

"Killing Monsters: What do our monster stories say about human nature?" with Rev. Sara Lewis

Story For All: "There's a Monster Under My Bed" by James Howe

Simon was lying in bed, thinking "There's a monster under my bed. I can hear him breathing. Listen. Yes, I told you, there's a monster under my bed."

Simon forgot to check under the bed tonight, and now it's too late. He's under there. Waiting. Maybe Simon should pull up the blanket and take a look? Forget it! The monster would grab him and pull him under the bed faster than he could call out for Dad or Mom.

What if Simon's foot slipped off the edge of the bed? The monster would bite it off, that's what. Simon thinks he'll lie right in the middle of the bed. And stay awake all night. Why did he tell mom he was too old for a night light! He can't see anything in here.

Oh no! Simon felt the mattress jump. Right under his leg, it went Pop! There is definitely a monster under the bed.

Or maybe there are two. Two hairy monsters playing hide and seek. No, monsters don't play games. They would be fighting under there. Wrestling. Or maybe fighting over who gets to eat Simon.

Or maybe there are three! Three slimy monsters sharpening their claws. Hear that? Simon thinks maybe he should run ... but no, they would grab him before he got to the door.

Or there could be four! Four fat monsters making a fire to fry Simon up. Oh, it's getting hot in here!

Or there might be five! Five drooly monsters crawling up the sides of the bed. Maybe Simon should scream, but uh oh, that's what his little brother Alex would do.

What if there are more? More and more monsters coming to get Simon? Make him into a midnight snack?

Simon started to say his goodbyes. Goodbye Mom. Goodbye Dad. Goodbye Grover Elementary. Goodbye Miss Oaks. Goodbye Grandpa. Goodbye ... wait a minute, what is that?

It's a flashlight. The flashlight mom had put on his bedside table and said "just in case". Just in case of what? Just in case of monsters?

Simon knew what to do now. He'd jump down and shine the flashlight in the monster's eyes, and it would scare them away. Ready? One, two, three

There IS a monster under the bed!

It's Simon's little brother Alex!

"What are you doing there?" Simon asks.

"Hiding" says Alex. "There's a monster under my bed. Hey, what are you doing with that flashlight?"

"Nothing" says Simon.

"Were you looking for monsters?" asks Alex.

"Don't be silly" says Simon. "There's no such thing as monsters. But hey, I've got an idea. Since you're scared, why don't you sleep here with me tonight? That way you won't be scared."

"Really?" says Alex.

So Alex and Simon got into Simon's bed. "Simon, I feel safe in here" said Alex. "you know why?"

"Why?" said Simon.

"Because you won't let the monsters get me." said Alex.

"Of course" said Simon. "What's a big brother for?"

Reading I: From *Women and Other Monsters* by Jess Zimmerman

"Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the humanities professor who literally wrote the book on "monster theory", outlines seven defining characteristics, or theses, of the monster. Some are pretty academic, but a few are immediately resonant: "the monster dwells at the gates of difference" and "the monster polices the borders of the possible." Monsters are signposts, in other words, to separate acceptable from unacceptable, what's

allowed from what is not. Their monstrosity is deviation blown up to exaggerated size, the mythic equivalent of “if you keep doing that your face will stick that way”.

Monsters exist in opposition to normality: exaggeratedly large or small, too many limbs or too few eyes, too complex or too rudimentary. Monstrosity is relative, born in the gulf between the expectation and the reality. Even Godzilla could live happily in a Godzilla-scale Tokyo.

Part I “The Monstrous”

I recently binge watched the excellent show “The Last of Us”, which is a sort of zombie story but with the zombie’s actually being infected by a fungus, the human equivalent of the poor ants that really do get infected and have their brains controlled by a fungus. The fungus human zombies are pretty scary, but in the end it’s actually the humans that are the real danger. Many of our modern monster stories are like this, exploring a fear and creating monsters to represent that fear, but also revealing our very real concerns about human nature.

We humans have probably been telling monster stories as long as we have been telling stories, and that’s been as long as there have been people. All cultures have some kind of monster story, and our imaginations continue to create new ones too.

Young children, just as Simon did in our story today, may fear the monster under the bed, the dark at night, the strange noise. Gerard Jones, in his book titled *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*, makes a convincing case for the way children choose stories that fulfill a need for them, often a need to feel powerful and to confront their fears boldly. In this view, the monster stories don’t create violence in the hearts and minds of supposedly innocent young humans, but rather the natural churning of complicated feelings of fear, power, helplessness, and anger that all humans have are what creates the monster stories and our fascination with them.

