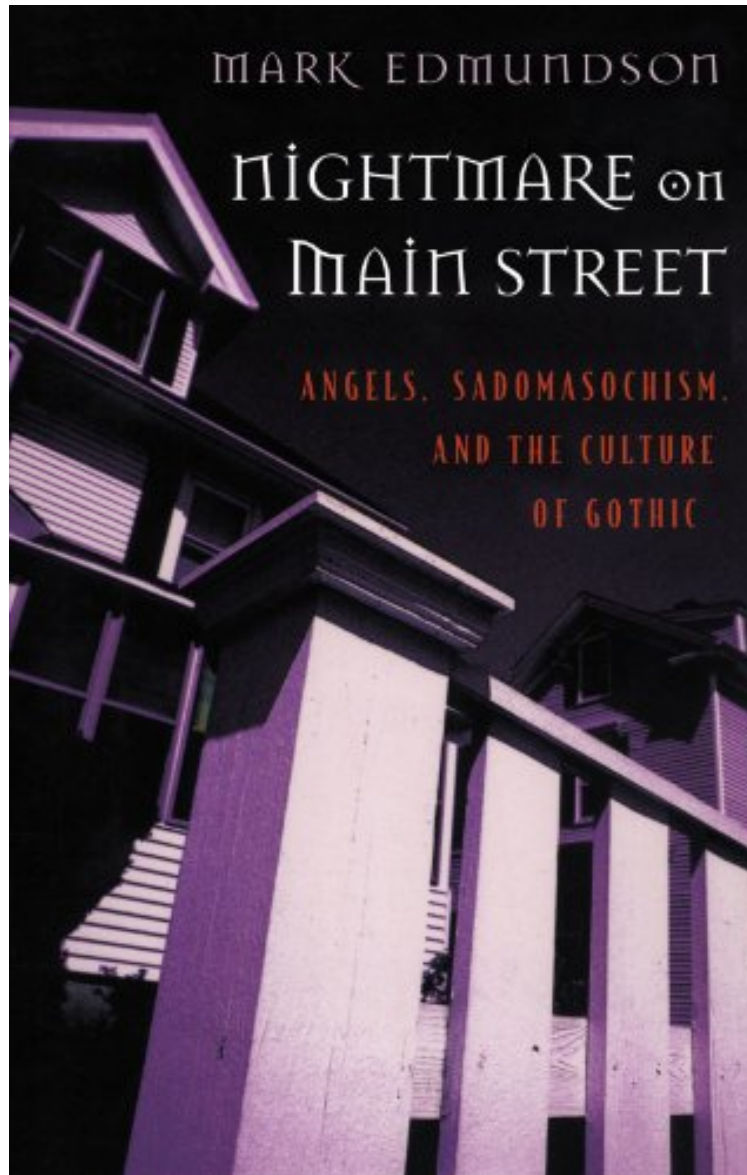


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Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic

Mark Edmundson

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#798422 in Books Harvard University Press 1999-11-01 1999-09-19Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.25 x .52 x 5.251, .52 #File Name: 0674624637208 pages | File size: 58.Mb

Mark Edmundson : Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Problematic yet Insightful BookBy Michael A. KleenFor someone

