

*Monster,  
She Wrote*







# *Monster, She Wrote*

*The Women Who  
Pioneered Horror &  
Speculative Fiction*

LISA KRÖGER AND  
MELANIE R. ANDERSON

  
QUIRK BOOKS  
PHILADELPHIA

Copyright © 2019 by Lisa Kröger and Melanie R. Anderson

All rights reserved. Except as authorized under U.S. copyright law, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Number: 2019930321

ISBN: 978-1-68369-138-9

Printed in China

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro, Mr. Eaves, Clearface Gothic LH,

Jacob Riley, and Cantoria MT

Designed by Andie Reid

Illustrations by Natalya Balnova

Production management by John J. McGurk

Quirk Books

215 Church Street

Philadelphia, PA 19106

[quirkbooks.com](http://quirkbooks.com)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To all the girls  
who still sleep with the lights on,  
but read the scary stories anyway*

# Contents

## 9 Introduction

### PART ONE: THE FOUNDING MOTHERS

- 17 Margaret Cavendish:  
Mad Madge
- 22 Ann Radcliffe:  
Terror over Horror
- 28 Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley:  
The Original Goth Girl
- 36 Regina Maria Roche:  
Scandalizing Jane Austen
- 40 Mary Anne Radcliffe:  
Purveyor of Guts and Gore
- 44 Charlotte Dacre:  
Exhibitor of Murder and  
Harlotry

### PART TWO: HAUNTING TALES

- 53 Elizabeth Gaskell:  
Ghosts Are Real
- 60 Charlotte Riddell:  
Born Storyteller
- 65 Amelia Edwards:  
The Most Learned Woman
- 70 Paula E. Hopkins:  
The Most Productive Writer
- 74 Vernon Lee:  
Ghostwriter *à la Garçonne*

- 80 Margaret Oliphant:  
Voice for the Dead

- 85 Edith Wharton:  
The Spine-Tingler

### PART THREE: CULT OF THE OCCULT

- 94 Marjorie Bowen:  
Scribe of the Supernatural
- 100 L. T. Meade:  
Maker of Female Masterminds
- 105 Alice Askew: Casualty of War
- 110 Margery Lawrence:  
Speaker to the Spirits
- 115 Dion Fortune:  
Britain's Psychic Defender

### PART FOUR: THE WOMEN WHO WROTE THE PULPS

- 125 Margaret St. Clair:  
Exploring Our Depths
- 130 Catherine Lucille Moore:  
Space Vamp Queen
- 134 Mary Elizabeth Counselman:  
Deep South Storyteller
- 139 Gertrude Barrows Bennett:  
Seer of the Unseen
- 144 Everil Worrell: Night Writer

