



Best Ghost Stories of J. S. Le Fanu

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As a member of the Fireside Poets, a group of five American poets whose work elevated American poetry to a status equal to if not surpassing that of the English poets, Longfellow produced a number of memorable poems including "Paul Revere's Ride," "The Song of Hiawatha," and "Evangeline." In "Evangeline," arguably his most famous work, we have the story of an Acadian girl who searches for her lost love Gabriel during the time of the Great Upheaval. Longfellow's poetry is notable for its lyricism and dealt extensively with stories of mythology and legend. As arguably the most famous American poet of his time his writings afforded him great success and established a legacy that endures to this day. This representative collection of poems includes some of his most memorable and popular verse.

Best Ghost Stories of J. S. Le Fanu Details

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From Reader Review Best Ghost Stories of J. S. Le Fanu for online ebook

Starfish says

This book would have got a 3.5 except it contains Carmilla which gets a 5. As well as being one of the earliest, its also got to be one of the best vampire stories out there. But yes, the other Fanu stories compiled here are good, but the way they're arranged it takes a while to get into them. I think the first few stories are quite weak, and it's not until you hit 'Green Tea' that things start to get creepy.

There's another weird thing about this anthology. Fanu's recycled some of his earlier works, lifting the endings and deaths complete with gory details from two of his early stories. This happens, but while most authors try to rework the material, Fanu has changed the scenery and names, left pretty much everything else intact. The editor of this anthology states at the start of the book that he has omitted others of Fanu's stories, presumably he has a lot of material to choose from. Why then include both the original story and the reworked version? And do this twice? Do you think people aren't going to read your book? Seriously.

Florence Iapicca says

One of my favorite horror authors. LeFanu wrote during a time where the horrors were vague so as not to offend innocent readers. However, his stories are graphic, colorful and still have that Victorian creepiness that is so fitting to a ghost story. If you love ghost stories, you need to read this.

Liz Yon) says

LeFanu writes a mean ghost story. Bear in mind that he wrote during the Victorian era when the ghost story was nearly formulaic in its composition: spectral ladies in white, rattling of chains and moaning in the night, churchyard phantoms and haunted estates. All the things that we now think of as cliché (but which I still secretly enjoy if well done). LeFanu partook of some of these same devices, but he broke literary ground in the genre, too. "Carmilla", one of the earliest vampire stories (preceded, I believe by Varney, the Vampire) is a brilliant leap forward in the vampire tale and hums with a repressed eroticism that has blossomed (and, pardon the pun, been done to death) in modern vampire literature. The stories that feature the setting of Golden Friars ("The Haunted Baronet" and "The Dead Sexton") are remarkable and thoroughly enjoyable for their depth of characterization, mainly in the secondary characters of the village folk. Golden Friars is a real place to me because of this deft handling. I withheld the fifth star because LeFanu recycled some of his plots (and the characters with them), a dismal habit some writers fall into when they have a lazy moment. It was disappointing to, essentially, read the same story twice under different titles. Shame on you, J.S.! But otherwise, LeFanu is one of my favorite writers of terrifying tales from this era, and he does a masterful job.

Kenneth says

This volume is probably the best single collection of J. Sheridan LeFanu's shorter supernatural fiction. It includes his short novel, "Carmilla" - one of the all time great vampire stories. LeFanu was an Anglo-Irish writer of the mid-19th century. The stories collected in this volume also include hauntings of various kinds and one where a man sells his soul to the Devil. Some are set in LeFanu's native Ireland, others in northern England and elsewhere.

Lauren says

- 1) Squire Toby's Will
 - 2) Schalken the Painter
 - 3) Madam Crowl's Ghost
 - 4) The Haunted Baronet
 - 5) Green Tea
 - 6) The Familiar
 - 7) Mr. Justice Harbottle
 - 9) Carmilla
 - 10) The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh
 - 11) An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street
 - 12) The Dead Sexton
 - 13) Ghost Stories of the Tiled House
 - 14) The White Cat of Drumgunniol
 - 15) An Authentic Narrative of a Haunted House [non-fiction]
 - 16) Sir Dominick's Bargain
 - 17) Ultor de Lacy
-

Randolph says

Editor Bleiler gives us ghost stories and only ghost stories, no gothic mysteries or natural explanations here, by the first great master of the English ghost story. Mostly good, some great, there is one "essay" and an excerpted chapter from The House by the Churchyard. Culled from The Purcell Papers, In a Glass Darkly, and Madame Crowl's Ghost, the bizarre and aimless Haunted Baronet novella is also included.

Despite its purported health benefits, one should moderate the consumption of Green Tea.

Carly says

I haven't read all of these stories yet, but Carmilla is one of my absolute favorite books of all time. No one expects to pick up a nineteenth century piece of literature and find a dark, creepy, lesbian vampire romance. I can't recommend it enough!

