



Best New Horror 21

Stephen Jones (Editor) , Michael Marshall Smith (Contributor) , Nicholas Royle (Contributor) , Simon Kurt Unsworth (Contributor) , Christian Matheson (Contributor) , John Gaskin (Contributor) , Terry Dowling (Contributor) , Mark Valentine (Contributor) , more... Robert Shearman (Contributor) , Rosalie Parker (Contributor) , Stephen Volk (Contributor) , Joe Hill (Contributor) , Brian Lumley (Contributor) , Stephen King (Contributor) , Barbara Roden (Contributor) , Ramsey Campbell (Contributor) , Simon Strantzas (Contributor) , Reggie Oliver (Contributor) , M.R. James (Contributor) , Michael Kelly (Contributor) , Chris Bell (Contributor) ...less

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'The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror' is an annual compilation of contemporary horror fiction, showcasing the talents of the finest writers working in the field of terror. This volume includes the best stories by up and coming stars of the genre.

Best New Horror 21 Details

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Reggie Oliver (Contributor) , M.R. James (Contributor) , Michael Kelly (Contributor) , Chris Bell
(Contributor) ...less**

From Reader Review Best New Horror 21 for online ebook

Sue says

Enjoyable entry in the long-running series, but a bit less gripping than the last couple of volumes. Good solid stories from some favorite veteran horror writers, but nothing stand-out. All in all, a good overview of the past year's short fiction, and as always, the round-up of the year at the beginning of the book was worth the price alone. I always find a lot of books, stories and new authors to check out.

F.R. says

Maybe, like vineyard owners who stare around at that year's crop and find it somewhat wanting, Stephen Jones feels sometimes that the vintage he has to work with is not as good as others. But what can he do? After all he has the contract with the publishers, he *has* to get this year's volume out. Yet he much know, somewhere in his heart, that this is not as good a bottle as some of the ones he's previously brought forth.

This 21st volume then is not a brilliant one, carrying as it does more than its fair share of distinctly average stories, with not even old reliables like Ramsay Campbell or Brian Lumley reaching their usual heights.

Of course, that said, there were some stories I greatly enjoyed. I'd particularly include: 'After The Ape' by Stephen Volk, which spins out what happened to Fay Wray's character after King Kong fell from the rooftops; Michael Kelly's 'The Woods', which is a backwards hunting story with a nasty twist; then there's the gruesome glee of murder in Rosalie Parker's 'In The Garden'; Robert Shearman's bizarre and disturbing 'Granny's Grinning'; the creepy Vietnam-set ghost story 'Two Steps Down The Road' by Terry Dowling; and the brilliant 'What Happens When You Wake Up In The Night' by Michael Marshall Smith.

That's not to say that the others are bad, just a tad underwhelming, with the result that I finished this volume with a shrug rather than any glow of pleasure. Who knows though – if I follow my wine analogy through – perhaps it will mature with age and if I come back to it in ten years I will find that this it's actually Don Perignon '55, and I was a fool to miss the other treats here.

Shawn says

And so, another down...

The "Year In..." as always is a satisfying, if depressing, overview of all things horror. As I've mentioned, I now find myself looking forward to the feature, and especially Jones' little soapbox moments at the conclusion - he's got experience, a distinct sensibility and an insider's perspective. Many seemed to have found this volume's entry catty, but I found it quite refreshingly frank and something that needed to be said, as Jones' calls out the generalized uncritical glad-handing that goes on in the genre - that specious, homogenizing "if you can't say anything nice" mantra awash in superlatives (everything is always "the greatest, the most inventive, the most original") that helps to neuter any deep thought (and along the way, Jones' reminds internet opinionators - like myself - they real critics have to earn their cred). Horror is awash with tons of crap and if a few more people respected their own opinions, pushed their critical skills a bit, and

didn't make nice out of a misguided desire not to offend (or a calculated desire to get "in") maybe there would be a slight abatement to the flood of detritus. But that's unlikely to happen...

So let's knock this off my to-do list, huh? Weak to strong, as always...