148 Eli Colter: Keeping the  
Wild West Weird

#### **PART FIVE: HAUNTING THE HOME**

159 Dorothy Macardle:  
Chronicler of Pain and Loss

163 Shirley Jackson:  
The Queen of Horror

170 Daphne du Maurier:  
The Dame of Dread

176 Toni Morrison:  
Haunted by History

182 Elizabeth Engstrom:  
Monstrosity in the Mundane

#### **PART SIX: PAPERBACK HORROR**

192 Joanne Fischmann:  
Recipes for Fear

196 Ruby Jean Jensen:  
Where Evil Meets Innocence

200 V. C. Andrews:  
Nightmares in the Attic

206 Kathe Koja: Kafka of the Weird

210 Lisa Tuttle:  
Adversary for the Devil

215 Tanith Lee:  
Rewriting Snow White

#### **PART SEVEN: THE NEW GOTHs**

226 Anne Rice:  
Queen of the Damned

232 Helen Oyeyemi:  
Teller of Feminist Fairy Tales

237 Susan Hill:  
Modern Gothic Ghost Maker

241 Sarah Waters:  
Welcome to the Dark Séance

246 Angela Carter:  
Teller of Bloody Fables

251 Jewelle Gomez:  
Afrofuturist Horrorist

#### **PART EIGHT: THE FUTURE OF HORROR AND SPECULATIVE FICTION**

261 The New Weird:  
Lovecraft Revisited and Revised

267 The New Vampire:  
Polishing the Fangs

272 The New Haunted House:  
Home, Deadly Home

276 The New Apocalypse:  
This Is the End (Again)

282 The New Serial Killer: Sharper  
Weapons, Sharper Victims

**291 Glossary**

**295 Notes**

**307 Suggested Reading**

**311 Index**

**320 Acknowledgments**



## Introduction

**W**hy are women great at writing horror fiction? Maybe because horror is a transgressive genre. It pushes readers to uncomfortable places, where we aren't used to treading, and it forces us to confront what we naturally want to avoid.

And women are accused of being transgressive all the time—or, at the very least, they are used to stepping outside of the carefully drawn boundaries that society has set for them. Women are told what to do and who to be. Women are taught to be sweet, to raise children, to stay in their place. Women are pushed to the edges of society, where they are expected to keep their mouths shut and their heads down. The marginalization of women may have been more overt in the past, at times when women couldn't vote or own property or work outside the home, but it still happens today. Women are still instructed to be good girls.

In any era, women become accustomed to entering unfamiliar spaces, including territory that they've been told not to enter. When writing is an off-limits act, writing one's story becomes a form of rebellion and taking back power. Consider, for example, Margaret Cavendish, who in the 1600s brazenly wrote about science and philosophy, two subjects then considered the purview of only male minds. More recently, Jewelle Gomez brought an African American and lesbian perspective to the vampire tale, which had long been the province of European male protagonists. Today, writers like Carmen Maria Machado and Helen Oyeyemi subvert

the so-called safe storytelling formats of the fairy tale and the supernatural yarn, adding women's voices to these traditional narrative forms.

For women especially, writing is often a kind of noncompliance, which calls to mind the prisoners in the comic book series *Bitch Planet* by writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and artist Valentine De Landro (Image Comics, 2014–17). The comic is brilliant—it tells a female-driven dystopian story about women sent to a prison planet as punishment for being noncompliant. What a great word to describe the women in this book.

The writers you'll meet in *Monster, She Wrote* are all rule breakers. And here's the funny thing: society doesn't always pay attention to what's happening over there on the edges. So while society was ignoring them, they were taking up their pens. While everyone else has been doing their own thing, women have been doing theirs, crafting tales about scientifically reanimated corpses, ghosts of aborted children, postapocalyptic underground cities.

Horror has been penned by men and women alike, but it's important to acknowledge that women have been contributing to the genre since its inception. As you'll discover in the following pages, the horror genre that readers love today would likely be unrecognizable without the contributions of these women.

These misbehaving women who write horror in all its nasty forms.









PART ONE

---

*The  
Founding  
Mothers*

**H**orror, strangeness, and fear have always been part of literature. Humans love their monsters; for evidence, look back, oh, four thousand years, give or take, to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Or consider that the “Inferno” section of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is by far the most popular among readers, thanks to the descent into Hell. Shakespeare wrote about ghosts and witches, and his *Titus Andronicus* (first performed in 1594) is one of the bloodiest and most violent plays of his career (maybe even the bloodiest play in European history . . . until the Grand Guignol, that is).

Clearly, audiences have always craved horror. But like all fiction, horror and other types of so-called weird fiction have ebbed and flowed in popularity, as well as changed forms, throughout history. So where did it all begin? There’s a strong argument that horror as it exists in the twenty-first century evolved from the Gothic novel, a literary style fashionable in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Gothic fiction started with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1765. The novel tells of a royal wedding that goes very, very wrong. Manfred, owner of the titular castle, is obsessed with marrying his son to a beautiful princess, Isabella, in order to continue his family line and secure wealth. The only problem? His son, Conrad, is rather sickly, and not a great prince at all. Before Conrad can marry Isabella, he is crushed to death . . . *by a giant helmet*.

