

***Folk Horror: New Global Pathways*, Edited by Dawn Keetley and Ruth Heholt, University of Wales Press, 2023, 280 pp., \$63 USD (pbk.)**

Sellers Johnson

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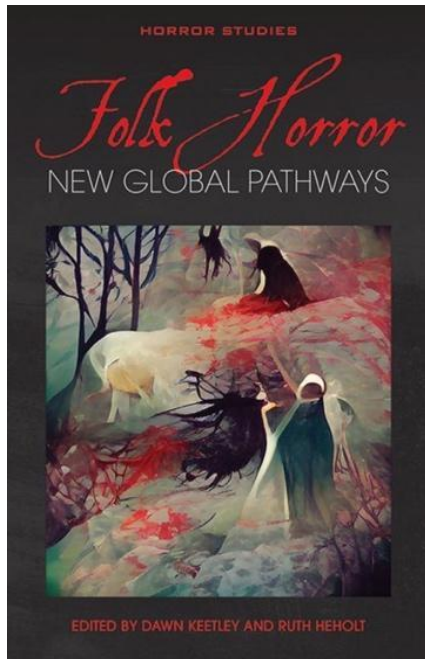
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BOOK REVIEW

Folk Horror: New Global Pathways

Edited by Dawn Keetley and Ruth Heholt
University of Wales Press
2023

280 pp., \$63 USD (pbk.)

In recent years, folk horror studies have experienced a resurgence of academic attention. Adam Scovell's 2017 monograph *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* has proven to be an exemplary text in a returning interest

towards this subgenre; and while folk horror has been prevalent for well over a century in literature and film, it is now seeing a renewal of attention as an integral area of horror genre studies. In their edited collection *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways*, editors Dawn Keetley and Ruth Heholt expand this critical attention by tracing prevailing trends and exceptional perspectives on folk horror from a diverse group of scholarly contributors.

Folk Horror offers over a dozen essays that posit several unique contemporary critical addresses on folk horror from a variety of international vantage points. The text is organized into four major sections that subsequently detail the linguistic roots of folklore/folk horror, revisit canonical films from the first wave of folk horror cinema (approximately 1968–79), explore new and unexpected sites of supernatural occurrences, and furnish political critiques of folk horror tales across Europe, Asia, and North America. Keetley and Heholt also attend to various modes of folk horror media, from films and novels to short stories and even video games. While Britain is regularly privileged as a central locale in folk horror studies, *Folk Horror* shines light on international perspectives by hosting analyses on folk horror narratives from around the globe: Appalachia, Italy, Mexico, Thailand, the U.K., and Ukraine.

Scovell is regularly cited in most chapters here, and his important contributions to the definition of folk horror are conspicuous to this academic interest. His conception of a “folk horror chain” (1-2) is a guiding framework for many of the analyses herein. Representations of skewed belief systems, threatening landscapes, isolated communities in conflict with conservative belief systems of the larger world, and a

happening/summoning are all defining attributes that help us to locate folk horror on a global scale. Most contributors here use Scovell as a springboard for their own distinctive contentions, broadening the critical scope of folk horror and bolstering new pathways of thinking. And yet, it is their eclectic variety of case studies attending to the folklore of the past that augur new folk horror ideas for future study.

In Part One: Folk Horror's Folklore, Jeffrey A. Tolbert's opening chapter examines the semantics of the "folk" in folklore and folk horror. His study of the "folkloresque [and] folkloristics [...] inaugurates a theme that runs through many of the subsequent chapters: folklore is not a static historical phenomenon, but an ongoing process in which we are all immersed" (7-8). Catherine Spooner's subsequent chapter questions the interaction of tourism, folklore, and community, asking "Whose folk?" She uses folklore surrounding the Lancashire Witches to determine that while regionalism might generate damaging mythologies, it can also reclaim vital local histories despite the blurring of fiction and reality—a theme that also underscores and contextualizes this collection. Lana Krys' next chapter shifts from Britain to Ukraine, to discuss the Ukrainian Gothic as a subversive mode for expressing national and political discourse. Ian Brodie's closing chapter for this section revisits the beloved cartoon *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (1969–70) to consider capitalist ideology and the commercial popularization of folk horror on the U.S. silver screen, despite *Scooby-Doo* exhibiting markedly different aesthetics and generic conventions than other folk horror fare.

