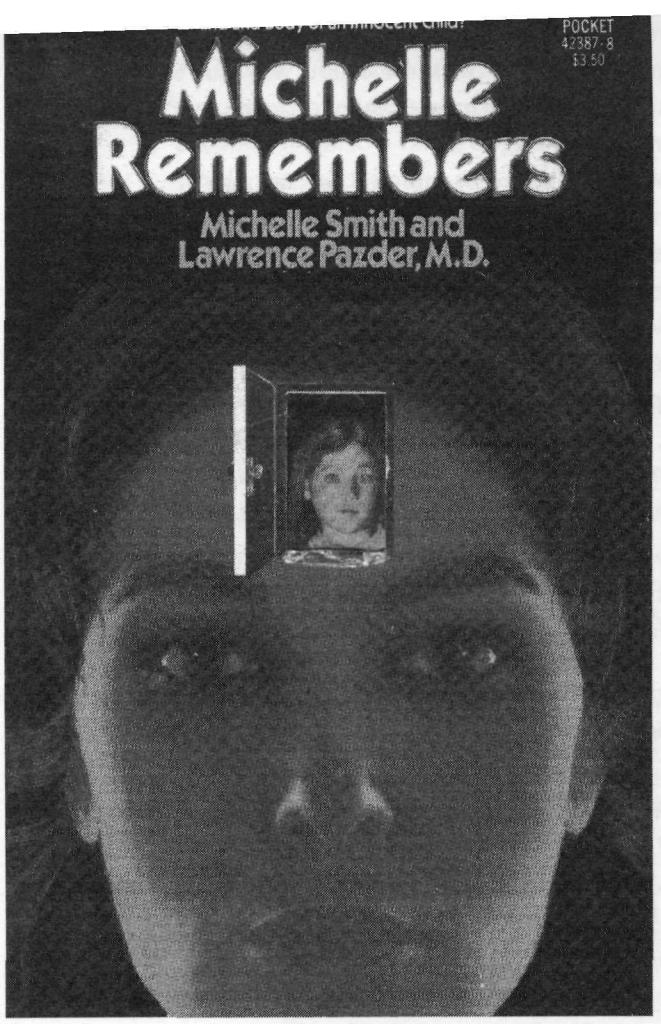
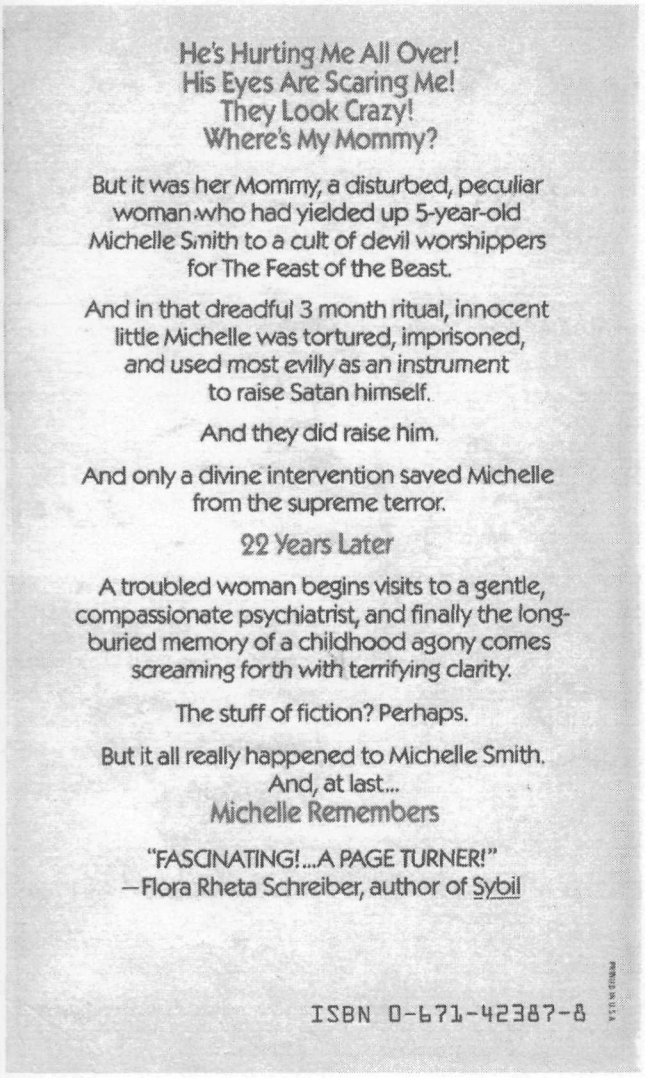


