scenes/passages really had to do with bringing the story along.

the author really captured a laid back and quite beat-esque language, although at times it felt forced to me. I'm not sure if I would read it again, but it was a nice quick read at the end of the day.

Jennifer says

Have you ever thought to yourself, "In a cosmic battle for the future of the world who would win; Jack Kerouac or Chthulu?" OK, you're right, it never even occurred to me either before I heard about Move Under Ground. Which is why it's just about the most preposterously cool premise I've heard for a book in a long time. So of course I had to read it.

Move Under Ground has more going for it than just a good gimmick. Mamatas smoothly overlays the dark, secretive world of H.P. Lovecraft's with the hallucinatory stream-of-conscious commentary of Kerouac at his best to produce one hell of a road trip. The Chthulu world seen through a wasted beat's eyes allows for lavishly horrifying visions. With William Burroughs as Kerouac's sidekick on the ride there are darkly hilarious moments as well.

What really makes this book a treasure is the prose. Move Under Ground is a mine of electric phrases and neon imagery bursting from blackness. But don't try to read this book in the midst of distractions. It requires concentration and imagination to picture everything Mamatas describes.

Jacob says

You could read any review and learn about how this book is a brilliant pastiche that fuses both the styles and content of H.P. Lovecraft and Jack Kerouac, into a Beat Road Novel featuring the Lovecraftian elder gods making a grab for cosmic power pitted against the unlikely beat protagonists of Kerouac's world (both real and fictional) ... so the question remains, what then do you read this review for? Well, one day I was in Borderlands buying an Ian Banks book and I started talking to the clerk about this book. I told him, as he smirked at me, that I really liked the book ... except for the ending because I thought it was a let down. I didn't really articulate it well ... I just said it was a let down. I've reread the book and the ending has grown on me but now I wish that there was something more to bridge the two spaces ... but whatever. What I didn't realize at the time was Nick Mamatas was standing right next to me and the clerk I was talking to was his publisher Jeremy Lassen. As I walked out of the store, I said, what the fuck was up with that clerk? Was it just me or was he kind of a jerk? He was trying not to bust up. Go me.

David says

A great premise that seems counterintuitive at first, but ends up working better than you could have imagined. Basically "Move Under Ground" is a crossover novel between the Beat and Cthulhu mythos'.

Nick Mamatas does a great job mixing Kerouac's writing style with Lovecraft's and the result is like a literary reeses' peanut butter cup. It's a shame that this book doesn't seem to be widely promoted/distributed. It's a great treat for Kerouac/Lovecraft fans.

Also, Burroughs gets what is probably the greatest one-liner of all time.

Jesse Bullington says

Read and enjoyed Move Under Ground by Nick Mamatas last week. It really got me thinking on the old chestnut of writing about historical events and persons--do you write in such a way that someone with zero knowledge of the subject matter going into the novel will be able to follow--at the risk of being overly expository--or do you just plunge in and write for yourself and others who are intimate with the material? The way I write is to (attempt to) juggle the two, including tidbits the aficionado will appreciate that won't punish the ignorant reader, so that you're both educating the novice and rewarding those in the know. In re: Move Under Ground, I'm at least roughly familiar with the cast and especially of Burroughs so never felt lost though I'm sure a great deal of nuance went over my head, but never so much that I minded. Or rather, noticed.

I first heard about the novel before having read any of Mamatas's short fiction and so reacted to it in the same way I reacted to hearing about Warren Ellis' Transmetropolitan way back when: like a complete dumbass. Hearing "it's a SF comic book about an obvious Hunter Thompson character" instilled me with the same amount of confidence or interest as "it's a novel about the Beats facing off against the Old Ones," which is to say, very little. Yet in both cases when I finally checked out the work in question all I could do was kick myself for being such a doubting Thomas--just because I can't imagine a successful fusion of such things doesn't mean it's not possible. Mamatas's novel is the sort of pastiche that makes you wince when you use the word "pastiche" to describe it, because it seems so much better than the p-word would imply. A very fun novel, excellently written.

