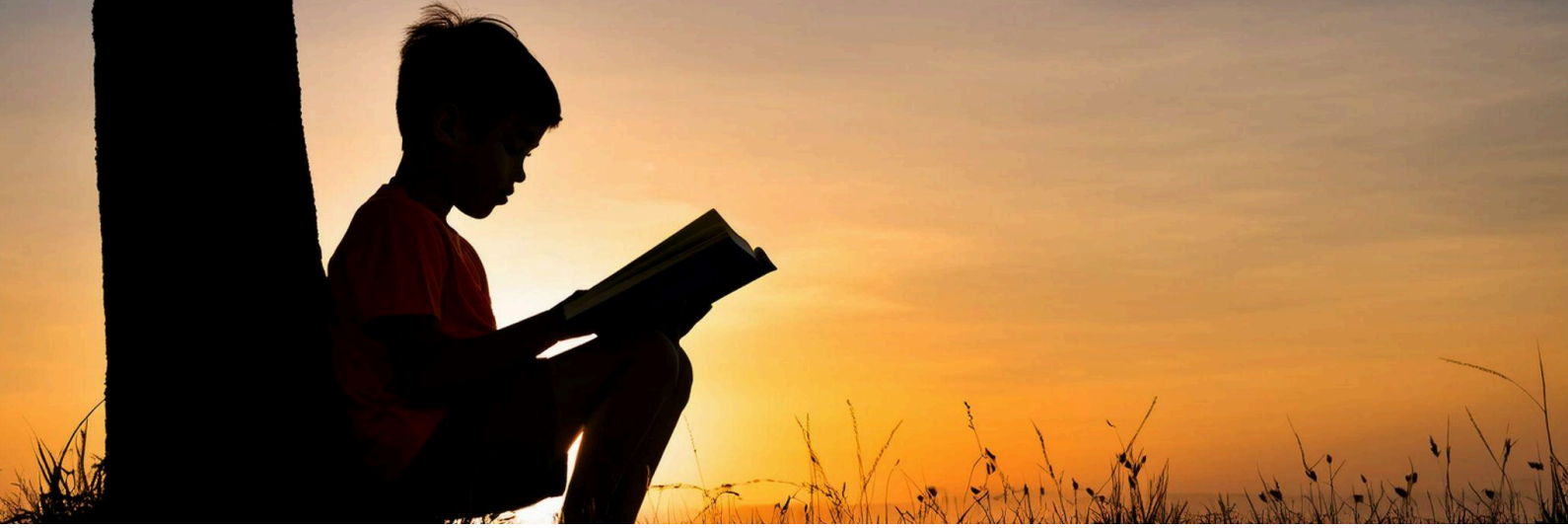

Hunt, Dan, 'A guide to responsible scaring: What are the limitations of horror in young adult fiction?'
Leaf Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, Jul 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/gpxe-4r95
URL: https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index

A Guide to Responsible Scaring: What are the Limitations of Horror in Young Adult Fiction?

Dan Hunt

Abstract
Through a close reading of recent Young Adult (YA) horror novels – including *Clown in a Cornfield* by Adam Cesare; *Harrow Lake* by Kat Ellis; and *I Feed Her to the Beast and the Beast is Me* by Jamison Shea – as well as Dan Hunt's own work-in-progress, this article explores the building blocks of the YA horror genre. It explores how YA horror adapts and challenges traditional genre limitations to suit a younger audience, investigating the boundaries of fear in YA fiction by asking: how scary is too scary? The article argues that hesitations toward writing YA horror fiction stem from a misconception that the genre is bound by restrictive rules, leading to diluted narratives. However, this perception often arises from a lack of research and understanding. To challenge these misconceptions, the article offers a framework for "responsible scaring" in YA horror writing.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people*, *young adult*, *horror*, *creative writing*, *publishing*

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I have always loved reading horror fiction – a fact that was particularly true when I was a teenager. It was not that I had a fascination with serial killers or the paranormal like the average YouTube or TikTok trawler of today, but I liked my fantasy a little darker. Books by Darren Shan and similar authors provided creepy escapism, where vampires and demons could be a real threat, not just Halloween decorations. Now, returning to Young Adult (YA) horror as a writer, I want to emulate that same sense of whimsical escapism but with a hint of dread. Which raises the questions: what are the limitations of horror in YA fiction? And, why do they matter?

