



Open Library of Humanities

**Review: Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, eds.  
*Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*  
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019)  
336 pages, ISBN: 9781474440929, £90.00 hbk**

Charlotte Naylor Davis, National Coalition of Independent Scholars, [drcharlottend@gmail.com](mailto:drcharlottend@gmail.com)

---



Maisha L Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes' companion *Twenty-First-Century Gothic* brings together a host of established scholars and newer critical voices in order to explore key ideas and evolving themes in the field. What Wester and Reyes deftly accomplish with this collection of essays is better than a set of definitions through which to analyse twenty-first century Gothic literature: it is a road map and a glossary of terms for the coming century, which shows the analytical reader the cultural framework in which Gothic literature is not only being written but also received. This is a key book for anyone who knows literature and wishes to engage critically with twenty-first century Gothic, but also anyone who is a fan that wants to think a little more deeply (in fact for the fan it is a lovely deep dive into all sorts of wonders).

The collection is divided into four sections, constructed to lead us through the main key forms and also the main issues addressed by twenty-first century Gothic media. These sections are: Updating the Tradition; Contemporary Monsters; Contemporary Subgenres; and Ethnogothic. This opening section centres the new and key movements not just in literary theory, but social and cultural acceptance within which Gothic authors are writing, and in doing so also engages with Gothic readers and writers and the diversity present in the surrounding culture of Gothic. These themes are key because of the 'self-awareness' of the twenty-first century. At the end of 2020 when public discourse around such things as the Black Lives Matter movement and the public debate around the cultural decoration of our landscape have made us all look at our cultural landscape a little differently – this section in particular seems like timely and relevant scholarship: are the statues of our collective history to be seen as monsters or heroes? How do we reckon with this past? This collection shows that Gothic literature, art and material culture still have a place in helping us wrestle with our cultural demons.

The editors have also taken care to ensure diversity of voices from the Gothic community, with representation from women, non-binary people, and those from non-anglophone countries, and those writers are not only writing about the 'diversity' subjects. The editors clearly seek to establish a dialogue around the subject of Gothic literature in the twenty-first century that is as diverse as its source material. The collection then is both speaking about and acting as a disruption, performing this traditional aspect of the Gothic itself.

This first section of the book investigates the way the new landscape of twenty-first century culture brings challenges to the classic idea of the monster. Much of what classic Gothic monsters once represented is now embraced – the outspoken women, homosexual

people, the immigrants – are no longer universally feared. Gothic literature and media, as is explained both in the introduction and in essays throughout, have become self-referential. As the Gothic constructs monsters to help us deal with the darkness and fears within us, contemporary Gothic then has had to adapt monsters such as the vampire because they have become ‘classics’ and cultural icons (104). In fact, where vampires, werewolves and ghosts were once to be feared, especially within a Christian context (as they represented eternal damnation or the beastly desires within), they now hold a very different power and place within culture. One of the most interesting things about fans of Gothic literature in the twentieth century, (but this is most keenly seen in those who have adopted Gothic aesthetics into other areas of their lives), was that it was often the dark, the othered, the monstrous that they were not only attracted to, but identified with. Where once the fan of Gothic literature was like Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey* – fascinated by the scare, the shiver but also repelled by what it displayed – modern fans of the Gothic (film, literature, art) are often as likely to see themselves in the monster, or the othered. Into this then, come the discussions in the excellent chapters on ‘Postcolonial Gothic’ by Sarah Ilott (19–33), then in section 2, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn’s ‘Contemporary Vampires’ (102–116), and Kaja Franck and Sam George’s ‘Werewolves’ (144–159) which give us the sense of this turn: the outcast is now, if not redeemed, understood to be a victim (of the oppressive religious bias, of systemic violence or of heteronormativity) and it is the current culture that has to have a reckoning. The monsters have come to take revenge on that which made them, and whether they even need to be quelled is up for debate. That early question of Mary Shelley’s, who is the monster and who the human, has come to its full reckoning in the twentieth century.

The structure of the book needs to be praised again as the next three sections constantly build on the discussions of the essays in the first. The excellent essay by Ní Fhlainn on the development of the modern vampire makes much more sense having already discussed the difficulties of postfeminist Gothic and its relation to romance (and the awkward morality of books like Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*). Similarly the current fascination with zombies and their change from mindless decaying bodies to things which imbibe and feel, or questions about their being part of society is discussed at length in Reyes’ essay, but has more depth once one can see the line between that change and ‘Neoliberal Gothic’ as exposed in the essay by Linnie Blake (60–71).

Within the section on ‘Contemporary Monsters’ the collection delves into the new places that need to be created to give audiences the true ‘shiver stories’ of Gothic past, or indeed horror of old. In a world where a vampire sparkles and is benign, and

a werewolf is relatable, what is left to be truly scary as a metaphor? Here the chapters on 'Gothic Digital Technologies' by Joseph Crawford (72–87), 'Contemporary Serial Killers' by Bernice Murphy (: 117–130) and Reyes' 'Zombies' (89–101) do this for me. In a world less explicitly religious, the idea of eternal damnation does not represent the vampire any longer, and eternal life seems like a boon – but the constant decay of the zombie is horrific to a society obsessed with beauty and youth. Though I wasn't convinced by Reyes' comment that it would be inevitable someone falls in love with the person that eats your husband's brain (97), the horror of how to deal with those who once committed awful crimes but return to the community is a keen discussion on our personal morality and capacity for forgive. The fear of viruses and our own capacity to create situations in which we unwillingly infect and hurt each other was a little too close comfort in a post Covid-19 world, but Reyes' exploration of the deep issues that have given rise to zombie apocalypse narratives in recent years shows how maybe these fears are not fantastical but sensible. The chill of horror tales told through technologies that we can't control is genuinely palpable in Joseph Crawford's introductory essay – 'Gothic Digital Technologies' (72–87).