who begins by insulting horror fans as "losers," Mark Edmundson has produced a work that is surprisingly as insightful as it is presumptive. *Nightmare on Main Street* is essentially a long essay, broken into three inter-related sections. His premise is bold: that we live in a culture saturated by the Gothic. The problem with his argument is glaring: his definition of "Gothic" is extremely broad. "America is a nation of extremes," he wrote, where the pessimistic and the optimistic, in equally unrealistic forms, constantly battle over the hearts and minds of the American public. On one hand stands *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and Oprah, and on the other side stands *Forrest Gump*. It might surprise you to find Oprah Winfrey and Freddy Krueger in the same category. According to Mark Edmundson, the single most important aspect of the Gothic is the hero-villain who does wrong, but is, in the end, internally conflicted. Since the guests on the Oprah Winfrey Show often satisfy that description, Oprah joined the ranks of the Gothic. So did news stories about the O.J. Simpson case, for that matter. Therein lies the problem with *Nightmare on Main Street*. Edmundson considers any portrayal of a duel nature in humanity to be Gothic. Never mind the elements of setting, mood, or the supernatural that make Gothic literature and film so unique. Those are all pushed aside in favor of the broadest possible characterization. This problem seems so glaring I am surprised that neither Richard Rorty nor Michael Pollan, two scholars who I greatly respect and who Edmundson credited for helping to shape his argument, didn't catch it right away. Just because something shares an aspect with Gothic literature and film doesn't make it Gothic as well. Aside from that rather glaring problem, *Nightmare on Main Street* is an entertaining and engaging work. Edmundson's observations occasionally made me laugh out loud. Describing Scar, the main villain of the popular '90s cartoon *The Lion King*, he wrote, "Scar's voice, courtesy of Jeremy Irons, is that of a cultivated, world-weary, gay man. He sounds like Gore Vidal with a significant hangover." (pg. 45) His description of our therapeutic culture is dead on, beginning with *Forrest Gump*. *Forrest Gump*, a movie that rewarded sweet and innocent ignorance, was, ultimately, our answer to *Nightmare on Elm Street*. "Forrest Gump played large in America because it worked as a vacation, a few hours away from more pressing Gothic fears," he explained. (pg. 76) In a culture so saturated with death, destruction, and fear, *Forrest Gump* reassured baby boomers that despite all the tumult, everything would work out in the end, as long as you viewed everything through a detached, sentimental lens. In his third section, Edmundson proposed that naked sadomasochism is what results when the culture of Gothic goes uncontested. "At the core of every Gothic plot is the SM scenario: victim, victimizer, terrible place, torment," he wrote. (pg. 133) The growth of SM culture in America is therefore the direct result of our inability to effectively counter the Gothic. Edmundson concludes on a down note, with no proposition regarding how to counter the Gothic, other than that *Forrest Gump* and religion won't do. He left it to his readers to discover a culturally redeeming art form. As a fan of the Gothic, I hope he has to wait for a long time.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Scarification Is Powerful! By Panopticonman Edmundson has got hold of a powerful idea here: that strategies and characters of Gothic literature have burst out of the realm of fiction and infiltrated our public life. While he sometimes pushes his broadly defined notion of the Gothic too far (it sometimes it seems as if everything belongs to the realm of the Gothic depending on his say so), for the most part he does stick to his original definition of a hero/villain, haunted structures, seduced and screaming heroines and the occasional heroic rescuer. He suggests, quite believably, that the powerful Gothic themes, have been used by Marx (the capitalist as vampire), and by Freud (humanity haunted by the past, in the grip of infantile memory which dooms us to behavior we can never fully escape except with the help of modernist magicians like Freud). Moving from the talk show (where families reenact Gothic scripts wherein hero/villains describe their inexplicably destructive behavior without understanding or regret as their families hurl abuse at them), to movies (pick just about anything including Disney films), Edmundson strikes at the root of the malevolent vine of the Gothic, a vine which snakes through our political life - Gothic monsters such as Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, through our social life - our collective perception that we are in danger even in the most benign circumstances. He does see hope for using the Gothic the way it was intended: to throw off the dead hand of the past, originally the aristocratic, then the plutocratic, or therapeutic, now bureaucratic hand of power and discipline. His writings on Freud are particularly incisive on the therapeutic hand. Here's a quote: "Freud, in his most resolutely Gothic moods, believed that we never forget anything, so that every past moment is stored somewhere in the psyche... He also thought, at least at times, that *any* negative event that befalls us -- no matter how apparently contingent -- is in some measure the result of our guilty need for punishment, our wish to self-destruct. Edmundson also notes that Foucault and Derrida and other "new" critics favor the Gothic as well. And if you think of Foucault's evocative prose style, and Derrida's "terrorism," Edmundson has a point, a minor point, but a point nonetheless. The Cold War Gothic has now been replaced by the Terrorist Gothic, the apocalyptic version of Gothicism. George W. Bush whips up the external apocalyptic Gothic, while at the same time we're being terrorized internally by the second variety of the Gothic - the "terror" gothic - in this case, the recession terror gothic. The Gothic can be a powerful tool for critiquing the status quo. The problem is, it has become the status quo, and, unlike "healthy" Gothic horror, it never opens out into new territory now. Instead, we're all doomed, doomed, doomed!. Edmundson notes a few exceptions: the first *Nightmare on Elm Street* by Wes Craven for one. I heartily agree on that score!

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Searching for Redemption in the Gothic 1990's By Malcolm Professor Edmundson's book explores some of the darker issues in our culture and the various ways some artists and others have tried to cope with

gothic "forces". For an academic book, it is very clearly written and witty. I learned a lot from it and found it very thought provoking. Edmundson notes that a few years ago he went on a prolonged horror movie binge, so his "culture" is probably slanted in a direction others may not find so familiar. However, I think that readers interested in horror and of an intellectual bent will love the book. I also think that psychotherapists might find this book quite worthwhile. There are some exceptionally clear presentations of some of Freud's concepts and, in my view, the book also is a meditation on trying to deal with human suffering and our attempts to find hope and redemption as individuals, both psychologically and spiritually. I found this to be a rewarding book and highly recommend it.

