UNSETTLING CHAPTERS:

31 DAYS OF DREAD

by VINCE DARCANGELO

Unsettling Chapters: 31 Days of Dread

and “Literary Subversions”

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Unsettling Chapters: 31 Days of Dread

Literary Subversions

By Vince Darcangelo

This past October, Ensuing Chapters, the book blog of *Transgress Magazine,* embarked on a Halloween-themed series of blog posts, **Unsettling Chapters: 31 Days of Dread**. Each day we discussed, reviewed or recommended a different work of literature that, well, unsettled the reader or evoked a feeling of dread. This did not necessarily mean horror fiction per se, though there was plenty of that on the list. It also included transgressive literature, Russian classics, audio horror and transcendent authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates and Michael Chabon, who obliterate such classifications.

It was a lot of fun, and now that it's over, we've decided to collect it all in one handy PDF for your disturbed reading pleasure. Because we know that Halloween is a mindset, not an event, and some of us don't need a holiday to read a scary book.

With that in mind, we hope you enjoy the following book discussions. We've featured a wide mix of writers in this collection: ones you'll know well, others you won't and some that may surprise you.

As always, thanks for reading, and hopefully you'll find these works as troubling as we do. If you notice that a favorite unsettling read of yours is not included here, please suggest it for next year's Days of Dread. Or simply recommend it for general reading. We're always in the market for good reads.

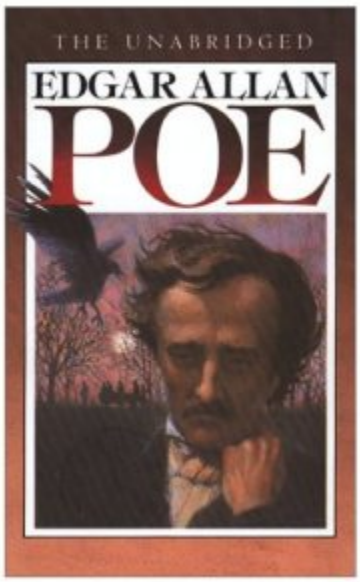
For more book discussions, as well as original fiction, essays, reviews and artwork, visit *Transgress Magazine* (www.transgressmagazine.com) and Ensuing Chapters (www.ensuingchapters.com), where you can download issues and subscribe to our RSS feed.

You can also stop by Smashwords (www.smashwords.com/books/view/173214) to download a free copy of *Transgress Magazine*'s first ebook release, "Skull City"—a seasonal short story that makes for the ultimate Halloween read.

And now: On to the disquiet…

Oct. 1

Edgar Allan Poe



If you're like me, autumn is a state of mind rather than a season. The world is rich with color and wonder, at once thrilling and reflective. It's a reminder that, yes, everything dies, but that, like the turning leaves, we are most beautiful at the last.

And if you're like me, Halloween is not a day to dress up as somebody else, but rather the one day a year that the rest of the world sees things *your* way.

With that in mind, starting today, ***Ensuing Chapters*** and ***Transgress*** digital magazine are teaming up to make this autumn even better. To supplement your Halloween horrors, each day, from Oct. 1 through Samhain, we'll be posting reviews and discussions of some of the most frightening books ever printed.

Think of it as a literary advent calendar for All Hallows' Eve!

We're calling it **Unsettling Chapters**. Oooooh!

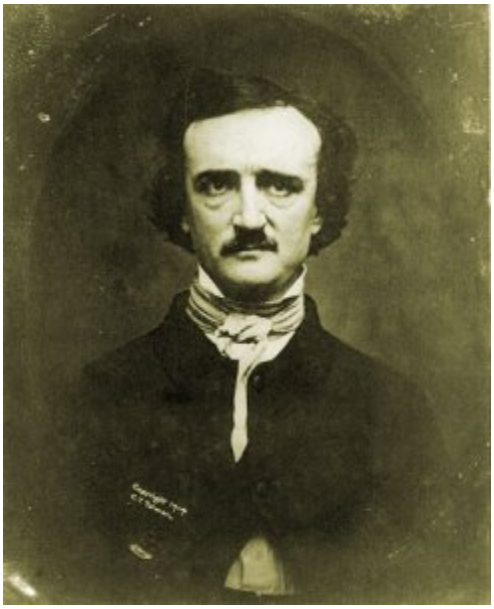
Some of these will be short stories, some novels, and whenever possible, we'll include a link for readers to access works that are available online.

A few disclaimers:

To be clear, we're talking about ***terrifying reads***. This does not necessarily mean *horror*, though expect plenty of the genre to make the list. There will be short scares, epic thrillers, transgressive mysteries, literary horrors and more than a few classics. The common thread is that they will all be unsettling in some way.

It's also worth noting that this is not a "best of" or any attempt at a definitive list. This is simply a collection of a few dozen literary works that have kept me up at night. There are plenty of books out there that I haven't read yet. Please, offer suggestions of titles I've missed. I'm always looking for more good reads for myself… and for next year's list.

We begin this series with Halloween's go-to author, **Edgar Allan Poe**. It's difficult to actually specify a particular book of his, as there are hundreds of collections of his work, themed and otherwise, sometimes complete, sometimes not. You really can't go wrong with any of them, and for our purposes, we're going to use my personal favorite, a leather-bound, early-'90s edition, ***The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe***.



It's just not autumn without a dirge or two from Poe. This anthology gives you plenty to choose from—the ghoulish, the grotesque and those gloomy Gothic tales that warm the soul. Of course, his classics are all here, such as my favorite, "The Masque of the Red Death" (which terrified me as a child and chills me as an adult with its

social commentary). There's "Hop-Frog," the ultimate revenge tale, and the haunting decay of "The Fall of the House of Usher."

And Poe reminds us that love is eternal in one of his lesser-known and most demented pieces, "Berenice," which revels in both the endearment and dangers of amateur dentistry.

Poe's works are in the public domain, and you can download all of them for your e-reader at **Project Gutenberg**. Stories can also be read online through the **Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore**, including the following recommended texts:

"Berenice"

"The Fall of the House of Usher"

"Hop-Frog"

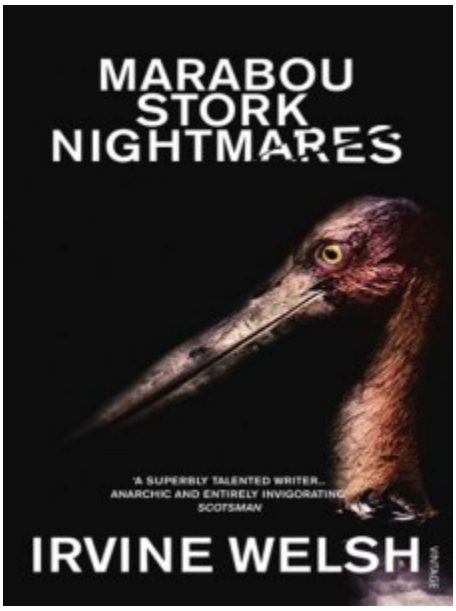
"The Masque of the Red Death"

Parts of this post are adapted from an earlier article of mine, "Thirteen horrifying reads for Halloween," *which appeared in the* Boulder Camera *in 2008*.

Oct. 2

Irvine Welsh: *Marabou Stork Nightmares*

For all the horror film and literature I consume, people sometimes assume that I scare easy. Well, not so much. Horror has its visceral thrills, but for me, it's more of an aesthetic experience. I enjoy the atmosphere more than the scares, and find humor in the most gruesome onscreen butchering. In general, I'm a tough nut to disturb.



Which brings us to ***Marabou Stork Nightmares***.

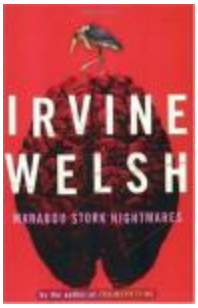
Don't consider this a recommendation. Consider this a challenge.

This novel has the distinction of being the only book that has kept me up at nights as an adult. The reader *survives* this book as much as they enjoy it. Be warned, this is a tense work of psychological brutality that forces you to confront human nature. It's a case study of devolutionary psychopathology, of working class nihilism and the addictive lure of violence. And a stellar piece of literature you'll never forget.

Of course, **Irvine Welsh** is best known for his debut novel, *Trainspotting*. *Marabou Stork* is his second full-length, first published in 1995. The story is narrated by Roy Strang, a comatose soccer hooligan with a troubled past. We experience the story from inside Strang's head, which creates a narrative as compelling as it is disjointed. He oscillates through multiple levels of consciousness, which are represented visually with different fonts that run forward,

back and sometimes up the page. This textual manipulation further immerses the reader in the nightmare.

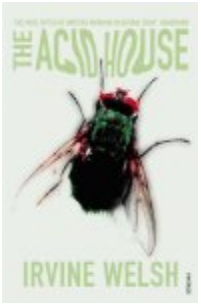
When closest to death, Strang endures wild hallucinations centered on a safari in which he is hunting the marabou stork, a vicious scavenger that will eat other animals alive. Strang's life story weaves throughout this psychedelic and troubling narrative, until the fractured shards of his memory come back together.



I once lent *Marabou Stork Nightmares* to a friend, an addict who was well-acquainted with the back alleys of hell, and he returned it two days later. He'd finished the book in less than 40 hours, in part because it was so good that he couldn't stop reading—and in part because he was too troubled to sleep.

Any book that elicits this type of visceral response is a must-read for Halloween.

Welsh has also written a number of horrific short stories, most of which appear in his stellar collection ***The Acid House***. Recommended stories include, "The Shooter," "Eurotrash" and the delightful "Snuff."



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Oct. 3

Paul Auster: *Man in the Dark*

One of my all-time favorite records is Shotgun Messiah's ***Violent New Breed***, a dystopic industrial-metal assault that is as much manifesto as music. What you hear within its tracks is the sound of your inner demons clawing their way out through your throat.

That's also how I would describe the writing of **Paul Auster**, best known for existentialist works such as *The Invention of Solitude*, *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *The New York Trilogy*. These grim tomes remind us that it is not the dark we are afraid of, but rather being left alone inside our own heads, which run riot in the small hours of night.

Which brings us to 2008's ***Man in the Dark***.

In this short novel, aging writer August Brill struggles with insomnia and attempts to lull himself to sleep by creating a story about a man named Owen Brick. It's a dystopian tale of senseless war and a fractured America, which provides an alternate history to 9/11. The narrative of *Man in the Dark* shifts between Brill's nocturnal counterfactuals and the despair of his waking existence. Recently widowed, he shares a house with his daughter and granddaughter (also recently widowed, in a manner of speaking).

The despair deepens as the source of the familial insomnia is revealed.

Despite being written in the first-person, *Man in the Dark* has the texture of a third-person narrative. Auster balances the two narratives (the waking and the counterfactual) along with interactions with other family members that expand plot points and keep us engaged in the story without focusing on the singular event driving this piece.

And of course, the fictional narrative within the narrative allows Brill to reveal insights into his life without the bias or sentimentality of confession. He uses Owen Brick as a stand-in for his own life.

When the climax comes, it feels inevitable. Auster achieves this result not with a clever twist (although there is an affecting shock at the end) but through the groundwork he lays throughout the novel. He transforms a simple first-person narrative into something more complex and complete, much as a reader would expect from a multi-character, third-person POV.

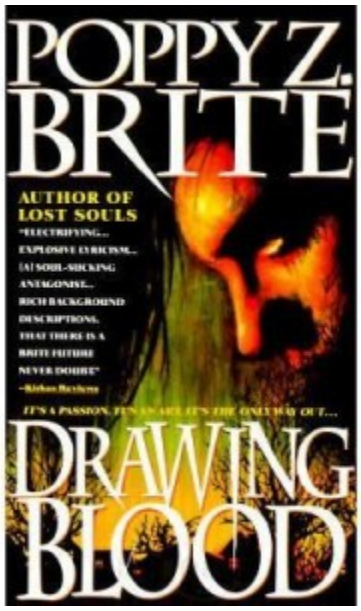
Most important for our purposes, Auster has penned a haunting work that reminds us that there is only one thing to fear in the dark—our own mind.

I recommend that you devour this book with *Violent New Breed* playing in the background.

And let those inner demons do their worst.

Oct. 4

Poppy Z. Brite



When **Poppy Z. Brite** published her debut novel, *Lost Souls*, in 1992, the young writer was heralded as horror's fastest rising star. Twenty years later, in semi-retirement from fiction writing, Brite's career has taken unexpected turns, and she has quietly put together one of the more interesting literary careers of contemporary authors.

For one thing, that's the last usage of the pronoun "she" you will read in this piece. Brite, who has always prominently featured gay and bisexual characters in her writing, identifies as a man and has begun transitioning. Brite prefers to be addressed with male pronouns, and we are happy to oblige.

With that out of the way, let's get to important matters: his writing.

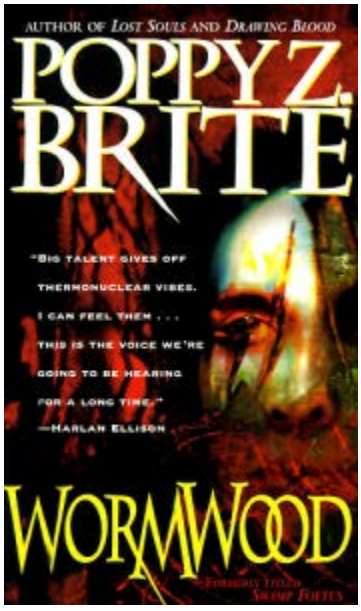
From 1992-94, Brite published two merciless novels and a stellar collection of short stories (*Wormwood*). He didn't make a splash in the horror world. It was an atomic bomb. And just at the right time. The genre had grown stale, with old masters losing steam and horror cinema bottoming out. Anne Rice was probably the exception as far as freshness and popularity, but her books and films were too appealing to the mainstream to appease darker tastes.

And then there was Brite.

Brite attracted a loyal goth following with his fractured tales of loners, transients and outcasts of all variety. This was horror for the disenfranchised, and his books made heroes of society's rejects who found themselves drawn, through their outsider-ness, into fugues of violence and evil.

My favorite of his books is 1993's *Drawing Blood*, which features two homeless youth—cartoonist Trevor McGee and computer hacker Zachary Bosch—who cross paths and form a romantic bond inside an abandoned house. Together, they are tortured by and confront Trevor's haunted past (along with a little help from the music of Charlie Parker).

It gets even better: Legend has it that, in 1994, a man firebombing a mail store in Los Angeles set himself on fire. Inside the store, waiting to be shipped, were original copies of *Drawing Blood*. The books supposedly absorbed the smell of his burning flesh and became collector's items, with copies of the $7 paperback selling for hundreds of dollars.



But this novel doesn't need urban legends to succeed. Brite is at full-strength in this novel. He captures the humanity of his outsider characters, the weirdness of his short fiction and the depravity of the world with both existential and supernatural elements.

