

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I'm always on the lookout for new speculative fiction to read. I like to check out the best of the year lists or look who gets nominated for awards. And I've noticed that with a lot of new fantasy novels, there is one word which keeps coming up over and over again in the descriptions: Gothic.

When I see the word Gothic, I think about the kind of books I was assigned to read in high school: Wuthering Heights, Rebecca, The Picture of Dorian Grey. But these marketing teams at publishing houses seem to know the word Gothic is hot – like that's going to sell books.

Some of these new novels are set in the same time period as classic Gothic books. But they have a perspective on history that feels more contemporary. For instance, there was a novel called The Essex Serpent by Sarah Perry. It's a Loch Ness monster type story that's set in the 19th century. But it deals more openly with feminist themes than Gothic novels that were actually written in the 19th century. Last year the book was turned into a mini-series for Apple TV.

WILL: The serpent is not real

CORA: But what if it is?

WILL: No the serpent is an invention, a symptom of the times we live we live in

CORA: Exciting times

WILL: Of great change that bring real fears with them

CORA: So you're against progress?

But not all of these new Gothic novels are set in the past. Some are set in the present day -- they're modern Gothics. What would that be like?

Well, for example, last year there was a critically acclaimed novel called Our Wives Under The Sea by Julia Armfield. It's about a woman who is trapped in a claustrophobic marriage. Her wife is a scientist who just came back from a deep sea expedition. But she's not the same person as she was before she left. In fact, something is very wrong with her.

Here is the actress Tanya Rich reading from the novel:

READING: "The ocean is unstill," she says, "farther down than you think. All the way to the bottom, things move." She seldom talks this much or this fluently, legs crossed and

gaze toward the window, the familiar slant of her expression, all her features slipping gently to the left. I'm aware, by now, that this kind of talk isn't really meant for me, but is simply a conversation she can't help having, the result of questions asked in some closed-off part of her head.

"There are no empty places," she says, and I imagine her glancing at cue cards, clicking through slides. "However deep you go," she says, "however far down, you'll find something there."

I used to think there was such a thing as emptiness, that there were places in the world one could go and be alone. This, I think, is still true, but the error in my reasoning was to assume that alone was somewhere you could go, rather than somewhere you had to be left.

Xavier Aldana Reyes teaches at The Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies in the UK. He goes by Xavi for short. I asked him, is this Gothic trend for real? Or am I imagining things – which is a very Gothic question to ask. He said, no. You're not imagining things. This trend really took off around 2020, 2021.

XAVI: Well, there has been an explosion of Gothic fiction the last two years in particular. Again, I don't know if this is directly connected to the pandemic, maybe people just had more time to, to write these, um, novels or maybe there's more of a market, um, at the moment. I don't know. But yes, I, I am finding it difficult just to catch up with the amount of Gothic that's been created.

Connecting it to the pandemic makes sense to me. You have all these writers who were trapped inside. They probably felt like they were haunting their own homes.

XAVI: I, I guess it would make sense, wouldn't it, that at the time in which we feel claustrophobic, we will write about claustrophobic things.

Kit Mayquist is the author of Tripping Arcadia, which is a Gothic novel set in modern day.

KIT: I really wanted to take those themes and that feeling you get from a historical Gothic novel and, uh, weave it into a more contemporary narrative, uh, contemporary Gothic novel.

Kit agrees this trend took off around 2020 – but he thinks it's more than just the pandemic.

KIT: The one I always start off with that I really credit spearheading this revival of Gothic literature is *Mexican Gothic* by Sylvia Moreno-Garcia.

Mexican Gothic was a big hit when it came out three years ago. The story takes place in Mexico in the 1950s. The protagonist is sent to live with her relatives in a house that's possessed by something sinister and supernatural. And I can attest, dear reader, that book is freaky and scary.

KIT: And I think that book really awoke the fascination with Gothic narratives and the Gothic story in terms of, you know, modern audiences and interests. And I think that really opened up a lot of doors to this resurgence that we're seeing now.

READING: As Catalina spoke, the smile on her lips died. Her eyes, which had been distant, suddenly fell on Noemí with the sharpness of a blade. She clutched Noemí's hands and leaned forward, speaking low.

"I need you to do a favor for me, but you can't tell anyone about it. You must promise you won't tell. Promise?"

"I promise."

"There's a woman in town. Her name is Marta Duval. She made a batch of medicine for me, but I've run out of it. You must go to her and get more. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course."

Catalina nodded. She was clutching Noemí's hands so tightly that her nails were digging into the soft flesh of her wrists.

