

Final Project | Editorial Plan

by Hannah Packard

You Belong in the Grave

BY LOGAN SPURGEON

Genre

Fiction; Southern Gothic Horror

Southern Gothic LGBTQ+ Literary Religious Horror

Target Audience

Adults 20s–50s, particularly women and LGBTQ+ readers, who are fans of horror, Southern gothic, queer, and dark fiction, and who are survivors of religious trauma and abuse or are allies of survivors—especially those who enjoy the work of authors like Shirley Jackson, Flannery O’Connor, Julia Armfield, T. Kingfisher, or Grady Hendrix.



Market Trends

AND POTENTIAL MARKET GAPS

Diverse Representation

Diverse and LGBTQ+ representation and narratives continue to grow in popularity and sales. *You Belong in the Grave* centers around the experiences of coming out and a family's acceptance—or total denial—of their son and brother's sexuality. Its religious setting also represents the subset of LGBTQ+ individuals who grew up in a Christian environment and/or experienced religious trauma due to their sexuality.

Niche Emerging Subgenres & Blended Genres

In 2025, publishing experts predict that the industry will continue to see titles that blend and bend genre. Additionally, niche subgenres continue to be on the rise. Spurgeon's *You Belong in the Grave* falls within niche subgenres, like Southern gothic queer fiction or religious horror, and also blends across genre by merging horror elements with a literary character-driven narrative and beautiful, purple prose.

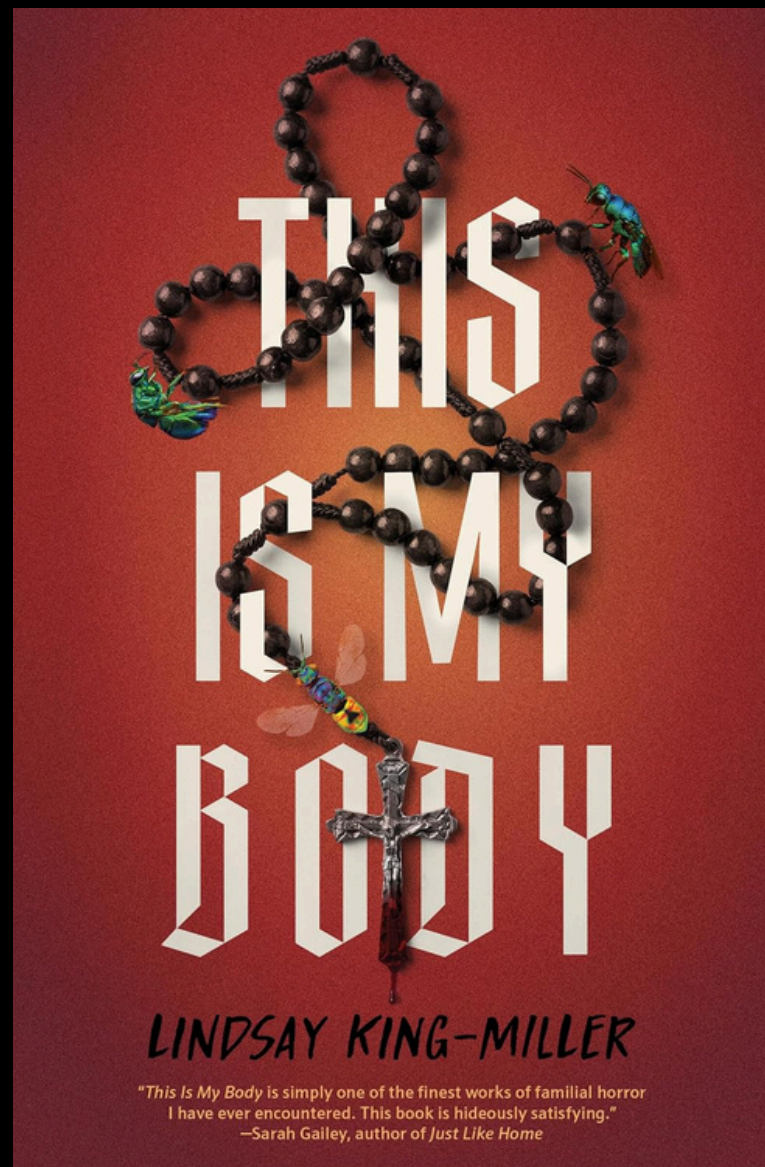
Diversity

While diversity in this genre, and in publishing in general is on the rise, there is still room to grow in author representation. From some perspectives, horror is one of the genres that still has the most catching up to do in terms of representation.

Horror with a Perspective

It's possible that books in this genre that lean into contemporarily relevant political and cultural themes would be a welcome addition. For instance, *You Belong in the Grave* touches on fundamental/evangelical Christianity—a group that has recently heard a few leaders say that empathy is a sin. Spurgeon's book shows, through the horror medium, the ultimate result of where this kind of thinking could lead.

