REVIEWS/RESENHAS

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Sears, John. *Stephen King's Gothic*, U of Wales P, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-7083-2402-8

by Natasha Rebry

In *Stephen King's Gothic* John Sears examines the Gothic underpinnings of the ubiquitous work of author Stephen King via a broad sample of King's works, ranging from his earliest writings to some of his most recent novels, stories, criticism, and interviews. Sears offers an insightful and nuanced analysis of how King's narratives both speak to and work against major Gothic writings, traditions, and themes such as repetition, doubling and allusion, secrecy and concealment, the writer and the text, uncanny features of time and place, resurrection and its hazards, degeneration, abjection and monstrosity. One of Sears' primary goals is to carve out a previously overlooked *niche* in Gothic criticism for a serious examination of King's fiction, often dismissed by critics as shallow, repetitious, and clichéd. According to Sears, scholarship around King's work fails to acknowledge the sophisticated and reflective ways that King engages with the Gothic, which, for Sears, functions by its recycling and repetition of tropes, characters, and locations. According to Sears, King's fiction offers ways of encountering and understanding some of our deepest fears about life and death, the past and the future, technological change, other people, monsters, ghosts, and the supernatural.

What is particularly interesting about this book is the way in which Sears explores his subject matter, via a deconstructionist unravelling of key concepts and repeated ideas revealed through a close-reading of selections from King's fiction, critical writings and interviews. Sears is concerned with examining how encounters with otherness are confronted, worked through, and recurrently left unresolved in King's work. His primary argument is that such encounters are frequently interrogated through King's preoccupations

with the figure of the writer and the acts and products of writing. These concerns, Sears suggests, are detectable throughout King's oeuvre and are structural to his Gothic vision, which locates texts and their production and consumption "at the moral and political centres of the universes [King] constructs," establishing writing as crucial to his construction of social relations (3). Via close-reading, Sears demonstrates how key words and ideas are embedded throughout King's work, sometimes revealing themselves to the reader in unexpected ways. For example, in his chapter on King's use of Gothic place, Sears takes the word *curlicue*, meaning a "fantastic curl or twist," from Paul Sheldon of *Misery* (1987) and demonstrates how this word and its connotations are woven throughout much of King's fiction, including *Salem's Lot* (1975), *The Shining* (1980), and *Pet Sematary* (1983). Using the definition of "fantastic curl or twist," Sears takes *curlicue* to mean both a turn or twist in writing or a set of spirals or concentric circles in architecture, as in the Micmac burial ground of *Pet Sematary*. Such a reading points to an understanding of King's work as heavily predicated upon intertextual and intratextual relations that create a labyrinthine, "immense and complex textual space" (Sears 2), which for Sears is best understood comprehensively.

Methodologically, Sears formulates this understanding of King's oeuvre in two distinct sections in *Stephen King's Gothic*. As King's body of work is immense, Sears explores only a handful of King's major works while continuously evoking and gesturing towards many others by returning to previous discussions and exploring ideas and tropes in new contexts. In the first section, Sears establishes King's persistent exploration of writers and writing in his fiction and outlines King's relationship with Gothic as well as several other traditions and genres, such as science fiction and the western. Sears begins his examination of King's Gothic with King's first published novel, *Carrie* (1974), which Sears argues establishes King's central concern with the Gothic tradition of writing. He then moves into a discussion of various facets of the writer's experience, such as his relationship with himself, as explored in *The Dark Half* (1989) and "Secret Window, Secret Garden" (1990); his relationship with genre and tradition, as seen in the blending of the Gothic and science fiction in *The Tommyknockers* (1987);

and lastly, his relationship with his reader, as presented in *Misery* (1987). In the second section, Sears explores some of King's major Gothic tropes: temporality and chronological disjunction, place and the location of horror, and the monstrosity of otherness and its tendency to become a feminine 'Other.' The concluding chapter explores King's narrative endings and suggests possible future routes of critical enquiry and engagement with King's works.

Sears' chapter on *Misery* (1987), "*Misery's* Gothic Tropes," stands out as one of his most thought-provoking and engaging discussions on King's fiction. Here, Sears argues that implicit in the novel's understanding of writer's block and the "misery" Paul Sheldon must endure at the hands of his number one fan, Annie Wilkes, is the term "misogyny," evoked by the beginning rhyme of both words. Sears claims that *Misery* is deeply anxious about male fantasies of female creativity and woman's power to create, reading Annie as equally active in the process of writing *Misery's Return*, the novel she forces Sheldon to write. In her active rather than passive reading of the manuscript, Annie constantly offers critical feedback, imposing her "rules of writing" on the writing of *Misery's Return*. Sears argues that Annie must be killed off in order to restore the primacy of the power of creation back to the male author-God in a reversal of Barthes' liberation of the reader. Sears' reading of Wilkes invites a more sympathetic understanding of her character as one who seeks to participate in the construction of creative fiction via the act of "radical reader involvement" with the make-belief worlds the writer creates (124).

