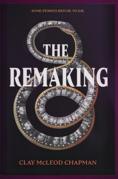
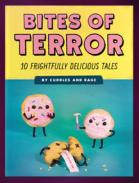
OURK BOOKS

Horror Reads 2020













The Remaking

by Clay McLeod Chapman

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The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires

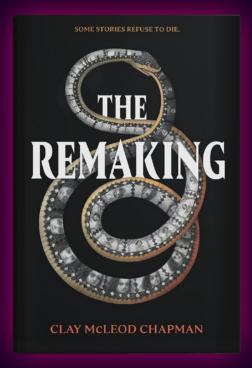
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A 2019 GOODREADS CHOICE AWARDS SEMIFINALIST

"An ambitious mosaic novel exploring the power of urban myth and superstition."

—Guardian

"Something like Stephen King's imperfect masterpiece *The Shining*..."

—Kirkus Reviews

"The Remaking is absolutely chilling. You won't be able to put it down or stop thinking about it after the lights go out."

—Mallory O'Meara, author of The Lady from the Black Lagoon

"A streamlined page turner of clearly cut supernatural encounters that moonlights as a frighteningly lucid story of injustice."

—Fangoria

Inspired by a true story, this supernatural thriller for fans of horror and true crime follows a tale as it evolves every twenty years—with terrifying results.

Ella Louise has lived in the woods surrounding Pilot's Creek, Virginia, for nearly a decade. Publicly, she and her daughter, Jessica, are shunned by her upper-crust family and the local residents. Privately, desperate characters visit her apothecary for a cure to what ails them—until Ella Louise is blamed for the death of a prominent customer. Accused of witchcraft, Ella Louise and Jessica are burned at the stake in the middle of the night. Ella Louise's burial site is never found, but the little girl has the most famous grave in the South: a steel-reinforced coffin surrounded by a fence of interconnected white crosses.

Their story will take the shape of an urban legend as it's told around a campfire by a man forever marked by his childhood encounters with Jessica. Decades later, a boy at that campfire will cast Amber Pendleton as Jessica in a '70s horror movie inspired by the Witch Girl of Pilot's Creek. Amber's experiences on that set and its meta-remake in the '90s will ripple through pop culture, ruining her life and career after she becomes the target of a witch hunt.

Amber's best chance to break the cycle of horror comes when a truecrime investigator tracks her down to interview her for his popular podcast. But will this final act of storytelling redeem her—or will it bring the story full circle, ready to be told once again? And again. And again . . .

CLAY MCLEOD CHAPMAN is the creator of the storytelling session "The Pumpkin Pie Show" and the author of *rest area, nothing untoward,* and the Tribe trilogy. He is co-author of the middle grade novel *Wendell and Wild,* with *Nightmare Before Christmas* director Henry Selick. In the world of comics, Chapman's work includes *Lazaretto, Iron Fist: Phantom Limb,* and *Edge of Spiderverse,* among others. He also writes for the screen, including *The Boy* (SXSW 2015), *Henley* (Sundance 2012), and *Late Bloomer* (Sundance 2005). You can find him at claymcleodchapman.com.

THE REMAKING

A NOVEL

CLAY MCLEOD CHAPMAN



THESE WOODS WHISPER.

The pines at your back? You can practically feel the needles bristling in the wind. Lean in and listen closely and you'll hear their stories. Everything that's ever happened underneath that vast canopy of conifers. Every last romantic tryst. The suicides. The lynchings. You name it. These trees will testify to them.

These woods have witnessed it all.

Whenever somebody from town wants to do something in secret, they come out here. Where they think they're alone. Where nobody's watching. They hide in the shadows, performing their little rituals beneath these branches, as if they believe these trees will keep their secrets for them. Their lovers' liaisons, their midnight masses. They think nobody is listening in . . . but that's simply not true. That's not true at all. The trees are listening.

Always listening.

The woods know what the people of Pilot's Creek have done.

What we've all done.

I've lived in this godforsaken town my whole goddamn life. I know just about everything there is to know about the people here. Every last dark secret.

Know how?

I listen. I listen to what the trees have to say.

I listen to the woods.

So. What story do you want to hear? You want to know what drove Halley Tompkins to hang herself back in '46? Or which men it was who strung Russell Parr up? Or how about that baby they found half-buried back in '38?

No. You're not here for any of those stories.

You want to hear about Jessica, don't you?

Course you do. That's why you're here, isn't it? Tonight of all nights . . .

Twenty years ago on this very evening.

October 16, 1931.

We don't have much time. Here it is, almost midnight, and I haven't even begun telling you the tale of the Little Witch Girl of Pilot's Creek.

Poor, poor Jessica.

You brought me a bottle? Don't be stingy on me, now. That's my price of admission. You want to hear a story, you better goddamn well have brought me an offering.

Alms for the minstrel. Something to wet my whistle so that I'll sing.

And Jessica's story takes time.

Takes the life right out of me.

Her story takes its toll on the teller, you hear? The price is too high . . . unless you got something for me to drink. My throat's so parched, I don't think I can tell it without a drop of that Lightning Bolt. I'll sound like a bullfrog before I'm finished.

Did you? Did you bring me a little something? Just to take the edge off? Warm my insides? It gets so cold out here at night.

Thank you. Thank you kindly. That's much better. Feel that fire working its way down my throat. Settling into my belly, like a bonfire.

Now. Where was I?

Let's start with Jessica's mother.

Ella Louise Ford was born right here in Pilot's Creek. She'd come from good stock. Her family owned their fair share of acreage, growing tobacco. But there was always something off about that girl. Her mother sensed it from the get-go. None of that sugar and spice and everything nice for Ella Louise. No—that girl was touched. Little Ella Louise talked to the possums. She made charms out of dried tobacco leaves. She kept bees in mason jars and hid them underneath her bed. She couldn't be bothered with frilly dresses or dolls like all the other girls. Not the porcelain kind, with pigtails and rose-painted cheeks. She made her own dolls. If you could even call them dolls. Looked more like totems. Like effigies. Twined together from twigs and wheat. Moss and leaves. Insects in their chests. Beetle hearts.

Try as they might, Mr. and Mrs. Ford could never break little Ella Louise of her strangeness streak. She never mingled with other children her age. None of them trusted her. All the other boys and girls sensed something was off about her and kept their distance. Mother Ford took it all too personally, as if their rejection of Ella Louise were an affront to the family name.

You got to understand, a town as small as Pilot's Creek was crippled with superstitions. Rumors spread like cancer. Words hold power around here—and once word got around about Ella Louise's peculiar habits, it wasn't long before business for the Fords took a turn. It only got worse as Ella Louise grew up and became a young woman. Nobody wanted to be associated with her family. Be seen fraternizing with the Fords in the streets or paying them a visit at their home. Anyone who did suffered just as much of a cold shoulder as they did.

Understand now—all anyone ever had 'round here was their reputation. Simply to be seen in the midst of the Fords was enough to bankrupt businesses. Ruin entire legacies. You couldn't wash the stink of that family off once it clung to your skin. That family was cursed. Mother Ford took to punishing her only daughter. Bending Ella Louise over her knee and trying to spank that darkness right out of her. Taking a switch to her thigh, until the insides of her legs bled. Anything that might exorcise this witchery brewing within her.

There it was. That word, at long last.

Witch.

It was whispered among the other mothers. Their children. All through town. In church, even. It wasn't long before all that gossip had grown into a downright din, the rumors spreading like wildfire, until everybody was talking about it. Until it was unavoidable.

Ella Louise Ford was a witch.

Her debutante ball was an absolute disaster. Her mother moved heaven and earth to make it a night to remember. And in a way it was. It truly was . . . just not how Mrs. Ford had hoped for.

Ella Louise had always been a sight to behold. She looked as if she had stepped right out of an oil painting. Something you might see in a museum. Her skin was pale, always pale, with the slightest hint of pink illuminating her cheeks. A grin always played across her face, but you'd never say she was smiling. Her lips just curled heavenward all on their own. Her eyes, if they ever locked onto yours, were a deep green, as green as the deep sea, I reckon, to the depths of which no man has ever ventured. Or ever will.

What mysteries lie behind those murky eyes, only the Devil knows.

Coming out to polite society had always been a part of the way of life for Pilot Creek's upper crust. Mrs. Ford had done it, her mother had done it, her mother before had done it, and on and on—so you damn well better believe Ella Louise was going to have her turn, no matter how much she protested. Mother Ford simply wouldn't hear it. She refused to let the ritual go. For a girl to become a woman, she needed to be presented. To be unveiled. That was their God-given rite of passage. Ella Louise was meant to wear a beautiful ballroom gown, made just for her. Pink silk. Mother Ford could barely hide her high hopes for her daughter when she handed over that dress. Even then, she held on to the fantasy that her own Ella Louise had a fighting chance of being welcomed into polite society . . . But at the very moment of her coming out, when every debutante is presented to the upper echelon of Pilot's Creek, Ella Louise entered the dance room covered in mud from head to toe. Her gown was in tatters, all that pink torn to shreds. Dried leaves in her hair.

You could see her body moving beneath the ripped fabric, her pale flesh exposed to everyone. Practically the whole town, staring at her.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

Ella Louise simply stood before them, smiling in that devilish way of hers, as if nothing were off about this at all. She asked her father for her first dance as a woman. Just as she had been instructed by her mother to do.

Mrs. Ford nearly fainted.

Ella Louise was cut off from that night forward. She was excommunicated from her own family. Disinherited. Her mother never uttered her daughter's name again. Her own flesh and blood. It was as if Ella Louise had never existed. Never lived another day in their house.

So Ella Louise moved into the woods.

She made this forest her home. It's unclear if she built her house herself or if someone had a hand in helping her, but a cabin manifested itself, seemingly out of nowhere. These woods are primarily composed of Eastern white pines that can reach up to a hundred feet, easily. They were originally used for building ship masts, centuries back, cut down and sent off to the naval yards in Norfolk. So much lush coverage, perfect for building a simple, one-story cottage with a fireplace cobbled together from stone and mortar. You could see the glow of a fire through its windows at night if you happened to be out here. But nothing and no one else actually lived out here. Not another soul.

Just Ella Louise.

And Jessica.

If I were better at my own arithmetic, I might surmise that it was the night of Ella Louise's coming out that served as the moment of her daughter's conception. Whatever had happened to Ella out there in those woods to bring her back in such a muddied state, well, nine months later . . .

But then again, I'm no mathematician.

And I sure as hell ain't no baby doctor.

Nobody knows who Jessica's father was. Or, more to the point, nobody owned up to it. Would you? Back then, in a town as small as this, you might as well have laid down with a leper. Ella Louise had become a burden for our town to bear. Pilot Creek's very own pariah. Weeks, months, would go by and nobody would see her rummaging about town. Hear her voice begging for pocket change. Even think about her out here, living alone, for all those years.

But then the sound of a baby crying lifted out from the woods. Jessica's wailing filled this forest. It echoed all the way into town. Into the ears and dreams of every last townsperson.

Ella Louise had a daughter now.

Other theories of paternity abounded. Such as Jessica had no father. She was immaculately conceived by the Devil himself. Ella Louise had made her pact with the Lord of Flies and he begot him an only daughter. Her very existence was a morbid reminder of her mother's unholy union with Beelzebub. Ella Louise and Jessica would come into town for their groceries, just like everybody else. Can't live off root vegetables alone, now. But when folks laid eyes on that little girl in Ella Louise's arms, all they ever saw was the princess of darkness.

We'd only see Jessica whenever she'd come into town. Watched

her grow in these fits and spurts. Months would go by and there she'd be, traipsing down the road with her mama. Always holding her hand. Always keeping her eyes down low, on the ground. She didn't attend school with the rest of us. Didn't learn about life like the rest of us. Whatever lessons she got came from her mother back at their cabin. I can only imagine what she was taught out there in those woods. The Devil's arithmetic.

When Jessica turned nine, she started coming into town on her own. Always had a list of goods to fetch from the store for her mother. She didn't have Ella Louise at her side, holding her hand and braving the lane anymore, so some of us boys felt a bit more emboldened to share our inherited distaste for Jessica. Children took to throwing stones at the girl. Calling her all kinds of names. I'm not proud to admit that I myself fetched a pebble or two in my boyhood, tossing it at little Jessica's back.

Once, I struck her right in the shoulder.

My aim was true.

She turned right to me. Even though I was among a dozen other kids, all of them holding their own rock, she knew I'd been the one to throw it. Knew the rock had come from my very hand. She pinched her eyes—and without ever saying a single word to me, I heard Jessica's voice in my head, as if my own thoughts were boiling over in my skull. She whispered to me.

Cursed me.

What'd she say? I'll never tell. Not unless you've got another bottle on you.

Suffice to say, her curse worked. I can't stop thinking about her. Not back then, not even now. She left an imprint of herself, a shadow, on my mind.

Little Jessica has never left.

Nobody ever mentions how beautiful she was. Her mother may have been a picture of perfection, such a lovely face, but Jessica . . .

Jessica took my breath away.

She was an angel.

But for the life of me, I can't remember what the color of her eyes was. I can't remember the color of her hair. Or the features of her face. I can't remember any of her.

I can't describe her.

Words escape me.

She returns to me, night after night, for over twenty years now and yet, the moment I wake, the vision of her dissipates. Gone. Just like that. I can only see her in my dreams.

As a boy, I was frightened of her. What she might do to me. But I couldn't stop myself from welcoming her into my head. Into my sleep. Now I wait for her. Yearning for her to return.

Why won't she let me go?

If Ella Louise had been touched with magic, then her daughter was downright blessed. Jessica had twice the talent her mother had.

Talent. What the hell else would you call it?

