BOOK REVIEWS

A History of Violence: A Brief Examination of Fear & Loathing at the Bookshop

Jean Seaton, *Carnage & the Media: The Making & Breaking of News About Violence* (London: Penguin, 2005)**; Joanna Bourke *Fear: A Cultural History*** (London: Virago, 2005)**; Mark Ames, *Going Postal: Rage, Murder & Rebellion in America*** (London: Snow Books, 2007)

Dara Downey

On initial inspection, Jean Seaton's *Carnage & the Media*, Joanna Bourke's *Fear* and Mark Ames' *Going Postal* would seem to have little enough in common with one another. When read in quick succession, however, it becomes clear that all three either point towards, or, more worryingly, actively create a cultural trend in which a fascination with fear and violence has spilled over the slimy, cyclopean walls of Gothic productions per se and into the psychopathology of everyday life.

The existence of this psychopathology is, of course, hardly a new or revolutionary notion. Particularly since the 1890s, by which time the Gothic novel had mutated almost beyond recognition, the horror genre has been more than willing to let us know that the monsters don't need to invade the everyday, because they are already here, chuckling malevolently to themselves as they gleefully inhabit a world struggling vainly to evict them by defining itself as "normal". Nonetheless, it remains a notion about which Western society seems to need constant reminding – although not everyone would agree. Jane Austen's affectionate spoofing of Ann Radcliffe's work in *Northanger Abbey* directly confronts the concern that a cultural climate where girls described as sweet and charming regularly devour the most "horrid" of books, books detailing rape, incest and imprisonment, might be neither a healthy nor even a very safe one. Much like the gory chillers that Austen (and Charlotte Lennox before her) felt compelled to condemn (at least in part, an ambivalence that I share), Seaton, Bourke and Ames tap into and cultivate a market where horrid books constitute light afternoon reading, to be strewn on coffee tables and read about in Sunday newspapers – and without the comforting bulwark of fiction and fantasy. And yet this, I would argue, is only made possible by a drive to construct and uphold a sense of the abnormal and containable nature of the very threats that these books gleefully insist are our constant bedfellows.

The basic premise of Seaton's book, which takes in the Roman games and medieval martyrs, as well as twentieth-century conflicts, is to let us know that war and violence are everywhere. From here, she argues that the media coverage of these sorts of events is in itself a form of violence, violence performed upon the truth, but also upon us, the viewers and readers, who find ourselves manipulated into believing what the media want us to believe and remaining ignorant of the things they want to keep from us. It's not all doom and gloom, of course, and Seaton acknowledges that audiences bring their own assumptions and interpretive tools to bear upon what they see and read. All the same, at the end of the book, we are left with the distinct feeling that there are weapons flying everywhere, whether actual or metaphorical, and that it's only a matter of time before one (or indeed many) of them lodges itself in our soft flesh.

Conversely, Bourke's weighty tome, in spite of its constant protestations to the contrary, because it is organised in essence as a chronological history of the things that people have been afraid of since the early 1800s, leaves one with the sense that, in "the long ago", people were afraid of silly things, and now that we have cancer and terrorists, we *really* know how to be scared. At the same time, her discussion of both of these modern fears is well nuanced, demonstrating that that fears of premature burial were entirely justified up until very recently; and, at the other end of her historical scale, that fear itself is often what ultimately kills a cancer patient. She also examines in detail the anti-Muslim propaganda fostered in the America press both before and after the events of September 11th 2001. Nonetheless, it's difficult not to come away with the impression that in the past they had fear, but now we have problems.

Finally, Ames' book deplores the media tendency to ascribe workplace and high-school shootings to psychological disturbance or to the violent nature of cultural texts and the ready availability of guns. As an alternative, Ames proposes that the systematic exploitation of ordinary workers by high-powered and overpaid bosses, and the pressures on high-school students to perform so as to become one of these exploited workers creates a profound but often unspoken discontent which briefly erupts into what he sees as essentially isolated and untheorised attempts at revolution. His vision of American society is itself rather Radcliffean, with the big-business moguls as the charismatic, vampiric, aristocratic villains, and the down-trodden white-collar workers and stressed-out students as the spunky but terrified heroines desperately but ineffectually fighting back.

In his critical work, *Terrors of Uncertainty* (1989), Joseph Grixti describes the worldview presented by Stephen King (that great barometer of what the American public are thinking – or at any rate what he thinks they ought to be thinking) in his novels as one which combines "helpless unease with vacuous optimism," (74), and it would seem to be precisely this queasy, limbo state that all three books are also, however unconsciously or peripherally, trying to promulgate. *Carnage & the Media*, to my mind, is the worst offender on this score. Admittedly, it is not without its high points. Seaton's discussion of the cultural (mainly Romantic) origins of the notion that emotions are, in comparison to reason and logic, both natural and inherently sincere, is both well placed and compelling. The section on the current state of Russia and its efforts both to copy Western styles of war reporting and resist their cultural hegemony makes for equally fascinating reading, and provides a much needed dose of cultural relativism. She also makes a point of occasionally distinguishing the tactics of British and American news in reporting events close to home for each country, and makes the interesting point that in Scandinavia, news about the conflict in Northern Ireland was presented from the side of the Republicans, which, she argues, resulted in a very different picture of events from that promulgated in Britain. On the subject of Northern Ireland, my personal favourite snippet of information about Russian newscasting relates to the debacle of the first Chechen war, about which Seaton imagines the Russian military elite saying to themselves, "'Let's have a short quick successful war – just like we watch on TV!'" She notes that "Russian television-watchers (including generals) had seen British tanks and rockets apparently suppressing communities in Northern Ireland for more than three decades – except that the images were fraudulent and had been from military exercises and promotions for international armament sales," (174).

In spite of these flashes of brilliance, however, Seaton's book succeeds only in implying that, really, Western news-making all falls generally under the same homogenised banner, a banner which proudly announces a commitment to manipulation (both of audiences and of "facts") and a willingness to pander to increasing time pressures. And this, I would argue, is where Grixti's "helpless unease" comes in,

partnered with the "vacuous optimism" of Seaton's repeated but utterly unsubstantiated assertions that audiences respond to news and film intelligently, with an awareness of conventions and artificiality, and an ability and desire to read what they see critically rather than passively. Repeatedly invoking an image of a general public at once victimised by representation, and competently dissecting its trickery, exactly where Seaton stands on the issues she raises about media-audience relations is far from evident.

