

*The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century*edited by **Simon Bacon**

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023

Hardback: £120 (ISBN # 9781793643414), 327pp.

Ebook: £45 (ISBN # 9781793643407), 327pp.

Vicky Brewster, Independent Scholar

The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century is a broad-ranging collection of essays introducing developments in Horror from the twentieth century to the first quarter of the twenty-first, and speculating on the future evolutions to be expected in the genre. The book covers a variety of authors, texts and entertainment media as primary texts, including movies, television, literature, video games, stage plays, and ‘new media’—which is never specifically defined, but includes independently created media such as podcasts, YouTube content, and forum-collated written horror such as Creepypasta. A range of themes and ideologies are also developed, including the legacies of the horror and Gothic canon as they move into the period of the reboot.

Several of the chapters take the form of literature or other text reviews, picking up a theme or medium and providing a thorough summary of relevant texts and some brief analysis of linking themes or over-arching trends. This is particularly the case in the first two parts of the volume, which focus on the ‘classics’ and media of twenty-first century horror respectively. These reviews will be helpful for anyone starting to research a new medium or interested in how their discipline might link to other forms of media, creating useful connections between texts and tropes. As Joan Passey writes in her chapter, ‘At its core, the Gothic is four centuries of literature bound together by a tapestry of references, a series of interlocking texts’ (74), and horror similarly relies upon comparisons with linking texts.

These chapters work well as a jumping-off point for deeper research, ensuring the reader is thoroughly cognisant of the main areas of interest for the given media, field, or ideology.

More depth, however, can be found in chapters that apply theory to a more limited selection of texts, particularly Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's chapter, 'Decadent Feasts: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Twenty-First-Century Prestige Horror Television', Brandon R. Grafius's chapter, 'Sympathy for the Candyman: The Politics of the Past in Supernatural Horror', and Laura R. Kremmel's chapter, 'Fear of Infection: Negotiating between Community and Isolation in Gothic Contagion Narratives'. These chapters tend to take a smaller number of texts and explore a mode or motif newly popular in contemporary horror, such as 'prestige' horror or the effects of the pandemic on the genre. For those who already have a strong grasp on the primary material available, these chapters provide more detail and specificity, and focus more on the most recent theory and criticism available. In general, the collection feels very up to date, and does not seem to have suffered from a lengthy review or publication process. Indeed, there are texts discussed that are only a year old at the time of publication, so the volume is very successful in providing a contemporary lens on the contemporary.

A theme raised in the introduction to the volume which felt most original was the concept of 'aspirational horror' – that is, 'horror as a call to action' (3). Bacon expands on this theory as a drawing away from horror's roots as a politically conservative, white, heteronormative, masculine genre – as Weinstock quotes Stephen Kind in his chapter, 'The horror story ... is really as conservative as an Illinois Republican in a three-piece pin-striped suit' (40). Instead, it has become a genre that has a social conscience and is actively making efforts towards both inclusivity in its creators, and 'a way to look at and investigate what we think of as "normal"' (3). While the specific notion of 'aspirational horror' is not taken forward into the collection as a technical term (and this feels like an excellent area of

expansion as the term holds a lot of resonance for horror in this current moment), it is reflected in many of the areas of focus in the wider collection.

While there is consideration given to the canon in chapters such as Joan Passey's 'The Remixing (and Ransacking) of Hill House: Surveying the Spectral Presence of Shirley Jackson in Contemporary Gothic Fiction' and M. Keith Booker's 'The Recurrence and Evolution of Universal's Classic Monsters in Twenty-First-Century Horror', these treatments nevertheless work to expand 'classic' horror out of its white heteronormative roots. Passey highlights how Jackson 'made a habit of illuminating the invisible women at the heart of literary output' (72) and concludes by asking 'how we can use [a conservative canon of horror] to generate something new, even liberatory' (82), while Booker summarises how traditional movie monsters in the twenty-first century reflect 'updated political visions' (57). The twenty-first-century reboot here is presented as an opportunity to rejuvenate the genre into the aspirational.

'Aspirational horror' is perhaps more explicitly expressed in the inclusion of chapters that specifically target creators that fall outside of the white heteronormative masculine notion of 'traditional' horror. Jacob Floyd raises some texts that may be new to many readers in his chapter 'Indigenous Horror in the Twenty-First Century', while Angela Marie Smith focuses on an oft-forgotten aspect of inclusivity in her chapter, 'Involution, Adaptation, Mutation: Horror's Disability Dynamics', and a couple of chapters are dedicated to queer theory. My only complaint about these chapters that broaden out the canon is they tend to focus largely on movie output, when there are other media canons being broadened that might have also made worthy inclusion. This is something of a flaw for the book at large, which while it includes many individual chapters on different media, film is by far the dominant mode explored. Furthermore, while the broadening of the canon to include Indigenous texts pays some attention to Australian as well and North American texts, the

book at large is highly focused on anglophone texts. Horror is a highly developed genre outside of the anglophone, particularly in Asia, Africa, and South America, but the vast majority of texts discussed herein are British and American.

In conclusion, *The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century* would make excellent reading for academics looking to learn about linked texts in media outside their existing discipline, or for those moving from an earlier period of horror into the contemporary. Specific chapters would also work well for reading on contemporary horror modules in various disciplines, providing as they do an accessible introduction to the main themes, texts, and modes of contemporary horror.