

Literacy in Place
Dr. Chea Parton
readingrural@gmail.com



INAUGURAL LITERACY IN PLACE RURAL TEEN WRITING CONTEST OPEN JULY 1-DEC 1, 2022

Telling Our Stories: Rural Pasts, Presents, and Futures

Rural people and life are often mocked, stereotyped, or even invisible in dominant narratives. But as the critically acclaimed anthology *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America* makes clear, life in rural America is diverse, complex, and nuanced. Rural teens have incredible stories to tell, and we want to hear them!

Rural students in grades 9-12 from all states are invited to submit fictional or nonfictional rural stories, any genre, but not to exceed 2000 words. One submission per student, please. Each entry must list an associated educator (teacher/librarian) as the winning student's classroom also receives prizes (see below). Please note: if this call is used as a classroom assignment, educators must select the top five entries to submit.

First place receives publication on Literacy in Place, their submission spotlighted on the Reading Rural YAL podcast & YouTube series, and a virtual visit from award-winning rural author Jeff Zentner (*In the Wild Light, The Serpent King*) to their English class or writing group. Their teacher/educator receives a classroom set of *Rural Voices*. Second place receives publication on Literacy in Place and a signed copy of a rural YA book.

Guest judges include J.R. Jamison (*Hillbilly Queer*) and Veeda Bybee (*Rural Voices, Call Down the Moon*). Specific guidelines, submission form, and full guest judge bios can be found at literacyinplace.com/inaugural-literacy-in-place-writing-contest. **Submissions accepted July 1, 2022 through midnight PST on December 1, 2022.** Winners announced February 2023. Entries that do not adhere to the guidelines will not be read.



Rural Adult Literature:

Suggestions for Spooky Season Reading

By Chea Parton,
Founder, *Literacy in Place*
and Rob Costello, *Author*

Every October in my rural classroom, we read, analyzed, and wrote spooky stories. Whether full-length books or short fiction, students got to choose a spooky story, worked in small groups to analyze the elements and techniques authors use to craft spooky stories, and then wrote their own. Their stories, then, were put in the school library for other students to check out and read. It was always a big hit.

I was reminded of this practice recently by Rob Costello, a rural writer of (really good) spooky stories and co-author of this article, after he watched my Author Talk interview with Melissa Wyatt.

In that interview, I lament the lack of rural representation in young adult literature. He brought to my attention that while rural representation might be an issue for realistic rural fiction, there are quite a number of rural YA horror/dark fantasy stories out there. I had no idea.

Horror, like YA more generally, is seen as a “fluff” genre where the stories aren’t worthy of critical analysis and are more like “brain candy” because they are perceived to lack in critical substance.

As Rob and I read, thought, and talked about these stories together, it became easy to see how that simply isn’t true. The best of these stories are layered and complex - they are both critical and fun.

Like rurality itself, opinions of YA horror have been shaped by a dominant deficit narrative that pushes them to the margins. What we’d like to do in this article is challenge that narrative by highlighting one rural YA horror book, as well as to provide suggestions for others that teachers could use in their classrooms.

Horror can be thought of as a genre

of fiction that seeks to generate feelings of fear, dread, repulsion, and terror in its audience. The best horror, however, transcends fear to also traffic in the full range of darker human emotions and experiences, including grief, loneliness, trauma, disgust, hatred, and despair.

There are many ways of categorizing horror into various sub-genres (slasher horror, body horror, folk horror, etc.), but in general, horror seeks to explore our deepest fears and associated dark emotions.

Horror is based in primal empathy. As mortal beings we all share the same weaknesses and vulnerabilities that make us prey to similar threats from death, disease, loss, etc. We are each programmed by instinct to avoid these threats, and to be suspicious or even fearful of that which is unfamiliar or unknown, since it may present a threat we have yet to identify.

At its most universal, horror taps into these common human fears - for example our fear of the dark, our fear of being eaten, or our fear of the other. Yet, as individuals, we each have our own unique fears based on lived experiences and personal traumas. In his essay “Haunted Castles, Dark Mirrors: On the Penguin Horror Series,” Academy Award-winning filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro writes, “To learn what we fear is to learn who we are.”

This “learning who we are” is deeply connected to where we’re from. For rural folks, horror stories set in rural places don’t just explore our deepest fears as people; they explore our deepest fears as *rural* people. They spotlight the often subconscious ways we have been conditioned by the larger social prejudices that have shaped and defined rural places for generations.

Horror enables us to resist that conditioning within ourselves, so that we as individuals may begin to question the ways those same external prejudices are challenged - or reinforced - in our own

communities.

A good horror story can thus enable a young reader to process their own trauma through the buffer of abstraction provided by fiction and metaphor, while simultaneously offering external validation of what they see as cruel, unjust, and untrue in the world they live in every day.

