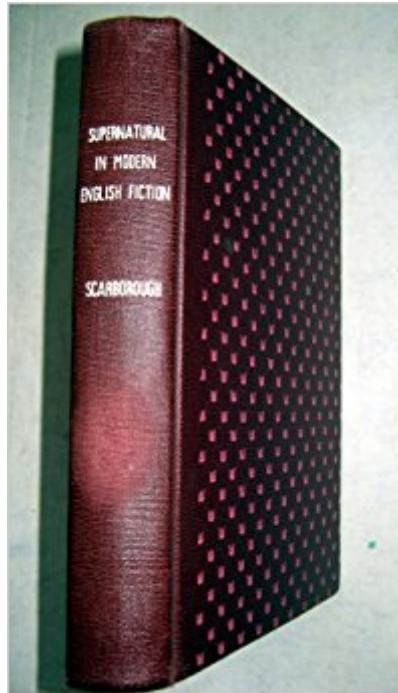




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The Supernatural In Modern English Fiction



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

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.

The typos apply to the Kindle version. I'm assuming that the footnotes came where the actual physical page ended but often in this they would come in the middle of paragraphs and even sentences. It makes for very choppy reading in places. Also, sometimes there will be a word misspelled, spelled phonetically (example: donjon for dungeon) and random letters or symbols in place of the actual letter (example: Jhe for The). If it had been free it might have been easier to overlook but it's a little on the shoddy side for a book that one has to pay for. If you can get past this then the book is well worth your time, especially if you are interested in the roots of horror and fantasy fiction. The author writes fluidly with a slightly teasing tone but never crosses the line into open snickering. I was puzzled at a few omissions such as M.R. James (particularly in the section on ghost stories) but I suppose it is her prerogative of which stories to choose. It also helped expand my Kindle library a bit since some of the authors I had never heard of and quite a few of them were

easily found for free or very cheaply. All in all it made great reading along with a few others. If you haven't read them already some good follow-up (or starting point) books to read would be, in no specific order: *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by H.P. Lovecraft (covers some of the same territory but goes more in-depth on some of the stories and books mentioned. It also covers some authors that this book missed. It, too, gives a wide berth on quite a lot of Victorian supernatural literature). *The Tale of Terror* by Edith Birkhead (Focuses more on the Gothic tale and their more immediate descendants) *Danse Macabre* by Stephen King (covers horror between the years of 1950-1980ish and focuses on a variety of media. He does speak a bit about some books and stories that are outside of that time-frame. He does omit some great writers that fall within his frame, though.) There are also a few by S.T. Joshi as well. 'The Modern Weird Tale' and 'The Weird Tale'. I can't speak to their contents though as I have never read them. All in all a great book if you don't mind wading through a few spots due to the aforementioned issues.

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 Austin 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.

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