



Four Color Fear: Forgotten Horror Comics of the 1950s

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Of the myriad genres comic books ventured into during its golden age, none was as controversial as or came at a greater cost than horror; the public outrage it incited almost destroyed the entire industry. Yet before the watchdog groups and Congress could intercede, horror books were flying off the newsstands. During its peak period (1951-54) over fifty titles appeared each month. Apparently there was something perversely irresistible about these graphic excursions into our dark side, and *Four Color Fear* collects the finest of these into a single robust and affordable volume.

EC is the comic book company most fans associate with horror; its complete line has been reprinted numerous times, and deservedly so. But to the average reader there remain unseen quite a batch of genuinely disturbing, compulsive, imaginative, at times even touching, horror stories presented from a variety of visions and perspectives, many of which at their best can stand toe to toe with EC.

All of the better horror companies are represented: Ajax-Farrell, Atlas, Avon, Charlton, Comic Media, Fawcett, Fiction House, Gilmor, Harvey, Quality, Standard, St. John, Story, Superior, Trojan, and Youthful. Artist perennials Jack Cole, Steve Ditko, George Evans, Frank Frazetta, Alex Toth, Al Williamson, Basil Wolverton, and Wallace Wood contribute both stories and covers, with many of the forty full-sized covers created by specialists Bernard Baily, L.B. Cole, William Ekgren, and Matt Fox.

Editors Benson and Sadowski have sifted through hundreds of rare books to cherry-pick the most compelling scripts and art, and they provide extensive background notes on the artists, writers, and companies involved in their creation. Digital restoration has been performed with subtlety and restraint, mainly to correct registration and printing errors, with every effort made to retain the flavor of the original comics, and to provide the reader the experience of finding in the attic a bound volume of the finest non-EC horror covers

and stories of the pre-code era.

Four Color Fear: Forgotten Horror Comics of the 1950s Details

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From Reader Review Four Color Fear: Forgotten Horror Comics of the 1950s for online ebook

Shawn says

So, in my crazy plan to read (or re-read) most of my collected horror comics in chronological order, I started off (after an initial sidestep splash into *Zombie Factory: 27 Tales Of Bizarre Comix Madness From Beyond The Tomb*) by re-reading my entire hardcover boxed set of *The Complete Tales from the Crypt* (review is here because it was so *gasp* *choke* long that I couldn't even put it on the page!).

I may do some more EC but decided I would pull this little unread gem off the shelf as its contents fit my plan perfectly. This, then, is an overview of everything *else* that was going on horror comics wise at the time of EC's rise to infamy - technically, this volume includes representative work by all those "cheap copycats" that William M. Gaines was always griping about in his editorials.

The fine folks at Fantagraphics were kind enough to collect these public domain stories into a solid overview - as to be expected, the production details are quality - good paper, secure binding, nice cover (sadly, not the one shown on Goodreads here - mine has a rather tasty panel of a midnight snack from "The Corpse Who Came To Dinner" and some flashy, glossy red laminate). I've said in my CRYPT review how I'd much rather see the original artwork in black in white but, of course, this is only possible if actual original artwork still exists and many of these companies were fly-by-nights or swallowed in the mists of time so here Fantagraphics has done a nice job shooting from (I presume) the best version of the original printed comics and then cleaning them up (I presume) digitally. It looks good but - that said - color is occasionally muddy or dark (sometimes it's beautiful) - but what can you do, go back in time and buy the originals yourself?

All the supporting info is well-researched - lots of detailed footnotes (not much critical copy on the stories themselves, but scads of stuff on the various companies, studios and individuals represented here) and luscious reproductions of some choice covers (William Ekgren, where have you been all my life!?) on glossy, slick paper just to sweeten the deal.

The book has a slightly aggressive "EC weren't the only ones on the block" tone, which I understand in some sense - the telescoping of the past (as memorably summed up in a SIMPSONS episode - "It was the 1930s and you may have seen Al Capone doing the Charleston on top of a flagpole!") can be stupid, reductive and dismaying (especially as you grow old and live through it in its now current, even more accelerated, computer assisted form) but it's also inevitable and, in a sense, understandable. So yes, the "horror comics are causing juvenile delinquency 1950s Red Scare-orama" does get summed up as the EC horror comics story and yes, that is reductive but - understandable. Put it another way, while the point of this book is to showcase everyone else producing work at the time, not unexpectedly a large part of the quotes, footnotes and history is STILL referencing Gaines' and Al Williamson's enfant terrible because, regardless of the quality of the other work, EC were THE guys to beat, the level everyone else was shooting for. They're inescapable!