Andy says

This one is difficult for me to evaluate--it's a book that executes well on its premise but just isn't for me. It imagines a Lovecraftian end-of-the-world scenario as perceived by Jack Kerouac and the other Beat writers; it follows Kerouac and William Burroughs as they traverse America in pursuit of Neal Cassidy, who may be somehow responsible for the whole mess. Wonderful idea, but I've never done well with Beat literature. As a result, this was a real struggle for me to get through. If you're in the target audience (you enjoy Lovecraft and you really love "On the Road"), it'd probably be just about perfect. But I only meet 50% of those criteria.

Printable Tire says

I think I would have liked this novel more if it didn't involve actual historic characters... I'm terribly biased against novels that try to interpret real human beings... for instance, even if the main character was simply called "Jack" and it was explicitly implied he is Jack Kerouac, but never called that, it would have been better for me... the author does a good "creative writing 101" impersonation of beat writing mixed with h.p. lovecraft lore, which is a great idea, but unfortunately falls flat for most of the book because it does not seem genuine, but merely a stylistic choice. Honestly, it is difficult to remember most of the book, I remember it

being a garbled and complete mess, not unlike something by Jack Kerouac, but whereas Kerouac never sticks to a plot or narrative structure, and never rushes through a sequence for the sake of a plot or narrative structure, this book attempts to, and that is why it ultimately fails.

Eli Bishop says

"What if H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic demons showed up in a Jack Kerouac novel": this could be a gimmicky lark like the Sherlock-Holmes-versus-Dracula kind of thing various people have done, or it could be the kind of dense historical fantasy that Tim Powers is good at, but Mamatas is on to something different. For one thing, he writes the whole thing *as* Kerouac, not just mimicking his style but with a real feeling for his character and for the things he cared about. But he's also got a good reason for this particular mash-up, a very ambitious reason - and he lets you know this right off by breaking the first promise such stories normally make, which is to leave something unscathed. It's not just our heroes in a secret skirmish with monsters in the sewer; no, Cthulhu has pretty much taken over the world, America is now a dreamlike hell and we are all screwed. Raise your hand if you sometimes feel like that.

Lovecraft wrote a lot about ultimate evil waiting to destroy our bodies and souls - and he wrote like someone who knew nothing about life except what he'd read in Victorian pulp or in Poe, but he still managed to express, in his verbose and nerdy way, the postwar feeling that the established order had cracked and revealed something rotten at the core. What exactly it would mean for it to crack all the way wasn't something he cared to go into, but, thirty years and another world war later, the Beat writers were part of a shift in attention toward those fractures and what might come out of them. What's destruction, what's insanity, is it good or bad; what's humanity, what's freedom, what's worth keeping?

So, following Kerouac's own tendency to assign mythic roles to his friends, Mamatas uses the Beats for different responses to the question: "What do you do when the status quo seems *very very wrong*?" William Burroughs is the best equipped to deal with Cthulhian America: slimy appendages, half-human authority figures and gratuitous cruelty were how he already saw the world, and now he gets to shoot monsters. Allen Ginsberg laughs and retreats into private playtime. Jack can't go either way - he's too interested in people, and he's trying to practice Buddhist compassionate detachment, a point of view that doesn't grant any special status to the apocalypse. Mamatas writes very convincingly from that point of view, and it's a startling effect, undercutting the nihilistic horror of Lovecraft and Burroughs with humane bemusement at the ways people fall into illusion and violence. The Cthulhu cultists aren't the slaving savages Lovecraft was afraid of; they're conformist citizens in a late-stage fascist delirium, dancing to entertain children that they forgot they killed. (The oddly warm-hearted tone, within the carnival of atrocities, also lets Mamatas be very funny. In one of several little travelogue scenes that would've fit perfectly in *On the Road*, a small-town waitress snickers at the pretensions of local demon-worshippers, who've "never seen a tentacle" because they're landlocked in the Midwest.)

The plot, if it's a plot, is provided by Jack's unstable friend Neal Cassady, whose descent into even worse behavior gives Jack something to focus on. Neal thinks the breakdown of reality is long overdue, and he's advanced from con-man to sorcerer without getting any smarter. Pursuing him into the ruins of New York allows Mamatas to bring the epic horror story back in touch with the personal one. It's no surprise that Jack's final effort to connect with this damaged guy is directly related to the last hope of the world, but the last scene is still a surprise. The ending, though it seems just right and is written with love, is hard to take for the same reasons that real life is hard to take.