"In The Garden" by Rosalie Parker is a short, well-written but somewhat familiar first person monologue. I usually have no problem with ambiguous stories (select works by Aickman and Campbell are personal faves) but Nicholas Royle's "The Reunion", in which a couple attend the titular event for the wife's medical school alma mater at a sprawling hotel, struck me as okay but kind of flat. Essentially, it touches on the subject of doppelgangers without ever actually arriving at that point. I was also disappointed by Simon Strantzas' "Cold To The Touch", in which a religiously minded climate scientist is sent to the polar north to investigate a strange stone circle. I've heard quite a bit about Strantzas but haven't read much by him. The story starts promisingly and is solidly (if somewhat un-remarkably) written (am I wrong or is there a blatant mistake about whether or not the stones are so warm that they have no snow on them, or snow has impacted in the weird runes?) but it seemed to me that it ended kind of lazily, with vague portentous gestures and little meat.

There were quite a number of solid stories that featured some small flaw that undermined their efficacy. Michael Kelly's two short pieces here fit that bill - "The Woods" shoots for the laudable goal of managing a spare, cut down, Hemingwayesque prose style, but the story's take on a fairly familiar situation does very little with it. Ejecting all excess verbiage, the story just runs where you're expecting. The second piece - "Princess of the Night" is an old-style revenge for death story (the EC Comics approach) themed on Halloween. No great shakes, either, but just the right length for the concept. "The Game of Bear", left unfinished by M.R. James, is here completed by Reggie Oliver. It's a solid set up but James left so little of it (assuming there's no other notes or plot sketches that the text given here) that while Oliver concocts a fairly good and suitably "Jamesian" ending, in truth I felt that even if James had survived to finish this exact story it would have invariably been one of the "lesser" James tales regardless. I guess part of the problem is that the implied (by James) "final situation" can't be survived to be expurgated by someone and so it becomes a story in which one must presume a climax not given - for comparison, think of the fact that the climaxes of "Warning To The Curious" and "Wailing Well" were witnessed from afar. I honestly can't decide if the climax here is an effective (and very Jamesian) choice on the author's part (I imagine one could make the argument that the supposition required to fill in the blanks make it that much creepier) or just hewing to the story as written - hard to say. Richard Christian Matheson appears with "Venturi", an interesting (if somewhat unsatisfying) evocation of a paranoid mood that culminates in a striking image - but not much of a story, more a tone poem.

I was thoroughly impressed with Ramsey Campbell's "Respects" until the oddly ineffective and muddling ending. Campbell, as I've noted before, has kept true to his life experience and is now focusing on the concerns and situations that come with aging. This story, in true Campbell fashion, is both an urban haunting scenario and a psychological study of a recently widowed woman dealing with obnoxious neighborhood thugs and smug, overprivileged welfare layabouts (as someone who thinks the welfare state actually serves a humane purpose - although not without its flaws - I'll say that Campbell walks a very good line with this depiction - constantly playing back and forth between our perception of disgust at the jerks and yet occasionally reminding us we're getting the impression from a cranky, nostalgic old woman who feels set adrift in a frightening modern world). The emotions of anger, frustration and helplessness that come not only with dealing with cretins and their lazy, self-serving ideas of respect (the story pivots on a "roadside memorial" built to honor a car crash victim who was, in actuality, a local hoodlum who was stealing the car which killed him) but, in a larger sense, that come with the paralyzing fear of aging and approaching death and loss of connection to the culture, are all very well done. And it's not to say the ending is bad by any means - in fact, I might even be able to argue that the ambiguity of it is exactly what the complex situation

previously sketched deserved - but that doesn't make it particularly satisfying, either.

The novella-ish Brian Lumley piece here, "The Nonesuch", is a bit odd. Ostensibly, it's a monster story about a man visiting a seaside hotel where the husband of the current owner died under mysterious circumstances somehow involving the abandoned hotel up the hill. The basic set-up resonated with Hans Heinz Ewers' "The Spider" (a cursed room and things seen across the way). The writing is certainly accomplished, as one would expect from a popular author of best-sellers, if a bit plodding and workmanlike at times with a tendency to over-describe and fill pages with clutter - all under the aegis of plot, of course, but perhaps to little service (what purpose did the minor detour to the Scotsman's jazz club that wasn't open actually serve?). This is a tendency and not a hindrance, though. The monster living unaccountably in our midst, when it comes, seems to strike some as absurd but I kind of imagined it as being drawn by Edward Gorey and had little problem with it.

