



## Best New Horror 8

*Stephen Jones (Editor) , Terry Lamsley (Contributor) , Joel Lane (Contributor) , Roberta Lannes (Contributor) , D.F. Lewis (Contributor) , Marni Griffin (Contributor) , Mark Chadbourn (Contributor) , Iain Sinclair (Contributor) , more... Thomas Ligotti (Contributor) , Thomas Tessier (Contributor) , Gregory Frost (Contributor) , Nicholas Royle (Contributor) , Poppy Z. Brite (Contributor) , Michael Marshall Smith (Contributor) , Christopher Fowler (Contributor) , Scott Edelman (Contributor) , Karl Edward Wagner (Contributor) , Douglas Clegg (Contributor) , Norman Partridge (Contributor) , Cherry Wilder (Contributor) , Richard Christian Matheson (Contributor) , Storm Constantine (Contributor) , Donald R. Burleson (Contributor) , Steve Rasnic Tem (Contributor) ...less*

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The internationally acclaimed annual collection of the bloodcurdling best in horror and dark fantasy, showcasing the very best writers working in the genre today.

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## From Reader Review Best New Horror 8 for online ebook

### De'Shawn says

Another interesting horror book.

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### Lucian Poll says

After a run of above-average entries in the Best New Horror series it was inevitable that we would hit an iffy one, and this is it. The weird thing is there's nothing massively wrong with volume 8. There are few if any stinkers in this volume, but we're not overly blessed with quality either. So, on this occasion, it's a 3/5 from me.

For those who like to know these things, Best New Horror 8 presents twenty-four horror shorts published during 1996, and runs as follows:

Walking The Dog – Terry Lamsley (4/5 – Steve is hired by the mysterious Mr Stook to walk his pet, or, more accurately: “get dragged around some godforsaken craggy moor for an hour each and every night”. It's an eccentric arrangement, certainly, but one that pales in weirdness compared to the “dog” itself. Still, at least the money is good. Now if only Steve can loosen the grip Stook seems to have taken on his life. Or, rather, his neck. I'd say this is the weakest story by Lamsley to appear in Best New Horror, but it's still worth a read. The characters are good, the setting is suitably creepy, and there's no mistaking this for anything other than a horror tale. Still, you have to wonder how this weird tale popped into Lamsley's head. I'll have what he's having, please.)

Mussolini And The Axeman's Jazz – Poppy Z. Brite (3/5 – Another beautifully-written story from Brite, and one, as you'd expect, that doesn't skimp on the claret. Like “The Sixth Sentinel” (Best New Horror 5), Brite digs into New Orleans' history for inspiration, but falters on this occasion by attempting to incorporate all of world history as well. (Small exaggeration.) Archduke Ferdinand and his wife are offed in Sarajevo, triggering the Great War. Four years later the Archduke's ghost turns up in New Orleans, exceedingly pissed off and determined to kill a centuries-old Italian occultist called Cagliostro, who he is convinced ordered his assassination. Beware, New Orleans, the axeman cometh. I think the trick is to ignore the tone set by the first part of this story. Come to it seeking a silly but gory tale and you'll have a better time of it.)

An Eye For An Eye – Norman Partridge (3/5 – Wanda and Russell are intrigued by a stuffed black cat owned by Wanda's grandmother, Madame Estrella, not least how Estrella is able to bring the thing back to life. The cat once starred in a few golden oldie horror movies, and it seems a fella of Estrella's acquaintance has more memorabilia stashed away somewhere. Wanda and Russell are keen to plunder this valuable collection. Wanda especially will stop at nothing to get her hands on it. This was one of those stories that was written to order for a themed anthology, and boy does it show. It's a fun read, but, like the story preceding it, there's rather a lot of wreckage to overlook.)

Underworld – Douglas Clegg (3/5 – Oliver takes his wife Jenny to an old Chinese restaurant squirrelled away in a run-down New York alley. The wife of the owner correctly guesses Jenny is pregnant, and is confident she will have a boy. But Jenny is tragically murdered and when Oliver returns to the alley sometime later he finds the restaurant has been boarded up. When he looks between the boards and into the

restaurant he sees a vision of Jenny framed in the glass of the kitchen door. This was okay, and better than Clegg's previous entry, "Where Flies Are Born" (Best New Horror 3), but it felt like a plot outline at times and would have benefitted from a bit more meat on the bones.)

