

The Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories Short Guide

The Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories by Robert Westall

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Overview

The *Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories* presents a sampler of the horror stories, ghost stories, realism, and science fiction that Westall has developed at greater length in his novels. Lonely, isolated individuals, prompted into strange and often frightening worlds by moments of crisis in their lives, deal with bizarre events that are often ambiguous and totally disorienting.

Whether the character is a young girl confronting what she believes to be the ghost of a nun in the beams of an ancient monastery or a middle-aged headmaster who finds that his cat can transform herself into a human-like but at the same time monstrous creature, Westall's characters cope with their bizarre circumstances with dignity. It is in these moments of crisis that these characters fully experience the world and confront their fears.

The range of these stories provides the reader with a sense of Westall's versatility and also a view of his preoccupations. Unlike other of Westall's short story collections, such as *Echoes of War* or *Break of Dark*, *The Haunting of Chas McGill* has no overriding theme that binds the collection together. Instead, the stories provide an index to various themes and concerns common to much of Westall's work: haunted houses symbolize the fears and preoccupations of the human mind; cats are the guardians against fear, tickets providing passage to another time, and sometimes even the source of fear; the past can tell us much about the present and can help us guard against the threats of the future; and people must make the best of what is often a confusing and uncertain world. These eight stories—"The Haunting of Chas McGill," "Almost a Ghost Story," "The Vacancy," "The Night Out," "The Creatures in the House," "Sea Coal," "The Dracula Tour," and "A Walk on the Wild Side"—provide readers with an initiation into Westall's work.

About the Author

British author Robert Atkinson Westall was born in Tynemouth, Northumberland, England on October 7, 1929. After attending Tynemouth High School and receiving a fine arts degree at Durham University in 1953 with first-class honors, Westall served in the Royal Signals of the British Army from 1953-1955. Westall continued his fine arts studies at the Slade School of the University of London, receiving his Doctor of Fine Arts degree in 1957.

Westall married Jean Underhill in 1958 and had one son, Christopher, for whom Westall wrote several of his early books, including *The Machine Gunners*. As Westall explains, "I wrote [*The Machine Gunners*] only for my son, then twelve. To tell him how it felt to be me, when I was twelve." Westall used his experience as a child in World War II as a basis for the events of *The Machine-Gunners*. At eighteen Christopher Westall was killed in a motorcycle accident, yet he lives on in several characters of his father's novels.

Westall taught art in the late 1950s, and served as Head of Art and Director of Careers at Sir John Deane's College in Northwich, England. In the early 1970s, before turning to his careers as an antiques dealer and writer of fiction for young adults, Westall was also a journalist and art critic.

Westall's writing has received numerous honors and awards. His first published novel, *The Machine-Gunners*, received the prestigious Carnegie Medal. *The Devil on the Road* was a runner-up for the award in 1979, and Westall received the award for a second time with his 1980 novel, the complex and intense *The Scarecrows*. *The Machine-Gunners*, *The Scarecrows*, *The Wind Eye*, and *Break of Dark* were all Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Books.

The Devil on the Road was named to the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults 1979 list. All of the following works have been included in various editions of Zena Sutherland's *The Best in Children's Books*: *The Machine-Gunners*, *The Watch House*, *The Wind Eye*, *Break of Dark*, *Futuretrack 5*, *The Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories*, *The Scarecrows*, and *Ghost Abbey*. Westall continued to be a prolific author throughout his career, with works ranging from realistic descriptions of English life during World War II to stories of the supernatural. Westall died on April 15, 1993, in Cheshire, England, of respiratory failure brought on by pneumonia.



Setting

All but one of the stories in *The Haunting of Chas McGill* take place in England. The England portrayed in the stories varies considerably, however, depending on whether Westall looks at England past, present, or future. The England of the past appears in "The Haunting of Chas McGill" and in "Sea Coal." Although these portraits of the past remind the reader of the uncertainties of that time, whether it be the fears of the war or the poverty of inhabitants of 1932 in "Sea Coal," that era also reminds us of the value of hard work and of the connection to family. The England of the present is recreated through faithfulness to speech and dialogue and a sense of tangible detail. The palpable cold that the audience feels in "Almost a Ghost Story" is generated through the sense of place—the stone floors, the fireplace that removes rather than adds heat to the room, and the shivering musicians.