But what's strange about the story is that Lumley has chosen to make the narrator the same character from his previous short stories "The Thin People" and "Stilts" - a man who likes his drink and, unaccountably, has a tendency to run into these oddball creatures living hidden with mankind (the creature here is not as compelling as the Thin People, due to it's basically non-human nature). So there's a protracted beginning in which the narrator has to fill us in on his background, explain away the drawbacks of having seen these things and cogitate a bit on why this might be. So, Lumley essentially engages with the drawbacks of serialized horror, but only to excuse the unlikelihood (said drawbacks, to me, hinge on a belief that horror generally works best when it takes place in a basically realistic world wherein the central "horror" or uncanny event exists in the singular. I did say "generally"). Given the above note - you might think the subtext could be one about drinking and incipient alcoholism (and that the varied creatures are some malevolent symbol for the DTs) and while drinking problems are dwelt on to a large degree, the scenario or events didn't really resonate with those concerns so much as seem to be taking place despite them (Put another way - the creature didn't *have* to kill drunks, it just found them an easier target). So, an okay story but problematic.

Now we reach the unabashedly "good" stories - the ones I found satisfying and had no (or very minor) qualms about.

In "Out and Back" by Barbara Roden, a young couple visits a long-abandoned amusement park and bickers. This has a moody, atmospheric setting and an ambiguous (and perhaps slightly weak) ending, but it did a good job of building dread through half-glimpsed motions and unsourced sounds. For those interested, a podcast reading of it can be found here. Chris Bell's "Shem-el-Nessim: An Inspiration In Perfume" take up that old literary challenge - can the perception and subtlety of scent be conveyed by text? - and does a pretty good job at it. It's a moody story of a raided Egyptian tomb, an ineffable fragrance and an Englishman in foreign climes and could be seen as a very different, ephemeral, somewhat erotic "mummy" story. Also set in Africa (Zambia, to be precise) is "Mami Wata". While the basic scenario is fairly familiar as a horror trope (ancient mythological figure manifests in modern times, the events witnessed by a visiting Westerner for contrast), Simon Kurt Unsworth's tale of a Zambian mining town plagued by a bloody Goddess figure has a good setting, nice atmosphere, strong description and pays off in a horrifying visual.

"Party Talk" by John Gaskin mines the familiar ground of the rural British ghost story but does so in an effective way, utilizing an old churchyard, a legend, unwed mothers separated by time, and a tooth dug up from a forgotten grave for strong atmospheric effect - the ending is pretty nasty. Meanwhile, "Two Steps Along The Road" by Terry Dowling deliberately approaches it's folkloric supernatural motif in a different and ambitious way, using a possible doppelganger/ghost located in a crumbing Vietnamese jungle hotel, as a laboratory situation for the narrator to experiment with a universal theory of ghosts and legendary monsters.

The whole thing hinges on whether the sudden reappearance of an expatriate's daughter, a few years after she was believed killed in a plane crash, is truly a supernatural manifestation or just a case of missed flights and mistaken identity (the girl is wholly there, walks and talks and discusses, not just some vague spirit - and yet she was considered officially dead in the crash). In essence, this is a literary cousin to Nigel Kneale's excellent teleplay *THE STONE TAPE* and the story does a good job of being - yes - atmospheric and downright spooky despite the clinical approach. There's a great scene that perfectly captures a breathless waiting in the dead of night for *something* outside your bedroom door to make itself known, and a very well-done classic "night hag" attack. It might be noted that both "Mami Wata" and "Two Steps" came from an anthology touting it's theme as Gothic stories set in exotic locales - but neither story struck me as particularly "Gothic", more just classic horror/supernatural/ghost stories, unless that venerable term has now been dumbed-down and shorthanded to just mean "spooky" or "not modern".

Finally, in a different key altogether, Stephen Volk's "After The Ape" gives us the personal, emotional and cultural wreckage to be viewed after a famous between-the-wars-event involving biplanes and the top of a famous building. Much like Caitlín R. Kiernan's excellent "The Ape's Wife" (which I was blown away by when I read it in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 19*), Anne Darrow's life does not go well (although "Wife" allows some latitude in that pronouncement). In truth, I liked the Kiernan story more, but this is a fine bit of emotional despair (if the seedy grimness is perhaps a tad overdone) - I can only assume the appearance of both these stories owes itself to Peter Jackson's then current remake of the classic film - nice to see modern authors open to the potent, rich symbolism that can be mined from old cinema. You can find a podcast reading of this story here, starting at 8 minutes, 40 seconds in.

