

BOOK REVIEWS

“Tales from the Crypt”

Roger Luckhurst (ed.), *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

The first thing that strikes the reader about this fantastic new anthology of Victorian gothic stories is the calibre of the authors it features. Seeing one famous name (Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry James, Oscar Wilde) following another serves as a reminder of what an astonishingly fertile period for Gothic writing the 1890s were. The variety of talent gathered here is also proof of how versatile a genre the Gothic tale had become by this time. In this collection, the hack writer of sensationalist shockers sits alongside the dedicated literary artiste, the recorder of colonial life, the subversive satirist and the experimentalist. All found in the Gothic tale a peculiarly flexible literary form which proved irresistible to their audience.

In his perceptive introduction, Roger Luckhurst relates how gothic literature has undergone continual transformation since its inception, but he believes that the genre has never spoken to or for the moment more powerfully than it did at the *fin de siècle*. He explains, for the benefit of the uninitiated, how rapid social and technological development, a growing taste for decadent aesthetics, the collapse of sexual and racial identity, the concept of degeneration and the possibility of the end of civilisation itself came to preoccupy the Victorian mind. All of this meant that a new kind of literature was necessary. Luckhurst argues that the Gothic genre was “perfect for this new literary environment” because it was an “intrinsically hybrid form” of fiction that had a spectacular capacity for mirroring the fears of the age.

Each of the twelve tales chosen for this anthology represents one or more of the archetypal Victorian Gothic themes and forms. We have straightforward ghost stories (Grant Allen’s “Pallinghurst Barrow,” Jean Lorrain’s “The Spectral Hand”); psychological studies in the supernatural (Henry James’ “Sir Edmund Orme” and Vernon Lee’s “Dionea”); tales of terror from the Empire (B.M. Croker’s “The Dak Bungalow at Dakor,” Kipling’s “The Mark of the Beast”); exercises in suspense and revenge (Wilde’s “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime,” Conan Doyle’s “The Case of Lady Sannox”); a work of outright horror (Conan Doyle’s “Lot No. 249”); and two pieces of science fiction (M.P. Shiel’s “Vaila” and Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan”).

One way of assessing this anthology is to follow the Gothic themes, characters and motifs which appear over and over again, albeit in a variety of forms. The return of the past is given a startlingly different treatment in the hands of Conan Doyle, Croker and Allen. Whether ghosts are a creation of the mind is a question that receives contrasting answers from Henry James, Allen and Lorrain. The *femme fatale* is a source of comedy for Wilde, a deadly influence for Conan Doyle and a figure bound up with ancient deities according to Machen and Lee. Bodily transformation is a subject that receives full-blooded exploration in Kipling, Allen and Machen, whose works all feature characters who turn into animals, undergo reverse decomposition and mutate. Finally, the extent to which the reader is encouraged to respect the ancient beliefs of different cultures varies depending on whether you are reading Croker, Kipling or Conan Doyle.

However one approaches it, this anthology is ultimately about enjoying some of the great moments in Gothic literature, and there is a tale here to suit everyone. Some fall short of the mark: Croker’s “Bungalow at Dakor” is a flat affair; Conan Doyle’s “Lady Sannox” is predictable but still horrid; and Wilde’s “Lord Arthur Savile” unwisely veers towards farce. If anything, the rarities please more than the

offerings from the “big names” of the genre. “Pallingshurst Barrow” is a splendidly chilling bit of hokum about a horde of spectral cavemen, and the two tales by Lorrain are classy and ironic, while “Dionea” is memorable for its heady atmosphere and gradually escalating sense of terror.

The centrepieces of the collection are the tales by Machen and Shiel. Both “The Great God Pan” and “Vaila” are overpowering amalgamations of science, the arcane and the occult. In the intricacy of their storytelling and their complex merging of the different species of the Gothic, they far surpass everything else on offer. They are phantasmagorical, hallucinatory, full of shadowy presences and dreamlike visions. Whereas the objective of many of the other stories seems to be simply to frighten or entertain, these two works represent something different – an attempt to use the genre to push the very boundaries of fiction itself.

“The Great God Pan” is a disturbing medley of Gothic obsessions. It manages to encompass an experiment to unmask the true face of reality, an epidemic of suicides, the discovery of a hideous archaeological artefact, a nocturnal journey through London’s necropolis, a crazed artist, a shape-shifting villainess who can literally frighten people to death, and the return to this dimension of the Lord of Misrule himself! Somehow, despite the luridness of his concoction, there is a tenderness about Machen’s writing, a tangible wonder at nature and the mysteries of creation that remains in the mind when the tale’s more morbid aspects are forgotten.

Shiel’s “Vaila,” on the other hand, contains not a shred of subtlety. It begins stark raving mad and reaches fever pitch by the end. The plot involves the narrator’s journey to the home of an old fellow student named Harfager on one of the Shetland Islands. He discovers him living in a spherical brass house surrounded by a maelstrom of howling winds and raging waters. It transpires that Harfager, his sister and their servant are all afflicted with Oxyecoia, a peculiar condition that makes them acutely sensitive to noise. Harfager shows his friend around the house, which turns out to be a single vast mechanism, constructed for some obscure purpose. What follows is a surreal epic involving bizarre technology, esoteric messages, necrophilia, spring-loaded coffins, an infestation of rats, mass death and the *aurora borealis*. A stranger, more demented piece of fiction would be difficult to conceive.

