



Best New Horror 20

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This annual collection of exceptional horror and dark fantasy fiction stories is the essential must-have for horror buffs. The 20th edition of this showcase of horror includes a comprehensive overview of international selections, an impressively researched necrology, and a list of indispensable contact addresses for the dedicated horror fan and aspiring writer of true horror.

Best New Horror 20 Details

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From Reader Review Best New Horror 20 for online ebook

Katie Cat Books says

A great collection of read-in-the-dark horror stories from many well-known authors (Stephen King) and some author you don't know, and should check out!

Pacing: Most of the stories are short-you can read the whole thing in one sitting. Others are longer and have breaks to stop at, and you'll be looking forward to the next time you pick the book up.

Frame: dark and stormy, ghostly, other-worldly, these all describe the stories included in this collection. A few whimsical, but mostly chilling, a good variety of storytelling.

Check it out, even just for the Stephen King!

Megan says

Not the strongest collection in this series, with more forgettable entries than usual and King's first contribution here an unfortunately weak one. Brian Lumley's "The Place of Waiting" was absolutely painful to slog through. It did have some high points, with Pinckney Benedict's "The Beginnings of Sorrow" standing out strongly as one of the better pieces, and a surprising one, but overall not quite the quality I've come to expect from this series.

Shawn says

Another one down - the "Year In" and "Necrology" this time are the usual (as I've said I actually find myself enjoying them more with each edition, and actually reading them - YMMV) with the "soapbox" this time reserved for musing on how few anthology series have ever lasted 20 years. Jones has earned a right to crow...

Without having much to say about that, then, let me use this space instead to gripe about something else. Story introductions - I'm sorry, man, but someone has to say it - an editor should not be slapping up whatever story introduction the author sends back without some thought to how much it blows the actual story it's introducing. I've said it before and I'll say it again - sometimes, with a short story, all you *have* is the surprise of your attack! I don't care that all of these stories are reprints, presumably the majority of them are still new to me, so why allow an author to steal most of his own thunder with a poorly worded introduction when a slight bit of rewriting might still get the point across and keep the mystery intact!?! Here, Peter Crowther tells you the central conceptual hook of "Frontpage McGuffin" while Gary McMahon does the same with "Through The Cracks", and Simon Strantzas lets you in on his (unfortunately superior) inspiration for "It Runs Beneath The Surface" while even Neil Gaiman proceeds his excellent "Feminine Endings" with a strangely disingenuous statement ("Readers have assumed the person writing the letter is a male and they have assumed the person writing the letter is a female. I have been unable to shed any light on the matter" - puh-lease! So you didn't know it when you were composing the two subtle jokes in the text that only work if the anonymous author is a male? Do you have a bridge to sell me?). There are a few other examples

throughout and all I can say is - a little more effort, please...

But what about the stories? This, I will admit, is one of the editions where I actually feel that the accusation that Jones' tastes are a bit dated might have more bite to them. Or perhaps not "dated", exactly, but he has his tastes (most of which I like) and in this batch he seems to indulge some of the more long-winded and weaker examples of same. There's still good stuff here, no doubt, and only 4 stories I felt were below par, but there was a larger amount of "good but flawed" examples than usual, and only 2 or 3 absolute standouts. Eh, you pays your money....

So, below par? Michael Bishop's "The Pile", about a condominium's refuse tip and the unlikely cursed piece of bric-a-brac found therein (replete with echoes of King's excellent "The Monkey") didn't really work at all for me due to the humorous tone. "2:00 P.M.: The Real Estate Agent Arrives" by Steve Rasnic Tem is a perfectly good illustration of my major problem with flash fiction - much of it is unformed story idea or springboard masquerading as story. Someone else on Goodreads points out that Tem's introductions runs longer than the actual "story" - honestly, his story title and author byline runs almost as long as the purported story! "The Place of Waiting" by Brian Lumley has some nice descriptive landscape passages, character voice and details, but I also found the story of painter bedeviled by strange characters on the lonely moors to be long-winded, clunky and ultimately too full of familiar, over-explained concepts. I was actually happy to finally finish it. I also may have to start to admit that I don't seem to have much affinity for the work of Simon Strantzas - who, especially here, strikes me as "Ramsey Campbell-lite", reiterating familiar concepts without adding much or saying it in a distinctive voice. A social worker's cynical and depressed worldview of his city environment begins to be reinforced by strange happenings around him in his fairly by-the-numbers piece of urban horror "It Runs Beneath The Surface," featuring that old standby "scary homeless people." Not terrible, just not terribly impressive either.

