

The Unquiet Dead

But wait -- ghosts can be creepy, in more than a Ghost Hunters freaking-yourself-out kind of way. Think about it -- unlike many other monsters, ghosts were human once. And the really nasty ones were probably really nasty when they were alive, except now they can't be locked up or killed. They also mess with our fears of what comes after death, seem to love violating the places we live and want to feel safe in, and have a bad habit of being the shades of those we loved.

There's a long tradition of short stories about ghosts, and English writers are famous for tales of the unquiet dead, perhaps none more so than M. R. James. His stories, found in Collected Ghost Stories, involve characters stumbling onto old books or antiques that bring about the wrath vengeful spirits, often in a disturbing or violent manner that is just as unsettling now as when the stories were written early in the 20th century. For a more comprehensive take on the modern ghost story, try The Mammoth Book of 20th Century Ghost Stories.

Novels featuring ghosts get farther from the campfire-tale origin of shorter works and usually feature drawn-out hauntings, an eerie atmosphere, and often explore the psychological state of the characters. There's a ton of great ghost fiction for teens. David Almond's Kit's Wilderness is steeped in an atmosphere of decay and dread, featuring a young man haunted by the shade of a sadistic bully in an old, run-down mining town. The House of Dead Maids, by Clare B. Dunkle, is kind of a prequel to Wuthering Heights, and has a young girl at the mercy of a sinister family and the malevolent ghosts of human sacrifices. Adele Griffin's Picture the Dead builds slowly to a chilling surprise ending, and makes the early days of photography and spiritualism quite interesting.

For those with a bit more stomach for gore and explicit content, Joe Hill's Heart-Shaped Box is the story of a former metal-band star who buys a ghost online(!) and finds out that he has a very personal connection when the blood starts spilling. Hill's father has also been known to write a good ghost tale or two. Finally, getting back to the English ghost story, this time with a modern twist, Justin Evans' The White Devil takes an elite English boarding school, an outcast American student, and (somehow) Lord Byron, mixes them up, and creates a story heavy with dread, death, and pale, cold apparitions who thirst for revenge. All of these books are available at MCPL, in addition to some classic ghost movies like Carnival of Souls, John Carpenter's version of The Fog, Poltergeist, and Japanese ghost flicks like Ringu and Ju-On. Take a ghost home with you today!

Posted by Chris H. on October 17, 2012

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