And now, the most truly excellent tales in the bunch.

I'm rapidly growing to like Mark Valentine's work and "The Axholme Toll" is an effective, strange tale (again, more in the mold of James than anything) as an historian visits an odd (aren't they all?) geographic locale in Britain while pursuing the answer to a literary mystery. He does not find the answer but witnesses the possible manifestation of a far older, local sin. Not for those who want action or gore but, aside from the rather abrupt ending, I enjoyed it.

"What Happens When You Wake Up In The Night" by Michael Marshall Smith could be seen as a variant of Richard Matheson's classic "Little Girl Lost" - in which a child wakes up in the pitch dark and finds that her room is different... and that waking here parents doesn't help. Some reviewers here seemed to hate this story but I thought it was a great example of the classic horror Ur tale - the one that underlays all the others - imaginatively conceived. Excellent stuff - let's see if he'll sell it to me for my podcast!

Robert Shearman's "Granny's Grinning" is one of the most disturbingly twisted horror stories I've had the pleasure to read recently - combining elements of perfect families, elder care, grief over widowhood, Christmastime and current fads in children's toys - taken to truly hideous extremes. Should definitely be checked out by horror fans!

Finally, just as good as the two previous but probably triple their length put-together is the father and son novella originally written for a Matheson tribute book (specifically "Duel", natch), the truly exciting "Throttle" by Joe Hill & Stephen King. Now "Duel" is one of my favorite Matheson stories, and (favorite made-for-tv movies to boot, a masterpiece of suspense) and I'll admit I viewed this story with some trepidation - and kudos to not making this a deliberate sequel to that story - but the genius comes in the tweaking of the scenario and the solid, solid writing. And kudos again for not turning in a lazy, easy take on the basic concept - biker gang versus 18-wheeler bent on their destruction - but instead using it to give us a high-octane action read, a surprisingly well-layered, psychological character study of the aging 'Nam vet

gang leader and his estranged, Gulf War vet fuck-up of a son, the paternal power dynamics that run through all parent/child relationships, the character and personality types that populate cycle gangs, the different meanings of revenge and even a glancing blow at America's mindscape following a history of seemingly endless wars post-Vietnam. An extremely good read.

So that's it. I'd love to wedge one more of these in before November comes with the new edition, so I can at least convince myself I'm making headway on reading the whole run, but we'll have to see.

Hugo says

This edition of Best New Horror loses one star automatically for its useless and irrelevant Summary and Necrology sections, which take up almost 200 of this book's 500 pages. The Necrology I could - with respect for the departed - understand, but Jones's dry listing of all the year's publications is an absolute waste of time and paper, and an editorial indulgence.

As to the stories; with any anthology, it's a mixed bag, but this book particularly seems to drift by each year on fumes. King and Hill's Throttle is a tired and unexceptional retread of Duel, but with motorbikes; not worthy of either writer at their best, and two stories - by Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley - had to be abandoned as they were old and tired and impossible to wade through.

And yet - and this is the reason I buy and devour this anthology series every year - there are the gems you'd miss if you didn't read this book. Like the discovery of Joe Hill and Kelly Link in its pages in years past, Best New Horror can always be relied upon to introduce you to new writers you won't have read before, or to remind you of newer names with their latest work. In this regard, this volume gives us Stephen Volk's incredible After The Ape and Terry Dowling's haunting Two Steps Along The Road, as well as effective tales from Michael Kelly and Chris Bell.

Malloryk0422 says

It was a very interesting book, some of the stories I thought were very creepy a couple of them I kept waiting for the big finish... that never came. Stephen Kings story he wrote with his son Joe Hill, was a typical King/Hill story, rich with description, and the feeling that you 'know' these people. All in all a very good book.