Comparable Titles



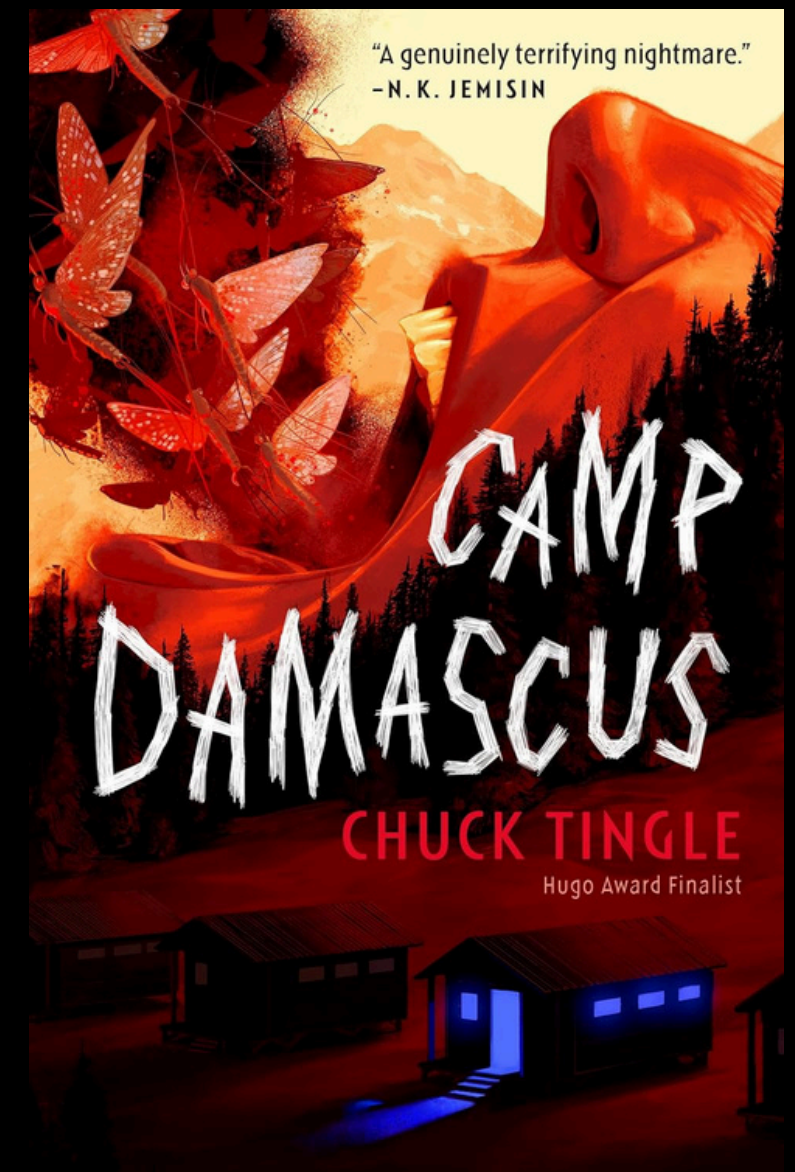
August 2025 | Quirk Books



September 2021 | Tor Books



January 2025 | Berkley



July 2023 | Tor Nightfire

Editorial Assessment

SUMMARY

You Belong in the Grave is a horror novel about Graham Easton, a young man who has found happiness with his partner, Nat. But when Graham's uncle Asher dies and he returns home for the funeral, Graham must face his mother, Miranda—whom he hasn't seen since he came out three years ago. Miranda Easton, a woman deeply entrenched in her fundamentalist Christian faith, is in a fragile mental state, fixated on the moral righteousness of her family and terrified of the ghost that has begun to haunt her. In the weekend spent together after the funeral, the Eastons are plagued by a ghost, divided by belief, and haunted by a rage that might burn away everything they hold dear.

STRENGTHS

This novel has a lot of strengths. First, let's start with the basics—the ***title and opening paragraph*** are both excellent, immediately drawing the reader into the story. Second, you have a real talent for ***beautiful descriptions and purple prose***. It's lovely and satisfying to read! You had several lines throughout that stopped me in my tracks in the best way. Third, the ***pacing*** of the plot is great. There were never any parts that dragged, nor did I think any sections needed a lot of expanding (although I do want more of a couple things—I'll talk about that in the next section). Fourth, your ***characters are well-developed***. The details that you included about their personalities—especially Saul, Graham, and Clara—made them feel distinct, grounded, and real, like they're people I know. I especially loved Saul's habit of asking too many questions. Great job!

