



The Dark Descent

David G. Hartwell (Editor), Clive Barker, Ray Bradbury, John Collier, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates

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This highly acclaimed anthology traces the evolution of horror, from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe to Stephen King. Adopted by colleges across the country to be used in literature courses, *The Dark Descent* showcases some of the finest horror fiction ever written.

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The Dark Descent Details

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From Reader Review *The Dark Descent* for online ebook

Alazzar says

I technically *should* put this book on my “Abandoned” or “Hiatus” shelf, because I didn’t finish it. But I feel I’ve read everything I’m going to from this book (at least, for the time being), so we’ll call it “Read.”

I started out by reading from the beginning (as is the tradition with books, I hear). I went through the introduction and found that the guy who threw this anthology together had a massive boner for Stephen King. I’ve read *Pet Sematary* and *Salem’s Lot*, and from those books I’ve decided I don’t much care for King. It’s the amount of background detail that gets me—I just don’t need that much info.

And, of course, the first story of the book happened to be by Mr. King. Sometimes that’s just the way it goes.

After reading King’s story and then the first few pages of the next two stories, I started to wonder if I even like horror at all. Nothing was grabbing my attention. So I resolved to do the following: instead of just going straight through the book, I’d read stories that were either A) written by authors I knew of/liked, or B) mentioned as some of the “best installments” when people reviewed *The Dark Descent*. It made for a much more enjoyable reading experience. Here’s the stuff I managed to get through, with asterisks by my favorite tales:

The Reach, Stephen King: The tale of an old woman who’s lived on an island off the coast of New England her entire life. There are some things that I think are supposed to be ghosts. I can’t begin to describe how unhappy I was with this story. Here I’d heard that *The Dark Descent* was the greatest horror anthology ever, and the first story didn’t have anything that I felt could even be *construed* as horror. Yuck.

The Summer People, Shirley Jackson: For some reason, I thought this was going to be a haunted house story. I also thought it was going to be good. It’s the tale of a couple who decides to stay at their lake house past Labor Day for the first time ever, only to find that things are a little different after the Summer. This is definitely on the more subtle end of horror, but the problem was that it was *too* subtle for me. I’ve read a lot of reviews where people have said this story is chilling, but I just didn’t get that. I mean, I understand *why* people might think it’s chilling, in that it’s one of those things that you feel could actually happen in the real world. But it just didn’t work for me.

***The Crowd, Ray Bradbury:** OK, *now* we’re talkin’. Ever wonder why it is that crowds gather so quickly around accidents? Ray Bradbury answers the question for us, and the explanation is a little unsettling. Great story.

John Charrington’s Wedding, E. Nesbit: I read this story not because I knew of the author, but because it was so short that I figured I could afford to give it a shot. It ended up being much longer than I expected, just because I was damn tired when I tried to read it and had to keep reading the same paragraphs over and over again. In the end, I feel my review is tarnished by the manner in which I read the story. It’s the tale of a man who gets engaged, only to . . . uh . . . something-something. I don’t know. I kinda snoozed through the last few pages.

***Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper, Robert Bloch:** The first thing I’ve read by Robert Bloch, and I loved it (save for a weird math error when discussing dates that really threw me off). A detective from London comes to Chicago in search of Jack the Ripper—long after Jack should have been dead from old age. He convinces

a psychiatrist to join him on the hunt for a famous murderer who may have found a way to lengthen his lifespan.

If Damon Comes, Charles L. Grant: A couple splits up and the former husband feels bad for his past transgressions, even though he's a hero in his son's eyes. When the son goes through a tragic experience, certain truths are revealed and creepiness ensues. (Can you tell I'm having a hard time trying to write some sort of review for this without spoiling anything?) Anyway, I read that this story was creepy, and while I agree with that assessment, it never actually gave me chills. Then again, I don't think anything in this book did, so that's not necessarily a bad thing.

