

TRIGGER WARNINGS IN HORROR ★ FEAR AND SAFETY

A STUDY OF UTILIZING TRIGGER WARNINGS IN THE HORROR GENRE

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Would the inclusion of trigger warnings on horror literature make the genre more accessible to readers suffering from trauma, and therefore, increase the readership of the horror genre?

ABSTRACT

By using data collected from the websites Goodreads and the StoryGraph, I evaluate whether the addition of trigger warnings in horror novels would benefit readers who live with trauma and PTSD. By analyzing the discussion around the use of trigger warnings in educational settings, I examine the debate between the pros and cons of utilizing trigger warnings and the potential benefits or harm they can incite. Although my data brings about inconclusive results, it is a starting point for a deeper examination of the growing popularity of the horror genre within the literary community and the growing debate around trigger warnings and the fears surrounding, and the fears surrounding censorship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I need to thank my partner, Dan. He has been there for me throughout my ventures back into university and has been my rock in all things, and I truly believe he is 100% in my corner. Second, I want to thank my son, Ulysses, whose mere existence encourages me to better myself and is the reason I went back to school. I want to thank Dr. Carrie Collenberg-González, who has been my foundation at PSU for the past three years, gave me the confidence to do my best, and has supported me in ways I can't even begin to describe. I want to thank Dr. Kathi Inman Berens, who has guided me through my second Master's degree with grace, and has been an inspiration and staunch supporter. A

big thank you to the PSU German community, where I have made lifelong friends and discovered I really am “the mom.” My dear friends Janice Guion, Alex Morrison, Kelly Titkemeier, Alden Girsch, Chase Bischoff, and Isabel Lemus Kristensen. I couldn’t have done this without their friendship, support, and at times, communal commiserating. And last, but incredibly importantly, my parents and my Oma, who were there for me from the very beginning and never stopped believing in me. Without them and their love, I don’t know where I would be today.

THE FIRST SCARE ★ INTRODUCTION¹

Horror is filled with daunting elements and themes, as it is one of the more direct genres in exploring topics that may be—or aim to be—disturbing, uncanny, and frightening. For fans of the genre, exploring these elements and themes is precisely what they seek: the feeling of being unsettled, shocked, or otherwise horrified. But, however, horror can be problematic for people who react negatively to the very reason many enjoy it—the emotional or physical reaction it can produce. What if people who struggle with these reactions or triggers, have the opportunity to find books within the horror genre, while being able to avoid the specific topics that are triggering for them?

A possible hurdle for readers is that the horror genre is not well organized into subgenres, and, from my observations, horror also does not often have trigger warnings listed within novels. Horror is a very fluid genre that does not have the same boundaries that other genres possess. As Jess Nevins, author and research librarian, elucidates, genres must stay within certain conventions, “but horror, because of its mutability, and its ability to nest, cuckoo-like, in any other genre, does not have content limitations or requirements” (xv).^{2,3} This lack of understanding in what to expect from the genre may leave readers without any indication about what they may be exposed to, other than what the cover copy has to offer or in searching reviews. Expanding readers’ knowledge about what to expect in a novel may open the horror genre to new readers if given the ability to be forewarned about certain topics explored in a novel.

¹ Section headers are named after common horror tropes as a way to highlight the different aspects that can be found within the genre.

² Some examples: “Westerns must have a certain setting; romances must have a certain emotional content; mysteries must have certain crimes; science fiction must have a set of assumptions about technology and society” (Nevins xv).

³ The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* redirects horror to fantasy fiction and mystery fiction (Murfin 229).

This research paper will first explore the ideas behind the use of trigger warnings and the aim of horror as a genre. Then, we will examine whether adding trigger warnings to horror novels would impact readership, based on user reviews and user-labeled trigger warnings throughout social media. Could adding trigger warnings help increase readership, or would it ruin the tension around the unknown and uncanny that horror aims to explore? I argue that trigger warnings have their uses, but with our current understanding of the horror genre and use of trigger warnings, they should be used sparingly and as a way to encourage readers to feel more comfortable with reading horror literature.

Using two social media websites, I examined the top three horror Goodreads Choice Awards winners from 2018 to 2022, and collected information about the top-five user-input trigger warnings on StoryGraph. With this information, I attempted to see if a trend affects ratings, based on each mention of the listed trigger warnings, as an indicator of whether adding trigger warnings could improve readership. Although there is potential for trigger warnings to be helpful for readers, currently, the controversy around the use of trigger warnings and the lack of solid research surrounding the horror genre in this regard limits our ability to understand the role of trigger warnings within the horror genre.

GHOSTS AREN'T REAL ★ ARE TRIGGER WARNINGS GOOD OR EVIL?

There is an ongoing debate over the use of trigger warnings in literature and whether they are helpful or counterproductive for people who live with trauma. First, we will examine the terminology, then review both sides of the argument.

SUMMONING EVIL ★ DEFINING THE TERM

There are different ways of looking at what constitutes a trigger; for this paper, I use triggers to describe their usage for people diagnosed with PTSD to avoid severe mental and physical reactions to trauma.

“For survivors of combat violence, sexual abuse or other trauma, certain sights, sounds, smells or other reminders can bring on intense emotional and even physical reactions, like a full-blown panic attack”

(Wiener 50). Using this definition of what constitutes a trigger, trigger warnings aim to help the aforementioned people avoid these intense reactions; it is a coping mechanism for traumatic events.

Trigger warnings aim to aid people who live with a traumatic past to be prepared to deal with, avoid increasing, or reliving their trauma.

There are varying opinions on the positive effects of trigger warnings in literature. Emily J. M. Knox, assistant professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois, notes that “supporters tend to argue that such warnings are simply ‘more speech’ and provide information about the material, while opponents argue that such labels are a form of censorship” (xvii). Some also believe confronting triggers is a way for people who live with them to learn to better cope with their condition, “Horror literature can offer a safe exploration of the feelings of fear and danger” (Brock-Servais 18).

Most research on trigger warnings has focused on their effects in educational settings, yet these concepts can be applied outside the classroom; they can also be applied to genres other than horror. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the research done in educational settings and apply it solely to the horror genre.

NO TRESPASSING ★ THE GOOD

In literature, trigger warnings are implemented for the protection of people who live with trauma, to help them avoid coming in contact with information that can trigger them. Trigger warnings also help inform readers by giving them the tools they need to prepare themselves to confront the topic in which they struggle. However, even when giving readers these tools, it is good to remember that, “we should never be de-sensitized, and nor should we celebrate de-sensitization” (Wiener 61). Using trigger warnings as a way to force people to confront their trauma is not always the proper course of action and can turn readers away, or worse, do more harm to their condition. Trigger warnings are a way to help readers engage with content while still maintaining sensitivity, as well as protecting and preparing those who live with trauma.

Some professors find limited use of trigger warnings can help inform students, while not overly stressing the negatives that may come up in studying a potentially triggering topic. Professor Lauren Griffith at Texas Tech University clarified, “I think that trigger warnings can and should be used in a limited number of situations, but overusing them can create a situation in which students opt out of learning experiences simply because they don’t want to confront their own assumptions about the world” (Wiener 51). Griffith uses trigger warnings in specific situations, but overall “doesn’t believe that trigger warnings best serve the cause of liberal education” (Wiener 51). Limiting trigger warnings to specific situations can protect those who need them while not giving students cause to avoid sensitive topics. An example of this, outside of an educational setting, can be seen when trigger

warnings are noted in a novel's front matter;⁴ it is subtle and often overlooked unless a reader is searching for that information.