Speaking of Brite's short fiction, ***Wormwood***, his first collection, is another of my Halloween staples, especially the tales "Angels" and "His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood."

Following this remarkable opening run of books, he published *Exquisite Corpse*, which eased back on the gothic elements, but retained the horror. In later years, Brite has kept the dark

but added comedy to his writing. He has a series of novels set in restaurants, and his nonfiction appears regularly in the *Times-Picayune* and other publications.

Brite is currently semi-retired from fiction writing, but fans (both old and new) can still relish in his early works each Halloween.

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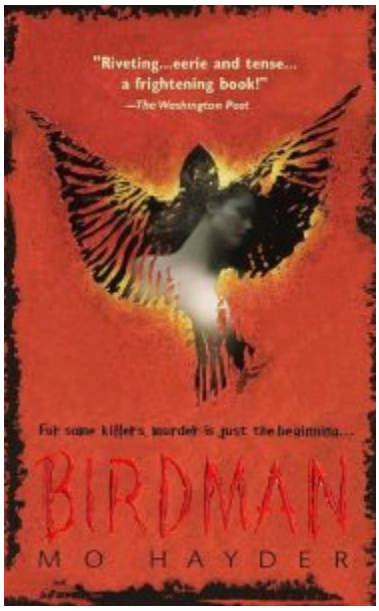
Oct. 5

Mo Hayder: *Birdman*



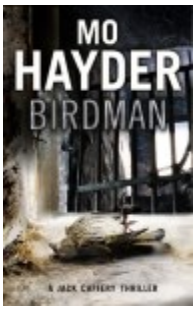
You're more likely to find English author Mo Hayder's 2000 debut novel, ***Birdman***, filed under crime or mystery than horror, but don't let that fool you. This book is more gruesome, sadistic and delivers more chills than almost anything you'll find on the horror shelves.

Birdman contains just about all the elements a fan of subversive literature could ask for: graphic violence, necrophilia, torture, mutilation, the creepy next-door neighbor, the tormented detective with a troubled past, an unsolved child murder that haunts the entire tale and you'll never guess how the birds come into play.

Befitting its tagline, "For some killers, murder is just the beginning..." this book will disturb the most hardened of readers.

Hayder published a sequel, ***The Treatment***, themed around child pornography, which futhered the torment of her protagonist, Jack Caffery, and his quest to find his missing brother. Unfortunately, *The Treatment* failed to hit the same high notes as *Birdman*, but was bold enough to leave us with a white-knuckle cliffhanger that left fans clamoring for resolution.

However, Hayder went another direction with subsequent books, *Tokyo* and *Pig Island*, which are stand-alone novels unconnected with the Jack Caffery series. They failed to live up to the

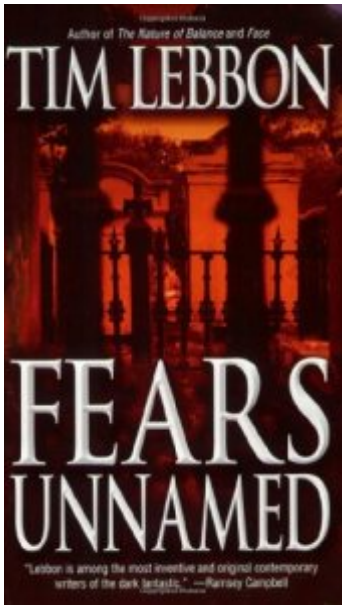


promise of her debut, but Hayder showed a willingness to push limits, taking us to gangland Japan and to the remote island home of a reclusive Scottish cult.

In 2008, Hayder returned to Jack Caffery with *Ritual*, the first in her Walking Man series. The fourth installment of the series is set for publication in 2013.

Oct. 6

Tim Lebbon: *Fears Unnamed*



Setting can be a literary minefield. When used correctly, it can create affecting works of art (think *The Shining*, *The House of the Seven Gables* or J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*). But sometimes a writer can become so fixated on setting that they produce a literary still life that is beautiful to look at, but what about the characters? If two people are having a conversation on a bridge, do we really need a three-page description of the bridge?

Probably not, but when setting works to *complement* the narrative, it strengthens the reader's bond to a location. My favorite book is Stephen King's *The Stand*, mostly because of the first-rate character development: Larry's sadness, Stu and Franny's determination, the loneliness of Harold and Nadine. But I can still see those bodies crucified to telephone poles along the Nevada highway. When I moved to Boulder, Colorado, I walked along Pearl and Arapahoe Streets, imagining them the way King did in the novel. During a recent trip to New York, I took a drive through the Lincoln Tunnel and could think only of Larry's gut-wrenching subterranean escape from a New York ravaged by Captain Trips.

Speaking of stellar post-apocalyptic settings, another master is British writer **Tim Lebbon**.

Lebbon is a highly decorated author of horror, fantasy and sci-fi. He'll soon be releasing a new novel in the U.K., *Coldbrook*, and a collection of short fiction, *Nothing as it Seems*, but for this Halloween, we're recalling his 2004 collection, ***Fears Unnamed***.

The four novellas that make up this collection all rely heavily on setting, be it a dystopian landscape covered by a strange, unceasing snow; the interior of a plane crashing into the frigid ocean; or the homey English countryside under attack from some bizarre threat.

The story that stands out the most for me in this collection is "Remnants," in which the narrator, Peter, is summoned by an old friend to join him in some unidentified, far-off desert. The friend, Scott, is an archeologist and has discovered what he believes to be a city of the dead. The story is more fantasy than horror, and in truth is as much an adventure tale in the vein of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* and H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*.

Once there, the city becomes a central character:

"Spread across the floor of the depression in the land, seemingly growing from the ground, lay the remains of several large and dozens of smaller buildings. Sand and grit was skirted around bases and against walls, drifted up and through openings that may have been windows, may have been wounds."

Setting takes on a greater role as we descend into the city's streets. On the one hand, it's a psychological riddle, a lost city occupied by ghosts, and is symbolic of Scott, who has gone mad in part due to the death of his son. On the other hand, the city is a physical place, and to navigate its throughways Peter must learn its history and overcome his fear of the spirits residing there.

The city becomes magical yet suspenseful, and through Peter's efforts it becomes a place of memory and memorial. The buried dead are not forgotten here. This is a place inhabited by all the interred things, and the pain of it is too much for Peter to bear.

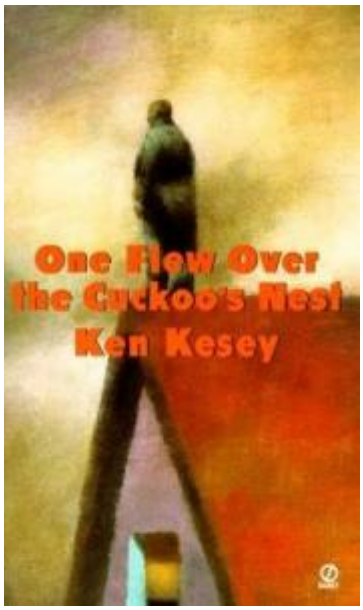
He has found the place where all the hurt is buried, and ultimately Peter's antagonist is not his old friend, but the city itself. "I plunged into the tunnel without a backward glance. If I turned I may have seen something impossible to ignore, a sight so mind-befuddling that it would petrify me, leaving me there to turn slowly to stone or a pillar of salt."

Lebbon's achievement is that he not only takes us to this otherworldly place, but makes it somehow familiar.

And for those who've had enough of the summer heat, dig into "White," a fictional freeze-out that delivers chills in more ways than one.

Oct. 7

Institutionalization



A timeless trope of horror media is the mental institution, be it *Halloween*'s Smith's Grove, Alice Cooper's *From the Inside*, Dr. Seward's sanitarium in *Dracula* or any of a thousand basic cable ghost-hunting shows. And it's not difficult to understand why.

There isn't any part of a mental institution that *can't* be manipulated to induce terror. Of course, there is the fear of the inmates, but also the fear of the doctors or the administration (see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). And a rundown asylum serves as an excellent backdrop in any creative work.

But my diagnosis is that the greatest fear we have of institutions is something more primal. It's not the fear of the inmates or the caretakers or the troubled spirits that haunt the Rubber Room. It's much simpler than that. It's the fear of confinement, the horror of institutionalization.

That's probably not much of a newsflash. Shocker: most people are afraid of being locked up in a tiny cell and treated like they're criminally insane! But I think what I'm getting at is the universality of mental illness and its close relationship with horror. I bet that more people are afraid of losing control of their faculties than are afraid of death.

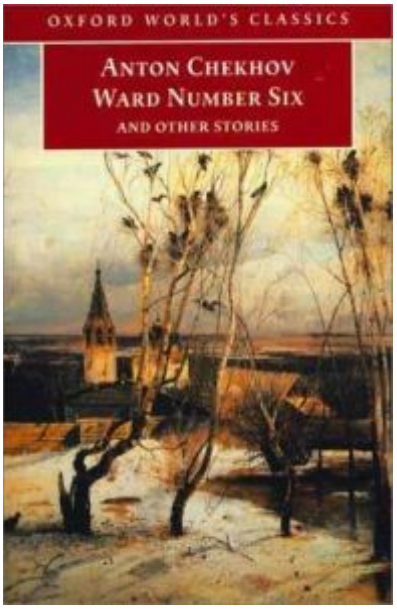
I would also guess that a fair number of horror writers and readers can credit their love of the genre to their own struggles with inner demons. (For a great social history of institutionalization, read Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*.)

Prior to becoming a journalist, I worked for seven years at an inpatient detox facility in Boulder, Colorado. My experiences there were ineffable, and from the time I started as an addictions counselor to the present, I have tried to write about events there through both fiction and nonfiction.

Every attempt has been a false start.

Turns out, it's a tough world to describe without becoming sensationalistic, sappy or overly scientific.

However, there are two writers who capture the horror of institutionalization in a magnificent way: Russian heavyweights **Anton Chekhov** and **Fyodor Dostoyevsky**.



Let's start with Chekhov's novella, ***Ward No. 6***, which draws us into this world almost as if the reader were an incoming patient. The first four chapters provide an overview of the institution and introduce its inhabitants. We meet the main character, Dr. Andrey Yefimitch, in chapter five, and here, we gain fresh perspective. We switch from patient to doctor as he becomes our lens through which we view the mentally ill, most strikingly through his interactions with Ivan Dmitritch. Yefimitch evolves through their awkward meetings. We feel his

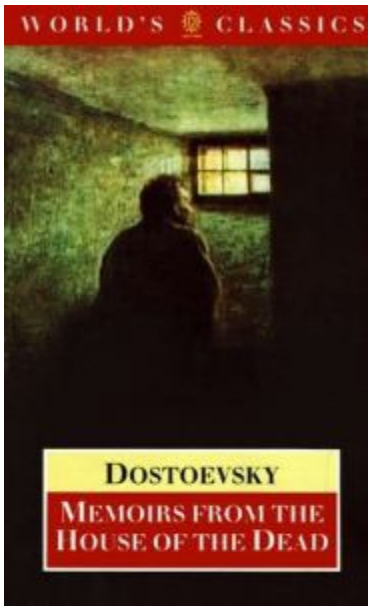
internal struggle with life both inside and outside the ward, and watch him blur the ever-permeable line between the diagnostician and the diagnosed.

It's not surprising. In the high-stress environment of an institution, it is inevitable that one *becomes* part of the environment. As Yefimitch says, "'I am not ill at all, it's simply that I have got into an enchanted circle which there is no getting out of.'"

This gets at what I believe lies beneath the surface of every creative work featuring an institution, be it a mental hospital, a prison, a nursing home. We're not afraid of the inhabitants. We're afraid of joining them.

On par with *Ward No. 6* is Dostoyevsky's ***The House of the Dead***, which is based on the author's four years incarcerated in a Siberian work camp. Here, Dostoyevsky gives us one of his darkest and most direct novels.

The first thing that strikes me is that *The House of the Dead* begins not with the institution, but with the setting around it. We get an idyllic description of Siberia, which is hardly what one would expect with a Russian prison narrative. And like Chekhov, Dostoyevsky provides us with a guide: Alexandr Petrovitch Goryanchikov.



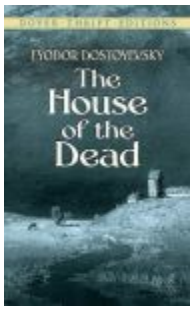
We meet the city on page one, the protagonist on page two, and through the latter we enter the prison itself.

Another daring decision Dostoyevsky makes concerns the narration. Despite being told through the lens of an inmate, the narrator is not telling *his* own story. Instead, the novel consists of pages retrieved from Alexandr

Petrovitch's notes, as discovered by the narrator and offered along with his comments and perceptions.

There are two advantages to this that I see. The first is that the distance allows for dispassion. By serving as a filter between us and Alexandr Petrovitch, the narrator avoids sentimentality and sensationalism. The second is that by using the found manuscript, we still have the thrill of suspense. If the narrator were telling his own story, we'd at least know that he is alive at the time of the telling. But with a found manuscript, we're wondering throughout what may or may not happen to its author.

The manuscript also gives us a segmented view of Petrovitch's life in prison rather than his entire incarceration story. While there is a linear flow to the book (beginning with Petrovitch's entrance to prison and concluding with his release), the arranging of the book by themes allows Dostoyevsky more freedom when fictionalizing his incredible experiences.



Both books weigh heavy on the reader, but this does not, I believe, imply despair. At once dreary and hopeful, the texts blur the line between inside and out, and cause the reader to reconsider preconceived notions of institutions. In *Ward No. 6*, we see the institution as a reflected image, as those on the outside find themselves drawn inward. In *The House of the Dead*, we get a first-hand account of the lives of the incarcerated. Though describing the outcast, Dostoyevsky startles the reader with a milieu that's surprisingly familiar.

It leaves one rethinking the nature of institutions and builds on our fear of captivity. What role would we assume in a Dostoyevskian drama? Are we the doctor? The visitor? The inmate?

Sure, the traditional horror memes are nice, but true terror oozes from the pages of *Ward No. 6* and *The House of the Dead*. These are heavier reads, and you might not finish them by Halloween. But for my money, there aren't many settings more frightening than a 19th century Siberian prison.

Oct. 8

Ryu Murakami: *Piercing*

Ryu Murakami is on the cutting edge of Japanese literary fiction *and* horror fiction (and the Japanese have a knack for producing quality horror). Murakami (not to be confused with Haruki Murakami, a dark author in his own right) might be best known to American audiences for the disturbing film adaptation of his novel *Audition*.

What I like about his fiction is both its incredibly dark, disturbing qualities, but also his exploration of psychological distress. The finest example of this is the short novel, ***Piercing***.

Piercing begins with Kawashima Masayuki, a new father, suffering from insomnia and staring down into the crib of his sleeping daughter. He is sweating and holding an ice pick. Yes, an ice pick. Every night he repeats this ritual, fighting the urge to stab his child with the weapon.

