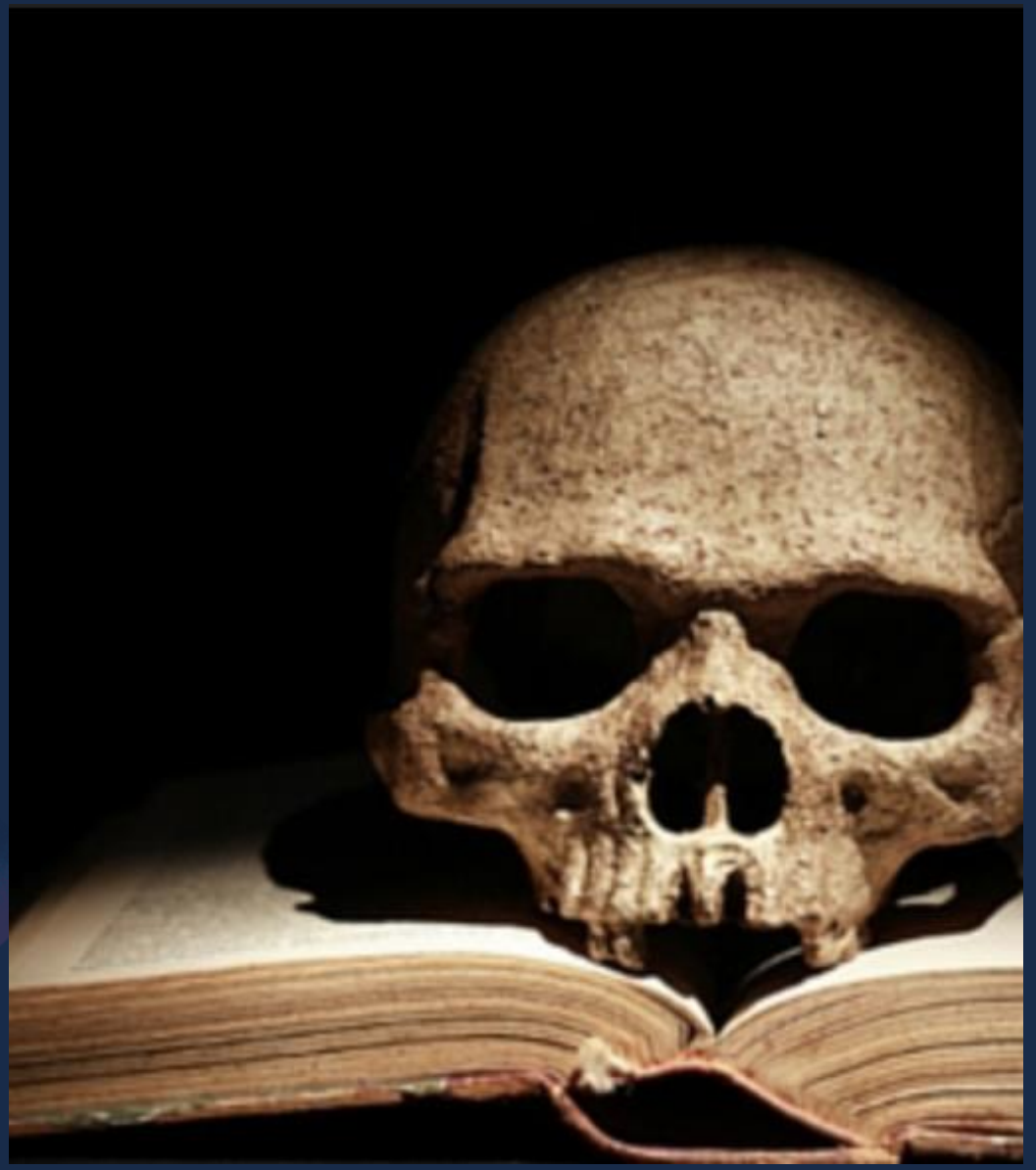
From Whispers to Screams: The Art of Horror

With KC Grifant



A writer is a writer before, as well as after, publication.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WRITERS' CONFERENCE

January 2026

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About KC Grifant

- Award-winning author & editor of numerous books, short stories
- Co-founder of the Horror Writers Association San Diego chapter
- Associate editor at Stars & Sabers Press
- Science Fiction and Fantasy Association (SFWA) mentor
- Instructor: UC San Diego, Reach Your Apex and others
- Speaker, moderator, panelist
- MS in Science Journalism, working professional

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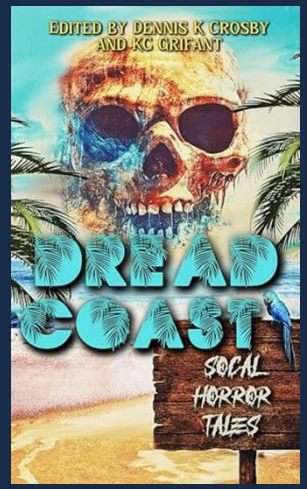

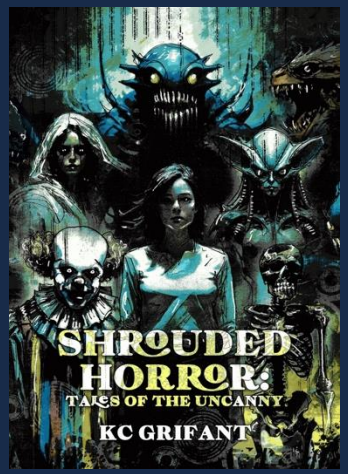

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Overview of Workshop

- Part 1: Getting at the Heart of Horror (w/ writing exercise)
- Part 2: The Power of Monsters (w/ writing exercise)
- Part 3: Infusing Dread (w/ writing exercise)
- Part 4: Popular Subgenres
- Q&A

Follow along!

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1: What Is Horror?

“Romance might promise that love conquers all. Fantasy can claim destiny waits for the worthy. Science fiction imagines better tomorrows. [And] horror says we are vulnerable.

