Autumn Reading

by Deborah Markus

"IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN. THE DAYS ARE FOGGY AND GREY OR COLDLY SUNNY, CLIMAXING EITHER WAY AT ABOUT FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON WITH A CERTAIN SLANT OF LIGHT THAT DRAWS ME TO THE SHELF IN SEARCH OF SEASONAL READING..."

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October reading, I always call it, though it tends to sprawl out over most of Autumn like a cat stretching himself across the newspaper.

Although much of what I turn to as the days grow shorter would be termed horror, none of it is gorror and very little of it is really frightening, at least to a modern audience. A young governess may occasionally sponge away the blood from a wound inflicted by the teeth of a madwoman, but for the most part terror is imagined or threatened more often than enacted and observed at close range. Scenes that would be horribly upsetting if set in this day and age retain only a certain pleasant frisson after mellowing for decades or centuries. And I'm glad of it. I don't really want to be frightened. No horror reader does. I only want that pleasant chill.

It's true. We're trying to move *away* from real fear, not toward it. No one who wants to be really afraid has to shell out for the latest by Barker or Campbell. Just go to the library and pick up Primo Levi's memoir of his year in Auschwitz. Or, easier yet, turn on the evening news. By taking our horror in fictional form, we're striving to control it, wrestling it into manageable form.

Look at the teenager who lives downstairs from me. He reminds me of myself at that age — really into wearing black, always got a horror novel tucked into his pocket or backpack. (Decent taste, too. The last time I saw him, he was simultaneously walking and reading a collection of Lovecraft's short stories.) Exactly the kind of kid everybody worries about. Those books must be warping his mind!

Not likely. If he's anything like I was back then, they're reassuring him. Ghastly as his home life seems, it could always be worse.

Or, as I felt back when too much horror was never enough, the vampires I read about pretty much non-stop were actually *less* scary than the things that frightened me in so-called real life. Or anyway more romantic, in every sense of the word. (I thought then and think now, for instance, that *Salem's Lot* is basically socially

acceptable soft-core porn, and before anyone tells the King to call his lawyers let me hasten to add that I intend that as a compliment. Anyone who thinks it's easy to write genuinely hot stuff hasn't tried it lately. If the big guy managed it without any intention in that direction, my hat and then some is off to him.)

The first best argument for horror fiction being originally and at its roots escape fiction is who its first best readers were, some two hundred years ago or so when the form first came into being. Women. Women with a little leisure time and money and a desperate need to forget for a while that they lived between Scylla and Charybdis. They could marry and be worn out and very likely killed by constant childbearing and -rearing; or they could remain single and be both socially unacceptable and economically straitened. As Jane Austen put it so well at about the time period I'm now addressing, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor." And married women, as she knew through keen observation, had a dreadful propensity for being miserable — poor animals, as she once described a young relation who was pregnant yet again, whom she predicted in pitying and rather horrified tones would be worn out before the age of thirty. That's assuming that the ravages of even carrying a child, let alone giving birth to it, didn't carry her to the grave. (Did you know that Charlotte Bronte, that great gothic writer, died of what is so condescendingly called morning sickness? Did you know that the first real substantial efforts to combat fatal nausea, or whatever you'd call it, began only in World War I, because significant numbers of soldiers were suffering from it?)

Small wonder that women turned to fiction, both the reading and the writing of it. Which in turn contributed to the low reputation the novel once had. Stephen King has been credited with making the horror novel respectable; but a few hundred years ago, *all* novels bore the stigma of being the lowest of the low. Jane Austen may have been smiling when she wrote most of *Northanger Abbey,* her send-up of the ridiculously over-the-top dark fiction of the time, but she was quite in earnest in this, perhaps its most famous passage:

> I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding — joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers. And while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens, — there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. "I am no novel reader — I seldom look into novels — Do not imagine that *I* often read novels — It is really very well for a novel." — Such is the common cant. — "And what are you reading, Miss —?" "Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. — "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;" or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

The irony of this passage is that, when

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Austen wrote it, it wasn't the least bit accurate, because Austen herself hadn't been published yet. *Northanger Abbey* was her first novel, though it didn't make its way to the public eye until after her death. What she saw in the novel form, fiercely devoted reader that she was, must have been its potential. The liveliest wit and humor in the best-chosen language were most definitely still waiting in the wings when she first picked up her pen.

The fact that *Northanger Abbey* is listed in *Horror: The 100 Best Books* is just one more supporting example of the old adage that you can't always believe what you read. As is the book itself, concerned as it is with the adventures of young Catherine Morland, who is so infatuated with "horrid" fiction that she convinces herself the father of her true love is a wicked man who has locked away or murdered his wife, when in fact he is merely a wicked man. Though at first blush the book might appear to be a cautionary tale warning *against* novel reading, it is in fact a spirited defense of that very act. Austen ciphers her characters in a code that is easy to crack: the ones who enjoy the same books Austen herself did are good, while those who don't, well, aren't. And of course those who damn novel reading altogether are the most despicable scum. (Note to those who have actually read the book: yes, I *know* that wicked two-timing Isabella Thorpe liked the same dreadful novels Austen and Catherine Morland did. But she also thought that Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, Austen's favorite book ever ever ever, "had not been readable." So she only passes half the literary taste test, and is therefore only "good" for half the book. See how easy?)

As you've no doubt begun to sense, this book is in fact so far from fearful that I would (and often do) prescribe it as a remedy for low spirits. Austen's humor is at its merriest and least restrained here, and Catherine Morland is the most engaging little fool to ever grace the pages of fiction. Far from being the stereotypical orphan with no relations in the world but an evil step-uncle, she has two healthy parents and nine brothers and sisters. ("A family of ten children," as Austen sagely points out, "will always be called a fine family, where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number.") But Catherine, on meeting the man who will eventually become her husband, doesn't know her own advantages — "did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward." I mean, come on. Does this sound scary to you?

The only real horror in this novel is in the society it describes. First off, there is no real privacy at all. Late eighteenth/early nineteenth century England is very like the tenth-century Japan Royall Tyler describes in the introduction to his recent translation of *The Tale of Genji*:

> Something essential to remember… is that no one in [the world of the novel] is ever alone. A lord or lady lived surrounded by a more or less large staff of women and, just outside, men. The notions of solitude and privacy did not exist… If [a lord] said something privately to a gentlewoman, he managed to do so in a room already containing a good many of them.

Austen's England is similarly situated — a country "where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open." Though often longing for freedom and privacy, this England's citizens are, as one expresses it, "always to be watched, in person or by proxy." And so Catherine seeks a moment to herself almost as ardently as, and more vainly than, she seeks a dance or a conversation with Henry Tilney, arguably the foxiest and least-appreciated of all Austen's heroes.

I just want to pause right here and mention a truly wonderful Website entirely devoted to this gentleman. (Well, it's for the whole novel, I guess, but a huge section is devoted to, as the Webmistress describes it, "The Cult of Da Man," with whom said mistress is shamelessly in lust.) It's at www.tilneysandtrapdoors.com, and it is absolutely brilliant. Go check it out when you have some free time — it's huge, but every inch of it is fabulously fun. Sample the fan fiction, please (bearing in mind The High Priestess' First Corollary of Fan Fiction: If Henry Tilney Is In The Story, There Must Be Smooching). I can't do it justice here, but I promise you won't regret reading "Deathmatch! Men of the Cloth," featuring "the Reverend Henry 'Da Man' Tilney" ("wearing a fetching outfit of non-fraying green muslin" and "bearing a striking resemblance to Horatio from the Hornblower movies") "vs. the Reverend Edmund 'So Bland He Has No Nickname' Bertram" (the "hero" of Austen's *Mansfield Park* and arguably the ickiest and least appealing guy who gets the girl in any of her books or anyone else's, bearing in this story "a striking resemblance to Horatio from the Hamlet movie"). The High Priestess of the site, Margaret Sullivan, also wrote a serious and surprisingly addictive selection of the letters she imagines Henry and Catherine exchanged while waiting for permission to marry.

