

AND THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT . . .

Allison Hudson

(1) In this fast-paced and ever changing world, one emotion remains consistent: fear. But with all the confusion, many people have forgotten what good, genuine fear is. Not the low-budget, garden variety fear we get in sequel after sequel of Halloween and The Amityville Horror, but real gut-wrenching terror that only a select few people (myself included) have had the pleasure to experience.

(2) Now don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about fear of losing your job, or fear of thunderstorms or snakes. What I'm talking about is fear such as only Stephen King and Anthony Perkins can show us. Even Edgar Allen Poe, the Great American Hack, can effectively send chills up our spines.

(3) The movie producers today seem to think that the public's idea of "scary" is a guy going around hacking up people with farm implements, or a house that has resident spirits who move furniture around. While this may satisfy the uneducated minds of Mr. and Mrs. White Bread, we true fear fanatics long for something more terrifying, something so unreal that it's actually believable.

(4) For example, take Stephen King, the modern master of horror. King is to horror stories what Shakespeare is to plays. In 500 pages or less, King can scare you silly and insure a sleepless night spent with the lights on and your ears pricked to detect the slightest sound of the "monsters" coming to get you. In fact, I would estimate that Stephen King is responsible for about 75% of my nightmares. Tony Perkins is responsible for close to 10%. Many a time I have cowered in the shower (Psycho), refused to stay in a hotel room numbered 217 (The Shining), had second thoughts about attending a high school prom (Carrie), and steered clear of '58 Plymouth Furies (Christine).

(5) One of the tactics used by most horror story writers to effectively frighten us and hold our attention is to let us know what is happening in the minds of several characters at once, and in the (mind?) of the object that has some sort of supernatural power. Everybody loves to be in on a secret. When the writer does this, we can see in our minds what is going to happen, but we are unable to stop it. We feel powerless because we know what consequence is about to befall our hero, yet at the same time we are helpless to prevent it.

(6) Another effective trick of the writer is to end the chapter right when something terrible has happened or is going to happen in the immediate future. This combination of suspense and frustration is exactly the effect the writer wants. What better way to make your readers frantically claw through your book, unable to put it down?

(7) Done correctly, these things are all necessary elements of a good horror story. But the fear that these writers drive us to is unlike any phobia or worry. It makes us wonder how long we can live in this world with these powers at large. It makes us wonder if that creak outside our door is just the house settling or if it's someone, or something, coming to take us down to those deep, black depths of horror with it--forever. It makes us aware of our own mortality, and of possible immortality.

(8) "And the Red Death held sway over all."