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## ***Monsters in America* Recounts Nation's History through Its Obsession with Horror**

Historian W. Scott Poole channels the terrors that lurk in the dark places of American history in his new book, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Baylor University Press, October 15, 2011). From sea serpents to zombies, from witch trials to alien invasions, and from Dracula to Norman Bates, Poole uncovers the real horrors that lie beneath our national fascination with monsters.

“The American past reads like something of a horror movie, maybe even a low-budget slasher,” says Poole, a history professor at College of Charleston. “It comes at us dripping with gore, victims lying scattered on the ground, eldritch moonlight revealing creeping horrors you never learned from your eighth-grade history textbook.”

Monsters reflect anxieties about political identities, religion, economic forces, race and gender dynamics, and societal changes. Through the ages, scary folk tales, witch hunts, legends of strange beasts, ghost stories, horror and sci-fi literature and movies, satanic panics, and urban legends reveal disturbing truths about American history.

Poole provides plentiful examples of the monstrous, the alien, and the horrifying in U.S. history:

- Witch Trials:** No aspect of Puritan experience lives more strongly in American memory than their fear of witches. The witch hunts in the towns of New England served as popular entertainment as well as evidence of religious conflict and persecution.
- Frontier monsters:** Sea serpents swam in American waters and strange beasts populated the wilderness. Belief in such creatures drew upon European folklore and the tendency for frontier dwellers to produce legends out of the shadowy forests and lakes that surrounded them.
- Slavery:** Terrifying creatures emerged out of the reality of the slave trade, and slave ships represented true houses of horror.
- The Civil War:** The shocking carnage was documented by photographer Matthew Brady in images that represent the birth of gore as an American entertainment. The bloodied corpse has been a significant part of popular culture ever since.
- Serial killers:** Victorian America developed an interest in a new monster: the mass murderer, such as the nation's first serial killer, H.H. Holmes. This fascination continued through the 20th century, as the horrors perpetuated by killers such as Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer became known.
- Cold War monsters:** The atomic age bred a fascination with the monstrous mutant. American moviegoers saw the destruction of major cities from 50-foot women, giant insects, and other creatures created by radiation or nuclear testing. Paranoia about “Reds under the beds” was an underlying theme of movies such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

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•**Alien visitations:** Invaders from other planets were a new space age fear. Yet some stories held out a messianic hope that the aliens were coming to save America from itself.

Friendly monsters in flying ships offered an escape from history.

•**Slasher films:** From *Psycho* to *Halloween*, slashers wielded their knives in the middle of a national conversation about mental health, crime, gender, family life, and sex.

•**Zombies:** The shambling hordes of zombies depicted in *Night of the Living Dead* and other films by George Romero are a unique American creation, offering a vision of an uncontainable horror. This new monster suited a culture in apocalyptic mode, playing to the widespread expectation that the clock had run out on the whole human race.

•**Vampires:** The more glamorous undead have experienced a surge in popularity over the last decade, as heroes, villains and love interests in TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries*. The wildly popular *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer is an attempt to reconstruct the vampire legend as a tale of the struggle for family values, with Meyer creating a fantasy creature entirely different from the vampire.

What horrors lie in store for America? Poole identifies the 21st century fear of the “posthuman”: the terror of becoming victims of monstrous machines. “The posthuman terrors have to be added to our list of possible monsters, along with sea serpents and serial killers,” Poole says. “Every historical period decides what its monsters will be and creates the monsters it needs.”

**W. Scott Poole** blames repeated viewings of *Shock Theatre* at an impressionable age for his monster obsession. Associate Professor of History at the College of Charleston, he is also a prolific pop culture critic whose reviews and commentary can be found at PopMatters.com, ReligionDispatches.com, and other sites. His previous books include *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* and *Never Surrender: Confederate Memory and Conservatism in the South Carolina Upcountry*, the 2004 winner of the George C. Rogers Award for Best Book on South Carolina History. Poole lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with his partner, Beth Phillips, two dogs, and extensive comic book and vinyl record collections.

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by W. Scott Poole

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