Another important consideration for the use of trigger warnings is the increase in people who live with trauma, increasing the number of people who can be affected by triggering events. Sarah Colbert, MA, claims that

With the increasing numbers of individuals afflicted with PTSD, it stands to reason that the number of individuals who could be triggered by seemingly innocuous events, stories, or pictures has also increased. All of these factors working together have created the desire for some sort of warning system. Out of this desire sprung the concept of a “trigger warning.” (10)

With more people potentially affected by triggers, it is important to consider how best to handle this issue as a society. Although the answer is deeper than attaching warnings to novels, it may help alleviate symptoms that come along with understanding and dealing with PTSD and trauma.

THE PATH TO HELL ★ THE BAD

Not everyone agrees with the idea of utilizing trigger warnings. Some professors and writers have pushed back against their use. In 2014, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Committee A wrote that the call for trigger warnings can lead to an environment where

it makes comfort a higher priority than intellectual engagement and . . . it singles out politically controversial topics like sex, race, class, capitalism, and colonialism for attention. Indeed, if such topics are associated with triggers, correctly or not, they are likely to be marginalized if not

⁴ Front matter is the information that goes at the beginning of a book before the main content. This is where a book has its publication information.

avoided altogether by faculty who fear complaints for offending or discomforting some of their students. (Wiener 70)

The argument here points out that readers may feel entitled to opt out of learning because they don't want to feel uncomfortable, challenged, or perhaps even use the warning merely as an excuse to avoid doing their work. This feeling of entitlement can aptly translate with general reading, as readers may be inclined to avoid reading something they are warned against, especially when they are not pushed to do so because of academic expectations. Other readers—horror fans, for example—may be drawn toward reading something they are warned against.

The debate around trigger warnings and censorship is hotly debated in academic settings. Yet it also reaches outside of academics. As Barbara M. Jones, PhD, academic author and librarian, indicates, “Trigger warnings are a quick fix for a systematic problem” (143). Tacking a few words onto a novel does not help people who are dealing with trauma heal; it only helps them to avoid the things that make them react to their trauma negatively. By avoiding these topics, we may end up accidentally, or intentionally, censoring people. Jones goes on to point out that

Many well-meaning people challenge books because they want to help in one small way with a contemporary problem. It might be teen suicide, it might be racism. It is their way of expressing their concern in making the world a better place. On the other hand, they must be shown that censorship creates barriers for others. And to remove themselves to a safe space is a real loss to dialogue. (143)

This kind of discussion is difficult to navigate with a topic that includes triggers that affect people differently and well-intentioned people may find that they are potentially doing more harm than good.

The voices that are usually censored often end up being those who are most affected by the topic, or have the most to lose with censorship.

The likelihood of censored work often leads to silencing the voices of people in marginalized positions. There is concern that “the materials most likely to have trigger warnings are those of marginalized communities. It is not a coincidence that, for example, the University of Kentucky issued a trigger warning . . . for *Picking Cotton* or that Oberlin College’s statement on the use of trigger warnings used in *Things Fall Apart* as an example,” (Knox xvi).^{5,6} These examples show the potential danger for misuse or subconscious bias to come into play. Creating an environment where readers can opt out of reading, or discourage teachers from using certain course materials, can lead to self-imposed censorship. If teachers are nervous about backlash due to discussing specific topics, they may be less likely to bring them up in their classrooms. If readers think something will bother them, they may choose to pass on something from which they may otherwise benefit.

BODY HORROR ★ THE HORRIFIC

Historically, horror originates from the Gothic literary tradition, beginning in the late 18th century—a break from neoclassicism⁷ and Modernity—and became a way for writers to deal with uncomfortable topics, giving voice to fears and anxieties, and helping the reader deal with the past. This expected confrontation makes the idea of using trigger warnings a questionable concept. How can one confront

⁵ For *Picking Cotton*, the University of Kentucky attached a blue card to the book with the follow notice: The University of Kentucky and the Common Reading Experience program recognize *Picking Cotton* needs to be read and utilized on campus with great sensitivity due to the issues it raises, such as sexual assault and racial dynamics. The book carries a trigger warning (Martin and Frisby 156).

⁶ Oberlin College received backlash from attaching a trigger warning to *Things Fall Apart*, with claims the university was taking their role too far. (Peltz)

⁷ Neoclassicism stressed “reason, harmony, balance, restraint, order, serenity, decorum, and realism—above all, an appeal to the intellect rather than emotion,” (Murfin 333). Neoclassicists therefore believed, “*Gothic* signified the barbaric or crude. For them, “Gothic” writing was untutored, unrestrained and ridiculously extravagant” (206).

their fears if they know to avoid them? Warning readers of the content within a story therefore has the potential to lessen the ability of horror to do what it was always meant to do—put readers in an uncomfortable position, forcing them to understand and deal with trauma.

The horror genre is a unique case when dealing with triggers and aims to disturb readers. Exploring what frightens you or makes you uncomfortable is one of the main draws for many fans. Matt Hills, lecturer at the University of Wales, Cardiff, aptly explains how horror can be used to give readers a sense of agency that other genres don't provide:

horror is viewed as pleasurable not so much for the way that it scares fans—this affective reaction is typically attributed to non-fans by those self-identifying within horror fandom—but rather for the way that horror texts can be used to perform and display types of agency, whether this is a knowledge of narrative worlds, of specific aesthetics, or of production and genre histories. (91)

The elements of fear are not necessarily what keeps fans from returning to the genre, or from readers becoming desensitized from repeated exposure. While trigger warnings are useful in helping readers avoid topics that make them uncomfortable or trigger their trauma, they also push against the surprise and intentional exploration of emotions that horror aims to evoke. Rhonda Brock-Servais, Professor of English at Longwood University, illustrates,

the idea that horror works as exposure therapy or a rehearsal of death for the reader. Consider that, in real life, if one is seeing bone or muscle or death agonies, either you're a medical professional or in a great deal of trouble. Horror Literature can offer a safe exploration of the feelings of fear and danger. (Brock-Servais 18)

If the surprise is lost, then horror loses its ability to create the types of emotions and experiences that readers come to expect.

As far as genre fiction is concerned, horror is a very versatile genre and can work within any other genre. Nevins gives a thoughtful explanation about the role of horror when stating

Works of horror can be fantastic or mimetic; they can be set in any place or time, involve any type of character, and supported by any plot. To qualify as horror, the commonly accepted view goes, all that a text must contain is the ability to create an effect in its reader: the feeling of dread, fear, horror, or terror (or, as Stephen King once put it, ‘the gross out’). (xv)

This is part of the excitement of horror, but it also means that the variety of potential trigger warnings is vast and all encompassing. Understanding when trigger warnings would be useful to readers is a difficult task when the variety of works can have all different types of effects on readers. Yet, although the definition of horror is difficult to pinpoint, utilizing trigger warnings can allow readers to find books they are interested in reading, while being able to avoid sensitive topics. Genre can be used as a way “to mediate between a social situation and the text which realizes certain features of this situation, or which responds strategically to its demands” (Frow 14). It bridges the gap between reality and the “what-if” that fiction explores.

True, trigger warnings may aid readers in finding horror novels that do not confront what triggers them. Nevertheless, this can backfire by allowing readers to avoid confronting concepts that make them uncomfortable—which is one of the main reasons for reading horror—giving the opportunity for healing.

MYSTERIOUS NEIGHBOR ★ THE WEBSITES

This research relies on user-input information on the websites StoryGraph and Goodreads. Both websites offer unique experiences for readers, each focusing on different expectations about their reading experience. By pulling information from these sites, I aimed to gain a broader perspective about both communities of readers, some of which overlap. While each website has similar features, each offers features that the other lacks. The functions unique to each website that are relevant to this paper are as follows: StoryGraph offers a user-input trigger warning feature and Goodreads offers an annual readers' Choice Awards, which includes horror as a specific genre. Both websites use reviews to promote books to site users.

