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Rediscovering Horror – From Graveyard Poetry to Popular Culture

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Horror: A Literary History, edited by Xavier Aldana Reyes, is divided into seven chapters which function as separate essays that can be read without having specific knowledge about the horror genre. If read systematically, the book presents an anthological review which establishes the continuity of the genre from 1764 to the early twenty-first century. Even though it privileges theory over textual analysis, the book can be used to elucidate numerous cultural productions and developments that have influenced the simultaneous evolution and devolution of horror by offering a precise insight into the continual interaction of social and literary spheres. Horror: A Literary History is valuable precisely because it questions the devalorizing stances towards the horror genre by acknowledging the importance of various writers who have contributed to the evolution of American and British literature but have often been marginalized because of their tendencies to transgress into the horror genre.

The fluidity of the concept of horror has provoked numerous attempts to position it within certain historical and locational coordinates, often ignoring the genre's intertextuality and transhistoricism. The contributors of Horror: A Literary History want to define horror in terms of its affective pretenses, to portray how horror derives its name from the effects it elicits in its readers, relying on a non-indexical engagement with the world. For Reyes, horror has substantial creative and imaginative potential; it is a genre which actively and predominantly seeks to create a pervasive feeling of unease (10). It also offers its readers/spectators veritable insights into the nature of taboo areas that otherwise dwell on the verge of the acceptable (10). An abject among literary genres,

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horror's transgressive nature simultaneously fascinates desire and disgust. For Reyes, horror is exciting precisely because it dares to go where other sanctioned literature does not (12) and because it is multilayered with social and political undertones. However, Reyes is also aware that not every work ascribed to the horror genre is an ingenious piece of social critique, precisely because horror has proved to be a marketable genre in the twenty-first century.

The first chapter, entitled "Gothic and the Cultural Sources of Horror," written by Dale Townshend, connects the beginning of horror with the development and rise of Gothic fiction in the eighteenth century via graveyard poetry. Townshend stresses the importance of Edward Young and Robert Blaire, who initiated a poetic tradition that turned to apostrophizing horror as the most powerful and effective literary and psychological sentiment (30). Townshend also discusses the distinction between horror and terror, which were habitually conflated in the eighteenth century by authors like Thomas Burke, John Aikin, and Horace Walpole who, in Townshend's opinion, brought the literature of horror into being with his 1764 novel Castle of Otranto. Walpole's concern with the unspeakable, which is simultaneously nameless and beyond the powers of verbal expression, becomes central to the portrayal of horror from 1764 onwards. Townshend concludes the first chapter by stressing Ann Radcliffe's conceptual framework which positions horror as firmly rooted in the body and which has shaped the perception of horror ever since 1826.

The second chapter, entitled "American Horror: Origins and Early Trends," written by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, positions the captivity narrative as the first indigenous form of horror, introduced by Mary Rowlandson in 1682. Monnet shows how horror arrived during a time of intense social transitions in America (54), and emphasizes the shifts in the political and religious landscape which influenced writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is the author of the Scarlet Letter (1850) and is known as America's first writer of historical horror. Monnet also reflects on Edgar Allan Poe's legacy, specifically the tonal ambivalence which mystifies the nature of his stories and renders the narratives unstable; they are simultaneously successful tales of horror, subtle pieces of mock-horror, and self-reflexive metafictions (63).

The third chapter, entitled "Horror in the Nineteenth Century: Dreadful Sensations, 1820-80," written by Royce Mahawatte, emphasizes how the nineteenth century journey into horror began with medical technology or, more precisely, with the medical casebook genre introduced by

Samuel Warren. Mahawatte states that the rise of medical and pseudo-scientific epistemologies contributed to the institutionalization of the body as a source of horror (80). In this particular period, horror cannot be identified as a distinctive genre of popular writing, since the Victorian writers blurred the boundary between the Gothic in fiction and the horrific in life (98). Gradually, Gothic was brought in line with Realism or the 'Condition of England' novel. Authors not directly associated with horror, such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, and Willkie Collins, used moments of horror when depicting psychological states, which resulted in domestic and psychological realism that began to encroach on what remained of Gothic conventions in the mid-nineteenth century (88). Ultimately, even though Victorian writers were not aware of the existence of horror in their works, even substituting it with the word sensation, they were responsible for nurturing a legacy which led to the revival of contemporary horror.

The fourth chapter, entitled "Transitions: From Victorian Gothic to Modern Horror, 1880-1932," written by Roger Luckhurst, focuses on the revival of late Victorian Gothic in Britain and ends with the consolidation of the elements of modern horror in American narratives. Victorian Gothic was marked by the existence of mutually exclusive binary oppositions of high and low literature. Horror literature was considered low, unfiltered for taste or morality and sold to a population categorized as being quarter educated (109). Furthermore, the late Victorian period was an era of progressive secularization, during which horror was imbued with radical materialism and atheism (115), which resulted in fiction being populated with physicists, medical doctors, and various experts in the uncanny and weird. Predominantly popular were ghost stories, such as Henry James' Turn of the Screw (1898). Luckhurst also acknowledges the existence of bio-horror, of writers such as Stevenson and Wilde who found their inspiration in the horrific body, and the importance of H.P. Lovecraft. Ultimately, the chapter ends with 1932 during which a new film classification, H for Horrific, arose and drastically changed the relation between fiction and film, paving the way for a vast and profitable industry.