Riju Ganguly says

Perhaps it is sacrilegious to mark a work by Le Fanu with anything less than 5 stars, but there were stories in this collection that had compelled me to run away from this book time-and-again. The contents of this collection are:

(*) Introduction by E.F. Bleiler

- 1) Squire Toby's Will
- 2) Schalken the Painter
- 3) Madam Crowl's Ghost
- 4) The Haunted Baronet
- 5) Green Tea
- 6) The Familiar
- 7) Mr. Justice Harbottle
- 9) Carmilla
- 10) The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh
- 11) An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street
- 12) The Dead Sexton
- 13) Ghost Stories of the Tiled House
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- 16) Sir Dominick's Bargain
- 17) Ultor de Lacy

(*) Sources

To be honest, the book earns most of its stars by virtue of "Carmilla" alone, with strong contributions from "Schalken the Painter", "Madam Crowl's Ghost", and "Green Tea" (excluding the ramblings of Dr. Martin Hesselius, which have been aptly described by competent persons as "psudoscintific flummery"), and because of its reasonable price, for which Dover Publications deserve heartfelt praise. As far as the other stories are concerned, quoting from Billy Wilder's unforgettable "Private Life of Sherlock Holmes" I have to state that they were not "my cup of tea".

X says

Wonderfully written short stories, but many of them started to seem similar and a bit predictable after an entire book of them.

A special note for anyone who finds himself stuck in a le Fanu short story: never trust the deformed hunchbacks; don't make deals with strange people who you meet in the woods; and if you had a dream that seemed real, it probably is.

Christian says

This is a fantastic, delicious, delirious collection of classical ghost stories. That is, you may not have heard of these stories unless you're abreast of Irish literature, but they are written in a charming, colorful colloquial vein. They're amusing, they're creepy, and they are a delight at every level.

Jessica says

The stories were ok for the most part. Near the end it got kind of repetitive. But I enjoyed it overall and was surprised at how bloody some of them were and some of the more, ahem, modern themes. I can say I am glad I read this book, though some of the prose was harder to get through.

Lian says

This is a collection of traditional Victorian ghost stories, legends and fairy tales about "the good about the mystical people of Ireland who have made a pact with the devil. I enjoyed the traditional Victorian tales best but overall an interesting collection of myth, mysteries and legends.

Well worth a read if you have an interest in fairy folk and tales of the supernatural.

Susan says

LeFanu wrote some wonderful ghost stories (Green Tea, The Familiar, Madam Crowl's Ghost and others) where everyday details/observations and psychological insight enhance the reported supernatural events. Some of the other tales included here are less successful ("The Haunted Baronet"), repeat key details/scenes from other stories and would be of more interest to a scholar of LeFanu than the casual reader. If this collection had omitted those less successful stories, I would have given it 4 or 5 stars.

Martha says

I'm torn on rating this one. While it contains most of LeFanu's best stories, there are some major clunkers in here also. Most notably, 'The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh' has the exact same ending as the much better story 'The Haunted Baronet'. Stories like 'Ardagh' wouldn't interest any readers except the completionist ones.

It's true that LeFanu is one of the masters of gothic horror stories. I'd recommend starting with the collection *In a Glass Darkly* if you're new to him.

Werner says

Distinguished Edwardian ghost story author M. R. James referred to his Victorian predecessor Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) as "the Master" of the sub-genre, an assessment echoed by many fans since then. E. F. Bleiler, one of the few serious 20th-century literary scholars to specialize in (instead of despise) the literature of the supernatural, assembled this collection of Le Fanu's "best," in his estimation, in 1964, and this edition is an unabridged Dover reprint. There are 16 selections here, including the novella *Carmilla*, which I'd read before and have reviewed in its own right (my review is here: <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>). I've also previously read "Squire Toby's Will," "Green Tea," and the chilling "Madam Crowell's Ghost;" the first two are included in, respectively, *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* and *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*, while the third was in an anthology I read over 20 years ago and no longer have bibliographic information for. :(On this go-around, I've read six selections (as usual, somewhat out of order).

I'm inclined to accept Bleiler's judgment that "An Authentic Narrative of a Haunted House," which Le Fanu published in the *Dublin University Magazine* during the time that he edited it, is written by Le Fanu, and that the author's assertion that it is not fiction, but an actual account of paranormal experiences he and his family had, is genuine. (Le Fanu's editorial introduction doesn't identify himself as "the narrator," but doesn't preclude that identification either.) This was quite fascinating (at least to me), and describes phenomena that I think might tentatively be explained by the hypothesis of "psychic imprinting," if such a thing can happen. Of the five fictional stories I've read so far, the highly original "Mr. Justice Harbottle" is my favorite (though I liked all of them). "The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh" arguably suffers somewhat structurally from the fact that, under the guise of repeating contradictory local legends, Le Fanu here tells two completely different stories involving the same character and locale (only the first one making real use of the peculiarities of the invented locale) and the apparent theme of a satanic bargain, although that interpretation isn't stated. Both are effective, but it could be maintained that making this two independent stories, and changing the main character's name and the place name in the second, would have been a better route to go. "Schalken the Painter" is definitely a dark tale, and arouses a strong negative reaction toward the sexist attitudes and practices of the society it depicts (though that might not have been Le Fanu's primary intention).