Michelle Misremembered

In 1977, real-life Canadian housewife Michelle Smith suffered a miscarriage and sank into depression. She began therapy with Dr. Lawrence Padzer, who revealed that her problems stemmed from repressed childhood memories. Together, they recovered these traumatic memories—which revealed that in 1955, when Michelle was five years old, her mother turned her over to a Satanic cult that used her as the centerpiece in an 81-day ritual known as the Feast of the Beast. During this marathon orgy, Michelle was raped by snakes, defecated on a Bible, watched her playmates being murdered, saw kittens crucified, had a devil tail and horns surgically grafted to her skeleton, got her teeth knocked out, and ate human flesh while being rubbed all over with dead babies. At the finish line, the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Michael appeared and healed her, miraculously erasing all physical evidence of these crimes.

It sounds like a novel, but Smith claimed it was all true. To warn the world, she and Padzer wrote *Michelle Remembers*, a blockbuster memoir that helped



Could the demonic ordeal described by Michelle Smith *possibly be real? (Spoiler alert: no.)*

spark America's Satanic Panic in the 1980s. People who should have known better became convinced that Satan lurked under every heavy-metal album cover and that Satanic covens operated day care centers across the country. Smith and Padzer left their respective spouses and married each other; they appeared on *Oprah*, went on a national book tour, popped up in *People* magazine, and shopped around a movie adaptation of their book which was kept out of theaters thanks only to threats of a lawsuit from both the Church of Satan's Anton LaVey and Smith's father.

Michelle Remembers updated the lurid, turn-of-the-century conspiracy theory about white slavers running an international network of sin. It posited a cradle-to-grave Satanic network that indoctrinated children into sex and drugs rings using Saturday morning cartoons and He-Man action figures, with New Age occultists wielding crystals behind it all. '80s America was ready for conspiracy theories, no matter how silly, and we're about to meet a man named Russ Martin, who had a few for sale.

Toll of the Dice

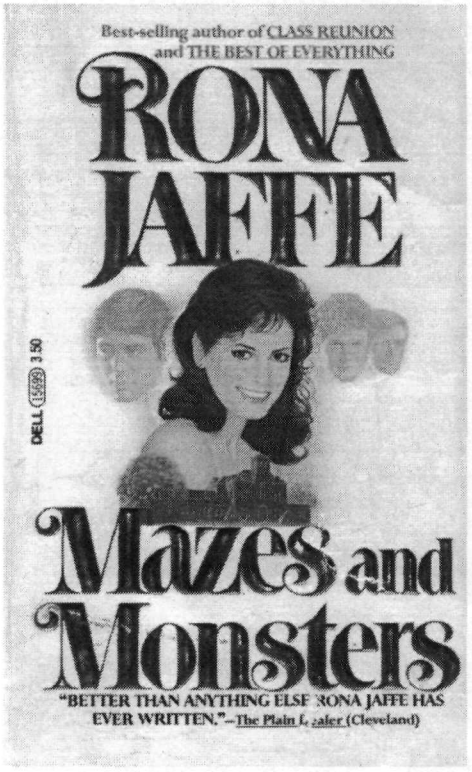
"Last night I cast my first spell . . . this is real power!"

"Which spell did you cast, Debbie?"

"I used the mind bondage spell on my father. He was trying to stop me from playing D&D. . . . He just bought me $200 worth of new D&D figures and manuals. It was great!"

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to 1984, the year Jack Chick published his infamous anti-RPG (role-playing game) tract *Dark Dungeons*, revealing that these dice-and-paper games are a gateway to Satanism and suicide! But under-neath all the bluster, the moral lather that Chick and groups like B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons) worked themselves into centered on a very real tragedy: the suicide of a child prodigy named James Dallas Egbert III.