FINDING ALLIES ★ GOODREADS

Goodreads, founded in 2006, builds its community around sharing readers' progress and reviews with friends and followers. This makes the "Updates" section the most prominent feature, initially shown when logging onto the site.⁸ The emphasis on other readers' activity aims to recommend books by finding readers with similar tastes—through interaction with other reviews, "Best Of" lists, and recommendations—and encouraging everyone to participate in the annual Choice Awards to showcase readers' favorites of the year.

Goodreads does not have a trigger warning feature built into the site, and the only way to find trigger warnings is by searching through reviews with keywords or browsing. This can be problematic since reviews often entail spoilers, and other opinions can sway readers into feeling a certain way about a book before they read it. Therefore, people tend to read reviews once they have finished the book, if

⁸All references to the sites are noted from the desktop version, not the mobile version which varies in layout.

at all. Nevertheless, there are profiles on Goodreads, such as the Trigger Warning Database,⁹ which posts reviews that contain only a list of trigger warnings for that book. This account is an outlier on Goodreads, and unless a reader is actively looking for trigger warning information, it is hard to come across. In fact, as an active user on Goodreads since 2010, I have never noticed any substantial mention of trigger warnings before discovering the feature on StoryGraph.

WARNING SIGNS ★ STORYGRAPH

StoryGraph, founded in 2019, is a newer social media site than Goodreads and is a book-tracking website that has recently become popular as a competitor to Goodreads. Filled with graphs, StoryGraph lives up to its name by highlighting readers' statistics over the potential social aspects of reading. It has features that Goodreads lacks, one of which—a critical feature for this research paper—is the ability to add trigger warnings, tallying the number and degree of a trigger warning based on user input. The trigger warning feature is a user-input system, allowing readers to add content warnings from a predetermined list. There is also an area for author-input content warning information, but I failed to see any author utilize this feature during my research.

The trigger warning system has three levels: graphic, moderate, and mild, and is meant to indicate the severity of the trigger. For example, if a trigger is explicitly described (graphic) versus mentioned in passing (mild), it can have a different impact on how it affects readers and therefore can be marked accordingly.

⁹ <https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/86920464-trigger-warning-database>

DON'T SPLIT UP ★ WEBSITES IN CONJUNCTION

The experience readers seek on Goodreads and StoryGraph can be very different, as each platform prioritizes different information, allowing readers to get the most out of the books they enjoy.¹⁰ On the StoryGraph website, reviews are lower on the information page—easily avoided, if desired—leaving space for readers to interact with the book's tagged genres and pacing, overview, and mood before coming to the average rating. Meanwhile, Goodreads prominently places the average rating at the forefront, above the overview and genre lists, offering technical specs, and a “Reader's *also* enjoyed” section, clearly emphasizing the community aspects of reading. StoryGraph focuses more on the statistics of a reader's personal experience, showing pie charts and graphs of, for example, the types of books, formats, and number of pages read per month or year in the Stats section, a section Goodreads does not offer. StoryGraph encourages readers to connect, but it is much less prominent than Goodreads.

In summary, Goodreads is more focused on the social aspects of reading and encourages Best Of lists, voting for favorites in the annual Choice Awards, and the site acts as a stand-in book group. StoryGraph focuses on the personal aspects of reading, statistics, personal reading challenges, and the “Mood” of a book, instead of reviews. By personalizing the experience, as StoryGraph has done, it is also an indicator as to why the site utilizes trigger warnings.

DECIPHERING THE MYSTERY ★ METHODOLOGY

To conduct my research, I examined the top three horror novels of the Goodreads Choice Awards for five years, from 2018 to 2022. Users vote for their favorite books in each category in a series of sessions,

¹⁰ Another factor is that Amazon owns Goodreads and some readers have moved to the independently owned StoryGraph.

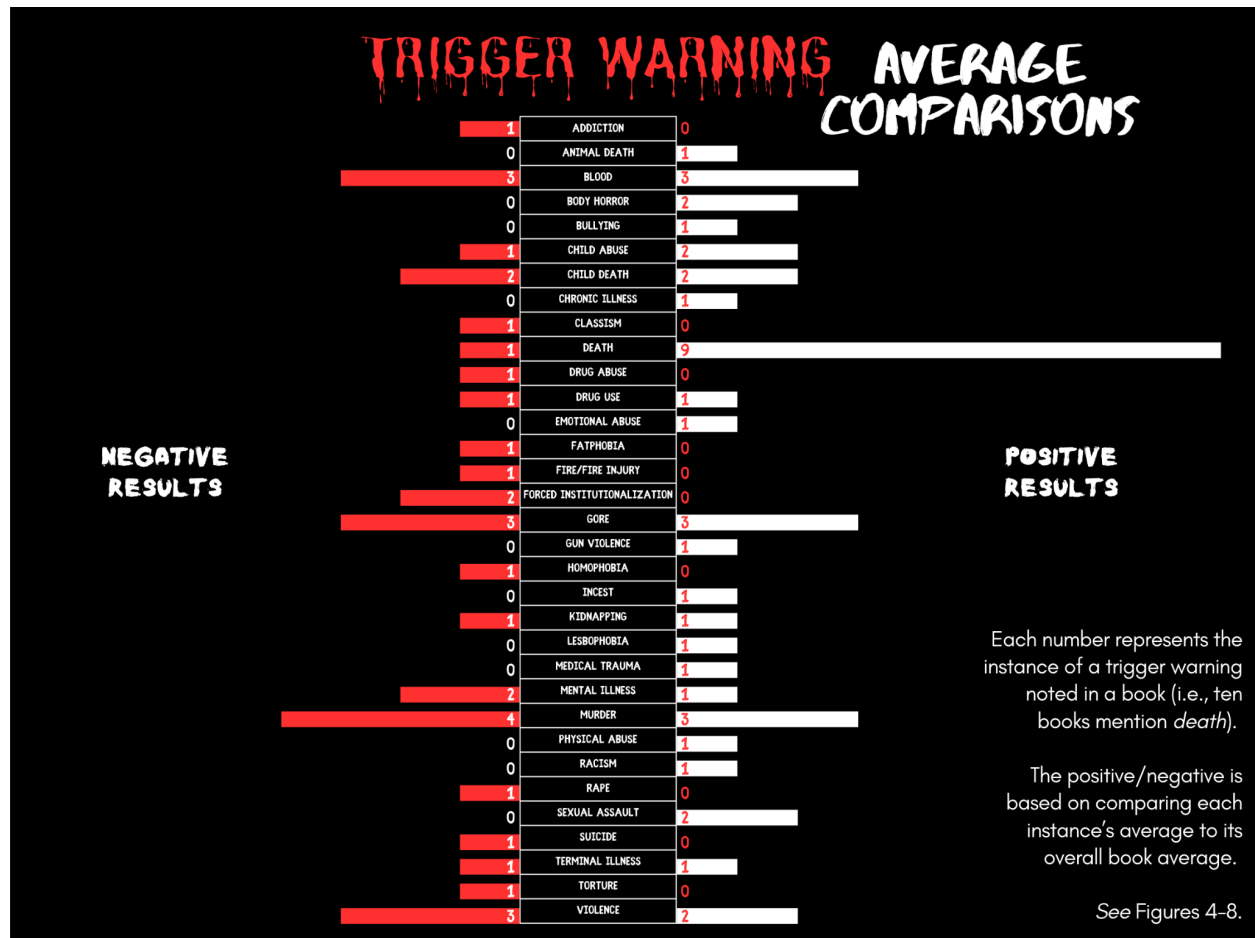
with a final vote for the winner. See [Figure 1](#) in the appendix. For each of these novels, I utilized the trigger warning feature on StoryGraph to record the top five graphic trigger warnings for each novel; when there were under five graphic warnings, I moved down the list to moderate, then minor, skipping over repeated triggers within each category. See [Figure 2](#) in the appendix. I then searched for each trigger warning in reviews on Goodreads and noted the ratings of the oldest (or first) 30 reviews that mention the trigger. See [Figure 3](#) in the appendix. By looking at the oldest reviews, the data's integrity is maintained, as new reviews are constantly being added and would affect the data collected. In some instances, the trigger warnings came up with less than 30 reviews, in which case, I averaged out the total number of reviews and added an asterisk next to the trigger warning to note the lack of complete data.