"Catalina, I'll speak to—"

"Shush. They can hear you," Catalina said and went quiet, her eyes bright as polished stones.

"Who can hear me?" Noemí asked slowly, as her cousin's eyes fixed on her, unblinking.

Catalina slowly leaned closer to her, whispering in her ear. "It's in the walls," she said. "The walls speak to me. They tell me secrets. Don't listen to them, press your hands against your ears, Noemí. There are ghosts. They're real. You'll see them eventually."

And then there was the novel *The Hacienda* by Isabel Canas, which came out last year. It also tells the story of a young woman in Mexico who moves into a haunted house. But her story takes place in the early 19th century. And it deals with subjects like colonialism and indigenous cultures in a way that 19th century Gothic novels rarely did.

XAVI: They both betray very good knowledge of the Gothic tradition. Um, Mexican Gothic is full of citations and quotes to, um, Gothic texts. And the *Hacienda* is essentially towing the line between historical war drama and, um, supernatural fiction. So anyone reading these stories are probably familiar with texts like *Rebecca* which they can subvert and take in their own ways.

Another reason why this trend fascinates me is because a lot of writers who are embracing the Gothic don't fit the old, white, heteronormative world that I usually think of as Gothic. Although Kit says, those books always appealed to him.

KIT: Gothic for a long time has always been a home for outsiders or people who don't feel like they're included in, uh, traditional narratives, right? So, like, as a queer individual, uh, myself and a lot of my queer friends have always been drawn to Gothic literature because it didn't shy away from issues or the feelings that we had by feeling isolated or ignored or having society tell us we were monstrous.

But like any Gothic tale, there are a lot of doors to open to get to the bottom of this mystery on why The Gothic has become such an effective storytelling device lately. And, as we keep unlocking those doors, frightening things might jump out at us. So, light the candles. Close the drapes. We're going deep into a Gothic Revival after the break.

BREAK

First of all, I want to address a pretty, kind of academic question. What is Gothic? Is it a genre, a subgenre, or maybe a feeling or a sensibility? Xavi says there actually is no clear answer.

XAVI: There has been a tendency, especially in academic circles, to move more towards the, uh, mode label because that gives it more fluidity. You know, it's less bound to a time and place or a set of characters and it's much more expressive of a sensibility. But the Gothic, for me is symbolized by a claustrophobic version of the past normally, and you can define that however you like. It normally takes the shape of, uh, a

claustrophobic space, so, whether that is a medieval castle or a Victorian mansion, or even a lift, I guess could be potentially, um, Gothic or a set of thoughts or beliefs that are just as, um, claustrophobic. They tend to come hand in hand though. And normally in terms of its concerns, it'll be all sorts of, um, um, binaries between good and evil, the barbaric and the modern men against women, you know, male being more patriarchal villainous characters, especially in the female Gothic tradition.

Again, here's Kit.

KIT: One of the cornerstones of Gothic literature has always been this idea that it's much more of a psychological form of horror, and it really takes the horror and horrifying element of any kind of story. So, like, you know, traditionally we think of like, okay, horror is monsters, it's zombies, it's this, uh, great paranormal entity who's trying to attack you. But Gothic really brings that inward. So the horror is less of an outside force, and the horror tends to be much more psychological and inward.

Leila Taylor is the author of a non-fiction book called Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul. We're going to hear more about her book later in the episode – but first, this is how she defines Gothic.

LEILA: I think there's a combination of fear, sadness, and horror or terror and taking all of those things and romanticizing them. I think it's romanticized melancholy and I think it's aestheticized fear. And it's also seeing beauty in things that are supposed to be horrific or things that are supposed to be disgusting and repulsive, the things that are creepy, things that are eerie. It's the Addams family. It's, it's, I think the Gothic is sort of a series of adjectives. Absolutely anything can be Gothic.

So, Jane Eyre falls into the category that people often call The Female Gothic. Dracula is Gothic horror. Frankenstein -- Gothic science fiction. The Secret Garden is a Gothic children's story. And of course, in the U.S. we have Southern Gothic.

And speaking of The Addams Family, one of the most popular shows on Netflix last year was Wednesday, which was produced by Tim Burton. It's about Wednesday Addams going to an elite boarding school full of mysteries, and annoying people she can't stand.

WEDNESDAY: When I look at you the following emojis come to mind: rope, shovel, hole. By the way, there are two Ds in Addams, if you're going to gossip about me, at least spell my name correctly.

That brings me to another question. Is there a difference between Goth and Gothic? I mean, I usually think of them as separate things, but Kit was into both.

