

## THE HORROR STORY

*Darryl Jones*

THE HORROR STORY IS one of the enduring genres of short fiction. With its characteristic reliance on the unity of time and effect, and on the creation of an unsettling mood or atmosphere leading to a shocking denouement, horror has proved particularly amenable to the short form, deliberately designed to be consumed in one sitting for maximum impact. A number of the greatest horror writers – Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, M. R. James, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Aickman – worked almost exclusively in the short story form, while others – Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sheridan Le Fanu, Arthur Conan Doyle, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, Clive Barker – made important contributions in long and short fiction. It is also a genre of important anthologies, which have collected the enduring moments of otherwise minor or neglected writers: William Maginn, Amelia B. Edwards, Fitz-James O'Brien, Rhoda Broughton, W. W. Jacobs, Oscar Cook and numerous others have made unforgettable appearances in a variety of anthologies of horror and the supernatural.

In his fiction and his poetry, Poe built a whole aesthetic around this intensity of effect:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give the plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention . . . If any literary work is too long to be read in some sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

In Poe's work, at least, literary theory anticipates and governs the practice of writing, always and at all points subordinated to a priori aesthetic concerns. Horror was for Poe the most suitable mode for achieving his aesthetic goals. Poe's position is a typically extreme one, yet many of his aims and concerns have been shared by other writers of horror fiction. This has led to the creation of a very particular type of fiction, rigorously excluding anything which does not tend towards this shocking, unsettling or appalling denouement, with the result that the horror short story can often seem a very demanding formal exercise before it is anything else.

M. R. James was obsessed by particulars, and consequently highly resistant to theorising of any kind, but his occasional pronouncements on his chosen literary form reveal similar concerns to Poe's:

Often have I been asked to formulate my views about ghost stories and tales of the marvellous, the mysterious, the supernatural. Never have I been able to find out whether I had any views that could be formulated. The truth is, I suspect, that the *genre* is too small to bear the imposition of far-reaching principles. Widen the question, and ask what governs the construction of short stories in general and a great deal might be said, and has been said . . . The ghost story is, at its best, only a particular sort of short story, and is subject to the same broad rules as the whole mass of them. These rules, I imagine, no writer ever consciously follows. In fact, it is absurd to talk of them as rules; they are qualities which have been observed to accompany success . . . Well then: two ingredients most valuable in the concocting of a ghost story are, to me, the atmosphere and the nicely-managed crescendo.<sup>2</sup>

The power of ‘the atmosphere and the nicely-managed crescendo’ is manifest in many of the most influential and widely anthologised horror stories. In W. W. Jacobs’s ‘The Monkey’s Paw’, the story builds to its celebrated denouement – a knock on the door – as the titular magical talisman brought back from India by a colonial soldier allows grieving parents seemingly to reanimate the corpse of their dead son, mangled in industrial machinery:

‘For God’s sake don’t let it in,’ cried the old man, trembling.

‘You’re afraid of your own son,’ she cried, struggling. ‘Let me go. I’m coming, Herbert; I’m coming.’<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ is very strictly constructed on aesthetic grounds originating in Poe, as an idyllic American small town is revealed as conducting an annual ritual sacrifice, the victim chosen in a ceremonial lottery and then stoned to death to ensure the fertility of the crops: ‘Used to be a saying about “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.” . . . There’s *always* been a lottery.’<sup>4</sup>

But *pace* Poe’s theorising, horror stories are not only purely formal exercises. Like all significant forms of cultural expression, horror’s appeal cannot be reduced to any one thing. As a popular cultural mode, horror often has a contextual immediacy, a tendency to finger, often in ways which are inchoate or inconsistent, contemporary concerns and anxieties. The development of colonial horror, to give just one example, is exactly contemporaneous with the major period of British imperial expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century, and often articulates what might be thought of as the uneasy unconscious of writers who were publicly highly committed to the Empire, most notably Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle. Viewed in this way, a story such as Kipling’s ‘The Mark of the Beast’ is highly revealing. It is the tale of a colonial administrator who violates a Hindu altar, and is cursed with a form of lycanthropy. The story has as its epigraph a ‘Native Proverb’, ‘Your Gods and my Gods – do you or I know which are the stronger?’, and opens with a revealingly relativistic theological statement:

East of Suez, some hold, the direct control of Providence ceases; Man being there handed over to the power of the Gods and Devils of Asia, and the Church of England Providence only exercising an occasional and modified supervision in the case of Englishmen.<sup>5</sup>

The vengeful ‘power of the Gods and Devils of Asia’, or of Africa, a discourse of uneasy Orientalism, pervades much British imperial fiction. Conan Doyle specialised in tales of ‘monstrous beasts giving nightmares to the aristocracy of deep England’,<sup>6</sup> to use Christopher Frayling’s phrase – from the English folklore of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or ‘The Terror of Blue John Gap’ to the imperial monsters of *The Lost World*, ‘The Brazilian Cat’, ‘The Adventure of the Speckled Band’ and many others. The horror of ‘The Monkey’s Paw’ is in effect the Empire knocking on the door of a suburban villa, bringing its terrors home. A generation later, colonial horror specialist Oscar Cook spent the 1910s as a civil servant in Borneo, an experience he used as the basis of a memorably ghoulish *oeuvre* of stories showcasing cannibalism, sacrificial rites, incest and a variety of imaginative forms of sexual revenge.

