

Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies

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EDITORIAL

ASHLEIGH PROSSER

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This issue of *Aeternum* is the product of academic publishing during the global COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter civil rights revolution, and we are proud to have been able to bring the article and book reviews contained within it to you while living through an unquestionably Gothic time, to paraphrase Angela Carter all those decades ago. To attempt to make meaningful commentary on the current state of affairs that our world is facing in the context of a small volume of scholarship on the contemporary Gothic is perhaps too much for one editorial introduction to strive for, so instead we humbly offer to you the work of these dedicated scholars for your enjoyment. For, at its heart, that is what the Gothic provides to us all in its simplest form: enjoyment.

So please, take the time to enjoy the analysis of the “happy Gothic” that Allison Craven offers in her article “The Joy of a Gothic Fable: Form, didacticism and ‘happiness’ in Sonya Hartnett’s *The Ghost’s Child* and Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook*”. Consider delving into the debauchorous pleasure of Anne Rice’s ground-breaking popular vampire series, *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2018), after reading Antonio Sanna’s review essay of the long-standing series as it reaches its end. Share in the spine-tingling fun of a ghost story, and contemplate their cultural history, through Astrid

Crosland's review of Catherine Belsey's new monograph, *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History* (2019). Or immerse yourself in the thrilling, chilling worlds of horror that videogames can offer, an experience Gwyneth Peaty reviews in her reading of Dawn Stobbart's *Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* (2019).

In whatever form you choose to consume the Gothic (or rather, for it to consume you...), all that we ask is that you enjoy it. We can all agree that fictional deaths are far better than real ones, so please stay safe and look after one another in these terribly tragic Gothic times.

Editor's Details

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The Joy of a Gothic Fable:

Form, didacticism and 'happy-ness' in Sonya Hartnett's *The Ghost's Child* and Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*

ABSTRACT

In this article, the novel The Ghost's Child and the film The Babadook are discussed as extended fables in which the didacticism of the fable form is expressed in Gothic modes. While the Gothic is traditionally associated with disturbance, despair and fragmentation of identity, these works are striking for the joyful key in which they conclude and the optimistic messages that accompany the resolutions. Both are therefore related to Catherine Spooner's (2017) concept of post-millennial "happy Gothic" which offers an alternative to the traditional view of Gothic. The happy-ness of these works is anchored in the fable form of the narratives, and examination of the form contributes to Spooner's allied project to examine both what Gothic "is" and what it "does". The happy-ness of these fables also inflects their connection to domestic traditions of Australian Gothic and the wider Gothic influences they exhibit. These are traced in the range of Sonya Hartnett's uses of Gothic in her personal oeuvre, and the traces in The Babadook from European art film and the paranoid woman's film of the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: Fable, Happy Gothic, Australian Gothic, Didactic, Grief, Miscarriage

The ancient narrative form of fable remains prevalent today in a range of world media and literatures. Typically short stories like Aesop's, and often allegorical, fables are marked by a didactic moral. The fable form is sometimes employed in extended narratives and in a range of aesthetic modalities. The Australian works in question in this article are a young adult novel, *The Ghost's Child* by Sonya Hartnett (2007) and a feature film, *The Babadook* written and directed by Jennifer Kent (2014), which are discussed as extended fables wherein the didacticism of the fable form is mobilized in Gothic modes. While the Gothic is traditionally associated with disturbance, despair, and fragmentation of identity, both works are striking for the joyful key in which they conclude and the optimistic messages that accompany the resolutions. Both works are therefore relevant to Catherine Spooner's (2017) concept of post-millennial "happy Gothic" with which she contests the prevailing critical discourse. In this article, I argue that *The Ghost's Child* and *The Babadook* can be interpreted through the lens of happy Gothic, and that this interpretation is anchored by the moral didacticism of the fable form.

Whether it is understood as a collection of motifs (Punter 2000) or a "whole symbolic realm" (Botting 2000), the Gothic is predominantly associated with disturbance or "unease" (Carter cited in Mulvey Roberts 1998). Undoubtedly *The Ghost's Child* and *The Babadook* evoke uneasiness and horror that can be aligned with traditional or "postmodern Gothic", the aim of which is also "to disturb" (Kealley 2017, 306). In Young Adult fiction in particular, the Gothic is a powerful means of destabilizing the symbolic order and "interrogating [...] authority" (Kealley 298). However, it is precisely this prevailing critical discourse, or what Spooner terms the "anxiety model" of Gothic (14-18), that she contests through the notion of happy Gothic. It offers scope to consider the range of emotional expressions in the works in question. Spooner's allied challenge to investigate not only what Gothic "is" but what it "does" (10) offers further scope to consider the potential impact of Gothic happiness in the world beyond the fictions. The expressive range of *The Babadook* plumbs the abject identity loss of the main character Amelia which results from her repressed grief and trauma, but it is not without humour and a spectrum of melancholy. The happiness of her survival and recovery in the end is deeply Gothic in invoking folkloric ritual in combatting the haunting force. Similarly, in *The Ghost's Child*, the protagonist Matilda's passages of grief and loss which result from her experience of miscarriage and a relationship breakdown are profound. Yet her buoyancy and resilience are hauntingly expressed through the (Tim) Burton-esque knockabout in her encounters with the ghostly child and the lost souls she meets on her travels to the Island of Stillness, and in the bubbling epithetic wisdom with which she recounts the events of her life. The conclusion, in which she is reunited in death with her lost child, is one of supreme wish fulfillment. In aligning these works with the potential of Spooner's description of happy Gothic, and the dual question of what Gothic is and does, I reflect

on the didactic properties of these works as fables about resilience and recovery from experiences of grief and trauma.

