Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Saints and Shape-Shifters

Nicole D. Sconiers · Thursday, September 21st, 2023

This is the story of two gatherings of Black women. We meet at night on Zoom. Come as you are. Sometimes we come exhausted or exuberant. Wearing bonnets, headwraps or hair freshly braided. Both gatherings are sacred spaces. In one, we cast out darkness. In the other, we celebrate it.

The first meeting is a prayer call, a virtual laying on of hands. The second is a meetup of Black women horror writers. Although I treasure both communities, I feel like a shape-shifter at times, gathering flecks of divinity and swaths of the macabre to transform into an entity that is both fierce and non-threatening.

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I wasn't raised in church. Although my brother and I had to don our Sunday best every weekend we visited my devout grandmother, my mom never forced religion on us. I didn't have to say nightly prayers. I didn't own a children's Bible. My first sacred text was *Whispers* by Dean Koontz. I was nine. My mother left the novel lying on our coffee table and I picked it up, intrigued by the cover artwork of an upright bloody knife behind a dove paperweight. As I curled up in the corner, flipping through pages, I felt a kinship with the darkness. I rooted for the monster.

At times, I feel like that unsuspecting dove. I protect myself by keeping my identities separate. Christian in Christian settings. Horror writer in horror spaces. Spiritual codeswitching. But sometimes I slip up and my true vernacular emerges. Like when I'm chatting with my bubbly new Christian friend, and I tell her I'm a writer.

"What do you write?" she asks.

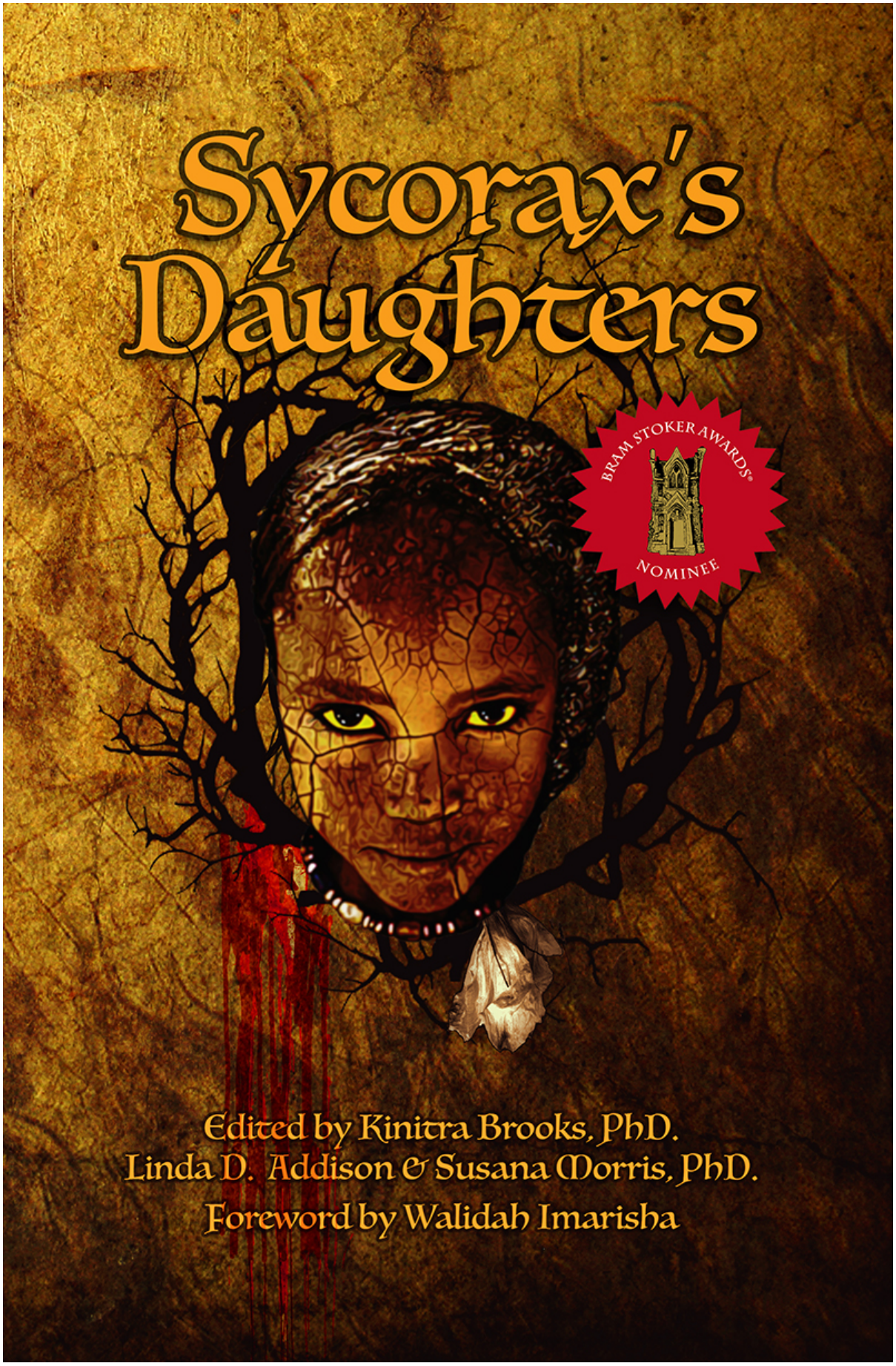
Instead of replying, "Short stories," as I typically do in mixed company, I say, "Horror." Her effervescence dissipates. Then she says, "Oh, okay," and changes the subject.

