



## What Women Want...in horror

By Paula Guran and Friends of The Spook

Women read horror. They watch horror. They write horror. They direct horror. They edit horror.

Horror is an emotion. Individuals respond and react differently depending on their own psychological and emotional makeup as well as the stimuli involved. We *sense* horror. We *feel* it. We *respond* to it. Men and women are different biologically and socialized differently. But when it comes to being a horror-lover are there gender-based variances? Do women want something other than men want from horror?

*The Spook* asked the question of a number of women. Their replies were fascinating and, to an extent, contradictory.

Writer **Kathe Koja** — her latest novel, *straydog*, will appear next spring from Farrar, Straus and Giroux — agrees

that horrific expectations vary from person to person, “but whether this changes by gender I couldn’t begin to say. I imagine it differs reader by reader, and is as personal as a taste for hot peppers, dark chocolate, or squid.”

However, literary horror history may point toward a particular appeal for women. “A lot of the appeal of horror for women comes from its gothic roots,” say writer, editor, critic **Pam Keeseey** ([www.monsterzine.com](http://www.monsterzine.com)). “Gothic literature, often dismissed as “women’s literature,” was women’s adventure literature, women’s quest literature. Traditional Gothic literature often put women at the center of the story, testing their strength, intelligence, bravery and endurance, often in the face of supernatural adversity. Those elements still appear with frequency in horror

films and literature — John Carpenter’s *Halloween* comes immediately to mind — and I think is, in part, what women find appealing about horror.”

**Yvonne Navarro** author of *That’s Not My Name*, *Red Shadows* and other novels, ([www.yvonnenavarro.com](http://www.yvonnenavarro.com)), feels women want more emotion in horror. She feels women “look at life, and thus horror, differently, putting more thought and planning into how their actions affect their existence and the existence of others. Men seem to be creatures of impulse — explosive, chaotic action. As a result, “their” horror often tends to be more speedy and gory, more shocking and geared to the external senses. A woman wants horror in terms of the pebble in the pond — how will this one action change everything? And who will it change? How will those peo-

ple *feel* when it does? Women like horror to be more grounded in emotion, sink those poison-tipped fingernails in...but do it all the way to the *heart*.”

“I have found more men like — and write — splatter-style horror than women do,” says **Chelsea Quinn Yarbro** ([www.chesequinnyarbro.com](http://www.chesequinnyarbro.com)), the author of scores of books both scary and not. “I think women are generally more drawn to the atmosphere of horror, the spookiness and uncertainty. I know many men who love a disquieting environment and women who like gore, but they tend to be less often encountered than the other way around.” (Yarbro also voiced what *she* wants from horror: “To be crassly pragmatic for the moment, what *this* woman wants from horror is fame and fortune — particularly the fortune part.”)

Although **Rain Graves** who lives and writes horror in San Francisco, probably agrees with Quinn’s practical desires (who wouldn’t?), she disagrees on gender differences: “As an avid horror reader, I think women want the same things from horror that men want. The key to getting what you want out of horror is to be terrified out of your wits, to the point of not being able to sleep, or getting images permanently imbedded into your psyche. Good horror does this without question and is memorable for that very reason. Psychological or physiological horror is a preference of taste in what evokes the emotion: not gender specific. Remember, being a woman in itself can be a horror. There is no less gore or psychological terror involved in birthing a child, than in the best horror novels. Most men will tell you they’d never want to experience that kind of trauma...”

*Au contraire*, says **Nancy Kilpatrick** author of the *Power of the Blood* vampire series ([www.sff.net/people/nancyk](http://www.sff.net/people/nancyk)): “Fiction and film that carefully walk the edge between the fantastic and the “real” world can totally unnerve me. Blatant horror — the maniac with the chainsaw after the busty blond chick — is stupid. Films like *The Sixth Sense* and *Shadow of the Vampire* work for me because they are intelligent, stylish, and they weave together two realms. For horror fiction to frighten me — and little does — I have to see real people (including supernatural characters) — but not stereotypical “normal” people — driven to the brink of madness by a situation that they are rapidly losing control of. I love it when a writer is skillful enough to draw me into his or her fictional



world to the extent that I forget I’m reading a story. I’m loathe to say it, but although many male horror aficionados I’ve met enjoy the same type of fiction and film I do, there are a lot who go more for the cheesy stuff.”