Our adult fears may be more sophisticated, but we also may imaginatively embody our fear of economic inequality and masses of disenfranchised and hungry people into a narrative of a zombie apocalypse and mindless invaders coming to eat our brains. We may take our fear of climate change or nuclear bombs and create giant monsters that rise up from the deep and smash cities. Turning the nebulous fear into something more concrete, something you can fight somehow, is an ancient human coping strategy.

Professor Leo Braudy, author of *Haunted: On Ghosts, Witches, Vampires, Zombies, and Other Monsters of the Natural and Supernatural Worlds*, , identifies four major

categories of monsters and what fears they represent: fear of nature, Fear of Science, Fear of our repressed selves, and Fear of death and change.

The fear of nature monsters are ancient. Leviathan and Behemoth, the two chaos monsters created by God in the Bible, were Nature Monsters. Monsters of flood, earthquake, storm, of forces outside of our control that seemed to randomly kill. Other ancient stories from around the world are also full of giants, fire spirits, and countless other monsters that embody large natural disasters. These stories try to help us process things far outside our human scale.

Fear of Science monsters populate our early science and horror fiction. The question of whether we humans might go too far in our pursuit of the power of technology and science brings us Frankenstein's monster and Jurassic Park. And, of course, the real monster in Frankenstein isn't the monster and the real monsters in Jurassic Park aren't the dinosaurs. These stories begin to wrestle with the question of human overstep, of human wrong.

The fear of our own repressed selves brings us Jekyll and Hyde and Werewolves. Could we be harboring a monster inside ourselves, something that might break out and cause us to transform into something awful and uncontrollable?

And finally, we fear death and change. So along come vampires, creatures that defy death and are immortal, at a horrible cost. Would you trade your humanity for eternal life in the dark? Would you never see the sun again in order to avoid that unknown crossing of death?

But Brandy's model leaves out another aspect of monster stories, which our first reading today points to. Monster stories also mark the boundaries of what we are saying is "acceptable" humanness. Like old maps that showed the known world and then just said "here there be dragons" on the unknown margins, monsters fill the edges of a rather narrow confines of what can be acceptable humanity.

And so we turn people into monsters, even if just metaphorically. Jess Zimmerman, in her wonderful book *Women and Other Monsters*, explores a slew of monsters from classical mythology that represent forbidden ways to be a woman: ugly, hungry, angry, sexual, powerful ... basically anything not in direct service to pleasing men. All of these monsters, such as Medusa and the Furies, well they tend to get slain by valiant male heroes. So here the monster story comes as a cautionary tale. Keep to your place, be a good woman, don't overstep into monstrosity lest you be destroyed.

And women are far from the only marginalized group to get the monster treatment. We have racist monster creations: King Kong climbing the building with a blonde white woman clutched in his hand. We have ableist monsters: the "stupid" troll that can be

tricked, the “deformed” hunchback. We have turned transgender people, disabled people, really anyone deemed outside the margins of that acceptable “map” of humanness, into monsters. These monsters don’t help us process natural fears of what is outside of our control. These monsters stand as warnings and narrow the possibility of what we can be as full humans in all our variety and uniqueness.

Reading II: Excerpt from “Humanizing Monsters”, an article published in *Civil American* (2017), by Casey Dorman.

In understanding those we regard as doing evil things, especially on a large and systematic scale (e.g. neo-Nazis, KKK, al Qaeda, ISIS, American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, racist policemen perhaps), labeling them as inherently “evil,” as “monsters,” or as “animals,” not only discourages our understanding of how they can do what they do, but it encourages us to *disengage our own moral standards when dealing with them*.

The danger in not recognizing that most of those who do evil are very much like us, rather than inherently evil misfits, is that it does not prepare us with ways to combat the conditions and methods that lead people to behave in evil ways. This is something that Muslim communities must face as they worry about their young people becoming radicalized and White American communities must face when they worry about their young people becoming followers of White Supremacists.

We appear to have an aversion to recognizing our own vulnerability to engaging in morally repugnant behavior. Although in every [psychology experiment on humans doing evil] ... there were some “heroes” who did not succumb to the psychological techniques and retained their moral compasses, such heroes were a tiny percentage (less than 10%) of participants; yet nearly 100% of people, when told about the experiments, predicted that they would be immune to the psychological methods. We are not good judges of ourselves. ... We view ourselves as possessing more “human essence” than others.

