

# Ordinary Horror Makes For an Extraordinary Read

By June Pulliam

Ellen Datlow, Kelly Link and Gavin Grant, eds. *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Twentieth Annual Collection*. New York: St. Martin's, 2007. 469 p.

Aficionados of the horror genre owe it to themselves to pick up a copy of the twentieth annual *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Ever since the series has been informed by Datlow's editorship, it has become a retrospective of the finest horror (and fantasy). I've reviewed this collection for a number of years, and am coming to appreciate Datlow's particular skill as an editor. In particular I am impressed with her ability to bring together consistently high quality work both by well-known authors of the genre, as well as by writers who are more mainstream. The result is an anthology of writing that never adheres to the generic conventions of horror or fantasy, but challenges these conventions and redefines them. Of course, Link and Grant do an equally excellent job of selecting fantasy for inclusion in this anthology, but since I am writing this review for our humble zine, and I am partial to horror, I will confine my comments to Datlow's work and the stories she has selected.

Standout stories in this year's collection include Joyce Carol Oates's "Landfill" and Glen Hirschberg's "The Muldoon." The title place of "Landfill" refers to the site where Hector Campos, Jr.'s battered and badly decomposed body is found, mouth filled with trash. Hector, a college freshman, has come to this humiliating end not due to any supernatural agency, but due to an all too mundane series of events involving alcohol and fraternity parties. Here, Oates is particularly deft at exploring the horror of daily life on a personal level. The pain that Hector's parents suffer in the month before their missing son is located is interspersed with the quotidian intrusions of daily life which seem obscenely out of place in the lives of people who we image should be absolutely consumed with grief.

"The Muldoon" is a convoluted Jewish ghost story about a type of wraith that clings "to every last vestige of life, no matter how painful or beset by betrayal, because only in life—this life—is there any possibility of pleasure or fulfillment or even release." The narrator remembers a night from her childhood when she and her family came to stay with her grandmother for her grandfather's funeral, and she learned about aspects of the deceased that were heretofore unknown to her. When she and her brother happen upon some of her grandfather's things, they discover a plaque from the Knights of Labor honoring him as "a Muldoon, no mistake" who takes care of his own. Before the night is over they come to understand the terrible weight of this quality when they learn about what happened to their two ailing great-grandmothers who were cared for at home by their grandparents until they died. While Hirschberg employs the supernatural in his story, the events of daily life are sufficiently horrifying to render this element redundant. As always, contributors to this collection know their craft, and the reader who gave many of these stories a second or third reading would be rewarded by a greater appreciation of

the writers' poetic use of language in which they frame their narrative like a carefully constructed photograph.

As always, this year's collection contains the usual features: a summation of the year in horror written by Datlow, a summation of the year in fantasy written by Link and Grant, as well as lengthy essays about the year's graphic novels, music, and other media that treat the fantastic. Scholars and librarians tasked with maintaining collections will find these essays particularly helpful since they enumerate new publications in the genre in ways that are not reproduced elsewhere. For over a decade now, *Books In Print* has not reliably identified new publications in fantasy and horror, and even running a search on amazon.com does not bring back results that appreciate the depth of these genres. However, since these essays are ultimately lists, I would like to request that next year, the editors and the publishers *not* print them in paragraph form, which makes it very difficult for the people using these lists to extract information.

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