Lives of the Great Enchanters

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a review of

The Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic by Alan Moore and Steve Moore. Top Shelf Productions and Knockabout Comics, 2024

Two writers, life-long friends, became practicing magicians and decades later decided to share what they have learned. Alan Moore is almost certainly the most important comics writer of the last half-century, having greatly expanded both the range and the depth of the medium, subverting, deconstructing, or reinventing every genre in which he has worked.

He most famously brought a sense of realpolitik to our superhero stories in the graphic novel *Watchmen*, though with later titles like *Tom Strong* and *Promethea* he tried to recapture the genre's sense of wonder. In *Swamp Thing* and *Providence*, he likewise used horror to challenge the morality of the social order, while *Lost Girls* converted Victorian children's literature into lurid pornography, elevated pornography to high art, and even used the story to deliver a powerful anti-war moral.

Though less famous, the late Steve Moore (no relation, except for where it counts: in affinity) was an accomplished writer in his own right, having penned stories for British comics staples like *2000 AD* and *Warrior*, and working for a while as an editor of the *Fortean Times*. Indeed, if we take influence to be both cumulative and transitive, he may even be said to have been more influential than his celebrated collaborator, in that it was Steve who taught Alan to write comics in the first place.

Equally relevant for the present discussion, it was also Steve who led Alan to magic. Though Alan Moore created something of a stir when he announced, on the occasion of his fortieth birthday in 1993, that he intended to become a ritual magician, in truth, he had been for some years observing as his friend Steve quietly developed his craft.

As Alan documented in his essay "The Unearthing," Steve enlisted him to witness the summoning of a lunar goddess, Selene. The result was either a shared hallucination, or else the deity's visible manifestation on the material plane—a remarkable occurrence in either case, which may lead us to wonder how different the one is from the other.

When Alan then began his own magical practice, he devoted himself to the worship of the second-century snake god Glycon, which had itself been manifested in the physical realm in the less mysterious form of a puppet operated by Alexander of Abonoteichus, "the first archeologically verifiable magician." It was only later that the two Moores learned that Alexander's stage show featured Selene as well and Glycon—a moon and a serpent.

Improbably many years later, and a decade after Steve Moore's sudden demise, the result of these multiple pairings has arrived as *The Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic*, a harmless-sounding title for an intimidating tome. The book comprises a history of the practice told through the "Lives of the Great Enchanters," detailed instructions for some basic magical activities, a novella depicting the initiation of a novice, and a long conclusion that doubles as a kind of manifesto.

The volume is beautifully illustrated, in a variety of distinct, but harmonious styles, displaying the talents of several comics artists, Rick Veitch and Kevin O'Neill among them, along with historical illustrations and an original portrait of Glycon by Alan Moore himself.

The two Moores suggest, among other things, that the human imagination exists as a kind of shared landscape, that gods and demons can be understood as autonomous projections of the subconscious mind, and that all of culture is in some respect an outgrowth of the occult. These are weighty ideas that the authors somehow hold lightly.

They forward hypothesis, suggest interpretations, and openly speculate. But they never insist, make few definite claims, and seldom lecture. They are happy to offer the reader the benefit of their experience, and that of the wisdom that they have acquired through their research, but they also make it clear that this can be no substitute for one's own experience, one's own wisdom.

Tempering their words of inspiration and practical instruction, this pair of wizard-guides offers a number of warnings—sober-minded cautions concerning a "life wasted in idle fantasy or a mind ruined by delusion," quick and relatively gentle jabs against Satanism, Wicca, chaos magick, and the New Age movement, and most of all, exhortations against any attempt to use magic for petty pursuits like making money, exacting revenge, or meeting girls.

Thus, they advise, "Free yourself from low material intentions by committing to a form of magical expression which demands we practice the Art for the Art's sake, rather than our own."

This invocation of aestheticism, constituting a philosophical and even a political commitment, is evident in nearly all of Alan Moore's work. Not only does he prize the skill, craft, and joy of creation and disdain the commercial exploitation of art through the endless production of sequels, prequels, movie and television adaptations, action figures, video games, and Happy Meal tie-ins, but the liberatory potential of beauty, pleasure, and imagination is a constant theme in his work, showing up in comics like *V for Vendetta*, *Lost Girls*, and *Promethea*, and in prose essays like "25,000 Years of Erotic Freedom" and (full disclosure) his introduction to my book about Oscar Wilde and anarchism.

The *Bumper Book*, both in terms of its content and as an objet d'art itself, represents a continuation of that aestheticist tradition.

The book is also explicit about its politics, describing magic as "a subjective practice of the individual, a means by which a single self may come to its own understanding of and make its own peace with the wonderful and terrible phenomenon that is existence," and suggesting that magic is therefore "congruent" with anarchism and "its insistence upon individual self-governance unmediated by an external authority."

Common to the subjectivist mysticism, autonomist politics and aesthetic imagination is a principle expounded by the Romantic poet William Blake: "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's"—a motto, the two Moores note, suitable to "an artist, a magician, or an anarchist."

There is, too, a deeper sense of politics implicit to the Moon and Serpent project: a new role for magic, reunifying the disparate disciplines which were once its province: science, politics, art, and spirituality.

This would, of course, completely reorient our conceptual universe—turning the pentacle right-side-up, if you will—and it is hard to imagine what the social and political implications would be, though it's clear that the Moores anticipate it landing us closer to the anarchist end of the spectrum. In particular, their suggestion that we replace religion with magic would imply a move away from authoritative institutions, settled dogma, and priestly hierarchies.

The long historical process by which magic was divided into separate disciplines, and may in the future be reintegrated, is described in the text as an application of the alchemical procedure *solve et coagula*—analysis and synthesis. But the authors also repeatedly refer to the first part of the process as a dismemberment, calling to mind a separate point of comparison: the death of the god Osiris, the rending of his body, and the scattering of his limbs and organs. His sister/lover Isis then sought out his remains and reassembled him—failing only to locate the phallus. By the logic of this barely-suppressed metaphor, our culture has divided the various elements of magic, and is at present missing the means for unification—the magician's wand.

This is a myth of loss, which calls us to further quests: Discover the wand—the magical principle, the True Will—and reunify the whole. The completion of this task marks the conclusion of one quest, but the commencement of a greater adventure. Not the end of history, but the dawn of a new Aeon.

Kristian Williams is the author of *The Illuminist: Philosophical Explorations in the Work of Alan Moore* (Emergency Hearts, 2024) and *Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde* (AK Press, 2020).

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