A volume like this is always going to have its omissions (Bram Stoker is notable by his absence and surely one of H.G. Wells’s darker fantasies should have found its way in ...) but overall this is the best representation of the diversity of *fin de siècle* Gothic literature available today. Luckhurst’s notes, chronology and bibliography shall prove invaluable to those new to the subject. For the seasoned devotee of the ghoulish, the grotesque and the decadent, however, it will be a pleasure to have these rare pieces between two covers. This is a book that is certain to stay by the bedside of any true horror lover.

EDWARD O'HARE

**Marilyn Brock, (ed.) *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker:
Essays on Gothic and Victorian Sensation Fiction***
(Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2009)

The Gothic is a genre that has long been studied for the issues that it raises concerning identity. *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker: Essays on Gothic and Victorian Sensation Fiction* is a refreshing and valuable collection that explores this genre within the context of nineteenth-century identity conflicts. In her introduction to this anthology of essays, Marilyn Brock explains that “Gothic and sensation fiction have much in common as literary genres that represent experiences inexpressible in literary realism by providing access to a dark, unconscious mode of knowledge” (1). She notes that both the reader and subject of a Gothic work experience a temporary identity crisis that is at once enjoyable and frightening. This takes into consideration that “the subject can project unresolved drives onto the characters, villains or otherwise, which provides an outlet for cathartic release of the psychic energy caught up in repressing these drives,” permitting the reader of these genres to “find one’s self while purging the unwanted, the Other” (2). The self is therefore forced into questioning its own perceptions about itself. Explaining that “the Gothic demonstrates that cultural assumptions about identity, sexuality and the circulation of power require ongoing challenge and reformulation,” (13) Brock correctly notes the potency this genre holds in comprehending the complexities of a particular society. She thus establishes her collection as an enlightening piece of scholarship for the twenty-first-century critic interested in Gothic and sensational works of the nineteenth century.

The literary works discussed here are well-known to critics; *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White*, *Great Expectations*, *Carmilla*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *Dracula* are among the more famous specimens examined in this collection. Lesser-known works, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s “Good Lady Ducayne” and Bram Stoker’s *Jewel of the Seven Stars*, are also treated here, receiving as much attention and consideration as their better-known brethren. Brock has divided the thirteen essays of this collection into three sections; the issues that mark these divisions are the instability of identity, the colonial context, and the reoccurring theme of fallen men/ women in Victorian fiction. This is extremely helpful to the reader as these divisions give a coherent and logical structure to this collection. Furthermore, all of the essays here brilliantly explore how Gothic and sensation-fiction writers utilise the iconic devices of these genres to illustrate some precise attitude and/ or mentality that characterised nineteenth-century Britain. The thorough analysis throughout this volume of the application of the Gothic to the conflicting issues of the self in nineteenth-century literature is the highlight of this work.

Scholars interested in this period, or the particular literary works examined, will find these essays convincing and helpful. In the first subdivision of this text, that which focuses on identity roles, such as gender, class, and character, Brock explores Mary Wollstonecraft’s unfinished *Maria*, specifically examining the feminist overtones that are intertwined with Gothic elements because, according to Brock, the “Gothic is an important genre for representing female experience” (17) and is thus used by Wollstonecraft to explore the repressed female voice. With similar considerations in mind, the nineteenth-century distinction between poet and “poetess” is considered by Richard Fantina in his essay that looks at the works of Letitia Elizabeth Landon. Fantina considers Gothic examples, such as “The Bridge of Lindorf” in comparison to the works of the major Romantic poets, resulting in the conclusion that Landon has more in common with the male poets of her time, such as Byron and Keats, than with female counterparts like Felicia Hemans. Writing on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas examines the feminine ideal, with the Gothic helping “to shape Brontë’s reflection on contemporary culture and aesthetics” (50). Judith Sanders and Elizabeth Anderman each provide essays

on Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*; Sanders looks to the narrative consciousness of this text and the anxieties that are brought on via heterosexuality and marriage, whereas Anderman focuses on the disintegration of the novel's narrative voice, resulting in what this essay terms "reader hysteria."

The second part of this collection, which concerns itself with colonialism, begins with a discussion by Julie M. Barst on the contradictory nature of Australia, in novels such as Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Barst skillfully argues that Australia is portrayed as a duality; it is a mysterious place of danger and cruelty, yet also functions as a land of opportunity and second chances. According to Barst, these literary representations of Australia allowed the Victorians to come to terms with the complexities of British imperialism. In the same section, Braddon's 'Good Lady Duayne' is examined by Saverio Tomaiuolo, who explores the economic parallels between bourgeois desires and vampirism. Feminine boundaries connected to racial differences, with an emphasis on motherhood, are analysed by Brock, who focuses on J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Stoker's *Dracula*. Brock explains that "the female victims in both tales are characterised as potential good English mothers, which is the most critical component of the stabilized definition of the Victorian home" (120). In much the same vein, Kate Holterhoff looks to Stoker's obscure *Jewel of the Seven Stars*, addressing the connections between gender and liminality. There is great variety of subject between this grouping of essays but they are unified by a strong colonial context that is significant to the direction that Gothic fiction was taking during this point in time.

