A COMPANION TO AMERICAN GOTHIC

EDITED BY
CHARLES L. CROW

WILEY Blackwell

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A Companion to American Gothic

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This book is dedicated to Allan Lloyd-Smith (1945–2010)

Notes on Contributors

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Arthur Redding is an Associate Professor of English at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He is author of *"Haints": American Ghosts, Millennial Passions, and Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (2011), *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* (2008), and *Raids on Human Consciousness: Writing, Anarchism, and Violence* (1998).

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Matthew Wynn Sivils is an Assistant Professor of English at Iowa State University and has published numerous articles on the works of early American Gothic writers, including Charles Brockden Brown, John Neal, and James Fenimore Cooper. He is co-editor of the award-winning scholarly journal, *Literature in the Early American Republic*.

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Preface

Gothic American literature offers essential insights into the history and culture of the United States. This statement would not have been understood or accepted a few decades ago.

As late as the 1950s, the Gothic was regarded as a minor European tradition concerned with gloomy mansions and imperiled maidens and having little relevance in America. The achievements of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe were accepted, and Faulkner sometimes was called a writer of Southern Gothic, but the larger pattern of American Gothic, and the usefulness of the category, was not generally recognized. I qualify the statement only because a few earlier scholars, notably Harry Levin in *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958), provided ideas that anticipate the direction of current scholarship.

In the 1960s, a period of great change in literary studies, as in many aspects of our culture, the definition of the Gothic was radically revised, and broadened, both in the United States and in Europe. While a full account of the theory of the Gothic will be found in Jerrold Hogle's chapter, the first in this volume, we should note Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) as a paradigm shifter in American Studies. Fiedler's work made irrelevant the earlier critical conversation about the contending romance and novel traditions in American literature, and defined a single broad tradition of American Gothic comprising the culture's dark, repressed, and oppositional elements, running back at least to Charles Brockden Brown. All subsequent discussions of American Gothic were shaped by this insight.

At the end of the 1960s, discussion of British and European Gothic was reenergized by Robert Hume's PMLA essay "Gothic Versus Romantic" and the debate it provoked. Through the 1970s and 1980s, a number of works on American Gothic appeared, in many instances extending Fiedler's ideas. *Uncanny American Fiction: Medusa's Face*

(1989) by Allan Lloyd-Smith (then known as Allan Gardner Smith), a British scholar of American culture, illustrates the merging of Gothic theory with the ideas of Derrida and Lacan in this period.

A defining moment in contemporary Gothic Studies was the foundation of the International Gothic Association (IGA) in 1991, with Allan Lloyd-Smith as its first president. The scholars attending the first IGA meeting at the University of East Anglia, its second, at Stirling, Scotland, in 1995, and subsequent biennial meetings, provided a cadre who developed Gothic courses and even degree programs in Britain, the United States, Canada, and indeed around the world. They, and their students, the second generation of IGA scholars, are well represented in this collection of essays.

Today Gothic Studies is well established in the academy. Several British universities offer MA degrees in the field, and one of the contributors to this volume, William Hughes, holds the title of Professor of Gothic Studies. The respected journal *Gothic Studies*, which was born at the Stirling IGA conference, can be found in university libraries globally and provides a juried forum for research. Major university presses publish significant new books every year, as the bibliographies of the following chapters attest. Courses in American Gothic, specifically, scarce heard of a few decades ago, are now taught in university English Departments and American Studies programs throughout the United States and in many other countries.

Thus, to return to the assertion of our opening sentence, our growing understanding of the Gothic has begun to reshape the larger disciplines of American Studies and American literature. Far from being a footnote to our literary tradition, the Gothic is now seen as essential to understanding our literature, and indeed our national project. The dominant, sanctioned history of the United States has been a narrative of social, economic, and technological progress. This narrative also asserts the doctrine of American exceptionalism, the belief that the country's essential innocence and its destiny place it above the constraints and judgments of other nations and of history. In contrast to this triumphant story, the Gothic is a counter-narrative, an alternative vision, recording fear, failure, despair, nightmare, crime, disease, and madness. The Gothic is that which is left out, what is excluded, by what W.D. Howells unfortunately once described as the smiling aspects of life that are more typically American. The Gothic thus is the natural medium for expression of our great national failures and crimes, such as the enslavement of Africans and the displacement and destruction of indigenous peoples. The Gothic is also a vehicle for stories of the oppression of women, and indeed for all groups forced to the margins of power by a patriarchal culture. The development of Gothic Studies has paralleled, and contributed to, the feminist movement and the field of women's studies, and the rediscovery of significant women authors of the nineteenth century. The Gothic also represented homosexuality obliquely in repressive times, and now directly engages gay culture. Gothic literature is the place where the nightmares of small and private

