

# CREEPERS

British Horror & Fantasy  
in the Twentieth Century

Edited by CLIVE BLOOM



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Clive Bloom**

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## Contributors

**Clive Bloom** (editor) is author and editor of numerous books and articles on cultural history, literary theory and popular fiction. He currently teaches at Middlesex University and has recently completed *Dark Knights: the New Comics in Context* (Pluto, 1993) with co-author Greg McCue.

**Victor Sage** is the author of books and articles on supernatural fiction and is currently co-editing a collection of essays on gothic fiction with Allan Lloyd Smith. Dr Sage teaches at the University of East Anglia.

**Gina Wisker** writes on popular and romantic fiction and is the editor of *Black Women's Writing*. Dr Wisker teaches at Anglia University Polytechnic.

**John Simons** is Head of English at Edgehill College of Higher Education. He is a regular contributor to works on popular culture as well as being an acknowledged expert on medieval and tudor literature. He is Editor of *From Medieval to Medievalism*.

**Alasdair Spark** teaches at King Alfred's College. His work includes articles on science fiction, popular culture and Vietnam.

**Dennis Butts** is an acknowledged authority on books for children and has recently edited *Stories and Society: Children's Literature in its Context*. He teaches at Reading University and is Chairman of the Children's Books History Society.

**Nicholas Rance** teaches English at Middlesex University. He is a contributor to many collections on popular and nineteenth-century fiction and author of *Wilkie Collins and other Sensation Novelists*.

**John Nicholson** is one of the founder members of the Small Press Group of Great Britain. He is the author of political and satiric pamphlets and an expert in popular and small press publications.

**Amanda Boulter** is a research student at Southampton University. Her research work has centred upon William Hope Hodgson and imperial fiction.

**Allan Lloyd Smith** is currently chair of the International Gothic Society. Convenor of a recent major conference on Gothic fiction he is co-editor of a collection of essays on the gothic with Victor Sage. Dr Lloyd Smith teaches at the University of East Anglia.

**Andrew Smith** has written numerous articles on popular fiction and culture. He is now preparing a collection of essays on the politics of reading at Southampton University.

## Preface

The horror tale in Britain has a venerable history and its gothic origins are still visible among the carnage that is the subject matter of contemporary horror authors. Yet the variety of incarnations the genre has undergone presents the reader with a rich and neglected vein of popular literary taste and popular cultural history. While most volumes about horror and supernatural fiction take a broad and international approach, this collection of critical essays makes a detailed enquiry into the fiction which has come out of Britain since the beginning of the twentieth century. By any standards the variety and remarkable diversity of the productions of this century would suggest the thriving nature of popular fiction which concentrates on horror and a continuing readership that enjoys 'things that go bump in the night'.

As with most popular fiction, it has been horror fiction's translation into other media that has guaranteed its survival. Many people remember with a nostalgic affection those Hammer horror movies, filmed with low budgets and uncannily reoccurring sets upon whose sound stages moved the fledgling stars of television's soap operas. Others will remember the Pan and Fontana anthologies which accompanied the flower-power years of the early 1960s and which now turn up in rather unhappy condition at jumbles and trunk sales. It has always been the critical mass of the genre that has been important rather than individual authors although some, like M.R. James have a prestige accorded only to 'serious' authors and some, like Clive Barker or Shaun Hutson have had a 'cult' following. Others like E.F. Benson wrote horror stories only on an occasional basis and are not remembered as especially associated with the genre and still others, like the once popular Dennis Wheatley, seem to have gone into a terminal decline despite writing one of the great novels of the genre: *The Devil Rides Out*.

The writers included in this volume span this century and reflect its concerns and obsessions. Alongside M.R. James, Arthur Machen and Dennis Wheatley are Clive Barker, James Herbert and Daphne du Maurier as well as many others both well known and less well known,

classic writers and schlock authors, some of the great tales of the genre and some that are destined for oblivion.

The world of supernatural and horror fiction is no less diverse in the themes and images it uses than any other field of writing. The chapters included in this volume acknowledge the diversity and range of the subject matter and offer not merely a clear and lucid account of the development of the genre, but also give insight into the individual authors and books discussed. Using a variety of critical methods to interrogate the subject of British horror fiction in the twentieth century this volume is guaranteed to appeal both to the serious enthusiast as well as the professional academic or student of popular fiction. The chapters that follow are a piquant introduction and analysis of the aesthetics of the horrible in the modern British imagination and a reminder that the genre, however minor or discounted, has refused to lay down and, like the living dead it is so fond of, it is still capable of haunting our literary tastes after almost a century.

