

5-20-2010

Book of the week: Gothic Histories

Deborah D. Rogers

University of Maine - Main, DRogers@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eng_facpub



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Repository Citation

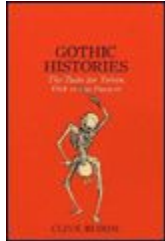
Rogers, Deborah D., "Book of the week: Gothic Histories" (2010). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 17.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eng_facpub/17

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Book of the week: Gothic Histories

Here be monsters, Deborah D. Rogers writes, and they're fun

May 20, 2010



Death is for the unimaginative. Others may conjure vampires, demons, zombies, ghouls, werewolves and, of course, your basic bleeding nun: "A figure entered, and drew near my bed with solemn measured steps. With trembling apprehension I examined this midnight visitor. God almighty! It was the bleeding nun! It was my lost companion! Her face was still veiled, but she no longer held her lamp and dagger. She lifted up her veil slowly. What a sight presented itself to my startled eyes! I beheld before me an animated Corse."

Come to Mama!

Evidence of our taste for the Gothic, this example of imagination run riot in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* is catnip for Clive Bloom. Bloom is a card-carrying public intellectual, a regular media commentator and the prolific author and editor of books on pulp fiction, Poe and Freud, graphic novels, politics and literature, best-sellers, *American Gothic*, *British horror*, *violence and the occult*. In short, he has street cred.

Although he can barely suppress a wink, Bloom has gone over to the dark side with obvious relish. In this exuberant and joyously morbid book, full of generous and juicy quotations, he explores the cultural persistence of Gothic on both sides of the Atlantic. His historical approach interweaves literary, political and cultural analysis with brief biographies documenting all manner of bizarre behaviour. The result is a broad, international and rich consideration of cruelty, violence, torture, misery, decadence, pain, pollution, corruption and decay. Cue the dungeons, prisons, monsters, corpses and banditti! Did I mention that this is an exuberant book?

Allowing little room for nuance or theory, this expansive approach includes as Gothic anything with a hint of the macabre, making it difficult for Bloom (try as he may) to define a genre that represents "continual confrontation with absolute otherness". Here, "Gothic is the map of a border, a mapping of the edge always illuminated by the shadow of night and the rays of the moon".

Bloom's poetic and (it must be said) de trop language itself assumes the Gothic, which is all-encompassing and overwhelming. His effusive style is, perhaps, appropriate for a genre that does not respect boundaries and knows no limits. Eluding definition, the Gothic heightens feelings by exciting dread. The fear is of madness and of "transcendent annihilation". The imagery is disturbing and the thoughts are unpalatable. Although Bloom's Gothic is "erotic in content and displaced into a sensuous geography", if you ask me, such tropes not only eroticise death, they eroticise anxiety.

Since Bloom's notion of Gothic is vast, his scope is wide. His survey of more than two and a half centuries includes painting, opera, film, photography and faux-medieval architecture, as well as literary precursors such as John Dyer, Robert Blair and Thomas Gray. Bloom's encyclopedic sweep encompasses Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Edmund Burke, William Beckford, Mary Shelley, Matthew Lewis, Charles Maturin, Charlotte Dacre, Edgar Allan Poe, the Marquis de Sade and Henry Fuseli. But along with the usual suspects, he includes Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels. Although the heart of the book may be the traditional Gothic, Radcliffe's *Montoni* resides comfortably alongside *Heathcliff*, *Frankenstein's Monster*, *Count Dracula*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Hannibal Lecter*.

Fine distinctions are sacrificed for the outre. For example, Bloom gives short shrift (simply quoting a secondary source) to the important distinction, first observed by Radcliffe, between terror and horror. Scholars regularly apply these useful terms to distinguish between the two types of Gothic: expanding the soul, "terror" (which Radcliffe associated with her own works) resides in hints and uncertainties that are resolved when the supernatural is ultimately explained. Constricting the soul, "horror" (associated with Lewis) is expressed by physical atrocity and demands belief in a supernatural that is not the product of paranoia and can never be explained. This distinction was later famously characterised by Gothic expert Devendra Varma as "awful apprehension" (terror) and "sickening realisation" (horror). Although this comparison of terror and horror has become a critical commonplace, it grounds important scholarship on "the female Gothic" (terror), which goes unnoticed here.

