BOOK REVIEWS

David J. Skal and Jessica Rains, *Claude Rains: An Actor's Voice*
Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008

Claude Rains was one of the greatest actors ever to work in Hollywood, a supporting player so brilliant that he'd steal any film from under anybody. He was nominated four times for a Best Supporting Oscar, from 1940-47, should probably have won them all, but ended up with none. Although he did have a small role in one post-World War I British melodrama, the now-lost *Build Thy House* (1920), his screen career didn't really get started until he was well into his forties, when he made his Hollywood debut in James Whale's *The Invisible Man* (1932), an incredibly demanding role that required an actor who could command the screen by virtue of his voice alone. I doubt whether there are more than half a dozen actors in Hollywood history who could have pulled this off, but fortunately Rains was blessed with one of the greatest voices ever.

He was, alas, too short, too old, and probably much too good for leading man material, and so he spent the rest of his career essaying an astonishing series of indelible character roles. In *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), he's the distinguished senior senator tempting greenhorn James Stewart with Mephistophelean *realpolitik*. In *The Wolf Man* (1941), he's Sir John Talbot, who has a son, Larry (Lon Chaney Jr) who is mysteriously twice his size and about the same age, and whom in a riotous Freudian crescendo he beats to death with a silver-tipped cane. He's easily the best thing in *Now, Voyager* (1942) (as a sympathetic shrink, Dr Jaquith), in *Notorious* (1946) (as a mother-loving Nazi), and in *Deception* (1946) (as an obnoxious composer). While he isn't the best thing about *Casablanca* (1942), that's only because the peculiar nature of that film's perfection means that no one element stands out over anything else. Nevertheless, his ironic cynicism precisely counterpoints Humphrey Bogart's romantic cynicism, and in a film on whose ending nobody seemed able to agree, it seems to me now that *the only possible way* it could have closed was with Rick and Louis walking off together at the 'beginning of [their] beautiful friendship' (to hell with Ilsa and Victor, those virtuous bores, let them go off on the plane together – Rick and Louis are meant for one another).

In his *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, David Thomson writes of Claude Rains: 'is there anyone more watchable, more delicate or acidic? … It is amazing that this mix of decorum and wildness has not yet inspired a biography.' Well, it has now, at last. David J. Skal will be familiar to many readers as the world's foremost authority on the classic Hollywood horror movie, and while Rains tried very hard not to be typecast in horror roles, he's still Griffin the Invisible Man, Sir John Talbot, and Erique Claudin, the deranged and disfigured virtuoso violinist, playing opposite that dullard Nelson Eddy in Arthur Lubin's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1943) (and yup, he's the best thing in it *by a mile*). Over a hundred of the book's 290 pages are by way of notes, filmographies and indices, which leaves a rather brisk, sleek, and functional narrative of Rains's life – which is, of course, in many ways entirely appropriate for its subject. Skal whisks the reader along at a terrific pace, pausing occasionally for an engaging anecdote, a wry aside, or a brief, judicious critical assessment. If Captain Louis Renault himself had written a biography of Claude Rains, it might have come across a bit like this.

Claude Rains was born in 1889 in Camberwell, South London – which is not quite Brixton, where Alfred Hitchcock thought he was born; nor quite Clapham, where Skal has him born, though it's very close to both. Nor is it quite East Dulwich, a mile or two down the road, where Boris Karloff was born a couple of

years earlier; nor quite Walworth, a couple of miles up the road, where Charlie Chaplin was born six months earlier. (I wonder if they ever crossed each other on the street? Somebody should write a novel about this.) Though hampered by both a speech impediment and a cockney accent (we're talking the 1900s here, not the 1960s), Rains still managed to find himself attached to Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's theatre company, as variously a gopher, a prompter, and eventually a bit-part player (after elocution lessons, for which Tree paid). As an officer in the First World War, Rains was wounded in a mustard gas attack, which left him permanently blind in one eye, but which also changed the timbre of his voice forever (hard to believe that something so rich and beautiful owes its existence to such brutality). After the War, Rains became a distinguished feature on the London stage, specializing in Shaw, and in 1923 began to teach at RADA, where his pupils included John Gielgud, who thought he was brilliant, and Charles Laughton, with whom he had a more troubled history.

In some ways, Laughton and Rains are analogous figures – enormously talented British stage actors who went on to forge careers of unlikely and unconventional success in Hollywood, punctuated by occasional, memorable forays into horror. Laughton supported Boris Karloff in *The Old Dark House* (1932), which James Whale directed the year before *The Invisible Man*; he played Dr Moreau in *The Island of Lost Souls* (1932) and Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939); his one project as a director was of course that classic work of American Gothic, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). In other ways, they are diametrically opposed. Laughton was a grotesque of monstrous appetites (he was an Oscar-winning Henry VIII in 1933), a hyperbolic barnstormer of an actor, and a man tormented by his homosexuality; while Rains was small and dapper, brought a meticulous precision and formality to everything he did, and was voraciously heterosexual (he had six wives, though Skal somehow makes it seem like rather more!). The notoriously insecure and defensive Laughton, fresh from his Oscar, was condescending about Rains's performance in *The Invisible Man*, exclaiming, 'Good God almighty, what did you do that for? A challenge? An extraordinary thing to do. I suppose *you* would accept a challenge like that.' When, later in the 30s, they met on the Universal lot, Laughton greeted Rains with a sneering 'Hello, you little shit.' They never spoke again.