Ella Louise nurtured her daughter's *talents*. Taught her all she knew. If Mother Ford had done her damnedest to stamp out the fire brewing within her child, then Ella Louise went ahead and fanned those flames within Jessica. Out here, in these woods, nobody was going to stop them.

It was said that Jessica could commune with wildlife. She could mend a bird's broken wing with just the touch of her hands. Weeds would wilt from under her touch. Just a simple tap from her finger against the soil and out sprouted a toadstool. A dozen mushrooms.

This was what people believed, at least. What folks whispered among themselves in town. Nobody ever saw these things with their own eyes. Not that we needed to.

We believed.

Any boys brave enough—or dumb enough—to set foot into the forest and sneak a peek through the windows of their cottage would

get pinkeye for their troubles. Anyone who came close to their home would break out in a rash, their skin scorched with poison ivy. Anyone who spoke ill of Ella Louise or Jessica within their earshot would suddenly discover an eruption of blisters covering their tongue.

None of this was simply a coincidence. None of this was chance. We all knew what Jessica was. What her mother was. What those two were up to out here in the woods.

But even a witch has got to make a living, right? Everybody struggles. The demands to make ends meet forced Ella Louise to set up her own apothecary shop in her house. For those folks in town who preferred to forgo the traditional medicine route, Ella Louise offered something a little more . . .

Herbal? Of the earth, shall we say?

It's all a bit hypocritical, I know, but sometimes modern medicine doesn't offer the solution. And it doesn't provide us with the destiny we believe we so richly deserve.

You want that fella to fall in love with you?

Ella Louise had something for that.

You want to get back at your boss for firing you?

Ella Louise had a little something for that, too.

You feeling sick in your soul?

Restless in the head?

Unhappy at your core?

Ella Louise had so many miracle cures. Medicines that had no names. Roots and leaves and fungi of all kinds. Flora and fauna, sealed within their own jars. The walls of her cottage were lined in glass. Hundreds if not thousands of mason jars, each one holding their own medicinal specimen. Herbs and insects and liquids of various viscosities. Each had a specific purpose, a particular healing property. Her medicines could do what the doctors in town couldn't. You just had to be brave enough to come out here and knock on her door. You had to ask. Please, Ella Louise, please help me. Save me. Please.

Nobody would come out and admit they had ever paid Ella Louise a visit. No one would profess to taking one of her cure-alls. You might as well confess to consorting with the Devil.

But we did.

We all did.

Men and women, mothers and fathers, boys and girls alike.

How couldn't we?

Ella Louise never judged. Never turned anyone away. She opened her doors to any soul in need who was willing to come knocking.

Shawna Reynolds had been suffering from severe cramps for the last few months of her pregnancy. She had only a few weeks before her due date, but the pain had become unbearable. Her family physician had failed her. Whatever prescriptions he provided did nothing. Shawna even crossed two county lines just to visit a prenatal specialist in the biggest hospital she could find, and even they couldn't get to the bottom of what was wrong with her.

Shawna and her husband had been trying—and trying—to get pregnant for years. *Years*. They prayed and prayed, but nothing ever took root. Just when they were about to finally give up, just when there wasn't any hope left of these two ever having their own child ... It happened.

A miracle.

But the pregnancy took its toll on Shawna. Everyone could tell just by looking at her. That child was leeching the life right out of her. Rather than plumping up as most mothers do, she was only getting thinner. Skeletal. Shawna always had to rest after a few steps, sit down and catch her breath, but she never caught it. Always exhausted, and yet unable to sleep for more than a few minutes. The more her stomach bulged, the more the rest of her wizened away. You could see her rib cage rise up from her skin with every breath. Her cheekbones practically cut through her face. Her eyes sank into the depths of their sockets, all hollowed out.

Those cramps just kept getting worse.

Crippling her.

Killing her.

If you had no other choice, if modern medicine had failed you, I'd imagine you'd go visit Ella Louise, too. Shawna walked into these woods, alone, and knocked on her door.

And asked.

Please, Ella Louise, please help me.

Save me.

Please.

Ella Louise took a mortar and pestle and ground a few leaves and dried root into a powder. She scooped a spoonful and mixed it with water and told Shawna to drink.

Drink it all.

Whatever it was, it worked. Shawna's cramps stopped. All the pain, washed away.

A miracle.

Shawna was walking again. Color returned to her cheeks. Her ribs drifted beneath a layer of flesh. Her smile, her happiness, returned, and nobody was the wiser. No one, not even her husband, knew how. Nobody cared. All that mattered was Shawna had turned a corner.

A miracle.

It wasn't until Shawna was finally nine months pregnant that she woke to discover that her bedsheets were spotted. There was blood all over the bed.

Blood on her thighs.

Shawna's husband-Wayne Reynolds-rushed her straight to the

doctor's house in the middle of the night. Carried her the whole way, until they were both covered in blood.

The baby didn't make it.

Their doctor believed the miscarriage had been induced by some sort of chemical agent. The physician didn't want to alarm Wayne, but they'd found traces of toxins that nobody in their right mind would ever ingest. Especially while they were pregnant.

Had Shawna been exposed to any kind of rare plant lately, he asked? Like Jerusalem cherry? Water hemlock? Rosary pea? Had she eaten anything from the woods recently?

Shawna broke down and confessed she had been taking a spoonful of Ella Louise's special remedy for weeks. Perhaps a little bit more than a spoonful, she sobbed. Wayne was beside himself with grief. Son or daughter, he was prepared to love the child with his whole heart.

They buried a boy.

It doesn't take long before grief curdles into rage, now, does it? Wayne had always been a proud man. A pillar of society. A man of God. Every Sunday, he'd be first in line to receive the sacrament. So imagine how crestfallen, how crushed he was when he found out his own wife had been sneaking off into the woods, behind his back, for a remedy that balked at God's own divine providence. A potion that killed his unborn child before he was able to take in his first breath. That consigned their unbaptized lamb, as Wayne himself fervently believed, to eternal hellfire.

What would you have done if you were in Wayne's shoes?

What would any of us have done?

He wanted retribution. He wanted Ella Louise to pay for what she'd done. To his wife. To his child. To his family that would never be.

Who among us wouldn't have demanded the exact same thing? Who could have blamed him? Certainly not anyone from our town. Certainly not the people of Pilot's Creek.

No—they understood. They saw his pain, his grief, his rage . . . and they knew what had to be done.

This had been a long time coming. Imagine a bonfire just waiting for the match.

Yearning to burn.

Now it was lit.

It didn't take much convincing on Wayne's part to get his friends all fired up. There were five men, all told. All members of the church. All law-abiding citizens.

Harold Smith. My own mailman.

Jeremy Hawthorne. Owner of Hawthorne Hardware.

Tom Watkins. Dentist.

Bill Pendleton. Accountant.

On this night, twenty years ago to the day, those five men went beyond the law. On this night, Wayne demanded justice no court could ever offer him and his family.

Tonight, they were going to burn a witch.

They circled around Ella Louise's cottage in the dark. Lord only knows how long they stood out there. Waiting. Staring through the windows. Watching Ella Louise and Jessica go about their business, none the wiser. Jessica reading to herself while Ella Louise sewed together a new dress for her daughter. Something pretty, no doubt. Humming the whole time.

Their plan was to smoke them out. Wayne tossed a bottle filled with diesel through the window. Then Harold Smith tossed in another. The flames spread over the pine floor. All those mason jars, all that glass lining the walls of the cottage—it all started to sparkle. The reflection of the conflagration lit up within each jar, hundreds of gleaming stars coming together in some unholy constellation.

The men waited.

And waited.

How long did those two hide inside? Longer than you might imagine. They must've known what was waiting for them. But the air grew thick. Dense with smoke. You could hear them coughing, gasping for air as glass started to shatter all around. All those jars, all their remedies, their life's work, was melting. Bursting. Going up in flames.

Ella Louise eventually burst through the door with nine-yearold Jessica clutched in her arms, hoisting her as best she could. That poor little girl was pressed tight against her mother's chest, coughing uncontrollably.

Jeremy Hawthorne and Bill Pendleton each grabbed Ella Louise by her arms. She struggled against their grip, trying desperately to pull herself free.

Jessica fell to the ground. Her mother yelled for her to run, *run*, so Jessica scrambled to her feet and raced for the trees.

She didn't get far.

Wayne Reynolds grabbed Jessica by her hair and yanked, sending her back to the ground. Ella Louise let out a howl as the man scooped her daughter up into his arms. Jessica's feet kicked through the air. But it was pointless. Hopeless. She couldn't wrestle herself free.

Tom Watkins was good with an axe, so in a matter of a few swings to a sapling, they had themselves a ready-made stake to tie Ella Louise to. They heaped kindling made of the branches of that sapling at her feet. Wet wood burns slowly. Very slowly.

The men circled around Ella Louise as she begged for her daughter's life. Pleaded with them to spare her. Do what they must to her, but let Jessica live.

The little girl yelled and screamed for her mama. Wayne Reynolds merely passed her off to Bill Pendleton. He fished out a box of wooden matches from his pocket and shook them next to Ella Louise's ear, those matches rattling.

Our town will not suffer a witch to live, Wayne said.

Then he struck a match.

Lighting her feet most certainly assured a slow burn. Took those flames a while to level with her head. Every mounting inch, every licking flicker was an invitation for her to shriek.

To plead for mercy.

To beg.

They made Jessica watch. Watch the fire rise. Watch the flames engulf her mother. Watch her body disappear beneath a sheet of orange and yellow. Jessica's screams had subsided into a keening. Just wet sounds. No shape or contours to it at all. Nothing but grief.

Suddenly little Jessica pulled herself free from Bill Pendleton's grip and ran right to her mother. Embraced her in flames. Wayne rushed to grab her and drag her back, but the girl wouldn't let go. The two ended up burning together.

Imagine, if you can, what it must have been like. Think about the flames at your feet.

Think about them climbing up your legs.

Your knees.

Your thighs.

Think about the smoke filling your lungs.

Think about the smell of your hair. That incendiary hiss filling the air, reeking of flame. Your hair, now burning, punctuated with an intermittent sizzle and pop. The smell of it is unavoidable now. Sulfur, scorched and organic. The odor of calcinated tissue wafting along. The smoke rising up from the smoldering web on your scalp, roasting for just a moment before combusting all together. Those chestnut tresses go up so quickly, as fragile as a bird's nest on fire.

Ever smell flesh on fire?

I have.

We all did. Everyone living within ten miles of Pilot's Creek smelled it that night.

I heard their screams. From miles away, in the safety of my own

bedroom, under the roof of my parents' house, I swear I heard Ella Louise and Jessica Ford screaming together.

Mother and daughter.

October 16, 1931. Four minutes past midnight.

At dawn, the sun rose up to ash. All that was left were their blackened bones. The ribs of one skeleton were much smaller than the other, both charred chest cavities gripping onto each other in one last attempt to hold on. Stay together.

Those men buried Ella Louise in these woods. No gravestone. No marker of any kind. Wherever her body lies out here, those five men took that location to their own graves.

Nobody knows now.

Jessica was different. These men knew she was more powerful than her mother. They were afraid of her. She might rise from the grave and avenge her mother for what they'd done.

So what did they do?

You know this part of the story. Everyone in town knows. Those foolish men protected themselves the only way they knew how. With God. With consecrated ground.

Wayne and his co-conspirators buried poor little Jessica in a steel-reinforced coffin. They laid her body to rest right there, in our very own Pilot's Creek Cemetery, along with the rest of the dead from our town. After they lowered her coffin into the ground, they filled it with concrete. Three whole bags' worth. And they poured gravel over the top of her hardened sepulcher.

But those boys didn't stop there, did they? No—they went ahead and erected a metal fence out of interconnected crosses. Over a hundred crucifixes, arm-in-arm with one another, surrounding her resting place.

To keep Jessica in the ground.

To contain the ghost of the Little Witch Girl of Pilot's Creek.

Her grave is all that's left of this story. Their cottage is gone.

Nobody knows for sure where it stood.

See this patch of soil where we're sitting? The grass won't grow. Trees won't grow. Nothing will grow here now. Not in this tainted soil. I reckon this is where Jessica and Ella Louise last held on to each other. Where their bodies burned. Nothing but scorched earth.

You ever hear of that fungus that killed upwards of sixteen thousand trees back in 1935? Whole forest was nothing but gnarled skeletons in every direction. Dead chestnut trees as far as the eyes could see. The wood wasn't even good enough for lumber. Rotten all the way through.

What do you think did that?

Wasn't some fungus.

That was Ella Louise. Her body's buried in these woods still, somewhere. Out here. Her blood soured the earth. Made the trees sick. What was left of her body broke down, seeping into the soil, until those roots sucked her up and choked. Took ten whole years to replenish these woods. Another five for anything to grow. The chestnuts and Eastern pines have finally come back—but still nothing grows on this very spot where we're sitting now.

If you ask me, those two aren't done.

Not with this town.

You can chalk it up to fate, if you feel like it, but everybody knows about Harold Smith's car wreck. How Jeremy Hawthorne died in a freak accident while restocking his shop late one night. How Tom Watkins asphyxiated after inhaling too much of his own laughing gas, his pants puddled around his ankles. How Bill Pendleton's body was riddled with all kinds of cancer, every last cell blackened to a crisp.

And Wayne? Well, everybody knows Wayne Reynolds took his own life not long after what he and his friends had done. Brought a double-barreled shotgun up to his mouth, wrapping his lips around the muzzle. There's no way of saying for sure, but folks believe the last word he uttered before pulling the trigger wasn't a word at all, but a name . . .

Jessica.

I hear her in my dreams. Hear her calling for me. Pleading with me. Begging for us all to save them, spare her mother, make it stop, make the flames stop.

