

Exploring “HAUNTED LEGENDS”

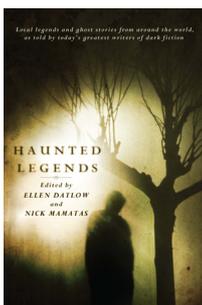
Written by Tony Timpone

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Horror anthologies may be a dime a dozen, but HAUNTED LEGENDS (a Tor hardcover debuting this week) looks to stand out from the pack. The collection was co-edited by the busy Ellen Datlow (pictured), the 2010 Hugo Award Best Editor Short Form winner, who has assembled 20 killer writers, including THE NAMELESS’ Ramsey Campbell, BUBBA HO-TEP’s Joe R. Lansdale, Kit Reed, IN SILENT GRAVES’ Gary A. Braunbeck, THRESHOLD’s Caitlin R. Kiernan and Kaaron Warren, as well as some of the hottest new talents in the field. Each writer wrestled with HAUNTED LEGENDS’ pretty unique theme, the make-or-break for omnibuses such as this: retell a classic ghost story or urban legend from around the world.

“I’ve always liked the ‘true’ ghost-story anthologies you can pick up in any gift shop or tourist store—small towns, big cities, even national parks have their own dark histories,” says HAUNTED LEGENDS co-editor Nick Mamatas. “At the same time, I couldn’t help but be disappointed by most of the books I’d buy, since the ghost stories were only rarely compiled by competent folklorists or writers. Usually, it was just the local nutcase writing down every drunken story he’d ever heard. I thought to myself, ‘What would one of these books be like if real writers wrote the stories?’ And then, a couple of years later, I had the opportunity to find out.”



Datlow and Mamatas assembled quite the stable of “real writers.” “We have plenty of well-known authors of subtle dark fiction, such as Ramsey Campbell, Laird Barron and Gary A. Braunbeck,” Mamatas says. “But we also have stories from writers known for their experimental fiction, like Lily Hoang, new writers such as John Mantooh and people known for other genres—fantasists Erzebet YellowBoy and Catherynne M. Valente, for example. To make sure we got the best stories possible, we allowed anyone to submit to the anthology—which is pretty unusual—and we also made a point of asking for stories from places other than the U.S. and UK. We have tales from Japan, Vietnam, India, Russia, Mexico and Australia. We took the regional ghost story and made the world our region.”

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This approach lent breadth and variety to the tales in HAUNTED LEGENDS. “Although the majority of the stories are quite dark, several are bittersweet lamentations of loss and pain, and at least one is pretty funny,” says Datlow, who has received the World Fantasy Award nine times, both the Bram Stoker and International Horror Guild Awards twice, four Hugo Awards, four Locus Awards and two Shirley Jackson Awards. “There are also many different types of stories. Not every ghost story involves the spirit of a dead person; we have cryptozoological horrors, moral panics and even a vampire tale of sorts. The role of the supernatural also varies; in one, a spirit is a metaphor for drug use, in another it stands for the problems of the immigrant experience, and some of the ghosts and creatures are just wild and dangerous, as any late night can be.”

Some of the real-life inspirations will strike a familiar chord with readers. “We have stories about Spring Heeled Jack, La Llorona, the haunted hitchhiker—three very different takes from different parts of the world—a haunting in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey and a real-life panic surrounding Chucky, the monstrous doll of the movies, and his influence on young children,” says Datlow. None other than Campbell penned the CHILD’S PLAY-inspired “Chucky Comes to Liverpool.” “Ramsey’s contribution captures the voice and secret world of children perfectly, in a story that riffs on the real-life murder of a toddler by two 10-year-old boys and the media scapegoating that followed.”

Outlining some of the other contributions to HAUNTED LEGENDS, Datlow continues, “Stephen Dedman’s ‘For Those in Peril on the Sea’ mocks the surreality of reality TV shows in his exploration of Australia’s jinxed ship *Alkimos*. Joe R. Lansdale’s ‘The Folding Man’ uses his familiarity with eastern Texas to dish up a terrifying tale...about nuns! Creepy, creepy nuns. And Caitlin R. Kiernan’s ‘As Red as Red’ has a connection not only to the vampiric and shapeshifting legends of her home state of Rhode Island, but is subtly tied in to her award-nominated novel THE RED TREE.”

With Datlow having edited dozens of collections over the last 25 years and served as a fiction editor at *Omni*, and Mamatas an author and co-editor of the fiction magazine *Clarkesworld*, the duo had potential writers lining up around the block to be part of HAUNTED LEGENDS. The collaborators then divided up the workload. “Nick read over 200 submissions during our two-week open reading period,” says Datlow. “He passed about 25 of those submissions on to me, and we went back and forth on about six of them and acquired four. We both read all the submissions from writers we solicited. And then we decided which stories to buy. If Nick was more familiar with the writer, he edited the story. If I was, I’d edit it. I did a final line edit before we handed the book in to our publisher, and Nick wrote the introduction. We decided on the order of the stories together; we chose Richard Bowes’ ‘Knickerbocker Holiday’ to lead off the

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anthology because it was a powerful story straightforwardly told, and ended with the Lansdale to make sure that no reader would be able to sleep the night he or she finished the book!”

For the last few years, vampires have been all the literary rage; then zombies became “the new vampires” in terms of popularity (cripes, even *IT’S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE ZOMBIES* became a *New York Times* Best Seller!). Will supernatural spooks in print emerge as the next hot thing? “Probably not,” says Mamatas. “Ghost stories are something else altogether—rather than coming and going in the face of trends, like vampires do when sexual politics are important, or like zombies when the economy is the most pressing issue, ghosts are perennial. The dead are always with us, and so are regrets, nostalgia for the past and plain old dread of the invisible world. I don’t know if ghost stories and other local legends of monsters or haunted places will ever be the “next big thing,” but it will always be the “old, old thing in the back of our minds.”

{comments on}