

THE READERS' ADVISORY GUIDE TO  
**HORROR**  

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THIRD EDITION

Becky Siegel Spratford

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# Series Introduction

*Joyce Saricks and Neal Wyatt*

SERIES EDITORS

In a library world in which finding answers to readers' advisory (RA) questions is often considered among our most daunting service challenges, library staff need guides that are supportive, accessible, and immediately useful. The titles in this series are designed to be just that. They help advisors become familiar with fiction genres and nonfiction subjects, especially those they don't personally read. They provide ready-made lists of "need to know" elements such as key authors and read-alikes, as well as tips on how to keep up with trends and important new authors and titles.

Written by librarians with years of RA experience who are also enthusiasts of the genre or subject, the titles in this series of practical guides emphasize an appreciation of the topic, focusing on the elements and features fans enjoy, so advisors unfamiliar with the topics can readily appreciate why they are so popular.

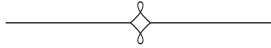
Because this series values the fundamental concepts of readers' advisory work and its potential to serve readers, viewers, and listeners in whatever future-space libraries inhabit, the focus of each book is on appeal and how appeal crosses genre, subject, and format, especially to include audio and video as well as graphic novels. Thus, each guide emphasizes the importance of whole collection readers' advisory and explores ways to make suggestions that include novels, nonfiction, and multimedia, as well as how to incorporate whole collection elements into displays and booklists.

Each guide includes sections designed to help librarians in their RA duties, be that daily work or occasional interactions. Topics covered in each volume include:

- The appeal of the genre or subject and information on subgenres and types so that librarians might understand the breadth and scope of the topic and how it relates to other genres and subjects. A brief history is also included to give advisors context and highlight beloved classic titles.
- Descriptions of key authors and titles with explanations of why they're important: why advisors should be familiar with them and

why they should be kept in our collections. Lists of read-alikes accompany these core author and title lists, allowing advisors to move from identifying a key author to helping patrons find new authors to enjoy.

- Information on how to conduct the RA conversation so that advisors can learn the tools and skills needed to develop deeper connections between their collections and their communities of readers, listeners, and viewers.
- A crash course in the genre or subject designed to get staff up to speed. Turn to this section to get a quick overview of the genre or subject as well as a list of key authors and read-alikes.
- Resources and techniques for keeping up to date and understanding new developments in the genre or subject are also provided. This section will not only aid staff already familiar with the genre or subject but also will help those not familiar learn how to become so.
- Tips for marketing collections and lists of resources and awards round out the tools staff need to be successful working with their community.



As readers who just happen to be readers' advisors, we hope that the guides in this series lead to longer to-be-read, -watched, and -listened-to piles. Our goal is that the series helps those new to RA feel supported and less at sea, and introduces new ideas or new ways of looking at foundational concepts to advisors who have been at this a while. Most of all, we hope that this series helps advisors feel excited and eager to help patrons find their next great title. So dig in, explore, learn, and enjoy the almost alchemical process of connecting title and reader.

# Preface

## WHY WE NEED HORROR AND WHY YOU NEED THIS BOOK

Readers love fantasy, but we need horror. Smart horror. Truthful horror.  
Horror that helps us make sense of a cruelly senseless world.

—BRIAN K. VAUGHAN<sup>1</sup>

Since the second edition of this book came out (2012), Horror has seen an explosion in mainstream popularity, one that I don't think anyone saw coming. Here are just a few obvious examples: *The Walking Dead* went from a cult graphic novel series to a pop culture, television obsession; Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* was a National Book Award finalist for fiction; multiple Horror titles by people not named King made the *New York Times* year-end notable books list; and new Horror voices, authors who were not even mentioned in my previous edition, have appeared on the *New York Times* Best Seller list.