But none of us did. None of us did a damn thing. We let them burn out there that night.

We all let it happen.

The whole town.

I visited Jessica's grave. Once. Years back, when I was just a kid. Dumbest goddamn thing I'd ever done in my whole life. But you got to understand—you've got to believe me when I tell you—all that time, sixteen years up to that point, Jessica had been calling for me.

Whispering to me. Come to me, she'd say. Come to me.

I had to see her.

Just once. Just to know if I was really hearing her voice or if I was going out of my mind.

I snuck out of my parents' house in the middle of the night and slipped off to the cemetery. I hadn't considered the time, but when it reached four minutes after midnight . . .

I saw her.

Jessica. Waltzing along her grave in circles. She wandered as far as her crucifix-fence would allow. Never stepped outside it. The hem of her handstitched dress was still scorched in a ring of ash, while the rest of her dress was blinding white. Fresh cotton.

When she saw me—and she most certainly did see me—she smiled. That grin filled my chest with cold. My lungs locked up. I felt like I was drowning.

She reached out to me. Held out her hand.

Help me, she said.

I took a step closer. Lifted my arm.

Help me . . .

I stopped. There couldn't be more than a few inches between our fingers.

Help . . .

I couldn't move. Couldn't take another step, no matter how loud her voice grew in my skull.

Help . . .

I stepped back. Away from her. Her smile withered. That was when I saw Jessica for what she really was. What she'd become, out there, under the ground, after all that time.

Her blackened bones.

Her charred lips.

Those mossy teeth.

They say little Jessica is still searching for her mother. Until they're reunited, her soul won't be at peace. She wanders about her grave, just waiting for someone to take her hand.

To let her out.

There it is. Four minutes past midnight. You can set your watch to it. Jessica and Ella Louise Ford breathed their last at this very moment, twenty years ago to the day.

Can you hear them? The trees? All those pines at your back, bristling in the breeze. You can nearly feel the pine needles against your neck, can't you? Piercing your skin. The branches will reach out. Grab you. Pull you away from the campfire and drag you back into the shadows.

You'll become a story, too. We all become ghost stories one day.

A good ghost story gets told . . . and retold. It's in the telling where the tale takes on a life of its own. A ghost story grows. It exists on the breath of those who tell it.

This one will live beyond me.

And you.

It'll live beyond all of us. This whole town. As long as there's someone around to tell it.

And tell it.

You hear that, Jessica? I did my part. Just like I was supposed to. Like I've always done.

I told your story. Again.

And again.

I'm so old now, Jessica. So tired. I can't keep doing this. Year after year. Let me go. Please. I'm begging you.

Let me go, you goddamn bitch. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please. Forgive me. Forgive me.

Free me.

Please.

Please.

Jessica, can you hear me? I know you're listening, damn it. Please. Please forgive me. Forgive our town. Forgive the people of Pilot's Creek.

We were wrong. We were wrong to do what we did to you and your mother.

Please. Please forgive us. Forgive us all.

Lift this curse. Release us.

Release me.

EXT. GRAVEYARD-LATER THAT NIGHT

The full moon casts an eerie blue glow over the headstones. An owl hoots.

CASSANDRA, HOPPER, GEMINI, DAMASCUS, and MOON-CHILD sit in a circle around Jessica Ford's grave, holding one another's hands. Candles are lit.

CLOSE ON Cassandra as she closes her eyes, ready to begin the séance.

CASSANDRA

We are speaking now to the spirit of Jessica Ford . . . We sense that you are with us, Jessica. We sense your presence. We sense that you cannot rest . . .

HOPPER

Yeah, lighten up, Jessica . . . Relax already.

MOONCHILD

Cut it out, Hopper. Be real.

CASSANDRA

Will you speak to us? Is there someone here you wish to

communicate with? We are here to help. Will you tell us why you're not at rest, Jessica? Why don't you feel at peace? Why does your spirit remain here in this place?

DAMASCUS

I'm asking my spirit the same damn thing . . .

MOONCHILD

Knock it off!

BACK ON Cassandra, head weaving back and forth. Something strange is happening. Her eyes roll up into her skull, revealing nothing but pure white.

CASSANDRA

What happened? Tell us, dear spirit. Tell us and you will be free. Tell us. Tell us . . .

MOONCHILD

Cassandra!

HOPPER

What the hell—

Cassandra GROANS *in a voice no longer her own. It's a child's voice . . . JESSICA.*

CASSANDRA

(Possessed:) Why have you woken me?

ONE

They looked just like her. All of them. Their faces, a harvest of apple cheeks. They had the same freckles as hers. Same soft lips framing milk-white teeth, each girl nibbling the tender flesh of her bottom lip. They were after a feeling. The sting without the blood.

How could there be so many of her? Amber counted two dozen at least. And that was just tallying the girls in the room right now. Who knew how many had auditioned already. There was no telling how many would occupy this very same seat after she abandoned it.

Just who exactly was Amber supposed to be today? She had already forgotten. The cattle calls were beginning to blur together in her mind. It was impossible to keep track.

A dead girl, that's right.

No, a ghost.

Wait. *A witch*. That was what she was reading for. It was a witch. A little witch girl.

Today's auditions were taking place in some nondescript office building along the outskirts of Santa Monica. Whatever operation had used this space before had apparently gone under, leaving its gutted boardroom and empty cubicles behind. The waiting area was really nothing more than a hall lined with folding chairs on either side, swarming with girls. Yearning girls. All those searching eyes. Hazel. Cerulean. Slate. Moss.

Brimming with hope.

Every time the casting director's assistant poked her head out from the boardroom, the coven of would-be witches all snapped their necks up at attention, the same look of desperation on their faces. Hoping to hear their name called next.

None of the girls made eye contact. Not with one another. That would be a big no-no. No one wants to see herself in the girl sitting next to her. Or sitting across from her. It feels like looking into a mirror at a reflection that's ready to hiss back, *I hate you*.

These girls were in competition with one another, weren't they?

A fight to the death?

They are not your friends, her mother insisted in the parking lot, her breath smelling like peat far too early in the morning. A single-malt bog. You're not on a playdate. This isn't a slumber party. You go in there and you show those sniveling little bitches what you're made of.

The two never talked about it, not at all, but one time, when Amber was five or so, she found a stack of yellowing headshots in her mother's closet. She knew she wasn't supposed to be rummaging through her mother's stuff, but she couldn't help herself. The fresh face smiling up at Amber looked so familiar. It looked like hers. But it wasn't. It couldn't be. This young woman had to be in her teens. Much older than Amber. When she showed her mother what she'd found, asking if she knew who the pretty woman in the picture was, Mom only snatched the headshots from Amber's hand and promptly tossed them into the trash. Every last photograph.

Amber had done plenty of cattle calls, but she always lost herself within the throng of girls in the waiting area, no matter where her mother dragged her. She couldn't help it. Her eyes would roam over the dozens of girls who looked exactly like her, wondering who they were.

Today's audition was no different.

She was no different.

She could feel it happening again. That swell of anxiety. The mounting panic. Nothing set her apart. There was nothing of hers, not her face or smile or hair, that she could call her own. There was no distinctive physical difference between her and the rest of them. She felt herself begin to fade, to blend in with the multitude of girls. It was hopeless. There was no possible way she'd get picked.

Amber could practically hear the collective din of every yearning girl's thoughts. That silent prayer whispered under their breaths: *Pick me pick me pick me pick me pick me*

She knew they were all whispering it because she was whispering it, too. Their thoughts were her thoughts.

That one and only wish.

Let me be The One . . .

What would it take to be chosen?

To be The One?

Mom had dressed her in her lime-green Jackie O pencil skirt, along with a matching plaid lime-green top with a high neck. Green tights. She had spotted five other Jackie Os in the waiting area already. Sorry, make that six. There were a couple Bardots. A few Mary Quants. Baby doll dresses. Turtlenecks and stockings. Even a few miniskirts. Miniskirts! She couldn't believe her eyes! How could their mothers let them expose so much leg like that? They weren't even ten!

Amber accidentally made eye contact with the girl sitting across from her. She was much prettier than Amber. Flaxen-blond hair, feathered just right. An eight-year-old Cheryl Tiegs.

Amber couldn't help but stare at her. Get lost in her beauty. When Little Cheryl Tiegs realized she was being ogled by this inferior doppelgänger, she glared at Amber until the air between them curdled. Amber only sank deeper into her seat, drifting below the surface of this sea of look-alikes and drowning herself. An elbow prodded her in the ribs. "Sit up straight," Amber's mother muttered. The casting director might be watching her at that very moment. Spying on her. Assessing Amber, here and now, as if sitting in the holding area were the real audition. The true test.

Amber clutched the mimeographed copy of her sides. She had trouble reading the bigger words by herself—and yet she knew the lines, as if they were an incantation. A magic spell to be whispered, repeated over and over again, that would summon up the very character of this little witch girl from the ether—back from the dead—and possess Amber's body.

She was ready to be inhabited by the role. A ripe vessel.

Take me, Amber offered in solemn submission. Take my body over the rest of these other girls. I am ready for you . . . I am The One.

Looking over the lines was unnecessary now. Amber knew them by heart.

By heart.

What a weird thing to say. Was this dialogue in her blood now? Circulating through her veins? It certainly felt like it. Amber had spent the entire night drilling lines with her mother. She knew the dialogue inside and out. Upside and down. Backward, forward. She dreamed the lines. Recited them in her sleep. Mom had seen to it. A part of their prep was for Mom to read a line at random, then Amber would respond, no matter where they were in the script.

The words of this little witch girl were now in her heart.

Flowing through her.

Whispers of dialogue had followed her into her dreams. She could've sworn that witch girl spoke to her. Communed with her from beyond the grave. What was it that she had said?

Come to me . . .

Where was that line in the script?

Come to me . . .

Amber hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep last night. Her nerves were so stretched, but it wasn't because of the audition. She wanted the part, of course. Who didn't? They all did. Every last girl. But who wanted it the most? What were they willing to give up?

To sacrifice?

No, Amber was nervous because of her mother. What she might do if Amber didn't get the part. She had spotted a few envelopes on the nightstand that her mom had left unopened.

Each envelope had words stamped in angry red ink over the front. Words like *FINAL NOTICE*.

Mom was already on her second cigarette since they sat down in the waiting area, which Amber knew was a bad sign. Here it was, ten minutes after their scheduled call time. They had been running late. Always late. Their stucco bungalow was on the wrong side of the valley, far, far away from where all the auditions took place. The rush to get Amber dressed, get her fed, get her hair brushed, get her out of the house on time, the maneuvering through traffic, pinpointing the office building, finding parking, running to make it on time, always running, *running, running*.

Had her name already been called and they hadn't been there to hear it?

Had they skipped over her?

Amber glanced down and saw her mother's left leg juddering like a jackhammer. She had absolutely panicked at the sight of those alligator bags under Amber's eyes. She broke out her own bottle of liquid concealer and, with her pinkie, dabbed at those gray shadows until they disappeared. *There*, Mom said. *Those storm clouds are gone*. *Like they were never there*.

All the mothers sat next to their daughters. There was more variation here, more distinction among the older women. Their daughters may have looked as if they had all come off the same assembly line, but the mothers had their own looks. Brow-skimming bangs. Feathered locks. Shimmery eyelids. Pearlescent cheeks. Bronzed skin. Glossy lips. Tanned and athletic, effortless and au naturel, utterly done up. She was always curious about what united these stage mothers. They must have shared the same competitive edge. That same cutthroat ambition. These women hired acting coaches for their children. Sent them to audition classes in lieu of soccer practice or swimming lessons or anything fun. Who had the best vocal instructor here, Amber wondered? Who had worked with the director before? Who knew the casting director or one of the producers on the film?

There were just so many Ambers.

Like dolls, she couldn't stop herself from thinking. *That's all I am. All any of us are.*

A Little Miss Amber doll.

Batteries sold separately! Comes with three prerecorded messages. Just pull Amber's string and she can repeat the dialogue from her sides, over and over again . . .

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of girls would read these exact same lines. That girl over there. And that girl over there. Her, over and over again. Her and her and her and her and . . .

Her.

They were all the same. She was the same.

A headshot.

A mimeograph, copied over and over and over again. Until the image itself began to degrade. Break down to hundreds of dots.

Amber couldn't stop herself from seeing their faces, all their faces, deteriorate. They were distorting all around her. Dissolving.

Decomposing.

Amber glanced down at her own headshot and realized it was nothing but a skull now. Black-and-white bones. Her lips had peeled away, her flesh gone, leaving behind that toothy smile that took hours to perfect. Her body had been buried long ago. Decades in the ground by now. Nothing but a charred skeleton. And yet they still poured cement over her grave to ensure that her corpse never clawed through the earth. To keep her in the ground forever. Amber blinked back. Back to the hallway.

Back to all the other girls.

Waiting. And waiting.

Nothing but a purgatory of yearning girls, whispering the same lines under their breath.

When were they going to call her name?

How long did she have to wait here?

Couldn't they just put her out of her misery?

Nine years old.

Amber was only nine years old. Her mother was always telling casting directors that "Amber is very mature for her age," and that they should consider her for older parts. *What presence! What equipoise!* But this wasn't her choice. This was never her dream. It had always been what her mother wanted. The cattle calls and acting classes. All she wanted was soccer and ice cream and scribbling in her coloring books. She wanted to watch *The Partridge Family* and stay up late and not have to worry about saying the right thing or looking the right way or smiling. Always smiling. She couldn't hold her lips together much longer. She wanted to rip them off.

Just call me already, she thought. Just call my name so I can say my lines and go home . . .

