BOOK REVIEWS

The Undead and the Reborn - Current Trends in Gothic and Horror Writing

Dara Downey

As the following reviews will make evident, the very concept of a "Book Review" section in a journal dealing with the Gothic and horror genres is characterised by a certain capaciousness, yet also, paradoxically, by a sense of narrowness, almost of repetition. This effect is produced primarily by the fact that the section encompasses both works of fiction and of criticism, two strands of genre writing which employ similar tactics and yet are becoming increasingly divergent. While it would be fallacious and naïve to assert that five reviews can constitute even a roughly indicative sample of the current state of horror fiction and scholarship, the choice of primary texts under discussion here (Stephen King's Cell, Chuck Palahniuk's Haunted, Bernice M. Murphy's Shirley Jackson, Christopher Frayling's Mad, Bad and Dangerous? The Scientist and the Cinema, Tony Earnshaw's Beating the Devil: The Making of Night of the Demon and the collection of essays edited by Bernd Herzogenrath The Films of Tod Browning) can be seen to constitute a microcosm of major trends on both sides of the fiction/criticism divide. One major aspect of recent tends being that while horror literature leans more and more towards homogeneity and creative stagnation, critics of the Gothic/Horror are turning to earlier works either in an effort to revive the genre's subversive potential, or to demonstrate how the conservative views of the past are alive and well today.

My own review of Chuck Palahnuik's Haunted and Kevin Corstorphine's assessment of Stephen King's Cell bear witness to the unapologetically masculine slant that a sizeable proportion of horror writing has taken in the past few years. Arguably, this is a reactionary response to the "feminisation" of the genre; a response akin to the rise of adventure novels in the nineteenth century which set themselves up as an antidote to the strict realism and domestic settings of the three-volume novel, basing their plots either in the colonies or in the American wilderness, (Showalter 1992, Brantlinger 1996). In a genre which traditionally has been dominated by men - even within the supposedly "feminine" sub-genre of the ghost story – a cursory glance at the Horror Section in almost any bookshop reveals that there has recently been an influx of books by writers such as Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Laurell K. Hamillton and the apparently undead Virginia Andrews. Fuelled, perhaps, by trends in television programming, but also simply by one another, these bewilderingly prolific novelists churn out sequel after sequel featuring sexy female vampires, sexy female vampire slayers, or sexy female victims of vampires posing on the covers in sexy feminine postures of submission or predatory intent, and plots which are as much if not more about seduction and romance as they are about fear or the supernatural.

Simultaneously, the male horror novelists seem to have become more, well, male than ever before. Unlike the works of writers such as Ray Bradbury and Ira Levin in the middle of the twentieth

century, the novels of Dean Koontz, Richard Laymon, James Herbert, and, of course, the High (Stephen) King of Horror tend less and less to feature any female character who could, as Carol J. Clover puts it, "be imagined as a credible perpetrator […] of the kind of violence on which, in the low-mythic universe, the status of full protagonist rests," (Clover, 1996). For some reason, this shift is accompanied by an upping of the ante on gore and what film censors refer to as "scenes of extended peril". In 1992, King wrote, 'I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out, I'm not proud' (Danse Macabre, 2000). Over the past decade or so, writers have wholeheartedly embraced King's lack of "pride" in this regard, and the spectacle of the repulsive (not to be confused with body horror and the painful metamorphoses and monstrous births prevalent in 1980s horror cinema) assaults us unrelentingly. Taking their cues from a mainstream culture pervaded by such unsavoury fare as the American Pie franchise and reality television programmes like Fear Factor, there is recent spate of horror films along the lines of Creep, Hostel, Cabin Fever, Saw and Saw II which wallow in abjection, squeezing from their still-conscious victims not only blood and guts, but also as much vomit, bile, spittle, tears and genital fluids as they can manage. Even these, however, occasionally mingle their parades of bodies in distress with the more ethereal suspense of an unseen, lurking source of terror. No such concession can be made for writers like King, nor even for more "reputable" ones like Palahniuk, who seem to have given up entirely on the terrorising end of things, leaving that to the likes of Al Gore (whose name suddenly seems deeply ironic) and our local news, while simultaneously (and inaccurately) poo-pooing amorphous fear as the preserve of such outdated, namby-pamby "'classical' ghost story writers like Henry James, M.R. James, and Nathaniel Hawthorne," (Danse Macabre, 2000).

Although it is reassuring to see, as Corstorphine points out, that, in response to the events of 9/11, horror is once again politicising itself, the niggling feeling that this response is more of a reactionary than a critical one remains. The Omega Man (the film version of I Am Legend to which King professes to owe such a debt) features a gleefully gun-toting (and, of course, not at all characteristic) Charlton Heston mowing down as many African-American undead as he possibly can. If, in 2006, our zombies have ceased to be mere lumbering displays of bodily ruin, and have once again taken on such distinct overtones of racial difference, fear, and distrust (however oblique or balanced by counter-discourse) then perhaps the bad old days, when horror retreated into the individual psyche of the psychotic killer and bolted the door, might be preferable to a hijacking of its iconography to fan the flames of multi-culturalism's funeral pyre. The new reluctance to "merely" terrorise one's readers, especially when paired with an ambivalent use of the "war on terror" as material, has done little to help horror's image as a progressive genre that treats important political or socio-cultural issues in an informed, responsible, and interrogatory manner. While debates continue to rage as to whether horror is profoundly conservative or open to harnessing for subversive purposes, perhaps what these writers allow us to see is that our much-flaunted, hyper-liberal political correctness our much-flaunted, hyper-liberal political correctness never ran very deep in the first place

