

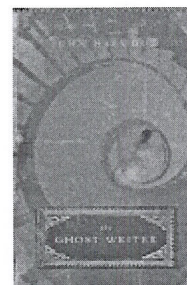


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The Ghost Writer by John Harwood

Harcourt, 2004 (2004)
Hardcover



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 Reviewed by Martina Bexte

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A young Australian lad, Gerard Freeman, loves hearing his mother talk about her idyllic childhood in England. When Gerard asks her if they'll ever return to her beloved manor house, she's fiercely adamant about never setting foot on English soil again. Gerard senses something from his mother's past has terrified her, yet she refuses to talk about it. He's convinced a locked drawer in her bedroom holds the key to the mystery. One day while she's napping he breaks open the drawer, but finds nothing other than a ghost story written by his grandmother, Viola. When his mother discovers what he's done, she rewards him with a sound beating and makes Gerard swear never to rifle through her personal things again.

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Twenty years later Gerard is still living at home, taking care of his ailing and increasingly paranoid mother, and working as a librarian. The only bright spot in his boring life is his English 'pen friend', Alice Jessel. She's wheelchair-bound and lives in an institution, yet is so vibrant in her writings and her secret yearnings that Gerard falls in love with her. After his mother's death, he's finally able to look through her belongings, and finds more of Viola's chilling stories. The more he reads, the more Gerard wonders if her supernatural tales are simply that, or clues to his own past. Gerard is finally able to travel to England to meet his love, and his obsession, Alice. But once he arrives at the institution, there's no sign of her. Gerard wonders if he's chasing after a ghost. He spends weeks looking for Alice, but to no avail. He returns home and comes to realize that his long distance and bizarre love affair with Alice is oddly reminiscent of Viola's stories.

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This is dark gothic at its best. It begins in the most guileless of ways, through the narratives of an innocent young boy. Throughout the story, Gerard remains naively susceptible to his mother, and to the machinations of his mysterious love interest, Alice. He is increasingly drawn into Viola's chilling tales to the point of obsession. Harwood pulls Gerard, and the reader, ever further into a realm where reality and fantasy, eventually and inevitably, turn into terror. *The Ghost Writer* is very well done, rich in character and atmosphere, and reminiscent in style and theme of past Victorian masters. Take your time and savour this story -- you won't be disappointed.

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The ghost writer

 Reviewer James Bradley
 April 9, 2004

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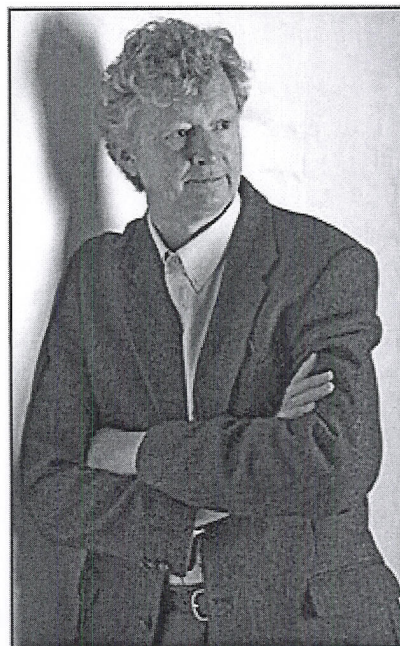
There is a wonderful image in the early chapters of John Harwood's debut novel in which the father of the narrator buys his son a train set.

The set holds little interest for the narrator, but for his father it becomes an obsession, growing to fill his life, the tracks taking on new loops, new elaborations, until they almost fill the workshop that his father keeps at the house's rear. It is all electrified, a tiny world of lines and points and switches, all able to be controlled from a chair to one side. But - and it is the "but" that makes it so wonderful - there is not a human figure in sight. Where "some train men have crowds of miniature people waiting on platforms, fields full of minutely hand-painted porcelain cows: my father's universe was populated only by trains".

Like almost everything else in *The Ghost Writer*, this image is far more than it seems, providing both a metaphor for the form Harwood takes such pleasure with - the ghost story, with its hermetic webs of paranoid connection and de Chiricoesque absences - and prefiguring and mocking the elaborate conceits of Harwood's novel's games of appropriation and subversion.

Harwood's narrator is Gerard Freeman, a librarian in Mawson, that "overgrown country town sprawled along the Great Southern Ocean", which might well be Adelaide, with its empty suburbs and watchful houses.

Since childhood, Gerard's life has been circumscribed by the fears



Elegant, witty author John Harwood.

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of his paranoid and secretive mother and his long-standing sexual desire for a crippled penfriend in England, the almost too cleverly named Alice Jessell.

Gerard's imaginative life is similarly enclosed, bound up in the second-hand world of his mother's remembered childhood in an English country house called Staplefield. And yet, for all its repeated evocation by his mother, the reason of that childhood's loss and the circumstances surrounding her coming to Australia remain hidden, bound up somehow in a story Gerard found in his mother's bedroom as a child.

After his mother's death, Gerard discovers another story and, more chillingly, the suggestion that the secret trauma that disfigured his mother's life was somehow bound up in these stories - the work of his mother's aunt, Viola Hatherley, a now-forgotten writer of ghost stories from the first half of the 20th century.

Harwood takes obvious pleasure in his rendering of Viola's stories, found one by one by the increasingly obsessed and unstable Gerard. Near pitch-perfect renderings of the tradition they draw upon, the stories are a virtuoso performance all of their own, right down to their mild archaism of voice.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to contrast their exercises in technique to the voice of Gerard: *The Ghost Writer* isn't half pastiche, it's all pastiche, and Gerard's voice is no more "real" than Viola's stories, an appropriation of the form it plays so cleverly with.