KIT: I was a, a teenager in the Emo Goth subculture. And so, I had my, uh, you know, Tim Burton hoodies and things like that.

In fact, he says Tim Burton was like a gateway drug into Gothic literature. I mean I also grew up on Tim Burton movies, but I'm a generation older than him, I saw them in the theaters. Then he told me something which I hadn't thought about. And it helped me understand why so many writers who are taking part in this Gothic Revival are in their 30s.

KIT: I mean, I was like 10 when like 9/11 and the start of war really came about as well. So, from the time I was like old enough to really be watching television, it was kind of death and these sort of themes, um, everywhere you looked contrasted with a very hyper pop, futuristic focused, uh, Y2K kind of narrative and it didn't match up. And I think that's why a lot of people ended up being drawn to Gothic subcultures and things like, uh, Emo music and, you know, Tim Burton and things like that was because it, uh, offered this, this comfort and this this place of understanding and this place of truth. And then from that you are introduced to Gothic literature and, and horror movies and things like this that then continue on with that theme of, we're going to talk about the things that no one else really wants to talk about.

Gothic stories aren't just about processing difficult emotions or dark thoughts. There's usually a class element as well.

Gothic literature really took off during The Industrial Revolution when massive amounts of wealth were being created, dividing old money from new money, and the rich from everyone else.

Kit related to those issues of class on a personal level. He graduated high school right when the Great Recession hit. And once again, he found himself immersed in The Gothic, especially reading stories about wealthy, unaccountable villains.

KIT: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. And if you ask me like to think of a horrifying monster in today's world, it's going to be someone with absolute power and control with enough wealth to hurt you in 20 different ways, even if it's not necessarily physical.

That's why his novel Tripping Arcadia is about a young woman who goes to work for a super-rich family which can ruin people's lives without a second thought. But the character does have one tool at her disposal.

READING: More than six thousand years separate us from the origin of poisons and the notion that as humans we have other methods of murder than how sharp we make our arrows or swords.

I had come to know too well the toxic lore of the botanicals that lay in my aunt's garden. Beneath the warmth of the sun and her guiding hand, I had received an education on the subject of poisoning beyond my wildest dreams and as a result had unintentionally developed a predisposition to the thought of such an act and how shockingly easy it would be if ever a reason found me.

The modern age did not want to believe in poisons. The fear of poison had been replaced by that of guns and nuclear attack and disease. In each of these was a monster more bold and less archaic, and so the poetry of poison faded in favor of its brothers, but the deed itself never left.

Now, there is a long tradition of Gothic villains that are physically monstrous like The Phantom of the Opera or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But Xavi says, in a lot of current Gothic stories, the villains don't fit that mold, even if there are characters like that in the stories.

XAVI: I think as we have moved ideologically to, to a, a context in which we are much more aware of the power of corporations and the power of, um, larger systems of, of economic imbalance, we're, we are actually seeing a shift in terms of who gets Gothicized. It becomes, and this is why we look now, for example, at older horror films from the 1930s, for example, and we look at the ways in which they, that they make those connections between monstrosity and deformity. And we look back on those now and think, wow, you would, you couldn't imagine making those, those films today, our notion of evil is now moral rather than physical. So of course, it makes sense that it is the processes of greed and oppression and repression that have become the Gothic monsters.

One of the most common supernatural villains in Gothic stories are vampires. In the '90s and early 2000s, vampires were often metaphors to talk about issues of sexuality like Twilight or True Blood. But I've noticed in a lot of these new Gothic stories, the vampires are back to being scary villains again, and not just because they drink blood. They're now often representing a powerful elite that uses and

abuses people. Like in the recent novel *House of Hunger* by Alexis Henderson. It's about a young woman with very few job prospects. So she goes to work as a quote "bloodmaid" for an aristocratic vampire.

READING: The worst of their job was the bleeding, which bloodmaids did frequently to satisfy the carnivorous appetites of the nobles, who relied on the healing properties of their blood as a lavish remedy for their varying ailments. But the way Marion saw it, work was work, and the work of a bloodmaid was far easier than that of the average factory hand in Prane. Besides, Marion had heard it rumored that upon the end of their tenure, bloodmaids were rewarded with lavish pensions that ensured they'd live their remaining days in accordance to the same standard of luxury they'd been accustomed to during their time as bloodmaids.

Agnes glowered down at the newspaper. "They've got some never to advertise a posting for a blood-whore in the matrimony column, of all places."

"Where else would you have them place it? A bloodmaid could hardly be called a servant."

