



Terror by Night: Classic Ghost & Horror Stories

Ambrose Bierce , David Stuart Davies (Editor)

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Nothing is so improbable as what is true' Of all the writers of ghost and horror stories, Ambrose Bierce is perhaps the most colourful. He was a dark, cynical and pessimistic soul who had a grim vision of fate and the unfairness of life, which he channelled into his fiction. And in his death, or rather his disappearance, he created a mystery as strange and unresolved as any that he penned himself. But more of that later. Ambrose Gwinett Bierce was born in a log cabin on 21st June 1842, in Horse Creek, Meigs County, Ohio, USA. He was the tenth of thirteen children, ten of whom survived infancy. His father, an unsuccessful farmer with an unseemly love of literature, had given all the Bierce children names beginning with 'A'. There was Abigail, the eldest; then Amelia, Ann, Addison, Aurelius etc. So oddness was a part of Bierce's life from the beginning. Poverty and religion of the extreme variety were the two chief influences on young Ambrose's childhood. He not only hated this period of his life, he also developed a deep hatred for his family and this is reflected in some of his stories which depict families preying on and murdering one another. For example the unforgettable opening sentence of 'An Imperfect Conflagration' seems to sum up his bitter attitude: 'Early in 1872 I murdered my father - an act that made a deep impression on me at the time'.

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From Reader Review **Terror by Night: Classic Ghost & Horror Stories** for online ebook

Juushika says

Ghosts and haunted houses, dying Civil War soldiers and attacking beasts, things unseen and terrors imagined: this volume collects 51 of Ambrose Bierce's short stories. It's not an imprint which you pick up for its own sake, but rather because it's the Bierce collection closest at hand. The introduction is adequate but awkwardly written and hardly comprehensive; the collection itself is not all of Bierce's short fiction, and the arrangement is adequate—never poor or jarring, and sometimes aiding the flow between stories. It isn't a volume that I recommend outright, but if it does happen to be the Bierce collection closest at hand, then do pick it up—because Bierce is worth reading. He's a deceptively simple writer: his tone is straightforward and his penchant for twist endings can grow predictable (and, the danger of a collection, may grow repetitive as well), but in that straightforwardness hides understatement. Dry wit, insightful irony, startling human perception, and no lack of horror—some human, some otherworldly, all of it crossing the boundary between the two in the impact it has on those involved—are all presented in a bare style that mimics simplicity but is actually skillful subtlety. Bierce's dark humor is delightful, and his horror is both intriguing and chilling, both as fearful pleasure and something outright unsettling.

For all of this, Bierce is not my new favorite short fiction author, in part because I do find his twist endings repeditive, in part because not all of his themes—family issues and human folly, ghosts and the Civil War—appeal to my own personal interests. But his voice and style do appeal to me, and as they are short, finely crafted, and often intriguing, I found Bierce's stories both addicting and supremely satisfying, and enjoyed this sampling of his short fiction. "An Occurance at Owl Creek Bridge," "An Imperfect Conflagration," and "The Damned Thing" were my favorites, but few stories disappointed me. Give or take this specific collection, but I recommend Bierce—to fans of horror and of short fiction, for he excelled at both.