The remaining essays of this collection focus on the idea of the fallen man/ woman as he or she is depicted via the Gothic literary trappings of the nineteenth century. Maria Granic-White examines the artificially created social values of mid-century Victorian society in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*. Specially, Granic-White argues that Gaskell questions "the absolute nature of two groups of women – the pure and the fallen – that expose the complex problems of the Victorian society's dichotomous worldview, and dismantles them in order to reconstitute them" (148). This discussion is followed by Stephanie King's essay which concerns itself with fatherly violence in Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*. King emphasises the characterisation of the fallen man, which is defined as encompassing "characters who succumb to deviance and vice, thereby threatening their gentlemanly status" (164). She cleverly juxtaposes this concept with the well-known image of the fallen woman and notes that the status of Silas and Dudley, as fallen men, is in direct opposition to ideas of the idolised Victorian male. With a similar interest in male figures, Jennifer Beauvais discusses *fin-de-siècle* masculinity in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. She interprets Hyde as an unmarried figure who moves between public and private spheres, displaying a duality of masculine and feminine traits, and who is ultimately used to personify the popular, yet non-traditional, image of the *fin-de-siècle* bachelor, an image that serves to question the perceived goodness of late nineteenth-century masculinity. Patriarchal expectations in Henry James's 'Owen Wingrave' and 'The Jolly Corner' are taken into consideration by Nicholas Harris in the final essay of this collection. As with the previous two divisions of essays, while there is a wide breadth of literary works examined here, the overarching theme of fallen men/ women in nineteenth-century Gothic fiction is conveyed effectively, adding to the overall value of this collection.

From Wollstonecraft to Stoker is an excellent collection of essays that will certainly be useful to those interested in how nineteenth-century writers utilised Gothic conventions when addressing issues of class, gender, and imperialism in their works. All of the essays are well-argued and brilliantly expounded on by their authors. The subjects and themes that are covered here, made especially coherent due to the clear direction of its editor, results in an approachable and intelligent work that should certainly be read by any scholar of the nineteenth-century novel, especially those interested in the Gothic and sensation-fiction genres. **JOEL T. TERRANOVA**

**Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure?:
Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)**

In September of last year, *The Irish Times* carried a report headlined “Re-release of ‘I Spit on Your Grave’ banned by film body” – proving, among other things, that you can’t keep a good “video nasty” down. In its infinite wisdom, the Irish Film Classification Office, currently headed by acting director, Mr. Ger Connolly, decided to prohibit a “new version” of Meir Zarchi’s 1978 rape-revenge thriller on the grounds that it “depicts acts of gross violence and cruelty (including torture) towards Humans.” Not an uncut version, one notes, merely one containing “a substantial amount of extra footage”. Cynics, of course, might suggest that this Canute-like decision was nothing more than a publicity ploy designed to secure Mr. Connolly’s elevation from acting to full-time director of the IFCO by being seen to get tough with the sort of filth that could otherwise easily be bought (uncut) with a few clicks of a mouse and a functioning credit card. But as no one in their right mind could possibly want films depicting “gross violence and cruelty (including torture)” made available to the Irish viewing public, it should be clear that the correct response of all right-thinking citizens is to applaud Mr. Connolly and his minions for their brave stance, and look forward to their rigorously applying the same criteria whenever *The Passion of the Christ*, for example, is submitted for DVD re-release.

I Spit on Your Grave was, of course, one of the originally “video nasties” outlawed in Britain with the introduction of the Video Recordings Act (VRA) of 1984, and as such features in Kate Egan’s *Trash or treasure?: Censorship and the changing meanings of the video nasties* (that loathsome lower-case is how the title is given), a short but heavyweight examination of the phenomenon which aims to “chart and explore the cultural mediations and historical processes that have underpinned the video nasties genre and its changing uses and meanings, and through this, to contribute to an understanding of how genre users can affect the functions and meanings of a genre or cultural category through time, and in relation to specific contexts and circumstances.” So there we have it. Comprised of three main sections (“Producing the nasties,” “Cults, collectors and cultural memory,” “Re-releases and re-evaluations”), each subdivided to cover such topics as the legacy of British horror film reviewing, the marketing of the video nasties, the anti-nasty press campaign, specialist horror magazines, “masculine” identities and nasty websites, collecting nasties, the post-VRA remarketing of nasties, and their revival at film festivals and on television, *Trash or treasure?* proves to be both an exhaustive and exhausting analysis of a much-covered subject.

There is, no doubt, a fascinating book to be written on why Britain, as opposed to other Western democracies, has always regarded the moving image with a suspicion and fear bordering on the pathological, leading to a system of censorship still routinely described as more restrictive than that of any comparable state (and despite the recent and strenuously Blairite efforts of the British Board of Film Censors to rebrand itself as a cuddly “classification” service, solely devoted to, like, helping parents make the right decisions for their kids, yeah?) It’s not as if there have been historic outbreaks of savagery, nihilism and civil disobedience arising from exposure to the evils of motion pictures; even post-VRA links made between films such as *First Blood* and *Child’s Play 3* and certain celebrated crimes have been shown to be less convincing than a politician’s promise. Part of the reason, in Egan’s view, is the suspicion of popular culture – and American popular culture, in particular – harboured by film critics across the political spectrum, all of whom seem to imagine the film business should be governed by the same Reithian principles espoused by the BBC, viz., to educate, inform and entertain – and preferably in

that order. Horror films, in particular, have routinely been dismissed as either “slick” (if well-made and American), mindless (badly made and American) or implausible (formulaic and American), the latter a charge seldom made against “approved” directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, for whom plausibility was never a pressing concern.

