



ERICH BUCHHAUS

Book Selector

The horror-tale is as old as human thought and speech. Cosmic terror appears as an ingredient of the earliest folklore of all races and is found in the most archaic ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings. It was a prominent feature of the elaborate ceremonial magic, with its rituals for the evocation of demons and spectres, which flourished from prehistoric times, reaching its highest development in Egypt and the Semitic nations. Fragments like the Book of Enoch and the Claviculae of Solomon well illustrate the power of the weird over the Eastern mind, and upon such things were based ensuing systems and

traditions, echoes of which extend even obscurely to the present time. Folklore during the Middle Ages steeped in fanciful darkness, brooded ominously on werewolves, witches, vampires and ghouls. This in turn would be carried over into the development of the gothic novel, to be seen in the writings of authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, Mary Shelley (**Frankenstein**) and Bram Stoker (**Dracula**).

The word 'horror' (in a literary sense) has had so many meanings and connotations over the years that it is easy to get confused. It has been downright abused, twisted into a saleable product, then abandoned as not commercial, becoming as much an epitaph as a description. The result is that most readers seldom consider what horror really is about.

This confusion can be pinpointed to the publishing industry that has continually redefined horror as a literary style and a market category through the years. Up to the 1970s, horror was simply a part of literature. Writers wrote stories and books that scared people, but they weren't seen under a separate label in the marketing niche, horror. Readers interested in dark fiction found what they were looking for in pulp fiction and science fiction titles.

The explosive success during the late 1960s and early 1970s of films such as **Rosemary's baby** and **The exorcist** brought about an upsurge in the demand of horror fiction and resulted in authors such as Stephen King and Dean Koontz to become immensely popular publishing icons from the 1980s onwards to reach bestseller status. King, and in some ways Koontz, came along with a style of writing that the public could relate to, with plenty of scary stuff, lots of words and plenty of descriptions of places that does not need a huge imagination to see why the protagonist in the book is scared. Horror could rightly take its place with science fiction and mystery as a genre unto itself.

Horror exists in the interaction between



the writer's words and you, the reader. It burrows into our primal psyches and ferrets out an emotional reaction, namely fear - the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind according to the founding father of modern horror, HP Lovecraft. The feeling of fear can be simply atmospheric, eerie, or just weird, creating, as Lovecraft points out, a sensation of horror.

This atmosphere can be found throughout literature from Shakespeare right down to the best-selling works of Stephen King and Clive Barker, in Anne Rice's vampire and witches, in traditional ghost stories, in gross-out gore stories as Graham Masterton and Shaun Hutson. Richard Laymon's stories at first shockingly explicit in violence and sex, later became more subdued. What makes his titles so scary is that everyday non-threatening things become objects of fear. James Herbert's novels again have ventured away from the straightforward horror tag to deliver something more with a psychological and supernatural twist. But like all other titles it boils down to just plain horror!

A taste in horror is like taste in music. Despite individual preferences and a certain stigma, horror is still a handy inclusive noun encompassing the basic dark emotions such as fear, terror, dread, panic, aversion and so forth.

From gory thrillers about serial killers to novels of psychological suspense where no blood is shed, from classic tales of haunted houses to subtle portraits of haunted minds, from stories of animals gone berserk to sagas of mad doctors and scientists, there are horror novels for every reading taste. What all these books have in common is a monster. Leonard Wolf states in the introduction to his critical analysis of the genre **Horror: a connoisseur's guide to literature and film**: 'Horror literature touches the nerve of paranoia that many of us cherish by confirming our suspicion that there is a "they" or an "it" or a "he" or a "she" that is out to get us. In horror fictions there are all kinds of evidence that the universe is badly made or ruled by forces other than those we have so far acknowledged. In the grip of horror literature, we find ourselves assuming what Lovecraft has called a subtle attitude of awed listening as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities

on the known universe's utmost rim.'

As Peter Straub, one of the most literate horror authors, said in answer to an interview question about how he came to write horror: 'And I was conscious that horror had a great literary history. Hawthorne, Henry James, Poe, many others had found a depth and seriousness in it which made horror, to me anyhow, more valid, more interesting and worthy, than the general run of mystery fiction. Horror was not about the invention of clever puzzles. It dealt with profound emotions and real mysteries, not who had left footprints under the gorse-bush and how the key to the library had wound up in the colonel's golf bag. Horror could touch people, change them, and make them think. While it was certainly entertaining, there was much more to it than mere weightless entertainment.'

Recently less and less horror titles have been seen and questions may arise as to the future of the horror novel. It is not dead as a genre but it just takes more originality to get a horror novel published today, because audiences are finally becoming sophisticated enough to demand a higher quality product.

See *Booklist* for a selection of favourite horror titles in the Service.

Biography

Books

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. **Supernatural horror in literature.** - Dover, 1973.

Wolf, Leonard. **Horror: a connoisseur's guide to literature and film.** - Facts On File, 1989.

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