I'm usually not one to complain about familiar horror tropes being given a good airing (in fact, a later story in this book does exactly that and I found it quite enjoyable), but the Strantzas piece and stories like "These Things We Have Always Known" by Lynda E. Rucker and Gary McMahon's "Through The Cracks" seem to suffer from a case of over-thinking on the part of the authors, reading to me as a bit dessicated, lacking some shot of emotional "juice" and instead just willing to play out a concept with little conviction. Both of these latter stories are better than "Runs" (imho) - and we've moved into the category of "good but flawed" pieces in the collection - "Cracks" has a woman revisiting an old flame only to discover his insane fixations have become obsessions (with the completely expected "but was it all true?" ending). "These Things", on the other hand, has inhabitants of a small Georgia town begin exhibiting bizarre behavior or siting ominous warnings that the strangeness they always felt was imminent (and specific to the locale) may finally be reaching fruition. There's some emotionally honest character work but I could have done without the casual mention of quasi-magical artistic powers (fairly non-plot relevant unless I'm missing something) and I would have preferred, beyond the pretty phrasing, a bit more proof or expansion of a late line ("We have nurtured it with our guarded, secret souls, we have made it potent with our lies.")

There are quite a few more "good but flawed" stories here - tales that are well-written and serviceable but lack some extra aspect that lifts them above the mere idea or stylistic skill. "Arkangel" by Christopher Fowler has two young men flee an ugly, violent bar fight in a small Polish town only to catch a night train straight from the town's grim, Holocaust-related past that judge's them accordingly. It was entertaining but also somewhat clumsily written in spots. I've liked other stories by Reggie Oliver but found "A Donkey At The Mysteries", with its academic traveling through the sun-baked isles of Greece (and perhaps its accidental evocation of Daphne du Maurier's "Not After Midnight" and it's Jamesian "antiquarian" - or in this case "classicist" - eye for horror) to be - despite some sharp, lucid writing and scene setting (ruined Greek temples, underground chambers) - ultimately too ambiguous and underwhelming in its final "moment of

horror" (the flashback structure probably didn't help either - but extra points for the casket roped with thorny brambles!). "Our Man In The Sudan" by Sarah Pinborough had similar problems. A British Intelligence agent travels to the titular country to investigate the death of a spy cooling his heels there, a man who send some enigmatic coded messages, but instead finds a populace, native and expatriate, who seem to fear the fairly common sandstorms. The writing here is good but the tale ends up being a dull and slightly stiff piece of Graham Greene-style travelogue with some unimpressive supernatural gilding at the climax. Run of the mill.

Ian R. MacLeod's "The Camping Wainwrights" is another story unfortunately undermined a bit by its too-forthcoming introduction. It's an interesting story of a British family who tolerate their father's mad yearly camping mania and crazy, destructive tendencies until one year when the trip goes disastrously wrong. What seemed to be an entertaining story with, perhaps at its core, a somewhat too-glib attitude towards mental illness, redeemed itself somewhat with a nice ambiguous ending. Still, not a "solid connect with the bat", if you get me. "Front Page McGuffin And The Greatest Story Never Told" by Peter Crowther is a perfectly serviceable and heartfelt piece of dark comedic fantasy (somewhat reminiscent of the Tales From Gavagan's Bar stories) about a soul chained by its superstitions - but, honestly not scary (and not trying to scare us) in the least (it even has a comedic punchline ending, along with an oddly intrusive omniscient narrator).

Finally, rounding out the "good but flawed" - a few extra words for "The Oram County Whoosit" by Steve Duffy.- a story I'm torn over simply because of a clash between conception and execution. So, good points first, the story is exceedingly well-written, sketching real characters with real voices in a finely drawn period setting (or two settings, actually). The conception? Well, while I appreciate the inclusion of some classic "Forteana" like the supposed geologic enigma of the "toad in the hole" as a starting point, and while it may be too reductive to say that what the author does here is essentially rewrite the opening segments of H.P. Lovecraft's At the Mountains of Madness, re-setting them in a Yukon gold-rush camp (and then the mountains of West Virginia)... well, it wouldn't be far off the mark either. This is basically a monster story with one of Lovecraft's barrel-shaped, crinoid "Elder Things" as the monster and, honestly, I find that just a bit too familiar of its model to be wholly supportive of it, as well-written as it is (only the ending flattens a bit as well). Troublesome.

