



## DAN SIMMONS'S SUMMER OF NIGHT AS HORROR NOVEL

**KASABE SOMNATH DEVIDAS**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Shivaji University, Kolhapur  
MS (INDIA)

### ABSTRACT

*There is some debate as to whether "horror" is a genre or, like "adventure," an aspect that may be found in several genres. Horror is a certain mood or atmosphere that might be found in a variety of places. Traditionally, horror was associated with certain archetypes such as demons, witches, ghosts, vampires and the like. However, this can be found in other genres, especially fantasy. If horror is a genre, then it deals with a protagonist dealing with overwhelming dark and evil forces. The key ingredient in horror fiction is its ability to provoke fear or terror in readers, usually via something demonic. There should be a sense of dread, unease, anxiety, or foreboding. Some critics have noted that experiencing horror fiction is like reading about your worst nightmares. Summer Of night was more about the "secrets and silences of childhood" than it was about monsters. Here are a few snapshots from that summer of 1960 in the "real" Elm Haven - Brimfield, Illinois - with a kid brother and some true friends who may (or may not) bear a close resemblance to some of the characters in Summer Of Night.*

**Key Words-** Horror, Novel, Summer of Night.

### Introduction-

Dan Simmons was born in Peoria, Illinois, in 1948, and grew up in various cities and small towns in the Midwest. Since his first published short story won the Rod Serling Memorial Award in the 1982 Twilight Zone Magazine Short Fiction contest, Dan Simmons has won some of the top awards in science fiction, horror, fantasy, and thriller genres, as well as honors for his mainstream fiction. He lives along the Front Range of Colorado. Dan Simmons won the World Fantasy Award for his novel *Song of Kali*. Notable books include the Hyperion series four science fiction novels *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, *Endymion*, and *The Rise of Endymion* and more recently *Illium* and *Olympos*. In 1995, Dan's alma



mater, Wabash College, awarded him an honorary doctorate for his contributions in education and writing.

### **Horror fiction-**

Horror is a genre of fiction which is intended to, or has the capacity to frighten, scare, disgust, or startle their readers or viewers by inducing feelings of horror and terror. Literary historian J. A. Cuddon has defined the horror story as "a piece of fiction in prose of variable length... which shocks or even frightens the reader, or perhaps induces a feeling of repulsion or loathing". It creates an eerie and frightening atmosphere. Horror is frequently supernatural, though it can be non-supernatural. Often the central menace of a work of horror fiction can be interpreted as a metaphor for the larger fears of a society.

### ***Summer of Night* and Horror Fiction-**

*Summer of Night* recounts the childhood of a group of pre-teens who band together in the 1960s to defeat a centuries-old evil that terrorizes their hometown of Elm Haven, Illinois. The novel, which was praised by Stephen King is similar to King's *It* in its focus on small town life, the corruption of innocence, the return of an ancient evil, and the responsibility for others that emerges with the transition from youth to adulthood.

In the sequel to *Summer of Night*, *A Winter Haunting*, Dale Stewart (one of the first book's protagonists, and now an adult), revisits his boyhood home to come to grips with mysteries that have disrupted his adult life. *Children of the Night*, another loose sequel, features Mike O'Rourke, now much older and a Roman Catholic priest, who is sent on a mission to investigate bizarre events in a European city. Another *Summer of Night* character, Dale's younger brother, Lawrence Stewart, appears as a minor character in Simmons' thriller *Darwin's Blade*, while the adult Cordie Cooke appears in *Fires of Eden*.

Soon after *Summer of Night*, Simmons, who had written mostly horror fiction, began to focus on writing science fiction, although in 2007 he returned with a work of historical fiction and horror, *The Terror*. In 2009 he also wrote a book, *Drood*, based on the last years of Charles Dickens' life, those leading up to the writing of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which Dickens had partially completed at the time of his death.

Dan Simmons wove a masterful tale of 1960's Illinois with its cozy little town and streets, Saturday outdoor movies and the kids who were the true heroes of the story. It reminded me of *Goonies* in places as we quickly grow to like Dale and his younger brother Lawrence, Mike, Duane and Kevin and Jim Harlan, friends, schoolmates and brave, lovable kids who have turned this book in a magical tale that swept in front of my eyes. I have never read a more real story that has horror, fantasy and people dying feeling as real as this tale. The



characters all stand out in their own way, so clear, so precise so pristine that when bad things happened to some of them, I had a tissue dabbing my eyes. The book is long, counting 600 pages but I know I will read it over again in a few years and I'm sure it will taste even better, just like leftover dinner with the deepening flavors and spices.

