

Of Books & Booze – Episode 026: Hollow Earth

It's noon somewhere . . . and that means it's time once again to examine the intersection between alcoholic refreshment and the written word.

Welcome to . . . Of Books & Booze

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to the show.

It turns out that the Hollow Earth is a tough topic with which to match a booze.

There was, at one point, The Hollow Earth Brewing Company out of Oxford, Pennsylvania, but that's closed.

Cleveland, Ohio's Masthead Brewing Company produced 16-ounce cans of Hollow Earth Triple New England IPA and HenHouse Brewing out of Novato, California boasted the Hollow *Planet* Double IPA . . . but these seem to have been limited production runs and are now unavailable.

There aren't even any recipes for hollow-earth themed cocktails on the internet or elsewhere because if Chauncey couldn't find them, they don't exist.

Therefore, today's beverage is La Fin Du Monde Triple Belgian Ale by the Unibroue Brewing Company of Chamblay, Quebec, Canada.

For those who speak neither French or Quebecois, La Fin Du Monde translates to "The End of The World."

Not to be confused with the any-minute-now-and-I-really-mean-it-this-time Apocalypse advertised and anticipated by the Christian community, La Fin Du Monde Ale is, per the producer's website, "a tribute to Quebec, the land encountered by 16th-Century French explorers who though they'd reached the end of the world."

So, while it doesn't *specifically* relate to the Hollow Earth hypothesis, La Fin Du Monde pairs nicely with other aspects of this episode that we'll get to soon enough.

As noted, La Fin Du Monde is a Belgian-style Triple.

What the hell is a "triple"?

And are there Belgian-style singles, doubles, and quadruples?

Regarding triples, there is conflicting info regarding the origin of the term as it applies to beer.

According to the Michael Jackson: Beer Hunter website, triple is a "Dutch-language term usually applied to the strongest beer of the house," while BeerAdvocate.com states, "The name 'Tripel' actually stems from part of the brewing process, in which brewers use up to three times the amount of malt found in a standard Trappist table beer."

As for Trappist beers, the Cliff's Notes version is that Trappist beer is brewed only by the monks of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, a silent order that takes their nickname from their abbey in the town of Soligny-la-Trappe.

And though there are single, double, and quadruple beers, they are beyond the scope of this episode.

As I was saying, La Fin Du Monde is a Belgian-style triple that weighs in at a hefty nine percent ABV. This is due to the confectioner's sugar that the monks add during fermentation not only to crank up the alcohol content, but also add flavor and aroma, as well as lighten the body of the beer.

Under normal circumstances, it's recommended pouring any Belgian ale into a goblet, chalice, tulip. I've also had Belgians served in a snifter, which I liked because it helped capture and focus the aromas.

That said, today, I'm sipping from what's known as a Glencarin Gin Goblet.

On the Venn Diagram of glassware, the Glencarin Gin Goblet nestles between a true goblet, a stumpy hurricane glass, a snifter, and a Burgundy glass.

It has a full base; medium-long stem; and a nice, round bottom that tapers to a narrow waist before the last half-inch flares out to the rim.

I chose the Glencarin Gin Goblet for several reasons, primarily due to its versatility when it comes to beverages and beverage styles. There are only so many kinds of glasses Chauncey will let me buy for this show, so functionality is paramount.

Anyway, La Fin Du Monde comes in several formats -- specifically on tap, cans, and bottles -- including a 750 milliliter version -- but I opted for the four-pack of 335 milliliter bottles.

At the pour, the La Fin Du Monde is nearly the color of equal parts pineapple juice and dark rum, and has a rich, even haze to it.

The head settles fairly quickly to a thin layer of foam then to a narrow bead where the beer meets the glass. Very little of it clings to the sides, so there's not much of what beer-ficianados refer to as "lacing." In the center of the bowl develops a faint cirrocumulus foam, which is fun to watch change shape after each sip.

The nose is a clean, crisp amalgam of citrus – including ruby red grapefruit and blood orange, and spices like white pepper and a whiff of coriander.

In the mouth, La Fin Du Monde's spectacular effervescence takes its time giving way to a richness born of the beer's higher ABV and quality ingredients.

The long finish delivers more citrus, particularly the pith, along with that coriander, white pepper, and some turmeric, before closing with a balanced bitter fruitiness.

In the final analysis, La Fin Du Monde is a damned good beer. I will be drinking the remaining three bottles throughout the show, so apologies in advance for when my enunciation gets . . . less-than precise. And so much for all that.

As for the book on the desk, the main one for discussion is *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History Of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations, And Marvelous Machines Below The Earth's Surface* by David Standish.