Just call me . . . Call me . . . Kill me . . . Call me . . . Kill me . . .

Amber had done three commercials. One was a national spot for a dish detergent. ("Wow! Where did all that dirt go? Thanks, Suds!")

Another was for an embarrassing off-brand Yoo-hoo drink that tasted like chalk. ("Mmm-mmm! Scrumptulicious! Nutritious and delicious! Go ahead and drink . . . Chocolicious!") Amber threw up all over the set after twelve takes of sipping too much of the awful stuff.

Then there was a local spot for a used-car dealership. ("Beep! Beep! Bring the whole family on down and take a ride!") She liked that commercial the best because she got to dress up like a cowgirl, her sleeves adorned in pink fringe, and ride a pony all day, even if it wasn't national.

But she'd never been in a movie before.

Never a feature.

You need to land this one, hon, Mom had said in the car, talking over her shoulder while Amber sat in the backseat, veering through traffic along the 405. They were already ten minutes late. Again. Get this part. You hear me? This one's going to be your breakout, I can feel it. After the reviews roll in and the critics single you out, you can leave this god-awful schlock behind and play whatever part you want. You'll have the pick of the litter, hon. Trust me. Are you listening, Amber? Amber? You go in there and nail this audition. Kill it for me, honey. Kill it.

Her tooth was loose. One of her upper central incisors. This was a problem. A major problem. Amber hadn't told her mother because she knew she'd get angry. If she lost a tooth before shooting began, they could fire her. We didn't hire a gap-toothed girl, the producers would say. But Amber couldn't help but run her tongue along the loose tooth. She couldn't stop herself from forcing the tip within the crevice of her gums, where it was most tender. She knew she was only making it worse, making the tooth looser. But she couldn't control herself. The root was raw, pain radiating out from her jaw. Worrying the nerve was the only feeling worth feeling right now. If she pushed at the tooth with her tongue, harder, just a little harder, Amber could feel the flesh flex and tear, the nerve ending separating, the very root ready to snap in—

"Amber Pendleton?"

Amber blinked back to the waiting area.

And smiled.

The casting director's assistant held the door open for her. Amber's

mother was asked to wait outside, with all the other mothers, but she insisted on coming along. To observe. Her mother always made her more nervous. More anxious. Mom knew this, but she barged in anyway. Why was she being so pushy? Bickering with the assistant? Amber could feel her cheeks getting hotter. Was she blushing? Her mother's voice was rising. Getting shriller. Saying something about this being a horror movie. The things that would be asked of Amber, demanded of her daughter. Somebody had to make sure she was safe. That Amber was protected. But the only protection Amber felt like she needed right now was from her mother.

Not that she'd ever say that.

Not out loud.

The room felt empty. Emptier than she had expected. Hollow. There wasn't much furniture in here, even for such a wide-open space. Just a fold-out card table. The blinds were drawn, so no sunlight shone through. The dull thrum of fluorescents filled the room. Filled her skull. She felt the low-wattage throb in her jaw. In her loose tooth. The nerve ending picked up the electricity pulsing in the bulbs above, transmitting signals throughout the rest of her head.

Something in her lungs caught. A hitch in her chest. It felt like sandpaper in her windpipe. Was she choking? Was her throat constricting? She couldn't breathe. The air wasn't reaching her lungs anymore. Where had the oxygen gone? Was her face turning blue? Was she dying? Why wasn't anybody noticing her asphyxiating? Why wasn't anyone trying to save her?

The casting director hadn't made eye contact with her yet. Hadn't seen Amber. Hadn't acknowledged her presence. She was scribbling something down on her yellow notepad. Making a note about the girl that had just auditioned before her. What if that girl already got the part? What if it was too late for Amber? Why was she even doing this? Why was she here?

The casting director still wouldn't look up.

Was Amber supposed to wait? Should she just start? Get it over with?

Amber noticed the Pall Mall dangling between the casting director's fingers. The cinder had sunk through the cigarette, unsmoked, a slender tail of ash threatening to break at any moment, like a gray salamander escaping its attacker by snapping off its own appendage.

There was no color in the casting director's hair, as if it had been sapped of all its pigment, reduced to ash. She seemed tired. Her shoulders drooped. How many girls had she seen already? How many times had she heard the exact same lines, repeated the exact same way? The tone? The inflection? The singsongy lilt of hundreds of girls would haunt her dreams forever. Amber had been haunted by these words, too, the dialogue drifting into her own dreams. But when she heard it, she only heard one voice. *The* voice. The very voice of the ghost girl herself, as if this witch had tutored her on how to deliver the lines. The recitation.

Amber now knew how to cast the spell.

The casting director finally glanced up. Her eyes settled on Amber for the first time.

Actually saw her.

She hesitated.

Halted, even.

Amber wasn't positive, but she swore she saw the casting director's eyes widen. Did her pupils just dilate, like black holes widening within the cosmos, swallowing Amber whole?

The casting director took her in.

Savored her.

She leaned forward, holding the rest of herself up with her elbows. "What's your name, young lady?" There was warmth in her voice.

Amber cleared her throat as quietly as possible. "Amber Pendle-ton."

"And what part will you be reading for us today, Amber?"

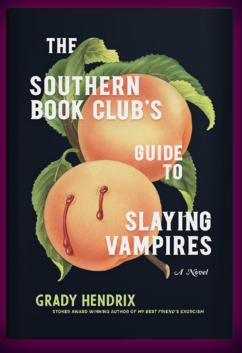
Amber straightened her spine, trying hard not to glance over at her hovering mother. She exhaled, letting the room settle before responding, just as she had practiced with Mom a million times before. "I'll be reading the part of Jessica Ford."

Just then, the ash detached itself from the casting director's cigarette, as if the mere mention of Jessica's name were enough to send it toppling. When it hit the table, flakes of gray scattered everywhere, all over the casting director's notepad. Freckles on a ghost.

"Whenever you're ready, Jessica." The casting director abruptly caught herself. Laughed at her own folly, coughing wetly. "Sorry. I meant Amber. Whenever you're ready, Amber." You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *THE REMAKING* by Clay McLeod Chapman. To continue reading, you can find the book at the following retailers or your local library:

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#1 APRIL 2020 LIBRARYREADS PICK AN APRIL INDIE NEXT PICK AN AMAZON BEST BOOK OF THE MONTH

"A clever, addictive vampire thriller . . . this powerful, eclectic novel both pays homage to the literary vampire canon and stands singularly within it." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Fans of smart horror will sink their teeth into this one." —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

> "A cheeky, spot-on pick for book clubs." —*Booklist*, starred review

"The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires is funny and warm and it's genuinely creepy and disturbing."

-Paul Tremblay, author of A Head Full of Ghosts and The Cabin at the End of the World

Steel Magnolias meets *Dracula* in this '90s-set horror novel about a women's book club that must do battle with a mysterious newcomer to their small Southern town, perfect for murderinos and fans of Stephen King.

Patricia Campbell's life has never felt smaller. Her husband is a workaholic, her teenage kids have their own lives, her senile mother-in-law needs constant care, and she's always a step behind on her endless to-do list. The only thing keeping her sane is her book club, a close-knit group of Charleston women united by their love of true crime. At these meetings they're as likely to talk about the Manson family as they are about their own families.

One evening after book club, Patricia is viciously attacked by an elderly neighbor, bringing the neighbor's handsome nephew, James Harris, into her life. James is well traveled and well read, and he makes Patricia feel things she hasn't felt in years. But when children on the other side of town go missing, their deaths written off by local police, Patricia has reason to believe James Harris is more of a Bundy than a Brad Pitt. The real problem? James is a monster of a different kind—and Patricia has already invited him in.

Little by little, James will insinuate himself into Patricia's life and try to take everything she took for granted—including the book club—but she won't surrender without a fight in this blood-soaked tale of neighborly kindness gone wrong.

GRADY HENDRIX is a novelist and screenwriter based in New York City. He is the author of *Horrorstör*, *My Best Friend's Exorcism*, *Paperbacks from Hell*, and *We Sold Our Souls*, all of which received critical praise from outlets including NPR, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, the A.V. Club, Paste, Buzzfeed, and more. He has contributed to *Playboy*, *The Village Voice*, and *Variety*.

THE SOUTHERN BOOK CLUB'S GUIDE TO SLAYING VAMPIRES

GRADY HENDRIX



AUTHOR'S NOTE

A few years ago I wrote a book called *My Best Friend's Exorcism* about two teenage girls in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1988, at the height of the Satanic Panic. They become convinced that one of them is possessed by Satan and, consequently, things go poorly.

That novel was written from a teenage point of view, and so the parents seemed awful because that's how parents seem when you're a teenager. But there's another version of that story, told from the parents' point of view, about how helpless you feel when your kid is in danger. I wanted to write a story about those parents, and so *The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires* was born. It's not a sequel to *My Best Friend's Exorcism*, but it takes place in the same neighborhood, a few years later, where I grew up.

When I was a kid I didn't take my mom seriously. She was a housewife who was in a book club, and she and her friends were always running errands, and driving car pool, and forcing us to follow rules that didn't make sense. They just seemed like a bunch of lightweights. Today I realize how many things they were dealing with that I was totally unaware of. They took the hits so we could skate by obliviously, because that's the deal: as a parent, you endure pain so your children don't have to.

This is also a book about vampires. They're that iconic American archetype of the rambling man, wearing denim, wandering from town to town with no past and no ties. Think Jack Kerouac, think Shane, think Woody Guthrie. Think Ted Bundy.

Because vampires are the original serial killers, stripped of every-

thing that makes us human—they have no friends, no family, no roots, no children. All they have is hunger. They eat and eat but they're never full. With this book, I wanted to pit a man freed from all responsibilities but his appetites against women whose lives are shaped by their endless responsibilities. I wanted to pit Dracula against my mom.

As you'll see, it's not a fair fight.

PROLOGUE

This story ends in blood.

Every story begins in blood: a squalling baby yanked from the womb, bathed in mucus and half a quart of their mother's blood. But not many stories end in blood these days. Usually it's a return to the hospital and a dry, quiet death surrounded by machines after a heart attack in the driveway, a stroke on the back porch, or a slow fade from lung cancer.

This story begins with five little girls, each born in a splash of her mother's blood, cleaned up, patted dry, then turned into proper young ladies, instructed in the wifely arts to become perfect partners and responsible parents, mothers who help with homework and do the laundry, who belong to church flower societies and bunco clubs, who send their children to cotillion and private schools.

You've seen these women. They meet for lunch and laugh loudly enough for everyone in the restaurant to hear. They get silly after a single glass of wine. Their idea of living on the edge is to buy a pair of Christmas earrings that light up. They agonize far too long over whether or not to order dessert.

As respectable individuals, their names will appear in the paper only three times: when they're born, when they get married, and when they die. They are gracious hostesses. They are generous to those less fortunate. They honor their husbands and nurture their children. They understand the importance of everyday china, the responsibility of inheriting Great-Grandmother's silver, the value of good linen. And by the time this story is over, they will be covered in blood. Some of it will be theirs. Some of it will belong to others. But they will drip with it. They will swim in it. They will drown in it. Housewife (n)—a light, worthless woman or girl —Oxford English Dictionary, compact edition, 1971

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY

November 1988

CHAPTER 1

In 1988, George H. W. Bush had just won the presidential election by inviting everyone to read his lips while Michael Dukakis lost it by riding in a tank. Dr. Huxtable was America's dad, *Kate & Allie* were America's moms, *The Golden Girls* were America's grandmoms, McDonald's announced it was opening its first restaurant in the Soviet Union, everyone bought Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and didn't read it, *Phantom of the Opera* opened on Broadway, and Patricia Campbell got ready to die.

She sprayed her hair, put on her earrings, and blotted her lipstick, but when she looked at herself in the mirror she didn't see a housewife of thirty-nine with two children and a bright future, she saw a dead person. Unless war broke out, the oceans rose, or the earth fell into the sun, tonight was the monthly meeting of the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant, and she hadn't read this month's book. And she was the discussant. Which meant that in less than ninety minutes she would stand up in front of a room full of women and lead them in a conversation about a book she hadn't read.

She had meant to read *Cry, the Beloved Country*—honestly—but every time she picked up her copy and read *There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills*, Korey rode her bike off the end of the dock because she thought that if she pedaled fast enough she could skim across the water, or she set her brother's hair on fire trying to see how close she could get a match before it caught, or she spent an entire weekend telling everyone who called that her mother couldn't come to the phone because she was dead, which Patricia only learned about when people started showing up at the front door with condolence casseroles.

Before Patricia could discover why the road that runs from Ixopo was so lovely, she'd see Blue run past the sun porch windows buck naked, or she'd realize the house was so quiet because she'd left him at the downtown library and had to jump in the Volvo and fly back over the bridge, praying that he hadn't been kidnapped by Moonies, or because he'd decided to see how many raisins he could fit up his nose (twenty-four). She never even learned where Ixopo was exactly because her mother-in-law, Miss Mary, moved in with them for a six-week visit and the garage room had to have clean towels, and the sheets on the guest bed had to be changed every day, and Miss Mary had trouble getting out of the tub so they had one of those bars installed and she had to find somebody to do that, and the children had laundry that needed to be done, and Carter had to have his shirts ironed, and Korey wanted new soccer cleats because everyone else had them but they really couldn't afford them right now, and Blue was only eating white food so she had to make rice every night for supper, and the road to Ixopo ran on to the hills without her.