It is clear, as Brian K. Vaughan noted in this chapter's epigraph, that people need Horror, and, in fact, they have always needed it. But why has it been in such demand over the last ten years? Writing this preface toward the end of 2020, I am sure many of you can posit some reasons, reasons that I will break down in chapter 1, but quite simply, our current world is a dumpster fire, with crisis after crisis piling up day after day, unfolding in real time through social media and phone alerts. It is nearly impossible to avoid being bombarded with messages of doom and gloom from the real world. As one of the hottest authors in Horror today, Stephen Graham Jones, noted in 2019, "Horror is the perfect vehicle for our current set of concerns, horror is most definitely booming."<sup>2</sup> He elaborated on this concept further in a podcast appearance earlier that year:

It [horror] makes me feel alive because if I'm feeling fear, it's fear for something that can be taken away which is to say I still have something, that I am still alive.<sup>3</sup>

Horror feels real right now, but the complex, biological processes that elicit fear, dread, and anxiety in humans have their roots deep in the evolution of all animals. Every person experiences fear, and in their own unique way, and that is why Horror tales go back to the dawn of storytelling. However, that is not to imply that the genre is stagnant. Each time Horror reemerges and stretches its tentacles into the mainstream public consciousness, it does so because of fresh voices and perspectives. Take 1922 and the birth of *Weird Tales*. Lovecraft and his contemporaries created

an entirely new type of horror, Cosmic Horror,<sup>4</sup> a subgenre that is seeing a resurgence 100 years later as its current practitioners grapple with its racist and misogynistic history. Or 1974, when Stephen King's *Carrie* was published and our current era of modern Horror began. And into the twenty-first century, when Horror is being embraced by those whose voices have been marginalized by the hegemony of a constructed white, heterosexual norm, those who have lived in real fear and horror, and are now turning their experiences into the best examples of the genre, causing a renaissance, as John Fram, debut author of *The Bright Lands*, which features an unapologetically queer hero, noted in *Library Journal*:

It's a trend I don't see stopping anytime soon. We live in a gaslit era, a time when straight, white society is finally being visited by the fears and uncertainties that the rest of us have been battling all our lives. Horror seems ready to tell us that yes, things really are more terrifying than you could have imagined. . . . What a time to be alive.<sup>5</sup>

As best-selling Horror author Brian Keene has noted, "The writers may change, but the genre prevails."<sup>6</sup> That was as much the case when Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* as it was when Jordan Peele won an Oscar for *Get Out*, and up to this book, a third edition of a guide to help you help those seeking scary, leisure reads. Keene's comment will be my mantra for the duration. I will focus on Horror as a genre with clear definition. I won't waste your time with a long recap of the history of all the writers who have come before this moment. This book is about the readers who crave terror, who are seeking ways to feel the fear, right now, at your library; it is a map for you, the library worker, to navigate the scary world of Horror Fiction with a particular focus on titles from the last ten years, titles that are not just by straight, white men like King, Koontz, and Straub.

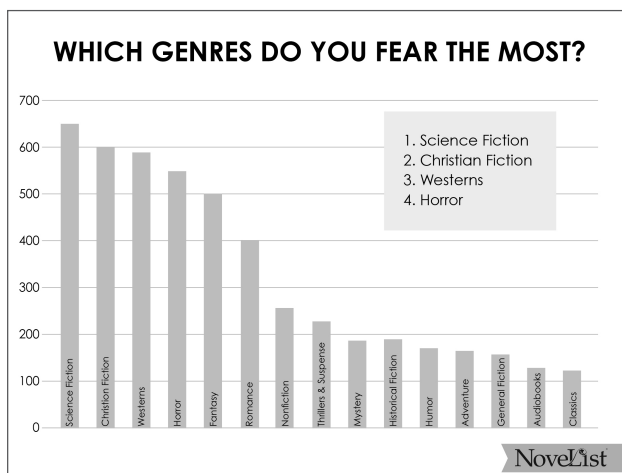
Throughout this book there will be mini history lessons, mentions of key authors, and plenty of resources to help you gain more context, but my focus is on singling out the reasons why readers seek Horror, how to have conversations with them about their favorite types of terrifying reads, where to find titles, who the most popular authors are, and, of course, many annotated lists to help you match books with readers.

I realize that this journey, even with my map to guide you, is a daunting one to a great number of you. As figure 0.1 shows, Horror is a genre that large numbers of library workers fear.<sup>7</sup> But not you, not if you have this book in front of you, because it can help you field all horror-related questions. No other resource is so tailored to your specific library needs.