"Well, they're far from wives, said Agnes, and when she spewed the words, she flecked the newspaper with spit. "Whoring for a night lord is nothing like marriage."

Marion saw little difference between the two.

Leila Taylor thinks this new type of Gothic villain, whether they're human or not, is a perfect fit for our disorienting digital media landscape.

LEILA: We're in this world where the truth really doesn't matter. Where lies are just as powerful if not more powerful and oddly valid in a strange way than the truth, like reality doesn't really matter. And it's a very strange world to manage. It's fighting madness. How do you react to that? And I think that's very Gothic <laugh>. It's very gaslighty.

In case you didn't catch that, she said, "gaslighty." Last year, Merriam-Webster declared that gaslighting was The Word of The Year. The term comes from a Gothic play, which was later adapted into a famous movie with Ingrid Bergman.

XAVI: What's interesting is that term, Gaslight, as it's originally used in the, the play and the film has to do with the, the, the gaslight system of Victorian London that, that they live in. And it's an indication of course, that the main character, if you know the story, uh, is being manipulated into thinking she's losing her mind.

PAULA: Elizabeth, did you turn on the gas? Did you turn on the gas anywhere downstairs just now?

ELIZABETH: Why no, mum. I've had it on in the kitchen all evening, that's all.

XAVI: So, it's interesting that that term is then used as a way of signaling well, you know, not being heard, being manipulated, being oppressed. Um, it's a, yeah, it's a beautiful analogy that then becomes a, a word of its own, but it has a longer tradition, the idea of the, um, uh, female heroine being cheated out of their inheritance, um, by a manipulative, um, uh, normally male character, um, who's got their own personal interest in mind as happens in *Gaslight* is really old.

And unfortunately, timeless. *Gaslight* was written in the 1930s. It takes place in the 1880s. That is typical of Gothic tales. They often use the past to talk about the present.

XAVI: The past offers that kind of buffer zone for us to think about our own progress.

One of our more Gothic filmmakers, Guillermo del Toro, does this a lot of his films. There was *Crimson Peak* in 2015, which is about a woman in the early 1900s who moves into a haunted house.

XAVI: I mean, that film is set in the early 20th century, but many of the concerns that the film raises about the domestic, uh, entrapment of women is, is still very valid today in the age of the Me Too movement.

Kit is also a big fan of that movie.

KIT: There's so many Easter eggs and callbacks to stories. Del Toro really took a little piece of every classic Gothic story and kind of fitted into this one narrative.

EDITH: There was such hatred in her eyes, an intelligence in her eyes. She knows who I am, and she wants me to leave!

LUCILLE: Nonsense my dear. You're not going anywhere. You had a bad dream, You were sleeping waking

EDITH: No! I'm afraid I shall go mad if I stay!

THOMAS: My darling, you're imagining things.

Guillermo Del Toro also used ghosts in his 2001 film *The Devil's Backbone*.

SFX: Ghost in Devil's Backbone

XAVI: You may not understand, for example, the particular ghosts of the Spanish Civil War, but you understand the concept of the ghost. And when Guillermo del Toro uses it in *The Devil's Backbone* to talk about their legacy of silence in that country, if it becomes possible for you to understand, um, that particular struggle.

Alongside vampires, ghosts are the most common supernatural character that you'll find in a Gothic story. And Ghosts are often used as metaphors to talk about the past, especially repressed trauma. The villain is usually trying to stop the protagonist from learning about this past, even if the ghost can't be exercised until the past is dealt with.

That's what Leila Taylor's book *Darkly* is about. She looks at why the Gothic sensibility resonates so much in American culture where we don't have traditions of ancient castles and aristocratic families.

But that was not the original plan for the book. At first, it was going to be about her experience being into Goth subcultures and being Black. As a teenager, she was into Tim Burton movies, Ann Rice novels, and Goth punk bands.

LEILA: And I was interested in looking at what it was like to be kind of twice marginalized, to be sort of a, a minority within a subculture. And I kind of realized, you know, Black Goths are like any other kind of Goths, <laugh>. Um, that's the kind of whole point is that we all like the same stuff and listen to the same music and wear the same kind of clothes. But the difference between a Black Goth in America and, you know, a white Goth in America is that they're a Black person in America. And that was the difference.

