Roald Dahl’s Book Of Ghost Stories (Short Story Anthology)

Introduction

"Spookiness is the real purpose of the ghost story. It should give you the creeps and disturb your thoughts..."

So says Roald Dahl in the introduction to this collection, originally published in 1983. Roald Dahl’s Book of Ghost Stories brings together 14 of his favourite spine-chillers, carefully chosen after a lot of research - Roald read 749 stories altogether before choosing his final selection.

The 14 stories collected in this anthology are:

W.S. by L. P. Hartley
Harry by Rosemary Timperley
The Corner Shop by Cynthia Asquith
In the Tube by E. F. Benson
Christmas Meeting by Rosemary Timperley
Elias and the Draug by Jonas Lie
Playmates by A. M. Burrage
Ringing the Changes by Robert Aickman
The Telephone by Mary Treadgold
The Ghost of a Hand by J. Sheridan Le Fanu
The Sweeper by A. M. Burrage (Ex–Private X)
Afterward by Edith Wharton
On the Brighton Road by Richard Middleton
The Upper Berth by F. Marion Crawford

The Authors in *Roald Dahl’s Book Of Ghost Stories*

**Leslie Poles Hartley** (30 December 1895 – 13 December 1972), known as L. P. Hartley, was a British novelist and short story writer. His best-known novels are the *Eustace and Hilda* trilogy (1947) and *The Go-Between* (1953). The latter was made into a 1971 film, directed by Joseph Losey with a star cast, in an adaptation by Harold Pinter. Its opening sentence, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there", has become almost proverbial. His 1957 novel *The Hireling* was made into a critically acclaimed film of the same title in 1973.

He is also a noted writer of short fiction that has been acclaimed for its eerie, strange qualities that have drawn comparison with the macabre wit of Saki and the supernatural fiction of Henry James and Walter de la Mare.


**Rosemary Timperley** (20 March 1920 – 9 November 1988) was a British novelist, short story writer and screenwriter. She wrote a wide range of fiction, publishing 66 novels in 33 years, and several hundred short stories, but is best remembered for her ghost stories which appear in many anthologies. She also edited several volumes of ghost stories. Her story *Harry* has been filmed several times.


**Lady Cynthia Mary Evelyn Asquith** (27 September 1887 – 31 March 1960) was an English writer and socialite, now known for her ghost stories and diaries. She also wrote novels and edited a number of anthologies, as well as writing for children and on the British Royal family.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Cynthia_Asquith)

**Edward Frederic "E. F." Benson** (24 July 1867 – 29 February 1940) was an English novelist, biographer, memoirist, archaeologist and short story writer.


**Jonas Lauritz Idemil Lie** (6 November 1833 – 5 July 1908) was a Norwegian novelist, poet, and playwright who is considered to have been one of the Four Greats of 19th century Norwegian literature, together with Henrik Ibsen, Bjornstjerne Bjornson and Alexander Kielland.

His two collections of short stories called *Troll* involve the superstitions of the fishermen and coast commoners of northern Norway. The much anthologized short story *Elias and the Draugh* was included in a collection originally published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.


**Alfred McLelland Burrage** (1889 – 1956) was a British writer. He was noted in his time as an author of fiction for boys which he published under the pseudonym Frank Lelland, including a popular series called "Tufty". After his death, however, Burrage became best known for his ghost stories.

M. R. James praised Burrage’s book *Some Ghost Stories*, saying that the book "keeps on the right side of the line, and if about half his ghosts are amiable, the rest have their terrors, and no mean ones". James later included Burrage among a list of contemporary writers who had "best realized" the possibilities of the ghost story. Bleiler has described Burrage’s work thus: "The best stories in *Some ghost stories and Someone in the room* are intelligent, well crafted, and imaginative." Richard Dalby has ranked Burrage as "one of the finest..."
English ghost story writers, alongside Benson, Wakefield and James.” Neil Barron has stated “Burage’s underrated short stories are deft and subtle, and include a number of poignant posthumous fantasies.”

Robert Fordyce Aickman (27 June 1914 – 26 February 1981) was an English conservationist and writer of fiction and nonfiction. As a conservationist, he is notable for co-founding the Inland Waterways Association, a group which has preserved from destruction and restored England’s inland canal system. As a writer, he is best known for his supernatural fiction, which he described as “strange stories”.

