

# In praise of frightening fiction

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Reading the world



Swooping down the tracks on the Dragon Coaster at Playland in Rye, New York, recently, I felt I finally understood the appeal of horror fiction. Sick to my stomach with terror as we gathered speed on this rattly, fiendish wooden rollercoaster, I couldn't wait to be rendered even more terrified round the next bend.

It's perhaps not news to say that many of us love to be scared to death. The interesting thing is that, if recent figures are any guide, readers are experiencing this urge more and more. The Bookseller, a British publishing trade magazine, reported that horror and ghost stories saw their biggest year in recent times, with sales rising by 54 per cent across territories between 2022 and 2023. And Nielsen BookScan, the industry's most reliable source for book sales, reported that horror and ghost stories touched record sales in the UK and Ireland in 2023. As pandemic, wildfires and looming world wars stalk the planet — when it feels that things can barely become more apocalyptic — it seems we simply can't get enough.

Why? It might appear counterintuitive for readers to choose these kinds of books when times are bad — but perhaps going to the dark side gives us more control over our real-world nightmares. This at least is the theory offered by Stephen King, the acknowledged master of horror, credited for reviving the genre with classics such as *Carrie* (1974) and *Pet Sematary* (1983).

"People do gravitate towards horror stories when times are tough," King said in a 2020 interview. "When you finish, you close the book and you've had a place to put your fears for a little while. You've been able to say, 'These problems are much worse than my problems.' And then you can go to bed and sleep like a baby."

If horror films from *Psycho* (1960) to *Talk to Me* (2022) have forced respectability on a genre that glories in its pulp origins, perhaps literary fiction isn't that far behind. I grew up on lurid Bengali ghost stories featuring *petnis* (ghosts of women who have died with unsatisfied dreams, especially of marriage) and *besho bhoots*, who haunted bamboo grooves.

Part of me wouldn't want horror to become too sedate, too gentrified, another "elevated genre" raised to the status of art when it's so comfortable down in the sewers and trash-filled alleys of the human condition. But modern horror writers are breathing new life — and fresh ghosts — into a genre that goes back to Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, and beyond.

The South Korean writer and translator Bora Chung burst on to the horror scene in 2017 with knife-sharp short stories in *Cursed Bunny*, which was translated by Anton Hur and shortlisted for the Booker

International Prize. Her characters include the titular bunny-shaped lamp, which takes revenge against a corporate CEO, and a disembodied talking head that appears in a young woman's toilet. Koreans of Chung's generation and younger face bleak economic prospects, overwork and high suicide rates; her writing seems to be a positive outcome of these despairing conditions. From her 2024 novel *Your Utopia* to speculative short stories about the gloomy future generated by technology and AI, her work reads like an unofficial record of nightmares.

Horror can also be intensely political. The work of the Argentine writer Mariana Enríquez (*Things We Lost in the Fire*, 2016, *Our Share of Night*, 2019) is stippled with ghosts from her country's past, paying testimony to a generation that grew up treating reports of torture and murder and of the disappearances of those kidnapped by the state or gangs as normal features of life. In a 2022 interview with the *F'I*, she said, in words that anticipate our times: "Reality is starting to resemble horror more and more . . . [even] in the west, in countries that thought

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that they had it figured out."

Horror is, like speculative fiction or romance, a very broad genre; recent novels and short story collections by Chung, Enríquez and many others are both sophisticated and subtle.

From *Frankenstein* to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), horror has often flirted with the literary, and along with its nicely grungy slasher-and-zombie roots, it's time to acknowledge its more serious side once again.

Browsing modern horror titles, I'm impressed at the sheer range — the monster in Tim Lebbon's *Among the Living* is a long-dormant virus in the Arctic tundra, Emma Glass's *Mrs Jekyll*, out this summer, features a terminally ill schoolteacher who feels a suppressed force stirring in her, and *Woodworm* by Layla Martínez, translated by Sophie Hughes and Annie McDermott, is an incredible reinvention of the haunted house as a place marked by history's ghosts, in this case dating back to Franco's dictatorship.

This generation has traded old ghosts for new, and they will scare you to pieces — and, best of all, when you close the book, the ghouls and monsters leave. In many ways, I wish real life was as simple.