

Twenty-First Century Ghost Stories for Readers Who Don't Believe in Ghosts

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within. ... [S]ilence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone."

In 1959, American writer Shirley Jackson penned the ultimate supernatural horror novel—*The Haunting of Hill House*—generally considered one of the best ghost stories ever written.

Jackson's classic, a gothic investigation into the female psyche and a tale about a mansion plagued by paranormal events, offers a model of terror sans a specific ghost. "The horror inherent in the novel does not lie in Hill House (monstrous though it is) or the events that take place within it, but in the unexplored recesses of its characters'—and its readers'—minds. This is perhaps why it remains the definitive haunted house story," reappraised the *Guardian* in 2010.

Other writers, too, have advanced the margins and mental space of the traditional ghost story, one that used to be populated by howling, flickering, table-tapping, vengeful ghosts of years—or centuries—past. Edgar Allen Poe, for example, dealt with the effects of guilt on a person's psyche in the short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843); Henry James raised doubts as to his narrator's sanity in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898); Peter Straub reprised the nightmarish past of five men in *Ghost Story* (1979); and Susan Hill provided a motive for the supernatural happenings in *The Woman in Black* (1983).

And don't forget Stephen King.

Contemporary authors, from Neil Gaiman to Sarah Waters and Joanne Harris, have reinvented the ghost story. Though some of the specters in today's stories have physical, unearthly presences, others represent "a vessel for collective terror and guilt, for the unspeakable. It alters to fit our fears. It understands us—how strenuously we run from the past, but always expect it to catch up with us" (*New York Times*). These ghosts—think of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning classic *Beloved* (1987)—are stand-ins for wrongs from the past: slavery, Jim Crow, war, and more. Some novels, such as Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black*

Tom, embody racism's profound influence on our cultural imagination; others, such as the "ghost" in Laura van den Berg's *The Third Hotel*, hover more intimately.

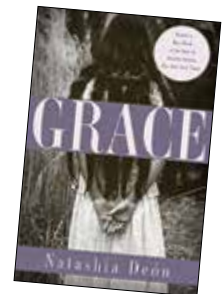
We present some contemporary ghost stories (all novels, some in the horror genre) where the ghost is, more often than not, a figurative expression of a personal, or collective, haunted past. We've omitted Stephen King (though see his recent *Joyland* ★★★★★ Sept/Oct 2013) since we've amply profiled him and his work.

The Ghosts of Slavery and Racism

Grace

By Natasha Deón (2016)

In the antebellum South, Naomi—the ghost of a dead slave, speaking from the afterlife—watches over her blond-haired, pink-skinned child, Josey, as she grows up amid the turmoil of the Civil War. Moving back and forth over three decades, Deón's powerful debut follows Naomi, as she flees slavery on an Alabama plantation after the horrific murders of her mother and the man who enslaved them. Naomi finds shelter in a Georgia brothel, goes on the run again, and is shot by bounty hunters just after giving birth. Naomi watches, as Josey is handed over to a nearby plantation mistress desperate for a child of her own and comes of age. Deón has a "real and rare ability to make reading a felt, almost physical experience—of terror, rage, identification, sorrow," wrote the *New York Times*. "Deón explores, with psychological acuity and absolutely no mercy, what the institution did to slave women—specifically, how it deprived them of the most basic chance to love, delight in and protect their own children."



The Ballad of Black Tom

By Victor LaValle (2016)

◆ SHIRLEY JACKSON AWARD

In this response to H. P. Lovecraft's infamous 1927 story, "The Horror at Red Hook," LaValle reappropriates Lovecraftian "cosmic horror" to convey the black experience in America. Black hustler Tommy Thomas Tester, a salesman who finds occult-related artifacts for sorcerers, lives in 1920s Harlem. Masquerading as a street musician, he's asked by a reclusive, white millionaire to play jazz at a party—but he becomes ensnared in a scheme involving the Great Old Ones, the powerful gods from space who once ruled Earth. From this vantage point, Tester reinvents himself as Black Tom, a powerful sorcerer who can exact racially motivated vengeance against those who killed his father. Perspective is also given to dilettante NYPD detective Malone. "*The Ballad of Black Tom* stands on its own as a compelling weird tale of Jazz-age New York City, but its penetrating examination of Lovecraft's creations and how they reflect racism's profound influence on our cultural imagination is where it really shines" (*Slate*).

