

**An Introduction to The**  
**Guillotine In**  
**Evangelical Media**

OR: Academia Didn't Like My Writing,  
So Fuck 'Em



Dedicated to my own personal Reviewer Three at [American Gothic Studies](#) who made this zine possible.

'Biochip injectors. And, of course, loyalty enforcement facilitators.'

Loyalty enforcement facilitators!? Why not just call them cranium and trunk separators? 'Guillotines, you mean?'

That made her wince. 'Director, please. That has such an eighteenth-century sound to it, and you can understand why we want to avoid any language that bespeaks violence or conjures images of beheading and the like.'

And the like? 'Begging your pardon, ma'am, but do we not assume that people will recognize the guillotines, or loyalty enforcement facilitators, for what they are? What else might they be used for, halving cabbages?'

'I don't find that the least bit amusing.'"

'I don't either, but let's call a blade a blade. People see a heavy, angled, razor-sharp edge waiting to be triggered from the top of a grooved track, with a head-shaped yoke at the bottom over a handy basket, and my guess is they'll have a clue what it's about.'

— *The Mark: The Beast Rules The World* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins

John the Revelator, put him in an elevator  
Take him up to the highest high  
Take him up to the top where the mountains stop  
Let him tell his book of lies

— "John The Revelator", Depeche Mode



Foreword: Not Gothic Enough For The Gothic Club	5
Emily's Intro:	7
Kieryn's Intro:	8
John The Revelator And The Loyalty Enforcement Facilitator: The Guillotine As Gothic Symbol In Apocalyptic Evangelical Media	9
Works Cited and Further Reading	12
Endnotes	14
From The First Draft: Chloe And The Guillotine	17
Chick's Guillotines	18

# Foreword: Not Gothic Enough For The Gothic Club

On November 8th, I received a rejection for my Provocation submitted to the Journal of the American Gothic. Despite the edits I had made to the first draft — I was asked not to have a standard thesis statement or treat it like a five-paragraph essay, instead focusing on asking for things from the scholars who would be reading the piece — I was told that I did not have a thesis statement, I clearly did not understand the “current scholarship”, I did not include enough sources but also somehow included too many, and I “overstated the inattention of scholars”.

I appreciate the author's attempts to revise the essay to make it more suitable for publication in Provocations. In this version of the essay, they do speak to the broader significance of Evangelical Protestantism (and their claims about guillotine imagery) for scholars of Gothic studies.

The essay, however, still has some issues. Its claims are not necessarily clear. The introduction urges scholars to pay more attention to Evangelical Protestantism, especially its predilection for guillotine imagery. Later paragraphs, propose a full-fledged subfield, entitled the Evangelical Gothic. They do not, however, flesh out that subfield. What is this essay's thesis? I would add that the claims about the inattention of scholars are also overstated. A quick Google Scholar search for "Gothic Evangelical," yields quite a few results. It is clear that the author needs to engage in more nuanced discussion of current scholarship.

As for the later paragraphs that discuss specific texts, they could use more context and discussion. I know that the word count for Provocations is limited to 2k, but the author wastes lots of words on extraneous footnotes. Also, the Works Cited only needs to include the texts cited in the essay. Words are wasted on recommendations for "further reading."

Ultimately, I cannot recommend this piece for publication.

The subject of my piece was the guillotine as a Gothic symbol in Evangelical apocalyptic literature — itself a form of the Gothic — and a key to understanding why Evangelicals have a certain political understanding.

Therefore, my question to the reviewers is: *what* current scholarship? Name three papers that have explored the use of the guillotine as a specifically Evangelical boogeyman. Name three sources someone could go to explore why mechanistic persecution is still on the minds of the privileged citizens of Empire, following the religion of that Empire, in a specifically antiquated mode! Name something that is

*accessible* to people hoping to trace the influences of Evangelical didactic fiction on the everyday.

American Gothic is a newer journal, and I certainly don't blame the editor who encouraged me to submit. It helps that I have dear friends either currently in academia or who are ex-academics who could help me navigate my feelings of rejection and anger around my reviewers. It didn't super help to know that this sort of rejection is common, even gentle, in the humanities, but it brought me to a space where I could grieve this piece and move on.