Part Two focuses on established canons of folk horror tropes, such as sacrifice and isolated communities, and looks at these themes from new perspectives. David Devanny examines typographic designs and the paratexts of different horror narratives, while Timothy Jones returns specifically to Britain to study the phenomenon of black magic stories and occulture. Bernice M. Murphy turns to North American folk horror literature from Shirley Jackson, Thomas Tryon, and Steven King, highlighting myths of human sacrifice associated with insular traditions, the Rural Gothic, and bountiful harvests (i.e., corn).

Part Three: Folk Horror in New Places expands beyond the typical canon of British folk horror and explores the alternative ways "in which landscape disarms human agency" (12). In her chapter "Sunny Landscapes, Dark Visions: E.F. Benson's Weird Domestic Folk Horror," Heholt studies the literary works of Benson, whose ghost stories occupy ostensibly safe spaces, where spectral encounters often occur in blinding daylight. In "Monsters in the Making: *Phi Pop* and Thai Folk Horror," Katarzyna Ancuta studies several *phi pop* films that present unique considerations of Thai folk horror through its regional folklore, modernization, animistic spirits, and

social hierarchies. As a local variation of a traditional understanding of folk horror, *phi pop* (as a classic figure in Thai horror cinema and folklore) highlights complications between the provinces and capital life and the rural/urban divide. Tanya Krzywinska's chapter helps to remedy a missing gap in critical attention towards folk horror and video games. She analyzes the concept of "ludic' folk horror—that is, folk horror that is designed to be played, rather than watched, read or listened to" (186). Krzywinska posits a unique aesthetic tension in ludic folk horror, where the general lack of agency that usually underscores the subgenre converges with the active nature of gaming.

The final section, Part Four: Folk Horror's Politics, explores political perspectives from Marco Malvestio on *filone* films and nationalism in Italy, Valeria Villegas Lindvall's critique on colonialism and racialized bodies embodied in the Latin American tale *La Llorona*, and Keetley's final chapter on ecocritical "sacrifice zones" of Appalachia, where outsiders succumb to the malevolent agency of the land. While "reaching for a greater historical and global inclusivity" (1), *Folk Horror* understands that the subgenre's enduring connection to British texts and traditions warrants revised study from a more transnational pool of scholarship.

While chapters from Heholt, Jones, and Spooner reposition some of these British perspectives, contributions from Ancuta, Malvestio, and Villegas Lindvall address other global locales with their own individual histories, chronologies, and definitions. This anthology covers its themes and threads quite nicely, and the pithy chapters provide readers with spirited musings on varying topics of folk horror. Some chapters would benefit from additional analysis, but new ground has certainly been laid for these considerations to grow in their academic lore.

In this collection of essays, Keetley and Heholt offer new considerations of folk horror that extend beyond the foundations of Scovell's folk horror chain. From the animistic spirits of Thai *phi pop*, Italian *filone* films, ludic folk horror's paradoxical lack of agency in video games, and prevailing capitalist attitudes in the original *Scooby-Doo* series, *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways* presents diverse enlightening content that is equally fun and accessible. These contributors also range from working academics to doctoral candidates, proving the merit of such emerging genre studies.

Through thirteen lucky essays, this anthology furnishes brief (if, at times, restrained) chapters that chart curses, cartoons, uncanny diurnal spectres, Ukrainian witches, the aftermath of the Rapture, and more, through literature, video games, and films that maintain an interdisciplinary, discerning interest in the themes of folklore and folk horror. Digital evolutions and an AI presence (as is apparent on the cover of this book) may augur uncanny forces for the future, but our dark visions, bleeding insights,

and imaginative folklore will endure as something eerily human. In horror and humour, we remain the distinct “folk” of our own tales.

— M. Sellers Johnson

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