

Biocultural horror study

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This interdisciplinary approach to an immensely popular genre, drawing from evolutionary and cognitive psychology, begins to explain why many people are attracted to scary stories and how and why they work. Horror fiction seems to exploit our hard-wired machinery for threat detection and handling, as well as our intuitive ontology. Traditional horror scholarship has largely ignored the biological substrate of the psychological aspects of horror, and I draw attention to the evolved foundations on which the cultural structures of horror fiction rest. I consider the static, universal components of horror narratives as well as the genre's context-dependent variance, and claim that horror fiction is crucially dependent on the evolved mind -- horror fiction varies within a narrow scope, defined by properties of the central nervous system. This becomes evident in the structure of horror monsters as well as the narrative components of horror tales. Traditional horror scholarship has focused on the cultural sensitivity of the genre by e.g. claiming that it miraculously came into being in 1764 with the publication of Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto" and links specific horror stories to salient contemporary cultural anxieties; I claim that horror stories are designed to activate species-specific adaptive mechanisms and thus display a surprising degree of uniformity. This approach to horror fiction pries open age-old paradoxes and charts new avenues for research into the human mind and the horrible narratives that it produces and consumes.