Even on the frontlines — bookstores — there are no set opinions. **Sue Duncan Howison**, co-owner of Dark Delicacies ([www.darkdel.com](http://www.darkdel.com)) in Burbank, Calif. thinks there is a difference. She finds, generally, that female customers in her store buy jewelry, items such as drawstring bags and scarves, and vampire books. “The guys buy hardcore horror, gifts for their girlfriends and wives, artwork, and furniture. The males are more playful while the females seem to be much more serious about their horror. The females also buy much more of the nonfiction, especially anything wiccan.

But in San Diego, Calif. at Mysterious Galaxy Books ([www.mystgalaxy.com](http://www.mystgalaxy.com)) **Maryelizabeth Hart’s** experience is that “horror readers don’t tend to break down along gender lines. Subgenre lines, yes, but not gender lines.”

Okay. No conclusions. We have fascinating responses from two dozen women (we just didn’t have room to use them all), and it appears no generalizations can be made, even on a personal level. Other than mechanics of craftsmanship — originality, good story, good writing, believable characters or performance, etc. — these women had a diversity of dark desires.

**Ellen Datlow**, a multi-award winning editor of sf, fantasy and horror, wants “to experience a visceral dread of what’s going to happen next and be left with a lingering chill; I want to be creeped out.” That’s not exactly the same thing **Teri A. Jacobs**, whose debut novel, *The Void*, will be out next year, craves, “[In horror, women want the] same things they want from sex: seduction, titillation, thrills, goose bumps, and a mind-blowing, heart-ripping climax.”

So, *The Spook* offers no resolution to the issue and leaves its readers to come to their own conclusions. But first, read three more articulate opinions...

### **Joyce Carol Oates:**

The short answer is: What men want. A heightened visceral experience that possesses some psychological significance. Original stories, images, themes. A sense that, though the vehicle is “horror,” the experience is human and touches an intimate chord. This might happen to me. Or, more horribly, this has already happened to me.

A longer answer might be: Women want in horror what they can’t invariably have in life. Unconsciously, we must want some articulated compensation for “being” women; for “having” a conspicuous biological/sociological status generally conceded to be secondary to that of the predominant sex. Not all women are feminized to the same degree, however, which might account for the fact that some



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“[In horror, women want the] same things they want from sex: seduction, titillation, thrills, goose bumps, and a mind-blowing, heart-ripping climax.”

our own good. We look forward to *The Spook!*

*Joyce Carol Oates has many awards for her highly significant literary contributions. She is the only woman who has ever been honored with the Bram Stoker Lifetime Achievement Award by the Horror Writers Association. Her most recent book is Faithless: Tales of Transgression.*

women (among them writers like myself) seem to as readily identify with male protagonists as with female.

There is a species of genteel mystery/fantasy fiction that is very difficult, in fact impossible, for me to read, which is written to appeal to “women readers.” Obviously, this genre has been enormously successful. (Though no genre is so successful, it is said, as pornography.)

There isn't a “woman writer” in the horror field of any distinction who seems to me to be especially “feminized.” Though the late Angela Carter, for instance, has written witty original feminist horror fantasy, Carter isn't all “feminine”; she's best described as androgynous. Mary Shelley, the young woman creator of *Frankenstein*, seems to us androgynous. Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker, and Franz Kafka in their very different, original ways, might be seen as dramatizing nightmares of (male) impotence and sexual anxiety, yet they seem to us androgynous, too. This is the instinctive ability to sympathize with either, or any, gender.

Yet there are brilliantly unsettling classic writers of horror like H.P. Lovecraft who have virtually no interest in “sympathizing” with human protagonists, only with delineating raw, unmitigated horror, or, as Lovecraft called it, the “weird.”