Spooner situates happy Gothic as a post-millennial discourse, and her account of it is both wide-ranging and nuanced. It is formed partly in response to debates about the presumed exhaustion or decline of the Gothic and the reception of some contemporary Gothic texts as diluted compared with historical examples (7-10). Spooner's effort instead is to "map its new territories" and to "appreciate the multivalent meanings of Gothic in twenty-first century culture" (10). In designating a "post-millennial" turn, Spooner does not suggest simply an epistemological break but considers how these texts "may refer to a continuation of pre-millennial discourse or a repudiation of it" or "possibly both at the same time" (7). Within this post-millennial oeuvre, Spooner describes "happy Gothic" as emerging in a range of texts for youth and mature audiences that are "comic, romantic, celebratory, gleeful, whimsical or even joyous" (3). In broadly naming these tendencies as "happy", Spooner invokes the "mobile, oppositional" potential of "happy" to "group together [...] a range of positively inclined emotions or moods" (4). These are texts that "are not anxious and do not, in the main, aim to shock or scare but are playful or even celebratory in tone" (7). Yet Spooner recognizes that ambiguities and contradictions emerge.

In proposing a history of happy Gothic, Spooner includes nineteenth century works as well as contemporary films, television, literature, and lifestyle entertainments. These include, for instance, Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, *The Munsters*, the films of Tim Burton, the sparkling vampires of the *Twilight Saga*, and Gothic tourism to mention a few of her many examples. Even so, Spooner emphasizes that in describing happy Gothic the effort is not to "definitively label its corpus of texts" but to map its tendencies and invite discussion about it (24). It is in this spirit that I adapt her ideas to the messages of optimism towards the effects of grief and trauma that I argue reside in these stories. *The Ghost's Child* and *The Babadook* cannot be described as unambiguously happy because the characters experience tragedy, melancholy, and depression. But it is the uplifting resolutions and humorous or playful narration that moves these works into the realm of happy Gothic. In recognition of the spectrum of emotions in Spooner's description, I work with the descriptor "happy-ness", rather than "happiness". Furthermore, as Gothic rhetoric is "tied to historical processes and works differently at different times and in different locations" (Spooner 10), I consider how the happy-ness of these works inflects the Australian domestic traditions of Gothic and the wider transnational influences in these works. These are traced in the range of Sonya Hartnett's uses of Gothic in her personal oeuvre, and the various influences on *The Babadook* from European art film and the paranoid woman's film of the twentieth century (see Doane 1987).

Irrespective of these cultural influences, however, the perceived happy-ness of the resolutions of these works is anchored by the didactic properties of fable form. Literary form can be understood as "patterns of transtextual repetition which organize textuality into meaningful units" (Frow 2016, x). Such "'patternings'" can "'remain

stable over time” and “migrate across contexts in a way that genres cannot” (Levine cited in Rudy 2018, 33). Jill Terry Rudy argues that analysis of form enables “social work” because “[f]orms coordinate social attention both to themselves and to the actors who collaborate to realize them” (Noyes qtd in Rudy 38). In the didactic expression of a positive perspective on the heroines’ experiences and their similar thematic interest in maternal trauma, *The Babadook* and *The Ghost’s Child* offer social work on the human experience of grief and recovery. How this social work emerges is also an effect of the sub-types of fable form, which are identified as the “assertional” sub-type in *The Babadook* and the “problematic” sub-type in *The Ghost’s Child*.¹

The “assertional” sub-type, like Aesop’s fables, plainly states a moral thesis (see Rubin and Sells 2012). In *The Babadook*, it emerges across the exposition of Amelia’s grief and fatigue that precipitates the horror of her haunting and breakdown, and the empowering spectacle of her recovery and restoration of her relationship with her child, Samuel. The didactic message is made clear at the end of the film through the rite of propitiation that Amelia enacts towards the creature that haunts them and the sublime revelation of her ongoing struggle with it. In comparison, *The Ghost’s Child* is a “problematic” sub-type of fable where “moral dilemmas” and the epigrammatic statement (of the assertional type) is displaced by various devices including (but not limited to) “playful narration” or “abstruse metaphors, and symbolism” (Rubin and Sells 2012). This well describes how the message about Matilda’s resilience is developed throughout the novel. It occurs amidst much symbolism and epigrammatic wisdom and “playful narration” of her experiences during her moral and spiritual quest about the nature of love and beauty. However, it is through the central dilemma of her relationship with Feather – unapproved by her parents, and later questioned by herself – that Matilda emerges as an archetype of resilience. A restated wisdom that life is for “going not stopping” becomes a signature expression of her quest that is repeated as Matilda departs joyfully to the afterlife in the company of her deceased child (Hartnett 2007, 155, 179).

Aside from these subtleties of form, as expressions of happy Gothic the novelistic discourse of *The Ghost’s Child* diverges from the cinematic narration of gaze and art design in *The Babadook*, and the hand-made qualities of its *mise-en-scène*. Furthermore, the novel and the film both display influences from Australian and transnational Gothic conventions in imparting the happy-ness and didactic messages. As these Australian traditions, to date, have not been associated with happy Gothic, I first consider how Australian Gothic tends to be regarded as having distinct vocabularies in literature and film. I then suggest how *The Ghost’s Child* and *The Babadook* contest this duality.

¹With thanks to Professor Richard Lansdown.

Undivided: Transnational and Australian Gothic

The tradition of Australian Gothic originated in colonial literature and visual art in the nineteenth century. It is most associated with the persistent figure of the bush or landscape as menace or threat, or, in some cases, as the site of morbid surprises for settlers (see Gelder and Weaver 2007). Marcus Clarke's nineteenth-century description of the "weird melancholy" and "fantastic" "monstrosities" of the land (cited in Turcotte 1998, 14) – arguably a contentious description in the present post-colonial era – evokes the atmosphere that is said to echo historical (European) Gothic in situating characters as "trapped in a hostile environment, or pursued by an unspecified [...] danger" (Turcotte qtd in Hawkes 2011, 68). Lesley Hawkes observes how it has become "almost an embedded metaphor in descriptions of the environment within Australia" (67). It is a "melancholy of displacement and a sense of not belonging in the environment" (Birns cited in Hawkes 67). Even so, and while many of the works in this vein are deemed pessimistic, Clarke's description is not wholly so. As Gerry Turcotte suggests, it harbors "the possibility of transformation" and "acts as a driving hope" (11). In other words, it seems not to preclude the possibility of happy Gothic.

