

THE
YEAR'S BEST

HORROR

STORIES XVIII

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**Edited by
KARL EDWARD WAGNER**

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

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Cover art by Les Edwards.

DAW Book Collectors No. 831.

First Printing, October 1990

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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To John and Anna Stewart,
and my niece, Niane—

J. D. and Gumbo Rule OK

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INTRODUCTION: HORROR FROM ANGST TO ZOMBIES

Don't let anyone try to tell you that the horror boom is over.

A dozen years back when I started out as editor of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, I used to reserve space on one shelf for genre publications with room for stories of note published outside the horror field. For 1989 hardcover and paperback anthologies alone crammed one long shelf, while small press magazines and booklets filled three Jack Daniels' cartons—this in addition to the ordered rows of monthly magazines ostensibly devoted to science fiction. This reflects a yearly progression, and there's no sign of things leveling off. While one anthology series dies, another takes its place; when one magazine folds, two more take its place—rather like the old story about the Hydra.

As a consequence, your overworked editor is being crowded out of his house by tottering stacks of horrors. And you, gentle reader, need only to settle down in your comfy chair and open your copy of *The Year's Best Horror Stories: XVIII*—this tidy, compact volume of concentrated horror. Only the best of the best has been chosen for you from amongst the many hundreds of horror stories of 1989—painstakingly and painfully by your dauntless editor, who probably will have to trade in his mirror shades for bifocals.

Don't think it's all been fun.

Increasingly in recent years as the genre has proliferated the criticism has been leveled that far, far too much current horror fiction is absolute rubbish. This, unfortunately, is all too true. Skipping over the dismal quality of most horror films and novels, the short story

has also fallen victim to pure and simple bad writing. Plots, when present, are too often so obvious and trite that one can only wonder as to why the author is bothering to clone a cliché. Characterization is too often lacking, motivation absent, and writing skills laughable. One evidence of this is the shrinking average word length of the horror story. This reflects a growing trend in horror writing simply to introduce a few faceless expendables and rush them to a grisly end—the grislier the better. Your editor yawns and turns to the next and similar pointless exercise.

How then to explain the increasing popularity of horror fiction? It's a sad combination of diminished expectations on the part of the reader and of limited aspirations on the part of the writer. A readership grown up on a fast-food diet of stalk-and-slash splatterfilms expects the same brainless level of entertainment in what it reads. The same generation of writers has never read beyond Stephen King and thinks that expanding the frontiers of horror fiction means going for the grosser gross-out. The result is rather like shoving your basic chainsaw-zombies tape into the VCR and fast-forwarding through all the dull bits between the bare tits and the exploding heads. No need to think, and no one expects you to. Put your brain in park, and pass the Twinkies and salsa.

Well, that's enough for the bad news. The good news is that quite a lot of excellent horror fiction manages to get published despite all this. And, if we consider Sturgeon's Law that 90% of everything makes good organic fertilizer, then it follows that there's hope for the remaining 10%—and thus if there's twice as much horror fiction as before, then that 10% is twice as big. Just a matter of sorting through that twice-as-big 90% to find the good stuff.

There is another positive side to this helter-skelter proliferation. Readers' tastes mature, become sophisticated. Writers grow up. There will be the inevitable attrition: the kid who isn't all that upset when his mom dumps his comics collection after he gets married; the garage-band star who puts up his K-Mart keyboard at

a garage sale. Sturgeon said: 90% ker-flush. The other 10% is in there for the kill. That's why the horror field is growing stronger and getting better, despite all the crap it takes and the crap it cranks out.

What bothers me more about the horror genre just now is a frenetic trend toward fragmentation. It's almost as if the genre seems poised on the brink of a Beirut-style civil war—tolerate no disbelievers, accept no compromises, take no prisoners. Most obvious has been the sniping over the past decade between advocates of “quiet horror” and of (presumably) “loud horror.” To an extent this is all merely a continuation of the earlier quarrel between fans of traditional horror and those of contemporary horror. It's all getting to be a bit strident, and the pursuit of excellence is too often abandoned in favor of pointless extremism. Because a story is dead boring dull, it is not necessarily literary horror. Writing about a Roto-Rooter rapist does not necessarily push back the frontiers of horror's future.

Well, each to his own tastes, and I have no problem with magazines and anthologies that are restricted to one given approach to what is actually a highly diversified genre. These basically are further examples of the theme anthologies so popular today: collections devoted to haunted houses, dead rock stars, holiday seasons, zombies, or—if you will—dark fantasy or splatterpunk.

I do, however, have misgivings concerning a present trend to limit anthologies to special groups of writers. Recently we have seen a good number of by-invitation-only anthologies as well as collections restricted to women writers only or to British writers only. Something doesn't feel right here.

Granted that there is always incentive for an editor to include as many Big Name authors as possible; granted that no one enjoys reading through the slush pile; granted that editors do tend to keep their friends in mind—but what about the No Name authors who are trying to be heard? If the “Members Only” attitude rankles, then I find those anthologies which arbi-

trarily exclude entire groups of writers far more invidious. While this may be considered an approach toward thematic unity, I can imagine the outcry if an editor announced an anthology restricted to male authors only. After that, perhaps, WASP writers only?

As a writer, I like to believe that my stories can stand on their own against the competition and be judged by their merit. If an editor bounces a story because it isn't good enough or it isn't right for the anthology, that's fair enough. Every writer deserves a fair chance. As an editor, I've always tried to maintain the same open policy that I'd expect if I were submitting a story to *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. After all, I used to submit stories to *The Year's Best Horror Stories* back when Gerald W. Page was editor—and Jerry bounced as many as he bought.

And now we come to *The Year's Best Horror Stories: XVIII*.

Once again, you'll find a few big name writers, quite a few who may well become the big name writers of this decade, and quite a few who probably won't. About a third of these writers are making their first appearance in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, proof that new blood is flowing freely.

And this time you have an alphabet of horror—twenty-six stories and poems ranging from angst to zombies. Regardless of your favorite tastes in horrors, you're going to find plenty to feast on here—from gothic to gore, from science fiction to surreal, from traditional to experimental, from *frisson* to fried brains.

Twenty-six. Count 'em. Angst to zombies. In all its many shapes and shades, this is state-of-the-art horror as we closed out the 1980s.

Stay tuned to this channel, and I'll be back to take you on a tour through the 1990s.

—Karl Edward Wagner
Chapel Hill, North Carolina