The fifth chapter, entitled "Horror Fiction from the Decline of the Universal Horror to the Rise of the Psycho Killer," written by Bernice M. Murphy, portrays the radical change horror underwent in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as it arose from the conditions of everyday life, usually associated with security and stability. Authors such as Shirley Jackson and Richard Matheson reconfigured old

tropes, themes, and settings in order to make them relevant for a post-atomic, post-psychoanalytical age (138), one of such settings being the archetype of the haunted house portrayed in Jackon's The Haunting of Hill House (1959). Murphy continues by emphasizing the importance of Dennis Wheatley in the context of British horror fiction. His opus includes tales of black magic and the occult, and has influenced authors such as Ray Russell, Ira Levin, and Charles Beaumont on the other side of the Atlantic. These authors implemented satanic themes into their narratives, which eventually resulted in the conquest of the American box office with movies such as Rosemary's Baby (1968), The Exorcist (1973), and The Omen (1976). Murphy states how the importance of Ira Levin's Rosemary's Baby (1967) helped underline one of post-war horror fiction's most pervasive themes of the evil, possessed, mutilated or 'alien' child (144), represented in William March's 1954 novel The Bad Seed or William Golding's Lord of the Flies from the same year. By offering an exhaustive overview, Murphy demonstrates the transition from horror imbued with supernatural elements to one inspired by psychological instability, which was firmly established as one of the major thematic concerns of American horror fiction (150). Robert Bloch's Psycho (1959) inspired movies like The Silence of the Lambs (1991) and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), and positioned the character of Norman Bates as one of the most pervasive figures in our social imaginary.

The sixth chapter, entitled "The Rise of Popular Horror, 1971-2000," written by Steffen Hantke, traces the immense popularity of horror in the 1970s which, with the help of television and short story format, transitioned into the mainstream. Hantke emphasizes how horror was the dominant genre during 1980s by virtue of numerous authors, such as Fritz Leiber, Robert McCammon, Chet Williamson, Dean Koontz, Brian Lumely, John Saul, and so on. Hantke also dedicates a significant portion of the chapter to Stephen King, stressing the importance of his work through which he perfected a stylistic hyper-realism (169) and which led to horror being positioned as a worthy genre. Hantke briefly mentions two British authors, Ramsey Campbell and James Herbert, but emphasizes that the boom was primarily a US condition. The period of the 1980s was also marked by the phenomenon of splatterpunk, first introduced by Skipp and Spector's Book of the Dead (1989), which inspired Kathe Koja's The Cipher (1991). The golden age of horror lasted until the late 1980s and the early 1990s, when horror plunged from the heights of mainstream popularity

(185). However, as shown in the last chapter, “Post-Millennial Horror, 2000-16,” written by Xavier Aldana Reyes, horror managed to revive its golden era.

In the final chapter, Reyes states how the period of the 1990s was a relatively static one for horror (189), and that the twenty-first century is partly driven by old blood – by authors such as King, Barker, and Campbell. These authors paved the way for numerous contemporary horror writers, among which American and British ones remain in the majority. Reyes discusses two writers in particular – Joe Hill (Heart Shaped Box, 2007) and Ajvide Lindqvist (Let the Right One in, 2007) – whom he singles out as promising, new voices. Furthermore, Reyes emphasizes the impact H.P. Lovecraft had on the birth of the subgenre of weird in the twenty-first century literary tradition, mostly represented by the works of Laird Barron. In the final portion of the chapter, Reyes also touches upon the most pervading horror icon of the twenty-first century, the zombie, emphasizing the importance of Max Brooks’ Zombie Survival Guide (2003) in farming up the global pandemic (210).

As Reyes states, Horror: A Literary History is a “book intended for the casual and interested reader” (14). By portraying and exploring the genre’s gradual evolution and mutation, it provides a good introduction to anyone seeking to research the genre thoroughly, especially since each chapter is followed by a list of recommended readings. Furthermore, each chapter provides a detailed historical framework which influenced the emergence of a particular work of horror fiction. In the introduction, Reyes distances himself from potential criticism by stating that the book was written in roughly chronological fashion and that the texts were chosen by the authors according to their perceived historical value (15). He also explains how this anthology is mainly focused on Great Britain and America because these two countries have contributed most prevalently to the genre (15). While an invaluable reading for those who have just embarked upon their horrific journey, and for scholars already immersed in the topic, the book can prove somewhat dry and lacking in textual analysis. From this point of view, the book often seems discontinued and subjective. However, taking the extent of the corpus into consideration, it is understandable that the authors chose only certain writers to discuss in detail. In terms of the time span it envelops, Horror: A Literary History is a considerable contribution to the anthology of horror.

Works Cited

Reyes, Xavier Aldana, ed. Horror: A Literary History. London: The British Library, 2016. Print.



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