In some instances, Sears's tracing of central tropes in King's fiction develops a less cohesive argument. In his discussion on Gothic monstrosity, for example, the discussion of King's gendering of monstrosity gets subsumed by a discussion of the face as a complex signifying system of horror. Sears claims that King genders objects of horror in his fiction in one of two ways: by recurrently feminising these objects for consumption by a male reader (188) or by regendering the feminine as genderless, "as 'it'" (191); yet the examination of gender is occasionally obscured by his discussion of the face, which Sears claims can be used as a signifier to chart representations of monstrosity in King's fiction. Many of the examples Sears uses

to build this analysis move away from a discussion of gender. While Sears does eventually link the two strands of this discussion in his closing examination of the final scene in *Pet Sematary*, the issues surrounding King's gendering of monstrosity are overshadowed by many of the intervening examples focused on interpretations of the face.

In critically examining King's works as Gothic, Sears continues a trend in Gothic criticism that seeks to expand the traditional definition from a genre with certain stock features and characters to a narrative mode "predicated on varieties of repetition, on the recycling of narratives and forms, on revisiting older, pre-existent texts, on labyrinthine texts and spaces, and on the seemingly endless resurrection of an apparently dead, outmoded tradition" (Sears 2). At the same time, however, Sears' understanding of the Gothic can be shifting, reading it sometimes as a mode and other times as a genre. This fluid understanding of the Gothic arises from Sears' premise that the Gothic, by its very nature, resists the classification his discussion of key repetition in King's oeuvre seeks to enact. The tension between Sears' attempt to define King's fiction as Gothic on the one hand, and his claim that the relations between King's oeuvre and conventional understandings of the Gothic "are best understood as mobile, flexible, [and] sometimes contradictory" (5) on the other, demonstrates Sears' contention that mobility is key to both King's fiction and also Gothic itself. While this tension is at times uncomfortable for the reader interested in clear definitions, these critical moves point to the deconstructionist concerns with reading, writing and decoding underlying Sears' text and demonstrate what is at stake in the field of Gothic studies, particularly for readers who are not specialists.

Overall, Sears has produced a sound critical examination of Stephen King's Gothic that is both thoroughly researched and highly readable. His study provides an opening for more serious and comprehensive critical examinations of King's work and suggests that King's fiction is best understood as part of an intricate intra- and inter-textual network. Sears' text is one of the few that offers an extended critical-theoretical engagement with King's writing, and will be of interest to

critics and fans of Gothic fiction alike.

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Beville, Maria. *Gothic-postmodernism: voicing the terrors of postmodernity.* Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2009.

by Marcia Tiemy Morita Kawamoto

Gothic-postmodernism is Maria Beville's proposal of a new literary genre, a hybrid combination of Gothic and Postmodernism. As she writes "the aim of this study is to recognize Gothic-postmodernism as a distinct literary movement and genre in its own right" (61). She reasons the creation of such term since she understands the existence of a "gap in literary criticism" (7), which ignores the presence of the Gothic in Postmodernism. Some critics, such as Fred Botting, argue that since the Gothic has lost its power in the postmodern period, new lighter versions have arisen as the "candygothic." For Beville, these milder versions are not Gothic at all. By counterarguing such discourses and defending that the Gothic has not lost its intensity, she recognizes the rise of a new kind of Gothic, which holds an "even darker vision of contemporary existence" (99), what she calls the Gothic-postmodernism.

The Gothic-postmodernism is not simply the blending of a genre and a period's artistic inclination; she defends the existence of a common feature between the Gothic and the Postmodernism: the sublime effects of terror. This sublime aspect comes from "the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity" (15). In the first part of the book, Beville discusses the theoretical aspects of the term. For the author, terror is an over-used and over-interpreted term in the Gothic, and it has lost the strength of its effects to contemporary audiences (8). Thus, her recuperation of the Gothic in the postmodern period is also a recuperation of the sublime feeling of terror. Moreover, as the Gothic is a literature of terror so is the Gothic-postmodernism. Her explanation is that the terror felt in the French Revolution, when the Gothic genre was born, is quite similar to the terror transmitted by contemporary terrorism and media.