He doesn't say it by name, but Murakami is writing about a very common, yet misunderstood condition: obsessive-compulsive disorder.

People unfamiliar with OCD often recognize it or ridicule it by its popular caricatures (comically repetitive actions), while in truth, these outward manifestations (or compulsions) are *symptoms* rather than the disease.

The true horror of OCD lies in the obsessions, which are more difficult to portray in books and cinema. Here, the sufferer visualizes upsetting fantasies: committing acts of violence against loved ones; performing self-mutilation; throwing oneself off a high structure.

Or holding an ice pick to the throat of a sleeping child.

It's easy to see why the truth about OCD is seldom discussed and not really understood. The obsessions are irrational and disparaging (who would want to hurt themselves or their loved ones?) and therefore difficult (and shameful) to explain or discuss. And even once you get over those hang-ups, are you any closer to understanding why the brain would act as its own worst enemy?

As someone interested in narratives of psychological distress (and someone with OCD) I find this to be a rich subject matter. What I love about Murakami is that he explores this disorder without naming it in his novel. Rather than explaining away Kawashima's actions, the reader is left struggling to figure out why he has such twisted fantasies.

Of course, a great novelist will only use this as a launch pad for a deeper story. Murakami

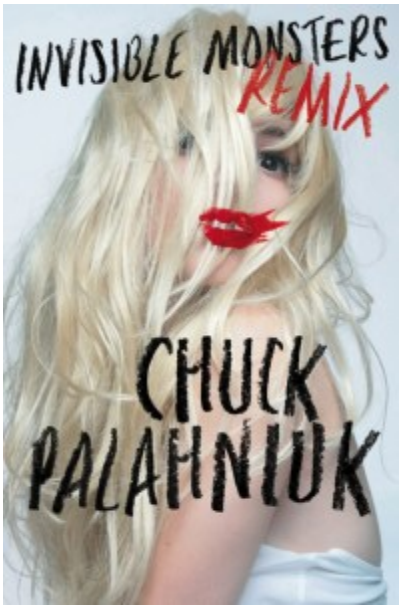
sends his protagonist on a journey. The result is a surreal and disturbing trip into one man's psychosis. In fact, we seldom return to the catalytic event that spurred this journey. Instead, we follow Kawashima's descent into a nightmare world with numerous twists, trysts and the surreal imagery associated with

Japanese horror.

And as the title suggests, Murakami explores various uses of the word “piercing,” from ice picks to body art—but especially the penetrating nature of our darkest insights.

Oct. 9

Chuck Palahniuk: *Invisible Monsters*



A close cousin of horror is transgressive fiction. These are novels, often dark or dystopian, that break cultural taboos for the sake of social commentary and satire. Considered to be a working-class style of literature, classical examples of transgressive literature include the Marquis de Sade, George Bataille, some work by Dostoyevsky and the Beat writers. Contemporary examples include Bret Easton Ellis and Irvine Welsh. Currently, the definitive author of transgressive fiction is **Chuck Palahniuk**.

I have long admired Palahniuk's writing, both for its satire and transgressive nature, and ***Invisible Monsters***, one of his earliest works, is considered to be among his most disturbing and poignant. It's an endless buffet of sexual disorientation, body modification, gender dysphoria, self-mutilation, fame-mongering, familial dysfunction, violence and manufactured reality.

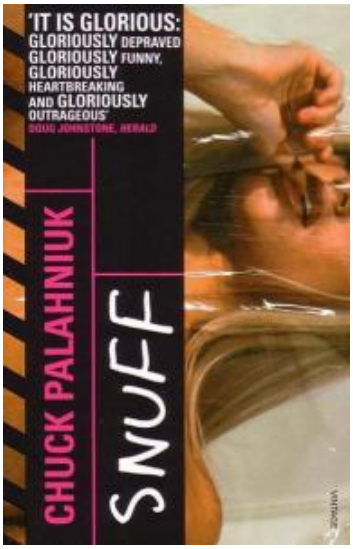
But at its core, *Invisible Monsters* is about identity. Who determines one's identity? Who defines who or what one is or is not? This can be sexual, biological, superficial. Identity is a personal, subjective thing. It's also one that manifests physically. For these characters, mutilation is the method of self-expression, either by accident (Brandy), by gender reconstruction surgery (Evie) and by their own hand (the narrator, Shannon).

Palahniuk exaggerates these tropes to the degree that they become fabulistic, and because of that, he had difficulty getting the book published. At the time, Palahniuk was a bit of a mystery. Here's a book that begins with a spinning shotgun and a room on fire, and it ends with… Well, time is a relative component of *Invisible Monsters*, so who the hell knows where it ends!

What we've learned of Palahniuk in the ensuing years is that his over-the-top approach is a monstrous distortion of our culture. In this way, he teaches us the value of the grotesque in satire. Shannon is a fashion model who intentionally disfigures herself, Brandy a homosexual who uses an accident as pretense for gender reassignment surgery. These are people who tear themselves apart, and the pieces don't quite fit when put back together again.

In life, the deepest wounds are the ones that are self-inflicted, and it is the characters' own hand that pours in the salt.

As if the novel wasn't surreal enough already, this summer Palahniuk released an updated version of *Invisible Monsters* featuring new and rearranged chapters.

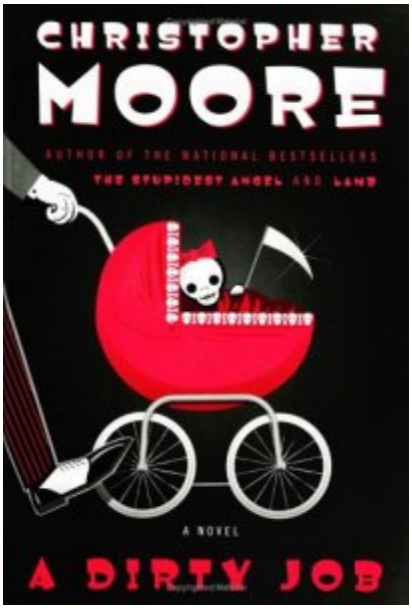


And if that's not enough to help you reach your disturbance quota, check out his collection of loosely connected stories, ***Haunted***, one of my favorites. Full of splatterpunk thrills, it's a bloodbath worthy of the Grand Guignol.

His 2008 novel, ***Snuff***, is another ick-inducing read, this time taking on the world of pornography. You can read my review of it here.

Oct. 10

Christopher Moore: *A Dirty Job*



OK, we've featured some dark selections these first couple weeks of **Unsettling Chapters**, and even darker territory remains.

For a breath of fresh air, today we'll discuss a comedic piece, Christopher Moore's ***A Dirty Job***. As much a humor writer as a horror writer, Moore (perhaps best known for *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*) penned this 2006 tome in response to the passing of his parents.

The light-hearted result is the tale of Beta Male Charlie Asher, who wakes up one day to find himself a Grim Reaper (we learn that Death relies on independent contractors to keep up with demand).

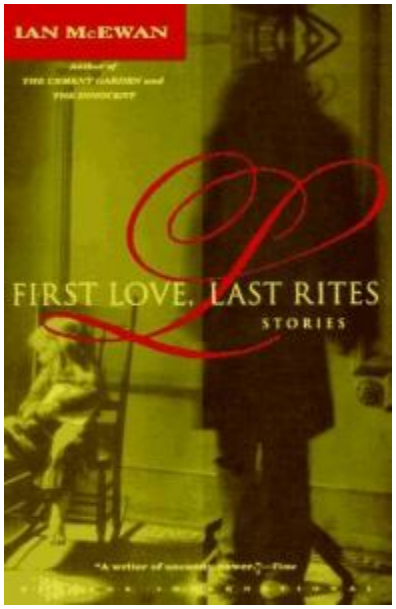
Hijinks ensue when he must protect his daughter Sophie (who has two hellhounds for pets) from the forces of evil. This is a rib-tickling romp playing off of traditional horror themes, and another fine effort from Moore, whom one might consider the Tom Robbins of the horror realm.

He has a long history of blending horror tropes with hilarity, dating back to his 1992 debut, Practical Demonkeeping. For those who prefer vampires with wit as well as bite, try his trilogy of *Bloodsucking Fiends*, *You Suck* and *Bite Me: A Love Story*.

Parts of this post are adapted from an earlier article of mine, “Thirteen horrifying reads for Halloween,” *which appeared in the* Boulder Camera *in 2008*.

Oct. 11

Ian McEwan



This feature is dedicated to dark, existential works that disturb the reader's foundation. For me, this is atmospheric writing with human monsters rather than otherworldly—that explore the darkness within rather than without.

So who better to feature, of course, than **Ian McEwan**.

McEwan was an early influence of mine, bringing a smart, lyrical sensibility to stories of depravity and darkness. He's better known these days for his more subdued novels, but in the early days he was known for producing a twisted brand of literary dysfunction. None so dark as the offerings in his first collection of short stories, ***First Love, Last Rites***, in particular its disturbing opening tale, "**Homemade**."

It's a touching tale of sex-crazed adolescence and a boy determined to lose his virginity. Worried he won't be very good in bed, and that the woman he desires would lose interest, he decides to practice on his younger sister.

OK, those who haven't read this story might think there should have been a "spoiler alert" before that last part. But what makes this story most disturbing is not the horror of the act of incest and sexual manipulation of a minor. It's the ease with which McEwan spins the yarn—or rather the ease with which the reader assumes the voice of the narrator.

I have read this story a few times and tried to understand what makes it so troublesome, and I believe it comes down to these five elements:

Strong narration. "Homecoming" is told from the perspective of its "monster," and this is a great example of the power of first-person narrative. With a third-person POV, it's easy to dismiss a child rapist as a villain. But, as with much of Poe's writing, it's much harder to dismiss the character when you're inside their head. The brother follows a "logical" thought process, slowly luring the reader deeper into his psychosis.

Passivity. The narrator is not the seeker of forbidden pleasures—at first. It is the narrator's best friend who introduces him to alcohol, cigarettes, shoplifting, masturbation and, ultimately, the race toward sexual initiation that inspires him to rape his sister. He appears to be a relatively innocent and endearing kid—this is McEwan's trap.

Normalcy. McEwan is the master at presenting the abnormal as normal, and treating evil as a continuum rather than a separate reality. He walks us through the psychological process of a regular teenager who devolves to the point that he commits incest. What makes the horror so disturbing is that it actually makes sense! (At least in the world the narrator devises.)

Unflinching. To quote Akira Kurosawa: "The role of the artist is to not look away." McEwan never flinches as he guides us step by step through the seduction of Connie, the sister, first through childhood games and finally through play-acting "Mummies and Daddies." It's a very, very difficult read. Expect to do a lot of cringing.

Inevitability. There is no neck-bending reveal in "Homemade." The narrator declares his intentions nine pages from the end, and the power of the ending is not its surprise but its inevitability. Of course it ended this way. It had to. The worst is that we're left with no

resolution, only the realization that the characters are now stuck in this world where this awful thing happened. Now what?

And isn't that the way all unsettling fiction ends? Now what? It's not death that's scary. It's the life that follows. It's the existential anguish that cries, "How can I go on living after this?"

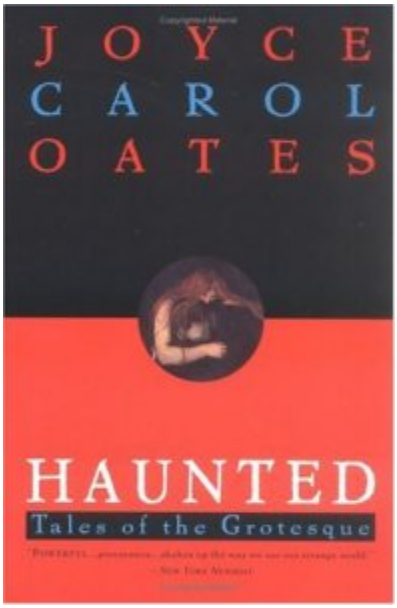
And this is why I'm such a fan of dark fiction. Don't give me vapid redemption. Give me Sartre. Give me Camus. Give me Dostoyevsky. Give me McEwan. These are authors bold enough to look honestly at the world, to explore its shadowy corners, and rather than redemption, leave us with the burden of irredeemable lives. (Another great example is McEwan's marvelous ***Atonement***.)

"Homecoming" is one of McEwan's many forays into incest. There was his debut novel, ***The Cement Garden***, and much of his early work revolves around violation, usually sexual in nature (***The Innocent***, ***The Comfort of Strangers***).

I highly recommend all of McEwan's early work, but for chills on the back of your neck (and queasiness in the tummy), you can't go wrong with "Homecoming."

Oct. 12

Joyce Carol Oates: *Haunted*



Nobody does literary horror better than **Joyce Carol Oates**, and nowhere is the fear more palpable than in her 1994 collection of psychological terror, ***Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque***.

Among the unrelenting terrors:

The title story, in which a woman recalls a haunted farmhouse from her youth, where she and her friend encounter something much more sinister than a ghost.

"Don't You Trust Me?" an unsettling account of an illegal and controversial medical procedure -- and the exploitation it brings.

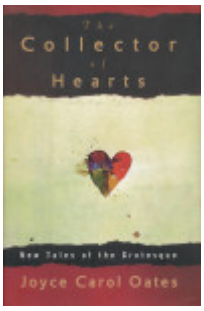
And the disturbing "Extenuating Circumstances" is a mother's confessional that reveals its excruciating conclusion like a mummy unwrapping its bandages (think David Foster Wallace's "Incarnations of a Burned Child").

This collection is also packed with signature Oates violence and revenge, and the tale of a macabre grocery store as discomforting as flakes of glass beneath the skin.

Diehards should also read the sequel, ***The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque***, which has its moments, but doesn't stand up to the original. The book starts strong,

with the *Twilight Zone*-ish "The Sky Blue Ball," which I think I devoured in a single breath. Haunting and mysterious, this one's got a Creep Factor of 10.

She hits this high note again with the title story, a classic bit of Oates' caught-in-the-spiderweb nightmare. From the start, we can guess the fate of our protagonist. And we ache throughout the piece, hoping it goes the other way.



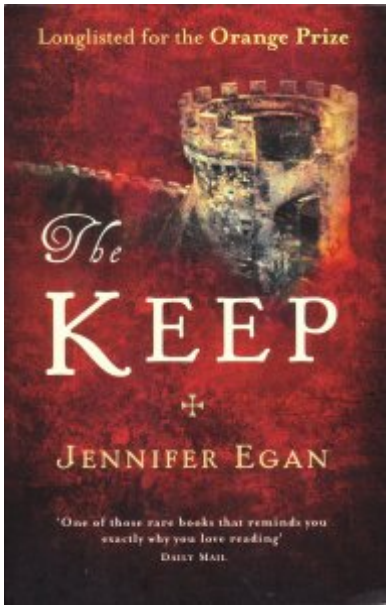
Some of her other collections include *The Female of the Species: Tales of Mystery and Suspense*, a collection of short stories about female killers, and *The Museum of Dr. Moses*.