Published in 2006 by Da Capo Press, *Hollow Earth* weighs in at 303 pages and is printed on a substantial paper stock which showcases the many high-quality photos and other images, as well as the book's overall aesthetic by [Cooley Design Lab](#).

The jacket design by [Alex Camlin](#) also merits mention as the oranges and yellows on the blue-black field make for an eye-catching cover, though for some visually-impaired readers, the indigo lettering might blend into in the darker background.

While *Hollow Earth* history and theory has long been an intended topic for this show, it came about a little sooner than anticipated, thanks to some side reading I'd indulged in.

I tend not to read fiction, but I'd stumbled on to an advance reader copy of *Where the Dead Wait: A Novel* by Ally Wilkes.

Published in December, 2023 by Atria/Emily Bestler Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, *Where the Dead Wait* is Wilkes's second novel, the first being 2022's *All the White Spaces*.

Somebody at The Guardian succinctly described *Where the Dead Wait* as "atmospheric Polar Gothic."

Little did I know that "Polar Gothic" is a long-standing literary sub-sub-sub-subgenre that includes, *The Terror* and *The Abominable*, both by Dan Simmons; *Stranded*, by Bracken MacLeod; *At the Mountains of Madness* by H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, and others.

In the abstract for her 2017 paper, "Haunted Ice, Fearful Sounds, and the Arctic Sublime: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic Space," [\[article download\]](#) [\[abstract\]](#) [Associate Professor Katherine Bowers](#) explains that, "polar Gothic . . . includes liminal space, the supernatural, the Gothic sublime, ghosts and apparitions, and imperial Gothic anxieties about the degradation of 'civilisation'" . . .

She also says that, "Polar space creates an uncanny potential for seeing one's own self and examining what lies beneath the surface of one's own rational mind."

This is certainly true of *Where the Dead Wait*, which takes place primarily in the frozen waste above the arctic circle with a third-person singular perspective that ping-pongs in time between 1869 and 1882.

This thirteen-year period spans a mere fraction of the roughly five-centuries that any nation with a boat was hot to find any sea lane connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

So, the thing history teachers never bothered to explain is why, beginning sometime in the 1400s, Europe suddenly needed this new trade route to the Orient.

By the way, back in the bad old days, referring to "the Orient" meant the ancient near east. This included modern Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Sudan, and the lands along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and the countries surrounding the Black Sea.

Goods traveled from to and from the Orient, usually in a combination of two ways: overland trade routes that schlepped exotic goods and spices via regular caravans, or

Shipping lanes that, from the West, traversed the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean, the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus Strait, and on into the Black Sea.

Anywhere along the way, goods would be loaded off of ships and put onto caravans, or vice-versa.

And for more than a thousand years, the supreme gateway to both land and sea trade routes was a city in western Turkey --- a swinging little place called Constantinople --- which, as of 330 CE, also happened to be the capital of the Roman Empire and the center of orthodox Christianity.

It was in the church's best interest to keep goods and the faithful flowing back-and-forth --- because, you know, money and power --- but, after centuries of decline and shrinkage, Constantinople finally fell to the Ottoman Empire in May 1453.

The Turks were happy to keep the trade routes open to all and sundry . . . but they jacked up the rates at the toll gates.

This put a deeper cut into the profits of the occidental capitalists, which I'm sure had them crying each other to sleep on their featherbeds and silk pillowcases.

If they didn't want to pay tribute to the Turks, Western entrepreneurs could send ships around all the way around Africa and up into the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf.

This was not optimal for several reasons including overall risk, expense, and the time it took to make the round-trip.

Naturally, the Late-Middle Age tycoons urged their heads of state to find other routes to the East that bypassed the whole Istanbulian isthmus.

Thus began the Rage of Exploration.

The first serious run the hunt for shipping lanes from Europe to the Orient was, of course, Christopher Columbus's so-called "discovery" of the New World --- which, as it turned out, had plenty of resources of its own to exploit and people to enslave.

But the Americas weren't Asia.

So, the search continued for a shorter route to the Orient.

In one way or another, every expedition failed --- including Columbus's.

I don't know what the actual numbers or percentages were, but every ship either found something else, came home empty handed, or fell victim of some disaster.

Many times, those ships didn't return so that rescue missions went out the following year. Sometimes, the rescue missions didn't make it back, either.

When a doomed ship's crewmembers were found alive, it tended to be thanks to the so-called "[Custom of the Sea](#)" --- a tidy euphemism for when the poor sucker drawing the short straw got "sacrificed" to feed everybody holding a long one.

Naturally, the Custom of the Sea was invoked only after the other corpses had been fully consumed . . . which we won't get into here because cannibalism is getting its own episode.