I'll come back to this book later this month, and write more (with, hopefully, some more general comments and assessments) at that time!

Nov. 2, 2012

I've now finished this book, and can pronounce it an excellent read of its type! Probably my favorite selection among the ones read in this go-around is *The Haunted Baronet* (1870), which at 117 pages is novella length, and so affords more scope for character development, incident, and atmospheric "treatment" (to use the author's term) than most of the other works here. This is one of apparently several tales Le Fanu set in the fictional village of Golden Friars in northern England (the other one reprinted here is "The Dead Sexton"). Bleiler says the author left Dublin only for "occasional trips," but from his effective evocation of that setting, I'd say he probably made at least one of those trips to the Yorkshire area. (The last part of the novella employs exactly the same plot --with just variation in names, setting, and details-- as the conclusion of "The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh," which shows some literary laziness, IMO; but it's not a deal-breaker.) Most of the other stories are set in Ireland, and according to Bleiler "The White Cat of Drumgunniol" makes use of actual Irish folklore, though I'm not well enough versed enough in that area to tell. Ghosts, of course, provide the usual supernatural phenomena here, but Satanic pacts and (in "Green Tea") visitations of demons are represented as well. Le Fanu's ghosts are characteristically motivated by desire for revenge, sometimes not just against those who wronged them, but against the latter's descendants too.

Bleiler, in his interesting and informative introduction, suggests that a strength of Le Fanu's approach to the ghost story (which he finds distinctive among Victorian writers in the genre) is his interest in the psychology and perceptions of the haunted person, not just the scary outward aspects of the haunting. I don't know about other Victorians, but Le Fanu certainly does focus on this; he doesn't reduce the supernatural to a psychological illusion, but he more than once suggests that certain conditions have to exist in the mind and nervous system before a person's senses can perceive the supernatural, and in tales like "The Familiar" he concentrates on the psychological effects the haunting has on its victim. Writing on the supernatural genre in *Good Fiction Guide* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), Michael Cox suggests that Victorian writers in the field tended to bring the supernatural into the setting of their own time and place, rather than making it remote in time or geography as the Romantic writers tended to do. But this may be another difference between Le Fanu and his contemporaries; the great majority of the stories here are set in the 18th century, and *Carmilla*, one of the few works set in his own time, takes place in distant Austria. Indeed, with his frequent use of the motif of old, handed-down stories and reference to old documents or old paintings, it's easy to see him as a significant influence for M. R. James in the development of the latter's own "antiquarian" style. He also has, like Lovecraft (who liked his work), a preference for straight narration over the use of much dialogue, though he can use dialogue in places where it's needed, and even makes, at times, very realistic use of Irish and northern British dialect.

Some have suggested that Le Fanu's character Dr. Martin Hesselius is literature's first "occult detective." That worthy does appear in a few of the stories here, but his function is to be a listening ear for haunted characters to tell their stories to, and a collector of occult lore. His role is passive, not active like that of true occult detective characters like Carnacki or Flaxman Low, who get out of the office, take on supernatural baddies on their own turf, and actively thwart them. Where he appears, Hesselius has more in common with figures like Irving's Geoffrey Crayon or Diedrich Knickerbocker: a filtering narrative voice to add, to use Irving's term, "resonance" to the tale.

Note: The selection "Ghost Stories of the Tiled House" is actually, according to the appended page-length note on "Sources" at the end of this collection, a couple of chapters from the longer, serially published story cycle "The House by the Churchyard" (1861). The latter of these two was reprinted as "An Authentic Narrative of the Ghost of a Hand" in Montague Summers' *The Supernatural Omnibus* and as "The Ghost of a Hand" in Roald Dahl's *Book Of Ghost Stories*. I'd read it there, but didn't immediately recognize it here because of the difference in title --though I remember thinking that it was distinctly "thematically akin" to the one I'd read earlier! :-)

The "Sources" usually don't date the original publication of these stories, with a few exceptions, and they're not arranged here in their chronological order (or, seemingly, any other logical order). Those would have been useful editorial features. But that minor quibble aside, this is a really outstanding collection of Le Fanu's work, and I'm really glad to have finally had the pleasure of reading it!