I want to emphasize that *You Belong in the Grave* is in great shape. All these pieces I've mentioned above are major, and

Editorial Assessment

STRENGTHS (continued)

you've done them well. There are some areas for improvement, but they are just spots in need of some tailoring—no major rewrites. So take a deep breath and pat yourself on the back! This is going to be a great novel.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

First, the manuscript will need a couple of rounds of edits—a developmental and line edit focusing on the elements I've listed below, and a thorough copyedit. Second is something that I know you already know—the **placement of your descriptive writing** needs some tweaking in certain spots. By that I mean that you should view your purple prose like seasoning. It has a vital place in the meal, but it's not the bulk of what makes up the dish. It should be measured and well-placed to make the greatest impact. This can be worked on during the editing process. Third, there are a few **plot and POV consistency** issues that will need to be fixed.

Fourth, **Graham's motivations**—why did he go home to stay with his family after the funeral? As the plot progressed and I realized that Miranda had tried to kill him three years before, I was even more confused about why he went there in the first place. He had absolutely no reason to put himself in that situation. This dovetails with the fifth thing—**Miranda's descent into madness** is a bit less impactful than it could be because she starts out very close to level 10. So she doesn't have much of an arc throughout, because she's been insane the whole time. To work on both of these elements, you could possibly include one or two moments of her not being purely cold, but glad to see him—something that would make it seem like maybe their relationship could be repaired, and that could be what motivates Graham to go home. This also gives you opportunity to

Editorial Assessment

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT (continued)

focus on her descent into madness in the latter half of the book, even revealing crucial scenes like when she trashes Graham's room or takes way too many sleeping pills (I want to know how many).

I will give a caveat before listing the final element—I have a hard time with unlikable characters in books. So the sixth thing is that I found *the repeated conversations between Graham and Miranda, Pastor Wilkes, or Saul* pretty difficult to read. As I've thought about it, I think the main difficulty is that the conversations he has with them are all the same and quite circular. Because of this, you get a similar problem as with Miranda, that there isn't room for any arc or change. I think a possible solution would be to add some variation to their characters' beliefs. For example, Saul's wife could be an interesting addition to add some conflict to his story. Perhaps he could call her after Graham comes out to him, and she could disagree with his perspective, which could shake his devotion to his mother earlier in the story. Or, you could add some variation to Graham's side, giving him more to say than just "there isn't anything wrong with me." While true, it eventually feels like a weak response.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Thank you for letting me read *You Belong in the Grave*! I loved it, and I know that with just a bit of polishing, this novel will really shine. Great work!

Example Edits

15: THE WARNINGS

Dreams, when they find a way into your mind, can be a gift. Precious and in vivid color, they are welcomed to abide with the host of heaven for the night. The two are lovers, in a sense, and only from dusk to dawn for the night. But nightmares are fiendish thieves. They are not invited; they sneak in through locked doors and concealed cracks. They leaping over walls in the moonlight and tunneling under every precaution. Nightmares rob the innocent of choice and joy. No one desires to partake in hellish visions; the watcher is merely a victim.

Graham was a victim tonight that night. As he drifted into sleep, a hazy dream world began to emerge from the blank space. He found himself on his back looking up at the stars in a clear sky. They were speckles in the firmament, each one shining in brilliance like deities in their own right. Graham was enamored by with their staggering glow.

Suddenly, the stars were not locked in their celestial positions. They moved freely in abnormal flight patterns. The stars fluttered and fell towards the earth like a gentle snow. They flew around like fireflies. Indeed indeed, the gods had become mere bugs in the shade of his dream. Graham sat up as the starlight fireflies swarmed around him. They picked him up, each bug lifting until he was standing.

Graham was in a field or a yard. He couldn't quite tell, as the grass had died long ago. He it was in a graey wasteland in the moonlight. As the fireflies dispersed, a pathway appeared. He began to walk. The ground felt jagged and hard under his bare feet, but there was a friendly connection to the earth—they had each other when no one else was around. He briefly thought that he could be happy here.

Then he came upon a pit, a hole in the ground dug in front of an ancient oak tree. The tree's thick branches, without leaves, sprawled in the air without leaves. It seemed as old as the world. Graham wondered what it had seen and heard, the secret meetings and lies it was told by passersbys. He wanted to climb the tree, but when he moved forward, he almost fell into the hole in front of him.

When the edges of the grass ended, Graham could see roots winding in and out of the brown, grainy soil. The pit was about six feet deep by Graham's estimation. It's a grave, he thought. Like a spotlight, the moonbeams bent to reveal a coffin at the bottom of the grave. The long rectangular tomb casket was made of the same oak as the tree. He convinced himself that the coffin had grown from the roots; it was part of the family tree. It's lid was open, and it was empty.

A shadow crossed before him, obscuring the moonlight. The figure was standing parallel to him where a headstone should have been. At the front of the grave stood his uncle Asher with a rope around his neck. The noose was knotted tight, rope extended upwards, and wrapped around a branch of the tree. Asher's feet weren't touching the ground.

"No, don't do it!" Graham cried. He tried to reach for his uncle, but he found his hands and feet bound by rope.

"There is no pit too deep that Jesus cannot reach," Asher prayed.