The story itself is around a school called Old Central, where Tubby, a not so god kid disappears on the last day. It's a huge old building that is going to be closed down as all the kids are supposed to go to a new school. Dale, Lawrance, Mike, Duane, Kev and Jim all go to the same school but they are very young, around 11 yrs old, some younger, some tad older yet they are real kids; at times with bratty tough attitudes, yet Simmons doesn't pretend to sketch out a superhero in a child's body, he takes each characters and builds on it making them as real to me as my own family. I grew to love each one of them as they enriched my book with their plans to find the missing kid. As the kids started to piece together what was going on, very bad things started to happen. Unusual dark forces such as walking corpses and black worms polluted their world as sun settled and sent real life terror that was really more terrifying than any other horror book I have ever read. I laughed, cried and even took a day of from work just to sit and read this book as it slowly and beautifully unfolded its mysteries to me.

Dan Simmons used the most intense, sublime and imaginary language to spin his tale that I have never read before in a scary book. I could feel the first day of summer, the sunshine, the happiness and the approaching gloom with the kids he so intensely described. I could probably use every single one of his sentences as a quite but when he said this about the evil things my hair really stood straight, as it was true: "Beyond the cone of light, large things circled and waited". Evil did strike at night but made some terrifying appearances at day time. When the kids run into mysterious soldiers, butchered animals in a barn with human sacrifices, mysterious holes in the ground, random neighbors' dying with cries of terror on their face they know that nothing is imagined and that It won't go away unless they stop it.

All the protagonists are 11 except for one who is younger and they are up against something ill-defined, sinister and extremely dangerous - but they don't know that when they decide to investigate the disappearance of a class-mate on the last day of school before the summer of 1960. Of course, being a YA novel, the kids need to solve the problems without the help of adults, a perennial plot-constraint/difficulty of the genre that Simmons deals with superbly. First of all, his choice of setting in small-town Illinois, 1960, is great because it solves most of the problem on its own; kids then ran rampant without supervision for entire days, went camping without adult accompaniment and went wherever they wanted that was within range of their bikes and energy. In our disappearance-investigating kids' small town of Elm Haven, this includes a wide range of locales, such as farmland, woodland, the town dump and the railroad/way. Private gun security in the USA back then seems to be similar to that of today i.e. non-existent and all the kids seem to have been taken shooting by their fathers.

**KASABE SOMNATH DEVIDAS**

3P a g e



The story is a sort of coming-of-age tale centered on a group of children growing up together in a small town in the 60's. School is out, summer is here, how exciting. The author brings alive the excitement of that first summer day when school is out and only months ahead await children who are eager to explore, to live, to have fun without responsibility. Idyllic summer days and nights. It opens in an old school that has seen its last class for it's about to be closed down, and the children all coming together on different days to try and solve the mysteries of the town, the horrors which await them. Each child comes from a different household holding its own basket of dysfunction. The households become as interesting as the main tale.

Although the story is deep and steeped richly in imagination, it's a fully characterized book, focusing on the internal thoughts and relationships for each of the children. I was dismayed at the death of a favorite, which I never saw coming. Simmons doesn't hold back the horrors of the death punch when delivering shocks for the book.

Nothing is predictable with how it will turn out and what will happen next. The ending with the villain and the wrap-up is in-depth, intelligent, and heavy with created history. There are no convenient or suddenly established plot points, but instead it was well constructed before the book was born to be slowly unraveled as small pieces are slowly handed out to the book's characters. It's a slow ride that didn't invest its hooks into me right away, so patience IS needed to trust this one to take off successfully. Still, despite the slower start, the internal character shifts are handled effectively and work well to not try the reader's patience. Huge emotional stakes in the characters' lives helped me keep reading.

Simmons was also talented with writing some truly creepy scenes, especially when deaths were involved, very awful and haunting stuff. Violence and blood isn't backed away from when it's needed, but it's not splashed on the page for mere shock effect. I did knock off half a star for some sluggishness and the death of a character who brought much to the story so that when they were gone, some of the magic left with them. Overall, though, this was an incredibly ambitious book that worked on all levels.