Once my data collecting was complete, I averaged the reviews per trigger to see how this average compared with the overall user rating on Goodreads. By doing so, I could see which reviews with trigger-word mentions averaged higher or lower than the overall book average. From here, I aimed to find a trend between specific words and average ratings.

THE TWIST ★ THE DATA & INTERPRETATION

The data I gathered showed mixed results, and I cannot answer clearly whether or not the lack of trigger warnings in horror novels has any effect. Therefore, I must deem the results as inconclusive. No discernible pattern emerged from my data, and the average ratings were seemingly random for each trigger-word. In the way I collected my data, it is impossible to determine whether trigger warnings affect readers' reviews. Some average reviews based on the trigger-words had higher average reviews,

while others had lower. See [Figures 4–8](#) in the appendix.



As my chart shows, the number of times an average review (per book) is higher or lower than the overall book average rating is relatively even. The only real outlier is *death*, which has a much higher rating in the average rating of reviews that mention the term. Other than *death*, the results show mostly a balance between the negative and positive reviews. Even in seemingly clear-cut cases, for example, *child abuse* or *gun violence*, the reviews actually have more positive than negative averages per book.

THE FINAL SCARE ★ CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, I will discuss some of the limitations I came across in my research and some recommendations for further research.

THE FINAL GIRL ★ CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges that I have encountered in my research that should be noted. While collecting data from Goodreads, I realized that only a few readers write reviews,¹¹ which means only a small portion of the readership leave their opinion about a title. This affects research in that if someone is triggered by something within a book, they may discontinue reading and forgo writing a review or mentioning what triggered them in their review. In part, this may be associated with the fact that discussing their triggers may cause negative emotions, or they may not be comfortable discussing their triggers in such a public setting.

Another limitation of my research is the specific terminology upon which I focused. When thinking about the wide variety of terms that can be used instead of the specific terms listed in the trigger warnings by StoryGraph, it would lead to a more accurate count of how trigger warnings are reflected in reviews.¹² Also, the intention behind using a term is not always clear. A reviewer may mention murder or child abduction, but that does not necessarily mean they are speaking about it in the context of a trigger warning and may be merely discussing the plot. This would mean that more time is needed when analyzing reviews, making sure to understand why reviewers use specific terminology—which is vital to understanding the context. With my data-gathering technique, it is

¹¹ For example, as of May 1, 2024, for *Hidden Figures* by Jason Rekulak, only 28,424 out of 258,078 readers wrote a review. This amounts to 11% of readers leaving reviews for this title on Goodreads.

¹² For example, *murder*; one could say homicide, assassination, slaughter, execution, killing; just to name a few.

impossible to know if a review is negative due to a trigger warning when other factors can come into play; perhaps the reviewer simply did not enjoy the characters, plot, or writing style, and happened to mention a trigger warning word in their review.

Bias is also a limitation in my research. Having the trigger-words only available in user-based input creates a bias toward the people who decide to participate in adding triggers and the types of triggers they choose to input. There is also the issue that trigger warnings may be input by people who are not actually being triggered by these events. There is no way of knowing whether these trigger topics are causing people to react negatively. Colbert points out that “what often triggers one individual may not trigger another individual, and that is what makes these triggers concerning to so many” (3). Without a comparison to what the writer or publisher would consider a trigger, or a more formal guideline around claiming something is a trigger, the type and degree of triggers do not have consistency or have a control group. Currently, it can only be safe to assume that the triggers flagged on StoryGraph, while marked with good intent, are not necessarily accurate.

Another issue with user-reported trigger warnings is that readers may be influenced by previously input information. If readers look at what is already marked as a trigger warning, they may agree, instead of deciding based on the reading alone. This means that if a reader sees something they would not necessarily mark as a trigger already flagged, they may be influenced by previous reviewers.

THE KNOW-IT-ALL ★ RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has shown that, as far as the horror genre is concerned, there are solid reasons to utilize or leave out trigger warnings. I believe there needs to be more thorough research done to make any kind of statement about whether trigger warnings should be utilized in horror novels for the purpose of

general consumption. Based on what I learned throughout this process, trigger warnings are best used sparingly and only for significant triggers. However, this paper should be used with caution when studying other genres. One of the tenets of horror is the attempt to unsettle and disturb readers, so it can be argued that the genre itself is a trigger warning. This cannot be said for other genres, which have different aims—a horrific murder in a horror novel is to be expected, but in a romance, it may come as an unwanted shock.

One option for adding trigger warnings into horror novels is to add them to novels in the front matter, where their presence is not distracting or necessarily noticed. Many people skip over the front matter, so the trigger warning information may easily be missed by most general audiences. On the other hand, for those who are affected by triggers, knowing that the information is there—and where to locate it—can be useful. This is taking into account the idea that noting triggers would hopefully help readers prepare themselves for possible triggering moments.

Research in other genres would also be beneficial for this discussion and could possibly shed a clearer picture of trigger warning effects. Contemporary fiction and romance are two genres that often confront triggering moments and do not have the genre-wide warning from which the horror genre benefits. For example, researching the use of trigger warnings in romance when dealing with consent, or more directly rape, may be much more discernable as to whether trigger warnings would be useful.

THE SEQUEL ★ FURTHER RESEARCH

Due to the nature of horror, this genre may not be best suited for a study on trigger warnings as it is rife with triggers. That is unless researchers can delve deeply into the content with a sharper focus and more detailed parameters. If researching a different genre, it may be easier to find results on a

surface-level examination of whether trigger warnings mentioned in StoryGraph would affect reviews on Goodreads.

Looking closely at the context of reviews, widening the scope of how many reviews are examined, and extending the terminology list to include synonyms of the trigger warning terms would be one way to continue research within the horror genre. Alternatively, comparing this research to other genres could produce interesting results and provide a clearer understanding of how these results can be interpreted.

DEUS EX MACHINA ★ CONCLUSIONS

Through my research, I have found the limitations and benefits of utilizing trigger warnings. In a genre meant to explore the depths of fear and all things that go bump in the night, horror seemed like an excellent choice for exploring the potential benefits of trigger warnings. I aimed to discover if trigger warnings could be a valuable tool in navigating horror—opening up the genre to people with specific triggers. Instead, I've come to discover that there are severe limitations to using trigger warnings within the genre.

As far as using trigger-words to analyze how those triggers affect reviews, I found this difficult to gauge with the level of research at my disposal. The words used for trigger warnings can often be used in a context outside of discussing triggers—used merely to mention a plot point or feature of the story. Unfortunately, for this study, the inability to easily gauge if a term is used in reference to triggers makes it difficult to accurately ascertain whether the lack of a warning affects the novel's rating. One

would have to read the context of each review to understand the usage, and even after such security, it would still be up for interpretation.

