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# SCREAM

CHILLING ADVENTURES  
*in the* SCIENCE *of* FEAR



MARGEE KERR

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**S C R E A M**



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*Dedicated to the Simmonses and the entire ScareHouse cast  
and crew. Thank you for the support and for the scares.*



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*Terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close.*

—*Edmund Burke*





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## LIST OF THRILLS AND CHILLS

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### NOTABLE HAUNTED PLACES

- Moundsville State Penitentiary, Moundsville, West Virginia
- Huns Allegheany Lunatic Asylum, Weston, West Virginia
- Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia
- Peabody Reef Light House, Bridgeport, Connecticut
- Hill View Manor, New Castle, Pennsylvania
- Hotel De Saito, Tequendama Falls, Colombia
- Cathedral de Sal de Zipaquirá, Zipaquirá, Colombia
- Guatavita Lagoon, Colombia
- La Candelaria, Bogotá, Colombia
- Central Bogotá Cemetery, Bogotá, Colombia
- Aokigahara Forest, Mount Fuji, Japan

### NOTABLE HAUNTED HOUSES AND SCARY ENTERTAINMENT

- State House, Pittsburgh
- Terror Behind the Walls, Philadelphia
- Factory of Terror, Canton, Ohio
- Ghostly Manor, Sandusky, Ohio
- Hamlet Hospital, Fuji-Q Highland, Japan
- Ultimate Fort, Fuji-Q Highland, Japan
- Daiba School Horror, Tokyo
- Ghost Bar, Tokyo

- Lock Up, Tokyo
- Castillo Del Terror, Bogotá, Colombia

#### **NOTABLE THRILL RIDES AND ACTIVITIES**

- Skydiving, Grove City, Pennsylvania
- CN Tower EdgeWalk, Toronto
- Fuji-Q Highland: Takabisha, Dodonpa, Eejanaika
- Cedar Point: Millennium Force, Corkscrew, GateKeeper, Gemini, Blue Streak, Raptor
- Universal Studios: Hollywood Riptide Rocket, The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman, Simpsons Ride, Transformers 3D, Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts
- Six Flags New Jersey: Batman, Green Lantern, Kingda Ka, Nitro, Superman, Slingshot

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## PREFACE



Room of Doors at ScareHouse in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy ScareHouse. Copyright Rebecca Scorsone.

It's about nine on a Friday night in mid-October. It's cold, but it's still the refreshing cold of autumn, not yet chilly enough to see your own breath. After surveying the line of people wrapped around the building for the length of about two city blocks, I start walking back up the hill to the main entrance of ScareHouse, a haunted attraction (or "haunt") in Pittsburgh.

As I walk, a customer shouts at me: “Hey! Hey! How scary is it?” I shout back, “Did you bring a change of pants?” and keep on walking. I give a passing nod to one of our security guards as I go through the front doors and weave my way around customers toward the heavy black curtains at the back of the lobby. As soon as I pass the curtains, the temperature increases by what seems like 20 degrees. I can feel a growing sense of anticipation as I make my way back to the Barn through the secret actor hallway that stretches down the middle of the haunt. On my left the growls and snarls coming from a zombie apocalypse grow louder and then fade as I pass. I smile as I hear a loud “splat” followed by high-pitched screams as one of our actors, a particularly energetic zombie, throws himself against a Plexiglas pane just inches away from a customer’s face (he’ll do this at least once a minute for the next five hours). On my right I hear the gargling, incomprehensible ranting of a deranged priest as I pass by the Chapel.

I finally get to the last stretch of the back hallway, and already I can feel the vibrations from the sliding and banging of the Serial Killer door. I say “door,” but it’s actually a wall of the room attached on a slider with a metal plate on the end that amplifies the sound. I hear “WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY ROOM?” followed by several different voices screaming and shouting, “Oh my God,” and other expletives. Though I can’t see our serial killer yet, I know what he is doing: holding up his butcher knife, bare chest puffed out, stepping just far enough into the space to intimidate but not impede the customers as they go running forward. The serial killer pulls back and slams the door closed. Just as the customers catch their breath and start to collect themselves, the serial killer’s “victim” character appears and begs for their help. Confused, startled, scared to death, they continue to run forward, into the Barn. The entrance is quiet, eerie, and filled with stuffed animals (not the fluffy kind), and just around the corner wait a butcher, a scarecrow, a chainsaw, and well, someone we just call Hayloft. This stretch of the haunt—from the Basement to the Barn—is one of my favorite places in the world.

