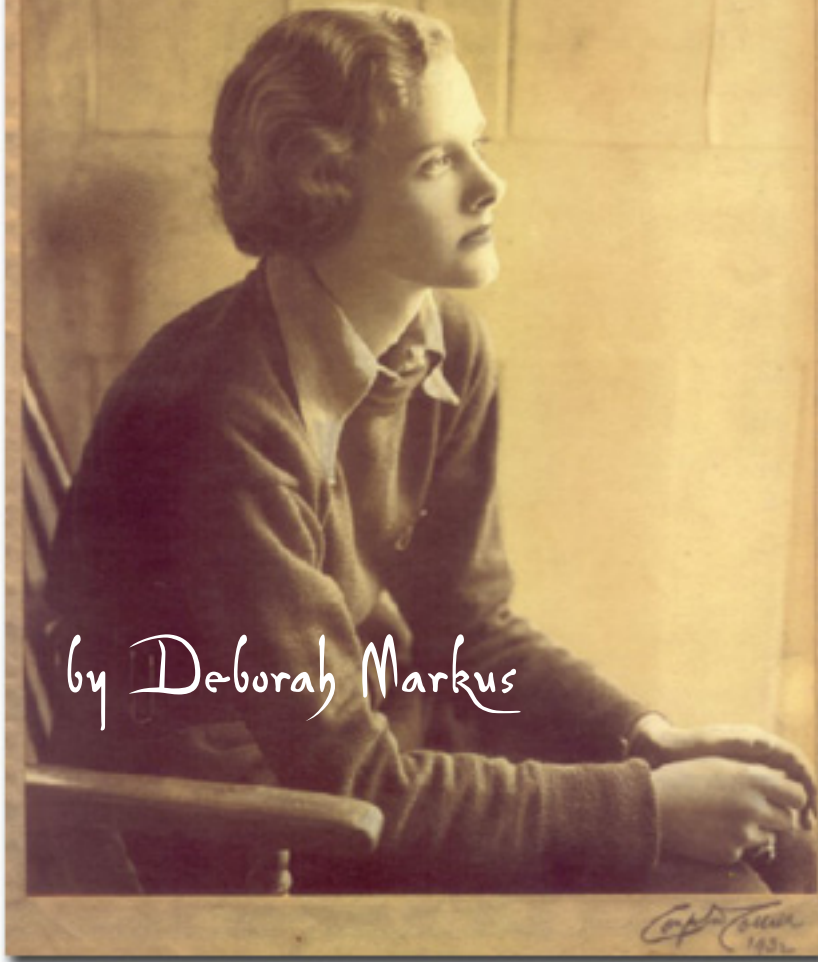


October Reading



by Deborah Markus

Daphne du Maurier

October demands a certain sort of reading. You can spend the rest of the year poring over Clive Barker and Stephen King — or, if you really want to be frightened, Danielle Steele and Jan Karon — but come October, you need to turn your literary calendar back a century or two and enjoy, not a real scare, but something with a good, comfy, ghost-story-around-the-fire kind of feel. You want to relish what Gothic used to mean before it turned into too many earrings and not enough hair.

You might want to begin with the basics. *Frankenstein* is a very good place to start, as long as you forget anything the movies might have told you about it. That thrilling scene in the laboratory, with the lightning

and the impassioned speech, never even came close to happening in the book. The creation scene there is far more frightening for being eerily the opposite: subdued, badly lit, and ghostly. Frankenstein "gives birth" to his creature in the middle of a rainy November night and promptly flees in horror; the rest of the novel is pretty much one long chase scene. For those who already know the novel well, the University of Chicago Press's scholarly edition of it may be of interest: it presents the 1818 original text, some corrections Shelley made in 1823, and the revised text of 1831. And speaking of background material, John Sutherland wrote two wonderful essays about *Frankenstein*: "How does Victor make his monsters?" in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* and "Why is the monster yellow?" in *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet?* Good clean fun.

Mary Shelley's lesser-known work, *Mathilda*, was never published in the writer's lifetime — she suppressed it herself because of its incest theme. It finally became widely available in 1990. Like *Frankenstein*, it is more philosophy than action; and, also like *F.*, it uneasily explores the link Mary Shelley saw between love and death. Her mother died when Shelley was born, as a direct consequence of having given birth. Shelley herself had several children, only one of whom lived. It was impossible for her to be the least bit saccharine about babies and birth, or, by extension, creation and any act that led to it. So *Mathilda*'s life begins just as her mother's ends; her father flees in grief; and the eventual father-daughter reunion, like that of *Frankenstein* and his creation, is inevitably tragic.

