



LEGAL HIGHS

Emma Freud on the joy of horror fiction

Why do we scare ourselves silly with chills and thrills for the sheer fun of it?

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I'm lying in bed reading a ghost story set in an abandoned cemetery in Middle America. A grave robber has been caught thieving from an ancient coffin by an angry "resident". With his demonic eyes, broken yellow teeth and the rotting skin of a long-dead man who has lain deep in the ground, he is burying the grave robber alive as a punishment for his crime.

I have a choice: to continue reading and risk my own death by Dreaded Fearfulness, or stop and watch Peppa Pig videos while my nervous system behaves like a bottle of Coke that has had three packets of Mentos dropped into it.

The irony is, I have done this to myself. You don't pick up a horror book thinking it might be fun or educational. You read a horror story to be frightened. It is you who turns over page after page, continuing to read something that may destroy your sanity. Well-written horror stories are a sublime, self-inflicted torture; they're as thrilling as they are horrendous. And it's the act of deliberate masochism that makes the experience of reading horror so horrific — and consequently the high even higher.

This literary torture started in 1764 with the birth of the gothic novel, and by 1818 had won its first Olympic gold in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which still sells more than 40,000 copies a year. It's especially beloved in the run-up to Christmas: as Jerome K Jerome wrote in 1891: "It is a genial, festive season, and we love to muse upon graves, and dead bodies, and murders, and blood."

Curiously, the horror-fiction industry is booming — it's now the fifth most popular fiction genre and in 2022 horror sales were up 79 per cent. Maybe as the world becomes increasingly terrifying we turn to horror as a counterpoint, needing to play with our boundaries of how much fear we can stomach. But also, when we're frightened, even by our own imaginations, our endocrine system creates an adrenaline and cortisol rush to help to prepare us for action. When we do not in fact die at the hand of the monstrous prose we're reading, the thrill of hot terror is followed by the joy of blessed relief. They're different types of natural highs.

My next reading matter this evening is a Japanese masterpiece featuring a spinster who finds a head made up of her own faecal matter living just under the waterline of her loo that talks to her every time she goes. Night, all ...