Jeff Hobbs says

Read so far--

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge--4

The Moonlit Road--3

Haita the Shepherd--

The Secret of Macarger's Gulch--2

The Eyes of the Panther--

The Stranger--3

An Inhabitant of Carcosa--2

The Applicant--

The Death of Halpin Frayser--

A Watcher by the Dead--3

An Imperfect Conflagration--

The Man and the Snake--2

John Mortonson's Funeral--

Moxon's Master--

The Damned Thing--3
The Realm of the Unreal--
Chickamauga--2
A Fruitless Assignment--
A Vine on a House--2
One of Twins--3
Present at a Hanging--
A Wireless Message--
One of the Missing--
An Arrest--
A Jug of Sirup--
The Isle of Pines--
At Old Man Eckert's--
Three and One are One--
The Spook House--
The Middle Toe of the Right Foot--3
The Thing at Nolan--
The Difficulty of Crossing a Field--
The Affair at Coulter's Notch--3
An Unfinished Race--
Charles Ashmore's Trail--
Staley Fleming's Hallucination--2
The Night-Doings at 'Deadman's'--
A Baby Tramp--
A Psychological Shipwreck--3
A Cold Greeting--
Beyond the Wall--2
John Bartine's Watch--3
The Man out of the Nose--
An Adventure at Brownville--
The Mocking-Bird--
The Suitable Surroundings--
The Boarded Window--2
A Lady from Redhorse--
The Famous Gilson Bequest--
A Holy Terror--
A Diagnosis of Death--2

7thTrooper says

Det är lite sinnessjukt hur många noveller som ingår i den här samlingen. Bierce var en man som inte använde två ord om ett räckte, minst sagt. Flera är knappa fem sidor långa. Ambrose Bierce var en bitter, bitter man och det märks väl i verken samlade i denna volym. Familjer som dödar varandra, kärlek som slutar olyckligt och ibland bara karaktärer som verkar hamna mitt i ett slags kosmiskt practical joke. "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field" är väl praktexemplet (och en av de kortaste/bästa novellerna i boken) på den senare. Som tur är uppskattar jag bitterhet i min litteratur. Kvalitén på de enskilda novellerna går förstås upp

och ned, med både höga toppar och låga dalar. "The Damned Thing", "Haita the Shepherd", "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" och "The Death of Halpin Frayser" är nog de bästa. Flera av de som bara är en sida eller två är däremot så gott som helt menlösa och kan med gott mod skippas. "Moxon's Master", däremot, var nog den sämsta. Tråkig och med en lika tråkig tvist, om än att den är lite intressant som tidig pseudo sci-fi.

Som helhet värd ett försök.

Bill Kerwin says

Bierce's masterworks of short fiction--a handful of stories including "The Moonlit Road," "One of the Missing," "Chickamauga," and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"--are singular and disturbing. They feature episodic, disjointed narratives produced from multiple perspectives and fragmented in time, each dominated by the same cold, ironic tone. Bierce projects a unique authorial voice: an Olympian utterance to be sure, but sent forth from an Olympus without any gods, an eminence empty of everything but sardonic laughter. (The only writer in my experience who comes close to this tone is the poet Robinson Jeffers.)

Not all of the stories collected here approach this high standard, but many of them do. At worst, these pieces may be little more than creepy anecdotes, 19th century newspaper ephemera suitable for entertaining businessmen riding homeward on the train. (Bierce wittily challenges precisely this sort of reader in one of his best shorter stories, "The Suitable Surroundings.") At other times, his contempt for middle class values causes him to slip into a barely concealed rage or a forced jocularly that inevitably mar the tone. Still, every story in this collection merits at least one reading.

Danielroffle says

A better journalist and humorist than ghost story writer, Bierce's tales of the supernatural suffer from a rather stilted writing style and collected (always a risk with ghost stories) they tend towards the repetitive. Worse yet, they are mostly lacking in Bierce's trademark sense of humor. There's some gems to be found here, but it's definitely one to dip into, not read in one go.

Paul Groos says

Nice stories, a polished and rich prose style. There are many haunted house tales, but these get boring after a while. Fortunately there are diamonds, such as A Watcher by the Dead, The Boarded Window and Beyond the Wall. Original, grisly and quite dark if not always scary. Often a little twist in the final sentence. Recommended for lovers of Poe and Lovecraft.

kymdotcom says

The moralistic overtone got old rather fast, so my favourite was probably the story where the cat was locked

in the coffin with the corpse and ate its face.

J-Man says

It took me a while to finish this one and I even took quite a long break from reading it because of the utter lameness of some stories but all in all there were some purely brilliant ones in there and I think Bierce's work should be considered from the perspective of historical significance above all else...