This overall sloppiness and lack of clarity characterises the book as a whole. Almost as grating as her overuse (and frequent misuse) of the word "paradoxically" are her interminable, labyrinthine sentences, which only succeed in muddying the argument and frustrating and wearying the reader. Nevertheless, this would be entirely forgivable were it not for a serious lack of organisation more generally. Issues that would seem to have already been covered return repeatedly, not merely name-checked so as to build up a solid argument, but dusted down and examined all over again, and rarely in a new light. Her discussion of body bags, and how they both occlude and speak of unspeakable horrors, sprawls over two chapters concerned with other matters, and comes to no real conclusions. The second and third times that the issue is raised she fails to acknowledge that it has already been dealt with. Indeed, her discussion of corpses overall, the fears surrounding them and how the news reacts to and seeks to forestall those fears, which contains the germs of some extremely important and challenging ideas, is where the books feels most rushed and poorly constructed. Seaton makes statements along the lines of "in nearly all societies, in all time periods, [the unburied corpse] has been an object of considerable fear," (191-92), but fails to address this at all, moving on instead to talk about the treatment of soldiers' bodies since World War 1, and, almost as an afterthought, eventually discussing some theories explaining this fear, such as David Stannard's *The Puritan Way of Death*, several pages later. This would have been helpful at the point where she makes her sweeping generalisation, not after she's spent quite some time on other things. Over and over, her abstract observations, bereft of illustration or explanation, leave the reader scratching his or her head and struggling to fill in the yawning blanks.

Finally, while I can see why Seaton chose to do it, the first three chapters, which concentrate on the games in the Roman arena and the martyrdom of early Christians, fail to gel with the purely modern focus of the rest of the book. In subsequent sections, she makes some half-hearted, often rather strained and irrelevant comparisons between this religious bloodshed and modern media, parallels which are, of course, obvious, but once again Seaton does little with them. One gets the impression that she just knows a lot about really old stuff, especially really old stuff to do with Christianity, and wanted to stick it in, whether it fit in with her overall thesis or not, and the result, as in the book as a whole, is a muddle.

In a rather different manner, in spite of its many strengths, Bourke's *Fear* also falls victim to the impulse identified by Grixti. I agree wholeheartedly with her staunch rejection of the more reductive conclusions of twentieth- (and indeed nineteenth-) century psychology, which she sees as blatantly – almost wilfully – privileging individual psychosis over social and cultural pressures and rigidly defined norms. Indeed, she sees psychology in this garb as actively harmful and even dangerous, dooming those individuals to further torment, isolation and madness by labelling, stigmatising and demonising them. She also hits the mark with her discussion of women's fears of being attacked when alone and outside, especially at night, and the investment which patriarchal culture has in creating and fostering these fears. Indeed, the issues raised by this discussion help to illuminate the way in which Seaton and Bourke's books each focus upon, and indeed produce, one of two very different kinds of narratives of fear. On the one hand, there is the fear akin to that generated by trailers for films of the stalk-and-slash variety (or, as in the recent spate of

"Gornography" films, stalk-capture-and-mutilate). While one is actually watching these films, the safety net of plot, dialogue and ingenious or groan-inducing resolution hangs securely beneath us; but in their absence, faced only with horrific flashes and terrified screams that leave us to imagine what might have elicited them, our fear has free rein. On the other hand, when one watches a film in its entirety, those same reassuring mechanisms, and the sense of unity and continuity that they create, can themselves send out messages about the causality of violence and the blame and justification that can be accorded to victim and villain alike. "Don't go out alone, don't talk to strangers, all men are out to get you," these films and the smooth logic of their plots tell us, and even those of us armed with a battery of academic knowledge and an awareness of horror conventions as conventions sometimes can't help but find ourselves listening.

This opposition is an intrinsic part of what, together, these books create. Seaton's fun-fair peep-show rendering of history, hopping across continents and in and out of various points in the twentieth century, combines with her messy argumentation to produce a sense (often opposed to what she is actually trying, incoherently, to say) that there is neither rhyme nor reason to the violent things that happen to ordinary people, and that bombard us on a daily basis. She provides us with sound-bite explanations, so jumbled and abbreviated that these explanations themselves require explanations that just aren't there. Meanwhile, Bourke takes the opposite tack, providing readers with an impressive, teleological, even epic narrative sweep, bringing us happily to a point in the twenty-first century where we need no longer fear burial alive, being crushed to death in a theatre fire, or having our minds subtly destroyed by our well-meaning analyst. She founders, however, on the rocky shores of the 9/11 question. *Fear* roundly, and with much success, condemns the racist fear-mongering that it has trailed in its wake like the gruesome products of a lynching, but seems to be unable to get beyond the simple fact that the bombing of the World Trade Centre was a horrific act of mass murder that left Americans (and most of the Western world, not to mention the Middle East and many American and British citizens who have suddenly become "immigrants") gripped by profound and justifiable fear. Where Seaton's eschewal of neat narrative generates its own sort of unease, Bourke's espousal of plotting as a means of allaying fear proves impossible to sustain in the face of the cataclysmic events of September 11th and its aftermath.

This is made painfully obvious in the final pages of her conclusion. She suggests, with admirable simplicity, that

> [...] there is nothing inherently wrong about fear. In many circumstances fear is an appropriate emotion to incite. Obviously parents are acting correctly when they evoke fears in their children: crossing roads, playing with fire and touching electrical sockets are rightly taught to be scary. In times of disaster or when faced with a serious threat, the "flight" response to fear might also be beneficial [...]. (389)

From here, however, she goes on to make such trite observations as "A world without fear would be a dull world indeed," "A world without fear would be a world without love," and "much of the human urge to creativity depends upon fear," (390-91). Now, I sympathise with Bourke here – she needs a nice neat little conclusion to tie everything together, but this is hardly the way to do it. Indeed, having shown incontrovertibly that the current anxieties about foreigners living in and coming into the United States were fuelled, even created, by ideologically motivated writing and reporting, what ought to be quite heartening statements can only fail to ring true. More generally, the book deals with some issues of

central importance to the way we lead our lives in the modern world and have done in the past – the potentially harmful influence of psychiatric techniques upon patients, and of the feminist "discourse of terror" surrounding the threat of rape upon women's lives; the artificially of panics surrounding immigration; the dangers of careless design and lack of planning for emergencies in public buildings; the very real fear of live burial in the nineteenth century. However, faced with the prospect of summing up, she concludes lamely by saying, in effect, "fearing these things makes us better people," when she should be saying, "isn't it appalling that something isn't being done about these things, about the way we're encouraged to fear them without doing anything about them, and which will therefore continue to rule our lives with very real fear and even more pressing danger." In spite of appearing to be the polar opposite of the gaping holes in Seaton's arguments, Bourke's neat little fairytale concludes in the weakest manner possible: she announces that it was all a dream, but we can still see a wolf sitting in our beds instead of Grandma. This isn't comfort – it's plausible denial, and that, in itself, is pretty scary.