This bush melancholy can be detected in various Australian films where it is usually discussed in terms of Gothic landscapes (see Rayner 2011; 2015; Stadler 2019). However, cinematic "Australian Gothic" has another connotation in Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka's (1988) touchstone description of the genre of grotesque modernist comedies that sprouted in the Australian cinema revival of the 1970s. Noted for the "blackness" of the "dark, inward comedy" which questions the perverse "normality" of the small town and suburb, and "surreal self-mockery" (Dermody and Jacka 51–52) these tropes often persist in contemporary films and are sometimes intertwined with remnant motifs of historical European Gothic literature (see Rayner 2011; 2015; Gaunson 2019). Not only for this reason, Dermody and Jacka's description of Australian Gothic does not entirely align with other accounts of Australian Gothic, but there is a widening consensus that both traditions pertain to settler anxieties about colonialism. Uncanny treatments of the bush or nature occur in *The Ghost's Child* and *The Babadook* and can be traced to both bush melancholy and Dermody and Jacka's Australian Gothic, and wider influences. Thus, they contest the duality and valence of these literary and cinematic vocabularies of Australian Gothic.

Hawkes aligns Hartnett's work with Australian bush melancholy in the sense that the "Australian environment" becomes "a menacing character" (70). Indeed, the landscape of *The Ghost's Child*, as Michelle Preston (2009) observes, is "inherently [...] haunting and haunted" (46). Characteristic of Hartnett's nigh-symbolist style, it is rich with figurative imagery. Yet the vegetation is not wholly indigenous, and its most menacing and depressing connotations are represented by the forest of conifers that signal Matilda's depression and grief, and the threadbare desert of the Island of Stillness. Furthermore, the place is uncanny in the sense that Hawkes describes in other works by Hartnett such as *The Midnight Zoo* (Hartnett 2010), where the action is

“set in an unnamed place”, not “Australia as such” but “still very much an Australian setting” (Hawkes 73). This uncanny and melancholy imagery merges with a range of transnational mythologies and folklore as the fantastical qualities of the setting are extended in the mythic characters that surround Matilda (who is also referred to as Maddy). The bird-like Feather, suggestive of both Eros and Peter Pan, and the sea monsters, Kraken and Leviathan, evolve from a European imaginary. The Nargun who creeps into Maddy’s teenage bedroom and leaves after the arrival of Maddy’s mature wisdom is a cave-dwelling stone woman associated with the Gunai people of Gippsland, Victoria. Despite its unmistakable bush melancholy, a range of mythologies are co-opted into the magic realist setting of *The Ghost’s Child*.

The relationship of *The Babadook* to the Australian Gothic is also ambiguous. It is pointedly distanced from the landscape tradition of Australian cinema, according to Stephen Gaunson (2019). Like Amanda Howell (2017), he discerns the European arthouse influences on *The Babadook* particularly in the central figure of the haunted house. However, Jessica Balanzategui (2017), referring to Dermody and Jacka’s definition of Australian Gothic and the suburban setting of *The Babadook*, argues that it is “a horror film with Australian Gothic influences” (26) for its “domestic monstrosity” and “horrors of the ordinary” (27). Yet both Gaunson and Balanzategui liken the monster (the Babadook) to a bunyip, a mythic creature associated with the bush literary tradition and with Indigenous Australian beliefs (see Gaunson 363; Balanzategui 28). Furthermore, a recurring image of a spectral and denuded tree that looms through the window of Amelia’s house is reminiscent of bush melancholy. It is as if the menace of the bush is relocated to Amelia’s haunted suburban terrain. A tragic phallic symbol, this tree alludes to the world of desire from which Amelia is alienated by grief, fatigue and haunting by the Babadook. It becomes an eerie analogue of the “melancholy of displacement” and “not belonging” that Hawkes associates with the bush.

The convergences of folkloric and aesthetic influences augment the happy-ness of these fables and the optimistic messages about the potential for recovery from tragedy and grief. In looking more closely at how this occurs, I turn first to the playful narration of Matilda’s story and its message of “going not stopping”. Various received as fairy tale, fantasy, and magic realism, Matilda’s story has been psychoanalysed as a discourse on melancholy (Preston 2009) and praised for its address to the taboo topic of miscarriage (Flanagan 2017). Given the social silence and the deep force of privacy that typically surrounds the experience of miscarriage and its relative rareness in fiction, the problematic fable form of *The Ghost’s Child* enables direct and yet delicately elliptic address to this deeply sensitive topic.² As the story culminates in the joyful reunion in death of Matilda with her deceased child it seems exemplary of the potential social work of a happy Gothic fable.

²In fact, miscarriage has figured in several contemporary films, for example: *A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011); and *Concussion* (Peter Landesman, 2015). The film adaptation of M.L. Stedman’s novel *The Light Between Oceans* (Derek Cianfrance, 2016) dramatizes the struggle of a couple to overcome their inability to achieve the live birth of the children they conceive.

A Happy Death: Matilda and the Fay

The Ghost's Child, now published for more than twelve years, appeared during something of a milestone period in Sonya Hartnett's career. It was published after the controversial and pseudonymously authored *Landscape with Animals* (Redfern 2006), and it was soon followed by the award of the Astrid Lindgren Prize in 2008. It is identified as a work of Young Adult fiction with wider appeal through the portrayal of Matilda's life story from her perspective as an old woman either near or post-death, an ambiguity to which I will return. An "independent and feisty feminist heroine" (Flanagan 2017), Matilda is doubly known by her name and her nickname, Maddy, at different stages of the narrative. As elderly Matilda, her meeting with the ghostly child forms a frame narrative to the story of her life. Her reminiscences form the inner narrative that centres on the failed relationship with her one true love, Feather, and the miscarried child that she conceived with Feather, and whom she blissfully recalls as "the fay". His brief gestation and loss coupled with the collapse of the relationship with Feather forms the central rite of passage in her life that is finally eclipsed in her journey to the afterlife in the company of the ghost child.

