

Creatures: Thirty Years of Monsters

edited by

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Introduction

It's not just that we live in a culture of monsters—that Frankenstein's monster, say, shuffles from screen to graphic novel to breakfast cereal—but that we have always lived in a culture of monsters. Go back to Beowulf, and Grendel strips the flesh from a hapless warrior's bones with his hideous teeth. Go back further, to the Book of Job, and the God who speaks to Job from the whirlwind boasts of having subdued and broken Leviathan, bridling the vast beast through its smoking nostrils. Go back still further, to Egypt's Middle Kingdom, and the flint-headed Apep coils just below the horizon, his scaly jaws open wide to threaten the sun. And so on: from the ancient Chinese Xian Tian, whose giant, headless body shakes its sword and rattles its shield, to the contemporary Chupacabra, which stalks the border between Mexico and the United States, monsters are among the building blocks of our cultures, a legacy to accompany the languages we learn. We meet them in a variety of venues, from old movies rerun on TV to books read under the blanket by flashlight, from the bright panels of comic books to stories passed around the playground.

It should come as no surprise, then, how many monsters are familiar to us. Long before we have contemplated Godzilla as a trope for Japanese trauma over the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we hear the great reptile's metallic roar. Before we have read Frankenstein's monster as Mary Shelley's grief over her lost daughter, we see the pattern of stitches that hold the artificial man's body together. We experience our monsters first in all their strange and striking particularity, as the host of details that assembles into them. Only later do we see them as vessels fit for carrying a weight of meaning, as something other than literal. Perhaps this explains some of their continuing power, because, no matter how well we may think we

explain them, they hail from a time in our lives when we did not know not to take them at face value.

No doubt, the current round of monster narratives that this anthology considers is indebted to the success of Stephen King's fiction. Several of the stories in his first collection, *Night Shift* (1978), employ monsters in a serious and frightening way, a practice his short novel, *The Mist* (1980), and longer novel, *It* (1986), solidify. At the same time, King follows in a line of American writers of the fantastic, reaching back through Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, and Theodore Sturgeon to H.P. Lovecraft and beyond. In "The Father Thing" (1954), "The Fog-Horn" (1951), "It" (1940), and *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), these writers place monsters center-stage in their fiction. In addition, British counterparts such as John Wyndham and E.F. Benson have brought their sensibilities to bear on the topic, while Franz Kafka, one of the giants of twentieth-century European literature, rests his career on a long story about a salesman who is metamorphosed into a monstrous insect. If there is one thing this range of fictions has in common, it is the decision to place the monster in a contemporary, realistically-portrayed setting, an imaginary toad in a real garden.

Frequently, the effect of such a move is comic, as is the case with several of the stories collected in the first section of this book. Joe R. Lansdale's "Godzilla's Twelve-Step Program" imagines the great monster and his fellows laboring to resist their destructive tendencies; while Jeffrey Ford's "After Moreau" retells and rewrites H.G. Wells's *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) from the point of view of one of the doctor's lesser-known creations, *Hippopotamus Man*; and Michael Kelly's "Kraken" presents the story of what might be called a were-kraken. However humorous their premises, each of these stories swerves, sometimes unexpectedly, towards the dark. In this, they are of a piece with the section's other selections. Both Jim Shepard's "The

Creature from the Black Lagoon” and Alaya Dawn Johnson’s “Among Their Bright Eyes” present monstrous narrators who are shot through with loneliness and melancholy, which their acts of often shocking violence do little to assuage. The monsters in Christopher Golden’s breakneck “Under Cover of the Night” and Carrie Laben’s offbeat “Underneath Me, Steady Air” are strange, savage entities antithetical to the humans they encounter; in this, they achieve something of the quality of the things that used to scrape the floor under our beds, to jangle the hangers in our closets. Yet in Golden and Laben’s stories, the monsters the characters confront are not completely unknown; whether from folklore or literary history, the protagonists are able to identify them.

It is a critical commonplace—cliché, even—to see the monster as the embodiment of the other. Certainly there are enough stories for which this is the case to allow this interpretation to stand. But the seven stories which open this anthology suggest an additional possibility: that what might be most frightening is that we recognize, whether from a movie watched from between fingers, or a story that made our hearts pound, or from a toy that used to stare across the bedroom at us.