Which brings me to another genuinely horrifying aspect of *N. A.* — the complete lack of power women had in and over their own lives. Catherine must, as Tilney himself points out, wait to be asked to dance, to converse, to visit (or to be wed); the power of refusal is hers, but never the power to initiate. Eleanor Tilney, Henry's long-suffering sister, is a far more disturbing case in point of helplessness. Though she belongs to a wealthy and prominent family, her time is never her own to command — her *life* isn't her own. In one scene, Catherine calls on her, wishing urgently to clear up a misunderstanding; Eleanor would love to speak with her, but General Tilney, her father, refuses to have his walk put off for even five minutes, and Eleanor must accompany him regardless of her own

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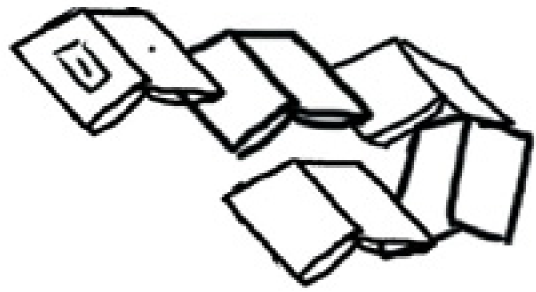


wishes in the matter. Later, and far more dreadfully, she is forced to be the bearer of bad news when her father's cruelty and tyranny reaches its height.

But this is only frightening or upsetting to feminists and fair-minded social historians. In terms of being a genuinely dark read, *Northanger Abbey* happily fails. As Autumn reading goes, it is at best the doorway to more appropriate material.

Such as the novels Catherine Morland admires. Constantly referred to is Mrs. Radcliffe's novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* — in fact, the second half of *N. A.* is largely a satire of that very book, with comic departures from pertinent plot points. I read *Udolpho* some ten years ago, when I was young and full of vigor and felt as if I had all the time in the world to devote to such an undertaking. All the time in the world is almost enough to let you finish *Udolpho,* if you skip the atrocious poetry the main characters keep suddenly breaking into without warning. I didn't. Skip it, that is. I thought it would be cheating or something. And so I can tell you in all honesty that you won't be missing a damned thing. Give it a miss, already, the way I wish I had. Learn from the mistakes of those who went before you. Which you may or may not take to mean giving the whole book a miss, which would be a shame because in spite of its length (nearly 700 pages), it's a lot of fun. If you do brave it, please write and remind me what's behind that black veil. I can't for the life of me remember, but I know it was important.

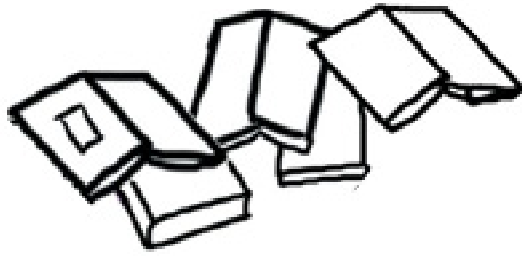
Rough as the path often is in *Udolpho*, it's a merry dance in a meadow compared to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, another extremely early horror work. Its only virtue is its shortness, and yet it stands as ghastly living proof that brevity is *not* the soul of wit. It can be enjoyed nowadays only for its frequent and entirely unintended humor. Walpole describes with a straight face a man who is about to cast off his loving, faithful, and devoted wife of some twenty years for a hot young number (regardless of how said h.y.n. feels about the case, and believe you me she isn't thrilled) he'd intended for his own son before said son died in a freak accident on what would have been his very wedding day, plus he spends most of the rest of the novel threatening and attempting to kill various young innocents of both major genders — Walpole, I say, describes this paragon as having a certain "asperity to his temper, which was naturally humane [and when was this, exactly?]; and his virtues were always ready to operate, when his passion did not obscure his reason." Which it does for pretty much the entire novel, so why even bring it up?

This book has scarcely a hundred pages to its name, and yet that's more than enough room for it to twist and wind itself among numerous long-lost fathers, sons, daughters, humongous fifty-foot long sabres, and enchanted helmets, as well as the occasional bleeding statue and obscure ancient prophecy. I just finished reading this book and I have no idea what it was about, except that there's a scene with a princess escaping to a nearby cathedral by way of a (long lost, of course) underground passageway, and I only remember *that* because Henry Tilney mentions something very like it in *N. A. Otranto* is historically interesting if only because Walpole is possibly the first author to have employed the old "I found this manuscript lying around somewhere and decided to translate and publish it" line about something he'd written himself. Except he really meant to pull the wool over the public's eyes, and only admitted to being the author when the book sold well enough to justify a second edition. Fun Autumn reading, though, especially if you invite some friends over one stormy night and take turns reading aloud, with serious penalties for bursting into laughter. And a great book to haul out the next time some old fogey starts complaining about the bleak state of contemporary fiction and longs for the good old days when horror writers could really write. "Ya mean like *this*?" "NOOOOO!"

Let's face it. It's wonderful in theory to go back to the basics and seek the roots of darkness, as I often feel the urge to do at this time of year; but in practice, you're better off moving forward in time a bit to when writers have had a little time to roll up their sleeves, sharpen up their wits, and give us stuff still worth reading a hundred-plus years later.

The Bronte sisters, for instance. I don't understand why their big three never make it to lists like the 100 Best. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* in particular has been tragically misunderstood for too long as a romance rather than a horror novel. Yes, there are some hot scenes. Heathcliff and Cathy's final embrace is matchless; and if you don't mind a touch of necrophilia, the "if she be cold, I'll think it is this north wind that chills *me*; and if she be motionless, it is sleep" scene has its charms. And yes, it's true that Heathcliff has massive charisma, especially when compared to every other male character in the book. But so does your Uncle Ted. This novel nicely anticipates the early works of Shirley Jackson in having virtually no appealing or trustworthy characters whatsoever. Heathcliff is not a fun guy. And unless you really dig stalker wife beaters with hefty cases of internalized racism, he's just not fantasy material. Which he admits himself, describing Isabella Linton's leaving behind her family and friends to cast in her lot with him:

> She abandoned them under a delusion, picturing in me a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character and acting on the false impressions she cherished… .I don't care who



"I MAY BE THE ONLY PERSON IN THE WORLD BITCHING BECAUSE THE INTRODUCTION TO A BOOK WASN'T LONG ENOUGH, BUT I HAVE CAUSE."

> knows that the passion was wholly on one side; and I never told her a lie about it. She cannot accuse me of showing one bit of deceitful softness. The first thing she saw me do, on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog; and when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her, except one: possibly she took that exception for herself. But no brutality disgusted her: I suppose she has an innate admiration of it, if only her precious person were secure from injury!

Where do women get off thinking this guy is all things wonderful and romantic? He never pretends to be anything but what he is, and that's a ruthless, singleminded, predatory monster. Which perhaps is part of the appeal of imagining oneself to be the one cherished exception of all the human race: the worse he is, the more amazing you could imagine yourself to be as his charmer. Except that statistically speaking, the odds are pretty heavily against your being Cathy, especially if you're alive (since Cathy spends most of this novel being, well, not); and if she's anything like the novel's portrait of her, why would you want to be? (I mean even aside from the dead part.)

