

BARTON

LIBRARY

Dare to know

Ghost Stories

Fiction that focuses on the spirits of the dead or other supernatural entities.

A sub-genre in which a spectral entity intrudes into the material world. They are frequently connected to a place, object, or person. These spirits may be summoned by magic or appear on their own volition. These stories have a basic purpose of inspiring a sense of creeping dread and frightening the reader, but they might be used for social commentary and morality tales. Ghosts often appear in narratives as guardians or as harbingers of things to come. Ghost hunters are also featured in many stories. Author Neil Gaiman observed in 2014: “Fear is a wonderful thing, in small doses ... It’s good to be a child again, for a little while, and to fear — not governments, not regulations, not infidelities or accountants or distant wars, but ghosts and such things that don’t exist, and even if they do, can do nothing to hurt us.”

Ghosts have a long cultural and literary history, appearing in many classics of the ancient world including the Greek dramatist Aeschylus’s *The Libation Bearers* (458 BC) or the Roman playwright Plautus’s *Mostellaria* (ca. 200 BC). During the English Renaissance, the titular hero of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (ca. 1600) was visited by the ghost of his father. Ghost stories also fill the pages of the Arabian work *One Thousand and One Nights* (ca. 1710s). In the modern era, ghost stories were present in Gothic and Victorian novels, and in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s. Francis Marion Crawford’s *The Upper Berth* (1894), Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), M. R. James’s *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), Edith Wharton’s *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), Violet Hunt’s *Tales of the Uneasy* (1911), William Hope Hodgson’s “The Ghosts of the Glen Doon” (1911), Algernon Blackwood’s *Incredible Adventures* (1914), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Madam Cowl’s Ghost* (1923), and Walter de la Mare’s “Out of the Deep” (1923) are classic examples.

Common Elements

Apparitions
Poltergeists
Supernatural entities
Hauntings
Distant screams

Connections to everyday life
White burial shrouds
Suggestions of an as-yet unknown reality
Ghosts as teachers

Social criticism
Ghost with uncompleted tasks in the living world

Guilt for past misdeeds
The inevitability of death

Benefits of Reading

Allows readers to safely experience the primal emotion of fear
Teaches readers to channel and overcome their fears

Permits readers to explore the darkness of their imaginations
Provides readers with a way to demystify death

Modern Literary Examples

<i>Anna Dressed in Blood</i> (2011) by Kendare Blake
<i>The Devil You Know</i> (2006) by Mike Carey
<i>Ghosts and Grisly Things</i> (1998) by Ramsey Campbell
<i>The Girl with Ghost Eyes</i> (2015) by M. H. Boroson
<i>Heart-Shaped Box</i> (2007) by Joe Hill
<i>Hell House</i> (1971) by Richard Matheson
<i>House of Shadows</i> (2020) by Darcy Coates
<i>I Remember You</i> (2014) by Yrsa Sigurdardottir

<i>Kill Creek</i> (2017) by Scott Thomas
<i>The Little Stranger</i> (2009) by Sarah Walters
<i>Mapping the Interior</i> (2017) by Stephan Graham Jones
<i>The Silent Companions</i> (2018) by Laura Purcell
<i>The Sorrows</i> (2018) by Jonathan Janz
<i>Wait Till Helen Comes</i> (1986) by Mary Downing Hahn
<i>The Woman in Black</i> (1983) by Susan Hill