In the section covering the marketing of the video nasties, Egan opens with a quote describing the early, unregulated years of home video as “A golden age ... [which] offered brief and unprecedented access to material which was almost legendary in its unavailability.” While that was undoubtedly the case, it should be remembered that the “golden age” was not the exclusive property of the gorehounds who have since appropriated it as their own: in those distant days one was as likely to find rare D.W. Griffith titles and previously unreleased Italian Westerns in one’s local video shop as *Prisoner of the Cannibal God* and its more notorious ilk such as *The Driller Killer* and *Zombie Flesh Eaters*. Later on, Egan makes the point that, while the subsequent campaign run by “a newly censorious right-wing British establishment” created and fuelled the nasties scare, the nasties themselves had been “created” by the outrageous (and frequently misleading) artwork and provocative sales tactics of the very distributors who would soon be having their collars felt by the Law. It is also useful to be reminded that the Thatcher government, with its emphasis on free-market entrepreneurship, initially had no interest in legislating against the “flickering filth” hysterically denounced by the *Daily Mail*, and was only reluctantly persuaded to introduce the VRA as a response to that organ’s on-going campaign of scaremongering, itself apparently instigated by some deranged Labour MP from Wales.

In considering the “second life” of (second-hand) video nasties, Egan provides a sustained and not-always flattering analysis of *The Dark Side* magazine and its role as a “gateway” for collectors and would-be collectors of “illicit” videos, while also subjecting the tactics employed by editor Allan Bryce, particularly in his letters page, to the sort of in-depth scrutiny that would, one imagines, leave that worthy gentleman feeling distinctly ill-at-ease, if not actually paranoid. Following on from this, Egan turns her attention to websites dedicated to video nasties, which she discovers to be mainly maintained by a coterie of mainly male obsessives obsessively dedicated to endless list-making, trivia and “facts” – to which one can only say, no shit? Rather bafflingly, however, Egan then takes issue with their appropriation of facts, asking “how can websites present these facts as their information and as part of their archive when such facts derive from official documents produced by governmental or state departments?” For an academic, whose own book is stuffed with endless “borrowed” quotes from other academics, to query the propriety of non-academics using official and presumably tax-payer-funded information to bolster whatever argument they want to make seems decidedly odd, to say nothing of rich.

At other points in the book, there are further examples of what might be termed a clash between the author’s ivory tower perspective and the real world. In the chapter on collecting video nasties, Egan paraphrases approvingly from a 2001 essay on the subject which states that “media industries and film distribution companies have sought to market contemporary collectibles, firstly, through the creation of discourses of scarcity or exclusivity (where videos or discs are marketed as limited collector’s editions, collector’s special editions or classic collectibles) and, secondly, through the inclusion on discs of an array of extras and other forms of background information on the production and post-production history of the film concerned.” While there is no doubt a certain amount of truth in this, as far as it goes, it tends to overlook the primary commercial reality which determined that DVD companies, in order to sell their new product, had to provide a reason for people to make the switch from VHS to DVD in the first place, and that providing extra goodies was the obvious way to do so.

In the section on remarketing the nasties in the post-VRA era, Egan draws attention to the fact that Anchor Bay UK chose to use the American packaging for its DVD release of *The Evil Dead* rather than the iconic imagery employed by Palace Pictures in Britain on its first release, making the assumption that this was done deliberately, to avoid courting further controversy (unlikely, given the fact that the film had then been passed uncut on DVD). A more probable explanation is that Anchor Bay UK were either unable to license the original artwork or were too idle or tight-fisted to do so, and simply issued the film, with national modifications, in the packaging provided by its American parent company. This is followed by a lengthy examination of the pre- and post-VRA incarnations of Vipco, the video distribution company which most assiduously trumpets and exploits its origin in the nasties era, that will leave most horror enthusiasts wondering why so much attention is being devoted to a company that, in the real world, is a byword for heavily-censored, poor-quality prints bought only by those who know no better (a reputation eventually, and amusingly, acknowledged by Egan through quotes from understandably aggrieved fans).

All in all, *Trash or treasure?* is an interesting and valuable work, though the necessity of hacking one's way through an often impenetrable jungle of academic jargon rather detracts from the overall effect, and there is a tendency, common to such works, to state the obvious as if it were revelation. On its own terms, however, it is well-written (though a Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at the University of Wales should know that cameras pan left-to-right or vice versa, and not "in and out") and cogently argued, but its future lies entirely within the walls of academe, not least due to its outrageous £50.00 retail price. It is also to be regretted that Manchester University Press baulked at the cost of colour plates, as the author makes a number of references to the colour schemes of the original nasties' screamingly unsubtle artwork. Given the high cost of the book, combined with the nation's parlous financial state, the current reviewer is considering donating his copy to the Irish Film Classification Office, where it may be read as an historical object lesson in the futility – and indeed, the immorality – of dictating to adults what they may or may not watch in the privacy of their own homes.

JOHN EXSHAW

**Patrick McAleer, *Inside the Dark Tower Series:
Art, Evil and Intertextuality in the Stephen King Novels***
(North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2009)

Patrick McAleer's *Inside the Dark Tower Series* (2009) traces the history of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series from conception to completion. Beginning in 1970 and stretching up to 2004, the *Dark Tower* series has reached a significant readership and consumed a large portion of Stephen King's life. McAleer discusses the effect the series has had on King, his readers, and the academic world.

