

Why I Write Horror

Sarah Langan New York University

Since I began publishing fiction, a pattern has emerged. I'm asked one question above all others, and it happens at readings, at NYU where I go to school for Environmental Science, and when I visit my boyfriend's family in Maryland. Friends and strangers alike narrow their eyes when they learn what my book is about. They wonder if I'm playing a practical joke. Then they ask: *Why do you write horror?* What they really mean is: *Are you mental or something?*

Some find my subject matter titillating, but not for the reasons I'd like. I once dated a man who was disappointed to discover that my apartment wasn't filled with candles and S&M sex toys. I was a horror writer, after all; wasn't I supposed to be kinky? And if I wasn't kinky, then why was I slumming in a genre scaffolded by the appetites of freaks?

My first novel was recently published. For a long time I wasn't able to sell it. During those years that I was papering my walls with rejection slips, I was young, single, a graduate of Columbia University's M.F.A. program, and living in New York. Back then, everybody wanted to be the next Candace Bushnell or Melissa Bank. Agents I queried, when they were kind enough to reply, asked: *Why are you writing this stuff? Do you have anything satiric or quirky, about dating?*

I tried. Really, I did. But the dates in my stories always ended quite badly, or else very happily, except that everybody turned into a fish. After a while, I went back to my unpublishable book.

HR

The Humanities Review
Volume 6, Issue 2
Spring 2008 PP 161-164
St. John's University

Sarah Langan

has an M.F.A.
from Columbia
University, and is
pursuing a master's
in Environmental
Toxicology at NYU. Her
first novel, *The Keeper*
(HarperCollins,
2006), was a *New
York Times* Editor's
Pick. Her second
novel, *The Missing*
(HarperCollins,
2007), won the Stoker
Award for best novel.
Her third novel,
Audrey's Door, is
slated for publication
in early 2009.

For the record: I have no interest in shaving my teeth into points and pretending I'm a vampire. My writing doesn't employ irony, either. I write my characters and settings as realistically as I know how. When the shit hits the fan, some of those characters die. A ghost gives them a good eviscerating, a changeling steals their kid, or at the very least, they lose an eye. In short, I write what marketing people have categorized as horror. And yes, I probably am mental, but my state of mind and my genre are completely unrelated.

The world out there is scary. For me, evil villains are a lot easier to understand than the nightly news. Monsters aren't psychologically misunderstood—they're BAD! We don't care that the Wicked Witch of the West used to be nice, and maybe her sisters will miss her when she's gone; we just want her punished. More to the point, we want her exterminated for the good of the society she has injured. But in life, people are rarely malicious, and even when they do bad things, they pull a Kissinger and deny it. We aren't privy to their motivations, so we can never be sure whether inflicting harm was their primary goal, or the collateral effect of other intentions. Besides, most suffering doesn't stem from cruelty, anyway. Its sources are greed, indifference, and, most gallingly, incompetence. Thus, we judge our villains less harshly in life than in art. They get off with a tap on the wrist, a fine, a suspended sentence. Our instincts decry their misdeeds, but conscience—human sympathy—makes cowards of us all.

All genres have their intended effects. In mysteries, readers are asked to analyze. They solve puzzles. In science fiction, they imagine new, and occasionally better, worlds. But in horror, readers are asked to *feel*. That is why, when they put the book on the nightstand and turn out the light, they imagine that the creaking floor might actually be the ghost from the novel, bursting through the fictitious world, and into their bedrooms. They are the Gepettos of the novels they read, and in feeling, they give Pinocchio flesh.