Joining the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant had seemed like a good idea at the time. Patricia realized she needed to get out of the house and meet new people the moment she leaned over at supper with Carter's boss and tried to cut up his steak for him. A book club made sense because she liked reading, especially mysteries. Carter had suggested it was because she went through life as if the entire world were a mystery to her, and she didn't disagree: *Patricia Campbell and the Secret of Cooking Three Meals a Day, Seven Days a Week, without Losing Your Mind. Patricia Campbell and the Case of the Five-Year-Old Child Who Keeps Biting Other People. Patricia Campbell and the Mystery of Finding Enough Time to Read the Newspaper When You Have Two Children and a Mother-in-Law Living with You and Everyone Needs Their Clothes Washed, and to Be Fed, and the House Needs to* Be Cleaned and Someone Has to Give the Dog His Heartworm Pills and You Should Probably Wash Your Own Hair Every Few Days or Your Daughter Is Going to Ask Why You Look Like a Street Person. A few discreet inquiries, and she'd been invited to the inaugural meeting of the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant at Marjorie Fretwell's house.

The Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant picked their books for that year in a very democratic process: Marjorie Fretwell invited them to select eleven books from a list of thirteen she found appropriate. She asked if there were other books anyone wanted to recommend, but everyone understood that wasn't a real question, except for Slick Paley, who seemed chronically unable to read social cues.

"I'd like to nominate *Like Lambs to the Slaughter: Your Child and the Occult,*" Slick said. "With that crystal store on Coleman Boulevard and Shirley MacLaine on the cover of *Time* magazine talking about her past lives, we need a wake-up call."

"I've never heard of it," Marjorie Fretwell said. "So I imagine it falls outside our mandate of reading the great books of the Western world. Anyone else?"

"But—" Slick protested.

"Anyone else?" Marjorie repeated.

They selected the books Marjorie wrote down for them, assigned each book to the month Marjorie thought best, and picked the discussants Marjorie thought were most appropriate. The discussant would open the meeting by delivering a twenty-minute presentation on the book, its background, and the life of its author, then lead the group discussion. A discussant could not cancel or trade books with anyone else without paying a stiff fine because the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant was not fooling around.

When it became clear she wasn't going to be able to finish *Cry*, *the Beloved Country*, Patricia called Marjorie.

"Marjorie," she said over the phone while putting a lid on the rice and turning it down from a boil. "It's Patricia Campbell. I need to talk to you about *Cry, the Beloved Country*."

"Such a powerful work," Marjorie said.

"Of course," Patricia said.

"I know you'll do it justice," Marjorie said.

"I'll do my best," Patricia said, realizing that this was the exact opposite of what she needed to say.

"And it's so timely with the situation in South Africa right now," Marjorie said.

A cold bolt of fear shot through Patricia: what was the situation in South Africa right now?

After she hung up, Patricia cursed herself for being a coward and a fool, and vowed to go to the library and look up *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the *Directory of World Literature*, but she had to do snacks for Korey's soccer team, and the babysitter had mono, and Carter had a sudden trip to Columbia and she had to help him pack, and then a snake came out of the toilet in the garage room and she had to beat it to death with a rake, and Blue drank a bottle of Wite-Out and she had to take him to the doctor to see if he would die (he wouldn't). She tried to look up Alan Paton, the author, in their *World Book Encyclopedia* but they were missing the *P* volume. She made a mental note that they needed new encyclopedias.

The doorbell rang.

"Mooooom," Korey called from the downstairs hall. "Pizza's here!"

She couldn't put it off any longer. It was time to face Marjorie.

Marjorie had handouts.

"These are just a few articles about current events in South Africa, including the recent unpleasantness in Vanderbijlpark," she said. "But I think Patricia will sum things up nicely for us in her discussion of Mr. Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*."

Everyone turned to stare at Patricia sitting on Marjorie's enormous pink-and-white sofa. Not being familiar with the design of Marjorie's home, she had put on a floral dress and felt like all anyone saw were her head and hands floating in midair. She wished she could pull them into her dress and disappear completely. She felt her soul exit her body and hover up by the ceiling.

"But before she begins," Marjorie said, and every head turned back her way, "let's have a moment of silence for Mr. Alan Paton. His passing earlier this year has shaken the literary world as much as it's shaken me."

Patricia's brain chased itself in circles: the author was dead? Recently? She hadn't seen anything in the paper. What could she say? How had he died? Was he murdered? Torn apart by wild dogs? Heart attack?

"Amen," Marjorie said. "Patricia?"

Patricia's soul decided that it was no fool and ascended into the afterlife, leaving her at the mercy of the women surrounding her. There was Grace Cavanaugh, who lived two doors down from Patricia but whom she'd only met once when Grace rang her doorbell and said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but you've lived here for six months and I need to know: is this the way you *intend* for your yard to look?"

Slick Paley blinked rapidly, her sharp foxy face and tiny eyes glued to Patricia, her pen poised above her notebook. Louise Gibbes cleared her throat. Cuffy Williams blew her nose slowly into a Kleenex. Sadie Funche leaned forward, nibbling on a cheese straw, eyes boring into Patricia. The only person not looking at Patricia was Kitty Scruggs, who eyed the bottle of wine in the center of the coffee table that no one had dared open.

"Well . . . ," Patricia began. "Didn't we all love *Cry, the Beloved Country*?"

Sadie, Slick, and Cuffy nodded. Patricia glanced at her watch and saw that seven seconds had passed. She could run out the clock. She let the silence linger hoping someone would jump in and say something, but the long pause only prompted Marjorie to say, "Patricia?" "It's so sad that Alan Paton was cut down in the prime of his life before writing more novels like *Cry, the Beloved Country*," Patricia said, feeling her way forward, word by word, guided by the nods of the other women. "Because this book has so many timely and relevant things to say to us now, especially after the terrible events in Vander... Vanderbill... South Africa."

The nodding got stronger. Patricia felt her soul descending back into her body. She forged ahead.

"I wanted to tell you all about Alan Paton's life," she said. "And why he wrote this book, but all those facts don't express how powerful this story is, how much it moved me, the great cry of outrage I felt when I read it. This is a book you read with your heart, not with your mind. Did anyone else feel that way?"

The nods were general, all over the living room.

"Exactly." Slick Paley nodded. "Yes."

"I feel so strongly about South Africa," Patricia said, and then remembered that Mary Brasington's husband was in banking and Joanie Wieter's husband did something with the stock market and they might have investments there. "But I know there are many sides to the issue, and I wonder if anyone wanted to present another point of view. In the spirit of Mr. Paton's book, this should be a conversation, not a speech."

Everyone was nodding. Her soul settled back into her body. She had done it. She had survived. Marjorie cleared her throat.

"Patricia," Marjorie asked. "What did you think about what the book had to say about Nelson Mandela?"

"So inspirational," Patricia said. "He simply towers over everything, even though he's really just mentioned."

"I don't believe he is," Marjorie said, and Slick Paley stopped nodding. "Where did you see him mentioned? On which page?"

Patricia's soul began ascending into the light again. *Good-bye*, it said. *Good-bye*, *Patricia*. *You're on your own now*...

"His spirit of freedom?" Patricia said. "It pervades every page?"

"When this book was written," Marjorie said. "Nelson Mandela was still a law student and a minor member of the ANC. I'm not sure how his spirit could be anywhere in this book, let alone pervading every page."

Marjorie drilled into Patricia's face with her ice-pick eyes.

"Well," Patricia croaked, because she was dead now and apparently death felt very, very dry. "What he was going to do. You could feel it building. In here. In this book. That we read."

"Patricia," Marjorie said. "You didn't read the book, did you?"

Time stopped. No one moved. Patricia wanted to lie, but a lifetime of breeding had made her a lady.

"Some of it," Patricia said.

Marjorie let out a soul-deep sigh that seemed to go on forever.

"Where did you stop?" she asked.

"The first page?" Patricia said, then began to babble. "I'm sorry, I know I've let you down, but the babysitter had mono, and Carter's mother is staying with us, and a snake came out of the commode, and everything's just been so hard this month. I really don't know what to say except I'm so, so sorry."

Black crept in around the edges of her vision. A high-pitched tone shrilled in her right ear.

"Well," Marjorie said. "You're the one who's lost out, by robbing yourself of what is possibly one of the finest works of world literature. And you've robbed all of us of your unique point of view. But what's done is done. Who else would be willing to lead the discussion?"

Sadie Funche retracted into her Laura Ashley dress like a turtle, Nancy Fox started shaking her head before Marjorie even reached the end of her sentence, and Cuffy Williams froze like a prey animal confronted by a predator.

"Did anyone actually read this month's book?" Marjorie asked. Silence.

"I cannot believe this," Marjorie said. "We all agreed, eleven months ago, to read the great books of the Western world and now, less than one year later, we've come to this. I am deeply disappointed in all of you. I thought we wanted to better ourselves, expose ourselves to thoughts and ideas from outside Mt. Pleasant. The men all say, 'It's not too clever for a girl to be clever,' and they laugh at us and think we only care about our hair. The only books they give us are cookbooks because in their minds we are silly, lightweight know-nothings. And you've just proven them right."

She stopped to catch her breath. Patricia noticed sweat glistening in her eyebrows. Marjorie continued:

"I strongly suggest y'all go home and think about whether you want to join us next month to read *Jude the Obscure* and—"

Grace Cavanaugh stood, hitching her purse over one shoulder.

"Grace?" Marjorie asked. "Are you not staying?"

"I just remembered an appointment," Grace said. "It entirely slipped my mind."

"Well," Marjorie said, her momentum undermined. "Don't let me keep you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Grace said.

And with that, the tall, elegant, prematurely gray Grace floated out of the room.

Robbed of its velocity, the meeting dissolved. Marjorie retreated to the kitchen, followed by a concerned Sadie Funche. A dispirited clump of women lingered around the dessert table making chitchat. Patricia lurked in her chair until no one seemed to be watching, then darted out of the house.

As she cut across Marjorie's front yard, she heard a noise that sounded like *Hey*. She stopped and looked for the source.

"Hey," Kitty Scruggs repeated.

Kitty lurked behind the line of parked cars in Marjorie's driveway, a cloud of blue smoke hovering over her head, a long thin cigarette between her fingers. Next to her stood Maryellen something-orother, also smoking. Kitty waved Patricia over with one hand.

Patricia knew that Maryellen was a Yankee from Massachusetts who told everyone that she was a feminist. And Kitty was one of those big women who wore the kind of clothes people charitably referred to as "fun"—baggy sweaters with multicolored handprints on them, chunky plastic jewelry. Patricia suspected that getting entangled with women like this was the first step on a slippery slope that ended with her wearing felt reindeer antlers at Christmas, or standing outside Citadel Mall asking people to sign a petition, so she approached them with caution.

"I liked what you did in there," Kitty said.

"I should have found time to read the book," Patricia told her.

"Why?" Kitty asked. "It was boring. I couldn't make it past the first chapter."

"I need to write Marjorie a note," Patricia said. "To apologize."

Maryellen squinted against the smoke and sucked on her cigarette.

"Marjorie got what she deserved," she said, exhaling.

"Listen." Kitty placed her body between the two of them and Marjorie's front door, just in case Marjorie was watching and could read lips. "I'm having some people read a book and come over to my house next month to talk about it. Maryellen'll be there."

"I couldn't possibly find the time to belong to two book clubs," Patricia said.

"Trust me," Kitty said. "After today, Marjorie's book club is done."

"What book are you reading?" Patricia asked, groping for reasons to say no.

Kitty reached into her denim shoulder bag and pulled out the kind of cheap paperback they sold at the drugstore.

"Evidence of Love: A True Story of Passion and Death in the Suburbs," she said. It took Patricia aback. This was one of those trashy true crime books. But clearly Kitty was reading it and you couldn't call someone else's taste in books trashy, even if it was.

"I'm not sure that's my kind of book," Patricia said.

"These two women were best friends and they chopped each other up with axes," Kitty said. "Don't pretend you don't want to know what happened."

"Jude is obscure for a reason," Maryellen growled.

"Is it just the two of you?" Patricia asked.

A voice piped up behind her.

"Hey, everyone," Slick Paley said. "What're y'all talking about over here?"

CHAPTER 2

The last bell of the day rang somewhere deep inside the bowels of Albemarle Academy and the double doors opened and disgorged a mob of small children strapped beneath bulging, spine-bending book bags. They hobbled to the car pool area like elderly gnomes, bent double beneath three-ring binders and social studies books. Patricia saw Korey and pecked at the horn. Korey looked up and broke into a loping run that made Patricia's heart hurt. Her daughter slid into the passenger seat, hauling her book bag onto her lap.

"Seat belts," Patricia said, and Korey clicked hers in.

"Why're you picking me up?" Korey asked.

"I thought we could stop by the Foot Locker and look at cleats," Patricia said. "Didn't you say you needed new ones? Then I was in the mood for TCBY."

She felt her daughter begin to glow, and as they drove over the West Ashley Bridge, Korey explained to her mom about all the different kind of cleats the other girls had and why she needed bladed cleats and they had to be hard ground cleats and not soft ground cleats even though they played on grass because hard ground cleats were faster. When she stopped for breath, Patricia said, "I heard about what happened at recess."

All the light went out inside Korey, and Patricia immediately regretted saying anything, but she had to say something because isn't that what mothers did?

"I don't know why Chelsea pulled your pants down in front of the class," Patricia said. "But it was an ugly, mean thing to do. As soon as we get home, I'm calling her mother."

"No!" Korey said. "Please, please, please, nothing happened. It wasn't a big deal. Please, Mom."

Patricia's own mother had never taken her side in anything, and Patricia wanted Korey to understand that this wasn't a punishment, this was a good thing, but Korey refused to go into Foot Locker, and mumbled that she didn't want any frozen yogurt, and Patricia felt like it was deeply unfair when all she'd tried to do was be a good mother and somehow that made her the Wicked Witch of the West. By the time she pulled into their driveway, steering wheel clenched in a death grip, she was not in the mood to see a white Cadillac the size of a small boat blocking her drive and Kitty Scruggs standing on her front steps.