All of which sounds like I'm dissing this book, when in fact I read and reread it with slack-jawed admiration and weep that Emily Bronte only lived to write one novel (and the beginning of another, which her sister destroyed, which makes me weep again). Part of the brilliance of the book is that one *is* drawn to it over and over, in spite (or because) of its relentless menace and fury. *Wuthering Heights* is a masterpiece, possibly the greatest horror novel ever written, and any reader or writer of dark fiction who hasn't read it yet should move that to the top of the "to do" list without delay.

Jane Eyre, sister Charlotte's major novel, is another tamed work. Admittedly, the romance is a lot stronger and cleaner — Rochester repents and cleans up his act, with a little help from a burning building, in a Christian manner Heathcliff would sneer at. And true, the book begins with Jane's childhood struggles — living with the evil step-relatives from hell, being sent off to a boarding school founded apparently by the Wicked Witch of the West and her son, or at least their nearest nineteenth-century representatives — and for that reason alone *Jane Eyre* has long been beloved by less-than-gorgeous, nerdy, bookloving girls and women who can relate to a heroine refreshingly and reassuringly "poor, obscure, plain, and little" who still gets a Byronic hero type to adore her.

But there are serious horror aspects to this work. Jane engages herself as a governess in a house strangely haunted, though no one but its master quite knows by whom. A guest is brutally assaulted by a nameless, sharp-toothed fiend; the master himself is nearly burned to death in his own bed by the same; and Jane herself, on the eve of what she supposes will be her wedding day, has her veil torn to pieces by "a woman, tall and large," with long dark hair and a ghastly purple face who reminds Jane of "the foul German spectre — the vampire." "Just at my bedside," Jane relates to her (sort of) fiance, "the figure stopped: the fiery eyes glared upon me — she thrust up her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. I was aware her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life… I became insensible from terror." Just another sweet old-fashioned nineteenth-century chick-flick of a novel.

One great twentieth-century writer, at least, noticed how disturbingly haunted this work is. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a very quiet, brief, terrifying what-if fictional foray, retelling the story from the point of view of "the madwoman in the attic." Read it — there's a Norton edition if you like footnotes (I do) — or catch if you can Jill Masters' incredible Books On Tape unabridged recording of it. Masters' voice is shaking with restrained emotion by the time she finishes reading the book. You'll be pretty shaken up yourself. And be warned — you'll be hard-pressed to fall in love, or even sympathy, again with Rochester after seeing him from this angle. (For more on Rochester as a truly ominous character, please see John Sutherland's essay "Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?" in the book of the same title.)

If you like some crit with your lit, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have done real justice to *Jane Eyre* as a revolutionary work of dark fiction in their *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Read it and you'll never again be tempted to think of Emily Dickinson or Jane Austen as cute and sweet. This book, among its other winning qualities, refers to *Wuthering Heights* as "Emily Bronte's Bible of Hell."

I confess to having a soft spot for the weakest and least read of the Bronte's blockbusters, Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It is least effective as a novel because it is unapologetically a cautionary tale, and least effective as a work of horror (though it is undoubtedly that) not merely because of its happy ending (the other two novels have those as well) but because it is a grimly realistic portrayal of what Heathcliff or Rochester or any dark moody romantic-hero type might be like if he existed in our own mundane plane, and what might become of a beautiful heroine who married such a rake in order to reform him. Helen Graham's struggles, her admission of defeat, and the drunken violence she is subjected to are as chilling as Anne Bronte intended them to be. Sadly, their message isn't outdated at all — haven't we all known women who fell in love and/or stayed with the wrong guy, insisting that not she but the world has misunderstood him? Anne's sympathy for women who fall into this emotional trap, and her snappish lack of patience for those who believed that love would conquer all or that a woman was solely responsible for a happy marriage

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comes through on every page, making this the feistiest and most unabashedly feminist of the Bronte novels. And also the only one to use the word "bitch" in its pejorative sense, back when that was an even nastier thing to call someone than it is now. Anne Bronte may have seemed sweet and meek in person, but her writing told a different story.

The omnipresent Christianity of the book is ultimately wearisome to even the most pious reader, though Anne's take on the afterlife is an interesting one. But the tension is well sustained throughout the work, as is the romance. It's refreshing, by the by, to see a female protagonist from this time period making a living in a non-domestic field; Helen Graham supports herself and her small son by her paintbrush. She is also darkly beautiful and at the end of the book inherits a lot of money, making her the gender-opposite platonic ideal of the guy every girl would want to marry. (An artist with flashing eyes and temper *and* an estate in the English countryside? Oh, yeah, *I*'d say no.)

What *is* it, while we're on the subject, about Brits and Autumn reading? Every single writer I've mentioned so far has hailed from that magic isle. And in the recent collection *The 13 Best Horror Stories of All Time,* which I'm about to spend one hell of a lot of time talking about and which was edited by Leslie Pockell, full nine of the authors hail from the U.K. (Ten if you count that everyone thinks Poe's British.)

Not that I'm whining. (Or whinging, if you're reading this on the other side of the Atlantic.) If I'm going to take issue with this book (aw, you guessed), it's not going to be because I want to sue for greater home team representation. The fact that several stories I think ought to have been included are home-grown American produce is sheer coincidence. Really. No, really.

Okay, why don't we go ahead and run with that point first: namely, who decided what was the best, proclaimed so proudly in the title? Don't look at me like that. I'm serious. And don't tell me it's any given editor of any given collection, deciding what he likes best. Like *Wolf's Complete Book of Terror* (ed. Leonard Wolf), which manages to be a good representative sampling of the field even while tacitly admitting that it's just a big bunch of stories Wolf happens to like. And which also managed to be a lot more "of all time" than Pockell's collection, by the by. Wolf scoured several centuries and continents (all right, Japan's not a continent, but still) in search of treasure. Pockell stuck to America and the British Isles. From that blink-and-you'll-miss-it snippet of an introduction of his, you'd think he had no choice in the matter. He never breathes a word about what went into his decision-making process, and so I'm forced to conclude that there must be a canonical "13 best" list somewhere and Pockell has simply obediently packed its contents within two covers, which makes me think he'd better not be getting paid much for such little labor. And if he *did* more work than that, then damn it, I want to hear about it. I may be the only person in the world bitching because the introduction to a book wasn't long enough, but I have cause.

I need some definition of terms here. "Horror," for instance. And "best." If best means best written, then why is Bram Stoker's "Dracula's Guest" included when a) it's not *that* good and b) it's not technically a short story, only a fragment Stoker lopped off *Dracula* for length's sake? (Or so the story goes. I'm not convinced. The piece is only 11 pages long. You don't go around saying a movie's too long and then just crop 37 seconds off it. Do you?) If best means just plain right-in-front-of-you best, that story has no business in this collection.

And if it's there because the best (or at least the most influential; Stoker, frankly, was only competent) horror authors ought to be represented, where is, say, Ambrose Bierce, author of *The Devil's Dictionary* and a hell of a lot of brilliantly written short stories? More importantly, where is Henry James? If "The Turn of the Screw" wouldn't fit (all right, it's 115 pages, but one of the stories that *did* make this collection was more than 70, and my feeling is that if a story is long enough that by the time you've finished it people are congratulating you on having quit smoking, a few more tens of pages doesn't much signify), it's not as if James never wrote anything else spooky. If "The Beast in the Jungle," say, is too philosophical for Pockell's target audience (or a little too close in material to "The Beckoning Fair One," which I am ex*treme*ly grateful to have made the acquaintance of in this collection), "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" is much more straightforward and very good.