Not that Rains wasn't himself insecure and tormented – he was an actor, after all. Standing 5'6", he was very conscious of his lack of stature, which he attempted to overcome by adopting an extremely formal bearing, and by brushing his hair backward in such a way as to add an extra inch or two to his height. When Rains made *Notorious* opposite the considerably taller Ingrid Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock suggested that he wear lifts for certain scenes, which he seems then to have done for the rest of his career. Perhaps stereotypically, he played a brilliant Napoleon on numerous occasions, on stage and screen. His womanizing, which seems compulsive, may have stemmed from insecurity, too. His drinking certainly did: by the 1950s, Rains was drinking very heavily, though it seems not to have affected his performances in any way, right up to very near the end of his life. He died in 1967, of complications brought on by cirrhosis of the liver. In 1971, his old friend and co-star Bette Davis (who was, Skal hints, in love with Rains from the start, though this was never consummated), was interviewed on American TV by Dick Cavett. Asked whether Claude Rains had been 'a happy person', Davis, not without demons of her own, said:

> 'As happy as …[*Pause*] … As a group, I don't think actors are what I'd call happy people. I think we're very moody people. I think we have great ups and great downs … If something turns out badly you're depressed for days. I think we're terribly peculiar that way, and rather lonely people, actually. So Claude I could not say was a happy person. He was witty, amusing, and beautiful, really beautiful. And thoroughly enchanting to be with. And brilliant.'

Like all great actors, Claude Rains gave his own happiness over to his audience. Like all worthwhile subjects, Claude Rains ultimately eludes his biographer. But the best compliment I can pay David J. Skal's book is probably the best compliment I can pay to any film biography: it made me want to spend the next couple of months of my life watching the complete films of Claude Rains. I think I will.

DARRYL JONES

Lynn Forest-Hill (Ed.), *The Mirror Crack'd: Fear and Horror in J.R.R. Tolkien's Major Works*
Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008

As the subtitle, if not the titular allusion to the *Idylls of the King*, indicates, Lynn Forrest-Hill's edited volume, *The Mirror Crack'd*, gathers chapters sharing an interest in investigating Tolkien's use of fear and horror, an important and potentially useful avenue of approach that has so far been under-utilised. The essays are also unified in their concentration upon the medieval sources of Tolkien's fiction. It is this fact, it seems, that accounts for the collection's rather confusing title. According to the introduction, 'it acknowledges the well-known medievalism of Tolkien's works' (1). However, the precise relevance of Tennyson and 'The Lady of Shallot' is never explained, and, never emerges, to this reviewer's eye at least.

The collection grew out of a session at the 2006 Leeds Medieval conference, and brings together the work of an eclectic array of scholars: Ph.D. students, independent Tolkien scholars, and a Professor of Physics and Astronomy. The content is almost equally diverse, encompassing discussions of *Beowulf*, spiders, light and darkness, and philology. Such a diversity is, in general, to be welcomed, and, if nothing else, this volume is testament both to the copiousness (in the medieval sense of rich abundance) of Tolkien's fiction and the continuing popularity of Tolkien studies both within and beyond the compass of academia.

The inevitable downside of such a range of subjects is a loss of coherence. In one respect, Forest-Hill has managed to ameliorate this: the texts cohere clearly in their investigation of Tolkien's medieval sources. However, as the editor herself acknowledges, there is an 'overabundant body of criticism that focuses on myth, legend, sagas, and medieval texts' (229). In this saturated marketplace, it is the volume's focus on horror and fear that promises to be its most valuable feature. Few readers can have read Tolkien without experiencing at least some *frisson* of fear and there are a number of points where this deepens to genuine horror. In the context of Tolkien studies, investigations that focus on his use of fear and horror have a good deal to offer and, in potential if not in the volume under review, offer a useful way of moving Tolkien scholarship on from the pervasive focus on the medieval, and of reading his work with a keener eye to his immediate literary context. It is a pity, therefore, that the chapters it contains are not marked by a consistent focus on these issues. It is an even greater pity that some of those chapters that pay the most attention to fear and horror are far from the most successful in the collection. And, unfortunately, there are more unsuccessful essays than there ought to be: the diversity of the contributors and the eclecticism of their approaches have resulted in a volume that is notably patchy in terms of its quality, and that declares a certain inadequacy in the editing process.

This problem is compounded by a chapter plan that, while not precisely saving the best till last, does push the worst into a rather prominent position. So, one first encounters a brief essay by Maria Raffaelle Benvenuto on 'the roots of fantastic horror in *The Lord of the Rings*.' This brief chapter provides a survey of the 'horrific' elements of Tolkien's great work, but fails to be very illuminating about any of them. This is followed by Jessica Burke's contribution – 'Fear and Horror: Monsters in Tolkien and *Beowulf*.' Burke is to be commended as one of the few contributors in this book to interrogate seriously the concept of fear. However, she merits censure for her misleading discussion of Augustine's views on evil and a discussion of the Biblical account of Cain that combines New Age whack-jobbery with a total lack of any account of its relevance to Tolkien. These are real problems, and are exacerbated by a rather lumpen and unclear writing style. Similar stylistic concerns beset Michael Cunningham's discussion of 'Liminality and the Construct of Horror in *Lord of the Rings*.' A chapter that opens with a sentence like 'J.R.R. Tolkien's

Middle-Earth is a Secondary World thriving with fauna and features that are at once familiar to the reader who soon finds a rich topography unfolding within the pages' (119) can scarcely be said to have put its best foot forward. Again, this reflects on an editing process that may have been too light of touch for the good of the volume – and of the author.

On the other hand, this volume also contains some genuinely useful and interesting material. Shandi Stevenson's essay 'The Shadow beyond the Firelight: Pre-Christian Archetypes and Imagery Meet Christian Theology in Tolkien's Treatment of Evil and Horror' is a valuable and stimulating discussion of a subject whose centrality to Tolkien's work has not always been recognised. Similarly, Reno Lauro's chapter 'Of Spiders and (the Medieval Aesthetics of) Light: Hope and Action in the Horrors of Shelob's Lair' contains some useful material on Tolkien's utilisation of light, darkness, and colour. Lauro draws a particularly interesting contrast between Tolkien's appreciation of the importance of vivid colour and 'the rather conservative palate adopted by Peter Jackson's art team' (56). A treatment of the philology and Tolkien's views on artistic endeavour rounds out a stimulating chapter. Julie Pridmore's contribution, on 'Images of Wolves in Tolkien's Fiction' also deserves mention for its exhaustive and encyclopaedic treatment of its theme, and, in particular, for her handling of Tolkien's revisions of his material.