- Award-winning author and editor Eric J. Guignard on genres

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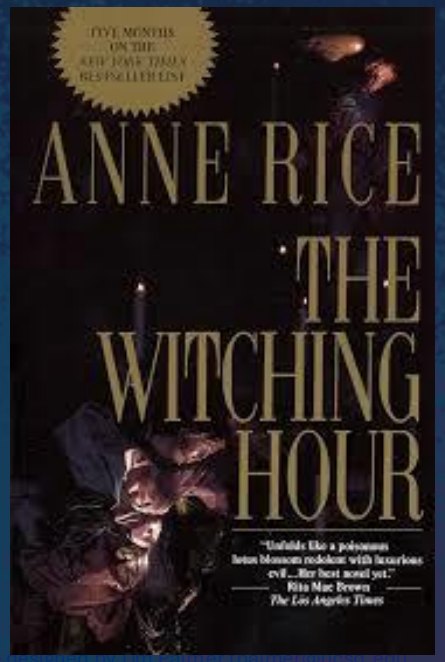
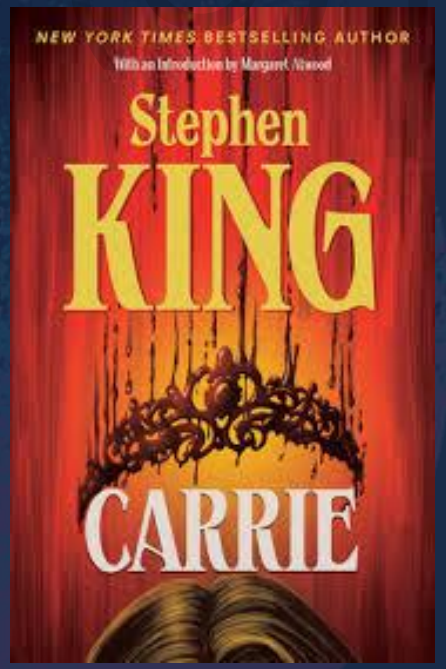
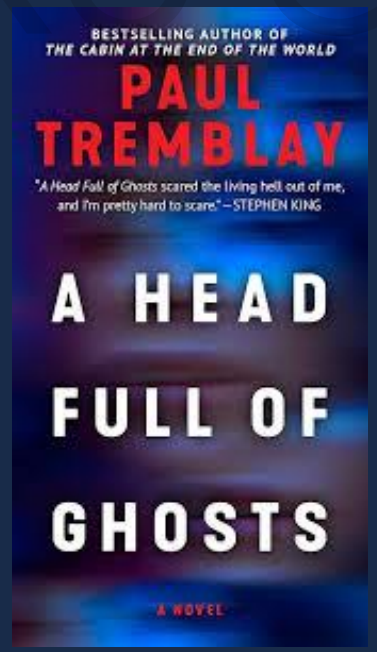
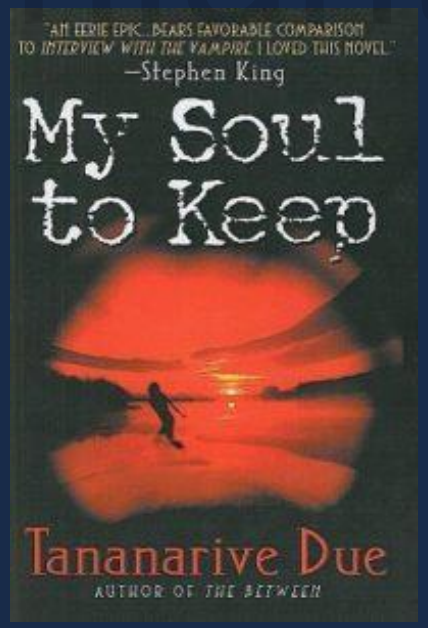
Harnessing Fear In Fiction

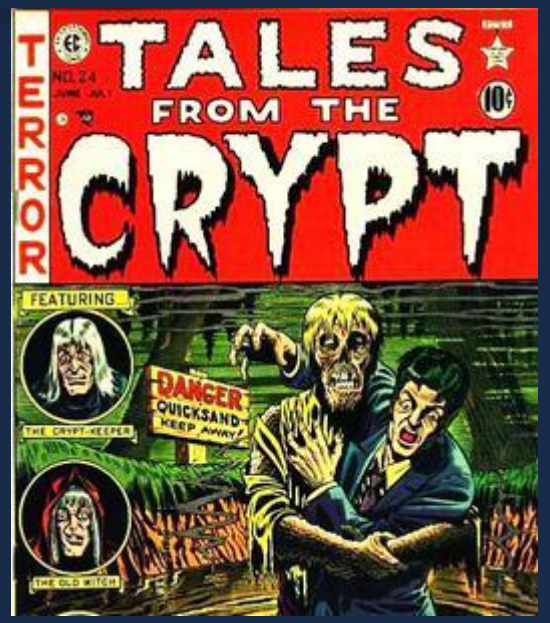
- Fear is the core narrative engine
- Emotional journey alongside of the horror
- A vehicle to understand ourselves and society











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Why Do We Like Horror?

***Stimulation*:** excitement, adrenaline

***Fascination and Learning*:** survival instruction manual

***Catharsis*:** surviving, accomplishment

***Processing*:** safe way to handle fears, traumas

***Enjoyment*:** bonding

"Horror is a universal language; we're all afraid. We're born afraid, we're all afraid of things: death, disfigurement, loss of a loved one."
–John Carpenter

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Why Write Horror?

Fear reveals character

Horror as emotional processing

Safe exploration of danger

Builds empathy and internal resilience

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Consider Core Fears And What They Represent

Fear of people

- Zombies, *Scream*

Fear of the other

- Sci-fi horror, *Aliens*

Fear of nature/animals

- *Jaws*

Fear of the self

- *Psycho*

Fear of the unknown

- Lovecraftian

Fear of science

- *Frankenstein*

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Writing Exercise #1: Find Your Fear

By digging deep into the why's of your own fears, you can find potential fodder for richer, more powerful stories.

