

SGF

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative, 1970-2012. By Paulina Palmer. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 204 pages, \$99.99). ISBN 978-1-137-30354-7

by Olivia Oliver-Hopkins

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.35>



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Copyright © Olivia Oliver-Hopkins 2020

ISSN: 2156-2407



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

***Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative, 1970-2012.* By Paulina Palmer. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 204 pages, \$99.99). ISBN 978-1-137-30354-7**

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.35>

Olivia Oliver-Hopkins

University of Sydney

From her considerable academic output over the last twenty-five years, it is clear that Paulina Palmer's primary research interest is in the queer Gothic, a literary and cinematic subgenre that is having something of "a moment" in academia at the present time. Therefore, the publication of *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative* is timely, even if (likely thanks to the glacial speed of academic publishing) it does not take into account some of the most recent developments in the field. Palmer's monograph, part of the Palgrave Gothic series edited by Clive Bloom, explores the ways in which queer themes and Gothic tropes interact in fiction in productive ways, with a particular focus upon developments in the academic study of queer history informing her research.

The work is well-structured, with four main chapters dedicated to the tropes of haunted houses and ghosts, vampires and the uncanny double, monsters (broadly construed), and urban and rural Gothic, respectively. For Palmer, the primary intersections between queerness and the Gothic gene include transgression, ghostliness, secrecy, the monster, death, and excess. She draws upon these concepts in each of the chapters, using some impressively wide-ranging research. However, the monograph's primary weakness is its incorporation of too many different theorists and evaluation of too many different fictional works in too slim a volume, resulting in, at times, cursory analysis and a tendency towards description.

In the first chapter, "Ghosts and Haunted Houses," Palmer analyzes Steve Berman's *Vintage: A Ghost Story* (2007) and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), setting up a pattern of comparisons between lesbian- and gay male-focused/American- and British-authored stories that persists throughout the book, in relation to what she terms "spectrality." She follows this with an exploration of *The Water's Edge* (Louise Tondeur, 2003) and *Winter Birds* (Jim Grimsley, 1984) in relation to the concept of the haunted house. Some of Palmer's strongest analysis is contained in the section

on *Vintage*, where she explores the unnamed narrator's sexual relationship with the apparent ghost of Josh, a homosexual man killed in the 1950s. Drawing on the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Palmer raises the idea that this relationship could be imagined: the narrator's means of coping psychologically with his recent eviction from the family home by his parents, due to his sexuality, as well as his experiences of bullying at school. Moreover, she uses Carla Freccero's notion of allowing "ghosts to speak" to explore the importance of connections between the contemporary queer community and our history. However, this section (like all of the sections in the work given its size) is very short – only five and a half pages – and thus lacks the detail necessary to be a truly useful analysis.

Palmer's second chapter, "Uncanny Others: Vampires and Doubles," again explores two pairs of texts in relation to two concepts: vampires in Meg Kingston's *Chrystal Heart* (2013) and Gary Bowen's *Diary of a Vampire* (1995), and Gothic doubling in Vincent Brome's *Love in the Plague* (2001) and Susan Swan's *The Wives of Bath* (1993). Despite being somewhat descriptive in parts, this chapter contains an interesting analysis of *Love in the Plague* as AIDS narrative and *Chrystal Heart* as comment on the popularity of neo-Victorian fiction in recent years. The chapter also provides a useful overview of the history of the development of the vampire, particularly in queer fiction.

The third chapter of the monograph, "Tracking the Monster," is an examination of queer gender – especially intersex and transgender – as monstrosity. Palmer acknowledges the political minefield in which she is working here and makes attempts to reclaim monstrosity through its queer potential, but her continual deadnaming and misgendering of trans and intersex authors and characters alike is somewhat troubling. This is particularly a problem in this chapter and in the last quarter of the

Book Reviews

previous chapter, due to their content, but it persists throughout the book. Political issues aside, this chapter's use of *Frankenstein* as Ur-text for the four fictional works Palmer examines here *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (Peter Ackroyd, 2008), *The Daylight Gate* (Jeanette Winterson, 2012), *Annabel* (Kathleen Winter, 2010), and the short story "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" (Randall Kenan, 1992) – is fascinating and a longer analysis would have added much to this volume.