In some ways this explains the very personal connection readers often make with speculative fiction, particularly adolescents. Their open-wounds-for-hearts find an outlet into which to bleed, and they can be as dramatic as they want, for once. They also get to be in charge. It isn't the bloody parts they remember (movies render gore better anyway); it's that moment of recognition, when a character learns what is at stake, and why. Our heroes must take up arms against a horrific threat in order to save their parents, their homes, their towns, the world, and of course, themselves. In Morrison's *Beloved*, shy Denver screws her courage to its sticking place, and asks the townspeople to help save her mother from a vengeful ghost. In King's *It*, Stan Uris realizes that he must return to his hometown and the tortured child he once was in order to save the lives of hundreds of children to come. Stan chooses the less heroic option and slits his wrists. He'd rather die than go home again. Without exception, these characters are so saturated with

dread that their thoughts on the page begin to read like screams. In *feeling* for them, we readers scream, too. We're not scared of the monsters anymore. Death is inevitable, after all. But in horror fiction, there is a fate worse than death: We could lose our courage.

Long before the monsters come knocking, characters in horror start out pretty messed up. Who can forget Margaret White's dirty pillow speech? She's a lot less interested in protecting her daughter Carrie's chastity than in subverting her own copious sexual desires. Is it Carrie who implodes that house, or Margaret guiltily devouring her own need to get laid, and retroactively, the proof of it? And then there is Oates' creation, Enid Stevick. After losing her virginity to her pugilist uncle, she never stops bleeding, as if exhibiting pain by blood is the same as crying tears. My favorite is the self-destructive rage of *The Shining's* Jack Torrance. In the first three words of the novel he describes his prospective employer as an "officious little prick," and so begins his disastrous descent into madness. These characters don't hide their wounds or dashed expectations. They can't even shut their mouths long enough to silence their own screams. They wear their childishness like a badge of courage for all to see, as if they do not know they've made themselves into objects of derision. It is we as readers who squirm in humiliation on their behalf. We can't help it; we *like* them. More to the point, we see ourselves in them. They're the flawed adolescents we left behind at the bus circle years ago. But how can we let go of our own consciences?

When it works, horror gets as close to the veins of our emotions as any piece of literature is able. The monsters do not exist to frighten us, but to soothe us. Their existence reassures us that we are reading fiction. We've got a lifeline, in case the characters with which we are identifying drag us too far into uncomfortable emotional terrain. Our characters' screams are our own screams, but when we are done, we can relax, because none of it was real, right? Except, we can't stop thinking about the friends we met in those books. We hope that long after the stories ended, they lived happy lives. We hope they are okay. We hope we're okay, too.

I've given up trying to write dating stories, mostly because I'm bad at it. But this is good news, since my luck has recently turned. Dark fiction is back in vogue. It's popular now for the same reasons it initially appealed to me. It turns the familiar on its ear, and offers new perspectives on the conventions we take for granted that might not be so wonderful, after all. Maybe we can tear them down. Maybe there really is such a thing as good and evil, and it doesn't exist in men, but the ideas and machines men build, that become self-perpetuating, and without logic, and accidentally cruel.

Stephen King, George Romero, David Cronenberg, and William Peter Blatty all achieved their initial success during the late seventies, when Carter held office, the hostages had not yet come home, and the answer to the energy crisis was a

sweater. I think this is significant. We needed horror in the 1970s to express the emotions inside of us.

Maybe it's popular now because we again are in crisis. Six and a half years ago our sky fell, and even now, the ashes have not settled. We carry them with us, literally and figuratively. Our seas are rising, and our oil keeps burning. We are in a war with no foreseeable end, and at this very moment, other nations we cannot police are amassing nuclear weapons. People look to horror to articulate these things that are too complicated for literal narration. What newspaper can convey our dread, our confusion, and, despite everything, our hope for a brighter tomorrow? What critical analysis of the Green Zone tells the story of the people in Iowa who can't bring toothpaste on an airplane? The tenor of our lives has changed, even though we will never see the desert sands. Will we crack under this pressure, or will we find our courage, and transform ourselves into the heroes of our own lives?

The drama we feel is not melodrama. The pain in our stomach is not a bad tortilla, or naive teen angst. It is real. It hurts. We are bleeding off the page, and no matter which side of the argument we stand, our dread is justified. These are scary times.

So, when people ask me why I write horror, my answer is: In this day and age, *shouldn't everyone?* ■■