The Thinking Reader's Guide to Fear

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Published: June 4, 2006

BECAUSE most right-thinking — i.e., literate, educated, professional-type — people consider horror fiction repulsive, juvenile or plain stupid, it's probably a good idea for me to acknowledge from the start that the genre's respectability deficit is fully deserved and even fundamental to its nature. The emotion horror stories strive to evoke — fear — is one that civilized folks are inclined to think of as low, primitive, animal. And it is, just like hunger, thirst and sexual desire. These are impulses that in most religious and many intellectual traditions derive value only from being controlled in the pursuit of piety or reason or whatever higher ideal of human behavior you happen to aspire to. Horror is, it's fair to say, pretty determinedly nonaspirational, which is perhaps why it appeals so strongly to teenagers, slackers and fatalists, and hardly at all to normal, functioning adults, who are busy keeping the more pressing everyday anxieties — disease, financial ruin, loss of love — at bay and who may fail to see the benefit of adding vampires and zombies and poltergeists to the list.

Enjoying horror stories, as I do, or finding them inherently pointless, silly and unwholesome, as many others do, is largely a matter of taste and temperament and is therefore unarguable. So rather than attempt to convert anybody, I'll just try to explain, with as little defensiveness as possible, what attracts me to this often indefensible genre. Since I don't actually believe in the existence of ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties and things that go bump in the night, I'm able to read horror fiction with a degree of equanimity, admiring the narrative skills of its best practitioners — whose storytelling, like that of most genre writers, tends to be classical, even old-fashioned — and allowing its bold, defiantly unsubtle metaphors to rattle around in my mind. To get anything out of horror, you have to be willing to surrender to those metaphors. Vampires may not be real, but the voracious, apparently unkillable, only nominally human predators they represent certainly are. (Chances are you've worked for at least one of them.) Zombies? Don't ask.

The ability to embody your fears and anxieties and revulsions metaphorically may or may not give you pleasure or contribute in any measurable way to your mental health, but it's a perfectly legitimate function of the working brain: one of those operations that help you maintain the appropriate respect for the power and weird beauty of unreason, its relentless prankishness, its capacity to prick us with sudden joys and sudden dreads. Horror fiction, even at its direst, frequently betrays an unexpectedly giddy quality, a sense of heedless, headlong freedom that's the proper effect of a good metaphor, building and rolling and breaking like a wave of the sea.

As with all genre fiction, horror writers work too much and too fast, too often rely on serviceable but weary conventions to get themselves through a rough patch of plot and are generally rather too quick to sacrifice aesthetic unity to speed and raw shock. But the reckless grip-it-and-rip-it approach to storytelling is less damaging to this genre than it is to, say, detective fiction, because the feeling of being at least a little out of control is basic to the experience of horror. What's terrifying in a story by [Stephen King](http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2004/01/03/books/authors/index.html?inline=nyt-per) or Peter Straub is, finally, nothing less than the sensation of pure helplessness, of confronting something that cannot be conquered — or regulated, or even understood — by reason alone. At its worst, horror is just a scary, kind of exhausting amusement park ride. But at its best, it can produce effects close to Rimbaud's ideal: the derangement of all the senses. If that's your thing.

The gentlest (or perhaps merely the most insidious) of the derangements horror fiction aims to induce is the temporal disorientation of the ghost story — which is, thanks to the participation of such indisputably serious writers as Charles Dickens, [Henry James](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/j/henry_james/index.html?inline=nyt-per) and Edith Wharton, and thanks also to its relative subtlety, easily the least disreputable of the genre's many forms. It deserves its exalted status. The ghost is the best, the richest, the most infinitely various of horror's metaphors because it speaks to the insoluble mysteries of time, to the universal sense (often uneasy, never uncomplicated) of the persistence of the past in the present. We've all, at least figuratively, felt the clammy touch of ghosts in our lives, and it's a far more ambiguous sensation than that of, say, being disemboweled by a werewolf or drained by a vampire. (I would imagine.) The psychological dynamic of ghost stories is approach/avoidance, rather than, as in the case of the hairier or bloodthirstier sorts of monsters, pure, panicky fight-or-flight. We want to be able to live with the past; what we fear is being suffocated by it.