Aaron Slack says

Beatniks vs. Cthulhu. Abyssmal. I have a problem with quitting a book once I've started it, even though I should. This blessedly short novel is a Lovecraftian homage to (rather than a parody of) the "Beat" literature of the 40's and 50's as exemplified by Jack Kerouac. The premise of the book is that Cthulhu has risen and begun the conquest of 1960's America. For some reason the only people immune to the Call are the down-and-out members of society like junkies and Beatniks. Even against Cthulhu I could not cheer for a band of "heroes" so morally bankrupt, and the plot was not very interesting. Not worth it even for Lovecraft fans.

stormhawk says

Well...

If H.P. Lovecraft and Jack Kerouac had a lover's, and then hired William S. Burroughs as the midwife, they might produce something not at all like this book. I'm not a big fan of mashups, but this is at least better than most. It's a gruesome road trip of a book, mimicking Kerouac style, but the story sometimes gets lost amidst the imagery.

Paul Fergus says

A supernatural stream-of-consciousness journey-battle to keep America free and bountiful for the rich, with only a dubious band of intellectuals standing between Let Them Eat Cake Forever and the savage forces of primitivism.

That is, ghost stories for ownership who fancy themselves literates.

On the surface you have Jack Kerouac, the King of the Beat Generation, and his fellow writers tackling the rise of the Elder God Cthulhu from its dark slumber to devour and transform the world, starting with America. It's the lowdown beats, the heroes at the vanguard of counterculture, against the madness-inducing evil of unstoppable monster gods, who embody the forces of capitalism and lifelessness.

After having a horrific vision of mighty Cthulhu rising from the depths off the coast of California Jack hits the road. He has numerous adventures both on the highways and city streets of 1950's America, encountering the forces of Cthulhu along the way.

At various times he reunites with his friends from his earlier days in the beat movement. It's a race against time to reach New York and save the country (and thus the rest of the world) from magical damnation.

The writing is rather good, deftly conjuring up the substance-fueled hallucinatory insights and nightmares Jack experiences. Moments flow from one to the other much as a dream, and indeed that is what reality is becoming--a dream of madness and mutation where physical laws transform or vanish altogether.

Is it all in Jack's imagination? Is he having a schizophrenic episode where he plunges into the unconscious or is this really happening? There's little time for reflection or grounding out; this is a party of the imagination and there's no going back. The reader must surf the wave and ride this one out; the writing pulls you along.

On the deeper level there's an interesting theme going on; that of betrayal--by your peers, or through your own actions--being the very mechanism by which domination and control re-adapt to maintain themselves over the population. It's a theme that's been visited before, but this is still a fresh take.

The trouble with the story is that it gets the sides mixed up. We're on the wrong side, POV wise. A lot gets missed out as a result.

See, Lovecraft's Cthulhu works often struck me as a variation of Sherlock Holme's "squires on a night out" setup. Privileged individuals with the leisure time and funds available to investigate supernatural threats to western man's dominance of earth.

The forces of the Elder Gods such as Cthulhu mainly stood in for the forces of primitive instinct that lurked in the hearts and minds of non-persons. In other words, rich peoples' fears of the poor--that bewildered herd that might break free at any moment and decide their own fates.

The book takes the position of Cthulhu and the Elder Gods as evil--manifestations of ownership and control, of the soulless life that modern industrial death culture breeds. But I think this is a complete error, rather the Elder Gods are aligned with the forces of nature, with instinct, and our deepest selves. They're the good guys!

In the book Jack is probably portrayed accurately in that he would likely struggle against the Elder Gods, but this still feels off to me. Wouldn't the beat generation actually be trying to help Cthulhu awaken? I can't help but sense they would be fighting for revolution on a grand and natural scale by invoking those very forces of primitive nature hidden within the dark corners of the universe.

The entire conflict of the book boils down to the choice of destroying the world in madness and horror or letting it continue on but at the cost of your soul. It's a trap, of course. Obviously the moral thing to do is sacrifice yourself, but it's the old adage "you can't buy your heart's desire for the price of your heart."

I mean, we have madness and horror now! How are beetle-men in suits and shape-shifting monsters any different than what we have today? At least with Cthulhu it's all out in the open, naked, pure and honest--that's the real revolution and renewal of consciousness, and the ending of the book suggests Jack and his buddies maintained exactly what they were programmed to uphold by the system they pretended to thwart.

