Proposal for *Gothic Realities: The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture*
L. Andrew Cooper, Ph.D.

**Book Title:** *Gothic Realities: The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture*

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**Purpose and Argument**

Horror fiction has been immensely popular since the first “Gothic” novel appeared in the eighteenth century, but critics have almost universally dismissed it as contemptible and even dangerous. Why? Many critics claim that horror stories create real-world horrors, and their condemnations aim to control this threat. *Gothic Realities* examines the horrific agency that critics have granted the horror genre for more than two centuries, identifying the extent to which Gothic fictions have the power to spawn Gothic realities.

**Target Markets/Audiences**

1. **Literary scholars.** *Gothic Realities* provides interpretations and historical contexts for literary texts from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and from England, Ireland, and the United States. It discusses well-known authors such as Mary Shelley and Oscar Wilde as well as under-read figures such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Charlotte Riddell. It could therefore appeal to literary scholars of many periods, nationalities, and authors.

2. **Media and pop culture scholars.** This book also discusses a significant number of films and gives brief attention to Gothic elements in music and video games. Scholars interested in horror films will find a history that demonstrates the genre’s foundation in literature while treating film as an equally important form of art.

3. **Graduate and undergraduate students.** *Gothic Realities* contextualizes and explains the theories that underpin its arguments, and it provides enough orienting information about storylines and historical trends to make the work accessible to readers unfamiliar with literary criticism and the Gothic. The work’s breadth makes it appropriate for many different types of courses on literature and/or film.

4. **Fans.** Many fans of the horror genre are avid readers, and since this book discusses Stephen King and Wes Craven alongside the classics, some readers might just pick it up for fun.

**Market Position**

Over the last three decades, a great deal has been written about the Gothic. Quite a few books have traced the development of the genre since the eighteenth century—including *Knowing Fear* by Jason Colavito (McFarland, 2008)—but very few focus on the genre’s historical impact. In fact, the only book the author knows that has a similar premise is Martin Tropp’s *Images of...*
Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture (McFarland, 1990). The proposed book’s subtitle, The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture, acknowledges Tropp’s strong influence on the dissertation that inspired it, but Gothic Realities ultimately covers a broader historical range and explores horror fiction not as something readers use to make sense of their worlds but as something that might actually have helped to create them. In doing so, it addresses a number of issues that have been central in Gothic criticism (especially Gothic sexuality, a topic at the centers of early works by Eve Sedgwick and Judith Halberstam) while also paying attention to significant but neglected issues such as the relationship between fictional and “true” ghost stories. Gothic Realities therefore marks a different direction for an established field, contributing to ongoing conversations while breaking ground for further research.

Annotated Table of Contents

Introduction: Bad Influences and Gothic Realities

For centuries, outraged pundits and parents have accused scary stories of making the world a scary place. Citing examples of crimes patterned on fictional models, these people argue that horror fictions cause real-world horrors. The introduction grants that strong relationships do exist between horror fiction and reality—this book is all about those relationships—but it provides a theoretical foundation for understanding why fiction can’t be responsible for real-world events.

Part One: Gothic Threats

1. The Threat in the Gothic’s Foundation: From John Locke to Horace Walpole
   Self-proclaimed “Gothic” fiction began in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, which pleased critics when they thought it was manuscript recovered from medieval times but horrified them when they learned that it was a contemporary production. This chapter argues that critics’ outrage over Walpole’s literary experiment stemmed from their internalization of philosophical principles from the works of John Locke and David Hume, principles that frame human minds and behaviors as products of environmental influences. Eighteenth-century critics expected contemporary literary works, environmental influences par excellence, to model good behavior. The tradition that Walpole started did the opposite, marking the Gothic as inherently antagonistic to virtue and social stability.

2. The Role of Gothic Threats in the Critical Evaluation of The Monk and The Mysteries of Udolpho
   This chapter examines how the critical reception of two of the eighteenth century’s most famous Gothic novels exemplifies critics’ understanding of Gothic threats: Matthew Lewis’s The Monk seemed to do everything possible to corrupt readers, and Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho seemed to counteract its genre’s tendencies and thus foster a virtuous readership. Critics therefore excoriated Lewis and beatified Radcliffe. The terms of critics’ pronouncements provide a sort of checklist for the threats the Gothic poses: the Gothic threatens to warp the young, subvert gender norms, inspire heretical beliefs in the supernatural, and undermine the established social order. The rest of Gothic Realities explores how the Gothic has indeed been involved in each of these pernicious activities.
Part Two: Gothic Sexualities

3. Pathological Reproduction: The Emergence of Homosexuality through 19th-Century Gothic Fiction

Literary historians have demonstrated that the prosecution of Oscar Wilde in 1895 for same-sex sexual offenses played a pivotal part in the emergence of the category “homosexual” as we understand it today. Considering the role of Wilde’s Gothic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* during Wilde’s trials, this chapter explores how the Gothic trope of pathological reproduction, which depicts often unspecified illicit sexuality as a monstrous contagion, contributed to the belief that homosexuality is a disease that gays and lesbians spread through monstrous recruiting practices. Tracing pathological reproduction through *Frankenstein*, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Carmilla*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, this chapter demonstrates not that the Gothic is in some ways homosexual (a common claim) but that the homosexual is in a crucial way Gothic.

