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*Monsters: A Companion (2020)* Edited by Simon Bacon

Review by Jack Fennel

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## **MONSTERS: A COMPANION (2020) EDITED BY SIMON BACON**

Review by Jack Fennell

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**Bacon, Simon, editor. *Monsters: a Companion*. Peter Lang, 2020. 280 pp.**

As a former editor of a previous volume in the *Companion* series, *Sci-Fi: A Companion* (2019), I am well aware of the inherent challenge of compiling a work of this type: the result has to be accessible to newcomers without putting off seasoned experts; it has to cover the fundamentals without re-treading old ground; and it has to do what previous critical companions did, while also differentiating itself in terms of range, approach, and content. In this regard, editor Simon Bacon and the contributors to this volume have succeeded admirably.

The book is divided into five sections – ‘Home,’ ‘Society,’ ‘Cultural Intersections,’ ‘Gender,’ and ‘Futures’ – which are, naturally, interpreted in a broad, thematic sense to allow for a variety of approaches. Thus, ‘Home’ addresses migration and mental illness alongside domestic violence; ‘Society’ encompasses a wide range of social problems and phenomena, from education to urban legends and the morality of ‘witnessing’; ‘Cultural Intersections’ deals with reinvention ‘within’ cultures as well as intercultural exchanges; ‘Gender’ includes feminist and queer readings of various texts, and ‘Futures’ considers not just Science-Fictional monstrosity, but anxieties about what awaits us in the very near future. This kind of division is rarely perfect, but such things give a book its own particular character. Here, Murray Leeder’s very informative and engaging overview of the use of animated skeletons as antagonists in fiction, with a particular focus on their deployment in the *Game of Thrones* TV series (2011-2019) created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, is included in the Gender section. I choose to interpret this as a bold editorial gesture, inviting us to consider how much of our identity is expected to be contingent on external appearance.

‘Home’ gets off to a strong start with Angela M. Smith’s analysis of the depiction of mental illness, using Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014) as a focal text. Smith not only explores the fraught relationship between superstition and neurosis in medical and cultural discourse, but also brings this insight to bear on the look of the film itself, noting that the Babadook’s appearance calls to mind both the Victorian medicalisation of ‘deviance’ and the design of several classic movie monsters. Simon Bacon’s own chapter on *The Invisible Man* (2020) and domestic violence follows with a number of striking observations about Leigh Whannell’s film and its fictional antecedents. For example, it had never occurred to me before that the titular antagonist of Paul Verhoeven’s film *Hollow Man* (2000), with his ‘facelessness’ and tendency to prey upon women within his own social circle, is a literal embodiment of sexual assault statistics.

Phil Fitzsimmons' chapter on Jennifer Kent's film *The Nightingale* (2018) considers the evils of colonialism in Australian cinema, including a brief consideration of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) directed by Peter Weir, though this is secondary to a psychoanalytical reading of paedophilic themes and implications in the chosen texts. Agnieszka Kotwasińska's analysis of the Polish musical Horror movie *The Lure* (2015), directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska, meanwhile, considers the film's humorous re-framing of Hans Christian Andersen's (1837) fairy tale "The Little Mermaid" as an immigrant story in light of European hostility towards migrants, with the Mediterranean as a "sea of bodies," the "gothicization" of immigration, the dehumanisation of immigrants, and the implication that acceptance is contingent on the migrants' willingness to be objectified for the gatekeepers' profit or gratification.