Everything you need to help your scariest patrons is here as long as you are willing to dive deep into the darkness, but you won't be alone. I will guide you, holding your hand, with the lights blazing. All I ask is that



**FIGURE 0.1**  
Which genres do you fear the most?



Source: Image taken and adapted from the NovelList Plus database and instructional materials.

you remember that your Horror fans aren't monsters, they just like to read about them.

So what are we waiting for? Enter if you dare . . .

## NOTES

1. Brian K. Vaughan, introduction to *Locke and Key: Crown of Shadows*, by Joe Hill, illus. Gabriel Rodriguez (Idea and Design Works, 2010).
2. Becky Spratford, "Stephen Graham Jones Primes Us for the Second Wave of Summer Scares," *RA for All: Horror* (blog), February 13, 2020, <http://raforallhorror.blogspot.com/2020/02/stephen-graham-jones-primes-us-for.html>.
3. Stephen Graham Jones, "Episode 38: Why Does Horror Matter?," in *Ladies of the Fright*, produced by Lisa Quigley and Mackenzie Kiera, podcast, recorded live at StokerCon 2019, [www.ladiesofthefright.com/podcast/2019/6/28/lotf-38-why-does-horror-matter-stoker-con-2019-panel](http://www.ladiesofthefright.com/podcast/2019/6/28/lotf-38-why-does-horror-matter-stoker-con-2019-panel). Transcribed by the author.
4. Cosmic Horror will be discussed at length in chapter 12.
5. Becky Spratford, "Rise of the Monsters: Top Horror Titles and Trends Coming This Season," *Library Journal*, July 8, 2020, [www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=rise-of-the-monsters-horror-genre-preview-2020](http://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=rise-of-the-monsters-horror-genre-preview-2020).
6. Brian Keene, *End of the Road* (Baltimore, MD: Cemetery Dance, 2020).
7. This survey was originally done for the NovelList program "Appealing to Genre Readers," <https://youtu.be/c7PG-ii4BOI>. The graphic was updated with new data by NovelList in 2020. Graphic was provided to the author by NovelList staff.

# Part I



# The Lure of the Dark Side

## Horror's Enduring Appeal

Horror is not a genre like mystery or science fiction or the western.  
It is not a kind of fiction meant to be confined to the ghetto  
of a special shelf in libraries and bookstores. Horror is an emotion.

—DOUGLAS E. WINTER<sup>1</sup>

### What Is Horror?

A basic understanding of why readers crave Horror Fiction can be seen in the epigraph to this chapter: “Horror is an emotion.” Readers love Horror for the way it makes them feel. It is the emotions that these novels elicit—the fear, anxiety, uneasiness, dread, the pure terror—that bring readers back again and again. That emotional pull is also what makes Horror so personal. What scares one reader may not even faze another. Therefore, it is important to have a strong working definition of Horror that can capture the range of the genre, while giving you a framework for how to understand why your readers are seeking out those emotions in their next leisure read.

I define *Horror* as a story in which the author manipulates the reader's emotions by introducing situations in which unexplainable phenomena and unearthly creatures threaten the protagonists and provoke terror in the reader. That is our starting point, and everything will build on this definition. If you need to refer to it at any time, see box 1.1.

Let's more closely examine this definition starting with the manipulation of emotion. Horror readers want to be scared. We will worry about how the author accomplishes this momentarily, but the first thing you need to understand is that regardless of the way the author produces feelings of fright, be it through graphic scenes of violence, a psychologically

**BOX 1.1****Definition of *Horror***

*Horror* is a story in which the author manipulates the reader's emotions by introducing situations in which unexplainable phenomena and unearthly creatures threaten the protagonists and provoke terror in the reader.

unsettling situation, or the creation of an uneasy atmosphere, it is the emotional pull of the story that makes it a satisfying Horror novel. If you take nothing else away from this book it should be an understanding of this simple fact: Horror is an emotion.<sup>2</sup> The author must set an uneasy tone from page one and sustain it throughout the work, even up to the last line, in order for the story to be a successful work of Horror. It is less important that the work terrify or scare (although it can and will do that often) than that it, as a completely fictional and impossible story, elicits unsettling emotions that readers can actually feel in their very real, living bodies.