The Curse Of Kali – Cherry Wilder (3/5 – Gwen lodges with the Bentons and their three kids. Rose Benton works in real estate, and through some financial finagling managed to secure ownership of the house next door, much to the annoyance of old widow Pallister who lived there. Now that Mrs Pallister has passed away, the Bentons are picking over their acquisition. When the youngest Benton fails to return home, Gwen is disturbed to see a shadowy figure at the corner of the Pallister house. This was okay, but, for me, the setup seemed overly-engineered to deliver the shock Wilder had in mind. I'd have also preferred a little less of the awful Bentons and a little more of the Pallisters, if only to better qualify events later in the story.)

The Film – Richard Christian Matheson (3/5 – A short shocker from Matheson which sees a ragtag bunch of sick and ailing ne'er-do-wells descend on a brutalist movie theatre in some futuristic, eco-apocalyptic shithole. They're all super-keen to see "The Film", even if it's the last thing they do. Another middling story here, but this does at least better Matheson's previous entry, "Ménage à Trois" (Best New Horror 6). It's an entertaining read, and one whose postmodernist leanings lend it a certain freshness, hep cats, but it won't be too long after the end before you start picking holes in it.)

Of A Cat, But Her Skin – Storm Constantine (3/5 – Nina escapes her control-freak other half, Scott, and loses herself for a while in the grounds of Elwood Grange. She happens across a stone monument tucked away in the woods: a wide obelisk carved with assorted arcane texts, atop which sits a sculpture of a cat hunkered down in a hunting pose. Nina is drawn to the monument, and feels it uncover a rich seam of confidence within her. This was okay, but it takes a while to get going. While I liked the places the story goes to, I couldn't help thinking that the fantasy element – I struggle to call it horror – serves to undermine Nina; as if she wouldn't have been capable of achieving what she does without receiving a little magical leg-up.)

Hopscotch – Donald R. Burleson (3/5 – It's the dead of night and an old woman revisits the neighbourhood of her youth. Signs of life are thin on the ground. The buildings vary from decrepit to barely inhabitable to piles of wire and rubble. The old woman finds a faded hopscotch grid in an enclosed alleyway, and recalls the gruesome fate of the intense young girl who painted it. The old woman flips a bottlecap into square 1. Game on. Well, you can't fault Burleson for lack of effort. From laying on the atmosphere with a trowel in the opening pages to ploughing on regardless of the fact he has an old woman playing hopscotch, in a dead part of town, in the middle of the night, on her own and beset with arthritis, he tries everything to make this story work. It's okay once it gets going, but, let's be blunt, there's a small mountain of bollocks you'll need to overlook.)

Ghost In The Machine – Steve Rasnic Tem (4/5 – Carter is baffled how the TV is still on with no power running to it. In fact, how can the TV be on at all when he'd already given it to his neighbour? It seems Carter's mind is in a strange place. Life has not been the same since his mother died. Best get the repairman around to help put things right. Fans of SRT know how strange his stories can get, and this is one of the strangest. In the story's introduction he describes how it was written at 2am, which sums up its dreamlike quality perfectly.)

The Moon Never Changes – Joel Lane (3/5 – Gareth is a young man who, for the most part, manages to keep under wraps the seething frustration he feels for modern life and the state of things. He attends meetings of a local fascist group and soaks up their dogma. He broods over photographs of those who dumped him. When Lorraine, a work colleague, invites herself around to his place, Gareth has a chance to turn his life around,

but is he willing to take it? In the introduction, Lane described the story as being about the psychology of fascism. I don't doubt this, but by wrapping this theme in his usual gossamer layers of metaphor and implied meaning, I couldn't help but feel he let the target off the hook.)

Butcher's Logic – Roberta Lannes (4/5 – It's 1950s US of A and we're following the eldest daughter of a family and her friendship with Jesse, a half-Puerto-Rican half-Afro-American boy. Neither of the girl's parents approve of her friendship. Hey, did I mention this was 1950s US of A? Okay, just checking. Anyway, the friendship sees her parents dial up their admonishment of the girl; her mother seemingly at every opportunity. Tempers boil over when, during a particularly fractious exchange, Jesse stands up to the girl's father, who accidentally buggers over and hurts himself. Later, on a grocery errand, the girl sees her father's car parked by the store. He's nowhere to be found inside, and the staff seem a little cagey: the cashier, the bagger... and the butcher. This is a very good story from Lannes, who replaces the extreme horror of her previous stories with something more restrained, and reaps the rewards.)