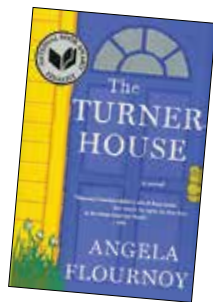


The Turner House

By Angela Flournoy (2015)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

In 2008, Detroit remains pummeled by the Great Recession, and elderly, bedridden Viola Turner has been forced to leave the house where she raised 13 children with her late husband, Francis, and to move in with her eldest son, Cha-Cha. As the grown-up Turner children squabble over what to do with the house, they must also confront the past and the consequences of the paths they've taken—unhappy marriages, financial setbacks, addiction, unemployment, and, for Cha-Cha, an obsession with a malevolent ghost, or "haint," he encountered in the home as a teen in 1958. Detroit's volatile history, from its heyday in the 1940s and the riots of 1967 to the present day, runs through the family's history in flashbacks, as does the history of the black flight and ongoing racial discrimination. *The Turner House*, heart-rending but never sappy, is "an engrossing and remarkably mature first novel" (*New York Times Book Review*). (★★★★ July/Aug 2015)



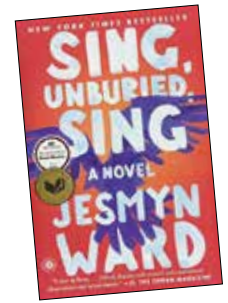
Sing, Unburied, Sing

By Jesmyn Ward (2017)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Ward returns to the world of post-Katrina Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, where its denizens struggle with poverty, violence, and racism. Jojo, a 13-year-old African American

boy, lives with his grandparents and his baby sister; their drug-addled mother, Leonie, remains haunted by visions of her murdered brother. When the white father of her children is released from prison, Leonie, who drifts in and out of her children's lives, takes them to the Mississippi State Penitentiary. On the nightmarish road trip, Jojo starts to connect to his own spirit, the ghost of a teen boy and former prisoner. In this multivoiced portrait of a family, both the hard, ugly truths of American history and the magic of Southern memories emerge. "The book's title could be read two ways—as an ode to the haunting music of the undead, whose histories shape our own, or as an exhortation to those still living to stand tall and proud against every form of bondage" (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*). (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2017)



Further Reading

THE GOOD HOUSE | TANANARIVE DUE (2003)

WHITE TEARS | HARI KUNZRU (★★★★ May/June 2017)

The Ghosts of War

The Little Stranger

By Sarah Waters (2009)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST

In post-World War II Britain, Dr. Faraday, now uneasily poised between classes, is summoned to the English manor where his mother was once a servant. The grand Georgian estate he remembers from boyhood is now a crumbling heap, ravaged by a dwindling family fortune and war. As the doctor delves into the lives of the troubled Ayres family and witnesses a string of unnerving occurrences, he finds himself struggling to reconcile his scientific beliefs with a sinister, irrational force. The novel straddles the psychological thriller, horror, and ghost story. Is the house haunted—or is the narrator mad? "*The Little Stranger* is one of the great literary ghost stories because Waters understands something essential about the form: The creepiest ghost is the one who may or may not be there at all," wrote *Slate*. But ghosts there are: of shame, of class, of the psyches of the inhabitants plagued by war and the erosion of social hierarchies. (★★★★ SELECTION, July/Aug 2009)

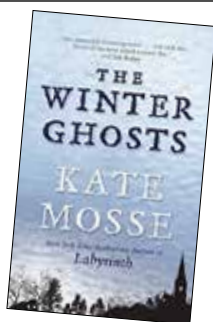


The Winter Ghosts

By Kate Mosse (2009)

In winter 1928, Briton Freddie Watson is traveling through the French Pyrenees, trying to make peace with the death

of his beloved brother in the Great War. Stranded in a snowstorm, he makes his way to a tiny village, once the heart of a Gnostic sect persecuted by the Roman Catholic church. There, he meets the ethereal, also suffering Fabrissa. A story emerges, eventually, about a village tragedy five centuries prior. “The dead leave their shadows, an echo of the space within which once they lived. They haunt us, never fading or growing older as we do. The loss we grieve is not just their futures but our own,” writes Mosse. With Fabrissa’s help, Watson finally puts his ghost to rest. “It’s a ghost story which stands comparison with classic spectral tales from the likes of M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, Henry James, Susan Hill, and Edith Wharton,” wrote the *New York Journal of Books*. “It’s both a page-turner and a poignant love poem to the landscape of southern France.”



