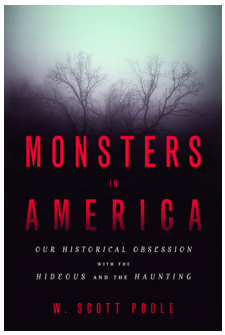
Author W. Scott Poole's new book MONSTERS IN AMERICA: OUR HISTORICAL OBSESSION WITH THE HIDEOUS AND THE HAUNTING (out now from Baylor University Press) combines academic acumen with the sort of insights only a real fan of the horror genre can offer, making it one of the best reads of the year. In person, Poole (pictured left) is affable, humble and hungry to know what others think.

Monsters tell us more about our history than we are comfortable hearing, but without them, the truth might be much harder to understand and talk about. Poole offered up some fascinating thought about spirituality in our discussion of his book, so much so that I tailored the interview entirely around that theme. Enjoy…

DAVID CANFIELD: Spirituality and history make interesting bedfellows. One seems rooted in fact, while the other is shrouded in mystery. Yet in your book, you talk about some very spiritual things in regard to monsters and their place in understanding history.



W. SCOTT POOLE: I do take American religion very seriously in relation to monsters. Although

MONSTERS IN AMERICA isn't about religion specifically, it does showcase points of intersection between religion and the monstrous at several points. The Puritans being fascinated with demonic beings hidden in the forests is one example. The obvious connection is their fear of the outsider. Their definition of religion as something that should produce conflict made that inevitable, as did their idea of religion as something that enforces social control. In the 20th century, the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial is often remarked on as a controversy about evolution. I call it the Scopes Monster Trial, because once you peel back the layers, the trial emerges as a desperate sort of attempt to reaffirm that people do not come from monsters. That's why evolution was seen as so threatening by many. It tapped into a popular dialectic that offered only two possibilities about man: that he was either a monster or an angel.

In the present day, we see the religious right utilize all sorts of monstrous imagery, description, etc. in their public attitude towards the LGB and transgender communities. The main theme across time is using the monstrous to talk about and characterize groups that are considered dangerous or threatening.

CANFIELD: That brings up one of my favorite films, THE VILLAGE. It does a beautiful job of showcasing just that tendency, especially among groups that hope to build some sort of utopia or heaven on Earth. The question of course is, "What are we willing to give up to achieve that?" A big movement now has to do with the development of a spirituality that does not include religion. We have everything from the so-called new athiests like Dawkins and Hitchens to the youth movements that embrace tribalism, events like Rainbow Gathering and Burning Man.

POOLE: It's important to remember that the monster hasn't always been a symbol of demonization. Even in conversations about the meaning of spirituality, the monster isn't always described in terms of the demonic. For many groups it has been that, particularly the more institutionalized ones. But less so for groups like Burning Man or the more New Age-type movements. In a larger religious meaning, the monster is something that rends and tears at and, finally, destroys us. As somebody who's not a part of institutional Christianity, for instance, I would argue that the monster provides a kind of spiritual path, in that the most authentic part of spiritual experience is the willingness to allow oneself to be destroyed.

You see this notion in certain forms of Buddhism, for instance, with their "wrathful deities"—creatures that are fanged and sword-wielding and very fierce, but not evil. In fact, they are necessary to true enlightenment precisely because they destroy the things in the individual which pull toward darkness, things like anger. It's important to consider the monster as having other purposes than merely demonizing the other, especially for horror fans.

CANFIELD: Of course, Christ is a demonized other. He wasn't crucified because he was safe to the status quo. Christianity also bears this notion of death to self, picking up one's cross, sharing in his and others' sufferings, self-sacrifice. The Church itself is often a casually demonized other at the hand of its critics. Yet there is no denying that there are many seeking spiritual authenticity through faith, as opposed to simply belonging to institutional Christianity. The implication here is the idea that religious faith is bad, or only for dumb people. As we attempt to understand the monstrous, do we have to be careful about what we throw away?

POOLE: For me as a historian, in part, of American religious experience, Americans have always drawn the distinction between the institutional and the pure experience or authentic experience of faith. This isn't a new thing in American religious life at all. Neither is experimentation. But maybe the current language—"I'm not religious; I'm spiritual"—is problematic. Death of self is an important thing, I think we both would agree. It has been an important and growing part of horror tradition since the 1960s. In the last 10 years, in fact, it has become very pronounced. People talk about zombies in terms of political or loose social satire, but there's no denying that it's as much, if not more, about who we've been and who we're afraid we'll be. Our fascination with zombies is that even though they look like some homogenous moss of rotting flesh, in reality, as they surge forward, they reveal a businessman, a soldier, a nurse, a cheerleader. They are us.

If the true task of spirituality can be said to be, at least in part, to help people come to terms with their own deaths, horror certainly helps us do that. Santayana said that the human task is to become witnesses and confessors to our own deaths. Not just the deaths of others, but our own.

CANFIELD: A pet idea of mine is that as horror films have become more violent, they've actually become more about search for meaning and our anxiety and guilt over the constantly approaching abyss. Many of the best horror movies in the last 10 years have been the more extreme ones that do this. Zombies certainly offer the most extreme violence of all the monster icons, matched only by psycho killers, who they replaced as the prominent monster icon in horror cinema.

POOLE: Horror has always been about excess. What we've seen is that much of what would have been taboo imagewise is now more acceptable in the mainstream. That in itself is telling. It certainly isn't adequate to say that this is the case because censors are just too lax. Eli Roth overspeaks this, but it is true that what has wrongly been called torture porn became

mainstreamed around the same time our society was having a major debate on the ethics of torture. I'm not sure this level of violence would ever have been as mainstreamed in another context. The War on Terror figures large here no matter what the goals of the filmmakers were. This stuff, once it's released and walks the Earth, does so on its own terms.

CANFIELD: Does the monstrous ever fail us as a culture?

POOLE: I think we fail it when we refuse to learn from it, or see what it clearly shows. The image of violence as entertainment runs far deeper and older than what we call the horror film. Some of the first films ever made were of lynchings and executions, and they were wildly popular in the U.S. In the 17th century, Cotton Mather said that his goal in writing about the Salem witchcraft trials in WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD was to entertain his audience. That's a profound thing.