4. Romps in the Closet: The Persistence of 19th-Century Notions in Contemporary Pop Culture

Though the association between non-normative sexuality and Gothic monstrosity is perhaps easiest to see in the anti-gay rhetoric spewed by groups such as the Traditional Values Coalition, the association is actually ubiquitous, even in texts understood to be gay-friendly. For example, the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, praised by some for progressively including a lesbian as a major character, nevertheless links homosexuals to evil werewolves and witches. Perhaps more interestingly, the horror films of David DeCoteau, embraced by queer communities for their homoeroticism, continue the 19th-century tradition of depicting characters as heterosexuals tainted by monstrosities that just happen to involve them in homoerotic circumstances. These films don’t just repeat the formula homosexual = monster—they revel in it, turning a once-shameful association into a site of pleasure.

Part Three: Gothic Ghosts

5. Ghost Stories and Ghostly Belief: Conventional Horrors that Make Good Truths

To earn their readers’ beliefs, “true” ghost stories have to include elements that readers recognize as ghostly, and what readers are most likely to recognize are the elements they’ve seen in ghost fictions. This chapter shows how the language of ghost fictions informs reports and perceptions of ghosts by Spiritualists, ghost hunters, and parapsychologists. By providing a language to describe supernatural experiences, the fictions of Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Algernon Blackwood, Shirley Jackson, and many less well-known writers help to define the “real” ghost. The resulting similarities between fact and fiction help to convert skeptics into believers, and their conversions threaten not only to create more believers in ghosts but also, according to some, more ghosts.

6. Ghost Epistemology: Five or Six Ways to Haunt the Senses

In cultures where authoritative claims about reality require the support of empirical data, a thing’s status as reality often depends on whether that thing appears to the senses. By giving readers language to describe supernatural experiences, ghost fictions also create an epistemological framework within which people can legitimately hear, see, touch, and smell ghosts. They even help to define the phenomenon named by M. Night Shyamalan’s film *The
Sixth Sense, a capacity that stretches the boundaries of empiricism. This chapter examines dozens of stories in print and film that provide the parameters for sensing real ghosts.

Part Four: Gothic Violence

7. Fictions that Kill: Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Stephen King’s Only Out-of-Print Novel
Recent studies have debunked the notion that the teenagers who killed 13 people at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999 were relatively normal but mistreated “Goth” kids who responded to bullying with murder. Nevertheless, the horrors at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and other schools have so much in common with Gothic elements in music, video games, literature, and film that contemporary critics and pundits continue to decry the dangers the Gothic poses to young people and to social order. This chapter takes a closer look at the claims about a causal link between horrific stories and horrific realities that arise again and again in debates about media violence. The chapter critiques the media-blaming rhetoric that, despite its flaws, managed to convince Stephen King that he should take his novel Rage—about a teenager who brings a gun to school—out of circulation because it seems to have spawned real-world copycats.

Like Rage, the films Natural Born Killers and Scream have been accused of inspiring real-life crimes. These films, as well as many of the others most frequently blamed for causing real-world horror, share a kind of self-consciousness that sets them apart from other horror films. Indeed, Natural Born Killers and Scream are in many ways about the relationship between media violence and real-world violence. These films, as well as the condemnations they’ve inspired, ultimately demonstrate that what people fear is not the films’ causal potential but the knowledge the films impart. The Gothic’s detractors assume that ignorance of violence could save the world from violence, and the films they hate most are the ones that critique the valorization of ignorance. A recent trend in horror films, dubbed “torture porn” by David Edelstein, is perhaps most threatening not because the films are gory but because their fixation on torture critiques the façade of ignorance that Americans strive to maintain about their own violent foreign policy.

About the Author
L. Andrew Cooper holds a Ph.D. from Princeton University, where he did research on horror fiction and film. He is now finishing his fourth year teaching in Georgia Tech's School of Literature, Communication, and Culture, where he serves as Coordinator of the Writing and Communication Program. At Georgia Tech he has taught several classes focusing on horror fiction and film and has published a number of articles, including a version of the second chapter of this book, which appeared in Gothic Studies in 2006.