The Horror Genre
How Do You React?
Why do I like horror?

Excellent question, although I’m not entirely sure how to respond to it. Your patrons might not, either. This question could apply to anyone in relation to any particular genre, actually. Most people, when asked why they like what they like, are at a loss for an explanation.

In my case, I’ll just say odd wiring from birth. Which is not to say that horror fans in general are odd—they’re not. I’m just drawn to terrifying, horrible, awful, creepy, nasty things. As long as they’re in books or movies. In real life, not so much (although I do watch an awful lot of the ID channel, so there’s that. And I really like spiders. A lot. And rats. And bats. And the monster in my closet).
Horror fans are used to being judged in a negative light. In fact, you may find your patron horror fan is a bit on the defensive when asking for a recommendation in the genre. Because:

- If you like horror, you must be a serial killer, right? (Nope, just a cereal killer)
- If you like horror, you must be weird. And you probably keep dead squirrels under your pillow (Nope)
- If you like horror, you probably dress like a vampire on your days off (Nope. Personally, I dress like the reclusive, introverted writer of horror that I am, i.e. jeans and T-shirt)
- I’m certainly not saying you judge anyone by his or her genre preferences, but I’ve encountered some of these things myself and just want to throw out there that your patrons who are horror fans may have some defense mechanisms up. No one bats an eye when a patron wants a book by, say, James Patterson, but if a patron wants a book about alien zombies who eat small children and who are ultimately defeated by a giant rat god, well, there could be some judginess there. Don’t do it. Alien zombies, giant rat gods, and their fans need love, too
So What is Horror?

- According to dictionary.com: an overwhelming and painful feeling caused by something frightfully shocking, terrifying, or revolting; a shuddering fear. Anything that causes such a feeling
- So the next question is: why would anyone want such a feeling?
- Although there’s no simple answer and no one particular answer, at least part of the reason is to encounter an experience without actually having the experience. In other words, you can enter a haunted house vicariously rather than literally
- Entertainment, whether in the form of books, movies, or video games, is a way to escape the world we live in, at least for the time being. Horror fans prefer their escapes to be along darker paths
- For us as librarians, the question of why a patron wants a book or movie in the horror genre is far less of an issue (as in not one at all) than how we put the right book or movie into his or her hands
- So how do we do that? Because the fan of *Dracula* (in any of its forms) is not necessarily the fan of *Hellraiser* (yes, it was a book first)
Elements of Horror

- Fear
- Surprise
- Mystery
- Gore—maybe
- Dark atmosphere
- Creeping dread
- Unease

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Horror Subgenres

- Terror
- Quiet horror (Tom Piccirilli, Ania Ahlborn)
- Gothic horror (Joyce Carol Oates, Mary Shelley)
- Realistic horror (Jack Ketchum, Richard Laymon, Peter Benchley)
- Splatterpunk (John Skip)
- Supernatural (Joe Hill, Shirley Jackson, M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood)
- Psychological (Bill Pronzini)
- Lovecraftian (umm, Lovecraft...Derleth, and many more)
- Noir (John D. MacDonald, Tom Piccirilli)
- Demonic (William Peter Blatty, Dennis Wheatley)
- Weird (Jeff Vandermeer)
- Comedic (Jeff Strand, David Wong)
But, wait, You Ask. Aren't You Forgetting Something? Or Someone?

Like this guy:
Because patrons who come looking for horror won’t need to be directed to him

Because Stephen King is far more than horror, and unless you’ve read a great majority of his works, you may recommend a book that isn’t actually horror (*Different Seasons*, *Blaze*, *Dolores Claiborne*, *The Colorado Kid*, *The Dead Zone*, *Sleeping Beauties*, *Eyes of the Dragon*, *Joyland*, . . .)

Because Stephen King fans are going to find their way to his books without your help. In fact, they likely already have

And, if Stephen King is the only author in your readers’ advisory horror arsenal, you’re in trouble

But not for long, because you’re here today and I’m here to get you out of that trouble
Regardless of genre, most of the questions you ask for RA are the same:

- Remember, reading is an experience and you need to get in touch with what the patron is looking to experience
- Know your read-alikes
- Know authors you haven’t read—because, let’s face it, you can’t nor do you want to read everything
- Remember that you’re recommending something the patron would like, which does not necessarily coincide with what you like—bonus if it does. But even so, I always tell patrons when I recommend a book I like that I think matches what they’re looking for that they are under no obligation to like it too and I won’t be offended if they don’t. Nor will I be if they decide to leave it on the shelf
- Talk about books with all of your patrons, regardless of their preferred genres. That will help you:
  - Know what your patrons like
  - Get opinions and free “reviews,” which will help you recommend books
  - Keep abreast of book trends
  - Keep you connected to your patrons, which, if I had to say what was the key to success as a librarian, that would be it
Depending on your collection, you may not have a lot of horror. Maybe even just a few titles. This is where crossover comes in.

Because very few books fit squarely into one particular genre.

