



Glenn C. Altschuler Ph.D.
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Monsters

We are visited by monsters because we are drawn to see what we dread to see.

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Review of *Haunted: On Ghosts, Witches, Vampires, Zombies, and Other Monsters of the Natural and Supernatural Worlds*. By Leo Braudy. Yale University Press. 306 pp. \$30.

All of us are visited by monsters, real and/or imagined. They might originate, as Freud once believed, in childhood traumas. Or our fear of death. Or in the threats posed by an “alien” group. That said, Leo Braudy, a professor of English and American Literature at the University of Southern California, reminds us that “because we are drawn to see what we also dread to see” stories about monsters have pervaded Western culture for centuries.

In *Haunted*, Braudy examines fictional accounts of monsters from the Protestant Reformation to the horror films of the 21st century. He identifies “four broad provinces” of terrifying curiosity that individually, and collectively, reflect the cultural anxiety of modernity: the monster from nature (think King Kong); the created monster (Frankenstein); the monster from within (Mr. Hyde); and the monster from the past (Dracula).

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Most important, Braudy indicates that we need not decide whether these monsters “arise from the inherent fears of an eternal human nature or are the products of a specific historical period.” They take their shape, he argues, from the interplay between both forces: the natural monster from fears of a powerful, hostile, vengeful physical world; the created monster

from fears about the implications of human aspiration and modern technology; the monster from within from fears of a repressed inner self; and the monster from the past from fear that the present has somehow lost much of its immediacy and intensity.

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As a bonus of sorts in his insightful and richly detailed book, Braudy examines the detective story as an (ostensibly) rational alternative to the irrationality of the world of monsters. And he suggests that, given our skepticism about any person's ability "to control the visible world, solve crimes, and bring criminals to justice," the ratiocinative skill of the detective has given way to his or her character, personal problems, and encounters with public corruption.

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Although, perhaps inevitably, it is speculative, Braudy's analysis of the role of historical context in the popularity of his "four provinces" of monstrosity is often compelling. The discovery and use of the atomic bomb, and, even more recently, an awareness of the threats to nature posed by climate change, he suggests, ushered in a new generation of natural monsters. Aroused by human activity, they wrecked vengeance on the world.

And the created monster, he points out, "naturally involves a metaphor of parenthood." The genre became prominent in the late eighteenth century, amidst an emphasis on the role of adults in retaining the innate goodness of children, and questions about the authority of church and state. In 1816, Braudy points out, Mary Shelley read Rousseau's *Emile*, or *On Education*, and wrote *Frankenstein*, in which the monster and the creator shared the same last name.

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In the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries, Braudy argues, the monster and the detective presented Janus-faced responses to an increasingly complex, industrialized society and its implications for personal identity. Horror highlighted a culture repressed by the daylight world; and the detective's urge to understand its mysteries. Both explored individual autonomy, double consciousness and multiple personalities, the stuff of the emerging discipline of psychology, which "replaced the conflict between the natural and the supernatural with the one between the conscious and subconscious or unconscious mind."

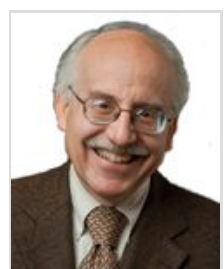
Monster stories, Braudy concludes, with an eye on the present, are "remarkably portable in an atmosphere of paranoia that encourages the fearful to apply whatever images are most likely at hand to shape and justify their fears," and to incite them to eliminate their enemies. After all, "reason may balk and ask complicated questions, but fear can forge into iron prejudice" our "knowledge" about zombies, immigrants, and terrorists.

Words and images don't kill, Braudy acknowledges. Yet, even though we think our knowledge that horror is a fictional genre can distance us from what's happening, it "can influence how we think about [and how we treat] those we love and those we hate."



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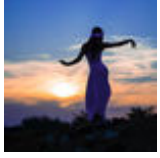
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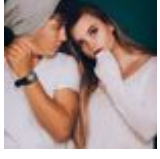
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