

Horror Subgenres

(Courtesy: <http://www.cuebon.com/ewriters/Hsubgenres.html>)

(Definitions and Examples - All) As it tends to distort our familiar reality, horror is a slippery genre to define. Disturbing themes such as possible insanity and unsought penetration suffuse these tales. In its harsher forms, these stories and depictions are deliberately shocking and controversial.

Aliens infuse this subgenre with relentless troublemaking. Overlapping with 'science fiction,' the source of terror is another planet, whose inhabitants are encountered there, or travel to our Earth, if not both. The "Alien" franchise (featuring Sigourney Weaver) leads this charge. Scott Sigler's novel *Infected* is a recent example, among many. In M. Night Shyamalan's movie *Signs*, mysterious rural visitors are revealed to be (somewhat improbable) aliens.

Creepy Kids horror is defined by its name. Horror mavens have said that children are mysterious strangers coming into the world--and this subgenre takes that unspoken worry and runs with it. Stephen King's short story and film *Children of the Corn* are straightforward examples. Many others, such as Richard Donner's film *The Omen*, involve a child who is directly related to Satan.

Cross Genre is a subgenre whose horror tales have almost-overriding elements of another major genre. For example, Joe Lansdale writes 'horror' in 'western' settings, while his novel *The Drive-In* ensnares rural rednecks. Frank Peretti's novel *The Oath* contains strong 'horror' elements, portrayed as 'the wages of sin' in an evangelical Christian context.

Cutting Edge refers to horror that consciously goes against the grain, and is probably without many of the genre's familiar tropes and/or styles. These tales usually feature a modern setting. Often this subgenre is associated with graphic novels, or new venues such as online chapter postings. Author Douglas Clegg has pioneered the latter with his novel *Purity*.

Dark Fantasy is an overlapping subgenre, and its stories generally feature human evil and strife, rather than supernatural monsters. Karl Edward Wagner's "Kane" books are an oft-cited example.

Dark Fiction is a huge descriptive category, almost as broad as 'speculative fiction.' Many genre publications use it in their title and/or self-description. (Sometimes, for practical reasons, it's used to market a horror story without employing the term itself.)

Erotic horror contains a strong sexual element. In this subgenre the sex can be explicit, *but* it's often far from pleasurable. Alfonsi and Scognamiglio's anthology *Dark Seductions* is an example. (As authors of this subgenre will regularly inform you, such tales are not for casual reading.)

Extreme (splatterpunk, grindhouse or visceral) This subgenre is as raw as fiction or film can be. The explicit violence and bloody gore are heaped on, often from start to finish. Splatterpunk is a term coined in imitation of cyberpunk, and favored by certain younger authors. Often these stories incorporate technology. Visceral is in between these two subgenres, and its stories aim for an "in your face" gross-out.

Fabulist horror is a descriptive category. Its stories often emphasize a 'different' tone or setting, such as an old-fashioned style. Often they have a distinctive locale, such as the Caribbean. Sara Stamey's novel *Islands* is one such. (Several publications use the term Fabulist in their name and/or self-description.)

Gothic (English gothic, southern gothic) 'Gothic' was originally synonymous with 'horror,' and in recent decades has come to indicate a certain tone and setting, in this and other major genres. This subgenre is often written in a 'literary' style. Many of these tales involve an evil from the past, as with haunted mansions and/or encroaching personal insanity. Most of Edgar Allen Poe's work fits this category. English and southern gothic tales are set in those locales, and traditionally have distinct styles. Kurt Singer has several anthologies with this emphasis. ('Gothic' is not to be confused with the trendy 'goth' lifestyle, although that blackness-loving subculture may eventually generate a subgenre of its own.)

Hauntings subgenre tales feature exactly this. Often the persistent ghost is a specific individual, somehow connected to the building or protagonist. The (supposedly true) novel and film *The Amityville Horror* are famous examples. The TV show *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* verged on romance, and the "Caspar" franchise on comedy.

Holocaust tales involve mass deaths, whether during the horrific 20th century event of that name; or involving a similar tragedy, past or future. Those deaths might be due to human slaughter, or from a plague or monsters. In a few bizarre versions, everyone has already died, and today's humanity is the replacement--but doesn't know it. Stephen King's novel and movie *The Stand* depict a near-future apocalyptic plague.

Humorous horror is fairly common, and its macabre elements are often understated--or exaggerated into parody. The old comic strip and TV show *The Addams Family* are familiar examples. The anthology *Blood Lite* from Kevin J. Anderson is a recent contribution to this subgenre.

