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Hobgoblin by John Coyne is a 1981 book about Scott Gardiner, a teenaged boy who becomes obsessed with "Hobgoblin," a fantasy roleplaying game based on Irish mythology, as his life in the game & in reality slowly blend.

Like the contemporary *Mazes & Monsters*, this is a species of problem novel (alho not aimed at young adult readers) by an established writer, which treats the playing of roleplaying games as indicative of deep neurotic needs. In both books, the protagonist is, or at least appears to be, suffering from schizophrenia or some analogous condition; in both books, the attainment of mature adulthood is accompanied by the abandonment of roleplaying games. Like the Jaffe book, this was published at the height of *Dungeons & Dragons*' popularity & soon after the intense media coverage of the Egbert steam tunnel incident (urban myths wherein roleplaying gamers enacting live action role-playing games perish, often in the utility tunnels below their university campuses).

Hobgoblin Details

Date : Published October 1st 1990 by Warner Books (NY) (first published 1981)

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Author : John Coyne

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From Reader Review Hobgoblin for online ebook

Travis says

Found a copy in a box of books that were going to the used bookstore. After I read this I realized why my extended family was so concerned that I played role playing games as a child. If this book was what they thought happened when you played role playing games, I probably would have been concerned too.

The unfortunate part of this book is the inconsistency. Characters know information that has never come up prior to the scene they need the information and the information will stop being important to them once the scene ends. The subplots escalate faster than needed while the overall plot stops and starts. The rate at which time is passing is difficult to judge. I can understand why it was in the box to go to the used bookstore.

Fred says

One of my all-time favs.(also one of only a few titles that I own multiple copies of.) If you're a RPG gamer I highly recommend this book. This book also set me on a quest to find out more about Brian Boru. As I write this I'm tempted to dig it out and re-read it.

Jeff says

A book full of stupid people doing stupid things.

Keleigh says

My number one fav book EVER! I would read this over and over, in fact, you'll have to excuse me, I'm going to go read it now.

Frank says

So after reading Mazes and Monsters, I struggled with this book. It deserves a 1/5 but it's not absolutely worthless. It's not crap, the characters have a small amount of depth, but the ending is weak, and the story fails. The motivation of the characters is poor, but at least there's motivation rather than "I rather sleep with X instead of Y and Y is ok with it".

The book starts with Scott Gardiner, a character already starting to show psychological problems (though he hides them from others). He loses his dad and his favorite "Hobgoblin" character on the same day, and likes to be called Brian Boru when he can, as that's his character's name. But again he hides this, it's not like he's going around school pretending to be him, though he jumps to that as escapism. And in fact Scott Gardiner as a character is good. He's a ball of emotion that is kind of all over the place, but the fact is, he's a believable character, he lost his dad, his mom is also going through that, and at least at the beginning he's suicidal, unfortunately that story disappears quickly, but all in all he's interesting.

As for the other characters of the book, most are flawed, and not in the tragic way, but in the poor writing. The mother starts off as just a mom, trying to do right by her son, but instead kind of turns hornball, and then not, and then back and then not. The mom is a poor character, she neglects a lot of warning signs but all in all, she's acceptable but only because of Valerie.

So Valerie, she's the girl who likes Scott because he's aloof, and different. She gives Bella Swan a run for her money, except, Bella Swan actually has some depth and a case can be made for her. Valerie, not so much. There's two incidents that come up. The first one she finds one character bleeding out from suicide, after a suicide attempt, he holds her down, climbs over her, is a dick to her, and rude almost constantly (at least in her words). The other has two people who strips her naked and leaves her tied and blindfolded on a gravestone. Now how many of these people get in trouble?

Answer? One becomes her boyfriend, and the others get off free, in fact planning another attack and this isn't internalized, she actually tells two adults of the stripping and bondage, and two adults somehow don't go to the police. Even her becoming the girlfriend of Scott, just doesn't work. The author needed a love interest and forced her into being it, ignoring what Scott is doing to Valerie.