- Think about your core fears
- Write a few sentences describing a **concrete fear** and why you might have that fear.
- Write a few sentences describing an **abstract fear** and why you might have that fear.
- Example:
  - Concrete fear: spiders, insects
  - Abstract fear: loss of control

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2: The Power of Monsters

Monsters as metaphors

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The Power of an Iconic Monster

Human, creature or something else, the monster has:

Distinct wants and needs

Powerful abilities

Their own logical constraints/rules/weaknesses

Traits that reflect the protagonist's fear or hidden self

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Monsters as Mirrors for Character

Monsters are often:

- **Trauma externalized into antagonists**
- **Personal fears of the characters manifested**
- **Forces that lead the main character to confront their own identity**

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Monsters as Mirrors for Society

- Externalize hidden desires and taboos (e.g., vampires)
- Critique social norms (e.g., Frankenstein represents consequences of scientific knowledge gone too far/playing God)
- Explore cultural, societal collective fears (e.g., Godzilla symbolizing Japan's fear of nuclear weapons)

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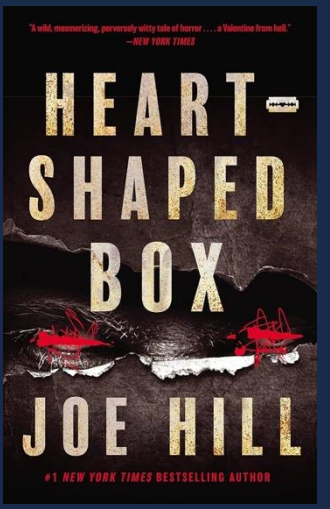
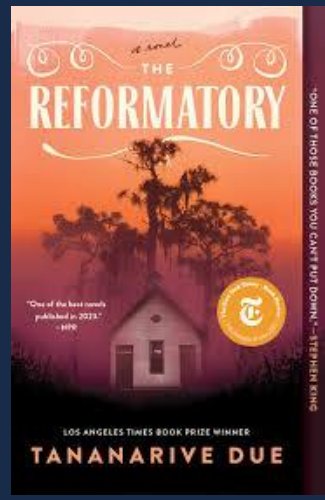
The Lingering Impact of Ghosts

Tips for ghost stories:

- Ghosts often represent a mystery that needs to be solved; don't overexplain too early
- Center emotional or historical trauma at its origin
- Let the ghost's desire (closure, revenge, etc.) drive the story
- Avoid cheap jump scares; protagonist "was dead all along and didn't know it" storylines
- Themes of past trauma, repression, closure, grief

"Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win."
-Stephen King





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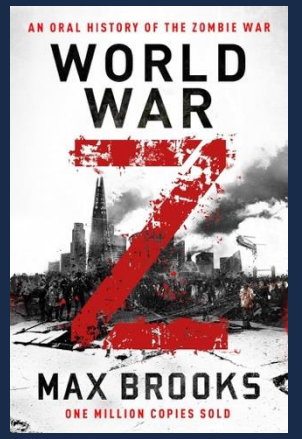
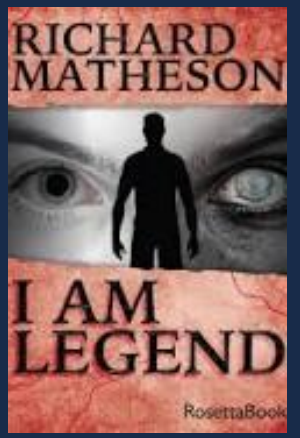
The Enduring Hunger of the Undead

Tips for zombie stories:

- Focus on group dynamics and human drama as people try to make sense of their world and rebuild
- Be realistic: limited resources increases tension (e.g., short supplies of ammo, food, time, trust)
- Maintain consistency in zombie behavior and infection progression
- Avoid cartoonish inefficiency
- Themes of dehumanization, contagion, survival, resilience, consumerism

"There's a whole new level of trauma when your dead friend is trying to eat your face."
-Justina Ireland





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The Seductive Appeal of Vampires

"We are the things that others fear."
- Anne Rice

Tips for writing vampire stories:

- Consider what attracts the characters and what repels them
- Establish clear rules for the vampirism
- Explore the cost of long life/immortality and how your vampires deal with it
- Avoid: overly powerful vampires, gothic mansions, brooding immortal who wants to be human again
- Themes of exploitation, desire, power, hunger, addiction, immortality

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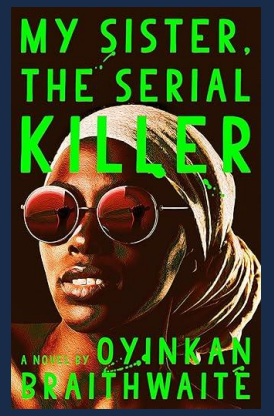
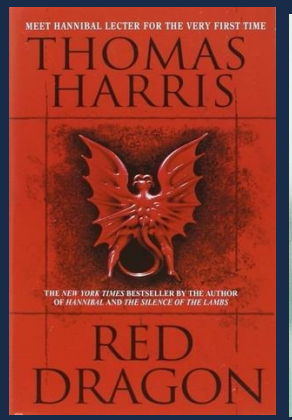
Unmasking the Monsters Within

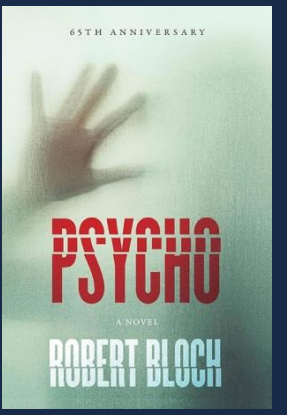
Tips for writing human monsters:

- Explore what trauma or belief drives the human
- Illustrate their depravity with traits or habits brought to the extreme
- Add an element of sympathy, however slight
- Explore moral gray areas for a richer story
- Avoid: evil due to “craziness;” a killer with a perfect plan and no flaws; ”split-personality” villain, monologues of explanation
- Themes of predation, authority, morality, ego, power, *often crosses into crime and thriller genres*

