



Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic

Peter Kafer

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In 1798, a decade after the Founding Fathers created a nation based on the principles of liberty and equality, Charles Brockden Brown, then an unknown Philadelphia writer, invented the American Gothic novel. His first book, *Wieland*, is the story of a religious fanatic haunted by demonic voices instructing him to murder his wife and children; in subsequent works, a young country bumpkin confronts the depravities of city existence, an impecunious daughter becomes the erotic obsession of an insane egomaniacal rationalist, and a sleepwalker awakes to—and participates in—the extremes of frontier savagery. How could a glorious age of American history also give rise to the darkest of literary traditions, one that would inspire Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen King, and many other best-selling American writers?

In *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic*, Peter Kafer carefully unravels the mystery of what compelled this pious Philadelphia Quaker to become fascinated with a peculiar form of dark European imagery and transform it into something wholly American. In the new nation, Kafer notes, there were no ancient monasteries, no haunted castles, no hierarchies of nobility to draw upon. Taking inspiration instead from his pacifist family's persecution at the hands of the American Revolutionaries, including the likes of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, as well as from perverse expressions of European-American Protestantism and the suppressed histories of his native Pennsylvania, Brockden Brown wrote of the horrors that lurked below the triumphant veneer of the young American republic. In doing so, he became the literary conscience of his generation.

Written with a witty and acutely critical eye, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic* illuminates the social and political influences on the nation's first professional novelist and reveals the surprising origins of one of American literature's most popular and enduring genres.

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