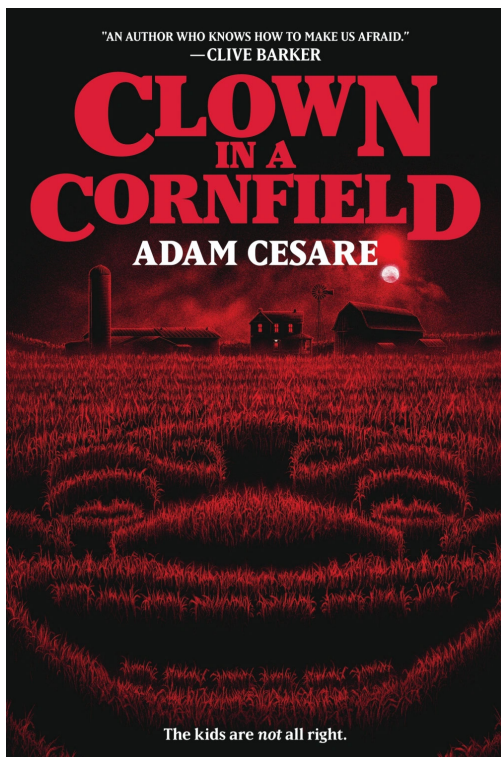
One excellent illustration of this is Adam Cesare’s *Bram Stoker Award*-winning *Clown in a Cornfield*, which takes place in a fictional rural resource extraction community in rural Missouri. In the story, terror is unleashed upon the teenagers of Kettle Springs, when a killer dressed as Frendo, the clown mascot of the recently defunct Baypen corn-syrup factory that was the town’s lifeblood, goes on a homicidal rampage to cull the rotten crop of kids and make Kettle Springs great again.

Clown in a Cornfield is straightforward slasher horror, featuring a human threat in the form of a killer in a clown suit. The book introduces us to an extraction community whose factory has burned to the ground. The ways that shapes the nostalgia and politics of the adults, particularly in relation to their own kids, is especially poignant.

Cesare brilliantly demonstrates how horror can offer a lens through which readers can think critically about the state of our world. Through the clever use of generational disparities, economic failures, and political ideologies, Cesare offers rural readers an opportunity to explore, consider, and confront how larger social forces have influenced and shaped the darker aspects and characteristics of rural living, as well as to think critically about how to prune those not-so-great community traits to continue to grow and progress.

In some aspects of the story, *Clown in a Cornfield* breaks down negative stereotypes about rural life. For example, one of the characters who fulfills most





Clown in a Cornfield by Adam Cesare is a great example of rural young adult horror.

Photo Courtesy of Harper Collins

of the rugged and survivalist (positive) stereotypes of rural men is gay, and in that juxtaposition he disrupts the notion that rural places are a heteronormative monolith.

However, the book also leans into some of the ugly stereotypes of rural places, especially those experienced by young folks pushed to the margins. It's as if the book is saying to these young

readers, "Hey, I see you. I see the kinds of threats, bigotry, and oppression you face where you are, and you are not alone."

The Margaret A. Edwards Award-winning author, A.S. King, recently told *School Library Journal* that, "I believe there's trauma in the soil of this country - from genocide, slavery, serial systems of oppression, serial exclusion and devaluation - and it's seeping into us, and into the children. I think we've walked with it through each generation who chose to lie about real history, and eventually we will have to face it."

This is one thing that YA horror does particularly well - to hold up a mirror to the ugliness within us and our society while simultaneously showing us that it's survivable and changeable.

Horror doesn't have to shy away from the darkness and threats in society. And because there is an abundance of horror fiction featuring rural people and places, YA horror offers a unique opportunity for teachers using critical rural pedagogical approaches to offer lifelines to rural students - especially those with marginalized identities.

Rob Costello (he/him) writes dark speculative and contemporary fiction with a queer bent for and about young people. Find out more at www.cloud-busterpress.com. *Photo provided*

Other Rural YA Horror/Dark Fantasy Recommendations

- *All These Bodies* by Kendare Blake
- *The Dead and the Dark* by Courtney Gould
- *This Poison Heart* and its sequel *This Wicked Fate* by Kalynn Bayron
- *To Break A Covenant* by Alison Ames
- *The River Has Teeth* and *Ghost Wood Song* by Erica Waters
- *The Violent Season* by Sara Walters
- *Sawkill Girls* by Claire Legrand
- *Lost in the Never Woods* by Aiden Thomas
- *Small Favors* by Erin A. Chang
- *The Coming Storm* by Regina M. Hansen



Resources for reading rural gems

Reading Guide Questions for Book Clubs and Classrooms

- What makes a place feel spooky?
- What about rurality specifically can feel spooky or scary? Are those things different for insiders and outsiders of rural communities?
- What feels spooky about nonrural areas? How are they similar to and different from rural places?
- How does the author capture those things?
- What specific parts of the book felt the most spooky or scary and why?
- What are the fears and societal issues the author is holding a mirror to? How does the spooky nature of the book help us think about those in new ways?



To learn more, visit literacyinplace.com

