Book Reviews

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*Critical Approaches to Horror Comic Books: Red Ink in the Gutter*, Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, and John Darowski (ed.) (2022), 9781032195704, h/bk, £130.

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This is a welcome attempt to address some gaps in the current growth area of horror comics.

In their introduction, Darowski and Pagnoni Berns define these gaps as a lack of close readings from an interdisciplinary perspective; too great a focus on specific periods, notably the early 1950s, to the detriment of others; and insufficient attention to non-anglophone comics (2). These are laudable, particularly the third aim, which can work to decentre the idea of horror comics as a specifically American thing in a specifically American Cold War chronology. Overall, though, I would have liked a more substantive introduction; I understand the logic of this being a diverse collection, and therefore letting it get on with its work, but I also would have appreciated a more theorized, worked-through introduction that would benefit those coming to this either from outside Horror Studies and/or Comics Studies. Mechanics of both genre and form can be rather unwieldy to the uninitiated.

Rui Lopes opens the book, ironically considering the identified areas of interest, with a chapter on EC and the early 1950s. What we have here is remarkably conventional, engaging with key EC horror comics and the anti-comics campaign in a purely domestic American setting. As a story, this one certainly benefits from international readings (as per Martin [Barker [1984](#CJML_BIB_J_0002)]). The chapter also seems to sit adrift of many of the key arguments in the McCarthyist era – Lopes covers in some detail how comics were caught up in an anti-communist rhetoric but does not engage with the wider scope of the scares of the 1950s, particularly the Lavender Scare, the Kinsey Reports and juvenile delinquency ([Johnson 2006](#CJML_BIB_J_0009); [Reumann 2005](#CJML_BIB_J_0014); [Gilbert 1988](#CJML_BIB_J_0007)). The chapter is therefore successful enough on the terms it sets for itself; for work on EC and the era more generally, though, I would direct attention elsewhere ([Whitted 2019](#CJML_BIB_J_0017); [Kiste Nyberg 1998](#CJML_BIB_J_0011); [Wright 2002](#CJML_BIB_J_0018)).

Henry Kamerling offers a more theoretically rigorous engagement with Man-Thing. In the material covered in the comic, though, it is worth flagging how similar concepts were being discussed elsewhere, particularly *Green Lantern Co-starring Green Arrow*. Kamerling also notes the characterization of Native Americans as ‘Noble Savages’, still a common trope in the 1970s, but in this context it is worth drawing attention both to the wider context of Red Power activism (see e.g. [Shreve 2012](#CJML_BIB_J_0015)) and the Seminole Wars of the nineteenth century, fought in Florida between the Seminole people and the American military; another element to consider is the tremendous success of Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, first published in 1970. Such engagement allows for discussion of both the Vanishing Indian trope and Native American resistance in the context of the comic being discussed here. The consideration of Man-Thing in connection to plant horror is necessary and welcome, and grounds the character theoretically. I would also have liked to have seen the character more grounded in its industrial context (see, for instance, [Goodrum and Smith 2021](#CJML_BIB_J_0008" \o "Goodrum, M. and Smith, P., Printing Terror: American Horror Comics as Cold War Commentary and Critique (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).): 194–95).

Debaditya Mukhopadhyay situates the Indian horror comic, *City of Sorrows*, within the traumatic histories that provide its narrative, visual and symbolic force. Mukhopadhyay’s reading does a very good job of detailing the history with which the comic engages, as well as sketching the religious and folkloric systems that underpin the horror in the comic. In connection to this, Mukhopadhyay shows how discourses of horror in India are transnational and draw on iconic international approaches and characters.

Pagnoni Berns then turns our attention to Spanish horror comics, particularly the Spanish version of *Creepy*, an American comic largely written and drawn, after an initial run by veterans of EC, by Spanish artists. Pagnoni Berns’s analysis focuses on the Spanish run of the comic, some of which was original, and some of which was reprinted from a range of American horror comics. There is, then, a complex process of mediation and remediation at play in this comic; additionally, in Pagnoni Berns’s specific case study on Jack the Ripper, there is also temporal and geographical distance from the Spanish present to enable contemporary commentary. While Pagnoni Berns’s case study promises much, the analysis rather sells it short; with some more careful theorization and working through, this could have been an excellent addition to the book.

Lauren Chochinov opens the section on race and gender in horror comics with her reading of *InSEXts* in the context of the nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality with which it engages. Chochinov skilfully draws together medicalising discourses with their literary counterparts and shows how *InSEXts* is influenced by and also reframes them. The chapter is particularly strong on showing how body horror is used to resist conventional notions of the Male Gaze, offering up instead a vision of Gothic monstrosity firmly connected to a rejection of patriarchal heteronormativity. In its sustained engagement with both the contextual history and the literature of the nineteenth century, especially vampires, the chapter mounts a sophisticated reading of the comic and the work it is doing. Chochinov’s work is an outstanding chapter in this collection.