The section on subgenres elaborates on how Gothic is as much as a genre is also a mode in which other types of writing operate. The contributors write not only on Gothic literature, but film, TV and digital media, showing the cultural reach of the Gothic tendrils. However, there is no mention of graphic novels or comics which I would have liked to see, especially as writers such as Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore get a few references – the graphic novel medium of storytelling is key to these authors' stylistic development, but also are used to enhance the Gothic nature of texts which are less gothic when in other media. The graphic novel series of Aaronovitch's 'Rivers of London' novels for example leans hard into the Gothic aesthetic in a way that the novels stay within urban fantasy and comedy. Graphic novels and comics, with their close visual and textual relationship are often within Gothic mode and I feel the collection could have benefitted from tackling that type of text.

The editors describe the Gothic as 'a palimpsest with tendrils reaching out into virtually every connected genre and subgenre' (4) and section 3 is the evidence of this. Where Claire Nally's essay on 'Steampunk' (203–217) and Carl Sederholm's essay on 'The New Weird' (161–173) make clear links to the origins of these subgenres within the Gothic, and then explore how they have taken it further (in Steampunk through the extensive material culture and nostalgia for a past that didn't exist; in the New Weird, the embrace of the true strangeness that is a melding between the monstrous

and the human). I found it harder to see the Gothic connections in the discussion of Anya Heise-von der Lippe's essay 'Posthuman Gothic' (218–231). However, this chapter is an excellent investigation into Posthuman texts and film, and discusses how the advances with AI play with the liminal space between human and machine. The chapter also makes clear that humanity and artificiality are bringing new fears to fictions, and provides a useful discussion of liminal spaces (a feature that is clear in all texts discussed in this volume).

The essays in the final section, 'Ethnogothic', investigate what has been inferred from previous chapters, particularly the first chapter in the book on 'Postcolonial Gothic' (19–32): that the Gothic is not only political, but may be more so than other forms of genre fiction. The monstrous or 'other' has always been key to Gothic literature, but here we are confronted with the fact that the political situation of these tales cannot be separated from the images within them. Sarah Ilott's essay concisely shows us how the monstrous in Gothic literature often represented not only fear of the darkness in human hearts but literal darkness of skin, or strangeness of the land that was being colonised. In participating in this 'othering', Gothic literature often took part in the colonisation of thought spaces, but in Postcolonial Gothic the genre is used to 'write back' to the coloniser. The land, the people, and the monsters which once were to be defeated are now able to either take revenge or be deconstructed to show that the horror exists because of violence. This 'writing back' becomes evident in the chapters on 'Aboriginal Gothic' by Katrin Althans and 'South African Gothic' by Rebecca Duncan. These chapters show us how the folk stories of colonised land and peoples can rise up to take revenge, but also confront colonisation. The folk stories mentioned, and the key ideas of how colonised people reassert their power through using the Gothic mode of writing is fascinating. Of particular note is Althans on 'Aboriginal Gothic' (276–288) where she discusses the use of Gothic to find new expression to tales, and law, that is otherwise expressed primarily in an oral culture. The chapter shows how Australian Aboriginal writers are using Gothic, particularly in TV formats, for their own ends, giving a true reality of a postcolonial expression where the tools of colonisers are exploited to educate, and open up a culture but because the writers are in control of the oral traditions nothing is forced from them. It is constructive of a new way forward and a turning of the tide.

Katarzyna Ancuta's chapter 'Asian Gothic' (233–248) provides a different framework of the Gothic. The chapter focusses on ghost stories, and what struck me was the notion that the ghost has a slightly different function outside of a Christian

view of the supernatural. This chapter shows how prevalent our Christian heritage is in much Gothic writing, as no matter how secular we think societies are, the supernatural metaphors we work with are bound into our dominant cultural religious landscape. In Christianity a ghost must be a displaced spirit. Its very existence is a disruption of the norm, and any animalistic spirit is breaking boundaries that classical understanding of Christian world view finds disturbing. But Ancuta describes the difference within Asian religious landscape – especially Buddhism, Taoism – where the ghost or animal spirit is not problematic in itself, rather it is its specific actions, its origin and or its effect that are the issue. The ghost then has much more agency. The ghost may be looking for revenge but the classic Christian ghost tropes of being fixed to a place or only a ‘shade’ of the living person do not hold sway. She also highlights the patriarchal background to many of the tropes that western Gothic film makers are borrowing and how these can be misrepresented. This problem of appropriating stories is also exposed in the chapter ‘Black Diaspora Gothic’ (289–303) by Maisha Wester, which shows how relearning or resurrecting folk monsters can help process the experience of those coming to a new land, where the immigrant is the one being consumed by the new culture rather than the old Gothic fear of the immigrants’ arrival. In the stories under analysis here, classic representations are switched, and we see once again that the Gothic can be used to expose systemic violence by making monsters which cannot be ignored.

This collection is an excellent introduction to so much within contemporary Gothic and it is worth buying for the bibliography and filmography alone. If you need to open up your reading and understanding of how modern social challenges can be tackled within genre fiction then this is an excellent collection to invest in and it will be useful for introductory and graduate courses alike. Reyes and Wester use this collection to set up the terrain for exploration and send you out in to it with just enough knowledge to survive the monsters that await.

---

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

---