The rest of the book has the typical cast, of course at the core of a story about a nerd and a clearly disturbed girl are two jocks. 80s style jocks who go to far, are treated like stars, and should be institutionalized but the fact is John Coyne somehow makes them even more unlikable than the normal stereotype.

There actually is a very interesting board game included as part of the game, a bit like D&D meeting a card game, and for 1980, it was pretty interesting, I actually wouldn't mind trying to play a game like it, because it sounds unique. A bit complicated, but unique.

As for the story, it's acceptable, it's not great. But it works for the most part until the end. The problem is the end is the book tells the wrong story. Scott/Brian shout out a few time that he wants to murder "all of them", he's clearly unstable, and imagines people as monsters more than once. The kids make fun of his board game, and really dig in. Homicidal rage is understandable, and clearly detailed and honestly you can understand the pain of Scott....

Now because logic just flew out the door at some point in the book, his girlfriend decides to throw a costume party for prom at an old castle that Scott lives at with all the characters dressing up like Hobgoblin characters (think D&D with an Irish slant). So kids were making fun of Hobgoblin just 10 pages before this, and somehow they all are going to dress up like this. Why? To reach out to a kid who said in class "I'm going to kill all of you" or something like that.. And no this isn't trying to twist the story into a contrived shell, this is what actually happens in the book.

So now take a moment, and think "how does this story end"? Columbine? Carrie? Something equally gruesome?

What ever you imagined is a hundred and fifty times better than how the book handles it. It takes the entire story it generated and just throws it away. I applaud it for not trying to make magic real, but at the same time the final parts of the book come out of nowhere, there is some gruesome parts, but it's unbelievable, and worse. The ending just stops. The bad guy is killed, and the book just stops. No aftermath, no questions, just "well his head was crushed". There's a 2 page epilogue, a note written from Scott to Valerie, that doesn't even attempt to explain the million questions everyone at the party would have had. The book just ends.

The real problem of the book is it was written in 1980 and written by someone who probably has never met a woman. The female characters were poor, and Valerie was insultingly bad. The story was well built outside of Valerie until the book decided to just give up and jump to a quick ending. It screams of a rushed ending because everything was aiming for another story. And while Columbine was still over 20 years later, the

movie Carrie had come out 4 years before this, and yet instead of a solid and believable ending, the book decides to ignore the obvious warning signs of the main character, and just deliver some crap that makes the reader wonder, why were these characters flaws even built. They aren't interesting flaws, they aren't good character development. The only thing I can think is either the publisher didn't want the original ending, or two different books were written and were slapped together.

The books story is bad and on it's own it probably could have survived, but when almost every character is unlikable, and you have just horrible writing, there's no forgiving that. The only reason this book gets a 2 from me is there's far worse books (*Mazes and Monsters* for one). And as this book was also based on the James Dallas Egbert incident, there's a valid point in comparing the two of them. But realize the 2/5 is only because "I found a book that's so bad this book should be rated a little higher"

Justin says

I want to preface this review by saying I knew exactly what to expect, when I saw this book at a book sale for my local library: a completely overblown cautionary tale about how "evil role-playing games" are corrupting our nation's youth, while completely ignoring the other, unrelated factors that might be screwing up these kids' lives. So, a ripoff, print version of the old Tom Hanks movie, *Mazes & Monsters* in other words. And that's what we get...for the most part. There's also a heaping helping of unlikable characters, inconsistent characterization, unexplained plot developments, and incoherence in the structure of the RPG that Coyne dreamt up for this book.

Let's start with the characters. When our "protagonist," Scott's father dies in the opening chapter of the book (it's early enough that I can't consider it a spoiler), and he's forced to go to a new school in a new state, you'd think that Coyne was setting him up to be a sympathetic character. Then we get a scene of him in the woods by his new home (a guest house by a **castle** naturally, but I'll get to that), trying to shoot squirrels with a slingshot, because he thinks they're evil forest spirits. I should mention that Scott is in his late teens. I've lost a parent myself, and I know how traumatic it is, but for crying out loud, kid, those squirrels never did anything to you!