Fun fact: The Custom of the Sea wasn't officially outlawed until 1884.

As for unofficially . . . who knows?

Let's just say that the diners pick their teeth while the dined-on tell no tales.

Anyway, after a couple of hundred years of failing to find a more direct route across the North American continent or via the Southern Hemisphere, the Old and New World movers and shakers went all-in on a navigable Northwest Passage through or around Canada to the Pacific.

Which brings us to the Little Ice Age.

There's not much serious disagreement among historians and historical climatologists that the northern hemisphere experienced what has come to be known as the "Little Ice Age," but, the start dates can vary, depending on whom you're talking to.

Even so, there's a solid case made for this major cooling trend beginning as far back as the late 1250s when the [Samalas volcano](#) on the small Indonesian island of Lombok blew its stack with an estimated [Explosivity Index](#) of seven.

Much like the [Richter Scale](#), the Volcanic Explosivity Index is a logarithmic measure of an eruption's power --- meaning the effects increase by a factor of ten with every higher rating.

For example, the [1980 eruption of Mt. St. Helens](#) in Washington State ejected approximately 1 cubic kilometer of magma, rock, ash, mudflows, and so on . . . but scored only a VEI 5.

A VEI of seven is measured as a super-colossal eruption blasting out at least a hundred times the debris, or 100 cubic kilometers of material.

The estimated VEI 7 for Samalas happens to be the same rating awarded to the massive blast of [Mount Tambora](#), also in Indonesia, on April 10th, 1815.

There were several other notable eruptions during 1815, but none anywhere near the size of Tambora. Also, it's important to mention that Tambora had been venting a large dark cloud since 1812 and that after the April 10th eruption, continued sending up smoke until late August, 1815.

Due of the force of their primary eruption events, both Samalas and Tambora injected massive amounts of dust and microparticles into the upper atmosphere --- a lot of which stayed there and circulated around the planet, bringing on a kind of nuclear winter.

The April 10th eruption of Mount Tambora was responsible for what is known as the "Year Without a Summer" that dropped global temperatures between 0.4 and 0.7 degrees Celsius.

Throughout 1816, Tambora had caused insane climate events like the Thames River freezing solid, summer snowfall in China and the United

States that ruined crops, sunset conditions at noon, high mortality rates, and general misery.

But, even though temperatures gradually righted themselves after 1816, the Northern Hemisphere's "normal" temperatures stayed on the low side, thanks to the ongoing Little Ice Age started way back in the 1250s.

It seems that the Samalas eruption of 1257 either caused or greatly contributed to a 600-year-long period that saw temperature drops, significant growth in the Atlantic ice pack, and increased glaciation around the northern hemisphere that put an end to the previously-reliable long summers enjoyed by Northern Europe, generally referred to as the "Medieval Warm Period."

Wikipedia also notes that Little Ice Age's coldest years kicked off sometime around 1560 and lasted until sometime into the 1630s, but, according to climate historians, it wasn't until the 1850s that The Little Ice Age started to wind itself down.

You may be familiar with the 1850s date as it's also the start of the Industrial Revolution and the ramp-up of anthropogenic climate change.

Which brings us back to the Northwest Passage.

In April 1815, with the help of military forces from the Netherlands and a handful of German states and duchies, the British handed Napoleon's his final ass-kicking at the Battle of Waterloo.

With no major wars to fight thanks to a rising *Pax Britannica*, the English decided to finish what they'd started in the 1500s and put the final jewel in their crown of naval dominance by "discovering" that elusive Northwest Passage.

Which sounds great . . . but, as this digression within a tangent illustrates, the area encompassed by the Arctic Circle --- and more than a little beyond it --- had been *amassing ice and choking far-northern sea lanes for more than five hundred and fifty years.*

Meaning that if a navigable Northwest Passage had ever existed, it was, by then, perpetually blocked.

So, while it's clear to us that wood and canvas ships, or even iron-hulled steamers, had not a chance in hell of sailing anywhere near geographic North, nobody knew so in 1815.

On top of that, British minds were too focused on fortune and glory to consider, let alone countenance, that they couldn't find a route or even get to the North Pole.

Thus started a century of throwing money and bodies at an unsolvable problem, of seasonal trips to the roof of the world by sailors, explorers, and scientist --- with only a fraction of them making it home.

For particulars on The Little Ice Age, take a look at [The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300 to 1850](#) by Brian Fagan. There is an updated edition with a 2019 publication date, so see if you can find that one first.

For the history of the Northwest Passage, find a copy of [The Man Who Ate His Boots: The Tragic History of the Search for the Northwest Passage](#) by Anthony Brandt.