The metafictional Gothic mode is pronounced in Matilda's encounter with the ghostly child. However, the use of Gothic aesthetics varies in Hartnett's works. For instance, in *Surrender* (Hartnett 2005) Adam Kealley (2017) argues that the abject mode emanates from global fears associated with postmodern Gothic, since the tropes of "the doppelgänger, the monstrous, and unsettling imagery" work to "capture the protagonist's subjective development" (296) and culminate in sublime moments of insight by the protagonist into the "inherent fragility of his socially proscribed reality" (306). In another vein, *The Children of the King* (Hartnett 2012) with its double narrative set in war time and the medieval era of Richard III uses the "gothic mode within a realist frame" (Miller 2015, 38). This technique has a pedagogical effect that Rose Miller argues calls attention to the "constructed and affective elements of historical and fictional narratives" (38). A comparable technique of dual times is employed in *The Ghost's Child* insofar as Matilda's haunting by the ghostly child in the fictional present provokes her prolonged recollections of the events of her life that comprise the greater part of the novel.

The most pronounced Gothic trope is the ghostly child himself, the addressee of Matilda's abundant epithetic wisdom. He also proves to be a double in that he is the "fay", the remembered pregnancy that Maddy named with the antique word for 'fairy'. But a question arises as to Matilda's own status as living or dead as there is some ambiguity in the frame narrative. Michelle Preston (2009), in her psychoanalytic reading, argues that the apostrophe on "ghost" in the novel's title indicates that Matilda is dead. If so, the narrative is a completed story that functions as an,

account of individual alienation and sadness whereby melancholy and depression serve as powerful forces (of loss-desire) able to induce spectral

presences in the life of the protagonist in ways that allow fantasy to become a means to negotiate loss and combat alienation (Preston 2009, 40).

Even so, Preston argues for a more empowering and non-bject view of Matilda's melancholy. She suggests how "the dialogic structure of the narrative" and "the friendships and conversations Matilda has with a variety of mythological and fantastic creatures" disturbs the binary (self-other) dichotomy that subtends melancholic desire in the Freudian schema (43).

The question of whether Matilda is alive or dead is an intriguing and engaging ambiguity. Unlike Preston, I experience Matilda's story as unfolding immediately before her death. I believe this is indicated – with gallows humour – by Matilda's apologies to her dog Peake for her failure to check the gas heater (Hartnett 2007, 178). It is one of those quasi-vaudeville moments that stretches the sincerity of the tale. Indeed, if Matilda is dead when the novel begins then *The Ghost's Child* could be regarded as "afterlife fiction". Sophie Masson (2018) argues that afterlife fiction features the liminality of the world of the dead who are not a threat to the living (unlike undead vampires and zombies), and the "narratives begin with death not end in it" (61, 65). Further, the "water topos" that Masson identifies as a feature of Young Adult afterlife fiction (73) is abundant in *The Ghost's Child* through Matilda's three sea voyages that suggest the watery worlds of her desires. The first is the voyage around the world with her father in search of the most beautiful thing; the second is to the Island of Stillness in pursuit of Feather; and the third, with which the book concludes, is the voyage to the afterlife accompanied by Peake and the ghostly child. Profoundly watery, too, is the pool of depression into which Maddy plunges after her miscarriage and from which she is rescued by Feather. He, too, is drawn into the water topos through his staring gaze out to sea. But unlike Feather's mesmeric stillness, Maddy's ocean voyages and the wisdom she acquires on her travels signify her dynamism and resilience.

Irrespective of her (im)mortality, I hold an optimistic view of Matilda's melancholy and its relationship to happy Gothic, even if the events suggest the fragility of her survival. The voyage to the Island of Stillness following the loss of the fay and the foundering of the relationship with Feather proves the most profound for Matilda. It takes her into the depths of near despair and yet enables her impulse for recovery. Preston interprets the condition in which Maddy finds Feather on the Island of Stillness – remote, unemotional, and indifferent – as the result of his suicide (47). I do not share her view but regard this sequence as a bitter coming of age for Maddy. The name of the boat, *The Albatross* is foreboding of the outcome of the voyage, and reminiscent of another fabled mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. It is imperilled as she travels across the ocean inhabited by talking fish, lost souls, and phantoms. She narrowly evades the legendary sea monsters the Kraken and Leviathan and the maelstrom in which the boat is nearly lost. However, she finds sanctuary in the friendship of Zephyrus the west wind, a figure from ancient Greek myth, who safely guides her to the island. He then endows her return voyage

with blustery wisdom for survival: that “life is for going, not stopping” (Hartnett 2007, 155), one of many didactic lessons that she recounts to the ghostly child.

This central event becomes the source of the ultimate moral wisdom of the fable. Her encounter with Feather on the island and their exchange about the loss of love, albeit embittering for Maddy, stimulates her later endeavours and her medical career. Thereafter, the vision of her life accelerates as she recalls her transformation from insecure teenager to heroic nurse in the Great War, and her career as an eye doctor. Through these recollections she reflects on her dimming memory of Feather and her ongoing struggle with grief for the fay. Her meeting with the child as a ghost therefore endows her tale with supreme wish fulfilment as she boards the little boat with him for the final voyage and “was away” (Hartnett 2007, 179). The message of “going, not stopping” seems reiterated in this conclusion and in the portrayal of Matilda as an archetype of resilience and a happy death. The reunion with the ghost, the child transformed from his gestational presence as the fay, becomes a reward and an uplifting conclusion to the optimistic melancholy of her life story.

The fay is emblematic of the sensitive representation of pregnancy and miscarriage that places this novel as a cross-over work for youth and mature audiences. Hartnett’s treatment of miscarriage is praised by Victoria Flanagan (2017) who comments that the “magic” in Matilda’s account of her life is not “otherworld” but belongs to “the wonder and enchantment that turns everyday occurrences into moments of great emotion and poignancy [...] such as marriage break-down and the loss of an unborn child” in such a “startlingly poetic and original manner”. These comments are testament to the social work of the novel and its fable form of narrative. It was adapted for the stage by Sally Richardson for the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre in Western Australia in 2012. According to Victoria Laurie (2012), it was “a perfect synthesis of fairy story, allegory and children’s picture book” that evoked “a strong emotional narrative that every mature adult will recognize”. Happy, yet Gothic, this reception also reflects on the social work of the didactic novel in dramatizing Matilda’s coming of age and life-passage to reunion with her miscarried child.

