

# **THE FRIGHTENERS: WHY WE LOVE MONSTERS, GHOSTS, DEATH AND GORE (2018) BY PETER LAWS**

Review by Rowan Bowman

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**Laws, Peter. *The Frighteners*. Icon Books Ltd, 2018. 320pp.**

Peter Laws is a regular contributor and reviewer for the *Fortean Times* and writes *The Frighteners* from the perspective of a practising Baptist minister coming to terms with his own macabre obsessions in an interesting autobiographical account of the struggle between his Christian beliefs and his fascination with the profane. The shame attached to indulging in an interest in the macabre has been recognised since Horace Walpole first denied his authorship of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), written in an age where absence of proof was rapidly becoming evidence of non-existence and the thrills of brushing against the unknown were demoted from fact to fiction. The Enlightenment gave us the phenomenon of Horror as a cultural response to the perception of evil and only that essential characteristic, the intrinsic quality of Todorov's "hesitation," can fill the uncertainties of life without belief, so that "we appear to have entered an era that has reintroduced the vocabulary of ghosts and haunting into everyday life" (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren ix).

Laws contends that, while morbid fascination is ostensibly a pejorative term, it can demonstrate an engagement and acceptance of extant trauma and the inevitability of death itself. While not referring to much of the work already done in this area, Laws's contribution provides evidence that, rather than dying with Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) which Fred Botting suggests rendered Horror incapable "of expelling evil," the Gothic and Horror live on as a powerful force within society (*Gothic* 177). Thus *The Frighteners* catalogues the ways in which modern society has embraced Horror tropes such as werewolves, vampires, and zombies, transmogrifying them into a transgressive, but ultimately liberating sub-culture for self-identifying 'weirdos' across the globe.

From the beginning Laws describes his experiences with the Horror industry's more commercial side, participating in Live Action Role Play (LARP) and giving accounts of side-shows etcetera, using these examples to suggest that "morbid interest is a natural, even *desirable* human behaviour" (20). He evidently relishes the real-life encounters which expose the apparent contradiction between his Christian belief and this culture, the book is peppered with examples of mainstream responses to his ghoulish eccentricities: "I've had the *you're-a-bit-kooky* glance a fair bit because I've loved creepy and macabre things [...] my whole life" (3, emphasis original). The anecdotes continue with more pertinence to his underlying argument throughout the book and make *The Frighteners* an informative introductory read for those unfamiliar with various Horror-

themed subcultures. Laws discusses current paranormal and Horror-related commercial phenomena, making the case that the large reduction of actual violence within society directly corresponds to the increase in recreational, fictional violence, a “channelling of dark desires” (35). Laws cites Stephen Pinkler’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2012) and Johan Norberg’s *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* (2017) suggesting that if our species had continued with its initial violent death rate we would have suffered two billion such deaths during the twentieth century “rather than the 100 million we actually saw” and that our perception of loss through conflict belies the rapid decline in violent death (33). He proposes that seeking out the macabre and horrific for pleasure is an evolutionary response rather than an abnormality, and that, as Stephen Nachmanovitch suggests, creative free-play is “an antidote to destruction” (*Free Play* 182).

Laws briefly touches on the psychology involved in feeling emotional reward for exposure to fictional fear and revulsion. He discusses the functioning of the amygdala (the organ in the brain which deals at an immediate subconscious level with social information and environmental stimuli) in an accessible, though basic, manner. These widely held theories suggest we deliberately seek to trigger and practise inherent instinctive behaviour by exposing ourselves to pretend horror which is processed by the amygdala as extant danger, thus allowing its safe exploration. Some of the examples Laws presents are disturbing, such as a brief exploration of Crush Videos, which come with appropriate warnings (52-55). Such fetishes are not fiction, as the real event is filmed, but their existence illustrates the common desire to experience horror at a safe distance. Laws suggests that we benefit from seeing the weakness in others and that we derive “positive feelings” from “morbid entertainment” (59), hence the popularity of the ‘Final Girl’ trope amongst young women (65-67), although he does not go on to link the empathy necessary for affective horror in books and films with the personal experience through free-play and role-playing.

Laws discusses changing attitudes to death and the way in which health concerns and increasing affluence have “wiped [mortality] from public view” (84), leading to a general lack of conversations relating to this inevitable part of life, proposing that crime dramas, Horror movies, and Hallowe’en are “simulations” of death that create a space in which to express concerns and discuss the taboo (86). He relates a fascinating anecdote about a visit to a funeral home as part of his day-job, to see a body prepared for burial, and goes on to consider the comfort of both belief in the afterlife and the resurgent pagan desire for corporeal recycling, each establishing a premise in the practitioner that death is merely a transition from one state to another. Even without this sort of belief, Laws suggests that “morbid culture persists” because we gain reassurance from seeing others’ death, presumably because familiarity reduces the fear of the unknown (92). Laws also investigates ‘killer culture,’ the obsessive collecting of memorabilia connected to violent death, including the “murderabilia” market for items such as Charles Manson’s hair (128). Laws cites examples of famous killers who collected mementos of their victims and dismisses the parallels between this and “murderabilia”: murderers wish to remember their exploits, collectors neither condone nor celebrate their crimes, but rather behave like accumulators of religious relics, either as a protective talisman, a desire to connect in some way with the previous owner, or a need to make sense of violence through curation (130-55). Laws further discusses attempts to humanise killers,

though rather than an empathy with these, he suggests a “more complex dissociation” between the killer and their deeds (138).