The final chapter of the work, "Regional Gothic: Uncanny Cities and Rural Areas," which explores rural and urban Gothic primarily in relation to Alan Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star* (1998) and Michelle Paver's *Dark Matter* (2011), is, however, half as long as the others so does not benefit from its sole focus on two works. The choice to pair these two (as well as the urban and the rural) together seems somewhat odd, but some of the analysis in this final chapter is particularly strong, particularly its focus upon the troubling of the real that the novels produce by their invocation of spectrality and voyeurism, which causes the audience to question whether certain events really happened or are merely the products of the protagonists' imaginations. "Regional Gothic" also works nicely as a final chapter as it reflects some of the themes analyzed in the previous three chapters, such as doubling and spectrality.

The primary fault in this work is the sheer number of theorists and novels used, resulting in necessarily brief analyses of each one, as may be evident from my descriptions of the central subjects of analysis above. But as though the laundry list of texts above was not enough for one volume of just over two hundred pages, Palmer also conducts several extremely brief analyses of other, often older texts – for example, there is a two-page analysis of both *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897) and "Carmilla" (Sheridan Le Fanu, 1872) in the second chapter, adding further to an already overcrowded field. One often feels left wanting more of Palmer's insightful analysis on each text, and, indeed, I am convinced that the whole volume should have been two or three times its size in order to examine all of the texts and theorists relayed here in the necessary detail.

Moreover, there are several stylistic issues that detract from the merits of the work. Palmer has an awkward tendency to frequently rely solely on pronouns when talking about relationships between same-sex pairings, rendering some of her sentences extremely confusing to those who have not read the novel she is discussing at the time. For example, in Chapter Two, Palmer ends a paragraph with "From the research [the unnamed narrator of *Vintage*] conducts there and the conversations that he holds with Josh, he discovers that, in the year 1957, the latter engaged in an angry altercation with his ex-lover Roddy on Route 47 on account of him having outed him at school in revenge for his sexual infidelities" (31). Very long sentences, running over

five, six or even seven lines at times and comprised of a great many clauses, are also not uncommon in this work, making it a difficult read at times. In addition, there are a considerable number of typographic errors throughout the text, especially at the beginning, which become quite irritating over time. However, I am aware that this may well be the fault of the publisher (and this era of change for the publishing industry, including the mass firing of subeditors) rather than Palmer herself. The book's title is also somewhat confusing as Palmer's primary focus is on works published between 1984 and 2013.

However, this work does have its merits. Palmer's research in this monograph, as previously mentioned, is incredibly wide-ranging, and even as a scholar who works in this field, there are a number of useful works cited that I had not yet discovered, as well as several new novels for my leisure reading list. As an academic who has clearly devoted her life's work to this genre, Palmer gives the impression that perhaps some of the cursoriness of her reference to various theorists is simply the product of her great familiarity with their work; however, for a less experienced reader, this can result in considerable confusion. Although she alludes to it only briefly (though repeatedly throughout the monograph), Palmer clearly has a great deal of lived experience of the early struggles of the queer rights movement in the 1970s and beyond, which I feel would greatly benefit her work if she were to engage with it more overtly in an interdisciplinary manner. Indeed, much of the strongest analysis in this work is also the most interdisciplinary.

Overall, *Queering Contemporary Gothic, 1970-2012* will primarily be useful for a more generalist audience or those embarking for the first time on queer Gothic fiction-related projects as a brief overview of the more contemporary work in the field, both in literature and academia. While its faults are frustrating at times, the work is still a valuable contribution to a growing and topical area of literary studies. Perhaps, most importantly, Palmer's love for and familiarity with this genre shines through the text.