Let us now consider the means by which authors create this emotional punch. In order for a book to be considered Horror, the author must introduce unexplainable phenomena or unearthly creatures, or both, setting them loose to run amok and stalk the protagonists. The threat must slip the bounds of the realistic and enter a realm that is the opposite of our known reality, one in which authors are free to imagine and justify that vampires, ghosts, and zombie plagues exist. These otherworldly events and monsters must threaten both the characters in the story and the reader turning the pages.

This is what makes Horror Horror—the monster, force, or villain that is stalking our heroes, raising our pulse, and forcing us to read with the lights blazing cannot be of our real world. Horror fans love that they truly believe in the monsters in their books while they are reading them but are happy to leave them on the page and return to the real world when they finish. For some readers, the threat in Horror must be of a supernatural origin, but increasingly, Horror authors are using scientific elements (a zombie virus, for example) as the spark behind their threat. The result is still the same. These are creatures and phenomena set within a frame that is outside our known world; as they stalk the characters, the reader is terrified and loving every minute of it.

Therefore, the fundamental feature of a Horror novel is that it must terrify the reader and do so with a pervasive sensibility. The reader needs to feel uneasy from the first page, even before any kind of monster is introduced. This unsettling feeling, coupled with the otherworldly threat, combine to provoke pure terror—the desired, and inescapable, emotional response all Horror fans seek.

## The Appeal of Horror

In his 1981 book *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King presents a social scientific analysis–cum–personal memoir of his love for works of Horror.<sup>3</sup> One of King’s most memorable comments about Horror comes quite early in the book: “[T]he work of Horror really is a dance—a moving rhythmic search. And what it’s looking for is the place where you, the viewer or the reader, live at your most primitive level.”<sup>4</sup> This dance metaphor is a great place for us to begin thinking about Horror readers and their devotion to the genre.

In *Readers’ Advisory Service in the Public Library*, Joyce Saricks set the readers’ advisory standard for getting to the heart of why readers enjoy a certain book.<sup>5</sup> Calling this quality *appeal*, she argued that library workers could use descriptors about a book’s pacing, characterization, story line, frame/setting, tone/mood, and style/language to understand the feel of the book. Using the framework created by Saricks, I will both describe and rank the main appeal factors of the Horror genre to aid you when working with readers. If you need a cheat sheet of the appeal factors when helping readers, I have included them in an outline form in box 1.2.

### BOX 1.2

#### Horror Appeal Factors

- Tone and mood
  - » Provokes terror
  - » Gives voice to our fears
  - » Creates uneasy atmosphere
- Characters we care about
- Pacing—steadily builds to frantic conclusion
- Language and style
  - » Lots of adjectives but still frank and colloquial
  - » Can be quirky to build unease (e.g., found footage, diaries, letters, “documents”)
  - » Flashbacks common
- Story line—common themes and issues
  - » Unexplainable phenomena and unearthly creatures threaten
  - » Coming-of-age
  - » Safe exploration of the dark side of humanity
  - » Place where readers can face their own fears
  - » Provides escape from life’s real horrors and anxiety
  - » Validates a belief in the supernatural
- Frame and setting—anywhere and everywhere, but must enhance the dark tone and mood

## ***Tone and Mood***

The central appeal of Horror is the feeling it generates. There is no question that the tone and mood of a Horror book are the most important appeal factors for Horror readers. More than any other type of literature, the Horror novel's ultimate objective is to scare by manipulating the reader's emotions. The Horror novel gives a voice to our fears, delivering the dark emotions of panic, chaos, destruction, aversion, and disgust that we Horror readers find uncompromisingly intriguing.