“No beast is more savage than man when possessed with power answerable to his rage.”
-Plutarch







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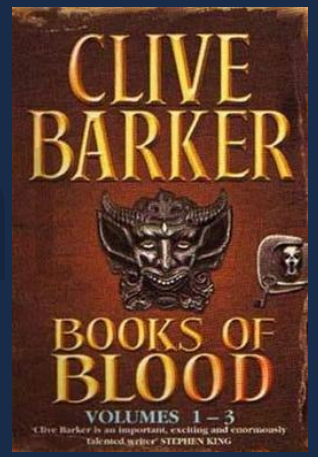
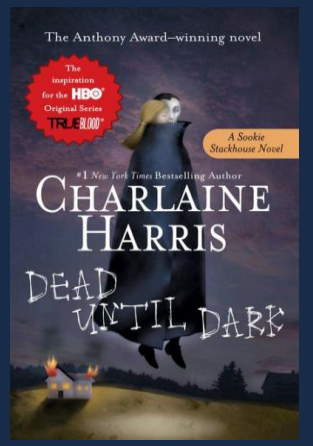
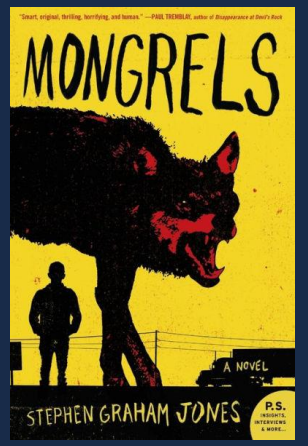
Other Monster Archetypes

- Werewolves: illustrates repression, what happens when rage and instinct erupts and control fails
- Doppelgängers: forces characters to confront who they are versus who they thought they are/pretend to be.
- Aliens (as monsters): eerie when their logic, intentions and capabilities are unknowable
- Devils: often negotiators, illustrating the horrors in the wrong choices and their consequences
- Witches: explores power outside accepted systems, and the fear that provokes persecution







Tip: Explore original sources of monster tales for inspiration, respect regional folklore

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Designing Monsters

Find your inspiration

- Look to folklore (respectfully), societal and personal fears, animal kingdom

Employ empathy

- Sympathetic monsters give depth
- Understanding your monster's POV will help with complexity and enhance realism/horror

Avoid:

- Overly obvious symbolism
- Harmful parallels to people
- A monster with no parallels to the main character

Ask:

- What fear does the monster represent?
- How does it interact with theme?
- How does the protagonist change?

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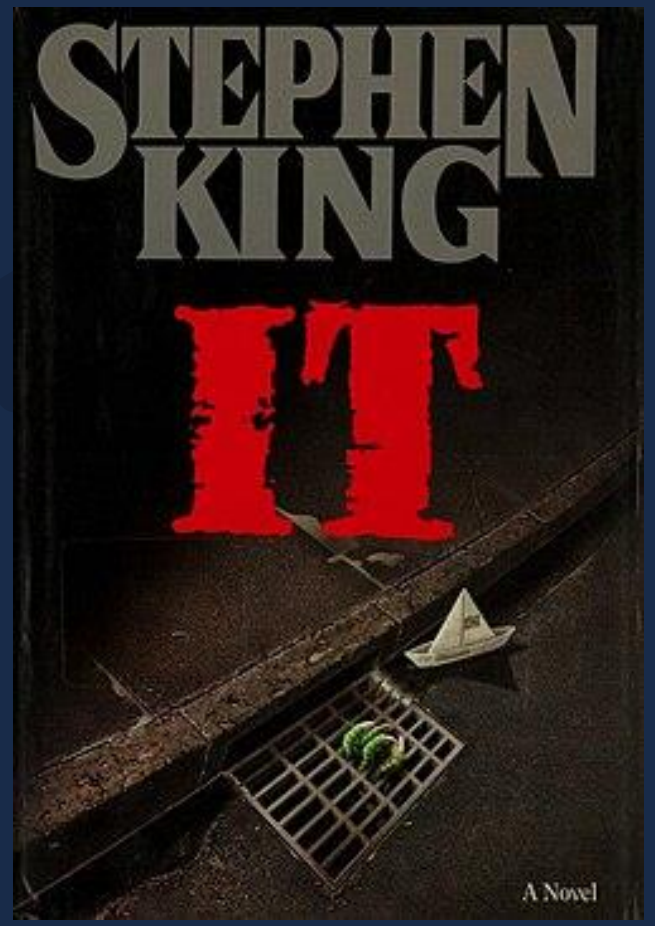
The Importance of Monster Limitations

They can seem invincible at first, until some weakness is revealed.

- Physical (can't be in sunlight, certain materials hurt)
- Spatial (e.g., only in one location, like water, underground, dreams)
- Temporal (can only be active for a short time) Behavior patterns (e.g., always needs to sleep after eating)
- Motives or instincts (e.g., can only come after you if you're already afraid)



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Writing Exercise #2: Build-A-Beast

Samples of monsters:
Ghosts, zombies, vampires, humans, werewolves, doppelgangers, aliens, demonic forces

- Pick one type of monster and write out their **stereotypical attributes**.
- **Brainstorm 3-5 alternates** that counter their attributes and is a new limitation.
- Example:
  - *Vampires*: attribute - need to drink human blood to survive; limitation - sunlight
  - Alternates: need to drink human tears; limitation - location
- Example:
  - *Werewolves*: transform against their will tied to the moonlight; limitation - silver
  - Alternates: control their transformation; elegant transformations; limitation - food

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Checklist for Monster Reveal

Foreshadow with escalating hints (sounds, smells, physical changes)

Avoid overexplaining; leave room for imagination

Control perspective, reveal through characters' eyes

Decide pacing: gradual/partial/ sudden reveal

Use sensory details along with visual description

Make it feel earned with prior setup and tension

Build anticipation (reveal through shadows, partial glimpses, silhouettes)

Use each monster glimpse/reveal to advance the narrative

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3: Dread vs. Horror

The value of building dread

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The Importance of Terror

Ann Radcliff

"Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them."