CLIP: Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit"

LEILA: And then I was listening to Billie Holiday's version, the original version of *Strange Fruit*, and I was like, this is the most Goth song I've ever heard. And I started looking at Tony Morrison's *Beloved*. I was like, this is horror. This is a classic Gothic haunted house book. And both of these things, *Strange Fruit*, *Beloved*, are based on true stories, they're based on actual experiences of Black people in this country. And it started to gel this idea of the Gothic aesthetic, the, the, you know, Gothic sensibility. It stems from the experience of uh, the transatlantic slave trade and the experience of those people and the, the misery and the blood and the death and the sadness and the horror and all of those things that are kind of seeped into American history, um, and has to come out

somewhere. All of that anxiety and all of that trauma, I think comes out in art, in music, in literature and film.

And today, a lot of educators and politicians across the U.S. are acting like barons of a Gothic manor, saying don't open that door, don't ask what's in the attic. There's nothing there. You're imagining things.

LEILA: That's Edgar Allen Poe. So many of his writings are about skeletons in a closet and people, you know, heart buried under floors and dead body. It's all about buried, hidden death, hidden trauma, hidden fears that are, um, literally in the building. It's literally in the house, it's in the floorboards. And that's kind of very much what I think America is about. It really is about burying its history and trying to have its sort of gleaning face forward and pretending that everything is great, but a lot of that is under the guise of wanting to protect the feelings of white children. And one of the things that the Gothic does, it faces that discomfort head on instead of it being something to avoid, all of those quote negative emotions are the stuff that the Gothic is exploring.

That's why she says a film like Get Out is Gothic. I mean there's the obvious factor that there is a well-to-do family living in a creepy house with sinister supernatural secrets. But she thinks the whole movie has a Gothic sensibility.

LEILA: In the beginning of Get Out, it's so brilliant because all it is, is a Black man walking alone in a white, affluent suburban neighborhood and how frightening that is and how unnerving and scary that is.

ANDRE: It's crazy, they got me out here in this creepy, confusing ass suburb. I'm serious, dawg. I feel like a sore thumb out here.

LEILA: And I think the idea of fear as a tool of oppression.

Yeah, it's interesting when I'm thinking back at all the Gothic stories I've seen that very often the motivation of the villain isn't greed, it's fear.

LEILA: Mm-hmm, whatever that fear is. Whether that fear is loss of power, loss of influence, loss of money, loss of love, whatever. It's that fear of, of someone that is different from me and what can they take from me.

Xavi agrees. He thinks that in movies like Get Out, the real monster is systemic racism.

XAVI: Like the monsters of the Gothic and none of these, um, systems really die off, do they, they just, um, morph often change and get revived, and you think you've killed them, but they come back.

Like in the 2021 film Candyman. In that franchise, the villain is the vengeful spirit of a Black man who was murdered in Chicago.

FINELY: I'm certainly not saying a ghost manifested by collective storytelling killed a prominent art dealer. I'm just saying all the sudden your work seems...eternal.

XAVI: It wasn't just poking its finger at white liberalism as it had been done in, um, in Get Out, but also, it's questioning the gentrification of certain, um, parts of cities, you know, and sort of like bringing everyone in into this question, you know, who is complicit into this process of, of othering?

I had been focusing on film, TV and literature. But Leila says this Gothic revival is happening in music too. When she listens to the musician M. Lamar, she hears a modern version of what Billie Holiday was doing with Strange Fruit

CLIP: M. Lamar singing

M. Lamar wears theatrical black clothes with heavy make-up. And he sometimes uses the word Gothic to describe his music. Leila thinks his work is like a combination of opera and death metal because can go from these very low vocal registers to very high ones.

LEILA: That is very Gothic to me. This combination of one playing with identity, playing with genre, this roughness with sort of smooth beauty, things like that. The songs, the lyrics in his songs are about the slave trade, and they are about death, and they are about haunting, but he refers to sort of like this, this Negro Zombie that's going to come rise up from the depths and sort of relive and take over things and there's, there's a lot that it's both Gothic and Goth about his work that I really, really admire.

Trends come and go, but the Gothic always comes back in style. It taps into a lot of conflicting emotions that make us human – along with the desire to bury those emotions. And if the world makes you feel like you're going mad, even though you know you're not – or you're pretty sure that you're not -- there will always be a place for you in The Gothic.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Xavier Aldana Reyes, Kit Mayquist, Leila Taylor and Tanya Rich.

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And by the way, if you haven't seen the Saturday Night Live parody of Gaslight, check it out. Kate McKinnon is brilliant, as always.

KATE MCKINNON: I don't know up from down, the next thing you'll tell me is this isn't a book.

WILL FORTE: No, Paula! That's a rat!

KATE MCKINNON: Is it? I've been reading rats all these years? Am I really that mad? I set a goal for myself of reading a rat a month.