In this article, I explore how contemporary horrors flex and stretch the limitations of the genre in a YA setting, and consider the responsibility authors have in facilitating young readers' experience of it. I seek to answer the question "how scary is too scary?" so that I can improve my understanding of the genre and write my own YA horror novel. For this, I will be focussing on Bram Stoker Award-winning author Adam Cesare's *Clown in a Cornfield* (Cesare, 2020a); seasoned YA horror author Kat Ellis' fourth book, *Harrow Lake* (Ellis, 2020); and Jamison Shea's debut, *I Feed Her to the Beast and the Beast is Me* (Shea, 2023). These contemporary titles were selected because they map and exemplify the three pillars of horror – violence, suspense, and betrayal – which I will dissect later in this essay.

Part I: Why Do Teens Read Horror?

To begin answering my broader question, I think it is important to understand why people – or, more importantly, why teens – love reading horror so that this knowledge can inform how we as writers create scares.

For millennia, the purpose of scary stories has been to keep children safe, preventing them from going into the dark forest at night or straying too close to the water's edge (Latham, 2022). But despite their warnings, these stories have enticed adolescents to come a little closer instead of recoiling. But why?

Experts at the University of Southern California (USC) explain that novel experiences far removed from everyday life fuel chemical responses in the brain, making fear somewhat addictive. A 'flood of fear paired with the relief of safety' (Lindberg, 2018) releases endorphins and dopamine which create a sense of euphoria. Irving Biederman, a specialist in cognitive neuroscience at USC, also suggests that children and young adults get 'especially excited' (Lindberg, 2018) because they are yet to partake in all of life's experiences – i.e. there are far more new things to experience.

However, contemporary YA author Lou Morgan provides a more metaphorical explanation as to why young readers enjoy scary books:

> In reading books that frighten us, we have the choice of whether to explore our fears […] we come away either knowing that the monsters can be defeated, that the forest doesn't go on forever and that the darkness can be driven back or – at the very least – we find ourselves one step closer to the light. (Morgan, 2015)

YA horror is not just about trying to scare the socks off the reader, but rather it provides a space to explore the scarier parts of life in a safe setting – and I think, either consciously or subconsciously, that is why teens keep coming back for more. After all, it is arguably one of the most popular fiction genres, both in and out of the YA market.

In April 2024, *The Bookseller* reported a record-breaking year for horror in general as sales rose by 54% in 2022-23 (Creamer, 2024). When researching the same period for the YA market, I found that seven out of the top ten overall bestselling YA books in 2023 were also horror and/or what could be considered horror adjacent – e.g. thriller, dystopian, etc. (Nielsen BookScan Online, 2024). But as author Jen Williams argues, horror fiction is a perpetually popular genre; it 'ebb[s] and flow[s] with what's going on in the world at large' (Creamer, 2024). Horror is not new, nor is it a phase. From the mother of science fiction, Mary Shelley, to the late, great James Herbert, horror has been in the hands of the everyday reader for more than two hundred years. However, I would argue its latest boom could be attributed to a time of social and cultural upheaval – war, the climate crisis, sexuality and trans rights, cost of living… No wonder teens have an appetite for horror fiction: it enables them to engage with and better understand relevant topics, whilst sinking their teeth into some blood and gore. In that respect, writers are not only entertainers, but philosophers and educators. We have a responsibility to both distract young readers and draw attention to key issues.

Part II: Pillars of Horror

So, what makes a book scary?

There is no one singular answer to this question – of course, fear is subjective – but, having conducted a close reading of my chosen texts and from considering critical writing in the field, I posit that there are three core pillars that make YA horror fiction so enjoyably terrifying to read yet daunting to write: violence/gore, suspense, and betrayal.

VIOLENCE/GORE

Sitting firmly in the slasher sub-genre of horror, *Clown in a Cornfield* (Cesare, 2020a) revels in gore without being gratuitous. In a somewhat expectable fashion, the book follows the teenagers of Kettle Springs as they are hunted en masse by the murderous Frendo the Clown, the town and Baypen corn syrup company's mascot. Although at face value this is a slasher narrative typical of the author's upbringing – 'raised on *Scream* and *Halloween* movies' (Cesare, 2020b, p.23) – Cesare dangles the prospect of circular saw beheadings (Cesare, 2020a, p.229) and cleaver lobotomies (p.300) while

weaving in a deeper conversation with YA readers about the growing discrepancy in traditional American values: the tech-driven liberal youth versus the right-wing 'Make Kettle Springs Great Again' (p.81) older generation.