Stephen King

"I recognize terror as the finest emotion… and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out [revulsion]."

King Hierarchy: Terror > Horror > Repulsion

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Dread and Terror vs. Horror

Key distinctions for understanding horror writing

Dread (Build Up, Overlays with Terror)

- Fear *before* the threat is known; tension, anticipation, imagination
- The waiting: when you know there is something to fear but don't know what
- Builds atmosphere and a sense of "the sublime" (awe + fear of that which we don't understand)

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Terror (Beginning of Revelation)

- The moment you see the threat; climax of facing the fear itself
- Releases tension with shock and adrenaline

Horror (Aftermath)

- Response to what remains after the fearful event (corpse, gore, disgust)
- Relies on revulsion, considered "cheap thrill"

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Atmosphere vs. Gore

Atmosphere

- Builds tension
- Adds to mood

Gore

- Focus on physical detail
- Aims to shock

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Tip: Writing gore is OK, but focusing on atmosphere will lead to horror that lingers in the reader's mind.

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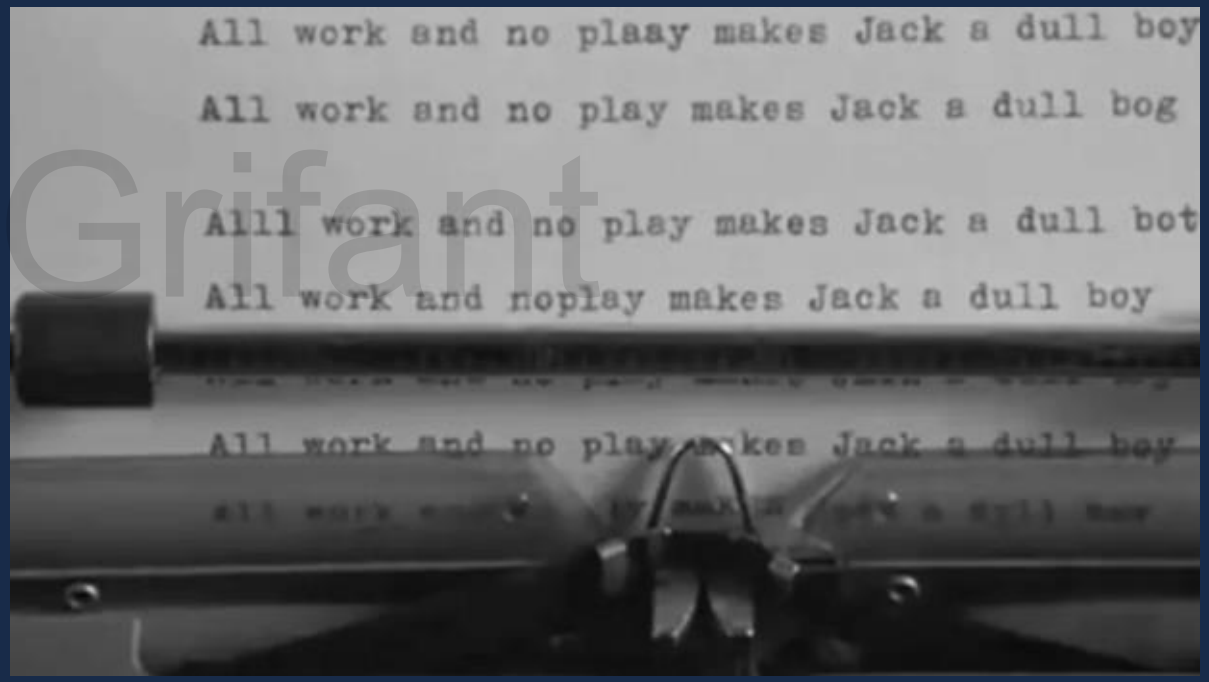
Tools to Infuse Dread and Build Terror

1: Strategic Word Choices

2: Sensory Details

3: Pacing and Reveals

4: Center Character Experience



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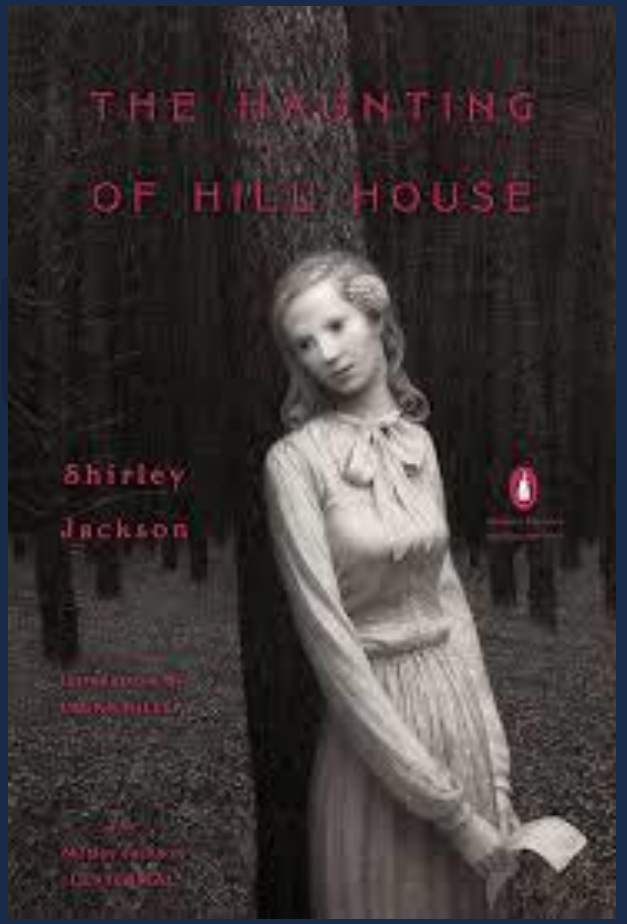
The Power of Word Choice, Example

"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against the hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone."
-Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*



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Word Choice to Evoke Dread

1

Select suggestive over explicit language

“No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely…”

2

Avoid over-explaining

“Stood so for eighty years”

3

Elicit a feeling of wrongness, things being off

“Not sane… holding darkness within”

4

Use omissions to build suspense

“Whatever walked there”

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Word Choice: Verbs/Descriptions

Use dark or disturbing imagery, jarring juxtaposition, negative connotations, or odd words to evoke discomfort.

