Brittany, Michelle, and Nicholas Diak, editors. *Horror Literature from Gothic to Postmodern: Critical Essays*. McFarland, 2020.

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/horror-literature-from-gothic-to-post-modern/

Horror Literature from Gothic to Postmodern is a collection of essays which began as conference papers from the 2017 and 2018 meetings of the Anne Radcliffe Academic Conference. The editors, Brittany Michelle and Nicholas Diak, are both creative writers and editors for McFarland who co-host the conference. The book includes essays on horror literature ranging from early British Gothic to contemporary postmodern horror. As Lisa Morton's foreword makes clear, the book is meant to answer questions such as what horror literature's ancestral line is and which major works of Gothic led to horror (1). This is all framed as an attempt to justify the academic study of horror. Morton ties horror to genre studies more broadly, citing Daniel Chandler's argument that genre studies reveal cultural values when examined in their contexts—a commonplace argument in Gothic and horror studies since at least Teresa A. Goddu's 1997 book *Gothic America*. It is a bit odd that this book takes such a broad focus, especially considering that horror studies is already a well-established field.

Horror Literature from Gothic to Postmodern comes up short in answering the questions Morton poses in the foreword. It does not narrativize the development of Gothic to horror literature or map the major works in those genres. Instead, the book is divided into four sections and an afterword. The sections loosely group essays pertaining to "Horror Writers Who Forged New Ground," "Spotlighting Horror Writers," "Exploring Literary Theory in Horror," and "Disease, Virus and Death in Horror" with an afterword by librarian Becky Spratford about housing horror literature in libraries during a time in which book bans are commonplace. While the sections "Horror Writers Who Forged New Ground" and "Spotlighting Horror Writers" make sense for a

book that attempts to track Gothic literature from its roots to contemporary horror, the "Exploring Literary Theory in Horror" and "Disease, Virus and Death in Horror" sections make less sense—especially considering that these sections take up half the book. Literary theory shows up in most of the essays, not just in the "Exploring Literary Theory in Horror" section, and many of the major developments in Gothic and horror studies are overlooked in the theory section without mention or justification. The "Disease, Virus and Death in Horror" section stands on its own. It never becomes clear how this section relates to the others.

The quality of the essays varies greatly. Some are well researched and argued while others are poorly executed. The book starts well with Elizabeth Bobbitt's chapter. Bobbitt defines early British Gothic and introduces the reader to the first mentions of horror within Gothic literature—Radcliffe's famous essay on "horror" and "terror." Bobbitt argues that Radcliffe's *Gaston de Blondeville* (1826) was the first Gothic work to take the supernatural seriously instead of explaining it away, as writers such as Matthew Gregory Lewis and even Radcliffe herself had done before. Bobbitt joins the contemporary conversation surrounding the cultural context of early British Gothic works, effectively asserting that Radcliffe made the supernatural real in order to confront British readers with the injustices of their medieval past and its haunting of their contemporary narratives—a reality customarily paved over with negative portrayals of Normans wherein British characters are the victims, not perpetrators, of violence. It is a bit baffling why the editors chose to open a book about tracking the influence and progression of Gothic to horror literature with an essay that examines one of Radcliffe's least-read novels, but Bobbitt does a good job providing enough historical background to give the reader a sense of Gothic's and horror's origins.

The remainder of the first section is quite weak, thus acting as a microcosm of the book's overall range of quality. The subject of the second chapter, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), makes sense as a touchstone for Gothic and horror studies as its effects are clearly felt to this day. However, the inclusion of Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) as the third and final entry in a section about writers who "forged new ground" in Gothic and horror literature is questionable at best. The argument that *World War Z* forged new ground in horror literature is weak, as discussed below. Furthermore, no explanation is ever provided for why these writers and not other influential authors, such as Stephen King, are highlighted in this section.