Felix says

I must admit that I skip both the "Introduction" and the "Necrology", the first giving an overview of what happened in the realm of Horror and Dark Fantasy, the second a list of obituaries of all those who had some relation to the genre and died in 2009. Don't get me wrong - I appreciate the work that went into these parts and I like having them as reference. I just don't feel like reading them completely.

That leaves about 300 pages of stories and this time the emphasis lies less on splatter than on traditional tales of the uncanny in the vein of early twentieth-century writers. Since I'm not too keen on splatter this suited me fine, even though I understand why some other reviewer here on Goodreads felt that there was dust on the

pages. The only graphically violent story was the King father & son collaboration "Throttle".

A definite highlight for me was the finished M.R. James story by Reggie Oliver. Among the better stories were "Two Steps Along the Road" by Terry Dowling and "Mami Wata" by Simon Kurt Unsworth. Disappointments were Ramsey Campbell's "Respects" and "The Axholme Toll" by Mark Valentine.

All in all a solid mix of good and not-so-good stories that certainly is not the *Best New Horror* but sure is above average.

Linda says

I like to read horror stories. I like to watch a GOOD horror movie. It's fun sometimes to SAFELY scare myself to death.

I wouldn't really call these stories "horror." I suppose they fall into that category because they're eerie. But, as for sending shivers down my spine, no.

Most of them are good, however, and I'm not at all sorry I read them. One story (Throttle) is by Stephen King and Joe Hill (Horns), who I discovered is his son. It was a good story, but it wasn't horror in the true Stephen King tradition.

Another one (The Game of Bear) was started by M.R. James, a master of turn-of-the-twentieth-century horror, but never finished. The second author, Reggie Oliver, was given permission by James's family to finish and publish it. Oliver does a bang up job of continuing James's style, but the ending seems very un-Jamesish to me. It ought to have been more subtle.

And my favorite is more poignant than "horrible." The Axeholm Toll concerns what used to be an island in northern England and is still a marshy, wild place, albeit now connected with the land. The author takes a Christmas rental up there and explores daily. I can't say too more without giving the story away, but the murder of St. Thomas Becket does play a part.

The last story, Princess of the Night, although just a little over a page long, was the only one that sent a delicious shiver down my spine. Well written, compact and only revealed at the end.

This book is Volume 21 of the series of Mammoth Books of Best New Horror and it may lead me to read other volumes.

Brittany says

This had some gems in it, and a few that genuinely disturbed me, and, thanks to Stephen King, I'm not easily disturbed. Those who enjoy horror fiction of the short story form should definitely add this to their TBR.

Leonca says

I'm not sure what it is about this collection that didn't quite draw me in. I have horror anthologies purchased in childhood with stories I still remember in vivid detail, but I don't think many of these reach that caliber. They weren't bad, just a bit underwhelming.

mark monday says

Intro - what an epic recounting of all that horror had to offer in 2009. still, i would have appreciated a bit more description because a catalogue is just not very compelling. and the editor's personalized comments about ex-friends was embarrassing and juvenile, and certainly an uninspiringly petty way to end the intro. tsk tsk, Stephen Jones.

"Throttle" by stephen king & joe hill. easily the best of the bunch, which is probably no surprise. it continues king's fascination with biker culture: the cast of Sons of Anarchy vs the demonic truck from Duel. in between the action, a meditation on the spoiled relationship between father and son, and the inability to heal old pains. considering that this was written by a father-son team, the emotional core of this story becomes particularly affecting.

"Two Steps Along the Road" by terry dowling. the second best story. as another reviewer noted, a very "asian" style of horror: ancient evil coming back in modern form. expertly written and the atmosphere is choice. a great ending.

"Cold to the Touch" by simon strantza. not bad, but lacking. the characterization did not work for me and the dialogue seemed forced. still, the arctic setting was well-done and i appreciated the sometimes subtle lovecraftian themes.

"Party Talk" by john gaskin. tediously over-written. sometimes purple prose goes right beyond enjoyably purple and right back into something called "bad writing". the narrative was nonsensical.

"The Woods" by michael kelly. a micro-story of sorts, and very well-done. a rather chilling last few paragraphs.

"Mami Wata" by simon unsworth. somewhat intriguing tale of a demonic nature succubus tormenting miners in Zambia. not bad.