***Dread, Clive Barker:** I'm not sure what to think of Clive Barker. I read *The Hellbound Heart* a while ago and thought the prose was great, and even that the concept was good. But man, Barker's got a whole different level of sadism than I'm used to. I used to think that I'd never read something that I felt was "too disturbing," 'cause I like disturbing. Then I came across Barker's work. *The Hellbound Heart* was good, but a bit gory for my not-normally-affected-by-gore tastes. Similarly, *Dread* is a story that is just *fucked up*, but I'll be damned if it wasn't interesting. And the ending was great, I thought. Clive Barker writes stuff that I may enjoy reading myself, but I don't know that I'd ever recommend it for anyone, and *Dread* is a perfect example of that. Great story, great writing, not fit for most stable minds.

***Born of Man and Woman, Richard Matheson:** I haven't read a whole lot of Matheson (*I Am Legend*, *Hell House*, a few short stories), but I'll be damned if I don't love his work. Matheson is definitely my favorite author to be found in this collection, even if I haven't read a whole lot of his stuff (mostly because I haven't read much from the other authors here, either). I'd read somewhere recently that *Born of Man and Woman* was one of the first things Matheson had published (if not the very first), and that it was supposed to be one of the best SF/horror shorts of all time. I can see why. In only three pages, Matheson created an amazing story of a boy unappreciated by his parents, only because he's different.

The Signal-Man, Charles Dickens: This was another one of those late-night reads that was made much harder by fatigue (though I'll also blame at least part of my faulty attention span on the fact that I wasn't particularly sucked in by the story). It's about a man who operates a signal station for a train track, and the strange things he's been seeing lately. I wasn't too impressed with it, overall. Not as bad as *The Reach* or *The Summer People*, certainly, but not as great as Bradbury, Bloch, Barker and Matheson.

***Crouch End, Stephen King:** OK. Here's the thing: I've always liked H.P. Lovecraft's ideas, but never much cared for his prose. He's one of those "unnecessary detail" guys, explaining things that do not require explanation. And his dialogue is some of the worst you'll ever read. And his voice kinda stinks. And his stories are often formulaic. But the concepts—the concepts are pretty awesome.

On the other hand, there's Stephen King, whose prose I like but story construction I hate. Way too much background info from this guy. He'll put you through 200 pages of *Salem's Lot* before he even *thinks* of mentioning something that *might* be vampiric in origin.

In *Crouch End*, King wrote a story that took place in Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. And my god, is this ever the best of both worlds.

We get King's excellent prose, Lovecraft's concepts. It's awesome. The story takes place in London and centers around an American woman who ends up in a bad part of town and sees things that no one should ever see. I always felt that the way Lovecraft's characters descended into madness could have been done better. King figured out the way it *should* be. Best Stephen King thing I've ever read, though I admittedly

haven't read much of his stuff.

***The Damned Thing, Ambrose Bierce:** Never heard of the author before I got this book, but a Google search of "best horror authors of all time" brought the name up. And man, am I glad it did. This story about a man's unusual death on a hunting trip conjures almost Lovecraft-style imagery in my mind. I was actually reminded of "The Dunwich Horror" as I read this. And there was a cool semi-scientific explanation at the end, which I dug.

You may have noticed that I didn't include the two Lovecraft stories (**The Call of Cthulhu, The Rats in the Walls**) in my list, but that's because I'd read them previously. In fact, I'd read Rats pretty recently, and I have to say, I had a hard time getting through the early pages. It was boring the crap out of me. But by the end, I was glad I read it, which seems to commonly be the case with Lovecraft stories for me.

Overall, the book gets 3 stars. Some stories are 5s, but there are so many stories I couldn't even get into after the first few pages that it made me not want to even try on the authors I hadn't heard of.

Wendy Dranfield says

I was really looking forward to reading this as I love dark short stories and I love the cover on my first edition copy (different to Goodreads), but I was disappointed. I only enjoyed the Joyce Carol Oates story and had to give up on quite a few of the others. I think they were all too old fashioned for my taste.

Ralph Pulner says

Essential. I would gladly pay for a college course if this book were it's subject. I don't think it would interest a casual horror fan but if you're a writer and want to get a broader understanding of horror then it's a must read. This book taught me that thematically, horror can show up in any genre. It need not be bloody. It can be psychological, hinted at, not explained, subtle or spoken in what is not said. I spent a good three months on this, reading one or two stories a night. There were some misses for me but overall this blew my mind.