The genesis and development of the modern horror story across the course of the nineteenth century is inseparable from the history of the great nineteenth-century periodicals whose publication provided a vehicle for much genre fiction. The second half of the nineteenth century, most particularly, was, as Philip Waller has observed, ‘the first and the *only* mass literary age’.<sup>7</sup> Many of the great popular fiction genres of the twentieth century – detective and crime fiction, espionage thrillers, adventure stories, science fiction – have their modern origins in the Victorian periodical boom.<sup>8</sup> Mass literacy was, to use Waller’s phrase, an ‘unprecedented phenomenon’,<sup>9</sup> and the variety of periodicals produced across the century, from *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in the 1810s to the *Strand Magazine* and its many imitators in the 1890s, need to be understood as the cultural manifestations of the interlinked socio-historical forces of capitalism, industrialisation and urbanisation, which may be the defining characteristics of modernity.

Mass literacy presupposes mass humanity, and in the nineteenth century this meant London, which was not only the centre of the largest empire in the history of the world, but with 6.58 million inhabitants by the end of the century was, in the words of the city’s historian Jerry White, ‘incomparably the largest city the world had ever seen’.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as Nick Barratt has shown, the history of the growth of London across the nineteenth century is, profoundly, a history of *suburbanisation*.<sup>11</sup>

‘Our parish is a suburban one’, and moreover ‘a very populous one’,<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens wrote in his first published book, *Sketches by Boz* (1836). Dickens is the greatest of all London novelists, and not coincidentally also a writer whose own career and practice is intimately interwoven with nineteenth-century periodical culture. He was the editor and sole contributor of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* (1840–1), in which *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* were first published. More ambitiously, he was editor and proprietor of two of the great mid-century periodicals, *Household Words* (1850–9) and *All the Year Round* (1859–95). The horror story, the tale of terror, the Gothic tale, the ghost story, and their many subgenres, were pioneered and developed in periodicals such as these. Dickens’s first novel proper, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), contains a number of interpolated supernatural tales and horror stories – notably ‘The Stroller’s Tale’ (Chapter 3) and ‘The Story of the Goblins who stole a Sexton’ (Chapter 28) – as well as a series of grim and ghoulish episodes and anecdotes such as those involving the medical students Bob Sawyer and Benjamin Allen (‘Nothing like dissecting, to give one an appetite’), or Sam Weller’s tale of the owner of a ‘Celebrated Sassage factory’, who falls into his own grinder and is turned into sausages and eaten.<sup>13</sup>

Dickens, in the famous words of *Pickwick's* Fat Boy, often 'wants to make your flesh creep'.<sup>14</sup> He is a major figure in the history of the supernatural tale. 'A Christmas Carol' (1843) is easily the most celebrated Christmas story in English, and the most famous ghost story. These two genres are intimately connected, and more than any other figure Dickens established the tradition of the Christmas Ghost Story, which continued through the work of M. R. James (many of whose ghost stories were composed specifically to be read to his colleagues and students on Christmas Eve) and beyond. 'A Christmas Carol' is also, profoundly, an urban narrative, its action largely taking place in Scrooge's office and rooms in the City, and the Cratchit home in Camden Town. Scrooge's encounter with Marley's ghost enables him to see the city for what it really is – a city simultaneously of the living and the dead: 'The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went.'<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the story, Scrooge rebuffs the charitable collectors who call soliciting donations for 'the Poor and destitute':

Are there no prisons? . . . And the Union workhouses? . . . Are they still in operation? . . . The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then? . . . If they [the Poor] would rather die, . . . they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.<sup>16</sup>

The Malthusian problem of the 'surplus population' of Victorian London's poor, crowded into its notorious slums and rookeries, is counterpointed in the story with the similarly Malthusian problem of what to do with London's dead. Victorian London was indeed, as 'A Christmas Carol' makes clear, a city of the dead as well as of the living, and its crowded churchyards were overflowing. Notoriously, in the Enon Chapel scandal of 1839, an overpowering stench and an infestation of rats led to the discovery of thousands of bodies piled into a small pit right under the floorboards of a chapel off the Strand.<sup>17</sup> London's great municipal cemeteries – from Kensal Green (1833) and Highgate (1839) through to Golders Green Crematorium (1902) – were the city's solution to its problem of the dead.

'A Christmas Carol' inaugurated a series of Dickensian Christmas stories, some of which were overtly supernatural – such as 'The Chimes' (1844), or 'The Haunted Man' (1848). The best of these, and one of the most celebrated and frequently anthologised of all English ghost stories, is 'The Signal-Man', which first appeared as part of *Mugby Junction*, an interconnected series of narratives by Dickens and others in the Christmas 1866 edition of *All the Year Round*. It is one of the great tales of precognition, in which a railway signalman is haunted by visions of the train crash which will eventually cost him his life. Precognition, the uncanny possibility of being haunted by the future, is one of the recurring tropes of Victorian and Edwardian horror, in 'A Christmas Carol's' Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come', and in stories such as Edith Wharton's 'Afterward' (1910), W. F. Harvey's 'August Heat' (1910), or E. F. Benson's 'The Room in the Tower' (1912). Classically, the appearance of ghosts served a variety of functions, one of which was to bring back, from beyond the grave, prophecies or important information about the future. In the presence of ghosts, the linear arrow of time breaks down. As with Scrooge's Christmas visitations (which, an attentive reading will show, simultaneously occur on three separate nights and the same Christmas Eve), ghosts occupy past, present and future at the same time.

