Horror Literature from Gothic to Post-Modern: Critical Essays

Edited by Michele Brittany and Nicholas Diak

Shannon Scott, University of St. Thomas

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Horror Literature from Gothic to Post-Modern: Critical Essays, edited by Michele Brittany and Nicholas Diak, contains fourteen compact and absorbing essays on recent and past horror literature and film. Lisa Morton's forward and Becky Spratford's afterward are essential gateways into and out of this text, reflecting on the importance of horror scholarship and its growing popularity in what many critics consider to be the Golden Age of Horror. Morton, president of the Horror Writers Association and winner of seven Bram Stoker Awards, begins by discussing the importance of Ann Radcliffe's 1826 essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry," published posthumously, which is considered "the first serious work of critical horror analysis" (1). In honour of Radcliffe's contribution, the HWA named their annual academic conference after Radcliffe, an event that becomes more popular every year. Spratford's afterward is similarly filled with new ideas for horror scholarship and so many research resources that it feels like gift bag at the end of party. Spratford emphasizes how "vital" writing can be when scholars "focus their attention" on popular genres like horror: "When we give attention to the stories

people read in their leisure time, we learn more about humanity in general" (216). Brittany and Diak's collection, broken into four subsections, feels vital and alive, even when the topics are decidedly not.

It is fitting that the collection launches with an essay by Elizabeth Bobbitt on the supernatural in Ann Radcliffe's *Gaston de Blondeville* (1826). Focusing on Radcliffe's later work, more antiquarian in nature as opposed to her more famous Gothic romances, Bobbitt explores Radcliffe's first real ghost – Radcliffe's previous supernatural occurrences in fiction are revealed to be fakes (to the disappointment of critics and writers like Sir Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge). The ghost, Reginald de Foleville, demands retribution against a "duplicitous knight, Gaston de Blondeville, who is a favourite of Henry III (1207-72)" (15). Bobbitt effectively shows that by using this avenging spectre, Radcliffe exposes the "most fundamental haunting: the violence and injustice of Britain's own medieval past" (25). Erica McCrystal's essay follows, looking at how the phrase "Jekyll and Hyde" has evolved in our lexicon since Robert Louis Stevenson's publication in 1886. McCrystal reveals the inspiration for Stevenson's now iconic character/s with biographical background on William Brodie, a man who led a double life as a criminal and a carpenter. Critical examinations of film adaptations, comic books, and the use of the phrase itself details the evolution of "Jekyll and Hyde" well beyond its historical context. McCrystal offers increasingly disparate uses of the phrase – from politics to the workplace to marketing campaigns to sports and weather.

Jumping to the twenty-first century, J. Rocky Colavito examines class upheaval and social chaos in Max Brooks's *World War Z* (2006), convincingly offering "clear insights into the wars by which the zombie pandemic undermined, overturned, and redefined social class" (41). Colavito uses specific examples from Brooks's text to illustrate how the destruction of a class

system destroys the lives of certain characters – as much as the zombie pandemic. For example, Breckenridge Scott makes a lot of money in the pharmaceutical industry, providing a faulty vaccine during the zombie pandemic, yet even with all his money, he cannot buy anything because the economy has tanked. Furthermore, individuals in high-level positions, or white-collar workers in general, are not needed anymore; instead, the new reality demands carpenters, machinists, and gravediggers.

The second part of the collection spotlights specific horror writers. John C. Tibbetts's essay explores the prolific career of an underrepresented British writer of weird fiction, Marjorie Bowen. The novels and stories Tibbetts discusses clearly reflect the rewards of studying her work more closely: "an *oeuvre* whose sheer variety of subjects and narrative complexities baffle, dismay, challenge and delight" (58). Author Lionel Thomas Caswell Rolt is featured by Danny Rhodes in an essay that focuses on Holt's *Sleep No More* (1848) in relation to the ghost stories of M. R. James. Rhodes parallels craft elements from both authors, ultimately proving that Rolt's spectral fiction builds on James's, using setting to create subtext for a new century/era of readers. Gavin F. Hurley's essay focuses on Richard Laymon's writing style, which Hurley finds laudable for its use of minimalism and plain vocabulary. Hurley specifically praises the narrative effect of Laymon's short sentences that create more negative space for the reader and thus render the writing style more cinematic and conducive to building dread and suspense, a style Hurley likens to John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Of course, it would not be a proper horror collection without an essay on Stephen King. James Arthur Anderson concentrates on the fictional writers in King's work, examining their varying levels of career success and failure. Anderson even creates a graph with four quadrants to illustrate where authors like Jack Torrence from *The Shining* (1977) or Mike Noonan from *Bag of Bones* (1998) would be placed. This essay

is engaging on a "meta" level, and for those who have indulged in King's newest collection, *Let it Bleed* (2020), the story "Rat" features another writer, Drew, who may need his own quadrant.

The third section in the collection is based on literary theory. For scholars studying feminist horror, Bridget E. Kowen writes an excellent essay on pubescent women and demonic possession, specifically the dangers the "possessed" young women pose to men's bodies and to the patriarchy in Ray Russell's *The Case against Satan* (1963), William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), and Paul Tremblay's *A Head Full of Ghosts* (2015). Kowen views male attempts to exorcize young women as "masculine authority of science and religion" that ultimately results in the patriarchy being restored (118). Tremblay's novel is considered a postmodern approach to the genre, but it also features the only "failed exorcism" in the grouping (126). On a lighter note, Emily Anctil's essay explores horror in children's literature (written for ages 3-6), where pop up illustrations function as jump scares and stories become "shadow texts" with coded meanings about overcoming fear while simultaneously evoking fear for pleasure (130). Johnny Murray's piece highlights the aesthetic use of the sublime and the grotesque in weird fiction, and the effect of fusing the two together to "intensify" feelings of "estrangement" for the reader (167).

Perhaps the most complex essay in this theoretical section is written by Naomi Simone Borwein regarding Indighorror in Aboriginal Australian fiction. Exploring Indigenous myth and metaphysics, Borwein's essay makes key distinctions between who and at what time the horror is written (by white colonial writers or indigenous writers) and also between the Dark Side of Dreaming and the Dark Side of the Dream. The first is "invested with pejorative and destructive aspects of the Australian Dream" while the latter utilizes Aboriginal Australian cultural traditions and mythic figures (147-148).

The final section on “Disease, Viruses and Death in Horror” will certainly make readers draw parallels to our own current pandemic. Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. composes an essay of dizzying interchanges and interconnections between *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968), William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957). Frazer Lee writes a surprisingly comprehensive and succinct essay on the variety of adaptations and spin-offs of Koji Suzuki’s *Ring* (1991). Lee applies a “socio-political backdrop of nineties Japan” to examine “boundary crossing translation and transition into a worldwide franchise” (188). He then exposes how *The Ring* stems from a specific time and place, yet has “universal themes” that make the text a “progenitor of a particularly world literary material” (191). The final essay, by Rachel Sixta Schmitz, explores technology in horror, contrasting Jim Sorenzo’s *Pulse* (2006) and Stephen King’s *Cell* (2006), and discovering that while technology is often used as the source of an apocalypse in the horror genre, either working as a virus or a haunting, it can potentially save everyone as well. There is something for every horror scholar in this eclectic collection. While it may not be “escapist” in subject for the current times, it certainly will engage and inspire all horror enthusiasts.