"Hellooooo," Kitty called in a way that immediately set Patricia's teeth on edge.

"Korey, this is Mrs. Scruggs," Patricia said, smiling too hard.

"Pleased to meet you," Korey mumbled.

"You're Korey?" Kitty asked. "Listen, I heard what Donna Phelps's little girl did to you today at school."

Korey looked at the ground, hair hanging over her face. Patricia wanted to tell Kitty she was only making it worse.

"The next time Chelsea Phelps does something like that," Kitty said, barreling ahead, "you tell everyone at the top of your lungs, 'Chelsea Phelps spent the night at Merit Scruggs's house last month and she wet her sleeping bag and blamed it on the dog.""

Patricia couldn't believe it. Parents didn't say things like that about other people's children. She turned to tell Korey not to listen but saw her daughter staring at Kitty in awe, eyes round, mouth open.

"Really?" Korey asked.

"She tooted at the table, too," Kitty said. "And tried to blame *that* on my four-year-old."

For a long, frozen moment, Patricia didn't know what to say, and then Korey burst into giggles. She laughed so hard she sat down on the front steps, fell over sideways, and gasped until she started to hiccup.

"Go inside and say hello to your grandmother," Patricia said, feeling suddenly grateful to Kitty.

"Aren't they such little pills at that age?" Kitty said, watching Korey go.

"They are peculiar," Patricia said.

"They're pills," Kitty said. "Bitter little pills who ought to be tied up in a sack and let out when they're eighteen. Here, I brought you this."

She handed Patricia a glossy new paperback copy of *Evidence of Love*.

"I know you think it's trash," Kitty said. "But it has passion, love, hate, romance, violence, excitement. It's just like Thomas Hardy, only in paperback and with eight pages of photos in the middle."

"I don't know," Patricia said. "I don't have a lot of time . . ."

But Kitty was already retreating to her car. Patricia decided that this mystery should be called *Patricia Campbell and the Inability to Say No*.

To her surprise, she tore through the book in three days.

Patricia almost didn't make the meeting. Right before she left, Korey washed her face in lemon juice to get rid of her freckles and wound up getting it in both eyes, sending her shrieking into the hall, where she ran face-first into a doorknob. Patricia flushed her eyes with water, put a bag of frozen peas on her goose egg, told Korey she'd had just as many, if not more, freckles when she was her age, and got her settled on the sofa with Miss Mary to watch *The Cosby Show*. She made it to the meeting ten minutes late.

Kitty lived on Seewee Farms, a two-hundred-acre chunk of Boone Hall Plantation that had been parceled off a long time ago as a wedding present to some Lord Proprietor or other. Through misadventure and poor decision making it had come to Kitty's grandmother-in-law, and when that eminent old lady had declined elegantly into her grave, she'd passed it on to her favorite grandson, Kitty's husband, Horse.

Way out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by flooded rice fields and tangled pine forest, dotted with broken-backed outbuildings inhabited solely by snakes, it was anchored by a hideously ugly main house painted chocolate brown and wrapped in sagging porches and rotting columns with raccoons in the attic and opossums in the walls. It was exactly the kind of grand home, suspended in a state of gracious decay, Patricia thought all the best Charlestonians owned.

Now she stood before the massive double doors on the sprawling front porch and pressed the bell and nothing happened. She tried again.

"Patricia!" Kitty called.

Patricia looked around, then up. Kitty leaned out the second-floor window.

"Go around to the side," Kitty hollered. "We haven't been able to find the key to that door in forever."

She met Kitty by her kitchen door.

"Come on in," Kitty said. "Don't mind the cat."

Patricia didn't see a cat anywhere, but she did see something that thrilled her: Kitty's kitchen was a disaster. Empty pizza boxes, schoolbooks, junk mail, and wet bathing suits crowded every flat surface. Back issues of *Southern Living* slid off chairs. A disassembled engine covered the kitchen table. By comparison, Patricia's house looked magazine perfect.

"This is what five kids looks like," Kitty said over her shoulder. "Stay smart, Patricia. Stop at two."

The front hall looked like something out of *Gone with the Wind* except its swooping staircase and oak floor were buried beneath a mudslide of violin cases, balled-up gym socks, taxidermied squir-

rels, glow-in-the-dark Frisbees, sheaves of parking tickets, collapsible music stands, soccer balls, lacrosse sticks, an umbrella stand full of baseball bats, and a dead, five-foot-tall rubber tree stuck inside a planter made of an amputated elephant's foot.

Kitty picked her way through the carnage, leading Patricia to a front room where Slick Paley and Maryellen Whatever-Her-Name-Was perched on the lip of a sofa covered with approximately five hundred throw pillows. Across from them, Grace Cavanaugh sat ramrod straight on a piano bench. Patricia didn't see a piano.

"All right," Kitty said, pouring wine from a jug. "Let's talk about axe murder!"

"Don't we need a name first?" Slick asked. "And to select books for the year?"

"This isn't a book club," Grace said.

"What do you mean, this isn't a book club?" Maryellen asked.

"We're just getting together to talk about a paperback book we all happened to read," Grace said. "It's not like it's a real book."

"Whatever you say, Grace," Kitty said, thrusting mugs of wine into everyone's hands. "Five children live in this house and it's eight years before the oldest one moves out. If I don't get some adult conversation tonight I'm going to blow my brains out."

"Hear, hear," Maryellen said. "Three girls: seven, five, and four."

"Four is such a lovely age," Slick cooed.

"Is it?" Maryellen asked, eyes narrowing.

"So are we a book club?" Patricia asked. She liked to know where things stood.

"We're a book club, we're not a book club, who cares?" Kitty said. "What I want to know is why Betty Gore came at her good friend, Candy Montgomery, with an axe and how the heck she got chopped up instead?"

Patricia looked around to see what the other women thought. Maryellen in her dry-cleaned blue jeans and her hair scrunchie and her harsh Yankee voice; tiny Slick looking like a particularly eager mouse with her pointy teeth and beady eyes; Kitty in her denim blouse with musical notes splayed across the front in gold sequins, slurping down a mug of wine, hair a mess, like a bear just woken up from hibernation; and finally Grace with a ruffled bow at her throat, sitting straight, hands folded perfectly in her lap, eyes blinking slowly from behind her large-framed glasses, studying them all like an owl.

These women were too different from her. Patricia didn't belong here.

"I think," Grace said, and they sat up straighter, "that it shows a remarkable lack of planning on Betty's part. If you're going to murder your best friend with an axe, you should make sure you know what you're doing."

That started the conversation, and without thinking, Patricia found herself joining in, and they were still talking about the book two hours later when they walked to their cars.

The following month they read *The Michigan Murders: The True* Story of the Ypsilanti Ripper's Reign of Terror, and then A Death in Canaan: A Classic Case of Good and Evil in a Small New England Town, followed by Bitter Blood: A True Story of Southern Family Pride, Madness, and Multiple Murder—all of them Kitty's recommendations.

They selected next year's books together, and when all the blurry black-and-white photos of crime scenes and minute-by-minute timelines of the night when it all happened began to blur, Grace came up with the idea of alternating each true crime book with a novel, so they would read *The Silence of the Lambs* one month, and *Buried Dreams: Inside the Mind of John Wayne Gacy* the next. They read *The Hillside Stranglers* by Darcy O'Brien, followed by Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, with its children baked into a pie and fed to their mother. ("The problem with that," Grace pointed out, "is you would need extremely large pies to fit two children, even minced.")

Patricia loved it. She asked Carter if he wanted to read along with her, but he told her he dealt with crazy patients all day, so the last thing he wanted to do was come home and read about crazy people. Patricia didn't mind. The not-quite-a-book-club, with all its slow poisoners and murderers-for-hire and angels of death, gave her a new outlook on life.

She and Carter had moved to the Old Village last year because they'd wanted to live somewhere with plenty of space, somewhere quiet, and somewhere, most importantly, safe. They wanted more than just a neighborhood, they wanted a community, where your home said you espoused a certain set of values. Somewhere protected from the chaos and the ceaseless change of the outside world. Somewhere the kids could play outside all day, unsupervised, until you called them in for supper.

The Old Village lay just across the Cooper River from downtown Charleston in the suburb of Mt. Pleasant, but while Charleston was formal and sophisticated, and Mt. Pleasant was its country cousin, the Old Village was a way of life. Or at least that was what the people who lived there believed. And Carter had worked long and hard so that they could finally afford not just a house but a way of life.

This way of life was a slice of live oaks and gracious homes lying between Coleman Boulevard and Charleston Harbor, where everyone still waved at cars when they went by and no one drove over twenty-five miles per hour.

It was where Carter taught Korey and Blue to crab off the dock, lowering raw chicken necks tied to long strings into the murky harbor water, and pulling up mean-eyed crabs they scooped up in nets. He took them shrimping at night, lit by the hissing white glare of their Coleman lantern. They went to oyster roasts and Sunday school, wedding receptions at Alhambra Hall and funerals at Stuhr's. They went to the Pierates Cruze block party every Christmas, and danced the shag at Wild Dunes on New Year's Eve. Korey and Blue went to Albemarle Academy on the other side of the harbor for school, and made friends, and had sleepovers, and Patricia drove car pool, and no one locked their doors, and everyone knew where you left your spare key when you went out of town, and you could go out all day and leave your windows open and the worst thing that might happen is you'd come home and find someone else's cat sleeping on your kitchen counter. It was a good place to raise children. It was a wonderful place to be a family. It was quiet, and soft, and peaceful, and safe.

But sometimes Patricia wanted to be challenged. Sometimes she yearned to see what she was made of. Sometimes she remembered being a nurse before she married Carter and wondered if she could still reach into a wound and hold an artery closed with her fingers, or if she still had the courage to pull a fishhook out of a child's eyelid. Sometimes she craved a little danger. And that was why she had book club.

In the fall of '91, Kitty's beloved Minnesota Twins made it to the World Series and she got Horse to chain-saw the two pine trees in their front yard and lay out a scaled-down baseball diamond in white lime. She invited all the members of their not-quite-a-book-club over to play a game with their husbands.

"Y'all," Slick said, at their last meeting before the game. "I need to unburden my conscience."

"Jesus Christ," Maryellen said, rolling her eyes. "Here it comes."

"Don't talk about who you don't know," Slick shot back. "Now, y'all, I don't like asking people to sin—"

"If baseball's a sin, I'm going to Hell," Kitty said.

"My husband, he . . . well," Slick said, ignoring Kitty. "Leland wouldn't understand why we read such morbid books in our book club—"

"It's not a book club," Grace said.

"—and I didn't want to worry him," Slick forged on, "so I told him we were a Bible study group." No one said anything for a full fifteen seconds. Finally, Maryellen spoke. "You told your husband we've been reading the Bible?"

"It rewards a lifetime of study," Slick said.

The silence stretched on as they looked at each other, incredulous, and then they all burst out laughing.

"I'm serious, y'all," Slick said. "He won't let me come anymore if he knows."

They realized she was serious.

"Slick," Kitty said, solemnly. "I promise, on Saturday, all of us will profess a sincere and deep enthusiasm for the word of God."

And on Saturday, they all did.

The husbands bumbled together in Kitty's front yard, shaking hands and making jokes, with their weekend stubble and their Clemson logos and their Polo shirts tucked into their stonewashed jean shorts. Kitty divided them into teams, splitting up the couples, but Patricia insisted Korey be allowed to play.

"All the other children are swimming off the dock," Kitty said.

"She'd rather play baseball," Patricia said.

"I'm not going to pitch underhanded just because she's a child," Kitty told her.

"She'll be fine," Patricia said.

Kitty had a strong swing and on the pitcher's mound, she threw lethal fastballs. Korey watched her strike out Slick and Ed. Then she was up at bat.

"Mom," she said. "What if I miss?"

"Then you tried your best," Patricia told her.

"What if I break one of her windows?" Korey asked.

"Then I'll buy you a frozen yogurt on the way home," Patricia said.

But as Korey walked to home plate, a bolt of worry shot through Patricia. Korey held the bat uncomfortably and its tip wobbled in the air. Her legs looked too thin, her arms looked too weak. She was just a baby. Patricia got ready to comfort her and tell her she tried her best. Kitty gave Patricia an apologetic shrug, then drew her right arm back and sent a fastball screaming at Korey in a straight line.

There was a crack and the ball suddenly reversed direction, sailing in a high arc toward Kitty's house, and then at the last moment it lifted, soaring over the roof, over the house, coming down somewhere deep in the woods. Everyone, even Korey, watched, frozen.

"Go, Korey!" Patricia screamed, breaking the silence. "Run!"

Korey circled the bases and her team took the game, 6–4. Korey was at bat for every single one of those points.

Six months later, it became clear Miss Mary could no longer live on her own. Carter and his two older brothers agreed to take turns having their mother stay with them four months at a time, and Carter, being the youngest, took her first.

Then Sandy called the day before he was supposed to drive down and pick her up, saying, "My kids are too young to be around Mama when she's confused like this. We want them to remember her the way she used to be."

Carter called his oldest brother, but Bobby said, "Mom wouldn't be comfortable in Virginia, it's too cold up here."

Harsh words were exchanged, and then Carter, sitting on the end of their bed, jammed his thumb down hard on the portable phone's hang-up button and held it there for a very long time before he said:

"Mom's staying."

"For how long?" Patricia asked.

"Forever," he said.

"But, Carter . . . ," she began.

"What do you want me to do, Patty?" he asked. "Throw her out on the street? I can't put her in a home."