Further Reading

LINCOLN IN THE BARDO | GEORGE SAUNDERS (★★★★★ May/June 2017; ♦ BOOKER PRIZE)

Familial, Ancestral, and Other Ghosts

The Third Hotel

By Laura van den Berg (2018)

Thirty-something Clare, grappling with the sudden death of her husband, Richard, a scholar of horror films, leaves their upstate New York home for Havana to visit a cinema festival they had planned on attending together. Then Clare spies him. She follows him—is he alive or dead, or perhaps merely haunting and hiding from her?—through the city, as she becomes more and more convinced he has been resurrected. Amid this surreal landscape, straddling the real and the imagined, Clare reflects on her past, including her relationship with Richard and her role in his strange death. Is the novel a dream, a horror movie, a love letter, or a secret? Read it however you like. “Toying with horror tropes and conventions, and displaying shades of authors such as Julio Cortázar, van den Berg turns Clare’s journey into a dreamlike exploration of grief. This is a potent novel about life, death, and the afterlife” (NPR).



The Comet Seekers

By Helen Sedgwick (2016)

In 2017, Roisin, an Irish astrophysicist, and François, a French chef, meet at a research station in Antarctica to wait

for the appearance of a comet. Both are tormented by a recent loss; both, too, are haunted by ancestral ghosts. “Like all good literary ghosts, these appear and disappear according to particular rules,” noted the *New York Times*. “Sedgwick divulges these slowly and sparingly, so that figuring out the ghost-logic becomes part of the fun.” Moving back and forth through time (with chapters arranged within the context of a comet’s and a ghost’s coappearance, with titles such as “1759: Halley’s Comet”), the novel explores Roisin’s and François’s lives before their arrival in Antarctica, François’s relationship with his strange mother, and the identity of the ghosts. “Sedgwick’s work seems more focused on giving us evidence of the grave consequences one faces if one tries to forget lineage altogether or attempts to hold on too tight” (*Washington Independent*).



Samuel Johnson’s Eternal Return

By Martin Riker (2018)

What happens if, when you die, your consciousness enters another body? This is exactly what happens to Samuel Johnson, a young adult living in Pennsylvania in the 1950s and the early 1960s who dies and finds himself inexplicably occupying the body of his assailant. Unable to interact from inside his new vessel or to leave the world, Samuel migrates from body to body, some sketchier than others, determined to stay close to his only son, as the decades pass. “No actions to take, no choices to make. Just awareness of myself as a being in nonspace, witness to a life that was not mine and had nothing to do with me,” he says. Drawing on Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal return, this philosophical meditation on life is a ghost story of the most unexpected kind. “Riker’s knack for putting Samuel in impossible situations while getting him closer to his goal is hugely entertaining,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. “Given the limitations Riker has imposed on poor ghostly Samuel, it’s remarkable that he was able to get any kind of novel out of his circumstances, much less one so moving and profound.”



Further Reading

THE LOVELY BONES | ALICE SEBOLD (2002)

HER FEARFUL SYMMETRY | AUDREY NIFFENEGER (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2009)

HEART-SHAPED BOX | JOE HILL (★★★★ May/June 2007)

The Victorian Gothic

Sleep, Pale Sister

By Joanne Harris (1994)

Henry Chester, a troubled, repressed Victorian artist, finds the perfect model in nine-year-old Effie. Ten years later, she is his demure, but discontented, wife, shaped by his will and sedated into submission. Desperate for affection, she falls into the arms of Moses Harper, which leads her into the underworld of prostitution, deceit, and murder. Who is Fanny Miller, the brothel keeper? And why does her daughter, murdered 10 years ago on the day of Henry's weekly visit, linger in the shadows? In this gothic and psychological thriller, narrated, in turns, by Henry, Effie, Moses, and Fanny, hypocrisies and murderous secrets slowly surface. "Harris explores the facets of twisted love and betrayal as she introduces macabre characters in bizarre circumstances, including a young ghost and a middle-aged prostitute-witch with a vendetta against Chester. This seemingly straitlaced Victorian household-turned-mad-house makes the gang at Manderley in du Maurier's *Rebecca* look tame in comparison" (*Booklist*).