The key to unlocking these deliciously dark emotions begins with atmosphere above all else. Often the most terrifying moments are achieved through subtle suggestions rather than through a series of shocking scenes and brutality (although that can happen too). A well-created atmosphere is integral to a successfully appealing Horror story. More important than character and plot development, atmosphere feeds our need to experience the fear created by the author. We need to feel the approaching danger in the background details as well as in the actual attacks. Horror goes after a visceral response in the reader, attacking us in our gut. Whether or not the story "scares" us is less important than if we truly experience these dark emotions. This appeal of Horror is often the most difficult for non-Horror readers to grasp. It is not about the jump scares. An entire mood needs to be created to make the fictional tale feel unsettling enough to be believable. In fact, the best Horror novels create a sense of fear and dread that follows the reader off the page. Fans want to feel anxious and uneasy even after closing the book.

To create this atmosphere, most Horror novels begin with an unsettling and dread-filled opening scene, one that is usually not central to the plot nor contains anything supernatural to elicit those feelings, but one that clearly sets the stage for the emotions to come. For example, in *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, our heroine, Noemi, is having a great time at a lavish party when she is suddenly called back home because of an emergency. The reader and our protagonist are unsettled and upset, but it is nothing compared to the terrors to come as she battles a centuries-old evil for the fate of her soul.

## ***Character***

Although the atmosphere of Horror is the key appeal to the genre's readers, the order of importance for the rest of the appeal factors will vary from reader to reader. In my experience, however, character comes next. Horror readers want characters that they care about. If we do not like the protagonist, we will not care that they are endangered. Think of it this way: if you

as a reader cannot sympathize with the protagonist, why would you care that the monster is stalking them? The terror dissipates quickly when the reader starts cheering the monster on for the kill.

In order to create these sympathetic characters, Horror writers often spread the point of view around in their novels. We can see how different characters are reacting to the situation, we get to know multiple characters more deeply, and we come to care about them all. However, even when the point of view shifts, one true hero tends to rise to the occasion. Horror authors also create sympathy by including human villains or foils to the protagonists. There is often one human character whom the reader does not trust, who is not good and just, and whom the reader may even root against.

### ***Pacing***

Although there is not a standard pacing for a Horror book, all Horror stories need to build in intensity. Although some will begin with an intense and horrific scene of violence and others with just unease, all set the stage for discomfort and then pull back a bit to build up the characters and the frame. This strategy leaves the fear lurking in the background while the pace slows down a bit, all so it can increase again as the action and the dread build. As the fear and terror are ratcheted up, so too is the pacing. By the end, what may have begun leisurely has become relentless. In fact, I dare any fan to put down a Horror book for more than five minutes in the last third. It is just about impossible. And if you can manage it, you will probably need to keep the lights on as a precaution.

### ***Language and Style***

The language of a Horror book is quite distinct. Horror novels are liberally filled with adjectives—many, many adjectives: adjectives that describe smells, sounds, tastes, and sights, adjectives that allow the reader to feel the fear with all their senses. These adjectives are essential in creating the atmosphere discussed earlier—allowing the reader to feel the fear. However, this copious use of adjectives does not make Horror novels flowery or dense in any way. Overall, the writing is frank and colloquial. This is everyday, accessible language describing extraordinary occurrences in great detail. Those details are relayed in a vivid but extremely accessible way.

The style of Horror novels is also there to support the mood. Authors often employ quirky style choices to highlight the unease in Horror novels. Diary entries, fake documents, e-mails, “lost papers,” and frequent

shifts in point of view are all common in Horror stories. These style choices heighten the unease by adding another layer of believability. Even though we know the story isn't true, these details flesh out the world-building and raise the deadly stakes. One of my favorite recent examples comes from *Eden* by Tim Lebbon, an eco-Horror tale set in a future in which world powers have united to create Virgin Zones, areas from which humans have been banished and nature is being given a chance to heal. Each chapter is prefaced by "found" documents from the wider conversation about the Virgin Zones. These documents allow the pacing to stay unrelentingly fast while giving the reader the very serious and dread-inducing details they need to understand this "what if" world.