On the other hand, trigger warnings are valuable when used properly. There is a section of the population who are affected by triggers in novels, and there are likely a number of readers who would feel more comfortable picking up a horror novel if they knew that their specific triggers were not in the novel of interest. Subtle notation could be a useful tool to help those readers navigate an otherwise inaccessible genre. Whether or not giving readers the opportunity to opt out of a book instead of confronting their triggers is a debate for another paper, but the value is there for general audiences. Yet, I would recommend that if trigger warnings are to be added to horror novels, they should be used sparingly and with serious consideration for the parameters around their use.

The fear of censorship is also a significant topic to discuss and should be carefully considered. The discord around including trigger warnings as a means of censorship is important. Yet, as Hills points out, “Horror fans may well oppose censorship, but they are also semiotically and subculturally indebted to it” (92). So the question then remains unanswered: would horror benefit from trigger warnings?

APPENDIX ★ GRAPHS & CHARTS

My information consists of two parts, the general data gathering, and the charts I created from the gathered data for a visual representation of my findings.

CHART OF BOOKS

This chart shows the top three books in the Goodreads' Choice Awards for the stated year and are in order (top to bottom) of their ranking. The title and author's name are shown for each book analyzed.

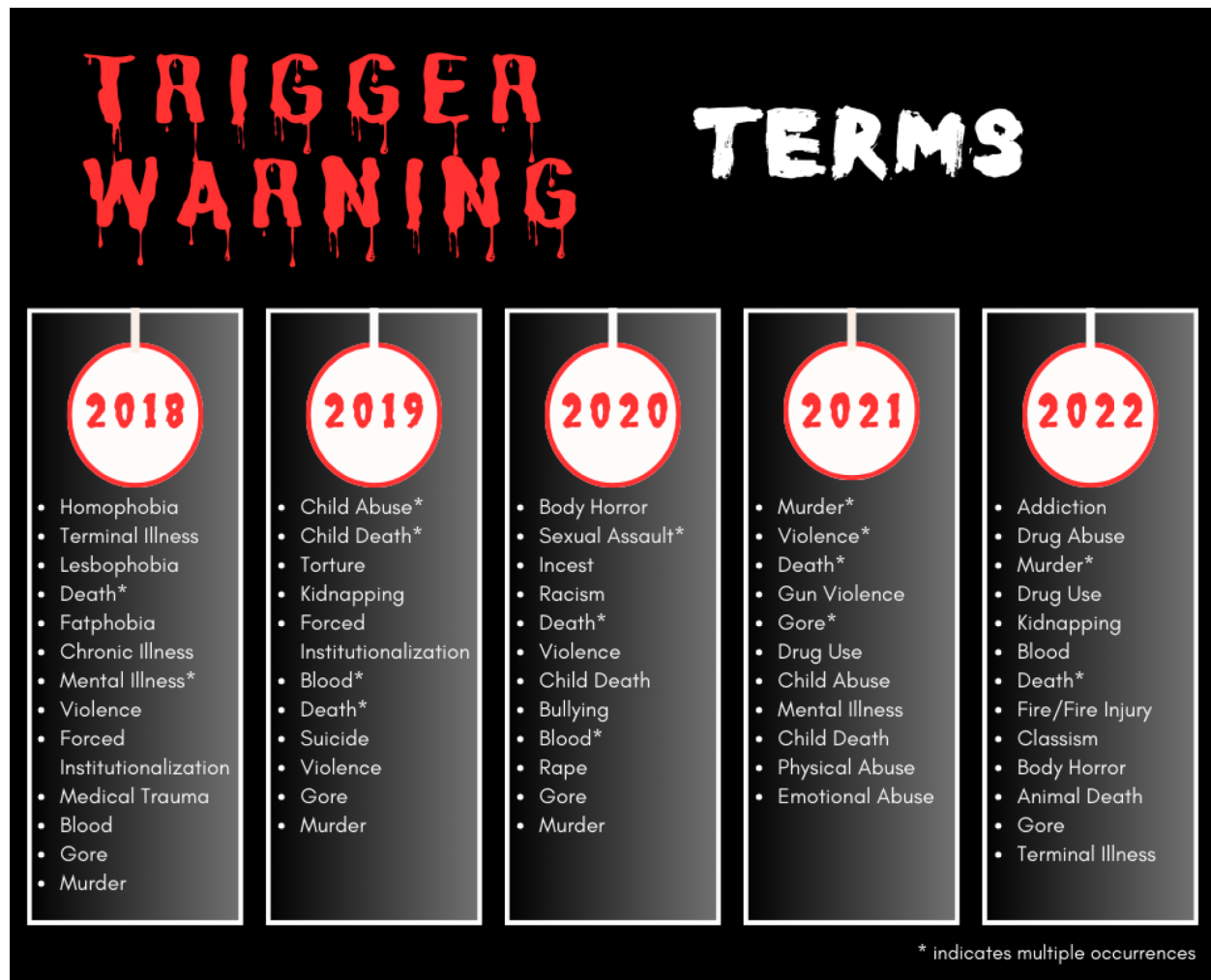
FIGURE 1

TRIGGER WARNINGS BOOK TITLES				
2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>Elevation</i> Stephen King	<i>The Institute</i> Stephen King	<i>Mexican Gothic</i> Silvia Moreno-Garcia	<i>The Final Girl Support Group</i> Grady Hendrix	<i>Hidden Pictures</i> Jason Rekulak
<i>Baby Teeth</i> Zoje Stage	<i>Imaginary Friend</i> Stephen Chbosky	<i>If it Bleeds</i> Stephen King	<i>Later</i> Stephen King	<i>The Hacienda</i> Isabel Cañas
<i>Dracul</i> Dacre Stoker & J. D. Baker	<i>The Girl in Red</i> Christina Henry	<i>The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires</i> Grady Hendrix	<i>The Last House on Needless Street</i> Catriona Ward	<i>What Moves the Dead</i> T. Kingfisher

CHART OF TRIGGER WARNINGS

This chart lists the top 5 triggers for each of the above-listed books by year. Repeats are consolidated and each additional instance is marked with an asterisk (*).

FIGURE 2



DATA COLLECTION SPREADSHEET

My spreadsheets compiled the average rating from both Goodreads and StoryGraph, the trigger warnings, the number of Goodreads reviews that mention the trigger-word, and the average rating of each trigger warning in comparison to the overall rating.

FIGURE 3

2022				2021			
Hidden Pictures - Jason Rekulak				The Final Girl Support Group - Grady Hendrix			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating	Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
4.14	Addiction	441	3.93	3.53	Murder	531	4.10
Storygraph Average Rating	Drug Abuse	594	3.70	Storygraph Average Rating	Violence	682	3.87
4.04	Murder	537	3.93	3.57	Death	301	4.00
Ratings	Drug Use	777	3.57	Ratings	Gun violence	722	3.87
176549	Kidnapping	82	3.07	119124	Gore	413	3.80
Reviews				Reviews			
20738				17647			
The Hacienda - Isabel Cañas				Later - Stephen King			
Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating	Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.84	Murder	118	3.77	3.98	Death	172	4.17
Storygraph Average Rating	Blood	93	3.63	Storygraph Average Rating	Gore	109	3.90
3.91	Death	138	3.73	3.87	Drug Use	383	4.07
Ratings	Fire/Fire Injury	38	3.80	Ratings	Murder	62	4.20
35188	Classism	56	3.83	118905	Violence	28	3.64
Reviews				Reviews			
5738				13333			
What Moves the Dead - T. Kingfisher				The Last House on Needless Street - Catriona Ward			
Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating	Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.92	Body horror	2230	4.50	3.86	Child Abuse	949	4.60
Storygraph Average Rating	Animal Death	238	4.20	Storygraph Average Rating	Mental Illness	746	3.73
3.98	Death	190	4.20	3.94	Child Death	765	4.53
Ratings	Gore	75	4.10	Ratings	Physical abuse	709	3.97
44990	Terminal Illness	149	4.30	82726	emotional abuse	788	4.13
Reviews				Reviews			
8128				14719			