To cheer yourself up after all this, you might turn to another classic: *Dracula*. Norton published a wonderful critical edition, with lots of jolly footnotes and plenty of essays and reviews after the story's text. Leonard Wolf's *Annotated Dracula* is also quite good. If you want some background material, check out Elizabeth Miller's *Dracula: Sense and Nonsense* or McNally & Florescu's *In Search of Dracula*. And Sutherland has some fun essays regarding *Dracula* in the above-mentioned collections: "Why does the Count come to England?" in the first, and "Why isn't everyone a vampire?" in the second.

Dracula itself is reasonably fun, though rather long, and fails to meet modern expectations of what vampire fiction ought to be like: namely, fast and hot. There are some reasonably steamy scenes, but not as many as one would hope. Better, if you're in the mood for that sort of thing, turn to J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, which is dreamily sensual rather than graphically explicit, and has wonderful atmosphere to boot. It's also very short, at least compared to *Drac*.

Speaking of short and fun though not at all sexy (hey, you can't have everything), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a fine companion for a crisp October evening. The fact that the reader already knows the ending (hint to readers who've been off-planet for the last century: THEY'RE THE SAME GUY) only adds to the fun, though one can envy those early readers, way back when the book first came out, who actually got a nasty shock when they found out who was who. And, in case you were wondering,

yes, John Sutherland *did* write a piece about *J&H*: “What does Edward Hyde look like?”

Speaking of people who are two men in one, now is the time to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, if you haven’t already. This isn’t considered a horror novel by everyone, but let’s face it, it’s creepy as hell. (See John Sutherland’s “Why does this novel disturb us?”) It’s all the more uneasifying for starting so comically. In five pages, Lord Henry Wotton seems to utter every Wildean quip you’ve ever heard of, including the ever-popular “there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.” But the mood deteriorates soon after. The jokes go cold and hard, shifting into observations like “There is always something ridiculous about the emotions of people whom one has ceased to love.”

Wilde could write such an accomplished horror novel exactly because he was the perfect humorist, and the comic and the horrific seek to provoke similarly extreme reactions. Once again, the modern reader will know enough about the premise not to be too surprised by the plot itself, but the writing is too rich and strange for that to matter.

George Eliot’s novella *The Lifted Veil* isn’t nearly as well known a work as *Picture*, but it’s a better October read for pure gothicism, and some of its most brilliant writing is actually rather Wildean. “What!” a character cries, “your wisdom thinks I must love the man I’m going to marry? The most unpleasant thing in the world. I should quarrel with him; I should be jealous of him; our *menage* would be conducted in a very ill-bred manner. A little quiet contempt contributes greatly to the elegance of life.”

This woman spends a great deal of time trying to convince the main character, who is infatuated with her, that his high-flown ideas of her are based in fantasy. But she appeals to him exactly because he doesn’t — or can’t — really know who or what she is. An illness has left him with the ability to discern the surface thoughts and deeper feelings of those around him; only Bertha, she of the unromantic madwoman-in-the-attic name, is a mystery to him. And so he is drawn to her. The fact that she’s a total babe likely helps. George Eliot, nee Marian Evans the plain-faced-to-the-point-of-bizarre-looking woman, must have taken

some pleasure in making beautiful Bertha, like Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, a destructive choice for a wife.

You may have noticed a recurring literary theme here: namely, October reading is best found in the nineteenth century. True, the eighteenth had plenty of spooky stuff, but let’s face it, no one much reads Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or even Lewis’s *The Monk* any more. They’re too thick, too unwieldy. The eighteenth-century does have one thing to offer the modern October reader, though: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I know — anything they make hapless students read can’t be any fun, right? But it can, once you’re free to read it just because you feel like it. Here, listen to this:

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

That’s what you want in October — nothing that’s actually, technically scarifying; just spooky, shivery, look-over-your-shoulder fun. “Slimy things did crawl with legs/Upon the slimy sea” — you know you like it. Martin Gardner annotated the poem some years ago, with illustrations by Dore. Snag this edition from the library if you find yourself wondering what Coleridge meant when he said he heard the dash of oars “eftsones.”

Speaking of long spooky narrative poems, you could do worse than read Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*. Chronicle Books put out a slim, pretty edition of it recently with an afterword by Joyce Carol Oates. The poem is very strange: a fairy tale/moral tale, with a lot of what feel like blatant sex scenes. And yet they’re not. Even Oates was puzzled by this aspect of the work, but she’s got a lot of illuminating things to say about it anyway.

So, what else can fill your October shopping needs? You’ll need some Poe, maybe some Sherlock Holmes (yes, I *know* he’s not an author — except for some trifling monographs); definitely some H. G. Wells. (Good as the movie of *The Invisible Man* is, the book is better. Ditto *War of the Worlds*.) I’ve had *The Woman in White* (Wilkie Collins) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (Nathaniel Hawthorne) on

my October reading table for longer than I care to admit. Maybe this will be the year I read them...