And fear not, fans of Joyce Carol Oates: We're not through with the author just yet. We have another Oates entry planned closer to Halloween.

Parts of this post are adapted from an earlier article of mine, "Thirteen horrifying reads for Halloween," *which appeared in the* Boulder Camera *in 2008*.

Oct. 13

Jennifer Egan: *The Keep*



Most books inspire me to write, either because, "Damn, that book was so good, I want to do that, too," or "Damn, I could do waaay better than that."

Then there are books like Jennifer Egan's ***The Keep***, which make we want to give up writing because nothing I could ever produce would come close to the genius of this book. *The Keep* has more levels than Scientology, and I was awed by the way Egan manages complex storylines and plot points.

The Keep begins as a gothic horror novel with a literary bent ala Joyce Carol Oates or Edgar Allan Poe. But soon, we learn that it's a story-within-a-story. The primary storyline is actually the product of an inmate in a prison writing group (or is it more real than that?).

I often find metafiction horribly pretentious, but in Egan's hands this device achieves a deeper complexity of character. The "fictional" tale is almost a confession, or at least catharthis, and the way the two narratives play off each other creates unbearable tension.

Finally, Egan includes a third narrative that completes the cycle of co-dependency that runs through the novel. Ultimately, this is a story of identity, exploration and imprisonment. What is real or not real doesn't matter much. The question to answer is: What do we do with the demons that haunt us?

Or rather, Where do we keep them?

The best part is that Egan leaves these questions (and these narratives) *half* answered. There are no neat, tidy endings. No sunsets, no profound philosophical conclusions. There are only troubled, complex people in turn confronting and running from their ghosts.

For a book with so much surrealism, the lack of resolution at the finish gives it a stunning verisimilitude: Did we really believe we could ever completely outrun our ghosts?

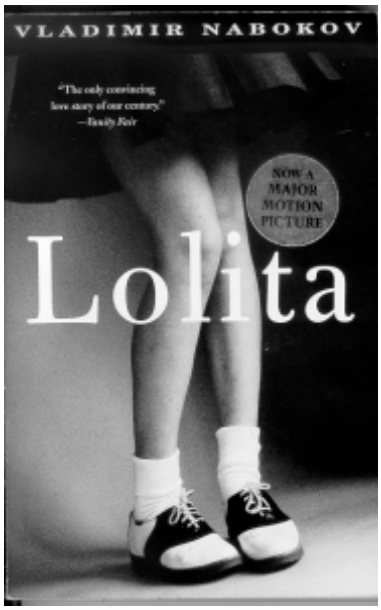
At the end, I wanted the story to go on and on, which is the magic of any great novel. It leaves you imagining the characters as real people and you want to know how they turn out.

I was also left wanting for a map to figure out how Egan navigated the dark, twisting corridors of this complex, yet refreshingly enjoyable novel. Mark this down as a "must-read."

Interestingly, there is a film version in the works. I'm not sure the narrative will hold up because of the limitations of cinema, but it will be worth a look. Just be sure to read the book first.

Oct. 14

Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*



When I think of what was controversial in the 1950s, I think of Elvis being filmed from the waist up. So, I went into ***Lolita*** thinking it couldn't possibly be as scandalous as advertised nearly six decades later.

Wrong. *Lolita* makes *To Catch a Predator* seem like child's play (so to speak). As oddly hilarious as it is disturbing, Nabakov's classic is one of the most insightful accounts of pathology (what many refer to as Humbert's unreliability) I've ever encountered, and still has the power to make the most hardened reader (i.e. me) queasy.

Reading this through the lens of a literary representation of mental illness, it's easy to see Humbert's source for pedophilia -- his stunted sexuality from an age-appropriate childhood romance left unconsummated and forever associated with death and loss (and run-on sentences).

More subtle, though, is Humbert's troubled conscience, which vacillates between self-awareness and self-fulfillment. Through carefully dropped hints, we realize that he is aware of Dolores' vulnerability and her lack of interest in their adult activities. He *knows* what he's doing is damaging the poor girl, but more often than not, his needs hijack his decisions.

The consequences fall squarely on the not-so-frail shoulders of 12-year-old Dolores Haze, who endures his abuse into her teen years. (Side note: Through Lolita, Nabokov paints a clear portrait of borderline personality disorder, which makes her story even more tragic.)

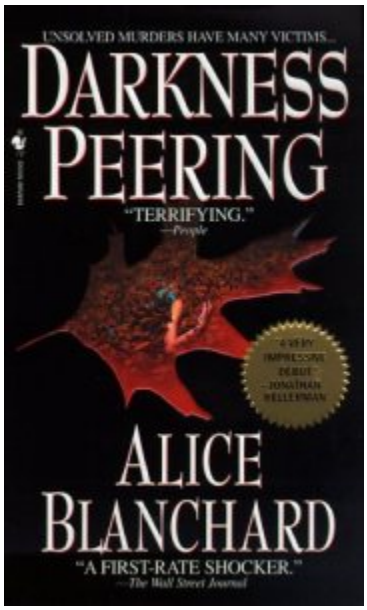
Still, through Humbert's rationalizations, however twisted or self-serving, he does try to protect his stepdaughter in his own clumsy way. While his selfishness trumps all, his moments of lucid affection make him as close to sympathetic as can be (sympathetic enough that we're rooting for him in his showdown with creepy Quilty).

What a tremendous book, and perhaps the greatest work of transgressive fiction. Nabakov's play with language is remarkable (especially considering English was his second tongue), and the pain and desperation sweating through the pages of this novel make it timeless.

Troubling, complicated and a work of genius, this is an unsettling read for the ages.

Oct. 15

Alice Blanchard: *Darkness Peering*



Alice Blanchard's 1999 crime novel, ***Darkness Peering***, is one of the most promising debuts ever -- a mind-bending psychological thriller set in rural Maine (classic Stephen King country).

Detective Rachel Storrow is still haunted by an 18-year-old unsolved murder that happened when she was a child, and a recent disappearance has brought that case back to the forefront. For Storrow, the killer might be closer than she thinks.

Featuring a gripping and poetic opening chapter, Blanchard takes hold of the reader's throat and never lets go.

It's also a surprisingly literary work. Underlying the horror is a tale of family drama, small-town suspicion and the secrets we bury with the dead.

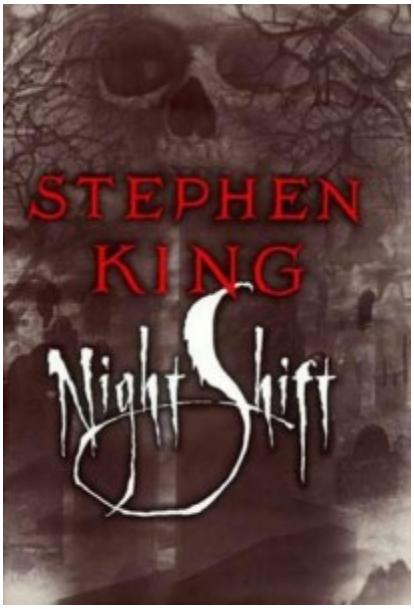
Blanchard takes on similar themes in later books, like *The Breathtaker* and *Life Sentences*. Her short-story collection, *The Stuntman's Daughter*, won the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in 1996.

But of all her works, my favorite remains *Darkness Peering*. This book is a perfect match for a stormy October night.

Parts of this post are adapted from an earlier article of mine, “Thirteen horrifying reads for Halloween,” *which appeared in the* Boulder Camera *in 2008*.

Oct. 16

Stephen King: *Night Shift*



Of course, no list of Halloween reads would be complete without an entry from the master of horror, **Stephen King**. In recent years, he has produced more fantastic literature than true horror. He has also plumbed a deeper emotional depth in recent works, such as *Lisey's Story* and *Duma Key*.

As great as these novels are, for pure chills, there's no beating King's early work. To get maximum bang for your October buck, revisit King's first short-story collection, 1978's ***Night Shift***.

This is King at his most ruthless, featuring some of his darkest material, such as one of his forgotten treasures, "One for the Road." Set amid the backdrop of a blizzard, a wife and daughter are stranded in a snow bank. With connections to Jerusalem's Lot, they learn that the elements are the least of their fears.

"I Am the Doorway" is the creepy account of a retired astronaut who learned he was not alone in deep space -- and he brought back a souvenir that just might drive him mad.

Some of King's best-known works are in this collection as well: "Children of the Corn," "Trucks" (which became the film "Maximum Overdrive") and "The Lawnmower Man."

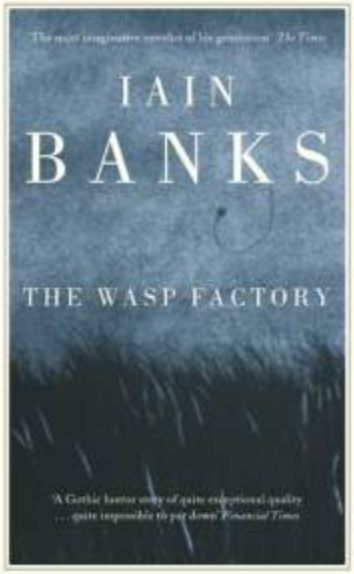
My favorite fright is "Sometimes They Come Back," an epic homage to childhood trauma and a reminder that, no matter how many years may pass, our demons are never far behind.

Of course, this is only King's first entry in **Unsettling Chapters**. We will certainly see more of the master in future installments.

Parts of this post are adapted from an earlier article of mine, “Thirteen horrifying reads for Halloween,” *which appeared in the* Boulder Camera *in 2008*.

Oct. 17

Iain Banks: *The Wasp Factory*



Welcome to ***The Wasp Factory***, where by the age of 16 Frank Cauldhame has already killed three children, including his younger brother. These days the teenager passes his time killing animals on the tiny British island he shares with his father.

Other favorite activities? Long walks on the beach, going to punk-rock shows with his drunken dwarf buddy, Jamie, and gathering wasps in his elaborately engineered torture chamber.

This 1984 debut from Scottish writer **Iain Banks** stirred up a mess of controversy when it was initially released, and remains a dark and twisted read nearly a quarter century later.

Another great example of effective first-person POV, the narrator's tale disorients and disturbs. No doubt, this is one of the greatest works of transgressive fiction I've ever read.

Like most works of suspense, the terror comes from what may happen rather than what actually happens. In this case, the novel's tension -- and greatest literary device -- is Frank's sadistic older brother, Eric.

Throughout the book, Eric, who has just escaped from a mental hospital, calls his younger brother from pay phones, each time closer to home, each time more psychotic,

threatening to kill Frank upon his return. It's a classic example of the shadow figure. We have a serial killer narrator, and he's not even the craziest member of the cast!

Or is he...? The tension builds to a violent climax with a shocking twist that reframes the entire story. It's the kind of ending that makes you want to go back to the beginning and read it all over again.

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Oct. 18

Mary Stewart Atwell: “Maynard”

There are many ways to unsettle the reader. There is shock, revulsion, introspect, subversion. But don’t forget subtlety. After all, I would imagine the slow constriction of the noose is the more terrifying than the drop.

Toward that end, three key elements of great horror are atmosphere, dissonance and distress. All three are manipulated to great effect in **Mary Stewart Atwell**’s short story, “**Maynard**,” which ran in the *Alaska Quarterly Review* and was honored in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2010*.

There is elusiveness in this piece that sets the reader on edge. The story is presented in a segmented style, and the core mysteries at the beginning remain mysteries at the end. There is such a tangle of loose threads that the story is unsettling to the reader long after the final words have been read.

Specifically, it is the narrator’s murky backstory that fuels the tension. She is on the run from someone who, as far as we can tell, was holding her against her will. He will find her, though, she is certain, but will we ever learn the full nature of her distress?

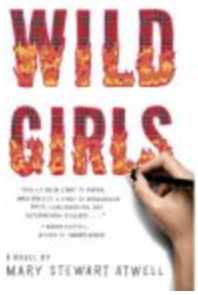
This is the foundation on which Atwell builds a dark, disturbing portrait of a troubled woman on the run. One of the building blocks she uses to great effect is atmosphere. Set in the rural south, Atwell colors her world with the imagery of backwoods America, a working-class dystopia of failure where methamphetamine and lawlessness run rampant. Into this world enters the narrator—whose name may or may not be Ashley.

She has three secrets she must keep hidden: her history, her whereabouts, the child to which she is about to give birth. The latter tweaks the reader's anxiety like a shot of bathtub meth. The narrator is unequipped to care for the child, but what is she to do? She would reveal too much of herself if she put it up for adoption, so she disposes of the baby, which sets in motion the events that lead to her final confrontation.

Finally, there is the dissonance that makes the story so unsettling. The reader is unable to connect all the loose threads, and there are missing links in the chain of events that we are compelled to reconcile.

In the end, that reconciliation must come from the reader's own mind. I discussed this story with a fellow reader long after reading, and have thought about it often since then. There are hints at great horror in this story, which is more powerful than if we knew every gruesome detail of our narrator's story.

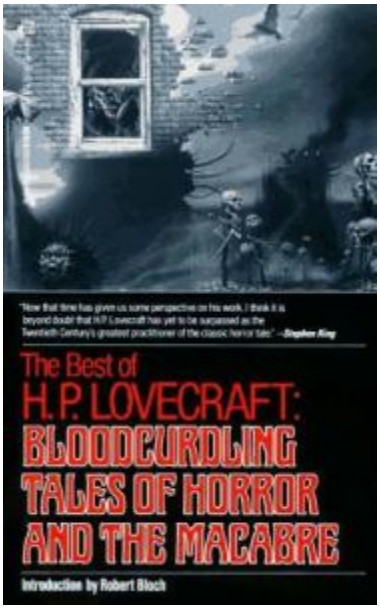
It lends a haunting quality that resonates through amazing lines like: "'Ashley,' he said. 'Please. Don't do this.' But Ashley is not my name."



Stories like this earned Atwell a deal for a full-length. Her debut novel, ***Wild Girls***, was published on Oct. 16.

Oct. 19

H.P. Lovecraft



Now, to one of my all-time favorites, **H.P. Lovecraft**.

The Wizard of Weird is one of the most puzzling figures in literature (no small feat) and a most peculiar phenomenon. Hardly read in his lifetime, his stories have since inspired movies, music, video and board games and countless writers.

The reclusive author of the Cthulhu Mythos is often overshadowed by the larger-than-life Lovecraft Mythos distilled from his letters, essays and fan speculation.

From this end of the millennium, he appears as a man out of time, which perhaps accounts for the skilled depictions of isolation and despair in his work. A troubled life, an early death—these are the makings of a horror legend.

For the HPL initiate, the place to start is ***The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre***. This collection of 16 of his best-known stories proves his staying power. My favorite is “The Outsider,” a dark epic of self-discovery. This story speaks to me as few stories can, and I believe this is Lovecraft at his most earnest.