McAleer begins by analysing the various genres of the *Dark Tower* series, claiming that the series fits within the realm of science fiction. Despite McAleer's assertion that King is attempting to defy genre and ascend to the ranks of more serious writers, the series is limited by being classed as belonging to a popular genre. McAleer gives reasons as to why the series should be examined outside the realm of the popular, and concludes that the main character, Roland, with his quest for knowledge, can be deemed a science-fictional figure. If examined in this way, McAleer explains, the series' ending can be better understood; however, this leaves multiple questions unanswered as to the completion of the series, since the end of *The Dark Tower* takes the reader and Roland back to the beginning of *The Gunslinger* where he must continuously repeat his quest.

Nevertheless, assigning genre to the *Dark Tower* series is difficult, because King himself did not follow any strict pattern which might permit it to be labeled as belonging to a specific category. In the Afterword to the original *Gunslinger* (1978), discussing where the series will go, Stephen King says, "Somewhere inside I know all of those things, and there is no need of an argument, or a synopsis, or an outline (outlines are the last resource of bad fiction writers who wish to God they were writing masters' theses). When it's time, those things – and their relevance to the gunslinger's quest – will roll out as naturally as tears or laughter." At any rate, McAleer brings a new and interesting academic interpretation to King's series, something which had previously been lacking due as much to the sporadic publication of the individual books as to confusion concerning the purpose and direction of the series.

Following his analysis of genre, McAleer asserts that, with the exception of James Egan's *The Dark Tower: Stephen King's Gothic Western* (1987), the texts written to support and analyse the series only add to the content of the series rather than provide real academic analysis. Bev Vincent's *The Road to the Dark Tower* (2004), for example, serves as a summary, and Robin Furth's *A Concordance* (2003), which is an encyclopedia, only attempts to give the reader a more ordered understanding of the content of the series as opposed to the context. King himself tries to add to the context of the series with two comic books, *The Gunslinger Born* (2007) and *The Long Road Home* (2008), but McAleer believes that these prevent it from being taken as a body of serious literary work: the comics do not connect to the rest of the series, as they add new information that contradicts events in the novels. Therefore, they create confusion for a consistent reader and misconception for the new reader. The length of time King took to publish the series could have caused his lapses in information, or, as McAleer says, it could be attributed to King's determination to make up a story despite existing genre rules and conventions.

McAleer seeks to add clarity to the series and provide a more academic interpretation, primarily by emphasising Roland's propensity for evil. He writes, "Roland remains as an evil character, not necessarily because he often chooses what appears to be evil to the reader but because he knows he is damned and does nothing to atone for his actions" (122). McAleer analyses the series' other characters in the same light, discussing the various forms of evil and the absence of good in King's fictional world. He focuses on the characters whose main crimes stand in the path of Roland's pursuit of the Tower: Rhea,

Jonas, Mordred Deschain, John Farson, the Tick Tock Man, Blaine the Mono, Randall Flagg, and the Crimson King. McAleer concludes that it is Stephen King's universe that is perverse and, as a result, the characters are portrayed as being perverse. Ultimately, however, Roland remains the most ruthless character in the series, though his actions are justified as he treks toward the Tower to save all universes.

Nevertheless, McAleer questions the validity of both King and Roland's motivations. Despite the perverse nature of the universe, it is King's story, and he uses the characters for whatever purpose he chooses. His main reasoning for this is to maintain his fictional world so as to allow him to continue to write. What McAleer's reading fails to acknowledge here is the extent to which the Tower's existence maintains evil in the universe. As long as the Tower stands, King will have a story to tell and Roland will continue to exist. Evil will need to be written about by the author and gotten rid of by the character. King and Roland work together to maintain the Tower because both King and Roland thrive on the evil that exists in the world, which the Tower creates, immortalising their required symbiotic relationship and justifying their existence as writer and character. Anyone who threatens the existing perverseness of Roland or King's world therefore stands as a threat. The characters who question the nature of the universe are destroyed because they either attempt to bring down the Tower, such as the Crimson King, or they choose death, like Jonas, Mordred, the town of Tull, and the city of Lud. This is not the first time characters from a Stephen King novel have tried to destroy evil at its source, but it is the first time a character – the Crimson King – has found the origins of evil and tried to bring down the entire fabric of existence by destroying the Tower. Because all characters fail to do so, the origin and continuation of "King's Evil" in his other works can be understood.

The Dark Tower, which is the center for King's fictional universe, draws characters from some of Stephen King's other books, including Randall Flagg from *The Stand* (1978) and *Eyes of the Dragon* (1987), Father Callahan from *Salem's Lot* (1975), and the Crimson King from *Insomnia* (1994). McAleer suggests that these intertextual references are a gateway to all of King's other fiction. He then describes King's *oeuvre* as "the longest novel in history," tying all the other works within it to the *Dark Tower* series as one story. McAleer claims that "... in approaching Stephen King's fiction in its entirety, each tale unto itself is read in one of two ways: as an isolated, stand-alone story or as a connected piece to the *Dark Tower* series" (139). If the latter statement is true, this would certainly answer many questions as to why evil is portrayed as an explicit force in all of King's fictional writing, and why the majority end with explosions, the aim of which is to rid the world of evil. These conclusions, or lack thereof, are, in McAleer's reading, a result of Roland's continuous quest for the Tower. As long as Roland preserves the Tower, then evil will continue to exist in all of King's fictional worlds. And since it can only be undone in the world of the Dark Tower, characters such as John Coffey from *The Green Mile* (1996) do not live very long, or choose not to, because of their propensity to do good. The reasoning for the continuation of Roland's quest is, for King and Roland, therefore both personal and universal.