Maybe Pockell considered that one to have been collected once too often for his liking. But he didn't seem to mind that when he included "The Monkey's Paw," by W.W. Jacobs. Let's face it — there *are* certain stories that *have* to be in a collection like this.

Incidentally, Academy Chicago Publishers released a wonderful collection of Jacobs' work a few years back. It's called *The Monkey's Paw and Other Tales of Mystery and the Macabre*, edited and with an actual annotated introduction by Gary Hoppenstand, and you could do a lot worse than spend an autumn evening with a pot of tea at your elbow and this book for company. Jacobs was hugely prolific, but most of what he wrote is almost unknown now, though he was a best-seller in his time. And he was better known for his humor than his horror writing, weirdly enough. The stories in this collection are quick, neat, and absorbing — you'll plan to read just one and end by finishing half the book in a single sitting. Jacobs has a fine hand for a delicate twist at the end of a story, and occasionally, as in "Three at Table," that twist takes the reader to a surprisingly

welcoming place, though one must journey through darkness to reach it. "The Monkey's Paw" is probably his finest twist ending, and it's also one of his only stories with a genuinely supernatural element — in general, Jacobs is more interested in how people mess with one another than in dangling ghosties and ghoulies in front of us. Even "The Monkey's Paw" is more about the people involved with the dark magic than it is about the magic itself.

As I was saying, there *are* must-haves in collections of this sort that require no explanation. But not many. You've got your "Monkey's Paw" and your "Tell-Tale Heart," which appear here, and I of all people am not going to argue with "The Lottery," which does its duty dance as well. But past a certain point, you're on your own. You're making choices, and every inclusion is also an exclusion. And so if you're going to throw phrases like "best horror stories" around, you'd better be prepared to defend them.

Let's get back to defining terms. What exactly do we mean by *horror* stories? Scary ones? Then why include "The Bottle Imp," whose tone is too jocular to terrify and which has besides a happy ending? If, again, we're talking about representing an author here rather than choosing stories for their own sakes, Robert Louis Stevenson has done scarier. (Certainly "The Body-Snatcher" is extremely chilling, though I do find that injection of the supernatural at the end a letdown. But maybe, again, the editor feared that this was one that had already been collected quite often.)

At any rate: If horror doesn't have to be scary, what *should* it be? Significant? That's what's so great about "The Monkey's Paw" — it added a phrase to our language, enriched our culture, and scared the pants off first-time readers. So why not include a story that gave us another term still used, and one you *don't* see around much anymore — Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" It's brilliant; it's concise; it's certainly dark in tone. It's a little short, but pair it up with "The Turn of the Screw" and you average two perfect-length stories.

And speaking of adding a phrase to our culture, I definitely want to cast a vote for Jerome Bixby's "It's a *Good* Life" being in any reasonable top 13 collection. I went back and reread that, and it was if anything even scarier than I remembered. I am discussing here the short story, by the way. If, God help you, you've only seen the "Twilight Zone" *movie* version, no offense but you're screwed. You're not even close to knowing what this story is about. Even if you've only seen the original Twilight Zone adaptation, which was extremely good, you're still missing something by not reading the original.

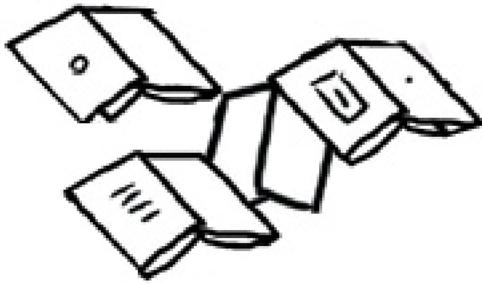
For those of you just now reaching this planet, you must understand that this story primarily concerns a, um, child named Anthony who is pretty much omnipotent. He can read minds. He can make something out of nothing, and most definitely render something *into* nothing. He can teleport. And, most importantly and what the film adaptations of necessity had to change, he's only three years old. So basically everyone who has to have anything to do with him is in a constant state of terror. They're scared of what he might do if he gets mad, of course, but they're almost as afraid of his "helping" them. Which really makes me think that Mr. Bixby must have had children.

Not only is the premise perfect, the prose is elegant and so understated as to be far more upsetting than it would be if the author just flat-out told us a lot of what was going on. The following passage is one that struck me, hard, and when I read it to a friend he said it was the one paragraph he remembered from reading the story more than ten years ago:

> Old McIntyre was working on a loom, designing it out of schoolbooks, but so far it was slow going. McIntyre was a capable man with wood and tools, but a loom was a big order when you couldn't get metal parts. McIntyre had been one of the ones who, at first, had wanted to try to get Anthony to make things the villagers needed, like clothes and canned goods and medical supplies and gasoline. Since then, he felt that what had happened to the whole Terrance family and Joe Kinney was his fault, and he worked hard trying to make it up to the rest of them. And since then, no one had tried to get Anthony to do anything.

Horror writing doesn't get better than that.

It also doesn't get better than Daphne du Maurier, and *there's* someone who isn't exactly suffering from overcollecting. I have before me, as well as the Wolf collection, *The Arbor House Treasury of Horror*



"I guess because I can relate to the main character in a way I can't with the guy from "The October Game." Not that I'm a big game hunter. *Please* don't mistake me on that. I don't need hate mail from Ingrid Newkirk at this point in my life."

and the Supernatural (compiled by Bill Pronzini, Barry Malzberg, and the anthologically omnipresent Martin Greenberg, with an intro by Stephen King); *A Harvest of Horrors* (edited by Eric Protter and featuring a blurb on the back from Harlan Ellison in one of his rare non-cranky moods); *Chamber of Horrors* (admitting of no editor but including, among other authors both classic and contemporary, a rare appearance of "The Night of the Tiger" by Stephen King); and *The Penguin Book of Horror Stories* (edited by J. A. Cuddon, and probably the strongest of the anthologies, all of which I recommend for your autumnal reading pleasure). We're talking dozens and dozens of authors and stories represented here, and not that many overlaps. And not one piece by du Maurier.

Come on, folks! I know I said this last year (I *think* I said this last year), but it would be really good for your soul to read "The Birds," which has exactly nothing to do with the movie, not that I'm trashing the movie but the resemblance ends with the title and the story's better. It would be even better for you to read something a little less well-known by her, just to rid yourself of that lingering impression people seem to have that she's some kind of romance writer. Romance writer? Fine. I guess that's why she wrote "The Alibi," a sparkling little fairy tale in which a certain Mr. Fenton decides that the way out of his midlife crisis and the suffocating boredom of his everyday life is not to dump his wife or buy a sports car but to randomly murder someone. Acquiring a perfect chance, a perfect situation, he postpones and postpones and ends by being accused of a murder he didn't in fact commit, though it was the very one he'd been planning. The two he'd been planning, I should say. And then it turns out to be three.

Some romance writer, hmm?

The fact is, du Maurier is one of the most underrated horror writers around. *Rebecca* is one more horror novel people insist on thinking of as a love story, and if you think the nameless main character's adoration of Maxim de Winter is all sweet and innocent and Joan Fontaine-y, I suggest you read the actual book and then read John Sutherland's essay "Where was Rebecca Shot?" in the book by that title. It'll change your ideas of good guy and bad guy, innocence and guilt, forever.

