HORROR
WRITING BOOTCAMP

with
Johnny Worthen
www.johnnyworthen.com

WEEK ONE - THE GHOST INSIDE

IMAGINE U THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH®

Horror Writing Bootcamp

Saturdays (3 sessions)
October 17th – October 31st, 2026
10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

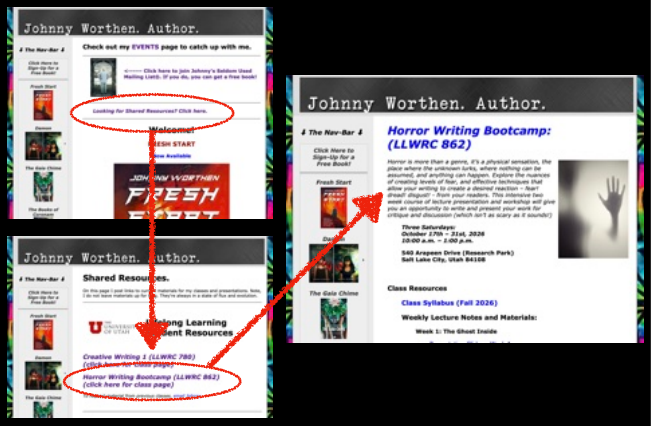
Lifelong Learning — *LLWRC 862*



THE PLAN

- **Expose** the deep roots of horror
- **Dissect** Horror into types and elements
- **Unearth** tips and techniques for using Horror effectively in our writing
- **Construct** some Horror and **Play** with it

Online/Shared Resources



http://johnnyworthen.com/SharedResources/LLWRC862/SharedLLWRC862.html

WARNING

This class may explore adult themes, language, and content.

–University of Utah

Johnny will probably take his shoes off. It's his thing. Don't freak out.

–Concerned Citizens for Comfort

INFINITE MONKEYS

Publication Opportunity

Monkey Anthology

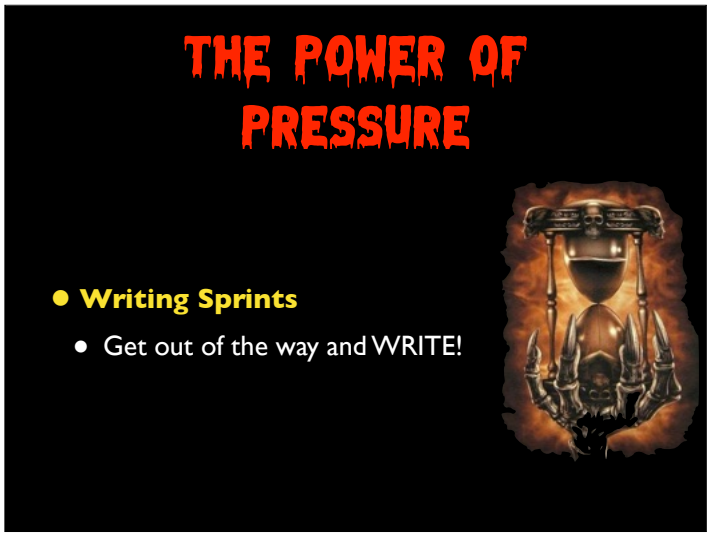
Theme: Myths but Science Fiction
(can have Horror elements)

Deadline: October 31, 2026

Flash Fiction, Short Fiction, and Poetry
5000 word limit


WHO IS JOHNNY WORTHEN?
• Utah Writer of the Year
• Finalist RMFW Writer of the Year
• Best-Selling Author
• Associative Instructor, University of Utah
• Multiple-genre hybrid author
• Former acquisitions Editor
• Past President of The League of Utah Writers
TRAINING
• BA English
• MA American Studies
• 26 Novels
• 32 Published Short Stories
• Professional Editor
• Old & Wise
• Tie-dye connoisseur
PUBLISHED NOVELS
• Beatrysel
• Dr. Stuart's Heart
• Eleanor, The Unseen Book 1
• Celeste, The Unseen Book 2
• David, The Unseen Book 3
• The Brand Demand
• What Immortal Hand
• The Finger Trap
• The Knickknack Case
• Thicker Than Water
• In the Wake of Captain Lord
• The Counterfeit Connection
• The Hermit of Big Horn County
• The Real Deal
• Of Kings, Queens, & Colonies
• Of Civilized, Saved & Savages
• Of Heroes Homes & Honey
• Things Bequeathed
• The Gaia Chime
• Things Revealed
• Fresh Start
• The Ranch (2027)
JOHNNY WORTHEN
FRESH START
A battle-weary Soldier-Priest seeks one murderer on a planet of criminals And then, there will be a reckoning...


