The Gothic tale has been with us for over two hundred years, but this collection is the first to illustrate the continuing strength of this special fictional tradition from its origins in the late eighteenth century. Gothic fiction is generally identified from Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto and the works of Ann Radcliffe, and with heroes and heroines menaced by feudal villains amid crumbling ruins. While the repertoire of claustrophobic settings, gloomy themes, and threatening atmosphere established the Gothic genre, later writers from Poe onwards achieved an ever greater sophistication, and a shift in emphasis from cruelty to decadence. Modern Gothic is distinguished by its imaginative variety of voice, from the chilling depiction of a disordered mind to the sinister suggestion of vampirism.

This anthology brings together the work of writers such as Le Fanu, Hawthorne, Hardy, Faulkner, and Borges with their earliest literary forebears, and emphasizes the central role of women writers from Anna Laetitia Aikin to Isabel Allende and Angela Carter. While the Gothic tale shares some characteristics with the ghost story and tales of horror and fantasy, the present volume triumphantly celebrates the distinctive features that define this powerful and unsettling literary form.
The function of Gothic narrative was exactly summed up by one of its exponents, Mrs Anna Laetitia Barbauld, whom I am surprised Chris Baldick does not refer to in his thoughtful and well-informed introduction. Her essay ‘On the Pleasure to be extracted from Objects of Terror’ analysed the Gothic mode as just that. It was a kind of reductio for literary purposes of Burke’s notion of the sublime as the manifestation in nature of wonder, awe and fear, and in its practical application was a kind of precursor of Post-Modernism. Anything goes provided it frightens you: no high as opposed to pop art, no elitism; a single shiver makes the whole world kin.