Tosha Taylor’s chapter mounts a sophisticated reading of *Tomie* by Junji Ito. In the process of reading *Tomie* in the *shojo* tradition, Taylor adds to our understanding of Ito and offers a fascinating analysis of the way the particular *shojo* sits within its context and the functioning of the genre as a whole. Taylor then situates this analysis neatly within theoretical and historical contexts, showing how *Tomie* both draws on and complicates existing understandings. This is another excellent chapter and welcome attention directed to the practices of horror comics outside the usual western spaces.

Blair Davis’s chapter on Lily Renée and the origins of horror comics is an excellent piece of research, pushing awareness of both the role of women and horror comics before EC. The analysis of the narratives and images is convincingly done. I would, however, have liked more of a consideration of why the series ended and greater historicization. Davis draws attention to the imagery borrowed from film, which is welcome, but some consideration of the scholarship on Universal’s *The Wolf Man* (1941) and its sequels would have helped (perhaps Craig Ian Mann’s work [2020] and Sam George and Bill Hughes’s edited collection [2020] were released too late to be considered, but readers interested in this should certainly read them alongside this chapter). Similarly, wider contextualization within the discourses about the role of women in the latter stages of the Second World War would have added significantly to Davis’s argument, given the beginnings of the shift from wartime empowerment to post-war containment. Overall, though, an interesting addition to the book and the scholarship.

Alexandre Desbiens-Brassard and Gabriella Colombo Machado undertake an analysis of Emily Carroll’s work with a specific focus on eating and monstrosity. Their article is compelling, draws on relevant and appropriate theoretical work, and arrives at convincing conclusions. I would, however, have liked to have seen the implications of consumption and gender pushed further, given the prevalent discourses around ideas of gender, food and bodies (I am thinking particularly of Katharina Vester, *A Taste of Power* [2015]). While the authors show how Carroll is reinterpreting and reframing fairy tales, consideration of the purposes of fairy tales, positioned against discourses of containment and/or definition, would have helped to bring out both their arguments and the resonances of Carroll’s work in a deeper and wider contextual sense. As such, this feels like a very good beginning – a platform from which further scholarship can develop.

Anna Marta Marini explores representations of the US–Mexico border as horror through Lang and Lipinski’s *Feeding Ground.* Marini is particularly strong on visual analysis and the coding of horror, showing how colour is used to code of representations of conventional horror, e.g. werewolves, in the same way as horrifying border interactions based on reality. In fact, the analysis of the borderlands as a whole, through comics and actuality, is a real strength of this chapter, with links between the Chupacabra and werewolves made to lived experience and discourse about both the borderlands and immigrant communities. While European in focus, the work would benefit from engagement with Willem de Blécourt’s work ([2015](#CJML_BIB_J_0004)), and interested scholars should also, as with Davis’s chapter, look at [Mann (2020)](#CJML_BIB_J_0013) and [George and Hughes (2020)](#CJML_BIB_J_0006). Overall, though, a welcome addition to the book.

Trevor Snyder opens the third section of the book, on adaptation in horror comics, with his chapter on zombies and vampires in the comic work of George A. Romero. While interesting in its engagement with Romero’s work for DC and Marvel, it reads as under-theorized in frustrating ways (there are only a handful of academic sources in the piece). It is clear from this chapter that there is a transmedia attempt to expand and explore Romero’s narrative universe, but little is done to establish why this is positive or interesting beyond informing the reader that this is the case. Transmedia storytelling is something of a growth area of interest at the moment, given the impact of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and this chapter needs to show far more clearly how it functions within this work and, crucially, what this means for Romero’s narrative universe (for a useful transmedia analysis, see [Flanagan et al. [2017](#CJML_BIB_J_0005)]).

Yelena Novitskaya’s chapter focuses on Nathan Carson and Sam Ford’s adaptation of Algernon Blackwood’s *The Willows*. The introduction clearly sets out adaptation theory and how Carson and Ford’s comic operates within that. As the chapter develops, Novitskaya sets out how the adaptation also draws on other writers, such as HP Lovecraft, to flesh out a narrative and visual world more familiar to even casual readers of Weird fiction. Novitskaya also accounts for other shifts, such as alterations to the central characters, showing how adaptation is contingent on a range of factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the text. This is a neatly argued and well supported chapter that does a lot of good work, considering a range of issues in adaptation and how they are explored in this particular comic.

Andrew Smith looks at Gou Tanabe’s manga adaptations of HP Lovecraft and posits interesting questions about how adaptations can handle Lovecraft’s widely attested racism (while not necessarily Smith’s fault, here is another example of the poor copy editing of this book – the title lists the manga artist as Tanabe Gou). In a fascinating twist, Smith shows how Tanabe does not engage with Lovecraft’s problematic politics because some of the Nativist ideas fit quite neatly with Japanese nationalism. In considering Tanabe’s practice of literal adaptation, and the wider past and present popularity of Lovecraft in Japan, Smith is able to comment on the manga in question, Lovecraft and Japanese politics – with equally impressive insight across all three. This is definitely one of the best chapters in the book.