First, the facts. In 1979, Egbert disappeared from his dorm room at Michigan State University and was traced to the steam tunnels that ran beneath the campus. There the trail went cold. His parents hired private investigator and tireless self-promoter William Dear to look into the case. Dear knew that Egbert played Dungeons and Dragons, and he heard that some of the Michigan State students LARPed in the steam tunnels (LARP stands for live-action role-playing, a type of game in which costumed players interact in character with props). Dear knew absolutely zilch about D&D, so he told a reporter that the game might have had something to do with the disappearance. That was all the press needed to declare Egbert a victim of a D&D game "gone wrong," igniting a media maelstrom.



Egbert showed up six months later living in Louisiana under an assumed name, but by then Dear's colorful version of events had taken hold and two relevant books were already on their way to market. The first was from Rona Jaffe, the extremely famous author who back in 1958, had published the proto–*Sex and the City* best seller *The Best of Everything*. Her subsequent *Mazes and Monsters*, released in the wake of the Egbert scandal, was a book about RPGs written by an author who knew nothing about them—and cared even less.

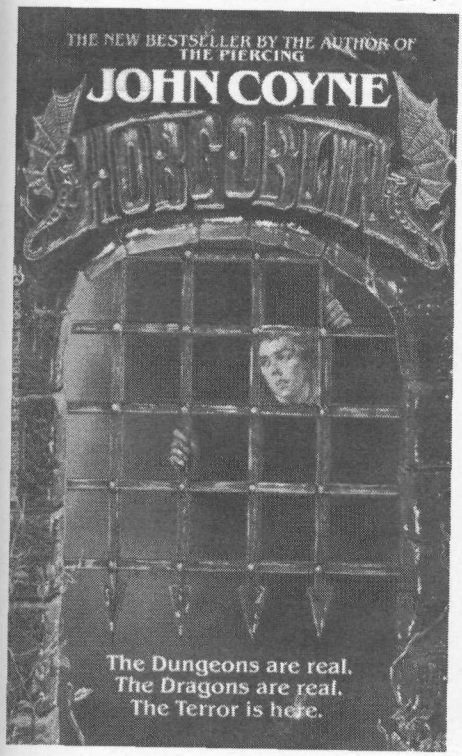
Jaffe did mint two conventions that became staples of this mini-genre of RPG panic books. The first was that each player turns to RPGs because something is broken inside them (usually, divorced parents are to blame). The other is that the games are deeply silly. *Mazes and Monsters* is best remembered today for its TV movie adaptation, which aired in 1982 and featured Tom Hanks in his first leading role, as Pardieu the Holy Man, freaking out on the streets of New York before trying to jump off the World

Trade Center.

It's an unwritten rule that if you're going to make a quick buck off a young person's alleged suicide attempt, you should at least be entertaining. Jaffe broke that rule, but John Coyne would not repeat her mistake. Coyne had already made bank with his calculated Exorcist imitation *The Piercing* (1979) and his ancient alien orgasm novel *The Searing* (1980). But, surprisingly, his D&D cash-in, *Hobgoblin*, was far more than a thinly veiled version of Egbert's story.

Protagonist Scott Gardiner is exactly the kind of kid Jaffe warned us was vulnerable to RPGs' lurid lure: brilliant, creative, socially awkward, and with a dead dad. He's also into a truly terrible RPG called Hobgoblin that may be only barely less boring than Mazes and Monsters. In a deeply unrealistic touch, Scott became wildly popular after introducing this RPG to Spencertown, his fancy boarding school. But as the story begins, he's not popular anymore. After his dad died (while Scott was playing Hobgoblin, of course) he was sent to public school, where his skill as the 25th level paladin, Brian Boru, makes him not an object of admiration, but rather a creep.

