



Ancient Images

Ramsey Campbell

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A colleague's violent death and its apparent cause - a stolen copy of an old, never-released Karloff/Lugosi film - set film editor Sandy Allan on the trail of the film's origins and history. Mystery surrounds the movie, and as Sandy learns of the tragedies which haunted its production, she finds herself threatened by an ancient force protecting secrets deeper than the suppression of a 50-year-old movie.

Ancient Images Details

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Bandit says

I wanted a change of pace from blood guts and gore of last week's Deathbringer, so I picked up Ancient Images, which has sat on my TBR list for a long long time. This is only my second book by Campbell, first one was Overnight, which has left me interested in the writer, but not overall impressed by the book. Ancient Images "wowed" me. I could barely put it down, the San Francisco Chronicle claims on the book cover that it's to be read in one sitting, took me 4 days on and off(life kept getting in the way), but what a great book. There is just something so right with the way this guy writes, the way he brings on the dread, the suspense, the unease without having to resort to gore and guts on every other page, not that I don't appreciate a gorefest now and then. The story is ingenious, a movie buff's dream, a film editor's in pursuit of a missing pre-war (WW2) horror film starring Lugosi and Karloff. The film's existence has been in question for 50 years and seems like someone or something will stop at nothing to keep it hidden...or maybe it's all a bunch of spooky coincidences and overactive imaginations. Campbell's done great things with this plot. It is set in the late 80s, so no cell phones or internet, which actually adds to the suspense and occasional isolation the main character deals with as she struggles to find the film. It's also occasionally extremely British, where politeness and propriety can be a tad maddening at times. Keeping that in mind, this is a great book, intelligent, well written and really scary. The cover, however cheesy, is actually plot relevant. I can't wait to read more of Ramsey Campbell's work and I highly recommend this book.

Nick says

I meant to read more Ramsey Campbell this summer, but "Ancient Images" is the only one I got read. Still, having never read it before, it was a wonderfully concise and suspenseful.

The search for a lost film of Karloff and Lugosi drives the action, and most of the first half of the book is centered on just this. When the second half of the story takes us to the secluded village where our heroine (a film editor with a mission) becomes the object of inquiry from the spooky villagers, the story becomes a sort of updated "Shadow over Innsmouth" or "Wicker Man."

But when the lost film emerges and the ties in to the spooky goings-on, the reader leaves the book with a genuinely satisfying mystification. It's a truly original take on old formulas.

Stewart Sternberg says

There is so much wrong with this novel. Sorry, Ramsey. This is a heavy handed work. Mr. Campbell beats the reader over the head with obvious and predictable foreshadowing. He also does little to develop character and the presence of a group of religious stalwarts provides little thematic support other than to provide fodder for the monsters.

I was reminded of The King In Yellow with the idea that the film at the center of the story is a one which has led to disaster for everyone who has had contact with it. However, that idea never received the proper treatment, and instead the story grinds into a boring mess.

Addy says

This was an ok read. Reminded me so much of Night of the Claw with the "creature" following said character, however, Night of the Claw was so much more enjoyable, so I'm writing this one off as one of his lesser books. The ending made no sense to me and I felt like a lot more should have been explained. But, maybe that was his intention. 3 stars for me.

Karl says

This U.K. hardcover book is published by Legend in 1989 and is signed by Ramsey Campbell on title page. The book was reprinted in 1990 with new cover art.

There's some ingenious plotting to go along with some crude moral posturing: Sandy's best pal, Graham, has finally dug up a print of a legendary, never released 1930's Karloff/Lugosi British film, "Tower of Fear" before he can screen it for Sandy, he inexplicably leaps off the roof of his tenth floor apartment building and the print is mysteriously stolen.

Determined to rescue Graham's good name from a columnist, who claims the print never existed, Sandy, after starting up a romance sets out to find the film.

Michele says

Meh. Too many tropes crammed into a single story: sinister corporation, lost/suppressed/secret document (in this case a Karloff/Lugosi film), eerie scarecrows, ancient curse on family, the land that needs blood to flourish, the cursed object, and (possibly) werewolves. And in the end almost nothing actually happens other than lots of highway driving from one town to another. Would have worked a better as a short story, and with about 50% less stuff.

Jason says

I liked the part where nothing happened for 280 pages and then everything that did happen was really stupid and happened for no reason.

