

There's Monsters and Then There's Monsters

Image for Horror fiction: There're a lot of arguments about what it is and isn't -- it's bloody; it doesn't have to be bloody. It's supernatural, like werewolves and ghosts; it can have just people -- they're scary enough. It's got sparkly vampires who can inexplicably run around all day; vampires don't fall in love, they fall with their fangs into your neck. Whatever version of horror you subscribe to, with Halloween coming up quickly, it's what's for dinner.

Over the next month or so I'll be posting about various kinds of horror fiction, mostly from a teen angle. Since there's surprisingly little actual horror fiction for teens, we'll look at some books in the general fiction collection, too, and throw in some movies and even music that are scary, or at least pretty creepy. Today I'm writing about horror fiction without the supernatural. Right off the bat I'm going to cheat a little by mentioning Rick Yancey's *Monstrumologist* novels. You'll find these in the Young Adult section, but they are also hands down some of the best horror written recently for any age group. The first book, *The Monstrumologist*, introduces William, an orphan who works for Dr. Warthrop, a scientist who studies unknown species of animals (cryptozoology). Since this is set in 1888 New England, they call it monstremology -- these aren't really monsters, but creatures no one has seen before or that are so rare they become the stuff of fireside stories. The thing I love about them is that the creatures are unusual -- anthropophagi in this book (no heads, massive jaws in their stomachs -- kind of like raptors that live in cemeteries), air-born spirits that hunger for blood in *The Curse of the Wendigo* (like the movie *Ravenous*), and zombie-jelly fallen from the stars in *The Isle of Blood*. These books are extremely creepy *and* bloody -- my favorite combination!

Another book that takes place mostly in graveyards but doesn't have monsters (aside from a psychopathic grave robber) is *Rotters* by Daniel Kraus. This one is also plenty gory and more than a little disturbing -- Joey's mom is killed in an accident and he gets shipped off to live with a father he's not seen since he was a toddler. His dad lives in a shack in rural Iowa, and both dad and shack smell like... well, they smell like the grave, which also happens to be dad's workplace. Soon Joey is learning the trade of grave robbing, and being courted by The Baby, whose insanity threatens both father and son.

Marcus Sedgwick, who has written some excellent monster horror, also wrote a great gothic novel set in a tiny English village slowly falling into the sea, called *White Crow*. Rebecca is staying in the village for the summer, and befriends a bizarre girl who is possibly stalking her. The two explore the ancient horrors of the village, including an abandoned manor with a hidden torture chamber. This one has some blood, but it's more about the atmosphere and creeping sense of dread the author creates. There's also a bit of history, but don't let that stop you! The whole "house with secrets" reminded me of Hitchcock's *Psycho* a little bit.

Finally, there are Helen Grant's two novels set in rural Germany, which are hard to classify. *The Vanishing of Katharina Linden* takes place in a small German village in 1999, and centers on the escalating disappearances of children and possible witchcraft. *The Glass Demon* concerns deaths linked to a lost medieval stained glass masterpiece that supposedly houses a demon. Both of these books are more about the darkness and horror of being human and up against the unknown, and feature young people. What makes them so horrific are the creepy bits of German folklore thrown in -- if you've ever Grimms' fairy tales in the non-Disneyfied version, you'll get the idea. All of these books and movies are great examples of horror that center on the unknown depths of evil in human beings and are worth a read, especially if you're played out on vampires and zombies. Give them a try!

Posted by Chris H. on September 22, 2012

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