“Pickman’s Model” and “The Picture in the House” explore the intersection of art and madness. For HPL, this crossroad manifests in the form of weird fiction, but I can’t help but wonder at his deeper intentions in these stories.

Likewise, “The Music of Erich Zann,” one of the finest pieces of horror fiction I’ve ever read. In a forgotten section of, presumably, Paris, a young student rents a room beneath a master violist. The man performs strange melodies at all hours of the night, and when the narrator learns of their origin… well, the story takes a classic Lovecraftian turn, but with more subtlety and greater effect. From a craft perspective, this is one of his best works.

From a reader’s perspective as well.

And I’ve got to touch on “The Rats in the Walls,” as great a depiction of psychosis and inherited guilt ever written. Be warned: It’s usually easy enough to overlook some of Lovecraft’s subtle racism, but it sits front and center in this story, which makes it tougher to swallow. If you can stomach that, you’ll enjoy this thoroughly gut-churning tale.

Then, of course, there are the mega-hits: “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Dunwich Horror,” “The Shadow Over Innsmouth.” There’s not much I can really add to the discussion of these classics, other than to chuckle (and sometimes cringe) at Lovecraft’s story titles. He had a penchant for the noun-prepositional phrase structure favored by the pulps (“The Colour Out of Space,” “The Haunter of the Dark,” “The Thing on the Doorstep”) or a variation thereof (“At the Mountains of Madness,” “Beyond the Wall of Sleep”).

The greatest thing to happen to Lovecraft fans in recent years is the **H.P. Lovecraft Literary Podcast**, a thoughtful and well-produced audio chronology of his work. They started in 2009, discussing one story at a time (one episode for shorter works, multiple episodes for longer ones), and came to the end of his oeuvre earlier this year. They offer all kinds of goodies for Miskatonic alumni, including professional readings, old episodes and original works.

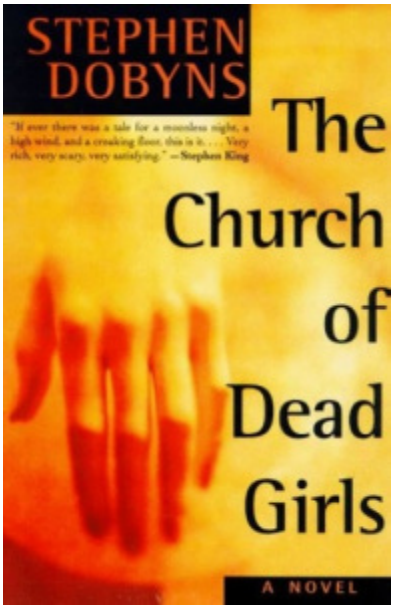
Best of all, though Lovecraft has been gone 75 years, his mythos live on. There are numerous collections of Lovecraft-inspired fiction, such as *Future Lovecraft* and *Shadows Over Baker Street* (an HPL/Sherlock Holmes mash-up). Writers such as Michael Chabon, Stephen King and Neil Gaiman have all contributed to the ongoing mythos.

And there is a new crop of writers adding to the legacy all the time. I highly recommend checking out the ***Lovecraft eZine***, which publishes great artwork, weird fiction and weekly Web updates and video chats.

As a wise man once said, “That is not dead which can eternal lie.”

Oct. 20

Stephen Dobyns: *The Church of Dead Girls*



Frequent readers have probably noticed a pattern among the entries of **Unsettling Chapters**. That is, the overt theme of a story is more often a sleight of hand. Put another way: The thing is not really about the thing.

Lovecraft's Old Ones are a manifestation of his insecurities. McEwan's transgressions are a front for the anxiety of individuality in the face of rigid and arbitrary social mores. Murakami's gore portrays mental disturbances rather than literal scenes.

And so it goes with **Stephen Dobyns**' 1997 mystery, ***The Church of Dead Girls***.

As with *Birdman*, Mo Hayder's debut discussed on Oct. 5, the ghoul in this novel uses human corpses as an artistic medium. But while *The Church of Dead Girls* offers terror and thrills, it also has high-minded literary aspirations.

The thing is not really about the thing.

This is less a whodunit and more a sociological work. What are the fears and biases of small-town folk? What prejudices are lurking in the shadows? A rash of murders and missing teenagers brings them all to the surface. Things get ugly.

"The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street" ugly.

Once threatened, the townsfolk begin pointing fingers in every possible direction. This compelling arc makes for a fascinating read. And gruesomely detailed horrors make this a must-read for Halloween.

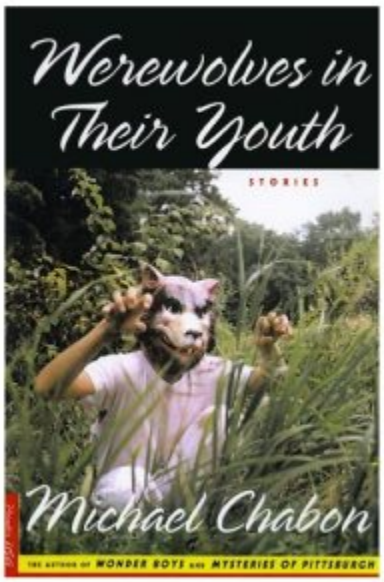
Speaking of fingers, whatever happened to those missing left hands?

Read the book and you'll understand.

Parts of this post are adapted from an earlier article of mine, "Thirteen horrifying reads for Halloween," *which appeared in the* Boulder Camera *in 2008*.

Oct. 21

Michael Chabon: “In the Black Mill”



Sadly, there is a great divide in the literature world, one which I don’t really understand. Having completed an MFA program, I can speak to the snootiness of the literati establishment and its delineation between literary and genre fiction.

Personally, I believe it’s all simply fiction, and if there is any division, it’s between well-written fiction and not-so-well-written fiction.

But rather than rehash this tired debate, I’d like to talk about a writer who obliterates this divide, Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Michael Chabon**. He has explored genre and pulp fiction in his novels *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, *The Final Solution* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and as editor of *McSweeney’s Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories*.

Perhaps his most daring genre work is the short story “**In the Black Mill**,” an homage to Lovecraft that first appeared in *Playboy* and later in his collection *Werewolves in Their Youth.*

For my money, “In the Black Mill” is the greatest Lovecraft-inspired work ever written. However, in full disclosure: I grew up in a rusting steel town outside of Pittsburgh, which is the setting for “In the Black Mill.” Lovecraftian horror set in the Rust Belt of my youth? A forbidden ritual centered on an old steel mill?

Sign me up.

I don't want to get into specifics, or give away too much, other than to say the pleasure of reading "In the Black Mill" comes from its balance of originality and familiarity. A lot of Lovecraft-inspired fiction comes across as overly referential or derivative. Chabon infuses the old legends with a post-industrial setting, a brilliant ending and a healthy dose of meta-fiction.

But for all the new wrinkles, Chabon links up with Lovecraft via three avenues: thematic connections, stylistic connections and familiar places and names.

First, the thematic connections:

There is a narrator called away from home, in this case an archeologist (Lovecraft was fond of having scholars or heirs travel to strange locales). Upon arrival, he encounters numerous grotesqueries among the local folk: physical deformities, impurity (particularly of food and drink) and increasingly odd and suspicious behavior. All classic Lovecraft devices, particularly his penchant for displacement.

Stylistic connections:

Here, Chabon deviates from his typical style and writes with Lovecraftian grandiosity. See un-Chabon-like phrases such as "…the immemorial accursedness of his drab Pennsylvania hometown" and "…the eldritch moment." The narrator also pays close attention to setting and description, much like HPL. We come to know the topography of this Rust Belt village as well as we know Arkham, Dunwich and Innsmouth, "that ill-rumoured and evilly shadowed seaport of death and blasphemous abnormality."

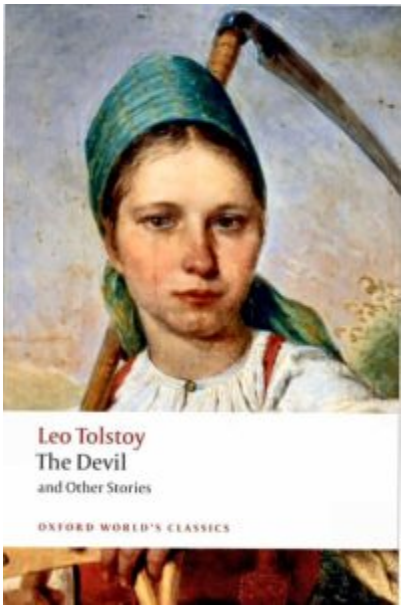
Likewise, Chabon draws a third connection to Lovecraft by utilizing similar places and names. There is the Miskahannock river and valley (what I imagine to be an amalgamation of Lovecraft's Miskatonic river and valley and "hannock," a variation of the Delaware Indian word for "stream," which is a commonly used suffix in Western Pennsylvania, as in Neshannock Township). There are the Yuggogheny Hills (Yog-Sothoth meets the Allegheny) and then characters named Philippa Howard Murrough and August Van Zorn.

Perhaps the greatest commonality between this story and HPL is philosophical. Lovecraft exceled at presenting what appeared to be insurmountable terror, only to reveal at the end that the evil is even greater than at first imagined. It's not the personal torment that is so horrifying, but scope. The implication that the nightmare has only just begun, and eventually, we will all suffer the narrator's fate.

This is post-industrial Rust Belt horror at its finest.

Oct. 22

Madness



For me, the most unsettling type of literature deals with mental illness or cognitive degeneration. Internal threats are always more terrifying than those coming from outside. Self-inflicted wounds cut the deepest, and loss of cognitive faculties is perhaps worse than death.

That's why many of the books we've discussed, thus far, have concerned mental illness. And it's a topic that has fascinated many great writers. Today, I'll look at works from three legendary authors—**Leo Tolstoy**, **Nikolai Gogol** and **Lu Xun**—that are each unsettling in their own way.

First, Tolstoy's "**The Notes of a Madman**," his short story based on a real-life panic attack he experienced in 1869.

What I find interesting about Tolstoy's story is that mental illness is not a major theme, and he's not making a grand statement about either insanity or the health care industry. Rather, his story is describing what we today know as depression and dissociation. It's interesting to read a work that presages what we consider to be a modern malaise.

It's also interesting to consider how the story would read if written today, with therapeutic language in common usage. As this story predates the official advent of psychotherapy, Tolstoy uses more everyday expressions to describe his panic attack: "At last we

came up to a small house with a post beside it. The house was white, but appeared terribly melancholy to me, so much so that I was even filled with dread."

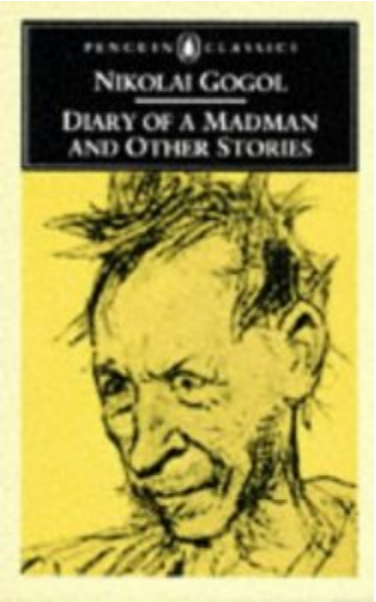
This feeling of dread results in a dissociative moment, and ends with a suffocating awareness of death—not the narrator's impending death, but the fact of life's cessation. "A cold shudder ran down my back… I saw and felt the approach of death, and at the same time I felt that it ought not to exist."

He traces this feeling back to his childhood, in which a similar fear overtook him when he was told stories of Jesus and his suffering. We now know that early childhood traumas establish patterns and plant seeds of self that often bloom as we approach middle age (the narrator is 35).

It's easy to think of our modern anxieties as unique to our time or our culture, and yet this story reads like a contemporary work (horse-drawn carriage and candle lighting aside). In this way, and not necessarily by intention, Tolstoy reveals the universality of anxiety, depression and dissociative episodes.

Tolstoy's brilliance is his ability to deliver his account as a first-person narrative. True, impaired characters tend to be unreliable narrators, but what is gained with this POV is the personal detail of the panic attack, which is vivid and horrifying. Tolstoy reminds us that self-awareness is common in these types of episodes, which is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of this story—not that we experience madness, but that we are fully aware of what's happening.

Gogol took a farcical approach in his story, "**The Diary of a Madman**." This is a first-person account of a Russian civil servant, Poprishchin, who winds up in an asylum.



Told in diary format, Gogol is able to develop conflict, desire and even self-description—a tricky proposition with an unreliable narrator.

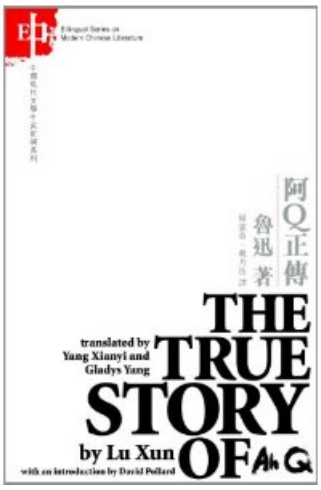
Poprishchin is a low-ranking clerk who feels looked-down upon by his superiors and fails to project the same superiority over his subordinates. He is a man relegated to performing menial tasks with no sense of purpose or respect, and certainly not social status.

Here, Gogol taps into a human universal: The need for self-actualization. A sense of purpose, a belief that our work, no matter how undesirable, has a bigger meaning.

In lieu of that, Poprishchin would settle for a meaningful romantic relationship. But he's past 40, and he pines for his boss's beautiful, young daughter, with whom he stands no chance of notice. Eventually, Poprishchin spirals out of control. He believes he is privy to a conversation between two dogs (and that they are corresponding via letters and making fun of him). He stalks his boss's daughter, an act which seems perfectly reasonable to him. And he is so troubled by the absence of a king in Spain that he convinces himself that *he* is the king of Spain. He asks, "How can a throne be vacant?… A state cannot be without a king."

Finally, there is Lu Xun's "**A Madman's Diary**."

The misconception some people have is that mental illness is simply a break from the commonly agreed-upon narrative of reality. But people dealing with mental distress are also living *within* a personal narrative that is every bit rooted in common sense and, more importantly, cause and effect as ours. What may seem disjointed to the group may seem perfectly linear to the individual.



The challenge is capturing that experience in fiction. Lu Xun employs two common devices, both of which, while effective when this story was published a century ago, would be difficult to get away with in modern literature. He starts with the voice of reason: a man introduces the diary of a friend who suffered from paranoid delusions, ostensibly for the purpose of medical research. Then we receive the voice of the narrator through a series of diary entries.

What I like about Lu Xun's approach is that he puts us in the mind of the mentally distressed. Xun's narrator begins with a common anxiety that others are looking at him strange, perhaps joking about him in the street and planning to harm him. Some local children laugh when they see him, and he deduces that they must have been instructed to do so from their parents.