The physical coldness heightens Rachel's fears of the ancient ghost. In "The Creatures in the House" and "A Walk on the Wild Side,") the daily routine of fixing meals or listening to the radio are a stopgap against the horrors waiting for the isolated and besieged characters. The England of the future in "The Vacancy" is a bleak, mean-spirited place where unemployment and grubby streets are the status quo and a bicycle is a precious commodity.

Determining the boundaries between past and present, however, is often difficult. Mike, in the time-travel fantasy "Sea Coal," walks directly from the present to the past, grasping his "ticket," the white cat he has saved from death. Only after several encounters with people along the way and after several striking anachronisms, does he realize that he is in 1932 rather than in 1982.

The haunted house is a predominant setting in these stories. Sometimes the dangers lurk outside the house, but more often the danger is from within.

A decrepit abbey, a house by the sea inhabited by a creature that preys on the owner's memories, Dracula's castle, an evacuated school that contains the ghost of an AWOL soldier from World War I, a headmaster's home, a waiting room from which no one ever returns—these are Westall's haunted buildings. Each serves as a battleground on which the characters of Westall's stories confront their fears and face their own weaknesses.



Social Sensitivity

Several aspects of Westall's work have been of continuing concern throughout his career: violence, harsh language, sexual content, insensitivity to the portrayal of female characters, and stereotypes about homosexuals and sex roles. In *The Haunting of Chas McGill* several of these elements are present. Violent events occur in nearly all of the stories. In "The Haunting of Chas McGill," for instance, the ghost soldier from World War I refers to the death of his friend and his friend's grotesque burial in the wall of the trench. In "The Vacancy," Martin is disintegrated "like an erratic firecracker" after he is identified as being a threat to the state because of his intelligence, initiative, and curiosity. The most violent of all of the stories is "A Walk on the Wild Side," which features a blood-spattered kitchen left in the wake of a burglary, an attempted rape, and a shooting. While the violence of some of the stories is integral to describe the milieu of World War II or as a political satire on the England of the future, the violence of "A Walk on the Wild Side" seems peripheral and gratuitous.

Of some concern in the collection are the sexual references and general portrayal of women. In "The Night Out" the four bikers out for a night of vandalism discover a naked couple in a parked car. The four enjoy exposing and embarrassing the couple to the police. Also quite explicit sexually are "The Dracula Tour" and "A Walk on the Wild Side." The female characters in both express frank sexual passion, and the narrator of "The Dracula Tour" makes love to Count Dracula. The scene is meant as a satiric commentary on the passionless husband and the sex-starved wife, but the story would probably be most appropriate for older readers.

With the exception of "The Creatures in the House," women characters play minimal or stereotyped roles in the stories. Girls and women tend to be nagging, hysterical, or sex-starved.

Sally in "The Creatures in the House" is the most complex of Westall's women in this collection, showing strength, courage, ingenuity, and anger in the face of the creature who comes to prey upon her mind.

Westall is much more successful in his treatment of male characters, particularly young men. He develops these characters in more detail, even in these short stories, and allows us to see not only the adolescent rebelliousness of the bikers in "The Night Out," but the curiosity of Chas McGill, the kindness of Mike Anderton in "Sea Coal," and the sense of social responsibility of the more mature Howard Snowdon in "A Walk on the Wild Side."

In general, Westall's collection offers a restrained, if also somewhat mature, approach to sensitive issues which are generally appropriate to the contexts of the stories. War stories without reference to violence, vampire stories without reference to Dracula's sexual charisma, or horror stories without horrors simply would not make sense.

Literary Qualities

One of the most impressive aspects of Westall's work as a whole and of this collection in particular is the variety both of story type and character.

Early in his career, Westall was often thought to be primarily a realist because of the success of his World War II realistic novel *The Machine-Gunners*.

If anything, however, Westall has made an even greater impact in the world of fantasy writing. He returned to World War II as a setting regularly over the years, but even those stories have not always been realistic. *The Promise*, for instance, uses the World War II setting as the backdrop for a ghostly love story. Even within fantasy, however, Westall's work is amazingly varied.

The stories in this collection, as do his novels, explore the realms of time travel, science fiction, ghost stories, horror, political satire, and a spoof on *Count Dracula*. This is in addition to the realistic stories "Almost a Ghost Story" and "The Night Out."

Westall's realistic stories are full of the minute detail that gives substance to the English setting. Day-to-day events like the comings and goings of cats and the taking of tea help build up a particular sense of place. Also noteworthy is Westall's ear for the variety of English dialect and idiom. Reviewers of Westall's work are often concerned that American audiences may have trouble with this aspect of Westall's writing, but it is in these details that Westall's special qualities reside.

