

# Hor-story Lessons

By June Pulliam

Little, Bentley. *The Vanishing*. New York: Signet, 2007. 386 p.

History is the operative term in Bentley Little's *The Vanishing*, as it is in his oeuvre in general. Little's post-modern horror exemplifies what Sigmund Freud described as the uncanny. In Freud's concept of the human mind, disturbing knowledge is evicted from the conscious mind, but it does not disappear permanently. Instead, this knowledge is merely repressed—still lurking in the nether regions of the unconscious like some sort of Lovecraftian monster.

Of course, the repressed never stays completely repressed. It resurfaces in numerous ways. It comes to us in our dreams, when the boundary between the conscious and unconscious mind is more fluid. In dreams, the repressed is costumed in an unrecognizable form so that we can deal with knowledge in a way that is not sufficiently disturbing to awaken us. In horror fiction, the repressed surfaces as the monster, that Other embodying all we fear and reject, but were once acquainted with, only now it is in a seemingly unrecognizable form. For example, Stephen King's Carrie White is monstrous not only because she uses her telekinetic powers to lay waste the town of Chamberlain, Maine, but because had circumstances been different, we could have been Carrie as well, the kid everyone picks on, the sacrificial lamb of the school whose loathsomeness embodies all of our worst insecurities about ourselves. So Carrie is despised not just because she is chunky, has pimples and her mama dresses her funny, but because her social awkwardness is *our* social awkwardness, which is usually mercifully forgiven by our peers. The repressed is the uncanny, "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar" but now appears as an unfamiliar double that nevertheless rings a bell. For Little, the uncanny is not personal, but cultural, spanning centuries and the consciousness of an entire nation.

Readers will recognize this instantly in *The Vanishing*. When several American multi-millionaires slaughter their families in ritualistic killings, leaving in their wakes bloody hieroglyphs smeared on the walls and suspiciously verdant flora, these events become the subject of journalistic speculation. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Brian Howells gets involved in the story in an unusual way: his mother receives a letter from Brian's father, who abandoned the family 20 years earlier, and the missive is also composed in the same indecipherable hieroglyphs found at the scene of the killings. Brian's investigation leads him to Carrie Daniels, a social worker with a client whose mentally disabled son has the face of a llama. Carrie is involved in an investigation of her own when she realizes that this boy's deformity is not a freak incident, but part of a larger phenomenon of children similarly misshapen so that they resemble possums and rhinos. When Carrie and Brian exchange notes, they come to understand that these things are more than random chance—instead, they have "stumbled onto history" in the sense that these things are the result of a long series of past events.

Indeed, Howells and Daniels have quite literally stumbled upon history, particularly the way Americans understand it. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James W. Loewen discusses what passes for the teaching of American history in the primary and secondary school system. Instead of presenting history as a field of inquiry into a set of complex issues with far reaching effects that have touched the present, it is taught as a series of dull but relatively uncontroversial facts that can be memorized by rote and regurgitated on standardized tests, effectively repressing knowledge of the past that is disturbing to the ruling classes. So it's not surprising that people end up on *The Tonight Show* as Jaywalking All-Stars unable to correctly give the dates of the Civil War or even pick out Adolf Hitler from a line-up, as the chances are fairly good that they were recipients of an education that failed to put these facts into a greater context that might give them sufficient meaning to be stored readily in their short term memories.

In Little's fictional world, knowledge of the past that is disturbing to the ruling classes has also been suppressed from the collective memory—and not passed on to the young through formal education. So when any of this knowledge resurfaces, it too has an uncanny quality to it. In this context, the history that Brian and Carrie learn about is not something even the best educated of us would have learned in books. It is instead completely irrational and monstrous. The homicidal billionaires are descendants of the robber barons of old who earned their money the old fashioned way—they took it through a combination of physical and legal coercion of people and a ruthless disregard for nature. Perhaps we have long suspected the violence at the source of this capital, but our national consciousness has disavowed this knowledge, cloaking the accumulations of the wealthy in an aura of merit demonstrated on an allegedly level playing field. According to Freud, “an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth.”<sup>1</sup> It is in this way that monsters emerge.

In *The Vanishing*, the descendants of the old time robber barons are literally haunted by the crimes of their ancestors, whose legacy includes a proclivity to savage others in perverse ways. For example, Lew Haskell, billionaire philanthropist who is so fanatical about eating only organic food that he raises much of what he consumes on his own estate, keeps a stable of lactating illegal migrant women who are milked to provide him with dairy products. The symbolism of exploitation here is fairly obvious.

Alas, while this novel begins with an interesting premise, it fails to deliver. About halfway through, when Little begins to reveal the actual source of the robber barons' madness, the plot begins getting bogged down with details about otherworldly creatures whose love of abomination makes them fairly boring. I just got the sense that Little didn't really know how to end this novel, and he seemed to be verging a little too closely to “scary lamp monster” territory in my humble opinion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny" in *The Uncanny*. David McLintock, translator. New York: Penguin, 2003. p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> Fans of *Family Guy* will remember a scene from one episode where Stephen King is in his publisher's office pitching his newest book. It's painfully obvious that King has no new idea to pitch, but that he has become so successful that he could put his name on the phone book and market it as a best seller. Thus, when King's publisher asks the writer about his newest idea for a novel, he does some quick thinking and seizes an office lamp as a prop for explaining about "the scary lamp monster." The publisher is unimpressed, but also realizes that King could put his name on the latest edition of the phone book and have a best seller, so he resignedly pushes a pile of cash towards the author, sealing the deal for the "scary lamp monster" book.