Kites And Kisses – D. F. Lewis (3/5 – Clive is a young lad who spends a lot of his time looking out of the window. He often sees another young lad playing outside with a kite. Asking his mother for a kite of his own, he is told that if he'd wanted one hard enough then he'd have had one by now, and how such twisted logic has helped them become so terribly, terribly wealthy. Clive isn't so sure about that. It seems every time Mr Court pops round in his dumpster, it's for money that Clive's mother doesn't have. This is one of the longer stories of Lewis's oeuvre, clocking in at a giddy five and a half pages. It's also one of his straightest stories, with some nice writerly flourishes, but the switch to his usual gnomic form right at the end is jarring.)

Last Train To Arnos Grove – Marni Griffin (3/5 – It's approaching midnight and a woman is trying to get home in time to receive a call from her other half. Wouldn't you know it, her car runs out of petrol, just outside Wood Green tube station. Scrabbling together what change she has, she buys a ticket for the underground. When she gets on the train she finds there are several more stops before Arnos Grove than advertised. This was okay, but it's another story that feels overly engineered. Was it really so fantastically important to be home by the stroke of midnight? Wouldn't her other half have called again a little bit later? Or does he turn into a pumpkin at one minute past? And who calls their partner at midnight anyway?)

The King Of Rain – Mark Chadbourn (4/5 – Four work colleagues are on a miserable hiking break on the Derbyshire moors: John, the owner of the business; Phil, the office curmudgeon; Gordon, the annoyingly upbeat guy; and young Sam, our narrator. As rain persists and the hike progresses, Gordon and Phil begin exhibiting strange injuries: a large bruise on the arm, a sudden nosebleed. Much to Sam's unease, John seems to be holding something back from them all. This is a very good story, and one written at a time when insufferable office team-building exercises were all the rage. Coincidence, perhaps?)

Hardball – Iain Sinclair (3/5 – For the last three years a young man has been in the employ of a crotchety and creatively-sweary drunkard, The Pole, painting the lines of football pitches on Hackney Marshes. It's a never-ending job, seeing as though there are 200 of them. His only other colleague is an unhinged youth, The Kid. To our man's surprise both The Pole and The Kid engage in a little extra-curricular activity, taking on other fans in penalty shootouts outside football grounds. Our man is asked to play, but soon comes to realise there's a lot more at stake than a couple of quid and a celebratory chug of vodka. This was okay, but it took a second reading for it to improve, and even then I didn't buy it. I suspect that for every reader who laps up the literary showboating on display here there'll be a couple more who see a story basting indulgently in its own writerly juices.)

Gas Station Carnivals – Thomas Ligotti (4/5 – This playfully meta story sees a dyspeptic writer sitting in a

cabaret club, drinking mint tea and smoking mild cigarettes. He is joined by a critic called Quissier, who is worried that he's in dutch with the club's proprietress after calling her a deluded no-talent. Quissier then goes on to relate his experience of run-down little carnivals that sometimes existed close to equally run-down gas stations, and of the strange and scary entertainment to be found there. But the writer stops him halfway through. He has a surprise in store for Quissier. Ligotti's stories have often been a highlight of the earlier Best New Horror books, and this is a really good one – probably my favourite of his appearances thus far.)

Ghost Music: A Memoir By George Beaune – Thomas Tessier (4/5 – From one great story by a Thomas to another. A music journalist recounts the strange events surrounding the decline of his friend, Eric Stringer, a composer who found success early in his career. Stringer moved to London to work on a quartet he'd been commissioned to write. The music he poured his heart and soul into creating was beautiful, but there was a problem. It already existed. He started over again, but the same thing happened. Was he suffering a bizarre episode of writer's block, or was something supernatural going on? Tessier really knows his stuff when it comes to classical music, it seems, and this has the feel of a story he wanted to write for some time.)

That Blissful Height – Gregory Frost (4/5 – Frost dramatises the story of Professor Robert Hare and his efforts to apply scientific methods to the craft of local mediums in mid-1800s Pennsylvania. He attends a seance with his friend and fellow cynic, John Hazard, and notes how mediums often had too much influence on the messages being passed along from the afterlife. Hare produces a series of inventions that attempt to create a degree of separation between the medium and the message being delivered. In doing so he finds his long-dead sister, Anna, keen to chat. Hare's head is turned, but Hazard remains unconvinced. Impeccable writing helps make this one of the strongest stories in the book.)