The castle, you see, is cursed by a statue of a knight that has come to life and is causing general chaos. Manfred is so fixated on perpetuating his family name that he decides to marry Isabella himself (not even his pesky wife can get in the way of his plans). But he thinks Isabella is in love

with the mysterious Theodore . . . who actually loves Manfred's daughter, Matilda. Confused? So is Manfred, and he kills his own daughter thinking that she is Isabella. Things go downhill from there, with plenty of mistaken identities and lots of knives that are meant for one person but end up in someone else's heart. As nuptial celebrations go, the book makes the Red Wedding in *Game of Thrones* seem not so bad.

Walpole's novel became so popular that it created a genre called the Gothic, named for the architecture found in so many of these books. And in the following decades, the new genre's popularity would shoot through the roof, primarily due to the work of women writers.

Gothic fiction might never have taken off without Ann Radcliffe, the English author who published *The Romance of the Forest* (T. Hookham & Carpenter, 1791), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (G. G. and J. Robinson, 1794), *The Italian* (Cadell and Davies, 1797), and other novels. Radcliffe's writing popularized the genre, but truth be told, her books seem tame compared to works that came after; they're more like cozy mysteries than eerie horror stories. Her spooky and dark castles played on the imagination without delivering actual ghosts.

An army of women writers followed Radcliffe, using the Gothic formula she'd developed to explore their own bloodier, more violent, and fantastic nightmares. These women, whom you're about to meet, in turn inspired generations of authors and filmmakers, including those creating horror stories today. Without Radcliffe and her successors, we wouldn't have the 1977 nightmarish fairy tale film *Suspiria*—or its 2018 remake. Likewise the quiet but brooding domestic horror of Daphne du Maurier or Shirley Jackson. The women who put pen to paper back at the beginning of horror and weird fiction—even before such terms were used—were unafraid to try new things, to take their stories into unexplored territory. And in doing so, they inspired and enabled writers for centuries to come.



## SPOTTING THE GOTHIC

Here's a handy checklist of attributes that indicate you're reading a Gothic novel.

- ❑ A virtuous young woman who's prone to quoting poetry and/or singing music while deep in the woods (not unlike Snow White), and equally prone to fainting and/or falling unconscious (also not unlike Snow White).
- ❑ A handsome man with a mysterious background who shares the heroine's love of poetry and/or music and/or the forest.
- ❑ A sinister-looking villain (almost always male, usually foreign, and — *gasp!* — Catholic) who's out for money (especially if the heroine is loaded and an orphan)
- ❑ Some sort of crumbling castle or abbey or convent—really any kind of once-majestic building now in ruins.
- ❑ A supernatural being (a ghost, a talking portrait, a giant statue that kills people by dropping helmets on them) that makes life difficult. Bonus points if the supernatural element is revealed by the end of the book to be not supernatural at all.



## *Mad Madge*



# Margaret Cavendish

1623–1673

**In a time when women had few career options** outside the home, and even fewer rights, one lady was writing a breathtakingly prolific body of work that prefigured the genre we now call speculative fiction.

Margaret Cavendish is an outlier, producing her strange fiction a century before Gothic novels came along. That seems appropriate for a woman who so refused definition. She was a poet. She was a philosopher whose intellect was on par with that of Thomas Hobbes—famed English political philosopher—and other thought leaders of the day, and she boldly added her voice to male-only discussions of politics and philosophy. She wrote an autobiography when this literary form was relatively new. More than that, she published plays, essays, and novels. And Cavendish may well have been one of the first literary “celebrities” in English history. Her open pursuit of fame was one of her ways of thumbing her nose at society—she was a Kardashians before there were Kardashians.

She was born in 1623 to the wealthy Lucas family of Essex—but her parents were not part of the titled aristocracy. Tragedy struck early; her father died when she was a young child. Her mother raised Cavendish as other daughters of rich families were raised, which meant no formal education, especially not in the sciences. Instead, she was taught to entertain in polite society, which included learning to read and write (as well as to sing and dance). Some women of her rank were afforded private tutoring, but Cavendish was not. So she read every book she could find, embarking on a self-navigated education in history and philosophy. Her brother John, who was highly educated in these fields, taught his sister what he learned.