This, however, is not something that Ames could be accused of – though perhaps we might wish it were so. Like Seaton, Ames' attitude to editing appears to have suffered from the very work-related pressures they both so vehemently deplore. For the first few pages, I must admit to having been rather put off by Ames' chatty colloquialisms, his minor repetitions (resulting in his using "obscene" three times on the same page, and several times per chapter) and (gasp!) the occasional typo, as well as by his relationship with the work of Michael Moore, which is characterised by petty one-upmanship. Fifty pages in, however, and I was hooked, not least by the clarity and accessibility of his writing, but also by the utterly compelling nature of the facts he presents. Like Bourke, he condemns psychoanalytical readings of behaviour, which both privilege personal neuroses and psychoses over social pressures and contradictions, and which create jeremiads against individuals seen as monsters while failing to address the core problems which have made them like that. Sticking closely to this stance, Ames paints a bleak and unforgettable picture of thousands, millions of ordinary American white collar workers and cheerful high-school kids convinced that they're living the American dream, with a house, a career, a car, a scholarship, but all the while being ground down by their bosses and by the government and by that very American dream which, it turns out, is only for the very few at the very top. And yet, Ames insists, chillingly, they worship the rich bastards like Donald Trump who work them till they're good for nothing but therapy, and then refuse to give them sick pay or medical cover. They ignore the relevance to their own lives while religiously recording the fat cats' TV shows and buying into their philosophies. The result is an almost science-fictional vision of a world on the brink of apocalypse, where the upper echelons are so corrupt that the only apparent solution is to spray bullets into fellow employees who may represent the oppressive system but certainly aren't the ones responsible for it. Indeed, workplace shooters in particular frequently miss their bosses in their rampages, who somehow have always just stepped out of the building moments before the carnage. Nonetheless, this is a solution which, appallingly and unbelievably, Ames quite unabashedly supports, in what he sees to be the absence of all others, in spite of its built-in flaws and, more importantly, the very real pain and suffering it inflicts on the innocent.

As he notes himself in his afterword, Ames' publishers were initially concerned, especially as he was writing it when 9/11 happened, that the book might come across as sympathising with, even encouraging, those who opened fire in schools and offices. And he would be the first to agree. He does so, he argues (perhaps rather speciously), in an effort to force us to see these shootings as the equivalent of slave rebellions, which may not always have struck at the right target, but which were the only means of

expressing discontent and pain in the absence of any support from fellow slaves or from authorities. On the one hand, the evidence presented in *Going Postal* makes a fairly solid case for seeing the school and office systems in America as the dispensers of wholesale injustice, relentlessly terrorising and heaping intolerable pressures upon employees and students, leaving no time for leisure, family or rest, and with ever-decreasing rewards. On the other hand, Ames also (at least nearly) manages to convince us that violence is, if not the answer, then at least a reasonable response to all of this tyranny. And this is far from being a comfortable, or indeed tenable, position for a reader to occupy. In his favour, his solution, however immature and insupportable it might be, most certainly cannot be described as "vacuous optimism" and the unease he represents, while all pervasive and all too often exploding with devastating results, is far from being "helpless". Only if we apply a certain amount of pressure to his thesis does this sense of impotence emerge in the book. He has proven himself incapable of proposing an alternative, non-violent answer – an impotence on his own part that, I suspect, he would rather sweep under the carpet and then stamp on, violently.

Overall, then, all three books wind up displaying highly complex and far from unobjectionable attitudes towards their central motifs – fear and violence. Only Ames, of course, has the guts to come out and condone violence, and as a result one finds oneself, strangely and unpleasantly, less disturbed by his book than by the others'. He, at any rate, has been honest, and if his thesis is impossible to agree with and as horrific as the oppression it seeks to combat, if not more so, at least he doesn't suggest that we should all just become better at watching the news or learn to love our racist fears and our victimisation at the hands of a culture that all but feeds off of fear. If nothing else, his book forces us to accept the fact that, whether we turn and fight them, or turn and flee them, fear and violence are our congenital, indeed our terminal, dis-eases.

DARA DOWNEY

Jonathan Rigby, *American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema*
London: Reynolds & Hearn LTD, 2007

Following his exhaustive volume on the British horror film entitled *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema*, author Jonathan Rigby returns with an accompanying chronological look at the early history of the American horror film. In *American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema*, Rigby maps the development of the genre from its origins in the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, documenting the fates of the two most renowned genre actors of the period, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, as a means of structuring his analysis.

Whereas *English Gothic* was able to find a prominent place in the vanguard of carefully considered scholarly analysis about British horror cinema (due, in part, to a dearth of available comparable material), the topic of Rigby's second book arguably doesn't allow its author such an easy ride. There is after all a wealth of material already published on the so-called 'Golden Age' of American horror cinema, specifically the more celebrated pictures released by Universal during the 1930s; David J Skal's *The Monster Show* and Mark A. Viera's *Hollywood Horror* to name but two. Rigby overcomes this potential problem by throwing his critical net wider than most, investigating a combination of canonical examples (*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*), moderately well-known, yet largely unstudied pictures (*The Old Dark House*, *Mystery of the Wax Museum*) and those films for which little or no academic analysis exists (*The Most Dangerous Game*, *All that Money Can Buy*).

The book begins by examining the origins of American Gothic in literature and film, introducing many of the conventionally recognised influences such as European Gothic writing and the pioneering work of Georges Méliès. Though Rigby duly acknowledges these actuating forces, his ability to go beyond established critical discussion concerning the horror film soon becomes evident in his decision to devote his entire second chapter to a wide ranging yet enlightening survey of silent horror cinema. The book takes in detailed studies of such silent films as Universal's 1924 adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the mystery melodrama *The Monster*, and the 1927 version of *The Cat and the Canary*. Rigby proposes that the theatrical 'Old Dark House' story and the writings of Edgar Allen Poe were of particular significance to the early development of the American silent horror film and charts the manner in which writers and directors drew narrative concepts from both sources in order to start producing a body of work that was definably American in nature.

As the book's focus moves onto the 1930s, Rigby accordingly examines the Universal Horror films and the fortunes of their two most prominent stars, Karloff and Lugosi. Largely concurring with established critical opinion, he praises both *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* for their intellectual handling of the source material, wealth of subtexts, and deftness of touch while criticising *Dracula* and the later *The Wolfman* due to leaden performances and wooden scripts (Rigby appears to hate Chaney Jnr. full stop). Alongside this reiteration of conventional critical opinion, Rigby adds to the established knowledge on this much discussed studio's output by virtue of his thorough accounts of the various sequels and spinoffs that came to form such an important part of Universal's horror proto-franchises. He provides comprehensive analysis of the more straightforward Universal sequels such as *Dracula's Daughter*: "possessing a mordant wit", *Son of Frankenstein*: "a masterful fusion", and *The Mummy's Hand*, alongside 'cross-pollinated' examples like *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*: "plenty to enjoy", *House of*

Frankenstein, and *House of Dracula*: "a final lapse into juvenilia" and the comedy Abbott and Costello spinoffs.