Once we've terrified ourselves reading Anne Rice or Stephen King, watching Halloween or following the O. J. Simpson trial, we can rely on the comfort of our inner child or Robert Bly's bongos, an angel, or even a crystal. In a brilliant assessment of American culture on the eve of the millennium, Mark Edmundson asks why we're determined to be haunted, courting the Gothic at every turn--and, at the same time, committed to escape through any new scheme for ready-made transcendence. *Nightmare on Main Street* depicts a culture suffused with the Gothic, not just in novels and films but even in the nonfictive realms of politics and academic theories, TV news and talk shows, various therapies, and discourses on AIDS and the environment. Gothic's first wave, in the 1790s, reflected the truly terrifying events unfolding in revolutionary France. What, Edmundson asks, does the ascendancy of the Gothic in the 1990s tell us about our own day? And what of another trend, seemingly unrelated--the widespread belief that re-creating oneself is as easy as making a wish? Looking at the world according to *Forrest Gump*, Edmundson shows how this parallel culture actually works reciprocally with the Gothic. An unchecked fixation on the Gothic, Edmundson argues, would result in a culture of sadomasochism. Against such a rancorous and dispiriting possibility, he draws on the work of Nietzsche and Shelley, and on the recent creations of Toni Morrison and Tony Kushner, to show how the Gothic and the visionary can come together in persuasive and renovating ways.

.com If you observe American pop culture, you'll recognize the questions Mark Edmundson raises in *Nightmare on Main Street*: Why are the 1990s seeing a resurgence of the gothic? Why do tabloid stories about people such as O. J. Simpson and Lorena Bobbitt captivate the public imagination? Why are "goth" fashions and music in vogue? Why is sadomasochistic sexuality on the rise? And what about the craze for what Edmundson calls "pop transcendence," the phony innocence exemplified by *Forrest Gump*, angels, and the inner child? *Nightmare on Main Street* is well written and accessible, and will be of interest to anyone appreciative of (or concerned about) horror books and movies. As Richard Rorty writes, "[This] book argues that America now has a bloated Id, a lascivious and cruel Superego, and almost no Ego at all: almost no moral resolution or political will." Edmundson's proposed solution is kind of vague, but he acknowledges the positive, creative role of horror: he proposes that we "take Gothic pessimism as a starting point and come up with visions that, while affirmative, never forget the authentic darkness that Gothic art discloses." From *Library Journal* Edmundson (English, Univ. of Virginia), who writes prolifically for both the "lit-crit" elite and the mass intelligentsia, here addresses neither literary historians nor "practitioners of...cultural studies." Yet because his work, however fun? horror literature and movies are, after all, created as entertainment? is still an academic product, he may fail to reach his intended audience. Any book that expects its readers to be breezily familiar with Prometheus, Foucault, Poe, and Freddy Krueger assumes a certain hipness rarely found beyond campus environs. The point of this disquisition is also obscure. While Edmundson backs up his basic observation that today's popular attraction to slasher flicks, tabloids, and O.J. Simpson true-life horror tales is similar to the Gothic phenomenon of the early 19th century, he never explains why he thinks the culture of Gothic flourished, then and now, and why it matters. Not recommended.? Scott H. Silverman, Bryn Mawr Coll. Lib., Pa. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. From *Kirkus* sWhat do Richard Nixon, Freddy Krueger, O.J. Simpson, and Edgar Allan Poe have in common with one another--but not with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Ralph Waldo Emerson? Answer: The former express our nation's cult of gothic guilt and fear; the latter are potential models of redemption. Edmundson (English/Univ. of Virginia) argues that the gothic mindset, exemplified in lurid classics of the late 18th century (e.g., Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Lewis's *The Monk*) dominates contemporary American culture. From these works he distills categories that he finds ubiquitous in modern pop culture, including protagonists equally divided between good and wicked selves, scenarios in which dungeons or other underground scenes of sadomasochistic horror figure prominently, the hidden past that refuses to die (in recovered-memory syndrome), and so forth. Racism is, above all else, the part of the American past that refuses to die, haunting us in fiction (Toni Morrison's *Beloved*), in the news (O.J.), and in cinema. Edmundson has written an entertaining and thoughtful book, but his overly elastic thesis occasionally gets the better of his good judgment. He is prone to write outlandish things, making his book at times a lurid bit of American gothic itself. His arguments often fall into the categories he criticizes: Poe, for example, is Emerson's evil twin in the American tradition (his America seems divided between angels and incubi). Though he justifiably scorns the recent angel craze as an expression of phony transcendence, he also presents Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, and even Nietzsche as angels of a sort (he calls them "visionaries") who might deliver us from our abject need. One might say that this book's thesis belongs in the American tradition of cultural pessimism, the very malady for which it purports to

be the cure. Even though Edmundson's main thesis is overdrawn, his book is rewarding. It has many startling insights, shrewd observations, and considerable narrative momentum. -- Copyright 1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.