In 1643 Cavendish applied to be, and was accepted as, a “maid of honour” to Queen Henrietta Maria, wife of King Charles I. Though her parents had been wealthy, Cavendish inherited no money following the death of her father (and certainly received no dowry for marriage). She knew she’d have to make her own way in the world. When the queen was exiled to France (following the execution of Charles I in the First English Civil War), Cavendish moved to Paris with her. There Cavendish met her husband, William, who would become Duke of Newcastle Upon Tyne. Despite protests from friends (they felt William was on the “wrong side” politically), theirs was a good match. William had been educated by Thomas Hobbes, and he found Cavendish to be his intellectual equal. The couple traveled before settling in England, where they began to restore the Cavendish estates that had been confiscated during the war. And soon Margaret Cavendish became socially infamous, known among the upper-class circles as “Mad Madge” for her wild fashion and her loud, flirtatious behavior.

Calling her the Kardashian of her day is no exaggeration; Cavendish was acutely aware of her notoriety and cultivated her reputation as a celebrity. Once, in London’s Hyde Park, she was mobbed by crowds, hoping for a glimpse of the infamous woman. How infamous was she? Cavendish scandalized polite society more than once; on one occasion, she showed up to a theater event wearing a dress that exposed her breasts, including her nipples, which she had thoughtfully painted red. Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, called her “mad, conceited and ridiculous.”

Which is perhaps another way of saying that Cavendish pushed against the societal roles



available to women in her day, who were expected to be demure and polite and, most important, silent in social situations. Women certainly were not supposed to speak about what were believed to be “men’s subjects” like philosophy or politics. And, should they know how to write, women definitely were not supposed to publish their writings. Not only did Cavendish read the major philosophers of the day, like Hobbes and Descartes, but by 1668 she had published numerous letters and essays on matters of philosophy, all with her name proudly on the front page.

## Out of This World

Most relevant to our purposes, Cavendish wrote what could well be considered the first science-fiction novel. Her 1666 book *The Description of the New World, Called the Blazing World* (often shortened to simply *The Blazing World*), was published some 150 years before Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. To be clear, scholars debate who holds that title of “first,” or if Cavendish’s book is even science fiction. Perhaps it’s better described as speculative fiction or philosophy. Ultimately, that’s not the point. *The Blazing World* is a breathtakingly creative narrative, worthy of study particularly for its treatment of women and its inventive technology. The main character, simply named the Empress, is kidnapped by a lovesick sailor and finds herself on a ship meeting a storm at sea. The crew doesn’t survive, but our protagonist is thrust into a magical world—what science-fiction readers would recognize as an alternate universe, entered through a portal.

This “Blazing World” is full of dreamlike inventions. Enormous boats are propelled by air-powered engines and can lock together in an intricate design to make them impermeable to weather. The society the Empress encounters is a feminist utopia where science and philosophy reign supreme. The adventure is part fantasy, part philosophical enquiry, part almost steampunk.

This new world is a vehicle for Cavendish's own philosophies (the author even shows up as a character named the Duchess), which resemble those of Thomas Hobbes. This doesn't mean she wasn't an original; she published several works detailing her personal theories. Like philosophers Hobbes and David Hume, Cavendish was a naturalist, believing that everything in the universe had a purpose and a mind—and every working part collaborated in the machine of the greater universe. She was interested in the intellect of humankind and the motions at work in the universe, much of which helped her build *The Blazing World*.

Cavendish wrote for most of her life, penning poetry, plays, and philosophical essays. She and her husband lived happily and never had children. But as possibly the first woman to publish science fiction, and the female frontrunner in the speculative fiction genre, she left quite a legacy.

## Reading List

**Not to be missed:** *The Blazing World* is in the public domain and not hard to find with some online searching. The breadth of Cavendish's imagination makes for a fun read.