The noose tightened around his neck, and he ascended higher in the air. Uncle Asher was suspended between branch and box, like a marionette manipulated by a cruel entertainer. He struggled against the rope, clawing at it, trying to rip apart fiber and thread. His legs flailed about in a desperate search for a stable foundation.

Graham traced the thick rope from his uncle's neck, up around the tree, and down to its end, which was hidden in a shadow. But there was one odd detail that Graham noticed—two hands were gripping the end of the rope.

"Let him go!" Graham said, but the ropes around his own body tightened.

"Help me! She's killing me!" Asher yelled, but each word came out as a huff, barely utterable, as his skin changed from its normal color to purple and then to graey.

Commented [HP1]: I wasn't 100% sure what you meant by this, so I attempted a tweak for clarity, but adjust how you see fit!

Commented [HP2]: I replaced this to avoid the repetition of "for the night".

Commented [HP3]: I've combined a few sentences throughout! Alternating between short and longer sentences can help keep a nice rhythm. It also helps when you have several sentences in a row starting with the same word.

Commented [HP4]: Something that I thought as I read through the novel is that it might benefit from a different format for thoughts to make it feel more personal (and since your POV is 3rd person omniscient anyway). You already do this in some places! So what if you formatted this as:

I could be happy here, Graham thought.

Asher suddenly dropped into the grave; his body lay limp in the casket like a rag doll on a wooden altar. The rope that once upheld him looked like a snake coiled on top of him. From the curtain of night under the tree emerged a woman wrapped in a tattered dress. Graham saw the silver cross that adorned her chest, the same dark green eyes and facial features as his own.

"Woe to you who follows in the footsteps of the deceived!" Miranda said.

Graham's body went into flight turned to run, but the ropes restricted his movement. He managed to loosen them and turn around, but when he did, Miranda was before him. Her face was similar to looked like Asher's—, graey and aged as if she had died years ago. Her skin was drab and scarred, her hair fried, and her eyes barren. His mother grabbed him by the neck and squeezed; her razor-sharp nails tore-tearing his flesh. Graham mimicked his uncle's attempt to be free.

The very cells in Graham's body began to die. He was withering away like a fresh flower in the midday sun. His throat was bruised, and his vocal cords were probably-broken shredded. He shrunk into himself; again, if that was even possible. He was small and the world he saw around him was becoming smaller too. All was lost.

"This is for your uncle," Miranda said as she lifted her son up and threw him into the pit.

Instead of hitting his uncle's body in the coffin, Graham landed with a splash and began to sink beneath icy water. He wanted to inhale, but he knew there was no air below. His body bent in deprivation. He swam up to the water's ceiling and breached the water's surface, breaking a thin sheet of ice in a chaotic pattern. He was frozen to the core, no heat or warmth or light. The sun had been stolen from the sky.

Graham looked around and noticed that the water wasn't clear, it was uncomfortably muddied even with the ice covering the water like glass. He saw the a shore in the distance and began to paddle swim towards it, one arm after the other. The ice cracked in front of before him as he swam. He emerged on the shore, not aware of how he actually made it there, and was surrounded by the woods. He knew them; they were the ones behind his childhood home. A wind from the north made him shiver. The cold inside him was unbearable, but that's all that he was now—nothing but outer darkness and the bitter, barren, frost. He tried to warm his hands by blowing on them, but it wasn't enough. He began to walk along the shore, hoping to find a nearby trail.

Before he could locate the path that would lead back to his house, he heard a sound coming from the woods. It was soft but erratic; a spasm of noise echoing from tree to tree. Graham thought it might have been the sound of snow being pressed firmly into the earth. It was suppressed, but he thought it sounded like the tread of footsteps.

Graham scanned the edge of the forest; the trees stood like slats on the landscape. They chopped the scene into pieces, making it hard to see what was coming his way. He looked and listened, but couldn't make out anything in the dark. The sound sprang up again, closer than before. He felt the hairs on his arm stand up in protest to his frozen position. He wanted to run back to the house, jump in his bed, and be wrapped in the warmth he desperately desired. What if she's there? He wondered. He couldn't go back home; his legs were concrete, cemented to the forest floor beneath his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, Graham saw a shadow move. He chalked it up to paranoia. It was most likely an animal—deer and foxes lived under the canopy of trees, maybe one was coming to drink. But whatever it was, it was running sprinted towards him. He jerked his head to keep up with the creature in his line of sight. Despite his vantage point, he felt like he was being hunted.

"Woe to you whose sins are not washed by water!" Miranda's voice reverberated.

The figure encircled him, a fleeting and flitting shade that darted darting in the midst of amid the trees. He knew it was his mother. He stepped stepping back, his legs finally unfrozen, and Graham slowly retreated onto the edge of the ice. It was solid there, but it wouldn't hold the further he went out.

Commented [HP5]: Because this is a dream sequence, I don't know if continuity is that important, but he was tied up, where did the ropes go?

