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Review by Amy Bride

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EXPLORING THE HORROR OF SUPERNATURAL FICTION: RAY BRADBURY'S ELLIOTT FAMILY (2020) EDITED BY MIRANDA CORCORAN AND STEVE GRONERT ELLERHOFF

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Corcoran, Miranda and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, editors. *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction: Ray Bradbury's Elliott Family*. Routledge, 2020, 246pp.

Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction: Ray Bradbury's Elliott Family is a comprehensive compendium which fulfils a conspicuous gap in existing Bradbury scholarship. As editors Miranda Corcoran and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff note in their introduction to the collection, the overwhelming majority of Bradbury criticism focuses on his contributions to Science Fiction and Dystopian writing, and even the small yet insightful handful of works that do consider Bradbury's supernatural works – such as Jonathan R. Eller and William F. Touponce's book *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction* (2004) and the latest issue of *The Ray Bradbury Review* edited by Jeffrey Kahan and Eller (No. 6, 2019) – relegate this writing to a side-note to his other, more famous publications. As the first book-length study to concentrate on Bradbury's Gothic writings, and his Elliott Family stories in particular, Corcoran and Ellerhoff's volume proposes a critical realignment of Bradbury as a seminal twentieth century Horror writer whose tales of spooky sister-witches, flying vampire-uncles and millennia-old mummified grandmothers have as much to say about the socio-political developments of mid-to-late-twentieth-century America as his dystopian visions of nuclear apocalypse, space travel, and book burning. To this point, *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction* achieves an easy-win; the quality of the close readings and gothicised interpretations of Bradbury's work provided by the volume's contributors make it difficult not to recognise Bradbury's skill, importance, and impact as a Gothic writer. As such, this volume is a must-read for Bradbury scholars and fans who might be unaware of his supernatural works and are thus missing out on a critically relevant and intellectually stimulating aspect of his career.

Beyond this immediate success, *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction* provides a fascinating insight into Bradbury's creative and editorial processes across his career. Due to the nature of the publication history of the Elliott Family stories (which appeared in various magazines between 1946 and 1994, with many revised and republished, and then later compiled in the 2001 'fix-up' novel *From the Dust Returned*), analyses of these works open a gateway through which the reader may examine Bradbury's creative and political leanings at a given time, which is then

comparable with the earlier or later versions of the same story. Corcoran and Ellerhoff exploit this opportunity to great effect, with a number of essays in the collection focusing on the same core stories (most notably, "The April Witch" and "Homecoming") from different publication perspectives. Dara Downey's essay "'Inverted and Dark and Mildly Different': Gothic Domestic Relations in Ray Bradbury and Shirley Jackson" is a particularly effective example, with Downey drawing connections between Bradbury's engagement with the carnivalesque and the development of domestic idealism, cultural homogeneity, and suburban conformity in post-war American culture. Downey's analysis compares the wedding scene in the original version of "Uncle Einar," first published in *Dark Carnival* (1947), in which ritual, ceremony, and performance are celebrated as part of the positive carnivalesque, with the edited and republished version of the same story which appeared in *From the Dust Returned*, in which the wedding scene is significantly downplayed, to the point of obscurity within the narrative. Downey argues that this shift between presenting the wedding as an openly and overtly Gothic spectacle to a distinct lack of disclosure of details can be read against changing attitudes towards domestic privacy (during a post-war era which promoted the home as both a private family space and where one's private family interactions were publicly scrutinised as evidence of anti-American sentiments), as well as the growing taboo surrounding carnival attractions such as freak shows which simultaneously challenged and reinforced societal norms regarding bodies, behaviours, and beliefs.

