

Why we create monsters

October 24 2011, By Christine Vidal

Experts in various aspects of the macabre include several University at Buffalo faculty members who specialize in what many cultures find horrible and terrifying.

The UB faculty specializations range from satanic practice, black magic and cultural monstrosities (like serial killers) to "real" and imagined vampires and zombies, as well as the bizarre Spanish gothic period in which our fascination with the utterly horrible is grounded. One expert includes greedy bankers and environmentally destructive corporations among the [monsters](#) of our time.

All of these experts, described below, can discuss not only what frightens us, but how and why we create monsters to help us cope with cultural anxiety.

Yes, Virginia, There Are "Real" Vampires

John Edgar Browning is an Arthur A. Schomburg Fellow and PhD candidate in American Studies at UB. He has written several books and conducts research on the vampire. He specializes in the Dracula figure in film, literature, television and popular culture.

"Vampires and monsters -- they're just us," Browning says. "They're what we aspire to be, what we're told to hate most about ourselves, what we secretly yearn for, but shouldn't."

Browning is the author of several books, including "Draculas, Vampires,

and Other Undead Forms," "Dracula in Visual Media: Film, Television, Comic Book and [Electronic Game](#) Appearances, 1921-2010" and "Speaking of Monsters: A Teratological Anthology."

Browning has been invited to lecture on a Holland-American vampire-themed cruise next summer.

The Monsters We Don't Recognize

David Schmid, PhD, professor of English, focuses on cultural monstrosities -- those among us whom we perceive as "monsters" and the role they play in our self-perception as individual and social beings. Although his initial work in this field focused on the serial killer as an American popular-culture figure, he also studies how our society safely represents and addresses the anxieties of our time through the use of other monsters, such as zombies and vampires.

He is the author of "Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture," "True Crime," a companion to crime fiction, "The Devil You Know: Dexter and the 'Goodness' of American Serial Killing" and books on noir novels, murderabilia and murder culture.

"The monsters I'm most interested in are the ones that exist in plain sight," Schmid says. "Sure, I write about the traditional Halloween and pop culture fare -- zombies, vampires and so on -- but I never want to lose sight of the fact that the most distinctive and numerous monsters in any culture are the ones that we don't immediately recognize.

"I conduct research on killers and their place in our cultural imagination but I also want to extend that focus to other monstrous figures and institutions: those whose apparent normality makes them no less destructive and murderous: the abusers at Abu Ghraib, the banks that are destroying lives while reaping record profits and the corporations who

are poisoning the planet for their bottom line."

Witches, Demons, Satanism, Sorcerers and the Undead

Phillips Stevens Jr., PhD, is an associate professor of anthropology and director of undergraduate studies in anthropology at UB, whose research and publications embrace works on spirits and spirit possession, Satanism, magic, sorcery, witchcraft, voodoo and deities of various cultures. His work focuses on West African spiritual practice and is a scholar of witchcraft.

Stevens has published dozens of articles on these issues as well as on divination, "distance healing," zombies, rites of passage, magical thinking and the dark side of humanity.

Where Does Our Fascination with the Horrible Come From?

David Castillo, PhD, associate professor and chair of the UB Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, specializes in an era that produced unusually grotesque, terrifying and fantastic literature.

Castillo can discuss the historical roots of supernatural visitation, terrifying visions, haunted houses and man-made horrors not unlike those we read about online or in the tabloid press today. Castillo can describe why we love this stuff, what it means "really," and how old and creepy our fascination actually is.

His latest book, "Baroque Horrors" presents tales of mutilation, mutation, monstrosity, murder and mayhem that, he says, "offer a way for us to understand our own modern fears and their monstrous offspring, and new ways to think about broad questions of political history and relate them to the modern age."

He says the historical roots of horror in the modern age lie in the Spanish baroque period, roughly 1600-1720. His book explores a lot of terrifying behavior, beliefs, places and people of that era rarely considered together. For instance, the young woman cemented up in the family home -- by her family, who waited for six years, despite the stench, while worms and vermin did her in from the feet up.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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