

BOOKS

By Steve Gravestock

They Came from Within: A History of Canadian Horror Cinema by Caelum Vatnsdal, Arbeiter Ring Publishing, Winnipeg, 2004. 256 pages. \$28.95.

Caelum Vatnsdal's eminently readable and highly entertaining *They Came from Within: A History of Canadian Horror Cinema* offers up a fairly exhaustive account of Canadian efforts in the horror film genre, stretching from a 1913 13-minute silent film called *The Werewolf* to recent additions such as *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* and *Ginger Snaps*.

The book isn't exactly a dry, purely factual history, which you'd hardly expect, or even want, given the subject. The tone is largely anecdotal. As Vatnsdal admits from the outset, there is a history of horror film in Canada but it's a checked one, with failures far outweighing successes; and the stories about the making of the films sometimes boast more entertainment value than the films themselves. Fortunately, Vatnsdal manfully resists the temptations to turn the book into a camp laugh-fest or over praise the obscurities he lovingly describes. (Although some may wonder about comparing the director of *Spasms*, William Fruet, to Ernest Hemingway; and I don't recall anyone referring to *Pin* as "a towering achievement.") Even when the films are weak or seriously flawed, which he readily admits, he treats them with a modicum of seriousness, although he does toss in his share of jokey asides and a few goofy, often charming suggestions on how certain films might have been improved. Pleasantly, this is a non-auteurist book, with Vatnsdal describing how horror filmmakers were typically hamstrung by the lack of proper special effects and experienced makeup people until the 1980s.

They Came from Within essentially consists of short discussions about the films, with significantly more space devoted to works Vatnsdal

considers crucial either for historical or aesthetic reasons, such as Julian Roffman's *The Mask*, Gilbert W. Taylor's *Dr. Frankenstein on Campus* (a.k.a. *Flick*), Bob Clark's *Black Christmas*, Ivan Reitman's *Cannibal Girls*, Peter Medak's *The Changeling*, Peter Carter's *Rituals*, George Mihalka's *My Bloody Valentine*, the four entries in the *Prom Night* series, Sandor Stern's *Pin* and most—though not all—of the early Cronenberg oeuvre. He also tosses in a mix of lost films and oddities such as Oliver Stone's *Seizure*; Lawrence Zazelenchuk's Sudbury-shot zombie movie, *The Corpse Eaters*; Jack Bravman's *Zombie Nightmare* and its two follow-ups, *Rock 'n' Roll Nightmare* and *Black Roses*; and Bob Clark's first horror effort, *The Night Walk*.

As Vatnsdal paints it, the history of Canadian horror is, for the most part, a history of amateurs taking risks, with a cornucopia of recalcitrant crews, shady producers horning their way into undeserved director's credits, inexperienced producers and financiers failing to read the fine print (that in some cases included the script) and wound up with art films instead of blood and gore, and equally inexperienced directors who thought the producers would understand that's what they were up to. There were neophyte filmmakers who were ripped-off by Hollywood

studios and suffered from pervasive critical neglect or usually blatant contempt, indifference and often outright hostility from the public and government funding bodies (no doubt one of the major reasons why the woefully underfunded shoots were often unprofessional), greed and stupidity. Significantly, this state of affairs wasn't confined to the tax-shelter years, but also included the video boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period Vatnsdal considers even more pathetic and far less charming.

Vatnsdal repeatedly rails against the cultural conservatism of the Canadian film industry and Canadian film criticism in general. For him, there is nothing particularly un-Canadian—or especially American—about horror films. In fact, Vatnsdal is pretty adept at tweaking our often pompous assumptions about the United States and our belief that we are a kinder, gentler version. Interestingly, he argues that the realist and documentary instincts that many of the earlier horror filmmakers, like Roffman, brought with them following their stints at the NFB were, to some degree, beneficial. These rather telling criticisms about our own cultural presumptions, the wealth of arcane detail, and Vatnsdal's obvious love for the subject make *They Came from Within* compulsively readable.