Then, he overhears a story about a nearby village where cannibalism is still practiced. This manifests as an obsessive fear of being eaten, and soon he believes that the children, his brother and the whole of the town intend to kill him and eat his flesh. This escalates into more dire theories.

When we write about the mentally ill, there is tendency to reduce them to the “other.” Going first-person, seeing through their eyes, offers some insight, but is still limited if we meet them in what we perceive to be a static state of being (e.g. sane vs. insane). But following the narrator’s descent illuminates the insidious nature of mental illness and distress. Lu Xun does a great job of capturing that in this classic tale.

And there are certainly others we could discuss, perhaps in future installments. But for now, these are three classic takes on mental illness that have much to offer to the conversation of madness in literature.

Oct. 23

Pseudopod

The apocryphal saying goes, “May you live in interesting times.” Indeed, the publishing world is in something of a fugue state these days (or should we say the past decade).

But rather than a curse, I consider it a good thing. I’ve found that I prefer reading magazines and newspaper articles on my Nook.

Programs and Web sites like Calibre, Byliner and Instapaper have made long-form journalism accessible to wider audiences, and audio books and podcasts have opened up new literary avenues for both writers and readers.

The latter, in particular, have made it possible to “read” while driving or drifting to sleep.

And when it comes to audio horror, **Pseudopod** stands head and tentacles above the rest.

Launched in 2006, Pseudopod recently broadcast its 300th episode... and the body count continues to rise. Featuring weekly short stories from contemporary horror authors, occasional flash pieces and periodic classics, the podcast has something for everyone.

There are brilliant tales of ultraviolent, existential horror (“Counting From Ten,” “The Duel”); grim philosophy (“Some Things Don’t Wash Off,” “What Dead People Are Supposed to

Do"); dark fantasy ("Goon Job," "Full Moon Over 1600"); adventure, both internal and external ("The Primakov," "The Greatest Adventure of All"); and Lovecraftian weird ("Hometown Horrible," "Jihad Over Innsmouth").

Those are only 10 of the 300-plus stories Pseudopod has produced, and the chills keep coming. Former editors Mur Lafferty and Ben Phillips seem like old friends, and host (and an initial contributor) Alasdair Stuart is in the class of Rod Sterling and Jack Palance. I'm awed, weekly, by his haunting delivery and thoughtful post-story editorials. Even when the featured story is so-so, Stuart's commentary alone is worth the listen.

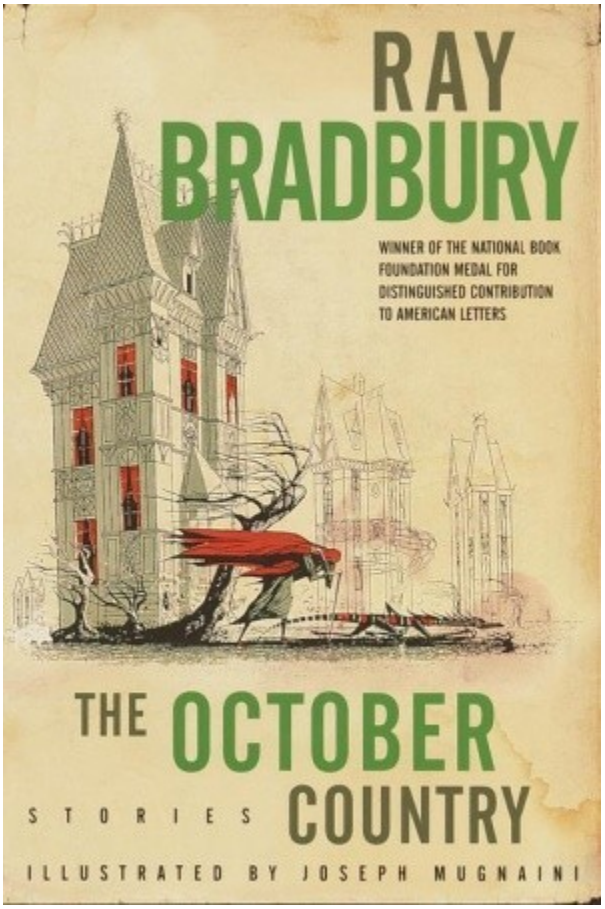
The podcast is free, and may be downloaded through a program such as iTunes. You can also access the entire archive of stories at the Web site.

Despite being free, Pseudopod is a professional, paying market, and it runs on donations from listeners. My suggestion, especially if you're new to the program, is to order the archive discs (which also make great gifts). Sure, I've got my favorite episodes on my computer, but by purchasing the discs, I have a permanent hard copy and have supported a great cause at the same time.

Other must-listen stories include "Raising Eddie," "Bag Man" and "The Hand You're Dealt." But with a few hundred stories to choose from, this podcast has something for everyone's Halloween hit list.

Oct. 24

Ray Bradbury



One of America's most influential writers, **Ray Bradbury** thrilled readers for decades and produced some of the defining works of the 20th century. For me, he defines a particular time in America—one of wonder and worry: the promise of space travel and the portent of a bookless dystopia.

For more on Bradbury, below I've pasted the essay I wrote upon his death this past summer. "The Moonless Sleep" appeared in *Transgress* magazine, alongside a Bradbury tribute by the talented Stephanie Train.

But for all the great fiction he produced throughout his lifetime, I remain in awe of his 1955 debut, *The October Country*, a collection of short stories originally published by Arkham Press as *Dark Carnival*.

I don't have much to say about this collection. The stories speak for themselves and make for a satisfying Halloween read:

The Moonless Sleep

Blaze on, ye dark carnivals, with the steam-wrought thunder of a midnight train! Gather ye lunatics, barkers and graveyard melancholics along the autumn midway! For Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show has come for its maker. And sadly, under the Big Tent of terrestrial existence, the Time Carousel spins only one direction. There will be no unwinding of the years. No flip-page fountain of youth. No restoring the burnt ashes to books.

On Tuesday, June 5, Ray Bradbury—master of the grimly fantastic—died at the age of 91. He left behind hundreds of stories, novels, screenplays, teleplays and nonfiction works, spanning 1947's *Dark Carnival* to last month's essay, "Take Me Home," in *The New Yorker*.

Bradbury enthralled a long-ago generation with the possibilities of space travel and the terror of a foreseen dystopia. The man's got a Hollywood Star, an Emmy, a Pulitzer special citation and has had a moon crater and a freaking asteroid named in honor of his work.

So here's to one of the true giants of American literature: A bittersweet slug of dandelion wine. Drink hearty, my friends.

#

Growing up a horror fan in the 1980s, I worshipped the holy trinity of Poe, Lovecraft and King. But there was always space on my bookshelf for Bradbury. It began during summer vacation—1984 or '85—when HBO broadcast *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. I watched it every chance. I memorized every scene, every line. I still see the smoke of the train, feel the tickle of the tarantulas under the sheets and tighten with unease recalling Mr. Dark littering the library floor with the torn pages of Jason Robards' life. I identified with young Will Holloway—

the nervous, homebound boy who preferred travels of the imaginary and literary variety over the untamed severity of Jim Nightshade.

So began my infatuation with carnivals and the leitmotif of illusion, midway facades and the bittersweet escapism of the roadside attraction. It's probably why I find carnivals appealing in art and depressing in real life, sort of like a dive bar during the day.

Something Wicked This Way Comes chilled me as a child, then moved me to tears as an adult when I recognized the undertone of melancholia in the narrative. I re-read it in my thirties and realized it was not so much the story of two boys, but rather the story of the father. The old man. Jason Robards in the safety of his library, puffing a pipe in a long-gone American pastoral.

Fahrenheit 451 rallied me as an angry young man, and still rumbles in my blood, much the way the dystopian works of Vonnegut continue to invade my thoughts nearly every day. We read "A Sound of Thunder" in elementary school, and I still feel the quiver in the back of my neck when we came to the end. And can anyone with an iPhone not consider "There Will Come Soft Rains" as prescient as it is brilliant?

Perhaps my favorite Bradbury work is *The October Country*, a stripped-down version of his story collection *Dark Carnival*. Even now, "The Crowd" is as haunting as ever, "Homecoming" is still creepy as hell, and I was so enamored that I once penned a prequel to "The Wind" as part of my creative writing thesis at Penn State.

Of all the dark treasures in *The October Country*, none affected me more than "The Scythe," a treatise on the life cycle that feels appropriate in the wake of Bradbury's passing. In the story, a Dust Bowl family breaks down on a dead-end street, starving and desperate. They

discover a farmhouse whose owner has died, deeding the property—rich with wheat and livestock—to whomever discovers his corpse.

Of course, there is a tangled string attached.

The twist is not a huge surprise, but the story's power comes from the author's philosophizing on the nature of life and death. Trapped in a *Twilight Zone* dreamscape, protagonist Drew Erickson refuses his grim duty… and reaps an equally grim fate:

… and still they lived, caught halfway, not dead, not alive. Simply—waiting. And all over the world, thousands more just like them, victims of accidents, fires, disease, suicide, waited, slept just like Molly and her children slept. Not able to die, not able to live. (209)

#

Though best known for his fantastic vision and plotting, there is much to admire in Bradbury's craft. The deceptive modesty of his prose, disguising his poetic bent. His command of flow and revelation. The comforting familiarity of the most unreal environs. How did he do it?

I've been asking that question for a few decades now, but still no luck. His book on craft, *Zen and the Art of Writing*, is one of the most inspiring writing primers ever penned. But like a great magician, Bradbury is just as mysterious whilst revealing his secrets.

I was fortunate to meet the author in June 1999. Bradbury spoke at the Chautauqua Auditorium in Boulder, Colo. He discussed his cinematic approach to writing. He said that people sometimes asked him how to adapt one of his stories into a film, a query at which he expressed disbelief. To paraphrase, he answered: Read it from one page to the next. "Page one, scene one." Write as if you're making a movie, he implored the aspiring authors in attendance.

Other tips centered on when to write that first novel (Don't even bother until you're thirty) and how (by threading together a series of short stories). Short fiction is rough waters for a young author—even someone of Bradbury's talent. In the early days, he met with publishers who liked his writing, but ultimately turned him down: Call us when you've got a novel, they told him. Nobody wants to read short stories.

Undeterred, Bradbury got the last laugh. He repackaged and re-pitched those rejected story collections as the "novels" *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Illustrated Man*. They were published in 1950 and '51 respectively.

He offered other anecdotes and advice, but honestly, I don't recall much of it. I was too enthralled with his stories.

I was also shocked by his appearance. For years, he'd been using the same photo on his book jackets: a kindly, slim, frost-haired middle-ager. That was my image of him until he hobbled onto the stage, heavyset and a decade or so older than his picture. Throughout the talk, the altitude played hell with his breathing. His hair was shaggy and unkempt.

When the talk was finished, he was helped down a set of stairs to meet with fans. His legs were unsteady as he navigated the steps. An assistant held his left hand. In the right, he clutched a freshly cracked beer bottle. He held it steady and savored a long drink when he reached the small table where he would sign books. A pen in one hand. A beer in the other.

I thought: This is my kind of guy. This is my kind of writer.

I trembled as I approached the table.

#

Bradbury penned a new introduction to the 1996 edition of *The October Country*. It was fittingly titled, “May I Die Before My Voices.” It refers to the muses that compel him to write—the daily imaginings that inspire his stories. To some, those voices would be a burden, a form of madness. For Bradbury, it was his *raison d’être*.

He closes his introduction with the breathtaking lines: “If some morning in the future I wake and there is silence, I’ll know my life is over. With luck, on my last day, the voices will still be busy and I will still be happy,” (viii).

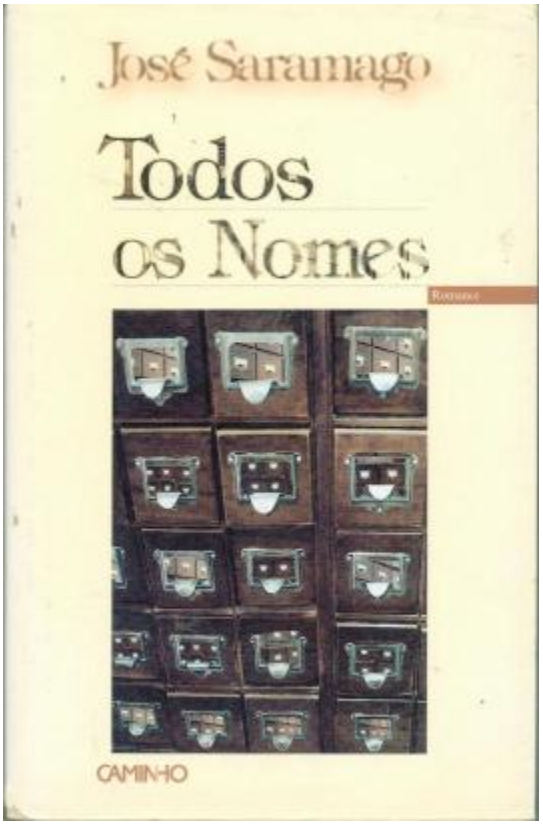
I can’t say if the voices were still speaking to him on June 5, but I feel comfortable saying that Bradbury’s voice is as resonant as ever. More than half a century after the release of *Fahrenheit 451*, dystopian literature still tops the best-seller and box-office charts. The universe is as mysterious as ever, and we have yet to walk on Mars or time-travel to hunt dinosaurs.

For these reasons, his timeless visions will continue to enthrall. I will certainly die before Bradbury’s voice gives out, and I’m happy to think that there will come future generations that will be equally comforted and inspired by his words. His prose that rockets off the page, that transports the reader in time, space, and can elicit moisture in the eye as effortlessly as a scream in the throat.

Bradbury’s gone, but his voice remains. To thrill us. To haunt us. To fill us with wonder. To remind us that we need not fear the voices in our own heads ever going silent. Because hopefully, surely, our voices will resonate beyond our meager, terrestrial lives.

Oct. 25

José Saramago: *All the Names*



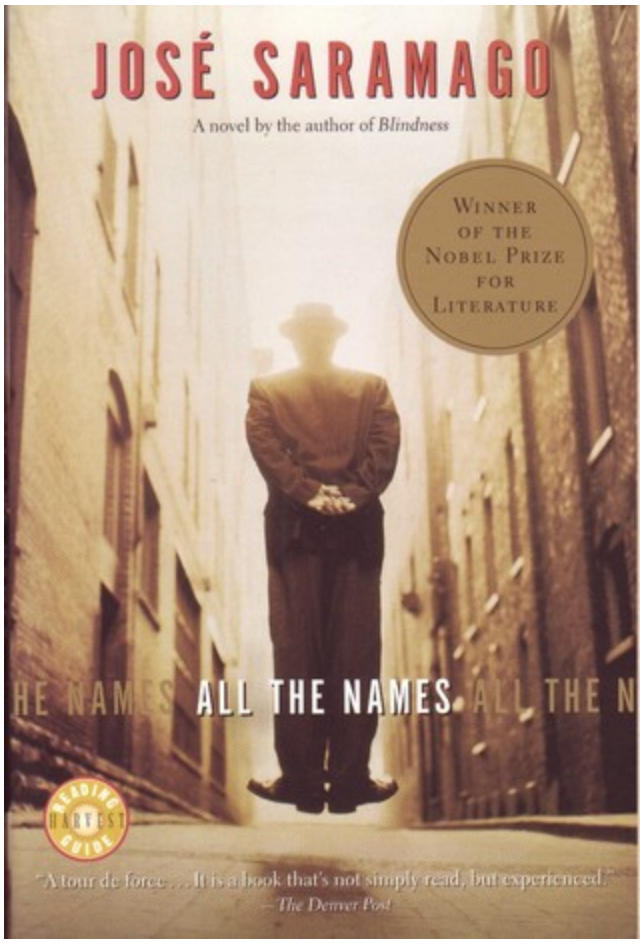
As I've expressed in previous posts, loss of one's identity is one of the more unsettling outcomes a story can provide. With life such a fleeting thing, rarely does one's name live far beyond their years.