There are, of course, notable exceptions, and some very fine work has been turned out in the past decade by the likes of Joyce Carol Oates, Neil Gaiman, Mark. Z. Danielewski, Peter Straub, and such lesser known writers as Susie Moloney, Elizabeth Hand and Tanith Lee. It is also unduly harsh and reductive to tar the far more subtle, gifted and socially aware Palahniuk with the same brush as King, Koontz and their ilk. Nonetheless, the transition from the giddy heights of Fight Club to the considerably less sublime Haunted would seem to indicate that he, too, cannot escape the prevailing trend in horror writing towards books where men are white and straight, women are victims, and everyone gets horribly killed, maimed or wounded, while the kind of spine-tingling epistemological uncertainty that prompted stories with titles like "The Damned Thing," (Bierce) "What Did Miss Darrington See?" (Cobb) "What Was It?" (O'Brien) and "The Thing on the Doorstep" (Lovecraft) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has, by and large, gone right out the window.

All is not lost, however, since academic criticism is doing some sterling work to prevent the sort of thing that frightened people fifty years ago from being condemned to obscurity. If the contributions to this, our first issue's book review section, are anything to go by, many critics have decided to eschew the current crop of fiction, and are turning instead to the classics of the past, the highly popular and critically acclaimed novels, stories and films of the first half of the twentieth century that, nonetheless, have long been deemed unworthy of attention. When taken together, the appearance of books on Shirley Jackson, Tod Browning, the figure of the mad scientist and Jacques Tourneur's Night of the Demon suggest a critical desire to return to what many see as the "golden age of horror", to a time before Psycho changed the face of the genre (and, indeed, as some would argue, of the world as we know it). Far from being a regressive or nostalgic move, it just might be the case, as the opening paragraph of Ann Patten's review makes clear, that only by looking backwards can serious inquiry be brought to bear on where our culture stands right now and where it plans on going. Should this diagnosis prove true, then the future looks rather grim for horror fiction's potential for producing innovative and challenging material, but decidedly bright for academics working in the genre, who have languished on the margins of acceptability for too long. The writers and filmmakers who are the subjects of these books have achieved what modern masculinist horror utterly fails to do – marrying the more gruesome aspects or the psychological concerns of twentieth-century Gothic/Horror with a sense of creeping, indefinable fear and a profound engagement with contemporary issues of prejudice, suburban malaise, and unethical science.

This should not, of course, be permitted to eclipse the sheer diversity of primary source material drawn upon by these texts – indeed, it is this very diversity which distinguishes such examples of horror from those produced in more recent years. It goes without saying that horror has always been a derivative form, more often than not relying upon its audience's awareness and expectations of generic conventions for its scare tactics. In Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen is pretty upfront about letting her readers know that the success of the Gothic depends largely upon its predictability, upon the ability of the even the flightiest and least educated young lady to summarise lucidly its basic elements after reading a mere two or three such novels. In the opening pages of The Turn of the Screw, Henry James, so frequently misrepresented as a pillar of polite realism, demonstrates that he

is equally at ease with the formulaic scene-setting central to a good ghost story. He arranges a group of well-off, rather irritating people around a roaring fire on Christmas Eve (the time of year when otherwise level-headed publications fill their pages with supernatural sensationalism), telling one another chilling little tales of apparitions and unexplained noises. Into the mix he adds the character of Douglas, who hints at but is reluctant to reveal the story of "'general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain'" that he has been keeping close to his chest for many years (Turn of the Screw, 1898). Unsurprisingly, such teasing reluctance on Douglas's part generates a flood of pleas and demands from his listeners, while heightening the reader's own curiosity and apprehensions. Indeed, much of the terrifying effect of the rest of the novella hangs upon this initial exploitation of the reader's prior knowledge of the genre. Similarly, the success of cycles such as the slew of Frankenstein and Dracula spin-off films (from Universal Studios to Hammer Films and beyond) relied heavily upon their audiences being clued in to how their narrative and characters functioned, while at the same time seizing the opportunity to play with and often thwart those expectations.

Post-Psycho, however, (or, perhaps more accurately, post-Halloween), with the birth of the slasher-flick, these practices of repetition and borrowing were taken to a whole new level by the purveyors of cheap frights, who constantly referenced their predecessors, often rather indiscriminately, to the point where Wes Craven parodied this predictability in the Scream trilogy, which was parodied in turn by the Scary Movie franchise. Stephen King is notorious for lifting set pieces wholesale from other works, and seems quite proud of the fact that 'Salem's Lot is, in places, a straight rewriting of Bram Stoker's Dracula, while evidently also owing a hefty debt to H.P. Lovecraft's descriptions of the semi-zombified, degenerate inhabitants of the stereotypical American small town. I would not like to imply that one should censure novels merely for being derivative or intertextual, since that would be to dismiss the Gothic completely. Equally, where secondary criticism is concerned, a concerted project of retrospection is only to be praised for its ability to rekindle interest in neglected texts and to generate new readings of more popular ones. It is simply that there is a point at which, as with the "boy-band" phenomenon, derivation and homage become repetition and mimicry, and when these strategies are deployed in service of Ameri-centric conservatism, we should perhaps begin to be afraid, be very afraid.