By recognising and investigating the differences between the two versions of "Uncle Einar," Downey teases a reading of Bradbury's changing attitudes towards the carnivalesque as influenced by the socio-political moment in which each version was published and subsequently provides a multi-dimensional close reading of Bradbury as a socially-engaged self-editor in addition to the compelling analysis of the work he produced. Downey's contextualisation of Bradbury's work against that of canonical Gothicism Shirley Jackson is exemplary of an additional, noteworthy success of *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction*. Much is made throughout the volume of Bradbury's deserved place amongst, and relationships with, canonical writers of American Gothic fiction, with Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, and Nathaniel Hawthorne amongst the most noted connections. Far from detracting from the volume's single-author focus, this contextualisation strengthens the editor's arguments for Bradbury's recognition as a Gothic writer whilst highlighting intriguing comparison points between Bradbury's supernatural works and those that have received more critical attention, thereby providing an anchor-point for readers who are unfamiliar with Bradbury's Gothic yet familiar with American Gothic more generally. Melanie Otto's essay "'Other Ways of Being': Ray Bradbury's 'The April Witch' in Conversation with Jamaica Kincaid's 'In the Night' and Leonora Carrington's 'The Seventh Horse'" provides the most unexpected, and in many ways the most rewarding, author comparison of Bradbury by positioning his work against continental American Magical Realism. Otto reads Cecy Elliott, big sister of the Elliott clan and eponymous "April Witch" of Bradbury's story, in relation to "concepts of shapeshifting, and dream journeying in creole and indigenous American folklore" in order to demonstrate her affinity with the self-assertive, sexually curious, and indeterminately-human, female protagonists of Kincaid's and Carrington's texts (91). As powerful women, Kincaid's, Carrington's and Bradbury's characters are, according to Otto's reading, both closer to nature and unnatural beings, at once threats to and protectors of the natural order that weave in and out of magical realms according to the desired power dynamics of their given circumstances.

Miranda Corcoran makes a similar argument regarding Cecy Elliott in the chapter "'I'll be in Every Living Thing in the World Tonight': Adolescent Femininity and the Gothic Uncanny in Bradbury's 'The April Witch.'" Corcoran examines the relationship between literary horror and female adolescence as a period of transgression from subject to object (including the self-alienation from one's own changing body, the discovery of sexuality, and the increasing pressures of societal expectations and gender conformity) to argue that "adolescent femininity is central to the narrative economy of the gothic" and, more specifically, that "the teenage girl [is] the archetypal embodiment of the uncanny" (71). Drawing on medical history, social discourse surrounding womanhood, the legacy of spiritualism, and even testimony from the Salem Witch Trials, Corcoran provides a highly compelling and engaging critique that is further supported by her analysis of the advertisements that accompanied the original magazine publication of Bradbury's tale through which Cecy's simultaneous rejection of domestic conformity and susceptibility to its restrictions is explored. According to Corcoran, "'The April Witch' foregrounds a vision of teenage femininity that is beholden to Cold War anxieties about the nuclear family and the reactive domesticity of the postwar period. At the same time, however, its construction of female adolescence is fundamentally uncanny and cloaked in the visual signifiers of the gothic that challenge the utopian optimism of the period" (71-72). This depth of investigation and vast array of cultural and clinical evidence makes Corcoran's chapter the stand-out essay of an already highly rigorous and readable collection.

A number of chapters touch upon or deal directly with the autobiographical aspects of the Elliott Family stories, including Bradbury's Illinois childhood, his eccentric extended Scandinavian family (upon whom many of the Elliott Family members are based), and Bradbury's own fears regarding life, death, and legacy. Whilst the establishing frameworks of these chapters are somewhat repetitive, given that most restate Bradbury's biographical data anew each time, the critical perspectives provided in these essays are varied and nuanced, meaning that a broad and insightful overview of Bradbury's autobiographical influences is available via a particular combination of chapters, should the reader wish to attain it. In this regard, the book might benefit from a separate author biography that covers the information relevant to his creation of the Elliott family. The inclusion of an appendix outlining the exhaustive publication history of each Elliott story is incredibly useful to readers who are likely to devour the entire volume and are interested in publication contexts, as the numerous publication dates and settings of each story can be difficult to map when discussed conversationally. Whilst the sole focus on the Elliott Family stories is at once understandable, engaging, and critically lacking in current scholarship, some comparative work between these and Bradbury's more dystopian works would have made an interesting entry point for readers more used to Bradbury's Science Fiction work. That being said, the Elliott Family stories certainly provide enough material to warrant a stand-alone critical volume; whilst *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction* is not an exhaustive collection of interpretations of Bradbury's Supernatural Fiction (nor does it claim to be), it does cover the major stories, characters, themes, and contextual influences in great detail and from alternative perspectives, and thus successfully establishes a firm foundation upon which future readings will be obligated to draw upon in their critique. Corcoran and Ellerhoff have selected essays that speak to each other as well as to the main concerns of the Elliott Family stories, and as such, have produced a volume that will no doubt become a seminal go-to text for Bradbury studies, and scholars of American Gothic literature more widely.

BIONOTE

Amy Bride completed her PhD in American Studies at University of Manchester, UK, in 2019. Her thesis examined the intersection of race and finance in American Gothic Monster Fiction of the Long American Century. She has previously published on the work of Bret Easton Ellis as late-capitalist hyper-gothic, and the development of racial finance in the American domestic slave trade. Her other research interests include the Blank Generation, technogothic, body horror, and cinema of the 1980s.