And Scott only continues to be an asshole throughout the rest of the book: He goes on paragraphs-long rants about *Hobgoblin* (the fantasy RPG in question), in excruciating technical detail, to people who have no exposure to it, and gets mad when they get disinterested. I personally *enjoy* RPGs, but at one point in the job where I used to work, I had a guy just decide one day to regale me with unsolicited stories from his campaign for over an hour. Even I got sick of that crap, and I can only imagine the reaction from someone with no pre-existing interest in such things. He also runs the wrong way in a football game to get revenge on some jocks who were bullying him (somehow scoring a touchdown for the other team, despite the fact that's not how football works--unless he fumbled the ball and the other team retrieved it in the end zone, the worst that his team could have suffered was a safety), hits a teacher at one point, and assaults the girl who's interested in him (for some unfathomable reason), not once, but multiple times. A real sympathetic chap, this Scott.

Let's talk about her for a bit, shall we? Valerie is interested in Scott because...he's tall? And openly hostile to everyone around him? And his locker is right next to hers? It's got to be one of those things, because those are his only defining characteristics based on her interactions with him. But for whatever reason, Val thinks she can "fix" Scott, so she keeps dogging along after him, even after he threatens her in his car ("I'm going to beat the shit out of you."), physically assaults her, **with a sword**, and at one point, clumsily tries to rape her. Sure, Valerie acts affronted immediately afterwards, but within a couple of pages, she's always back to trailing after him like a homesick puppy. And really, most of the male characters in this book are

uncomfortably rapey: from Scott, to the aforementioned jocks, to Derek, the boss and way too forward love interest for Scott's mom (I guess sexual harassment in the workplace was a foreign concept in the '80s), to things we learn about some of the other side characters. It's...rather disturbing, actually.

I could be here all day if I were to talk about all the side characters, so I'll move on to the inconsistent characterization. Take Scott, himself: Besides going back and forth from seeming to understand *Hobgoblin* is just a game, to literally seeing the world through the eyes of his character, he's downright schizophrenic in his dealings with people. He goes from seeing his mother as some kind of monster that he'd be better off without, to trying to commit suicide because he doesn't want to be a burden to her. Plus, he'll be almost pleasant at times, then fly off the handle at the slightest provocation, and there never seems to be any rationale as to what will set him off. We've already covered Val, and her complete lack of a sense of self-preservation, but in the interests of space, believe me when I say most of the other characters are no better.

The plot itself is one of the biggest problems with *Hobgoblin*, however. So, an eccentric, turn-of-the-century millionaire imported an entire castle from Ireland, stocked it with all sorts of European armor and weaponry, and somehow survived the Great Depression with all his fortune intact. (view spoiler) There are rampant cases of assault (physical and sexual) in the school and outlying community where Scott & his mother have moved to, and nothing ever gets done about it. Hell, people die at the end of this book, and we're never even informed of the consequences of any of that. And there are a bunch of little things that make me wonder if the author was even paying attention, like Scott's mother saying she enjoyed the quiet of the castle where she works as an archivist/historian, after all the tourists and workers have gone home--then a page or two later, she's feeling creeped out, because she's apparently never been alone in the castle before. It's a mess.