"The Nonesuch" by brian lumley. a demonic parasol? really, lumley, really? my God, this story was terrible. not terribly written (he is a professional after all)....just terrible.

and the rest: just not very impressive. a whole lot of not-very-impressive. and certainly not interesting enough to spend time reviewing.

Mariana says

I'm just giving it 2 stars because of Ramsey Campbell and M.R. James. Forgettable, at moments it was

unbearable to read.... and I'm an avid horror reader. Definitely not a good selection of stories.

Jodie says

Not nearly scary enough! The one star was because of the Stephen King story throttle that he wrote with his son; that was good. Also, the story in the garden made me want to re-read another series.

Erin Edgar says

When I can't quite decide what author to read next, I dip into a collection of short stories. This collection was overall pretty forgetable. However, I did read a story by an author, Michael Kelly, who I haven't read before. For me, the most interesting thing about many short story collections is to read the editor's notes before each story. The author often talks about what inspired a story. Sometimes, that is more interesting than the story itself.

Steve says

Volume 21 of *Best New Horror* is a very solid entry in the long-running series. It's structured, like all the rest, with a lengthy Introduction which focuses on all things (books, films, etc.) Horror for 2009, as well as an equally lengthy "Necrology" at the end of the book. The book is approximately 500 pages long, with 200 pages taken up by these two sections. This used to annoy me, and I know it still annoys many. I now find these sections useful, especially the Introductions. If you like Horror, these Introductions, if you take a long view, are great resources if you're looking for older titles and authors. One comment on this particular effort is that Jones seems uncharacteristically grumpy. Maybe it's the massive changes rolling through the publishing industry, but whatever it is, I was surprised at Jones' snarky swipe at fellow Horror anthologist Ellen Datlow. To some extent I believe they kind of complement each other. Jones tends to be very British, whereas Datlow shows a willingness (not always a good thing, given some of the examples I've read) to stretch the boundaries of genre. A few comments on the stories:

1. Michael Kelly, "The Woods." Meh. A really short piece that had me wondering if Jones was thinking of Flash Fiction (Don't ask me about the definition, since I don't know) when he included this piece. The author says that he wrote this piece, with Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Whatever. It didn't help the story.
2. Stephen King & Joe Hill, "Throttle." Pretty good story that uses Richard Matheson's "Duel" as its inspiration. This time the "duel" is between a motorcycle gang and a trucker. This story is sneaky good in that (unlike the original) there is some identification with the trucker. One thing that hurt the story (for me) was the knowledge that King is a fan of the TV show, "Sons of Anarchy." It was hard not to see some of the characters of the story as characters from the show.
3. Babara Roden, "Out and Back." A young couple exploring an abandoned amusement park. Roden does an outstanding job establishing atmosphere. However, I wasn't crazy about the ending. Still, a good read.

4. Ramsey Campbell, "Respects." Couldn't finish it. I'm a big fan of Campbell, but that doesn't mean I like everything. If the story doesn't click, reading him can be like swimming in extra chunky peanut butter. Two pages from this one did the trick.
5. Simon Strantzas, "Cold to the Touch." Lovecraftian story set in the Arctic. Global warming, God, and something in the ice. First time I've read this guy. Meh. It's been done before, and done better.
6. M.R. James & Reggie Oliver, "The Game of Bear." An unfinished James story, that is finished by Oliver. Oliver did a good job with it. I thought the ending in particular captured James' ability to truly shock you.
7. Chris Bell, "Shem-el-Nessim: An Inspiration in Perfume." I hate the title, but I love the story. If you're a fan of the original 1931 movie, *The Mummy* (the one with Karloff), then you should enjoy this story. Outstanding.
8. Michael Marshall Smith, "What Happens When You Wake Up in the Night." Why is this story in this collection? Filler, and that's about it.
9. Nicholas Royle, "The Reunion." Disorienting tale that takes place at a college reunion. It's well written, but left me cold.
10. Simon Kurt Unsworth, "Mami Wata." Great story that takes place at a mine in Africa. Something is scaring (and killing) the workers. I've now read 3 stories by Unsworth, all in different settings, showing wonderful range. He's one of the new writers I now look for in anthologies. Outstanding.
11. Richard Christian Matheson, "Venturi." A story about the Malibu fires. I thought this was going to be filler, but found it to be pretty harrowing. Solid story. Well done.
12. John Gaskin, "Party Talk." A haunting story that reminded me of both M.R. James and Henry James ("Turn of the Screw"). This is evil stuff, and may well be the best pure Horror story in the collection. Outstanding.
13. Terry Dowling, "Two Steps Down the Road." A paranormal investigator comes to investigate a possible haunting in Vietnam. This one has style to burn. If you like Asian horror, then you should like this one. Outstanding – and Evil.
14. Mark Valentine, "The Axholme Toll." An evil book story, set on a remote island. This story is very reminiscent of M.R. James. It's pretty good, but normally I like this sort of story much better than I actually did. Just a bit too dry. Still, I would like to read more from this author.
15. Robert Shearman, "Granny's Grinning." A humorous story (I think) about zombies. I'm bored with zombies, so I skipped it.
16. Rosalie Parker, "In the Garden." Well written, super short story. The problem with this one is that I knew, after a paragraph or so, how it would end.
17. Stephen Volk, "After the Ape." Best story in the collection. It's not really a Horror tale (and I'm flexible on that), but more like dark fantasy. Whatever it is, it's Outstanding. King Kong, the Aftermath, with Ann Darrow getting drunk while the big guy gets removed, piece by piece, down below. It's 1933, but you can't help but pick up on 9/11, the dangers of populism, and so much more. This story could of easily found its