Part II: “The Human”

In 2019 a gunman massacred 22 people inside a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, deliberately targeting Latinx and Hispanic victims. Afterward, then-President Trump declared that mass killers are “mentally ill monsters”. Trump is far from the only leader to declare that people who commit mass shootings are “monsters”. It is a common, and convenient, explanation.

We often label people who do something truly awful as “monsters”, setting them apart from normal humans. People who commit murder, rape, child abuse, war crimes, torture – these are awful things and we humans like to think they are not human behaviors but rather monstrous ones.

Making people into monsters is one form of Dehumanization. Other forms of dehumanization may sound like calling people animals or germs or such, a technique that encourages “us” (humans) to see “them” (the no longer fully and essentially human) as something separate from us that we do not owe humane and right relationship to.

Psychologist Albert Bandura described dehumanization as one form of Moral Disengagement. Moral Disengagement allows us to treat other humans in ways that we would find morally incompatible if we thought of those humans as being just like us.

Certainly we can think of extreme examples of dehumanization such as genocides and slavery. Dehumanization has led to awful things – we might even say to Monstrous things. And here is the crazy catch of it all – it’s tempting to dehumanize the people who dehumanize. To say that Nazis and enslavers were monsters. That their actions were not human.

We are all capable of moral disengagement, and we’ve all most likely engaged in dehumanization too. Dehumanization helps us turn away from all the overwhelming harms of this world. Dehumanization helps us explain away actions that are deeply troubling. I know I sometimes do it, even when I am aware and trying to avoid it.

And then there is yet another problem that comes from placing a dividing line between the human and the monstrous – we may find ourselves struggling to address the harms done by anyone we know, relate to, and feel is human like us. This can look like saying that rapists are monsters, and then not being able to address the ways that sexual and domestic violence is often perpetrated by those nearest to us rather than by strangers and monsters from without. Or placing a line for accountability so far into “monstrous” behavior territory that we ignore all the smaller harms that we still label as “human”.

In a piece for Ms Magazine in 2020, comedian Amber Rollo wrote this:

I’m sure you’ve heard it in your industry as well. “Harvey Weinstein is a monster,” these folks told us, whereas “those are just men who have made mistakes.” Weinstein became an almost fictional villain to them, a caricature of a Bad Guy. It was safe to say nobody we knew was quite as bad as that, at least the people we know are human.

Harvey Weinstein, accused of committing more than 80 rapes and sexual assaults and convicted on many of these charges, is in my opinion an awful man. And he is human. And the scale of his misdeeds should not be the line in the sand for accountability,

either. All harms, whether they are “just a joke” or an unwanted hand on the back, still need to be addressed as we work to create a society free from sexual violence or harassment.

Or let’s return to the example of the mass shooter. Thinking of people who commit mass shootings as monsters or as “insane” is a common explanation for how they could do what they do. But studies of mass shooters have found that only about 20-25% of them have any diagnosable mental illness. The rest are just in the grip of strong emotion and lacking positive coping skills and possessing easy access to weapons and violence.

Psychiatrist Dr Richard Friedman wrote this for the New York Times: Still, the clear implication of these findings is that people in the grip of ordinary emotion are capable of carrying out heinous acts of violence; you don’t need to have a mental illness to be a “monster.”

So what do we need to do? We need to recognize the full complexity of our humanity. We need to recognize the possible monster within each of us, in that we are all capable of doing harm. And we need to counter dehumanization with love, empathy, and compassion.

This has been a call of faith for ages, a form of the golden rule found in almost all faiths – do unto others as you would have done to you. Do unto others, ALL others, as though they are human just like you.

We need reform in our criminal injustice system. We need to remember what attorney and author Bryan Stephenson says, that no one is defined by the worse thing they’ve done in their life.

We need reform in our immigration system, in our economic systems, in our health systems. We need better access to mental health resources. There is A LOT of big work to be done at a systemic level.

And there is even more work to be done in every individual heart. We need to recognize that it isn’t all about “them” out there, the people who we think are different than us. It’s about All of us, and how we are all capable of doing harm. We overestimate our own essential goodness, and fail to equip ourselves with sufficient skills for actually doing good. We need more social emotional learning in our schools. We all need more emotional literacy. We need to work to heal trauma. We need to learn communication and emotional resiliency skills. We need to learn to hold our fears, our anger, all the uncomfortable but totally normal feelings, in healthy ways.

We need to bring the monsters out of the shadows, recognize them as being part of us, and then do the work to be in right relationship.

Reflection question(s):

1. What monsters have captured your imagination, and what fears or fantasies might they represent?
2. How do you understand the human capacity for “evil”?
3. How should we respond to humans who do harm?