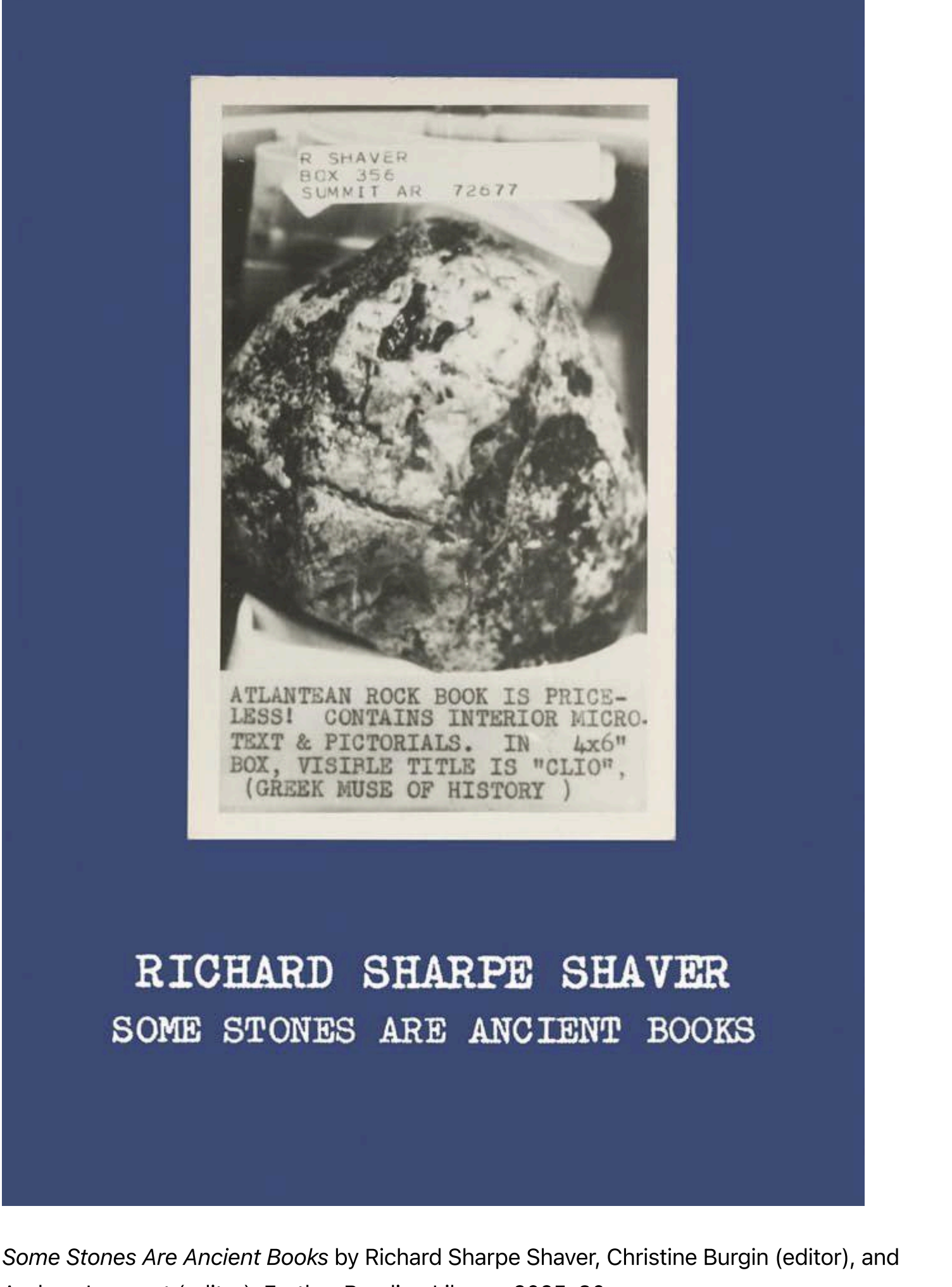


Worlds in Stone: The Rock Books of Richard Sharpe Shaver | Los Angeles Review of Books

Aaron Labaree excavates Richard Sharpe Shaver’s “Some Stones Are Ancient Books.”