And finally, we come to the game of *Hobgoblin* itself. A game where multiplying numbers together is, and I quote, "...harder than homework." (I know American public schools are pretty terrible, but come *on!*) It's part of the framework of the story, yet I get the impression the author had no idea what would make a game like this fun...or that he even understood how dice work. Case in point, apparently to tell whether you hit something in combat, you roll three "pyramid dice," which I assume are 4-sided dice, with a triangle as each side. This somehow gets you a percentage result, with an added decimal point--and you can somehow roll over 100%. On three dice, presumably with sides numbered 1-4. There aren't even enough dice to *get* four decimal places' (hundreds, tens, ones, tenths) worth of numbers, regardless of how many sides they have! Or how about when someone rolls a 9 on a "cube die"? Cubes have six sides, and there's no mention of the number having been modified. Finally, to determine what adventure the "Dealer" (because of course the person running the game is a "Dealer" in this. Real subtle.), sends people on, he rolls two "cube dice," and consults a table. That's it. No creativity, no making your own stories, just 11 pre-determined adventures for this "epic" game. (11, because while 2 six-sided dice can add up to a max of 12, you can't roll a total of 1 on two dice.)

This may seem minor, but again, it's a core part of the story (for better or worse). And I know the early '80s were still the formative years for tabletop RPGs, but dice haven't magically started working differently since those days. *Hobgoblin* as a game is incoherent. *Hobgoblin* as a book is...harder to pin down. It's terrible, to be sure, for all the reasons listed above, but is it the right *kind* of terrible? That is to say, is *Hobgoblin* more *Mystery Science Theater 3000* or something directed by *Uwe Boll*? Ultimately, it's somewhere in between. There are certainly parts that are laughably bad, but they're undercut by scenes that just made me uncomfortable (how many times did Valerie almost get raped?). The demonizing of tabletop RPGs was certainly there, but not quite as overwhelming as I'd expected it to be--and I almost think the book would have been more entertaining if Coyne had gone the full-on, Bible-thumping, "We have to protect the **children!**" route.

In other words, despite everything I've said, *Hobgoblin* isn't as bad as I thought it would be. And that actually kind of acts to its detriment.

Julian says

I read this book when I was vaguely a teenager. At the time I was still in the throes of intensive Dungeon and Dragoning, and this book is about a roll playing game acted out in reality, which with spectacularly failed results my friends and I also attempted. I'd love to read this again, as at the time I found this book both scary and sexy. The characters were real people (vs. Lolth, the wicked spider queen of the drow elves for example) and their actions were realistic to me. Despite a good 20 years having passed since I read this, in my mind's eye I can still see a number of the scenes played out in this book with a good deal of clarity. Anyone got a copy?

Okay, I reread this. I just dropped it from 4 stars to one. It sucks. It's god awful. What a disappointment. The lesson is, *do not reread books from your adolescents.*

Andrew Horton says

Legitimately creepy YA novel about a Dungeons and Dragons-esque role-playing game that comes to life. Written in the early eighties at the height of D&D's popularity and growing parental concern, this goes straight for the supernatural. Still holds up well in spite of some clunky prose and occasional melodrama. A preteen favorite of mine.

Grady Hendrix says

Meet Scott Gardiner, exactly the kind of kid everyone warns us is vulnerable to the lurid lure of RPGs: brilliant, creative, socially awkward, and WITH A DEAD FATHER OMG NO THIS KID IS DOOMED. Scott is obsessed (OBSESSED I TELL YOU!) with a truly terrible RPG called *Hobgoblin*. One part RPG, one part *Magic: The Gathering*, it's based on Celtic mythology so it's full of unfortunate character names like "Boobach" and questionable spells like "fairy vision." Players speak in fraught, reverent tones ("The dice? Oh, God, Gardiner, no! It's too risky.") and, in a deeply unrealistic touch, Scott is wildly popular after introducing this role-playing monstrosity to Spencertown, his fancy boarding school. But he's not attending some fancy boarding school anymore. After his dad died (while Scott was playing *Hobgoblin!!!!!!!!!!!!*) he got sent to public school where his skill as the 25th level paladin, Brian Boru, doesn't make him an object of admiration, it makes him a creep.

Read the rest of this review.

Menion says

Actual rating: 3.5 stars.

This book was a pleasant surprise, especially seeing as I didn't think was all that great. This one is much better on all fronts: better plot, better characters, better writing, better plot twists.