Commented [HP6]: This word choice gave me pause—but I'm not sure what would be a good alternative. "Disturbingly"? But I'm not sure what's uncomfortable and disturbing about muddy water.

Commented [HP7]: Deleting because he swam there, which was just described.

Commented [HP8]: Deleting because it's a bit redundant and it felt like it interrupted the flow.

Example Edits

He took another step back. Shattered fractals ~~appeared as the ice~~ gave way and his ankle dipped beneath the water. ~~Stupid. h~~He thought ~~as he blamed himself for this. This~~it was all his fault.

Graham looked ~~down~~ at his leg and then ~~sought up~~ to find where his mother was. She was right in front of him, dripping wet and covered in frost. Miranda's lips were cracked and her teeth chattered, her eyelids ~~held lined with~~ icicles. She reached out and ~~pushed shoved~~ her son backwards. She had given him life once, and now she was trying to take it away.

"This is for you."

The force against ~~his Graham's~~ chest sent shockwaves through his torso and limbs. The wind left ~~the chambers of~~ his lungs and froze on its way out, making a dense cloud. The world was in slow motion as ~~Graham he~~ fell onto the ~~frozen~~ surface of the lake. Shards of ice crashed around him until he could no longer see.

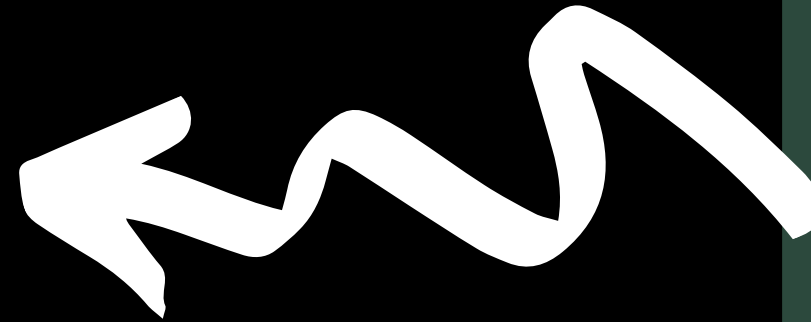
Graham wanted to ~~reply retaliate~~, but the forest was replaced by the ~~brink of the water~~. He reached ~~out~~ his hand and touched what remained of the surface, attempting to pull himself out, but Miranda would never allow that. She ~~pinned placed~~ her hands on his head and shoved him down. He tried to fight, but he could hardly move as the chill drained him. His strength was gone. In a last effort, he latched on to his mother's forearms. He tried to gain control, to wrestle his monstrous mother ~~into~~ submission. ~~But h~~He failed to get ~~even~~ the smallest revenge in such an unfair fight.

He sank further and further into the abyss. He was dying for air, ~~the~~ bubbles no longer ~~escapinged~~ his mouth because there was nothing left ~~in his lungs~~. He could not resist the natural functions his body relied on for life. ~~So, against his own wisdom, —so~~ he took a breath. A rush of water invaded ~~himis nostrils~~ like a foreign body not meant to inhabit his blood. The ice-cold water ~~ironically~~ burned his insides. ~~and h~~His vision became blurry in a haze of pain, water, and ~~sky — all unclear, mud~~. ~~The last of h~~His limbs tingled ~~and stung~~ as ~~the what~~ little life inside of him left out of his fingertips and toes.

Commented [HP9]: It felt like the word here needed to be stronger, so here's a suggestion!

Commented [HP10]: I'm not sure what you mean by this...maybe replace with something like "the swirling water"?

Commented [HP11]: I replaced this because if he sank further into the abyss, he probably wouldn't be able to see the sky.



See the attached document for a closer look.

Cover Design

STYLE & TARGET AUDIENCE APPEAL

VISUAL STYLE

For *You Belong in the Grave*, I would love to see the cover explore a fresh, modernized take on the covers you would commonly find on pulp gothic novels—the iconic image of a woman running away from a dark and haunted-looking house. While this style was popularized by gothic romance novels, the iconic imagery translates well to gothic horror. For example, the cover shown here of Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s novel, *Mexican Gothic*, is a wonderful modern interpretation of the style. It would be interesting to see this older style blended with modern textures and fonts.

TARGET AUDIENCE APPEAL

A call back to this popular cover style would not only indicate the plot of this book well—which includes a haunted house that the protagonist really should run away from—but I also think it would appeal to the target audience.