The remaining essays in the volume are interesting in a more minor key. Rainer Nagel's discussion of Tolkien's spiders and Amy Amendt-Raduage's treatment of 'Barrows, Wights, and Ordinary People' both reflect on the important of philology to Tolkien's work, and the richness imparted by his careful selection of archaic words. In a similar way, Romauld Ian Lakowski's treatment of 'The Slaying of Glaurung and Medieval Dragon Lore' highlights Tolkien's use of pre-existing mythic material. Like a number of other chapters, Lakowski's is also notable for its extension of the scope of the collection beyond *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*.

A very different and rather interesting approach is taken by Kristine Larsen. Her contribution – 'Shadow and Flame: Myth, Monsters and Mother Nature in Middle-earth' – concentrates on the development of Tolkien's *legendarium* by arguing for the relevance of the concepts of geomythology and astromythology for his approach. Larsen's thesis is appealing, on the whole, though one cannot but feel that true Tolkien fans may be dismayed (rather like the conservative Christians who are the usual target of these demythologising discourses) at having the supernatural elements of the story simply explained away as representing geological and astronomic phenomena.

This volume, then, is not without value, and some of the material it contains is useful. It is, however, hamstringed by a number of issues. In particular its failure to live up to the considerable promise of its subtitle is disappointing. With a more clearly conceived focus, and, perhaps, a rather more ruthless and interventionist editor this could have been an interesting and important book. In the event it has to settle for interesting.

MARK SWEETNAM

Margaret Oliphant, *The Library Window*
Tampa Florida: University of Tampa Press, 2006

Margaret Oliphant belongs to that class of writers of the Victorian era who have the dubious accolade of being referred to as prolific. Literary legend has it that, when invited to her home for tea, Anthony Trollope and Oliphant compared their literary output and much to the former's amazement, Oliphant's proved to be substantially greater. While Trollope wrote some 47 novels, Oliphant wrote 98. She also published 26 books of non-fiction, more than 50 short stories, over 300 articles and reviews in addition to 25 volumes of personal correspondence, 4 volumes of diaries and a posthumously published autobiography. There is also evidence that she burnt some novels and that her ne'er-do-well brother, Willie, published some of her earlier novels in his own name.

As far as critical commentary on Oliphant's life and writing is concerned, there are two recurrent themes – one is her immense literary production and the other her personal hardships and these two themes are often linked. Widowed by her husband of only seven years (who died bankrupt) and with three children to raise, Oliphant supported herself and her children as well as her brother Willie and her brother Frank and his family through her writing. Not surprisingly, many critics and commentators have viewed Oliphant's literary production and financial necessity as unhappy bedfellows and have, at best, lamented and, at worst, condemned her work as a fatal comprise of her creative integrity. Virginia Woolf's comments are typical in this regard; she writes of Oliphant "[She] sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn a living and educate her children." In her autobiography, posthumously published in 1899, Oliphant's comments on this aspect of her literary career give voice to a far more pluralistic attitude to literary productivity:

> I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth. I have never had any theory on the subject. I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact it was necessary for me to work for my children. That, however, was not the first motive, so that when I laugh iniquities off and say that it is my trade, I do it only by way of eluding the question which I have neither time nor wish to enter into. (*Autobiography*, 14)

It seems that one of the few exceptions to the ease with which Oliphant wrote comes in the form of her tales of the supernatural. Writing to John Blackwood on the subject of producing more of these tales, Oliphant explained, "They are not like any others. I can produce them only when they come to me." Indeed, when compared to her prolific literary output in other areas, Oliphant's supernatural tales (which she did not begin writing until the age fifty) are few and number less than a dozen. The majority of these tales were collected in the volume *Tales of the Seen and the Unseen* and despite their generic titles – 'The Open Door', 'The Secret Chamber', 'The Portrait' – they are distinctive and diverse in their representation of the supernatural; emphasising the themes of familial love, loss, mourning, guilt and the less than wholly successful role of religious faith in comforting the bereaved. 'The Library Window', one of Oliphant's finest ghost stories, is perhaps a little untypical in this regard. Not only is it is her only supernatural story with a definite female narrator but it is also a tale whose theme of loss is most vividly represented not through death but through missed opportunity and possibilities unrealised. The story concerns a young woman who, on a prolonged visit to her Aunt Mary's home and at her aunt's indulgence, spends most of her day ensconced in a window recess reading or employed at her

needlework. While engaged in these occupations she overhears her aunt's elderly female friends discuss a window in the building opposite:

"It's no window […] It has been filled in, in the days of the window duties."
"It's just a delusion: and that is my opinion of the window, if you ask me."
"One thing is clear […] it cannot be a window to see through. It may be filled in or it may be built up, but it is not a window to give light."
"And who ever hear of a window that was no to see through?" (7)

The young woman soon becomes obsessed by the window and begins to see beyond its apparently opaque panes to a room inside. The window in question belongs to a library and the room that is slowly revealed to the narrator is that of a scholar who can be seen seated at his desk immersed in writing. Through the course of the narrative, a number of stories connected with the scholar are revealed by different characters, none of them satisfactory to the young girl, not only because all of them are based on the assumption that he is now dead but also because they emphasise rather trite romantic scenarios of doomed or unreciprocated love. One of these stories, told by the narrator's aunt, involves the exchange of a ring as a token of love. This is significant because one of Aunt Mary's elderly friends, Lady Carnbee, wears a diamond ring which fascinates and repels the young woman. The ring is too big for Lady Carnbee's finger and twists around into her palm: "the big diamonds blazed underneath in the hollow of her hand, like some dangerous thing hiding and sending out darts of light." (8) Whatever the ring may signify for the narrator or the reader, it "seemed to mean far more than was said" and when the young girl is bequeathed it on Lady Carnbee's death she never wears it but instead keeps it in a house she does not visit and secretly hopes that it might eventually be stolen.

