

Books Worth Revisiting: Supernatural Short Stories

Everyone likes a good story, and a good short story is a work of art. At this time of year, with the holidays just around the corner, a good ghost story always seems to be just the thing. Stories about ghosts and the supernatural are part of the genre of fiction called “macabre.” Two past masters of the macabre short story are W. W. Jacobs (1863-1943) and M. R. James (1862-1936).

The Monkey’s Paw and Other Tales of the Macabre / RC 46641:

William Wymark Jacobs’ supernatural masterpiece, “The Monkey’s Paw,” a tale about three wishes and the horror that descends on those making the wishes, is one of the most anthologized short stories ever published. In his time, Jacobs was equally celebrated for his stories about sailors, material for which he gathered from his meanderings as a child along London’s docks where his father was employed. This collection includes some of his seafaring stories with macabre overtones. “Captain Rogers” is a story about a prosperous landlord who has managed to hide his piratical past but is threatened by the appearance of an old shipmate with blackmail on his mind. Readers of “The Lost Ship” see how the villagers in the story change over time when their loved ones fail to return from a promising sea voyage. Jacobs’ supernatural tales fall into two categories—the horrifying and the humorous. Jacobs was brilliant at depicting ordinary people being suddenly catapulted into horror, usually because of uncontrolled temper, greed, or stupidity. A gentleman on the point of marrying is undone by his fiancée’s bracelet in “The Well,” and a murderer, attempting to frame another for his crime, finds that dead bodies sometimes have other notions in “In the Library.” One excellent example of Jacobs’ humorous supernatural stories is “The Vigil,” in which an overbearing and dictatorial old soldier is challenged by his prospective son-in-law to spend a night alone in a haunted house.

The Ghost Stories of M. R. James / RC 11355: Even though Montague Rhodes James was a contemporary of Jacobs, the two authors were as different from each other as night and day, especially in their writing styles. The son of a minister, James spent his entire life in academic circles, becoming a well-known medieval scholar and eventually becoming provost of King’s College, Cambridge, and then Eton College.

James wrote thirty-one ghost stories between 1894 and 1927, most written as occasional pieces for friends, patrons, and colleagues and read during the Christmas season. Unlike Americans who consider Halloween as the prime time for ghost stories, people in Great Britain associate ghost stories with Christmas. Even today, readings of James' stories are aired every Christmas Eve by the British Broadcasting System (BBC).

The settings for James' stories are usually universities, churches, or rural villages. His protagonists often are engaged in some form of research or investigation; their encounters with the macabre result either deliberately from the protagonists' curiosity, or they may stumble into the situation unwittingly. However the encounter comes about, it is almost always unpleasant and sometimes fatal. The reader often is not certain just exactly whom or what the supernatural presence may be, but the resulting horror is no less vivid for the lack of precise details.

James' stories were collected and published as *The Ghost Stories of M. R. James* in 1931, and they still are considered to be some of the best ever written. The most famous story is "The Mezzotint," in which an art collector receives on approval a seemingly ordinary print; he thinks the asking price is too much until he notices that something peculiar is going on inside the frame. Other notable stories in the collection:

- Tourists staying in rooms 12 and 14 at a Danish hotel are discombobulated by the comings and goings of "Number 13."
- After rejecting a poorly written book, a reviewer finds himself terrorized by a modern-day alchemist in "Casting the Runes."
- "Mr. Humphreys and His Inheritance" details the joys and perils of garden mazes.
- An unscrupulous book dealer receives his come-uppance after he steals "The Uncommon Prayer Book."

Some of James' ghost stories are also available in an earlier anthology, **Ghost Stories of an Antiquary / BR 02649.**

Both Jacobs' and James' short stories are suitable for most readers, although the themes of death and horror may be too disturbing for younger readers. Neither collection contains strong language or descriptions of sexual situations.