Simon Workman says

A massive deep dive into the broad variety of horror fiction, covering Poe and his contemporaries through the late 1980s when it was published. Its reputation as one of the greatest anthologies of the genre is well-deserved. If you're looking for an entry point into horror, this is it!

DeAnna Knippling says

Good, but exhausting.

The book is split into three sections, covering moral horror, horror that draws its effects out of some kind of psychological element, and horror in which, hmmm, the horror comes from that laws of reality simply not being fixed firmly in place (the fantastical). Otherwise the sections are not organized or are organized by some method that I didn't comprehend.

The first section got tiresome after a while (people receiving their due over and over), the middle section was fun, and the last section, which I had been looking forward most to, was dull. Whatever was supposed to be horrifically fantastical about these stories did not strike me as such. A few of the stories in that section I liked, but mostly they were loooooong and without much of the fantastic--mostly ghosts. "Ghosts exist! Ones that aren't normal!" In other contexts I might have been less annoyed. As it was the selection of stories felt heavy handed.

The main benefit of the collection is that it pulls from horror stories across genres and times. This a WIDE-ranging collection in that sense, and I enjoyed being surprised by authors that I didn't know wrote any horror. The collection does indeed live up to its title, even if it would have been more beneficial to have the three sections put in time order, so it was easier to see the lines of descent.

If you're interested in the fantastic types of horror, I'd go with the Vandermeers' THE WEIRD collection instead or in addition. Some of the stories cross over; I feel the exploration of the subgenre gets better treatment there, though.

Matt Belcroft says

This is a sampling of various horror writers over a span of 200 years. Some of the stories (read 'writers') were very interesting and I would have liked them to be longer. Others seemed to drag on and on. I will admit that I just don't have the patience for Lovecraft whose stories seem to go on and on, but maybe that was the style of writing that was popular in those days. I enjoyed the more modern writers both because of the easier-to-read prose style and perhaps I could understand their perspective, being more in line with the current century. I like science fiction and so enjoyed the last story in the anthology a lot (A Little Something for Us Tempunauts by Phillip K. Dick)

Paul Bryant says

Contains one of PB's All Time Greats :

"The Summer People" by Shirley Jackson (1950)

Old Shirl has got matter-of-fact horror *down*, she *owns* matter-of-fact horror, and it's a thing of wonder. Perfectly bland boring people do these ordinary things and it all plods on and plods on and you're looking at your watch and scratching your left ventricle until you realise this routine stuff is now involving immense cruelty and death. Come round to tea any day, Shirley Jackson.

Laura says

If I may quote Forrest Gump for a moment, I'd like to say that The Dark Descent is like a box of chocolates. Not so much because you "never know what you're gonna get" - because these stories are almost uniformly well written - but because the best way to consume it is a few pieces (stories) at a time, so they don't get overwhelming and start tasting all the same (or make you sick).

The editor, David Hartwell, has divided the story collection into what he calls three "streams": 1) moral allegorical, or stories that are "about the intrusion of horror into reality...[and:] the colorful special effects of evil." 2) psychological metaphor, or stories that "have a monster at the center" whether supernatural or psychological, and 3) fantastic, or stories that generate horror through their "ambiguity as to the nature of reality". He admits himself that these are not hard and fast descriptions, in fact many stories cross boundaries, but it is an interesting way of looking at the history of short horror fiction.

It's also interesting to see which types of stories appeal to you the most. I found myself most interested in the "third stream", the fantastic stories, although I had already read almost all of them. Of the other sections, I found I had read only four of the "second stream" stories and three of the "first stream". Whichever type of story appeals to you the most, David Hartwell has done an excellent job in choosing examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including some from several writers whose names do not spring to mind when the subject of horror writing is being discussed.

Matt says

I found this to be an excellent anthology chronicling Hartwell's take on the evolution of the horror tale. However, rather than laying out the tales in chronological fashion, Hartwell instead breaks the anthology into three separate sections delineating the three main types of horror tale as they have developed since the 19th century. There are several well known benchmark classics as well as hard to find gems that outline his conception of the horror genre.

