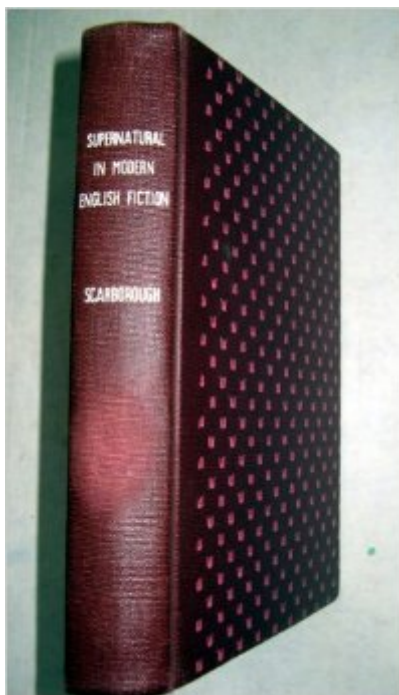


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The Supernatural In Modern English Fiction



Synopsis

This book deals with ghosts and devils in an impressionistic way. The book devotes more attention to the fiction of the supernatural of the nineteenth century. The author seeks to show that there is a genuine revival of wonder in our time, with certain changes in the characterization of supernatural beings. It includes not only the themes that are strictly supernatural, but also those which, formerly considered unearthly, carry on the traditions of the magical.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First of all the potential reader should know that this book was published in 1917, so the 'Modern' in the title refers to the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the earliest part of the twentieth century. Secondly, the author omits mention of most of the ghost story authors from that period who are still popular today, e.g. J. S. Le Fanu (first ghostly tale published in 1838) and M. R. James (first collection of stories published in 1904). She also leaves out most of Victorian ladies whose ghost stories are still in print today, e.g. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, E. Nesbit, and Mrs. Riddell. I would classify this book as an overview of the literature of supernatural fantasy and horror (including a Byronic poem about a vampire). The ghost story as defined and brought to its peak by Victorian and Edwardian authors, receives only brief mention in the chapter, "Modern Ghosts." Scarborough begins with the Gothic Romance, of which she says: "The mysterious twilights of medievalism invited eyes tired of the noonday glare of Augustan formalism. The natural had become familiar to monotony, hence men craved the supernatural. And so the Gothic novel came into being." 'Gothic' is used to designate the eighteenth-century, pseudo-medieval novel of horror. The author begins with Horace Walpole's, "The Castle of Otranto"--if you are at all fond of Regency romances, you are bound to run across a heroine who is reading Walpole's tale of mad monks and haunted castles, or Mrs. Radcliffe's horrific "Mysteries of Udolpho." These novels depicting "decaying castles with treacherous stairways leading to mysterious rooms, halls of black marble, and vaults whose great

rusty keys groan in the locks"--plus a heroine who wanders through spider-webbed corridors at midnight--did not have much staying power. According to Scarborough, Jane Austen finally gave this genre the kiss of death when she satirized their gloomy, overwrought style in "Northanger Abbey," which remained unpublished until after her death in 1818. "The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction" describes many gothic romance peculiarities in detail, while having a certain amount of gentle fun with them. A chapter on European supernatural literature is followed by the aforementioned chapter on "Modern Ghosts." The author makes much of the effect Poe, Balzac, Hoffmann and other Romantic supernaturalists had on the nineteenth century English and American ghost story. Balzac in particular exerted a strong influence over Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, English author of "The Haunters and the Haunted," and progenitor of that infamous opening sentence, "It was a dark and stormy night..." (yes, that Bulwer-Lytton). Other stories that the author selects for discussion depend more on the Romantic tradition of insanity, gruesome decline, and horrid death to spark them along, rather than a purely supernatural mechanism. (As a matter of fact, Scarborough even published a novel in which the heroine was driven mad by the wind.) She also expends a great deal of print on Spiritualism (which was already on the decline when this book was written), and the mystical, folkloric pantheism of such writers as W.B. Yeats ("The Celtic Twilight") and Algernon Blackwood ("Ancient Sorceries"). Scarborough draws heavily upon Romanticism, Spiritualism, and folklore for her chapters on "The Devil and His Allies," "Supernatural Life (which contains an excellent exposition on the legend of the Wandering Jew)," and "The Supernatural in Folk-tales." "Supernatural Science" is the only really dated chapter in this book, with its discussions of hypnotism, the Fourth Dimension, uncanny chemistry, and students who exchange eyeballs. Even here, the author provides interesting commentary on A. Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, Arthur Machen (whom she despises), and Ambrose Bierce, among other authors who were popular at the beginning of the twentieth century (and still are). "The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction" should appeal to anyone who is interested in the evolution of fantasy and horror literature. Try "Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood" by Jack Sullivan or "Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story" by Julia Briggs if your interest is more focused on literature that is entirely devoted to ghosts.

This is the latest in Lethe Press's series of reissues of works on the occult. 'The Supernatural In Modern English Fiction' was written in 1917 by Dorothy Scarborough. Given that the series has been uneven so far I did not have high expectations for this volume, and have only now discovered that it is a veritable treasure trove of books and literary history. It covers the period from Horace

Walpole's 'Castle of Otranto' and other Gothic romances straight through to the author's own present times in the early 20th Century. This makes for a literal cast of thousands. I was quite surprised to discover that horror and fantasy were a major part of the world's literary output from the very beginnings of popular literature. From Walpole, Maturin, and Shelley right through to Doyle, Machen, and Blackwood it was indeed a crowded stage. And Scarborough manages to present most of these efforts in a readable and well-organized fashion. Initially we are given a historical approach, but then the themes are taken up separately. Ghost stories, the demonic, the wandering Jew, rebirth, the afterlife, folk tales, and even 'scientific' monsters each get their turn in the sun. As I've indicated Scarborough writes without any of the boring academic tone which often haunts this kind of material. This makes this volume an entertaining way to hunt down new reading material as well as a help in steering one's way through book stall accretions with a steady hand. Keep a pencil and a piece of paper handy while reading this book, you are bound to find things of interest. My only regret is the lack of a bibliography. Scarborough is quite up front about this. In addition to the 3,000 or so titles that she drew upon for the book, there was an even larger additional number that she felt should be provided to the reader/researcher. There simply was no room at the inn. Unfortunately, to our loss, the bibliography promised as a second volume never materialized. There is, however, a good index, which will have to serve in its stead.

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