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## Columns



### Nine Monsters Rated: Which is Scariest?

by Tamim Ansary

Every year the community center down the block from my house sets up a "haunted house" at Halloween. For a couple bucks, you can stick your hand into a bucket of warm fettuccini and pretend they're entrails. If you try you might even feel a twitch of fear. Why some people want to feel frightened, I don't know, but we do. Lots of us do.

It isn't real-life menace we crave, of course; it's fictional horror. Alas, in my opinion, our scariest creatures have been overexposed. When I see "ghost" I think Ghostbusters. Goblins? Casper's uncles. Witches? Sabrina. Vampires? Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

The chill is gone.

So what's a member of Fright Club to do? I've been thinking that we might need to look beyond the tired, traditional, mainstream scary creatures to less familiar monsters. I looked into it, and I found a number of worthwhile candidates from cultures around the globe. How many of these monsters do you know?

Creature	Culture
Hai-uru	African
Raktabija	Indian
Chindis	Navajo
Golem	Jewish
Chupacabra	Puerto Rican, Mexican
Jinn	Islamic
Banshees	Irish
Ghouls	Arabic
Windigo	Cree and Ojibwa

I've rated each creature from 1 to 10 on my own private scare-o-meter, on which 10 means total terror. See what you think.

#### Hai-uru

African folklore is rife with legends of a frightening fellow who hunts human prey. He'll kill you if he can, but he'll give you magic powers if you beat him. He's Hai-uru to the Khoikhoi of southern and western Africa, Tikdoshe to the Zulu of southern Africa, and Adroa in Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).

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Details differ, but all these creatures share one feature: They have only half a body--one eye, one arm, one leg, etc. What's up with that? I think this thing may be aimed at some nerve that I don't have.

**Scare-o-meter rating: 3**

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### Raktabija

Topping the terror charts of Indian mythology is Raktabija, the demon's demon. The gods couldn't kill him because every drop of his blood that touched the ground turned into a new demon.

Then the god Shiva's sweet wife Parvati went into action. She turned into Kali, goddess of death and destruction. She stuck out her tongue till it covered the world and then chopped off Rakbatija's head: all the spilled blood fell on her tongue and she drank it down.

If you've seen a typical sculpture of Kali, you've seen Raktabija. He's the severed head she's holding at arm's length. What a monster! On the other hand, he's dead--a definite detriment to his power.

**Scare-o-meter rating: 3** (All we have to worry about now is Kali.)

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### Chindis

According to Navajo beliefs, when people die, the evil in them lingers on. These spirits, known as chindis, account for the Navajos' particular dread of corpses. When someone dies among the Navajo, tradition calls for the house to be burned to the ground and the person's name never to be spoken again.

Here's the thing about chindis: If you do evil, a chindi can attach itself to you and no one can detach it except the person you have wronged. So yes, be afraid of chindis if you're evil--be very afraid. If you're good, relax.

Me, I'm not worried. Whistle whistle.

**Scare-o-meter rating: 6**

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### Golem

Frankenstein's monster was scary till he got a gig as Fred Munster and later moved to Nick at Night.

The underlying story, however, tapped our modern anxiety about technology: know-it-all builds artificial servant out of lifeless matter but loses control of it. That idea still scares us, especially when we think about how nanotechnology is about to meet genetic engineering.... Yet the archetypal story isn't new at all.

The granddaddy of the type might be the Jewish legend of the golem. Sometime around 1500, it seems, a certain Rabbi Löw of Prague decided to build a tireless servant. He shaped a heap of clay into a crude humanoid, muttered a spell and--say hello to the golem, a powerful pile of mindless matter that follows its master's orders relentlessly.

Needless to say, it didn't work out as hoped.



**Scare-o-meter rating: 4**

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### Chupacabra

We think of vampires as suave fellows in black tuxedos and silk capes. But that's only our common Transylvanian vampire, Dracula, invented by 19th-century novelist Bram Stoker. (Dracula, incidentally, has some historical basis in a 15th-century count known as Vlad the Impaler. His name says it all.)

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But the vampire myth is both older and younger than Vlad. The Chinese were telling stories about a vampire called *giang shi* as early as 600 BC. And in Puerto Rico, Chile, and Mexico, there have been recent stories of a new vampire called the *chupacabra*.

The *chupacabra* kills goats and cattle by sucking the blood out of them. Nothing else is known about it--that's what makes it scary. You can imagine anything. So ... for all I know the *chupacabra* might be a two-legged tree-stump with a beak and a cape. Come to think of it, the scare-o-meter reading just dropped.

**Final score: 1 1/2** (10 if you're a goat)

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### Jinn

In Afghanistan, where I grew up, we didn't have witches or ghosts. The fearsome spooks of my own childhood were *jinn*.

These creatures are mentioned in the Qur'an, the scriptures of Islam; if you're a good Muslim, you have to believe in them. The Qur'an says *jinn* are made of smokeless fire, so you can't see them, but they're everywhere, everywhere, especially in old, abandoned buildings ... rural cemeteries ... dank basements--places like that.

When the back of your neck prickles for no reason, *jinn* are near. Sometimes they get inside you. To me, the Blair Witch Project was about *jinn*.

**Scare-o-meter rating: 8**

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### Banshees

There's only one thing most of us know about banshees: They scream. But what are they?

I'll tell you. Banshees ("women of the hills" in Gaelic) come out of Irish folklore. They're women who died in childbirth and are doomed to spend the remaining years of their allotted span near deserted streams, washing blood from the grave garments of those who are about to die.

The banshee's scream is more of a wail. If you hear it, someone in your family is about to die.

Sad-scary.

**Scare-o-meter rating: 7**

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**Ghouls**

We come now to ghouls, creatures out of ancient Islamic folklore. The word ghoul comes from an Arabic term meaning "the grabber"--as in a hand bursting out of the earth and grabbing your ankle!

Seems that in ancient days, Arabian nomads would upon occasion run across a plundered grave. Sometimes the corpse was missing. Sometimes, they'd find half-eaten remains nearby. How to make sense of this?

Two possibilities spring to mind. One: wild dogs. Two--equally plausible: some corpses come back to life after burial and feed on their fellow dead. Islamic folklore did not choose "wild dogs."

**Scare-o-meter rating:** 8 (The grossness factor may be distorting this reading.)

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**Windigo**

The windigo is a Native American nightmare, invented in the subarctic by the Cree and Ojibwa peoples.

Let's set the scene: The subarctic is about 5 million sq km (2 million sq mi) of forest and tundra inhabited by fewer than 60,000 people. We're talking lonely. Winters last forever up there, and winter nights are long, cold, and dark.

In times past, the people who lived in this region spent winters holed up in their shelters, rationing out their dwindling food supplies, and telling tales. The most dreadful of these stories featured the windigo, a friendless creature that lives alone in the forest. It's 6 to 9 m (20 to 30 ft) tall and has a lipless mouth and jagged teeth. Its footprints in the snow are full of blood and you can hear its hissing breath for miles.

It eats people. And that's the good news.

The bad news is, if a windigo catches you alone in the forest, it can possess you. Then you turn into a windigo yourself--a mindless cannibal.

I think I see the underlying fear that glimmers through this story. Survival in the subarctic was a desperate struggle. Often, food ran out before winter did. Sometimes, well.... Cannibalism happens.

There you have the real horror of the windigo legend. Ask not what some monster might do to you; ask what you might do to someone should you become a monster.

**Scare-o-meter rating:** 11

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