The long and short of it is I would definitely nominate a du Maurier story for any collection purporting to include the best of the genre. "The Birds" is awesome; if it were too violent for Leslie Pockell's taste, he could have run his eyes over "The Blue Lenses," which can only be read at a white heat in a state of desperate wonder until the flawless conclusion. I'm also very, very fond of "The Apple Tree," if only because the main character is such a refreshingly unmitigated pig and reaches his end in such a satisfactory fashion.

I'd also like to have seen another rarely reprinted masterpiece: Ray Bradbury's "The October Game." I checked and, sure enough, it's aged just fine. It's a tale of revenge and Halloween madness. The main character, unlike Bradbury himself, has "never liked October.

> Ever since he first lay in the autumn leaves before his grandmother's house many years ago and heard the wind and saw the empty trees. It had made him cry, without a reason. And a little of that sadness returned each year to him. It always went away with spring.
>
> But it was different tonight. There was a feeling of autumn coming to last a million years.
>
> There would be no spring.

Talk about your self-fulfilling prophecies.

This story also contains the finest last sentence ever, ever.

"The October Game" is my best friend's favorite Bradbury story, and as much as I admire it I have to admit that I find one of Bradbury's science fiction stories just as frightening in a different way, if only because I don't think it exactly set out to be a horror story in the same way the other one did. I read "A Sound of Thunder" (the story which, rumor has it, inspired the naming of chaos theory's butterfly effect) when I was about ten. It terrified me then and it terrifies me now, I guess because I can relate to the main character in a way I can't with the guy from "The October Game." Not that I'm a big game hunter. *Please* don't mistake me on that. I don't need hate mail from Ingrid Newkirk at this point in my life. No, but there's that crucial point in the story when we all realize what's gone wrong. Especially the main character, who brought it all about. "'Can't we,' he pleaded to the world, to himself, to the officials, to the Machine, 'can't we take it *back*, can't we *make* it alive again? Can't we start over? Can't we —'"

We've all felt like that. Felt the mixed terror and disbelief in the irrevocable slip, the drop, the shatter. And then it's happened, it's broken, it's gone, so quickly that we can't believe it couldn't just as quickly be all right again. Oh, let me start this day, this hour, this *minute* over, please, somebody. Backward, turn backward, o time, in your flight…

It never does, though.

All right, I've spent enough time in the land of what-if. Obviously with an anthology of this sort (you remember the one we were talking about, right?), anyone could quibble about the choices made. I don't wish so much that the editor had been more of my mind on the subject (the hell I don't), but that he'd been able, and willing, to defend his choices better. And you might as

well know what they were, and maybe give a holler about what *you'd* have done differently, 'cause we're all so interested. Really. No, really. Drop us a line.

Aside from what I've already mentioned, then, there's "Green Tea," by J. Sheridan Le Fanu, he of "Carmilla" fame. "Green Tea" is everywhere, and although some of the scary scenes are genuinely disturbing, I find the ending unsatisfactory. I also find the premise odd. I'm sure that at the time Le Fanu wrote the story, green tea was seen as very foreign and exotic. These days — well, I'll bet full half the kitchens in my building alone have green tea in them. That it should be perceived back then as so alarming strikes me as vaguely xenophobic, almost racist.

For $1.50, by the way, you can get a Dover Thrift Edition of Le Fanu's *Green Tea and Other Ghost Stories*, which boils down to fifty cents per story with one shorty thrown in for free. I especially enjoyed "Squire Toby's Will," which contains a lot of spookiness and also the sage practical advice that "It behooves us all to act promptly on our good resolutions. There is a determined gravitation towards evil, which, if left to itself, will bear down first intentions." Too true.

Then, of course, there's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the addition of which I would be applauding a lot harder if Pockell hadn't done what so many recent reprints of the story do, God only knows why. I know I ranted about this last year, but it bears repeating: There's a really important line, early on in the story, which ought to read "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." This collection and many other lop off the last two words of that sentence. Given that this is a story of a woman going slowly insane in, and apparently because of, a marriage where she is hardly considered or treated as an equal, this omission is critical. And stupid. What started it? Why does it happen so often? It's almost as ridiculous as Pockell's straight-faced statement that "it is left to the reader to decide if [the protagonist] falls into madness or into another dimension." Give me a break. This isn't Cthulhu we're talking about here, it's just plain ordinary commonplace up-the-sandbox Diary-of-a-Mad-Housewife nutballing. Deal with it.

Speaking of Cthulhu — yes, "The Call of Cthulhu" is here. I wish it weren't, actually. I wish we had been given something else of Lovecraft's. "The Dunwich Horror" would be nice. It's aged a lot better. I like a big guy with a cuttlefish face as much as anyone, but I find this story a little boring.

"The Great God Pan," by Arthur Machen, is luminous. I think its only fault, if it has one, is that it contains too many really great ideas for one short story. But every loose end is tied up, and the effect is brilliant.

"Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," by M. R. James, is weak. I'm sorry, but I'll say it again — weak. If we have to have a James represented here, it ought to be Henry.

"The Country of the Blind" is, if you'll pardon the irony, beautiful, even if you don't have the same weakness for H. G. Wells I do. Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" is a fine example of a "duty" story — very influential, but not necessarily riveting to the modern eye. Actually it's pretty good once you get past all the damned trees of the title, but I admit I start floundering and whining in any story with that much scenery.

"The Beckoning Fair One" is so insanely good that I've been bribing everyone I know to read it. For the incorruptable, I just keep saying "Oh, let me just read you this one little bit" several hundred times until they just rip the damned book out of my hands and read it themselves for sheer efficiency's sake. One thing I'd like to know, though: every other story in this book has a little "about the author" at the beginning of it. Very handy for those who haven't heard of, say, Poe. But despite the 411 on all the better-known authors, there's nothing whatsoever about Oliver Onions, who last I checked isn't exactly a household name?

I wonder if his fame wasn't much greater in his heyday. God only knows when exactly that was, since his life stretched from the Victorian era across the Edwardian and stopped just at the doorstep of our beloved '60's. The main character of "The Beckoning Fair One" is a writer — one who makes his living at it (just). He can count on having his novels published and even selling to some extent, but has given up on any wild ideas of fame and fortune. In one scene, he's having a conversation on the subject of writing with his best friend, with whom he has a kind of James Stewart-Barbara bel Geddes (a la *Vertigo*) relationship (she's a both-feet-on-the-ground type who's in love with him, and he thinks of her as a good pal and wonders vaguely now and then why she never got married). She's also a writer, a self-confessed hack journalist who makes more money than he does and has no

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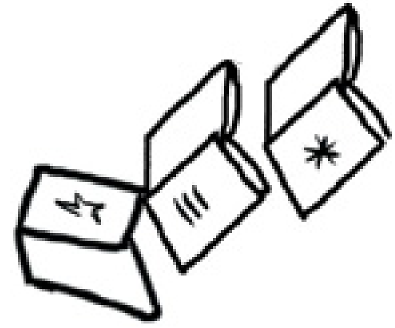

illusions about her own talent but plenty of faith in his. She mentions, accurately, that since he moved into his new digs (not like it's a haunted house or anything —really — okay, maybe a little) he hasn't done a lick of work:

> "And why should I do nothing but work?" he demanded. "How much happier am I for it? I don't say I don't love my work — when it's done; but I hate doing it. Sometimes it's an intolerable burden that I simply long to be rid of. Once in many weeks it has a moment, one moment, of glow and thrill for me; I remember the days when it was all glow and thrill; and now I'm forty-four, and it's becoming drudgery. Nobody wants it; I'm ceasing to want it myself; and if any ordinary sensible man were to ask me whether I didn't think I was a fool to go on, I think I should agree that I was."