**Also try:** If Margaret Cavendish's outrageous life sounds like fiction, readers may be interested in Katie Whitaker's book *Mad Madge* (Basic Books, 2003), which explores the paradoxes in the real Duchess's life. For instance, Whitaker speculates that Cavendish was dyslexic, though she pushed herself to read and write.

**Related work:** The *Black Dossier* graphic novel from Alan Moore's League of Extraordinary Gentlemen series (DC Comics, 2010) takes its characters on a trip to the Blazing World . . . which appears in 3-D when viewed with the glasses included with the book.



*“I had rather die  
in the adventure of  
noble achievements,  
than live in obscure  
and sluggish  
security.”*

—The Blazing World



## ◆ *Terror over Horror* ◆

### Ann Radcliffe

1764–1823

**She's not a horror writer, let's get that straight.** Ann Radcliffe wanted to terrify her readers, make them feel alive through her words. She wrote about blood and murder and terrifically terrifying villains. But she wasn't a *horror* writer, not in the least.

She didn't have to be. Eighteenth-century English readers couldn't get enough of the macabre, and by the latter half of the century, the Gothic novel was the most popular genre of literature. Enter Ann Radcliffe, who wrote the most popular Gothic romances of the 1790s, making her a best-selling writer in her day and establishing the definitive formula for the genre. She is still considered the most significant Gothic writer in eighteenth-century English literature and, in the last decade of the 1700s, was at the forefront of a uniquely female-driven moment of women writing novels for women.

So who was Ann Radcliffe?

She was born Ann Ward in 1764 in Holborn, England, to a haberdasher and his wife. (Doesn't that sound like the most British thing you've ever heard?) Not much is known about her childhood, though it's said she was curious and clever—and a voracious reader, thanks in part to an aunt who left young Ann a number of books in her will. She also loved theater and the opera and attended both regularly as an adult. In 1787, around age 23, she married a journalist named William Radcliffe, who edited a radical paper called the *Gazette*, notable for its pro-French Revolution stance. The couple lived in London, though they traveled across Europe, including Switzerland, Germany, and Austria—places that would later inspire the long, detailed descriptions of landscapes in her writing.

Just two months after her marriage, Radcliffe began to write, anonymously publishing her first novel *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* with Hookham in 1789. It earned Radcliffe three shillings. The setting is the Scottish Highlands; the plot involves a peasant boy who discovers he is in fact an aristocrat. The book was not widely reviewed, but it set Radcliffe on the path to a career writing the Gothic. Her second novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (Hookham, 1790), was the first to bear her name on the cover; the book drew more reviews, many of them positive. Additional novels followed, including *The Romance of the Forest* (Hookham, 1791) and her most famous novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794 by G. G. and J. Robinson. By now, Radcliffe's readership was well established, and the sale of her fourth book brought in £50. She continued to write for enjoyment, and in doing so became one of the era's most successful female writers.

## Mrs. Radcliffe's Castle

*The Mysteries of Udolpho* takes place in the sixteenth century in southern France, where the young and beautiful Emily St. Aubert is living the perfect life, full of poetry and long walks in the woods. Emily and her father leave on a trip through the Pyrenees, where she meets the handsome and equally poetic Valancourt. If *The Mysteries of Udolpho* were a love story, then the tale might end here. However, this is a Gothic novel, so Emily's father dies, leaving her an orphan. She goes to live with a wealthy aunt in the drafty castle Udolpho, only to be held captive there when her aunt marries the villainous Montoni.

Montoni tries to force Emily to marry his friend, the Count Morano, in a ploy for the two men to steal the women's large estate. Also, the castle may or may not be haunted . . . (Spoiler: it's not.) The castle at first *seems* haunted, thanks to various ghostly sights and sounds. But Radcliffe preferred the narrative technique of the "explained supernatural," meaning

that the spooky atmosphere turns out to have real-world explanations. For example, Emily is horrified to find, lurking behind an ominous black curtain, what she thinks is a rotting corpse but turns out to be a melted wax figure. That may seem like a letdown to modern horror readers (show us the bloody corpse, please), but Radcliffe's choice was intentional. Ghosts are spooky, but the true threat was one she saw in the real world: men who were willing to abuse women in order to gain wealth.