DARA DOWNEY

Stephen King, *Cell*
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006.

Cell's opening dedication to Richard Matheson and George Romero lays bare King's intentions for this return to horror territory. Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* (1954) and Romero's 'Dead' films, particularly *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), lurk in the background as thematic inspiration for what could ostensibly be called a zombie novel. This, of course, ignores the fact that Romero does not refer to the creatures of his films as zombies, whereas *I Am Legend* is explicitly about vampires, although Matheson places his vampires entirely within a rational science fiction mode. These contradictions are entirely appropriate, as here King creates a narrative familiar to fans of the 'zombie' sub-genre while re-inventing it to suit a specifically contemporary purpose.

Cell can be categorised as a technological thriller, raising more obvious comparisons with authors such as Michael Crichton than the horror movies it so frequently references. King, however, maintains his trademark focus on everyday people and how they react to each other and larger events, rather than attempting to provide any kind of authoritative explanation for what is happening. All we learn of the disaster that is central to the novel comes by way of speculation on the part of the characters. This is in some ways unsatisfying, but is appropriate to the fear *Cell* exploits - the fear that information technology, specifically the ubiquitous mobile phone, might be the downfall of civilisation rather than the bringer of a utopia based on communication. This downfall is triggered by a 'pulse' that hijacks mobile telephone networks, causing anyone who answers their phone or is already using one to become violently insane. The source of the pulse is unexplained (although telemarketers would seem to be an obvious culprit for the inspiration of insane rage). An act of terrorism is frequently suggested, but the possibility remains that this was merely an accident or the actions of nerds with too much time on their hands, in a similar way to computer viruses that spiral out of control. Yet terrorism, whether validated by the narrative or not, remains a powerful spectre and permeates the thematic concerns of the novel, including the tempting wordplay of 'Cell' in the title to refer to a diffuse terrorist unit.

The rather jaunty opening tone of the novel is more akin to an episode of *The Twilight Zone* than the King we are used to:

> At three o'clock on that day, a young man of no particular importance to history came walking – almost bouncing – east along Boylston Street in Boston. His name was Clayton Riddell. There was an expression of undoubted contentment on his face to go along with the spring in his step (King 3).

This light-hearted tone, which includes a rather unexpected reference to the Crazy Frog (surely another possible culprit for the insane rage), soon gives way to a *Grand Guignol* excess of chewed-open necks, spurting arteries, and disembowelled poodles. This makes a suitably shocking impact and sets the groundwork for several gripping chapters, as Clay and a ragtag group of

survivors attempt to escape from the chaos of the city and make some sense out of what is happening around them. Whether or not terrorists are responsible in the context of the narrative, the horrific images of 9/11 are echoed in a series of explosions, plumes of smoke blotting out the sky, and suicidal 'jumpers' plummeting to their deaths from tall buildings. One of the characters wrongly assumes that history is repeating itself: "The dirty bastards are using planes again" (King 19).

It is not so much terrorism itself that appears here, but the fear of its possibility and the resultant suspicion that permeates contemporary Western society. The initial mania displayed by the people that Clay terms the "phone-crazies" develops into a semblance of order amongst those affected as they restructure society in a new way. This is so striking that Clay is forced into taking something of a cultural relativist standpoint, and adopts the term "phoners" instead, marking their difference while refraining from making a value judgement. This is clearly inspired by the ending of Matheson's *I Am Legend*, where the central character realises that as the last non-vampiric human on earth, it is he who is abnormal. *I Am Legend*, written on the cusp of the Civil Rights movement, hints obliquely at its social concerns as the conspicuously Aryan hero, Robert Neville, is taken away by the vampires: "The dark men dragged his lifeless body from the house. Into the night. Into the world that was theirs and no longer his" (Matheson 153). Likewise, King's use of simile and metaphor in *Cell* occasionally has a certain political charge: "Directly ahead, thousands of phoners had gone to their knees like Muslims about to pray" (King 353). The potential crudity of such comparisons, however, are counterpoised nicely with satirical swipes at mainstream American culture including consumerism and gun control. Most interesting of all is the way in which it is Clay and the other survivors who resort to terrorist-like tactics, including martyrdom and car bombing.

Cell is a curious mix of the old and the new in that King harks back in style and tone to literary and filmic predecessors. Film is particularly relevant as his characters have a tendency to view everything that happens in relation to popular movies, including Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and what seems to be the recent Spielberg version of *War of the Worlds* (2005). Fans of King's oeuvre will not be disappointed with the familiar archetypes; a thinly disguised young Stephen King as chief protagonist, a memorably creepy villain in the form of the Raggedy Man, and the mass of phone-crazies as the rampaging Freudian id. Less familiar are the overtly political allusions and a more pessimistic tone to the narrative as a whole, the two being perhaps related. The pacing undeniably drops off somewhat towards the end, but this does not prevent *Cell* from being King's most tightly constructed novel-length work for some time. Likewise, symbolic themes revolving around telepathy and prophetic dreams start to appear in the final third of the novel that are not resolved in a fully satisfying way, leading the reader to think that King had somewhere in mind a mythology of similar proportions to *The Stand* (1978) but does not fully develop it in favour of constructing a more instantly enjoyable thriller. Overall, there is a slightly jarring effect to *Cell's* competing directions but this does not manage to ruin what remains a compelling premise handled with flair and a tangible sense of macabre joy in the writing.