Now on to the solidly "good" stories, starting with some old hands! Stephen King finally makes it into the BNH series with "The New York Times At Special Bargain Rates" (the title is just obliquely related to the story, unless I'm missing some implied hideous truth about corporate phone-advertising and the afterlife) which is an effective, if perhaps the slightest bit slight, tale of a woman who gets an important phone call two weeks after her husband dies in a plane crash. Melancholy and human. Meanwhile, "The Long Way" by Ramsey Campbell is told in first person by a boy (perhaps the slightest bit too articulate for his age, but then what do I know?) who is becoming increasingly wary of passing by a derelict, vandalized house on an abandoned block of flats during his walk to care for his partially crippled relative. It's Campbell doing his familiar (but effective) commingling of urban fright and psychological landscape - family dynamics of over-controlling parents who play the boy off each other, adolescent fears of aging and disability linked to the paralysis of fear - physical, mental and emotional, etc. - all tied up in a vague and horrific stilted figure. Tim Lebbon's "Falling Off The World" is such an entertaining read that I'll forgive it the fact that it didn't become the uber-cool re-invention of a forgotten monster type that I had predicted it would be. I still might have desired a different ending for this tale of a small girl entangled in a large balloon and borne aloft into the fantastic realms of the stratosphere - something a little less ambiguous/symbolic, but its a perfectly reasonable way to end such a scenario and the details along the way are well conveyed.

Those who like old style, historically-set "supernatural tales" ("ghost story" might be a bit too reductive, and this is very Ambrose Bierce-American psychological horror, as opposed to a classic British ghost story

model) will enjoy "The Overseer" which Albert E. Cowdrey unfurls here at novella length for your delectation. Set in the pre and post Civil War South, it follows a man who's downward moral spiral of life is haunted by the image/ghost/figure/demon of his plantation family's slave Overseer - a cruel, vindictive man who makes a strong impression on the main character as a boy and whose image/influence he can't seem to shake as he matures. As I said, very Bierce at times, playing with our perceptions as to the actual reality of the figure or its origins as a guilt-inspired phantasm as we follow the history of the narrator through flashbacks, tracing a life filled with violence, thievery, war, injury, racial strife, drug addiction and murder. A nice slice of Southern Gothic with some fine writing and beautiful passages, it doesn't surprise but it solidly entertains. Those who do not cotton to the form need not apply...

And then there's "The Beginnings of Sorrow" by Pinckney Benedict. One might presume that stories of talking dogs are inherently comical but this (well received on Goodreads) tale proves that presumption a falsity. When a rural couple's hunting dog begins to talk (as in a lot of speaking animal stories, it's first word is a refusal) and then slowly begins to take on more human aspects, the couple and their entire world (literally) begins to come apart. A disturbing and (literally) apocalyptic tale that keeps opening up the range of scale on its horror element, this was a pleasure to read.

I also enjoyed three stories which hewed pretty closely to familiar tropes and so may seem too "old hat" for those that demand endless invention in their fiction (but you too shall tire of that at some point, trust me...). Mark Samuels writes in a decidedly European dark-fantastique mode in "'Destination Nihil' by Edmund Bertrand" - a macabre tone poem about an amnesiac awaking on a dark, seemingly aimless train whose contents and passenger become more disturbing the more he investigates. A nicely symbolic sketch of futility and despair. Tanith Lee's "Under Fog" is that old familiar standby - ironic just desserts for unscrupulous men, but I still enjoyed her solid little dark fantasy tale of a small coastal village who survive by deliberately wrecking passing ships, and their inevitable comeuppance (even if the form of that comeuppance is the slightest bit underwhelming). While the also-familiar "The Old Traditions Are Best" seems to have seriously bent someone's nose out of joint here on Goodreads (a bit of projection?), Paul Finch tells a nice little story of a punk teen on furlough detention stuck in a coastal Cornwall town celebrating an ancient festival - an opportunity for some juvey crime, he thinks, but there's still the fiercely judgmental local folklore creature, 'Obby 'Orse, to deal with. As I said, familiar, but I don't usually judge that a fault if there's either invention or just good old enjoyable writing on hand, and here there's the latter - nice place description as well - and I liked the brief coda that implies an extra cruel twist.