In the second chapter, Erica McCrystal summarizes Stevenson's narrative and its adaptation and references throughout time but never proposes an argument. McCrystal does not back up any assertions about the influence of Stevenson's story on Western society with citations from other scholars. She spends most of the chapter noting adaptations of *Jekyll and Hyde* and references to it in contemporary popular culture without asserting a purpose for tracking them. McCrystal does point out that many people continue to read the duality of Jekyll and Hyde into their lives—a potentially interesting and fruitful observation. However, she does not go on to assess the values coded into the "Jekyll and Hyde" metaphor or consider how these values may connect to larger systems of meaning. For instance, many scholars have examined the savage/civilized binary coded into the narrative and how it connects to Stevenson's cultural context. It would be interesting to see McCrystal consider how this savage/civilized binary changed over time as uses of the "Jekyll and Hyde" metaphor adapted to new contexts.

The third and final chapter of the first section is about one of the newest works of horror literature addressed in the book—which is exciting—but is poorly researched and executed. J.

Rocky Colavito examines class upheaval in *World War Z*, arguing that social categories and the binaries that hold them up are disrupted after the novel's zombie apocalypse. In the novel, the rich and previously powerful characters become nearly useless in the face of a world where skilled physical labor is needed in order to rebuild. Colavito argues that this world collapses class binaries of upper and lower as it "undermines, overturns, and redefines social class" (41). However, according to Colavito's summary of the novel, it seems more like these binaries are simply flipped, not deconstructed or overturned as concepts. For example, Colavito claims that *World War Z* is of specific value for collapsing the binary between human and savage in zombie narratives. Colavito examines how "savage" is generally a code for the reemergence of the "buried past" in horror (50). While this is true—and considered common knowledge in horror studies—Colavito's argument neither deconstructs nor undermines notions of "savage" and "civilized" but reinscribes them. Instead of questioning these concepts by placing them in their white supremacist historical context, Colavito's argument makes it sound as if all the characters become savage when civilization collapses. And this theme has, in fact, been explored at least since George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1967), which makes it difficult to see how *World War Z* contributes anything groundbreaking to horror.

Furthermore, *Horror Literature from Gothic to Postmodern* largely overlooks queerness and race in Gothic and horror, two well-established and important subjects. That the book concerns itself with Western—largely British and American—Gothic and horror is taken for granted, something that Naomi Simone Borwein's excellent chapter on Aboriginal Australian horror brings into stark focus. Borwein crafts an intriguing argument about Aboriginal Australian subjectivity in horror narratives. She posits that Western "anthropological readings of monstrosity" in Aboriginal Australian horror have long limited any serious study of the cultural differences

between Aboriginal Australian horror and Western horror theory (141). Borwein theorizes a "synchronic horror" in Aboriginal Australian narratives that depends on a non-linear understanding of time that defies Western, linear conceptions of time and undermines the Western horror tendency to portray the racial Other as a monster (155). Borwein joins an exciting, emerging critical conversation around Indigenous peoples, monstrosity, and genre fiction. It is a shame to see a potentially groundbreaking essay such as Borwein's hidden near the back of a book that may drive many readers away early on with its inconsistencies.

Horror Literature from Gothic to Postmodern is a mixed bag containing important works of scholarship pertaining to Gothic and horror literature alongside poorly researched and argued chapters. I was surprised to find multiple misplaced commas and a run-on sentence early in the book, the highs and lows in quality making for a jarring reading experience. While this volume may not be worth your time overall, it would be well worthwhile for Gothic and horror scholars to read the chapters by Elizabeth Bobbitt, Bridget E. Keown, Naomi Simone Borwein, Kevin J. Wentmore, Jr., and Johnny Murray. These chapters are all well-argued and novel, contributing important advancements to their fields. While the inclusion of creative writers in the book is refreshing—Lisa Morton's foreword being thoughtful and Danny Rhodes' chapter possibly being of great use to creative writers looking for instruction on atmospheric writing—the book feels disjointed and falsely advertised as a guide to the history of Gothic and horror fiction.

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American literature forthcoming in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* and *Studies in the Fantastic*, respectively.