

# Portrait of the Horror Tale as a Young Adult Story

By June Pulliam

Noyes, Deborah, ed. *The Restless Dead: Ten Original Stories of the Supernatural*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2007. 253 p.

The 1974 publication of Robert Cormier's dark and insightful novel *The Chocolate War* marks the birth of what is known today as Young Adult (YA) literature, that species of fiction written for and marketed to teens. When he was writing *The Chocolate War*, Cormier didn't have a young adult audience in mind, and was taken aback by his publisher's decision to market his book to this demographic, since most people at the time thought of teen fiction as an inferior species of writing created for people who lacked the reading skills to appreciate fine literature. But the success of *The Chocolate War* emboldened publishers to market other high quality works of fiction to teens, and the genre, as a publishing category anyway, was born.

Over thirty years later, young adult fiction flourishes as a genre that boasts much well-written and sometimes cutting edge material, yet a prejudice against YA fiction still endures. Often, it is still viewed as material lacking literary merit, as something only brought into the classroom to develop the literacy skills of "reluctant readers." YA horror is doubly damned since horror is viewed as at best formulaic genre fiction, and at worst as a literature catering to the prurient interests of budding serial killers and sadists. Deborah Noyes' collection, *The Restless Dead*, is a work that undermines the opinions of detractors of both horror literature's and YA fiction.

Though this anthology is marketed to teens (Candlewick Press is a YA imprint), adults will also enjoy these stories, written by luminaries of both YA fiction and horror literature. Contributors include well-known YA authors M. T. Anderson (*Feed*), Annette Curtis Klause (*Blood and Chocolate*, *The Silver Kiss*) and Libba Bray (*A Great and Terrible Beauty*—a *New York Times Review of Books* bestseller), as well as Kelly Link, one of the editors of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror Series*. Link's comic story "The Wrong Grave" is the first of the collection. In a fit of grief, a teen hack poet rashly buries with his deceased girlfriend the only copies of his literary masterpieces. Six months later, the teen bard's ardor for his dead love has cooled, and he now regrets leaving the only copies of his poems in her cold embrace. So he is left with no other option but to go about the grisly business of retrieving them. Alas, he digs up the wrong grave and is punished for both his mistake and his callous attitude towards his dead flame when the grave's inhabitant will not obligingly remain in her coffin, but follows him everywhere to become his new clingy (and unattractively decomposing) girlfriend.

Chris Wooding's "The House and the Locket" pays homage to the 19<sup>th</sup> century ghost story. The young adult protagonist, a gentleman from a good family, is enjoined by his father to marry a worthy young woman and settle down, but the protagonist has that masculine horror of commitment so lamented by women in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Thus he spends his evenings drinking and whoring with his best friend, rather than in the wholesome company of his fiancé. After one such debauch, he walks home with his friend, and the two find themselves enshrouded in fog and pursued by an unseen assailant. Desperate to escape their pursuer, the pair seek shelter in an abandoned house haunted by creatures from another time. The terrors that the protagonist and his friend witness that night are reminiscent of those seen in the works of J. Sheridan Le Fanu or Oliver Onions, 19<sup>th</sup> century masters of the supernatural tale.

Holly Black's "The Poison Eaters" is similarly derivative of an earlier literary tradition, in this case, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter." In Black's narrative, a father has raised his three beautiful daughters to be literally poisonous to the touch. Nancy Etchemendy's "Honey in the Wound" recalls a time before penicillin, when infections easily carried away their victims.

Overall, this is a strong collection of stories, and many of the entries are of the quality found in something like *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* collection. I am in the habit of reading myself to sleep every night, and can honestly report that a few of the entries actually disturbed my sleep, which is no small accomplishment—given my usual reading material.

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