The writer of his obituary in The Times, as quoted by Mike Ashley, said, “... his most outstanding and lasting achievement was as a writer of what he himself like to call ‘strange tales.’ He brought to these his immense knowledge of the occult, psychological insights and a richness of background and characterisation which rank his stories with those of M.R. James and Walter de la Mare.” Ashley himself wrote: “Aickman’s writings are an acquired taste like fine wines. I have no doubt that his work will always remain unknown to the majority of readers, and perhaps he would have wanted it that way. He wrote what and how he wanted, for expression, not for popularity. In another of his letters to me he said ‘I have received a good deal of esteem, but never a big commercial success, and am usually wondering whether anything by me will ever be published again.’... It is astonishing that someone of Aickman’s stature should have difficult in selling his work. Perhaps now, too late for Aickman’s benefit, someone will have the sense to publish it.” This situation has since been remedied by an extensive program of reprints of Aickman’s work by Tartarus Press and Faber.

Mary Treadgold (16 April 1910 – 14 May 2005) was a British author of books for children and adults, a literary editor and a BBC producer. She won the Carnegie Medal for British children’s books in 1941.

Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu (28 August 1814 – 7 February 1873) was an Irish writer of Gothic tales and mystery novels. He was a leading ghost-story writer of the nineteenth century and was central to the development of the genre in the Victorian era. M. R. James described Le Fanu as “absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories”. Three of his best-known works are Uncle Silas, Carmilla and The House by the Churchyard.

Le Fanu worked in many genres but remains best known for his mystery and horror fiction. He was a meticulous craftsman and frequently re-worked plots and ideas from his earlier writing in subsequent pieces. Many of his novels, for example, are expansions and refinements of earlier short stories. He specialised in tone and effect rather than “shock horror”, and liked to leave important details unexplained and mysterious. He avoided overt supernatural effects: in most of his major works, the supernatural is strongly implied but a “natural” explanation is also possible. The demonic monkey in “Green Tea” could be a delusion of the story’s protagonist, who is the only person to see it; in “The Familiar”, Captain Barton’s death seems to be supernatural, but is not actually witnessed, and the ghostly owl may be a real bird. This technique influenced later horror artists, both in print and on film (see, for example, the film producer Val Lewton’s principle of “indirect horror”). Though
other writers have since chosen less subtle techniques, Le Fanu's best tales, such as the vampire novella *Carmilla*, remain some of the most powerful in the genre. He had enormous influence on one of the 20th century's most important ghost story writers, M. R. James, and although his work fell out of favour in the early part of the 20th century, towards the end of the century interest in his work increased and remains comparatively strong.


**Edith Wharton** (January 24, 1862 – August 11, 1937) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, short story writer, and designer. She was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1927, 1928 and 1930. Wharton combined her insider's view of America's privileged classes with a brilliant, natural wit to write humorous, incisive novels and short stories of social and psychological insight. She was well acquainted with many of her era's other literary and public figures, including Theodore Roosevelt.


**Richard Barham Middleton** (28 October 1882 – 1 December 1911) was an English poet and author, who is remembered mostly for his short ghost stories, in particular *The Ghost Ship*.

Middleton suffered from severe depression, known as melancholia at that time. He spent the last nine months of his life in Brussels, where in December 1911 he took his life by poisoning himself with chloroform, which had been prescribed as a remedy for his condition. His literary reputation was kept alive by Edgar Jepson and Arthur Machen, the latter of whom wrote an introduction to Middleton's collection *The Ghost Ship and Other Stories*, and later by John Gawsworth. His stories have appeared in several anthologies.


**Francis Marion Crawford** (August 2, 1854 – April 9, 1909) was an American writer noted for his many novels, especially those set in Italy, and for his classic weird and fantastic stories.

H. Russell Wakefield, in an essay on ghost stories, called Crawford’s *The Upper Berth* "the very best one" of such stories. Norman Douglas credits Crawford’s financial success as instrumental in encouraging himself to write (though he remained critical of Crawford’s habit of inserting first-person editorial comments into his fiction).