Fair enough. To be lost to the ages is understandable, but for some, the worst fate is to be forgotten in your own time. It's a unique flavor of despair, born of an imbalance between social needs and social disconnect.

Nowhere is this curious space more poignantly explored than in **José Saramago**'s ***All the Names***.

This book was published a year before Saramago, best known for the novel *Blindness*, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. *All the Names* is worthy of such honors.

The protagonist, one Senhor José, works in a nameless city (a stand-in for Lisbon in Saramago's native Portugal) as a low-level clerk. Similar to Dostoyevsky and Kafka, Saramago presents us with a character caught in the gears of a drab, oppressive machine of unknown origin and inexplicable intent. He works for the Central Registry, which tracks the births, marriages and deaths of all citizens. Every life is reduced to an index card bearing these dates. The job of the Central Registry is to create, update and file each card.



"We all know that, however long old people may last, their hour will always come. Not a day passes without the clerks' having to take down files from the shelves of the living in order to carry them to the shelves at the rear…"

José, who actually lives at the Registry building, makes nightly sojourns within its stacks. He hopes to escape his "bureaucratic alienation" by searching for meaning among the necropolis of index cards. Then one day, he finds something else. He becomes fixated on the card of an anonymous woman, and begins a clumsy search for her throughout the city.

Of course, what he's really doing is working through an existential crisis. Or some other anxiety. The archives in the Central Registry are so large that clerks have become lost in their

labyrinth. The metaphor is apt for José's anxious mind. One bad thought, and then another. Disaster lurks eternal.

It's unsettling to think that, in the end, we'll be little more than forgotten statistics. The same goes for everyone we love and care for. We will all be forgotten. Time will make sure of that. What's worse, though, is to feel societal mechanisms imposing anonymity while we're still alive. To become a living ghost.

What makes *All the Names* successful, as with all existentialist writings, is that the answers seem more like questions. So, what is life if but a few dates typed onto an index card? Is there meaning or merely statistical data? Like Albert Camus, Saramago reminds us that the answer isn't important—or even attainable. The meaning lies in the pursuit of, well, meaning.

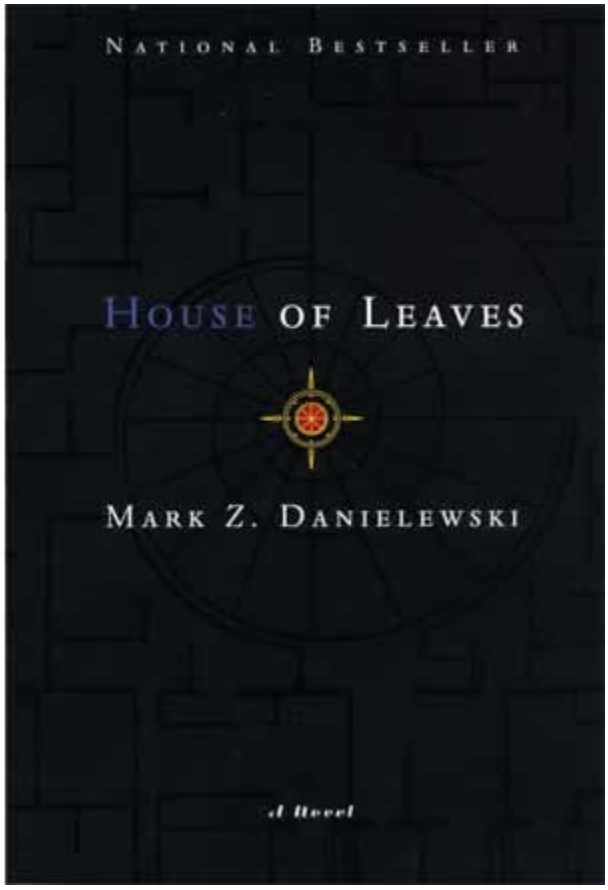
Saramago empowers us with his narrative. He reminds us that in the face of mortality, victory is not an outcome. Victory is the fight itself. It is Senhor José taking those first bold steps into the archives, dwarfed by mountains of faceless information, to turn an index card back into a person.

I'm reminded of a favorite line from Camus' *The Plague*: "And indeed it could be said that once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of plague was ended."

Indeed.

Oct. 26

Mark Z. Danielewski: *House of Leaves*



We are all familiar with the parameters of dream logic—the mental space where things are out of place or time but follow an alternative, interior logic. You know, like you're catering a dinner for all your ex-girlfriends in a gothic castle, and for some reason Dog the Bounty Hunter is pitching you a show about vigilante sea lions. You wake up and wonder: "Why did that make sense?"

It's a fun diversion that is, unfortunately, difficult to replicate in waking consciousness. But you can come close by reading **Mark Z. Danielewski**'s ***House of Leaves***, a 2000 horror novel that is more of an entity than a book.

Designed with multiple fonts and colors, footnotes within footnotes and text running backward, forward, upside down, even spiraling, the physical layout of the text manipulates the novel's pacing and creates a somewhat interactive experience.

It's probably as close as we've come to reading with 3-D glasses.

The narrative is equally layered and complex, and academics have taken multiple stabs at this book. I would guess it's had the most scholarly treatments of any horror novel since *Frankenstein*. Therefore, I won't even attempt to offer an academic account, as I don't have anything particularly profound to say on that front (and would bore myself to tears in the process).

What I can speak to is the effect Danielewski creates by inviting the reader into a story that they can't quite trust. We have multiple unreliable narrators; the ever-shifting dimensions of a house; drug-impaired testimony; unverifiable videotapes; and the ravings of a half-mad blind man. (He also borrows the Lovecraftian theme of geometry-induced madness, not to mention a mysterious tome.)

Can we trust what we see and read? Hell no. And that's why *House of Leaves* is so unnerving.

I think of it as a literary haunted house. Every October, people line up outside strip malls, warehouses and amusement parks to navigate dark, disorienting hallways. They know they won't be harmed, but will experience the thrill of uncertainty.

The same with *House of Leaves*. It elicits a visceral reaction in a way few other books can. We're aware of what Danielewski is doing. When we need to rotate the book to read the text, we know it's to recreate the impossible geometry of the staircase. When there is one word of text on a page, it's to replicate the cavernous quality of the basement and to force us to read slower.

But we're affected just the same, as when we're knowingly manipulated inside a haunted house.

House of Leaves is not a quick read. It is an experience. If you started reading it today, I don't know that you could finish it by Halloween. But I feel confident in saying that you're *not supposed* to read it that quick. This is a book to be absorbed. It should age along with you.

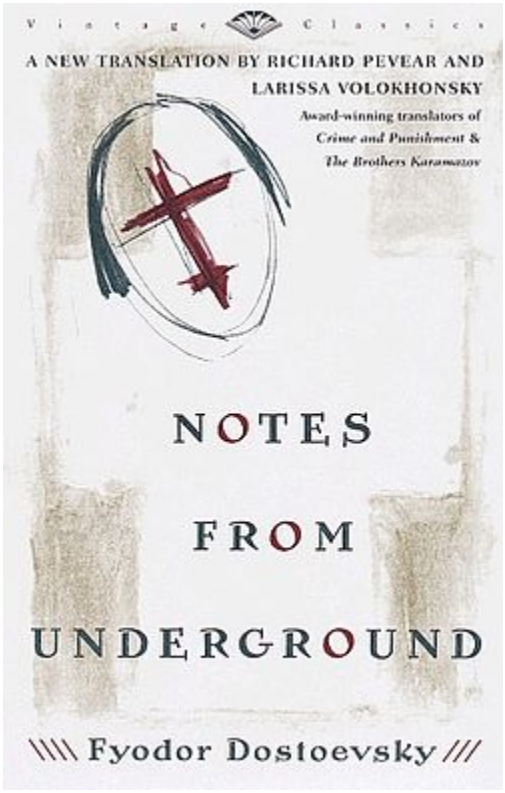
Read correctly, you will internalize the disorientation. You will want to measure the length of every hallway in your house to find inconsistencies. To make sure, every day, that the dimensions of your world haven't changed while you were sleeping.

Because in Danielewski's world, they do change. Sometimes they'll shift right under your feet, and they might even swallow you whole.

Oct. 27

Fyodor Dostoyevsky: *Notes From Underground*

"I am a sick man… I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man." Is there a better opening line in literature?



Most importantly, this sentence establishes the tone that defines **Fyodor Dostoyevsky**'s ***Notes from Underground***. Considered to be the first modern novel, there is no other work that as deftly captures the anxiety of despair and inadequacy.

Our narrator, the Underground Man, guides us through a dark and unpleasant world, recounting his drab civil servant's life and the many insults that have shaped his misanthropy. Through this, he unearths the philosophy of the underground. It is a grim, but honest view, and with no connection to the surface world, the Underground Man simmers in his despair.

Actually, I'm not sure "simmer" is a strong enough word. The Underground Man doesn't experience pain so much as he consumes it. He recalls past injustices when there is no fresh ones to sustain him. Misery exudes from his pores, his breath, his clothes, and rather than opening a window, he basks in the stench of his humiliation.

But his ordeal has only begun.

We come to section two, “Apropos of the Wet Snow,” in which the true horror is set in motion. Here, we get more action and less confession. Following a series of insults, the Underground Man encounters a young prostitute, Liza, and for a time, redemption—and through redemption, meaning—seems possible.

Inevitably, though, you remember that you’re reading Dostoyevsky, and things become even darker than they were before. Watching the Underground Man abase himself is one thing. Watching him do it to another is harder to bear.

But of course, this is necessary to Dostoyevsky’s theme. Denigration is a team sport, and it relies on the consent of both victim and aggressor. That’s why, sadly, in the cycle of abuse, victims become abusers. We need Liza in the story to serve as witness to the Underground Man’s suffering. We need her to offer him redemption, or else he remains only a victim (which would be neither believable nor compelling). Ultimately, he is a conspirator in the surface world that has forced him underground.

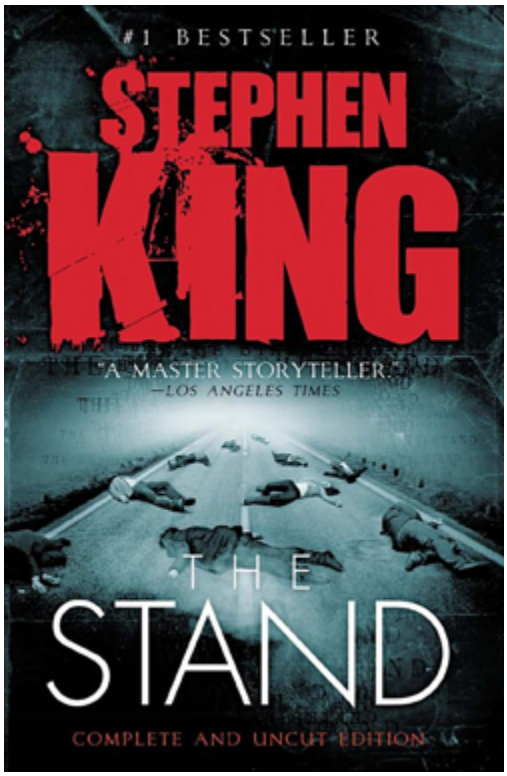
And with true Dostoyevsky flair, Liza reminds us that *there is no bottom*. We meet the Underground Man, and we believe him to be the nadir of humanity. Then he meets Liza. What other characters are waiting offstage, unseen, but their suffering no less palpable?

So, this book may not be everyone’s mug of Russian Caravan, but it should still make your to-read list (especially if you’re a fan of unsettling literature). *Notes from Underground* is a link to the past, as it shows us that modern anxieties aren’t so new. It’s a classic work of existential philosophy. And artists and analysts alike should read this as a guidebook to the darkest shadows of the subconscious.

Notes from Underground is available as a free ebook through Project Gutenbeg.

Oct. 28

Stephen King: Apocalypse



In "The Hollow Men," T.S. Eliot famously wrote, "This is how the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper."

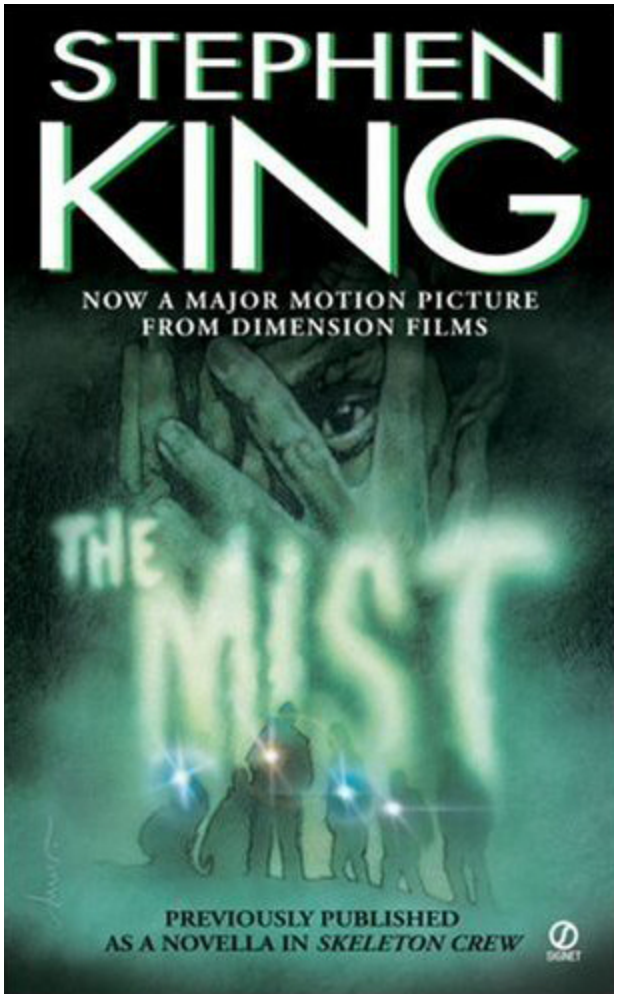
It's obvious that Eliot never read any **Stephen King**!