There are a lot of fun ghost story collections out there, too. Dover’s *Classic Ghost Stories* weighs in at 11 stories for a whopping \$2.95, and includes LeFanu, R. L. Stevenson, Charles Dickens, Henry James, and M. R. James (no relation), as well as lesser-known writers. If you want a weightier and costlier collection, consider *The Penguin Book of Horror Stories*, which contains such classics as William Fryer Harvey’s “The Beast with Five Fingers” and “The Body Snatcher” by Robert Louis Stevenson. *The Little Big Book of Chills and Thrills*, a recent collection, is fun, though light on fiction — it’s mostly a pretty book for your October coffee table, though I was glad to find Ray Bradbury’s “The Troll” and Lloyd Alexander’s “The Foundling” there.

Oh, and how could I forget the ultimate October read: *The Turn of the Screw*. Read it and then get into a rousing argument with your intellectual friends about whether or not the governess was insane. (Actually, I don’t believe this is a valid question, though the lit-crit types all seem to think it is. James himself said that he meant the work to be a straightforward ghost story, and to me that’s exactly how it reads. But, hey, it’s your party.) And speaking of Henry James, “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” is quite good. James wrote about a skillion ghost stories, though, so take your pick.

And since no one seems able to talk about Edith Wharton without mentioning Henry James, let’s turn the tables and insist on talking about her after mentioning him. *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* should be on every autumn night table. The introduction, brief as it is, is worth the price of the book for its wonderful answer to the question “Do you believe in ghosts?” “No, but I’m afraid of them.” Which is my feeling exactly. And will be yours after you read “Pomegranate Seed,” an absolutely terrifying story in which the most violent occurrence is the puzzling-over by the main character of a note pencilled too faintly to be read. But its message is understood by the man it was sent to. All too well. Shiver shiver.

Even though she was a twentieth-century author (she died comparatively recently — in the eighties, I believe), everyone thinks of Daphne du Maurier as someone who



Photo inset: From top left clockwise to center; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, H.G. Wells, Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, George Eliot, Mary Shelley (center).

wrote a long time ago, thanks to her writing style and choice of subject matter, which makes her perfect for this time of year.

You may have seen the movie of *Rebecca*, but I'm sorry, you still have to read it. Hitchcock softened the story somewhat — made the violence not so violent — so as not to shock his audience; he also made the nameless main character a lot nicer than she is in the original work. Just as *Rebecca's* plot resembles that of *Jane Eyre*, so does *Rebecca's* narrator resemble Jane herself: both of them are allegedly sweet little victims of the wicked schemers around them, and both, as you'll notice after a reread or two, are quite capable of being really nasty little pieces of work. Look at the reaction when Maxim finally tells his new young wife the truth about his relationship with Rebecca, and about what he did to her. Not very sweet. But brilliant, compelling writing. And a wrenching, wonderful story.

If you've already read *Rebecca*, try *The Rebecca Notebook And Other Memories*. It includes du Maurier's notes for the novel, jotted down when she was still piecing ideas together but didn't have time to do anything with them yet. Some of the plotline is very much like what she finally wrote; some is startlingly different. Rather than the shipwreck after the party, there's an attempted suicide and a touching reconciliation scene. Maxim is originally named Henry. The collection also offers the original epilogue for *Rebecca*, something like the existing first chapter but weaker. The main character is a little too plump rather than a little too thin. Manderley becomes a country club instead of — well, I won't ruin the real ending for those who haven't read the novel. But check it out if you like twentieth-century Gothic.

This isn't real Goth, or even fiction for that matter, but if you enjoy du Maurier's work you might want to read Flavia Leng's *Daphne du Maurier: A Daughter's Memoir*. Chapter One starts thus: "*Rebecca* and I were conceived about the same time in 1936, but whereas the novel was very much planned and thought-out, I was unquestionably a mistake." Now, how can

you go wrong with a beginning like that?

Many people know that Hitchcock's "The Birds" was adapted from a short story by du Maurier. They, and you, might not know how very different the works are from one another. And in terms of just plain terror — the quiet, creeping kind — the story beats the movie hands down. The best place to read this piece is in *Daphne du Maurier's Classics of the Macabre*, beautifully illustrated by Michael Foreman. The collection also includes "The Apple Tree," a wonderfully gradual unfolding of just how much of a bastard any main character can be; "The Alibi," which I recommend only to the strong of stomach; and "The Blue Lenses," the finest portrait of female terror and vulnerability since Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Which brings us back to the nineteenth century, but just barely and only for a minute. "Yellow Wallpaper" is an unreliable (or all-too-reliable, depending on how raving a feminist you are) narrator story of a woman who is made uneasy by the house she and her husband have rented for the summer. Well, she's got plenty of time to be all kinds of uneasy; she's on the fashionable "rest cure" for "nervous depression," thanks to her husband the omniscient (ha ha) doctor, and that means no work of any kind until she's all better and ready to be a happy housewife. No reading or writing. But she sneaks in a journal just the same, and you should really run out and read it.