But the violence and gore of *Clown in a Cornfield* are not just a front for deeper social and political commentary, tricking its readers into surreptitious philosophy. It is cinematic and filmic, working to entertain and get the right reaction out of its audience. In chapter sixteen, as the protagonist, Quinn, and neighbour-come-friend, Rust, enjoy a momentary victory, having freed their classmates from a burning barn, they – and the reader – are quickly reminded of the urgent danger at hand as, mid-dialogue, a boy is shot in the side of the head with a crossbow bolt by Frendo (p.214). It is jarring and unexpected, shocking yet exciting. Violence drives the plot and levies tension. We are momentarily jump-scared into reading on.

Violence and gore in horror are often discounted as 'cheap scares' that lack substance (Thomas, 2017) – the sheer concept of a killer clown in a cornfield sounds outright cheesy with no opportunity for hidden meaning or commentary. Nevertheless, violence and gore are a staple of the wider genre, and done correctly, as Cesare demonstrates with an overall body count in the teens-to-twenties that somehow avoids feeling over the top, can be a source of morbid entertainment. In YA horror specifically, I think gore has scared writers more than readers from approaching the trope, as they are unsure where to draw the line. Master of (YA) Horror himself, Darren Shan, has professed 'there's actually not that much difference in what you can get away with' (Shan, 2019) between YA and adult horror. However, in a review of Cesare's clown slasher on pop culture website *Capes and Tights*, Editor-in-Chief Justin Soderberg admits 'let's be honest we didn't expect much from a young adult book' as though YA horror is a toned down, lesser form of the genre – and *Clown in a Cornfield* (Cesare, 2020a) is anything but. I was surprised at the movie-level, bloody action of the book. In truth, one of the reasons I was drawn to Cesare's story was the number of reviewers who could not believe that it was published under HarperTeen – and I am positive teens would also have that same draw to shocked reviews.

While Cesare pushes boundaries, he does not stand alone in his use of gore in YA horror fiction. In *Harrow Lake* (Ellis, 2020), Ellis does not pull punches, describing the act of pulling a tooth buried in the narrator's arm after falling beneath the Bone Tree: 'I squeeze my flesh hard, forcing the lump up towards the cut […] I dig it out with my nails. My hand is covered in my own blood […] There was a tooth in my arm' (p.115). Similarly, in *I Feed Her to the Beast* (Shea, 2023), Shea paints their story in excessive blood, from the literal 'red-stained river' of Acheron (p.70) to ballet dancers hiding razor blades in one another's shoes (pp.37-38).

I think the effectiveness of violence and gore in YA horror fiction hangs on its rarity. Whether it is the frequency of how much it appears – *Harrow Lake* (Ellis, 2020) features hardly any, except for some distinct scenes, as mentioned – or the inventiveness and variety in its appearance, such as *Clown in a Cornfields*' (Cesare,

2020a) vast arsenal of killing methods, we retain an element of morbid entertainment. Too much samey gore and the author risks desensitising readers.

In my work-in-progress (WIP), *Run While You Can* (Hunt, 2025) – a story about a girl who is dared to spend the night at her private school only to be hunted by her monstrous classmates – I want to include elements of body horror with the shapeshifting antagonists peeling off their skin to transform. When writing such scenes, it is important to strike a balance, ensuring that gore, as Shan implores, serves a purpose and is not 'used gratuitously' (Shan, 2019) for a YA audience. To which one might ask: do we not want our readers to be scared? Yes, we do – but we want them scared, not scarred. As writers, we should not cause psychological harm. The horror genre is so effective because it targets humans' evolved defence system, the fear system, with stimuli we know are inherently fictional (Clasen, 2017, pp.23-34). In that sense, gore should feel exaggerated – either impossible or darkly comical. It would be morally irresponsible of us as writers to inflict lasting mental discomfort on readers, especially ones so young and impressionable.