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In fact, I may tell you our ghost department is not what it used to be. People are indifferent to apparitions nowadays, in this country, at any rate, and ghosts are so sensitive that they don't go where they are not wanted.

Henry A. Hering  
'The Telepather'

He was, beyond question, experiencing all the mental variations of – *someone else!* It was un-moral. It was awful. It was – well, after all, at the same time, it was uncommonly interesting.

Algernon Blackwood  
'The Occupant of the Room'

Death.

This is death – Silence. Trapped in a dark void. Forever. The void.

Peter James  
*Dreamer*

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law

Aleister Crowley  
*The Book of the Law*

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# **Part I: Into the Crypt**



# 1 Empire Gothic: Explanation and Epiphany in Conan Doyle, Kipling and Chesterton

**Victor Sage**

The history of the gothic is the history of a set of cultural responses, not a genre. Nowhere is this more evident than in what I shall call, for want of a better word, Empire gothic; that flowering of popular magazine stories in the early twentieth century whose subject matter is often the borderline between English culture and the (perceived) culture of the Empire, the apotheosis of which is probably Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The real form of all these stories, irrespective of whether they are classifiable as horror stories, detective stories, creepy stories or spy stories (these are all the names of famous later anthologies) is a dynamic of foregrounded testimony, a reported witnessing of the uncanny and the marvellous, if not the miraculous. The miracles of the devil are included; horror plays across all these evolving sub-genres irrespective of their particular formal shapes and demands. And it is in this act of dramatised witnessing – itself a mixture of theology and law – that certain forms of cultural unease are expressed with differing degrees of fictional self-consciousness.

The gothic tradition involves a specific kind of fragmentation of the reader's response. The narrative method, from the earliest gothic novels on, has foregrounded multiple subjective testimony and in the traditional gothic it is used to throw into question the cultural guarantees of belief in a dividing line between superstition (the past, the other) and rationality (the present, the reader). This tradition goes back to eighteenth-century discussions about the authority of biblical testimony for miracles. Pressure falls upon the epistemological guarantees for truth in the eighteenth century, due largely to Hume and his attack on the validity of testimony to the miraculous. In the nineteenth century this pressure diversified and increased with the advent of positivism and the work of continental scholars on the origins of the biblical narratives.<sup>1</sup> The notion of 'superstition' became even more fascinating and threatening to a readership whose certainties were in the process of being eroded, as people became aware

of ideas like sympathetic magic and ritual pollution – the materials of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

In the later popular fiction of the Empire period, the anthologies thrive on boundary experiences. But whereas in the early gothic, there was an obsession with setting action back in time (to the feudal past, for example, or whatever pictures of a remote and barbarous age the author could conjure up), the 'other' is now also a contemporaneous and geographical phenomenon. It is a question of cultural space.<sup>2</sup>

Boundaries in this fiction manifest themselves in a counterpoint between two rhetorical modes: the Epiphany (reported through an eye-witness, and usually horrible), and the Explanation (often piquantly unsatisfying, raising more questions than it solves). Explanation is foregrounded as a necessity, yet often forbidden to be singular. It is put into relationship with other frameworks of explanation. And with this process the genre signals are disrupted. Todorov with his law of hesitation might seem to help, but these narratives thrive on deliberately provoked conflict between explanations of the horrid epiphanies, the casual yet compelling violations of the laws of nature, which they offer to the reader. In fact, they really exist in the gaps between the explanations.

I will begin with something which appears the very counter-example to this argument, what I think of as closed testimony; a story with a thirst for closure. The nicest example of this I can find is a horror story – a kind of vampire story, in fact, which masquerades as a detective story: Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Speckled Band'.

'The Speckled Band' is the story of a medical doctor who invents a particularly ingenious perfect crime. Relying on ignorance of poisonous snakebites among English country coroners and the incapacity of English country doctors to analyse rare poisons even if the bite were discovered, he imports a swamp adder, the deadliest snake in all India, and introduces it into the bedroom – on to the bed, to be precise – of his two stepdaughters while they are asleep. The first daughter is bitten, and dies. The second, who does not understand how her sister died but suspects some kind of foul play, approaches Sherlock Holmes in desperation.