KEVIN CORSTORPHINE

Christopher Frayling, Mad, Bad and Dangerous? The Scientist and the Cinema
London: Reaktion Books, 2005.

Tony Earnshaw, Beating the Devil: The Making of 'Night of the Demon'
Bradford: National Museum of Film, Photography and Television, 2005.

From *Frankenstein* on down, mad science has played a distinguished role in the history of modern horror. This separation of scientific research and inquiry from any ethical concerns in disciplines as remote as vivisection and nuclear physics has produced a resonant stereotype of the scientist as both more and less than human – capable of playing God, yes, but also morally feeble and physically stunted. This is a stereotype which Christopher Frayling is keen to engage with and redress in his compelling and enormously knowledgeable book, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous?* The Scientist and the Cinema. As Frayling points out, this is a view of scientists and their work that stems from fear and ignorance, often perpetuated by those of us who work in the humanities, and who have virtually no grasp of scientific ideas and methods – as witnessed, for example, in the notorious 'Two Cultures' debate between C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis in the 1950s and 60s, where it was obvious that all Leavis knew about science was the he didn't like it. Having said that, while there certainly are suave, literate and cultured scientific writers (Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins), it has also to be said that scientists often don't present themselves to the public in the best light. As anyone who has ever watched *University Challenge* will know, you can always spot the science student: he (for it is usually a he) is the geeky one at the far right, with the pudding-basin hairstyle and the brown jumper, who has never had sex.

There are a number of important books on science in the cinema – most notably David J. Skal's Screams of Reason, Andrew Tudor's Monsters and Mad Scientists, and Kim Newman's Millennium Movies – and I'm pleased to say that, while it does overlap with these in certain places, Frayling's book mostly complements rather than reiterates them. Where Frayling really engages here is in his account of Hollywood biopics of real scientists, a difficult trick with what seems superficially dull raw material – 'Who wants to see the story of a milkman?' as Jack Warner said of The Story of Louis Pasteur; while Dr Ehrlich's Magic Bullet, in which Edward G. Robinson searched for a cure for syphilis, was accompanied by a poster which strongly recalled Robinson's celebrated gangster roles in Little Caesar or Key Largo. Where Victor (or Henry) Frankenstein was, for Hollywood, a European intellectual and thus abstractly theoretical, inhuman, perhaps evil, his positive American counterpart was Thomas Edison, folksy, practical, self-educated, benign – and thus played by a spunky Mickey Rooney in Young Tom Edison, or a solid, trustworthy Spencer Tracy in Edison, The Man, rather than the neurotic, sexually-ambiguous Colin Clive. Even Albert Einstein, the archetypal abstract European scientific intellectual, was given a Hollywood makeover, transformed into a wise, cuddly, twinkly-eyed humanist as played by Sam Jaffe or Walter Matthau. American cinema doesn't like its intellectuals to be too, well, intellectual – as Frayling mischievously points out, the first thing

that the Scarecrow does after being awarded his doctorate (of Thinkology!) in The Wizard of Oz, is get Pythagoras's Theorem wrong.

The problematics of all this – how to represent science positively to a mass audience who fear it - are brilliantly highlighted in what is for me the best part of the book, a lengthy and fascinating disquisition on the cinematic career of the former Nazi rocket scientist Wernher Von Braun, who, after the Second World War, went to work for the US government as a major figure in its developing space program – thus becoming, of course, one of the models for Dr Strangelove. Von Braun seems to have been untroubled by the politics of any regime he worked for, as long as they funded his research – Uncle Sam or Uncle Joe Stalin, it was all the same to him, he said after the collapse of the Nazi regime meant he needed new sponsors: 'All I wanted was a rich uncle.' Amazingly, one significant step in Von Braun's rehabilitation for an American public was his appearance alongside Walt Disney in the 1955 documentary Man in Space. Then he was given an almost-clean bill of health in his own biopic, I Aim at the Stars, where he was played by that great Hollywood 'good German', Curt Jurgens, a naturalized Austrian, who was imprisoned in a concentration camp during the War for his anti-Nazi beliefs. English audiences – who had been at the sharp end of Von Braun's research – were less charitable, with the film eliciting the famous review, 'I Aim at the Stars – But Sometimes I Hit London'.

As ever, Frayling here is a hugely companionable and good-humoured guide who wears his massive learning very lightly indeed. He also pops up, very welcome, as the writer of the Introduction to Tony Earnshaw's Beating the Devil: The Making of 'Night of the Demon', where he gives an account of M. R. James and of the British Library in the cinema, which neatly prefaces Earnshaw's study of the making of what is, for my money, the greatest of all British horror movies, Jacques Tourneur's 1957 adaptation of James's 'Casting the Runes'. Here, science is treated with maximum scepticism, little more than materialist dogma, as intransigently rationalist American psychologist Dana Andrews (boo!) is given a comprehensive lesson in metaphysics by Home Counties Satanist Niall MacGinnis (hooray!).