McAleer concludes his book by discussing whether or not the *Dark Tower* series will survive, ultimately depending on time to reveal the answer. He also discusses the harsh criticism King's writing has faced in the past from critics like Harold Bloom, and the resentment King feels for post-structuralism and Roland Barthes' notion of the "Death of the Author." King's solution to this is to write himself into the story and save the main character's life, thus very literally asserting the continuing importance of the author's presence in his work. McAleer claims that King uses metafiction and intertextuality to satirise Roland Barthes' essay, stating, "All in all, it is with this planned, complex and intricate network of fiction that King reminds readers that not even the death or removal of the author would allow for readers to take over their own readership of King's fiction because the pulls and designs of Stephen King as an author are ubiquitous and anything but negligible" (145). Ultimately, Roland's quest for the Tower doubles with

King's quest for immortality through writing which would imply that the series itself calls for the very thing that McAleer wants – further academic attention.

Whether or not the series will survive, McAleer's analysis of the series is an excellent step in that direction. McAleer calls for the recontextualisation of King's other works and their place within his fictional universe. If his "other" novels and short stories all have a place within the series, then King will have created the longest novel in history. Therefore, if one book is available for critical analysis, they all are. As McAleer puts it, "For the time being, the door to the Tower is open and readers are walking through it. King is certainly doing all he can to keep the path to the Dark Tower cleared for his readers, but even an author with such popularity and control over his creation cannot ensure that the *Dark Tower* will live on. Mayhap it will, mayhap it will not. Still, the tale of the gunslinger is being read, and that is certainly a promising start" (*Inside the Dark Tower Series*, 182). McAleer's book cannot decide the fate of *The Dark Tower* series, but it has certainly laid the foundations for further analysis of the series in its entirety. If nothing else, it serves as the first of hopefully many academic texts analysing a central work in the Stephen King canon.

DAN TOOLEY

“Into the Labyrinth”
Adam Foulds, *The Quickenings Maze*
 (Jonathan Cape, 2009)

Adam Foulds is one of Britain's most highly acclaimed young poets and it's therefore appropriate that *The Quickenings Maze*, his second novel, should feature fictionalised characterisations of two of the greatest British poets who ever lived – Alfred, Lord Tennyson and John Clare. The result is one of the finest works of Gothic fiction of the last twenty years and a stunning performance by a new master of the genre. Set in the Forest of Epping near London around 1840, *The Quickenings Maze* concerns the fortunes of Dr. Matthew Allen, chemist, phrenologist, naturalist, and the physician in charge of High Beach Asylum, a shelter for the insane which Allen runs along his own reformist precepts.

An autodidact with a vast, inquiring mind, Dr. Allen has become a wealthy and influential figure, but he wants more. No longer finding the plight of the insane sufficiently stimulating, Dr. Allen conceives a new business scheme which he is convinced will make him one of the richest men in the country. Risking everything, he sets about developing a machine to change the very face of the earth.

Among Allen's patients at High Beach is the so-called “Peasant Poet” John Clare, a great recorder of the vanishing English countryside. Once the toast of literary society, Clare's drinking and depression have led to his incarceration. Cut off from his wife and children and the natural kingdom that nourished his soul, he drifts ever deeper into a labyrinth of lunacy. Another poet soon appears in Epping – Alfred Tennyson, who has come ostensibly to entrust his melancholic brother into Allen's care. His real intentions, though, are to overcome the crippling grief caused by the death of his best friend Arthur Hallam and to rediscover his lost inspiration.

Gradually the lives of Foulds' characters begin to touch one another's. Dr. Allen seeks Tennyson's investment in his machine while Hannah, his lonely daughter, hopes to win the heart of the dashing if aloof poet. However, Allen also enlists the help of an engineer, Thomas Rawnsley, whose awkward but sincere love finds its object in Hannah. Together Allen and Rawnsley construct the machine, a mechanical device designed for automatically reproducing woodcarving, but their reckless dreams quickly lead to disaster. Meanwhile, Clare's roaming beyond the asylum to a gypsy encampment ends with him falling victim to Allen's sadistic assistants, who place the gentle, child-like poet in solitary confinement. Soon his only hope of salvation rests on returning home.

As the work of a 33 year-old writer, *The Quickenings Maze* is an colossal achievement, a work whose tender, delicate prose holds within it a galaxy of complex thought, powerful emotion and human truths. Foulds marvellously evokes the utter strangeness of an earlier age. He delights in the arcane details and bizarre trappings of a time when science and medicine were still not that far removed from metaphysics and alchemy, and when the goal of genius was to discover the Grand Agent, the animator of everything. As with all of the great Gothic writers, in Foulds' imagination, man is part of a single, unified reality in which human beings, trees, thought-waves, sunbeams and shadows are all equally alive. There are no beginnings or endings, births or deaths in this book, only metamorphoses.