2020				2019			
Mexican Gothic - Silvia Moreno-Garcia				The Institute - Stephen King			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating	Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.68	Body horror	11150	4.37	4.2	Child abuse	1015	4.20
Storygraph Average Rating	Sexual Assault	1123	4.20	Storygraph Average Rating	Child death	977	4.17
3.8	Incest	981	4.23	4.1	Torture	322	3.67
Ratings	Racism	945	4.43	Ratings	Kidnapping	209	4.20
325703	Death	357	4.37	252218	Forced institutionaliza	216	3.50
Reviews				Reviews			
47325				25219			
If It Bleeds - Stephen King				Imaginary Friend - Stephen Chbosky			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating	Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.99	Violence	14	3.93	3.54	Child Abuse	364	3.47
Storygraph Average Rating	Child Death	283	4.10	Storygraph Average Rating	Child Death	372	3.53
3.87	Bullying	7	3.14	3.47	Blood	47	3.03
Ratings	Death	248	4.07	Ratings	Death	103	3.60
87007	Blood	23	4.26	48778	Suicide	60	3.37
Reviews				Reviews			
9714				10117			
The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires - Grady Hendrix				The Girl in Red - Christina Henry			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating	Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.81	Rape	1016	3.80	3.71	Violence	58	3.33
Storygraph Average Rating	Gore	1825	4.23	Storygraph Average Rating	Gore	60	3.53
3.81	Blood	1140	3.87	3.69	Death	93	3.83
Ratings	Sexual Assault	1131	3.67	Ratings	Blood	42	3.07
195552	Murder	472	4.03	14765	Murder	15	3.20
Reviews				Reviews			
29684				2746			

2018			
Elevation - Stephen King			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.65	Homophobia	100	3.30
Storygraph Average Rating	Terminal Illness	106	3.30
3.46	Lesbophobia	2	4.50
Ratings	Death	206	3.90
127737	Fatphobia	3	1.67
Reviews			
15111			
Baby Teeth - Zoje Stage			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
3.61	Chronic Illness	447	3.80
Storygraph Average Rating	Mental Illness	671	3.47
3.5	Violence	109	3.40
Ratings	Forced Institutionaliza	91	3.30
65223	Medical trauma	197	3.87
Reviews			
10775			
Dracul - Dacre Stoker & J.D. Barker			
Goodreads Average Rating	Storygraph Triggers Top 5 Graphic	Goodreads Mentions	Avg. Rating
4.14	Blood	85	4.27
Storygraph Average Rating	Gore	36	4.03
4.01	Death	68	4.50
Ratings	Mental Illness	58	4.30
14763	Murder	5	4.00
Reviews			
2700			

AVERAGE RATING COMPARISON CHARTS, BY THE BOOKS

These charts show the average rating of each book in comparison to each of the top five triggers mentioned for each book. Green indicates the average rating of reviews using the trigger-word are higher than the overall average rating and red indicates the average rating of the reviews using the trigger-word are lower than the overall average.

If a trigger warning has an asterisk(*) next to the word, there were not 30 reviews that mention the trigger-word and the average is taken from a lesser number of reviews.

The book's overall average is shown in white; golds indicate reviews with higher averages, and reds indicate reviews with lower averages.