Some Stones Are Ancient Books by Richard Sharpe Shaver, Christine Burgin (editor), and Andrew Lampert (editor). Further Reading Library, 2025. 80 pages.

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THERE IS A LONG and distinguished tradition of gazing at stones. Chinese connoisseurs since the Tang dynasty have admired “scholar’s rocks,” which are prized for the way their resemblance to landscapes, animals, or human figures invites contemplation. In 17th-century Europe, kings and princes collected “ruin marbles” from Tuscany that looked, in cross section, eerily like landscapes. One writer, art historian Jurgis Baltrušaitis, describes a stone like this in a gallery in Bologna as “a white marble veined with red, dark and other colors so disposed by Nature that they call to mind the woes of Troy, with the city and the rocks in flames.”

In the 20th century, French poet and surrealist Roger Caillois wrote two books about his rock collection. Caillois was fascinated by the way the natural formations in stone suggested pictures. “[O]nce perceived,” he wrote in *The Writing of Stones* (1970; tr. Barbara Bray, 1985),

they soon become tyrannical [...] The observer is always finding fresh details to round out the supposed analogy. Such images miniaturize, for his benefit alone, every object in the world, providing him with stable duplicates which he may hold in the palm of his hand, carry about from place to place, or put in a glass case.

Some Stones Are Ancient Books, a new collection of photographs and ephemera from Further Reading Library and editors Christine Burgin and Andrew Lampert, introduces a proud American entry into this tradition. At the same time that Caillois was working on *The Writing of Stones*, the science fiction writer Richard Sharpe Shaver was assembling his own collection of pictorial stones on his farm in Tennessee. To Shaver, however, the images on these rocks were not the product of blind geological processes. Shaver believed that these “rock books” were the art of an ancient spacefaring civilization that had inhabited earth for millennia before departing for other planets. For 20 years, he cut, photographed, and painted these stones, assembling these images, along with typewritten notes, into homemade books, a selection of which are included in *Some Stones*.

Shaver was a popular science fiction writer in the 1940s and ’50s. His stories, such as “Slaves of the Worm” and “Invasion of the Micro-Men,” helped the magazines *Fantastic Adventures* and *Amazing Stories* sell tens of thousands of copies each month. Shaver’s tales take place not in the future but in his version of the deep past, on an earth populated by Atlanteans, mermen, and beautiful Amazons. They’re filled with all the space battles and seductive aliens you would expect, but the heart of Shaver’s imaginative world is underground and very dark.

As artist Brian Tucker explains in his excellent introductory essay to *Some Stones*, Shaver actually believed that a race of “sadistic creatures that live inside the earth” were secretly manipulating human society. These beings, known as the Dero—short for “degenerate or detrimental robots”—were the decayed remnants of an ancient, hyper-advanced race that once inhabited earth. According to Shaver, these ancients built vast subterranean cities to escape the toxic rays of the sun, and although they eventually fled to another planet, they left behind some of their kind—the “abandondero”—and the powerful machines they had created.

The Dero, now degenerate and mentally impaired, used these machines, including “ray” devices capable of projecting thoughts and voices into human minds, to inflict suffering on the surface world, causing death, madness, and war.

Shaver first learned about the Dero when he began hearing voices while working at the Ford Motor Plant in the 1930s. His first published story, the 1945 smash hit “I Remember Lemuria!” was prefaced by an author’s note: “To me it is tragic that the only way I can tell my story is in the guise of fiction.” *Amazing Stories*’ star writer was a functioning psychotic who had been released from Ionia State Hospital in Michigan that same year. Shaver’s first published piece in the magazine was a description of “Mantong,” a universal language he believed he had discovered while institutionalized.

Fans loved Shaver’s stories, while critics mocked them, but it’s unclear if Shaver really had literary aspirations at all. What he wanted was to tell the world the fantastic truths he had discovered. When the public’s appetite for his stories faded, Shaver didn’t tinker with his style or switch genres but instead moved to the country to become a farmer. It was there that he discovered the stones that revealed even more amazing truths to him. “Rock books,” he wrote, “are an immense loom of the whole science of the Atlantean culture of vast magnitude.” In the patterns on the face of local granite, he saw a pageant of the pre-deluge world: battles, rituals, evil Deros, kings and queens of vanished empires.

