

WHO'S AFRAID OF NEW ENGLAND? EVERYONE.

Experts and authors explain our
regional love of the macabre

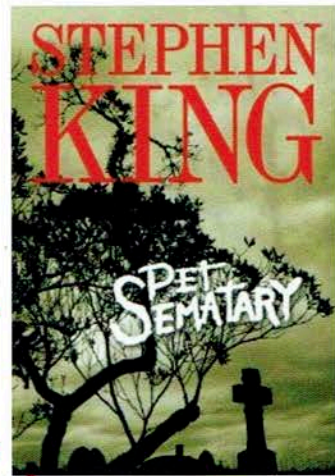
BY TOM SOBOLESKI

"Monsters are real, and ghosts are real, too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win." So says New England's own master of ghoulish tales, Stephen King.

Full of murky bogs and hazy mists, mysterious disappearances, untold haunted cemeteries and foreboding old edifices, New England is a predominant setting for depraved tales that can frighten the most grounded soul. What lies beneath our charming veneer that scares us? Are we steeped with the lore of ancestral perversions that provide never-ending fodder for imaginative storytellers? Do ancient evils truly inhabit our midst?

The Oxford American Dictionary defines horror as a painful feeling of loathing and fear. If something causes pain and fear, why are horror stories and movies so popular? Some analysts contend that horror is a magnetic lure—an antidote to fear—with psychologically cleansing properties.

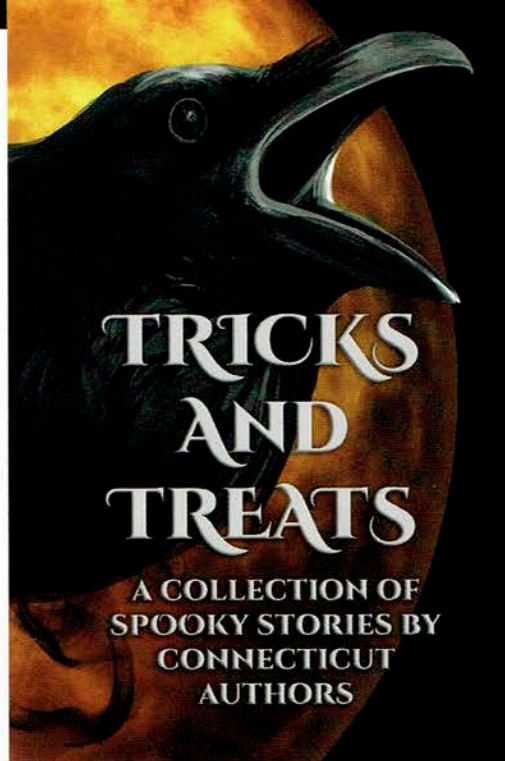
From Nathaniel Hawthorne's early Gothic prose, to H.P. Lovecraft's twisted tales of ghastly creatures obliterating coastal villages, to Stephen King's troubled psychotics in contemporary Maine, New England has been plentiful with writers only too willing to satisfy macabre cravings. Lovecraft, who Stephen King called "the twentieth century's greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale", is perhaps the mentor-in-spirit of today's peddlers of fright. A native of Providence, Rhode Island, Lovecraft made this region the setting for most of his wild imaginings: horrific monsters and not-of-this-world forces dooming humanity.



A Breeding Ground of Fear

Contemporary authors of horror abound in the region—many are in Connecticut—and all agree that our history and environment provide ample stimuli for the genre. Elizabeth Brundage, whose current book, *All Things Cease to Appear*, was called a complex thriller with "impeccable writing" by the *New York Times*, points out that nearly every town in New England has "archaic structures" camouflaged by decades of untrimmed shrubbery, "many with dark windows and crooked shutters" that "inspire the darkest of possibilities."

We've seen them and their "creeping shadows" many times,



she says, "yet we are newly intrigued each time, open to the possibility that there are things out there that we cannot see or explain—demonic presences, ghosts, aliens—that somehow have the power to control us, to capture us, to destroy us."

Connecticut native Stacey Longo, author of several books and short stories full of bad occurrences, suggests that our regional mindset primes the pump. "New England's temperament is one of suspicion," Longo says. "We're a society comprised of small towns that like to keep to ourselves and are wary of outsiders. We New Englanders are often shadowy, cold, and a bit dreary ourselves, aren't we?"

If our personalities and old houses don't supply enough fear fuel, there're plenty more traits stoking those disposed to dread. "The New England landscape lends itself to the thought of scary," says Connecticut horror writer Kristi Petersen Schoonover. "We have evergreen woods that are quite frightening even during the day. We have caves, mountains, and rocky shorelines that are practically unequaled in their creepy factor."