Please, though, try to find a collection of Gilman's work — don't just grab any old anthology or English lit textbook this story happens to be plunked into. Those books, I've noticed, tend to edit this story, often badly and bizarrely. They mess with the wonderful staccato of Gilman's Dickinsonian line-breaks. Worst of all, *they chop off a pivotal line of the story like what's-her-name chops off what's-her-name's finger in "The Piano."* I kid you not. I cannot tell you how often I have come across this. The sixth line of "The Yellow Wallpaper" should read: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." And as often as not, those last two words, in a

story that is a not-so-subtle tale of the destructive effects of a certain kind of marriage on a certain kind of woman — these last two words are *gone*. How can they do that? That's like publishing "The Raven" and leaving out the "Nevermore." That's like making "Cujo" a kitten. Anyway, if you can find this story sound and whole as the author intended it, I promise a most October thrill at the end.

John Sutherland's *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* has a fine essay, "What cure for the Madwoman in the Attic?" about "The Yellow Wallpaper." Just ignore his footnote about the name Jane being a typo for Jennie. It's not true, and its not being true is practically the point of the story.

Back to the twentieth century: I wish I had more to recommend. Tim Burton's *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories* is all right, if you like your horror funny (or your funny horrific). Better is the more recent collection *Creepy Susie and 13 other tragic tales for troubled children* by Angus Oblong, but I freely admit that this one isn't the least bit Gothic — it's just the exactly wrong kind of fun.

Send Bygraves, by Martha Grimes, is a Gothic October read. It's a book-length poem (with lots of eerily beautiful illustrations by Devis Grebu) about a murder so byzantine that the only hope is to send Bygraves, a detective far more mysterious than any mere murder could ever hope to be. Here's a bit from the beginning:

...I lay in bed
Sweating it out at night with the fangs
and cloaks
They called just shadows. No one ever
comes clean
About murder or sex. They can leave
you there for dead,
Tied up in an attic, or down in some
ravine.
"Mum, someone's trying to kill me."
"Don't be absurd,
Dear," she'd say, washing the blood
from the basin.
"If we can't have a butler, how could
we ever afford
To hire an assassin?"

Tell me you don't want to read the rest after that. Read the chapters regarding "The Sad (but realistic) Tale of Brian Jumpers" and "Why Don't We Kill Them Off And Be Done With It?"; read about "All of the villagers out/To murder one

another/In typical English fashion.” Come on. Treat yourself.

Speaking of murder, please try to find a copy of Margaret Atwood’s slim, strange book *Murder in the Dark*. It’s a collection of short stories, most of them no more than a page long, many only a paragraph or two. The title story is brilliant — you’ll find yourself reading it to anyone who will listen. It’s nothing more than a detailed description of a game you can play with some friends. Everyone picks pieces of paper from a box. One piece is marked with an X, for the detective, and another is colored with a black spot, for the murderer. The remaining pieces are all blank, indicating potential victims. Sounds rather sinister — but remember, it’s only a game. Isn’t it?

To finish off the slim pickings the twentieth century has to offer the October reader, I will mention Alison Lurie’s short story collection, *Women and Ghosts*. Anything by Lurie is wonderful — she’s a lot like Jane Austen, and in fact an early novel of hers is named after a piece of Austen juvenilia. But this collection is especially fine for the reader new to her, though old admirers will be glad to see that, true to

Lurie form, many of the characters in this collection are culled from previous works of hers. Some of the pieces, like the “Pool People,” are definitely disturbing, one or two are rather funny, and all of them have a no-nonsense here-is-a-story-and-now-I-will-tell-it-to-you quality quite refreshing in this day and age.

Here, as an appropriate ending for this October reading list, is the beginning of Lurie’s “Another Halloween”:

You’ve got to admit there’s something uncomfortable about Halloween as a holiday. I mean, what are we celebrating? Not the American Revolution, or the family, or God, or the New Year, nothing like that. Nothing respectable. Instead of flags or holly or colored lights, the streets are full of weird-looking dwarfish creatures, monsters and witches and animals running on their hind legs. You might say, Oh, they’re only our kids, and other people’s kids. But how do you know for sure?

How indeed.
Happy October. ~
