

Bookslut



"A board game for book lovers"

- Publishers Weekly

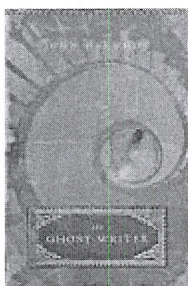
- [Home](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Advertise](#)

September 2004

Adam Lipkin

fear factor

The Ghost Writer by John Harwood



There's a weird form of snobbery that arises among some genre fans and critics. It's a near-xenophobic reaction to anyone writing a genre work who doesn't have roots within the genre as a fan or a writer, and it's exacerbated when the book is pitched as "mainstream." Sci-fi fans who never met a space opera they couldn't rationalize buying complained about Maria Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (or, going back, Carl Sagan's *Contact*). There's a group of mystery fans who hate the mainstream success of Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*, and romance fans trash Robert James Waller (as does everyone else, of course). It's almost anti-snobbery, opposing books that get the attention of the New York Times and don't get relegated to the genre racks at Borders.

Horror fans aren't immune to this. My own problems with *The Lovely Bones* were legion before it became a huge hit, but my own column griping about its HWA award certainly reads as if I'm ticked at its mainstream success. But horror is in a weird position. Unlike most other genres, horror's forerunners have long crossed over into what's considered "acceptable" literature. Poe, Stoker, Jackson, and Shelley are all mainstays of any well-balanced education, as are the horrific works of folks like James, Stevenson, and Wilde. Horror stories have achieved a level of academic and literary acceptance that fans of Chandler, Verne, and even Tolkein can only dream of. But for reasons that could probably fill an entire book, the genre (like so many others) has ghettoized itself, confining "horror" mostly to the big pulp houses (Leisure, et al), and the boutique small presses putting out beautiful but expensive limited editions. Neither of these are bad things, but they don't exactly bring in the new fans.

(That's not to say that literary horror doesn't exist -- someday, I'll give Clive Barker and Jonathan Carroll the columns they deserve -- but that all too little contemporary horror is recognized as

literary.)

Horror breakthroughs also require more originality, plot-wise. Sagan, Russell, and Carr wrote pretty standard genre plots. They just happened to do so incredibly well, and got mainstream attention for their efforts, a factor as much due to luck as to anything else (although Sagan, of course, had name-recognition going for him). Horror needs more. The best a slasher novel could ever hope for is the "well, it's amazingly good horror, but still horror" reviews that greet Thomas Harris novels, and most of the other standard themes -- zombies, werewolves, the occult -- don't have a chance unless they're presented under the aegis of Magical Realism (something Alice Hoffman has made a career out of).

Which brings me to the book of the year. John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* is one of the finest debut novels I've ever seen, a multilayered story that manages to be truly haunting, something few authors even try nowadays. The initial plot is intriguing enough: Gerard Freeman is a reclusive librarian living in Australia. For most of his life, his two primary relationships have been with his mother -- a English ex-pat with a haunted look who has long kept secrets from her son -- and with his unseen pen-pal Alice, who lives in England and is bed-ridden after an accident that killed her parents.

What starts off as an intriguing gothic-style tale takes its first turn early on, as Harwood inserts numerous (and eventually longer) ghost stories into the novel for Gerard to discover. At first, Gerard assumes that the stories, written by his grandmother, are merely diversions, but as the stories start getting longer and more complex, he notices the parallels between events in them and his life. He also notices the disturbing implication in the stories that his mother may have been involved in something sinister in her past. These stories, which walk a fine line between pastiche (references to Henry and M.R James, as well as to Jane Austen and Wilkie Collins, abound) and originality (one of a woman haunted in the pubic reading room of the London Library could easily stand on its own in any horror anthology), take up over half of the book, and those reading the novel for the Gerard/Alice narrative might find them a distraction.

But Harwood is too self-assured a writer to let that happen. The stories are every bit as essential to Gerard's life as anything Alice herself writes to him. And Harwood's writing, while deliberately set at the slow pace of most Victorian literature, is quietly wonderful, with moments like, "boys, I had learned from somewhere, were supposed to think their mothers were beautiful, but I suspected mine was not," popping up after a young Gerard discovers a secret picture of a beautiful woman that his mother had hidden. The small moments of wit contrast with the overall sense of dread Gerard feels as he discovers more of his grandmother's tales, and continues his quest to finally meet Alice. He doesn't waste time on the literary equivalent of cat scares, instead opting for a slower, often pages-long, build up of the idea that something is wrong, both in Gerard's life and in the lives of the characters he reads about.

I normally shudder to talk about endings (and I certainly won't spoil this one), but *The Ghost Writer* does have something of a let-down over the final five pages or so. It's hard to tell if this is a sign of Harwood's lack of experience finally coming into play (something that seems unlikely, given how solid the rest of the novel is), an inability to finally tie together the incredibly ambitious set-up of the book, or possibly bad editorial interference. If it weakens the novel, it doesn't do so enough to make me regret reading it. Harwood's debut is quite possibly the best tale of a haunting (and in this case, it's as much about Gerard being haunted by his own need for companionship as anything else) since Shirley Jackson, and one of the richest debut novels, horror or otherwise, in ages.

The Ghost Writer by John Harwood

Harcourt

ISBN: 0151010749

384 Pages

[Buy this book >>>](#)