Grieve I did. But part of grief is acceptance, and I have accepted that I want this piece to be out in the world in whatever form I think will reach the audience I think needs it. I don't think American Gothic is that audience.

Who is, then? You, I hope.

Someone who has seen Evangelical political stances and (reasonably) responds with "Why are these so hypocritical? Don't they know?"

Someone who grew up Evangelical or Evangelical-adjacent, who had this fear but never knew why.

Someone who wants to understand where the persecution complex of one of the most powerful demographics in the world comes from — not just from a space of knowing propaganda, but also from a space of trauma that *generations* of that trauma have inflicted on them.

(I am not asking you to forgive Evangelicals or to treat Evangelicals like an oppressed class because of their trauma. I am asking you to understand that people do dumb, thoughtless, violent shit because of annihilation anxiety, no matter how unreasonable. Being trauma-informed does not just mean caring for our loved ones, it means understanding that evil can come from a place of deep hurt, and how to prevent that in future.)

I ask for your curiosity, your interest, and maybe a bit of a sense of humor as you read this. Maybe you'll learn something new. Maybe you'll do your own investigation into Evangelical fiction. The world is your oyster, baby.

**-Jacqueline Bryk**

## Emily's Intro:

I am not, by training, a scholar of Gothic Studies, but I do have a PhD in English. As such, I am intimately familiar with the ways that literary academics categorize their work, and yet, when I offered to read Jax's draft of this piece, I felt as if I didn't know enough, because Gothic Literature is not my speciality, and I am not familiar with current scholarship on this subject. That uncertainty I felt is, as far as many academics are concerned, a feature, not a bug. Scholarship, in many cases, is gate locked behind hugely expensive subscriptions to academic journals that are a perk for professors, as many academic libraries pay for these subscriptions. But they are, by design, not accessible to people who are not currently working for or enrolled in an academic institution.

How, then, are people like Jax supposed to contribute to fields like Gothic Studies? Based on the response she got, a response that largely points to her provocation's "lack of current scholarship" as her reason for denial, it is clear that, at least in this case, scholars are primarily interested in talking to themselves, not to the world at large. The audience of scholars is, usually, other scholars, but this piece is written for a much broader audience. It asks all folks who are interested in the Gothic to consider a layer of meaning that they might not have before, from a context informed by an Evangelical experience that is likely not the starting point of most scholars.

Activists do benefit a lot from academic ideas, but the way that activists present ideas is broadly different than the way academics do. Though their cultural cachet may be significant, academics are often in the precarious position of needing to publish their ideas in enough well respected (read: old and associated with powerful institutions) academic journals in order to keep their jobs. And those jobs are increasingly rare. This system incentives gatekeeping and keeping ideas away from the general population. Activists, on the other hand, do their best to make their ideas broadly accessible, both in their language and in their distribution. Their work asks to engage in a dialogue with many people, with varying ideas.

I think that activists remember what academics so often forget: the making of ideas is a fundamentally collaborative process. Jax's work informed my thinking, and in



editing it, I offered her new avenues of thought to help her tailor her work to academia. I didn't write the piece, but the collaboration mattered all the same, and Jax asked me to write this introduction as a result. Building a space that is collaborative and accessible is important to activists. Building a space that *looks like* it is accessible and collaborative is important to academics.

I know which space I'd rather spend my time in.

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## Kieryn's Intro:

"I grew up under a rock" used to be the second part of any introduction I gave when I was freshly out of the cult-like evangelical world I grew up in. Like many evangelical homeschoolers of the '90s I wasn't allowed to read books like Harry Potter, or watch movies or TV shows with magic or sex. I didn't finish catching up on the cultural touchstones of my peers until I was in my late 20s. As a child, however, I was allowed and encouraged to consume morally justified yet horrific violence from historical or bible stories like Mel Gibsons' *The Passion* and *Braveheart* or *The Patriot*. I consumed books focused on surviving the inevitable apocalyptic end-times featuring decapitation and other forms of antiquated violence; not just for fun, but as thought training. Even if I was (probably) going to be raptured, it was my duty to do my best to prepare others for their demise if they didn't choose salvation.