Earnshaw's book has considerable virtues, though it has to be said from the start that he's hardly a brilliant critic, and so his analysis of the film itself doesn't really tell us very much. Instead, what the book does is to provide information which, as a long-term admirer and student of Night of the Demon, has enriched my appreciation of it greatly. Firstly, there's the definitive account of the provenance of the demon itself – while the demon, based on a Ken Adam design, is certainly terrifying in close-up, it mostly looks like a puppet, and its inclusion in the film, at the insistence of producer Hal Chester and against the wishes of Tourneur, has always been controversial, with many commentators siding with Tourneur in believing that it ruins the film's air of subtle ambiguity, firmly nailing it instead to one, supernatural interpretation. True, perhaps, but as Earnshaw demonstrates, far from being a crude imposition by the money-men, the demon was there from the start, central to the conception of the film. There are other joys here, too. Censors' reports are reproduced, and characteristically, these are both hilarious and depressing: the censors, for example, were worried

about the film's 'weird music', and – in a film about Satanism! – concluded that 'The use of the word "hell" is unacceptable.' After reading Earnshaw, I also now know precisely those scenes which Dana Andrews played drunk – actually, that's all of his scenes, though there are some in which he is quite clearly smashed and slurring his words. This is not, I think, a book for the casual buyer, but any serious student of the British horror film will definitely want a copy.

DARRYL JONES

Chuck Palahniuk, Haunted
London: Vintage, 2006

The convention of the "large group of people in an isolated setting tell one another stories" is a venerable and deeply respected one. What is easily forgetten, however, is the manner in which, from Boccacio's Decameron, to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Marguerite de Navarre's Heptameron, it has always been little more than an excuse for bawdy - or, to put it more bluntly, for a mixture of maudlin sentimentality and cheerfully amoral indulgence in sex and violence. While Haunted, the latest offering from Chuck Palahniuk (he of Fight Club fame), might at first glance come across as a complete overhaul of this high-cultural tradition for the "gross-out" and reality-TV era, in this respect at least, it differs little from its antecedents.

The premise of the novel is that a group of would-be writers respond to an advertisement for a "Writers' Retreat", with absolutely no contact with the outside world, in an atmosphere ideally suited to creative output. Those who respond, somewhat inevitably, are all merely escaping from something - failed careers, past crimes (including several murders), bad relationships and the parole officer, events which inspire their faintly irritating nicknames, including Mother Nature, Chef Assassin, the Duke of Vandals, Saint Gut-Free and more in this general vein. With little real talent or even interest in writing, when they discover that the abandoned theatre in which the mysterious, wheelchair-bound Mr. Whittier has imprisoned them is far from five-star luxury, they seize the opportunity to make matters worse in the hope of making their fortune by selling the story of their abuse at his hands to the media. Thus, they set about destroying the cleaning appliances, ruining the freeze-dried food and chopping off their own extremities.

The most damning critique of any book is the inability or disinclination of a reader to bother finishing it, and more than one acquaintance of mine has given Haunted this accolade. It is the kind of book that has passed into legend already, and everybody has a story about it. A friend's brother announced that he felt "violated" by the time he finished reading it, and I have also been treated to a story of someone rather irrelevantly shouting "You're just an American cultural imperialist!" at Palahniuk himself during one of the author's many public readings of the story "Guts", the first tale of the novel/collection, and one which relates two stomach-churningly disastrous masturbation misadventures. In the Afterword, following the kind of surprise ending that I thought were reserved for M. Night Shyamalan's films, Palahniuk tells the reader, rather smugly, how at least one person faints every time he reads this story in public, and while he does mention several female fainters, anecdotal evidence (both my own and his) would suggest that it is predominantly men who are so overwhelmed by "Guts" that they simply black out, a statistic which has an interesting correlation in the gender dynamics of the book as a whole. While male characters are represented as reprehensible for what they do - their bad choices, inhumanity towards their fellow men (and women) and so on - the novel posits the female body itself as the ultimate locus of disgust. Over and over, we are treated to queasy descriptions of various parts of the female anatomy, but particularly to the way in which

women wear clothes and make-up, which apparently are supposed to make the reader shudder or gag. The following passage is a case in point,

> "Miranda" just sits there, his eyes tented under long, thick lashes. His eyes floating in blue-green pools of eyeliner. He tubes red lipstick onto his lipstick. He smears blusher on top of his blusher. Mascara on his mascara. His cropped blouse rides up on his chest. The pink silk of it seems to hang off the tanned ripples of his rib cage. His stomach showing, tight and tanned, it's a male stomach. He's a total sex-doll fantasy, the kind of woman only a man would become. (Palahniuk, 258)

This story, "Speaking Bitterness" - the tale of a women's support group who essentially gang rape another woman because she is so physically perfect they think that she must be a transsexual - is told by Comrade Snarky, who we are meant to dislike because, while the would-be writers are starving, she keeps announcing that this means that they are so thin that they could wear anything. She is later "punished" by the narrative by being cannibalised while still alive. Similarly, Miss America, who sees having lost weight as her life's achievement, discovers early on that she is pregnant, miscarries and is forced to eat her own baby turned into soup before dying messily herself (it's that kind of book). The first victim of the text, she has been set up for this fate by the combination of her physical fragility and victimisation at the hands of a culture which mercilessly objectifies women. On the one hand, the pressures on women to conform to an impossible standard of beauty seem to be vigorously condemned by Palahniuk's recurring anti-cosmetic rants. On the other, the way in which "Speaking Bitterness" figures a women's support group as sadistic rapists can be read as an attempt to suggest that Palahniuk's preference for fresh-faced, unalloyed, Edenic female purity is actually an opinion held by women themselves. By suggesting that women are far more militant, than men, when confronted with cosmetically constructed beauty, and react more violently, the book successfully exculpates itself by acting out its own fear and loathing, while transferring the blame onto the object of its repulsion.