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Marion_Crawford)
A Brief Introduction To Ghost Stories

DEFINITION
A ghost story may be any piece of fiction, or drama, that includes a ghost, or simply takes as a premise the possibility of ghosts or characters' belief in them. The "ghost" may appear of its own accord or be summoned by magic. Linked to the ghost is the idea of "hauntings", where a supernatural entity is tied to a place, object or person.

Colloquially, the term "ghost story" can refer to any kind of scary story. In a narrower sense, the ghost story has been developed as a short story format, within genre fiction. It is a form of supernatural fiction and specifically of weird fiction, and is often a horror story.

While ghost stories are often explicitly meant to be scary, they have been written to serve all sorts of purposes, from comedy to morality tales. Ghosts often appear in the narrative as sentinels or prophets of things to come. Belief in ghosts is found in all cultures around the world, and thus ghost stories may be passed down orally or in written form.

HISTORY
A widespread belief concerning ghosts is that they are composed of a misty, airy, or subtle material. Anthropologists link this idea to early beliefs that ghosts were the person within the person (the person's spirit), most noticeable in ancient cultures as a person's breath, which upon exhaling in colder climates appears visibly as a white mist. Belief in ghosts is found in all cultures around the world, and thus ghost stories may be passed down orally or in written form.

In 1929, five key features of the English ghost story were identified in Some Remarks on Ghost Stories by M. R. James. As summarized by Frank Coffman for a course in popular imaginative literature, they were:

- The pretense of truth
- "A pleasing terror"
- No gratuitous bloodshed or sex
- No "explanation of the machinery"
- Setting: "those of the writer's (and reader's) own day"

GOLDEN AGE OF THE GHOST STORY
Historian of the ghost story Jack Sullivan has noted that many literary critics argue a "Golden Age of the Ghost Story" existed between the decline of the Gothic novel in the 1830s and the start of the First World War. Sullivan argues that the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Sheridan Le Fanu inaugurated this "Golden Age". Le Fanu’s collections, such as In a Glass Darkly (1872) and The Purcell Papers (1880), helped popularise the short story as a medium for ghost fiction. Charlotte Riddell, who wrote fiction as Mrs. J. H. Riddell, created ghost stories which were noted for adept use of the haunted house theme.

The "classic" ghost story arose during the Victorian period, and included authors such as M. R. James, Sheridan Le Fanu, Violet Hunt, and Henry James. Classic ghost stories were influenced by the gothic fiction tradition, and contain elements of folklore and psychology. M. R. James summed up the essential elements of a ghost story as, "Malevolence and terror, the glare of evil faces, 'the stony grin of unearthly malice', pursuing forms in darkness, and 'long-drawn, distant screams', are all in place, and so is a modicum of blood, shed with deliberation and carefully husbanded...".

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_story)
Curl up by the fire and I'll tell you a ghost story. Don't be alarmed by the creak of the floorboards, the murmurs in the basement, the shrill ululations of a distant dog. Try not to be perturbed by the flickering candle, the fleeting shadows, the horned, hairy hand that appears at your elbow. Something moved? There's a face in the brickwork? A murderer, long ago, was buried in the cellar? Stay calm. Breathe deeply. The ghosts of Christmases past are gathering.

It was the Victorian era, of course, when ghosts proliferated most obviously in fiction – as well as on stage, in photographs and in drawing room seances. Before the start of Victoria's reign in 1837, the health of the genre was thought to be failing. But by 1887, when Mary Louise Molesworth wrote The Story of the Rippling Train, her character Mrs Snowdon was bemoaning ghosts' prevalence. "One hears nothing else nowadays," she said, and in the pages that followed, she would hear yet another, about the phantom of a beautiful woman who had appeared after being terribly burnt in a fire.

What had raised all these apparitions from the dead? The most straightforward explanation is the rise of the periodical press, says Ruth Robbins, professor of English literature at Leeds Metropolitan University. Ghost stories had traditionally been an oral form, but publishers suddenly needed a mass of content, and ghost stories fitted the bill – short, cheap, generic, repetitive, able to be cut quite easily to length.

