

Word & Vision: The Faces of Horror

By Tricia Sparks,

With contributions from Dustin Sparks

Horror, it captures the mind and causes the imagination to run wild. The undisputed king of Halloween and its festivities is horror. It brings to mind various monstrous images such as Mary Shelly's Frankenstein, werewolves, witches, ghosts, and goblins, and the ever-popular vampire. Whether in the celebrated form of Bram Stoker's Dracula or the modern twists such as HBO's newest series "True Blood," they still hold captive the minds of adult and child alike. For others, horror is embodied by crazed killers such as Freddy Kruger, Jason Vorheese, or even the more recent killer Jigsaw. Some are on the written page, while others are on the big screen.

The modern horror flick brings to mind a mass of severed limbs, mad murderers, and blood spatter. Until recently, this description colored my view of the genre as a whole, from paper to the silver screen. However, I've recently re-evaluated my stand on horror, thanks to reading several books and watching a few of the older horror films.

Horror on screen is a big business; at least 62 of the films that were made in 2008 have been horror films. It is one of the few genres where there have even been films written to challenge the writers of their craft to grow and change. The Scream series dared to point out to the writers as a whole that horror on the screen had become predictable in that there was a clear formula that could be observed and unspoken rules within a film that unless followed would result in character death. As a result some writers have changed the elements and taken the writing in new directions.

Like most things both book and film have their similarities and their differences. One of the main similarities is that both film and novel alike use setting and character to draw reader or viewer deeper into the tale they weave. They also build the tension of the piece by compressing time as the story grows closer to its climax. Both book and film make the time passing shorter to where a moment can stand still but for the reader or viewer it feels like one huge blur. The main similarity though is in that despite this difference in presentation be it written page or film, horror's purpose is to entertain.

The differences between film and novel are telling. As mentioned earlier horror in film use shock and gore to scare its fans but the novels are vastly different in that they play more in the realm of the mind. Psychological and dark, they play upon our fears as the movies do but at the same time look at real life issues through the guise of strange in some cases supernatural imagery. Even the focus of the plot is different in that with film of late the viewer is shown an endless cycle of death and gore, the killer falls, only to rise again.

In the novels there is a different format. The story follows ordinary individuals in extraordinary or extreme situations. As these characters go through the events the writer keeps the readers as close to those individuals as possible. Staying in their heads and following their

actions as they work through the events. A horror novel in truth more closely resembles that of a film thriller than the current slasher films being produced.

Another interesting thing that can be found in horror is that there are a few films that have managed to bridge that gap between fill and novel. One is that of the Saw series. It has the death and gore frequently appearing in film as well as the killer falling only to come back but it also plays in the mental and psychological area as found in the horror novel. It even has the traditional twist ending where the hero comes to realize that all is not right with the world and despite his best efforts he's won and yet still managed to lose. All of which play into a good traditionally written horror.

Both Film and novel also have certain advantages and disadvantages. One of the main advantages of film over book is that of the soundtrack. Films have the ability to include sound which a novel is lacking. In a book you can describe sound but this has limitations. Not everyone hears the same sound in their heads, yet the movies give the viewers a definitive sound track that is unique and memorable. For those who follow horror films they'll hear a piece and know immediately it's connected to a specific film. Those pieces are iconic, and some of them are so renowned that people who haven't watched the movies know them.

A major advantage in novel is that the writer can take you more easily into a characters head we as readers can be privy to their private thoughts in film this doesn't work so well it either comes out as exposition or must be cut all together. The main advantage they share is that a well written horror is shaped by creativity and when a writer is able to capture their audiences' imagination there's no end to the possibilities of what a story can accomplish

Despite the many difference between film and novel one thing is clear. As writers and readers alike the scariest weapon we hold is our minds.