

*Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*

Catherine Spooner

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Don't judge a book by its cover, or so the old adage goes; when it comes to Catherine Spooner's most recent publication, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*, though, it is hard not to. The eye-catching cover, with whimsically macabre illustrations created by artist Alice Marwick, features an array of familiar contemporary Gothic figures; the *Twilight* (2008-2012) saga's Edward and Bella, Tim Burton's Mad Hatter, and *The Mighty Boosh* (2003-2007) logo all feature alongside more traditional iconography of the genre: bats, dolls, ravens, roses, and skulls. Spooner is a respected authority on the Gothic and has, over the years, published extensively on the genre across two monographs: *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (2004) and *Contemporary Gothic* (2006), countless chapters, articles, edited collections, and exhibition catalogues. *Post-Millennial Gothic* is a welcome addition to this growing collection.

*Post-Millennial Gothic* charts the pervasive spread of the Gothic in post-millennial culture, showing that contemporary Gothic is often humorous, romantic, and increasingly, as Spooner deftly demonstrates, happy. Spooner surveys an eclectically comprehensive mix of narratives from iconic Gothic texts: *Frankenstein* (1818), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Dracula* (1897); to more recent cult films: *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *The Lost Boys* (1987), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990); serialized sitcoms: *The IT Crowd* (2006-2013), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-), *Being Human* (2011-2014); supernatural series: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996-2003), *Supernatural* (2005-), *True Blood* (2008-2014); and makeover shows: *Grand Designs* (1999-), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007), *Snog Marry Avoid* (2008-2013). It is an extensive interdisciplinary study for alongside these literary and visual narratives, Spooner examines Goth subculture, fashion, advertising, and tourism.

Spooner acknowledges that to call something post-millennial only a decade into the new millennium may ‘seem premature’ (4) to some, but stresses that it is a ‘deliberately provocative title’ (4). In light of the pre-millennial ‘cultural anxiety fixated on fears of social and technological collapse’ (4), and post-millennial tragedy of 9/11 coupled with the subsequent ‘war on terror’, this neologism is both justified and illuminating. Likewise, ‘happy Gothic’ is a term that may appear initially paradoxical, yet it is, as Spooner explains, pertinent to the numerous contemporary Gothic texts that are not ‘understood as a means for Western society’s fears to be worked through’ (3) – as applicable to Gothic criticism more broadly. She coins the phrase as an umbrella term to describe ‘positively inclined emotions or moods that are unexpected in conventional Gothic critical discourse’ (3).

Chapter One, ‘Consuming the Edible Graveyard’, examines both Gothic lifestyles and the notion of lifestyle Gothic, a term applicable to those who ‘wish to live Gothically, to extend their reading or viewing experience to everyday life’ (29). The chapter addresses consumer culture’s adoption of Gothic, explores society’s consumption of Gothic products, and highlights the significance of Goth style – subjects that are then expanded upon in subsequent chapters. Chapter Two, “‘The images, for me, *are* the story’”, focuses on the importance and continuing influence of film director Tim Burton in the growth of post-millennial Gothic aesthetics. The chapter illustrates that for Burton, and the many who follow his lead, this new type of Gothic ‘is based as much in aesthetics as it is in narrative’ (49). Chapter Three, “‘Forget Nu Rave, We’re Into Nu Grave!’”, examines high street style and its use of Gothic romance, and in doing so outlines Gothic fashion and its various subcategories. Chapter Four, ‘*Gothic Charm School*, or, How Vampires Learned to Sparkle’, charts the evolution of the post-millennial vampire from Stephenie Meyer’s contentious sparkly vampires in *Twilight* (2008-2012), to the ‘vegetarian’ vampires in *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), to those that survive on artificial blood in *True Blood* (2008-2014), through to the abstinent vampires in *Being Human* (2011-2014). Spooner concluding that these alternative lifestyle choices ‘show us new ways to negotiate identity politics... in an increasingly commodified twenty-first century’ (97). Chapter Five, ‘Pretty in Black’, examines the figure of the Goth girl in a subset Spooner terms ‘whimsical macabre’, a variant of happy Gothic that ‘reconfigures the gruesome and grotesque as playful, quirky and even cute’ (99). Chapter Six, “‘Happy Nights are Here Again’”, studies the assimilation of vampires and other monstrous figures into an evolving comedic discourse; a space that mirrors the vampires’ own permeable nature and that offers ‘a way of continually

interrogating ... tradition, and in doing so, renewing and refreshing it' (143). Chapter Seven, "I'm the Shoreditch Vampire", considers the place of Goth masculinity in stand-up comedy, comic personae, and television comedy, and concludes that these shows 'more or less sympathetically, defines Goth as "other" – as the opposite of the mainstream, the opposite of successful integration into society' (164). Chapter Eight, "Swishing about and spookiness", focuses upon the British seaside town of Whitby as a key site of Gothic literary tourism, employed in novels from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to Paul Magrs' *Never the Bride* (2006), and also 'as a kind of overdetermined Gothic space' (165-166) in its own right.

*Post-Millennial Gothic* is foremost an academic study, but one that is pleasingly free of convoluted jargon, which makes it an enjoyable whistle-stop tour of post-millennial happy Gothic. It is not by any means an exhaustive list of every happy Gothic text, and it does not profess to be. *Post-Millennial Gothic* responds instead to the mutable nature of Gothic criticism, agreeing 'that Gothic is no longer where it used to be, but rather than lament its passing, seeks to map its new territories' (8), and this is an aim in which Spooner undoubtedly succeeds. Due largely to textual constraints Spooner's focus is predominantly upon British and American culture; this Western focus is an omission (alongside other forms of the Gothic) that she readily invites other scholars to address. Whether from Spooner herself, or another researcher responding to this call, I sincerely hope that there is more to come on this captivating topic.