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<u>Examples:</u>

- Verbs
  - “The masked man walked toward her” vs. “the masked man lumbered/darted toward her”

- Descriptions
  - “the sun shone” vs. “the sun burned” or “the sun glared”
  - “The flowers sat in the vase, slowly rotting”

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Sensory - Lean Into the Visceral

Horror taps into the physiological; think of unique ways to describe fear and related sensations.

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Avoid flat descriptions:

“A shiver ran down his spine.”

“She gasped for breath.”

Describe how these sensations feel to you. Examples:

“A fingernail of ice trailed along her collarbone.”

“She clawed at her chest as her lungs screamed for air.”

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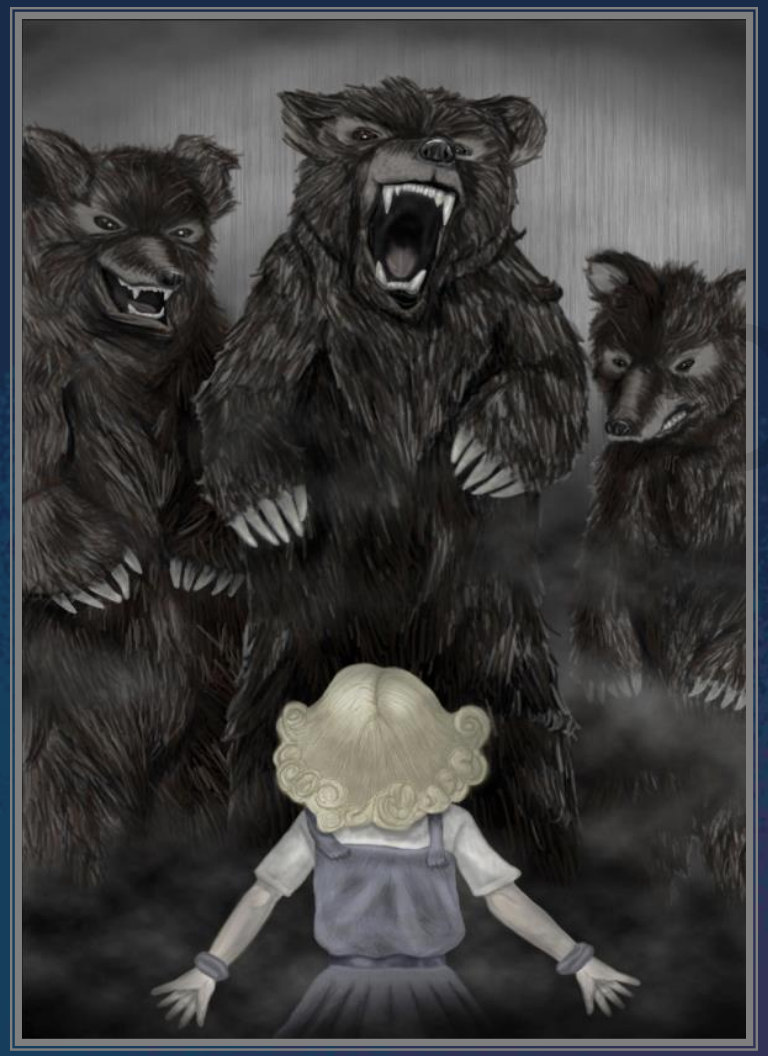
Pacing and Reveals



Pacing too fast: jarring, confusing

Pacing too slow: boring

Reveal too obvious: unsatisfying

Reveal too ambiguous: frustrating

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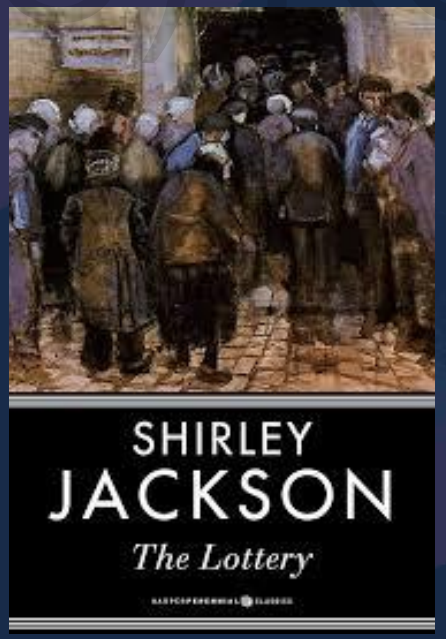
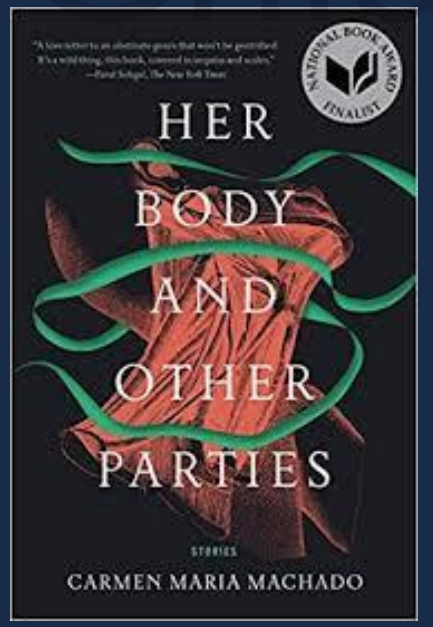
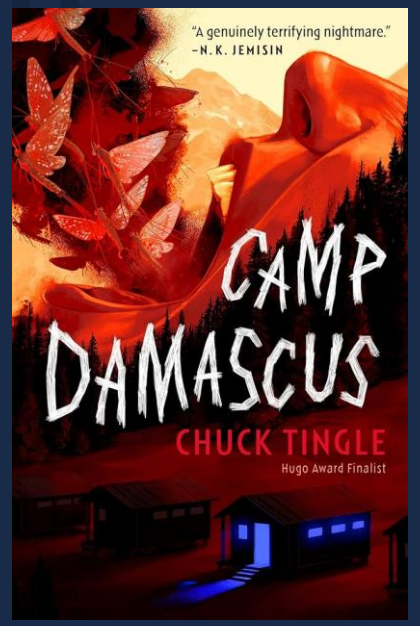
Center Character Experience