Both titles are available in print and audio formats.

For more information on the Toba volcano eruption that scored a mind-blowing eight on the Volcanic Explosivity Index, tune into [episode three in the Of Books & Booze](#) catalog where we get into [Donald Prothero's](#) excellent book, [When Humans Nearly Vanished](#) while discussing Brassfield's Eruption red blend.

So, all of that seemingly unnecessary background on The Little Ice Age and the Northwest Passage establishes context for a quick discussion of *Where the Dead Wait*, but also sets us up for Hollow Earth Theory in general and David Standish's book in particular.

I need to top up my beverage so now seems like a good time for a short break.

Take a listen to some good people doing good things, and we'll be right back.

[COMMERCIAL!]

What got me on the Hollow Earth topic sooner than expected was the brief mention in *Where the Dead Wait* of "the theories of Captain Symmes."

It might have been sometime in high school when my extracurricular reading first introduced me to Captain John Cleves Symmes, Jr. and his so-called theory, but I've never forgotten it --- because once that kind of thing is in your head, it tends to stick around.

However, I hadn't previously done a deep dive into the origins of Hollow Earth Theory.

And because I'm a drinker with a podcast problem, now seemed to be as good a time as any.

Due to his being referenced in *Where the Dead Wait*, my first mission was to learn more about exactly who was Captain John Cleves Symmes, Jr, --- and what were the core tenants of his theory.

Before skipping ahead to the most relevant parts, it's important to note that Symmes was born in November 1780, and that his rank is based not on maritime exploits, but on military service:

That's right.

Symmes was a captain in the United States Army --- which is confusing as hell, and kind of a let-down, but it also explains a lot.

Fast forward to April 10th, 1818 --- way out in the Missouri territory frontier town of St. Louis --- where Symmes started handing out [Circular Number One](#) -- his signed, one-page declaration putting forth his belief.

The formal part of the declaration is short enough that it's worth reading in its entirety:

TO ALL THE WORLD! [in all caps]

I declare the earth is hollow, and habitable within; containing a number of solid concentrick spheres, one within the other, and that it is open at the poles 12 or 16 degrees; I pledge my life in support of this truth, and am ready to explore the hollow, if the world will support and aid me in the undertaking.

At the bottom of the pamphlet, he has the balls to add:

I ask one hundred brave companions, well equipped, to start from Siberia in the fall season, with Reindeer and slays, on the ice of the frozen sea; I engage we find warm and rich land, stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals if not men, on reaching one degree northward of latitude 82; we will return the succeeding spring.

To recap, Symmes announced as fact his unfounded delusion that, beyond the Arctic and Antarctic Circles, the Earth is open like a giant spherical donut, with more and smaller donuts inside the main one, each presumably with entrances at their northern and southern ends.

Apparently, Symmes kept publishing these postcolonial blipverts --- half-page declarations that further defined and elaborated his original hypothesis, but not in any kind of sensible order.

It's hard to imagine these pamphlets and their batshit-crazy premise met with general guffaws and/or snorts of derision, especially from the press . . . but they did.

Even so, Symmes held to his gospel and before long was conducting a series of lecture-hall sermons that had enough attendance to encourage him to keep going while gaining him a few disciples.

Then, in 1826; Morgan, Lodge, and Fisher of Cincinnati printed and published [Symmes's Theory Of Concentric Spheres: Demonstrating That The Earth Is Hollow, Habitable Within, And Widely Open About The Poles](#) as written by an anonymous "Citizen of the United States"

While reading this 168-page defense and allegedly scientific support of Symmes's screwball conjecture, I became convinced it was written by Symmes himself, but that wasn't the case.

Turns out it was a Symmes groupie by the name of James McBride, who, sufficiently butt-hurt by the abuse heaped by the public and the press on his messiah, penned this "short treatise" to "accelerate the march of scientific improvement, enlarge the field of philosophic speculation, and open to the world new objects of ambition and enterprise" vis-à-vis the Hollow Earth.

But get this: McBride, for unknown though easily discerned reasons, abandoned the courage of his convictions and left his name off the by-line, instead attributing it to a "Citizen of the United States" before starting with quotes from Shakespeare and Milton in order to drape his anonymous screed in their virtues.

According to Symmes via McBride via Standish, "The whole thing rested on Symmes's 'proof' of a universal imperative toward hollow concentric spheres, from planets down to the molecular level."

McBride summarizes the overall theory as such:

The Earth is composed of at least five hollow concentric spheres, with spaces between each, an atmosphere surrounding each; and habitable as well upon the concave as the convex surface. Each of these spheres are widely open at the poles. The north polar opening of the sphere we inhabit, is believed to be four thousand miles in diameter, the southern above six thousand.