Foulds' talent for characterisation is also extraordinary. His creations instantly emerge from the page as complete beings, each with a brain, heart and voice of their own. This allows Foulds to handle one of the classic Gothic themes – the shifting, unstable nature of identity – exquisitely. Those who live in his asylum, both sane and insane, are people who have lost or are in danger of losing themselves. Allen's

obsession with the great mysteries of the universe and his belief in progress lead him to overlook his human frailty, with catastrophic consequences. By contrast, Tennyson is a vacant creature, waiting to turn his own sadness into his life's work. In response to violence, Clare becomes other people (including Lord Byron, Shakespeare and a boxer named Jack Randall). Another inmate called Margaret has been transformed, as a result of her husband's savagery, into an avatar of religious martyrdom and prepares to absorb all the evils of the world. The scenes in which she experiences miraculous visions are Gothic writing of the highest order:

"And the wounds of the nails, driven into His poor, innocent body by the hammering of Sin. They held him up. He hung from them. This thought enlarged suddenly – they were how He hung in the world: it was his wounds, His pain, that connected Him to the world. She felt this in herself, that at her points of contact with the world she was in pain, that her soul was pinned to the wall of her flesh, suffering, suffocating for release. She knotted her fingers tightly together, swaying in the strength of this thought. She breathed hissing through her teeth, grateful for this illumination, and wanting more."

What gives *The Quickenning Maze* its exceptional power is Foulds' ability with language. His shimmering, evanescent writing dances to a unique and glorious melody and every sentence glitters with gemstones. The period dialogue, the undoing of many lesser historical novels, is vivid, lyrical and entirely convincing. Above all, his attunement to the natural world, his appreciation of the patterns and cycles of organic life unseen by most of us, makes *The Quickenning Maze* a humbling celebration of our planet. This is a novel about two great poets written by a novelist with poetic powers of perception equal to theirs in every way.

A brief, simple story in which the universal predicament of mankind can be glimpsed, *The Quickenning Maze* is a literary novel set apart by its capacity to be frequently and often unbearably moving. It is a book which reveals much about our primal relationship with the earth, the quiet disappointments and tragedies which ruin the lives of most people, the brutality and folly which can destroy us so quickly, the limitless scope of the imagination, the resilience of faith and the precariousness of our hold on reality. *The Quickenning Maze* confirms Adam Foulds as one of the most brilliant young authors to appear in recent times. A truly beautiful novel, it is a work of the highest distinction that will linger long in the memory and in the heart.

NORMAN OSBORN

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's Baby*
(London: Penguin, 2010)

It would be fair to say that, until recently, Russian writer Ludmilla Petrushevskaya has been rather unknown in the West. A few of her novels and short stories have been translated over the years and the short animated film *Tale of Tales* (1979), which she helped to write, is a minor cult classic, but otherwise she remained hidden behind the Iron Curtain. Reading this new collection of tales, one wonders how she could have been overlooked for so long. As it turns out, for much of her career Petrushevskaya had trouble getting her work published in Russia. Her realist tales about the hardships suffered by ordinary people were classed as being too radical, dissident and, surprisingly, “too grim” (given the period she was living through this is about as considered a literary judgement as saying that there’s too much snow in Pushkin’s *The Blizzard*). In the introduction to this collection of short stories, Keith Gessen, who has translated with the help of Anna Summers, highlights just how difficult it was for her to be published: “[t]he same editor who first published Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union in *Novy Mir* in the early 1960s met with Petrushevskaya in 1968 to tell her that, in her case there was no hope.” Instead, she wrote largely for fringe theatre. But in the late 1980s, Petrushevskaya returned to prose and her reputation started to grow. The title page of this collection states that she has since been shortlisted for the Russian Booker Prize and has won The Triumph, Russia’s most prestigious award. Petrushevskaya is now commonly regarded as one of Russia’s leading contemporary writers, is studied in universities and her 70th birthday was even cause for national celebration.

The subtitle of this collection is, fittingly, *Scary Fairy Tales* and the stories are divided by Gessen and Summers into four sections, “Songs of the Eastern Slavs,” “Allegories,” “Requiems” and “Fairy Tales.” While these categories encompass a wide variety of styles, from magical realism to ghost stories and even science fiction, Petrushevskaya can skilfully make them all feel like age-old folk tales. Quite a few even begin with the classic invocation; “There once lived ...” In a recent introduction to a volume of Grimm’s Fairy Tales, A.S Byatt mentions how the Brothers retained “the peculiarly flat, unadorned nature” of fairy tales. This is a stylistic quality which Petrushevskaya also utilises, while her characters often function more as archetypes than as individuals, and remain unnamed or are simply referred to as Mothers, Wives, Husbands or Sons. Indeed, family is one of Petrushevskaya’s recurring preoccupations, along with its attendant obligations, sacrifices and betrayals. One of her most disturbing treatments of this topic and possibly the most powerful story in this collection is “Hygiene,” in which a deadly virus may or may not be spreading through a small community. With its queasy mix of tension and violence, it’s the sort of story one wishes David Cronenberg would adapt. From the first line, it grabs the reader and refuses to let go:

“One time the doorbell rang at the apartment of the R. Family, and the little girl ran to answer it. A young man stood before her. In the hallway light he appeared to be ill, with extremely delicate, pink, shiny skin. He said he’d come to warn the family of an immediate danger: There was an epidemic in the town, an illness that killed in three days. People turned red, they swelled up, and then, mostly, they died.”

