

## Teens and the Horror Genre: How Much is Too Much?

With the horror genre continuing to rise in popularity in films, television, and literature, there has also been a rise in the number of books and shows targeted at youth that glorify and romanticize death and decay. Why do teens love this kind of imagery? It has been speculated that the rise in the amount of supernatural content available to teens is due to the development of special effects, which can be an attracting feature in films targeted at this age group (Comberton Village College, 2013, para. 1). The tremendous popularity of the horror genre in teen books may be due to the fact that gruesome content captures the imagination.

However, this causes a lot of worry amongst parents who fear that their teenagers will be negatively influenced by the violence depicted in these types of stories. But do parents really have anything to worry about? Can exposure to the horror genre really have negative impacts on youth? Shirley Morrison, a Nova Scotia mother of two, has said that she feels horror books, television shows, and films erode away the moral values that parents try to teach

their children. She fears that the “lack of respect for others,” shown by the characters in this genre may rub off on her teen children (“Scare tactics: who's afraid of horror books, kids or parents,” 1996, para. 8). And Sharon is not alone. Over the last year Angela Ardolino, the editor of the popular North American parenting magazine *Parenting*, has gone on national television claiming that exposure to the horror genre causes increased aggression and anxiety in teens and desensitizes them to violence (Action News, American Broadcasting Company, 8 March 2012). In the period shortly following this exposure to gruesome imagery teens run the risk of “acting out” (Action News, American Broadcasting Company, 8 March 2012) what they saw or imagined unless an adult intervenes.

But this is simply not true and cannot be backed by scientific proof. In fact, the opposite can be proven. It was found in a study earlier this year, by Dr. Anne Bartsch of the University of Augsburg's Department of Educational Technology in Germany, that people are attracted to the horror genre for its depictions of violence, but not for the

reasons one would assume. People are attracted to the heroes in the stories who have to step up and save the others, and audiences have reported increased feelings of empathy, admiration, and appreciation after being exposed to horror (MacInnes, 2003, p. 1).

Moreover, noted Toronto psychotherapist Sharon Dembo has reported that teens specifically enjoy the vivid characterizations that exist in this genre, as it shows them that they are not the only ones who ever feel scared and vulnerable, and that these are normal human emotions (“Scare tactics: who's afraid of horror books, kids or parents,” 1996, para. 5). These kinds of books and shows provide teens with examples of others who have faced their fears. Books of this genre are also praised for getting teens reading on their own, just for fun. Public library staff in Ontario have said they cannot count the number of times parents have come in to thank them for suggesting an R.L. Stine horror book to their teen because it sparked their interest in reading (“Scare tactics: who's afraid of horror books, kids or parents,” 1996, para. 6).

For those parents who may still be concerned about the amount of

supernatural and scary content in their teen's books and shows, they may rely on the various systems of rating that have been put in place by professionals to determine what content is teen appropriate. For example, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rate all video games and films before they are released to the public. For television, a similar system is in place called the TV Parental Guidelines. For ratings on teen novels, most public libraries rate all books listed in their online catalogue.

## References

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