FIGURE 4 – 2018

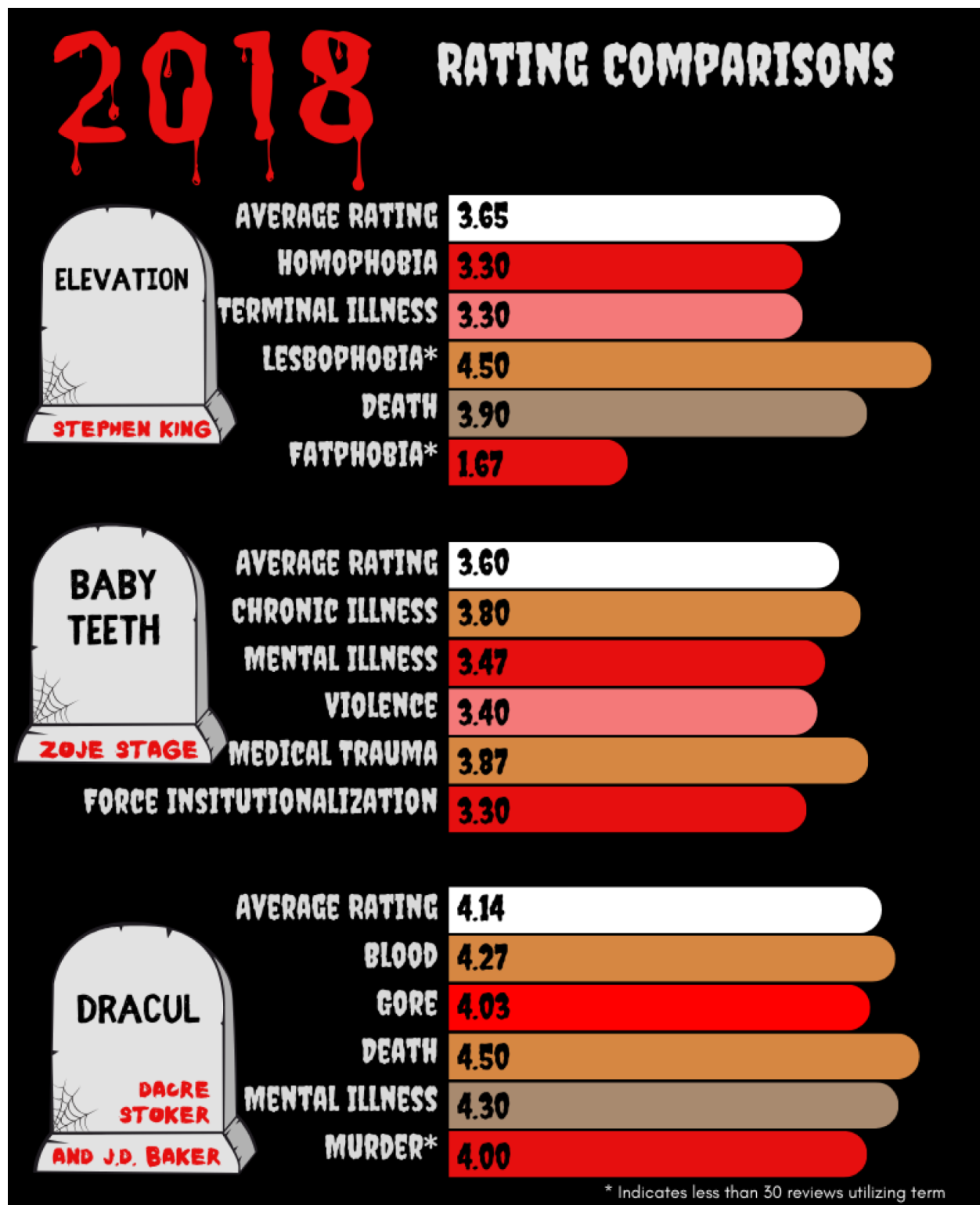


FIGURE 5 – 2019

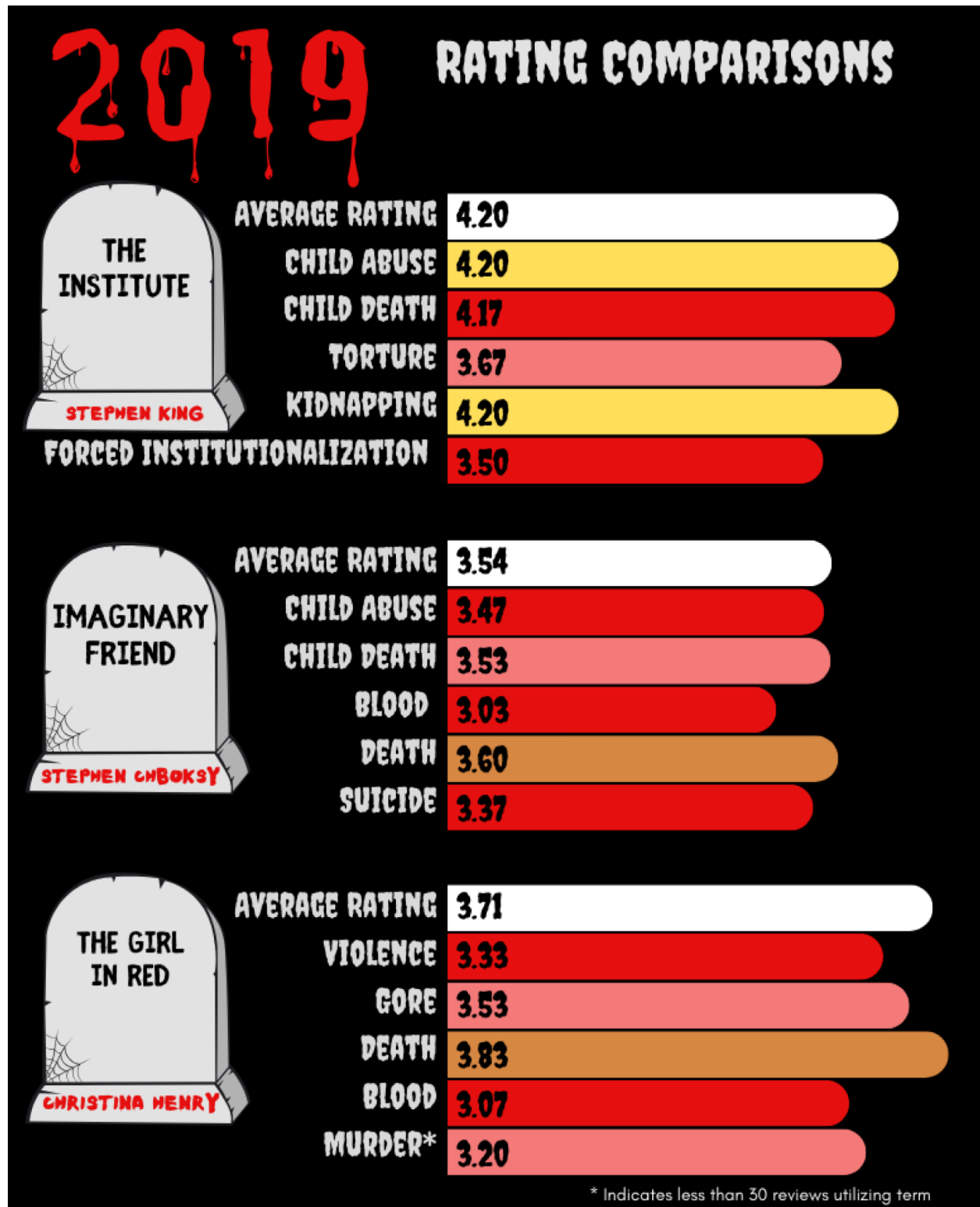


FIGURE 6 – 2020

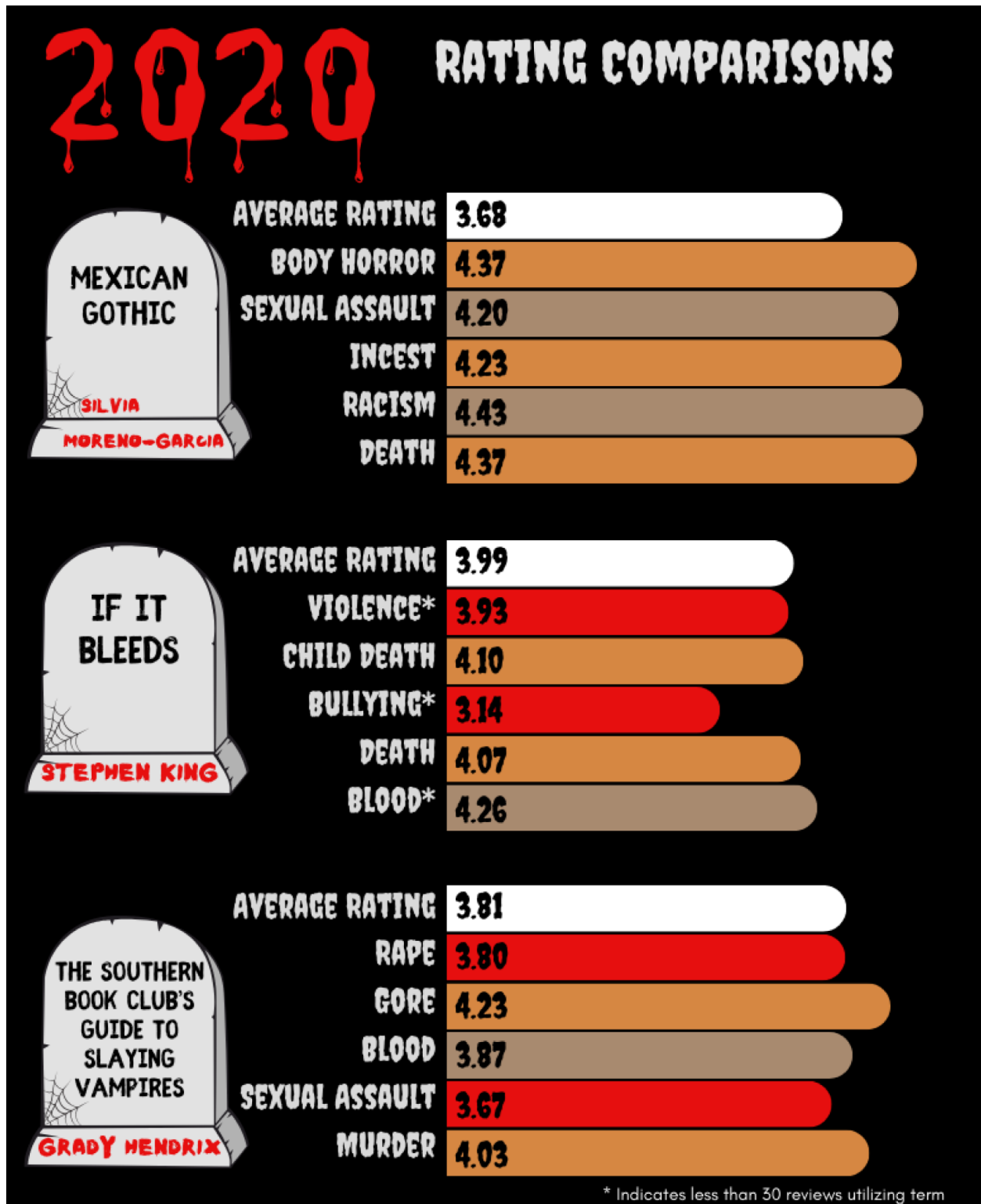