Schoonover, a member of the New England Horror Writers Association and a former Norman Mailer writer's scholar, also cites our climate as a factor. "Our weather can be really dreary, especially in fall and winter when it's damp and cold. There's something to be said for the damp and the cold because it seeps into your bones. If you stay on the coast and there are high winds at night, there's this high pitched moaning. It's almost like screaming."

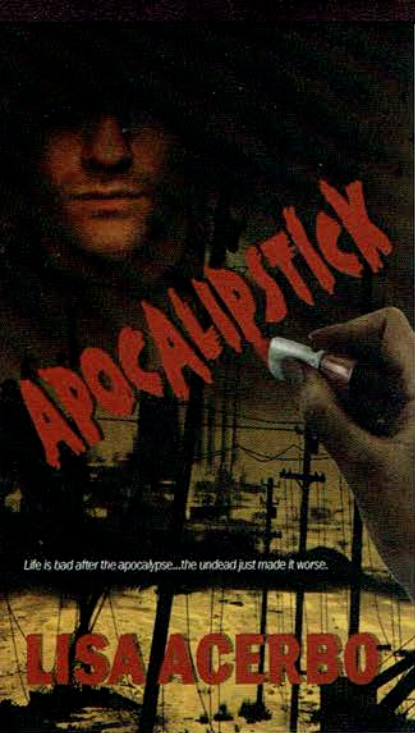
It can sound like shrieking all night, she says. "It's terrifying."

Stephen King captures this phenomenon in his book, *Pet Semetary*: "The feeling had risen in her the way a wind rises—an early stirring of the grasses, hardly noticed; then the air begins to move faster and harder, and there is no calm left; then the gusts become hard enough to make eerie screaming noises around the eaves."

The Connecticut Vampire Scare
Legends handed down through generations sink deep into the recesses of our regional psyche, providing yet more fodder for fans of the twisted. Lisa Acerbo, another

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plagued the family.”

Two symptoms of tuberculosis are coughing up blood and the body’s wasting away. The disease was not understood in the 18th century, so when someone had it, families often thought it was a recently deceased relative rising from the grave to feed on them. One remedy was to exhume the body and, among other rituals, remove the heart and burn it, thinking this would break the spell.

Acerbo’s book, *Apocalipstick*, draws from this dark period.

The demographics of New England also predispose it to be a breeding ground for diabolic imaginings. James Berger, a senior lecturer in English and American Studies at Yale, suggests its roots are deep. “Early British settlement of the area,” he says, “and their sense of the spiritual/demonic aspects of the wilderness,” along with “the popularity of the Gothic genres in late 18th century and early 19th century,” were precursors to today’s plots.

Schoonover adds that immigrants are still weaving their old legends into the mosaic of the region. “They settle here and add their own spin with the stories they bring from their own countries,” she says. “That creates this rich storytelling atmosphere.”



Fright Has Might

So what is the allure of heart-pounding, breath-stopping fear? Some theories suggest that the macabre not only has an irresistible allure, but can also be redemptive. Dr. Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University, wrote for

WebMD: “There’s a long history of people being intensely curious about the ‘dark side’ and trying to make sense of it. Through movies, we’re able to see horror in front of our eyes, and some people are extremely fascinated by it.”

Schoonover echoes that belief. “I think people have a fascination for both the unknown and for things that can potentially hurt them,” she says. “And I think that horror gives a safe distance so they can enjoy staring at that thing that terrifies them, but it’s at a safe distance. It’s not really in their world; it’s not really going to threaten them.”

Could there be a redeeming component to horror? Margee Kerr, a PhD who specializes in fear and is an adjunct professor at the University of Pittsburg, told *Coastal Connecticut* magazine, “There’s also the psychological component. We have fun doing these scary things because it leaves us feeling really confident in ourselves, because we’ve done something challenging and we survived. So that is going to make us feel like pretty badass, even though we know it’s fake.”

Our region’s output of fear-inducing books and movies shows no sign of slowing down. The legacy of Poe and Lovecraft continued through the 20th century with Arthur Miller (*The Crucible*) and Charles Grant, who placed many of his stories in the fictitious Connecticut town of Oxrun Station. Grant was praised by Stephen King as “the premier horror writer of his or any generation.” Today, Connecticut natives Schoonover, Longo and Acerbo are just a few carrying the torch. Due out this fall, *Tricks and Treats: A Collection of Spooky Stories by Connecticut Authors* is edited by Longo and includes tales by her and Schoonover.

Prose holds no lock on the genre. Connecticut was the filming location for such classics as the 2005 remake of *War of the Worlds*, the ghost fantasy *Beetlejuice*, and the satirical thriller *The Stepford Wives*.

One final explanation for why horror’s temptation shows no sign of abating: after centuries of dread, it may be baked into us. As H.P. Lovecraft wrote in his classic story, *The Dunwich Horror*: “Perhaps one reason is that the natives are now repellently decadent, having gone far along the path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters.”

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