Games of the sort Harwood is playing take a high degree of control over their elements and, certainly for the first two-thirds of the novel, Harwood rarely misses a beat. Condemned to a world that is largely imaginary by his mother's stories and his impotent desire for Alice, the hapless Gerard is always one step behind the game that is being played out around (and with) him. And, as Harwood unravels his plot with consummate elegance and wit, the novel plays engagingly with questions of reality and imagination, of old world and new, and the dangers of a life lived too much in the mind.

Even better, the novel is often genuinely unsettling, though perhaps not quite in the manner the stories it contains might seem to intend.

It is only in the novel's last third that it begins to come unstuck. Ghost stories draw their energies from the tension between our rational minds and the suggestive power of the unknown and, as long as that tension can be maintained and we are suspended in a state somewhere between the two, we are moved out of the everyday and into another place where sublimated desires and irrational fears are made frighteningly tangible. This state of possibility has a frisson that is seductive and unsettling, but the demands of narrative are such that any resolution we are offered from within the story is likely to be either distressingly mundane or unsatisfyingly supernatural.

Henry James, a master of the form, famously chose to tick both of the above in *The Turn of the Screw*, but Harwood has a different trick to play. In keeping with the meta-fictional gameplay of what has gone before, *The Ghost Writer* folds its interwoven stories back into one another, creating an Escher-like loop within itself

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and posing other, less easily answered questions about the power of stories to make us into what we are, even as it reveals the answers Gerard seeks. Does it satisfy? Read it and find out.

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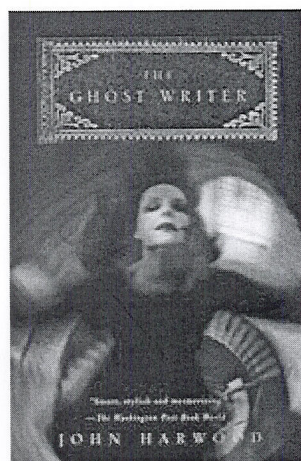
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Synopsis

A tantalizing tale of family secrets hidden in spine-tingling ghost stories -- that have started to come true

Growing up in a small Australian town, Gerard Freeman loves to hear his mother talk about her idyllic childhood in an English country manor. But she swears that she will never return to England, and refuses to tell him what happened to her family, though she is clearly terrified of some invisible yet ever-present threat. One hot afternoon, he waits until she is napping, then creeps into her bedroom to break open the drawer that's always locked, the one that he hopes holds all her secrets. . . .

Twenty years later, Gerard has not left home -- he works as a librarian -- but he lives for just two things: his English penfriend Alice, for whom he yearns with all his heart, and the ghost story he found in his mother's drawer all those years ago. Written by his great-grandmother Viola, it hints at the terrible crime that haunted his mother, and, finally, destroyed her. And as Viola's chilling tales lead him to London, Gerard realizes that the stories might hold the key to finding Alice as well as unveiling his family's mystery -- or are they leading him directly to the untimely death they seem to foretell?

Harwood's deliciously clever debut never loosens its grip on us as it moves from Gerard's present-day detective work to the macabre world of Viola's supernatural stories, from Australia to London, from the safety of books to the terror of a ghost story come alive. Astonishingly assured, compulsively readable, *The Ghost Writer* shows us just how dangerous family skeletons -- and stories -- can be.

Praise

"Harwood's debut is a haunting literary gothic, a slow-building suspense thriller. Lyrical, labyrinthine. An atmospheric paranormal thriller with many surprises."
Booklist,

"The Ghost Writer," is a first-class creeper, a literary ghost story in the Victorian tradition."
Boston Globe,

"A compelling ghost story and an auspicious debut."
Denver Post,

"Intricate and engrossing. Harwood raises the ghost of the Victorian ghost story. One ghoulishly absorbing read. B+."
Entertainment Weekly,

"Compulsively readable. A wonderful debut, evoking a century's worth of family history, by a multitalented and artistically ambidextrous newcomer."
Kirkus,

"Spooky and gripping, a chilling tale sure to make your spine shiver on even the hottest summer day."
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,

"A creepy literary mystery. A terrific debut, very accomplished and assured."
Murder Ink Bookstore Newsletter,

"The Ghost Writer" is a grand Victorian tale in which Gerard becomes increasingly certain something wicked his way comes.
New York Daily News, 7/4/2004

"Combines suspense that keeps readers up with a literary voice that allows them to respect themselves in the morning."
Publishers Weekly,

"Sly nods to spooky literary spinsters - James' Miss Jessel, Dickens's Miss Havisham - set the tone for this confident debut."
PW,

"By the last page, all loose ends have been tied up, but the uncanny still clings to everything."
Laura Miller, Salon.com,

"You can't help being dazzled by Harwood's inventiveness, especially his sure-footed mastery of prose style. [An] entertainingly accomplished first novel."
San Jose Mercury News,

"A fabulous, very spooky ghost story in the classic mode that will remind some people of A.S. Byatt's "Possession."
Laura Miller, Talk of the Nation,

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

"An elegant homage to the Victorian ghost story tradition. Like Dickens's The Pickwick Papers, Harwood makes your flesh creep."
The Times of London,

"An exceptionally inventive first novel."
The Weekend Australian,

"Harwood has written a smart, stylish and mesmerizing book."
Washington Post Book World,

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