Introductions
• Who are you?
• What is your writing experience?
• What are you looking for here?


THE POWER OF PRESSURE
• Writing Sprints
• Get out of the way and WRITE!

EXERCISE

- TOUCHING THE DARKNESS
  - **Make a list of your fears.**
    - Be honest
      - NEVER tell anyone!
        - *(SHOW them instead)*

SOME HORROR THEMES

- Abandonment
- Cannibalism
- Captivity
- Chases
- Confinement/ Being Trapped
- Conspiracies
- Escapes
- Gore
- Helplessness
- Imprisonment
- Isolation
- Temptation
- Madness
- Murder
- Mystery
- Nightmares
- Peeping
- Sex
- Suicide
- Survival
- Torture
- Violence
- Vulnerability



EXERCISE

- **MOOD BY CHOICE**
  - **Color this scene SCARY**
    - *Use Word Choice, Detail, and Focus*

A man waits in a motel room. It's daytime. The phone rings. He answers it, brightly saying "hello." He listens for a moment, then hangs up. He puts on a coat, collects a few things—one is heavy, one is light. He goes to the door to leave, but it opens before he gets there. He says two words.

The 4 F's

- Hardwired into humanity
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Feed
  - Fornicate*

The 4 F's

- Hardwired into humanity
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Feed
  - Fornicate

The 2 D's

Fight, Flight → **DREAD**

Feed, Fornicate → **DESIRE**

A GENRE BASED ON EMOTIONAL REACTION

- **DESIRE** (fornicate/feed)
  - **Erotica**
    - *I Want*
    - *plus +*
- **DREAD** (fight/flight)
  - **Horror**
    - *I Don't Want*
    - *minus -*



THE CHASE-SURVIVAL

- **EROTICA**
  - Pursuit
  - Attraction
  - *"Come to me"*
- **HORROR**
  - Pursuit
  - Revulsion
  - *"Keep away"*

Laws of Attraction
Point Of View
Primal

A GENRE BASED ON PHYSICAL REACTION

- **EROTICA**
  - Mood alteration
  - Physical arousal
    - heart race
    - endorphins
  - LUST
- **HORROR**
  - Mood alteration
  - Physical anxiety
    - heart race
    - adrenaline
  - FEAR



LUST & FEAR
EROTICA & HORROR

Closely Related Emotions
Closely Related Genres



EXERCISE

- **CHASE**
  - **Write a scene where someone is being chased**
    - *No fighting*
  - *By robots*
  - *By flies*
  - *By cultists*
  - *By a psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est?*



- FEAR is defining element of Horror genre





BREAKING IT DOWN

- Stephen King's 3 Fold Definition
  - The Gross Out (Revulsion)
  - The Horror
  - The Terror
- *Arbitrary terms, good ideas*

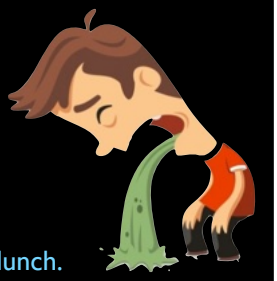


REVULSION (THE GROSS OUT)

- *"The Gross-out: the sight of a severed head tumbling down a flight of stairs, it's when the lights go out and something green and slimy splatters against your arm."*

REVULSION (THE GROSS OUT)

- Disgust
- Nauseating
- Visceral
- "Splatter horror"
- STAKES - You might lose your lunch.



THE HORROR

- *"The Horror: the unnatural, spiders the size of bears, the dead waking up and walking around, it's when the lights go out and something with claws grabs you by the arm."*

THE HORROR

- Monsters
- Outside entity
- Pursuing menace
  - Predator/Prey
- Quantifiable and Definable "Other"
- STAKES - You might lose your life.