Dickens's use of the railway as the locus for horror is characteristic of the nineteenth century, and again powerfully reflective of the social conditions which produced periodical fiction.<sup>18</sup> The Fat Boy's pronouncement, 'I wants to make your flesh creep', is contained in a chapter entitled 'Strongly illustrative of the Position, that the course of true love is not a Railway'. *Dombey and Son* was first published in novel form in 1848, the year in which the newsagent W. H. Smith opened its first railway kiosk, on Euston Station – an event which Raymond Williams has read as formative for Victorian fiction.<sup>19</sup> *Dombey* records the destruction of traditional London communities by the building of the railway, and closes with its villain, Carker, killed by a train, which the novel represents as a monster, with 'red eyes, bleared and dim', which 'struck him limb from limb, and licked his stream of life up with its fiery heart, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air'.<sup>20</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, in his first large-scale work of futurology, *Anticipations*, H. G. Wells wrote: 'The nineteenth century, when it takes its place with the other centuries in the chronological charts of the future, will, if it needs a symbol, almost inevitably have as that symbol a steam engine running upon a railway.'<sup>21</sup> 'The Signal Man' inaugurates a significant tradition of railway horror, which would include M. R. James's 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects' ('By some means and for some reason Mr. Burton contrived to reserve a compartment for himself . . . But these precautions avail little against the angry dead'),<sup>22</sup> Andrew Caldecott's 'Branch Line to Benceston', Robert Aickman's 'The Trains' and 'The Waiting Room', and Clive Barker's 'The Midnight Meat Train'.

The presence of W. H. Smith on Euston station testifies to the overwhelming appeal of nineteenth-century periodical fiction for commuters. Wells, himself a significant writer of periodical fiction in the 1890s, was completely aware of this:

To make the railway train a perfect symbol of our times, it should be presented as uncomfortably full in the third class – a few passengers standing – and everybody reading the current number either of the *Daily Mail*, *Pearson's Weekly*, *Answers*, *Tit Bits*, or whatever Greatest Novel of the Century happened to be going.<sup>23</sup>

Even *Sketches by Boz*, though it just predates the coming of the railways, is prescient in its awareness of the suburban commuter, and contains a chapter dedicated to a new phenomenon, 'Omnibuses' (Chapter 16). Writing a generation after Wells, the literary critic Q. D. Leavis, in her semi-sociological study of mass literacy, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), identified 'the exhausted city worker' as the archetypal consumer of popular genre fiction.<sup>24</sup> Reading in relatively short bursts, often in the face of mental lassitude, this mass reading public demanded a literature of sensation, thrill and shock. Horror fiction – and especially *short* horror fiction – was made for such readers.

Some of the most successful horror fiction trades on viscosity, on the embodied nature of its aesthetic affect. Early in the nineteenth century, the Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe formulated a taxonomy of the different kinds of fear, *terror* and *horror*: 'Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them.'<sup>25</sup> This distinction between 'terror' (numinous, metaphysical anticipation and dread) and 'horror' (shocking, often disgusting revelation) has proved a lasting and influential one, accepted by many (but not all) writers and commentators.

*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, founded in 1817, was the first of the great nineteenth-century periodicals. Its appeal was based on an interrelated combination of scurrilous and often libellous political journalism and sensational, often shocking fiction. It was, in Radcliffe's terms, often more interested in offering its readers the experience of horror, rather than terror, though its long history (it finally closed in 1980) contained plenty of both. Although *Blackwood's* mellowed somewhat across the century, publishing, amongst others, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot and Joseph Conrad, initially it specialised in lurid fiction.<sup>26</sup> A perennial favourite theme of *Blackwood's* was the tale of claustrophobia, entrapment or imprisonment, such as Daniel Keyte Sandford's 'A Night in the Catacombs' (1818), John Galt's 'The Buried Alive' (1821), William Mudford's 'The Iron Shroud' (1830), or best of all William Maginn's 'The Man in the Bell' (1821), written by the most scurrilous of all *Blackwood's* journalists, in which the narrator finds himself trapped in a church tower under a giant, swinging bell. *Blackwood's* in general, and this strain of its fiction in particular, was to prove very influential upon the works of Edgar Allan Poe, many of whose stories ('The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Cask of Amontillado', 'The Pit and the Pendulum', 'The Premature Burial') and poems ('The Bells') draw on the *Blackwood's* template. Indeed, Poe initially framed his stories within the narrative of 'The Folio Club', as ghoulish tales told by a variety of characters, including 'Mr. Blackwood Blackwood, who had written certain articles for foreign Magazines.'<sup>27</sup> In his story 'How to Write a Blackwood's Article', the protagonist seeks advice on writing horror stories from William Blackwood himself, and is told that 'The first thing requisite is to get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before' – trapped in an 'oven or big bell . . . tumbl[ing] out of a balloon . . . swallowed up in an earthquake, or . . . stuck fast in a chimney.'<sup>28</sup>

*Blackwood's* other characteristic genre was the medical horror story, a subgenre which was to prove lastingly influential across the nineteenth century and beyond, as perhaps the major manifestation of the *embodied* nature of some nineteenth-century horror. Samuel Warren's ongoing collection of tales, *Pages from the Diary of a Late Physician*, a long-running serial published in *Blackwood's* from 1830 to 1837, was a particularly successful example of this, often dealing in the ghoulish specifics of medical cases ('Then follow the details of his disease, which are so shocking as to be unfit for any but professional eyes . . .').<sup>29</sup> Enduring public anxieties about the activities of doctors and medical students, and particularly their associations with Resurrection Men, or bodysnatchers, illegally stealing corpses (or in the notorious Burke and Hare case of 1828, murdering) to provide specimens for medical research, led to the Anatomy Act of 1832, which legalised the medical dissection of donated cadavers. The relationship between doctors and bodysnatchers, and the class tensions implicit in this relationship, were ripe for fictional exploitation. The Chartist and journalist G. W. M. Reynolds's sprawling and hugely popular serial fiction *The Mysteries of London* (published from 1844) has as its most sensational narrative strand the activities of the Resurrection Man Anthony Tidkins. Decades later, Robert Louis Stevenson was still drawing on the Burke and Hare case for 'The Body Snatcher' (1884), one of a series of horror stories he wrote examining divided identity, professional repute and public respectability, and class relations (others include 'Deacon Brodie', and most famously *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*).

