Fiction

Nick Cutter, *The Troop*
(London: Headline, 2014)

> *"That's what made it so scary. This wasn't a bear or a shark or a psycho axe murderer; those things were bad, sure, but you could get away from them. Hide.*
>
> *"How could you hide from a murderer who lived under your skin?"*
>
> *–The Troop*, p. 232

American gothic fiction has always been concerned with bridging the gap between perpetrator and victim. From its conception, with the troubling relationship between protagonist Huntly and his doppelgänger nemesis Clithero in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1899), to modern slasher movies like John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1980) in which Laurie Strode must identify with teen-killer Michael Meyers in order to destroy him, that gap has continued to close.[1] So too goes the practice in American gothic's close relation, Canadian gothic literature, in which the harshness of the landscape often means that humanity becomes its own nemesis. As Margaret Atwood observes, 'when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle. If a man feels he can survive only by amputating himself, turning himself into a cripple or a eunuch, what price survival?'[2] Nick Cutter, the pen name of Canadian novel and short-story writer Craig Davidson, may not be breaking any new ground in his 2014 novel *The Troop*, but he explores this enduring trope by revelling in the abject and the disgusting to an almost unbearable degree, with impressive results. Taking up themes previously explored in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Stephen King's *The Body* (1982), Cutter brings these books' ideas regarding youth, death, and survival to their logical, bloody, and merciless conclusion, via the fear of contagion found in Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). The murderer is very much under our skin in *The Troop*; indeed, the murderer might just *be* us. And the murderer might also be about to explode out of us in a violent mess of blood, pus, and internal organs.

The Troop follows a group of five boy-scouts (Kent, Max, Newton, Ephraim, and Shelley) and their scout leader as they embark on their annual excursion to Falstaff Island, a

[1] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), pp. 48-49.
[2] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: A List, 1972), p. 28.

secluded spot off the east coast of Canada. Their camping trip is soon derailed when a sick and starving man arrives on the doorstep of their cabin. The scout master, physician Tim Riggs, suspects that the man is dying from some type of parasitic worm and, unable to make contact with the mainland, decides to operate on him himself. The reader, who is privy to newspaper stories and top-secret government reports which are interspersed between the main chapters (Cutter's nod to the narrative structure of King's *Carrie* (1974)), soon learns that this man has escaped from a laboratory in which he was a test subject for a supposedly revolutionary new diet pill. There he was infected with a strain of genetically engineered tape worm which has been consuming him from the inside out, turning him into a horrifying incubator for its eggs.

Tim's adherence to the Hippocratic Oath proves to be his downfall as, during his ad-hoc procedure, he himself becomes infected when he accidentally ingests some tape-worm eggs. He soon becomes dangerously ravenous, eating anything and everything available, while losing weight at an alarming rate. Unsure of what to do, the five boys lock Tim up in a wardrobe and wait for the boat to arrive the next morning from the mainland. When the boat doesn't arrive, the boys soon fall to infighting. While Newton (nicknamed 'Newt'), the most resourceful and knowledgeable (in other words, the nerd) of the group, tries to keep them together, Kent soon becomes infected, leading him to brawl with Ephraim over whether he should be locked up with their scout master. Shelley, meanwhile, whose favourite sports include pulling the legs off beetles and drowning kittens, unsurprisingly becomes a threat to the rest of the scouts once out from under the supervision of the scout master. The inter-chapter material informs the reader early on that only one of the boys survives their island ordeal, without specifying which one, adding to the already excruciating tone of dread and despair.