I give a high five to the serial killer and ask how the scares are tonight. With a big smile he responds, “Awesome.” The crew

in this stretch of rooms has worked together for over three years. The energy and intensity they build are nothing short of magical. I sneak into a drop panel (a window cut into a wall with a heavy door that you can drop open and pop through) right next to the sliding door and peer through a penny-sized hole in the wall, and I watch. These peepholes pepper the entire haunt and are built for actors and security guards watching for cues, customer flow, and, of course, troublemakers. For sociological observation, not so much.

The first time I did this I felt creepy, and if I'm honest, it still feels creepy. Peering through a hole in the wall is hardly a socially sanctioned and acceptable thing to do. To say it's taboo is an understatement. I spent over six years working in research with oversight of the institutional review board (IRB) at a local university, which set strict parameters on human subject research. The IRB is pretty serious about informed consent, especially when dealing with sensitive situations. And while all customers are repeatedly warned and notified they will be on camera once entering the haunt, this kind of voyeurism still feels unfair, dangerous, and yes, powerful. Making it feel even more awkward, I'm watching people in a moment of pure terror and vulnerability. I see the expressions on their faces, I hear their screams, and occasionally I see the tears in their eyes. They run, trip over each other, and instinctively push back, forward, any direction that is away from the serial killer and his knife. I've seen men push their girlfriends out of the way as they try to move and others drop to their knees and scream for God.

There is usually a minute or so break in between groups. It's a quiet and surreal minute. The screams from the previous group now entering the Barn can be heard as they are introduced to our scarecrow. I crouch there, peering through the hole, and catch sight of the first person in the next group. She's young, probably mid-twenties, and looking around at everything. There is a lot to hold her attention. The room is scattered with photos on the wall, a sink filled with blood and guts, a 3-D projection of maggots crawling over garbage. She scans the floor, the corners, trying to see ahead, completely unsuspecting that at any moment the entire wall to her left will slam open. I feel anxious, even though



I've watched this many times. The anticipation builds, and I feel my heart start beating faster. I wonder *when*—when is he going to slide the door? I watch as the customer moves slowly forward, her attention distracted by a mirror placed right in front of her on an opposing wall, the wall I'm hiding behind. For a moment I think she can see me, but I know it's impossible. Just as she realizes it's her own reflection in the mirror, the door slams open, and the serial killer delivers his scare. The young woman, along with the rest of her group, screams as they stumble forward and to the right. I turn to watch them round the corner and see their screams have turned to hysterical laughter right before reverting back to screams as the killer's victim delivers *his* scare. As the group moves into the Barn, I congratulate the actors on their highly successful one-two setup. They smile and laugh and reset their positions at their own peepholes, waiting for their cue.

Again in this moment of quiet I find myself in awe. Something amazing is happening in this space. Each time I walk away I feel as if I've witnessed humans at their most basic and primal state. It's a privilege. How often in life do we actually see each other stripped of pretense and social scripts? So I continue to crouch, staring through a peephole, watching customers scream in terror, actors poised on their toes watching and lying in wait to jump out and go "boo," and I wonder how we got to this point and why all these people are standing in line for two hours to pay money for the chance to scream.

• • •

I've been a fan of haunted houses since my first trip at age six through a tiny, shabby, thrown-together haunt with toilet paper mummies and black plastic bats on a gymnasium stage. Not only were they in line with my general interest in scary stories and fascination with the macabre, but Halloween was the best holiday, in my opinion, because it was all about friends, monsters, and candy, rather than family and responsibility. I found the excitement and anticipation of haunted houses exhilarating, realizing pretty early in life that I was a thrill seeker. Of course I didn't use

that language or know what a thrill seeker was, or an adrenaline junky, or a daredevil, or the academic concepts for these terms: sensation seeking, novelty seeking, benign masochism, hedonic reversals. I didn't know what stress sensitive versus stress resilient meant; I just knew I really enjoyed things like haunted houses, scary movies, riding my horse bareback with abandon across fields, roller-skating fast, and going on the steepest roller coasters. I never really stopped to think about why I enjoyed it. I just figured it was fun and funny and an all-around good time.

