

## **“Strange Things Afoot: Gothic Literature in the American Tradition”**

A Collection by Cynthia Ferguson

I have a confession to make: literature is not the liberal art closest to my heart. I much prefer history, with its hard facts and critical analysis, to the interpretation of themes, symbolism and character development found in creative works. For this reason, it's singular that I have such an appreciation for works in the “American Gothic” genre, which are notorious for these very same themes, symbolism and character development, ripe for interpretation. This is also my limitation, in that I cannot describe or analyze the richness of description, the depth of character, or the universality of themes of the “American Gothic” to the same degree that someone of a more literary background might be able. I don't pretend to understand the intricacies, but my experience reading these books is just as solidly based in instinctual reactions toward the characters, events, and settings.

I could not tell you the motivation behind the character of Flannery O'Connor's *The Misfit*, but I can describe the cold chill that settled over me as the events of the last few pages of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” unfolded. I'm sure that they symbolize something, but that isn't what keeps me reading past the point of extreme frustration with the desperation and depravity of characters like those of the Douthit, Pyncheon and Snopes families. It isn't my intellect that is shocked when *Beloved* begins to consume Sethe, or when Mattie Silver and Ethan Frome take their ill-fated sled ride, or when Dick Hickock and Perry Smith cross the line between robbery and murder; it's an emotional response, felt a lot deeper than anything intellectually-begotten ever could be.

That emotional response is what keeps me coming back to American Gothic, and that's how I came to acquire, over a number of years, the books that I can now call my collection. To me, this genre opens up another world, one that doesn't flinch away from the grotesque, the unsightly, the surreal or the bizarre. The books I have chosen for this collection all feature a confrontation with a less-than-perfect reality. To a lesser degree, they also embody the natural inclination to escape

this reality: McCullers' Frankie's desire to leave her small town forever is as palpable as the wish of Jackson's Mary Katherine for the outside world to leave her alone. Perhaps someone of a more literary stripe would surmise these books represent for me the ultimate escape from reality, as this is what I do when I'm reading them. I'll leave speculation of that sort to the experts. All I know is that I particularly enjoy them.

The books themselves vary widely in every other way besides genre. Some I've bought new on impulse, knowing that I would enjoy them (*Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*; *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*; *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*.) Others were purchased used, sat around on my bookshelves for months before I tentatively picked them up, and ended up loved (*The Member of the Wedding*; *Beloved*; *In Cold Blood*.) A few I picked up for free, either from a library discard shelf (*Ethan Frome*) or the Book Thing of Baltimore (*Tragic Ground*; *The House of the Seven Gables*.) *The Civil War Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* I borrowed from an acquaintance, years ago, and failed to return, as I ashamedly admit is what usually happens in such cases. I bought *The Snopes Trilogy* even though I already owned all the books in paperback. Some are hardcover, some are short story collections, some date from the 19th century, and one is a work of creative nonfiction. Still, however patchwork my collection may seem, they are very much a cohesive unit based upon the contents between their covers. They are all works by American authors showcasing the American spin upon Gothic literature in all its spine-tingling glory and sobering surrealism. These books have afforded me many hours of pleasure away (at least temporarily) from my sometimes dry, rigorous, and primary-source-driven major studies in history. I suppose some flights of fancy are permissible, occasionally.

Annotated bibliography:

1. Bierce, Ambrose, and Ernest J. Hopkins, comp. *The Civil War Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1988.

On permanent loan from an acquaintance. Bierce is a master of the short-story genre. These are grim, gruesome, frank and unflinching portraits of “men suddenly confronting their own mortality,” as Cathy N. Davidson is quoted on the back cover. Many have a surreal quality and most have a twist or surprise ending. This has the effect of making the reader reconsider their previous assumptions about what they thought had been happening in the story. The most gothic element of these stories is that they nearly all take place in an atmosphere of imminent death.

2. Caldwell, Erskine. *Tragic Ground*. New York: New American Library, 1944.

Acquired from The Book Thing of Baltimore, which I love for many reasons, primary among them the opportunity it gives me to test the waters on a book I’m not quite sure about. This is one of those books. I had read Caldwell’s excellent short story collection *Men and Women*, but wasn’t sure how I’d like his novels. This was a very challenging book for me, in that I dislike and have little sympathy for most of the characters, but as most American Gothic stories feature some sort of jarring aspect, I kept reading. The Douthit family lives in a wretched and unsightly world of their own making. The characters live in a state of complete disarray in a town called Poor Boy and keep themselves there by their very laziness, despite Spence’s insistence that they will someday return to Beaseley County, a town in which they once lived. This place attains mythic proportions in Spence’s mind as he ignores the dysfunctionality of his family, including their tendencies toward wanton sex and violence.

3. Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. New York: Signet, 1980.

Bought used sometime in 2010, and practically devoured over the course of a weekend in 2011. This is the best written creative nonfiction I have ever encountered. Capote gets inside the heads of two would-be-robbers-turned murderers (Hickock and Smith) and describes the events prior to, during, and after their crime in sometimes grisly, sometimes touching detail. At its time of publication, the book was considered exploitative and gratuitous. The reality portrayed here is sad and ugly, the story of how two men tried to escape their pathetic lives, lives which became forever bound to those of their unsuspecting and innocent victims through acts of violence. In the end there was no justice for anyone involved.