Also, Symmes doesn't posit an interior sun. Instead, he surmises the Earth's north and south holes are formed not on a perfect 90-degree slice off top, but on a 12-degree diagonal, with the high-side matching the upper-end of the rotational axis.

This alignment allows sunlight into the top and bottom of the first hole and all the way down to the inner-most sphere . . . assuming the successive interior spheres rotate on the same axial procession as the outer shell that we live on.

I don't remember if McBride and/or Standish ever explain why there are five interior spheres and not more . . . or less.

Also, I don't recall if McBride and/or Standish ever got into why Symmes was convinced that the part we live on is the outer-most sphere.

But Standish does explain why ice-free shipping lanes at the top of the world had become a key aspect of the obsession with a Northwest Passage:

Symmes, McBride, and others insist that the zone of fierce cold and ice near the poles is merely a frozen ring to be traversed. Beyond it, things warm up, and there is an open polar sea leading to the interior. Again, the anecdotal experience of many explorers . . . are offered as evidence

This insistence on an open polar sea was far from being the private hobby-horse of Symmes and his defenders. It had widespread currency, largely because people *wanted* it to be true.

As late as 1873, [an] article . . . in the Atlantic Monthly glibly states that, "it is now generally conceded that a vast open ocean exists in the polar regions."

So, thanks to the era's economically-driven wish-think, the madcap hope for a polar sea route to Asia and back was kept alive, no matter how implausible it was, or how many sailors died and/or ships were lost in the search.

Fun Fact: A Northwest Passage was finally discovered in 1850, but it stayed so packed full of sea ice that it remained, a Northwest Impassage.

And it wouldn't be until 1906 that Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen would manage to sail his sloop from Greenland to Alaska via the Passage.

Now, with global warming and the loss of the icecaps, there are a pair of traversable sea lanes over the northern route, but they are generally too clogged with ice to be navigable or efficient.

As we head into the final stretch of this episode a few things still need mentioning:

In his book, *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations, and Marvelous Machines Below the Earth's Surface*, David Standish explores not just the Symmes Hypothesis, but examines the ins, outs, arounds, and throughs of the supposed worlds within our planet.

Standish's book starts with how modern Hollow Earth theory dates back to 1691 when English mathematician, physicist, and Astronomer Royal, Edmund Halley, presented a trio of papers on what he surmised was really going on below the Earth's crust that kept causing occasional wacky compass readings while at sea.

Standish discusses that some version of a Hollow Earth has been around for long as civilization has --- mostly disguised as legend, myth, or dogma.

He also dedicates many well-spent words on the unintended effects that Symmes's so-called theories ultimately had beyond the age of exploration and empire --- effects that he couldn't have hoped for, let alone imagine.

As early as 1820, the idea of a world --- or worlds --- interior to our own launched a proto-science-fiction genre that eventually evolved into what's known as [Subterranean Fiction](#).

Authors who've worked in the Hollow Earth sub-genred include Edgar Rice Burroughs, Richard Sharpe Shaver, Max McCoy, and Rudy Rucker, as well as the aforementioned Poe and Lovecraft.

Fun fact: Since Professor Lidenbrock and company go down only 87 miles, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* doesn't fall under Hollow Earth fiction.

So, to put a bow on this sucker:

Where the Dead Wait: A Novel by Ally Wilkes has a spectral and often disassociated quality that made for interesting reading. To say that it's a high-arctic take on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is an oversimplification, but it's as close to an elevator pitch as I found in the reviewer blurbs. In this case though, the protagonist has other desires besides finding the lost expedition. *Where the Dead Wait* is recommended for readers looking for an eerie tale full of mystery, emotion, and horror.

The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300 to 1850 by Brian Fagan and *The Man Who Ate His Boots: The Tragic History of the Search for the Northwest Passage* by Anthony Brandt are both fine resources on their respective topics and should be on your list.

If you read only one book discussed today, do yourself a big favor and pick up a copy of *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations, and Marvelous Machines Below the Earth's Surface* by David Standish.

Along with being deeply and comprehensively researched, it's a very well-written, very fun read.

And while Standish is amused by the overall topic, he takes it seriously. His comprehensive and diligent approach is further enhanced by occasional asides and wry commentary, making *Hollow Earth* history even more enjoyable. High marks all around.

That's it for the show, but there's plenty more to know.

For more information on the books, booze, and other material referenced, take a look at the links section in the web page for this episode.

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tip your servers,

drink but never drive–

then get up and do it all again tomorrow.

See you next time.