Anthony Vacca says

Propelled by a hunt for a crackerjack Macguffin—the print of an apocryphal horror film starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff that suffered from a bedeviled production and was suppressed before its release by pre-WW2 censors concerned with its "unpatriotic" content—*Ancient Images* is a sedate horror mystery that strives for social commentary wherever the search takes our dogged protagonist, an independent female

(circa the late 1980s) television editor. Scenes of urban decay and pastoral hypocrisy serve well-meaning Ramsey Campbell as chances to decry homophobia, finger wag at the splatterpunk genre and its celebrants, and take potshots at English classicism, until, finally, he pits his heroine against a reclusive, but prosperous village, whose bread-making inhabitants practice a bloody propitiation to fertility elementals. While Campbell's confidence and skill at writing slow-paced horror is admirable, the climax of *Ancient Images* is not sensational enough to make a reader feel truly awarded for their patience. Also Campbell relies far too many times on building unease by having a character spot, but then quickly dismiss, strange and spindly figures scampering out of sight. While many incidentals do delight—a climb up an ominous tower, the unveiling of a creepy family crest, an encounter with a trio of menacing matrons, a description of a vine flowering out of an eye socket—they don't leaven this novel into a superior horror experience. Read the artful *Midnight Sun* first.

Andy says

This is a good read, it kept me interested until the very end and I was downright excited to see what would happen next. This is my second Campbell novel, I read "The Hungry Moon" back in March and I don't know why I took so long to get to another one. According to S. T. Joshi who's opinion I respect a great deal, this isn't even one of Campbell's better novels, I don't have enough reference to say, but I personally enjoyed this one as much or perhaps more than "The Hungry Moon."

I will say, I think Campbell overplays his creepy touches at times. In some places it's like, "Uh-oh! There's the monster!" "Oh, is that it over there?" "Is something scratching at the door?" He maintains his subtlety, but at some places it becomes overkill. I'm almost saying to myself, "Yes, the monster is nearby, but can we get on with the story?" I guess this is why some complain that sometimes Campbell seems to care more about atmospherics than plot. On the other hand, this is really a minor qualm, because it does keep up the suspense and he will throw in an occasional detail that's truly effective.

The story follows Sandy, a TV film editor at the Metropolitan who's informed by her friend Graham that he's uncovered the uber-rare 1938 Lugosi/Karloff film "The Tower of Fear." She goes to his apartment for a private viewing that evening, finds the projection booth a shambles and watches in horror as Graham leaps from the opposite building to his death. She's not sure if he committed suicide or was being chased by something, but the film has gone missing. Graham's lover Toby gives her Graham's notebook full of names he was contacting to track down the rare film and Sandy teams up with American film critic Roger Stone to try and find the film as a tribute to Graham's memory. Everyone they contact is reluctant to discuss the whole project and a few have some very creepy stories about what happened during the filming. And the closer she gets to the truth, the more Sandy begins to feel she's being watched and stalked.

The plot has familiar feel to it, someone dies mysteriously, their friend tries to piece together the facts, encounters a lot of colorful characters who dread to speak of the terrible past events. We see this in horror, and film noir quite a lot too. This is a nice break from the classic novels I've been reading.

Jonathan says

Probably the sleekest, most thriller-like novel in the prolific Ramsey Campbell's catalogue, *Ancient Images* is a story of detection with occult elements that begin to dominate as the novel progresses.

It's 1988 in London, England. Metropolitan TV film editor Sandy Allan witnesses the baffling, apparent suicide of her friend and mentor, a film historian who had just announced that he'd secured a copy of a long-lost 1938 Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi British horror film. But the film isn't in Sandy's mentor's ransacked apartment.

In order to help deal with her trauma, Sandy uses the mentor's notebook to reconstruct a list of people to contact for information about the film. She takes holiday time and with the help of an American film writer sets out to see if she can track down another copy of the film.

Her quest takes her across much of England. Many of the actors and production staff remain alive 50 years later. Not so much the director, who died in a car crash mere days after the completion of filming.

Campbell does such a fine job of describing the fictional film that one starts to wish it were real -- if so, it would be one of Karloff and Lugosi's finest on-screen team-ups. Along the way, Campbell deals with anti-horror, censorship crazes in Great Britain in both the 1930's and 1980's. The English peer responsible for the initial quashing of the film invoked the good of the British people back in 1938 as to why this horror film -- and horror films in general -- shouldn't be allowed in Great Britain. In 1988, the 'Video Nasties' censorship hysteria is in full-blown inferno.

But Sandy won't be dissuaded, despite increasingly weird goings-on, the mysterious death of her cats Bogart and Bacall, and a growing sense of being followed. Campbell has noted that Sandy is perhaps his least tortured, most 'normal' protagonist. This aids in the generation of suspense -- she's not the sort of Campbell character who would believe in even the possibility of the supernatural. All those times she thinks she sees something at the edge of vision -- well, they can be explained away. Can't they?

Its likable, uncomplicated protagonist and its detective-thriller architecture make *Ancient Images* Campbell's most accessible book to non-horror readers, in my humble opinion. It's a terrific ride with a tense climax. Highly recommended.