King has destroyed the world many times over, and by many different means (plague, cars, cell phones, even exploding meth labs), and each time it is most certainly with a bang. My personal favorites are *The Stand* and *The Mist*, but there's something for everyone on his buffet of world-ending visions.

Any longtime reader of King's knows that his strength is character development. His end-of-days narratives are so strong not because of the impending doom but for how his characters respond to it.

For example, *The Stand* is horrific when Captain Trips decimates the globe, but heroic when its survivors stand up to Randall Flagg. *The Mist* enthralls with the interpersonal conflicts that emerge within the grocery store. I'm not afraid fog-shrouded aliens, but I'm terrified of religious extremism in closed quarters.

Another favorite trick of King's is what I call the extrapolated horror. "Trucks," the short story that inspired the film *Maximum Overdrive*, focuses first on the ordeal of the survivors holed up in the diner. In many ways, the story is quite silly (a semi-trailer apocalypse!), but where it haunts the reader is its ending: The moment when you realize that all the horror that has come before is merely the opening act for something far, far worse.



This is a small sampling of King's apocalyptic works:

The Stand

The Mist

Under the Dome (sort of)

"Night Surf" (prelude to *The Stand*)

King has also penned his fair share of dystopian literature:

"The Long Walk"

"The Running Man"

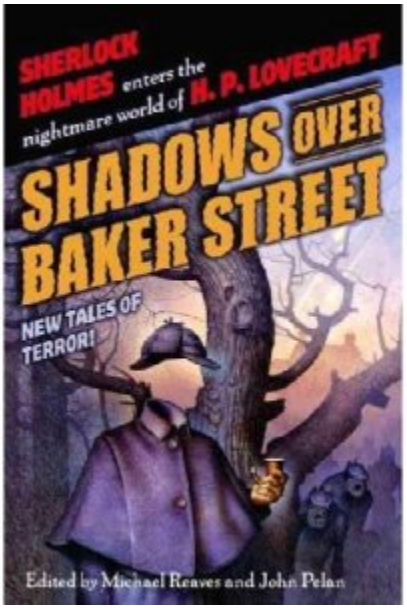
"The Children of the Corn"

With more than 100 novels, stories and screenplays to his name, King's bookshelf is long. Pull one or two down from the shelves this Halloween. Believe me, the end of days never sounded so good.

Oct. 29

Neil Gaiman: “A Study in Emerald”

Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, the first book in the Sherlock Holmes series, has to be one of the most adapted pieces of modern literature. Nearly every Holmes' reboot begins with an updated take on this classic tale, which speaks to the brilliance of Doyle's writing.



It's a timeless tale of murder, deceit and the prototypical damaged investigators: the PTSD-stricken Watson and the mentally disquieted Holmes (pick your diagnoses: autism, OCD, bipolar, etc.).

For my money, the greatest adaptation of this story is "**A Study in Emerald**," which appears in *Shadows Over Baker Street*, a mash-up of Sherlock Holmes and H.P. Lovecraft.

Penned by master storyteller **Neil Gaiman**, "A Study in Emerald" imagines the tale in a post-Lovecraftian landscape, 700 years following the epic struggle between humans and the Great Old Ones.

It shouldn't come as a shock as to who won that inter-dimensional war, but the nature of the post-war dystopia might. As will the unexpected deviations from the original.

Is it truly unsettling? Not in the same way as most of the books we've previously discussed. But it is a bold venture by a gifted author, and the greatest mingling of two of my favorite mythos.

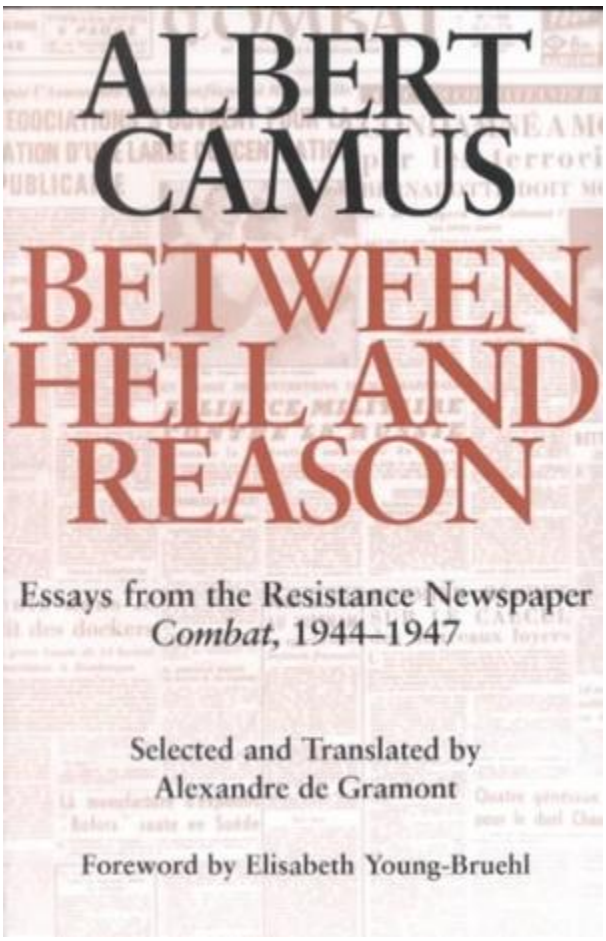
This story also appears in Gaiman's ***Fragile Things***, along with other favorites like "October in the Chair," "Bitter Grounds" and "Strange Little Girls."

For Halloween, Gaiman is offering a free audio book through All Hallows Read. It's a program that promotes literacy by encouraging people to give someone a book for Halloween. Now through Oct. 31, in partnership with Audible.com, Gaiman is offering a free audio story of his, "Click-Clack the Rattle Bag." Get yours at www.audible.com/ScareUs.

Oct. 30

Albert Camus: The Fall

I've always felt a deep kinship with **Albert Camus**. We both come from working-class roots, and we each found our way to journalism. That's about where the similarities end. While I broke into newspapers as a music and features writer, Camus was editor of *Combat*, an underground political paper that was part of the French Resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II.

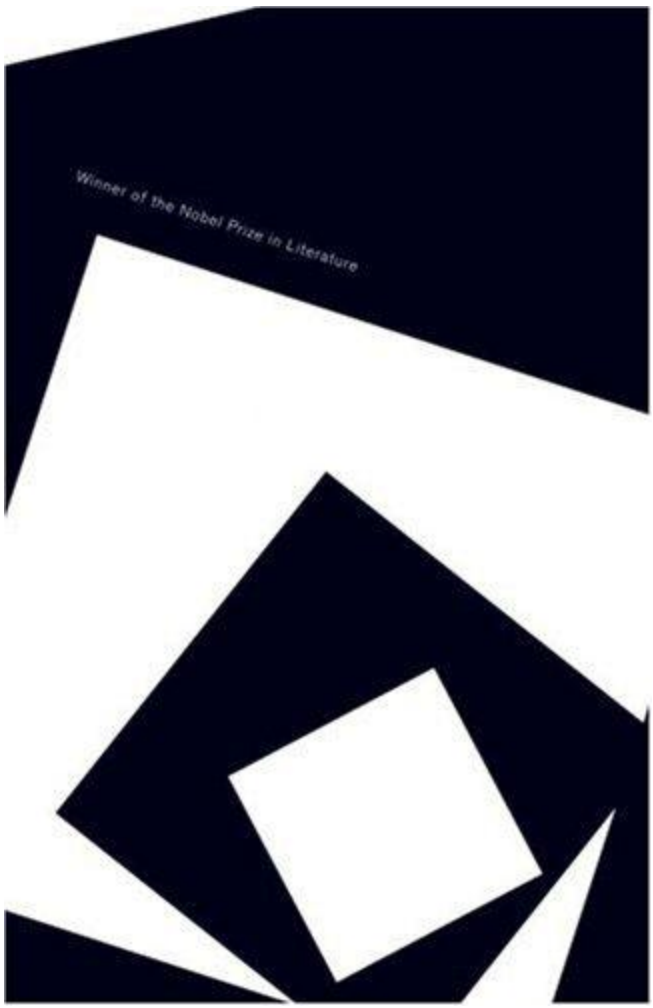


He and his co-workers were jailed and sometimes murdered. If you want to read some amazing and inspirational writing, pick up *Between Hell and Reason*, a collection of his war journalism. There is an immediacy to his writing, because he knew that every article could be his last.

If this book doesn't get you up and off the couch (at least to go to the voting booth), nothing will.

However, that's not the book I want to discuss today, although there is plenty disturbing about Nazi occupation. Truly, any Camus offering is unsettling, in the truest sense of the word,

because that's his intent. These are not pastorals. Camus does not soothe the reader with hugs and rainbows. He couldn't care less about your spiritual nourishment.



Camus challenges the reader. He inspires the reader. Discomfited? Good. That's a natural way to feel. The question is: What are you going to do about it?

So it goes in all his works, both fiction and non. My two favorite books of his, and two at the top of my all-time list are *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. *The Plague* is one of his darker (and classic) works, but for our purposes at Unsettling Chapters, nothing matches ***The Fall***.

Here we have the long-form confessional of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who haunts the smoky confines of a lowlife bar in Amsterdam's Red Light District. He tells his story to an unknown, unseen audience, and that juices the narrative with an intimacy and informality we don't always get from Camus.

It's also inherently unreliable. What do we make of Clamence and his wild tale of falling from grace? Can we believe it to be true? Is it the ravings of a madman or a drunkard? Clamence even says, when describing a motto for his house, "Don't rely on it."

I've read *The Fall* twice, and I'm still not convinced that "we're" even there. At the end, there is a shift suggesting that Clamence has been having a dissociative episode and talking to himself the whole time: "Are we not all alike, constantly talking and to no one…"

Clamence takes us on a guided tour of Amsterdam, which is designed, he says, in the nature of Dante's rings of hell. We move through the city via his dramatic monologue.

But though setting has an important part to play, it is the narrator's interior landscape at center stage. Clamence presents the anxieties of his time, and they look very similar to modern anxieties. He speaks for the fragility of man, and how one's descent is incremental.

Camus nails the pathway of anxiety and how we are our own worst interrogators. He touches on thought perseveration, self-sabotage and even has an incident of road rage—perhaps its first mention in literature?

In turns hopeful and hopeless, Clamence is a man buried under the rubble of his failings, held down by his own hand. It's a reminder that we make poor choices, focus our attention on the things that scar us, and ultimately, author our own demise.

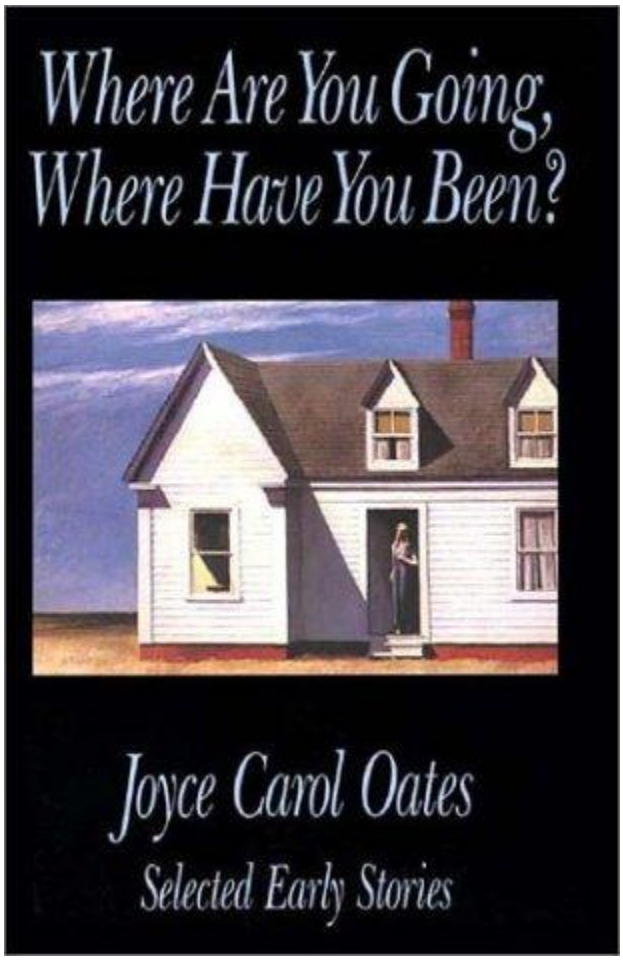
Now that's an unsettling premise.

I don't imagine a film version will displace *It's a Wonderful Life* as a holiday tradition, but for anyone curious about the workings of a mind in distress, you should wind your way into this twisted narrative.

Oct. 31

Joyce Carol Oates:

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”



As promised, we've come back to one of our favorite authors, **Joyce Carol Oates**--the queen of disquieting literature. For this Halloween installment of Unsettling Chapters, we're discussing the Holy Grail of dark fiction, "**Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?**"

Nearly a half-century since its publishing in 1966, this remains the most disturbing story I've ever read. I was introduced to "Where Are You Going..." in college, where it was read aloud by our English teacher, and my former employer, Julie Papadimas. What I remember most is gripping the side of my desk, trying to keep from screaming at Connie.

This is as visceral a reaction I've ever had to a work of fiction. I wasn't just affected by this story. I was pissed. I felt sick. I wanted to dive into the pages and lock the front door.

Though a lot of readers, I'm sure, are familiar with the ending, I don't want to spoil it for anyone who hasn't read it. I will only say that halfway through the story, it dawned on me just how it had to end. You feel the bile rising in your throat, yet there's no looking away. There's no putting it down. There is only the suffocating gaze of Arnold Friend and his sociopathic schmooze.

This is not a trick-or-treat brand of spooky, but the essence of true fear. The rare story that forces the reader to accept their vulnerabilities and realize that we can't always protect the ones we love. Can we even save ourselves?

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" unnerves me in a way similar to Flannery O'Connor. It's fiction that replicates that moment on a roller coaster when the train is briefly suspended at the top, about to descend, but seemingly frozen in place. When you feel the bottom drop underneath, but you have yet to tumble after. The breathless space where time knots into an excruciating paralysis.

This is the way Oates entwines and consumes us. With the patient grace of a constrictor. And her grip has yet to slack.

I pray that it never does.

And finally, for a Halloween treat, you can read (or re-read) "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" at the University of San Francisco's Web site.

Enjoy, my Samhain sweets.

...And sadly, that brings us to the end of our **31 Days of Dread** series. Tomorrow, like a post-rampage Hulk, we will return to our proper form as **Ensuing Chapters**, where we'll produce a monthly column for *Transgress Magazine* and write semi-weekly blog posts.

Thanks for reading. If you have any suggestions for disturbing books or stories we may have missed, please send them along. We're always looking for a new unsettling read... and we've got 11 months to kill until next October.