

*This article was first published as a contribution piece for the Edinburgh Ebook Festival 2013  
(<http://edebookfest2013.wordpress.com/>).*

## **Horror: the Peculiar Pleasures of Being Scared**

What is it about dark and horrific tales that so attracts us? Why do we choose to read about skulking murderers, ancient sources of evil, and the restless dead (and undead)? Why do we want to be scared silly like this, when in other circumstances we're quick to avoid unnecessary stress and fear? In short, why horror?

Answering this question is difficult, and perhaps impossible. It does, after all, presuppose that horror, both as a genre and an experience, is homogeneous, which is highly questionable. There are probably as many different ways to be scared as there are people in the world. What frightens me may leave you cold, and vice-versa. 'Horror', one might argue, is really little more than a handy label to put on books, one that helps to minimise the chances of misleading potential readers. Possibly horror does not become horror until it is subjectively felt as such.

Happily, however, there is a wealth of horror out there to choose from, not least in the self-publishing world, as I discovered a few months ago when I set out to read some examples. Several books later, I'm aware that I've barely even scratched the surface. The quantity of horror available is substantial, and the quality, in my experience, is often considerable. There's something to suit every taste, from the pulpiest of pulp horror to the most exquisitely subtle and nuanced of tales.

A fellow horror fan, Aniko Carmean, wrote an eloquent [blog post](#) last year on the nature and appeal of horror, one section of which is worth quoting:

*'Horror is the implacable reality of death. I once heard the phrase, "All love stories end in death." I would simplify that statement, shorten it. All ends in death. As a genre, horror embraces that truism.'*

Aniko's novel [Stolen Climates](#) is well worth a read. Paying homage to such horror classics as *The Wicker Man* and Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, it revisits the theme of the isolated community with a dark secret. Isolated communities don't get much creepier than the little Texan town of Breaker, nor secrets much nastier than that kept by the not-so-good townsfolk, as outsider Genny and her family find out to their cost. *Stolen Climates* is a story about the wilderness, and the dark amoral heart of that wilderness, and the extent to which we are both attracted and threatened by it. And yes, it's also about 'the implacable reality of death'.

Another horror novel, Peter Labrow's [The Well](#), also explores the theme of a small town with a secret. As in many a horror story, the secret in question, despite having its roots in the more-or-less distant past, cannot be safely relegated to history: it continues to have implications for the present. A claustrophobic tale of both physical and mental entrapment, deceit, and a steadily mounting tension that becomes almost unbearable, *The Well* is a masterful roller coaster ride of terror.

This horror leitmotif – the past that refuses to stay safely buried, but continues to reverberate in the present – is also much in evidence in J.D. Hughes' [Northman](#). A pacey horror-thriller, in the first few chapters alone it takes the reader on a white-knuckle ride that encompasses everything from a Viking raid to the crash of a World War II bomber to a present-day archaeological dig – a dig that, far from turning up just the usual shards of pottery, in fact unearths a centuries-old evil.

The premise of the ancient, supernatural threat runs through much horror, including Paul D. Dail's [The Imaginings](#). An inventive take on the theme of demonic possession, the novel follows the hapless protagonist, David, as he attempts to outrun and outwit a terrifying entity that has its own particular, sinister reasons for targeting him. An intricate, thrilling journey into the heart of demonic darkness, *The Imaginings* will keep you turning the pages until long after dark – if you dare.

At this stage, you might reasonably complain that I'd just strayed into the territory of the cliché with that last sentence. You'd have a point; and here it seems pertinent to address an issue that often bedevils the horror genre – its tendency to be clichéd, formulaic. As a genre, indeed, it often veers perilously close to self-parody, as a quick viewing of just about any horror B-movie will illustrate. Horror writers can, in response, try strenuously to avoid cliché; or they can take the opposite route, and not just repeat but gleefully own the clichés, and make them the subject of many a knowing wink between author and reader. An example of the latter strategy may be found in Lucinda Elliot's [That Scoundrel Emile Dubois](#), a feisty, funny retake on the old gothic mystery. Here, dark deeds are carried out in lonely country houses, amidst wild countryside and stormy weather; rogues get up to all sorts of mischief, while servants gossip and innocent young ladies faint. Clichéd? Certainly: but here, far from being a weakness, it becomes a strength.

Dark fiction, let it be said, need not be lacking in dark humour.