Which pretty much every writer in the universe can relate to, to a greater or lesser extent.

This story, with its dreamy, circling terror, was worth the price of the book to me. And I'm not just saying that because I can write books off on my taxes.

Speaking of write-offs, I also picked up a copy of *The Ultimate Halloween*, edited by Marvin Kaye. It was pretty good — mostly contemporary fiction by fine solid midlist folk, with a sprinkling of classics. I liked "Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out," by Darrell Schweitzer, a wicked little period piece, and "A Matter of Taste," which I wouldn't recommend reading at lunchtime. And I was glad to see "All Souls" by Edith Wharton, a gaslighting story written years before the movie ever came out, and "The Unnameable" by H. P. Lovecraft, which adds to its own inherent virtues the fact that it *isn't* "The Call of Cthulhu," "Pickman's Model," or "The Dunwich Horror." Not that there's a damned thing wrong with including any of those in any anthology (except, perhaps, a gardening one), but it's nice to have the public reminded that he wrote other stuff. "The Rats in the Walls," for instance. *Man*, is that a scary story. But I digress.

My only objection to this collection is that I feel it shot its bolt on the first story, "Auntie Elspeth's Halloween Story, or The Gourd, the Bad, and the Ugly" by Esther Freisner, by setting a high standard of quality it couldn't always meet. I know you always want to start and finish strong, but I think they started too strong. If I had read pretty much any other story first, I would have just been pleased and massively entertained by this one and then gotten on with life. But it was *so* good, and then it was followed by a weak one, and I just felt like my night was going downhill from there. When I put the book down for a day or two and then picked it up again, it was much better going.

That first story, if you want to know, is a story within a story, kind of like the play-within-a-play Shakespeare was so fond of. Auntie Elspeth, a vicious old kite in comparison with whom the Countess Bathory looks like Mary frigging Poppins, is sitting in her wheelchair in a rest home, desperately trying to survive a visit from three young relatives. They're bored. They want a Halloween story. Auntie Elspeth is all too happy to comply, assuming she can get a word in edgewise:

> I heard that, Billy. If you're going to be malicious, at least have the stones to do it out loud so a person can hear you. Halloween is not my favorite holiday because I'm an old witch, I don't care what your Mommy said. Your Mommy also said she was a virgin when she married your Daddy, but between you and me and the Seventh Fleet —
>
> Cindy, dear, it's not polite to interrupt. However, since you *did* ask, a virgin is a mythological creature, okay? Sort of like a dragon or a unicorn or a compassionate conservative or —
>
> Look, grow up, learn to read, look up the words you don't know in the dictionary, and shut the hell up for two seconds. I don't have time to answer a lot of stupid questions.

You gotta love her.

Anyway, after the kids reject the story of "How the Vampire Prince Plunged His Fangs into the Heaving White Bosom of the Helpless Maiden and Devoured Her Still-Beating Heart" without even *hear*ing it (everyone's a critic), they are treated instead to the story of Jo-Jo the Jolly Jack o'Lantern. If you think this is anything your kids would be allowed to hear before the age of forty or so, you haven't been listening. I won't give away anything else about the tale, but I will mention, since you might not know already, that (according to the tale, anyway, and why would Auntie Elspeth lie?), jack o'lanterns are made "to light up the nights and keep away whatever's wandering in the dark."

> What's that, Billy? What *is* wandering in the dark that the jack o'lanterns have to keep away? Gracious, I can't tell you that. Your parents wouldn't approve. So I guess you'll just have to sit up at night all by yourself, staring out into the darkness, and imagine what *might* be waiting out there. Waiting and watching and biding its time until it knows you're sound asleep and can't see it coming. Mercy sakes, whatever might it be? Will it have fangs or scales or claws or all three or something even worse than that? Will it be

> hungry? Will it know how to climb up walls and through windows, even when they're locked down tight, or will it just ring the doorbell, hm? I won't tell — that would spoil the surprise — but you go right ahead and imagine it.
>
> Won't that be fun?

Sorry to quote this story so heavily, but I am in fact restraining myself since I'd like to just reprint the whole thing right here. Reading this was the most fun I've had since before I figured out that it's way more fun to give people a subtle hint about the fact that you're wearing that $87 Victoria's Secret dealie under your outers than to just have it be your own little secret. It really perks the party up. Especially if you're a guy.

I'm digressing again, aren't I?

Last year's October reading essay was really more an annotated list than a philosophical essay, and I feel there's some value in that. I also have a list of titles that I started jotting down about six seconds after that piece went to press, which I've been smacking myself in the head for not remembering to point out. So here, to round things off, are this years picks:

First, I don't know how I managed to talk about *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* last year without mentioning *Mary Reilly*, by Valerie Martin. It's an absolutely convincing rewrite from the point of view of Dr. Jekyll's maid. The amount of casual detail is staggering, and as a former domestic worker myself I really appreciated having one treated with dignity and respect as a main character. The gap between upper and lower class in nineteenth-century England is brought painfully to light, especially in this conversation between master and maid, which sticks in my head:

> "The Marley School, Mary?" he said. "Why, that is one of my projects."
>
> "Truly, sir? You mean you was a teacher there?"
>
> "No, Mary," he said, seeming to think my idea a funny one. "I've never seen the school. But it was partly my idea and I gave the money for the building and I am on the board still. We see to the running of the school… .It seems remarkable, really, that you should go to my school and end up in my house."
>
> Then I had such a mean thought it left me speechless, for it was this, that considering how rough the school was, it was a wonder I could read and had got as far as I have in the world, which surely even Master mun see isn't very far. So I said nothing, but wiped my sweating forehead on my sleeve and stood looking at Master across the dirt feeling all the world was standing between us and we'd no way ever to cross it, but also that somehow we was also two sides of the same coin, doing our different work in the same house and as close, without speaking, as a dog and his shadow.

Even more brilliant is the leading up to the discovery of Hyde. Never of course suspecting the truth until the very end (while of course we readers know it all along), Mary keeps a journal of all the scraps of information she can glean about him. "Cook has seen him," begins one entry, and

then, later, "Mr. Poole has seen him;" and then, finally, heading a section of shivering brilliance, "I have seen him." The encounter that takes place in that chapter makes me almost willing to see the movie, since John Malkovich plays Jekyll and, I suppose (I hope), Hyde; but I can't imagine suffering in silence through Julia Roberts attempting an English accent, and my husband says there's enough screaming around here as it is, so I'll content myself with the book.

And with recommending it heartily, except for the very ending. Have you read *The Handmaid's Tale*? Do you remember the very very last part, that brief shattering postscript? *Mary Reilly* attempts something like that, and in my opinion fails miserably. The "afterword," claiming this book to be a found manuscript, is anticlimactic and rather show-offy. (I think it's interesting, by the by, that Valerie Martin and Margaret Atwood were working on their respective novels not only at the same time but as practically next-door neighbors while teaching at the same university, as I read years ago in an interview with Atwood; they used to drop in on one another and have tea and talk about their work. Hmmm.)

Tiny, tiny flaw. Read the book anyway. It's one of those novels you can really lose yourself in.