Imagine my surprise when I noticed the religious symbolism in [Lovecraft](#), dystopian horror, and my brief foray into non-sci fi horror movies reminded me of the tracts we'd put in candy baskets for the neighbors on Halloween. Hellhouses and chicktracts were invented as tools to warn and prepare unbelievers about their impending doom should they not convert. Growing up I took the weight of this very seriously and didn't expect to have as much of a visceral reaction to the violent, fascist-religious tones in horror as an adult.

It wasn't until reading Jax's zine that I was able to finally connect why this form of violence in gothic media hit me differently than it did my non-religious friends. What they were entertaining as violent fantasy, I re-lived as a serious threat, because to me, it was once. While there aren't any studies (to my knowledge) of exvangelicals and their relation to the gothic genre, I don't think it's uncommon to experience a more bodied response to the imagery as art as part of the deconstruction process. I would love to see more research on the intersections here.

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# John The Revelator And The Loyalty Enforcement Facilitator: The Guillotine As Gothic Symbol In Apocalyptic Evangelical Media

In 1909, between lugubrious, apocalyptic paragraphs well-seasoned with quotes from Daniel, Matthew, and Revelation, Ebenezer John Thomas wrote the following: "An image is to be made of "the beast," and all who will not worship the image will be killed ([Rev. 13:15](#)). **As beheading (20:4) is stated to be the mode of this death, probably the guillotine will be again at work**"<sup>1</sup>(Thomas). In 2023, in a deeply ironic echo of Thomas's assertion, ex-evangelical writer and influencer April Ajoy wrote on Twitter: "As a kid, did you ever imagine yourself dying by guillotine or were you not evangelical?" (Ajoy). The guillotine itself fits perfectly – like a head in a pillory, one might say – into the anti-Christian sentiments of the gothic (Hoeveler) and holds pride of place in the hysterical imaginations of premillennial dispensationalist fiction authors. The Evangelical imagination holds a wealth of untapped Gothic understanding, and the weight the guillotine's blade provides creates a unique entry point into this God-haunted world for literary, religious, and sociological scholars alike.

While Gothic scholars have long engaged with the Catholic motifs in the genre, current scholarship leaves a gaping hole where investigations of Evangelical Protestant themes and aesthetics — especially those of the Rapture and the Tribulation — should be taking pride of place. The Evangelical apocalypse is a gothic setting haunted by decades of tradition, with only the barest threads of Bible verses<sup>2</sup> to string disparate images together into an oddly coherent, repetitive narrative. The haunting begins even before the story opens — according to John Nelson Darby, Cyrus Scofield, and other founding fathers of so-called Rapture theology<sup>3</sup>, "true Christians"<sup>4</sup> are already invisibly marked for a future point when they will suddenly vanish from the Earth. While they leave no ghosts, they inevitably leave behind writings, films, or art instructing those who do not disappear in the Rapture either in how to survive the upcoming Tribulation — a period, usually seven years long, of suffering, disaster, and global government — or how to die in grace. Thus, the protagonists of this canon of Rapture stories, this Evangelical Gothic, are haunted by not only the past, but also the upcoming terror of the next seven years, including the blade of the guillotine. Other Gothic tropes — e.g. sensualized torture, androgynously beautiful villains, anachronistic technology<sup>5</sup>, corruption of innocent young things, wolves in sheep's clothing, a dark aristocracy, debauched religious imagery — make their appearances in time and with different

narrative weights, but none make quite the monumental [Gothic] image (Collins) as the guillotine.

As a foundational trope, the guillotine becomes the key to the proposed Evangelical Gothic. Any text in the Gothic tradition can include an Antichrist figure or dread of and desperate attempts to escape damnation. While other Gothic texts use the guillotine — *El Conde*, the 2023 gothic comedy directed by Pablo Larrain springs immediately to mind — no tradition wields it quite so gleefully as Evangelical authors haunting their audiences with slow, apocalyptic futures owned by debauched demonic governments. The construction of the guillotine as monumental Gothic image has its roots in both the French Revolution and, perhaps surprisingly, the Cold War. John Nelson Darby and Cyrus I. Scofield both grew up in the shadow of the Reign of Terror, and the guillotine would have represented both mechanical execution regardless of status and efficient de-Christianization of a seemingly-fallen nation<sup>6</sup> (Carrabine). Given the French Revolution's aesthetic and philosophical ties to the Communists of the twenty-first century, it makes sense then that Darby and Scofield's guillotine nightmares would begin to haunt Evangelicals, especially American pastor-authors and artists who saw a metonym for the destructive rot at the heart of society.