What follows is a gut-wrenching account that unflinchingly charts the disintegration of a family as a result of misfortune, fear, greed and suspicion. The violent disintegration of the family unit is a common feature of fairy tales (just think of Hansel and Gretel) but here Petrushevskaya infuses it with elements of Gothic horror. There is even an explicit reference to that other famous tale of paranoia and murder – Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat.” With its brutal portrayal of a society where its inhabitants quickly

turn on each other, deserted by the government, willing to murder each other and even their young, it is a chilling thought that this story is listed under the section entitled “Allegories.” It would seem that a grim parable could be a more accurate method of depicting such material than any amount of state-sanctioned “Socialist Realist” tales.

As this brief synopsis indicates, Petrushevskaya’s real skill lies in the way in which the mundane, the horrific and the fantastical are always narrated in the same matter-of-fact style. For her, fantasy and reality appear to be of the same substance. A contemporary of Petrushevskaya, the fabulist author Andrei Sinyavsky, wrote in his essay “What is Socialist Realism?” that “I put my hope in a phantasmagoria art [...] an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life. Such an art would correspond best to the spirit of our time. May the fantastic imagery of Hoffman and Dostoevskii [...] teach us how to be truthful with the absurd and fantastic”, a sentiment Petrushevskaya would seem to share. Indeed, the stories wouldn’t work quite so well if Petrushevskaya wasn’t so good at capturing everyday life; the fact that she was initially known for writing gritty, realist stories comes as no surprise. The characters that populate her stories are drunks, failures, the grief-stricken, the meek and the unlucky. Some of the stories, such as “There’s Someone in the House” and “Revenge,” show a real flair for domestic Gothic and could rival the work of Shirley Jackson in their depictions of mental disintegration and hysteria. However, unlike her more straightforward works, these fairy tales manage to reveal obliquely what it was like to live under a Soviet regime. There is no unveiling of massacres or gulags; but the bleak, insistent reality of life in Russia is everywhere in these stories. For example, “The New Robinson Crusoes: A Chronicle of the End of the Twentieth Century” recounts a family’s hardscrabble existence, living a semi-itinerant lifestyle which means that they have to barter, cajole and work constantly to survive. Money appears to be useless and they don’t listen to the radio because it’s “full of lies and falsehoods.” What the family is running from is never fully revealed, but it is implied that it might be the government. This story could almost be a post-apocalyptic fable, except that one has the sense that Petrushevskaya’s portrait of a society in ruins wasn’t totally fictional or figurative. Corruption is endemic in these stories, the family unit is unstable and life is often disposable. Like many of her other tales, the unsettling atmosphere in this story is created by a low-level, underlying terror that is never resolved; the family is constantly under threat and any day could be their last.

Other stories in the *Fairy Tales* section of the book such as “Marilena’s Secret” (in which a pair of ballet-dancing twins are turned into a single overweight woman by a vengeful wizard) or “The Cabbage-Patch Mother” (narrating what happens when a woman comes across a tiny, teardrop-sized infant) incorporate more traditional fantasy elements and seem closer to the work of Angela Carter. There is a whimsy in these stories that’s skilfully tempered by dark humour and a deadpan treatment of surreal events. Petrushevskaya also has a great knack for a striking phrase. When the twins are transformed into an obese woman, she is described as having “a chest like a big pillow, a back like a blow-up mattress, and a stomach like a bag of potatoes.” Events unfold in a way that is difficult to predict, but it feels like there is a nightmare logic dictating the events in these stories, while the occasional flights of fancy act as a respite from some of the darker aspects of the collection.

If there is one drawback to this book, it is the occasional repetitiveness that mars many short-story collections. Given the scant characterisation and reoccurrence of similar scenarios, it is occasionally difficult to tell certain stories apart, but this is only a minor criticism. Overall, Petrushevskaya draws on the strengths of fairy tales, their capacity for magic and tragedy, their hard-nosed folk wisdom, and their ability to terrify and entertain. Writing about Andrei Sinyavsky, Geoffrey Hosking says that his “tales all invest mundane Soviet reality with elements of the grotesque partly as a technique of *ostranerie* ('making strange') to draw attention to specific aspects of that reality [...]. The atmosphere of authoritarianism,

mass deceit, mistrust and fear transposes readily into a nightmare world.” He may as well have been thinking about Petrushevskaya. These are unsentimental stories written by someone with a clear eye for the realities of life. There are few consolations but occasionally there is a happy ending; the child is saved or the dead lover comes back one last time. In their introduction, Gessen and Summers trace these tales to the ancient tradition of *nekyia* (though they may be confusing this with *katabasis*) which has literary origins in the *Odyssey* and runs right through to *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Turn of the Screw*, whereby characters travel “to the underworld and other parallel realities occur outside past, present, and future.” *Nekyia* results in a communion with the dead whereby they speak once more to the living. With these Gothic tales, Petrushevskaya performs her own sort of *nekyia*, giving voice to those who were silenced, disappeared and killed. Gessen and Summers have done a commendable job in doing much the same thing for Petrushevskaya’s literary voice. It is to be hoped that this collection is only the beginning and that in time we may finally have the full measure of this intriguing author.

BRIAN DAVEY