Horror Categories

Before we take a look at the various subcategories of horror fiction, it might be useful to have a working definition of the genre as a whole. Michael Seidman defines horror as being about "the elemental battle between good and evil. At another level," he continues, "... horror is about the things that scare us, the things we check for under the bed before we go to sleep . . . ."

Subcategories in horror are less well defined than in other genres, and are frequently the result of marketing decisions as much as literary ones. But being familiar with the terms used to describe different horror styles can be important in understanding how your own novel might be best presented to an agent or editor. What follows is a brief description of the most commonly used terms, along with names of authors and, where necessary, representative works.

**Dark Fantasy**--Sometimes used as a euphemistic term for horror in general, but also refers to a specific type of fantasy, usually less graphic than other horror subcategories, that features more "traditional" supernatural or mythical beings (vampires, werewolves, zombies, etc.) in either contemporary or historical settings. (Contemporary: Stephen King--*Salem's Lot*, Thomas Tessier--*The Nightwalker*. Historical: Brian Stableford--*The Empire of Fear*, *The Werewolves of London*, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro.

**Supernatural/Occult**--Similar to the dark fantasy, but may be more graphic in its depiction of violence. Stories feature satanic worship, demonic possession, or ultimate evil incarnate in an entity or supernatural being that may or may not have its roots in traditional mythology or folklore. (Ramsey Campbell, Robert McCammon, Ira Levin--*Rosemary's Baby*, William Peter Blatty--*The Exorcist*, Stephen King--*Pet Sematary*).

**Hauntings**--"Classic" stories of ghosts, poltergeists, and spiritual possessions. The level of violence portrayed varies, but many writers in this category exploit the reader's natural fear of the unknown by hinting at the horror and letting the reader's imagination supply the details. (Peter Straub--*Ghost Story*, Richard Matheson--*Hell House*).

**Psychological Horror**--Features a human monster with horrific, but not supernatural, aspects. (Thomas Harris--*Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*; Dean Koontz--*Whispers*).

**Technological Horror**--"Monsters" in these stories are the result of science run amok or technology turned to purposes of evil. (Dean Koontz--*Watchers*).

**Splatterpunk**--Very graphic depiction of violence--often gratuitous--popularized in the 1980s, especially in film--*Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, etc.

**Juvenile/Young Adult**--Can be any horror style, but with a protagonist who is the same age as, or slightly older than, the targeted reader. Stories for middle grades (eight to twelve years old) are scary, with monsters and violent acts that might best be described as...
"gross," but stories for young adults (thirteen and up) may be more graphic. (R.L. Stine, Christopher Pike, Carol Gorman)

Once you've identified which subcategory your novel idea falls into, start studying the market like a professional: Go to the bookstore and see which houses publish your kind of novel, and read recent examples from each publisher. Look up the publishers in Novel & Short Story Writer's Market to see what their submission requirements are and send away for their writers' guidelines. Keep on top of current trends by reading new releases in your category on a regular basis.

Recognizing an Original Idea

We've already identified the easiest way to know what other writers in your genre are doing: read new releases regularly. You should also get in the habit of reading the classics to see what themes and treatments have already run their course (be aware, though, that these things do tend to cycle back around). While it may be true that there are no truly new ideas, you can bring a fresh perspective to even the most time-worn (Anne Rice did it with her vampire novels; Theodore Roszak reinterprets a classic in The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein). Even so, every genre has its clichés. Ramsey Campbell has the following to say on the subject:

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that the horror field is riddled with clichés. The house that's for sale too cheaply, the guy who must be working nights because he sleeps during the day (must be a handyman, too, to judge by that big box he keeps in the cellar), the attic room the landlady keeps locked, the place none of the topers in the village inn will visit after dark--we can all have fun recognizing these and many others, which is by no means to say that they haven't been used effectively by masters of the craft. But I think there are more fundamental clichés in the field. . .

Take the theme of evil, as the horror story often does. Writing about evil is a moral act, and it won't do to recycle definitions of evil, to take them on trust. Horror fiction frequently presents the idea of evil in such a shorthand form as to be essentially meaningless--something vague out there that causes folks to commit terrible acts, something other than ourselves, nothing to do with us. That sounds to me more like an excuse than a definition, and I hope it's had its day. If we're going to write about evil, then let's define it and how it relates to ourselves.

. . . Some clichés are simply products of lazy writing. Tradition shouldn't be used as an excuse to repeat what earlier writers have done; if you feel the need to write about the stock figures of the horror story, that's all the more reason to imagine them anew. ("Avoiding What's Been Done to Death," How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction--Writer's Digest Books)

Writing in a different chapter of the same reference book, James Kisner points to specific themes that are likely to be rejected by publishers of speculative fiction:
You'll soon discover, to cite a few examples, that stories in which the main characters turn out to be Adam and Eve, or in which the character is being born, or is in hell, or it's all a dream, are so timeworn as to be unacceptable in virtually any form, no matter how well written your particular variation might be. (To these examples, I would add stories about word processors or computers that are possessed and/or have gone berserk; stories about killer fogs; stories with trains as metaphors; and stories about possessed vehicles or machinery of any kind. The first several times these were done, they were original; now they are passing into the realm of the hackneyed. How do I know? By my own extensive reading in the genres.) ("Freedom of Originality in Fantastic Fiction--and How to Use It,"