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## **Subtle Thrills, Little Spills: Psychological Horror**

In yesterday's post, I talked about the horror of demons and the restless dead, of monsters and murderers. Today, I'd like to talk about another, deeper kind of horror: the horror of alienation and loneliness, of bereavement and despair. The former frightens us, in part perhaps, because it is so rare, and therefore so shocking; the latter frightens us precisely because it is so common. The former is as startling and cathartic, and ultimately as harmless, as a roller coaster ride; the latter, done well, creeps up on you, takes hold of you so gently that you barely know what's happening, and then – if it's done *really* well – refuses to let go.

This style of horror, let it be said, is a rather small sub-genre. It eschews gore and cheap shocks and searches instead for a more subtle, more profound, and ultimately more upsetting horror. It is often, on the surface at least, less frightening than its in-your-face cousin; but, in insinuating itself into the reader's mind and playing on some of our most common and deeply-rooted fears, it provokes the kind of terror – cold, disquieting, and absolutely plausible – that lives far longer in the imagination. Books like these would probably be better described as 'dark fiction', rather than 'horror'. You won't necessarily sleep with the light on after reading them; but the darkness may well seem that little more pregnant with curious possibilities and nebulous threats.

An understated evocation of the darkness that runs through the fabric of even the most mundane lives can be found in Penelope Crowe's [\*100 Unfortunate Days\*](#). This 'diary of a madwoman' dwells upon the kind of horror that might afflict almost anyone, at almost any time: the horror of squandered life and wasted love. This is the kind of horror that we can all relate to; it is the darkness that lurks behind the even façade of our lives, and which we mostly tolerate by simply ignoring it. In *100 Unfortunate Days*, though, all the things that we normally choose to overlook – enduring sadness, creeping depression, the passing of time, and the disappointment intrinsic to human existence – are placed before our eyes with merciless clarity. And, along with them, Crowe presents us with something still more frightening: the lingering threat of madness.

In contrast to Crowe's unconventional narrative style, LK Jay's entertaining tale [\*The Listening Post\*](#) combines a World War II setting with a homage to the traditional ghost story. Set in an isolated, disused lighthouse on the windswept East Coast of England, it relates the story of a young man's brush with the supernatural as the tragic events of the past continue to intrude upon the present. Like many a ghost story, it relies upon atmosphere rather than schlock-horror for its effect,

and dwells upon the all-too-real demons of lost love, jealousy, and premature death. It is a tale rich with memorable images: a lonely figure standing on a desolate beach, awaiting someone who will never come. A man in the grip of a fever seeing – or believing he sees – a light flashing from a lighthouse that is no longer operational. An unsuspecting stranger pausing as he climbs the stairs, sensing – but not seeing – another presence.

Dennis Hamley's [\*Colonel Mustard in the Library with the Candlestick: Four Slightly Weird Stories\*](#) draws upon the horror that is peculiar to youth: the horror of playground bullies and tyrannical teachers, and of the essential loneliness and powerlessness of childhood. In the story that gives the collection its name and *The Other Task*, the young protagonists have to rely upon their innate qualities and cunning in a world that remains largely indifferent to their plight. In the other tales in the collection we meet with such diverse yet everyday characters as an incompetent doctor and an inept football referee. As the reader soon finds out, however, even these most commonplace of personalities can beckon us into the darkness. In *Hospital Trust*, Hamley explores the theme of revenge, while *The Worst Referee in the Entire Universe* is a study of hubris and Faustian pacts with the Devil.

Susan Price's excellent collection of dark tales, [\*Nightcomers\*](#), is a perfect example of psychological horror. *Black Dog* is a quiet, beautifully-written study of the crippling effects of grief, and as subtle and moving a horror story as you're likely to read anywhere. *The Baby* is a story of love that transcends death, while *Padfoot* is a retelling of the old British legend of the ghost dog ('Padfoot haunts lonely roads and lanes, padding along in the dark.') The quietly disturbing *Beautiful* contrasts an age-old evil, and the timeless themes of loneliness, obsession and dependence, with an ultra-modern setting, to great (and unsettling) effect.

These four books are all fine examples of what I mean by psychological horror: horror that avoids blood and guts and garish special effects, and relies instead upon atmosphere, the slow build-up of tension, and – above all – good writing. It is easy to laugh at the less subtle forms of horror, largely because they descend all too easily into farce. Laughing at psychological horror is much harder, and even if you succeed you may find that your laughter sounds a little forced and hollow. These books, fictional though they are, evoke a horror that is all too convincing, and all too likely. This is the horror of the unknown, of mystery, of loneliness and grief and unrequited love. It is, in short, the kind of horror that we all must experience. You are most unlikely to fall victim to monsters or murderers; but, as psychological horror reminds you, that doesn't necessarily mean that you are safe. Horror, in one form or another, is as inevitable as the onset of darkness, or death itself.