

Would like to
discuss this
some time - from
a comment you
made at supper
about ghost stories
Larry Johnson

The Thrill

OF FEAR

The room is pitch dark, and you are 8 years old. Terrible anticipatory giggles grip you and your friends as the story begins to unfold. An unfortunate dismemberment has occurred in the fourth dimension, you are told, and here is all that's left. Someone passes an item identified as the victim's leg around the circle, and you feel the now-slimy flesh of a peeled banana. Except you don't really know it's a banana. What will later be identified as a chicken bone crosses your palm, and you hear "This is all that was left of his arm." Finally, a peeled grape lands in your hand. "This was his eye," the voice says, and you dream with a mixture of delight and fear.

The person who remembers this Halloween party game as one of childhood's highlights might become one of the millions of adults who sit spellbound as they willingly subject themselves to fanciful horror—through stories, books, and movies. But why do we enjoy getting a good case of the heebie-jeebies? Why do we find scary stories so delicious? What hunger in us have Poe, Hitchcock, and King fulfilled?

"Everybody craves excitement," says ghost-story teller Roberta Brown of Louisville, Kentucky, "but at the same time we want to be able to control it. We can cut it off if we get too scared." Peekonk, Massachusetts, storyteller Bill Harley agrees: "It's a gut response. We're looking for things that remind us that we're alive. And listening to ghost stories is a cheaper and safer high than a lot of things."

Indeed, scary stories in any medium allow us to enter "the dark side" with a built-in safety net. The social setting tells us that what's happening is just a story, but if we begin to forget, if the story takes us beyond our comfort zone, if we suddenly feel we can't handle the fear anymore, we can simply close the book, walk out of the theater, or leave the storytelling circle.

Scary stories both enhance our reality and offer us an escape from it. If the mundaneness of daily life has dulled our senses, a little "safe" horror quickens the blood and alerts the defenses while sending a delicious chill down the spine. For the truly adventurous, thrill sports such as hang-gliding and rock-climbing serve the same purpose. Psychologists call this drive sensation-seeking, and indeed, the allure of a good scary story is akin to our real-life curiosity about the morbid.

To fight the attraction would be to fight nature itself. Neurosci-

entists have shown that the brain under mental or physical stress produces chemicals called endorphins, which evoke a feeling of euphoria. A person hearing a scary story thus feels the physiological equivalent of a runner's high. Even animals seek stimulation, and within limits, they prefer stressful or complex action. One researcher reports, for example, that monkeys in India sit at the very edge of the road and jump out of the path of oncoming cars at the last possible moment. Some birds place stinging ants or nettles on their bodies in what is believed to be self-stimulating behavior. Like them, we can't help ourselves. As children we feel drawn to look in the dark corners—under the bed, in the closet. We beg to hear a scary story, then giggle wildly with fright.

Some of that pull is due to our need to confront our fears. If we're afraid of bogymen, we want to meet as many as we can within a fantasy setting in order to get used to the idea. An avid Stephen King fan reports that she read his book *The Stand* (Doubleday, 1978; revised and expanded Doubleday edition, 1990), a horror epic about a flu bug gone rampant, when she had a case of the real-life flu. Another horror aficionado who was feeling a bit anxious took home a pile of Poe stories "so I could give myself something to be *really* scared about." Anthropologists say that our need to master fear can be traced back to tribal cultures that taught their young men to practice hunting by holding make-believe sessions.

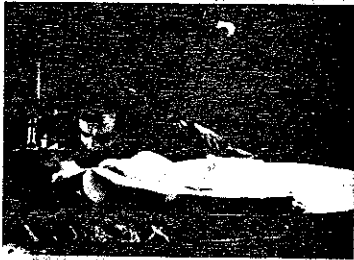
A search for the spiritual

Scary stories stretch the scope of reality in disturbing yet exciting ways. Normally confined to our notions of the predictable here and now, we hunger for stories that suggest another reality, another set of rules. We want to hear about the cold drafts that ghosts trail, spoons that mysteriously fly through the air, and strange beings who haunt grave sites or whisk living people away. At times we yearn for a UFO to land in our back yard. We long to be caught up in forces beyond our control.

"People are intrigued by the idea that there really is more on earth than we've ever dreamed of," says San Diego librarian and storyteller Harlynn Geisler. "In some way we're all scientists—all trying to gather evidence that there's more to life and that there is an afterlife." Some would argue that we're also searching for proof of a supreme being.