That out of the way, what do you get here. First of all, a delicious smorgasbord of beautiful artwork - some EC stalwarts (Reed Crandall for one), early Frank Frazetta, the incomparable and unique Basil Wolverton (nobody stippled like Wolverton. He must have been an influence on Joe Sacco!). The exquisite Jack Cole - it just goes on and on! Truly a treat for the eyes.

The stories - well, remember what you're reading here, horror comics ostensibly for kids, caught in a historical moment between the terror pulps, the golden age of radio horror, Universal monster movies, the

real world horrors of World War 2 on one side - and the Atomic Age, fears of technology, and the EC crew pushing the envelope until it tore on the the other side. All your expected old and new tropes are here - along with the goofy, weird and exotic -

Hell and Deals with the Devil: "Valley of Horror", "Death Deals A Hand", "A Pact With The Devil" (featuring that old standby, the Devil going out in top hat and tails because, y'know, he's a snappy dresser) and "Pit Of The Damned" (which has a giant, stooped, blue-skinned witch, burning vistas of Hell and conscious, tortured severed heads to recommend it)

The Revenge of the Dead (EC's newly minted formula): "The Corpse That Came To Dinner" (in which a wise-talking, newly-risen suicide moves in with a suburban couple and makes a nuisance of himself, smoking cigars, playing dead man's poker and serving human meat stew. It's a silly story - they eventually "look up a voodoo doctor" and get some "ghost poison" that paralyzes him - with an even sillier twist ending, but boy, what great artwork!), "Dust Unto Dust" (some nice Harvey Kurtzman-inspired panel pacing/storytelling on this predictable story that has a darkly poetic last few panels) and "The Thing From The Sea" (in either Stephen King's short story "The Boogeyman" - which was his tribute to EC - or his book *Danse Macabre*, he recounts a horror comic book story and a particular line of dialogue that horrified him as a child. I believe he misremembered it, understandably, as an EC tale and it is in fact this story - unless this story ripped off the line from an EC comic - said line being "Johnny... I'm coming! Wait for meeee... I can't walk very fast, Johnny, because if I go too fast, a lot of me will break off and fall...").

Voodoo and "Primitive" Tribal Magic: "Cat's Death", "A Safari of Death", "Drum Of Doom" (which does feature a swarm of cool flying zombies!).

Horror Comedy: "I Vampire" (about vampires upping their game in dealing with humans - features a giant vat of blood at a vampire blood bank, with a staircase curling up the side!)

Comic Book Metaphysics & Trippy, Strange Dimensional Travel: "The Man Who Outdistanced Death", "The Maze Master" (with weird, Ditko-esque dimensions) and Wolverton's (oddly pre-LSD but strongly lysergic) "Nightmare World".

Weird Science Fiction: "Death Sentence" (with shape-shifting slime monster) and "The Wall Of Flesh" (exactly that, grown as a "flesh bank", I wonder if it was inspired by Arch Obler's famous LIGHT'S OUT episode/Bill Cosby nightmare "The Chicken Heart"?).

Grand Guignol's, Conte Cruels & Tales of Obsession: "Experiment In Terror" (like a 1950's version of SAW), "Chef's Delight" (with a very EC final *gasp/choke* panel and a splash page illo that has nothing at all to do with the story), the surprisingly cruel "Art For Death's Sake" (in which a woman is tortured over months and driven insane to provide a "mad artist" with realistic references!) and "The Body Maker" (which almost plays out like an early version of a Jess Franco, European medical horror movie).

Twisty Twilight Zone/Noir-like Stories: "Here Today", "The Strange Case of Henpecked Harry" (about a Walter Mitty type repeatedly beaten by his wife) "Night Screams", "Amnesia", "Me, Ghost" (with early - and stylistically overly busy - artwork by Jack Katz of *The First Kingdom* fame), "What Was The Discovery?", "Custodian Of The Dead" (which blatantly rips off Henry Kuttner's classic pulp horror story "The Graveyard Rats" - showing that EC wasn't the only one doing it at the time) and the bizarre, visionary political satire "Corpses Coast To Coast" (the first of two stories here predicated on a countrywide strike by the Gravediggers Union - did some actual historical event happen? - this time allowing the organized Zombie Unions and their dead-eyed leader, Big Z, to seize control in an obvious parody of Communism/Socialism).