I mentioned earlier that Ambrose Bierce does not make an appearance in *The 13 Best*. Go ahead and make up the difference by grabbing a collection of his stories. Again, you can get one cheap through Dover Publications, home of the one- to two-dollar paperback editions of public domain works. *The Moonlit Road and other Ghost and Horror Stories* will set you back all of six bits. I was surprised to see it didn't contain "The Damned Thing," which I'm fond of though the science is sadly weak (Bierce's generally is), or "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," which is depressingly wonderful, since they're two of his better-known stories. But this collection is still a solid one. It contains "The Eyes of the Panther," which is deep and dark and is second only to Lovecraft's "Herbert West, Reanimator" in the shortest-story-ever-to be-divided-into-chapters contest. Chapters have such clinical titles as "One Does Not Always Marry When Insane" and "A Room May Be Too Narrow For Three, Though One Is Outside." Also there is my possibly all-time favorite Bierce piece, "The Secret of Macarger's Gulch," in which Bierce displays his talent for sardonic dialogue. "My dear," a man says to his wife regarding their guest, "Mr. Elderson has upset his wine." "That was hardly accurate," the guest reports; "— I had simply dropped it, glass and all." Later in the same conversation, the host remarks, "My dear, do you not observe that Mr. Elderson's boneplate has water in it?" "I had," the guest confesses, "deposited a chicken bone in my finger bowl." I won't tell you a word about the plot, but it's a damned spooky story — there's a reason Elderson keeps fumbling at the dinner table.

A little later in time, but still mercilessly sharp and brilliant, is Elizabeth Bowen, whom I confess I haven't read enough of to be able to recommend any particular collection of her stories. (I have a big fat one with all of them slapped together like so much bacon.) But catch "The Demon Lover," a lot closer to the original poem than Shirley Jackson's story by the same title. And please plan on sleeping with the light on after you read "The Cat Jumps," a lovely story about a house got cheap by a family of severe skeptics who don't care in the least what went on the last time the place was occupied. Which was murder, as a matter of fact. Only one person done in, but what the murderer lacked in quantity he more than made up for in loving dwelling on the details. "No one would mind if it had been just a short sharp shooting," one guest mentions to another at the housewarming party. "But it was so… prolonged. It went on all over the house." And that's the beginning of exactly the sort of tasteless, tactless conversation the hosts had hoped to avoid, which in turn is the beginning of — well, you'll just have to see. It could be nothing, after all.

To lift your spirits and make it possible to sleep after that, read (or reread, I don't care which) Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost," which manages to be funny but still spooky here and there. Maybe just there. I guess there's only one really dark bit, actually. Anyway, it's about a once-respected ghost being driven to distraction by an unappreciative American family, who make fun of him and take an interest in his noisy chains. My favorite passage is when the ghost starts to realize what he's up against:

> The next day the ghost was very weak and tired. The terrible excitement of the last four weeks was beginning to have its effect. His nerves were completely shattered, and he started at the slightest noise. For five days he kept his room, and at last made up his mind to give up the point of the blood-stain on the library floor. If the Otis family did not want it, they clearly did not deserve it.

When the ghost does feel himself morally obligated to haunt a particular corridor once a week, he meekly uses the Rising Sun Lubricator the family has left out for him to oil his chains and thus keep that infernal racket down. But don't feel too bad for him. He gets a happy ending, as does everyone in this story.

While we're on the subject of not-scary-but-still-terrific Autumn reading, do please check out *Lolly Willowes* by Sylvia Townsend Warner, beautifully re-released by the New York Review Books series, and with an introduction by Alison Lurie (whose collection *Women and Ghosts* I distinctly recall recommending last year). It seems like a perfectly ordinary novel about a perfectly ordinary Englishwoman of good and ancient family. "'That,' said Laura's mother, 'is an heirloom of your great-aunt Emma who died.' And Laura was sorry for the poor young lady who alone, it seemed to her, of all her relations had had the misfortune to die." Death, indeed, is seen as a melancholy but gentle visitor in this novel. "During the last few years of her life," Warner reports, "Mrs. Willowes grew continually more skilled in evading responsibilities, and her death seemed but the final perfected expression of this skill. It was as if she had said, yawning a delicate cat's yawn, 'I think I will go to my grave now,' and had left the room, her white shawl trailing behind her."

Quite good writing, but still rather in the ordinary scheme of things. Until Laura, called Lolly by the family she is desperate to get away from, sells her soul to the devil in exchange for peace and quiet and a life in the country. She's not evil, but it seems that no one but the devil is at all interested in her or what she wants. Everyone else only like to have the useful spinster aunt about the place to take care of things in patience and gratitude for being suffered to live at all. The book is an early feminist work, in its own way — or not so much feminist as a sort of sticking up for a certain kind of woman, a class now perhaps extinct or at least on the endangered list: single, useful, and taken for granted. Except by one:

"Think, Satan, what a compliment you pay her, pursuing her soul, lying in wait for it, following it through all its windings, crafty and patient and secret like a gentleman out killing tigers. Her soul — when no one else would give a look at her body even! And they are all so accustomed, so sure of her! They say: 'Dear Lolly! What shall we give her for her birthday this year? Perhaps a hot-water bottle. Or what about a nice black lace scarf? Or a new workbox? Her old one is nearly worn out.' But you say: 'Come here, my bird! I will give you the dangerous black night to stretch your wings in, and poisonous berries to feed on, and a nest of bones and thorns, perched high up in danger where no one can climb to it.'"

And who could resist an offer like that?

Okay, I still haven't fulfilled my every-year Halloween resolution of reading *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins. But I did read "The Haunted Hotel" by the same author. I liked it, at least most of it, though I can't quite get past the fact that the author describes a woman in her early thirties as "middle-aged." (It has been pointed out to me that in the Victorian era, when this book was written, this might be little more than a statement of fact. Quit muddying the water with the truth — I know when I've been insulted.) There are also more than a few o-so-amusing references to how quaintly foolish women can be, which made me glad that Collins is already dead since I'm a busy woman and where I'm from (or at least wherever I am at any given time) that kind of "humor" is a slapping offense.

Yet Collins astonished me by producing a specimen of "children's" writing, i.e. a piece of text written by a child character in the story, that was completely convincing:

Dear Aunt Agnes,

Our governess is going away. She has had money left to her and a house of her own. We have had cake and wine to drink her health. You promised to be our governess if we wanted another. We want you. Mama knows nothing about this. Please come before Mama can get another governess.

Your loving Lucy, who write this.

Clara and Blanch have tried to write too, but they are too young to do it. They blot the paper.

So the kids are great. But the women are all either benighted ingenues or malevolent harpies; or else they commit the cardinal crime of being unattractive. Mrs. Roland, for example, was

a person of unblemished character, obviously; but not without visible drawbacks. Big bushy eyebrows, an awfully deep and solemn voice, a harsh, unbending manner, complete absence in her figure of the undulating lines characteristic of the sex, presented virtue in this excellent person under its least alluring aspect. Strangers, on a first introduction to her [well, who the hell else would be being "first introduced"? and is there such a thing as a second introduction?], were accustomed to wonder why she was not a man.

This is like Dickens at his least admirable: the gleeful checking-off of unpleasant physical characteristics, mingled with childish descriptives *("awfully* deep") implying a four-year-old gaping in unabashed wonder at the spectacle before him, and of course the unspoken agreement with the reader that saying someone is ugly is hilarious, especially if you say exactly how. As long as it's a woman, at least. Nowhere in the work is a man described so savagely, though some might deserve it. One charming bloke wants to marry the above-mentioned Agnes and is distressed at the idea of her taking the position of governess to her nieces, since it would make her feel useful and contented and he prefers her to be as lonely and unhappy as possible in order for his advances to appear that much more attractive. But this is presented in an indulgent, "boys will be boys" tone.