In the fantasy stories Westall uses ambiguity to his advantage. The stories are always on the borderline between reality and fantasy, between past and present. The title of "Almost a Ghost Story" suggests this quality. Is Rachel really only seeing the shadow of a bat as everyone says she is, or does she perceive something in the old abbey to which everyone else is oblivious? It is not by chance that Howard observes the transformed Rama through the blur of his reading spectacles. Westall adds uncertainty to the scene by confusing Howard's perceptions of it.

The fears and horrors that Westall creates in the fantasies are often generated initially through some quality or flaw in the central character. As he has said, "We are all haunted houses."

Sally in "The Creatures in the House" can only be attacked when she is despairing. And what an attack! For an author who so highly esteems the value of remembering the past, what greater fear is there than of a creature who eats away at the memories stored in the brain? Similarly, only when Chas has persisted in his curiosity to find out what lies behind the cupboard in the next room does he find the ghost.

In addition to these general types of stories, Westall also writes political and social satire, particularly about the future, and often with sardonic or mordant humor. Martin in "The Vacancy," (the title itself a play on words), lives in a bleak, future England where



the only reward for imagination and intelligence is disintegration. "The Dracula Tour" lampoons the loutish and arrogant British tourist who comes to Transylvania to kill Count Dracula. The young husband does not anticipate the important role Count Dracula serves, however, even in a Communist state. In Transylvania, Count Dracula has his own state bodyguard. Clearly then, what is apparent in *The Haunting of Chas McGill* is its versatility.



Themes and Characters

Certain themes have become trademarks of Westall's work over the years.

One theme introduced in Westall's first novel, *The Machine-Gunners*, involves the ability of young people to act independently and to solve problems without the help of adults. The adults of "The Haunting of Chas McGill" are obstacles rather than aids.

Connected to this theme is the sense that it is individuals in their most isolated and besieged moments who become most susceptible not only to the threats of the supernatural but also to the pitfalls of everyday life. Perhaps the best example is Sally in "The Creatures in the House." The creature in the story feeds "on women alone; women in despair." Alone in her new house, afraid of what she will become, Sally becomes prey for the creature. It is only through her initiative in surrounding herself with cats and confronting the creature in its hiding place that she is able to overcome the creature. Chas McGill (in "The Haunting of Chas McGill") and Howard (in "A Walk on the Wild Side") show similar initiative. Chas, transferred to a spooky house with a ghost who uncooperatively fails to heed the blackout, must overcome his fear and break through the wall to the room next door. Howard in "A Walk on the Wild Side" leaves the protection of his home and goes to the chemical works to confront his fears. These characters are isolated, vulnerable, and susceptible to the horrors Westall has in store for them.

Westall's choice of central characters has always been quite varied. He does not hesitate to choose adult figures as protagonists, as, for example, in "A Walk on the Wild Side" and "The Creatures in the House." Although three of the stories in the collection feature female protagonists—Rachel in "Almost a Ghost Story," Sally in "The Creatures in the House," and Sheila in "The Dracula Tour"—Westall is most successful in delineating his young male protagonists. The narrator of "The Night Out" matures from rebellious biker to responsible adult, although not without regret. Mike in "Sea Coal" uses his journey fifty years into the England of the past to strengthen his connections with his father and grandfather. The continuity from grandfather to father to son is a common thread in Westall's work. The bonds between generations, though not without their weaknesses, are often strengthened by a respect for the dignity and value of work and an appreciation for how members of an older generation have made a contribution to society—something perhaps no longer possible for a younger man given the political and economic circumstances of his life.



Topics for Discussion

"The Haunting of Chas McGill" 1. At the end of the story, the cupboard has disappeared, the rusty hook is gone, and Nana appears to be less certain that the hanging actually took place. What has happened in the story to cause these changes?

2. How does the war affect Chas?

"Almost a Ghost Story" 1. Does Rachel really see a ghost?

Why is Rachel so upset?

2. How does Westall develop the sense of coldness in the story?

"The Vacancy" 1. Were you surprised that Martin was disintegrated? On reading the story a second time, do you find clues to the ending?

2. Why is the bicycle such an important item in the story?

"The Night Out" 1. Describe the relationships between the narrator, Carpet, Geronimo, and Maniac. Why does the narrator feel a sense of loss at the end of the story?

2. The story looks at the stereotype of the biker from the biker's point of view. What effects do the bikers wish to have on those around them? Does Westall's portrayal go beyond stereotypes?