4. Faulkner, William. *Snapes: A Trilogy*. New York: Random House, 1959-1964.

I don't think I can adequately describe how much I love the work of William Faulkner. It took me a while to truly "get into" his stream-of-consciousness writing style, and I still have trouble with passages occasionally, but I credit a great high school teacher of mine for opening up the rich complexities of his novels. His characters are so interesting, and I find the Snopes family most so, out of all of them. They are backwards in every sense of the word: proudly uneducated, mean, conniving, and without any sort of discernible moral code. This particular box set showcases the novels in which the Snopeses play a major, and primarily antagonistic, role. I bought it already having owned the three novels it contains- *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*- in paperback, because I loved the idea of affording these largely repulsive characters their very own box set.

5. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. New York: New American Library, 1981.

Found at The Book Thing of Baltimore. Hawthorne is definitely not my favorite novelist, but I enjoyed this particular novel of his more than I had any others. The Pyncheon family inhabits an insular and introverted world. They keep to themselves because of a dark family secret which comes back to haunt them despite their best efforts, culminating in a very surprising climax and ending. Everything about this book is cloaked in mystery, including the identity of one of the characters.

6. Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Bought new (I love the new cover art), previously read on loan from the library. Two sisters live with an elderly uncle, the rest of their family having died, possibly murdered by the younger sister Mary Katherine. The atmosphere of this novel is so sinister, creepy, and weird, but at the same time there is such an element of black humor present and even some sweet moments. Mary Katherine spends most of her time in her head and resists all attempts by neighbors to intrude into her safe, if somewhat spooky world.

7. Lovecraft, H.P., and Joyce Carol Oates, comp. *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

Bought new. It's true that Lovecraft's stories are generally thought of as straightforward horror, but there are gothic elements present here as well. Often his protagonists, hoping to escape unsatisfying life circumstances, unwittingly stumble into otherworldly situations that make them wish they'd never left the comforts of home. There is plenty of gore present, too, though never cartoonish or exploitatively done.

8. McCullers, Carson. *The Member of the Wedding*. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.

Bought used. Not much actually happens, physically, in this tiny novella, but there is a lot going on inside the head of its protagonist, Frankie. Though only twelve, Frankie can only see beyond

the limitations of her confined and restricting world, hoping that once her brother is married, he and his bride will take her away with them. Some shocking events take place, beyond Frankie's full comprehension, and described as she sees them, which planted in me a muted sense of horror and disbelief.

9. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1987.

Bought used and read entirely within the course of a weekend out of town. There are a lot of issues going on in this book that comment upon seriously atrocious events in America's past, which I probably do not have the background, historically or sociologically, to fully understand. The plot, wherein an escaped slave named Sethe tries to make a new life for herself and her daughter and sons, descends into horror and surrealism when what might be the reincarnation of her murdered child appears, in adult form, and proceeds to dominate everything around her. This novel is very unsettling in many ways.

10. O'Connor, Flannery, and Robert Giroux, ed. *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.

I love everything Flannery O'Connor wrote, and it was difficult for me to choose this compilation of her short stories for this collection, over her delightfully bizarre novels. Short fiction, however, is how I first encountered the rich wonder of O'Connor's worlds, and so I picked the compilation. Seriously haunting settings, characters and events abound here, although *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* stands out as my all-time favorite story. No one gets a happy ending in a Flannery O'Connor story, and life and circumstances are unrepentantly unfair.

11. Wharton, Edith. *Ethan Frome*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.

Found on a library discard shelf, and loved ever since. I've read other Wharton novels, but a uniquely (emotionally and physically) confining setting and tragically sympathetic characters make *Ethan Frome* my absolute favorite, and one of my top 5 favorite novels generally. That Mattie Silver and Ethan Frome recognize the utter inescapability of their fates makes for a very emotional reading experience and a devastating ending, an inevitability that one could almost sense from the beginning of the book.

Annotated wish list:

1. Carver, Raymond. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

This is Carver's first collection of short stories, written at the apex of his alcoholism, and arguably his bleakest. He was a master of the short fiction genre, an uncompromising critic of human relationships, and a revealer of complicated and depressing realities.

2. Halttunen, Karen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000.

This scholarly work apparently explores the correlation between the American public's fascination with the grotesque and the gothic works produced by authors since the country's earliest days. Historic and gothic—I'm pretty sure I'd love it.

3. McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

I read about half of this and then had to return it to the library. The amount of gore, wanton violence and utter depravity saturating this book definitely qualifies it as American Gothic. It would fit right in with the other books on my shelves.

4. Oates, Joyce Carol, and Bruce McAllister, eds. *American Gothic Tales*. New York: Plume, 1996.

Short stories are my favorite thing to read, hands down. This collection, edited by the one and only Joyce Carol Oates, comes highly recommended and spans a considerable period of time. I feel like this compilation would really tie my collection together.

5. Williams, Tennessee. *Three by Tennessee: Sweet Bird of Youth, The Rose Tattoo, and The Night of the Iguana*. New York: Signet, 1976.

I haven't read any Tennessee Williams other than *The Glass Menagerie*, but I have seen the movie adaptations of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. His settings and characters always come across to me as quite bizarre and complex, and their grim circumstances and tragic fates are very gothic indeed. These plays are apparently no exception to the rule.