The one rule of RA—in my ‘book,’ anyway, is to not let a patron go bookless. Even if you have to order something through ILL.
Remember the emotions that horror evokes? Try to get at which emotion(s) the patron is seeking—what’s the experience they’re looking for?

Also, are they looking for a page-turner or something that’s more of a slow-burn?
Page turners that will horrify:

*Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn

*Red Dragon* and the rest of the Hannibal Lecter series by Thomas Harris

*The Tormenter* by Bill Pronzini

*Behind Closed Doors* by B.A. Paris

*Before I Go to Sleep* by S.J. Watson

*Night Film* by Marisha Pessl

*The House Next Door* by Anne Rivers Siddons

(Wait! Anne Rivers Siddons? Yep)
They’ll Sneak Up on You

Books that will haunt the reader (and not necessarily because of ghosts)—quiet horror:

*Universal Harvester* by John Darnielle
*Grief Cottage* by Gail Godwin
*Shadowbahn* by Steve Erickson
*The Choir of Ill Children* by Tom Piccirilli
*Manhattan Ghost Story* by T.M. Wright
*A Head Full of Ghosts* by Paul Tremblay
What the bleep is that? Paranormal horror:

* NOS4A2 by Joe Hill
* Summer of Night by Dan Simmons
* Within These Walls by Ania Ahlborn
* Firefly Rain by Richard Dansky
* Darkness Demands by Simon Clark
* You Come When I Call You by Douglas Clegg
* The Servants by Michael Marshall Smith
* Wildwood Road by Christopher Golden
Gosh, That’s Really Weird

What just happened? Reading the Weird:

*The Southern Reach Trilogy* by Jeff Vandermeer

Almost anything by Simon Strantzas, editor of *Year’s Best Weird Fiction*

Robert Aickman

*The Doll Who Ate His Mother* by Ramsey Campbell

Almost anything by China Mieville
Gothic Tales:

- *Waking the Moon* by Elizabeth Hand
- *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson
- *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* by Seanan McGuire
- *Mudwoman* by Joyce Carol Oates
- *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë
- *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole
- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
Cosmic, or Lovecraftian, Horror:
  Anything in the Cthulhu Mythos by H.P. Lovecraft or August Derleth
  *The Ballad of Black Tom* by Victor LaValle
  *Reanimatrix* by Pete Rawlik
  *The King in Yellow* by Robert W. Chambers
  *The Croning* by Laird Barron
Realistic horror, ripped from the headlines:

*Red, The Lost, The Girl Next Door, Cover* by Jack Ketchum

*Among the Missing, The Lake, No Sanctuary* by Richard Laymon

💀💀💀💀 Please note that anything by either of these authors is extremely disturbing. Not for the faint-of-heart
Suspense with a horrific edge. In other words, crossover appeal:

*Cape Fear* by John D. MacDonald

*The Midnight Road* by Tom Piccirilli

*Chasing the Dead* by Joe Schreiber

*Jaws* by Peter Benchley

*Riptide* by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child

*Three Weeks to Say Goodbye* by C.J. Box

*Roadside Crosses* by Jeffrey Deaver (most of Deaver, actually)

*Creepers* by David Morrell
The last few years have seen a serious uptick in horror for middle grade and young adult readers. And don’t forget the crossover appeal of YA fiction; adults like it, too.
Middle Grade Horror

*The Night Gardener* by Jonathan Auxier
*Doll Bones* by Holly Black
*Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn
*Coraline* by Neil Gaiman
*Thornhill* by Pam Smy
*Midnight Library* series
*Scream Street* series
Young Adult Horror

Glory O’Brien’s History of the Future by A.S. King
As Simple as Snow by Gregory Galloway
The Riverman  by Aaron Starmer
What Happened to Cass McBride by Gail Giles
The Body of Christopher Creed by Carol Plum-Ucci
The Girl from the Well by Rin Chupeco
In the Shadow of Blackbirds by Cat Winters
Being Dead by Vivian Vande Velde
Cuckoo Song by Frances Hardinge
Getting Graphic

iZombie by Chris Roberson and Michael Allred
Locke & Key by Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez
Monstress by Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda
Wet Moon by Sophie Campbell (older editions under Ross Campbell)
Freaks of the Heartland by Steve Niles and Greg Ruth
Horror Genre Staples

*The Year’s Best Dark Fantasy and Horror* edited by Paula Guran

*The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* edited by Stephen Jones

*The Best Horror of the Year* edited by Ellen Datlow

All short story collections, of course, but these editors are giants of the field. If they put something in one of these collections, it’s the real deal. These are a good jumping-off point, as most of the authors included have written novels as well (although not all, to be sure)
Horror and its subgenres—like all genres—are fuzzy. They’re more marketing categories than anything else.

The real question is what your patrons are looking for. Give them a few choices and let them decide.

Don’t rule out short story collections—some of the best work in the genre—and in any genre—is being (and has been done) in short form.
I love to discuss books—especially horror—so I welcome questions via email or phone

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