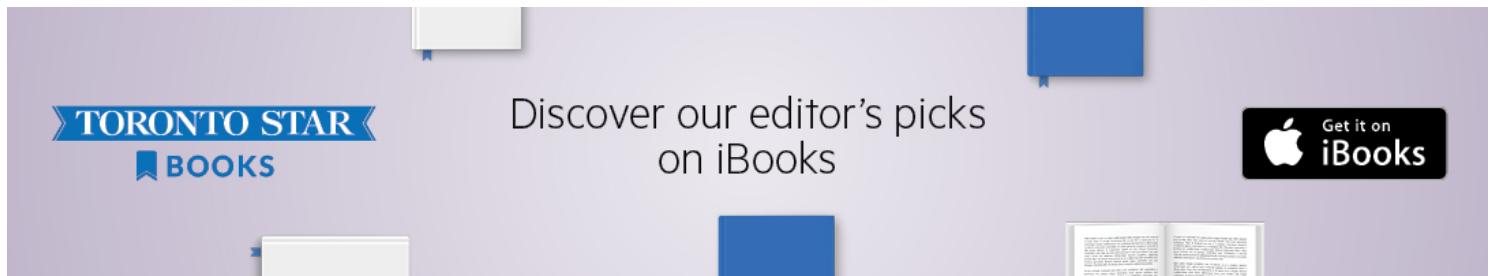




This copy is for your personal non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies of Toronto Star content for distribution to colleagues, clients or customers, or inquire about permissions/licensing, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com



How the First World War created the horror genre

By **JAMES GRAINGER** Special to the Star

Sun., Nov. 11, 2018

When we speak of collectively remembering the First World War our thoughts naturally turn to poppies worn on lapels and observing a moment of silence on Nov. 11. We do our best to imagine the horrors of a war that traumatized and mutilated an entire generation of young men, then we forget about the War to End All Wars for another year.

Or do we? In **Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror**

(Counterpoint) historian W. Scott Poole argues that the traumas of the First World War still echo through our culture 100 years later. From the *The Walking Dead*'s zombie hordes to the faceless killing machines of the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* franchises, the monsters of our collective imagination were born from the world's first truly modern war.



Season 9 of *The Walking Dead* recently premiered. In a new book, *In Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror*, W. Scott Poole argues the genre was shaped by First World War veterans who discovered a new capacity for shock due to what they saw on the battlefield. (JACKSON LEE DAVIS / AMC/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE)

Poole insists that we cannot understand horror without reference to the First World War. “The horror created over the last few decades owes so much to ideas that appear in the films made by veterans of the Great War after 1918,” he says. “Armies of the living dead, séances gone wrong, vampires, mirrors as deadly invitations to another world, murderous slashers — all these appear in the work of the directors of the First World War era.”

The list of war veterans who also helped created the first great horror films is impressive. Directors and screenwriters F.W. Murnau and Albin Grau (*Nosferatu*), Fritz Lang (*Metropolis, M*), James Whale (*Frankenstein, The Bride of Frankenstein*), and Paul Wegener (*The Golem*) all fought in some of the war’s most brutal battles, while Bela Lugosi, for many horror fans the *only* Count Dracula, served with distinction in the Austro-Hungarian army. There they saw thousands of bodies mashed to a pulp and recombined into grotesque shapes, an experience we see acted out in the countless zombie films and works of body horror.

The war did not just traumatize a generation of soldiers and many of their families: it shattered a cultural consensus that had united Western society for centuries. Deeply held convictions about the sanctity of death, burial, honour, duty, and valour simply disappeared.

“Death has always been a horror but it’s as if the Great War, and the language of horror born out of it, catastrophically shattered a set of comforting ideas that religion and sentiment had provided for Europe and North America,” Poole says. “There had probably not been another time in human history when so many human beings had been confronted with so many corpses on a daily basis. The idea that one could not bury one’s loved ones, that there was really nothing left of them to bury, shocked the civilian populace.”

The literary horror tradition, already firmly established before the war, also underwent a profound change. “We go from tales of singular creatures of the night or manifestations of the uncanny to stories of cosmic horror. Horror fiction becomes apocalyptic because the destruction the war wrought seemed so apocalyptic. H.P. Lovecraft may be the best example but we also see it in the frightening worlds created by Kafka while the war raged. Authors like Arthur Machen, who had been largely ignored prior to the war because they portrayed a haunted universe instead of simply a haunted house, are also reexamined.”

Poole, who has written extensively on the history of horror film and literature, says it was probably just a matter of time before he got around to tackling the First World War. “I fell in love with the classic monsters of Universal Studios when I was a kid. This, combined with my interest in the memory and trauma of war, made it nearly impossible to avoid the Great War, how much its shadow hovered over the earliest and most influential horror films.”

As for our current cultural moment, which has seen a re-flourishing of the horror genre in film and literature, Poole sees not only the shadows of a war lost to living memory but a whole new set of cultural anxieties.

“The horror film is on the cusp of change,” he reflects. “We are seeing the emergence of horror on the digital frontier in films like *Friend Request* or the *Unfriended* series, which see social media as a nightmare land. Whole mythologies are being born online (*Slenderman*, for example). This reflects not just our anxieties. It’s the real world intruding into horror and fantasy, a world in which we rightly worry about the fate of democracy when bots and fake social media posts affect the outcome of elections and lead to immense suffering.”

If Poole is right, the directors and writers who plumb our darkest fears will not be left wanting for fresh material.

James Grainger is the Star’s horror books columnist.

4/5 articles left

Subscribe to The Star for just \$0.99 for you

Subscribe Now



Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved.
Republication or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written
consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star
articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com