

*Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses*

**Gina Wisker**

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There is a persistent trope in Gothic fiction, particularly Gothic fiction of the more Romantic persuasion: the image of the Fleeing Woman. Depicted either in prose or on the lurid cover of pulp paperbacks she is beautiful but haunted, her raven hair and billowing gown flowing in the night-time breeze. We can only guess at what she is fleeing from through the sinister implications of the castle looming behind her, a figure silhouetted in a candlelit window. Yet we know, deep down, what she is ultimately running from: men and male systems of power. What is more interesting – more relevant to the Gothic's interest, as Angela Carter tells us in this book's introduction, of 'provoking unease' (1) – is what she is running to. In *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction* Gina Wisker attempts to look at what this destination might be by exploring 'the contradictions and the richness of ways in which contemporary women writers, both established and new, conventional and radical, use the opportunities afforded by the Gothic to engage with culture, imagination and their arguments' (1).

After a brief, scene-setting introduction, Wisker's book is divided broadly into four sections. We start with overviews that focus on some major names from the world of Women's Gothic – Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and Tananarive Due – then journey through how these writers and their peers work through concepts of post-

colonialism and demythologising accepted narratives. Two chapters follow on the approaches of women writers to vampires, both as threats and opportunities, before Wisker turns her attention to the nebulous matter of ghosts and ghost stories.

Opening with an analysis of work from three writers who will be known to potential readers, albeit to greater or lesser degrees, is a wise move on Wisker's part and I found that the first three chapters allowed her to introduce philosophical concepts – like the feminist thought of Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous or Julia Kristeva's concept of the repellent attraction that is abjection – by attaching them to the perhaps more well-known works from Carter, Atwood et al. In fact, it is a quote from the section on Angela Carter that, I think, cuts to the heart of *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction's* content and aims. In her non-fiction book *The Sadeian Woman* (1978), Wisker tells us, Carter makes the statement that 'the strong meatify the weak' (51). Not 'oppress', not 'brutalise', not even 'kill' but '*meatify*'. What a word, what an image that is. The weak are not simply lower than the strong, but they have their agency and their identity removed from them as they are rendered down into commodities to be exploited, no longer seen as people. This stretches from Carter's reworking of Bluebeard in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), through Atwood's depiction of female disenfranchisement in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – where women are defined solely on their ability to bear children and have even their names taken from them – and on to the doubling of Black women's 'meatification' in Morrison's writing. Although horrific and suppressive, Wisker also sees that this 'meatification' is, like the dismembered corpse in Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), achingly Gothic; the absence and repression of women allows them to return all the more ferociously as self-constructed revenants and Wisker supports this later in the book by quoting Alison Rudd's statement that 'the presence of the Gothic allows a space for the unspeakable and haunted past to force its way to the surface' (118). For me, this thread opened up the main writers of this section – along with other voices

like Jean Rhys or Shani Mootoo – to a much deeper and richer reading than I would have been previously able to undertake. It made me want to search out the works I have not read and re-read with fresh eyes those I have, which I think is the highest compliment any literary criticism can be offered.

I found the theory of the twinned chapters ‘Vampire Bites’ and ‘Vampire Kisses’ – that, for the already-meatified, the vampire can be less of a predator than they are a liberator and that the vampire’s abjection transgression of the binary life/death boundary can also be extended out to gender, sexuality and power structures – harder to enjoy almost purely because the selected case studies of Poppy Z Brite, Anne Rice, the *Twilight* series (2008-2012) and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) are also works I find hard to enjoy. In fact, it almost feels a shame that so much space is taken up with *Twilight*, which even Wisker refers to derogatorily, when Ana Lily Amirpour’s multi-layered *A Girl Walks Home At Night* (2015) barely warrants a paragraph. Equally, it is a curious omission to not discuss the power inversions of the perpetually youthful Eli in *Let The Right One In* (2008), especially as it is referenced by name in the subtitle of a previous chapter.

This is an issue of my own tastes, however, far more than it is of Wisker’s writing or thought and the final sections, which looks at ghost stories authored by women – works which deal with ‘breaking silences, speaking from the shadows and revealing some of the contradictions and everyday horrors of families, domestic situations, romance and relationships’ (207) – and then opens up the ‘daylight gate’ (236) to a wider selection of women’s Gothic fiction is a wonderful cornucopia. Old favourites – like Susan Hill’s *The Woman In Black* (1983) or Sarah Water’s *The Little Stranger* (2009) – are re-assessed and new works revealed.

*Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction* is a crucial undertaking and one I am sure I will return to repeatedly as I work through its impressive bibliography. It also sits perfectly at

a nexus of other, equally important writing like Megen de Bruin-Molé's *Gothic Remixed* (2019), *Women's Colonial Gothic Writing* (2018) by Melissa Edmundson or Julia Round's investigation of *Gothic for Girls* (2019) and ties them all into a framework of interlinked but distinct scholarship.

More importantly, especially for male readers like myself, it reminds us that for many women the Gothic nightmares of being trapped, hunted or made to feel insane are not a fiction that can be ended by closing the book or pausing the film, are not even really nightmares at all, but are simply the way their world is. *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction* shows how this can be resisted and, by resisting, ended.