Yet, these stories of romantic intrigue hold little interest for the young narrator; what fascinates her above all else is the scholar's utter absorption in his work: "He moved just so much as a man will do when he is very busily writing, thinking of nothing else." Her feeling on coming to her window to look at him is always the same: "Is he still there? is he writing, writing always? I wonder what he is writing!" (21) Curiously, what never occurs to the young woman is how her own actions mirror the scholar's. She too sits virtually motionless for long hours at her window immersed in solitary occupation but significantly her time is not spent writing but reading, sewing and then spying on the scholar. At one point the scholar moves from his desk to his window and appears to wave his hand at the young woman. He will do this once more at the story's close, years later when the narrator returns from India a widow with her young children. Bereft of companionship and with no one to welcome her on her sad homecoming, she is certain she sees him in the crowd waving at her: "I landed almost cheerfully, thinking here was someone who would help me. But he had disappeared, as he did from the window, with that one wave of his hand." (48) What was the promise that this figure offered the narrator all those years ago as a young woman and now as a widowed mother? Romance? A kindred love of solitude? The life of a writer? Whatever the significance of his influence on her it is fleeting and ultimately lost but still, as the narrator explains earlier, "it is always interesting to have a glimpse like this of an unknown life." (21)

Some critics have suggested that Oliphant's scholar is a shadowy representation of her fellow countryman Walter Scott whose prolific writing was legendary. Indeed Scott is mentioned in 'The Library Window' but in part this is to differentiate him from the scholar, for unlike Scott whose was once seen through a window incessantly writing and throwing each finished sheet of paper down on the floor, the scholar's movement is limited to writing alone: "[I]t appeared to be a long long page which never wanted turning." (21) Of course Oliphant herself wrote ceaselessly and, like Scott, her writing output was closely bound up

with financial necessity. Could it be that Oliphant's scholar is some impossible dream whose intense commitment to writing is, unlike Scott's or Oliphant's, unhampered by worldly concerns, even to the extent of not having to turn a page to continue writing? Even if this is so, what of the female narrator who is fascinated with, and drawn to, the scholar's activities but it seems never succeeds in emulating them let alone understanding their significance? Could she be Oliphant's shadowy double just as the scholar is her impossible ideal? Widowed, with her young children, the narrator is not unlike Oliphant but fortunately, not least of all for us as readers, Oliphant herself succeeded in far more than an outsider's brief glimpse at a life immersed in the art of writing.

One of the greatest pleasures in reading the University of Tampa Press' publication of 'The Library Window' is its conscious decision to place Oliphant and her work within a literary and cultural context. With both an introduction and an engaging afterword by Elizabeth Winston it affords this most intriguing of Oliphant's ghostly tales and Oliphant herself the focused consideration they so richly deserve. *The Library Window* is the first volume in a series from the University of Tampa Press entitled *Insistent Visions* whose objective is to return to print "lost or under-appreciated supernatural fiction, mysteries, science fiction, and adventure stories from the 19th century"; a worthwhile objective indeed. What's more, the second volume in the series is a critical new edition of the fictional work of the Irish occult figure Cheiro, *A Study of Destiny*. We look forward to volume three soon; it's been too long already! Oliphant's 'The Library Window' is certainly an excellent place to start rediscovering and reassessing under-appreciated 19th century fiction. While many of her ghost stories are suspenseful and decidedly unnerving her supernatural writing does not sit comfortably with contemporary assumptions about the role of Victorian ghost stories as diverting entertainment. Rather, her supernatural narratives directly confront the pain of loss and the incomprehensible void between what is, what was and what can never be – themes as relevant today as they were in Oliphant's time.

ELIZABETH McCARTHY

"A Creak and a Crack and the Scent of Sandalwood": Joanne Owen, *Puppet Master*
London: Orion Children's Books, 2008

Puppets and puppetry are the central motifs of Joanne Owen's debut novel *Puppet Master*. A dark fantasy for young readers, *Puppet Master* is, according to the blurb, "rich with the traditions of circus and theatre"; the contents page is, intriguingly, laid out like a playbill and the text is divided not into chapters, but into acts and scenes. This unusual opening has the effect of defamiliarising the reader and drawing new awareness to the experience of reading, an experience which is enhanced by the textured binding, rich illustrations and an exotic, Czech vocabulary. This appeal, however, belies the darker aspects of the text, which has undertones of murder, fascism and necrophilia.

On the surface, there is the story of Milena, a young Czech girl who lives with her grandmother, Baba, who is an accomplished cook and storyteller. But this cosy world of stew and stories masks the darker side of family life, the death of Milena's father and the mysterious disappearance of her mother, Ludmila. It emerges that Ludmila's fate is bound up with the machinations of the eponymous Master Puppeteer and his fanatical apprentices, twins Zdenko and Zdenka. The Master's devious plan to take over Prague centres on using people as puppets – some he controls through hypnotism, others, including Ludmila, he transforms into actual puppets which perform in his shows. When Milena discovers that her mother has been kidnapped by the Master, she must fight to rescue her.

