

# The New York Times

# Book Review

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## Scary on the Outside



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Wendell Mayo's beguiling **B. HORROR: And Other Stories** (Livingston, paper, \$11) contains, as the title suggests, narratives that are often loosely based on the plots and themes of cheap horror films. "Mary Magdalena Versus Godzilla" tracks a man's lifelong attempts to entertain (and later, in a way, to save) his sister through his obsession with Godzilla; "B. Horror" contrasts the terror a young actor tries to evoke in his stage performances, in which he re-enacts scenes from B movies, with the terror he sees in reality; and "Robert's Bride" is "Bride of Frankenstein" retold with depth and sophistication, cataloging a man's confused attraction to his friend's inscrutable fiancée. But Mayo, in his third book, demonstrates that "horror" can mean something as simple as fear and apprehension, and in patient, sharp prose, he pushes his characters into small psychic duels, where people come close to understanding each other but can't — or won't — get there. The results can be as funny as "Going Long," where a man's obsession with football makes him blind to his estrangement from his wife, or in "Who Made You," where a couple's arguments over a refrigerator, Greenpeace and the Baltimore Catechism make the distance between them all too clear. Mayo can also be a surprisingly poignant writer; "Woman Without Arms" is a painterly meditation on a lover's body, prosthetic limbs and all, that raises questions about the nature of physical attraction. There's no need for standard B movie tropes — Roger Corman's buckets of blood, Ed Wood's bad lighting — to shock the reader here. In Mayo's world, each character already wears a cheap, unconvincing mask; that these disguises hew so close to reality is terrifying enough.

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