If the implications of the Anatomy Act were ripe for exploitation in horror fiction, so too were Martin's Act of 1822 and the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876, both of

which sought to regulate the practices of vivisection and animal experimentation in the light of a developing discourse of medical ethics. These practices had accompanied the rise of experimental physiology as a recognised medical discipline in the nineteenth century: William Sharpey was appointed Chair of General Anatomy and Physiology at University College London in 1836; the Physiological Society was founded in 1876.<sup>30</sup> The nineteenth-century vivisection debates were public and intensely political, led by activist organisations such as the RSPCA (founded 1824), or Frances Power Cobbe's Victoria Street Society (1875, and later renamed the British Anti-Vivisection Society).<sup>31</sup> Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is the archetypal fiction of unethical medical research, literalising the metaphor of the Resurrection Man. Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales 'The Birth-Mark' (1843) and 'Rappaccini's Daughter' (1844) both deal with the subject of human experimentation. H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) contains a portrait of the archetypal Victorian archvivisectioner, experimenting without anaesthetic on live animal subjects in an attempt to transform them into human beings. Moreau, like many of fiction's mad doctors, is a sadist who carries out his activities under the guise of supposedly disinterested scientific research, claiming that 'To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter.'<sup>32</sup> One of H. P. Lovecraft's earliest tales, 'Herbert West – Reanimator' (1922) is perhaps best read as a late outlier to nineteenth-century medical horror:

as I have said, it happened when we were in the medical school, where West had already made himself notorious through his wild theories on the nature of death and the possibility of overcoming it artificially . . . In his experiments with various animating solutions he had killed and treated immense numbers of rabbits, guinea-pigs, cats, dogs, and monkeys, till he had become the prime nuisance of the college.<sup>33</sup>

Burke and Hare supplied corpses for Dr Robert Knox, who taught anatomy at Edinburgh University Medical School – in the nineteenth century the foremost medical school in Britain and Ireland. Robert Louis Stevenson himself studied Engineering at Edinburgh. His younger contemporary Arthur Conan Doyle trained as a doctor at Edinburgh University, initially specialising in syphilis, before settling into general practice. Of all *fin-de-siècle* writers, Doyle's career was perhaps the one most closely imbricated with periodical fiction, because of his long-running relationship with *The Strand Magazine*, which owed a large part of its success to the unparalleled popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Doyle very clearly understood himself as one of life's all-rounders, a general practitioner of fiction, and made distinguished contributions not only to the detective story, but also to the adventure story, to historical fiction, to sporting fiction and to the horror story.<sup>34</sup> This was a genre which allowed Doyle to put his medical expertise to good use, in tales such as 'The Case of Lady Sannox' (in which a brilliant surgeon is tricked into operating on the face of the woman he loves), 'The Third Generation' (a young gentleman discovers on the eve of his wedding that he has hereditary syphilis), 'The Retirement of Signor Lambert' (a jealous husband cuts the vocal chords of an opera singer who is having an affair with his wife), or 'The Brown Hand' (the ghost of an Afghan tribesman haunts the doctor who amputated his hand). Doyle also wrote two astonishingly ghoulish collections of vignettes, 'A Medical Document' and 'The Surgeon Talks', in which gatherings of medical men

seek to outdo one another with ever more lurid anecdotes drawn from their professional practices. In 'A Medical Document', an alienist remarks that

there is a side of life which is too medical for the general public and too romantic for the professional journals, but which contains some of the richest human materials that a man could study. It's not a pleasant side, I am afraid, but if it is good enough for Providence to create, it is good enough for us to try and understand.<sup>35</sup>

A surgeon immediately provides an example of this, and tells the history of 'a famous beauty in London Society' who comes to his consulting rooms:

a rodent ulcer was eating its way upwards, coiling on in its serpiginous fashion until the end of it was flush with her collar. The red streak of its trail was lost below the line of her bust. Year by year it had ascended and she had heightened her dress to hide it, until now it was about to invade her face.<sup>36</sup>

Nineteenth-century medical horror provided the source for one continuing, and often highly controversial, strain of viscerally embodied horror, which placed a strong and often graphic emphasis on the corpo-reality of fear. This is horror at its most straightforwardly transgressive, single-mindedly setting out to shock. From the publication of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* in 1796 to modern 'moral panics' arising from video nasties or violent computer games, it has often occasioned a very public discourse on the ethics of representation, what could or should be shown: does exposure to violent or transgressive images cause violent or transgressive behaviour? The urge to censor, purge and ban is a familiar accompaniment to some horror.<sup>37</sup>

Visceral horror could afford even writers who later settled into mainstream, canonical respectability the opportunity to probe the limits of the ethics of representation. In Poe's *Blackwood's* pastiche, 'A Predicament', Psyche Zenobia narrates her own decapitation by the hands of an Edinburgh cathedral clock. In his most visceral tale, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', a mesmerised man is kept suspended at the point of death for seven months. Released from his trance, 'his whole frame at once – within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putrescence.'<sup>38</sup>