As Laura Mulvey points out in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", the typical reaction within patriarchal discourse to the alleged threat posed by the presence of a female figure in a text is the "devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object," in an attempt to confine the woman within male structures of meaning, so that she exists only in relation to his actions towards her (1975). The Baroness Frostbite (who lost her lips after falling asleep in snow while trying to rescue a Bible-Bashing misogynist from a pool of boiling water, and now replaces them with make-up) conveniently functions to conflate the two, equally unsavoury, subject positions of victim and monster, since her mouth is described as "just a grease-shiny hole she screws open and shut to talk […] just a pink-lipstick pucker in the bottom half of her face," (Palahniuk, 23). As Suzanne E. Hatty points out, visible injury to the body renders that body abject and monstrous, and Palahniuk succeeds neatly in disfiguring his female characters through oblique acts of male violence and then implying that their deformity is an innate part of femininity and of feminine cosmetic practices (2000). He may find make-up icky, but he certainly isn't going to take responsibility for his phobia.

Above and beyond the gender politics, it is difficult to bring oneself to say that the book is an overall success. A major problem is that we are never told which of the characters the narrator is. At first, I expected some sort of revelation on this score, and, when none was forthcoming, I decided that the "we" of the narrative voice was a deliberate attempt to undermine novelistic conventions and centeredness. I was unable, however, to dispel my creeping suspicion that Palahniuk just forgot that he was doing it. That said, there is much to be praised. The "twist" is relatively surprising; the gross-out levels (if one is looking for that kind of thing) are spectacularly high; and the final story, "Obsolete", told by Mr Whittier, is a beautifully crafted little apocalyptic allegory that reminds one of the best of Ray Bradbury's science fiction, and the book very nearly ends on a high note. The effect is somewhat dissipated, however, by the Afterword, which renders all too clear Palahniuk's almost puerile delight at being able to make people faint in public. The perceptive commentary on the devastating effects of the media and the "fifteen-seconds-of-fame" culture on ordinary people becomes buried under a sense that he has simply put together as many things as he can think of to make his readers - and particularly his male readers - go "yuck". Beneath its aggressive postmodern sensibilities, and its commitment to stylistic playfulness and rebellion, lies an assumption that he is writing for a male audience, representing women in a manner that leaves the old dichotomies intact, betraying a conservativism that is as much disappointing as it is disturbing. Good work, but must try harder.

DARA DOWNEY

Bernice M. Murphy. ed. Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy
Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005

From certain angles, the preoccupations of mid-twentieth century America could be seen as uncannily prescient of similar concerns in the America of today. The rhetoric of conformity and political correctness silenced open debate. A growing recognition of a military and industrial power elite made people feel that their individual votes were subsumed amid a powerless mass at the polls, at the same time that "democracy" and "freedom" were celebrated at home and defended on other continents. Enemies were dehumanised as "evil" and Americans accepted that a war against a hydra-headed enemy needed to last for an "indefinite" period into the future. Everyone feared weapons of mass destruction, and yet this fear was mixed with apathy. A sprawl of homogenised suburbs was touted as having everything but seemed to be lacking something. Many people felt they never had it so good; while unequal class, gender, and race relations left others literally dispossessed. And the world looked on, as Alan Valentine notes in his 1954 book The Age of Conformity, "alternately hopeful that American freedom [would] continue to flourish and expand, and fearful that their own cultures [would] become too like that of America," (Valentine, 1954).

These were the anxieties of the age that made writer, Shirley Jackson, feel that indeed something was askew in her world. This homologous relation to our own time makes studying how Jackson expressed her unease in an inimitable, ostensibly apolitical and downright wacky style particularly timely and a rich area for scholars and general readers alike to consider.

Bernice M. Murphy's newly assembled book of essays on Jackson compiles in one volume some of the best-known essays in Jackson scholarship along with some fresh perspectives from newer voices. This is the first time a multi-authored collection of Jackson criticism has ever been produced. Its principal focus is to widen the scope of Jackson scholarship taking in a field of work that encompasses more than just Jackson's two most famous works, "The Lottery" (1948), a “horrifying tale of conformity” and The Haunting of Hill House (1959), her novel about supernatural hauntings, madness, and being different. Murphy's book includes essays on Jackson's lesser known, though by no means inferior, novels, stories, and family chronicles; and demonstrates the extent to which both those familiar with and those new to her work recognise that there is clearly more that is culturally and aesthetically valuable in Jackson's oeuvre. The volume also contains an index of Jackson's complete works, along with their original publication dates, which is very useful to historicist scholars interested in observing how the author makes oblique references to the above-noted sources of 1950s malaise.

