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## Book Review

Brittany, Michele & Diak, Nicholas. (Eds). (2020). **Horror Literature from Gothic to Post-Modern**. McFarland & Company, Inc.

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Dark tales have a long cultural history but horror scholarship, although gaining a solid footing in academia more recently, has much to contribute to our understanding of our ‘human’ selves. In *Horror Literature from Gothic to Post-Modern* the collection of essays draws on the growing range of horror studies that highlight ways in which identities, relationships, and humanity itself are questioned. Outlining the study of this specific genre as pertinent to understanding cultural history, the Foreword by Lisa Morton acts as an introduction to this edited collection through a succinct contextualization of the historical development of academic non-fiction writings on horror, with Michele Brittany and Nicholas Diak’s introduction elaborating on the collection’s source, structure, and content. Despite the suggestion from the title, this volume is not strictly chronological, but rather is divided into four thematic sections with discussions within these sections ranging from the eighteenth-century Gothic to twenty-first century cinematic horror.

### Section One: Horror Writers Who Forged New Ground

Elizabeth Bobbitt and Erica McCrystal bring a fresh perspective to both an iconic Gothic author and text in this section. Focusing on Anne Radcliffe’s posthumously published ‘First Truly Supernatural Ghost in *Gaston de Blondville* [1826]’ (Bobbitt, 2020, 16), Elizabeth Bobbitt explores Radcliffe’s interest in antiquary in resituating her post-1797 works in Britain, arguing Radcliffe uses the ghost’s appearance to challenge a British national cultural identity formed by ‘the violence and injustice of Britain’s own medieval past’ (p.25). Erica McCrystal, too, re-examines how the eponymous Gothic villain of R.L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) has become a real-world cultural reference for disparity. While the nomenclature ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ may have lost some of the darker, violent connotations of its origins, McCrystal (2020) argues, it ‘provides a recognizable association’ (p.33) of human duality for today’s society.

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While these opening chapters offer an introduction to notions of human identity in earlier texts, J. Rocky Colavito's chapter delves into conceptualizations of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. 'ScatterGories' explores how the 'loss of status, community, and humanity' (p.45) are highlighted in 'horrifying dimensions ... [to] illuminate different sorts of category crises' (p.45) in Max Brooks' novel *World War Z* (2006). Moving beyond the obvious socioeconomic destabilization of societal inversion, Colavito explores how Brooks' novel upsets the 'binary between human and zombie' (p.49) when the survivors resort to cannibalism out of desperation. In confusing the category of what it means to be human, and highlighting 'the lengths to which people will go to maintain a former way of life' (p.51), Brooks' zombie narrative reveals the 'deepest horrors' (p.51) of human nature.

## Section Two: Spotighting Horror Writers

Spanning the twentieth century, the essays here draw attention to the innovative styles employed by writers in pushing the boundaries of horror to reflect changing attitudes across the period, tapping into the human emotions of fear, shock, dread and suspense so integral to the genre (Reyes, 2016, 7). Here, John C. Tibbetts examines several of Marjorie Bowen's wide and varied range of narrative styles of the inter-war period, albeit published under several sobriquets. Perhaps best known for her Weird short stories, and for 'deploying Gothic tropes to illuminate her portraits of women ... as either maligned victims or monstrous aggressors' (p.60), Bowen's stories unearth the ghosts of historical crimes of injustice that earn her a 'place within the ranks of other British women ... [with] a predilection for themes and tropes of historical settings, ghostly possessions, neurotic women, and supernatural sex' (p.65).

Post-war ghost story writer L. T. C. Rolt, Danny Rhodes argues, 'carries the form to untrodden places' (p.70). Drawing a line under the typical Edwardian style and 'forging the way for the urban stories that preponderate the horror genre today' (p.70), Rolt's attention to detail in describing his setting and inclusion of 'colloquial expression, dialect and regional variation' (p.74) of his working-class characters gives his stories an authoritative authenticity. While Rhodes points out that the atmospheric description of landscape and the natural world plays an integral role in Rolt's 'new type of industrial ghost story' (p.79), Rhodes' argument skirts Rolt's use of natural agency as a foreboding terror that obfuscates the natural and supernatural world(s); an idea that could have potential for ecohumanist discussions beyond this current essay.

While Stephen King is said to be responsible for 'updat[ing] horror fiction *stylistically*' (Hantke, 2016, 169, emphasis in original), which James Arthur Anderson discusses more specifically in relation to the popular and/or critical success of King's author-protagonists in the concluding chapter to this section, Gavin Hurley explores Richard Laymon's postmodernist rhetorical style of horror fiction that gives his work a filmic quality. Although not classed as postmodern, Laymon's fiction has a minimalist style that uses dialectic negative or blank space to create suspenseful horror, wherein '[t]he "real" becomes the "reel" which is housed within a novel' (p.93). Laymon's stylistic writing and his 'attention on the horror fiction *experience*', Hurley argues, 'is what makes him a contemporary master of horror' (p.98, emphasis in original).