"The Creatures in the House" 1. The house in the story is a battleground between the creature and the other "creatures" in the house. Describe how the various locales of the house are important to the confrontation.

2. What is the creature? Why is it defeated by the cats?

"Sea Coal" 1. Why does Mike return to 1982 at the end of the story?

2. What is different about the England of the past? When do you first recognize that Mike has entered the past?

"The Dracula Tour" 1. What is the narrator's view of her husband, his friend, and Count Dracula?

2. Mihaly says, "Dracula lives, my stupid friend, and will continue to do so, while I am his State security officer." What does he mean by this? Why is Dracula's continued existence important, even in a Communist state?

"A Walk on the Wild Side" 1. Westall's narrator says that "to live with a cat is to live with fear."



What does this story say about the nature of cats and of Howard's relationship with Rama?

2. Why does Howard conceal some of the facts from the police?

General Questions 1. Are there any connections among the stories that provide some rationale for including them in one collection?

2. Westall has said that "the past helps us live the future." Is there anything in these stories that supports that view?

3. Survey the gender and age of the main characters of these stories. Does Westall choose any one type of character consistently to be the major character?

4. All of the stories except one are set in England. What are some of the characteristics of the stories that make them uniquely English?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Westall often uses a house or other building as the central setting for his frightening stories. Explore how these buildings are used in the stories.
2. Discuss how cats figure prominently in Westall's work.
3. Westall is noted for the variety of his work. Some novels are very realistic and others focus on the supernatural or horror story. Classify the stories in this collection according to the types of stories they are.
4. Describe the nature of England past, present, and future as portrayed in the stories in this collection.
5. The stories are often told through the eyes of the central figure. Does this make the stories more frightening?

Look at exceptions to this and explain how point of view changes the way we react to the stories.

6. What are the sources of fear in Westall's stories?
7. A continuing topic in Westall's work is the effect of war on individuals. Explore how war affects individuals in a variety of Westall's novels and stories.
8. Examine Westall's use of dialect to reflect characters' personalities and backgrounds.
9. Westall especially focuses on the relationships between sons and fathers (and grandfathers). What do the continuities of these relationships supply for the characters involved?
10. Westall has often been criticized for providing weak and stereotypical portraits of women. Do you agree?

Look at the female characters in these stories and in works from early and late in Westall's career.

For Further Reference

Cocucci, Joseph M. P. R. Review. *Best Sellers* 43 (February 1984): 432.

Cocucci admires Westall's characterization, but does not find the stories particularly frightening nor particularly suited to children.

Gervat, Fred M. Review. *The Book Report* 3 (May-June 1984): 36. Gervat faults Westall's use of dialect and the uneven quality of the stories.

Rees, David. *Painted Desert, Green Shade: Essays on Contemporary Writers of Fiction for Children and Young Adults*. Boston: Horn Book, 1984.

Rees harshly criticizes Westall's macho attitudes and insensitivity to women and homosexuals.

Review. *Kirkus Reviews, Juvenile Issue* 51 (November 1, 1983): J209-J210.

This review finds the collection competent but of little appeal to teenage readers.

Schnacht, Chuck. Review. *School Library Journal* 30 (January 1984): 90. This reviewer admires Westall's writing, especially in selections dealing with cats and in his development of young protagonists, but he finds inconsistency in the target audience and predicts difficulty with the British allusions.

Townsend, John Rowe. *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature*. 2d rev. ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1983. Townsend describes the anger and the brilliance in Westall's depiction of characters and family relationships and in his knack for psycho-fantasy.

"Westall, Robert." In *Contemporary Authors. New Rev. Series*. 18 (1986): 480-482. This article provides basic biographical information and comments from Westall on his work.

"Westall, Robert." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. 17 (1981): 555-560.

This article surveys critical reactions to Westall's work.

Westall, Robert. "How Real Do You Want Your Realism?" *Signal* 28 (January 1979): 34-46. Westall comments on the origins of his writing and the suitability of his work for young adults.

———. Interview. In Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 2d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985. This brief interview with Westall focuses on how Westall copes with the present and relates it to the past.

———. "Nightmares for Money." In Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 3d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989. This

interview with Westall differentiates between horror stories and ghost stories and argues for the value of the latter.

Related Titles

Chas McGill appears in two other Westall novels, *The Machine-Gunners* and in the American version of *Fathom Five* (Jack Stokoe is the protagonist in the British version). These works all use World War II as the setting, although "The Haunting of Chas McGill" is fantasy rather than realism.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996