In its dramatization of maternal trauma, *The Babadook* is a proximate fable to *The Ghost’s Child*. In comparing its form as fable, the medium of film is crucial in detecting its assertional type because the narration depends on the cinematic properties of art direction and uncanny gaze. But like *The Ghost’s Child*, and as noted earlier, this film is a site of converging Gothic aesthetics from Australian and European traditions. It is also reminiscent of the “paranoid woman’s film” defined by Mary Anne Doane (1987), and folk ritual elements secure its didactic force. These several influences coalesce in asserting the moral about confronting repressed grief and trauma. Through the depiction of Amelia’s confrontation with her grief, like *The Ghost’s Child*, it offers insight into the convergent aesthetics of post-millennial Gothic and a sense of what, potentially, Gothic does, or can do for audiences.

Asserting Control over Unknowable Forces: Amelia and the Babadook

The Babadook is a 2014 Australian feature film of an original screenplay by Jennifer Kent, inspired by her earlier short film, *Monster* (Jennifer Kent 2005). *The Babadook* follows the life of Amelia (Essie Davis) and her young son Sam (Noah Wiseman) who live together in an old terrace house in the Australian suburbs. Their loneliness and sadness originated from the death of Sam's father who was killed in a road accident as he and Amelia travelled to the hospital for Sam's birth, a backstory that is revealed through Amelia's dreams. Sam is a loving but rather uncontrollable child and Amelia's grief makes her impotent in managing him, and she evades Sam's birthday each year because it holds such painful memories. When Sam finds a mysterious children's pop-up book entitled "The Babadook", the monstrous character within it begins to haunt them. Each time Amelia tries to destroy the book, it returns. Amelia's grief, fears, and fatigue all converge in a breakdown and she becomes a kind of monster herself until, provoked by Sam, she instead summons the strength to confront the Babadook and orders it to leave her house.

In the concluding scenes, Amelia is seen in a rejuvenated state as she and Sam collect worms from the garden. Amelia feeds the worms to a creature in the basement who Sam is forbidden to see until he is "bigger". The scene of feeding is filmed from the unseen creature's point of view as Amelia struggles to maintain her mental and postural balance in its roaring presence. Thereafter, the film ends with Amelia embracing Sam in the garden in celebration of his birthday. From these scenes it appears that while her struggle with the Babadook or what it represents continues, Amelia has overcome its worst effects. These crucial closing scenes suggest the assertional form of the fable in bringing attention to the uplifting message of the film about Amelia's survival and recovery.

My view of this, however, is not typical of the wider reception of the film. While it has received consistent acclaim, it has divided critics and reviewers about its genre and whether it is simply a psychological horror film or something more complex (see Buerger's coverage of the reception, 34). Aside from its Australian and other Gothic influences, *The Babadook* is clearly in dialogue with "popular horror films and cycles" (Balanzategui 26). Its ritual elements and "hand-made" design aesthetics (which are described further below) also suggest "folk horror" (see, for instance, Scovell 2017). However, the haunted house motif and the house-bound anxieties of the heroine are reminiscent of the "paranoid woman's films" described by Mary Anne Doane (1987) where the uncanniness has a particular relationship to the home and woman's place within it. Furthermore, my conviction about its optimistic ending is not shared by Shelley Buerger (2017) who argues that Amelia's monstrous breakdown is borne of her "refusal of maternity" and that while her maternal abjection is both "destructive and redemptive", the film's resolution is "equivocal" (34).

Indeed, there is a question about just what it is that the Babadook represents, and whether it is of supernatural or psychological origin. The Babadook is not the

spirit of Amelia's dead husband although it manifests in his form in one disturbing incident. It seems that it appears to be more like the cumulative grief for the tragedy of his loss that inhabits the house in monstrous form. The film keeps open both possibilities that the haunting is real, or that it is a projection of Amelia's deep repressed grief and desperate weariness. In an interview, Kent (2013b) explains that the ambiguity is purposeful and that she wanted audiences to make their own decisions about the source of the Babadook. Even so, the depiction of the monster is intertextual with a range of vampiric monsters and its sexual predatoriness is also equally suggestive of the traditional Gothic vampire. In appearance it is rather like a demon bird with phallic talons and huge wingspan as it rises in Amelia's darkened bedroom. Its rasping call is suggestive of an Australian native bird (see Balanzategui 28). The aural presence of the Babadook is made more sinister by the incantatory rhyming couplets of the book that Amelia reads to Sam. This rhythm is likewise echoed in the mysterious three knocks on the door that announce each return of the book after Amelia throws it away.

This poetic of ritual and incantation foreshadows the Pagan connotations of the feeding scene at the end of the film which resembles a rite of propitiation, as suggested by Briony Kidd (2014). The rite implies Amelia's recognition of her ability only to contain rather than to completely eliminate the repressed desires and feelings that the Babadook represents. The sense of ancient lore in the rite contained within the fable form of storytelling endows its message with a quality of sage wisdom about the effects of grief and the power to overcome trauma. It gives didactic force to the peaceful sequence that concludes the film and the final image in which mother and child warmly embrace and celebrate Sam's birthday. The outdoor setting of these final scenes contrast with the largely interior *mise-en-scène* and the palette of dark colours that evoke anxiety and depression in the uncanny house of grief. The final shot of Amelia and Sam's embrace directly balances the opening in which they are discovered facing each other at a strained distance at opposite ends of a dining table in the dim kitchen.