Patricia immediately softened. Carter's father had died when he was young and his mother had raised him alone. His next-oldest brother was eight years his senior and so it had been Carter and his mother on their own. Miss Mary's sacrifices for Carter were family legend.

"You're right," she said. "We have the garage room. We'll make it work."

"Thank you," he said after a long pause, and he sounded so genuinely grateful, Patricia knew they'd made the right decision.

But Korey was starting middle school, and Blue couldn't focus on his math and he needed a tutor and he was only in fourth grade, and Carter's mother couldn't always say what she was thinking, and she was getting worse every day.

Frustration poisoned Miss Mary's personality. Once she had doted on her grandchildren. Now, when Blue accidentally knocked over her buttermilk she pinched his arm so hard it left a black-andblue mark. She kicked Patricia in the shin after finding out there was no liver for her supper. She demanded to be taken to the bus station constantly. After a series of incidents, Patricia learned she couldn't be left home alone.

Grace stopped by early one afternoon on a day when Miss Mary had already thrown her bowl of cereal on the floor, then clogged her toilet in the garage room with an entire roll of paper.

"I wanted to invite you to be my guest for the closing night of Spoleto," Grace told Patricia. "I have tickets for you, Kitty, Maryellen, and Slick. I thought it would be nice if we did something cultural."

Patricia ached to go. Closing night of Spoleto took place outdoors at Middleton Place. You had a picnic on a blanket on the hill facing the lake while the Charleston Symphony Orchestra played classical music and it ended with fireworks. Then she heard Ragtag yelp from the den and Miss Mary say something ugly.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," Patricia said.

"Can I help?" Grace asked.

And it all came out, how scared Patricia felt about Miss Mary living with them, how hard it was for her to sit at the table for dinner with the children, how much of a strain it was on her and Carter.

"But I don't want to complain," Patricia said. "She did so much for Carter."

Grace said she was sorry Patricia wouldn't make Spoleto, then left, and Patricia cursed herself for talking too much.

The next day, a pickup truck pulled into Patricia's driveway with Kitty's boys in the back along with a portable toilet, a walker, bedpans, washing basins, large-handled plastic cutlery, and boxes of unbreakable plates. Kitty heaved herself out of the driver's seat.

"When Horse's mother lived with us we wound up with all this junk," she said. "We'll bring the hospital bed over tomorrow. I just need to round up some more fellas to lift it."

Patricia realized that Grace must have called Kitty and told her the situation. Before she could call Grace to say thank you, her doorbell rang again. A short black woman, plump but sharp-eyed, her hair set in a stiff old-fashioned helmet, wearing white slacks and a white nurse's tunic under a purple cardigan, stood on her front porch.

"Mrs. Cavanaugh said you might be able to use my help," the woman said. "My name is Ursula Greene and I take care of old folks."

"It's very nice of you," Patricia began. "But—"

"I'll also look after the children occasionally at no extra charge," Mrs. Greene said. "I'm not a babysitter, but Mrs. Cavanaugh said you might step out from time to time. I charge eleven dollars an hour and thirteen dollars an hour at night. I don't mind cooking for the little ones, but I don't want it to become a habit."

It was cheaper than Patricia thought, but she still couldn't imagine anyone being willing to deal with Miss Mary.

"Before you make a decision," she said, "let me introduce you to my mother-in-law."

They walked onto the sun porch, where Miss Mary sat watching television. Miss Mary scowled at the interruption.

"Who's this?" she snipped.

"This is Mrs. Greene," Patricia said. "Mrs. Greene, I'd like you to meet—"

"What's she doing here?" Miss Mary said.

"I've come to brush your hair and do your nails," Mrs. Greene said. "And make you something to eat later."

"Why can't that one do it?" Miss Mary asked, jabbing a gnarled finger at Patricia.

"Because you're working that one's last nerve," Mrs. Greene said. "And if that one doesn't get a break she's liable to throw you off the roof."

Miss Mary thought about it for a minute, then said, "No one's pushing me off any roof."

"Keep acting like that and I might help her," Mrs. Greene said.

Three weeks later, Patricia sat on a green plaid blanket at Middleton Place, listening to the Charleston Symphony Orchestra play Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks." Overhead, the first firework unfolded until it filled the sky like a burning green dandelion. Fireworks always moved Patricia. It took so much time and effort to get them right and they were over so quickly and could only be enjoyed by such a small number of people.

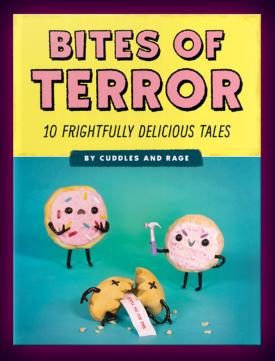
By the light of the fireworks she looked at the women sitting around her: Grace in a lawn chair, eyes closed, listening to the music; Kitty, asleep on her back, plastic wineglass tipping dangerously in one hand; Maryellen in her overalls, legs stretched out in front of her, taking in Charleston's finest; and Slick, legs tucked beneath her, head cocked, listening to the music like it was homework.

Patricia realized that for four years, these were the women she'd seen every month. She'd talked to them about her marriage, and her children, and gotten frustrated with them, and argued with them, and seen all of them cry at some point, and somewhere along the line, among all the slaughtered coeds, and shocking small-town secrets, and missing children, and true accounts of the cases that changed America forever, she'd learned two things: they were all in this together, and if their husbands ever took out a life insurance policy on them they were in trouble.

You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *THE SOUTHERN BOOK CLUB'S GUIDE TO SLAYING VAMPIRES* by Grady Hendrix. To continue reading, you can find the book at the following retailers or your local library:

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"A genre blend carefully considered, and seemingly designed for the movies weirdos that skulk the darkest corners of eBay on the hunt for out-of-print DVDs and even the more sordid VHS. It deals in the grim of humanity but never loses itself to its misery."

-Film School Rejects

"Funny and inventive." *—Free Lance-Star*

"An absolute blast for those of us with very specific sensibilities . . . every page is clever and appealing, and every story is worth its salt." *—Forever Young Adult*

Tuck into these darkly funny horror stories served as an utterly unforgettable graphic novel of hand-sculpted dioramas.

The Cake Creeper cordially invites you to a delicious and diabolical feast . . . where he'll serve you a slice of tasty terror. Enter the world of *Bites of Terror*, a gleefully macabre anthology of cautionary tales. Meet an ice-cream cone who regrets a wish granted by a sinister salesman, a quarantined strawberry trying to escape a deathly mold outbreak, and a widowed watermelon dying to regrow her husband from a seed. In the tradition of *Tales from the Crypt* and other classic horror comics, *Bites of Terror* presents a tasty combination of horror and humor that reflects the human condition.

CUDDLES AND RAGE—aka Liz and Jimmy Reed—are the creators of a world of disturbingly cute stories. Their original webcomic featuring handmade dioramas of anthropomorphic foods has expanded into books, animation, and product design. Their clients include Netflix, HarperCollins, TLC, and the Science Channel. They live and work in the DC area.

BITES OF TERROR

10 FRIGHTFULLY DELICIOUS TALES

BY CUDDLES AND RAGE



FOREWORD

"How do you guys do it?"

That was the first question I asked Liz and Jimmy Reed about their work. I wasn't talking about the astonishing world building they've done as Cuddles and Rage, a brilliant storytelling duo that examines the human condition through stories about anthropomorphic cupcakes, veggies, and snacks who live rich, full, hilarious, and often relatable lives. I wasn't asking about their photography, which has a clean, retro vibe that captures the eye and the imagination. The biggest mystery of Liz and Jimmy's work isn't the way they create eerily human personalities for their characters, nor is it the jaw-dropping amount of detail in their scenes. It's their collaborative process, their individual talents combining seamlessly to create a world that feels fully realized.

After meeting them at a film festival and then following them on Instagram, watching their short films on YouTube, and purchasing their artwork, which adorn several spots in my house, I'm delighted that they're bringing their Richard Scarry—esque "foodiverse" to *Bites of Terror*, a horror anthology that serves as the perfect banquet for their particular brand of adorable and delicious mayhem.

An arcane but affable host who tells cautionary tales with gruesome plot twists is a tradition practically as old as eating itself, and with *Bites of Terror* these creators earn a spot in a storytelling continuum: Aesop, the Brothers Grimm, Rod Serling, and Cuddles and Rage. What's more, this particular endeavor falls into an uncanny space all its own: horror stories filled with the kind of existential dread that adults will relate to in an adorable, kid-friendly package.

"How do you guys do it?" I'm not sure they ever gave me a real answer, perhaps because it's a hopeless question. Their creative process is uniquely their own; one might as well ask a master baker how they've executed the perfect dessert. Liz and Jimmy operate intuitively as one unit, and it's as rare as it is amazing to behold. And maybe that's all we need to know. We needn't concern ourselves with how the anthropomorphic donuts (and cakes and fruits and veggies) get made; they exist and we're lucky to have them. Knowing too much about the process might diminish the magic—and the magic in these pages is something to be treasured, respected, and preserved.

> **PHIL NOBILE JR.** Editor in Chief, *Fangoria* magazine

Greetings, my crumby friends! I am the Cake Creeper.





STARTERS







You have quite the artifact as well. Your candle intrigues me. I sense that it is extraordinarily special.

It is. I've had it since my first birthday.

Are they

valuable?

That's incredible! So what's

with these items here?

As you can see, Eyevon and I have quite the affinity for unique artifacts. Our years of searching have yielded this magnificent collection.



Oh yes, but not in material terms. You see, every object has a history, and each one remembers everything that happens to it. When I place the item in my cauldron, its story will come to life for us to devour. Eyevon and I spend many nights savoring these flavorful tales.

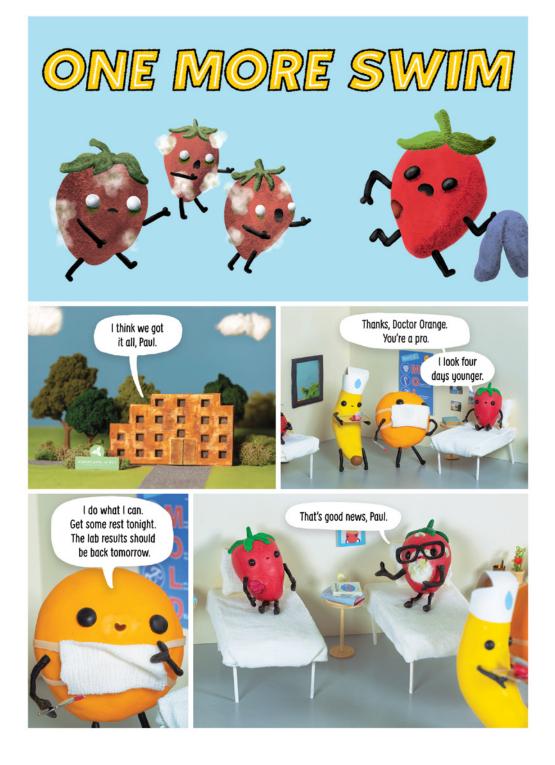
Squeak!

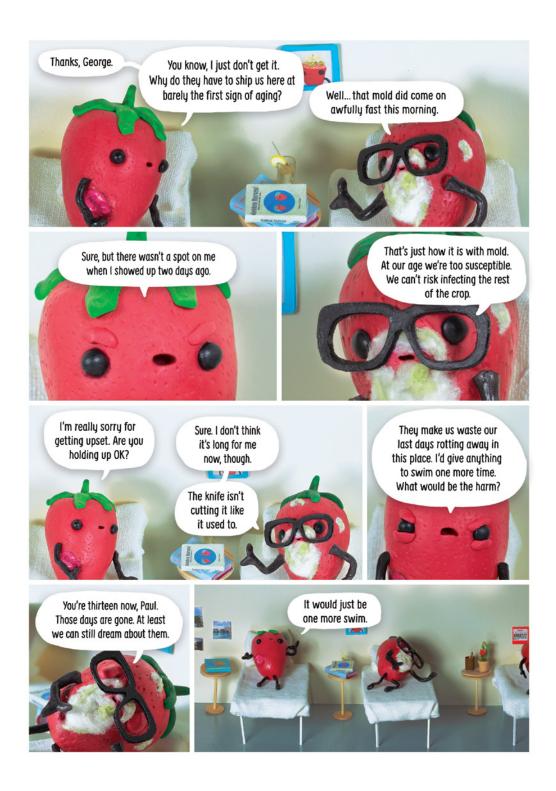
I curated this collection of ingredients for an unusual original recipe. When combined together, they will bring to life something...

