

Introduction

Old Monsters and the Monsters of Old

In her 2017 book *Forgotten*, Marlene Goldman notes that the media often adopts a Gothic register and use apocalyptic language to describe the rise in dementia cases across the west in recent decades. The disease is figured as a “silent killer” that threatens to erase our identities, turning us and our loved ones into a faceless zombie mob. But horror is a genre that is often deployed to depict old people more generally, not just those debilitated by disease. One has only to think of the witches that populate cultural texts of all sorts, from *Macbeth* and “Snow White” to *Game of Thrones*. In such instances, horror is used to evoke not just a fear of death but a fear of aging, older age being equated with bodily, mental and social decline.

On the other hand, the idea of the unnatural extension of the lifespan has also generated its own brand of horror. Immortality may be something humans, at least since the time of *Gilgamesh*, have always sought to attain, but its pursuit has invariably entailed some sort of retribution. For vampires, eternal life is a curse that forces them to feed on the blood of the young to maintain their decrepit existence (a trope that is eerily evocative of the unfortunate stereotype of the present-day pensioner). Movies like Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (which highlights the risks and implications of plastic surgery) also express the reservations many have about the powers of technology to unnaturally prolong youth.

Recent and more subversive takes on the genre might be especially productive for our discussion about aging and older age. Novels like *The Girl with All the Gifts* or *Handling the Undead*, for example, ask us to rethink

the figure of the zombie and how we might relate to such creatures were we ever to be irreversibly overrun by them. Would we be able to coexist with zombies, say, if they posed no imminent danger to us? A question very much like this is posed by the film *Relic*, which is at the center of a few of essays in this collection. Like *Relic*, the novel *White Is for Witching* foregrounds intergenerational bonds, the monster it revolves around being a *soucouyant*, a witch/ghost that is repellent not so much because she is old but rather because it congregates in herself the bodies of women from three different generations.

In this book we investigate what exactly we are afraid of when we posit old age as a source of horror. We will examine the different kinds of fear associated with aging and assess if and how these fears can be allayed. The essays in this collection grapple with such topics as: the fear of backwardness, conservatism and irrationality (which we often unfairly associate with people that live in rural areas or with little education); aging backwards and children that behave like adults; fear of losing one's memory and identity; the persistence of the past in the present (haunts, curses and ghosts); fear of disability and dependence. As Leo Braudy reminds us in *Haunted*, fear is historical. As such, it can be interrogated, debunked and perhaps dispelled. Our ultimate aim is to harness the thrills and pleasures of horror to think about how quality of life can be improved in old age and how older people can be better integrated in our ever fearful and suspicious societies.