The story has obvious parallels with *The Adventures of Pinocchio* – the villainous Puppet Master, for example, is a clear descendent of Swallowfire – but it soon becomes clear that *Puppet Master* is aimed at an older readership than its predecessor. From the gruesome account of the blinding of the master craftsman, to the uncanny dualism of Zdenko and Zdenka, and the image of Ludmila as puppet, many of the images Owen draws upon are obviously upsetting, though there are some images which are more subtly disturbing. While the living puppets have strong connotations of slavery and the undead, they also hint at the de-individuation brought about by fascist regimes. The Puppet Master's obsession with race and national heritage, and his desire to rewrite and refocus national legends, has stark parallels with events in twentieth century Europe.

Puppet Master is exquisitely presented. Almost every page is graced with a dark and beautiful illustrations; an editorial note describes the illustrations as collages made of "layer upon layer of artwork and subtle colour [each with] its own unique richness". There are playbills, photographs, snippets from newspapers, ancient stories, letters, pressed flowers and glossaries and notes. The various threads of the narrative are distinguished, not only through the style of the writing, but through the very appearance of the pages which alternate between white paper for the main narrative and weathered, aged paper for the mythological narratives – some of which look like they could have been torn from ancient and perhaps even magical books. The ambiguity and the beauty of these images are, without doubt, one of the book's main selling points.

The layered technique used in the illustrations is echoed by the intertextuality of the narrative itself. Owen draws the reader through tiers of stories, myths, legends, layer upon layer of intertext and suggestion. But while the obscurity of the images is attractive, the lack of clarity in the narrative is more frustrating than eerie and, at times, the multiple layers threaten to obfuscate and destabilise the main plot. While we are in no doubt that Milena is the central protagonist, many different points of view are followed in different chapters, leading to a lack of consistency in the narration. The bewildered reader is

left to decipher much of the plot alone. There is a lack of consistency in the mechanics of the story too – the text is riddled with mistakes which will bother any but the laziest of readers. Katerina and Tereza are referred to as Baba's sisters-in-law but on the next page they are established as her daughters-in-law (pp.38-39). In one scene the Puppet Master and his twin accomplices appear at Milena's bedroom window to give her a birthday present – a doll in her own image. They subsequently plot to kidnap Milena: why not simply snatch her from her bed? Elsewhere Owen notes that Ludmila is held in a tiny cage in a room that is too small and cramped to stand upright in (p.77) but later, when Milena has joined her mother in the cage, Ludmila is able to pace around the cage with her "gown rippl[ing] behind her like a scarlet river" (pp. 156-157). More generally, there are points where the narrative expands too quickly and becomes confusing; at other points, the dialogue is clumpy and convoluted. When Katerina turns to her sister and says, "We've become embroiled in what can only be described as a highly dangerous political and personal conspiracy" (p.154), she not only states the obvious, but states it in a very unnatural manner. Details like this are small, but not insignificant, and it is disappointing that the same care was not taken in editing the text as was taken in designing the fabulous illustrations.

Ideally, *Puppet Master* belongs on the shelf and in the hands of a young teenage reader with a keen interest in stories of the supernatural and the occult, a reader who will enjoy the unique qualities of the book, delight in the illustrations and intertexts and who will spend many happy days afterwards chasing up stories of Czech mythology. But such readers are hard to come by and harder still to satisfy, and it is by no means easy to produce such an interesting and unusual book for such a notoriously demanding readership group. As a first novel, *Puppet Master* shows great promise; Owen has fabulous imagination and scope in her writing and the hugely ambitious nature of the project ought to be acknowledged properly. It is a delight to see an author who is not afraid to try something new. *Puppet Master* challenges the expected format and content of children's books and Owen will be rewarded with a following of readers who want to be challenged, who are not afraid of a complicated text, and who will eagerly await Owen's next publication.

JANE CARROLL

Kim Paffenroth, *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth*
Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007

Long championed by scholars and historians from humanist and Marxists traditions, George A. Romero's central film creations are given a justly ecumenical analysis in Kim Paffenroth's *Gospel of the Living Dead*. Though Paffenroth is mainly interested in uncovering the strongly Christian themes in this remarkable series of very bleak and outwardly atheistic films, he is also concerned with showing Romero's general willingness to breach very difficult human subjects on a massive scale. In clear, readable prose, Paffenroth presents a series of detailed essays on the films of the Romero zombie series – *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Land of the Dead* (2005) – even straying slightly outside of this canon to investigate the *Dawn of the Dead* remake (2004, directed by Zack Snyder and written by James Gunn, without any direct supervision by Romero). Though published in 2007, the book obviously went to press before the release of Romero's *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and the remake of *Day of the Dead* (2008, directed by Steve Miner), and for that matter does not consider (perhaps wisely) the supposedly-official sequel to *Day of the Dead*, the direct-to-video *Day of the Dead 2: Contagium* (directed by Ana Clavell and James Glenn Dudelson).

Paffenroth's introduction serves as a general primer on zombie cinema, providing a brief outline of its general thematic issues, and explaining his own interpretive direction on the subject. Romero is widely understood by horror fans, scholars, and Western culture at large as central to the development of the zombie movie tradition, though *28 Days Later* (2002) and the Romero-inspired *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) are often used as points of comparison or for reinforcement of themes commonly found in the zombie film. Paffenroth identifies racism, sexism, and an indictment of modern American individualism as central to Romero's social concerns (18-21). These issues amount to a broad critique of contemporary society, characteristically widely sweeping but constantly augmented, re-invented, or shifted with each successive film. Paffenroth identifies these themes as "a critique that could be characterized as broadly Christian, but which many modern American Christians may now find uncomfortable or unfamiliar" (22). *Gospel of the Living Dead* therefore approaches Romero's movies from the position of a rather pluralistic and humanistic Christianity, noting how these films can be seen as "a most welcome corrective" to corrupt, amoral, selfish, pointlessly exclusionary and ignorant behaviours (22). Further, Paffenroth considers the historical and spiritual antecedent of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* against each of Romero's films, showing that the different movies play to themes that are present in the most famous of literary hells.