Dark Fantasy, Gothic Chillers & Bizarre Monsters: "Evil Intruder" (set in suburbia, this has a hilarious, blubbery-lipped hobgoblin desiring to experience real, human love), "The Slithering Horror Of Skontong

Swamp!" (very nice George Evans artwork of burned, crispy swamp zombies lurking in a small town alleyway), "Puppet Peril", "The Wall Of Flesh", "Swamp Monster" (another Wolverton standout), "Servants of the Tomb" (which I reviewed in *Zombie Factory: 27 Tales Of Bizarre Comix Madness From Beyond The Tomb* under its more hyperbolic and juvenile retitling, "The Slimy Mummy" - "Raaar", goes the Slimy Mummy!), "Death Sentence", "The Flapping Head" (really! - it features an overly complicated curse and a manananggal-like creature), the 'Truevision' tale "Nightmare" (Truevision was a 2-D answer to the 3-D comics fad that imposed a black border around all panels and then always had an object in the panel extending out into it - it looks as underwhelming as it sounds) and the sublimely bizarre and hilarious "Green Horror" in which an evil (and jealous) cactus falls in love and kills people (no, it's not possessed by a spirit, motivated by the devil or driven by demons, it's just a cactus - a very well-mannered one at that, as it knocks before entering a room!).

As might be expected, there's even some EC level experimentation with the form. "What's Happening At 8:30 P.M." combines some nice Will Eisner-inspired art by Howard Nostrand with a strange tale of a strange main character in an even stranger setting! "Colorama", on the other hand, is probably the most interesting thing here, a story that takes EC's "first person POV" trick (great artwork by Bob Powell) and combines it with a strange, obsessive, Fauvist-like Modernist nightmare of color gone mad!

So, there you have it - quite a collection and well worth taking a look at if you're interested in horror comics of the 1950s or horror comics in general (and presuming you have some sense of historical context, of course)

Robert says

Lots of sheer camp, lots of gory (well, for the 50's it's gory) horror, & lots of great art. Enjoyed this book, produced with the usual Fantagraphics flair.

Suvi says

A perfect escape, when I can only afford to take short breaks at a time from studying. Like *Tales from the Crypt*, one of my favourite tv shows and which is based on the 1950s EC Comics series, these stories are ridiculously campy but so much fun. I also love the art of vintage comics, although in this one the way colour has been used makes some frames a bit smudgy.

David Maine says

Let me echo what the people who are raving about this book have said... it's nuts, it's twisted, it's glorious. EC is the comic company famous for their horror comics in the 1950s, but there were lots of competitors, many of whom used the same artists (Wally Wood for example) and it is those publishers who have been culled here. There are tons of stories, a nice cover gallery and a thoughtful essay in the back that puts some of this stuff in perspective. Yeah, it must have been pretty shocking back then, but by today's videogame standards (or even, say, *CSI*) it's pretty tame. There's also a strong moralistic tone to many of them, although of course it's open to interpretation just how sincere those morals are meant to be...

All in all, a terrific collection to pore over, with those thoughtful extras I mentioned that elevate this above

the run-of-the-mill bound comics collection.

Bill FromPA says

All in color for 300 dimes, here is a large selection of pre-code horror comics and comic book covers from publishers other than EC and Atlas (a forthcoming Atlas collection is hinted at in the notes).

The art for the most part is impressive, with masters like Jack Cole, Howard Nostrand, Bob Powell, Wallace Wood, Al Williamson, and the inimitable Basil Wolverton. A wonderful tale called "Here Today...", more noir than horror, by Sid Check and Frank Frazetta may be the best art / story combination in the book. Another good story, "The Corpse That Came to Dinner", provides the cover illustration and is impressively drawn by Reed Crandall and Mike Peppe; however, the twist ending is undercut by artwork which fails to visually reinforce the point made by the thought balloons. Color is used to strong effect in the stories "Colorama" and "What's Happening at ... 8:30 P. M." The story "Amnesia", drawn by Warren Kramer emphasizing black shadows and expressionist coloring, makes excellent and heavily ironic use of narration in the second person singular. In terms of writing, there are a number of misses here, the formula of murder followed by gruesome revenge is overused and some of the stories are quite a muddle in terms of narrative; the justification for the inclusion of these weaker selections would appear to be the quality of the artwork.

I was surprised that I found some of the most effective stories to be from the Iger studio, for these are among the most poorly drawn. Some of the Iger stories, most likely written by Ruth Roche according to the notes, have a genuinely unsettling quality to them, a quality actually aided by the rather crude drawings, which look like they might have been done by mental patients attempting to accommodate their unsettling visions to the conventions of war ("Corpses ... Coast to Coast") or romance comics ("Night Screams"). Even the story "Death Deals a Hand", which is a weak re-working of R. L. Stevenson's "The Suicide Club", gains a certain creepiness from the artwork which in this case, with its playing cards, devil-like protagonist, and sexy femme fatale, strikes me as if it might have been drawn by a waterfront tattoo artist on the hide of some drunken sailor.