As Universal's horror movies garnered more and more success, so it was that a host of rival major studios and independents attempted to take advantage of the perceived horror boom by releasing their own genre films in the 1930s and '40s. Studios such as RKO, Paramount and Warner Bros released movies that, while never receiving quite the levels of success of Universal's did, nevertheless proved a commercial money-spinner. Indeed, Rigby's dissection of many of these non-Universal, lesser known horror movies forms perhaps the most interesting part of *American Gothic*, providing the reader with a valuable insight into a range of non-canonical films that is both valuable in and of itself and as a means of reassessing and re-evaluating the canon. Rigby's exploratory instincts see him examine the cycle of RKO/Val Lewton films; choosing *The Seventh Victim* and *The Body Snatcher* for particular praise, he calls the former "expertly crafted" and discusses its foreshadowing of both *Rosemary's Baby* and *Psycho*; and dubs the latter "beautifully played". The 'Doctor X' run of films at Warner Bros, which he suggests are "Hollywood's first out-and-out shocker(s) to sport an aggressively contemporary setting", and many of the horror films produced by Paramount and M-G-M that seem to be frequently overlooked by other academic studies yet remain integral to the development of the American horror film.

Rigby wisely chooses to end his chronicle of American horror in the 1950s, a decade which witnessed a severe decline and subsequent displacement of the genre's more gothic trappings by 'space-race' fuelled science fiction motifs. While he somewhat vaguely suggests that a few of the science fiction films of the era (*The Thing From Another World*, *The Man From Planet X*) have enough gothic paraphernalia to qualify as valid subject matter, Rigby rightly acknowledges the near death of horror (and the careers of Karloff and Lugosi) in American cinema in the mid-1950s and the genre's subsequent rebirth in England as an appropriate point at which to end his study.

In conclusion, in presenting the reader with such an engaging and informative evaluation of a set of lesser known films alongside an analysis of their more renowned contemporaries, *American Gothic* succeeds as a useful addition to the horror aficionado's library. It is both the breadth and depth of Rigby's selections that render the book a must-have for anyone with an interest in the subject matter. Though it may be the case that *American Gothic* cannot hope to be as comprehensive or as original as Rigby's earlier study of the English horror film (which also examined significant examples of genre television in addition to surveying the entire history of British horror cinema), the greater output of genre product in America undoubtedly makes such a task impossible. Nonetheless, it is a testament to the passion and rigour of Rigby's book that one is left with both a greater understanding of the significant trends and developments in the early American horror film, and an enormous desire for the author to extend his analysis of the genre into the cinema of the latter part of the twentieth century by producing an *American Gothic 2*.

DAVID SIMMONS

Shaun Hutson, *Unmarked Graves*
Orbit books, 2007

Shaun Hutson has been a mainstay in British Horror fiction for over 20 years, with more than 60 novels to his name (including those written under his 8 pseudonyms). Of these, some of the most memorable include *Slugs* (which features slugs growing teeth and developing a taste for human flesh) and *White Ghost* (involving the IRA and severed heads in Leicester Square…).

Unmarked Graves is the latest novel from Hutson and continues the theme of urban horror that runs through many of his previous books. The novel follows the story of three main protagonists. The first is Nick Pearson, an investigative journalist recently returned from Sierra Leone (having reported on genocide committed during the civil war) and now keen to investigate racism against African immigrants in Darworth, a typical small English town. The second is Stephen Kirkland, a resident of Darworth and leader of a group of neo-Nazis involved in tormenting the town's growing immigrant population. Kirkland's prejudice is further fuelled by the fact that his brother was killed by an African. The final character, initially only described as the 'Tall Man', journeys from Sierra Leon to Darworth, a trip occasionally punctuated by the odd bloody sacrifice. Once he arrives in England he swiftly begins to incite the immigrant population to begin fighting back against the racists who continually attack them. This tripartite narrative division includes occasional points of crossover, helping to develop motivations and insights into character actions.

Just so you know, when I was asked to review *Unmarked Graves* I jumped at the chance. I *like* cheesy horror novels and films - especially the ones featuring giant crabs, man-eating slugs and blood beasts. They make me grin from ear to ear because at times there's something deeply enjoyable about reading a novel in which plot so unashamedly takes second place to gore and where you're guaranteed at least one set of heaving bosoms every chapter. This is a feature of a number of horror writers who specialise in producing written versions of slasher film and B- movie plots (writers such as James Herbert, Guy N. Smyth and the ever popular Richard Laymon). The 1970s and '80s saw an explosion of these '*schlock*' horror films and books, much in the same way as there is a current trend towards torture movies (such as the *Saw* series and the disappointing *Hostel*) today. As a result of this convergence of literary and filmic horror motifs you come to expect some stereotypes in this type of horror fiction. There's *always* a square-jawed, slightly right-wing hero, a ravishing blonde and some sort of unholy terror, as well as the inevitable moment when it is revealed that the real evil was humanity, all along. Having said that, this tick-the-box approach to certain books and films was acceptable enough during the seventies and eighties but as book and film audiences have matured over the years, much more has come to be expected from writers and film makers alike - such as a plot. These expectations are best seen in the breakdown of the formulaic movies churned out by Hollywood over the last three decades. The audiences' increased expectations have resulted in the strip mining of new media industries, most notably graphic novels and video games, for ideas (although this has resulted in some of the most horrendous films ever made – such as anything directed by Uwe Boll).

But to describe *Unmarked Graves* as hackneyed is perhaps not harsh enough. The character types follow the stereotypical format of this kind of pulp fiction to the letter, with Kirkland acting as a counterpoint to the liberal ways of Nick, and the 'Tall Man' inevitably acting as the evil mastermind who's manipulating everyone for his own ends, but here it fails to work even on the most basic level.

The writing is generally poor, and Hutson has an unfortunate tendency to overstate character comments (for example an inner-city racist when tending a grave "smiled to himself. 'I wonder if they can hear?' he murmured, continuing his own ministrations," something the character couldn't even spell, let alone do.) The chapters follow an almost painful progression characterised by clichéd dialogue and poorly paced plotting. And worst of all, the novel is just plain boring. By the time the first zombie shows up the book is 100 pages in (and in this long awaited scene, all it does is walk out of the morgue) with the book a total of 264 pages long. In many ways this is one of the most unforgivable aspects of this novel, in that it neglects to provide for the needs of its target audience, those interested in the cheesy, fast read.