The use of guillotine as a Gothic symbol stretches far beyond the novels of Evangelicals. While the *Left Behind* series by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, and its accompanying young adult novels, give this essay its title, the distinct, looming frame of the guillotine is best suited to a visual medium. The *Thief In The Night* series, a Tribulation-focused film series shot entirely in Des Moines between 1972 and 1983, inspired Jenkins and LaHaye to write their magnum opus and prominently features a guillotine in two separate movies<sup>7</sup> — including the insinuated guillotine death of a child<sup>8</sup>. Four separate Chick tracts — short comic books aimed at converting non-Evangelicals through conspiratorial and “scared straight” tactics, the Chick visual Gothic could be a paper of its own<sup>9</sup> — feature the guillotine prominently, including a very striking image in “The Beast”: a guillotine mounted on a golf cart in case any pesky Christians happen to be traveling through the marketplace. The audience observes a hapless Christian being dragged to his death with a cheerful “haw haw!” on the part of an ostensibly godless Communist soldier (Chick). Even hell houses — Christian haunted houses with deeply visceral and sensationalized scenes, often performed yearly as another form of “scared straight” evangelism (Pellegrini) — focused on the Rapture and Tribulation regularly include guillotine imagery or sound effects. Occasionally, in order to modernize the threat, artists will rename the guillotine to something like the “loyalty enforcement

facilitator" (LaHaye and Jenkins) or simply "the process" (West Millen Baptist Church). Victims may be guillotined privately or publicly, in front of images of the devil or subject to jeering crowds. However, the message remains consistent throughout all mediums: after the Rapture, to not fall to the Devil is to lay one's head in the guillotine's pillory. One either falls to the nightmares of the past or the uncertain hauntings of the future.

Why, then, is this a worthy topic of study, especially in the realm of the Gothic? What does the field gain from sharing the scaffold with millions of Christians invested in this very specific reading of Revelations 20:4? Seven days before the US general election of 2024, an Evangelical Christian speaker at a conservative political rally proceeded to call the Democratic candidate "the Antichrist" and "the Devil" (Bennett) before waving a prop cross around to chants of "USA! USA!" Millions of people worldwide have been exposed to the same media he has at church services, on mission trips, and as part of Bible study groups. Paul Lalonde, the producer of the second attempt at film adaptations of *Left Behind*, even stated that "It's also a historical account in a sense, because it's based on a true story, it just hasn't happened yet" (Wilkinson). The speaker at the rally was raised in the same milieu that treats the Evangelical Gothic not as *fiction*, but as *prediction*.

It's tempting to dismiss Evangelical media — and the guillotine as its Gothic image — as a series of failed prophecies, and tedious formulaic fiction to boot. This is a crucial mistake; the guillotine may not be the whole of the Evangelical Gothic milieu, but it becomes an image to tie together the needs and fears, and thus the political goals, of its artists and adherents. It's no accident that LaHaye and Jenkins rename the guillotine the "loyalty enforcement facilitator" in the eighth book of the core *Left Behind* novel series — apart from the ominous doublespeak, it reveals that the authors believe only dread and fear of punishment can sufficiently motivate people into giving their hearts to a cause. The use of the guillotine not only ties into a single verse in Revelations, but also hell anxiety, religious trauma, and fears of a charismatic, uncaring elite — in other words, deep Gothic themes. A true understanding of the guillotine as a Gothic image allows the field to understand and deconstruct the Evangelical narrative — so where is the scholarship?