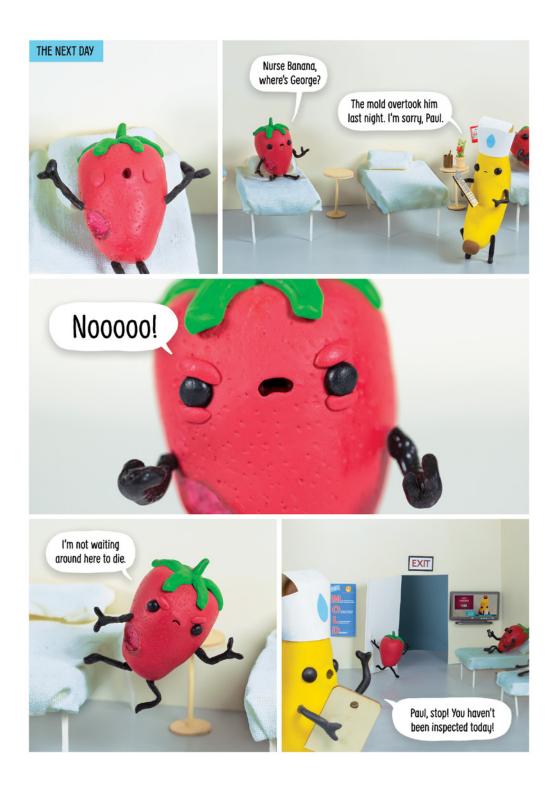


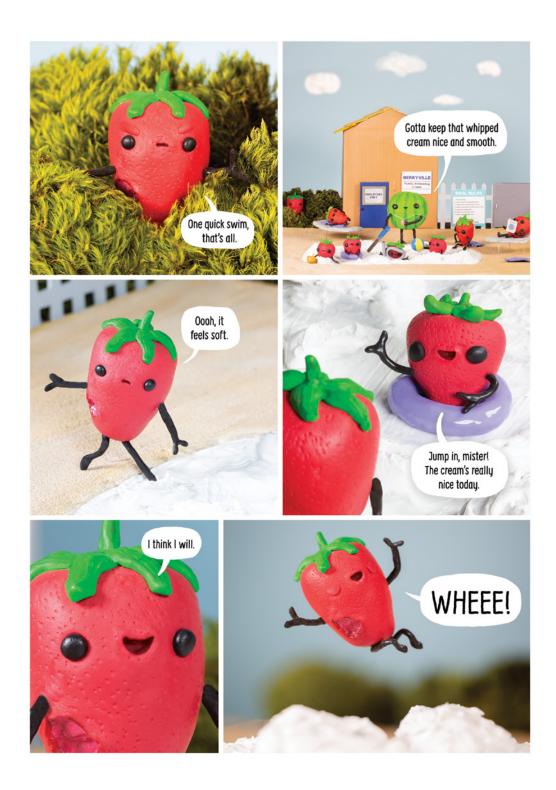


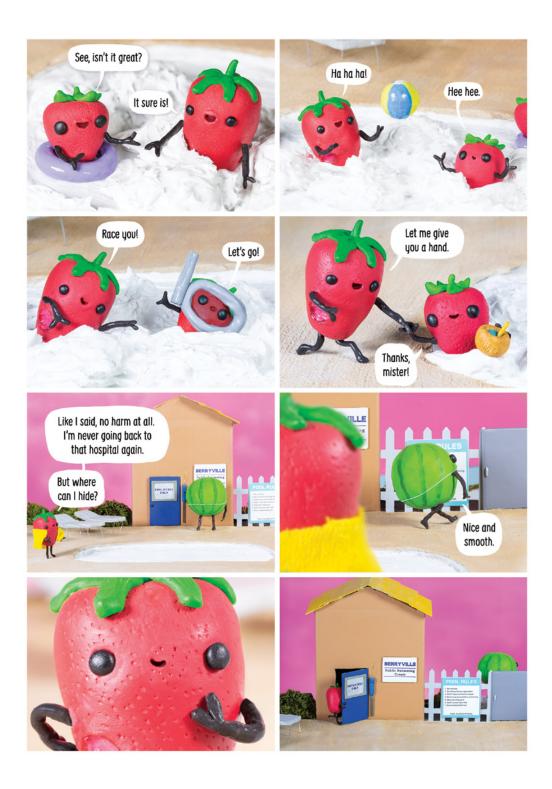


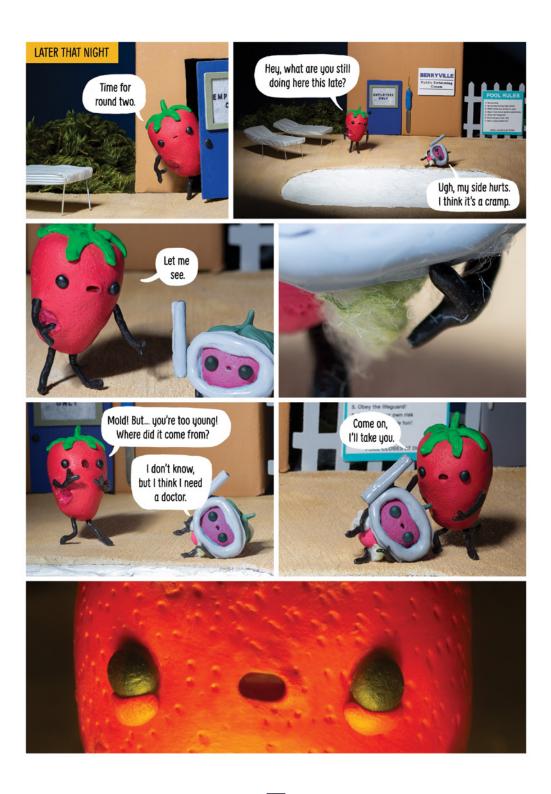


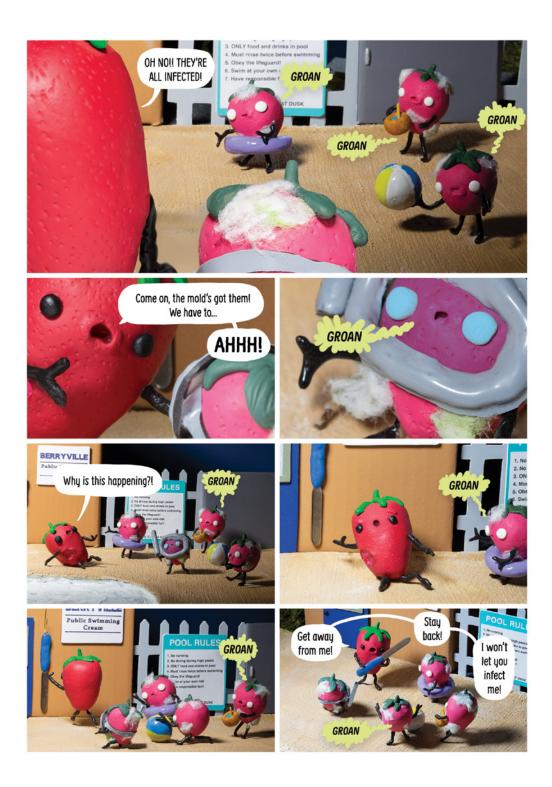




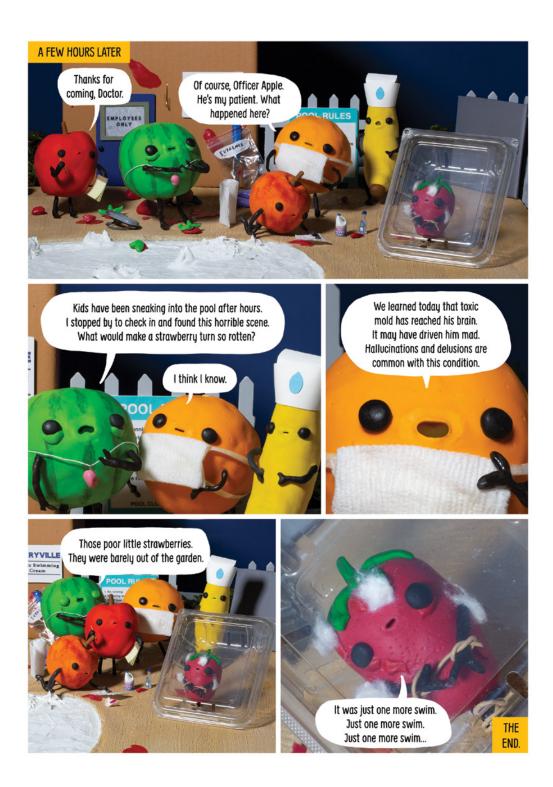












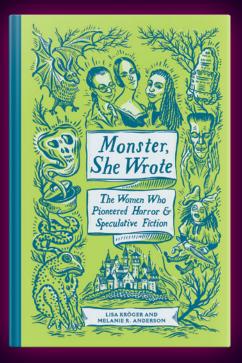


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A 2019 BRAM STOKER AWARD® NOMINEE A 2019 *BOOKLIST* EDITORS' CHOICE IN ARTS AND LITERATURE

"I was elated when *Monster, She Wrote* arrived in my mailbox. It is a book I have been waiting to read for a long time . . . Lisa Kröger and Melanie R. Anderson deserve a standing ovation."

—Danielle Trussoni for the New York Times Book Review

"Inspired not only in the way it explores what the off-kilter, the monstrous and the half-known has meant to women for centuries but also in how it illuminates the often unusual lives of the women who crafted these dark worlds."

-BookPage

"Your necronomicon for all women writing horror."

—Book Riot

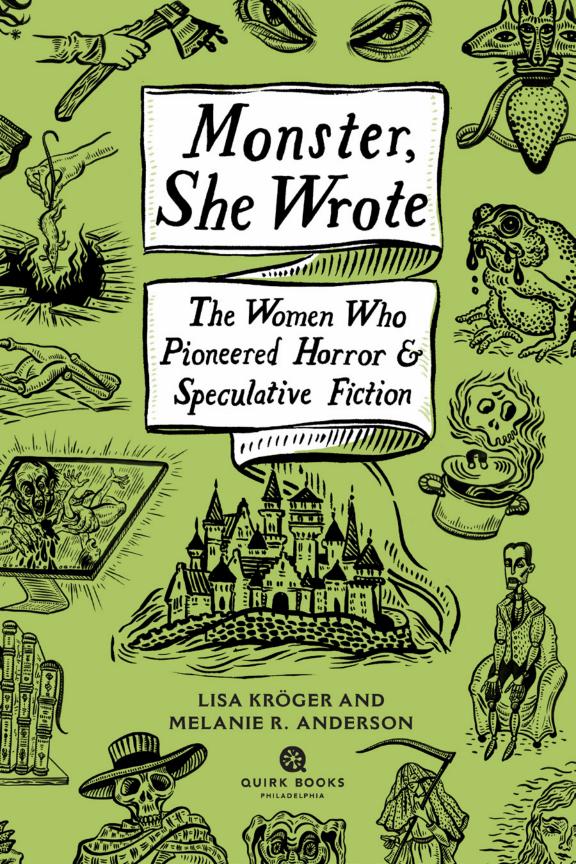
Meet the women writers who defied convention to craft some of literature's strangest tales, from *Frankenstein* to *The Haunting of Hill House* and beyond.

Frankenstein was just the beginning: horror stories and other weird fiction wouldn't exist without the women who created it. From Gothic ghost stories to psychological horror to science fiction, women have been primary architects of speculative literature of all sorts. And their own life stories are as intriguing as their fiction. Everyone knows about Mary Shelley, creator of Frankenstein, who was rumored to keep her late husband's heart in her desk drawer. But have you heard of Margaret "Mad Madge" Cavendish, who wrote a science-fiction epic 150 years earlier (and liked to wear topless gowns to the theater)? If you know the astounding work of Shirley Jackson, whose novel The Haunting of Hill House was reinvented as a Netflix series, then try the psychological hauntings of Violet Paget, who was openly involved in long-term romantic relationships with women in the Victorian era. You'll meet celebrated icons (Ann Radcliffe, V. C. Andrews), forgotten wordsmiths (Eli Colter, Ruby Jean Jensen), and today's vanguard (Helen Oyeyemi). Curated reading lists point you to their most spine-chilling tales.

Part biography, part reader's guide, the engaging write-ups and detailed reading lists will introduce you to more than a hundred authors and over two hundred of their mysterious and spooky novels, novellas, and stories.

LISA KRÖGER holds a PhD in English. Her short fiction has appeared in *Cemetery Dance* magazine and *Lost Highways: Dark Fictions from the Road.* She's an adjunct instructor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi, Gulf Coast. She co-hosts the Know Fear Podcast.

MELANIE R. ANDERSON is an assistant professor of English at Delta State University in Cleveland, MS. Her book *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* was a winner of the 2014 South Central MLA Book Prize. She cohosts the Know Fear Podcast.



Introduction 6

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 De-Connick 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.

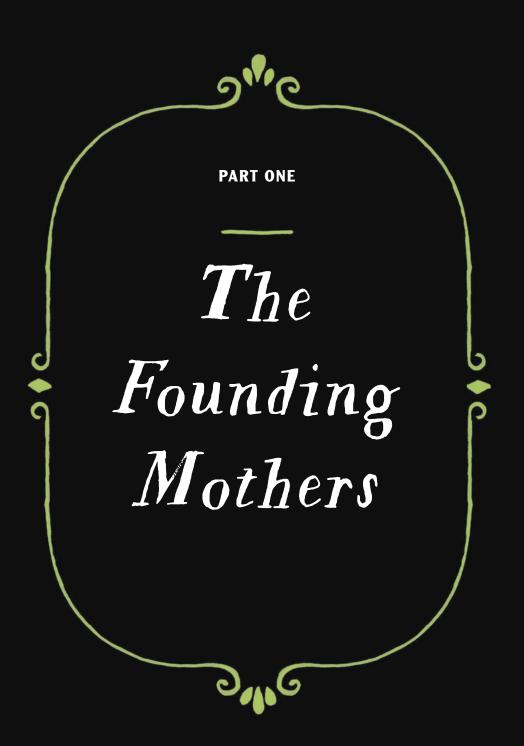
The writers you'll meet in *Monster, She Wrote* are all rule breakers. And here's the funny thing: society doesn't always pay attention to what's happening over there on the edges. So while society was ignoring them, they were taking up their pens. While everyone else has been doing their own thing, 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.







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 Kardashian 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 Des-

cartes, 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 Descrip*-



tion 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 Blondeville*, 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: loooooooooong). 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 popular) 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.

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.

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! You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *MONSTER, SHE WROTE* by Lisa Kröger and Melanie R. Anderson. To continue reading, you can find the book at the following retailers or your local library:

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