John Darowski approaches Marvel’s Punisher as a horror character. Darowski’s account is rooted in the idea of shifts to the idea of heroes and monsters amid the fallout of Watergate and Vietnam, though it would have been helpful to have more of the background of monsters turning monster hunter so it was not presented as an entirely new phenomenon – for instance, Larry Talbot fights Frankenstein’s monster to protect humanity, seemingly at the cost of his own life, in the conclusion of *Frankenstein Meets The Wolf Man* (1943), and even this is some sixty years after Nietzsche’s ruminations on fighting monsters. Some acknowledgement is made of the context that informed the initial creation of the character, though I remain unconvinced that Frank Castle challenges categorization as per Cohen’s Monster Theses (178). When the focus shifts to a post-9/11 context, little is done to connect discourses around masculinity to the 1970s, despite a concerted pushback on feminism in both historical moments; in fact, the section is heavier on narrative than analysis. This means that there is insufficient work done to convince me of the elements of which I am unsure. This, ultimately, is a shame because what could have been an interesting reading is rather underdone.

Marco Favaro’s chapter focuses on Dylan Dog through a Freudian and Jungian perspective. It is, however, as with the previous chapter, rather underdone. Well-established principles are presented as something new and, once the framework of the chapter is established, little is done to build into analytically new territory from there. I would also be interested to know how the series draws on other contemporary texts, given its origins in 1986, the creation of John Constantine in 1985, and the release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in 1984 – especially as the nightmare in Figure 16.2 bears a striking resemblance to Freddy Krueger. Very well, a structure is proposed; what does this mean? The chapter stops, rather than concludes, so the reader is left to fight the monsters of meaning themselves.

Ingrid Butler turns our attention to ‘Kaine: Endorphins – Between Life and Death’, a manga by Kaori Yuki. Her reading of the text and imagery is incisive, though given the mention of both anxieties about technology and *The Sorrows of Werther*, it would have been beneficial to at least acknowledge *Frankenstein* (1818). Similarly, to establish a longer trajectory for anxieties of occult products of mass media technology, Butler could have referred to the wealth of stories of haunted books (see e.g. [Kirk 2016](#CJML_BIB_J_0010)). I thought the elements of sexuality could have been further developed in the analysis; these are rather relegated to the margins and it seems like they deserved a more central role. The chapter is very short compared to the rest of the volume, so more space could have been used for the topic. Overall, a good introduction to what might be an unfamiliar genre for many western readers, with a number of good points – but the whole is in need of further development so as not to leave so many tantalizing dangling threads.

Christina M. Knopf sets out her case very neatly from the beginning, situating Anthony Cleveland and Jef Sadzinski’s *Show’s End* in a long tradition of carnivals and ‘freak shows’. Knopf then works through the comic by positioning it within Foucauldian notions of heterotopia, developing her analysis through consideration of each of the principles in turn. This serves the function of introducing the theory to audiences unaware of it and simultaneously ordering and advancing the analysis. It would have helped, though, to ground this more effectively in historical reality; Knopf gestures to the right things, but it would have been helpful for readers previously unaware of the freak show literature and history to have it pinned down rather more concretely. Rachel Adams’s *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* ([2001](#CJML_BIB_J_0001)) would have been a good point of reference in this regard. Overall, though, a useful chapter.

The book concludes with Annick Pellegrin’s analysis of the Franco-Belgian band dessinée *Zombillénium*. Pellegrin’s chapter uses concepts of capitalist realism and left melancholy to show *Zombillénium*’s approach to critiquing industrial relations. While the analysis shows how these are very much surface-level considerations of the text itself, some useful points are still made. What would have helped this chapter along is a longer-term consideration of the role of the particular horror characters in question. Zombies, for instance, have a long history of mapping out violently enforced hierarchies of race and class, so some incorporation of that would have enriched the chapter (see, e.g. [Luckhurst 2016](#CJML_BIB_J_0012)). Overall, an interesting read, but one that could very easily have been pushed beyond interesting into something more.

Overall, this is an inconsistent volume. There are some very useful and interesting chapters, and some that needed much more work to bring the volume up to a more consistent standard. Copy editing requires attention throughout to eliminate some basic errors. On the whole, this is a welcome addition to horror comics scholarship, pushing it further into international areas beyond the oft-studied markets of United States and Japan. A more substantial editorial introduction was necessary to pull the disparate threads of the book together; while there is a clear structure, divided into subcategories that are relevant and helpful in guiding the reader, the wealth of different approaches and territories under consideration do require a little more work to make the book hang together in the most effective way. Still, in general, I can recommend this collection to scholars of horror generally and to those specifically interested in Comics Studies.

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