Laws brings zombies into this conversation, citing his personal experience of LARPing and special interest conventions. He tracks their provenance from Africa, through Haitian Voodoo and into fiction via the efforts of the writer William Seabrook in the 1920's (106-107) and then into contemporary culture through George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). He offers a brief description of the principles of creating a real zombie through drugs and suggests that the depiction of these creatures, originating in “largely uncharted” African culture, changed over time to become subsumed into a Science Fiction of infection and desperation, reflecting our subservience to “multinational corporations” (121). Laws suggests this shift from supernatural to Science Fiction fits “particularly well with modern belief systems” and that the zombie-apocalypse allows us to reconnoitre a life more “epic” (114, 115).

Laws again uses personal experience and investigations to discuss the cultural interest in werewolves. He gives a brief history of lycanthropy, including “clinical lycanthropy” which acknowledges that an individual may believe they have become an animal, originally seen as a curse, but now a “welcome blessing” (167, 170). This leads on to furry fandom, and an excursion into the conventions surrounding the desire to perform as an [anthropomorphised] non-human animal ‘fursona,’ enabling social fantasies that endow a “liberating confidence-boost” (178). Laws also discusses those driven to pretend to be vampires, and the swing from a fearful abhorrence to the sexualisation and romanticism currently associated with supernatural blood-suckers. Other writers, for example Botting in *Gothic* (1995), cover this argument in greater depth, however Laws has interviewed practising “Sanguinarian vampires” and his accounts are directly from under the coffin lid, rather than theoretical (185). The final section deals with demonic possession and the recent escalation in requests for exorcism (189). Laws suggests some claims of possession are a way, through exorcism, to be forgiven and readmitted into society (191). He concludes that self-identified “inner duality,” whether through possession, adopting a fursona, sanguinarism, or lycanthropy, can “become a key step in finding wholeness” (193).

Laws discusses the value of play quite late in the volume, citing its therapeutic use with children after the horror of the 9/11 attacks. However, as violent play is not exclusive to traumatised children, Laws suggests that the dopamine reward the brain experiences from novelty is enhanced when it includes fear, explaining the popularity of children's books with gory details. This developmental reward for memorable novelty is accompanied by a desire to repeat exposure to scary fantasies until the fear is “identified” and explored “in a relatively safe environment” (209). Laws contends that stereotyping is important in such stories, providing a framework in which to develop a moral code, touching upon the significance of fairy tales told in the original and uncensored versions, proposing that they can give children a reassuring sense of empowerment (215). This is again covered at an introductory level; the topic of fairy tales is widely written about elsewhere, for example Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1991). Laws suggests that adult “morbid interest” might be “simple nostalgia” for the intensity of

the fear we feel as children (125-126).

Laws also examines the rising cultural popularity of ghost hunts, again using personal investigative experience to inform his conclusions. Until very recently ghost-sightings were considered to be warnings or bad omens signifying the potentially catastrophic failure of ritual (239-241), and Laws points to the changing attitudes which mean that funeral rites now simply “keep the dead [in our hearts]” whereas in the past they were often to “keep them *in their coffins*” (242). Laws discusses the decline in religious beliefs, but suggests that the increasing popularity of paranormal investigations is due to a combination of cheap, harmless entertainment and – interestingly – an increasing incidence of “strange and anomalous experiences” which drive curiosity in the paranormal (Alan Murdie, *Chair of The Ghost Club*, in interview, quoted 252). Laws confesses that even though he sometimes experiences fear at the thought of encountering ghosts, the fear of “death without an afterlife” scares him far more (258). This Christian approach to ghosts is supplemented by an exploration of crypt-art, the decorative display of dismembered skeletons, as a Catholic endorsement of ghoulish delight. Laws returns to the perceived dichotomy between his religion and his morbid fascination with the Horror sub-culture, explaining that he came to religion through fearful realisation that “God might be the only truly effective answer to evil,” an epiphany he attributes to watching *The Exorcist* (1973) in his teens (270). He mentions that Tunisia banned this film on the grounds that it “presented ‘unjustified’ propaganda in favour of Christianity” and suggests that Horror movies are “parables” affirming that there is life after death (272-274). His consumption of Horror and his Christianity stem from the same fear, therefore he concludes that there is “little wisdom in denying the dark” (280).

*The Frighteners* serves as an excellent introduction to the modern popular consumption of Horror, gore, and the supernatural, using a myriad of examples from the author’s life, including extensive interviews with practitioners of the macabre and an overview of the Horror industry. Rather than an academic point of view, ultimately this work presents a Christian viewpoint on the Horror tropes within our society and offers comfort for followers of the Christian religion who feel conflicted by their interest in the paranormal and horrific. Those seeking a less partisan approach might also consider reading *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* by Noël Carroll (Routledge, 1990). *The Frighteners* offers an accessible and enjoyable excursion into this subculture and provides many avenues for further exploration.

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**BIONOTE**

Based in England, **Rowan Bowman** has a PhD in Creative Writing. Her research interests include spectral landscapes, method writing, Horror, and all things cryptoscatological. She has written one novel, *Checkmate* (Snowbooks 2015), and has had several short stories published. Her ghost story, "The Beast of Blanchland," won TheGhostStory.com competition in summer 2018.