

# Matt Foley, Rebecca Duncan *Patrick McGrath and his Worlds*

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**Review of** Foley, M.; Duncan, R. (eds) (2020). *Patrick McGrath and his Worlds. Madness and the Transnational Gothic*. New York: Routledge, 182 pp.

Patrick McGrath has the transnational status of a British-born writer who resides in Manhattan. His oeuvre contains British and American settings in which his Gothic prose depicts disturbed characters. The book *Patrick McGrath and his Worlds. Madness and the Transnational Gothic* (2020), edited by scholars Matt Foley and Rebecca Duncan, sheds new light on McGrath's work with a compilation of readings that thoroughly analyse the author's narratives. McGrath, a key figure in contemporary Gothic fiction, edited an anthology alongside American novelist Bradford Morrow in 1991 titled *The Picador Book of New Gothic*. In it, a definition of 'New Gothic' was established. Almost thirty years later, this definition remains influential and essential in comprehending McGrath's fiction of "horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil, and weird sexuality", all of which "strongly manifest the Gothic sensibility" (McGrath, Morrow 1991, xiv). The essays contained within this volume reflect these Gothic sensibilities as they study McGrath's evolution as a writer.

With a foreword by Sue Zlosnik, an expert on Patrick McGrath, and an introduction by the editors, the reader is made familiar with the writer's literary universe. Apart from the above-mentioned features of the 'New Gothic', explanations about McGrath's 'transnational Gothic' emerge with a focus on his use of the Imperial Gothic in some of his stories and novels, his different settings in Britain, America (especially New York), and his forthcoming location of Spain.



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McGrath's unsound characters and his treatment of madness are also emphasised, and novels such as *Spider* (1990), *Dr Haggard's Disease* (1993) and *Asylum* (1996) are mentioned. All the contributors to this volume are qualified researchers who have written and published extensively on McGrath's writings, therefore the reader is guaranteed insightful approaches to his fiction.

The volume is divided into three sections: "Transnational McGrath", "Theorizing McGrath", and "Millennial McGrath". The collection treats all the subjects accurately and adequately, and begins with eminent professor David Punter and his "Writing and Reading the *Spider*. McGrath's Web", in which Punter considers what "spidery writing" means, and the use of the spider in a variety of fictions (and a sculpture) from different cultures. Punter writes about the arthropod from Arachne's myth to recent writings including McGrath's *Spider*, and he explains that McGrath's story links writing, madness and fantasy.

Chapter 2, "Martha Peake and the Madness of 'Free Trade'" by lecturer Evert Jan van Leeuwen examines McGrath's novel *Martha Peake. A Novel of the Revolution* (2000) from an original approach, focusing on the economic development the narrative depicts, both in Britain and later on in the USA during the American Revolution. Two characters of the novel are emphasized: the capitalist William Tree, and the more romantic Ambrose Tree. Both imagine the alleged story behind Martha Peake and her father Harry. In terms of future research, Van Leeuwen's study could be usefully linked to further study of McGrath's other story "Julius" from *Ghost Town* (2005), which is set during the American Civil War, and to the depiction of other characters by McGrath through the lens of this clash or comparison between capitalism and a more 'poetic' or idealistic lifestyle or set of values.

Chapter 3, Alan Gregory's "'A Cell without a Nucleus Is a Ruin'. Vampiric Creations of the Unhealthy Disabled in Patrick McGrath's 'Blood Disease'" introduces a discerning triad: disability studies, illness and the Gothic, and how McGrath frequently adds a physical impairment to his characters apart from their psychological distortions. Although Gregory focuses on the story found in McGrath's *Blood and Water and Other Tales* (1988), Gregory also mentions the writer's first novel *The Grotesque* (1989) to develop a connection between disabilities and the Gothic in McGrath's fiction.

The first section of the volume closes with Xavier Aldana Reyes, founder member of the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies, interviewing Patrick McGrath. In the conversation, the author illustrates his views about the Spanish Civil War, which will be the setting for his forthcoming novel and clarifies his choice of ghosts among other Gothic tropes to depict his narratives. Among other topics, in this interesting conversation, McGrath also mentions his methods of research.

