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IT CAME FROM THE CLOSET: QUEER REFLECTIONS ON HORROR (2022) EDITED BY JOE VALLESE

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Queer writers are often interested in combining personal reflection and critical analysis, from incorporating individual experiences into academic scholarship to creating critically-engaged memoirs like *The Argonauts* (2015) and *In the Dream House* (2019). While *It Came from the Closet* (2022) draws upon these methodological precedents, editor Joe Vallese's claim that this collection is a "first-of-its-kind-anthology" does not feel like an exaggeration (6). Like two of its major interests, queerness and monstrosity, this collection resists clear categorisation, approaching Horror and queer life with a critic's magnifying glass and the mirror of the memoirist.

Vallese concisely describes the anthology as "a collection of eclectic memoirs that use horror as the lens through which the writers consider and reflect upon queer identity, and vice versa" (5). While each essay blends film criticism and queer memoir in different proportions, the writers' personal experiences drive the collection. Though the contributors speak to broader conversations about Horror and queerness, quotations from theory are rare; their commentary feels more suited to a cultural magazine or review than an academic journal. This fusion of criticism and memoir opens opportunities for reflection that would not be possible in a traditional academic paper or a conventional film review, enhancing rather than undermining the collection's intellectual rigour and originality. The anthology's commitment to treating personal experiences as worthy sites of analysis and entry into these films is one of its particular strengths.

It Came from the Closet is organised into five loosely thematic sections, each opened by an illustration by Bishakh Som depicting images from the memoirs to follow. The essays in "An Excellent Day for an Exorcism" focus on possession and demons, while the entries in "Monster Mash" examine monsters from the classic werewolf of *The Wolf Man* (1941) to the infamous shark in *Jaws* (1975). "Fatal Attractions" is particularly interested in queer desires, especially those resistant to categorisation or entangled with power. In "Whatever You Do, Don't Fall Asleep," dreams and doubles take centre stage as identities and reality are unsettled. The concluding section, "Final Cuts," feels somewhat arbitrary in its organisation but seeks to bring the collection full circle. For instance, Will Stockton's essay – which presents his son's unruly behaviour as possession and discusses the films *Child's Play* (1988) and *The Exorcist* (1973) – reaches back strongly to section

one. The concluding essay, Viet Dinh's "Notes on *Sleepaway Camp*," satisfyingly mirrors Vallese's introduction to the collection, which begins with Vallese's first experience watching the same slasher film. As Dinh ends the final essay with the beginning of *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), we return to the start of the collection; we end "as we must, at the beginning" (285).

Vallese promises, "While these essays spotlight each writer's singular queer perspective, their respective presentations and analyses of 'the Horror Film' serve as a kind of universal connective tissue between them and their readers" (5). Yet, an underlying question drives the anthology's collective appreciation for Horror: why do queer people love Horror when Horror so often does not love queer people – instead abusing, villainising, and marginalising them? The anthology does not provide one answer. Instead, it offers many individual and personal answers, pointing toward both the pain and the possibility of Horror.

The films addressed in the anthology range from the classic to the contemporary, from blockbusters to lesser-known gems. Some movies – *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Good Manners (As boas maneiras)* (2017), *Sleepaway Camp* – fit fairly intuitively beneath the umbrella of queer Horror. Yet, alongside them in this collection are unexpected movies, like *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Godzilla* (1954). The essays on these films provide queer reflections on Horror without requiring the films to be explicitly queer. Several writers compellingly read queer valences into films where they have not been frequently identified. For example, Richard Scott Larson offers a fresh take on *Halloween* (1978), reading it as a coming-out story, and Jen Corrigan explores the homoeroticism of *Jaws*. Corrigan argues that, on screen, "queerness is most easily tolerated when masked with straight performance" and intentionally approaches *Jaws* as a "straight film that can be read as queer" (95-96). Corrigan's choice to see queerness in *Jaws* leads to an original reading of the film, and her approach asks what might happen if we encounter films looking for queerness rather than expecting heteronormativity.

The collection circles themes of identity and identification. While queerness unites these essays, queer is not a static term. The memoirists are gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, pansexual, polyamorous, agender, and more. They turn to Horror to investigate a plethora of experiences with which queerness can intersect, such as race, disability, illness, fatness, trauma, pregnancy, family, abuse, shame, and love. These various perspectives and interests lead the contributors to identify with different aspects of the films they analyse. The act of identification serves as a methodological bridge between criticism and memoir. When I see myself in a character, it reveals something about the film's power and politics, and I also learn something about how I see myself. This loop of reflections – the viewer pointing to the film pointing back – is the motion at the collection's core.

As a scholar interested in the desires and fears that monsters embody, I expected the writers to identify with the monster, a perennially queer figure, and many do – sometimes triumphantly, often ambiguously. Prince Shakur wonders, "what happens when we, the children, become the monsters, the very things meant to be cast out?" (91). Zefyr Lisowski asks, "If you first see yourself in a host of ghosts, what does it mean to live despite that?" (42). However, contributors identify

with other figures too. Dinh and Tucker Lieberman discuss the Final Girl, the survivor who faces the killer's horrors and lives to tell the tale. The resilient Final Girl combines feminine and masculine traits and promises an existence beyond the victim/killer binary – the two categories to which gays and lesbians are typically relegated in Horror.