The *Dead* films are read as a kind of *auteurist* progression for Romero, though even the *Dawn* remake is understood as expanding the thematic ground of the previous movies in the series. *Night of the Living Dead* is duly contextualised as an important turning point in the history of the horror genre, but also as "one of the great success stories of film history" (27). Low budget, starkly filmed with gritty immediacy, and uncompromisingly violent, *Night* is a touchstone of modern horror. Paffenroth points out that it is "clearly and overwhelmingly the most hopeless and depressing of all the Romero zombie movies," mainly due to the death of Ben (Duane Jones) at the hands of a human hunting posse (43). While there are no overtly Christian references in the film – indeed, the world seems bleakly drained of any meaningful spirituality – Paffenroth asserts that a Christian viewer will understand how the film exposes human fallacies, especially "human arrogance, supposed self-sufficiency, and resulting complacency" as sites of continued sinfulness (44). Refreshingly, Paffenroth is not necessarily concerned with affirming or

defending Romero's every move, but rather with articulating the latent meanings of these sometimes taken-for-granted films.

Dawn of the Dead is examined for its broadened scope of critique, including how it advances anti-consumerist, anti-sexist, and anti-racist messages. Paffenroth adds an extra-textual element to his analysis, pointing out that "exactly like Dante's *Inferno*, the film is ghastly, funny, shocking, but also humane and humanizing," and that both book and film "unmask human beings for the selfish, greedy, self-destructive creatures that they are," and similarly try to reach out to audiences and "shock us out of our sins" (70). *Gospel of the Living Dead* examines *Day of the Dead* with less esteem (and overt enthusiasm) in terms of technical accomplishment or wholeness of approach, though finds it valuable for the depth of its examination of a claustrophobic situation. Human nature is here on trial, played out through the shouting, bickering, shallowness, greed, and hostility of the central characters. For Paffenroth, *Day* is best approached as a thought-experiment, as "although it is less satisfying as a movie than any of the others, conceptually or intellectually it is much deeper and more complex than the last two [*Dawn* remake, *Land*] films" (72).

The *Dawn of the Dead* remake – endlessly debated by fans for its absence of Romero and for its controversial inclusion of "running zombies" – garners the same attention as the other *Dead* films. [An aside: As far as I am concerned, running zombies are fine so long as they run for a reason. In the case of the *Dawn* remake, I think it suggests an exponential increase in the appetites and desperation of the living dead, which is perhaps entirely appropriate to the post-9/11 West]. Though different in its roots (a direct re-interpretation of an existing property), budget (modest, though huge in comparison to the other films in the series), marketing (name actors as opposed to relative unknowns, a trend continued in *Land of the Dead*), and style (in a general sense, faster and more furious than Romero's films), *Dawn* treads much familiar thematic ground. Paffenroth summarises by saying that "criticism of modern American society is prominent in the remake, especially in its criticism of materialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia, but this criticism is more balanced and less stark" (112). The general sense by the end is of a slightly more optimistic view of people, their world, and its institutions. Finally, *Land of the Dead* caps the series with a tentative message of possibility. Despite its very blatant dichotomisation of barbarous, vile human beings on the one hand and community-building, sympathetic zombies on the other, some kind of compromise can insure the continued (perhaps not deserved) existence of the human race. *Land* provides "the only unambiguously hopeful ending in any of the films" in which human and zombie might "live—or, more properly, coexist— in peace with one another" (116). In this sense, Paffenroth sees Romero's zombie films as returning to the terrain of hope, though it is unclear if this is for extra-textual reasons – *Land* was a mainstream film and therefore might have demanded a more mainstream ending – or as a progression toward humanistic possibility on the director's part.

Kim Paffenroth writes in a very accessible, reader-friendly way. While Robin Wood's analysis of the *Dead* films (mainly in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*) is more rigorously theoretical and Tony Williams's views (from his book *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead*) more literary and traditionally scholarly, Paffenroth's book is a great place to find an alternative voice. The main problem with *Gospel of the Living Dead* is not in its ideas, but rather in its over-inclusion of non-essential information. Paffenroth writes detailed synopses of each of the main films he analyses, thereby filling nearly half of each chapter with descriptive, non-analytical text. The *Dead* films are so commonly available throughout the English-speaking world that having access to a second-hand account of plot and narrative is not necessary: viewers can do this type of fact-gathering themselves! Rather, Paffenroth should have expanded his interpretive passages, especially his central – though ultimately

underdeveloped – connection between the Hell of Dante's *Inferno* and Romero's Hells on Earth, which he uses as a point of comparison and as a legitimising link between Romero and the respectable, "high" cultural past. The connections, however, seem too tenuous to be teased out too far. As it stands, though, Paffenroth's *Gospel of the Living Dead* is a curious, rewarding book for the religious and secular alike. It helps illustrate how films even as outwardly Godless as Romero's zombie works can benefit from divine interpretation.

KEVIN M. FLANAGAN

Hazel Court, *Hazel Court - Horror Queen*: *An Autobiography*
Tomahawk Press , 2008

Hazel Court, co-star of such films as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *The Raven* (1963) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), died in April of this year, a week before the publication of her autobiography. That regrettable occurrence, combined with her iconic status among horror aficionados, has led certain reviewers to offer opinions of *Hazel Court – Horror Queen* which, it must be said, reflect better on their sense of delicacy than their sense of judgement. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, and all that sort of thing...