However, the most common stylistic choice in Horror is the use of the flashback. Flashbacks serve a few purposes in the Horror novel. First, they help underscore the dark tone by going back to a time when things were much better. The juxtaposition makes the current situation seem even worse by comparison. The flashback acts as a magnifying glass, intensifying how bad things have become. Flashbacks also serve as a break in the bleak hopelessness of the current story line; going back to happier times allows the reader to breathe easily, if only for a few pages. Even the most ardent Horror fan could use a break as the unease and anxiety build to near-bursting levels.

### **Story Line**

Horror readers care about the actual plot much less than they do about the previously listed appeal factors. That does not mean that story line is not important; in fact, the story line is instrumental to a Horror reader's enjoyment. It simply means that readers tend to focus less on what happens and more on how the story makes them feel. This focus makes knowing common tropes even more imperative if you want to have successful interactions with your Horror readers.

First of all, let's remember our Horror definition: all Horror is set in a world where unexplainable phenomena and unearthly creatures constantly threaten. Readers have to be willing to suspend their disbelief. Without these otherworldly elements, a story is not Horror.

Many common tropes and issues pop up in Horror stories, the most prominent being a coming-of-age story line. In every Horror novel, the protagonist not only is battling physical demons but also usually has to "grow up" and overcome their personal demons, rise to the occasion, and triumph. This struggle is a huge appeal factor in the Horror story that cannot be overlooked. These are flawed protagonists who are average in every way; many are even misfits of some type. They must battle and defeat their personal monsters as well as the supernatural threat. Readers



are drawn to the hero's similarity to themselves, to their own struggles. They, reluctantly at first, rise to the occasion, defeat the monster, and become surer of themselves. And if the protagonist can do it, and with very mortal consequences, well then, so too can the reader.

A powerful voyeuristic thrill also compels readers to explore the malevolent, dark side of humanity with forbidden decadence, and Horror novels are a way to do this safely. These novels are a safe way to acknowledge the wickedness within our own psyches and take a small peek into this illicit world. Tangentially, Horror also allows its readers to face their own fears. We are all scared of something, and reading a story of others overcoming monsters, witches, or demons empowers us to face our own fears. As bad as our worst fear may be, it cannot be worse than staring down a pack of zombies. In a similar vein, Horror is also a great escape from the real horrors of life. Fiction in general is often noted for its ability to let the reader escape the real world, but Horror specifically seems to be a popular antidote to hard times. As King notes in *Danse Macabre*,

Horror movies and horror novels have always been popular, but every 10 to 20 years they seem to enjoy a cycle of increased popularity and visibility. These periods almost always seem to coincide with periods of fairly serious economic and/or political strain.<sup>6</sup>

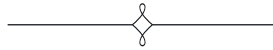
Sound familiar? A rise in the popularity of Horror is known to happen in tandem with readers' desires to escape current real-world difficulties.

Finally, Horror story lines are appealing to many because they validate belief in the supernatural. Horror feeds on this natural curiosity by creating situations in which unexplainable phenomena and unearthly creatures are the norm. Everyday life can be a series of mechanical or logical events, or both, but many people look for more out of life. Still others are looking for answers or explanations for the problems and tragedies in their own lives. The supernatural becomes an alluring solution in these situations. One of the most common supernatural topics tackled in the genre is life after death. Ghosts, spirits, vampires, zombies, and mummies all come back from the dead. Even though these life-after-death scenarios usually involve the risen being wreaking havoc on the people and places in the novel, it is oddly comforting to the reader to have our fears about what happens to us after we die answered in some tangible way.

### ***Frame and Setting***

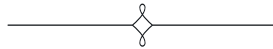
A Horror novel can be set just about anywhere; the only requirement is that the setting allows for the characters to be isolated from the larger populace in some way. Popular examples are islands, storms that cut off communication with the outside world, deserted old homes, apocalyptic

times, or being taken prisoner. Contrary to popular belief, a Horror novel does not need to be set in a small, rural town. There is Horror set everywhere, from cities to the country, foreign and domestic, North and South. If there is a specific setting that appeals to your patron, rest assured, there is a Horror novel taking place there. Rather than re-creating a specific place, the key to whether the setting for a Horror novel works is that the author is able to use it in tandem with the tone. Here is an example I use in my live training programs that underscores how the same setting can be used to create a completely different mood:



Imagine a young woman driving over a bridge onto a desert island. It is a bright, sunny day, and she has the windows down. She has just left her longtime boyfriend because she needs to focus on herself, her dreams, and her needs. She has rented a house, all alone on the beach, planning to spend two glorious weeks working on the novel she has always wanted to write. After parking and letting herself in, she throws open the windows to take in the sunlight and gorgeous view. There is a knock on the door. She isn't expecting anyone but goes to open the door. On the other side is the handsome caretaker, there to make sure everything is okay with the rental.