Although what initially stands out about *The Troop* is undeniably its focus on gore and body horror, what lingers is its almost unbending dedication to the conventions of the classic American-gothic narrative, including the strong influence of the environment, the cabin in the woods, the cave scene at the heart of the story that is reminiscent of Poe's fiction, and of course the discovery that what is monstrous and what is human cannot finally be distinguished from one another. The novel also contains specifically Canadian resonances, as the characters become Wendigo-like. As Atwood writes in *Survival*, 'the character sees too much of the wilderness, and in a sense becomes it, leaving his humanity behind'.[3] Cutter's

[3] Atwood, p. 53.

vivid, gruesome imagery, which is often difficult to read, emphasises in particular the experience of horror itself via the senses, particularly that of smell. In typical gothic fashion, in the absence of authority or certain guidance, the boys have only their senses to rely on. And even one's senses are not always enough, as our de-facto protagonist Max's ordeal soon teaches him: 'All bodies fail, he realized. They fall to pieces in pieces, bit by tortuous bit, and a man had to watch it fall apart around him' (p. 91). *The Troop*, true to its gothic roots, strips its characters to the bone (in this case quite literally) to see what comes out.

Although the boys occasionally sound less like boys and more like what a middle-aged author would imagine a fourteen-year-old boy sounds like — particularly in Newt's inter-chapter diaries in which he ends up sounding more like posh swot Martin Prince from *The Simpsons* than an intelligent teenager — he remarks, for example, '[w]ho doesn't like opening the mailbox and finding a letter from a friend, even one you've never met in person?' (p. 78) — the characters are sufficiently distinguished from one another for each of them to render them believable as individuals. Cutter's prose is more than adequate for the job, allowing him to make some devastating observations about life and death, and the depths to which people will sink in the name of survival. In one of the novel's most memorable scenes (perhaps an allusion to *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980)), in which the boys attempt to butcher a turtle for its meat, Max makes a horrific discovery about the nature of violence itself:

> Suddenly Max understood those awful stories he'd seen on the national news, the ones where a reporter grimly intoned some poor person had been stabbed forty times or whatever. Maybe the stabber would have stopped after a single stab if that was all it took. But most living things don't *want* to die. It took a lot to kill them. Events take on a vicious momentum. All of a sudden you're stabbing as a matter of necessity. You're hoping that if you just put enough holes into a body, the life will drain out and death will rapidly flow in … (p. 256)

Here Cutter demonstrates his ability to relate the specific to the general, the animal to the human, instinctual acts to those of premeditation. Cutter deftly universalises a single act of desperation on an isolated island, to demonstrate how an act of violence in every-day society, no matter how reasoned, can give away to madness at any moment.

Concerning itself with the enduring tropes of gothic horror as well as more contemporary issues regarding 'Big Pharma' and weapons of mass destruction, Davidson's first novel under the Nick Cutter pseudonym is a grim but satisfying read. One of the most terrifying and perhaps most admirable aspects of *The Troop* is that no one is off-limits. The

boys here are all fourteen, just young enough to come across as children rather than their older, more horror-friendly cousin, the far less likable, promiscuous, unruly teenager. Forty years on and there is still something of a taboo about a text such as *Jaws* (1975), which insists on feeding a boy to a giant shark. It's perhaps for this reason that Cutter's child-butchering tale comes with a warning from Stephen King himself, one of horror's most renowned child killers, who cautions that Cutter's book is '[n]ot for the faint-hearted'. Indeed *The Troop* will probably give your heart something of a workout. It may also leave you feeling itchy all over and worrying that every cough is the signal of your demise. But then again, that's all par the course for a good gothic novel.

Sarah Cullen

Lafcadio Hearn, *Insect Literature*
(Dublin: Swan River Press, 2015)

Greek-Irish author Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) is mostly known to Western readers as the writer of *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, a collection of uncanny Japanese tales published in 1903. His course in life was an unusual one: after he was abandoned by both his parents, he led a nomadic existence, encountering adventure and hardship in Ireland, Great Britain, and the US (where he worked as a journalist), and eventually settled in Japan. Here he was enabled by his exceptional talent to produce various essays, fiction, and poetry about the Land of the Rising Sun. Hearn's engagement with the Japanese popular imagination is evident in *Insect Literature*, a collection of reprinted essays and stories all of which centre on the subject of insects, and are further united by the pervasive use of various gothic images and themes.