Skin Deep – Nicholas Royle (3/5 – Henderson has been enthusiastically boffing Graham Bloor's wife, Elizabeth, behind the man's back for some time. When Henderson is invited to accompany the Bloors to the Highlands to help hunt wildcat, he accepts, but is saddened and disconcerted to find Elizabeth unable to make it. Cue the tension as the two men head on out. This is another story that is jarringly over-engineered. Within the space of the first two pages we establish: 1) that Bloor is being offered two grand from a taxidermist for each wildcat, 2) that wildcats are "as rare as rocking horse droppings", and 3) that Bloor is a successful businessman with a big house and a flash car. Ri-i-i-ight, because spending days hunting wildcat is just what successful businessmen do for pocket change. I smell droppings, and they're not from a rocking horse. Although the story never really recovers from this clanger, it does have its moments and Royle provides a strong ending.)

Hell Hath Enlarged Herself – Michael Marshall Smith (4/5 – An old man drives to his hotel room. Along the way he remembers David, his long-time friend and colleague; David's other half, Rebecca; and the incredible technological advances the three of them made together in their youth. Back then they worked in secret in an attempt to create a nanotechnological panacea. But each advance they made came with an added layer of hubris, which, as any Outer Limits fan knows, never plays out well. This novelette was nominated for a World Fantasy Award at the time and, while the futuristic science on display has rusted a bit over the years, the story is still a good one. It does come slightly adrift towards the end, however, when MMS starts spooning in the supernatural.)

Unforgotten – Christopher Fowler (3/5 – A ruthless property developer is keen to purchase a knackered old building sitting between two others he owns. The developer plans to knock the whole lot down and parcel the land for development. His right-hand-man, however, sees a certain charm in the building. He also finds that the building's plans don't quite add up. Not every square foot of the place seems to be accounted for. I doubt there are many people who can rival Fowler's knowledge of London and his passion for the place, but on this occasion it proves his undoing. The story is pretty good near the end, but there's too much farting about

getting there. A rare misfire for me. He used elements of this story some years later in his second Bryant & May novel, "The Water Room", with, sadly, similar results.)

A Plague On Both Your Houses – Scott Edelman (3/5 – Five words: "Romeo and Juliet and Zombies". A long-running enmity exists between the living and the living dead. Carlo, son of the mayor of living New York City, falls head over heels for Delores at a masquerade ball. But, unbeknownst to Carlo, Delores is a zombie, and the daughter of Leopold, king of the zombies, no less. Can true love find a way? Edelman presents for the audience's delectation a five act play written in rhyming couplets. It's an admirable effort, but it's telling that Edelman couldn't find anyone to publish the piece, resorting instead to self-publishing it as a Halloween card. Still, "A Plague..." eventually bagged a Stoker nomination, so his efforts seem vindicated. For me, though, I'm with the editor who said 'Sorry, but we don't like Shakespeare'.)

Final Cut – Karl Edward Wagner (4/5 – In what was believed to be Wagner's last story before his untimely death, Dr Kirby Meredith is a psychiatrist in a large hospital who gets a distressing call from Cousin Bob. Bob, a longtime drunkard, can't stop vomiting blood, and so Meredith instructs him to come to the hospital straight away. Bob is stabilised, but finds he needs an operation to save his life. While under the knife, Bob has a strange dream in which he stumbles into morgue and an ongoing autopsy. Or at least he thinks it was a dream. This is a very good story. Though there's a sense that Wagner, a trained psychiatrist himself, was getting one or two things off his chest, it never strays into polemic.)

The Break – Terry Lamsley (5/5 – If "Walking The Dog" was Lamsley's weakest appearance in Best New Horror, then I would say "The Break" is his strongest. In this superb novelette, Danny accompanies his grandparents on a week's holiday in the sleepy seaside town of Todley Bay. He sees a number of weird things happening around him, from a man taking days to inch a large heavy box along the jetty, to a huge oily gull stalking him, to a hotel with a shifting number of floors, to a surfeit of folks only he seems able to see. Some of these folks seem awfully keen to guide Danny's senile grandfather away. The lightness of touch imbuing Lamsley's earlier appearances in Best New Horror is replaced with sobering observations on the effects of Alzheimers on the sufferer and those who love them, and his story is all the more powerful for it. Jones leaves the best for last in Best New Horror 8.)

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## **Greg Kerestan says**

This is a standout volume in the anthology series, as it contains two of my all-time favorite Best New Horror stories, Poppy Z. Brite's "Mussolini and the Axeman's Jazz," and the unbelievably weird "Gas Station Carnivals" by Thomas Ligotti. Luckily the rest of the stories are mostly good, but even if it were a two-piece chapbook with just those, this one would be worth picking up.

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