Patrick says

This was my first encounter with Ramsey Campbell, a writer whose work I've been drawn to following a number of citations of him from other writers I admire. And I really, really enjoyed reading this, and am now quite eager to read his other stuff. I've noted before on here how much I enjoy what might be considered fairly trashy horror fiction, but if this novel is anything to go by, Campbell ought to occupy a much more prominent status in modern literature (not just genre fiction) than he currently does.

The plot revolves around a lost film starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff; made in Britain in the 1930's, it was never released and virtually disappeared after the death of its director in mysterious circumstances. In the book, a print of the film emerges, but quickly vanishes again after the grisly suicide of the man who discovers it, and the novel follows the efforts of film editor Sandy Allen to track down the origins of the movie, and to discover what really happened to the man who made it.

The book is written (and set) in the late 1980's, with the whole 'video nasties' horror movie scare very much lurking in the background. But there are also frequent references to an earlier moral panic of the 1930's, when the first horror films first scandalised the establishment and effectively forced the creation of a

government-subsidised film industry for films made in (and about) Britain.

And yet despite the modern setting, it's very much a careful, toned-down horror story in the vein of writers much older than Campbell. The novel actually goes to some lengths to distance itself from the contemporary tendency towards lashings of gore and increasingly spectacular effects. The author is a master at the art of undercutting an apparently normal scene with a subtly unsettling touch: a shadow where there was none before; the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside; a lingering glimpse of a dark figure at the side of the road. Campbell has described his own work as a '*comedy of paranoia*', which perfectly describes what occurs here, though it certainly couldn't be called a comedy in any conventional sense. The whole thing has a deeply dreary atmosphere of modernity, one that reminded me somewhat of the later novels of J.G. Ballard in its oppressive vision of Britain.

I don't expect that everyone will like this book, and I suppose many will object to the fact that the central conceit of the novel is never properly explained. Even though the reader does get to 'see' the film in its entirety, the links between it and the unsettling events of the plot remain somewhat obscure. Yes, in some ways it rushes towards a conclusion which feels uncertain and altogether too abrupt, but I didn't much care: for me, enjoying this book was about entering the uncanny ambience of the author's world. I hope I get to go back there soon.

Ashley Brown says

After reading a lot of James Herbert I kept seeing the name Ramsey Campbell mentioned in several British horror write-ups so I set out to have a look at his work. The title that I was most attracted to was "Ancient Images" due to the plot description. I actually emailed the author before I read it and he was very polite and helpful, which made me want to like it even more.

Basically the plot revolves around a supposedly cursed roll of film and the efforts of a young film editor as she goes to find it. What I liked most about this is the lengths that Campbell goes through to build up the suspense, until 3/4 of away through the book you don't actually know what the horror is that's in store for our heroine.

This is a very old fashioned tale and I won't pretend that it is a thrill-a-minute piece, instead it builds upon its dark theme with a series of visions of fleeting shadows and strange animals that may or may not be real. Sandy, the protagonist, heads on a cross-country trip to interview the remaining cast and crew members who were involved in the cursed production - one that actually had Lugosi and Karloff in it (fictional obviously). I enjoyed the geography of the whole piece as well - I lived in Lincoln for a while and live fairly near Cromer (two of the principal locations) so I was able to visualise them pretty well which added an extra dimension to the story for me.

You won't see the ending coming until the book slowly trundles towards it and if you haven't enjoyed the well crafted, well described story by that point they should probably stick to your Twilights.

Barry says

My first novel by Ramsey Campbell will be far, far, FAR from my last. A tight, suspenseful tale, *Ancient Images* features one of my biggest passions as an integral plot point: early-era Hollywood. The main character, Sandy Allan, goes on quite a terrifying journey in search of a long-lost (and recently found, then stolen from a dead friend of hers) Bela Lugosi/Boris Karloff film. Her portrayal is very nicely realized, with her coming across as a real woman, free of exploitation and full of believable emotions. That alone deserves five stars; throw in an absolutely captivating mystery, full of half-glimpsed figures and a growing sense of unease, and you get a nearly perfect book.

Aside from a playful groan at the fact that the film in the book is totally fictional (too bad!), there were a couple of faults to the book which did manage to take away one star for me.

For one thing, the opening scene, as well as another scene that came a little later on, are ultimately identifiable as (respectively) a scene from the film and the fate of the film's director, but both were dropped in with no clear sign as to what they were or how they fit into the overall narrative that, although creepy, left me somewhat confused.

