

Philadelphia Gothic

5 monthly sessions: Saturdays, February 9, March 9, April 13, May 11, June 8 | 2:00–4:00 p.m.

Course includes a talk and tour at Laurel Hill Cemetery, Tuesday, May 14, 6:00 p.m.

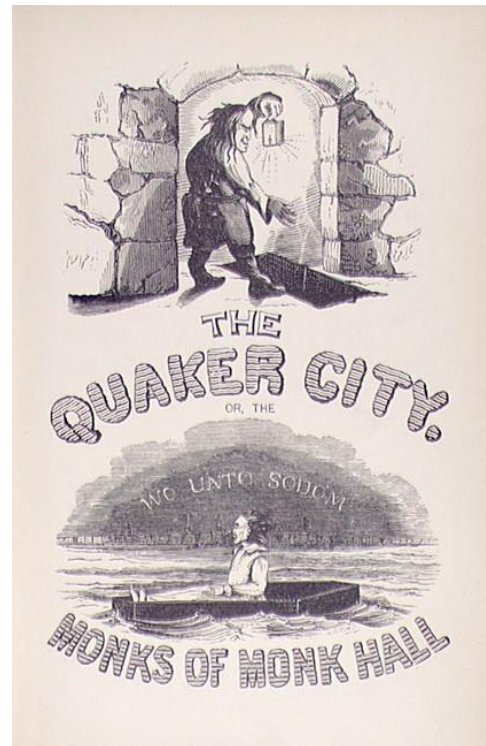
Tuition: \$250

Led by Edward G. Pettit, Sunstein Manager of Public Programs at The Rosenbach

Philadelphia in the Early Republic was a city of high culture in the arts, sciences, publishing and government. Founded upon the Quaker principles of William Penn, the city fostered the revolutionary movement and became the cradle for the documents that would shape America's government. More than one traveler referred to Philadelphia as the Athens of America. Yet another Philadelphia lurked in the pages of novels and magazines, a seeming paradox to its democratic ideals: Philadelphia Gothic.

Charles Brockden Brown transformed a strictly European genre of literature into a distinctly American nightmare of the terrors that lurked beneath our democratic ideals. While European Gothic focused on the haunting and corrupting sins of their past, Brockden Brown's Gothic was about what one scholar called, the "individual potential for evil in a new society." Just as American citizens have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, American Gothic tells us that we also have the potential for death, murder and pursuit of destruction. American Gothic is about the criminal element. European Gothic is haunted by specters and mad monks. In America we are at the mercy of serial killers. And Philadelphia became the crucible for this very American version of the Gothic that continues in the many strains of Horror fiction and film today.

In this course, we'll explore the works of these authors — Charles Brockden Brown, Robert Montgomery Bird, George Lippard, Edgar Allan Poe, and Frank Webb — and see how they were inspired to look beneath the veneer of American democracy and expose our deepest fears.



Included in this course is a lecture and tour at Laurel Hill Cemetery on May 14.

Texts for the course:

- *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* by Charles Brockden Brown. Best edition is in the Hackett Classics series (ISBN: 0872209210). Also included in the Library of America's Brown volume, *Three Gothic Novels*. However, any edition will do.
- *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* by Robert Montgomery Bird. Published by New York Review Books Classics, edited by Christopher Looby

- Various short stories by Edgar Allan Poe, including “Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” “The Man of the Crowd” and maybe a few more. Most anthologies of Poe will have the stories we’ll be reading.
- *The Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk Hall* by George Lippard
The best version is the one edited by David Reynolds for the University of Massachusetts Press (ISBN: 0870239716). Most other versions are just print on demand from very corrupt texts. Don’t be seduced by their cheap prices. Get Reynolds’ version.
- *The Garies and their Friends* by Frank J. Webb
Published by Broadview Press, edited by William Hunting Howell and Megan Walsh
- I’ll also supplement with pdfs of various essays and reviews that provide both contextual and critical perspectives.

Our schedule:

February 9

We’ll begin with the first of the Philadelphia Gothic novelists, Charles Brockden Brown. Three of his first four novels are set in and around Philadelphia, the city where he was born and raised. Although he wrote prolifically in several genres, it was these novels that captivated his early readers, including a young British author, Mary Shelley, who read and reread Brown’s works as she worked on her great reimagining of the gothic novel, *Frankenstein*. We’ll read the most urban of Brown’s novels, *Arthur Mervyn*, set in Philadelphia during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 that ravaged the city’s population. The title hero must navigate murderous conspiracies in the midst of a contagion that reflects the immorality of a democratic nation dependent upon Atlantic slavery

March 9

We’ll jump ahead a few decades to 1836 and read Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee*, the dark comedy version of Philadelphia Gothic. From the NYRB Classics jacket copy: “a scathingly humorous and utterly original novel out of Andrew Jackson’s America, the story of an incorrigible loafer who inadvertently discovers the power to project his soul into dying men’s bodies and to take over their lives. So gifted, Sheppard Lee sets off in pursuit of happiness, only to find himself thwarted at every turn. In growing desperation he shifts from body to body, now a rich man and now poor man, now a madman and now a slave, a bewildered spirit trapped in the dark maze of American identity.” Edgar Allan Poe was an early reviewer of this book.

April 13

We move onto the great practitioner of all things macabre, Edgar Allan Poe, and examine some of the stories he wrote while in Philadelphia that reflect the Philadelphia Gothic tradition. We’ll see how Poe’s immersion in the antebellum culture of Philadelphia came to be the crucible for the development of his psychological works of horror which have had such a lasting impact on the American horror landscape.

May 11

The peak of Philadelphia Gothic, George Lippard's *The Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk Hall* was one of the most popular novels of antebellum America. Part of the city-mystery novels which were all the rage in the 1840s in Europe and America, Lippard's most famous work was inspired by a real-life murder in Philadelphia, but the author transformed this crime into a scathing indictment of the many sins of America. Lurid, sensational, and always entertaining, Lippard shocked and titillated his early readers, earning the moniker "Satellite of Sin," but all of his novels have a crusading zeal that make him a kind of proto-muckraker.

Tuesday, May 14, 6pm

All students of this class are invited free of charge to a lecture, "Philadelphia Gothic: the Crucible of American Horror" that I'll give at Laurel Hill Cemetery, followed by a cemetery tour that will feature some of the writers and associates of Philadelphia Gothic, including the graves of the two men who inspired Lippard's *Quaker City*.

June 8

While Lippard exposes many crimes of antebellum America, he has almost nothing to say of the America's deepest sin, slavery. Frank J. Webb's *The Garies* portrays the lives of free blacks in Philadelphia, especially the 1830s and '40s when Webb lived in the city and anti-black riots raged unabated. Webb's mother was the illegitimate daughter of Aaron Burr. His first novel, *The Garies*, was published in London in 1857, where he lived for several years after Philadelphia. We'll examine how Philadelphia Gothic can also encompass the urban horrors of African-American experience.