The activities of the Spanish Inquisition had long fascinated Gothic novelists. This is perhaps the most sensational manifestation of the anti-monastic, anti-Catholic animus of much Romantic Gothic. Inquisitorial dungeons and torture chambers play significant roles, for example, in *The Monk*, or in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Torture and its implements, often represented with a cultured, connoisseurish sadism, make frequent appearances in a variety of tales of terror. Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum' applies his own formalist aesthetic to the psychology of torture, adapting the basic premise of Maginn's 'The Man in the Bell' to a tale of an inquisition victim tied down under a giant blade attached to a swinging pendulum. Conan Doyle's 'The Leather Funnel' tells of the psychic resonances of an artefact used in 'The torture of water – the "Extraordinary question"'<sup>39</sup> – that is, the enforced drinking of sixteen pints of water. In Bram Stoker's 'The Squaw', an American tourist visits a torture chamber and is trapped inside 'The Iron Virgin of Nurnberg':

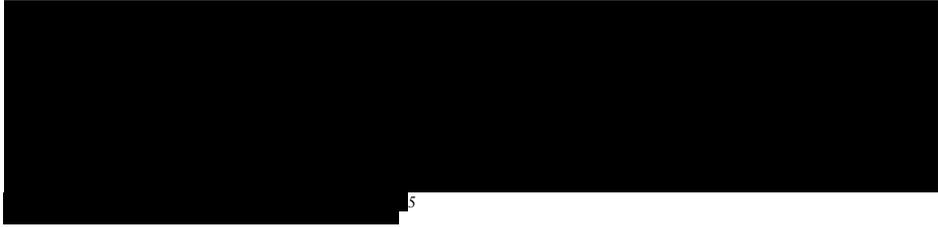
And then the spikes did their work. Happily the end was quick, for when I wrenched open the door they had pierced so deep that they had locked in the bones of the skull through which they had crushed, and actually tore him – it – out of his iron prison till, bound as he was, he fell at full length with a sickly thud upon the floor, the face turning upward as he fell.<sup>40</sup>

These ghoulish tales of bodily dismemberment and dissolution proved unsurprisingly irresistible to twentieth-century pulp writers. There are innumerable instances of this. Following the success, in particular, of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu series, beginning with *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913), a strain of 'Yellow Peril' horror often articulated geopolitical anxieties about Asian political and demographic power by writing them on the body, as a series of 'diabolical' tortures.<sup>41</sup> In George Fielding Eliot's 'The Copper Bowl', for example, a Chinese mandarin attempts to gain information about the location of a French legionary outpost by means of a rat placed inside a heated copper bowl, whose only means of escape is by gnawing its way through the prisoner's abdomen:

When he raised his head the pulse had ceased to beat. Where it had been, blood was flowing sluggishly – dark venous blood, flowing in purple horror.

And from the midst of it, out of the girl's side, the grey, pointed head of the rat was thrust, its muzzle dripping gore, its black eyes glittering beadily at the madman who gibbered and frothed above it.<sup>42</sup>





In 1848, the same year that W. H. Smith opened its Euston kiosk, the novelist Catherine Crowe published what was to become, in its strange way, one of the most influential books of the nineteenth century. *The Night Side of Nature* is a compendium of supernatural tales, anecdotes and folklore, whose range of interests – trance visions, dreams and precognition; ghosts, poltergeists and haunted houses; doppelgängers – effectively cover the range of subjects that were to be developed in the supernatural tale.<sup>46</sup> Crowe's work was a significant contribution to the Victorian climate of enchantment that was to exist in an uneasy dialectic with the era's dominant secularising discourses of utilitarianism, industrialisation, scientific naturalism and the concomitant 'crisis of faith' that characterised the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>47</sup> As Jarlath Killeen writes in his history of nineteenth-century Gothic, 'No major Victorian thinker or writer, from the Brontës to the Brownings, from Dickens to Darwin, was unconcerned about the occult.'<sup>48</sup>

The growth of spiritualism as a series of practices and beliefs was a major intellectual phenomenon of the second half of the nineteenth century, albeit in ways that were complex and often internally inconsistent. Spiritualism posited the survival of the human personality after death, and the existence of an 'other world' – an astral or spirit realm – coexisting and interpenetrating with our own material world, and most readily accessible through the intercession of a medium. For many – perhaps most – of its adherents, spiritualism was entirely compatible with Christianity, even of the most orthodox Anglican variety. For others it led on to an intellectual path that took them to the further shores of belief – to esoteric Buddhism, theosophy, hermetic philosophy or occultism. Janet Oppenheim, spiritualism's most authoritative historian, has argued that the spiritualists' 'concerns and aspirations placed them – far from the lunatic fringe of society – squarely amidst the cultural, intellectual, and emotional moods of the era.'<sup>49</sup> The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in Trinity College Cambridge in 1891 as an attempt to provide an empirical basis for testing the claims of spiritualists and mediums, which it took very seriously. The SPR's early membership included many of the foremost cultural and intellectual figures of the age, such as Henry Sidgwick, A. J. Balfour, William James and Henri Bergson.