To begin the second section, "Theorizing McGrath", Benjamin E. Noad pens "Madness, Tragedy, and the Implied Reader of Patrick McGrath's *Spider*" questioning what happens with McGrath's portrayal of schizophrenia in *Spider*, and how a schizophrenic reader can face the reading of a text which describes the very mental disorder from which they suffer. Noad admits that McGrath is well-versed in psychiatric illnesses and develops on the theme of the writer's doubts about the institutions which deal with these patients, a theme also perceptible in other writings such as *Asylum* (1996), although Noad chooses not to expand on other texts.

The independent scholar Daniel Southward categorizes McGrath's characters in the chapter entitled "The Terrors of the Self. The Manipulation of Identity Mythologies in Patrick McGrath's Novels". Beginning with *Martha Peake*, Southward divides McGrath's individuals into these categories: "historiographic editors", that is, those who attempt to impose a new identity on other characters (as in *The Grotesque*, *Spider* and *Dr Haggard's Disease*); "self-mythologizers", when the characters create a new identity for themselves (*Port Mungo*, *Trauma*, *Constance*); and, finally, "identity victims" when the characters' voice is non-existent and others create their identity (*Asylum*, *The Wardrobe Mistress*).

The last essay of this section, "Patrick McGrath and Passion. The Gothic Modernism of *Asylum* and Beyond" by editors Matt Foley and Rebecca Duncan highlights a new approach to McGrath's fiction departing from the more traditional psychological/psychoanalytical one, focusing primarily on the similarities between *Asylum*, *Port Mungo* and D.H. Lawrence's works which are informed by his views on the 'primal', instinctual nature of human beings.

The last section of the volume, "Millennial McGrath", commences with two scholars analysing McGrath's *Trauma*: Michela Vanon Alliaata and Dana Alex, although the latter extends her research to McGrath's story "Ground Zero" from *Ghost Town*. Alliaata explores the Freudian elements in McGrath's novel and how the Vietnam War triggers the so-called PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in "The Price of Suffering and the Value of Remembering. Patrick McGrath's *Trauma*", arguing that the novel illustrates "the ways in which trauma may be induced by the perception of another's suffering, through identification with another's traumatic story" (120). Her essay is relevant as it painstakingly describes the characters of the novel, yet as it is followed by Alex's "'You have to be a warrior to live here'. PTSD as a Collective Sociopolitical Condition in Patrick McGrath's Writing", the reader may feel that the chapters are too similar, despite their differences. Both Alliaata and Alex draw on Freud, Caruth and other specialists in trauma studies, although Alex, in analysing the 9/11 terrorist attacks, raises the question of collective trauma and what trauma does to society.

The last chapter of the book, with the attention-grabbing title of “The Liar, the Bitch, and the Wardrobe. Resisting Political Terror, Anti-Semitism, and Revenants in Patrick McGrath’s *The Wardrobe Mistress*” is by Danel Olson. Olson, who wrote an endnote in McGrath’s *Writing Madness* (2017), investigates the concepts of “the ghostly, the monstrous, and the pathology of anti-Semitism” (152) in the writer’s latest novel. Olson’s chapter analyses the employment of ghosts (in this case the dybbuk, a malicious spirit in Jewish mythology) in a post-war atmosphere, a setting McGrath will be repeating in his forthcoming novel in Spain. After a brief afterword by McGrath in which he explains his view on creativity, the reader can find Olson’s appendix with Patrick McGrath’s bibliography and interviews, vital for any student of McGrath’s fiction.

The main goal of the volume *Patrick McGrath and his Worlds* is to analyse the author’s world, his characterization of madness and his stories set in different corners of the world, therefore creating a transnational Gothic. The chapters of the book emphasize either one or both of these concepts. This book is highly recommendable not only to readers interested in McGrath’s Gothic fiction, but also to any person fond of history, psychology, psychiatry and economy. A complete volume which opens new doors for scholarship.

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