

SCIENCE FICTION THAT SCARS CHILDREN

I did not suffer from over-protective parents. One cold November weekend during my childhood, they took me to see *Konga*, a low-budget horror movie set in London about a mad scientist and a giant rampaging ape. My tiny New England town was hosting a horror film series: for 25 cents, this King Kong rip-off could be seen in the auditorium of my elementary school—the only venue large enough to hold events of any significant size. I was completely traumatized by the movie and demanded a nightlight at bedtime. My parents obliged, and I'm certain they would have kept that nightlight burning for the next two weeks if necessary. Unfortunately, a couple of evenings later we were among the thirty million people plunged into darkness by the Great Northeast Blackout of 1965. I still think of that as the longest and perhaps the most terrifying night of my life.

I'm not sure if that's why I've always been a wimp when it comes to horror, whether it's presented in movies or literature. There's a good chance I was destined for my squeamishness. I had always stayed out of the TV room when my family watched horror flicks. I was so frightened by the dinosaurs that I couldn't sit through my dad's readings of the Edgar Rice Burroughs's Pellucidar series. I left the room so often during his rendition of John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?" that I only remember snatches of Campbell's story about a protean alien thing wreaking havoc on an intrepid band of Antarctic explorers.

One terrifying tale that I did manage to sit through was Arthur C. Clarke's "A Walk in the Dark." That story, which leaves so much to the reader's imagination, probably scarred me for life. I can still hear the rattle of those monstrous claws whenever I'm out walking alone at

night. Convinced that Clarke was a horror writer, it was ten years before I found the courage to read any of his other stories and novels.

My grandfather managed to add to my fears by retelling Richard Matheson's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. After that, I was sure that if I went into the basement alone I was bound to encounter a black widow spider. A daunting thought even if I wasn't shrinking.

Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt"—a story about scary children and their beleaguered parents—was a classic horror tale from the Golden Age of Science Fiction that I discovered on my own. I remember reading the tale as a young girl, and then rereading it to be sure I'd gotten the ending right. I had not previously encountered such horrible children and wasn't quite certain that kids could behave so badly. It took me a couple of reads to be certain that yes, the story had played out exactly as I'd originally thought it had.

Although I managed to avoid most horror movies, I was still drawn to some terrifying works of literature like a moth to a flame. As a young woman, I must have read George R.R. Martin's Hugo and Nebula-award-winning novelette "Sandkings" five or six times. Not because I didn't get it—I did. But each subsequent reading gave me the mesmerizing frisson of fear that I'd felt the first time through the tale.

In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King says, "I recognize terror as the finest emotion . . . and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find that I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud." I really don't like the slice and dice approach to fiction, but there are stories that render pain so exquisitely I sometimes find that I just can't turn away. Paolo Bacigalupi's tale

about the depraved future that fosters "The Fluted Girl" is one of those brutal stories that have left indelible marks on me. I let my own daughter read the tale when she was twelve, and while she now loves all of Paolo's work, she says she's never quite recovered from the experience.

The range of emotions discussed by King and pervasive in the stories that disrupted my childhood can be found in some of the tales published in *Asimov's* over the years. The magazine has never been much of a home for horror, but dark stories do slip into our pages from time to time. Mike Resnick, Lucius Shepard, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Kit Reed have given us monsters. S.P. Somtow has twisted the scalpel far more skillfully than any maniac with a chainsaw. S.N. Dyer, Connie Willis, Esther M. Friesner, and Cherry Wilder have all found ways to disturb my dreams with haunting tales of stolen lives and restless spirits. We've had enough supernatural stories to fill anthologies about vampires, werewolves, and ghosts.

I still read horror sparingly and I usu-

ally pass on tales of the occult submitted here. *Asimov's* is primarily a science fiction magazine, after all. My favorite tales of terror are psychological SF stories like Chris Beckett's "Day 29," where both the reader and the main character aren't exactly sure about what he's done and what he will do next, but we have a pretty bad idea. Yet there has always been a little leeway for fantasy and the outré in *Asimov's*. Our annual slightly spooky October/November issue leaves the door cracked open just enough for ghosts and other supernatural creatures to creep in.

Another parent might have been more protective of their children's reading and viewing encounters. Someone else might wonder at my dad's choices for bedtime reading, but children are resilient. I may not have developed the taste for horror that my father had, but my wounds gave me some appreciation for the thrill of being frightened. Just don't expect me to be the one who investigates the noise in the basement.

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