

## ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

Maynard Sims

[www.maynard-sims.com](http://www.maynard-sims.com)

### IT'S THAT OLD 'BIG BROTHER' THEME AGAIN

It should be no surprise to fans of horror and sf that TV's Big Brother has become such a phenomena.

Take a handful of disparate types, enclose them in a house, shut them off from the outside world, give them an incentive to stay in the house, and gradually pick them off, one at a time. And all the while their every move is watched.

That is the general idea behind the TV show, and behind some of the scariest books and films ever produced. No wonder the nation's hooked.

The scenario has been proven to work over and over again. One of the best examples of this type of story is Richard Matheson's Hell House.

Published in 1971 (the same year as William Peter Blatty's The Exorcist) Hell House gives us another take on the same idea as Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House twelve years previously.

A group of experts in psychic phenomena shut themselves up at the old and very haunted Belasco mansion in Maine; the 'Mount Everest of haunted houses.' There is a financial incentive for them to stay there. Publishing magnate Deutsch is old and close to death and wants to take away the uncertainty of that certain fate. The experts can expect to receive one hundred thousand dollars apiece if they can either prove or disprove the theory of life after death.

Our group of housemates consists of Lionel Barrett, a physicist, and a non-believer in the afterlife, Florence Tanner, a mental medium, who wants to use the money to build a Spiritualist church, and Benjamin Fischer Franklin, a physical medium, in fact one of the best physical mediums of his or any other generation. Franklin is the only sane survivor of an attempt to investigate the house thirty years previously. The fourth member of the group is Edith, Barrett's much younger wife, and probably the most vulnerable of the quartet.

The pace of the book is fast. No sooner do the group arrive than the ghostly happenings begin, and from then on the reader is taken on a roller coaster ride of manifestations and psychic shenanigans that made the readers of 1971 sit up and take notice.

What separated Matheson's book from Rosemary's Baby and others of the period was the graphic use of sex as a weapon used against the group.

It's hard to believe now what an impact such scenes of necrophilia and graphic seduction had at the time, but one reviewer was prompted to write that Matheson had written 'a dirty book'.

What Matheson was actually doing was to use this 'closed environment' narrative device to give himself and the reader the opportunity to study their characters in depth without outside distractions.

The most revealing case study in Hell House is the relationship of Barrett and his much younger wife. Crippled by polio and feigning impotence, Barrett cannot cope when the house gets to work on Edith, turning her from a placid repressed little wife, to a man-hungry vamp who forces herself on her husband in a graphic scene set in a steam room, and then tries to seduce Fischer.

When dealing with an isolated group such as this the interplay between them all is put under a microscope. The reader/viewer becomes Big Brother, watching this group of people ripping each other apart. It is in fact the human condition in microcosm. Often in this type of story, the cruelty and pain inflicted on certain characters by their colleagues is more horrific than any malign outside force; and sometimes, because of the insularity of the situation, there is much more opportunity for soul searching. We find characters torn apart by their personal demons, as they struggle to cope with the intense introspection.

Florence examines and tries to come to terms with the death of her brother, transferring her guilt and the love for her brother to Daniel, the 'son' of Emeric Belasco. Fischer remains for most of the book shut off from the malign influences as he tries to convince himself he's only there for the money.

The overall feeling of the book is claustrophobic, haunting and truly scary. Compared to what the occupants of Hell House have to endure, Nasty Nick and his colleagues had it fairly cushy. The nastiest manifestations to plague the Big Brother housemates were two unpleasantly large spiders, and even these met a rapid end.

Whereas the film of *The Exorcist* added to the reputation of the book, lifting it completely out of genre and into the mainstream, the film of *Hell House* had precisely the reverse effect.

Saddled with the lumbering title, *The Legend of Hell House*, and hopelessly miscast, the film misses on so many levels that for those of us who went to see it on its release, it came as a huge disappointment. The fact that Matheson wrote the script only compounded the disappointment. One can only assume that he handed in the script and then had nothing more to do with the film, because the sure touch he demonstrated with the book is sadly missing here.

Pamela Franklin, beautiful and talented as she was – and a wonderful 'screamer' – (in fact few people have screamed as well on film either before or since, with perhaps the exception of Fay Wray!), was far too young to play the middle-aged ex-actress Florence Tanner. The key to Tanner's character was that, considering her age (43) and previous life style she is incredibly naive and gullible when confronted by the house. Her conviction she is right about Belasco's son being the major haunting influence, and the way she sets about proving it works wonderfully in the book. But because of Franklin's youth the same character in the film comes across as slightly dense and faintly arrogant.

Clive Revill sleepwalks through his part as Lionel Barrett. The New Zealand actor, so good in a number of films, seems slightly embarrassed about having the beautiful Gayle Hunnicut play his wife. And so he should be! The character of Edith Barrett in the book is petite, boyish, sexually repressed, and when she tries to seduce Benjamin Franklin Fischer, the reader is embarrassed for her, and for Fischer. The same scene played in the film with Hunnicut vamping it up leaves one with impression that she could have Roddy McDowell's Fischer for dinner, and take on the rest of the cast and crew for desert.

Only McDowell shines. In what is considered to be one of the highlights of his long career, he *is* Ben Fischer. He inhabits the character so well, and brings the book's hero to life so successfully, one can only regret that the finished film wasn't worthy of his talents.

But the most awful piece of casting, and without doubt the major flaw of the entire film, was that of Michael Gough as the corpse of Emeric Belasco.

In the book Belasco is describe as frightening of visage, '*the face of a demon who has taken on a human aspect.*' The urbane Gough is as about as frightening as Charlie Drake (diminutive British comedian, popular at the time). The casting – obviously intended as an in-joke by director John Hough, falls flat and only serves to destroy any tension and drama that has been built up before it. Which is a shame, because up until that point, despite the casting, the film had been quite effective.

So without the blockbuster film to swell its fortunes *Hell House* quickly joined the ranks of 'just another horror book', to the point that when Bantam reprinted in 1973 they repackaged it as 'A novel of demonic possession' and saddled it with a cover of a young girl in a floaty dress/nightdress carrying a candlestick, obviously hoping to cash in on the success of Blatty's book.

Which is a shame, because with *Hell House*, Richard Matheson, along with Blatty and before them Ira Levin, can take credit in taking the supernatural novel to new heights and paving the way for the Kings and Koontzes who were to follow.