As much of the action and most of the encounters with the Babadook occur within the house, Amelia's haunting is reminiscent of the "paranoid woman's films" as defined by Mary Anne Doane (1987), a Gothic variation on the woman's film of the 1940s. Doane's test cases are films like *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock 1940) and *The Haunting* (Robert Wise 1963) where the uncanniness results from "dramas of seeing" which "become invested with horror within the context of the home, and sexual anxiety is projected onto the axis of suspense" (134). If denaturalizing familiar spaces is the method of the Gothic film, in the paranoid woman's film, Doane argues, the "paradigmatic woman's space—the home—is yoked to dread, and to a crisis of vision" (134). The house itself bears on and reflects the state of the subject's mind through a dialectic of seen/unseen. Places which elude the eye suggest paranoia that leads to a split between "the known and the unknown", and as such staircases, doors, windows, and rooms are uncanny spaces that mediate connections between the familiar and the unfamiliar, "or between neurosis and psychosis" (Doane 134-136).

This dialectic is varied in *The Babadook* because at the height of the haunting, either within or outside the house, for Amelia the Babadook is *everywhere she looks*. Doors and windows provide channels of gaze, and the staircase becomes a conveyor of her repressed mobility, as she hastens up or down it in pursuit of, or escape from, the Babadook. The domestic amenities are haunted: the refrigerator conceals the cockroach infestation; and the Babadook appears on the television that she channelsurfs in struggling to stay awake in fear of the monster. He is in the police station and in the car. The Babadook is everywhere, but it is her home that becomes the site of Amelia's crisis and breakdown. The haunting of Amelia's house and mind is not only an effect of gaze but of set design in which the house was approached as a particular kind of "world" (Kent in "Interviews" 2013b). The production designer, Alex Holmes, describes how it was conceived with a "storybook" aesthetic that would appear both "authentic" and stylized ("Behind the Scenes" 2013). The dark colour palette was a critical element of design that works to suggest the uncanny atmosphere within the house. Amelia and Sam appear very pale within its dark hues.

If the retro shabbiness of the house consumed much of the design effort, a "hand-made" quality was chosen for the haunted pop-up book, "The Babadook", which Kent explains was the first element of the film that was created, even before the set design or cinematography ("Interviews" 2013b). She commissioned the artist Alex Juhasz to design and hand-make the book, and she speaks of its importance in creating the sense of fear in the film. Its prominent role in the montage is reminiscent of German Expressionist cinema, and Juhasz comments that the book was purposefully created by hand to avoid the appearance of "effects" ("Interviews" 2013a). This hand-made aesthetic is reinforced in the concluding scenes of Amelia's ritual hand-feeding of the Babadook, and the tactile sense of love in her embrace of Sam. These tactile elements along with the ritual that anchors the assertional fable form generate a strong sense of resolution.

The resolution of the film arrives with a didactic, uplifting and genre-defying expression of the possibility of survival and recovery from grief and depression. In this sense, it positively departs from the convention of the paranoid woman's film and while *The Babadook* might not reach the "glee" or "whimsy" of other examples of Spooner's happy Gothic, referred to earlier, its final sentiment is more than implicitly happy. This is in the sense that the final image shows Sam and Amelia celebrating Sam's birthday for the first time. This is not only a sign of Amelia's transformed state of mind but a literal celebration in keeping with the "celebratory [...] tone" of some happy Gothic texts (Spooner 7). In its Australian setting and its tracing of Australian and transnational Gothic motifs, *The Babadook* expands and transcends the domestic tradition in a most uplifting way.

Conclusion: The Joy of a Gothic Fable

Spooner's endeavour to describe and map the happy Gothic is in part to suggest how it is "not an entirely new sensibility but one that has, in the twenty-first century, found new conditions in which to flourish" (24). In determining how the "cultural work" of Gothic texts attains meaning in contemporary culture (25), Spooner's notion of the happy Gothic and its spectrum of emotions opens a rich vein of discussion about the role and effect of literature and film in the world beyond fiction. In identifying the fable form and its didactic work in these texts, I seek to contribute to Spooner's project to examine both what Gothic "is" and what it "does". For some audiences, the fables of *Matilda* and *Amelia* will be more than cathartic or passive representations. Through the depiction of the horror of grief and loss they provide spaces for engaging and reflecting on the depressive effects of these emotions as well as ways of confronting repression.

The Ghost's Child and *The Babadook* are fables that suggest the vibrancy of the Gothic and the potential for its expression of uncanniness to be uplifting and insightful. As contemporary landmarks of Australian Gothic, both fables register the diversity of influences on these practices and the dialogue with historical and popular tropes as well as cultural motifs. The potential to perceive that happy-ness emerges from these stories in their respective media of novel and film requires that the narrative form of fable be recognized as an anchoring structure that enables the didactic claims to be read and seen. *Matilda's* reunion with her lost child in the afterlife, and *Amelia's* sense of control over what besets her peace of mind, are creative instructions about experiences that befall many people. As Gothic heroines, their stories speak of joy.

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BOOK REVIEW

Anne Rice. *The Vampire Chronicles*. New York: Knopf. 1976-2018.

Reviewed by Antonio Sanna (Università degli Studi di Sassari)

With the publication of *Blood Communion* in 2018, Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*, one of the world's longest and most popular sagas on vampires, has reached its thirteenth (and probably final) volume. Anne Rice's novels, along with the "spin-offs" *Pandora* (1998), *Vittorio the Vampire* (1999), and the graphic novel *Interview with the Vampire: Claudia's Story* (2012), have become even more popular thanks to the successful realization of Neil Jordan's 1994 film adaptation of the first book, *Interview with the Vampire* (with a star-studded cast that includes Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, Antonio Banderas, and a young Kirsten Dunst), and the release of Michael Rymer's sequel film *Queen of the Damned* in 2002 (which constricts the events narrated in the series' second and third volumes).