WHY WE ENJOY FRIGHTENING FLICKS

"SOMETIMES THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHY YOU WATCH horror movies and why you like them," says Ron Tamborini, a professor of communications at Michigan State University in East Lansing who has extensively studied horror films' appeal. "You like them because of



Robert Quarry plays a vampire in *The Deathmaster*.

what you experience when you're exposed to them. If you watch one and are not so upset that it scares you to death, there are many other factors that might determine your response. You're going to be excited anyhow, and the way you experience that excitement can be determined by any number of things—the people you're with, the social situation, the way the movie ends."

Viewers' memory of the event and the emotions they attach to it also affect how well they enjoy the movie, Tamborini says. "If at the end all you remember are disturbing and upsetting images, you're probably not going to like such films, and you'll tend to avoid them. But if you remember the fact that the monster got destroyed or that everyone around you thought you were brave for acting fearless or that your date cuddled up next to you, you'll probably enjoy them." Thus, children get the chance to learn how to master their fears and practice being brave, and adolescent males have the opportunity to practice being macho and untouched while their female counterparts act fearful and dependent for strength on their male friends.

Tamborini adds that viewers do eventually become desensitized to a certain degree of scariness and need increasingly scary or gory stories in order to get the same kick. "When you are exposed to a certain type of repeated stimulus," he says, "it loses its ability to create the same intensity of response. If you want to experience that same level of response, you have to go on to something different or more extreme. Some people say that's why we find more and more graphic effects in today's horror films."

—M.H.

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Bela Lugosi enacts the title role in *Dracula*.

Stories that deal with death and supernatural elements provide a way to search for the spiritual, says Loren Niemi, a renowned ghost-story teller who is also the director of development for St. Stephen's Catholic Church in Minneapolis. "Our fundamental issue is that we don't know what to do with death," Niemi says. "We need to have some way to respond to it. Ghosts suggest some possibilities beyond death, and at one level, that reassures us." Hearing ghost stories also presents a way for us to practice our own death, he says—"to handle the unknown, our fears, and our questions."

"We can talk about horrible things," Harley says, "by putting them into the context of 'that's not really real.' Then it's safe for us to look at them. We're all chased by our own demons. When we bring up these images in stories, we're getting in touch with some of the stuff that people have inside them."

The dark side of human nature is at once the source, the target, and the audience of the present-day master of horror fiction, Stephen King. The same man who as a child sat spellbound in the aura of his Uncle Clayton's stories and who fantasized at length about death wrote in the first chapter to *Danse Macabre* (Berkley, 1985), "Horror, terror, fear, panic: these are the emotions which drive wedges between us, split us off from the crowd, and make us alone.... The melodies of the horror tale are simple and repetitive, and they are melodies of disestablishment and disintegration... but another paradox is that the ritual outletting of these emotions seems to bring things back to a more stable and constructive state again."

King continues, "...we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones. With the endless inventiveness of humankind, we grasp the very elements which are so divisive and destructive and try to turn them into tools—to dismantle themselves." King was not speaking only of his audience's needs. In a *Playboy* interview conducted seven years ago, he explained how horror writing was a catharsis for him: "...all the violent energies I have—and I have a lot of them—I can vomit out onto the paper. All the rage and hate and frustration, all that's dangerous and sick and foul within me, I'm able to spew into my work."

Beyond the pale

In the last 30 years horror films and books have surged to new popularity—and sometimes depicted a grotesquely exaggerated and violent world of horror. "That's something I decry," says Robert Bloch, a professional writer for 56 years, the author of *Psycho* (Simon & Schuster, 1959), and the co-author with Andre Norton of the forthcoming *The Jekyll Legacy* (Tor, 1990), a sequel to Robert Louis Stevenson's story "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Explains Bloch, "I've always taken great pains to draw a line over which I will not step. The power of suggestion is greater than the power of the explicit. You can accomplish the same ends without setting out to nauseate or to inure the reader to violence." Arguably the best example of subtle movie horror is Janet Leigh's famous shower scene in the film version of *Psycho*. So riveting is the cinematic murder that many viewers swear they see a stabbing that is never shown.

"Much of modern horror is deadening," says Harley, referring to the explicit violence popular in current films. "It's sad how far filmmakers will go now to get an audience's response, how much

more gruesome they'll get." In the oral tradition, however, he adds, the teller can be subtle and still get a response: "Storytellers don't have to depict a string of murders—they can use words to evoke the feeling of horror."

