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The Ghost Writer

John Harwood

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Paperback - (April 1, 2004) 288 pages

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Reviews

Amazon.co.uk Review

The Ghost Writer, John Harwood's debut novel, is a rousing story with many twists and turns--rather reminiscent of taking apart a Russian matryoshka nesting doll. Gerard Freeman, aged 10, sneaks into his mother's room and unlocks a secret drawer, only to find a picture of a woman he has never seen before, but one that he will find again and again. His mother discovers him and gives him the beating of his life. Why this excessive reaction? She is a worried, paranoid, thin and fretful type with an "anxious, haunted look". By tale's end, we know why.

Phyllis Freeman, Gerard's mother, was happiest when speaking fondly of Staplefield, her childhood home, where there were things they "didn't have in Mawson [Australia]--chaffinches and mayflies and foxgloves and hawthorn, coopers and farriers and old Mr Bartholomew who delivered fresh milk and eggs to their house with his horse and cart." It's the sort of childhood idyll that the timid and lonely Gerard believes in and longs for. He strikes up a correspondence with an English penfriend, Alice Jessel, when he is 13 and a half, living in a desolate place with a frantic mother and a silent father. She is his age, her parents were killed in an accident and she has been crippled by it. She now lives in an institution, and her description of the grounds sounds much like his mother's description of Staplefield. They go through young adulthood together, in letters only, thousands of miles apart, eventually declaring their love for one another.

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Interwoven with the narrative of Alice and Gerard's letters are real ghost stories, the creation of Gerard's great-grandmother, Viola. At first, they seem to be scary Victorian tales of the supernatural. Then we see that they have a spooky way of mirroring, or preceding, events in real life, off the page. Gerard comes upon them, one by one, in mysterious ways, but clearly something, or someone, is leading him. The stories seem to implicate his mother in some nefarious goings-on, but the truth is far worse than Gerard imagines.

Any more would be telling too much. Turn on all the lights in the house when you settle down with this one, and plan to spend a long time reading because you will be lost in the story immediately. —*Valerie Ryan, Amazon.com*

Ruth Rendell, The Sunday Times

'[Harwood] has a gift for creating suspense, apparently effortlessly, as if it belongs in the nature of fiction.'

Patricia Duncker

'A wonderful, compulsive, clever, fascinating, eerie, thrilling book. I couldn't stop reading once I had begun... A tour de force.'

The Observer

'The Ghost Writer is irresistible, pushing all the genre's gothic buttons and casting a convincingly Dickensian pall.'

The TLS

'The Ghost Writer has ... a delicacy and tenderness that makes it wonderfully readable.'

The Times

'Makes your flesh creep.'

Synopsis

One hot January afternoon in Mawson, Australia, a young boy sets out to burgle his mother's room. Today, he thinks, he will open the special drawer, the locked drawer that must contain secrets. And it does. But sometimes we keep secrets for a reason. Sometimes a secret is there to hold those we love safe. Twenty years on, an onlooker would see in Gerard Freeman the boy he once was; a little more timid and unworldly, perhaps, but essentially the same solitary, serious child. Gerard has not left Mawson - he works as a librarian at the university - but he now lives for only two things: his crippled penfriend Alice, whom he has never met, but for whom he yearns with all his heart, and the manuscript he found in that locked drawer. For within those pages were the first hints at the terrible story that haunted his mother and, finally, destroyed her. And there must be other manuscripts which will contain the key, if only he can find them. In John Harwood's deliciously clever first novel, Gerard's quest to unveil the mystery that shrouds his family, and his life, will take him from Mawson to London, from the safety of his books to the terror of a ghost story come alive.

From the Publisher

The ghost story comes alive in a spellbinding first novel

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Editorial Reviews

Amazon.com

The Cornish prayer: "From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties and things that go bump in the night, Good Lord, deliver us!" is an appropriate invocation when reading *The Ghost Writer*, John Harwood's debut novel. It is a rousing good ghost story, with many twists and turns, rather like taking apart a Russian matryoshka nesting doll.

Gerard Freeman, at age ten, sneaks into his mother's room and unlocks a secret drawer, only to find a picture of a woman he has never seen before, but one that he will find again and again. His mother discovers him and gives him the beating of his life. Why this excessive reaction? She is a worried, paranoid, thin, and fretful type with an "anxious, haunted look." By tale's end, we know why.

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Interwoven with the narrative of Alice and Gerard's letters are real ghost stories, the creation of Gerard's great-grandmother, Viola. At first, they seem to be scary Victorian tales of the supernatural. Then, we see that they have a spooky way of mirroring, or preceding, events in real life, off the page. Gerard comes upon them, one by one, in mysterious ways, but clearly something, or someone, is leading him. The stories seem to implicate his mother in some nefarious goings-on, but the truth is far worse than Gerard imagines.