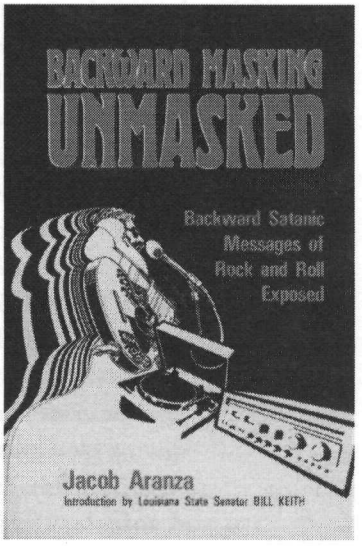
Scott tries to prove to his new classmates that Hobgoblin is cool, but it is not cool. In fact, because of Hobgoblin, his mother is murdered, Scott is attacked, and his girlfriend is kidnapped, stripped naked, and almost raped by the school bullies. After ambling along like a slow-moving character study for eighteen chapters, the book delivers a gibbering, blood-drenched set piece from an '80s slasher film. At the school's Halloween dance, almost every secondary character is gruesomely slaughtered in a fast-paced forty-two pages; then there's a brief one-page epilogue in which a happy Scott returns to his fancy boarding school where people truly understand him. Also, now that he has murdered a man, he decides that he's a grown-up and no longer needs to play Hobgoblin.



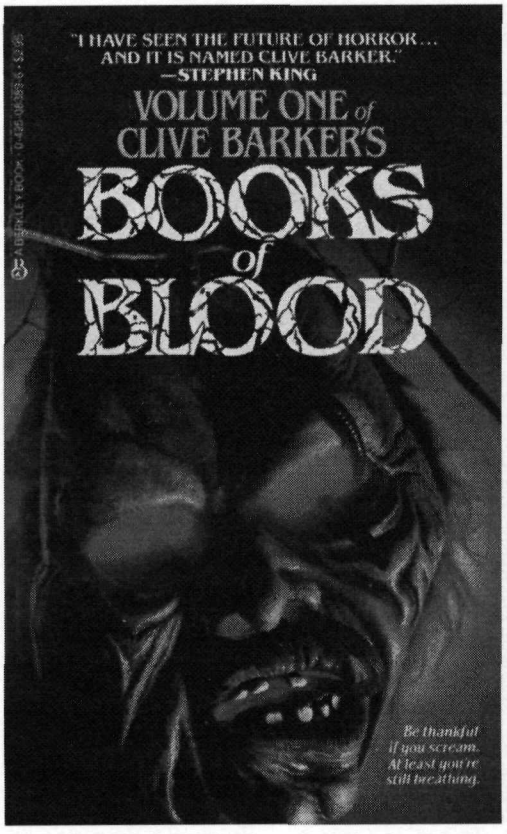
The claim that rock albums contain subliminal backward messages could only make them more appealing to their intended audience.

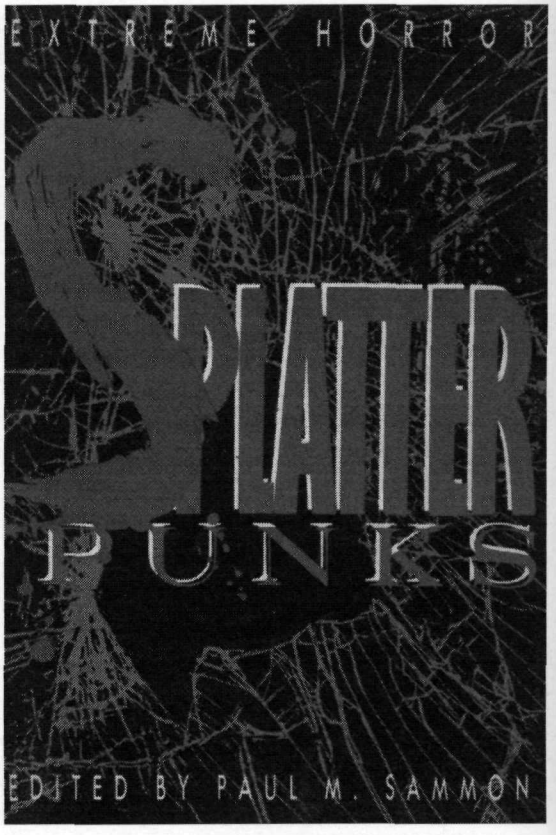
In 1986, war was declared. On metal.