The 'Society' section begins with John Edgar Browning's insights into teaching a class on slasher films, generously including a week-by-week outline that should be of interest to any reader who might be putting together a Fantastika-related module, while Lauren Rosewarne's chapter on cyberbullies makes a good case for considering the cyberbully as a latter-day 'bogeyman,' highlighting the resonances between the anonymous online aggressor and traditional antagonists such as ghosts, shapeshifters, and slasher villains (e.g. their indeterminate identities, their ability to strike from anywhere, inhabiting an unreal 'dream world,' and so on). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas gives us a good overview of urban legends and their proximity to lived experience, before looking specifically at the Japanese urban legend of the Slit-Mouthed Woman and describing its changing contexts, from the rapid urbanisation of the Japanese countryside during the twentieth century to the conscious reinvention of Folk material in present-day Horror cinema. W. Scott Poole's analysis of Sara Perry's novel *Melmoth* (2018) concludes the section with a troubling rumination on the idea of 'bearing witness' to atrocity and human suffering, when the act of witnessing achieves nothing and the witnesses refuse to acknowledge their own part in that suffering.

Part Three, 'Cultural Intersections,' effectively a showcase of selected monsters from different world traditions, will be of particular interest to monsterologists. Benjamin Baumann charts the pop-culture evolution of the Thai 'Phi Krasue,' examining how a creature that initially did not fit into any convenient Western category came to be 'vampirised' as a consequence of globalisation, and is now beginning to return to its roots as an object of pity rather than revulsion. Inés Ordiz, in turn, looks at the roots and evolution of La Llorona, the weeping, child-murdering spirit of Mexican legend – from her possible antecedents in pre-Columbian religion, to her identification as the hated La Malinche (who supposedly betrayed her people to Cortéz), to her reclamation by twenty-first century Chicana feminists. Gail de Vos uses Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* and the on-going franchise (1993-present) as a starting-point to examine the Russian folkloric figure of Baba Yaga, and highlight what a varied and multifaceted creature she is, though more often than not in Western media she serves as a signifier of "strange Russian otherness." Partha Mitter takes the still-creaky *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), directed by Steven Spielberg, as a prime example of Hindu deities being conflated with Western demonic imagery, and traces the roots of this calumny all the way back to the end of the first millennium. Yasmine Musharbash closes out the section with a look at the depiction of monstrosity in the TV series *Cleverman* (2016-2017), created by Ryan Griffen,

which takes the Indigenous Australian myth of 'hairy people' as its basis. Musharbash introduces the reader to the concept of the "indigenous uncanny," derived from feelings of curiosity rather than fear, and shows how the hairy people (or yowies) are positioned as relatable monsters for Australian Aboriginal viewers.

'Gender' begins with Eddie Falvey's analysis of Robert Eggers' film *The Witch* (2015), which provides a basis to look at how Satan is incorporated into gendered Horror narratives. Falvey describes an interesting shift from depictions of Satan as a violator to ones that present him as a saviour of oppressed women – a change that is all the more interesting for being teased out through a story that presents the seventeenth century Puritan worldview literally. Emily Brick follows with an interesting overview of the 'warlock' figure, coining a memorable descriptor in "male-pattern monstrosity", and Craig Ian Mann lays out a convincing argument against the standard interpretation of werewolf narratives as dramatisations of male anger as "the beast within," focusing on emancipatory stories of female werewolves, such as in Jonas Alexander Arnby's film *When Animals Dream* (2014).

In 'Futures,' Leah Richards underlines the themes that render clones into 'monsters' in fiction (e.g. there's never just one of them, implications that they possess a 'hive mind,' and so on), and makes a number of very sensible points that debunk each of these in turn, highlighting the plasticity of the human genome and the effects of socialisation. Dahlia Schweitzer uses the Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan TV series *The Strain* (2014-2017) to discuss how plagues are employed discursively to separate in-group from out-group, and Self from Other. Carl H. Sederholm takes us in an interesting direction with his chapter on death metal band Abhorrence's album *Megalohydrothalassophobia* (2018), through which Sederholm expands upon cosmic pessimism, 'the mesh,' hyperobjects, and the Anthropocene. Gerry Canavan revisits Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) to examine the story's implied argument about legal versus biological distinctions between human and non-human, and briefly mentions an intriguing theory about the alien 'Prawns': that they are all in fact transformed humans, abductees who were previously exposed to the mutagenic compound that drives the film's plot. Finally, Elana Gomel addresses the zombie through Mike Carey's novel *The Girl With All the Gifts* (2014), looking at the convergence between the zombie and the posthuman, with the zombie as a representative of "the perpetual now" that recycles human culture even as it supersedes us – as Gomel puts it, "Humanity is dead, but the Oxbridge curriculum lives on" (238).