Adding to this confusion is the substitution of Mary Ann Radcliffe for Ann Radcliffe (completely different contemporaries) in the index. Throughout this book, facts and dates - like the Gothic itself - are best approached with caution. For example, *The Monk* did not appear in 1794, but in either 1795 or 1796 (the publication history is complex), and the Allans never legally adopted Poe. Nevertheless, I tended to overlook such mistakes (not to mention typos) because they are less important than the many interesting and credible things Bloom has to say.

Originating in an aristocratic ennui that sought excitement before it was shocked out of complacency by the guillotine, early Gothic appeals to our yearning to "transcend the mundane": "To be haunted ... is a means of imagining an 'elsewhere'

into which we step as readers." This "elsewhere" is peopled by the exquisitely sensitive, who "worry about everything, and so they might in their circumstances, because everything is or could be significant ... (A) portrait which is veiled or distant music or footsteps thrill and terrify, which give notice of the sublime and exquisite faculties of mind of the central character." Gothic protagonists must "'resonate' with the vibrations of nature ... This mental and emotional flight from quotidian realities ensures gothic heroes and heroines have such acute hearing, taste and feeling that even life itself becomes painful, because it is imperfect and unutterably dull."

Bloom finds that such extreme sensibility, codified in the late-18th-century Gothic, has been adopted by sensitive artists ever since. But there is a dangerous and morbid side of "exquisite melancholy", which Bloom explores especially well in its German iteration. Sensitive souls responded to Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which opened the emotional floodgates and made suicide fashionable.

He also has an interesting spin on another fraught aspect of Gothic, nature worship (associated with the Sublime), which grew into a cult. Bloom focuses on Radcliffe's descriptions of scenery in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), where her heroine cannot "restrain her transport" (Radcliffe's words) as she surveys the landscape. Danger lurks here since Emily's "transport" comes from "NATURE not God, who is a mere inference of the landscape".

This orgasmic Gothic, if you will, leads to the divine Marquis: "Romantic Gothicism had unwittingly discovered the path to Hell and no one knew that road better than the Marquis de Sade." In *Justine* (1791), virtue is not rewarded, but debauched, raped and sodomised. Although Bloom allows that de Sade's work may not itself be Gothic, he convincingly argues that it serves both as a commentary on Radcliffe's novels and as a major influence on *The Monk*, on Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and, most interestingly, on *Frankenstein* (1818), where another innocent Justine is guillotined.

Introducing new ideas and synthesising a good deal of scholarship, this colourful survey of the inception and development of Gothic is accessible, fun and over the top. In exaggerated Gothic fashion, however, Bloom may be too dressed up for the party.

THE AUTHOR

Clive Bloom is emeritus professor of English and American studies at [Middlesex University](#). He currently divides his academic time between New York University and the [University of Notre Dame](#). He is also a consultant editor with Libris Press and Palgrave Macmillan.

Educated at the [University of Southampton](#) and the University of Essex, he says that he came into political study through the study of culture. At one point, he was academic adviser to *Modern Review*, the magazine that promised "low culture for highbrows". However this relationship was short-lived, and he later revealed in an

interview that he considered editor Toby Young and chief financier Peter York to be "pretentious arseholes".

He has a strong affinity with London, and has written articles for the Evening Standard and a book on the history of violence in the city.

Gothic Histories: The Taste for Terror, 1764 to the Present

By Clive Bloom

Continuum, 224pp

ISBN [9781847060501](#) and 0518

Published 1 May 2010

Times Higher Education Book of the Week feature article on Clive Bloom's Gothic Histories: The Taste for Terror, 1764 to the Present. The Times Higher Education 20 May 2010: 50-51.

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=41163>

4