Even more problematic are Hutson's desperate attempts to treat the topic of immigration into Britain in a 'sensitive' manner. Every character – even the Neo Nazi – gets a chance to try and justify their motives for behaving like they do. The police try their best to solve the murder of a refugee and the refugees refuse to trust them. The strange thing is that all of the immigrants in the book are illegal, despite living in rental accommodation and receiving state benefits, an apparent vision of the Daily Mail's worst fears suddenly realised. *Unmarked Graves* genuinely feels like a novel in which Hutson was trying to tackle the effect of increased immigration from outside Europe into the UK and the potential clash of cultures that may result, and as such this presents a timely and potentially fascinating topic for a horror novel. It's unfortunate then that *Unmarked Graves* fails to deal with these issues satisfactorily or to make imaginative use of the vast tract of mythology available within African folklore. Instead, he just uses the standard voodoo plot (native villagers, turned evil, use magic to attack unsuspecting white people) which has been bandied about for decades.

Another major flaw in the novel is that it isn't frightening on any level whatsoever, relying instead on standard plot devices more akin to those seen in films such as *Friday the Thirteenth* than in an effective horror novel. This can have an upside if one is looking for a no-brainer read but carrying this off successfully does require a certain slickness which *Unmarked Graves* fails to provide, making this a painful read. In this reviewer's opinion, *Unmarked Graves* is a novel best avoided. Give me Guy N. Smith's *Night of the Crabs* any day!

RICO RAMIREZ

Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark Texts*
Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007

The Raw Shark Texts can immediately be praised for being a pun with a point. Like the Rorschach test it alludes to, this debut novel by British author Steven Hall revolves around the issue of perspective, its narrative shifting under the reader's gaze. This experimental work requires faith on the part of the reader; the novelist as helmsman perhaps, steering through the murky waters of the narrator's consciousness. The inevitable comparison here is to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), which likewise uses elements of horror to produce something entirely new, yet at the same time gestures towards the future of the genre. Like *House of Leaves*, *The Raw Shark Texts* could be categorised as an existential horror novel, and shares key concerns such as memory and identity. Unlike Danielewski's exhaustively annotated work, however, this is a more conventional novel. The fast pace and roughly linear narrative allow for Hall's work to be read as a straightforward thriller, albeit one that is consistently preoccupied with the nature of language, subverting even its own storytelling in the process.

Although the film rights are already under negotiation (with Nicole Kidman apparently interested in replacing the novel's male lead), it is difficult to see how this would work. Hall's strong internet presence and Canongate's marketing would suggest that what we have here is a modern cult writer in the vein of Chuck Palahniuk, yet *The Raw Shark Texts* is not inherently a filmic novel. Unapologetically literary, it is concerned as much with the nature of its own existence as with the motivations of the central protagonist and supporting characters. As is the case with House of Leaves, Borges is clearly an influence, and is referenced before the first chapter. Likewise, Italo Calvino gets a mention, and Calvino's technique of making the reader aware they are reading a novel is omnipresent. Most obvious is the use of pictorial illustrations composed of text, which range from the subtle use of vowels to represent bubbles underwater that opens the second section, to one spectacular example of textual play near the climax (involving a shark composed of previously used sections of narrative). The knowing postmodernity, however, is not as intrusive as in *House of Leaves*, and this remains in many ways a conventional mystery/horror novel.

The Raw Shark Texts revolves around a man in his late twenties called Eric Sanderson. Suffering from extreme memory loss, he discovers a note from "the first Eric Sanderson" containing instruction that will lead him into a bizarre adventure. Eric discovers that he is being pursued by a creature called a Ludovician: a "conceptual shark" composed entirely of ideas. This linguistic predator feeds on memory and leaves its victims devoid of the narratives of their own lives. The chief question facing the reader is the extent to which this creature is real and how much it owes to Eric's traumatised response to the death of his girlfriend Clio in a scuba-diving accident. Either way, Hall manages to construct convincing justifications for the existence of this creature, largely based on the "meme" theories of Richard Dawkins and Susan Blackmore, a meme being a single unit or building block of cultural information or evolution. Also important is the nature of "un-space", described as, "the labelless car parks, crawl tunnels, disused attics and cellars, bunkers, maintenance corridors, derelict industrial estates, boarded-up houses [...] the pockets of no-name-place under manhole covers and behind the overgrow of railway sidings" (80). In some ways reminiscent of J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), these spaces are bleak and lonely areas, yet here provide refuge from the relentless flow of information and narrative inherent in contemporary society.

This is certainly a novel of ideas, yet it is not entirely navel-gazing. One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Raw Shark Texts* is what is has to say about the state of literature and culture. References to contemporary society do not feel forced, but tap into the more recent memetic reference points to sink into our collective consciousness. Take for example Hall's description of the character Scout "throwing herself through a Tetris gap of missing bricks at the end of the corridor" (218), or an unexpected yet pleasing anecdote where another central character recounts the oriental history of his secret society in a style taken straight out of a Kung-Fu popcorn flick, the slyly referential tone comparable to Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films (2003/2004). This casual postmodernism is carried on throughout, leading some critics to comment on the magpie-like style of the novel, which does borrow heavily from other sources, notably Spielberg's film version of *Jaws* (1975). Yet to dismiss this as a facsimile would be to miss the point spectacularly. *The Raw Shark Texts* is primarily a novel about narrative; both the act of storytelling and the way in which we transform our lives into linear stories (an issue particularly relevant in the age of blogging and MySpace). In a poignant moment where Eric thinks of Clio, he reflects that:

> There's no way to really preserve a person when they've gone and that's because whatever you write down it's not the truth, it's just a story. Stories are all we're ever left with in our head or on paper: clever narratives put together from selected facts, legends, well edited tall tales with us in the starring roles. (413)

Despite this acknowledgement, there is the sense that the novel does yearn for something concrete in the midst of the white noise of the information age. Eric, however, is not an aloof protagonist who stands back from the symptoms of postmodernity, coming under fire in a flashback scene with Clio for "this thing you have about always comparing things in real life to things in films" (39). In few other novels (aside from Don DeLillo's) is the condition of hyperreality more apparent or convincing. At one point in the novel Dr. Fidorous, an expert in conceptual fish, constructs a boat out of ideas. To Eric's remark that the boat (which is clearly modelled on that in Jaws) looks familiar he replies, "It should be familiar. If you were to say shark-hunting boat to almost anybody in the western world they'll visualise this exact same boat. This [...] is the current collective idea of what a shark-hunting boat should be" (314-315).