While personal reflections thread through these essays, each contributor takes a different stance on which is the lens and which is the object: the Horror film or queer life. Lieberman's "The Trail of His Flames" stands out for interrogating the collection's methodology and experimental form. Exploring what a memoir-about-a-movie can provide, Lieberman uses *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) to narrate the mental distress he experienced after falling out with a friend, interweaving his own story with sections written from the perspective of the film's Final Girl, Nancy. I highlight Lieberman's essay because it circles some of the anthology's key concerns. How do we tell queer stories – 'real' and fictional – both of which can horrify and warp or expose the truth? As Lieberman points out, queer stories are often queer in multiple ways. Most obviously, the story may depict queer characters or have a queer storyteller. But Lieberman argues that a story may also be queer "based on how it keeps secrets," navigating both visibility and invisibility as zones of uncertain safety: "The queerest stories are the ones that are hardest to tell" (180). By examining and inhabiting a Horror movie about trauma, Lieberman wrestles with how to narrate 'real' trauma, elucidating the promises and impossibilities of truthfully telling the story of one's, or another's, life.

In addition to raising meaningful epistemological questions about queer storytelling and memoir, the collection addresses several scholarly gaps. Lisowski offers a first-of-its-kind reading of *The Ring* (2002) with an eye towards disability, and Sarah Fonseca spotlights *Is That You? (¿Eres tú, papá?)* (2018), Cuba's only psychological Horror film, as a movie deserving of critical attention. Dinh recognises the camp sensibility of *Sleepaway Camp* and its queer potential beyond its transphobic twist ending; he also distinguishes between the morality of traditional Horror (where the monster transgresses) and the slasher (where the victims do), describing the murderous Angela as both the monster and the Final Girl. In "Both Ways," Carmen Maria Machado provides a powerful reassessment of *Jennifer's Body* – and a necessary analysis of bisexuality, which remains markedly under-theorised. Machado describes the slipperiness of bisexuality: "it can appear to be other things, it can disguise itself in ways monosexuality can't, reveal itself against all knowledge and expectations" (26). She provides the powerful image of bisexuality as a body of water, one which many queer people coming of age in a heteronormative society must, at some point, cross, and she defends depictions of bisexuality that are "conflicted, spectral, transient" (25). Machado's celebration of trips into these bisexual waters, whether momentary or lasting, resists cultural and critical tendencies to gatekeep and essentialise.

Carrow Narby's "Indescribable" is also worth foregrounding for its scholarly contributions, particularly to queer and monster theory. Narby challenges readings of blob monsters as unrelatable and less threatening to social norms than humanoid creatures, arguing that the opposite is true: the blob is relatable and radical. Narby reads the titular pink menace of *The Blob* (the 1988 remake) and the sex-crazed, shapeshifting blob monsters of *Society* (1989) as queer threats to heteronormativity,

bodily boundaries, and categorical distinctions. Speaking from their embodied experience as a self-described fat, agender individual, Narby relates to the blob monster, admiring its rejection of social and symbolic orders. In a fascinating analysis of desire, identity, and abjection, they locate in the blob monster a promise of “intimacy without legibility,” the chance to be loved without needing to be known: “Not the eternal separation of annihilation but just the opposite: the end of solitude” (79). Narby adds to monster scholarship a serious consideration of the blob from a queer, agender, fat perspective.

Several contributors turn to Horror as a place for finding queer power or glimpsing queer futures, even when the films seem to reject those possibilities. At the same time, other essayists propose and adopt a different approach: they sit with the harm these films can cause, without searching for liberatory queer possibility within the films themselves. For these writers, the focus is not on extracting sustenance through a reparative reading but on finding a way forward when sustenance has been denied – the damage done, the hatred internalised. Lisowski puts it best in “The Girl, the Well, the Ring”: “These movies hurt me and I kept watching them, and there’s nothing redemptive about that. [...] I have to believe that if we stare closely enough at what hates us, somehow we can make our own love as well” (48). Lisowski’s proposition is not simple pessimism: she proposes a practice of reading that looks toward queer flourishing without needing to search for it in cultural objects that work against it. Lisowski avoids wholly rejecting or redeeming Horror; instead, she stares it down, investigating the wounds it caused with the hope that something can still be found, if not healed, through the process.

It Came from the Closet is a distinctive collection, speaking with strong and varied voices, that will satisfy lovers of Horror and queer memoir. Within their personal stories and film commentaries, the essayists offer insightful reflections on queer experiences, the Horror genre, and the act of memoir, speaking to and beyond traditional scholarship. Within this anthology, the relationship between queerness and Horror emerges as ambivalent, multifaceted, and changeable. The contributors simultaneously celebrate Horror’s queer possibilities and acknowledge the real pain of being made into a victim, a killer, or a monster. *It Came from the Closet* has room for both views, picturing Horror as a site of queer resistance and a haunted house where, while wading through feelings of disgust and monstrosity, queer people still find a home.

BIONOTE

Paige Elizabeth Allen is a US-based writer, researcher, and theatre-maker. She earned an MSt in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (University of Oxford, UK) and a BA in English (Princeton University, US). Publications include an article on illness in *Wuthering Heights* (*Oxford Research in English*), a chapter on women-led creative teams in *Milestones in Musical Theatre*, and a forthcoming co-authored book on feminist approaches to musical theatre. Other interests include the Gothic tradition, Speculative Fiction/film, and monstrosity. Her dissertation explored haunted houses in the works of Daisy Johnson and Shirley Jackson through a queer, posthuman lens. She received Princeton’s highest undergraduate honour.