The 'Speckled Band' is a 'case', set back in the year 1883, and kept secret by Watson until the death of the last surviving witness, the second of the stepdaughters, Miss Helen Stoner.<sup>3</sup> It concerns 'the well-known Surrey family of the Roylotts of Stoke Moran'. Watson comments immediately in the first paragraph,

It is perhaps as well that the facts should now come to light, for I have reasons to know there are widespread rumours as to the death of Dr Grimesby Roylott which tend to make the matter even more terrible than the truth.<sup>4</sup>

This is exactly the same justification for telling the story as the one given by the narrator in Poe's famous 'The Facts in The Case of M. Valdemar', the model for all 'strange cases'. Rumour needs to be scotched by first-hand evidence. Truth is at a premium even though Watson has already observed that Holmes, since he was working for his art not for money, 'refused to associate himself with any investigation which did not tend toward the unusual, and even the fantastic'. There is thus, in the outer fictional frame of Watson's recording of the 'case', a possibility of testimony to both the true and the marvellous.

It is with these ambiguous expectations that we are confronted with our first-hand witness, Miss Stoner, herself the very emblem of fear and a living sign of the secrecy and unease at the heart of the story.

A lady, dressed in black and heavily veiled, who had been sitting in the window, rose as we entered.

'Good morning, madam', said Holmes cheerily. 'My name is Sherlock Holmes. This is my intimate friend and associate, Dr Watson, before whom you can speak as freely as before myself. Ha, I am glad to see that Mrs Hudson has had the sense to light the fire. Pray draw up to it, and I shall order you a cup of hot coffee, for I observe that you are shivering'.

'It is not cold which makes me shiver', said the woman in a low voice, changing her seat as requested.

'What then?'

'It is fear, Mr Holmes. It is terror'. She raised her veil as she spoke, and we could see that she was indeed in a pitiable state of agitation, her face all drawn and grey, with restless, frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal. Her features and figure were those of a woman of thirty, but her hair was shot with premature grey, and her expression was weary and haggard.

Miss Stoner's story begins by making a firm connection between the dissolution of aristocratic Saxon cultural roots and the emigration of the last remaining scion of the stock, her stepfather Dr Grimsby Roylott, out to India to avoid debt and dishonour.

The family was at one time among the richest in England, and the estate extended over the borders into Berkshire in the north, and Hampshire in the west. In the last century, however, four successive heirs were of a dissolute and wasteful disposition, and the family ruin was eventually completed by a gambler, in the days of the Regency. Nothing was left save a few acres of ground and the two-hundred-year-old house, which is itself crushed under a heavy mortgage, the last squire dragged out his existence there, living the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper; but his only son, my stepfather, seeing that



he must adapt himself to the new conditions, obtained an advance from a relative, which enabled him to take a medical degree, and went out to Calcutta, where, by his professional skill and his force of character, he established a large practice.

So far so good, but Roylott murders a native and ruins everything.

In a fit of anger, however, caused by some robberies which had been perpetrated in the house, he beat his native Butler to death, and narrowly escaped a capital sentence. As it was he suffered a long term of imprisonment and afterwards returned to England, a morose and disappointed man.

He turns inward and becomes a recluse in the decaying old family home, Stoke Moran. The implication is that he has become criminalised, but Miss Stoner's language suggests only a psychological dimension at this stage – that he has inherited a strain of mania. The gothic stereotype of the mysterious, ruined, Uncle Silas figure – in this case a wicked stepfather, is updated, embedded and disguised in the social story of a scandal in the Empire.

The conscious level of motivation in the case is closely worked out in parallel, and embedded in Miss Stoner's evidence. Financially, this reclusive existence is made possible by his marriage.

When Dr Roylott was in India he married my mother, Mrs Stoner, the young widow of Major-General Stoner, of the Bengal Artillery. My sister Julia and I were twins, and we were only two years old at the time of my mother's remarriage. She had a considerable sum of money, not less than a thousand a year, and this she bequeathed to Dr Roylott entirely whilst we resided with him, with a provision that a certain sum should be allowed to each of us in the event of our marriage. Shortly after our return to England my mother died – she was killed eight years ago in a railway accident near Crewe. Dr Roylott then abandoned his attempts to establish himself in practice in London, and took us to live with him in the ancestral house at Stoke Moran, the money which my mother left was enough for all our wants, and there seemed no obstacle to our happiness.

This financial independence leads Roylott, however, contrary to these expectations, to become the outsider that he is. His mania can now show itself. The neighbours, 'who had at first been overjoyed to see a Roylott of Stoke Moran back in the old family seat' are shunned. There are brawls and episodes of violence and he becomes the terror of the village.