It might seem that the search for real meaning in the midst of this memetic flux is futile, yet Hall's obvious skill as a writer manages to transcend the conceptual chaos and convey moments of real poignancy. Eric, devoid of memories and meaning, ponders his situation as he begins to rebuild something resembling a life and identity:

> I'd been a flat thing, something I always mistook for a shadow, but maybe the eroding effect of events had begun weathering me out of the ground, revealing new surfaces and edges. Can nothing really be scraped away the same way something can? I wondered about what else might be down there, what I could become if all these layers of absence and loss and bad things could ever be excavated and taken away. (232)

The Raw Shark Texts succeeds on a number of levels. Although not hardcore horror, it balances suburban realism and fantasy gothic with as much flair as Clive Barker's *Weaveworld* (1987). Meanwhile, the well thought-out and implemented elements of linguistic play give the narrative satisfying intellectual depth without losing sight of pace and humour. Not only does the novel succeed in making the absurd believable, but perhaps most impressive of all is its ability to be genuinely touching while maintaining a

pleasingly cynical edge. In this case the hype is to be believed: *The Raw Shark Texts* is not just a promising debut but displays the kind of originality and style that will almost certainly create a legion of cult followers.

KEVIN CORSTORPHINE

Charlie Huston, *No Dominion*
Orbit Publishing, 2007

No Dominion is the second book in Charlie Huston's 'Joe Pitt' series, a modern take on the vampire that for once doesn't involve leather-clad heroines filled with angst at their vampiric state whilst having interesting sexual encounters with werewolves, demons and anything else with (or without) a pulse.

In the first novel, *Already Dead*, readers were introduced to a world where Manhattan is divided into competing Vampyre Clans (Yes, I said Vampyres, but trust me, it's not a bad thing…) who have divided the island amongst themselves. Vampyres are created by a virus known as 'The Vyrus' which results in the victim lusting after blood and being highly allergic to sunlight (which makes them grow tumours all over their bodies and die screaming within a few minutes of exposure). Unlike traditional vampires, Huston's interpretation of the supernatural monster doesn't have the standard fangs; instead they knock their victims out and drain their blood using a syringe.

The Vampyres of Manhattan are highly territorial, killing any rival clan members who enter their territory, each clan jealously protecting their land. The largest and most powerful of the clans is the Coalition, which once claimed all of Manhattan as its territory. This is of course until the Society made an appearance and precipitated a Vampyre civil war, gouging out its own slice of the island with its liberal, hippy-like outlook on living with humans in peace and the ultimate goal of finding a cure to the Vyrus. The Hood is made of African American, Hispanic and Chinese Vampyres who occupy Harlem and really don't like white people (Vampyre or human). The most mysterious clan of Vampyres (and the most feared) is the Enclave, who attempt to unlock the true power of the Vyrus by reducing their blood intake to the point of near starvation.

In the midst of this maelstrom of blood-thieving competitiveness lives Joe Pitt, a rogue Vampyre who once worked for the Society as a clan enforcer and now uses his expertise to help anyone with enough money to pay for his services.

Already Dead saw Joe trying to track down a kidnapped human girl who knew a bit too much about the Vampyre underworld. In the process, he managed to upset the Coalition, his main source of income, now out to ruin him any way it can.

No Dominion begins a few months after the events of *Already Dead* and, suffice to say, Joe is hitting hard times. He's low on cash, low on blood and, in true film noir fashion, his rent's due. In order to rectify this unfortunate situation, Joe takes an under-the-table job from the leader of the Society, tracking down the source of a new drug which is being used by Vampyres (something which should be impossible as a result of the Vyrus destroying anything toxic that enters a Vampyre's body). This leads Joe across Manhattan tracking down the source (including a run-in with a new-born Vampyre who calls himself Vlad and has a harem of three Vampyre women who seduce anyone who walks in the door. Sound familiar?).

The 'Joe Pitt' series takes as its inspiration the hard-boiled detective novel, with Pitt regularly facing the more gritty aspects of a private detective's life, up to and including regular beatings, drinking whiskey and being sarcastic whilst getting punched in the face. This darker approach to the vampire novel results

in a wry and witty read that pulls no punches when it comes to violence. Pitt is regularly faced with nasty situations that result in broken necks and teeth being spat about the place.

The series also moves the supernatural idea of vampires aside, instead focusing on a disease carried in blood as the cause of Vampyrism (rather than demonic possession, being half-demon or having angered God and being cursed to work the world forever, cursed to feast on blood, brood, and if it's an Anne Rice novel, have sex with everything that moves.) This focus on blood is a recurrent theme in both of the Joe Pitt novels. Houston takes great pains to detail how a Vampyre goes about getting blood, eschewing the traditional teeth/neck interface for a dose of Rohypnol and a needle in a vein, with the victim left alive (the reason given being that with a population of a few thousand Vampyres for 8 million humans, eventually the police would notice exsanguinated bodies turning up all over the place and draw some interesting, if not downright inconvenient, conclusions).

The author portrays in detail the pleasure the Vampyres take in drinking blood, ignoring the previously standard approach of the vampires feeling remorse for their bloodlust and hanging around grave yards feeling sorry for themselves (*à la Angel*, Barb and J.C. Hendee's *Dhampir* series of novels, *Interview with the Vampire* and anything else written since 1980). Rather, Houston's Vampyres exalt in it and revel in their abilities, with one group of Vampyres attempting to explore their belief in the mystic nature of the Vyrus (one of the few allusions in the Pitt series to the Supernatural) by refusing to feed, resulting in the Vyrus ramping up their abilities and their lust for blood to ensure its own survival.

Houston also parallels Pitts' Vampyric nature with that of his girlfriend (Evie) who has AIDS. Both diseases are carried in blood, with both characters afraid to have sex with the other for fear of infection. A moral dilemma develops in *No Dominion* as Evie's condition begins to worsen, with Joe aware that he could save her by turning her into a Vampyre.

No Dominion is an excellent take on the Vampire (Vampyre) mythos, adding a new and interesting twist on a genre that has been in danger of becoming tired and overused (the aforementioned scantily clad heroine and brooding. Lots of brooding), no thanks to a combination of Anne Rice and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

No Dominion is an excellent novel that adds significantly to the Vampire-related fiction, turning what was becoming a bland and increasingly annoying genre into an exciting and original approach to the mythos. Much like Sergei Lukyanenko's *Night Watch* Trilogy, the Joe Pitt series has added something bold and interesting that will hopefully breathe new unlife into this perennially popular subgenre of horror fiction.

EOIN MURPHY

Gothic NZ: The Darker Side of Kiwi Culture, eds. Misha Kavka, Jennifer Lawn & Mary Paul
Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006

New Zealand has no more intrinsic claim to 'being gothic' than any other nation. Indeed, it may well have less, yet it is a nation that is certainly fond of the gothic turn. Our national filmmaker – Peter Jackson – had his beginnings in splatter before shifting his attention to teenage murderesses. Our national writer – Janet Frame – was almost as famous for her time spent in institutions as for her writing about her time spent in institutions. Our national painter – Colin McCahon – produced bleak landscapes spattered with forbidding biblical quotations. Our national game – rugby – at club level involves standing around in the rain in the middle of winter while cheerfully encouraging our children to brutalise one another. While these observations might be glib, clichéd, there's no denying that New Zealanders pride themselves on a national tradition that is a little bit gloomy, a little bit grim.