“YOU WILL REMEMBER HIGH PLACE, THOUGH HOPEFULLY NOT IN YOUR DREAMS.” —NPR

“A seductive and subversive tale.” —Vanity Fair

“Fabulous, freaky, one-of-a-kind.” —Los Angeles Times

“Deliciously creepy.” —Vox

“A new classic of the genre.” —Chicago Review of Books

“Gripping, dark and captivating.” —Remezcla

“One of the genre’s most exciting talents.” —Nerdist

“Part du Maurier, part del Toro.” —Slate

“As rich in suspense as it is in lush ’50s atmosphere.” —Entertainment Weekly

“Beautifully disturbing.” —Tor.com

“Engrossing and wonderfully repulsive.” —BuzzFeed

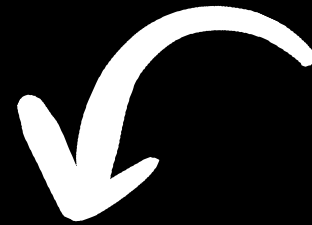
MEXICAN GOTHIC

Directed by
SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA

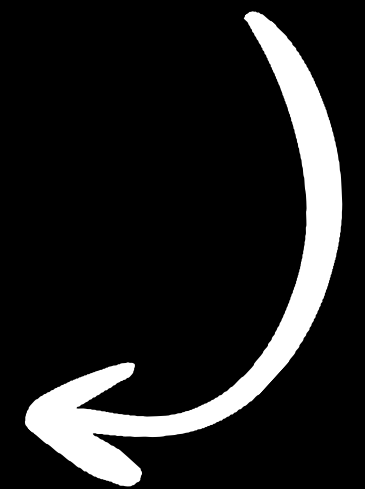
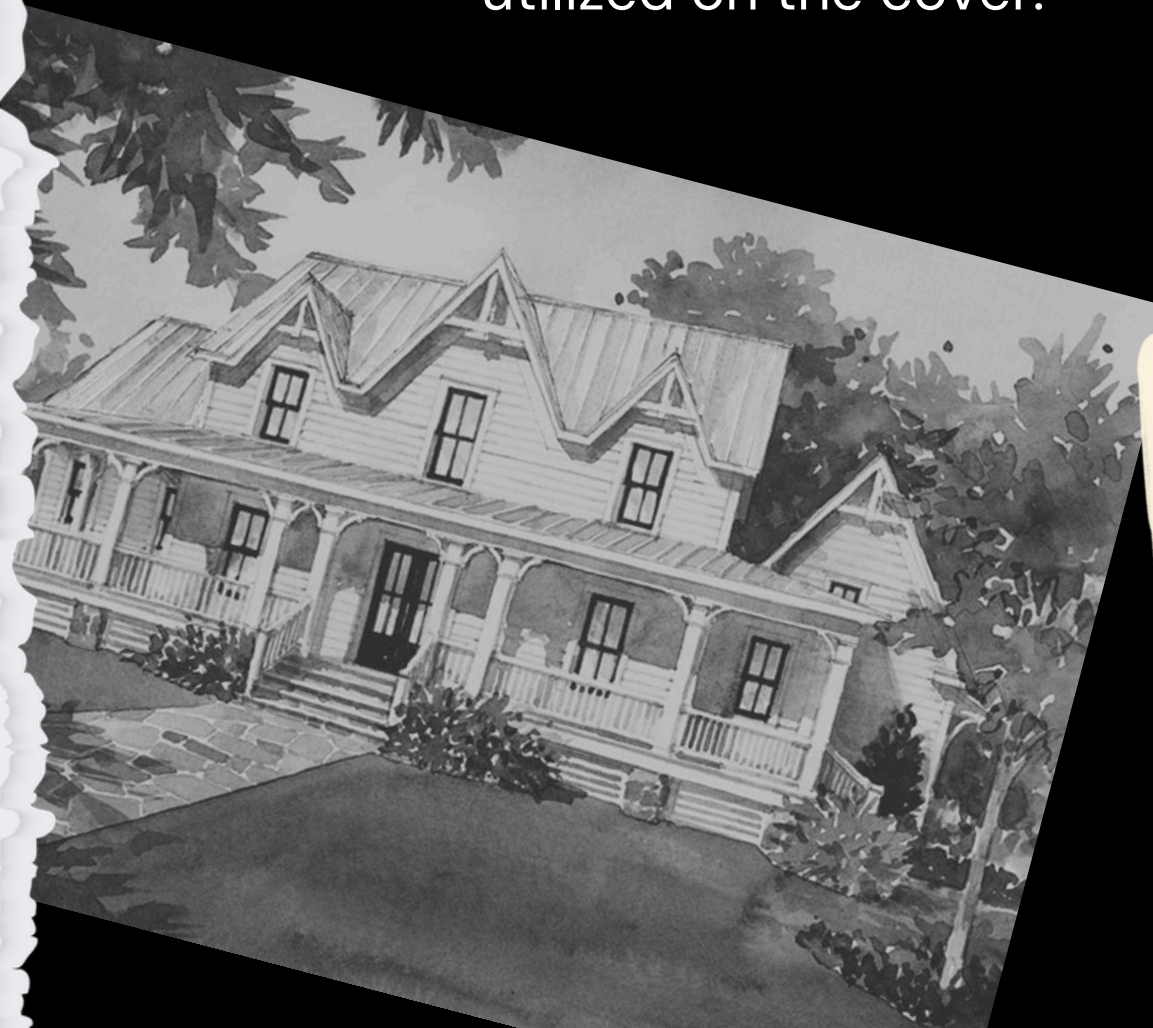
A DEL REY PRODUCTION