Yet part of the great power of spiritualism was also its appeal for the marginalised voices of Victorian society, amongst the working class and especially, as Alex Owen has shown, for women.<sup>50</sup> It was this intellectual climate that produced – and, to an extent, that was produced by – the development of the ghost story in English. In this, as in so much else, Dickens was a pioneering figure. But the ghost story, with its recurring concerns of domesticity and entrapment, in which the secure and comforting environment of the home becomes inverted, uncanny, haunted, proved to be a powerful medium through which to articulate the anxieties of women. In her critical study *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide*, Vanessa D. Dickerson persuasively situated

the Victorian ghost story within the context of the 'ambiguous, marginal, ghostly' position of Victorian women: 'The ghost corresponded more particularly to the Victorian woman's visibility and invisibility, her power and powerlessness.'<sup>51</sup> The list of English-language women writers who have made important contributions to the ghost story is a very long one (just as a random sample, it would include Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Riddell, Rhoda Broughton, Vernon Lee, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Edith Wharton), and any representative anthology of ghost stories contains (or should contain) many women writers.<sup>52</sup>

Amelia B. Edwards's 'The Phantom Coach' (1864) provides a good example of the tensions arising out of the ghost story, simultaneously ontological and gendered. A lawyer gets lost in a blizzard while out grouse shooting on the Yorkshire moors, and finds shelter in the house of a scholarly recluse. The scholar is a white-maned magus whose walls are 'scrawled over with strange diagrams' and who discourses at length on the limitations of Victorian scientific naturalism, in a manner which recalls the table of contents of *The Night Side of Nature*:

He spoke of the soul and its aspirations; of the spirit and its powers; of second sight; of prophecy; of those phenomena which, under the names of ghosts, spectres, and supernatural appearances, have been denied by the sceptics and attested by the credulous, of all ages.<sup>53</sup>

Ostensibly, this is a characteristically masculinist Victorian narrative, in which a young bourgeois professional has his narrow intellectual horizons expanded by an authoritative older man – precisely the same dynamic of class and authority which underlies the relationship between the young newly wedded lawyer Jonathan Harker and the paternal polymath Van Helsing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The scholar is himself an ambiguous character, liminally supernatural, and this meeting precipitates the lawyer's later encounter with a ghostly mail-coach, which leaves him lying in a snowdrift 'in a state of raving delirium, with a broken arm and a compound fracture of the skull'.<sup>54</sup> This is, indeed, where the story seems to end, but it is not where it begins. The lawyer is recently married, 'very much in love, and of course, very happy'.<sup>55</sup> Yet his wife is occluded from his story, rendered silent, a spectral presence: the story actually closes not with the phantom coach, but with the lawyer's assertion that 'I never told my wife the fearful events which I have just related to you.'<sup>56</sup>

The Victorians did not, of course, invent ghosts. But the historian Owen Davies has argued that the Victorian ghost may represent a new development in thinking about the supernatural in its very *purposelessness*. In his 1894 study of psychical research, the folklorist Andrew Lang concluded that the modern ghost was 'a purposeless creature', appearing 'nobody knows why; he has no message to deliver, no secret crime to reveal, no appointment to keep, no treasure to disclose, no commissions to be executed, and, as an almost invariable rule, he does not speak, even if you speak to him'.<sup>57</sup> With a small few exceptions, this is certainly the case in the work of the most influential of all ghost-story writers, M. R. James.

James was a manuscript scholar of enormous distinction. His stories generally arise out of his academic research, to which they are perhaps best viewed as a kind of by-product or imaginative surplus. One of the most interesting things about James's stories is the way in which they are very self-consciously removed from the tenor of

their times, and attempt to deny or refute any ideological or contextual reading. For much of his scholarly life, James was based in King's College Cambridge. At exactly the same time, and right next door, the SPR was founded in Trinity College. And yet the foremost English ghost-story writer had little interest in, and no enthusiasm for, the activities of the most high-profile group of academic ghost-hunters. 'The Mezzotint' (1904) dismisses the SPR as 'the Phasmatological Society',<sup>58</sup> an interfering bunch from whom the story's supernatural artwork must be kept a secret. (The 'Phasmatological Society' translates as the 'Ghost Society'; the SPR began life as the Cambridge Ghost Society.) James himself displayed little interest in the actual existence of the supernatural, maintaining that 'I am prepared to consider evidence and accept it if it satisfies me'<sup>59</sup> – an answer which, admittedly, would also have satisfied the SPR. However, James drew very clear lines of demarcation between the literary ghost story and psychological investigation: 'I have not sought to embody in them any well-considered scheme of "psychical" theory', he wrote of his stories; 'The story that claims to be "veridical" (in the language of the Society of Psychological Research) is a very different affair.'<sup>60</sup>

James's ghost stories are learned, austere, highly formalised intellectual exercises, set in a confined and instantly recognisable milieu of repressed bachelor scholars, academic and religious institutions, isolated country houses, and uncanny inns and hotels. Deeply immersed in the concerns of James's own scholarship – medieval manuscripts, clerical architecture, academic politics – the stories self-consciously set out to repel modernity. Fascinatingly, the stories' anxieties often emerge out of what they attempt to occlude. 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' is perhaps James's most celebrated and widely discussed tale, but what is often overlooked is that it is in fact a Christmas ghost story, not only (as was common for James) in the occasion of its composition or telling (it was first read in King's College at Christmas 1903), but also in its setting. The rational materialist Professor Parkin takes himself off on a solitary East Anglian holiday during the Christmas vacation, and unearths the supernatural whistle on 'the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle'.<sup>61</sup> This is 21 December, the winter solstice, when the forces of darkness are at their strongest, and therefore the time of doubt (the saint's day of Doubting Thomas). In its very solitariness, 'Oh, Whistle' self-consciously rejects the familial ideology – hearth and home – which underpinned the Dickensian ghost story. When domesticity intrudes upon the story, it does so characteristically for James as a locus of terror: the whistle summons up a ghost which takes the form of a bedsheet which rises from the bed next to Parkins, with 'a horrible, an intensely horrible face of *crumpled linen*'.<sup>62</sup>