Imagine that same woman, driving across that same bridge, but at night and in a driving rainstorm. She is nervous, having just narrowly escaped an abusive boyfriend. She knows of a safe house, a cabin that has been in her family for years. She is racing away from the danger, always looking over her shoulder, struggling to keep the car on the bridge. After arriving, frantically searching in the dark for the hidden key and fumbling to open the door, she bursts inside, bolting the door behind her, closing all the curtains, and gasping for air. Then, there is a knock on the door . . .



A Horror novel really can be set anywhere, as long as the appropriate tone and mood are placed in the forefront.

The same rules apply to frame because Horror novels can and do feature any background frame; it really depends on the writers' outside interests. Popular frames include medicine, science, and pandemics. Horror novelists who are personally accomplished in another field, such as Josh Malerman in music or Caitlín R. Kiernan in paleontology, often include details of their interests in their novels. With the rise in Horror written by people of color, we are also beginning to see cultural references in the

frame details. For example, *haints*, a popular term for demons in African American culture, show up in many Black-authored Horror novels, such as *Ring Shout* by P. Djèlí Clark. Another example is a pivotal scene in *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones, which takes place in a Native American sweat lodge.

Often, Horror novels use other Horror books, movies, or popular figures as part of their frames. Allowing the genre itself to serve as a frame adds a level of credibility to the story, a feeling that we have been here before, while also serving as a foreshadowing of the terror that is to come. It can both increase pacing and intensify the dark mood. Plus, it can be a lot of fun for fans, and isn't that why people read fiction in the first place?

The most obvious example of this genre framing right now is the increased use of Lovecraft as a character or one of his stories as the overall frame of a new tale, especially those written by the people Lovecraft himself hated in life. However, it is even more common in the world of Horror Fiction to add Easter egg<sup>7</sup> references. Whether this technique is successful depends on the ability of the reader to “get” all the references. If a novel becomes too insular, new readers will be turned away because they won't be able to follow the story in front of them. One of the best examples of this level of genre detail can be seen in *A Head Full of Ghosts* by Paul Tremblay. This critically acclaimed novel is a compelling, character-centered, harrowing story of a family dealing with a possible demonic possession, but it is also a love letter to the Horror novels and films that have influenced the author, most notably *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson.

## Appeal versus Theme in Horror

Since the last time I wrote this book, there has been a movement in readers' advisory to consider more than just appeal when matching readers with books. Developed by the team behind the NovelList database, a discussion of “theme” has been added to the conversation. Themes are common story elements that pop up in many books.<sup>8</sup> Although appeal describes the feel of a book and is specific to that book, themes can be applied across genres. Or, as I like to say, when it comes to Horror, “appeal” is why you like the book you are holding, whereas “theme” is about the things in that book that terrify you. Because what invokes fear is different for every reader, both must be considered.

In figure 1.1, you can see a list of the themes NovelList uses for Horror novels.<sup>9</sup> Please notice that, like appeal, they are used in different categories: characters, plot, monsters, setting, style. This classification allows you, the library worker, to really focus on what the reader enjoys about

**FIGURE 1.1**  
Themes in Horror

**• THEMES IN HORROR •**

**CHARACTERS**

Band of survivors  
Teamwork means survival.