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# Endnotes

1. Emphasis added.
2. When writers in this tradition refer to “the Bible”, they are most often referring to the King James Version, the most gothic of all Biblical translations.
3. This is technically “premillennial dispensationalism” or “pre-tribulational premillennialism”, the most popular theological understanding of the Rapture in denominations that include it.
4. Of course what defines a “true Christian” is as up for debate as what defines “the Gothic”.
5. One particularly notable example is Image of the Beast, where multi-megaton nuclear weapons explode while 200 million horsemen ride across the Central Asian steppe. These are treated as equally threatening.
6. The majority of Christians killed by guillotine were Catholics, but this has never stopped Evangelicals – who, ironically, do not view Catholics as Christian – from claiming the fear of the de-Christianizing power of the guillotine. This does, however, maintain the anti-Catholic sentiment of the Gothic, as the Catholics are now portrayed as the users, rather than the victims, of the guillotine.
7. For reasons unexplained, the one character guillotined on screen is strapped into the device face-up.
8. While it is unlikely that this scene inspired Stephen King’s aesthetics for *It*, it’s interesting to note that the child guillotined in the third *Thief In The Night* movie carries around a red balloon in the prison before his execution and the audience is informed of his death by seeing the balloon fly by the window.
9. Please take this as encouragement.



## From The First Draft: A Thief In The Night

This shorthand continues into the infamous Thief In The Night cinematic universe by Mark IV Pictures. While the eponymous first movie does not contain any on-screen methods of execution, two of its sequels — *A Distant Thunder* and *Image Of The Beast* — prominently feature a platform-mounted guillotine used on main characters. The executioners from the fiction's evil empire, the United Nations Imperium of Total Emergency, who man the guillotine are specifically costumed to look like Soviet or PRC soldiers. In addition, Mark IV Pictures combines images of disrupted small-town life with not just the guillotine, but also mounted cavalry, water turning to blood, and nuclear explosions. The guillotine is a foreign machine of death and humiliation, used by insurgents who don't understand or don't care about salvation or goodness. These insurgents have taken over the world, wiping away any trace of "God's people" in favor of simply "people". Cruelly, perhaps unnecessarily so, they strap the main characters of both *Thunder* and *Beast* into the guillotine with their eyes facing the blade. Both executions are interrupted by a sudden thunderstorm — another staple of the Gothic genre — but the fickle heroine of *Thunder* dies while crying out for the mark of the Beast to save herself, while the virile hero of *Beast* goes on to hack a Satanic computer with the Salvation Army's hymn Onward Christian Soldiers.



## From The First Draft: Chloe And The Guillotine

The reader is meant to understand that the guillotine, already loaded with the creeping dread of any other execution device, carries with it the weight of a gothic symbol. It is not merely a device for cutting heads off, it is a device that heralds the triumph of an ontological evil that has haunted the protagonists even before they stepped onto the page. It also includes an element of humiliation reminiscent of Jack Chick's *The Beast* comic. While most minor characters who are believers are guillotined on international television, LaHaye and Jenkins choose to preserve the modesty of a female main character. Chloe Williams nee Steele, the daughter of Rayford Steele and wife of Cameron "Buck" Williams, plays the role of the soiled ingenue, her innocence stripped away throughout the events of the *Left Behind* series as she helps found and manage a paramilitary resistance group. When finally captured and executed in book 11, *Armageddon*, an angel appears in front of the cameras and "[his] glow blinded the eyes of the world" (LaHaye and Jenkins 136); Chloe's humiliation at being put to death publicly, as part of Carrabine's spectacle, is therefore mitigated. The innocence she lost in life is returned to her in death, a classic gothic trope.



# Chick's Guillotines



If they don't take the mark, they'll be beheaded\* ...



...but if they do take the mark, they will go into the lake of fire forever when they die!\*\*


\*Revelation 13:15-17; 20:4 \*\*Revelation 14:9-11

God will start to show His anger at the world's evil, by wiping out 1/3 of almost *everything*.



Gulp!  
What things?

Like you, these fools *refused* to take the mark! There's *no* place to hide!



C'mon!... Let's get this over with. I don't want to miss my lunch!

“... and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands...” Revelation 20:4

Famine comes. The Beast demands everyone take his mark in their forehead or hand so they can buy or sell food.\*



Those who refuse his mark are beheaded.\*\* Those who take it, God will cast into the lake of fire.\*\*\*

\*Rev. 13:16-17 \*\*Rev. 20:4 \*\*\*Rev. 14:9-10

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**Bonus Guillotines:**



*Image Of The Beast (1980)*



*Apocalypse II: Revelation (1999)*

<https://linktr.ee/RuffleJax>