What do women want? We have no clear idea. We're open to new suggestions. We're adventurous. Perhaps too adventurous for

### **Tabitha King:**

I am no kind of expert on what men or women want from the genre called horror. To be sure, I expect in both instances a *frisson*. I do agree that the primary purpose of the genre is cathartic, or a kind of safe exercise of certain emotions.

Many of the conventions of the genre strike me as ludicrous. I once read some Lovecraft aloud to my children and broke up giggling over the word “mephitic.” On the other hand, there is a passage in *Gerald's Game* by the little-known novelist Stephen King that exquisitely details my own experience of the terror of sleep paralysis or waking nightmare — except that when it happens to me, there is no real monster present. The sleep-paralyzed nightmare that I experienced was agonizing not just because I could not move to protect myself from the phantom terror, but because I woke from it so sick and exhausted.

(Eventually I learned that the phenomenon is a common one and that has a physiological explanation, and my fears of it diminished. Since then, my worst experience with it occurred under the influence of a narcotic I was given after a surgery; I stopped taking the narcotic immediately.)

On reading that passage in *Gerald's Game*, I was pleased at its accuracy and the skill with which the writer evoked the nightmare. I am past being afraid of it. In

fact, fictional horrors of all kinds have little impact on me anymore. They are fictional, after all, and there are more horrors in this world than you can dream, Horatio, and more monsters.

*Tabitha King is the author of eight novels. Her novel Small World will be republished as a hardcover book by Stealth Press in January 2002.*

### **Tia V. Travis:**

What do women want in horror fiction? There's an opening you can drive a Black Maria through. I don't dare to presume to know all like the gypsy fortune telling box at a sideshow: slip a nickel in the slot and out slides a card with all the deepest, darkest, literary desires of every woman who ever opened a book! No, I'd have to say the desires of today's reader are as diverse as the individual psyches of readers themselves — the sum total of our hopes, dreams, loves and deaths, all locked within the haunted rooms of our subconscious minds.

What printed cards can I offer you for your literary nickel, then? First, like some of you, I've written a little and read a lot. Second, like many of you, I have an abiding love of dark literature. Third—? Let's just say I happened to pick up the phone the other afternoon when Anthony Sapienza, publisher of *The Spook*, called and asked me! So much for credentials.

To return to the question, then: As a woman who both reads and writes horror fiction, what do I expect from my reading experience? Well, I like writers with passion for their craft. I like writers who respect their readers. And I like writers with an underlying compassion for others, and for the human condition in general.

There are many wonderfully talented women writing dark fiction today. Quite a few of them won't be found in the horror

section of your local bookstore. I recently read a novel by Rebecca Goldstein, the surprisingly scary winner of a MacArthur Foundation grant. *The Properties of Light: A Novel of Love, Betrayal, and Quantum Physics* is a perfect mathematical equation of sex, science, and obsession, a deeply disturbing psychological study that you will never find mixed in with all those paperbacks with black covers.

Other recommendations? Angela Carter's wickedly beautiful fairy tales for grownups (*The Bloody Chamber*), and the retold fairy tales of lyrical Irish author, Emma Donoghue (*Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*). Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, based on the true story of a 19th century convicted murderess. Sheri Holman, whose novel *The Dress Lodger*, for those who can stomach it, is a sardonic tour de force done up in grand Burke and Hare bodysnatcher style. There are some immensely gifted writers of short fiction, as well, such as Hawaiian poet/writer Kiana Davenport. Davenport's "Bones of the Inner Ear" (reprinted in *Best American Short Stories 2000*), is a gorgeously brutal story of several generations of island women — both in the roles of the abused and the abuser.

But when I really want a wonderful shivers-down-the-spine scare, I'll dust off the classics. Who can resist the archetypal haunted house...the bony hand emerging from the ancestral burial plot...the lure of the Monkey's Paw...the sinister carriage thundering through a mountain pass in the dead of night...the skeleton of the bride accidentally locked in a chest during wedding party hide-and-seek?