Gothic NZ is the first book-length publication to treat the 'darker side' of New Zealand culture. It's a collection largely composed of critical essays, although it also includes a few snatches of poetry, a memoir-ish rumination, and a number of prints. The focus is generally contemporary. The collection ought to be a treat; in actuality, it's a little trickier than that.

'Where is the gothic?' asks editor Lawn in her introduction. Certainly, the mobility of the genre is part of its appeal as a field of research, and *Gothic NZ* includes articles so diverse as to suggest that whatever the gothic is, it is itinerant. There are pieces which feature colonial architecture, tattooing, the gothic potentialities of home renovation, and the kind of streetwear favoured by disconsolate young people who hide behind their fringes and paint their fingernails black. It's easy enough to locate the gothic in these disparate locations – but how are we to account for their disparate gothicnesses? How are these things connected?

Lawn's answer is evasive: nothing is gothic in itself, but it is possible to look at anything gothically. It's a fair enough response to the bewildering proliferation of gothic manifestations, but one that proves unsatisfying as an editorial policy in a collection like this. If it is possible to look at something gothically, then what would prompt us to do so? Once we have chosen to see something gothically, how is our understanding modified? Likewise, if seeing the gothic is a shift in our mode of vision, is seeing something as 'kiwi' a similar choice? To introduce a collection about the 'darker side of kiwi culture' with this argument creates a need to draw out these considerations within the selections. The contributions themselves are often entertaining, generally interesting and occasionally astute, but their arguments – through no fault of the contributors, as the collection has been assembled from conference papers and a handful of already published pieces – can barely treat the editorial premise. All the same, there's good fun to be had.

Gothic NZ's catholic approach really works well in the case of Bill Manhire's smart poem, 'Ghost Painting', which is accompanied by the unattributed colonial painting 'Picnic at Woodhaugh c.1863', which it describes. These are joined by contemporary painter Saskia Leek's somewhat uncanny reiteration of the picnic in her own work, painted after having read the poem but not having seen the original picture, and curator Justin Paton's notes from Leek's 2000 exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. The featured works aren't new, the reproduction of Leek's picture is frustratingly tiny, and Manhire's poem is gothic really in title only, but it's a satisfying bringing together of texts nevertheless. Yet this approach

doesn't work quite so well elsewhere, particularly with the other two poetic inclusions, from less established poets; white text on black pages is inexplicably accompanied by photos of headstones and goths standing in the water. These feel like verse from a '90s gothic fanzine, and whether you'll like them or not depends on whether you like that sort of thing or not.

Martin Edmond, in a well turned-out piece of essayistic memoir, frames gothic moments from his provincial Ohakune childhood: the madwoman from across the road butchering a bull for her dogs in the Edmond's garden on a dark and stormy night strikes me as a particularly authentic, and particularly kiwi, gothic turn. His piece is interspersed with photographs of Ohakune, Raetihi and Waiourou, landscapes that are underdeveloped, filled with the twisted wreckage of trees. The country seems bleak in black and white, and people are missing or dwarfed. Yet all of these pictures date from a period much earlier than the one being recounted – as if the editors were worried that pictures dating from Edmond's childhood might not have made the provinces look quite sinister enough.

Sarah Shieff worries about the racialist/racist readings which are possible in the recent *Lord of the Rings* films (surely only an adopted New Zealand text!) What are we to make of those nasty, dirty and brown Uruk-Hai compared to the nicely laundered, white elves? Of course, Shieff is right; the *Lord of the Rings* probably does articulate rhetorics of race. My real question is, why does this discourse find space in a collection about New Zeland Gothic, given that the *Rings* films aren't exactly New Zealand texts, and aren't really gothic either? Aren't they better understood as part of the now problematic genre of the epic, which frequently depends on making the distinction between various groups and then discriminating between them? Is it really useful to regard race rhetoric as inherently gothic?

Misha Kavka does a good job of describing the aesthetic of Misery, the artist responsible for a popular brand of local streetwear that features cutesy-creepy images, often drawn out of nursery rhymes. A selection of Misery's drawings are included and are a pleasure, but Kavka leaves uninterrogated the question of how the ooky-spooky pop-gothic has become such a populist, youthful phenomenon, and how it might relate to bleaker visions of the gothic.

Photographer Yvonne Todd is represented with a selection of her work. Todd is perhaps best known for her images of Virginia-Andrews-gothic young women, which are included and do have a gently disquieting quality, but also included are Todd's images, 'Clammy Pipes' and 'Wet Sock', both of which depict exactly what they claim to. As no essay on Todd's work is included, I am left to puzzle over what, exactly, is meant to be gothic in these images. This can hardly be a criticism of Todd for not being 'gothic enough', but is a query about an editorial policy that espouses a very foggy notion of what might be gothic. This is perhaps best exemplified in an article where Mark Jackson links a group of dinky tattoo designs to Medieval Scholasticism via High Gothic architecture, Edgar Allan Poe and Adolf Loos. It's a baffling read.

This sort of approach – where any one thing that is named as gothic relates to any other thing which shares the category – ignores the historicising work done by a number of very capable scholars. Simply put, the gothic isn't what it's always been; what once referred almost exclusively to works by Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis and Fuseli has recently included considerations of gothic Oprah Winfrey and gothic Martha Stewart. According to *Gothic NZ*, we can add leaky buildings, plumbing problems and quest

fantasy to the list. How far can we stretch a discursive term? Does the gothic, as it is now critically conceived, have anything to do with how the term is popularly understood?

Gothic studies have been increasingly popular internationally over the last thirty years, and I was surprised that the collection seldom engaged with the considerable body of scholarship that has developed. There are only a tiny handful of international gothic scholars in the collection's bibliography. Why does *Gothic NZ* exclude reference to so much salient work that's already been done?

There are other silences too. Why not a proper article on author Ronald Hugh Morrieson, generally regarded as our premiere gothicist, rather than scattered allusions? Why not something on the maudlin, grotesque paintings of Tony Fomison? Why not photographer Christine Webster's *Black Carnival* or *New Myths* works? Where are bands such as the Skeptics, Children's Hour? Is New Zealand's only Booker winner, *The Bone People*, gothic? And why is there only the odd mention, in passing, of perhaps our most profound visionary of the domestic gothic: Janet Frame? It seems to me that if there is room in the collection for more marginally gothic considerations – for instance, glum modernist architectures, the incursion of tree roots into plumbing, Land Transport Safety Authority ads – there ought to be room for more substantial material too. Gothic studies has opened up significant possibilities, and there's plenty of work yet to be done in explicating the gothic in New Zealand texts more important the ones explored here.