lives have found expression. Indeed, only by studying American Gothic, a literature often of hysterical extremes, violence, obscurity, and the surreal, can one reach a balanced and rational understanding of American culture from colonial times to our present postmodern age.

About the Book

This volume presents the arena of American Gothic Studies as it is today. Its forty-two chapters were written by thirty-eight scholars, who come from the United States and eight other countries. In this group are some who attended that historic meeting at the University of East Anglia in 1991, as well as young academics representing a third generation of Gothic scholars. The essays range, in the chronology of their subjects, from American Indian mythology to contemporary television, vampire movies, and Gothic digital games, and illustrate a variety of critical approaches.

The chapters are grouped in seven parts. The first, "Theorizing American Gothic," introduces key Gothic tropes. It surveys the technical approaches that have been used in the study of American Gothic, and also demonstrates the application of theory to several texts and problems. David Punter's far-ranging chapter illustrates the premise of the Gothic as exploration of national guilt and trauma – a notion that several later chapters will reference. Martin Procházka takes the most enduring of Gothic tropes, the ruin (which was most often, in Europe, a castle or mansion), and shows its persistence and mutations in America. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's survey of monsters and the monstrous is relevant to a multitude of Gothic narratives. Sherry R. Truffin's chapter on "Gothic Metafiction" applies contemporary theory to two disturbing contemporary texts. All of the chapters in Part I might be seen as useful preparation for the chapters to follow.

Readers may observe a useful debate about the "Origins of American Gothic" in Part II. The critical inquiry about Gothic origins has pushed deeper and deeper into the colonial past. Certainly American Gothic long has been linked to the core issue of race, which is central to American culture in the way that class is in Britain. Chapters in this section by Teresa A. Goddu and Matthew Wynn Sivils explore the importance of the escaped slave narrative and the Indian captivity as foundations of American Gothic. Benjamin F. Fisher argues that the conventions of European Gothic were first introduced to America in the popular drama of the eighteenth century, even before the experiments of Charles Brockden Brown in fiction. Brown, the first American Gothic novelist, and founder of several enduring Gothic traditions in fiction, is the subject of a chapter by Carol Margaret Davison; George Lippard, Brown's fellow Philadelphian, author of the long-forgotten masterpiece *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, is discussed by Chad Luck.

Part III contains essays on the classic period of American Gothic, the nineteenth century, and the legacy of its writers and texts into the twentieth century and the present. Faye Ringel's essay on New England explores the tradition of that region back to the time of the Puritans and forward to H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, and Stephen King, each of whom receives an individual chapter in Part V. Professor Ringel also introduces the important subject of Female Gothic, which, in the United States, largely originated in New England and began to be rediscovered and properly evaluated only in the late twentieth century. The debate between "Dark Romantics" and the Transcendentalists, which defined American Gothic for this age, and which is essential to understanding Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, is the subject of a chapter by Ted Billy.

Poe's mighty shadow is the subject of two chapters. Sherry R. Truffin compares Poe's *doppelgänger* story "William Wilson" with a late twentieth-century example of "schoolhouse Gothic," Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. William Moss demonstrates Poe's influence upon the tradition of Southern Gothic, down to William Faulkner and Walker Percy. Andrew Smith's chapter on "Henry James's Ghosts" ventures into the labyrinths of the writer called "The Master" by his admirers, author of *The Turn of the Screw*, the single most discussed work of American literature. Lynette Carpenter's "A Sisterhood of Sleuths" traces the evolution of a Gothic convention into a popular American literary form. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's chapter pairs the cold ironic master of the weird tale, Ambrose Bierce, with Richard Matheson, whose *I Am Legend* began the modern revival of the vampire story – a subject that will be revisited in Part V.