The majority of the novels are focused on Lestat de Lioncourt, an impulsive, irreverent, eccentric and remorseless vampire sired in eighteenth-century France, who recounts his tales directly addressing the reader in a first-person narrative that often revels in self-complacency and narcissism. Four of the thirteen novels, on the other hand, are narrated by the vampires that Lestat has encountered during his peregrinations. Furthermore, *Queen of the Damned* (1988), *Prince Lestat* (2014) and

Prince Lestat and the Realms of Atlantis (2016) – respectively, the third, eleventh and twelfth volume in the saga – are instead fragmented by the use of multiple narrators, both humans and vampires, which allows the narratives to provide several perspectives on the occurring events as well as augment the suspense by juxtaposing the actions and perceptions of different characters.

Vampires are not the only liminal beings present in the novels. The supernatural cast is also made up of witches (some of whom derive from Rice's series *Lives of the Mayfair Witches* [1990-94]), the good-natured beings who come from the lost city of Atlantis, and the ghosts and spirits that populate the fifth book in the series, *Memnoch the Devil* (1995), which is a re-formulation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) that has the titular character showing Lestat the story of the fallen angel and the incarnation of the Christian God. The supernatural creatures are monitored by the human members of the Talamasca, a secret organization formed during the middle ages to study all paranormal phenomena. Many recurring characters – such as the seductive and capricious Armand, narrator of *The Vampire Armand* (1998), who seems to have come out of a Caravaggio painting, Marius the peaceful undead of *Blood and Gold* (2000), and the Children of the Night (vampire covens living in cemeteries and worshipping Satan) – enrich the texts with a varied population of supernatural beings presented with nuance. Strikingly original is the idea that vampires generally prey only on evil doers after reading their minds. This establishes a behavioural ethics for creatures that have been instead mainly associated with primordial instincts, salacious passions, and unredeemable murderousness (especially in horror films and the many adaptations of Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*).

Rice's novels are a typical example of postmodern horror with their (ironic) self-acknowledgment of their fictitious events and the references to their publication history. As Stacey Abbott has argued (2007, 6), vampires have become an embodiment of modernity, the community of the undead depicted in Rice's series indeed makes ample use of emails and cell phones, and owns medical laboratories and corporations, thus living actively in the present rather than avoiding any contact with it like earlier incarnations of the figure. In addition, the vampires' ability to fly, and therefore to transcend national boundaries, further exemplifies the "meaninglessness of distance and global separation" (Abbott 218) that characterizes the contemporary idea of "Nosferatu". *The Vampire Chronicles* further depicts a dark world preoccupied with sex and desire in which vampires are eroticized figures. As George E. Haggerty (2006) has noted, Rice's narratives are "interested in male-male desire" and she employs "the imagery of gay life to give characters substance and texture", thus "express[ing] culture's secret desire for, and secret fear of, the gay man" (186-187).

Settings such as cemeteries and foggy nineteenth-century streets are often alternated with contemporary locations, and many of the novels are mainly set in New Orleans, Miami, and New York, but also in the Caribbean, the jungles of South America, and the subterranean cities of Cappadocia. Some of the saga's books also share the sensibility and aesthetics typical of Southern Gothic, especially *Blackwood*

Farm (2002), which is set in the dark swamps of Louisiana. One of the greatest merits of *The Vampire Chronicles* lies in its depiction of the past, from the ancient reign of Egypt and the ritual sacrifices of the Druids, to the Barbarians' sack of Rome, the destruction of Pompeii, and the banquets in early-modern Venice. Historical events and figures are generally marginal to the fictional universe of Rice's vampires, but the atmosphere of the past, the realistic description of the natural landscapes and the urban environments as well as the changes in humanity's religions, wisdom and philosophy during the various centuries, are portrayed with acute precision and vivid imagery.

The tone of Rice's narrative style is fluid and the characters' dialogues are often characterized by brief, incisive sentences, but some passages from the texts also reach poetical notes, especially when describing the vampires' visual and olfactory perception of reality. The sensations experienced by such creatures are indeed conveyed with exceptional detail, from their perennial thirst for blood and ravenous appetites to their need for physical contact and warmth. Furthermore, Rice is known for endowing her stories with frequent plot twists and far-from-expectable turns of events, including deceptions, betrayals, and revelations, that keep the reader turning the page from book to book. *The Vampire Chronicles* is an enjoyable series that will certainly seduce lovers of vampires and those who seek the typically Gothic depiction of extreme passions and excesses. For its blend of suspenseful narratives, intrigue, horror, and sensuality, it is certainly one of the founding horror literary series of the contemporary age.

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BOOK REVIEW

Catherine Belsey. *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History*. University of Edinburgh Press, 2019. 282 pp. eBook ISBN: 978 1 4744 1739 6

Reviewed by Astrid Crosland (Auckland University of Technology)

An engrossing read that skilfully uses numerous examples to weave a nuanced presentation of a broad topic, as Belsey admits, “the only safe generalisation about ghost stories is no generalisations hold” (53). While Belsey’s definition of “troubled dead” defaults to a particularly to “ghosts,” this terminology could use further definition, as the inclusion of some corporeal undead such as Norse “revenants” prompts questions about the exclusion of similar creatures such as the vampire and zombie, further complicated by the later inclusion of Lamia and “fairy ladies,” which all broadly fit into the same categorization of “not alive” but otherwise seem rather disparate. With that in mind, this book would be a good selection for someone looking for a broad overview of popular ghost tales throughout Western history. Belsey offers analysis of figures stretching back to some of the earliest extant texts in human history, from *Gilgamesh* and *Aeneid*, to recent popular titles by authors such as Audrey Niffenegger and Neil Gaiman. There are additionally a number of film and theatrical texts that further illustrate the diverse representation of “troubled dead” across numerous mediums and periods.

Belsey begins with a relatively obscure folktale in the prelude, this introduction proves that this volume holds new narratives to introduce to ghost enthusiasts whilst also establishing some of the recurrent themes that are used to analyse the author's wide selection of texts. This eventually circles back to her final coda, which highlights the inexorability of haunting forces in the very structure of the English language. To Belsey, the ghost is the bodiless spirit of storytelling itself, existing as a means for the past to infiltrate the present, for those who have come before to simultaneously exist now. This blurring of separate and often opposite qualities will likely already be familiar to scholars of the Gothic and one of the stand-out chapters, "Unquiet Gothic Castles", delves into the history of the genre's interaction with common beliefs about death and the afterlife, as well as the enduring iconographic legacy of archetypes defined within the Gothic canon.