Robert says

While the quality of the stories herein definitely merit a five-star review, the collection certainly could have been arranged a little better. Similar stories have been lumped together which dulls the overall effect somewhat. There is nothing terrifying about familiarity. Even so, what stories they are! Bierce is perhaps the most economical writer I have ever read, able to spin a truly shuddersome yarn in just a handful of paragraphs and some of his best work is also his shortest.

Themes tend to revolve around infidelity, familial break-up and the hubris and folly of man almost exclusively set in rural or remote areas. Inarguably, his best work is on the theme of the supernatural war story where Bierce brings his own personal experiences of the American Civil War to the fore, tales which are melancholy and violent even without the inclusion of spirits and weird happenings. He also gets credit for the invention of the God Hastur who turns up as a patron of shepherds, but would later be reinvented by Robert W Chambers as The King In Yellow before a final incarnation as one of HP Lovecraft's Elder Gods. The influence he exerts on Lovecraft is in fact quite apparent, for the supernatural in Bierce's stories is not an entity which can be fought against, but an unknowable force of doom against which there is no protection. Morose and grim, this is a collection best consumed one bite at a time, preferably when the sun has dipped below the horizon.

Simon says

This book must have one of the most disturbing covers of any I have any read. Many a startled glance I have received whilst reading in public places, I can tell you. If you are considering getting this book but the cover is putting you off, rest assured that it has now been re-issued with less horific cover art!

It has taken me quite a while to get through this collection, despite there being less than three hundred pages. It contains no less than fifty-one stories so that gives you an idea of how short many of them are. That being said, these are not light and easy reads. It's not the prose which is easy going enough given the time in which these stories were written. It's the density of the text itself that demands full concentration so that all pertinent facts are grasped allowing one to get the full import of the conclusions reached. In my opinion, you do not want to read more than a few of these at a time. I certainly would not have wanted to read the entire collection without breaks.

Many of these stories are set in and around the American civil war and explore the bitter, harshness of life. Cosmic balance is maintained however because bad things that people do are inevitably punished, by supernatural forces beyond the grave if necessary.

Some of the stories really touched me, betraying flashes of Bierce's brilliance while others just left me cold. Sometimes I felt that my own lack of concentration was at fault for failing to grasp the full meaning behind the story while at other times I felt it was just that they had dated poorly, the effect being somewhat less shocking today than it might have been at the time. The themes were quite repetative but again, that criticism would be somewhat dispersed by breaking up the reading of this collection.

A good sampling of a talented writer with a somewhat bleak view of life that dominated his work.

Teresa Goodman says

What can I say, I like the work of Bierce, it is refreshing in the way he crafts a story for maximum damage to the psyche! This guy knows how to scare the hell out of people and I would highly recommend just about anything by him! Assuming of course you like Gothic ghost stories! If you don't know, here is a good place to start.

Rima says

Not all if them were ghost stories. Some were just a little weird, or involved coincidences. A very enjoyable read, though.

Sandy says

Wordsworth Editions, published in London, has a wonderful thing going with its current series entitled "Tales of Mystery & the Supernatural," bringing back into print short-story collections and full-length novels from such relatively unknown authors as Gertrude Atherton, Edith Nesbit, D.K. Broster, Marjorie Bowen, May Sinclair and Dennis Wheatley. The imprint's collection of horror tales from Ohio-born Ambrose Bierce is a very satisfying and generous one, gathering 51 of the author's more shuddery pieces, out of the 90 or so from his complete oeuvre. (Bierce never wrote any longer pieces, calling the novel, in typically cynical fashion, "a short story padded.") Bierce, who was born in 1842 and died mysteriously, most likely in Mexico, around 1914, wrote tales that have been elsewhere divided into three categories: Tales of Horror, Tall Tales and Tales of the Civil War, in which he fought with distinction on the Union side. But these three loose categories don't tell the full story; his most famous short piece, for example, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," while certainly being a tale of war, is also undeniably a psychological horror story. Indeed, a reader of this volume will quickly discern at least eight types of Bierce tales therein; more on that in a moment. All the stories in this collection display an extremely fine polish as regards writing technique (some of the tales may even be accused of being overwritten) and a cynical, often merciless worldview. The author was not nicknamed "Bitter Bierce" for nothing, and there is absolutely no way for the reader to predict whether or not any character, be it man, woman or child, will suffer a horrible fate. As no less a critic than H.P. Lovecraft wrote of Bierce's writing, in his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature": "[There is in it] a rare strain of sardonic comedy and graveyard humour, and a kind of delight in images of cruelty and tantalising disappointment." And as David Stuart Davies mentions, in his well-written and informative intro to this edition, "His stories invariably turn on these strange and often heart-stopping twists of fate--twists that are calculated to shock and shake the reader out of a comfortable complacency...."