SUSPENSE

Of the three pillars, suspense is the most vital for generating scares in YA horror fiction. Whether through a general sense of unease created by the setting or the sound of footsteps approaching, suspense encapsulates the feeling we relish from reading horror. But what is important for a YA audience is ensuring the suspense stops when readers close the book – nobody wants their children to be kept up at night. Writers should want their stories to be memorable, but not so much that they cause traumatic nightmares.

Author Alex Woolf – whose horror *Soul Shadows* was shortlisted for the Falkirk Red Book Award – advises that the best way to build suspense for a YA audience is to use first-person present tense narration to 'get inside the lead character's head so the reader gets to share their apprehension[s]' (Woolf, 2020). And, while I agree this is an effective way to deliver a horror story, it is not a hard and fast rule.

Written, for the majority, in first-person present tense, the initial suspense in *Harrow Lake* (Ellis, 2020) centres around the reader knowing that the protagonist eventually goes missing. In the prologue – the transcript of an interview between a journalist and fictional famous movie director, Nolan Nox – the reader discovers that the book's narrator and Nolan's daughter, Lola, 'disappeared when she visited Harrow Lake last year' (p.12). But she is not the only one: we also learn that other people have gone missing at this mysterious location. Readers are hooked with a suspenseful, dark mystery: what is going to happen to Lola? Or, more importantly as a first-person narration: what is going to happen to me?

There are two other key sources of suspense in *Harrow Lake*: its location and the monster, Mr Jitters. Following *Save the Cat!*'s 'Monster in the House' (Brody, 2023, pp.350-373) story structure for YA horror, Ellis builds tension by providing the reader with an inescapable threat in a confined space. From the moment Lola arrives in

Harrow Lake in chapter three, the 'unsettling […] tall and thin' (Ellis, 2020, p.38) figure appears outside Bryn's Museum & Memorabilia, and follows her from then on. Consequently, Lola never feels safe. Even going into Harrow Lake woods is a danger, we are told that:

> 'On a moonless night […] the trees might mistake you for one of their own […] stand still for even a moment, and you'll feel your toenails sprouting long like talons, digging down into the earth, planting like roots' (p.43).

One thing is clear: Harrow Lake is not safe and there is nowhere to escape – except, for the reader, via reality. Mr Jitters is comfortably confined to a fictional place and, although frightening, the constant feeling of looking over one's shoulder stops when the book does.

A similar suspense is generated through the setting of *Clown in a Cornfield* (Cesare, 2020a). Like Harrow Lake, Kettle Springs and its surrounding cornfields are fictional yet close enough to reality that they are believable, however, this time, the story is presented in third-person omniscient narration. So, how else can we create suspense? Associate Professor of American Literature, Maria Anastasova, theorises that suspense lies in a 'cognitive state of uncertainty' (Ortony et al, 1998, cited in Anastasova, 2019, p.8) and that 'the greater [the uncertainty] is, the greater the suspense is' (Anastasova, 2019, p.8). Cesare creates uncertainty in his YA readers by unleashing the wrath of Frendo on absolutely anyone. First, Mayor Harlan Jaffers is killed with an ice pick (Cesare, 2020a, pp.114-115). Then, the 'meathead […] Neanderthal' (pp.42-43), Tucker Lee, is overpowered (p.129). After that, things get messy, and we lose track of who was last on the chopping block. Suspense is created through the uncertain question: who is next? But the reader can be certain "it's not me" since, unlike Ellis' first-person mystery, *Clown in a Cornfield* is told through a cinematic, voyeuristic lens.

Written in first-person, albeit past tense, Shea combines Woolf's advice on storyteller perspective (Woolf, 2020) with Anastasova's theory of uncertainty (Anastasova, 2019) to create a suspenseful and unpredictable protagonist. Laure is a Black ballerina with a working-class background in a sea of pale heiresses and well-connected millionaires. She has fought for her place in the cutthroat world of the Parisian ballet and will not give up without a fight. So, when she gains her mind-controlling powers from the demon Acheron, Laure is dangerously unpredictable, going as far as openly exerting her will over ballet royalty and chair of the ballet's board, Rose-Marie Baumé, in a busy, public restaurant (Shea, 2023, pp.92-93). This specific act is not scary, but the reader's fear comes from wondering how far or how dark Laure will go with her power.

