

## Not Afraid to Slay: Women of the Haunt Industry

**Jan Knuth**

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*Not Afraid to Slay takes a feminist, insider's view at a fast-growing entertainment industry: haunting.*

Jan Knuth's *Not Afraid to Slay* is a fascinating introduction to the haunt industry and the women in it.

Knuth's book is centered on haunted houses—popular sources of live entertainment that aim to recreate the experiences of actual supernatural hauntings, if through decorations, special effects, and performances. Knuth, like countless other horror fans and thrill-seekers, once paid money to go through such houses, mazes, and hospitals in search of spooky fun.

A Halloween enthusiast, Knuth discusses getting into the haunting side of the industry herself, almost by accident: she began recreating haunted houses as a fun way to give candy to trick-or-treaters, but her setups soon overtook her entire yard. After deciding that she needed to find a different space for her hobby, a real estate agent led her to a house for sale. Run-down and dirty, it was perfect for her purposes. Grey House Haunts was born.

Knuth's book is brief, but it still contains considerable information about the haunt industry, drawing on her insider's knowledge. Its topical chapters are both practical and philosophical, working to pull information from multiple perspectives. And every chapter ends with an interview with another industry person, accompanied by photographs of that person in full costume. Women's growing role in the haunt industry is a point of focus: Knuth shows the gendered expectations involved in haunting, and meditates on why women make up most of the industry's performers. The book winds up presenting haunting as a feminist expression of freedom.

The book also contains reflections on the role of fear and the social importance of the haunting industry. These reflections draw on the Greek concept of catharsis, as well as on evolutionary theories about fear as a survival mechanism. The industry is represented well as a source of meaningful stress relief, but in a way that addresses the ethics of haunting with nuance, delineating differences between scaring people and traumatizing them, and interrogating what is acceptable and what is not.

This is an effective general introduction to the haunt industry that's enlivened by charm and wit. Knuth engages in wry asides and writes in a distinctive, personalized style. But the book also remembers to treat serious topics, including staff safety, with a more sober tone. The effect is a compelling treatment of a niche but growing industry.

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CAROLINA CIUCCI (July 23, 2021)

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