Even more curious is *Gothic NZ*'s tendency to avoid texts we might regard as horrific or even fearful. Perhaps the article on a series of Land Transport Safety Authority advertisements depicting violent car crashes and their aftermaths is an exception here, but the campaign's ambit is really limited to didactic shock effects. In general, the gothic described by the collection is a feeling of quiet unease, a subtle darkening, an academic argument; yet this is hardly the whole of what we might describe as the gothic. Where are the ghosts, the murderers, the zombies? Why should the collection avoid them? There's perhaps a sense the editors would like to shun all that sort of unpleasantness, that they would like to make the gothic a little nicer than it actually is.

The book itself looks lovely, with wide margins and colourful illustrations; but as I write this, having had the book for only a week, there is a large crack appearing in the binding. I'm left with the sense that *Gothic NZ* is an appealing collection, but one that doesn't hold together particularly well.

TIM JONES

Gary William Crawford, *Robert Aickman: An Introduction*
Baton Rouge: Gothic Press, 2003

What an odd man Robert Aickman was. Variously a conservationist, a short story writer, an editor, a devotee of inland waterways, a cultural activist and administrator, Aickman was the grandson of the great *fin-de-siécle* bestseller Richard Marsh, author of that landmark work of orientalist sleaze, *The Beetle*. He seems to have been conceived on his parents' wedding night, apparently the only time they had sex: an experience which was, his mother later informed Robert, 'worse than I could ever have believed possible' – honestly, how Freudian is that! Well, as Philip Larkin once wrote, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad' – they did, indeed, if you were a certain kind and vintage of Englishman, which Aickman and Larkin both were. Aickman found it difficult to make friends with men, but enjoyed the company of many women, as variously friend, confidant, or lover – often unrequited, though occasionally not, as in the case of Elizabeth Jane Howard, with whom Aickman had an affair before her marriage to Kingsley Amis. During the inter-war years, Aickman lived something of a Bohemian lifestyle in London, stepping out with cross-dressing women, and escorting to the opera a woman wearing a fur coat and nothing underneath, before settling down to a most unconventional marriage with his wife Ray, whom he married 'not for love, but out of sympathy'. She later divorced him, found God, and became a nun, Sister Benedicta. Aickman Snr, an architect whose practice failed because of his chronic lack of punctuality (and general weirdness), didn't have the money to send Robert to Oxbridge as he would have liked, and so his son grew into a classic autodidact, who could seem polymathic, but who became insecure and defensive when challenged. Unsurprisingly, he liked to host dinner parties, in which he could hold forth to handpicked guests.

I think I first came across Aickman in his role as editor of the great Fontana Ghost Stories series, a gig he got from Herbert Van Thal, legendary editor of the rival Pan Horror Stories, whose lurid covers may have got me into this horror business in the first place. Across a number of introductions to this series, Aickman articulated a philosophy and aesthetics of the ghost story which is in equal parts subtle and contradictory, often difficult, occasionally banal, and sometimes profound. They could also often be wildly out of step with the intellectual interests and abilities of his actual readership. Take this, for example, from *The Third Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories* (1966):

The first good reason [to read ghost stories] is the need we all must feel for some degree of reconciliation with death. The second is vaguer but still more continuously present in the consciousness of most of us: the need to escape, at least occasionally, from a mechanistic world, ever more definable, ever more predictable, and, therefore, ever more unsatisfying and frustrating. As an antidote to daily living in a compulsorily egalitarian society, a good ghost story, against all appearances, can bring real joy. The reader may actually depart from it singing.

To which I now say: *Gaudeamus*. But what many of Aickman's original readers in the sixties and seventies (including my younger self, just graduated onto this from reading Warlord comics) would have made of this spot of prefab Anglo-Adorno is anybody's guess.

Aickman's stories are arresting in their very oddness. Though he was a believer in some sort of supernaturalism, Aickman's ghosts are barely there at all, shades of shades, nuances of peculiarity just – just – ruffling the surface. It's as if, for Aickman, the simple fact of Englishness is uncanny enough (and,

given his family history, this may have seemed an inescapable conclusion for him). Thus, to read Aickman is to enter a world where heroines have names like Griselda de Reptonville or Clarinda Hartley, and where the men are called Wendley Roper or Laming Gatestead; a world of self-actualizing lesbians and (you guessed it) sexually-repressed men. Colvin, the protagonist of 'The Visiting Star', is writing a book on lead and plumbago mining (what a great word, plumbago). One occasionally suspects that the whole thing might be a rather droll if obscure joke, except that I'm not sure Robert Aickman had a sense of humour to speak of.

Gary William Crawford's book is very keen and incredibly informative, but it's not a work of criticism in any way that I understand the word. He tells us interesting things, for sure, and knows more about Aickman than you or I ever could. The opening section, a sketch of Aickman's life, is completely fascinating, and had me wishing that Crawford had gone for a full-scale critical biography. Problem is, when it comes to discussing the fiction itself, Crawford gives far too much weight to opinions from the *demi-monde* of amateur horror commentary – of which he himself is a part – where old-school connoisseurship and new-fangled fandom combine to produce a kind of unlicensed quasi-scholarship in which the opinions of online enthusiasts are offered as oracular. Hell, I know this makes me sound like a crusty, institutionalized old academic fart, and maybe I am, but nevertheless there is a real difference between literary criticism, a professional skill which takes years of training to develop, and simply recounting the plots of stories. And this is not to assume an *a priori* position of cultural snobbery – as the very existence of this journal amply testifies.

Perhaps this is unfair. Unlike some of the online fellow-travellers he freely quotes, Crawford does have a kind of thesis here, albeit one that is never fully worked out, and certainly never really integrated into the readings of the stories themselves. Aickman, Crawford believes, was a particular kind of very English Freudian, fucked up by his mum and dad, and also a Surrealist. Well, Griselda de Reptonville and experts in plumbago mining seem pretty surreal to me, and Crawford dots his book with quotations from Freud and Breton. But these theorists exist in a kind of parallel intellectual world to Aickman's own writings, never intersecting. To give an example. In 'No Stranger Than a Flower', the heroine, Nesta, in an unsatisfying marriage with her (repressed!) husband Curtis, changes her appearance though the supernatural agency of Mrs De Milo. Her mouth transforms into 'a new wound'. Now, Crawford does acknowledge that this is 'surreal' and 'sexual', which it is - but that's it. Let me tell you, if I had written this book, reader, you would at this point have got a five-page Freudian disquisition on castration and lack, on Freud's Wolf Man and his haunting visions of his mother's vagina as an open wound. (And speaking of lack, I'm sure I could've got Mrs De Milo in there too.)

But perhaps this is just me, and perhaps this, too, is unfair. After all, this is, as its subtitle tells us, a critical introduction. And if the purpose of a critical introduction is to send readers back to the original works with new, or renewed, interest and enthusiasm, then yes, Gary William Crawford's book does just what it says on the tin.

DARRYL JONES