

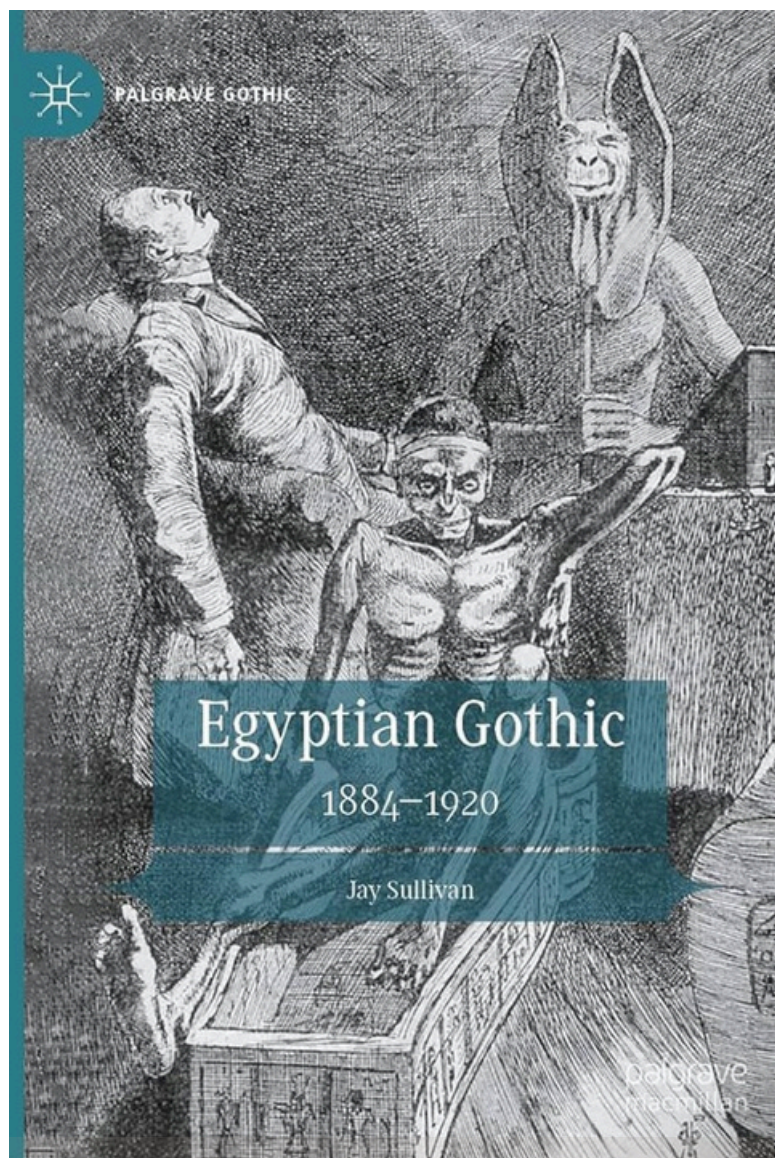
# Egyptian Gothic 1884–1920

## *by Dr. Jay Sullivan*

Review by Michelle Keeley-Adamson

**Reading**, by its very nature, appeals to our senses. All of us who love reading know the feeling of flicking through the pages of a book and inhaling its scent, or the sensation of touching the creased, dog-eared corners of a second-hand novel. Then, when we sit down in our favourite spot with a nice cup of tea and begin to read, we are transported. We see different lands, hear the voices of characters, imagine how something might feel in our hands, or how something might taste. With the right book, all of this could be delightful. We might comfortably imagine feeling a warm breeze on our face or perhaps picture ourselves eating a delicious apple pie that's seasoned to perfection with cinnamon.

But what if it wasn't all so cosy? What if our senses, when reading, weren't pleasantly tickled, but instead, left us feeling a sense of



The cover of 'Egyptian Gothic 1884–1920' by Jay Sullivan. Published in 2025 by Springer Nature as part of the Palgrave Gothic series

dread as we turned each page? What if we weren't imagining apple pies and warm summer days and instead, we were imagining we were an archaeologist placing a hand on an ancient Egyptian mummy, only for our touch to be unexpectedly returned? (p.26) What if we were imagining entering a room, only for our nostrils to be attacked by a pungent odour emanating from an ancient incense bottle? (p.94)

In *Egyptian Gothic 1884-1920*, Jay Sullivan offers us a unique insight into how our senses are played upon in Egyptianising Gothic literature, with authors using the sensory as a tool to drive the narrative of mummy fiction (p.26) allowing the reader to experience curiosity and horror alongside the characters in the stories. (p.24).

If it were to stop there, I would have closed the book feeling satisfied with my newly acquired understanding of the emerging topic of sensory studies and how it applies to the Egyptianised gothic, but Sullivan has much more in store for the reader, and it makes for compelling reading.

Sullivan uses the sensory as a tool to examine Egyptianised Gothic tales between 1884-1920 in a methodical way, transporting us through each of the senses (sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste) and uses this, alongside wider academic theory to consider what all of this can tell us about attitudes toward Empire.

Sullivan ensures that the reader is provided with the context we need to be able to join in on this journey through the sensory. In the first section of the book, we learn about attitudes to mummified remains and the histories of museum displays before finding out about the emergence of the Egyptianised Gothic.

The structure of this book is something else I enjoyed. I like a history book that I can dip in to. You can read the sections in the book in any order and it still makes perfect sense (no pun intended), and this is something that Sullivan makes clear to the reader, even offering a recommended starting point.

Wherever you start your journey in the book, Sullivan is consistent in the approach to the that the sensory depictions offer a means for Egypt to 'strike back against the British Empire.' This methodical approach goes a step further than the usual brief analyses of

Empire that we sometimes see and instead delves into the nuanced problems and fears that have been created by the British Empire. In doing so, the reader is also able to explore, guided by Sullivan, how these fears evolve as the Empire begins to collapse.

In taking this methodical approach to the sensory and Empire in the Egyptian Gothic, Sullivan also shines a light on the Empire at home, examining how the sensory descriptions in stories can apply to stereotypes and beliefs about the different classes and the qualities they possess (pp.94-95), as well as gender and the role of women at home in parallel to the powerful, female characters that pose a threat to the Western man. (p.22)

The study of class is something that is woven through this book with an expert level of understanding and care as Sullivan explores access to museums, objects, sensory experiences and written media, and attitudes towards working-class and how they are represented in the texts. As working-class people, we do not often see our histories reflected in texts covering the reception of ancient Egypt in literary media or otherwise, but on another note, to read a book written by a fellow working class person, who reflects this in the dedication...well, in Sullivan's words we are 'seen' and this book is 'proof it can be done' (p.vii).

Using texts that many of us will be familiar with, alongside rarer unearthed texts, Sullivan has crafted a book that can be considered a first, but also one that I'm sure will be frequently re-read and referenced by all of us with an interest in the Egyptianised Gothic. It has not only provided us readers and researchers with a valuable new way in which to engage with our source materials but has proven itself to be a thoroughly enjoyable read, allowing Sullivan to showcase a vast knowledge acquired through years of research, alongside Sullivan's quick wit and engaging writing style.

*Egyptian Gothic 1884-1920* is out now.

You can pick up a copy at Springer Nature or  
at all good bookshops!