Lovecraftian (Cthulhu mythos, etc.) These subgenres are rooted in the pioneering fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. The originals and newer works have a distinct style, with florid prose and an overwhelming pessimism. (They overlap with 'science fiction,' as his *In the Mountains of Madness* was first serialized in that genre's magazine *Astounding*.) Cthulhu is perhaps Lovecraft's most famous creation, an eldritch demigod from the deep past.

Tiny subgenres focus on Lovecraft's other varied creations. A recent example is Elizabeth Bear's short story "Shoggoths in Bloom."

Media tie-in (*Dark Shadows* novels, etc.) These novels feature characters made famous by Hollywood, such as Freddy Krueger. They must follow the canon of the originators, and make no permanent changes in the main characters. Many novels follow up on the popular TV show (and recent movie) *Dark Shadows*, including a series by Lara Parker, who played Angelique in the original episodes.

Mind Control horror exploits this particular fear. The method may be sorcerous or technological, but the victims are compelled to act against their will and better natures-- often while fully aware of what's happening. *False Memory*, by Dean Koontz, is a popular example. Curt Siodmak's novel *Donovan's Brain* is an early example of invasive medical technology gone awry.

Noir horror is a descriptive subgenre. It invokes a gritty urban setting, much like its counterparts in other major genres. Weary, cynical characters populate these tales. *The Midnight Road*, by Tom Piccirilli, is a great example.

Paranormal is a subgenre with mortal heroes. Such tales emphasize a difficult battle against evil supernatural encroachment, whether by a saintly exorcist or high-tech ghostbusters. There are many popular examples, such as Tobe Hooper's film *Poltergeist*. (Unlike most 'horror' stories, there's 50-50 chance the good guys will fully prevail.)

Psychological (surreal) This subgenre is usually written from a tight viewpoint. Is the protagonist really seeing terrible things, perhaps battling against human conspiracies and/or demonic possession -- or is he (less often, she) going insane? On the flip side, this subgenre can feature an insane protagonist, such as a tormented serial killer. A subtle example is John Steinbeck's short story "The Snake," which is low key, yet disturbing. A modern example is the novel *Heart Shaped Box*, by Joe Hill. Surreal horror incorporates bizarre imagery, often drawn from vivid, threatening dreams. One popular example is *Aberrations of Reality*, by Aaron J. French.

Quiet or Soft horror is, relatively speaking, a mild subgenre. Strong emotion, rather than external violence, is emphasized. The novels of James Herbert are a good example.

Rampant Animals is a subgenre whose name says it all. Perhaps the dominant examples are Stephen King's novel and film *Cujo*, which feature an unstoppable rabid dog. Aggressive spiders and chthonic monsters and many other nasty critters fill such pages. (Opposite this, William F. Claxton's 1972 film *Night of the Lepus* attempts to scare people with gigantic rabbits!)

Rampant Technology exploits the fear that man has dared too much, and created mechanisms that will turn against us. In Greg Bear's novel *Dead Lines*, a spam-laden Internet infests the afterlife. In Stephen King's short story and film *The Mangle*, a

possessed laundry machine starts attacking people. Many other tales depict familiar devices running amok--usually without needing to be plugged in.

Satanic Bargains a.k.a. "deal with the devil" stories are common enough to merit their own subgenre. The protagonist, usually an ambitious man, strikes a Faustian bargain with the prince of darkness (or his representative). In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the deal is implicit and the moral lesson explicit. Dana Reed's novel *Margo* features a woman seeking eternal youth.

Supernatural (demons, zombies, etc.) These stories focus on various types of monster from 'beyond,' persistently ruining the lives of a suffering humanity. Often the setting is an isolated village, where the protagonist becomes stranded. There are countless examples. Anne Rice's novels are filled with powerful arcane beings. Zombies are popular enough to warrant special mention. A top example is Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, along with its several film versions. Edgar Wright's film *Shaun of the Dead*, contain humorous elements

Suspense or Dark Suspense (thriller) This subgenre is a broad descriptive category. These stories depict few if any supernatural elements, but rather, a continual (usually, unknown and growing) menace. David Morrell's story collection *Black Evening* is one example. Horror thrillers add 'action' elements to the story. The hero may run far and fast, but he can't hide. Many of Richard Matheson's short stories depict this well.

Weird (bizarro) This is a descriptive category--in a genre which is comprised of nothing but weird! The long-running magazine *Weird Tales* is often cited in this regard.