From a writing perspective, I think suspense is almost undervalued in its potential to scare – I rarely hear about a piece being "too suspenseful" – so it is important to remember that for YA audiences, as previously explained, books should

be memorable but not scarring. As writers, we want our readers to feel a sense of unease, but not so much that they hide their books in the freezer like Joey and his copy of *The Shining* (The One Where Monica and Richard are Friends, 1997). Taking inspiration from Cesare and Ellis, I want to create suspense in my WIP through a confined, yet familiar place (a school at night) that the reader can escape to, but also from. When they stop reading, the monsters hunting them stay in the fictional St Kilburn's Academy for Girls (Hunt, 2025).

BETRAYAL

Whether of a friend or family, a betrayal of oneself, or a betrayal of the familiar, this final pillar plays on the reader's real-world, everyday fears. In horror fiction, paranoia can be weaponised, doubt sewn into every scene. Forget ghosts and ghouls, the scariest monsters of all are people, even ourselves. In the words of famed horror writer Stephen King:

> 'Like the scariest bad dreams, the good creepshow often does its work by turning the status quo inside out – what scares us the most about Mr Hyde, perhaps, is the fact that he was a part of Dr Jekyll all along […] it should not be surprising that the horror genre has turned more and more to trying to show us a reflection we won't like – our own.' (King, 1993, p.316)

And that is exactly what Shea sets out to achieve in their debut novel. *I Feed Her to the Beast* (Shea, 2023) is a modern interpretation of the Faustian bargain (TheGothicLibrarian, 2024) wherein ballerina Laure pursues her ambitions through a deal with a demonic entity that resides deep in the catacombs of Paris. In doing so, she meets other victims of Acheron who have made similar pacts – Laure asking for 'power' (Shea, 2023, p.62) while her newfound friends ask for 'beauty' and 'money' (p.125) and, later, 'to feel no more pain' (p.154), each request a very human desire or weakness to be corrected. In the end – and as the title suggests – Laure is the beast after all as she completes her descent into darkness by merging with Acheron. But, it is a transformation only she can see, 'a cursed duet revealed only in the mirror' (p.286), a metaphor for facing our misdeeds and whether we shun them or accept our perfectly imperfect selves.

While this is a frightening message about identity for some, teen readers – who are already searching for and wrestling with their sense of self (Stephenson, 2023) – crave Shea's book's confident reassurance. As one reviewer commented, 'With every choice Laure makes, my own heart swelled with dark satisfaction: I support Laure's rights, and I support every one of her wrongs' (Schulz, 2023). With this in mind, the betrayal pillar of YA horror fiction is a different kind of scare. It is not a horrifying image or feeling, but a reality to contend with.

Clown in a Cornfield (Cesare, 2020a) is much more literal in its handling of betrayal, with several betrayals (or harsh realities) scattered throughout: that one of

the men behind the Frendo mask was their science teacher, Mr Vern (p.217); that Ronnie and Matt had been bribed into helping Sheriff Dunne and his pack of clowns all along (p.270); and that the mastermind behind the Kettle Springs massacre was Baypen CEO and Cole's elusive father, Arthur Hill (p.309). The common thread between these betrayals is that they are people in positions of authority, people who should be trustworthy but are not – friends, family, the law, and corporations.

Harrow Lake (Ellis, 2020) does this also. Lola and her mother Lorelei are both betrayed by their guardians, abused, and victims of trauma. They are also leered at by men and sexualised from a young age. However, unlike *Clown in a Cornfield*, a lot of this is heavily implied or told through a simple look or gesture – from kind-creepy neighbour Grant's hand resting at the small of Lola's back (p.33) to constant retellings of Lorelei's close relationship with her father whose knee she was always sat upon (p.201). Again, this is not typically scary from a traditional horror point of view, but they are unsettling truths about the world readers live in.

By writing about our scary reality, we make it manageable, giving readers the tools to contend with real-world problems. Through a betrayal of the self, Shea teaches about identity. Through a betrayal of trust, Cesare teaches about trusting authority figures in our community. Through a betrayal at home, Ellis teaches about sexism and domestic abuse. These are the real scares.