Cover Design

INSPIRATION

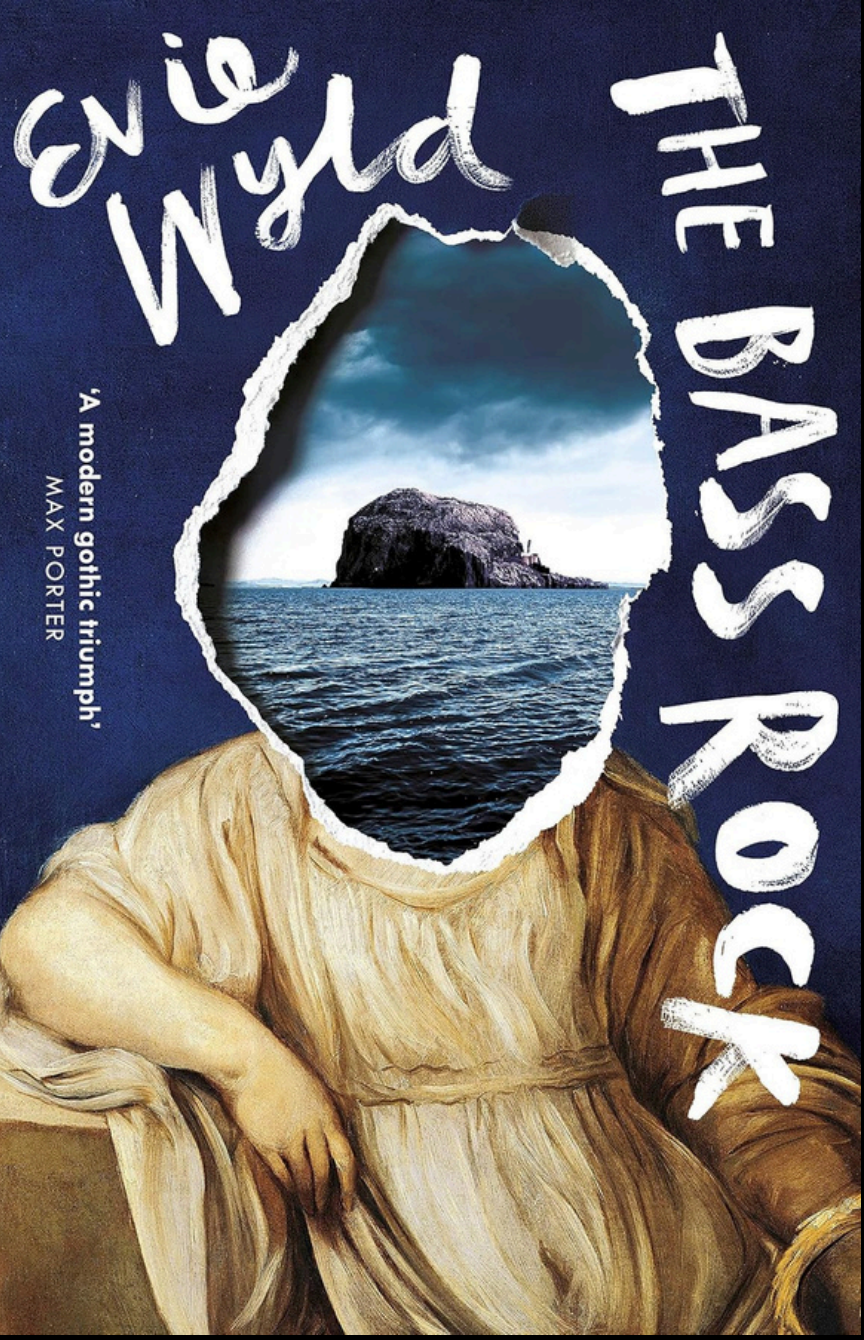
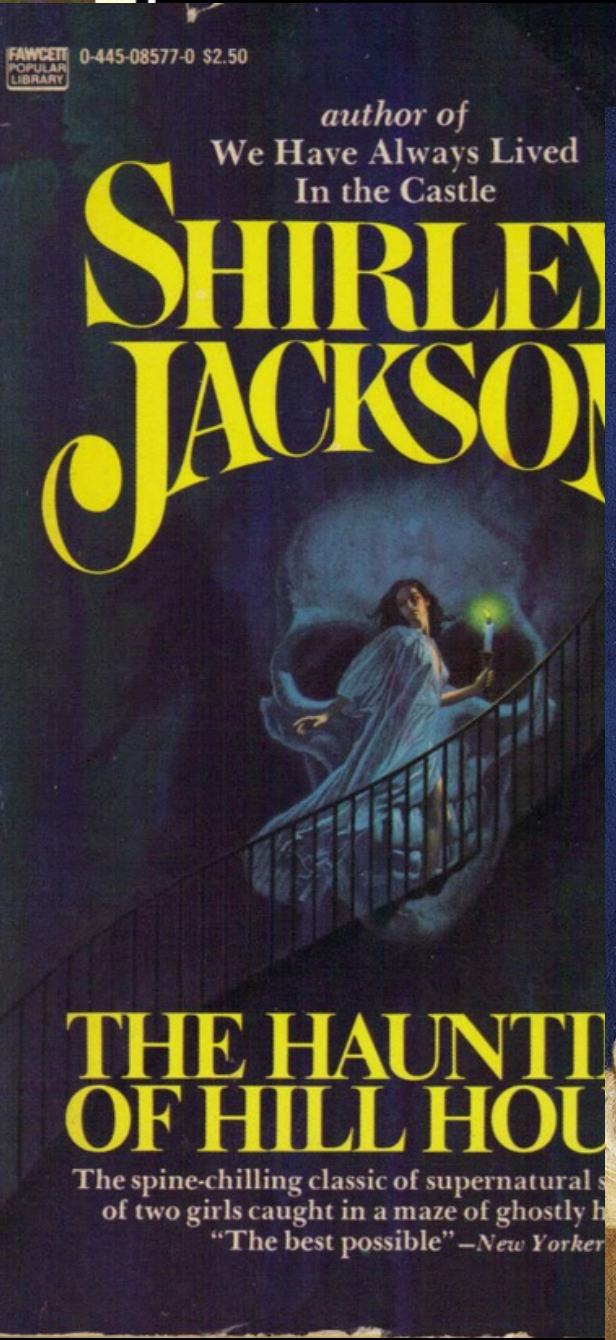
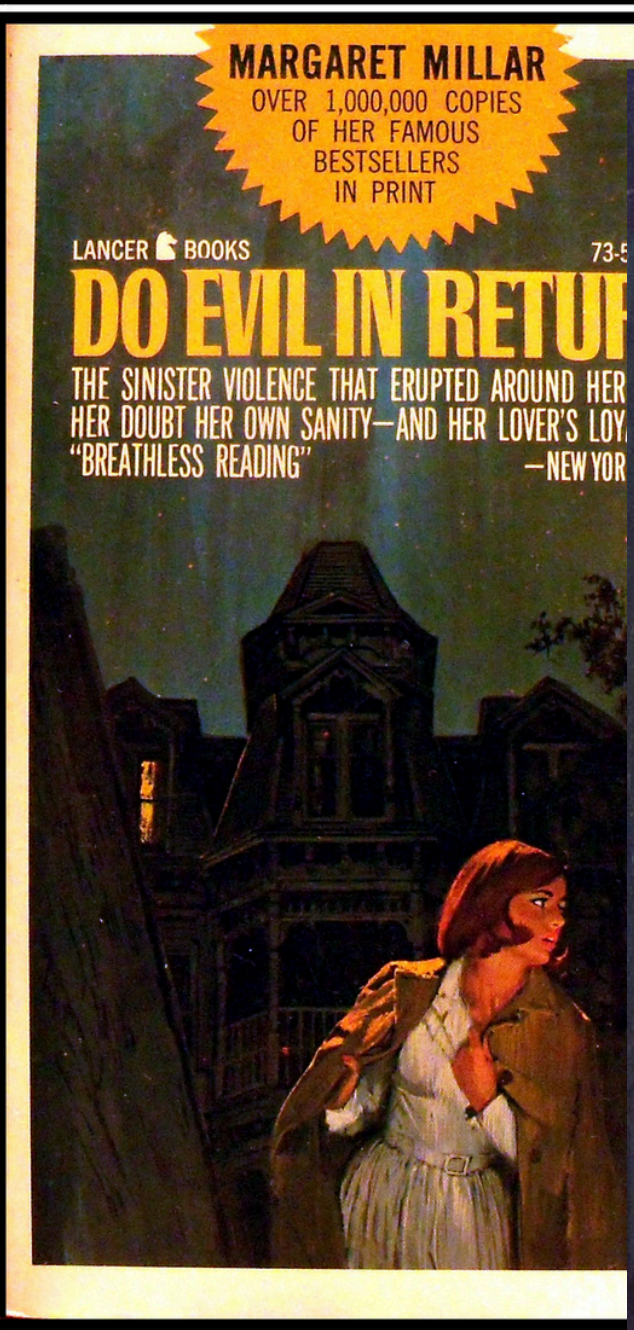


The image to the left shows an example of the pulp gothic cover motif, with the twist of having a man on the cover rather than a woman. The image below is an example of what the house on the cover could look like. However, unlike these examples, I would love to see a brighter, richer color palette utilized on the cover.



Cover Design

INSPIRATION



Thank you!