And downright frustrating was the fact that Sandy's 20th century American level-headedness made one aspect of her journey fairly unbelievable, after a time: namely, her seemingly unshakeable ignorance of the fact that she was being pursued. It's one thing for a person to see something strange and dismiss it, and another for her or him to question what they've seen, but return to their train of so-called rational thought. But in this case, it grew kind of ludicrous, after a time, how many times Sandy saw or even encountered a strange figure lurking in the shadows around her, and to dismiss them every time. But, eventually she catches onto the reader's growing sense of terror, and the payoff is quite appropriately nerve-wracking.

All in all, faults aside, this is a tight, perfectly-paced and eerie read. Highly recommended for anyone who loves their horror quiet, creepy, and powerful - and for fans of the silver era of Hollywood.

Kevin Lucia says

The Oxford Companion to English literature calls Ramsey Campbell Britain's "most respected living horror writer", and *Ancient Images*, a Samhain Publishing re-print of one of Campbell's earlier novels, bears excellent testimony to this assertion. As with all of Campbell's works, the prose is smooth, his attention to detail immaculate, and the tension winds tighter and tighter as the story progresses.

Campbell's pacing is also excellent, as he slowly builds a solid foundation upon which to sprint toward the novel's end. An enthralling read, one that evokes very primal emotions - fear of the dark, of isolation, and of the things we can't see moving in the shadows, hiding just beyond the light's reach.

After her friend and co-worker dies under mysterious circumstances, film editor Sandy Allen embarks upon a quest to unearth a mythic film, a lost horror-movie starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. It was this film she was to screen with her friend the night of his death, and, much as she can't prove it, Sandy can't shake the feeling that her friend died BECAUSE of this film... and not just because someone killed her friend to steal

the lost film.

But because the film itself brought death to him.

Every step Sandy takes closer to the film's secrets - interviewing retired actors, camera men, descendents of those involved in the film's production - Sandy senses something drawing closer to her. Shadows become figures dogging her steps at night. Windblown branches claw at her windows like talons. And when Sandy is finally drawn to the small community whose history provided the basis for the film, Redfield - a harvest community whose past is drenched in bloodshed - Sandy realizes she may have stumbled upon an ages-old power that will not only do anything to cover its tracks....

But will also kill to continue its legacy.

For Redfield's rich soil is thirsty, once again. It demands to be sated. And just about anyone's blood will do.

Horror comes in many shapes and sizes, and the genre's big enough for all kinds of tastes, but it's always refreshing to know there still exists writers like Campbell, who can invoke fear simply through the power of excellent story-telling, through emotional cues, creating psychological disquiet subtly, with great care and restraint. And this is also a nice homage to movies and the enduring power of their stories and images, how they preserve things...as well as a haunting concept.

That maybe some things shouldn't be preserved at all.

Randolph says

This really wasn't up to Campbell's usual standards and I was surprised. Other than the early apparent suicide of Graham Nolan and presumably a flashback to an earlier death from a car accident (and something else), which both happen in the first 50 pages, nothing much frightening happens in this book. Campbell attempts to build a disturbing atmosphere with vague suggestions that also telegraph all too well what WILL happen in the last 20 pages, but it never works. The confrontation by Sandy with the townspeople, which ultimately leads to nothing, is the only mildly menacing scene. He doesn't even use the incident of the crippled Roger alone dumped at the side of the road to do anything. The final monster(s) and brooding evil turn out to be fairly easy to thwart. The ultimate film screening is a big nothing as well.

The premise is also preposterous: a "lost" and suppressed British film called Tower of Fear starring Lugosi and Karloff and a famous director that nobody except a few film buffs seems to know anything about or even knows still exists. It was supposedly suppressed suggestively for being too disturbing (its not it turns out, just personally offensive to one British family and a little prosperous, but deadly, town). The director is considered to be some type of James Whale or Tod Browning type who dies mysteriously in a car crash after the film is made. This is what the flashback presumably is, although a monster supposedly devours whats left of him after the crash, so the death should be more mysterious and notorious than it is actually considered.

This flimsy premise of the novel takes its story from the actually lost silent Lon Chaney Sr. vehicle London After Midnight. Real life people who have actually seen London After Midnight, despite still photographs of Chaney's truly demonic appearance, say the entire film is so laughably silly that it would be considered comic by today's standards. Campbell throws in his usual hippie flourish with the Enoch and his roving pariah caravan tribe looking for a place that will "accept them." There is also an early theme about the

rampant meaningless violence, grue, and its sinister adherents in current (for 1989) film and media which is abandoned after the first quarter of the novel; never developed or used again. It was like Campbell just didn't know where to go with it but decided to leave it in as a little social commentary.

Campbell is usually a master of urban horror but the bucolic and only vaguely menacing rural setting for the novel never lets him apply what he is best at. I got the feeling Campbell wanted to try something altogether different, but it ultimately fails.

This is no place to start (but maybe a place to end) with the usually excellent Campbell.