FIGURE 7 – 2021

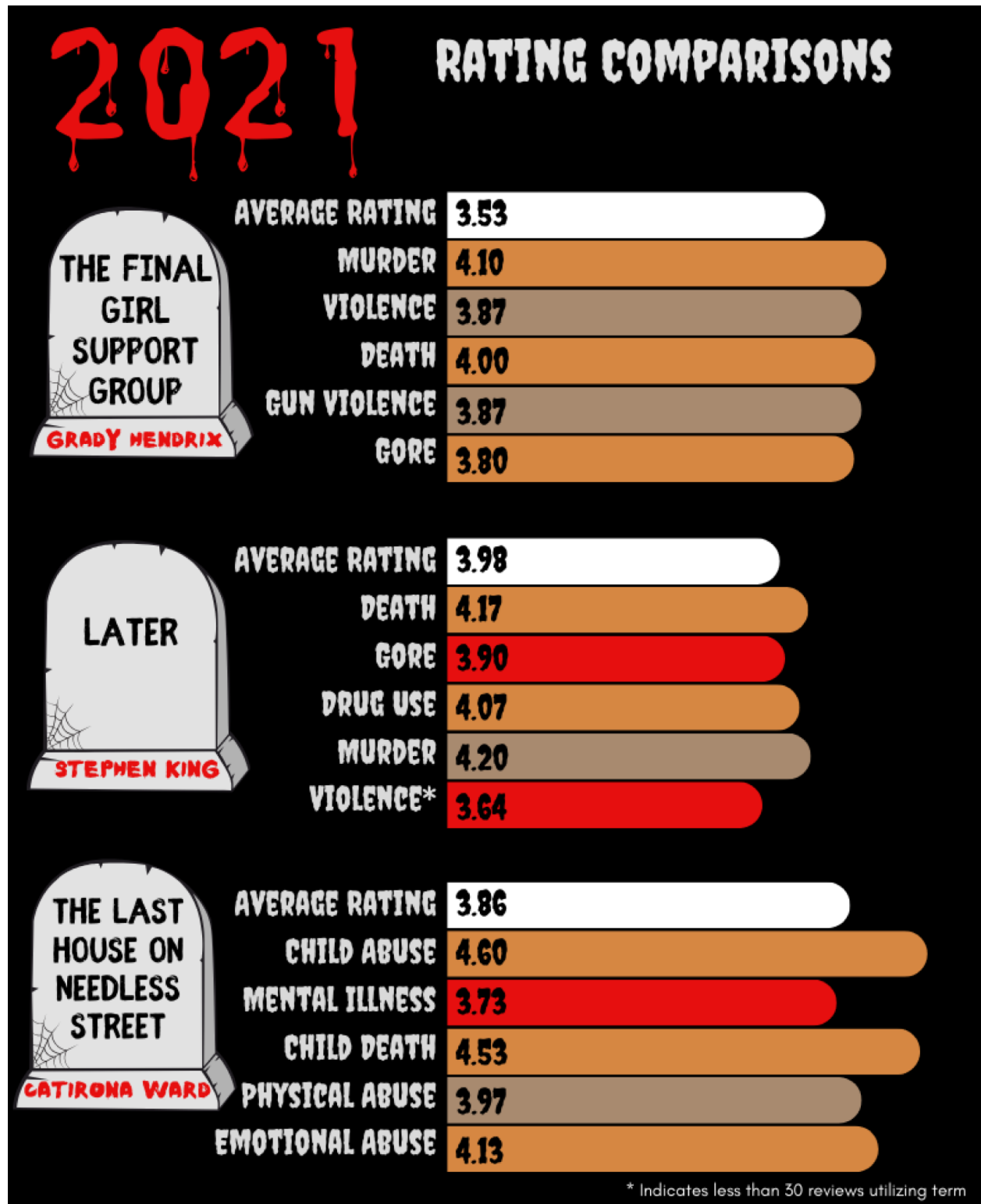
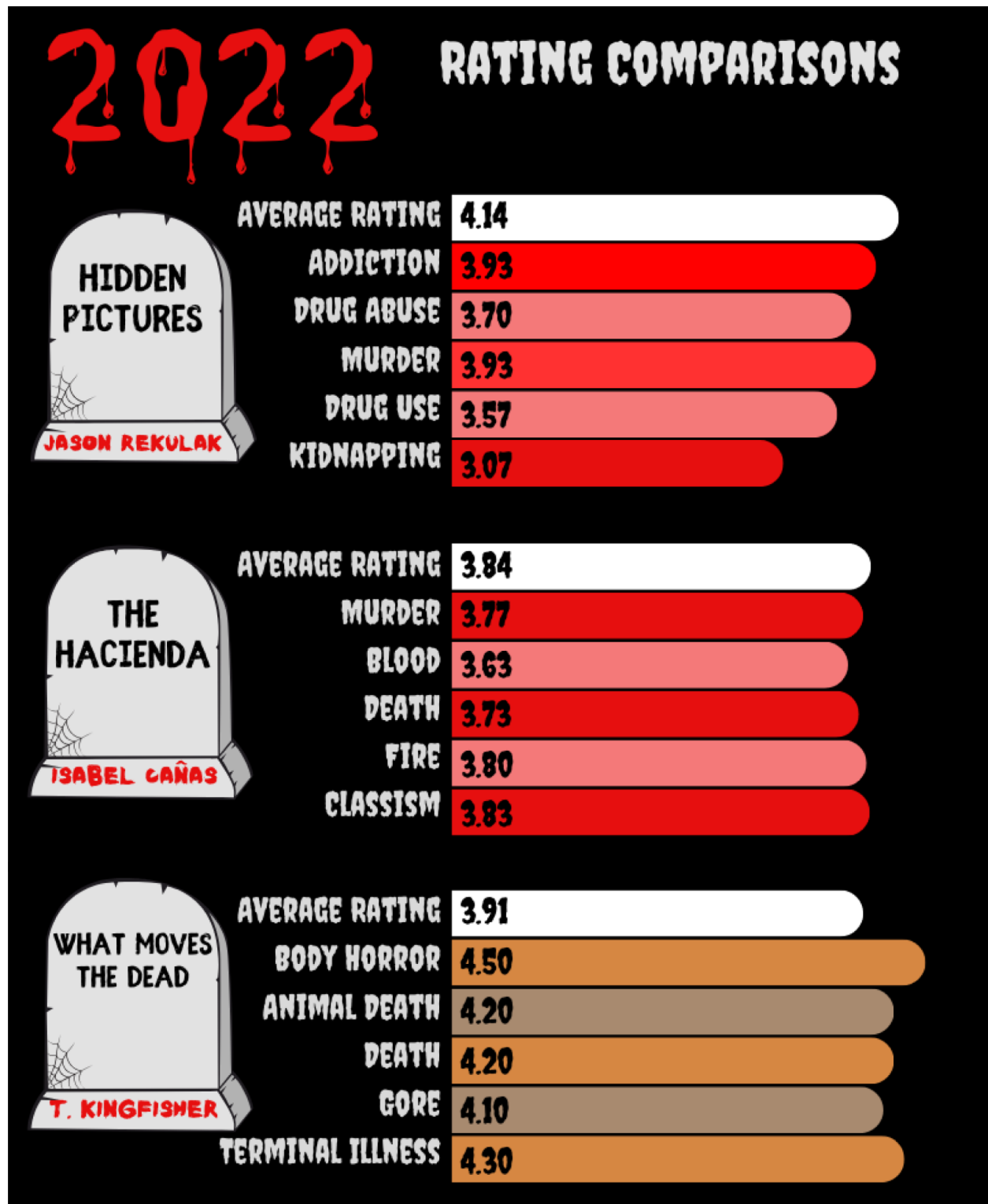


FIGURE 8 – 2022



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