I don't usually consider Neil Gaiman a horror writer - he hews closer to dark fantasy most of the time - but he really hits it out of the park here with my favorite story in the collection, "Feminine Endings". I was initially wary of tweeness as the introduction told me the piece was written for a collection of "love letters as stories" but this a supremely creepy tale once you get the gist of what's going on - an obsessional confessional from a unique point of view that becomes a thoroughly plausible stalking scenario. Extremely well done!

And so, that's it for now. Next on the BNH horizon would be this year's installment, and then I'll try to retroactively knock a few more off the list - while working in all my other reading.

Randolph says

I'm not real impressed with these "Best of" annual anthologies after reading a couple. A better title would be "Mammoth Book of Pretty Okay Horror." The "Horror in 2008" and the Necrology are largely dross and seem like filler to me. I found a third of the stories above average, a third average, and a third bad (by page

count). This is just too much inferior material in a year that couldn't have been that lean and an anthology that only has 21 stories. Two of the longish stories are just awful, full of hackneyed tropes and devices, but then you get an **Arkangel** or **It Runs Beneath the Surface** that are excellent but are painfully short.

There is a story entitled **The Overseer** that is really bad and the tedious Brian Lumley story just confirms my opinion of Lumley's writing. M.R. James would turn over in his grave if he could read these two "ghost" stories.

Crystal says

By reading this book, I had hoped to discover horror genre authors that could write something that I would find scary. The authors Lynda E. Rucker, Paul Finch, Albert E. Cowdrey, and Pinckney Benedict who were featured in this book were all pretty good and I can see them writing novels that would actually scare me. I do love the author Neil Gaiman but his stuff doesn't really scare me and sometimes can be funny instead. I had a good time with this book!

Caton says

Different cover for the UK version (more stylish). Jones does an intro/review of horror in 2008 at the beginning, and he has the last word, with a list of the famous and semi famous who passed away over the previous year. The good news there, is you can skip his ego stroking and start the book 80 pages in and look like you've reading like hell, and you know you've got 80 pages at the end to give you'll probably never read. (And this is a bonus, because if you ever have to use the book to prop up a wobbly wardrobe, or stop the dining table from rocking, you'll know the stories inside are fairly well buffered from damage.

And what of the stories inside? All well written, but I came away with a feeling of stodginess at the end. I'm beginning to wonder if all the only writers left in the world are getting old and doddery, or if it's just Jones's preferences being reflected.

Pick of the bunch: The beginnings of Sorrow by Pinckney Benedict. I knew I was going to like the story from the first line--"Vandal Boucher told his dog Hark to go snatch the duck out of the rushes where it had fallen, and Hark told him No."

Yup, I knew exactly where Vandal was coming from with that one.

Dennis Cooper says

I've been reading this series since the start. Maybe not all but certainly a good few of the volumes. So I know what to expect. I enjoy most of the stories. I would tell you which I liked but my choices won't be yours so discover your own by reading the book. Another fine volume. Oh if you're looking for blood and gore then you'll be disappointed.

Gavin says

The first 15 percent is a bizarre round-up of the year in fantasy/horror books and the effects of the financial crisis on the publishing industry. I guess if you want that then this is the book for you!

The stories themselves range from great (in the shape of Cold Rest, The Oram County Whoosit and The Beginnings of Sorrow), through to utter piffle, special mention to Stephen King's farted out non starter and the offensively Daily Mail "Hobby Hoss" by someone who used to write for The Bill. And honestly may have been the person to kill the series off if this story is any indication of their aptitude for writing.

To talk about some stories in particular:

The first story is about a dead man who wanders into a bar, it wasn't really horror other than that it had a zombie in it and allusions to spiritual magic. Personally I found it profoundly warm and comforting, and that's not really something I associate with horror. That said, I think I will be looking up some of Peter Crowther's other stuff after reading it, as he has a wonderful ear for schmaltz and "guy talk" dialogue.

There's a strong branch of Lovecraftian horror present, from Lynda Rucker's wonderful tale of Cold Rest, to the aforementioned Oram County and Beginnings of Sorrow. All three capture the essence of what horror should be in the written word. Something which conjures up the feeling of falling out of control, in a world that has rules, just not ones that the protagonist can understand or play by. Though technically the Oram County is more of a sublimely characterised Creature Feature, the references to the coloured night sky are definitely nods to H.P.

There are other stories that pass the time enjoyably enough, but if this truly is the Mammoth Book of Best New Horror, and roughly 20% of the stories are good (and not all of those are strictly speaking, well, *scary*), it's probably not a big surprise that I don't read horror.

I'm thoroughly open to any recommendations, though.