Whew, thank goodness! Scrooge McDuck was starting to worry he'd have to buy some hardware and see if nukes really work against Star Spawn. Now he can buy that mansion in Antarctica after all!

Bjorn says

At first, this sounds what in fanfic circles is apparently known as "crack": an idea, a pairing, a crossover so absolutely ludicrous it's too weird and too much fun NOT to read. Like Winnie the Pooh fighting vampires in Sunnydale, or Mohammad on The Cosby Show.

But actually, it makes sense, in a somewhat twisted sort of way. The story is narrated by Jack Kerouac in something that... well, it's been a while since I read *On The Road* (in Swedish), so I really can't say whether Mamatas apes Kerouac or parodies him, but the prose flows in a jazzy, half-crazy manner that's often a delight to read. And somehow Mamatas manages to marry the beatnik counter-culture thing via Burroughs' bugmen and mugwumps to the huge, impersonal monsters of Lovecraft - or rather, not the monsters themselves but the underlying theme of an ancient, evil world looming just below the surface, the futility of

mankind in a world where evil gods can snuff us out without hardly noticing us.

Had I seen the Beast in the sky - the tentacles, snaky scales, the deep burning eyes? Oh yes, under the full moon and everything, "All the hipsters can see him," he said. "Squares can't, and that's the trouble. That's why we have to move under ground now."

Once you're exposed to Lovecraft's monsters, you go mad; somehow this ties in nicely with Kerouac's buddhist leanings and a general anti-consumerist non-conformist spin.

Everyone dies. The soul is immortal. This isn't even real; it's an illusion. The world, it's a mad dream of a blind god.

Mamatas acknowledges two of the 20th century's greatest myth-makers - both Lovecraft and Kerouac created (or were credited with creating) genres, worlds of their own, and as such he lets them create yet a new (or possibly) old world here. He does let his fanboy tendencies get the better of him once or twice, and at times he seems more interested in just putting a somewhat more Burroughsian spin on On The Road than telling a story of his own. But in the end, he does manage to weld it all together - if not seamlessly - and creates a really fun read.

Tim says

Confession: Just before I started reading this book I'd inwardly decided that this would be the last non-Lovecraft Cthulhu themed book I would read. Cthulhu has of late become a cute, and cuddly icon of ironic horror, and the original miasma of unknown dread the character was supposed to have has--for me--become totally lost amongst the internet memes, and cartoon depictions. Along comes MOVE UNDER GROUND.

MOVE UNDER GROUND has very little, if any, of the kitsch and wink/nod that you'd expect from something this thematically high-concept; Jack Kerouac and the Beats vs. Cthulhu. I was expecting a "cool-daddy-o" stream of consciousness road-trip across America ending with a super-heroic Kerouac bare-knuckle brawling with an elder god in a coffee, I couldn't have gotten more different experience.

MOVE UNDER GROUND reads a lot like a lost Kerouac novel; it's filled with the bodhisattva philosophy that populates Kerouac's actual novels, and while it may not be pitch-perfect, it hits the right notes at the right times. It also contains some very good horror writing, as Kerouac and his dharma bums travel across a nightmare apocalypse America that has fallen under the thrall of Cthulhu and the Old Ones. Beatniks and hipsters remain untouched by the taint of the elder gods, but the straighter the suit, the more insectoid and deformed they become. The country is transformed into a wild landscape of lurid horror-- trains become giant white worms crawling the rails, small town folk shout and kill and revel in death, translucent tentacles shroud the sky, worming their way into the hearts and minds of all the squares.

maybe spoilers

Kerouac is his Sal Paradise character here, seemingly just along for the ride, observing, vacillating between desire and detachment, pushed by the Buddha's palm toward his final destination. Neal Cassady is a vibrating grifter, making off-page deals with terrible gods for terrible power all in the name of truth and adventure. Seeking the role of the hero, but often becoming the heel. Burroughs is played for laughs, mostly. A reedy junky, detached and almost as insect-like as the shoggoths he fights.

maybe spoilers

Just when I thought all of the horror had been drained from the dead dreamer, Mamatas found a way to make Cthulhu scary again.