My thrill seeking led me to ScareHouse, a nationally recognized haunted attraction in Pittsburgh. ScareHouse was the scariest haunt I'd ever been through (and I've been through a lot). In the midst of one particularly scary moment there, I actually ran into a wall and hurt my shoulder; it was sore for weeks. It was also the weirdest haunt I'd seen: there was no Freddy or Jason or Leatherface, and it wasn't all gore and blood and guts, like so many popular haunts these days. Instead it had rooms where you wore 3-D glasses and everything was painted in neon colors, and there were strange and unusual original characters. The mood was unsettling and uncanny. After going through the haunt I felt energized but also relaxed and even calm. I decided I wanted to be there as much as possible, which was crazy because I was in the middle of writing my dissertation, and I had a full-time job with the Veterans Administration working in the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion.

After finishing my first tour of ScareHouse, I found one of the owners, Scott Simmons, and I told him I would do whatever they needed to be part of their team. An actor, still covered in blood, had been stalking us. He asked in jest, "What can a sociologist do for a haunted house?" "I can analyze data!" I replied. So that's what I did.

My dissertation advisor gave me the side eye upon learning my plans to work at ScareHouse, but I didn't care. Every year, on their customer survey, ScareHouse asked, "What do you find scary?" What an opportunity! This data, though not exhaustive or controlled enough to be published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, was a rare glimpse behind the curtain, into fear as

it looks in the real world. Since 2008 I have had the pleasure of reading people’s reports of what they fear, and it is not only entertaining but enlightening.

As I continued to study fear in my work both at the University of Pittsburgh and at ScareHouse, I found I had questions that weren’t being answered with theory and stacks of lab research. Everything I read focused on the negative side of fear. Scholars show how panic, anxiety, worry, and fear have taken hold of the American psyche and become the driving emotions behind a majority of our actions and decisions, to our great detriment. Numerous authors dissect and condemn the rampant “fear profiteering” in contemporary American society, arguing (correctly) that fear is used to sell products and shape political debates. Viewer-hungry news outlets manipulate our fear response and our brain’s inability to distinguish “real” threats from the abstract and anomalous terrors across the globe that appear within seconds on our smart phones and TVs. We live in an objectively safer world than ever before, but we’re bombarded with fear-triggering messages and worried about issues that likely won’t affect us and are far from our control. We are arguably consumed with fear.

And yet lots of people enjoy fear. They *love* screaming their heads off, and they proudly post pictures of their wet pants on Twitter and Facebook. They exit haunted houses smiling, laughing, hugging, and giving each other high fives.

My observations at ScareHouse (not to mention the commercial success of scary material from TV to video games) were not matching up to the literature. There were questions that needed to be answered. Some of them were fun: Why do some people like haunted houses and others don’t? What’s the difference between physical thrills like roller coasters and psychological chills like being alone in the dark? But some were serious: What can we learn from scaring ourselves? How do biology and culture influence what we’re afraid of and how we engage with scary and thrilling material? And why, in a world where people perceive themselves to be in ever-greater danger, are we seeking out even more fear—in record numbers? I discovered a story about fear that needed to be investigated, experienced, and shared.

So I went about trying to do just that. And it wasn't going to happen in a lab.

• • •

For the past two years I've been all over the world trying to understand fear from inside out. I've been to the world's scariest haunted houses and on its steepest roller coasters. I've dangled, suspended by a cable, from one of the tallest human-made structures in the world. I've jumped out of a plane and spent the night at an abandoned prison—twice. I've been handcuffed and forced to crawl through a tunnel in the pitch dark—and yet I was more terrified by something that happened to me in broad daylight. I've cried a few times, including once by myself in the middle of a forest in Japan and once in a crowd in Colombia. I've spoken to a long list of experts and scientists studying all things thrilling, scary, and haunting. These experiences have changed my life for the better.

This book is the result of what I learned. These are my adventures in fear.



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PART I  
PHYSICAL THRILLS

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*The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine.*

*Mary Shelley; Frankenstein*



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## THE STOMACH DROP

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Sunset at Fuji Q Highland, Japan. Photo by the author.

There's nothing quite like gazing up through a roller coaster's vast web of iron and steel.

My first ride was at age eleven on the Comet, Hershey Park's oldest roller coaster, where I couldn't stop tying and retying my ponytail because I was convinced my Rapunzel-like hair, which at the time extended below my waist and almost down to my knees, would get caught in the tracks. (In hindsight, this concern still seems reasonable.) There had been many more rides since



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