Books

A Cultural Guide to Satanism, Psychopaths, and the Real American Horror Story

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|
Oct. 14, 2024

Salem's Lot, 2024 (Courtesy of Max)

A professor of Jewish and American studies at Columbia, Jeremy Dauber is an expert in US history and culture. His latest book, *American Scary: A History of Horror, from Salem to Stephen King and Beyond*, explores the country's fascination with the macabre.

Horror is often dismissed as a lowbrow genre. Why should it be taken seriously?

For most of American history, horror was not really considered a genre; it was just part of human experience — what people read, wrote, and thought about. Authors like Edith Wharton, William Faulkner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James all wrote stories with elements of horror. So the subject is very worthwhile for anyone who cares about culture and literature.

In my book, I argue that horror comes in two overarching categories. One is more cosmic and supernatural in the form of monsters, ghosts, vampires, and so on. The other is the "monster next door," so to speak, or the terror that's up close and human — murder, war, and other real-life violence and fear.

Both types of horror have characterized episodes of American history from its beginnings. In the seventeenth century, you had colonists coming to America who were by and large very religious. They were afraid of diabolic forces, which sometimes turned into fear of their neighbors. The Salem Witch Trials is one of the most notorious real-life examples: hundreds of people — mostly women — were accused of making pacts with Satan, and nineteen were executed.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (© 1951 20th Century Fox. All rights reserved / IMDb)

Which historical events have primarily influenced horror as a modern genre?

The post-World War II period was major. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki and into the Cold War, people started fearing the new possibility that humans had the power to destroy the world as we know it. That anxiety played out in alien-invasion films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and the 1953 version of *The War of the Worlds*. Reports of the Holocaust and the inhumanity that human beings inflicted on each other in Nazi Germany made people think more about psychopathy and sociopathy, leading to films like *The Sadist* in 1963.

James Brolin and Margot Kidder in *The Amityville Horror*. (© 1979 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved / IMDb)

Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. (Brooksfilms / IMDb)

I'm also interested in the period of the late 1970s through early '80s, when an economic downturn caused the "rusting" of the American industrial heartland and a decline in real estate. Haunted-house stories became popular, such as Stephen King's novel *Salem's Lot* and the 1979 movie *The Amityville Horror*. The AIDS epidemic in the 1980s coincided with a resurgence of vampire stories as well as movies about bodily infection and change, like David Cronenberg's 1986 remake of *The Fly*.

You can see contemporary concerns expressed in more recent works. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* deals with the unfinished business of racial tensions in America, and the 2020 film adaptation of *The Invisible Man* explores stalking and domestic violence. The dystopian TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, manifests concerns about the threats to women's bodily autonomy. Those are just a few contemporary examples.

Daniel Kaluuya in *Get Out*. (© 2016 Universal Pictures / IMDb)

How has technology influenced horror?

In two overarching ways. First, technological advances themselves have enabled new modes of horror. The coming of sound films allowed for audible screams and the rise of the horror “scream queen.” When horror came to TV in the 1960s, the genre got a little bit softer, more domestic, and even funny, as with *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*. The Internet age has allowed for horror memes and myths like Slenderman to flourish in online communities.

Al Lewis, Beverley Owen, and Grant Williams in *The Munsters*. (Universal Television / IMDb)

Second, technology is often written into horror and sci-fi stories. One of my favorite examples is *The Terminator*, which came out in 1984. On one hand, it's about a killer robot from the future coming back to save the world from nuclear destruction, but it's also a product of exactly the moment when answering machines became popular. Not only are the devices featured in the movie; in a way, the Terminator himself operates like an answering machine by imitating voices over the phone.

The true-crime genre has exploded with the rise of podcasts and streaming. Do you see a connection between the popularity of fictional horror and documentary horror?

For sure — many people are drawn to real-life horror stories. One of the effects of true crime is that it can make us feel like threats are more present than they statistically are. The 1980s and '90s saw the rise of "stranger danger," when a few high-profile news stories led the public to overestimate the risk of child kidnapping by strangers. This was also the time of "Satanic panic," when people thought Satan worshippers were going around abducting children. It was, essentially, made up.

The current obsession with true crime in the form of podcasts, documentaries, and other media still has the effect of making people feel like they're living in a society saturated with criminality. The TV comedy *Only Murders in the Building*, about neighbors who start a podcast to investigate crimes happening in their apartment building, satirizes this phenomenon.

Steve Martin in *Only Murders in the Building*. (Craig Blankenhorn / Hulu)

Whether real or fictional, why do you think people are drawn to such dark and disturbing stories?

I think the answer is as old as Aristotle. We have so many fears, whether cosmic or tangible, but ultimately we can't do much about them — there's nothing we can do about the threat of nuclear war. Horror allows us to experience fearful things in a controlled environment. If we watch a movie about a monster or serial killer, we can let our fears out for a walk during the runtime, then put them aside afterward. That can be cathartic.

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