Sadowski and John Benson provide notes to each story as well as additional panels and covers in the final 22 pages. For fans of horror comics this is a no-brainer purchase (which phrase accurately describes one of the reproduced covers), but those who like literary horror may find enough here, particularly in the second half of the book, to make a reading worthwhile.

Steve Banes says

A fair overview of non-EC type pre-code horror from the 1950's, with a splattering of good (and not so good) examples of story and art chosen from some of the more notorious publishers of the era. A handful of interesting extras in the "Notes" and "Cover Section Key", plus the nice printing still make it worth the purchase.

For tons more pre-code I recommend my blog "THE HORRORS OF IT ALL"
<http://thehorrorsofitall.blogspot.com/>

Chris Thompson says

weird campy kitchy fun!

"It was a novel idea... This dance on the large native drum! Patrons crowded the exclusive New York night club to see the famous Annette Perform! But as the exotic dancer's feet began tapping out a rhythmic tattoo, strange things commenced happening... horrible, unearthly things! And the giant Haitian tom-tom became a **DRUM OF DOOM!**"

Castle Spooktacular says

SO COOL!!! A great collection of lost comics of the macabre variety

Graham P says

A possessed cactus who wants revenge on a lover; a troll who murders just to have a kiss from a mortal; an acid trip where a human brain is transplanted into a googly-eyed lizard-bat from another realm; and plenty of pissed-off zombies, vengeful harlots, psychopathic dwarfs and other pulp trademarks make this a wonderful collection of pre-code horror comics.

Andy says

Late last night under a full moon I tore my clothes off, smeared blood all over my body shining in the moonlight and dug feverishly over Dr. Frederick Wertham's grave. When I hit the cedar of his coffin I kicked it open and threw in a copy of "Four Color Fear". Dr. Wertham's rotting flesh oozing off his skeletal frame quivered in horror. I whispered, "This is for Jack Cole, Basil Wolverton, Wally Wood and even loveable Warren Kremer from Harvey Comics. They will be avenged, Herr Doktor". I then slammed down the coffin, tamped down six feet of worm-infested soil, raised my head to the demon moon and laughed maniacally. Every night is Halloween.

Jon Yates says

A carnal cavalcade of ghoulish greats from the forgotten rags that rotted in EC's illustrious shadow! Whether read by the light of the full moon or with a flashlight under adolescent bedsheets, this collection is guaranteed to corrode the crevices of your mind and plunge you headfirst into untold horrors that no lesser authority than the Federal Government of the United States tried to extinguish. Lovingly reprinted nightmares abound, as do well-researched notes, and a middle section containing the very best of the most lurid of the cover illustrations of the era!

Andy says

Although the story material of many of the tales in *Four Color Fear* may not hold up so well these days, the entire package is stellar. These horror comics from the 50s come from magazines no one remembers anymore, mostly because they weren't around for very long. Yet they stood toe-to-toe with the giant of horror comics, EC (which have been reprinted to death - no pun intended).

The digital restoration simply looks magnificent. As an added bonus, Benson has added background material on the writers and artists, a brief history of horror comics and an impressive gallery of cover art. If you're into horror comics at all, this is one title you won't want to be without. Bring on the second edition!

Charles Dee Mitchell says

In the cover image, an open refrigerator door lights a putrescent ghoul munching a piece of cold fried chicken. Flip the book, and you find the horrified suburban couple standing in the kitchen doorway. I was too young to be aware of this material when it came out, but I feel I somehow absorbed it into my psyche. All the standard horror tropes are here -- the wax museum, the voodoo ceremony, jungle goods, slimy creatures from the swamp, etc -- but there is a visceral quality to the images that at least mainstream movies wouldn't dare pull off until two decades later. And these comics must be the cradle of all bad writing. The inspiration, if there was one, was Lovecraft, but even at his most fervid he put together words that made sense. The writers of the text panels here were not concerned with coherence.

The book looks great, reproducing everything in its original format and with a glossy insert for a cover gallery. Extensive notes tell just about as much as you would ever want to know about individual stories, writers, and artists. A thoroughly enjoyable walk down libidinal memory lane.

Alyssa Arney says

What a gem. A great collection of horror comics that were only intensified in their "scariness" simply because many of the stories were more realistic or if they were posed in a supernatural light they could definitely be applicable to society and life then and now. Definitely read some things in here that I would not have normally come across.

David James says

An above average urk factor. Recommend for all fans of fifties horror comics.