The fact remains, however, that reading *Hazel Court – Horror Queen* is an experience akin to being stuck in a lift with Madeline Bassett, that most terrifyingly empty-headed and sentimental of Bertram Wooster's matrimonial near-misses. Whether Miss Court would have shared Miss Bassett's view that rabbits are gnomes in attendance on the Fairy Queen and that the stars are God's daisy chain, is now impossible to ascertain, but on the evidence of this book, it seems more than likely. How else to explain her girlishly gushing recollections of an idyllic, chocolate-box childhood complete with Bob the milkman, Dobbin the horse, and Cinderella's glass slippers, to say nothing of her prescription for world peace: "With the world in great turmoil, one wonders sometimes if maybe coffee isn't the answer. The way of simplicity can be powerful." So there we are. "With milk or without, Mr. Bin Laden?"

Even by the deplorably low standards of luvvie-lit, this book is an embarrassment. At times, Miss Court appears to be addressing a particularly backward group of children: recalling Paul Robeson, she writes, "Some of you may not know who he is but there's never been anyone like him before or since. He was a magical human being." Having mentioned that Richard Greene was once known as "the Brylcreem Boy", she then adds, helpfully, that "Brylcreem was a product used to slick down men's hair and make it shine, and it did just that. In fact, it made men's hair look like the shine my mother would get on her grate after using black lead polish." Write that down in your jotters, boys and girls. And when, for reasons not worth going into, she happens to refer to the death of Mary, Queen of Scots, one can almost see her stamping her foot, her brow furrowed like Shirley Temple's, as she delivers the following admonition, "To die by the sword of an executioner was very wrong." Very, very wrong! Bold, bad executioner!

Platitudes flow from Miss Court's pen more freely than blood in a Hammer film. Particularly cherishable is her recollection of discovering a young Bill Clinton, a friend of her step-children, cooking hamburgers in her kitchen: "He still loves hamburgers, his favourite food. Born a Leo in August, it's no surprise. They love meat. My son is a Leo, so I know." Best of all, however, is a brief encounter, at MGM Studios in 1965, with Elvis Presley. Rushing from her dressing room to the set of *Dr. Kildare*, Miss Court found herself unable to stop for an audience with the King: "Fleeing down the corridor, I turned around. He was laughing as he waved one of those famous hands. I will never forget the energy that surrounded him, even as he waved. Mesmerising. I should have gone back and talked, but I was very young." The eternally girlish Miss Court, it seems worth mentioning (as she coyly fails to do herself), was born in 1926, and so was 39 at the time of this "youthful" missed opportunity.

Buttock-clenchingly awful though *Hazel Court – Horror Queen* is in almost every respect, none of that would have mattered had Miss Court had anything even remotely interesting or novel to relate concerning her work for Hammer and AIP. Predictably, of course, she does not. The section (one can hardly dignify it with the description of "chapter") on *The Curse of Frankenstein* contains the following pearls of

perspicacity: Peter Cushing was "a wonderful human being", Christopher Lee was "very funny, and really not scary at all", Robert Urquhart was "a very nice human being ... and quite attractive", while director Terence Fisher "knew his craft and gently steered the production." Her recollections of working for Roger Corman are equally vapid ("He was a fast director, and we worked very quickly ... Roger was very, very clever") and include the priceless (or should that be "Price-less"?) revelation, regarding *The Masque of the Red Death*, that, "The scenes in the film where I sacrifice myself to the devil gave me a very strange feeling. It was almost like I was really doing it, and I thought, 'Oh my God, I am giving myself to the devil!'" Clearly, there was Method in Miss Court's madness.

Given that her horror films are the entire *raison d'être* – and sole selling point – of these memoirs, one can imagine a rictus-grin of disappointment freezing the face of publisher Bruce Sachs as he waded through this mindless waffle. "When I had asked Hazel Court some years ago to write her autobiography, I never expected the one she finally delivered," Mr Sachs has recalled (see www.hammerfilms.com), and there can be little reason to doubt the veracity of that statement. Mr Sachs, however, is nothing if not loyal: "She spent the last days of her life studying every page [of the proofs]. She loved it. 'The most important thing I've done in my life', she told me. Hazel's opinion on the finished book was the only one that mattered to me." Which, one imagines, is just as well, as there will be no shortage of disappointed horror fans willing to share a rather different opinion of this "important" work. It would be gratifying to report that Mr Kenneth Bishton, credited as proof-reader of the book, had also studied "every page", but the constant misspelling of "Edgar Allan Poe" in the memoirs of an actress remembered for adaptations of that author's work rather suggests he did not, as do Miss Court's uncorrected assertions that Stuart Whitman won an Oscar for *The Mark* (he was nominated but didn't win), and that she and second husband, the director Don Taylor, "were filming in Rome right after Liz Taylor and Richard Burton made *Cleopatra* there" (Don Taylor's *The Five Man Army* was made six years after the release of *Cleopatra*). Picture captions are not usually the preserve of the proof-reader, but someone at Tomahawk should have known that John Gregson did not look remotely like Michael Craig.

Tomahawk Press have published some excellent books (Tony Earnshaw's *Beating the Devil – The Making of Night of the Demon*, Wayne Kinsey's *Hammer Films – The Elstree Studio Years*, and Sheldon Hall's book on *Zulu* come readily to mind), but *Hazel Court – Horror Queen* is not one of them. Even the plethora of photographs, seized on by some reviewers as an excuse to pass over the accompanying prose, are largely banal, an endless succession of magazine covers and studio portraits which only serve to reinforce the impression that Miss Court's most abiding memories of her film career were the opportunities it afforded her to dress up prettily in pretty dresses. Unless, like Madeline Bassett, one believes that "every time a fairy hiccoughs a wee baby is born" or one has a particularly well-developed taste for masochism, there is no good reason for wasting either money or time on a book which, to borrow the title of Miss Court's first film for AIP, would have been best served by a "premature burial".