The plot is good, though. The writing is, too — Collins can resemble Dickens at his best as well as his worst. Check it out. And check with me next year to see if I get around to *The Woman In White*.

I don't segue well when I've been up too late reading, and so I'm going to swing here abruptly from atmospheric Victorian murder mystery to subtle modern fable without apology. Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* was the first book (though hardly the last) I ever bought with a bookstore-employee's discount, back when a hardcover could sport a $16.95 cover price. I still consider it one of the most worthwhile

purchases I ever made. The premise of this quiet, well-crafted, very British novel is simple. Harriet and David Lovatt, young, married, and very much in love, announce their intention of having a large family, in spite of their less-than-large income. They can't do this without the help of their own already-existing families, some members of whom are less than thrilled at being expected to help with a venture with which they aren't particularly in agreement even in theory, let alone in practice.

> Harriet said fiercely, "Perhaps we ought to have been born into another country. Do you realise that having six children, in another part of the world, it would be normal, nothing shocking about it — *they* aren't made to feel criminals."
>
> "It's we who are abnormal, here in Europe," said David.
>
> "I don't know about that," said Dorothy, as stubborn as either of them. "But if you were having six — or eight, or ten — no, I know what you are thinking, Harriet, I know you, don't I? — and if you were in another part of the world, like Egypt or India or somewhere, then half of them would die and they wouldn't be educated, either. You want things both ways. The aristocracy — yes, they can have children like rabbits, and expect to, but they have the money to pay for it. And poor people can have children, and half of them die, and expect to. But people like us, in the middle, we have to be careful about the children we have so we can look after them."

Oblivious to this warning, Harriet and David are fruitful and multiply. But they don't have the threatened six children. Only five. Because child number five is — well, he's sort of a throwback to the days, long long past, when fertility *was* uncontrolled and most people *did* have lots and lots of kids and the struggle to survive wasn't a quiet desperation kind of thing but a real tooth-and-nail fight.

Even before he was born, his mother and father knew something was wrong, something was different about this baby. He kicked much too early and much too hard, and his mother was driven to taking long, ferocious walks in an effort to distract herself from the pain she can't escape. As for her husband, "he had stopped putting his hand on her stomach, in the old companionable way, for what he felt there was beyond what he could manage with." And when baby Ben is born, everyone sees the truth of that: he's beyond what *any*one can manage with, all eleven pounds of him:

> He was not a pretty baby. He did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyebrows to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in a thick yellowish stubble, while the side and back hair grew downwards. His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms. He opened his eyes and looked straight up into his mother's face. They were focussed greeny-yellow eyes, like lumps of soapstone. She had been waiting to exchange looks with the creature who, she had been sure, had been trying to hurt her, but there was no recognition there. And her heart contracted with pity for him: poor little beast, his mother disliking him so much… But she heard herself say nervously, though she tried to laugh, "He's like a troll, or a goblin or something."

Oh, isn't he.

Doris Lessing has recently written a sequel to this book. I believe it's called *Ben, in the World*. I want nothing to do with it. I want this book alone, in all its eerie perfection.

I'll end this endless article with my all-time favorite ever ever author, who must have a place on any decent Autumn reading list. Of course it's Shirley Jackson. Who'd you expect, Danielle Steele? (Scary, yes, but in a different way.)

You can't go wrong with Jackson, so it's almost pointless for me to make specific recommendations. But I'm going to make one anyway. It's *Just An Ordinary Day*, the collection that came out a few years ago, edited by her son Laurence and her daughter Sarah, containing both unpublished and previously published (but mostly uncollected) works. There's a wide range of tones and styles here — humor (some forced, some sublime), sappy sentimental stuff, social satire, even kind of an action

story. And of course, lots and lots of scary. Supernatural and mundane.

On the mundane front, two stories especially stick in my mind. One is "The Friends," in which Ellen, a wealthy and attractive society matron, inadvertently discovers that a long-time friend of hers is having an affair. Bad enough, unsettling; but then the friend, knowing that Ellen knows, starts using Ellen (without permission) as a cover. Perhaps it's understandable that Ellen fights back, feeling repulsed at being so involved in this affair when it's bad enough just knowing about it. But what she does is in itself so repulsive that her friend's original offense almost vanishes. This story, in which nothing gorier than a country club dance occurs, made me feel unclean, or as if I'd just eaten something rotten. But in a good way. Oh, just read it. You'll see what I mean.

The other piece I need to mention is "The Order of Charlotte's Going," which was so good I almost started crying at the idea that I'd lived without it for so long. It's the story of two cousins, one rich and one poor, one dying and one healthy. The latter becomes paid companion to the former, to the pleasure of both. Neither of them pay proper respect to the idea that Charlotte is in fact terminally ill:

> Actually, she had all the pleasures of dying for that whole summer. Everyone knew about it, and they gave her the best of everything, and always found a chair for her at the garden parties, and someone was always sure to be there to fetch poor Charlotte a drink or to talk to poor Charlotte or to play up to poor Charlotte's gallant attempts to tone down her part; she used to wink at me across the room and I might wander over and say amiably, "Well, Charlotte dear, dead yet?" and everyone would gasp and say "Shhh" and "Good *Lord*," and Charlotte wouldn't be able to keep from laughing, and of course *that* made everyone tell everyone else how courageous poor Charlotte was, and wasn't it lucky she was taking it so well, when of course all the time she was just enjoying herself right up to the hilt, more than she ever did before she was dying.

Beautiful humor; and like Charlotte and her companion's life together, it soon turns dark and hard. Brilliant story. First published in *Charm* magazine, of all places, and if it didn't make it into the *Best Stories* collection of that year, there's no justice in this world. Which is probably true. Don't say I didn't warn you. This story sure will.

But the best, the very best story in the book is a good old-fashioned ghost story. It takes place in a very Shirley Jacksony New England village, home of the old Sanderson house, which has recently been purchased by some city dwellers gone country, Ethel and Jim Sloane. (The Sanderson house is up in the hills, "so proud and remote"; if none of this rings a bell, you're definitely Shirley Jackson deficient. Go fix that.) The story sounds a little like an urban legend at first — Ethel stops to pick up two hitchhikers in the rain, but by the time she gets home, they've disappeared. And the back seat is perfectly dry, as if no one's been there at all.

So far, so boring. Except that the hitchhikers are a thoroughly upsetting pair — a strange old woman and a very small child wearing nothing but pajamas, barefoot and miserable in the rain and the mud. And on being asked where they want to go, the old lady says, "To the Sanderson place." To Ethel's own house, in other words. On telling her husband what has happened, Ethel learns from him that their house was the site, on a rainy night some sixty years ago, of a kidnapping — a small boy by a crazy old lady. No one knows whatever became of them, but it's believed they both drowned in the creek near Ethel's home — the one the bridge she's been warned against driving on in the rain goes directly over.

Ethel is jubilant. "'Oh, lovely,' she said, and sighed, and stretched, and smiled. 'Ghosts,' she said. 'I saw two honest-to-goodness ghosts. No wonder,' she said, 'no *wonder* the child looked so awful. Awful! Kidnapped, and then drowned. No *wonder*." She wants to tell the world her good fortune. And then she finds out the hard way that having "two ghosts of our very own" might not exactly be the stroke of luck she's cracking it up to be.

Heh, heh, heh.

Happy autumn reading, everyone, and may your dreams be blissfully dark. ~