As to those eight types of tales found in this volume, by far the most commonly encountered is the Ghost Tale, such as "A Baby Tramp," in which a mother's ghost lures its baby son on a cross-country pilgrimage; "The Moonlit Road," a murderous tale told from three vantages, including the dead wife; "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot," in which another murdered wife (little love is lost in these grisly Bierce stories!) takes a hideous vengeance; and "Staley Fleming's Hallucination," which features what may be literature's earliest canine ghost. Then there are the purely Supernatural Tales, such as "The Spook House," with its unescapable room filled with corpses; "A Wireless Message," in which a man sees his wife's flaming doom from 1,000 miles away; and "John Bartine's Watch," with its accursed timepiece. Of course, there are the Civil War Tales, and if "Occurrence" is the best-known of the six presented here, it is not alone in quality. "One of the Missing" tells of the terrible plight of a Union soldier who is trapped beneath the wreckage of a bombarded building; "Chickamauga" describes the outcome of that horrible battle through the eyes of a 6-year-old boy; and "Three and One Are One," "The Affair at Coulter's Notch" and "The Mocking-Bird" all tell ironic tales of how the war divided families and turned son against father, husband against wife, and brother against brother. And speaking of horrible, what I refer to as Bierce's purely Horrible Doings is the fourth category here; tales that tell of characters visited by truly horrendous fates. "The Man Out of the Nose" tells of the tragic end that a married man's love affair brings about; "The Applicant" tells the sorry story of a poor old man on Christmas Eve; "A Holy Terror" gives us a gold prospector violating the grounds in a deserted cemetery; and "The Eyes of the Panther" tells of how a tragedy involving a wildcat has a far-reaching psychological impact on a woman later on. Then there are what I suppose one might call Strange Doings; tales, many of them short shorts, that make you scratch your head and go "Wha?" In "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field," "An Unfinished Race" and "Charles Ashmore's Trail," men mysteriously vanish without a trace; in "John Mortonson's Funeral," a hungry feline interrupts a man's mourning family; and in "An Adventure at Brownville," an opera singer seemingly has a murderous effect on women. Bierce also wrote what may be regarded as two Science Fiction Tales, and they are both doozies: "Moxon's Master," featuring a nasty-tempered, chess-playing automaton, and "The Damned Thing," with its invisible, field-dwelling creatures. The seventh category here is Tales of Murder, of which "An Imperfect Conflagration" is a perfect example; here, a man casually murders both his parents to possess himself of a music box. (Well, at least he had a good reason!) Finally, there are the Unclassifiable Tales; stories that are difficult to synopsise, much less describe. In "Haita the Shepherd," a lad learns a hard lesson about the essence of happiness; in "The Night Doings at 'Deadman's'," a man sits in a shanty waiting for the ghost of a "Chinaman" whose braid he cut off; in "The Death of Halpin Frayser," a man walks through a forest that is dripping with blood to meet the spirit of his dead mother....