way into a an adventuresome literary magazine.

18. Brian Lumley, “The Nonesuch.” Couldn’t finish it. And at 40 pages, that sort of sucks.

19. Michael Kelly (again), “Princess of the Night.” Why is this in here? I can’t fathom why Jones feels this writer needs to bookend the stories. He just isn’t that good.

Overall, 3 1/2 stars, rounded up because the good stuff was really good.

Fred Venturini says

My feelings on this year’s “Mammoth” entry might be a matter of taste over substance. The stories are rich and well-written, but there was a lingering feel of dust on the pages—not befitting to the proclamation of “new” on the cover.

You can’t go wrong with “Throttle,” a collaboration by Joe Hill and Stephen King, based on the story “Duel,” by Richard Matheson. That’s a hefty trifecta, and some excellent reading. The biker gang twist was clever, and the deft attention paid to characters and their motivations adds dimension to the twisted trucker looking to wreak havoc in his growling semi.

“Venturi” and “What Happens When You Wake Up in the Night,” by Richard Christian Matheson and Michael Marshall Smith, respectively, were the other two highlights for me. “Venturi” is a slick exercise in paranoia, intimately told with such fervor that the book almost heats up in your hands. “Night” is primal fear seen through the simple narrative of a young girl, and the focus is on the fear, not the rational reasons for what she is experiencing, racking up some serious points on the “I’ll remember this one for a while” horror Richter scale.

Stephen Volk’s “After the Ape” crossed me up. Beautiful and almost lyrical, it tells the story of Ann Darrow dealing with the death of her “lover,” King Kong. Yet I asked myself why this was in a horror anthology. The story can best be described as having “emotional dread,” as she follows her grief to the interminable end, and its inclusion made me consider the blurring boundaries of genre. If someone opens up yet another discussion on the differences between “literary” and “horror” fiction, I might be compelled to use this as evidence that there’s plenty room for both on a piece of paper.

For the rest of the stories as a whole, whether it’s through settings (1920’s Cairo, old hotels, derelict amusement parks) or language (big-voice / third-person narration and word choice), it felt like a very antique collection. “The Reunion” would be at home next to a Poe story, and “The Game of Bear” is an M. R. James story finished up by Reggie Oliver. Good stories? Yes. But if I told you some of these stories were fifty or a hundred years old, you would believe me. Not an excellent barometer for what’s new and exciting in horror fiction.

The antho is worth your money. You get the excellent “Year in Horror” and “Necrology” sections, as well as some handy addresses and resources for the aspiring writer or ardent horror fan. You get about 300 pages of solid horror stories, not a dud in the bunch. You may very well like it, as I did, but what kept me from loving it was how the tales seemed like fresh pieces of wood, beaten with chains to look older than they really were. I was ready for something new and exciting, and instead I got tried and true.

Solid collection. But not spectacular.