The chapters that did not convince me have one thing in common, which is psychoanalytical criticism. I harbour no specific animus against the psychoanalytical approach in itself, but I find that it lends itself to argument by assertion, and its efficacy depends on the reader's own adherence to Freudian orthodoxy. I admit that I did not understand Anthony Curtis Adler's chapter on Lady Gaga, as analysed through her guest appearance in an episode of Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* (2012). I felt I was on surer ground with Daniel Sheppard's analysis of the TV series *Bates Motel* (2013-2017), developed by Carlton Cuse, Kerry Ehrin, and Anthony Cipriano, as an articulation of queer monstrosity, but I was still conflicted; I may be reading Sheppard's argument incorrectly, but I did not understand how the queer-coding of fictional serial killers could be read as something to

be celebrated. Again, this may come down to a question of personal taste, and readers who are better-versed in psychoanalytic literary theory will probably engage with these chapters in a more rewarding manner than I did.

It should be noted that the production timeframe between issuing a call for papers and publication can sometimes work against a book's contents, especially with the accelerated news cycle of the past five years or so, and this is thus reflected within the text. A couple of essays make references to a then-current Trump presidency, and Dahlia Schweitzer's chapter, in tackling the subject of plagues with reference to the depiction of such in disaster movies of the 1990s and 2000s, has been noticeably impacted after the fact by the Covid-19 pandemic; this book thus falls just a few months short of the most obvious 'dividing-line' in recent history since 9/11, another victim of the Cursed Year of 2020. This is, of course, no reflection on the contributors or the editor.

I felt that I should save discussion of the Foreword and Afterword to this volume until the end of this review, to better to sum up the phenomenal breadth of its subject matter. The Foreword, by Sherry C. M. Lindquist, is an overview of an exhibition held in the Museum of the University of Memphis in 2018, featuring works by the artists Wangechi Mutu, Le Marquee La Flora, William Christenberry, Roger Cleaves, and Saya Woolfalk. Lindquist's account of this exhibition describes a space in which different kinds of monstrosity, from the figurative to the conceptual, are represented within the larger monstrous contexts of colonisation and racial violence, demonstrating that the monster can exist as both an object amenable to understanding and a presence lingering within the negative spaces of history, trying to avoid articulation. Patricia MacCormack's Afterword focuses on the TV series *Hannibal* (2013-2015) developed by Bryan Fuller, interrogating the highly stylised depictions of murder with reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'body without organs,' and exploring our fascination for fictionalised murderers that are, after all, a very different species from their real-world analogues. These are appropriate pieces to parenthesise this collection: whatever the monster's merits, at the end of the day it remains a monster, and we would do well to remember our ambivalent relationship to it.

Overall, this companion volume to monsters is an edifying introduction to a field of study that until relatively recently was somewhat obscure; it is straightforward and matter-of-fact enough to be welcoming to the beginner, without sacrificing theoretical complexity when needed, and the variety of approaches on display means that those well-versed in the study of monsters will also find it enlightening. A worthy entry in the series, and a worthy inclusion for a researcher's reference library.

## BIONOTE

**Jack Fennell** is a researcher, writer, and editor based in Limerick, Ireland. He is the editor of two anthologies, *A Brilliant Void* (2018) and *It Rose Up* (2021), collecting lesser-known Irish Science Fiction and Fantasy stories respectively, both published by Tramp Press. His academic studies *Irish Science Fiction* (2014) and *Rough Beasts: Monstrosity in Irish Literature, 1800-2010* (2019) are published by Liverpool University Press, and his own fiction has appeared in *Silver Apples Magazine*, *The Only One in the World*, and *Who Sleuthed It?* He teaches at the University of Limerick.