Indeed, this book is already so packed with references that the relevance of some texts, particularly modern films and novels, are laconically explained, and frequently the author does not take time to explain the different cultural significance of elements presented within her own analysis. Both metaphorical and metaphysical interpretations of the ghost require introspection on one of the most complex and evolving questions all humans eventually consider, but given one of Belsey's central claims throughout this book is that "ghosts are dedicated followers of fashion" (5) a sense of time and place is critical to contextualise the prevailing popular attitudes. Whether death is perceived as the end of a singular existence or one in a series of lifetimes results in a difference in the ritual and response to a perceived return from the dead, and Belsey's presentation means these different cultural perspectives are not always made clear, particularly in the context of cultural texts originating outside of Western tradition. A majority of Belsey's sources are from Europe and North America. Some vendors (including amazon.com,) have listed this book under the variant subtitle, *Ghost Stories in Western Culture*, which is an accurate description of the content's focus. Remaining within these parameters would allow a focused scope for Belsey's analysis - a truly global analysis of the "troubled dead" surely would encompass numerous volumes - but the occasional inclusions of modern and folkloric Japanese, Ancient Mesopotamian, and Ancient Egyptian sources complicates the efficacy of the overall analysis as it isn't clear whether these references are intended to convey shared influence or coincidental similarity. An argument can be left feeling unfinished only to be picked up on much later, and so some of this information can often feel contextually displaced for the reader.

While the contents are organised under general topics, the lack of chronological or geographic order to the examples as well as frequent visitations to various texts, imposes some interruption to the analytical flow, although some cohesion between textual references is facilitated through the index. In the first chapter, Belsey introduces Hamlet as a pivotal representation amongst ghostly characters, illustrating how Shakespeare drew from numerous belief systems, including Classical and Norse mythology as well contemporary English folklore to depict the multiplicitous spirit of

Old King Hamlet. However, while *Hamlet* is the helix text of Belsey's discussion, and gives a familiar icon for readers to return to, the book notably lacks any close analysis of Ophelia, who could logically fit under either the "Women in White" or "Dangerous Dead Women" chapters given that Ophelia, through the popular Victorian lens of the genteel madwoman, driven to suicide by great loss and romantic torment, has as much of an influence on stock ghost archetypes as the looming patriarch.

Overall, this book was an enjoyable collection of ghost stories, linked by some interesting analysis, but the focus on Western tradition with only brief tangents to other cultures (especially in a way that assumes shared customs and traditions) raises questions whether Belsey is intentionally trying to suggest a universal cultural history of haunting figures. A strong analytical position takes a backseat to an engaging series of tales, skilfully retold with evident subject expertise, but this does mean readers require some additional background knowledge of the topic.

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BOOK REVIEW

Dawn Stobbart. *Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* University of Wales Press, 2019. 263 pp. Book ISBN: 978-1786834362

Reviewed by Gwyneth Peaty (Curtin University)

Dawn Stobbart's interdisciplinary debut is published as part of the *Horror Studies* series from University of Wales Press. An accessible and well organised monograph, *Videogames and Horror* works well as an introductory text, particularly for researchers of horror and the Gothic who may not be familiar with video games as a medium or game studies as an area of academic research. It is also appropriate for scholars familiar with game studies who are interested in learning more about how horror operates within the medium.

In the early chapters, Stobbart outlines key concepts in video game research and notes core areas of interest relevant to studies of horror. She offers definitions of fundamental terms, such as immersion and flow, and traces the distinction between horror and terror. Various forms of horror (including splatter, slasher, and survival horror) are unpacked as different genres of gameplay experience; a useful breakdown that avoids grouping all horror games into a single amorphous mass. The way such games interact with other forms of media is also explored, with important discussions of adaptation and transmedia. Stobbart highlights the ongoing interconnectedness of cinema, literature, and video games, pointing out that horror games present "an intermedial form of storytelling that requires the knowledge of other texts – audio,

visual and written” (85). The extent to which games reproduce or remediate existing horror tropes and figures is drawn out in later chapters.

The last two sections were most interesting to me as someone relatively familiar with game studies and Gothic horror. In chapter six, ‘The Undead Invade: Monsters in Videogames’, Stobbart makes astute observations about the nature of monstrosity in games, especially regarding who and what is constructed as monstrous during gameplay. For instance:

The use of AI to direct [monsters] is used across the medium to react to player choices or [...] anticipate the player’s actions. In this, the game itself becomes monstrous: the monster is the intelligence in the machine, posing a threat to the character in the game and to the player’s objective in playing – completion (144).

Games are ideally placed to explore guilt, choice, morality, responsibility, and monstrosity because the player is not an observer but a participant. Some of the most impactful horror games, as Stobbart notes, implicate *you* as the monster; “the narrative is structured in such a way that the player discovers that they are the bad guy” (161-162). This chapter suggests that amongst all games, the horror genre is particularly significant for researchers with an interest in monsters because “in a medium saturated with monsters, most of which need to be destroyed, the horror game is able to complicate the representation of the monster’s identity” (163).

The final chapter is, I suspect, the one I will return to most often in this book, as it raises intriguing questions about how games might help us explore the concept and reality of death. In ‘Death and the End: The Final Chapter?’ Stobbart weaves a nuanced discussion of the topic that incorporates a variety of intersecting sources, from *Dante’s Inferno* to Stephen King. The very connection between a player and their avatar, she notes, is predicated on life-giving and taking; “The player enters into a liminal state between life and death through the relationship that is constructed with (and as) a character in a videogame. The player, through interaction, endows the character with life” (170). There is great value in exploring how horror games engage with death and mortality, given the extent to which they foreground these experiences.

Videogames and Horror is a useful and thought-provoking resource for Gothic scholars and students alike. The analysis is clearly presented and rooted in practical gameplay examples throughout. It will be a valuable addition to both academic libraries and personal research collections.

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