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The shadowy front door beckons, a gaping maw of mystery that simply must be explored. Though foreboding, it lures hordes of frail mortals who approach with timid steps, hands outstretched in the darkness as if to fend off the fright.

Yet it comes. Ghouls shriek and leap from mossy mausoleum walls, shrouded ghosts linger and lurk in a ramshackle seance room, eviscerated bodies litter the walkway. Soon, even the burliest, toughest of men are squealing like infants and covering behind their girlfriends.

And then emerges the most horrifying, astonishing thing of all:

"They come out and say, 'Let's go again!' " said Kathryn Cobbs, show director of the Frigh Nights Halloween extravaganza at the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, a 45-minute maze -- one of the longest in the country -- overrun with all things morbid, monstrous and macabre. It draws thousands of victims -- make that visitors -- every year.



It's downright scary that so many of us actually want to be scared, at least in controlled environments. We seek out fright and fear and ghosts and gore: fake blood and brain matter spattered on the walls in haunted attractions at amusement parks, or psychotic killers slicing off limbs in slasher flicks galore.

And we pay for this stuff. Fear is a booming business, a \$300 million industry for professional haunted houses, says Patrick Konopelski, president of the Haunted Attractions Association. In addition, Americans spend billions more on Halloween costumes, decor and movies, according to the National Retail Federation.

So what is it that draws us so dramatically to the dark side?

"It does seem counterintuitive that we would want to be scared," said Christopher Moreman, Cal State East Bay's resident zombie expert. He's actually an associate professor of philosophy who studies horror, comparative religions, paranormal experiences, and death and dying in pop culture. And he just plain likes zombies.

"Some researchers think (the desire to be scared) is a matter of instinct," he said. "We have this basic 'fight or flight' instinct, but we don't have lifestyles now that require the use of that. So there's a need to experience those sensations."

Indeed, in tense situations heart rates increase, we breathe faster, muscles tighten, attention focuses for quick and effective responses to threats. But if the brain knows there's no real danger, it experiences this rush of adrenaline as enjoyable. In fact, Moreman sees a relation between horror and comedy, and not just in the sense of "Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy."

"With a joke, tension builds, and the punch line resolves it. It's a release," he said. "Same with horror. You've made it through, and there's a relief of tension. You've survived the experience and can even laugh at it."

Sinister, but safe

"Many people say (being scared) makes them 'feel alive,' " said East Bay parapsychologist Loyd Auerbach, who is often surprised when people who are terrified of real things that go bump in the night in their very own basements will eagerly pay to attend a staged haunted attraction.

"There are those rare persons who seek out actual physical risks that engender that feeling, but most people look to be scared in controlled environments where they are reasonably sure nothing will actually hurt them," he said.

The environments may be controlled, but it's that "out of control" feeling that's desirable, Cobbs said.

"There's so much control in every aspect of our lives, we want that visceral experience somehow," she said.

Psychologists describe this as a "liminal state," an in-between realm where things are allowed to "get weird," Moreman said, then eventually all returns to a state of order. Such a threshold plays an important role in various human rites of passage, such as a bachelor party, he said, where things get wild before the ordered married life.

Halloween can be seen as a liminal ritual, he said. "All Hallow's Eve is supposed to mark the end of the harvest season, the period bordering between life and death," Moreman said. "It's a liminal space that happens when spirits of the dead can come through, so people dress up as monsters to confuse the real monsters, and all this weirdness happens before we go back to an ordered state of everyday life.

"It gives us a chance to confront and mediate our fear of mortality."

Engineering evil

The experts in the moviemaking and haunted-house biz know all this. They know how to write plots and design scares to play on our deepest dread. And there are trends in terror, just as much as in fashion and music.

"The horror genre is particularly supple in adapting to and reflecting the deepest fears and anxieties of the times," said Gary Handman, retired director of the Media Resources Center at UC Berkeley, which has one of the largest collections of film and audio recordings in the country.

"Those great, classic Universal horror films were made during the bleakest years of the Great Depression. The 1950s horror films almost uniformly reflected nuclear anxieties, gender anxieties and other cultural worries: Big bugs! Alien invasion! Fifty-foot women running amok! They mean something in terms of cultural nightmares."

And haunted-house designers don't just throw up displays in random configurations. They know what scares you, and they go for the jugular.

"We create characters for our actors with a backstory. It's not just someone in a mask jumping out," said Cobbs, who runs the "scare school" for dozens of actors who put on the scary show at the Winchester house. "We take advantage of all the senses: music, sounds, even scents -- in the swamp area, there's that damp, marshy smell piped in. You have different kinds of scares, like stalking, where the actors make eye contact and linger. Or tag team, where one distracts and the other one does the scare. Every customer gets an experience unique to them."

Such sensory experiences give the effect of being inside a horror movie. "Instead of just watching it, the killer is coming after you," Cobbs said. "But of course he's not really going to kill you. It's all controlled.

"If it weren't controlled, it would be a nightmare."