Lori Titus, a former Catholic school girl, can relate to feeling misunderstood and judged. She writes dark fiction, particularly horror and the paranormal, and is the author of *The Bell House*, *Hunting in Closed Spaces* and *Blood Relations*. I grew acquainted with her work years ago when we contributed to the Black woman's horror anthology *Sycorax's Daughters*.

"I was once part of a circle of women who shared prayer. I was told how fear is 'not of God,' and apparently, I was doing the devil's work," says Lori, whose early influences include Edgar Allan Poe, Shirley Jackson, and C.S. Lewis.

Sadly, those women in the prayer circle couldn’t overcome their preconceived notions of horror, or they’d realize Christian themes are interwoven in Lori’s work. Her novels, particularly the Marradith Ryder series, examine generational curses, salvation and rebirth.

“Despite some people not approving of my choice to write horror, faith has always been a driving force in my work,” she says. “As women of faith, our biggest thing is just to untie ourselves from other people’s expectations and let our imaginations take these stories wherever they need to go.”



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Sometimes my faith complements my secular writing. Before I write a story, I often pray that my

characters will speak to me, a form of sanctified conjuring. I'll listen to piano worship music as I'm plotting how my Black heroines will navigate their respective hellscapes. I know the stories I've written about hair-eating demons, time-traveling culture vultures, and porn-addicted women haunted by digital fantasies come to life were Spirit inspired.

C. Y. Marshall believes being a horror writer is a gift from God. She runs the group Angels of Darkness on Facebook, a community of Black women horror writers, and is the author of eight horror novels, among them the *Lady Ice* series and *Blood Rites: Rise of the Beast*. C.Y. grew up Methodist and was active in church as an usher and choir member. Like me, she felt drawn to spooky tales at a young age, devouring ghost stories and books on the paranormal.

"I was asked why I chose to write about a female serial killer for my *Lady Ice* series. There weren't many stories, or any I could recall, about a Black female serial killer, and I wanted to write about one," she says. "I never feel shame or apologetic for what I love to write."

C.Y. laments that folks are more concerned with imaginary monsters than with the real demons in their midst.

"When I tell people I love horror, whether it's watching it or writing it, I get comments like, 'How can you watch that stuff? Doesn't it mess with your spirit?" she says. "Hunger, racism, police brutality, and an incompetent educational system, where many of our children graduate below grade level, messes with my spirit. Many people choose not to understand that we live horror every day and the boogeyman is not hiding in the closet. He is in plain sight."