Patriarchy and greed. They'll get you every time, no supernatural phenomenon required.

Radcliffe's popularity increased with each new book. She published her final Gothic novel, *The Italian*, in 1797. The plot revolves around a pair of star-crossed lovers, the orphan Vivaldi and the lovely Ellena. Vivaldi woos Ellena, but the girl's mother and the villainous monk (seeing a trend here?) Father Schedoni scheme to keep the lovebirds apart. The book garnered rave reviews from, among others, writers Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Frances Burney; Radcliffe did receive some criticism for anti-Catholic sentiment in her narratives. Maybe one less evil monk, Mrs. Radcliffe? Her final work, *Gaston de Blondville*, was released posthumously in 1826, though Radcliffe may have had reasons for not publishing it when she was alive. Although it is a typical Gothic novel,

it is more than a bit rambling (read: loooooooooooooong). And the plot doesn't always make sense, especially when she plays around with the supernatural (with real ghosts this time).

Today, Radcliffe is considered not only a pioneer of her genre but also a voice for women's rights. Her particular (and incredibly pop-



ular) take on the female Gothic focused on the abuses women suffered at the hands of men, especially through traditional institutions like marriage.

Though she might not have written horror per se, Radcliffe knew how to terrify, and her work inspired countless writers who came after her. Sir Walter Scott, the Marquis de Sade, and even Edgar Allan Poe have cited her influence. She was particularly important as an example of a successful female author. In her day, so many women writers took to writing Gothic novels that critics began to call them the “Radcliffean school.” It’s difficult to imagine the horror genre without the familiar elements of the Gothic, and without Radcliffe’s captivating storytelling, we may not have had the Gothic horror novel at all.

## HORROR VS. TERROR

In an 1826 essay, Ann Radcliffe wrote:

*“Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them.”*

In other words, terror was high art, meant to shake the reader alive. Terror is standing on the edge of a cliff, feeling both fear and the overwhelming beauty of the scene in front of you. Horror pushes you over that cliff, leaving no appreciation for beauty or the sublime, just sheer and blinding fear followed by blood and guts. For Radcliffe, horror was low art, a bomb that destroys feeling, leaving the reader numb—and something true writers shouldn’t aspire to. Fortunately, not all writers of the Gothic agreed!

## Reading List

**Not to be missed:** If you read only one Radcliffe novel, make it *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Newer editions are widely available. It's a long book, and the first third or so is basically a travelogue, with lengthy descriptions of various landscapes. Expect lots of meaningful stares at mountain scenery—Emily St. Aubert and her family love nature and spontaneously break out into poetry when the views so move them. Don't let this dissuade you; once the orphaned Emily is with her aunt, the action picks up and the book becomes one chill-inducing read. Consider it Terror 101, and enjoy seeing where many of your favorite authors found their inspiration.

**Also try:** Perhaps more than any of her other books, *The Italian* shows Radcliffe's skills as a writer. It features a scheming monk as the villain, which has led scholars to speculate that Radcliffe wrote the book in response to Matthew Lewis. She famously hated his novel *The Monk* (Joseph Bell, 1796).

**Related work:** Jane Austen parodied the Gothic novel in her novel *Northanger Abbey* (John Murray, 1817). One of the main characters in Austen's book is presented as rather naïve simply because of her choice of reading material, which includes Radcliffe's *Udolpho* and *The Italian*. In related media, a film about Austen's life, *Becoming Jane* (2007), featured an appearance by Helen McCrory as Ann Radcliffe. That may be as close as we get to a biopic of Radcliffe, given how little is known about her life.

Back to *Monster, She Wrote* Book Page