It is tales like these I remember checking out of the one-room country library of my childhood. Perhaps they still frighten me because they've been with me the longest: Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw." Sheridan LeFanu's "Uncle Silas." Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (now there's a writer with compassion for the human-or inhuman-condition).

What is it about these books that has the power to reach beyond the grave, to enter our hearts and minds in a way no contemporary dark fiction can attempt? It might have something to do with the passage of time itself. By the simple act of reading, we are able to raise the dead, reviving authors who have long since

turned to dust. As we turn the pages, we can live in their worlds and recreate a past age.

The past itself can be an irresistible draw. There's something about the formal dialogue and antiquated turns of expression in these works, the elaborate set pieces, the lavish descriptions, the more leisurely and introspective pacing...Even the newer classics, perhaps because I grew up with them, still have that hypnotic power over me (though they're told with quite different voices): Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Stephen Kings *Salem's Lot*, and Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*.

Above all, I find that the most deeply satisfying horror fiction — contemporary or classic — makes me *think* about the world I live in. It makes me reevaluate my experiences and impressions of life. Sometimes the writer accomplishes this subtly, gracefully, with the kind of exquisite poetry that leaves the reader breathless with wonder. And sometimes this is accomplished by straightforward, in-your-face storytelling that tightens the narrative noose with each sentence, stories that draw and quarter you from the first get-go, writers who make you see a different viewpoint whether you're willing to or not.

But that's the beauty and magic, the mystery and power of the best dark fiction...the kind of stories that leave splinters in your heart like one of the Snow Queen's ice daggers.

Those daggers may melt, but they surely leave their mark. ~

*Recent stories by Tia V. Travis have been reprinted in the thirteenth and fourteenth annual The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror. Her first collection, Down Here in the Garden and Other Stories, will be published by Subterranean Press in 2002. Its title story has been nominated for an International Horror Guild Award. Though she claims to have lived in a haunted house (documented in the book, Canada Ghost to Ghost), she has since fled to northern California with her husband, writer Norman Partridge.*

#### **About the Art Used to Accompany This Article:**

##### **Lady Macbeth**

Painted in 1784; Oil on canvas; 2.21 x 1.60 m; Louvre, Paris, France

##### **The Nightmare**

Painted in 1781; Oil on canvas; 127 x 102 cm; Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, USA

##### **The Night-Hag Visiting the Lapland Witches**

Painted circa 1796; Oil on canvas; 102 x 126 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA

Swiss-born painter **Henri Fuseli** supposedly ate raw pork chops before sleeping in order to induce the nightmares that inspired his macabre paintings. After emigrating to England in 1764, Fuseli studied in Italy for eight years (1770–78). He exhibited his first version of *The Nightmare* at the Royal Academy in London in 1782. (Also called *The Incubus*, it features the horse more predominantly than in the version we use.) The work was condemned as degenerate and "not art" by critics, but the painting (and its variations) was enormously popular and established Fuseli. The Gothic imagery and fascination with the unconscious made the painting a primary image of the Romantic movement. An engraving of the painting hung in Sigmund Freud's apartment in Vienna in the 1920s.

Fuseli painted and drew many images from the works of Shakespeare including several scenes from *Macbeth* in addition to this painting of Lady Macbeth sleep-walking from the opening scene of play's final act. After seeing David Garrick and Mrs. Pritchard in the play in 1760, he executed a watercolor of the pair in the second scene of Act II when Lady Macbeth seizes the bloodied daggers her husband has just used in regicide. More than 50 years later he painted the same scene even more powerfully and suggestively in oils.

*Night-hag* is an appellation of the Greek goddess Hecate who, in the Middle Ages became identified with witchcraft. The painting, first exhibited in 1799, illustrates a passage from *Paradise Lost*, II (622–666). Sin's hellhounds are equated with those who "follow the night-hag when, called, / In secret, riding through the air she comes." Lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance / With Lapland witches, while the laboring moon Eclipses. ~

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