

Short Fiction Review published in Cabbages & Kings episode 46 - Surrounded by the Past

Hello! It's spring time, and for many that means coming out of winter hibernation (or torpor). Green is a concept and sensation again and all you really want to do is kill and devour the nearest thing you can find. Or...wait, is that right? Eh, whatever. What I mean to say, I guess, is that spring seems a great time to talk about a genre that isn't always talked an awful lot about in SFF (to the point that it's not even in that wonderful abbreviation)—horror. And, more specifically, I want to talk about horror tropes.

Because, you see, speculative horror is one of those genres that can be differentiated from the rest of SFF mostly by feeling. A story is horror because of the feelings it evokes, the dread and fear that it makes the reader experience, as much as anything else. But there are also things that can clue a reader into the fact that a piece is horror. Or HORROR (rawr!)? And the interesting thing is that a lot of the tropes of horror come not from written horror but from films. The idea of the horror movie is one that typically follows a very standard formula. These, too, have been pulled from the literary tradition but also have taken on a life of their own in movies. And that, in turn, has bled back into the stories we tell. It's a wonderful, cyclic discussion that genre often has with itself, and I think that horror demonstrates quite well.

For today's fiction recommendations I want to point out some recent stories (from late 2016 and early 2017) that I feel have a lot to say in conversation with horror and tropes and are just otherwise good reads.

The first story is "Four Haunted Houses" by Adam-Troy Castro (from Nightmare Magazine's September 2016). It's a story that's very aware of the various ways that houses and hauntings can be portrayed in horror. And it moves through four instances of haunted houses, showing the different ways that we can imagine and treat with such a simple concept in very complex ways. The story is told to the reader, who is pulled into these situations, these hypothetical hauntings. And the tropes of the genre are front and center, the unsuspecting nuclear family finding that there are things they're not prepared for, that they cannot face. In some ways the story seems to ask which haunting is more horrifying, which more dangerous, which more unsettling. It doesn't offer an answer so much as it takes the reader on a tour of possible hells and wonders idly which the reader might end up in. There's a lingering threat to the piece, from that uncertainty, that almost casual view of the pain and hurt that these hauntings can cause.

Much more actively subversive to the tropes of horror, though, are a pair from just this March. The first, "The Girl Who's Going to Survive Your Horror Movie" by Barbara A. Barnett (from Flash Fiction Online), imagines a woman not so much being stalked by a killer (though there's that, as well) as stalked by a genre. It's the personification of horror movies itself which is chasing her, trying to force her into the familiar trappings of a slasher movie. At every turn she and her friends are pushed into engaging with horror, to become its next victim. And yet the main character refuses to submit, refuses to play by the rules of horror. The result is a rather fun and funny piece that still manages to get at how horror tropes can feel pointed at times, entertainment but entertaining because they make the dominant comfortable at the expense of the marginalized. That breaking the pattern of horror, refusing to give it space, is showing it to be like a tantruming child insisting on its own importance and supremacy. But the tropes, as the story points out, are fairly easy to spot and often very easy to avoid.

The other March piece is "If We Survive the Night" by Carlie St. George (from The Dark Magazine). And this story...well, aside from being one of my favorite from March (and from 2017 so far), it does an amazing job of directly confronting the tropes of horror (again the slasher movie horror more specifically) and showing how they reinforce the abuse and marginalization of women, people of color, queers, and many more. Far from being about the dangers of random psychopathic violence, the story shows that the real threat is from normalizing the murder of women. The insistence that a woman who is good enough, who is somehow pure enough, will survive. That she will win. That she will fight back in the right way, or be saved, or something. The

result of which is to say that anyone who finds themselves a victim in some way deserves it. Here the women of horror stories, those who aren't the Final Girl, the Good Girl, are punished for dying. Are punished again and again and gaslit and told, essentially, that they have to deserve not being murdered. That they have to convince men (or Angels, but really it's men they're being forced to perform for) that they are sorry for...being killed. It's a gutpunch of a story that offers an amazing narrative voice that flows from woman to woman, creating this chorus of victims whose stories have been taken by the genre, by the tropes, and who are figuring out how to take their stories back.

In a similar vein, "The Venus Effect" by Joseph Allen Hill (from Lightspeed's Dec 2016) tells a story about a person trying to write a story. I'll admit that this is sort of a cheat because the story isn't horror specifically but at the same time it has a lot of that feel. That the main character is also being stalked, but that the specter that's haunting them is the tropes of all of SFF and beyond that, of the lurking reality that doesn't allow for black people to escape to some place better. At every turn there is always a bullet to bring the narrator of the story back. To prevent them from writing something free of pain or injustice. At every turn the narrator finds that they are pushed back into a box, back towards their own death and extinction. They cannot write about spaceships or superpowers because, again, that doesn't reinforce what the dominant want to believe and promote. The story subverts tropes by showing how they are closed to so many people, how they are used along racial lines and for those who aren't "supposed" to be in certain roles, to step outside of expectations carries a great risk. It's a story, too, that directly confronts the reader with the weight of these tropes and with the reality that the tropes inveigle. It's a difficult piece at times but a beautiful one and one worth grappling with, especially because it's one that directly engages with the reader.

Okay, and last up is "None of This Ever Happened" by Gabriela Santiago (from Lightspeed's POC Destroy Horror), a story that features a writer coming into contact with the horror they write about, imagining a scenario that steamrolls out of control as the pressure to perform and produce become all consuming. The story is another that evokes many of the tropes of horror, and like some of the other pieces the main character is aware on a rather meta-level about these tropes. And yet that doesn't make them safe. There's a paranoia here that, a bit like "The Venus Effect," isn't there to seem unreasonable or establish that the narrator isn't mentally sound. Because while that's the trope in horror it's one that's rooted in dismissing the fact that some people have to be paranoid, that some people have to be always aware, because the penalties for not following "the rules" can be intense. This is a wonderfully strange story, too, where the relationship between the narrator and the character and the writer and the reader are never clear, never comfortable. It's a great way to complicate the tropes of horror, to take these things that are supposed to make us feel happily aware of what's going on and then twisting them into new nightmares.

And really what all of these stories do is approach the way that horror reflects the fears of society while also reinforcing many of the harms society does. Why are so many of the psycho-killers male and Final Girls women? Horror doesn't really care (in most of its iterations). It just wants to focus on the fear. These stories do a nice job of pulling out from just the fear and looking at the reasons why? At the corruption at the heart of what makes this horror entertaining and (for the dominant) affirming. So yeah, definitely check out these stories and, until next time, this has been Charles Payseur.