JOHN EXSHAW

Carole Zucker, *The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Dark Carnival*
Wallflower Press, 2008

For those interested in the manifestation of the Gothic within contemporary cinema, a book-length study of the work of Neil Jordan is a welcome publication. Since his successful collaboration with Angela Carter in adapting her series of short stories from *The Bloody Chamber* (filmed as *The Company of Wolves* [1984]), Jordan has steadily built a small body of Gothic works within a much larger literary and cinematic oeuvre, often choosing to adapt novels (*Interview with a Vampire* [1994], *The Butcher Boy* [1997] and *In Dreams* [1999]) as well as occasionally writing original works (*High Spirits* [1988]). With such works, Jordan has proven himself to be one of the few directors whose autueristic sensibilities lends themselves naturally to the Gothic, for his interest, as author Carole Zucker states, resides "in the mysterious shadow side of humankind."

The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Dark Carnival is an extensive critical overview of virtually all of Jordan's work to date. Throughout, Zucker's approach to analysis is interdisciplinary, using, amongst others, art history, psychology, philosophy, literary criticism, myths and fairy tales as a means by which to illuminate Jordan's work. Through such modes, Zucker identifies the "artistic hybridity" of Jordan's cinema and suggests that such an oeuvre is deeply informed by Celtic myth and folklore, Romanticism and the Gothic. The critiques themselves are not in chronological order, with Zucker instead choosing to group the films together thematically in an effort to expose the commonality between differing works. This approach allows intriguing juxtapositions to be made, such as the chapter in which *The Company of Wolves* is positioned alongside *Mona Lisa* (1986); films unified by their relationship to the fairy tale and the manner in which "identity, gender and cruelty form the basis of a reality in which characters may find or loose themselves." With such comparisons taking place and ably supported by eloquent critique, one is encouraged to revisit some of Jordan's films and view them again with a totally new perspective on both the narrative and its potential meanings.

The analysis of *The Company of Wolves* is clear and insightful, exploring the use of the fairy tale within the film before identifying its symbolic values: the labyrinthine nature of the narrative and the associations of sexual awakening and the menstrual cycle as an exploration of the protagonist's psyche. The reading then broadens to encompass the concerns of its director, most notably his "predilection for the dark carnival" that concludes in the confirmation that Jordan is indeed "one of the most mordant modern re-tellers of fairy tales."

In Dreams, Jordan's adaptation (with Bruce Robinson) of Bari Wood's novel *Doll's Eyes*, is a further fairy-tale narrative loaded with potent symbolic imagery. Zucker dedicates a full chapter to a critique of this film and then builds upon these readings throughout other chapters: she analyses protagonist Claire's (Annette Bennning) status as a re-born heroine and her quest for understanding and wholeness. Throughout this reading there is an appropriate application of the concepts and content of myths and the fairy tale to add further critical depth to the discussion, suggesting that Claire is ultimately "Jordan's Postmodern conception of Snow White", an active heroine who has no prince to rescue her. Here the interdisciplinary approach is actively at work, constructing coherent readings that not only evidence Jordan's "artistic hybridity" but also the value of Zucker's critical hybridity.

An equally diverse approach is taken with *Interview with a Vampire*: the film is analysed from the perspective of acting, with Zucker suggesting that it is a narrative that is "in great measure about

performance as spectacle, funded, as it is for much of the film, by copious amounts of theatrical rhetoric," leading to a close analysis of the brothel scene and then through the *Le Théâtre des Vampires* sequence. Here dialogue, style, gesture and actor/viewer relationship is explored in order to produce an assessment of the protagonist vampires: Tom Cruise's depiction of Lestat as a sadistic dandy is clearly amplified by Zucker's approach whilst Brad Pitt's performance as Louis elicits a greater sense of pity. Zucker's convincing readings amplifies the very humanity of the inhuman vampires through their gestures, their movement and their very theatricality. Like she does with *In Dreams*, Zucker returns to *Interview with a Vampire* later in the book, positioning it this time as a Romantic text in which Louis is an archetypal Romantic hero "consumed with guilt and the knowledge that he can never in all eternity attain redemption." In this reading Louis becomes a "creature suspended between extremes", one who desired death when in life and now desires death even in the afterlife.

What is disappointing, particularly given the depth that Zucker goes to in her analysis of the films, is the lack of critique of *High Spirits*: the film is discussed in a brief paragraph that explains the plot and the problematic experience Jordan had with the studio, Tri-Star. As she indicates, the film was taken out of Jordan's hands, scenes re-shot and the narrative distilled, in Jordan's words, to a "silly, frenetic teenage comedy." Whilst there may not be much to wring critically from the director's experience, it may have been possible to explore the vision that Jordan had for this film. This possibility is compounded by the fact that Zucker had access to Jordan's personal archives, a space in which one imagines there to be a wealth of the unseen in relation to this film. This omission becomes all the more frustrating given that part of Zucker's approach to this oeuvre is through Celtic folklore and the Gothic, the two central tropes upon which the narrative of *High Spirits* hangs. Although one could argue that the released film bears only Jordan's name, the presence of a crumbling Gothic mansion, the spectres that haunt its dark corridors and the almost necrophilic relationships between the living and the dead suggest that strands of Jordan's preoccupations, no matter how fine, still remain within the narrative.

A further minor concern is that some aspects of the text feel as if Zucker wants to say more and that the length of a chapter is not, in some cases, enough to explore fully her understanding of the individual films. This can be frustrating: at times the text feels like it is merely broaching the surface and at other times leaves a tantalising suggestion, particularly when Zucker ends a paragraph with "The film also challenges the paradisal notion of childhood as it focuses on children's lives cut short by violence." So much is suggested in terms of further critical readings by this sentence only for it to simply end at a full stop.

Regardless of this, Zucker's book is an articulate and high-quality critique that covers a diverse range of film in an equally diverse range of critical modes. Herein lies the success of the work, for that very diversity brings about new readings and new interpretations of now well-established Gothic adaptations.

JAMES ROSE