Ever one to spot a commercial opportunity, she says, Charles Dickens produced his own highly successful ghost story, A Christmas Carol, in serial form just before Christmas 1843. This was the same year the first commercially produced Christmas card was sent, and Dickens's story both reflected and influenced a growing trend for marking Christmas with secular celebrations. Dr Andrew Smith, author of The Ghost Story 1840-1920, says: "People like Dickens wanted to revive some notion of community invested within that idea of Christmas. What's interesting about his version of Christmas is that it's not particularly Christian. It's about the family, helping the poor, a moment where you might pause and reflect on your life." It's about Ebenezer Scrooge realising, through the counsel of ghosts, that he must embrace his family, look after his good-natured clerk, and become the embodiment of generosity.

Christmas has long been associated with ghosts, says Roger Clarke, author of A Natural History of Ghosts: 500 Years of Hunting for Proof. Just before Christmas 1642, for instance, shepherds were said to have seen ghostly civil war soldiers battling in the skies. This connection continued in the Victorian era through Dickens's story, and through the ghost stories he later published at Christmas in his periodical All the Year Round, with contributors including Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell. It would also continue in the tradition started by MR James, the provost of King's College, Cambridge, who would invite a select few students and friends to his rooms each year on Christmas Eve, where he'd read one of the ghost stories he had written, which are still popular today. They include Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book (1895), in which an ancient holy book brings forth a demonic presence, first announced by a hand covered in "coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny and wrinkled".

The popularity of ghost stories was strongly related to economic changes. The industrial revolution had led people to migrate from rural villages into towns and cities, and created a new middle class. They moved into hou-
...so spookily good at them.

Lighting was often provided by gas lamps, which have also been implicated in the rise of the ghost story; the carbon monoxide they emitted could provoke hallucinations. And there was a preponderance of people encountering ghosts in their daily life come the middle of the century. In 1848, the young Fox sisters of New York heard a series of tappings, a spirit apparently communicating with them through code, and their story spread quickly. The vogue for spiritualism was under way. Spiritualists believed spirits residing in the afterlife were potentially able to commune with the living, and they set up seances to enable this.

Peter Lamont, author of Extraordinary Beliefs, says these gatherings started off quite simply, "and the phenomenon gets more and more impressive. There are floating tables, floating musical instruments, and at some point you get full-form materialisation of ghosts, dressed in white. Occasionally, the [apparition] would get grabbed at a seance and it was discovered that it was actually the medium."

This interest in the supernatural might seem at odds with the growing body of scientific and technological knowledge, but many argue they were intimately connected. In the 19th century, people were increasingly able to communicate at a distance, in disembodied fashion. The telegraph allowed messages to be tapped out in code over long distances – not so unlike the Fox sisters’ purported ghost – and the ability to communicate first with other cities, then countries, eventually to transmit messages across the Atlantic, was brilliant and alarming. "If you can have people communicating from 3,000 miles away," says Robbins, "words coming across the ocean, tapped out in Morse code, it may actually be quite a small leap of the imagination to say, 'There's a dead person who is talking to me through Morse code.'"

The growth of photography brought the advent of spirit photography – there were people who charged enormous fees, and used various tricks, to picture sitters with ghostly images of dead loved ones. William Mumler, for instance, who created a famous image of Mary Todd Lincoln with the ghostly hands of her dead husband, Abraham Lincoln, resting on her shoulders. Then came film and radio. Ghostly disembodied voices and images poured out of the screen and over the airwaves.

There were ghosts in the ether, under the bed, and more and more, in people's heads. "Throughout the 19th century," says Smith, "there is a progressive internalisation of horror, the idea that the monsters are not out there, but to be found within. That obviously culminates with Freud. With the ghost story there's a sense that instead of being able to lock yourself away in your home, to leave the monster outside, the monster lives with you, and has a kind of intimacy."

(Source: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/23/ghost-stories-victorians-spaghetti-good)
BIBLIOTECA TECLA SALA

Avinguda de Josep Tarradellas i Joan, 44
Telèfon: 93 260 24 84
bibtedasala@l-h.cat
Els dilluns, de 15.30 a 21 h
De dimarts a divendres, de 9 a 21 h
Els dissabtes, d’10 a 14 h i de 15 a 20 h
Setmana Santa, Nadal i estiu: horaris especials

www.l-h.cat/biblioteques

Notes

barcelonabookclub.wordpress.com