Further Reading

THE SILENT COMPANIONS | LAURA PURCELL (2017)

THE GHOST WRITER | JOHN HARWOOD (2004)

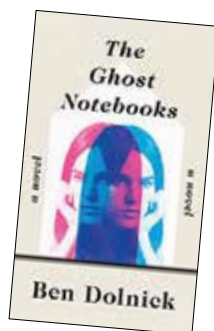
FLORENCE AND GILES | JOHN HARDING (2010)

The Haunted House

The Ghost Notebooks

By Ben Dolnick (2017)

It's either break up or get engaged for Nick Beron and Hannah Rampe. When they dubiously choose the latter, they leave Queens for the remote upstate town of Hibernia, where Hannah becomes the live-in director of the Edmund Wright Historic House. "The line between romantic getaway and lonely creepy farmhouse is, it turns out, fairly thin," muses Nick, a musician, about the house, which is dedicated to a philosopher obsessed with contacting his dead son. Hannah, who once suffered a mental breakdown, starts to hear voices at night and falls under the house's spell. When she disappears, Nick tries to uncover the macabre secrets of the Wright House. In this love story, ghost tale, and bildungsroman, Dolnick "serves up a more nuanced account of the couple's unraveling, leaving us to



wonder if their problems are the work of malevolent spiritual forces or a complicated psychological meltdown. ... What [readers] want is a well-crafted ghost story, and that's exactly what they'll get" (*New York Times*).

Slade House

By David Mitchell (2015)

The shortest of Mitchell's works, *Slade House* tackles the haunted-house genre. Every nine years in October, soul-sucking, "atemporal" twins Jonah and Norah Grayer tempt guests—unsuspecting victims—into their London home, accessed through a tiny door in an alleyway down from a pub. Five first person narrators, several resembling characters from previous Mitchell novels and spaced nine years apart, act as tour guides. Their disappearances become untraceable; their trails quickly grow cold. The real and the fantastical—a sliver of hell, for some—are difficult to distinguish in this gently eerie ghost story spanning the years 1979 to 2015. "The author throws us off balance with a tightly focused ... novel that seems to have as much in common with Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*—to which Mitchell alludes here, obliquely, along with more direct references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*." (*Chicago Tribune*). (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2016)

Further Reading

THE GOOD HOUSE | TANANARIVE DUE (2003)

THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL | PETER JAMES (2015)

HOUSE OF LEAVES | MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI (2000)

THIS HOUSE IS HAUNTED | JOHN BOYNE (2013)

And One Children's Book ...

The Graveyard Book

By Neil Gaiman

◆ NEWBERY MEDAL, CARNEGIE MEDAL, HUGO AWARD, LOCUS AWARD

After the violent murder of his parents and sister, the very human toddler Nobody Owens (Bod) escapes and finds refuge in a cemetery. Kindly ghouls and werewolves soon take him under their wing, teach him their supernatural, not-quite-human ways, and instill in him a sense of family and duty. As he grows up, Bod learns to face the challenges of everyday cemetery life—from the horrors of a city of abandoned ghouls to not-so-nice bullies. However, Bod realizes that, in order to escape the killer still at large and have his revenge on the man who murdered his family, he will have to leave the graveyard, navigate an even scarier human society, and experience life. "This brief, dark, savoury adventure deserves to become a modern classic of children's writing: it has more mystery, excitement and wisdom in a single chapter than all the soap-operatic dilemmas, empty acrobatics and moral dogmatism in those thousands of pages of Potter franchise" (*Independent*). (★★★★ **SELECTION** Jan/Feb 2009) ■