Many of the essays consider how Jackson manipulates Gothic forms in order to reflect some of these contemporary fears and anxieties. John Parks and Diane Long Hoeveler individually consider Jackson's use of Gothic codes. Joan Wylie Hall examines suburbia as a fallen Eden in The Road through the Wall (1948). Rich Pascal discusses The Sundial (1958) and the retreat toward the American miniature as emblematic of the post-war tendency to "think small and look inward". Marta

Caminero-Santangelo looks at post-war representations of female multiple personality in The Bird's Nest (1954). Murphy's own essay evaluates Jackson's work as cohering into a distinctive New England Gothic, one which reflects the author's own uneasy attitudes about the region and its inhabitants. Roberta Rubenstein, Tricia Lootens, Judie Newman and Lynette Carpenter approach Jackson's fiction from psychoanalytic and second-wave feminist standpoints. Dara Downey and Darryl Jones examine Jackson's influence on horror titan Stephen King, while Darryl Hattenhauer reconsiders the David Self 1999 film adaptation of Hill House produced by Stephen Spielberg. James Egan examines the way narrative modes as diverse as the comic, the satiric, the fantastic, and the Gothic are made to interact in Jackson's work. And S.T. Joshi looks at her domestic fiction to show how Jackson so adroitly straddles multiple genres forcing readers to question the appropriateness of genre boundaries, and recognising that a loose label of "weird" is about the broadest and best epithet for a writer like Jackson.

But Shirley Jackson resisted labels, either in a genuine effort to maintain her privacy and artistic integrity, or in the service of a clever manipulation of her persona, which she, her husband and her publisher astutely marketed - she was a mother, a housewife, a witch and a writer. She wrote challenging novels and stories for highbrow literary journals as well as material for her children's school plays, a book on witchcraft and prolific contributions to popular women's magazines, which enabled her to act as breadwinner for her family.

Was Jackson a feminist? It's hard to say. Betty Friedan devotes part of a chapter in The Feminine Mystique (1963) to explaining how Jackson's work quite frankly offends in its popularising of traditional gender roles. However, as Murphy's introduction and the contributions of the volume's four feminist critics discuss, Jackson did focus on female anxieties and the reappropriation of female power, and so, she would seem ripe for feminist scholars looking to rediscover marginialised writers with a subversive message. But Jackson never prided herself on being tidy. According to one of her biographers, Judy Oppenheimer, Jackson's later works clearly demonstrate that she was no feminist: "She had no interest in other women's problems ... [Jackson] had a definite disdain for the sort of young mother who would read her work in Good Housekeeping or Woman's Home Companion and think she had found a soulmate ..."; she "did not need a political movement to tell her that women were capable of exercising power," (Oppenheimer, 1988).

Murphy explains that one of the reasons why Jackson's work has been ignored by critics for so long is precisely because Jackson is so difficult to categorise - she appealed to both literary and popular audiences and apparently was simultaneously both proto- and anti-feminist. Thus, it is likely that the academic neglect of her work arose from the fact that, for critics looking to write smooth narratives of literary history, she was an awkward figure to assimilate. Another reason for the lack of critical attention is the perception that Jackson was somehow a minor writer. From the point of view of Jackson's other biographer, Lenemaja Friedman, this is an accurate assessment, since, in her opinion, Jackson does not "deal directly with the essential problems of love, death, war, disease poverty and insanity in its most ugly aspects," (Friedman, 1975).

Future critics may decide that these perceived weaknesses in Jackson actually combine to produce the author's creative method. As Jackson is re-evaluated from historicist and post-feminist points of view, readers may begin to appreciate that her many stories about the possibility of evil within the everyday (and especially inside the houses, lives and minds of one's next-door neighbours) may actually offer clues that the uncanny or weird aspects in Jackson's writing were used by her, as she says herself, as a "convenient shorthand" for describing all that she regarded as disturbing in the world (Oppenheimer, 1988).

We'll never know the definitive answer to the question that Murphy and others feel compelled to ask - who was Shirley Jackson? - but Jackson's tendency to only ever present the reader with certain, limited perspectives is perhaps one of the pleasures of reading this author. Reading this volume of essays, as a companion to Jackson's complete works, will help readers to decide for themselves.

ANN L. PATTEN

Bernd Herzogenrath, ed. The Films of Tod Browning
London, Black Dog Publishing Limited

The director Curtis Harrington, a close friend of the late James Whale, director of Frankenstein, once told me how he and a friend journeyed out to the Malibu colony in the 1950s to knock on the door of Whale's Hollywood horror rival Tod Browning and see what they could learn about this singularly reclusive director and his legendary work with Lon Chaney and Bela Lugosi, and most especially his notorious masterpiece Freaks. But, like a pair of apprehensive visitors approaching Castle Dracula, they lost their nerve at the last moment, and a unique opportunity was lost.

A comprehensive critical casebook on the enigmatic director once called "The Edgar Allan Poe of the cinema" has been long overdue. While The Films of Tod Browning does an admirably ambitious job in presenting a variety of critical perspectives on Browning, the man himself remains elusive. Like Bram Stoker, whose Dracula formed the basis of his most famous film, Browning never gave a career retrospective interview, or kept journals or notes about his artistic intentions. And, like Stoker, Browning has been a lightning rod for all manner of theoretical interpretations.