Through this imaginative and elegantly written work — contained in a sumptuous hardback volume — Hearn skilfully guides the reader around the strange and enchanting world of insects. Following Anne-Sylvie Homassel's introduction and Masanobu Otani's (one of Hearn's former pupils) short note, the majority of the essays are each dedicated to one specific type of insect, discussing its interesting and unique qualities, while the author makes his own personal, imaginative, and often humorous observations on the subject. Moreover, the essays explore each of these tiny creatures' reputation in the Japanese cultural tradition, focusing predominantly on insects' associations with death and spectrality. There are also three essays that focus on the representation of insects in Eastern and Western poetry: 'Some Poems about Insects', 'Some French Poetry about Insects', and 'Insects and Greek Poetry', in

all of which Hearn also touches on insect poetry's alertness to ideas about life's ephemerality, mourning, and death.

Homassel's introduction is a delightful and informative prelude to the main text. She introduces both Hearn's personal love of insects and the significance that these minute beings have in the Buddhist cosmogony, and stresses the author's interest in the affiliation between insects and the world of the dead in both the Ancient Greek and Japanese imagination. For Hearn, the uncanny connection between insects and the dead is integral to the representation of insects in the Japanese tradition: most of the pieces of this volume draw attention to the recurrent notions of death and ghostliness in popular tales, and the ways in which, in Japanese folklore, insects and the world of spirits and phantoms are often intermingled with one another. Thus, the essays are interspersed with traditional otherworldly tales and folk narratives — retold by Hearn — which highlight the extent to which there is very little difference between phantoms, spirits, goblins, and insects in the Eastern imagination. In this respect, the uncanny representation of insects in these fables and legends may be seen as a significant element of Asian gothic, in which spectrality is linked with the Buddhist notion of reincarnation.

According to Japanese folklore, insects are very often considered to be spirits or the roaming souls of dead people; correspondingly, Hearn attributes a degree of ghostliness to most of the insects discussed in this collection. The author's wonderful essay 'Butterflies', for example, tells us that these marvellous creatures are endowed in Japanese folklore with unusually uncanny qualities, as they can be the spirits of either dead or living humans. There are many Upper-East popular tales that reproduce this idea, argues Hearn, as for example with the case of a Chinese scholar who experienced astral projection, during which his soul wandered in the shape of a butterfly while he was sleeping. Similarly, Hearn tells us the story of Akiko, a girl who, having died young, returned from the grave fifty years later as a butterfly in order to claim the soul of her beloved, bringing to mind traditional Western gothic ballads revolving around a resurrection motif, such as 'Fair Margaret and Sweet William' (which dates to the seventeenth century). In the essay 'Some Poems about Insects', Hearn claims that, although there is Western poetry that presents butterflies as symbols of the soul, there is almost no such poetry that would actually present a butterfly (or any other insect) as the spirit of the dead, because, he argues, phantoms in the Western tradition are rarely related to non-human life. By contrast, the Eastern tradition has often identified human souls and spirits with butterflies and with other types of insects.

In the essay 'Dragon-flies', Hearn discusses how dragonflies are also closely associated with the supernatural realm in Japanese folklore. Indeed, there is a great variety of dragon-flies with magnificent colours and fittingly unearthly names: 'the demon', 'the goblin', 'the ancestral spirits', 'the ghost', 'the lady of the weeping willow', and so on, all strongly reminiscent of iconic demonic and spooky presences we come across repeatedly in ghost stories. In Japan, certain dragon-flies, the author informs us, are believed to be 'ridden by the dead', and old Japanese poetry written in the *hokku* form frequently refers to the dragonfly's 'ghostly stillness', the 'goblin oddity' of its eyes, while such poetry has also pictured this creature 'flitting above the graves'. Moreover, during the Japanese Festival of the Bon, dragonflies are said to carry the August Spirits of the Ancestors who revisit their former homes.

In the essay 'Fireflies', Hearn examines how the ethereal insect of the title is frequently depicted in Japan as an apparition. Due to their extraordinary sparkling bodies that give them a somewhat spectral appearance, fireflies, whose favourite tree is the willow — which is 'the tree of the dead' and also 'the favorite of human ghosts', according to the author — are strongly connected with the invisible world of spirits. In the popular Japanese imagination, fireflies are sometimes believed to be ghosts, goblin fires, or even malevolent spirits. Hearn also discusses here a selection of old Japanese poems in which these peculiar creatures are described as 'ghostly' and able to produce 'uncanny' effects due to their dreamlike appearance. Thus, as Hearn claims, people in Japan tended to believe that children's hunting of fireflies at night can be extremely dangerous.