My WIP, *Run While You Can* (Hunt, 2025) will feature two types of betrayal. One, a betrayal of friendship where my protagonist Roz is lied to by her shapeshifting classmates so that they can kill her, and the other, a betrayal of the self as Roz considers whether she will leave her world views behind to fit in with a new crowd. I chose these betrayals because they are pertinent to YA readers, both playing on and helping to deal with fears that arise during those formative years at secondary school.

Part III: Are There Limitations to YA Horror?

At a glance, it seems like nothing is off the table with YA horror fiction. Perhaps curb the swearing and sexier scenes as our morality gremlins – those voices of reason perched on our shoulders (Skuse, 2024) – might advise for any piece of writing for younger readers. But upon closer inspection, the crucial difference between YA horror and its adult counterpart is not what should be cut, but what needs to be present. It is less about the limitations and more about what must be included to make YA horror a satisfying, well-rounded reading experience.

In the "real world", bad people do bad things and, for the most part, they get away with it – literary examples of which, there are many. But in contemporary YA horror fiction, I suggest, the good guys must somehow "win."

Lola survives the landslide and seeks justice for her mother (Ellis, 2020, p.239); Laure, although thought to be dead, is her unapologetic, true self, dancing happily with the devil – both physically and metaphorically (Shea, 2023, pp.306-307); and Quinn, Cole, and Rust live to see a reformed Kettle Springs, each of them going to therapy, and safe in the knowledge that, even if they had died, the careless murderers would have

been caught regardless (Cesare, 2020a, p.335). But, historically, these optimistically happy endings have not always been the case.

Over time, the bar for entry to YA horror fiction has heightened. Teens – whether knowingly or unknowingly, whether driven by individual choice or market forces – demand stories that foster self-improvement. But it was not so long ago that shelves were lined with the mass market series and pulp horrors of yesteryear (Kole, 2012, p.4) where hundred-page paperbacks were cheaply sold on shock factor.

Celebrating its twentieth anniversary, Darren Shan's *Lord Loss* (Shan, 2005) – the first in the ten-book Demonata series – had a significant impact the first time I read it. As though the 'WARNING: SERIOUSLY SCARY' notice on the back cover was not enough, the fast-paced horrific action, dark humour, and supernatural twists enthralled me. But compared to today's examples of the genre, it is devoid of hope. For example, at the beginning, Grubbs sees his parents decapitated and he is locked in an asylum (pp.33-45); by the end, he may be returning to the normality of school, but he is scarred, caring for his comatose uncle Dervish, and afraid that he might be turning into a werewolf – or else he will be dispatched by the Lambs (pp.259-264). It is only on the final page that the reader has a (short) sigh of relief. *Lord Loss* is still a spectacularly entertaining read, pushing the boundaries of two out of three of my proposed pillars of YA horror fiction – violence/gore and suspense – but beyond escapism, I struggle to see the injection of optimism or lessons on being 'better and nobler' (Shan, 2019) that Shan claims to uphold in his stories.

Looking at a thirty-year-old example, *Fear Street: The Thrill Club* (Stine, 1994) is a predecessor to R.L. Stine's internationally recognised *Goosebumps* series. It pre-dates the modern YA fiction market we know today (Kole, 2012, p.4) and relies on flash-in-the-pan cheap shocks similar to the popular 'penny dreadfuls' of the 1800s (Anderson, 2016). *Thrill Club* (Stine, 1994) is outdated – particularly the basis of its scares which rely on colonialist misinterpretations of 'primitive' Papua New Guinean culture (Stine, 1994, p.24) – but even read in the context of the period it was published, the narrative lacks any ramifications. Despite three people being brutally murdered, the events of the book are seemingly brushed under the carpet, with all charges dropped and Talia joking that any horror stories she writes in the future will have 'happy ending[s]' (pp.147-148).

So, is vintage YA horror scarier than its modern counterparts?

