Gothic Nature

Gothic Nature 1

How to Cite: Jackson, D. O. P. (2019) Book Review: Lee Gambin, *Nope, Nothing Wrong Here: The Making of Cujo*. *Gothic Nature*. 1, 239-241. Available from: https://gothicnaturejournal.com/.
Published: 14 September 2019

Peer Review:
All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a double-blind process.

Copyright:
© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Open Access:
Gothic Nature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Lee Gambin, *Nope, Nothing Wrong Here: The Making of* Cujo

(Albany, GA: BearManor Media, 2017)

Daniel Otto Jack Petersen

Cujo (1983) is an iconic instance of the time-honoured animal subgenre of eco-horror, one that brings a rabid, two-hundred-pound St. Bernard into visceral proximity with terrified humans. One of the best things about Lee Gambin's labour of love on the making of *Cujo* is that his book's very existence provokes readers to revisit director Lewis Teague's adaptation of Stephen King's novel of the same name. I hadn't seen *Cujo* since I watched it on VHS as a young teenager in the 1980s. Watching it before reading Gambin's book, I was pleased to rediscover a well-crafted film. Artful cinematography by Jan de Bont, good animal special effects, and solid, sometimes remarkable, acting (especially by the mother and son duo played by Dee Wallace—of *E.T.* fame—and Danny Pintauro) make this one of the better adaptations of King's work. And it's still pretty scary! The title of Lee Gambin's book is taken from a television commercial in the film made by the advertising agency of one of the central characters. The ad features a professorial figure who, after taking a bite of the children's cereal being advertised, assures his viewers: 'Nope, nothing wrong here'. The facile slogan, of course, drips with irony.

Gambin's book launches straight into, without preface or introduction, a scene-by-scene analysis of the entire film. Each chapter's scene analysis is followed by an array of related interview excerpts from cast and crew (accompanied by hundreds of photographs of the film sets). Some excerpts tie into the chapter's focus quite well and others seem only of tangential interest at best. The book is situated somewhere between an academic work and what might be called 'fan scholarship'. Secondary literature is scarcely mentioned and no citations are provided for the book's critical, cultural, or historical claims. Earlier versions of the screenplay are frequently mentioned, but again without cited sources. Gambin's scene-by-scene analyses also engage in no overt conversation with critical theorists or scholars of any kind (except for a few passing references in the most general terms). Readers of *Gothic Nature* may find this disappointing as *Cujo* begs to be put into conversation with an interdisciplinary field like Animal Studies. One can imagine, for example, a strange and lively engagement between *Cujo*

and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003).

Nevertheless, Gambin's book provides many prompts for the interested scholar to trace out such conversations themselves. For example, Gambin observes that, while earlier 'dogsploitation horror' movies like *Dogs* (1976) and *The Pack* (1977) were centred on ecological and social concerns, '*Cujo* brings the horror home to the domestic interpersonal, rather than being about societal flaws and a response to animal neglect' and that 'this is something that will happen within the eighties coming out of the ecologically aware seventies, where family-centric dramas will merge with horror' (p. 303-304). Gambin's observation will provoke ecocritics to wonder if Teague's film wrests animal horror from its ecological and social consciousness in the service of advancing a mere metaphor for human domestic concerns or if it literally brings ecohorror home, regardless of middle-class and working-class families' attitudes toward ecological coexistence. At the point in the film where mother and son are besieged by the rabid dog in a broken-down Pinto, four-year-old Tad asks his mother with pitiful vulnerability whether the monster dog can 'eat his way in' to the little car. She responds 'No'. But the movie shows that monstrous coexistence can indeed eat its way into the allegedly safe space of modern industrial domesticity (cf. Gambin, 2017: p. 293).

What, after all, induces Cujo's monstrous transformation from gentle, loyal pet to ferocious killer? Nothing more or less than the St. Bernard's ecosystemic encounter with rabid bats in a cave whilst chasing a rabbit in rural environs. As Gambin notes, the monster behind the monster here is rabies: 'in *Cujo*, the disease would act as the monstrous entity inhabiting a normally benevolent dog' (p. 168). The domestic struggles of the humans in the film (which include abuse and adultery) do not exempt them from learning, bodily and gorily, that they are interconnected members of the same local ecology that can make a pet undergo a 'tragic transformation' (p. 169). (As Gambin aptly observes in several places, the film is a striking portrait of animal suffering.) There is no anthropogenic cause for the monster here. There is simply participation in the viral vagaries of a regional biome. The film does not allow the significant otherness—that is, 'specific difference' that is taken seriously (Haraway, 2003: pp.. 3, 7)—of bats, dogs, and even viruses, to be reduced to strictly human concerns, even environmentalist ones. This monstrous intersection of human and animal drama is what Gambin aptly labels 'horror of circumstance' (p. 42). Perhaps *Cujo* shows us that sometimes it

takes even a *monster* dog to remind us that 'dogs are not about oneself. Indeed, that is the beauty of dogs' (Haraway 2003: p. 11).

Finally, it's worth noting that one of the most interesting fruits of the hundreds of interview excerpts is the wealth of detail from the animal trainers on the film set. Anyone wishing to trace out the relationship between the cinematic genre of animal horror and what filmmakers must do to get real-life animal 'actors' to 'play' those roles (practices that range from the playful to the cruel, as the interviews reveal) will find a wealth of material for such a line of inquiry in Gambin's book. What would Donna Haraway, who participates with her dog as a trainer and competitor in 'dog agility' sports, make of these practices? For example, while sometimes the trainers used toys off camera to get the dogs to leap (p. 285), other times chief trainer Karl Lewis Miller (who also worked with St. Bernards on the *Beethoven* series of films) donned a fright mask to genuinely scare the dogs into growling aggressively (p. 254) and would later feel depressed about it (p. 288). What counts as monstrous here and what remains within the bounds of the humane?

While Gambin's book would benefit from a lengthy introduction that thoroughly contextualises the material, it is a labour of love that will reward those interested in delving into the myriad production details of this canine horror classic of the 1980s. Cujo's cultural heritage will no doubt live on, and Gambin's guide may aid the interested critic and entertain the general reader.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Haraway, D. (2003) *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press.