As co-author (with Elias Savada) of the Browning biography Dark Carnival, I cannot claim to be entirely objective in my appraisals of the essays in The Films of Tod Browning, but even when I disagreed with certain conclusions I had to admire the intelligence with which the writers argued their points, deftly avoiding the typical smoke-and-screen pitfalls of academic jargon.

The handsomely printed volume includes twelve essays, plus Bernd Herzogenrath's introduction. The contents are divided into two sections. The first, "Themes, Topics, Approaches" opens with Vivian Sobchack's "The Films of Tod Browning: An Overview Long Past." Originally written in 1974, the piece provides a basic survey of Browning's career, his thematic preoccupations, with an special on his "crook films" of the 1920s (Browning in many ways established the conventions of the gangster picture). Sobchack's essay also quotes contemporaneous reviews of Browning's films, giving a useful historical perspective. Modern film criticism too often views cinematic history through the anachronistic point of view of current politics and prejudices. Browning's work is almost always firmly grounded in the zeitgeist of its own period, even though it often has uncanny resonances with our own.

Boris Henry's "Tod Browning and the Slapstick Genre" examines the influence upon Browning's work by vaudeville and burlesque, two fields he worked in extensively as a young man. There is a fine line between humor and cruelty in slapstick, as well as throughout the Browning canon, not unlike the violent uproariousness of a traditional Punch and Judy show. Indeed, in films like The Unknown (arguably Browning's best film) the director often treats his protagonists like battered meat puppets, to which the audience responsed with a stifled scream barely covered by a mordant laugh. The denouement of The Unknown is both a sick joke and probably the most emotionally devastating variation on an O. Henry "twist" ending in the history of cinema, in which a fake carnival amputee

(Chaney) blackmails a doctor into actually cutting off his arms to please an arm-phobic Joan Crawford, who apparently has been manhandled a few times too many in the past. But once his arms are gone, Crawford shakes off her phobia and falls happily into the arms of the carnival strong man. And, of course, sends the mutilated Chaney right over the edge into wild retributive fantasies worthy of the best Jacobean revenge melodramas.

Matthew Solomon's "Staging Deception: Theatrical Illusionism in Browning's Films of the 1920s" explores the relationship between Browning's narratives of stage magic..."The Spectator's Spectacle: Tod Browning's Theatre" by Stefanie Diekmann and Ekkehard Knorer links his work to the Theatre du Grand Guignol of Paris. Browning spent a great deal of time in Europe, and like his many Hollywood horror compatriots, was fully aware of Monmartre's world-famous "theatre des horreurs" and its cinematic possibilities.

"Double Identity: Presence and Absence in the Films of Tod Browning" by Alec Charles tries a bit too hard to imply directorial intention into Browning's often sloppy continuity gaffes. They may be subliminally disturbing and disorienting… but intentional? The jury is still out, and may well not be back anytime soon. But Charles' analysis of the constant reassertion of traditional patriarchism in Browning's films is well-considered indeed.

Translated from the French, Nicole Brenez's "Body Dreams: Lon Chaney and Tod Browning -- Thesaurus Anatomicus" is probably the subject of a full-length book or documentary.

The book's second section, "Films," begins with a particularly fascinating essay by Robin Blyn, "Between Silence and Sound: Ventriloquism and the Advent of the Voice in The Unholy Three" Like Chaney, the whole silent film industry during the cusp of sound wrestled with the representation of voice. A truly original essay vis a vis Browning and Chaney.

Stefan Brandt's "White Bo(d)y in Wonderland: Cultural Alterity and Sexual Desire in Where East is East" is probably the best essay every published on this particular film.

"Speaking with Eyes: Tod Browning's Dracula and its Phantom Camera" by Elisabeth Bronfen spends too much time rehashing plot details of a famous but tedious film. Her stimulating insights into the technical aspects of Browning therefore seem a bit buried, but are well worth excavating.

Leger Grindon provides a detailed analysis of Browning's rarely seen and even more rarely discussed Iron Man, the boxing picture starring Lew Ayres and Jean Harlow that was Browning's final film for Universal. (Universal wasn't happy with him; his original five picture contract was truncated to three). Editor Herzogenrath's "The Monstrous Body/Politic of Freaks" takes a particularly intelligent Lacanian approach to Freaks.

The final essay "Mark of the Vampire" by Matthew Sweney oddly makes no connections between Mark and Browning's London After Midnight, of which it was a quasi-remake.

The book concludes with a section of fourteen full-color, full-page plates of posters from Browning films, several of which this reviewer has never seen before, and a checklist of Browning's film work as actor, screenwriter and director from 1909 through 1939.

Since Browning's personal life clearly influenced his work, the book could have benefited from a basic biographical essay. The drunken traffic accident in 1915 that killed one of his passengers and nearly crippled Browning certainly fueled his every-growing obsession with physical incapacity (Sobchack mentions the incident only in passing). And no one has yet written an in-depth essay examining the relationship between Browning's chronic, debilitating alcoholism and the dark themes of his films.

There is one extremely odd editorial omission. None of the contributors (not even the editor) receive even the briefest biographical note.

But all in all, The Films of Tod Browning is a major contribution in the quest for one of the most elusive and fascinating personalities in Hollywood history.

DAVID J. SKAL