"The cassette or CD player in too many teens' rooms is an altar to evil, dispensing the devil's devices to the accompaniment of a catchy beat," warned televangelist Bob Larson. In the 1983 book *Backward Masking Unmasked* (1983), author Jacob Aranza warned that Queen's song (and football game favorite) "We Are the Champions" was "the unofficial national anthem for gays in America." Larson listed all the satanic bands out to seduce our children, balancing the usual suspects—Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Black Sabbath—with Electric Light Orchestra, the Beatles, and the Eagles, as well as those crazy-dangerous Beach Boys (transcendental meditators), Bee Gees (believers in reincarnation), and John Denver (once tried aikido). Fueled by *Michelle Remembers* (see page 43), James Egbert III's disappearance (page 76), and by the mid-'80s Satanic Panic was in full swing, possibly because the threat of secret satanists was a welcome distraction from the real dangers threatening to kill us all.



Pop culture was the battlefield in this new holy war, and heavy metal music was on the front lines. In 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) issued their "Filthy 15" blacklist of objectionable sounds, whose only real effect was to guide curious kids to the smuttiest music on the market. Made up of the wives of power brokers and politicians in Washington, D.C., the PMRC publicly demanded that record labels reassess the contracts of musicians who performed violent or sexualized stage shows. They managed to stage Senate hearings on explicit lyrics and "porn rock," which accomplished little except to show Americans that Twisted Sister's Dee Snider was more levelheaded and informed than Tipper Gore. The group's only





Clive Barker (*far left*) made a name for himself with his debut multivolume short-story collection, inspiring the splatterpunk movement of gory horror fiction. David Schow coined the term, and John Skipp and Craig Spector were among the founding fathers (*right*).

lasting impact was the explicit lyrics sticker on CDs and cassettes, immediately making those recordings one hundred times more desirable to kids.

Horror responded in the most metal way possible. When televangelists denounced horror movies, books, and games as causing cannibalism, murder, suicide, depression, and domestic violence, horror writers and metal bands doubled down, firehosing ever-more-offensive content into the faces of conservatives. In Providence, Rhode Island, at the 12th World Fantasy Convention in 1986, this weaponized brattitude took horror fiction one step closer to extinction when *Fangoria* columnist David Schow coined the term *splatterpunk*, named for a new school of fiction oozing out of the crypt. At the vanguard was Clive Barker, whose debut six-volume short story collection *The Books of Blood*, published in the U.K. in 1984, was released in the U.S in 1986 in the form of six terrible-looking paperbacks.

There had always been American writers, like Jack Ketchum, who refused to blink when describing gore, but the complete conviction, serious craft, and forensic eye for grotesque detail that Barker brought to his stories, about zombie actresses giving blowjobs and an army of disembodied hands declaring war on the human race, unleashed the beast. All at once, a pack of young dudes— Ray Garton, Joe R. Lansdale, Richard Christian Matheson, John Skipp, Craig Spector, and Schow— were delivering bloody books featuring all the ways a human body could be folded,

Hello, Clarice

By the late '80s, horror fiction was walking down an empty street, all alone, late at night, stalked by a maniac that would prove to be its doom: the serial killer. The FBI had been using the term *serial killer* since 1961, and books about psychotic killers have a long history, dating at back least to Robert Bloch's *Psycho* in 1959. In 1970, Lawrance Holmes's novel *A Very Short Walk* introduced us to a killer narrating the story of his own murderous alienation, starting as an angry fetus stewing in amniotic rage juice. Judith Rossner's 1975 novel *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, about a woman who picks up a stranger in a bar and gets murdered for her trouble, was a cultural touchstone that inspired a million magazine think pieces. Shane Stevens's *By Reason of Insanity*, published in 1979, opens with a kid burning and cannibalizing his mean mommy; it was called "extraordinary . . . a modulated, finely written tale" by the *New York Times*.

But 1981 was the dawn of something new. That was the year the term *serial killer* entered the mainstream. And that was the year that saw the publication of the book Stephen King called "probably the best popular novel to be published since *The Godfather*." Genre historian Douglas E. Winter wrote that, although many established novelists may have written the second-best book of the year, there was no doubt that "the best horror novel of the early eighties" was from a relatively obscure thriller writer named Thomas Harris. The book was *Red Dragon*.

