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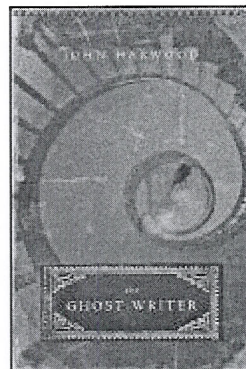
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The Ghost Writer

by John Harwood

A Review by Laura Miller

You could label some elements of John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* as pure hokey: It's got veiled specters, accursed paintings, a deserted house with a sinister basement. But like those gifted cooks who can somehow turn a can of soup into a savory dish, Harwood knows how to shiver and nerves out of unpromisingly familiar territory. *The Ghost Writer* is the first-person account of a boy named Freeman, who spends his 1960s boyhood in a remote Australian town plagued by millipedes and red devils. His father is distant and his mother scared of her own shadow. The only time her apprehension lifts is when she's telling tales about Staplefield, the stately English country house where she grew up with her beloved grandmother. In an exotic realm of chaffinches and hawthorn hedges, even her stories dry up when she catches her shadow in a secret drawer, where he discovers an old letter containing a ghost story written by someone carrying a photograph of a beautiful, unnamed woman.

All this nostalgia and mystery pretty much guarantees

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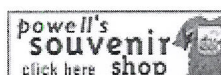
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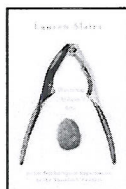


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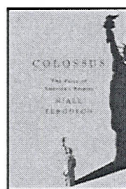


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Colossus: The Price of
America's Empire

Gerard will get the yen to visit England, and w becomes pen pals with Alice -- an elusive Engli whom he imagines to be a pre-Raphaelite-style die is cast. After his mother's death, when Ger become a quiet, recessive young man feeding c longings for faraway things, he heads back to t country, searching for Staplefield and Alice. A stories, written by Viola and published in vario reviews decades earlier, becomes part of the t one-half of *The Ghost Writer* is made up of Vic supremely spooky yarns, all of which seem to i men who are martyrs to love and victims of sup forces. The stories are obscurely entwined with Gerard's mother, whom he suspects of having b in a terrible crime. On her deathbed, when Ge about Viola's stories, his mother will only tell h true."

The Ghost Writer has a patchwork quality remi Byatt's *Possession*; each of the several voices (Alice) is entirely distinct, as if the novel were i from documentary evidence. Byatt is only the i subterranean of allusions, however, for Harwo many overt literary references -- most notably James' *Turn of the Screw* -- into his book. This postmodern cleverness; in fact, it isn't postmo Instead, the technique shows Harwood's keen l of how alternating the prosaic with the unreal pervasive creepiness. It's as if by reading about haunted (or mad) governess, Gerard invites a s The heady, story-drugged atmosphere of Viola' into Gerard's fairly rational account of his ques the two blur together is exactly the sort of pla from, the borderline between dream and wakii

Gerard's investigation of his mother's past take into a thicket of fact, fiction and lies that mig someone's attempt to hide her guilt, but might trap. Harwood's plot is intricate -- it may leave out the finer points of the various twists on yo you follow it breathlessly to its conclusion -- b are Viola's tales. Some are more inventive tha particularly a story set in the Reading Room at Museum that gives a whole new meaning to the foggy day in London town." But all of them hav quality that oozes out beyond the solid structu Harwood's plot and in the end envelopes it. By all the loose ends have been tied up, but that i

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uncanny still clings to everything. As with all tl
stories, you're left feeling that the truth about
happened can never finally be pinned down.

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