A warning to the casual reader, though. This book is a doorstop and is packed with both short stories and novellas, coming in at over 1000 pages total. I am a very fast reader and it still took me months to get through it. Normally I devour a book in just a few days or weeks but I kept finding that I viewed this anthology as not only something to read for pleasure but also as required reading (it had been my own White Whale for years when I finally found it in used book store recently). I found myself breaking away from it at times to read another novel or something of different genre so that every time I picked it back it would feel like a fresh experience of discovery.

If you consider yourself a horror aficionado (as I humbly do) then you will view this anthology as a must-have for your collection.

Ctgt says

An excellent collection of shorts/novellas from a wide range of authors. You will find some of the usual

suspects-King, Poe, Lovecraft but for me the strength of the collection was the inclusion of so many authors I have heard of but never read. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Thomas M. Disch, Theodore Sturgeon, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Robert Hitchens, Henry James, Oliver Onions, Joyce Carol Oates and authors you wouldn't normally associate with horror fiction Fritz Leiber, William Faulkner, Gene Wolfe and Philip K. Dick.

A few of my favorites;

The Autopsy *Michael Shea*-read it now.

Sticks *Karl Edward Wagner*-a long time favorite of mine.

Vandy, Vandy *Manly Wade Wellman*-Silver John

The Yellow Wallpaper *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*-another unread classic for me.

A Rose for Emily *William Faulkner*-who knew?

The Repairer of Reputations *Robert W. Chambers*-The King in Yellow

If you like your horror with nuance and subtlety this is the book for you. If you're looking for gore and entrails look somewhere else.

Michael Fierce says

One of the best anthologies I have ever read!

Has some of my favorite short stories of all time all in one volume!

The Whimper of Whipped Dogs by Harlan Ellison, **The Call of Cthulhu** by H.P. Lovecraft, **Sticks** by Karl Edward Wagner, and **Dread** by Clive Barker (though I hated the stupid downer of a movie that completely missed the feel and point of the original short story).

Includes many other classic short stories, many of which I like or almost like as much as the ones I mentioned - but I can't quite remember their details at the moment - and some that can be hard to find.

Super Highly Recommended!!!!!!

Gabriel says

I am SO looking forward to this tome. I found it in a outlet store for \$6 and grabbed it as fast as I could. Stories from some of my favorites (Harlan Ellison's "Whimper of Whipped Dogs" plus a couple from Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, HP Lovecraft and one from Philip K. Dick) as well as from people who I need to

read/read more of (Nathaniel Hawthorne, Clive Barker, I think Robert Bloch is also in here). If this is as good as it claims to be, I will be using it when I teach my Horror Short Fiction class again.

What a collection! Definitely worth any price you find it for (it's only \$20 off of Amazon). What makes this so wonderful are not the stories from the well-known authors (although King's third entry in here, "Crouch End" is one of his best works period) but rather from those who aren't normally recognized. Karl E. Wagner's "Sticks" is easily one of the best short stories I've ever read and "If Damon Comes" actually truly scared a bunch of hardened students (people who looked at lots of random horror movies and thought nothing of them).

Sure, there are some clunkers in here (the choice for Henry James does not fit in the order that it was put in, for instance). There are also some that most readers will not admit into the horror genre ("The Yellow Wallpaper," "The Beautiful Stranger" by Shirley Jackson, and "Something For Us Tempanauts" by Philip K. Dick), but in the context of the section, they can allow for a great discussion on how the themes of horror stories are found in other types of writing.

Overall, something that everyone should at least look at if not read. A great introduction to a deep genre and the type of book that will make those interested look for even more.

Kurt Vosper says

I don't know what to say about this book. Other than a few stories...this was a labour and not a pleasure. That said, the few stories in it were worth reading. Ughh!

Lestat says

If you have any interest in horror fiction, The Dark Descent is essential. In fact, if you're new to horror, don't bother with anything else. This compilation will not only introduce some of the best works in short fiction of the last hundred years, but it will do so with a clarity of vision that actually allows you to survey how far we have come and what remains to be explored. Each work in this anthology represents an incredible peak in style and expression that has never been topped regardless of its age, and the editor Hartwell introduces each of these terrors lovingly. I can't tell you how wonderful it was for me to find out about authors like Clive Barker, Robert Aickman, Oliver Onions and many others for the first time in this book. Enjoy the feast of horror!

David says

First collection of horror stories I ever owned and read cover to cover.
