

The New Lavender Menace:
A Review of two Gay/Lesbian Horror Anthologies--
*Bending the Landscape: Horror and Queer Fear: Gay Horror
Fiction*

by Stine Fletcher

Griffith, Nicola, and Stephen Pagel, eds. *Bending the Landscape: Horror*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2001. 332 p.

Rowe, Michael, ed. *Queer Fear: Gay Horror Fiction*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000. 252 p.

Horror is the third anthology in Nicola Griffith and Stephen Pagel's *Bending the Landscape* series. Having previously examined the genres of science fiction and fantasy, the editors now turn their attention to presenting a group of "original stories with gay or lesbian characters, set in a milieu or landscape bent slightly out of true." The editors use their introduction to show how they developed their "guidelines" of what constitutes horror, even going so far as to quote the *OED*.

Their short essay largely sets the tone for the fiction to follow: constrained, dry and academic. Each story is preceded by a brief, didactic and unnecessary intrusion by the editors in the form of a small paragraph, which explains the themes and possible frightening elements of each story. Thus, at the outset, Griffith and Pagel ably dispel all terror for the sake of intellectual explanation. Despite their statement that the horror genre is "defined less by what goes into the fiction than by what the reader gets out of it," they leave nothing to the reader's imagination. While their chosen authors have some prestige in their own rights, they seem to have taken the editors' statement too much to heart, putting little in their fiction that invokes any quality of fear or terror. The reader's imagination is given little if anything to latch onto for a good case of the creeps. While such a lack of effort may be satisfactory for those stories that are meant to be comic, it results overall in a disappointing excuse for a horror anthology.

The majority of the anthology is burdened with stories of gay dysfunction and dysfunctional gay relationships that happen to have elements of horror fiction. "Lost Homeland" and "In the Days Still Left" are primarily about lesbians dealing with men in their lives, and by the way, each of these stories just happens to contain a ghost. In "Coyote Love," a macho military man who has a one night gay fling must do as trapped animals do to get out of the fling--chew off a limb. And in "Til Death," purgatory is forever being trapped in an airport (beware the fire escape stairs). All offer some comic relief in tales that just happen to include one desperate soldier, one ghost and a painful pit of Hell. "Passing" and "Memorabilia" are reminiscent of the sci fi dystopias of 1984 and *The Handmaid's Tale*, but dystopian fiction often uses elements of horror--hence the dystopic

Rowe could well have been describing Griffith and Pagel's collection of "cerebral literary experience." Near the end of his introduction, he gives his own guidelines for inclusion in his anthology of "gay-themed horror":

This is one genre, thank God, where it's impossible to hide behind political rhetoric or polemic. I commissioned or selected the stories in *Queer Fear* because they strike a nerve, like a cool hand touching your face in the dark when you know you're alone, and although they may be termed "gay" or "queer" in theme or content, they are horror stories, make no mistake.

Here again Rowe makes mention of the qualities that make his collection a success as a horror anthology, qualities that are lacking in Griffith and Pagel's work. In short, Rowe's chosen fictions are simply good horror stories. Regardless of how it's defined, horror fiction must scare, terrify, frighten, cause goose bumps—and Rowe's collection accomplishes all this from beginning to end.

Rowe does not ease the reader into his collection. The anthology begins with C. Mark Uplands "The Night Guard," which is a tale worthy of being adapted into a movie. Fred, the main character, finds himself in an anonymous prison with a vicious, sadistic jailer, but by the end of the story, Fred's torments have only just begun. While Uplands main character is gay, Fred's personal hell is so well depicted it will strike fear in any reader. Uplands piece exemplifies one of the strengths of this collection: the terrors and fears of a gay character become real for readers of any persuasion.