Earlier examples seem to take the attitude that the genre is a stripped-back version of adult horror that does not need tailoring, simply to be aged down through the use of younger characters – such as Grubbs, the thirteen-to-sixteen-year-old protagonist of *Lord Loss* (Shan, 2005) – or familiar settings, like the after-school Thrill Club (Stine, 1994). However, this does not mean past YA horror is inherently scarier, rather that it was a novelty for writers and publishers at the time. While the founding authors of YA horror were finding their feet, publishers such as HarperCollins were 'dubious' and deemed some stories 'too dark to succeed' (Shan, 2019). Now, twenty years later, HarperCollins boasts hundreds of YA horror books in its catalogue

(HarperCollins, n.d.a) – championing titles such as Tiffany D. Jackson's *White Smoke*, Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, Derek Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant*, as well as a whole section of their website dedicated to 'I want to feel… Scared!' (HarperCollins, n.d.b) – reflecting a growing demand. And, as interest has risen, so too have publishers' awareness of young readers' cultural and emotional intelligence, raising expectations for deeper narratives – and, consequently, more meaningful scares.

Critics attribute horror's success to its ability to reflect the fears and politics of the time (George, 2024). While modern readers can analyse vintage YA horror through a political lens, the strength of modern YA horror lies in how seamlessly political themes are woven throughout. For example, Cesare consciously explores sexuality (Cesare, 2020a, p.328) and substance abuse (pp.224-225), among a myriad of other topics, while Stine's engagement with deeper themes is limited to a passing glance at loss (Stine, 1994, p.141).

Part IV: A Guide to Responsible Scaring

I think people have apprehensions about writing YA horror fiction because it is often misinterpreted as having a series of rules and limitations that necessitate a watered-down imitation of the wider genre, but this apprehension stems from a lack of knowhow and research.

In exploring contemporary examples of the genre, the question is not: how scary is too scary? Instead, we should ask: what can writers do to prevent over-scaring, and scare responsibly? And so, in an effort to dispel notions of YA horror being a limiting genre, this is my guide to responsible scaring:

1. **Content warnings** have become commonplace on the internet since their inception in the 1990s (Duignan, 2023), but a growing market trend in YA horror is to preface stories with these warnings. This can be presented in the form of an 'Author's Note' much like Shea's caution before the prologue – 'this book contains copious depictions of blood and features ritualistic self-harm' (Shea, 2023, p.5) – or, as in Ellis' case, a short 'Trigger warning' paragraph on the author's website listing any potentially problematic content (Ellis, no date, para. 23). Unlike Shan's alluring 'WARNING: SERIOUSLY SCARY' (Shan, 2005) used to market the book, the conservative content warning is used to care for its readers' wellbeing, facilitating entertaining scares for those with certain sensitivities or a lower tolerance for specific types of horror (e.g. body horror).
2. **Short scares**, as Woolf suggests, not only keep a story 'tight and punchy' (Woolf, 2020) but serve as a solution to not creating overwhelming suspense. Prolonged scares – such as a chase or graphic fight scene – should never last more than a few pages. Tucker's bloody knife fight with

Frendo (Cesare, 2020a, pp.127-128) is memorable but only lasts three pages. Dedicating whole chapters to horrific action sounds appealing but, realistically, can make for a stressful (or boring) read.

3. **Purposeful and meaningful horror**, particularly when it comes to violence/gore, avoids gratuitousness. Much like my previous point, brevity is key. As writers, we should always question: how can we be thriftier with words? So, when it comes to horror, describe the action in as few words as possible. Teens do not need to languish in the blood and viscera to get the message. Overly detailed passages could lead to and encourage imitative behaviour in vulnerable individuals, as Kenyon College's Assistant Professor, Ian Williams Curtis, suggests in his work on the effects of online horror fiction such as 'creepypasta' (Curtis, 2024).
4. **Endings** are the cherry on the cake for YA horror fiction. No matter how dark a story gets, a good ending provides a light at the end of the tunnel, the satisfaction of overcoming an obstacle. The victory may be bitter-sweet – characters are often injured or irrevocably changed – but the new equilibrium (Todorov, 1971) should leave readers empowered.
5. **Comedy** alleviates horror. YA horror does not need non-stop laughs or to classify itself under the comedy-horror sub-genre, but horror should not take itself too seriously. This is a particular point for improvement for myself: I have been told that my writing can be quite comedic and entertaining (Cuthew, 2025), therefore, if I lean into my strengths, I can alleviate worries of over-scaring with the occasional and often self-aware joke. I plan for the narrator and protagonist of my WIP, Roz (Hunt, 2025) to use her comedic wit to not only survive the horrors but make light of them.

Have fun scaring.

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