



# LOVECRAFT



AMERICA'S  
DEMONS  
EXPOSED!

# COUNTRY

A NEW NOVEL! FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE MURGE

## MATT RUFF



I'm not really a big fan of H.P. Lovecraft, but I love this weirdly unexpected novel. Like the best sci-fi and horror, it uses those genre tropes...wait. First things first: this is a really entertaining book. It's so firmly rooted in the real world that when elements of the supernatural slowly nudge into the story, you're a little shocked, the way anyone would be if someone suddenly made a chair slide across the room with their mind or froze you into place by a spell. Set in 1954 during the height of Jim Crow, Matt Ruff's book creates a vivid cast of characters, an extended family centering around their business of publishing "The Safe Negro Travel Guide." That's a Fodor's for black people that designates which diners and motels will welcome their business, which gas stations offer a rest room and the towns to avoid at all times (not just after sunset). Beyond their business, they're fun because everyone from our first protagonist Atticus and his uncle George down to comic book drawing nerd Horace are all huge fans of sci-fi and fantasy, making them better equipped than most to deal with the unexpected phenomena hurtling their way. Ruff is so good here in detailing the constant threat of violence and subjugation for black people in the 1950s that when a shadowy group of wizards take over the story, it feels like just one more way the white man wants to use the black race for their own nefarious ends. Ruff works on two levels here. First he has fun with all the horror story conventions, with individual stories/chapters reveling in classic devices such as the haunted house, a doll possessed by a demonic force, a portal to other worlds and so on. But he grounds these nightmarish situations through the prism of race. In one case, the first wizard that pops into view wants to lure Atticus to his estate because this black man is a blood relative of the wizard's ancestors, the eventual descendant linked to them by the rape of one of their slaves. In another linked story, a woman named Ruby who is sensible enough to take off when the new home she moves into proves haunted is convinced to help a white man she suspects is up to no good. Why? Because he dangles the possibility of living a life of unexpected freedom by drinking an elixir that turns her into a white woman; her scenes discovering the power this disguise gives her is particularly vivid. The battle of wits is so fun, the parade of extravagant horrors so creepy you could easily overlook how good a job Ruff has done in giving his tales an unexpected emotional heft. I was freaked out by that demonic doll, not because it was so original but because the asthmatic kid Horace was so believable to me I worried about his fate. I immediately checked out Ruff's bibliography, only to discover he's produced a string of cult novels that have garnered a passionate if small audience. Well, no wonder. Anyone who can write a page-turner that can satisfy fans of both Ta-Hehisi Coates and Stephen King is a rare talent. -- Michael Giltz