I don't feel like doing the RDCV of the plot tonight, so here's what works and what doesn't. First of all, the

plot was a damn good one, and it kept you guessing. Quite often, the people (or are they?) that are living in the woods and causing trouble, it was really an unknown if they were actual human beings, or legendary creatures out of Irish folklore. The author did a great job on that part, I didn't know for sure what they were till he spilled the beans in the end. Well done! The writing was also better this time, it actually had a bit of genuine creep factor. One of the best scenes was the one in the graveyard with Valerie, that one had me on the edge of my seat.

Again, the plot had a good deal of twists and turns. You will be guessing right up until the end who is on the side of right, and Coyne did kill off one or two of the main characters that you expected to live. That's always a sign of good writing to me, not being afraid to whack some of the favorite characters. Also, the plot isn't just all about the castle and the creatures (or are they?) that inhabit the woods. There is plenty of plot involving the main character, Scott, and his troubles at his new school. It's a necessary thread, it ties into the main one quite nicely towards the end. It also gave you a break from the main plot line, and it was just as intriguing as the primary story thread.

My only grump was I thought a little more detail could have been used to tie up the story at the end. You didn't get any explanation for how some of the characters came to be at all, and that made it a bit confusing. That's the only change I would liked to have seen, the epilogue felt rushed and lacking in the needed information to tie the whole story up.

Overall, a pleasant surprise and a page turner from John Coyne, I'm glad I took a flier on this one.

Sean Grigsby says

I have to give this one 4 stars for keeping my interest and drawing me in. It didn't end how I thought it would, but I was still satisfied. And if the book was meant to warn away from fantasy RPG's, it had the opposite effect.

Jimbo says

story about a kid that is into playing a fantsay role playing game. he also is a misfit, and then bad stuff starts happening as his mother start digging away at the history of a castle. it was a bit creepy, but not scary. written pretty well, but got a little predictable towards the end. not a bad book at all.

Vezlandia Day says

I first got this book in high school. It's about a kid who has this totally kick ass 'dungeons and dragons' character. He moves to a castle with his mom who does historical preservation work or something like that. You guessed it, weird things start happening. He has to battle the things that become real...or are they? I will probably read this book 5 more time before I kick the bucket. There's just something about it...

Vomithatsteve says

This is a book about fantasy role-playing games from the early '80s. The question here isn't "is this a good book." The question is "is this book *hilariously* bad or not? The answer is, unfortunately, not particularly.

The main character is the standard cliché for this genre: a misunderstood teen who plays RPGs and has trouble distinguishing the game from reality. However, where other examples of this genre would usually make him likeable, Coyne doesn't bother. The character acts like a jerk (especially to the people who are nice to him), tries to kill himself multiple times, and swears like a 12-year-old on Xbox live.

There are FAR more adult situations than are called for in a book like this. (How many people need to grope the same teenage girl? Apparently 5.)

There were a few parts that qualified as hilariously bad. (The line "The boy was queer... but it wasn't God who touched him." means something *wholly* different now than it did in 1981!)

The one thing the book does well is maintain an air of mystery about whether or not the titular hobgoblins are real. You're not really sure if there are going to be monsters at the end of the book or just scary people until you get there.

Ultimately, I don't resent the \$.25 or time I spent on this book, but I'm probably not going to read it again.

David says

Another book I read as a teenager. This was a schlock, sensational novel written back when Dungeons & Dragons (and the associated mania surrounding it) was just becoming a big thing. The protagonist is a teenager obsessed with a D&D-style roleplaying game, to the point that he over-identifies with his character. The plot is almost like Jack Chick's "Dark Dungeons," minus the Christianity... and the humor.

Despite that, I gave it 2 stars instead of the 1 it probably deserves because I do remember enjoying it (though even as a teenager I recognized that it was a pretty crappy novel). Also, the one thing the writer did do well was preserve the mystery about the "hobgoblins" -- I didn't know until the very end whether or not we were actually going to see supernatural creatures.