**Childhood trauma**  
Innocence is lost through a confrontation with evil.

**Final girls**  
The lone female survivors of a horrific event.

**Unreliable narrator**  
Don't believe everything you read.

**Real-life monsters**  
Sometimes the scariest monsters are the ones beside you.

**Vampire menace**  
Garlic-challenged bloodsuckers.

**Werewolves among us**  
Beware the full moon!

**Witchcraft and the occult**  
Sinister spell-casting begets supernatural horror.

**Zombie apocalypse**  
Live free or ...walk dead?

**PLOT**

**Cursed!**  
Some objects should just be left in the weird little store where you find them.

**Possessed**  
What an excellent day for an exorcism!

**Trapped!**  
Think isolated cabins, Arctic research bases, submarines, graves, or elevators...

**Vengeance is mine**  
Hell hath no fury like a character scorned.

**SETTING**

**Don't go in there!**  
It takes more guts than brains to visit these creepy spots.

**Small-town horror**  
Small towns have problems too.

**Moving to a haunted house**  
Spoiler alert — moving was a BAD idea!

**STYLE**

**Body horror**  
Reader beware — horrible things can happen to the human body.

**Found footage**  
Framing devices (such as letters or diaries) highlight the horror in real time.

**Lovecraftian horror**  
Look here for horror beyond human understanding.

**Monster mashups**  
Classic literature or history with an injection of horror.

**MONSTERS**

**Creature feature**  
Scary monsters that aren't vampires, witches, zombies, or werewolves.

**Creepy clowns and bad seeds**  
Menace lurks behind things that seem innocent.

**Evil animals**  
Normal animals become human-eating machines.

**Evil transformations**  
A normal, mild-mannered citizen transforms into something terrible.

**NovelList**

Source: Adapted from the NovelList Plus database and instructional materials.

a specific book. But unlike appeal, whose terms can feel a little jargony at times, themes rely much more on natural language. For example, a reader might not completely comprehend what you mean by describing the pacing of a Horror book as “intensifying,” but you can be sure that there is no confusion in the theme “Vengeance is mine!”

When it comes to Horror, many of the themes identified by NoveList would also fit into what we previously might have called a *subgenre*, such as possession, haunted houses, and monsters. But as you can see, themes are able to dig a little deeper, so you get categories like Body Horror, Final Girls, and Trapped! Conversely, there are also themes that are not the sole property of Horror, such as Unreliable Narrator or Evil Transformations. This new vocabulary, when used in conjunction with the appeal terms I have laid out, will allow you to think more broadly about what titles to steer your reader toward and to understand with even more clarity why someone likes a particular type of scary story. It gives you the language you need to have a deeper conversation with a Horror reader regardless of your personal feelings for the genre.

The key to helping any reader is to understand what is most compelling about a specific book. I have given you this key to begin unlocking your Horror patrons’ passion for the macabre. This chapter is a cheat sheet to help you get into their heads and think in their terrorizing terms. You may not want to feel unsettled when reading for fun, but they do. You don’t have to share their passion in order to help; you just need to want to understand why they love feeling the fear and use it to help them find their next good read.

And we will get there, but first, we need to get up to speed in the genre as it stands today, assessing its biggest authors and trends.

## NOTES

1. Douglas E. Winter (ed.), introduction to *Prime Evil: New Stories by the Masters of Modern Horror* (New York: New American Library, 1988).
2. In *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, 3d ed. (Chicago: ALA, 2019), Neal Wyatt and Joyce Saricks group the major literary genres in categories, placing Horror in the Emotions Genres grouping along with Romance and Relationship Fiction.
3. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1981).
4. King, *Danse Macabre*, 17–18.
5. Joyce Saricks, *Readers’ Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 3d ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2005).
6. King, *Danse Macabre*, 40.

7. *Easter egg* is defined as “a hidden feature in a commercially released product (such as software or a DVD),” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Easter%20egg](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Easter%20egg).
8. Please see the webinar “Unlocking Themes to Improve Your Readers’ Advisory,” <https://youtu.be/Z0dJih4l-b0>, in which I discuss how to use themes in more detail.
9. To see a list of every appeal term and theme used by NovelList for every age level and genre, not just Horror, visit [www.ebscohost.com/novelist/idea-center/learn/learn-story-element](http://www.ebscohost.com/novelist/idea-center/learn/learn-story-element). Graphic was made by NovelList staff at my request.

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