All of the short stories in the collection are good horror stories. A few stand out as examples of the editor's description of horror: that it is involved with the erotic and that it is personal. In "The Sound of Weeping," Thomas S. Roche places his main character Quinn into a reality that begins to take on the fearsome characteristics of the zombie movie he is watching on TV. Quinn, living in his own fundamentalist, homophobic universe, is ravaged (or is he?) by the recently dead corpse of lovely young man. Roche's story is an excellent blend of the erotic and the horrific. "Hey Fairy!" by Edo Van Belkom, is a somewhat lighter piece that exemplifies how the authors of this collection put homophobia to its best use for horror fiction. A creature from the realm of faerie happens to inhabit the body of a gay man who encounters a few rabid homophobes who intend to bash his brains in. The faerie finds such behavior intolerable and gives his host the spunk and strength to deal with his attackers in a gory manner. By the end of the story, the reader doesn't know whether to feel congratulations for the ability for such vengeance or fright by the murderous beast now stalking the night. Caitlin R. Kiernan's "Skimblehanks (New Orleans, 1956)," the only lesbian story in the collection, puts the reader in mind of an old black and white gothic horror movie, *Hush Hush Sweet Charlotte* perhaps. As with older horror thrillers, the terror is all in the mind of the main character and the reader. Various events, both ordinary and scary, may or may not be connected. Terror, in this tale, is what readers make it. Bryers's "You Can't Always Get What You Want" will strike a chord, horrific or humorous, with fans of vampire fiction. The author takes tales of homoerotic male creatures of the night and gives them a swift kick with a vampire no fang-loving boy toy wants to meet.

effect. This does not make such fiction truly suitable for a horror anthology. The same applies to the few stories more akin to science fiction: "Love on a Stick," "If I Could See Lazarus Rising" and "Triangle." "What Are You Afraid Of" is merely academic mental masturbation. The stilted lesbian conversation of "Explanations Are Clear" (seemingly styled on the unbearable dialogue of the lesbian film *Claire of the Moon*) drives the reader to distraction. Overall, the issues of being gay take center stage and dilute any horrific elements in the stories.

A few stories do stand apart as having elements and content more conducive to a horror tale. In "Broken Canes" by Alexi Smart, two young girls who may be budding into baby dykes are the only witnesses to a local outcast's protracted death as the result of a motorcycle accident. The narrator of "The Man Who Picks The Chamomile," by Marc McLaughlan, must decide whether to remain with a controlling lover who grows healing chamomile or to die without this remedy. These stories have some success as horror tales because homosexuality and its attendant issues don't overwhelm the writing. They are simply decent horror stories with characters that happen to be gay.

Griffith and Pagel's collection fails as a horror anthology possibly because the editors have put their emphasis on bending the landscape of homosexuality when it is already skewed. Though homosexuality may be the norm for the editors, in everyday reality it is still often seen as alternative, weird, odd, and plainly not "normal." The writers manage to bend their stories to the point of skewing out anything horrific. The reader is never drawn into the terror and madness that the characters experience. Instead of personal terrors that the reader can relate to, we are witness to something akin to a ranting session with one's analyst, and the characters doing the ranting are annoying and need to get a clue and a life. Judging from the introduction, this reviewer wonders if the editors enjoy or are actually fans of horror fiction. Yes they can intellectualize and define, but do they honestly like a good scare? Probably not, given the academic and uninspired flavor of the collection as a whole.

By contrast, Michael Rowe's anthology *Queer Fear* is an intense, vibrant and downright scary collection of horror fiction. His introduction is as engrossing as the short stories. He reminisces about growing up knowing he was different from other boys and loving horror fiction. Rowe found that his fascination with scary stuff was viewed by society as an acceptable alternative for a boy who did not fit the athletic, heterosexual norm. His definition of horror is not academic speculation. Instead he relies on a more personal description to try to capture the nature of literature that terrifies. He remarks on the true horrors present in the everyday reality for gay and straight individuals. He also notes the connection between horror and the erotic:

Horror fiction incites the same response in the mainstream reading public as erotica does. Both of these "outlaw" genres deal with strong emotion, violence, and a lack of control that is uniquely human. The imagery is often violent . . . For its part, horror places the reader squarely in the middle of conflict, invites visceral response, and doesn't provide the "easy out" of an antiseptic, dispassionate, cerebral literary experience.

While *Queer Fear* is clearly a good horror anthology, *Bending the Landscape: Horror* may have its uses. It may be tame enough for fans of gay and lesbian fiction who have never ventured into the horror genre or who find horror novels and films too scary. Griffith and Pagel's work may also provide a useful entrée for horror fans into the realm of queer fiction. Homosexual sex is present in both works, but in *Horror* it is downplayed, more of a background detail that happens to come up simply because two characters are romantically involved. Homoeroticism is more vital in *Queer Fear*. Sex is part and parcel of what is terrifying. While Rowe's anthology would not qualify as a collection of horror erotica, it does merit close study by for those interested in the subject of sex and horror. *Queer Fear* is also worth the read for anyone looking for a good anthology of truly creepy horror fiction.

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