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"We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world."
— Ephesians 6:12

Black women are considered the backbone of the Black church. Not only do we have a complicated relationship with a patriarchal institution that often subjugates us, we are further stigmatized when we write about the undead, witchcraft, vampires and other "demonic" topics.

As C.Y. notes, there are real-life monsters all around us. I often feel powerless when I witness aggressive antiblackness in the form of book bans, whitewashing African-American history, and when I see gerrymandering, and the dismantling of affirmative action. When billionaires and presidential hopefuls are on some ol' anti-woke bullshit to crush the souls of Black and other marginalized folks with politically sanctioned hatred and emotional and spiritual violence, how do you combat such evil without feeling hopeless? Horror gives me a voice to challenge injustice and advocate for the disenfranchised, two tenets at the heart of Christianity.

It's alarming to see Black Christians aligning themselves with the dark side by peddling this bigotry. They believe they're trying to set others free but they're ensnaring them. Not long ago, I was at home watching a livestream of a sermon and it turned into a war on wokeness. The guest pastor's message was uplifting but dry, so I reached for my phone to scroll Instagram. My ears perked up when this Black man announced to his largely Black congregation, "I don't believe in systemic racism." He knew institutional racism was a false god because he once visited the posh home of a wealthy Black man who owned several luxury cars.

I quickly ended the livestream. Furious and disheartened. Systemic racism doesn't exist because some Black people are rich property owners? Bruce's Beach would like a word. For every wealthy Black homeowner the pastor knows, there are millions of African-Americans still impacted by the legacy of redlining[1] or who have had their property snatched through eminent domain, which disproportionately impacts poor people of color[2]. For every rich Black person he encounters, there are hundreds of college-educated Black women listening to his sermon who earn less than white men without degrees[3], Black women who are supporting his church through tithes and offerings on paychecks impacted by the wage gap.

I know this one well-meaning but misguided Black man of the cloth isn't responsible for upholding interlocking systems of oppression, but he and many other Black Christians are unknowingly being a mouthpiece for the rulers of darkness the Bible warns us about.

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I want to write fun horror stories that aren't about struggle. It's such a burden to always be viewed as a mobile lighthouse, to feel like your mission is to mule for your faith or your art.

Carole McDonnell, another sister contributor to *Sycorax's Daughters*, knows the struggle of feeling compelled to pen uncomfortable truths. She writes Christian, supernatural, and ethnic stories and contributed to the anthology *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonialism in Science Fiction*, edited by Nalo Hopkinson.

"Usually, I write about disabilities and racial issues, especially in my fantasies. In *The Constant Tower*, my fantasy novel, I write about imperialism. Same for *Wind Follower*," says Carole, the granddaughter of a Methodist minister. "I don't like building a reservoir of fear in people, but I do like kicking their sacred goats and making folks feel unsettled."

Carole shares her challenges with both the Christian and secular publishing worlds and the response to her story "Listen Listen Listen," about a boy who loses his eyesight but can see the world through the senses and vibrations that nearby objects emit.

"It doesn't preach about Black oppression, which is what secular and white editors want. But neither is it blatantly preacherly, which is what Christian editors and readers want," she says. "To be oneself in a world where labels are important is difficult for a Black person who simply wants to be human."

I feel her on that. The need to just be. Not always on brand. Quirky. Womanist. Jesus lover. Horror writer. Woke. Identities that are always swirling and clashing. Shape-shifting.

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I'm at Readercon on a panel about COVID's effects on literary tone. At first, panelists are informed we have to mask up, but later we're allowed to remove our masks. It seems fitting now.

The moderator asks how we coped during the early days of lockdown. I don't hesitate. I share with this gathering of mostly white, progressive horror, sci-fi and spec fiction writers how my best friend from childhood started a weekly prayer call for Black women during the pandemic so we wouldn't feel isolated. It feels good not having to code-switch, to be able to bring my whole self

into a room and not shrink from any part of my identity so others won't feel threatened or offended. Celebrating both the darkness and the light.

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