Shaver used a high-quality lens and a bellows to blow up photos several times so that, as he put it, “we can determine the exact number of scales on a mermaid’s arm.” A few of Shaver’s rock pictures in *Some Stones* include ruler markings next to them, in millimeters. For Shaver, every square centimeter of his rocks featured scenes worthy of Minoan Crete or Hieronymus Bosch. An earlier book on Shaver’s art includes an image of an abstract-looking section of stone that Shaver describes as “a shot of a female, divesting herself of her clothes and running for the water.” He elaborates: “What is interesting is her clothing. Zippers and clasps are clearly evident. The corselet looks very sophisticated and her undergarments are embroidered with scallops. Quite scandalous is the fact that her tail shows.” Along with photographs, he made paintings of these stones by projecting magnified rock images onto a canvas or piece of cardboard on the floor and interpreting in paint what was already clear to him in the rock formations.

Shaver was as prolific in his rock photography and paintings as he had been in his science fiction, and *Some Stones* can only cover a small portion of his output. This is well chosen, though. The book captures the feeling of Shaver’s project as well as a kind of midcentury DIY flavor. Along with prints of his rock images and typewritten notes, the book includes Shaver’s homemade advertisements for the rock books and notebooks he sold from his home in Summit, Arkansas (“Only Source of Pre-Deluge Artifacts”) and some of the hand-painted titles he would send in along with his later stories (“Let’s Play Havoc: The Hidden Whispering”).

Some Stones is a stylish and attractive introduction to Shaver’s world, but in fact, it’s only the latest addition to the field of Shaverology. There are at least six other published books about Shaver and his work (two of which [were reviewed](#) for LARB in 2013), along with eight volumes of his collected stories and several shows of his art in New York and California. For an obscure eccentric who died 50 years ago and, it has to be said, wrote pretty badly, Shaver has maintained a surprisingly devoted following.

Partly, this is for the same reason his stories made such a sensation when they were first published: a certain number of people are prepared to believe in ancient aliens, the hollow earth, and their own persecution by hidden beings. Partly, it’s that his paintings, which teem with violent struggle, strange rituals, and buxom blondes, are compelling outsider art. But I think it’s also that there’s something pure, almost heroic, about his strain of all-American eccentricity. His work is a kind of multidisciplinary version of roadside art, like a spaceship made from 100,000 bottle caps.

A fan who visited Shaver in his studio wrote that when he was struggling with a painting or print, “he would take his shoe off and pound three times on the floor, while cursing the deros.” They may have continued to trouble him, but still we can think that his life was a victory over these subhuman villains. He did not find success—few people bought his rock books—but he did find a world of inexhaustible beauty in his backyard.

For Chinese or Renaissance scholars, the act of finding worlds in stone was aesthetic and contemplative. For Shaver, it was literal and prophetic: his form was science fiction rather than philosophy. But the natural and spontaneous affinity of their obsessions is sometimes almost spooky. Shaver, for example, found images of the underground world that obsessed him in the very stones that had come from underground. Italian artists of the early 17th century did the same when they painted scenes from Dante on Tuscan marbles that resembled the fiery caverns of hell, as if, as Caillois puts it, there was some complicity between the suffering humans and the tortured stone. Sophisticated stone enthusiasts of that era could hardly look at certain septaria formations without seeing Shaveresque images: priests conducting ceremonies, underwater fishermen, and spindly demons. For Shaver, there was a reason these images were “tyrannical”: they were really there.

If you spend enough time in the world of stone-gazers, you can almost start to believe him. Caillois himself confesses that when he sees a primitive face in the geometric pattern of a limestone, he “can scarcely refrain from suspecting some ancient, diffused magnetism; a call from the center of things; a dim, almost lost memory, or perhaps a presentiment, pointless in so puny a being, of a universal syntax.”

LARB Contributor

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