Any more would be telling too much. Turn on all the lights in the house when you settle down with this one, and plan to spend a long time reading because you will be lost in the story immediately. —Valerie Ryan

From Publishers Weekly

Sly nods to spooky literary spinsters—Henry James's Miss Jessel and Dickens's Miss Havisham—set the tone for this confident debut, a gothic suspense novel with a metatextual spin. Gerard Freeman grows up on the windswept southern coast of Australia in the late 20th century with a controlling mother strangely silent about the details of her childhood in England. His only solace is steadfast English pen friend, Alice, to whom he confides everything. What was Gerard's mother, Phyllis,... [▶ read more](#)

Book Description

A tantalizing tale of suspense and family secrets that weaves Victorian ghost stories into the present – where they start to come true

Timid, solitary librarian Gerard Freeman lives for just two things: his elusive pen pal Alice and a story he found hidden in his mother's drawer years ago. Written by his great-grandmother Viola, it hints at his mother's role in a sinister crime. And as he discovers more of Viola's chilling tales, he realizes that they might hold the key to finding Alice and unveiling his family's mystery – or will they bring him the untimely death they seem to foretell?

Harwood's astonishing, assured debut shows us just how dangerous family skeletons – and stories – can be.

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★★★★★ **Excellent and Mysterious**, October 11, 2004

Reviewer: [C Baker](#) (Washington, DC) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME

This is one of the better novels I've read this year. It truly grabs your interest from the first page and keeps it until the very, bitter end. The story's narrator is Gerard Freeman who comes across some ghost stories hidden in his mother's room. As we learn more about Gerard and his relationship to his mother we find a very dysfunctional family and suspect skeletons are truly hiding in the closet. Gerard becomes a bit obsessed about finding out more about his over protective mother's childhood and the strange ghost stories he finds written by his great-grandmother, Viola.

Why did Gerard's mother move so very far away from her family? Why was she so violently angry about Gerard finding and reading the stories hidden in her room? Why is she so reticent and resistant to telling Gerard anything at all about her past and about his family? The answers to these questions figure prominently in mystery Gerard begins to unravel as an adult.

Meanwhile, Gerard oddly comes across a pen pal he begins writing and falling in love with, a relationship that lasts throughout puberty and into adulthood without ever meeting face-to-face. Later, again through written communication, he is helped in his quest to discover his mother's and family's past by an old friend of his aunt's. Both figure very prominently in the story as it comes to its conclusion.

This is a very well written and enjoyable novel. I highly recommend it.

Was this review helpful to you? ☒ yes ☐ no [\(Report this\)](#)

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful:

★★★★☆ **Good right up to the last chapter**, October 9, 2004

Reviewer: [Just me](#) - [See all my reviews](#)

Minor spoilers below:

I would have given this book 3 1/2 stars if I could have, it was a good read and I flew threw it right up until the ending. The fact that the story is sectioned into many smaller "mini-stories" makes it a bit choppy, but also kept things interesting as something new was always being introduced.

I won't say that the ending ruined the book for me, but it certainly put a damper on it. I read the last chapter three or four times and I'm still not certain that I understood what was really supposed to be going on. There isn't the satisfaction of figuring out "whodunnit" because by the last paragraph you're still scratching your head over whether the "guilty" party is really guilty or not. After that the story stops abruptly, with a lot of loose ends (in particular, the course of events that must have taken place over some 'missing' years in the storyline, and a

somewhat random event at the very end). Maybe I wasn't reading carefully enough, but the more details I found, the more ambiguous the ending seemed to me. I'm not sure if this was intentional or not, but I would have liked one more chapter!

Was this review helpful to you? ☐ yes ☐ no [\(Report this\)](#)

★★★★☆ **Solid Victorian Stuff**, October 9, 2004

Reviewer: [R. Mitra "mystery writer"](#) (Muttontown, NY United States)

- [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME

Gerard Freeman, the hero of the book at a very early age in Australia, growing up with his mother, realizes something is wrong with her and with him. He falls in love with a pen pal, who is going to undergo surgery and can become paralyzed. Such is the beginning. True to Victorian times, a large part of the book is spent in Gerard reading old manuscripts, nice short ghostly tales somehow never reaching the finesse that Ms. Byatt achieved in *Possession*. Perhaps Mr. Harwood did borrow, albeit unconsciously from that book, perhaps not. It is so well written that time and pages fly quickly. Ultimately, everything is neatly tied in with a rather unbelievable climax. Still, a very tidy book. Good ghost stories are hard to come by and the last one was also from Australia, Richard Adams' (*Watership Down*) *The Girl On The Swing*. That was a real spine tingler. This one could have been a stunning novella, in the manner of *The Turn of the Screw*. Expanding it to a novel length has robbed it of much needed intensity. The author has promise and I look forward to his new book.

Was this review helpful to you? ☐ yes ☐ no [\(Report this\)](#)

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful:

★★★★☆ **Refreshingly Old Style**, October 5, 2004

Reviewer: [Starlightmntn](#) (PA, USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

It is refreshing to see a return to the style of the Victorian ghost story. In fact, Mr. Harwood cleverly uses the literary device of "found" ghost stories to get a chance to write in the Victorian style itself (probably not a very respected or marketable commodity today, but I love them). Although after the first "found" story, a bit of the reincarnated spirit fades, the first ghost story could easily have been by H.P. Lovecraft and is great fun to read.

The story itself is clever and engaging, but I confess that despite Mr. Harwood's strenuous effort to build an intricate mystery, I figured it out well before the ending. That left the final misdirections of the villain seem overdone and overly confusing for a reader who hasn't figured it out. The story would have had more impact if the intricacies were lightened and the suspense/fear increased in its place. Overall, a worthwhile read.

Was this review helpful to you? ☐ yes ☐ no [\(Report this\)](#)

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