That sensation is nurtured in the nebulous region where reality and fantasy merge and the audience begins to lose track of what is real and what is not. Explains Harley, "I'm interested in how far a storyteller can take a listener before he or she says, 'This can't be real.'" Once the storyteller has created that shady realm, "it suddenly becomes easier for people to buy into a whole set of suppositions that they wouldn't have bought into before."

Harley likes to tell Selchie stories—Scottish legends about seals that can assume human form—reset in modern times. One such tale is about a child who has grown up in suburban America and suddenly finds himself powerfully attracted to water, experiencing a lure that's beyond his control. "And ultimately there's this chilling point," he says, "where listeners realize that their suspension of disbelief has gone a lot farther than they would normally have let it."

A story's success depends a great deal on where the listeners are and who they're with. Everybody knows, for example, that campfire ghost tales work better in the shared protection and intimacy of others—and what constitutes an entertaining event to a group might truly unnerve one person alone in the woods at night. Furthermore, an audience's willingness to suspend disbelief depends on a tacitly understood group decision to do so. An individual who wants to hear a scary story can hardly enter

the spooky realm if his or her companions all ridicule the notion that it's possible.

Our level of real-world anxiety can also affect scary stories' appeal to us. Says Geisler, "Real life can be terrifying. Are you going to have enough money to pay your taxes? Even the littlest kid knows about nuclear bombs and the death of the environment. Sometimes we get so overwhelmed just knowing that there really are people who go around murdering other people that we want to take a vacation from reality. We can hear a story, forget all about our worries, and feel safe." Bloch agrees: "The more apprehension we have of real horror in the streets, the subways, the classroom, the more necessary it is for us to deal with horror on a controllable level. We need reassurance that we can control the fears that surround us."

Tell me a scary truth

Storytellers agree that adults needn't lose their interest in fearsome fantasies as they age and gain life experience. Mature audiences can just as easily be hooked if tellers pay attention to the way they introduce a story and to the credibility of the story line before it diverges into fantasy territory. Roberta Brown has been telling ghost stories at Kentucky's Corn Island Storytelling Festival for seven years, mostly to adults. "It's hard to believe that thousands of people can be that quiet," she says. "They're really locked into it."

Determining children's response to stories is sometimes more difficult—which makes it harder for a teller to know whether a

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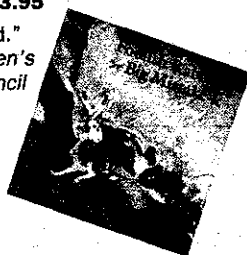


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given tale is appropriate for young listeners. "Kids don't have as great a library of symbols and images to draw on as adults do," says Harley, "so the ones they're exposed to have a lot more power."

"I don't tell strong stories with strong images to young kids anymore," he continues. "When I was working in an elementary school with some really wild kids, they said, 'Tell us some ghost stories.' When I did, they said, 'That wasn't scary. Tell us some really scary ones.' I told them one horrific Icelandic saga about a guy named Grettir. Then they said, 'That wasn't scary either.' A month later one tough kid said he'd had a nightmare about the story. I asked who else did, and a lot of kids raised their hands. I felt responsible for that."

Well-crafted stories with adult themes can appeal to children too. As an example, Niemi offers a story about twin brothers who live together and a woman who marries one of them. When her husband dies, he comes back as a ghost and leaves a depression in her bed. "Kids like the story, even though I'm certain that they don't get all of it," Niemi says. "But adults understand the story on deeper levels—what loss is about, what intimacy means, and what we share."

In addition to their value as stimulators of the imagination, such stories can provide an intellectual confirmation of life's



mysteries. Even stark reality has unexplained occurrences, and, Niemi argues, we need to explore them. "We can explain science and technology, but people often have experiences that can't be explained," he says. "Sometimes we put them aside and say we imagined them. But instead we should look at the experiences that are beyond explanation and acknowledge them."

Whether we are looking for spirituality, a little practice at our own deaths, contact with other realities, or simply a bit of excitement, there's something else, something elusive that we're really after, beyond the grasp of language. It's almost as if we're saying "tell me a scary truth." In the introduction to

Stephen King: The Art of Darkness (New American Library, 1986) Douglas Winter says, "There is a secret self—the eternal child perhaps—lurking somewhere within each of us who yearns to be shown that the worst is true: that zombies can walk, that ghosts really beckon...."

If those thoughts are a bit frightening, well, let's put them in a story. But first let's turn out the lights. ♦

Marie Hofer is a Knoxville, Tennessee, freelance writer who vividly remembers the peeled grapes.

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