There are many other types of insects that exhibit unearthly qualities in the Japanese imagination. One of these is the particularly haunting sound that some insects produce. In the essay 'Insect-Musicians', for example, Hearn speaks of various insects that participate in their own way in the traditional Japanese Festivals for the Dead, singing ethereal and melancholy tunes to eerie effect. There are also several uncanny tales about such tiny beings, like the story of two female weavers who died and took the form of the *hataori*, a strange minute insect. It is not only the way they look, states Hearn, but also the peculiar fairy-like sound that they make which renders these 'insect musicians' bizarre and otherworldly. A further example is the *kusa-hibari*, an insect that is similar to a tiny cricket, and sings a mysterious song about 'the unseen and the unknown', coming from the depths of time and its own ancestral past. Such ideas echo Hearn's essay 'Gothic Horror' — included in *Shadowings* (1900), a collection of strange stories and essays — in which he claims that the

uncanny remembrance of the ancestral past can invoke a sense of 'terrible beauty', verging on gothic wonder.

In the essay 'Semi', which is about different types of Japanese cicadae, we learn about the *higurashi* (meaning 'day-darkening'), which makes its melancholy bell-like music only in the hour of twilight. The same essay details a ghostly legend which tells of a man who fell sick and died away from his home, and then became an autumn cicada whose cry never ceases. *Insect Literature* also refers to Japanese ghost stories and strange beliefs about the fly, and the uncanny significance of the peculiar sound that this insect produces. In the tale 'Story of a Fly', for example, the author tells us of a maid-servant who died and returned to life in the form of a buzzing fly, demanding a Buddhist service so as to secure her next rebirth, while in the short humorous essay 'The Festive', Hearn refers to this insect's 'ghostly noises in the dead waste and middle of the night' as he 'haunteth' kitchens and printing-offices, but also to its suicidal tendencies as 'it drowns in bowls of creams'.

While the aforementioned insects are portrayed by Hearn as delicate and eerie, other types of insects are depicted as monstrous and repulsive, plunging us into a gothic nightmare. In the essay 'Mosquitoes', for example, these insects are paralleled with vampires: they are often the reincarnations of wicked dead people, who, while being in the state of *preta* (an intermediate state between hell and earth in Japanese religion), return as horrific blood-sucking creatures, condemned to prey on the living. Moreover, the beautiful tiny creature in the tale 'The Jewel Insect' is perfectly evil as it sends other insects, like butterflies and moths, to a ghastly death. The lives of insects, writes Hearn, are full of 'atrocious, horrible facts'. This is seen in the essay 'Dr Hava's Tarantula', in which Hearn fills the reader's imagination with illustrative and gruesome images, describing the violent fights between wasps and spiders, which end in appalling massacres, thoroughly grotesque and disturbing. The culmination of the frightful and demonic side of insects is the essay 'Gaki', positioned towards the end of the book. *Gaki* are the shadowy spirits which, according to the Japanese Buddhist system, wander in the cycle of torment called 'The World of Hungry Ghosts', and, in the Japanese popular imagination, are often identified with insects. Lastly, in 'The Dream of Akinosuké' (a supernatural story originally included in *Kwaidan* along with 'Butterflies' and 'Mosquitoes') a colony of ants exerts strange powers over the soul of the protagonist (which takes the form of a butterfly), in a weird tale in which ants are paralleled with humans.

With this remarkably unusual work, Hearn sheds light on the strange universe of insects as well as their connections to the spectral world in the Japanese tradition; by merging

myth, philosophy, poetry, and popular fancy, he has created a bewitching mixture of the elaborate and the bizarre. We are privy to a charming narration interlaced with fanciful tales and poetry, in which not all is gothic, but the gothic elements are the ones most likely to dominate and then linger in the reader's mind.

Maria Giakaniki