James was a keen reader of supernatural fiction right up to the end of his life. He understood himself as, in the words of one of his characters, 'a Victorian by birth and education',<sup>63</sup> and thus found himself profoundly out of sympathy with most manifestations of modernity. In his chosen fictional genre, he disapproved of the weird tale, largely on the grounds of class and taste. He was equivocal about Arthur Machen, who 'has a nasty after-taste. Rather a foul mind I think, but as clever as they make 'em.'<sup>64</sup> He was downright dismissive of the weird tale's foremost practitioner, complaining after having read 'a disquisition of nearly 40 pages of double columns on Supernatural Horror in Literature by one H. P. Lovecraft, whose style is of the most offensive. He uses the word cosmic about 24 times.'<sup>65</sup> He disliked Christine Campbell Thomson's pulpish *Not at Night* series, whose stories were largely anthologised from *Weird Tales* magazine, and whose methods ran directly counter to his own:

On the whole, then, I say, you must have horror and also malevolence. Not less necessary, however, is reticence. There is a series of books I have read, I think American in origin, called *Not at Night* (and with other like titles), which sin glaringly against this law.<sup>66</sup>

These contrasts, and James's responses, encapsulate the dynamic between terror and horror which has animated the genre since the Romantic Gothic novel. At times, this has been played out in a series of wrangles over nomenclature, as though writers did not want to own up to the straightforward vulgarity of 'horror'. Thus, a survey of the history of the genre gives us 'Tales of Terror' (*Blackwood's*), 'Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque' (Poe), 'Tales of Unease' (Conan Doyle), *Weird Tales*, 'Strange Stories' (Robert Aickman) and 'Dark Fantasy' (or even, heaven help us, 'The Dark Fantastique'). Clive Barker refers to himself as a 'Dark Imaginer'.<sup>67</sup> Refreshingly, Herbert Van Thal's honest and influential series of *Pan Books of Horror Stories*, distinguished by their memorably lurid covers (skulls and severed heads a speciality), was one of the great successes of post-war British publishing, appearing annually from 1959 to 1989, and selling 5.6 million copies.<sup>68</sup> There are, of course, notable subgeneric distinctions between these kinds of horror, which continue to be the subjects of discussion and argument for writers and critics. For as long as this is the case, the horror story will continue to develop.

## Notes

1. Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', in *Selected Writings*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 675, p. 677.
2. M. R. James, 'Introduction' to V. H. Collins (ed.), *Ghosts and Marvels*, in *Collected Ghost Stories*, ed. Darryl Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 400.
3. W. W. Jacobs, 'The Monkey's Paw', in Darryl Jones (ed.), *Horror Stories: Classic Tales from Hoffmann to Hodgson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 336.
4. Shirley Jackson, 'The Lottery', in *Novels and Stories*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Library of America, 2010), p. 232.
5. Rudyard Kipling, 'The Mark of the Beast', in Jones (ed.), *Horror Stories*, p. 208.
6. Frayling, 'Introduction' to Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, edited with an introduction and notes by Christopher Frayling (London: Penguin, 2001), p. xxii.
7. Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1780–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.
8. For the importance of periodical publication for fiction in the late nineteenth century, particularly with the demise of the 'triple-decker' realist novel, see Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), pp. 9–87.
9. Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p. 3.
10. Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 3.
11. Nick Barratt, *Greater London: The Story of the Suburbs* (London: Random House, 2012).
12. Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. Dennis Walder (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 26, p. 55.
13. Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. Mark Wormald (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 397, p. 407.
14. *Ibid.* p. 114.
15. Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', in *Christmas Books*, ed. Ruth Glancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 23.

16. Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', pp. 10–11.
17. See Catharine Arnold, *Necropolis: London and its Dead* (London: Pocket Books, 2007), pp. 104–7.
18. For accounts of the significance of the railway to Victorian culture, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization and Perception of Time and Space*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Nicholas Daly, 'Sensation drama, the railway and modernity', in *Literature, Technology and Modernity, 1860–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 10–33; Simon Bradley, *The Railways: Nation, Network and People* (London: Profile, 2015). For a specific account of Dickens in this context, see Jonathan Grossman, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
19. See Raymond Williams, 'Forms of English Fiction in 1848', in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 150.
20. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 823.
21. H. G. Wells, *Anticipations*, in *The Works of H.G. Wells*, Atlantic Edition (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924), p. iv, p. 5.
22. M. R. James, 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects', in *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 400.
23. Wells, *Anticipations*, p. 15.
24. Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 32.
25. Ann Radcliffe, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', *New Monthly Magazine*, 16: 1 (January 1826): 145–52. Repr. in E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (eds), *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 168.
26. For an account of the genesis of *Blackwood's* and its fiction, on which I draw here, see Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick (eds), 'Introduction' to *Tales of Terror from Blackwood's Magazine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. vii–xviii.
27. Poe, 'The Folio Club', *Selected Writings*, p. 596.
28. Poe, 'How to Write a Blackwood Article', *Selected Writings*, p. 177.
29. Samuel Warren, 'A "Man About Town"', in Morrison and Baldick (eds), *Tales of Terror from Blackwood's Magazine*, p. 203.
30. These details are from the Physiological Society's website. Available at <<http://www.physoc.org/society-history>> (last accessed 15 April 2018).
31. See Richard D. French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science in Victorian Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
32. H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, ed. Darryl Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
33. H. P. Lovecraft, 'Herbert West – Reanimator', in *Tales*, ed. Peter Straub (New York: Library of America, 2005), p. 24.
34. For studies of Doyle as a literary 'all-rounder', see, for example, Douglas Kerr, *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
35. Arthur Conan Doyle, 'A Medical Document', in *The Conan Doyle Stories* (London: John Murray, 1929), p. 1045.
36. *Ibid.* pp. 1045–6.
37. There is an enormous body of literature on this subject, but see, for example, André Parreaux, *The Publication of 'The Monk': A Literary Event 1796–1798* (Paris: Didier, 1960); Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (St Albans: Paladin, 1973); Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto, 1984); David Kerekes and David Slater, *See No Evil: Banned Films and Video Controversies* (Manchester: Headpress, 2000); Martin Barker and Julian Petley (eds), *Ill-Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* (London: Routledge, 2001).
38. Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', *Selected Writings*, p. 414.