Part IV, "American Gothic and Race," returns to the crucial issue introduced in Part I. Michelle Burnham's question – "Is There an Indigenous Gothic?" – is answered not only by a survey of significant contemporary American Indian writers, but also, surprisingly, with the suggestion that Gothic issues were present in indigenous oral traditions before the European invasion. One of the finest of American authors, long neglected, is the subject of Justin D. Edwards's "Gothic Transgressions: Charles W. Chesnutt, Conjure, and the Law." Andrew Hock Soon Ng analyzes the use of Gothic tropes by Asian American writers. The racial issues discussed by these chapters will be present, explicitly or implicitly, in many of those that follow.

Part V, "Gothic Modern and Postmodern," contains essays on several significant authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: H.P. Lovecraft (Faye Ringel), Flannery O'Connor (Chad Rohman), Shirley Jackson (Dara Downey), Joyce Carol Oates (Gavin Cologne-Brookes), Sylvia Plath (Kathleen L. Nichols), Stephen King (Tony Magistrale and Steven Bruhm), Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (Marsha L. Wester), William Gibson, the founder of cyberpunk science fiction (John Whatley), and Cormac McCarthy (Ronja Vieth). Lynda Barry's *Cruddy* – an "illustrated" novel, a form midway between print and graphic novels – is the subject of a chapter by Ellen E. Berry. This chapter, like Professor Whatley's, anticipates the new media chapters of Part VI.

Several chapters in Part V extend issues introduced earlier, such as the legacy of slavery and the traditions of New England and the South. The migration of the Gothic from the traditional sites of wilderness, haunted mansions, and ruins into modern American suburbia is the subject of Bernice M. Murphy's chapter. Our discussion of vampires, begun in Chapter 17, continues here in chapters by William Hughes and Gina Wisker, as well as in the chapters on King and Plath, and in Arthur Redding's chapter, "Apocalyptic Gothic." Both Redding's chapter and Whatley's on William Gibson find that American Gothic haunts the future as well as the past.

The sections thus far have discussed print media, with the exception of the indigenous fables discussed by Michelle Burnham (Chapter 18) and theater (Fisher, Chapter 8), written primarily for performance rather than reading. Part VI, "Gothic in Other Media," takes us into forms not often studied in literature courses but which have found, and continue to reach, audiences in the millions. Richard J. Hand's chapter on audio drama takes us back to the golden age of radio, when shows such as *The Shadow* and *Inner Sanctum* deliciously frightened thousands of listeners every week, and demonstrated that the theater of the mind created by sound is one of the most effective of Gothic media – one that is still practiced in the Internet age. David Fine's chapter on "Film Noir and the Gothic" explores a tradition of Gothic in the movies, which may be the dominant narrative medium of the twentieth century. Carol Margaret Davison's "The American Dream/The American Nightmare: American Gothic on the Small Screen" defines the considerable Gothic achievement of television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood*, and reminds us that television, like film, is a medium that is more important even than print in the current Goth culture to the popularity of the vampire legend in its several permutations. The last chapter in this section, Tanya Krzywinska's "Digital Games and the American Gothic: Investigating Gothic Game Grammar," is an introduction to a medium of infinite imaginative potential and a huge current audience, one that can only grow as the human mind and artificial intelligence continue to interact.

Part VII, "American Gothic and World Gothic," outlines an issue suggested earlier in this introduction. American Gothic, in a global world market of ideas and culture, has many interactions with the imaginations of other lands. Andrew Hock Soon Ng's opening chapter in this section shows the influence of American Gothic authors, especially Poe and Faulkner, on writers in East and Southeast Asia. Antonio Alcalá González examines the use of Gothic tropes from the literature of the United States in the fiction of the great Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. And Carol Siegel discusses American responses to contemporary Scandinavian Gothicism, such as the Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In*.

The forty-two chapters of this collection, then, illustrate both the rich variety of American Gothic and the diversity of critical lenses through which it may be viewed. As these chapters reveal, the Gothic is present in American culture from the beginning, born of the same interaction of Enlightenment and Romantic