***Red Dragon* signaled the rise of the literary serial killer . . . and the fade-out of anything-goes, over-the-top paperback horror. But the book stayed under the radar until the sequel, *Silence of the Lambs*, became a smash.**

Deeply literary, informed by the latest thinking on forensics and criminal profiling, *Red Dragon* was a writer's book that inspired dozens of copycats but never quite broke into the mainstream. Even its ultra-'80s movie adaptation *Manhunter* (1986) didn't help sales. However, the book and the film did introduce a minor character named Hannibal Lecter, who was willing to wait for his turn in the spotlight. It wouldn't be long before the culture caught up to him. According to the FBI, there were only 19 serial murders in '60s sixties, while the '70s saw a flood of 119, and the '80s yielded 200. The country watched in stunned fascination as one unshaven white man with a supervillain name after another was arrested for crimes that seemed to call the very notion of shared humanity into question: the Hillside Strangler, Son of Sam, the Freeway Killer, the Vampire of Sacramento, the Green River Killer, the Night Stalker, the Sunset Strip Killer, the Zodiac Killer.

The seemingly sudden surge of serial killers took everyone by surprise, and in a flash the scariest motive for murder was no motive at all. A deranged falconer terrorizes Manhattan with his killer peregrine falcon in *Peregrine* (1981) for no other reason than he thinks it's a challenge. In *Horror Story* (1979; page 208), a disgraced general starts an end-times cult in rural Connecticut, abducts a family of lost tourists, and drops off the husband in Boston with a .357 magnum and instructions to execute a random black family before 11 p.m. or his wife and child die. The general's motive? Absolutely nothing. Even Robert Bloch's agent suggested he write *Psycho II* (1982; page 208), and Bloch complied, submitting a book in which Norman Bates is not so bad . . . but the therapist who thinks he can rehabilitate him, and the movie producers making a film about his killings,

Hang Your Stockings and Say Your Prayers

It's the night before Christmas and all through the town, someone is chopping up pregnant coeds, stabbing babysitters in the brain, and decapitating divorced ladies. Even more so than Halloween, Christmas is horror's favorite holiday, full of psycho Santas leaving red-and-green-wrapped heads under each and every Christmas tree.

Black Christmas is an Italian giallo-style thriller, with a faceless black-gloved killer terrorizing a tiny snowbound town. Its stalk 'n' slash set pieces can be stopped only by inexperienced Sheriff Bud Dunsmore, who not only is overwhelmed by the murders, but he hasn't even bought his daughter a Christmas present yet. *Slay Bells* ups the yuletide ante with a deranged lunatic dressed like Santa stalking a snowed-in shopping mall, where he murders teens to avenge his grandfather's defeat in a long-ago fly-fishing tournament.

But, mostly, holiday paperback horror turned out to be that terrible boyfriend who wraps an Applebee's coupon in a Tiffany's box or slides a subscription to *Ladies' Home Journal* into an iPhone case. Its screaming seasonal covers concealed a distinct lack of Christmas carnage inside. No enraged, fire-shrouded snowmen appear in *Slumber Party.* And not only are no evil elf-babies born in *Christmas Babies*, the novel takes place in February. In Florida.

Books that delivered true seasonal slaughter typically didn't advertise that fact on their covers. Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year for WASPs, and WASP horror novels (you remember them from chapter 3) include plenty of Christmas carnage for every boy and girl.

Weirdly enough, it was by way of Christmas that the Satanic Panic spread its infection from heavy metal and role-playing games to horror movies. In 1984 TriStar Pictures released *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, and television ads for this touching tale—about a tiny orphan who dons a Santa suit and murders everyone in sight—featured a bloody St. Nick waving an ax. That image earned so many protests, and resulted in so many tots picketing movie theaters with WE LOVE SANTA signs, that the distributor pulled the film from theaters after barely a week. It was a lesson that horror writers learned well: mess with Santa and risk getting axed.

While *Black Christmas* and *Slay Bells* are indeed set during the holidays, there's no yuletide terror to be found in *Christmas Babies* or *Slumber Party.*