THE TERROR

- *"Terror, when you come home and notice everything you own had been taken away and replaced by an exact substitute. It's when the lights go out and you feel something behind you, you hear it, you feel its breath against your ear, but when you turn around, there's nothing there..."*

THE TERROR

- *"A fear you cannot share with others"*
- As close as our minds
- Unclassifiable & Undefinable
- Menace Beyond Reason
  - Within ourselves?
- Psychological / Spiritual
- Paranoia
- STAKES - You might lose your sanity and/or soul

The Gross Out

Super-Ego

- Controlling knowledge challenged
- Values and societal morals

The Horror

Ego

- Interaction with physical world - 4 F's
- Mortal danger

The Terror

Id

- Psychological / Spiritual
- Beyond comprehension

The Gross Out
Social Match

Super-Ego

- Controlling knowledge challenged
- Values and societal morals

The Horror
Physical Match

Ego

- Interaction with physical world - 4 F's
- Mortal danger

The Terror
Spiritual Match

Id

- Psychological / Spiritual
- Beyond comprehension

"I'll try to terrify you first, and if that doesn't work, I'll horrify you, and if I can't make it there, I'll try to gross you out. I'm not proud."

–Stephen King

How deep will the scars be?

Good: The Gross Out
Better: The Horror
Best: The Terror

>> all three get an EMOTIONAL and PHYSICAL reaction <<

SENSES

- Use all five (6-15+?) to engage the reader

EXERCISE

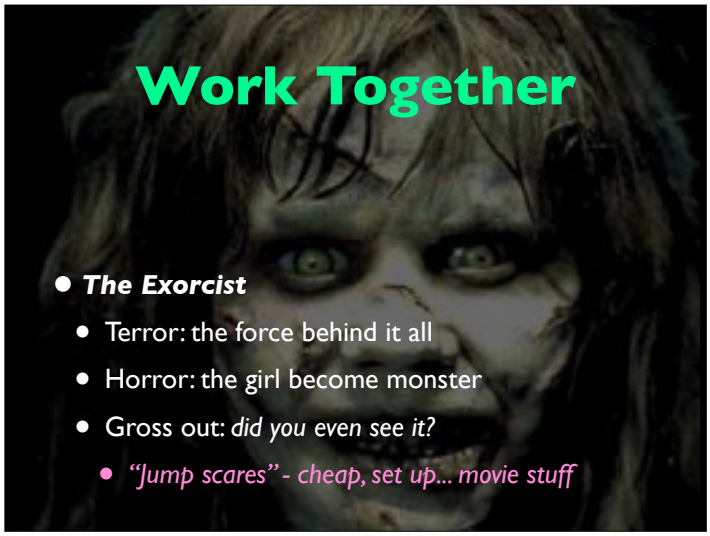
- **REVULSION**
  - **Write a GROSS OUT scene**
    - Visceral Description
      - Turn our stomachs
    - *Opening a grave*
    - *Accident victim*
    - *Symptoms of new super virus*
    - *Infestation*

EXERCISE

- **HORROR**
  - **Write a HORROR scene**
    - Hiding from a physical threat
      - Body in danger
    - *Monster coming*
    - *Animal scratching at the door*
    - *Stalked by a killer*
    - *Drowning as a ship sinks*

EXERCISE

- TERROR
  - **Write a TERROR scene**
    - Psychological threat
      - Edge of madness
    - *Physical reality is shifting*
    - *Huge Conspiracy*
    - *Demonic Possession*
    - *Brain eating parasite*



Work Together

- ***The Exorcist***
  - Terror: the force behind it all
  - Horror: the girl become monster
  - Gross out: *did you even see it?*
    - *"Jump scares" - cheap, set up... movie stuff*

SCENE & SEQUEL

"Scene and sequel are two types of written passages used by authors to advance the plot of a story. Scenes propel a story forward as the character attempts to achieve a goal. Sequels provide an opportunity for the character to react to the scene, analyze the new situation, and decide upon the next course of action."

— Wikipedia (knows all)

Fractal



Scene

A Complete Dramatic Unit



HOMEWORK

- **Read: The Hanging Stranger**
- **Write a Scene up to 300 words**
  - **Recognizing the threat**
    - **Express fear - scary!**
  - This is for class Critique
    - Submit it **Standard Manuscript Format**
    - email to me by **THURSDAY NIGHT*** at:
      - johnny@johnnyworthen.com
      - .doc, .docx, or .pdf formats please
    - **If you miss deadline bring enough copies for everyone*