If you're a horror fan who enjoyed the childhood trials in Stephen King's IT, or the bonding and tragedy in Robert McCammon's Boy's Life, you'll almost certainly love Summer of Night. There's something especially effective about drama-horror focusing on adolescence and coming of age in the midst of trials and struggles, calling upon the power of friendship to draw strength to defeat foes so much larger than individual self.

There is, however a slight flaw, which is the writing itself. Generally speaking it is the evocative, atmospheric prose one expects from Simmons, but just occasionally, scattered through-out the book are individual sentences that stand out glaringly as bad - and easily corrected. A minor annoyance in a novel that manages to capture the nostalgia for childhood



summer vacations/holidays from school, the fears, concerns and bonds of school-children and the spookiness and dread inspired by the inexplicable events occurring exceedingly well.

Which leads me to say which genre I think this book belongs to: yes, I already claimed it is Simmons' YA novel but I also believe it is his Ray Bradbury novel. Its resemblances to both *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* are striking: small-town Illinois setting, nostalgic look back at childhood summers, unexpected tragedy and evil, nostalgia for old horror films and stories, wannabe writers.

Similar in intensity and enjoy ability, as well as roughly in plot, to Stephen King's *IT*, *Summer of Night* is over 600 pages of delightful, entertaining horror fiction. Simmons' character development is what makes this book stand out from many of its peers, and his ability to transport even the most jaded reader into the fictional town of Elm Haven, IL, is truly impressive. This tale is reminiscent of Stephen King's *It* and *The Body*. It involves a group of children dealing with strange events occurring in their town (Elm Haven, IL) in the summer of 1960. The story starts off with the last day of school and the last day for this building. Old Central is going to be closed down and probably demolished. As the children impatiently await the bell that will release them to freedom, one child (Tubby Cooke) disappears.

In the course of the next week the group of young boys (occasionally joined by Cordie Cooke, the sister of Tubby), begin to experience very strange events. Several see the figure of a WWI doughboy who follows them and seem to be haunting the grandmother of one of them. One of the group is almost run over by the Rendering Truck driven by the former school janitor. Other strange events take place and it ultimately piques the group's curiosity and causes them to investigate some of the weird happenings. Interspersed with these supernatural events are the typical things an 11 or 12 year old experiences - bullies, searching for buried treasure, noticing girls for the first time and enjoying an outdoor movie on a summer night. As the book goes on things take a more deadly turn and the boys start to become truly afraid. What is haunting the school? What is the doughboy after? What is causing the odd tunnels under various structures? As the boys draw closer to the core of the mystery, people who can answer their questions about the town's history begin getting killed or disappearing. As the story draws to its eerie finale, the reader is never sure who will make it to the end.

This book is a good read but has some inconsistencies that distracted me. Memo, Mike O'Rourke's ill grandmother, is initially described as his maternal grandmother but later in the story possesses family photos and artifacts that would make her seem to be his father's mother. Some of the characters are not fully fleshed out. Jim Harlen and Kevin Grumbacher seemed so incidental to the story that they might not have existed at all. The fact that no one but these children notice the goings on calls for a bit of a suspension of disbelief. I also didn't

**KASABE SOMNATH DEVIDAS**

5P a g e

feel that the reason behind all of this was explained. Why were the WWI soldier and the dead teacher the only two brought back from the dead? How did the teachers find the evil in the school? Why did nothing happen before? I wish some of these areas had been given more detail. Despite that, I enjoyed the book and would recommend it to anyone who is a fan of King's I.

### Conclusion-

Simmons has proved why he is one of the best writers out there with *Summer of Night*. He cannot fault this book at all, the length was perfect, there was a lot of detail, but not too much to make it unnecessary. But the best part was the characters. He has compared Simmons to Stephen King regarding his character building. But after this, He has to say that Simmons is superior. I mean, he takes six 11 year old boys and turns them into these fantastic characters that all have their own background and personality, and yet you can relate to each one of them.

Everything that they experience, you experience. It's as though you are the 7th character and you are trying to solve the mystery of Old Central. That's why He couldn't put this down. He had to know what happened next. This is why this book deserves its praise as one of the best horror books in the literary horror fiction genre.

## REFERENCES

- Cuddon J.A. *The Penguin Book of Horror Stories*, e.d.Harmondsworth Penguin, 1984.
- Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Methuen London, 1981.
- Simmons Dan, *Summer of Night*, ed. Grand Central Publisher, 1991.