## Section Three: Exploring Literary Theory in Horror

The chapters in this section offer thematic perspectives on how horror provides important modes of understanding societal shifts in anxieties. Bridget E. Keown explores gender, power,



and trauma in late twentieth-century novels of demonic possession and exorcism. While horror narratives have a long history of exposing the socio-political and cultural othering of women (see: Harrington, 2018) and scholarship in highlighting women's role in horror is growing (see: Heller-Nicholas, 2020), for Keown, these horror narratives illustrate how 'female trauma and rebellion are interpreted as horrific and subsequently silenced by masculine authority figures as a symbolic return to patriarchal order' (p.116).

Focusing on horror in children's literature, Emily Anctil demonstrates how horror archetypes, tropes, aesthetics and techniques are re-purposed within picture books aimed at very young children. As Jessica R. McCort (2016) has pointed out, horror has been 'lurking in the children's library for a long, long time' (p.6), used, Anctil adds here, within the horror tradition 'to maintain control over [disobedient] children' (p.130). Today's picture books, Anctil argues, use scary situations to empower young children in facing their fears.

Distinct from Western notions of fear that rely on Self/Other binaries, Naomi Simone Borwein elucidates an 'Aboriginal Australian Theory of Horror and Monstrosity, as a Culturally Specific Paradigm' (p.142) through a dreaming epistemology. As a shared feature of both White and Aboriginal Australian horror dreaming draws fear around blurred categories as 'space and time are not bound by binary associations' (p.148). Whereas existing monster studies have tended to be eurocentric leaving a gap in scholarship of the indighorror figures of Aboriginal Australian mythos, Borwein argues, '[s]ynchronic horror becomes a useful term to explain the complex multivariable space of dreaming horror and monstrosity' (p.154) and move beyond colonial contexts.

In spotlighting weird fiction, Johnny Murray places the sublime and grotesque at the heart of a genre that attempts to describe the numinous, liminal things and experiences that are beyond the veil of reason. Drawing on several examples of well-known weird writers, Murray elaborates how this type of fiction revolves around the horrific representations of sublime phenomena made grotesque in invoking '[h]eady admixtures of attraction and repulsion' (p.169), of ethereal and physical, and metamorphic, transgressive subversions of logic and reason.

#### **Section 4: Disease, Viruses and Death in Horror**

In perhaps the most relevant section for ecohuman discussions, the chapters here consider contemporary anxieties reflected in viral horror and the speculative consequences of human and nonhuman interactions. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. explores how George Romero's zombie apocalypse movies can be read through Samuel Beckett's absurdist comedy in grappling with twentieth-century understandings of death and the human condition. Illustrating that *Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Night of the Living Dead* offer enough similarities to demonstrate the ironic nihilism of American culture towards humanity and death, Wetmore argues a Beckett 'world-view lurks behind contemporary zombie culture' (p.185).

Exploring 'the viral nature of [Koji] Suzuki's story' *Ring* and its multiple iterations as it 'mutates from the first novel in the series to the latest book and [(Hollywood)] film sequels' to 'the viral pop-up perpetuated via the Internet in the sequel *Rings*' (p.191), Frazer Lee pinpoints the way in which Japanese cinematic and American J-horror remake versions proffer their own cultural perspectives of collectivism and Western individualism. The story's universal concept of technophobia and a Gothic curse contribute to its transnational success,

Lee argues, as '[t]he long, black hair, flowing white robes, and staring eyes of [the] avenging female' (p.192) emerges as the iconic cultural marker of a truly global angst.

Rahel Sixta Schmitz continues the theme in exploring contemporary horror's use of viral disease as the cause of global apocalypse through digital devices of modern communication. Drawing on human-nonhuman entanglements and what it means to be human, Schmitz highlights how underlying anxieties about technological reliance and digital dis-ease are entwined with biological disease and visualized through 'an epidemiological map' (p.211) before emphasizing the 'neutraliz[ation of] the human subject' (p.211) in Sonzero's film *Pulse* and King's novel *Cell*. Moreover, Schmitz concludes, the ambivalent endings these texts paradoxically suggest that technology may provide the answer to the very problem it created in the first place.

Becky Spratford concludes this collection of essays that focus on what stories of fear, anxiety, and monsters reveal 'about us as humans, the societies we build, and our interactions with each other and the world around us' (p.215), calling on librarians and scholars to solidify academic support for horror studies. Indeed, the comprehensive variety of essays covering a range of historical contexts, genres, texts, narrative styles, and key issues within this collection offers the volume as a foundational text for horror students and scholars alike. To echo Spratford, not including this in library collections would be 'truly horrific' (p.217).

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