39. Conan Doyle, 'The Leather Funnel', in *Gothic Tales*, ed. Darryl Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 405.
40. Bram Stoker, 'The Squaw', in *Horror Stories*, ed. Jones, p. 262.
41. In its modern form, 'Yellow Peril' fiction dates from the 1890s, and particularly the publication of M. P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger* in 1898. For studies of the 'Yellow Peril', see, for example, David Glover, 'Die Gelbe Gefahr, le peril jaune, yellow peril: the geopolitics of a fear', in Kate Hebblethwaite and Elizabeth McCarthy (eds), *Fear: Essays on the Meaning and Experience of Fear* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), pp. 47–59. Christopher Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014); John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats (eds), *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (London: Verso, 2013).
42. George Fielding Eliot, 'The Copper Bowl', in Herbert van Thal (ed.), *The Pan Book of Horror Stories* (London: Pan, 1959), p. 60.
43. Volumes 1–3 were published by Sphere in 1984, and volumes 4–6 in 1985. For this chapter, I am using the two-volume anthology editions: *Clive Barker's Books of Blood*, vols 1–3 (London: Warner, 1994); *Clive Barker's Books of Blood*, vols 4–6 (London: Warner, 1994).
44. Barker, *Books of Blood*, vol. 2, p. 60.
45. Clive Barker, interviewed in Douglas E. Winter, 'Give Me B-Movies or Give Me Death!', *Faces of Fear* (1985). Available online at <<http://www.clivebarker.info/censorship.html>> (last accessed 15 April 2018).
46. Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers*, 2 vols. (London: T. C. Newby, 1848).
47. For scientific materialism (or scientific naturalism), see, for example, Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Victorian Scientific Naturalism: Community, Identity, Continuity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). For the Victorian 'crisis of faith', see, for example, Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain* (London: Macmillan 1986); Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in 19th-century Religious Belief* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991).
48. Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Literature, 1814–1925* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 124. See also Nicola Bown et al., eds, *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
49. Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 4.
50. Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
51. Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 5. For a counter-argument to this influential thesis, see Jarlath Killeen, 'Victorian Women and the Challenge of the Phantom', in Helen Conrad O'Briain and Julie-Anne Stevens (eds), *The Ghost Story from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century: A Ghostly Genre* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010), pp. 81–96. See also Dara Downey, *American Women's Ghost Stories in the Gilded Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
52. For example, *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories*, ed. Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) contains eight stories by women writers; *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*, ed. Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) has eleven; *The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories from Elizabeth Gaskell to Ambrose Bierce*, ed. Michael Newton (London: Penguin, 2010) has eight. For an anthology specifically dedicated to women writers, see Richard Dalby (ed.), *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories* (London: Virago, 1987). For American writers in particular, see Alfred Bendixen (ed.), *Haunted Women: The Best Supernatural Tales by American*

- Women* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985); Catherine A. Lundie (ed.), *Restless Spirits: Ghost Stories by American Women 1872–1926* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).
53. Amelia B. Edwards, 'The Phantom Coach', in Cox and Gilbert (eds), *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories*, p. 16, p. 18.
  54. Ibid. p. 24.
  55. Ibid. p. 14.
  56. Ibid. p. 24.
  57. Owen Davies, *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (London: Palgrave, 2007).
  58. James, 'The Mezzotint', *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 31.
  59. James, 'Ghosts – Treat them Gently!', *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 418.
  60. James, 'Introduction to *Ghosts and Marvels*', *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 407, and 'Ghosts – Treat them Gently!', *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 416.
  61. James, 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad', *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 88.
  62. Ibid. p. 92.
  63. James, 'A Neighbour's Landmark', *Collected Ghost Stories*, p. 315.
  64. M. R. James, letter to Nico Llewelyn Davies, 12 January 1928, in *A Pleasing Terror: The Complete Supernatural Writings*, ed. Christopher Roden and Barbara Roden (Ashcroft, BC: Ash-Tree Press, 2001), p. 642.
  65. Ibid. p. 641.
  66. James, 'Ghosts – Treat them Gently!', p. 418.
  67. See Sorcha Ní Fhláinn (ed.), *Clive Barker: Dark Imaginer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
  68. For the sales figures for the *Pan Books of Horror Stories*, see Johnny Mains, *Lest You Should Suffer Nightmares: A Biography of Herbert Van Thal* (Bargoed: Screaming Dreams, 2011), p. 21.

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