- What fear does the horror target?
- What choices does the horror force the characters to make?
- How does the horror transform the characters?
- How do the characters experience the horror?







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The Importance of Character

“Horror happens inside a person. I'll tell people if you imagine a monster hanging out in the middle of a field and it's alone, there's no worry. It's just a monster hanging out. It's only a monster when somebody is there to perceive it and be threatened by it and consider it monstrous.

We really need to be, to at least some degree, in our characters and **showing what these characters are experiencing, putting readers into their heads.”**
-Tim Waggoner

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Writing Exercise #3: Inspiring Dread

Your tools:

- *Dark or disturbing imagery/setting*
- *Jarring juxtaposition*
- *Strong verbs*
- *Sensory details*
- *Character experience*

Using your listed fears or your monster from the previous exercise, draft a few sentences of an opening scene meant to inspire dread using the tools listed on the left.

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Summary For Elevating Your Horror

Establish the rules of the horror	• Determine what rules govern the monster, killer, curse or threat • Ensure consistency and internal logic
Use rules to build tension	• Revealing the rules sustains anticipation • Letting characters find logical ways around the rules allows for creative storytelling
Leave space for the unknown	• Not every mystery needs be solved • Slight ambiguity keeps the horror echoing after the story ends

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4: Popular Subgenres

+ writing horror for various age groups

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Horror in YA and MG

"Writing horror for children is a balancing act. **You want to evoke the thrill of fear without crossing into nightmare territory…** The horror encountered is typically resolved in a way that restores order and safety, reinforcing a sense of security by the end of the story…The scary elements serve a larger narrative purpose of growth and self-discovery."

-L. Marie Wood

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Middle Grade Horror

Focus on:

- A fantastical element (R.L. Stine)
- Straightforward themes and language
- Adventurous/wondrous tone rather than overly scary

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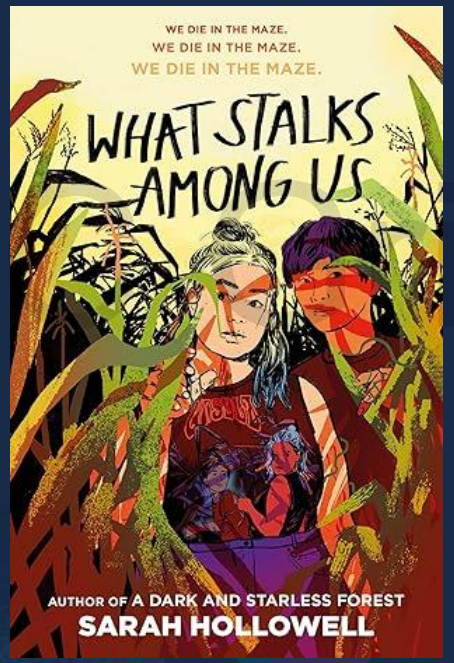
YA Horror

Focus on:

- Darker stories within common YA themes (independence, resilience, identity)
- Trajectory of helplessness to empowerment
- Hopeful ending



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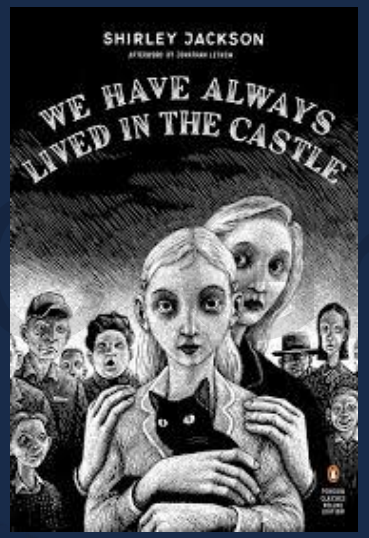
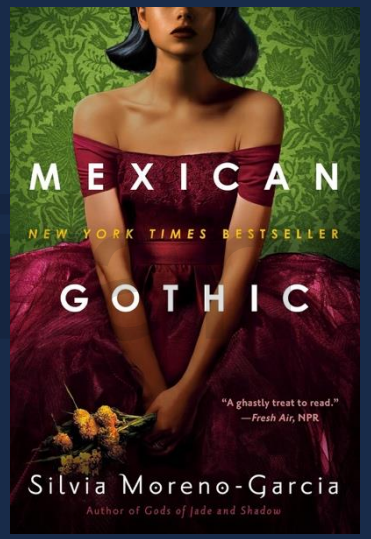
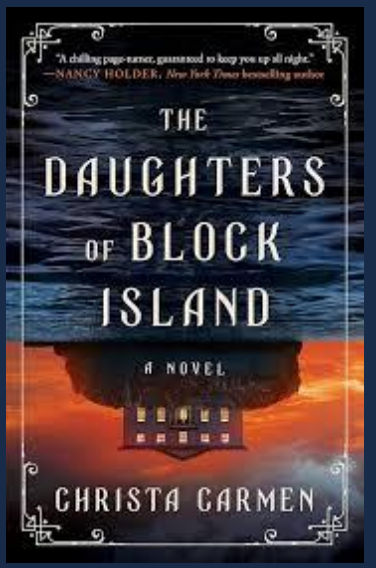
Gothic Horror

Focus on:

- **Atmosphere**
- **Psychological Dread**
- **Haunted Pasts**
- **Vulnerable Heroines**
- **Supernatural**







Core Fears

Decay, isolation, the past, family history, trauma, claustrophobia, abandonment

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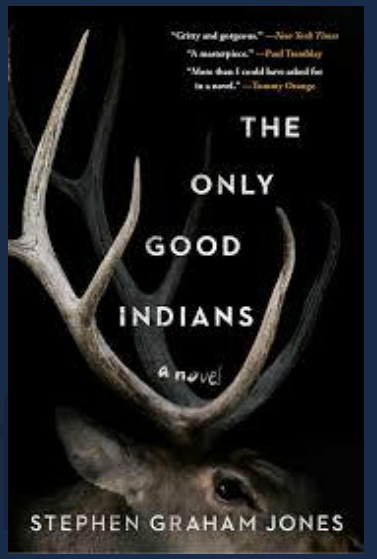
Folklore Horror

Focus on:

- **Isolated Communities**
- **Religious Overtones**
- **Conflict Between Old and New**

Note: Do appropriate research and respect cultural origins when writing



Core Fears:

The past, the unknown, harmful traditions, unforgiving nature (the woods)

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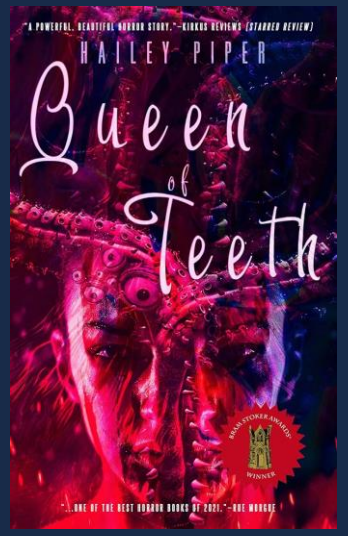
Body Horror

Focus on:

- **Bodily Transformation**
- **Identity and Autonomy Loss**
- **Graphic Details**

***Core Fears*:**
The body, biology, loss of identity



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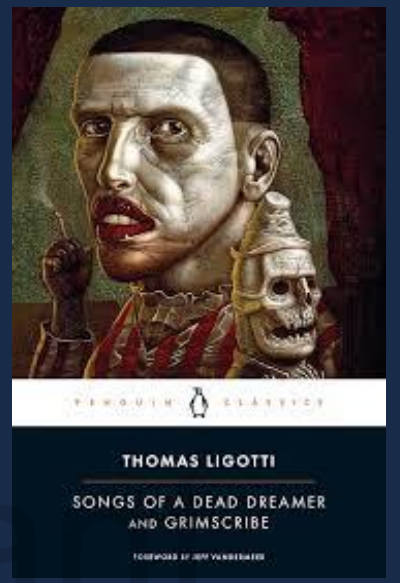
Cosmic Horror

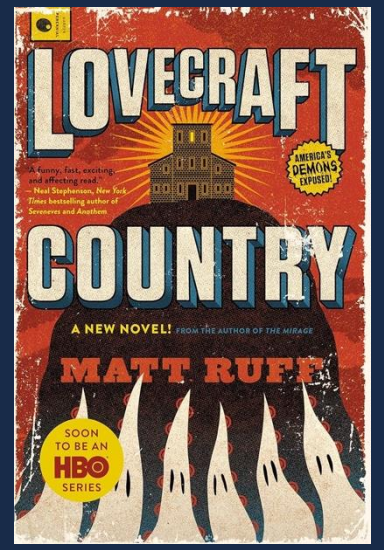
Focus on:

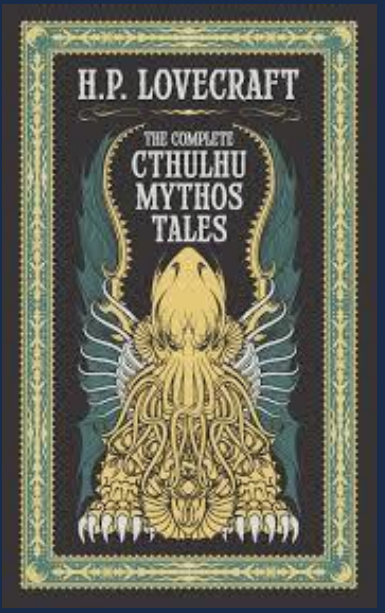
- **Cosmic Dread**
- **“Ancient Ones”**
- **Forbidden Knowledge**
- **The Uncanny/Surreal**

Core Fears:

Insanity, universal indifference, unknowable horrors, existential dread







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Subgenres Tips

Use Subgenres as Tools

- Let mystery, psychological, gothic or cosmic elements shape your story without limiting your creativity

Blend and Bend Expectations

- The best horror often mixes genres to create fresh, surprising experiences

Character First

- Whatever your subgenre, always center the characters and their fears foremost

<u>Other subgenres to explore</u>

- Supernatural/paranormal
- Slashers
- Creature features
- Sci-fi Horror
- Horror comedy
- Eco horror
- Psychological horror
- Splatterpunk/ extreme horror
- Weird horror
- Horror westerns
- Fantasy Horror

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Writing Exercises For Home

Core Fear Extraction	• Write one paragraph identifying your story's core fear (loss of control, isolation, being watched). Do *not* mention a monster—focus only on the emotion.
Dread Without Reveal	• Write a 300-word scene where something is wrong, but the threat is never shown. Use atmosphere, sensory detail, and the feeling of "off-ness" only.
Build-a-Beast Continuation	• Expand on your monster brainstorm. List: 3 strengths, 3 limitations and 1 rule it can never break. Then write a short scene illustrating a strength and limitation.
Reveal a Horror	• Rewrite the same moment three ways: 1-gradual reveal, 2-partial/obscured reveal, and 3-sudden shock. Compare which feels most effective.

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Resources & Q&A

If you have questions, email KC.SciFiWri@gmail.com

scifiwri.com/references

@KCGrifant on the socials

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