Daniel says

The book starts with a good introduction of the horror genre in 2008, which look as a good year for this kind of literature and when I've ended reading this part I got really excited and expecting to experience some of the best new horror, as the title of the books promises. With such bright names in the front cover I was looking for the top short stories but unfortunately I've got myself bored pretty quickly. The main failure is that the most of the stories suffer of lack of suspense and it's hard to find the real horror in them.

I've ended up liking only 3 of the stories:

The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates by Stephen King - No big surprise here, I've been long time fan of King and I already have read this short story in "Just After Sunset" but it was nice to remembered it once more.

Feminine Endings by Neil Gaiman - This one is really short and there's not much of a plot here but that's make it even more creepy. It's fully grown up horror story, a disturbing tale of romantic and erotic obsession, written of the form of the letter in which the writer—a human-statue—tells his love how he has observed her

whilst standing completely still and unnoticed for hours on end.

Arkangel by Christopher Fowler - I already had my bad experience with Christopher Fowler's Red Bride and I wasn't expected much of his story but gladly, I ended up wrong about Arkangel which was one of the best things in this collection.

Greg Kerestan says

There's never a truly disappointing volume in the "Best New Horror" series, and this one tends more towards the surreal and unsettling than the typical and clichéd. I was only familiar with one story in this volume beforehand ("Falling Off the World," in which a balloon ride is reimagined in haunting terms), but this volume of unexpected pleasures lent itself more to evocative "hooks" and images than completely memorable stories. And sometimes that's for the best: no single sustained narrative could contain a modern-day cursed monkey doll, a froglike Greek dweller on the threshold, a suburban dad whose camping fetish borders on mania, and a half-seen puppetlike figure lurking in the shadows of an abandoned building.

Jaqui says

The scariest thing about this book was the cover.

Felix says

Another solid year's best anthology. Some good stories, some bad stories, a lot of solid well-written stories that nevertheless weren't really remarkable.

Liked:

Neil Gaiman: "Feminine Endings"

Gary McMahon: "Through the Cracks"

Ramsey Campbell: "The Long Way"

Didn't like:

Stephen King: "The New York Times At Special Bargain Rates"

Simon Strantzas: "It Runs Beneath The Surface"

Tanith Lee: "Under Fog"

Chris Kenyon says

The BEST new horror? Really? That was the best? The one star is for Stephen King's story which was the only good thing in the whole book.

Karin says

A good anthology, just not as scary as I hoped it would be.

F.R. says

For the second year in a row I've read all the stories in Stephen Jones's annual compendium one after the other, rather than dipping in which has previously been my wont. I'm not sure the overall quality is as good as Volume 19, but there is some very entertaining tales behind this year's more abstract front cover. Like last time the below list is not comprehensive, just my personal favourites this book around:

Feminine Endings by Neil Gaiman

Hilariously creepy little story where one of those human statue performers fixates on a woman.

Through The Cracks by Gary McMahon

I'm not sure I really brought the relationship at the centre of this, but the idea of monsters creeping from elsewhere through the cracks in the walls was really well done.

The Old Traditions Are Best by Paul Finch

I do like it when sinister things take place in English country towns. This probably has a lot of 'The Wicker Man' in its DNA, but I won't hold that against it.

The Long Way by Ramsey Campbell

Excellent examination by Campbell of childhood fears. I particularly liked the do-gooder but deeply unsympathetic parents.

The Pile by Michael Bishop

Interesting story that boils down to a cursed toy gorilla, but it does give chills.

The Camping Wainwrights by Ian R. MacLeod

Brilliant tale about a dysfunctional family having a holiday the wrong side of hell. The character of the father is a particularly English horror.

The Overseer by Albert E. Crowley

Well written piece which expertly unfolds over two timelines. I liked that – for most of it – it could be read as a ghost story or about guilt and inherited evil.

The Beginnings of Sorrow by Pinckney Benedict

Absolutely my favourite in this year's book! What starts out as an almost sweet and gentle talking dog story, becomes something incredibly disturbing.

(Something I've never liked about these books is the 'meet the author' paragraphs at the start of each tale.

'Let me tell you about my life and the everyday event which inspired this tale, before I try to scare you'. [If it has to be there at all I'd rather it was at the end, easier to skip past that way.] This routine biography reaches the zenith of absurdity in this volume, with '2:00 pm: The Real Estate Agent Arrives' by Steve Resnic Tem. Resnis Tem's biography is longer than the actual story!)