As you can see, a wide assortment of story types, plots and settings. Most of the stories here are concise to the point of terseness; only two stories are longer than 10 pages, and many barely fill two. Elegantly written by a master wordsmith, and filled with concisely etched characters and backdrops, there is certainly not much in the way of padding. Brilliantly cynical, as would be expected from the man who gave the world "The Devil's Dictionary," the tales presented here often provoke a guffaw in the middle of a shudder. Bottom line: All readers who have not yet had the pleasure of encountering this true master of the art should certainly pounce!

Benjamin Stahl says

After First Reading - (4 Stars)

Ambrose Bierce is simply a fantastic author. It's a shame that many people don't know any of his stuff, when every single horror fan at least knows some of Poe's or Lovecraft's stories. Personally, I would go so far as

saying that I think Bierce is better than these two iconic authors. In this lengthy compilation, which contains almost all of Bierce's short fiction, there are so many great and often scary tales that I will not bother naming any of them. Suffice to say that anyone who appreciates horror which is both scary and inventive - "inventive" being the keyword here - then you should definitely read this book, or any other that contains the work of Ambrose Bierce.

I have no hesitation in saying that much of these stories contain just as much - if not more - morbid creativeness than all of Stephen King's most beloved works ...

After Second Reading - (3 Stars)

I've been wanting to revisit this book for a while. Out of all the short story anthologies I've read - (Poe, Lovecraft, Collins, Kipling, James, etc) - Ambrose Bierce stood out to me as the being the better of the bunch. He had such a short, sharp, bitter, no-nonsense approach to his storytelling, and his trademark twists were always surprising, despite being expected in some shape or form.

Mostly the first half of this book, without a doubt, is almost perfect, containing many interesting and often chilling stories set around the Civil War, or at least within that same time period. Unlike M.R. James, who tends to waddle through his set-ups sometimes, Bierce grabs you by the scruff and pulls you right down into his story at the beginning, before slapping you in the face with his cleverly bent conclusions. At first I thought I was enjoying this book even more the second time around - (unlike what happened rereading M.R. James again) - and I was contemplating for a little while whether this might actually be another five star book, even though I didn't like the idea of giving an anthology book that rating, preferring to save five-stars for novels only.

Since my opinion is obviously the one that everyone looks up to, hence the 149 likes this review will receive, I would like to draw that pretended attention to these particular stories. I won't talk *about* them, because I'm lazy and I have to go to work soon. I'll just list them like. So, my personal favourites were as follows: *An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge ... Haila The Shepherd ... The Eyes Of The Panther/ ... The Stranger ... A Watcher By The Dead ... An Imperfect Conflagration ... The Man And The Snake ... The Damned Thing ... Chickamauga ... A Fruitless Assignment ... and The Spook House.*

A Vine On A House, like many mothers in this book, was really cool, but it was much too short. But the thing is, all these stories I've mentioned are in the first half of the book. The second half is almost *completely* overrun with what I felt were mostly fillers. It's the same thing with all these books. It's best not to read all the stories at once, but take small, irregular bites. But I just don't like doing things that way, so admittedly, the fact that I eventually got bored with the repetitiveness of many of these stories is more my fault than Bierce's.

But even in the way the book is *compiled*, I thought the overall effect was unnecessarily marred. As I said before, the stronger stories inhabit the first half, so after those there's not that much to be mesmerised by, and thus the second half took me much longer to read. But also, Bierce seems to progress through certain types of horror stories, that being topics like the "haunted house", "civil war", "person goes missing" etc. And all these sub-genres are placed together, instead of being mixed around, and so you find yourself stuck with a bunch of stories that all feel the same. Especially the haunted house stories all seemed to start identically, with some abandoned house in the country, broken doors and windows, some stranger walks past one night and notices something. It just got boring and irritating after a while.

If this book had been stripped down of several less-powerful stories, or at least structured in a slightly less confirmative way, then I would feel much more compelled to let it keep its four stars. But as it is, while being great at times, there's just a little too many average stuff to make the book, essentially, feel like a mostly average read.

No disrespect to Bierce though. I would still say he is one of my favourite authors.
