

MODERN HORROR

Elegant Reads for the Witching Season

By Alma Katsu
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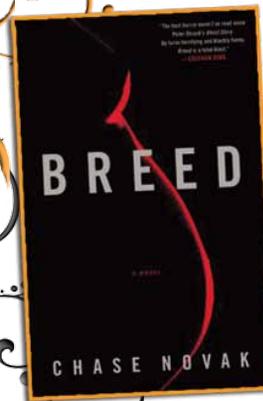
It's the time of year when our reading appetites run to dark and chilling supernatural tales.

Of course, some of us don't wait for Halloween and read this way year-round, but for those of you who prefer to wait until pumpkin season for your spooky reads, here's a list of elegant horror novels you might consider for your annual indulgence. For a change of pace, we thought it would be fun to skip the more gory and graphic horror novels in favor of the more fantastic. There's something singularly sinister about horror when it comes from an unexpected place.

"The Little Stranger" (2009) by Sarah Waters: If you ask me, the hardest type of horror to write successfully is the ghost story. It's difficult to put a new spin on them—it's awfully easy to fall into a rut—and they tend to be slow to build, which seems to run contrary to many modern readers' tastes. Not so with this modern classic. The pacing is so perfect, and the post-World War II era is evoked so thoroughly that the fact that it's a ghost story may elude you until the very end.

"Those Across The River" (2011) by Christopher Buehlman blends Southern gothic, Civil War historical and werewolves in this well-written debut novel, which came out in 2011. The prose is lovely, setting you up perfectly for some scenes that are unexpectedly and breathtakingly disturbing.

"Breed" (2012) by Chase Novak (Scott Spencer): Many have compared this novel, the first written by two-time National Book Award finalist Scott Spencer under his pen name, to *Rosemary's Baby*, but the twist is that it's the parents who have turned demonic, not the children, which seems very fitting for this day and age. Reportedly the first in a



series of horror stories to be written by Spencer.

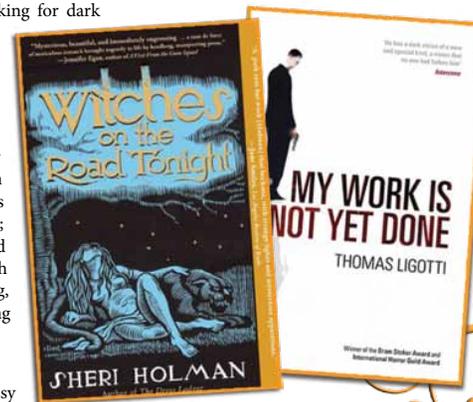
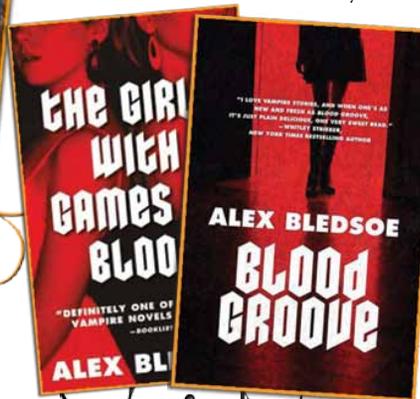
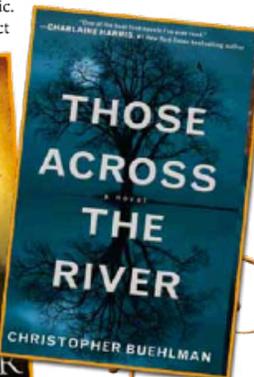
Not wanting to submit *Suspense* readers to my preferences alone, I asked W. Scott Poole, history professor at the College of Charleston and author of "Monsters in American: Our Historical Obsession With the Hideous and the Haunting" (Baylor University Press) for recommendations. As you might expect from an academic and expert in the genre, he selected two works that combine thought-provoking literary approaches with dark fantasy and horror.

You may feel you are already familiar with the terrors of the daily grind, but "My Work Is Not Yet Done" (2002) by Thomas Ligotti, subtitled "Three Tales of Corporate Horror," will doubtless give you a whole new outlook. Bram Stoker Award and World Fantasy award winner, Ligotti's writing is frequently compared to Lovecraft and Poe and has been described as "philosophical horror". For readers who are looking for dark reminders of the terrors and decay of the everyday world.

"Witches On The Road Tonight" (2011) by Sheri Holman is about more than witches or monsters: it's a story about fear itself and particularly how fear has played a role in American life over the past century. This theme is played as we follow three characters: Tucker, a Depression-era writer; Eddie, a small-time TV fright night host dying of cancer; and Wallis, his daughter, a TV journalist, as they grapple with their fears in this ambitious novel. For dazzling storytelling, you can't go wrong with Holman, author of the best-selling historical novel "The Dress Lodger."

Suzanne Johnson is not only the author of urban fantasy novels "Royal Street" and "River Road" (coming November 2012), but she writes the Fiction Affliction columns for science

fiction-fantasy website *Tor.com*, keeping an eye out for new releases in all thing paranormal and fantasy. When asked what she would recommend for chilling Halloween reading, she recommended Alex Bledsoe's Memphis Vampire books, "Blood Groove" (2009) and "The Girls With Games of Blood" (2010). These books are perfect for readers looking for their vampire-book fix but want it with a twist. In these books, Bledsoe brings an old-world vampire who thought himself dead back to life in 1970s Memphis, providing the perfect vehicle for his noir-ish, edgy stories. ■



Alma Katsu is the author of "The Taker" and "The Reckoning" (Gallery Books/Simon and Schuster), the first two books in a spellbinding trilogy of love, magic, betrayal and redemption. Part historical novel, part dark fantasy, "The Taker" was named a top ten debut novel of 2011 by ALA/Booklist. For more information, please visit www.almakatsu.com.