

Horror begins at home: the haunting new chapter in domestic noir

A new wave of gothic and haunted house novels explores the fears that lurk behind closed doors



Guests at Hill House are tormented by hammering and wild laughter. Photograph: Steve Dietl/Netflix/Allstar

Charlotte Northedge

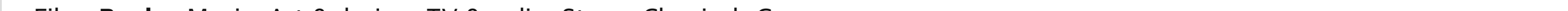
Sat 29 Oct 2022 07:00 EDT

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When Dee walks through the front door in Catriona Ward’s recent thriller *The Last House on Needless Street*, readers of gothic fiction find themselves in a familiar place. The house is “an underworld; a deep cave where lonely shafts of light fall on strange mounds, jagged broken things. Plywood is nailed over all the windows,” and the “whole place smells of death; not of rot or blood but dry bone and dust; like an old grave, long forgotten”.

Dee is investigating the disappearance of her younger sister Lulu, 11 years earlier, and the trail has led her to Ted Bannerman, a strange loner who lives at the edge of the woods with his cat Olivia, and occasionally his daughter, Lauren. Lurking next door, Dee hears scratching and scrabbling through the walls; late at night she sees a face at her window, “eyes gleaming like lamps, filled with the light of death”; her creepy neighbour’s undergrowth seems to writhe with snakes: “she sees them everywhere, their shadowed coils”. But are these visions real, or products of Dee’s troubled mind – and exactly what are the horrors that haunt Ted’s house?

Ward is one of a number of novelists exploring new territory in gothic fiction, though the haunted house has long proved a source of fascination and fear. From Henry James’s governess in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) to Shirley Jackson’s shy Eleanor Vance in her 1959 classic *The Haunting of Hill House*, recently adapted for Netflix, these stories have often hinged on unreliable narrators, usually women, whose psychological problems and struggles with loneliness tinge their perceptions of the danger around them. Stephen King famously singled out those works as “the only two great novels of the supernatural in the last hundred years”, but it was his son, fellow horror novelist Joe Hill, who put his finger on why: because “houses aren’t haunted – people are”.



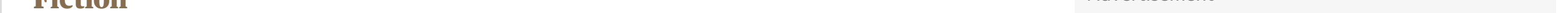
Tuppence Middleton and Martin Compston in the TV adaptation of Louise Candlish’s novel *Our House*. Photograph: Jon Ford (specials) Laurence Cendrowicz/ITV

Hill House appears to Eleanor “vile”, “diseased”; the guests gathered to witness the old mansion’s supernatural powers are tormented by late-night hammering, deathly cold, wild laughter in the corridors. Yet when Eleanor’s name appears on the walls – a chilling device echoed in Sarah Waters’ 2009 gothic novel, *The Little Stranger* – Eleanor is accused of having written it herself. Increasingly, readers – and even Eleanor herself – begin to wonder how much of the action is taking place “inside her head as much as in the hall”. As in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, whose narrator is confined to a single room with walls that seem to shift and writhe and come alive at night, Eleanor’s mental state becomes intertwined with that of the house, until she feels that “whatever it wants of me it can have”.

Gilman’s narrator has what we would now call postnatal depression, and her physician husband prescribes bed rest and an absence of all stimulus, meaning no reading or writing, and hours spent staring at the peeling wallpaper of the old nursery until she becomes convinced it is possessed: “And worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.” Imprisoned in the domestic realm, as Eleanor has also been while she cared for her elderly mother, it is hardly surprising that these female protagonists see danger in the buildings around them. As Erin Kelly, author of recent gothic thriller *The Skeleton Key*, puts it, “natural reactions to coercive or abusive behaviours can easily be dismissed as ‘madness’. And the home has traditionally been a place – often the only place – of female agency.”



In my novel, *The People Before*, gallery fundraiser Jess finds herself shut away in a dilapidated old house when she leaves work and moves with her young family to the Suffolk countryside. Cut off from former colleagues and friends, and isolated from neighbours who are suspicious of the London family that has taken on this notorious local property, Jess feels on edge, watched – at night, she’s convinced a stranger is lurking, just out of sight. Are these premonitions, or is her mind playing tricks? In *The Skeleton Key*, Nell is convinced her return to the family home in London, to celebrate the anniversary of her father’s legendary treasure hunt book, is fraught with danger. The house holds secrets, and the tension of the novel resides in whether Nell will uncover their true source in time.



Houses have played a central part in many recent thrillers, to the extent that a new genre of domestic noir has emerged in the last decade, as writers explore fears around home ownership, family breakdown and marital disharmony. Louise Candlish’s 2018 novel *Our House*, recently televised, asked readers to put themselves in a nightmarish situation – returning from a trip to discover strangers moving into your beloved family home. Meanwhile Abigail Dean’s thriller of last year, *Girl A*, raised darker questions about how a house can hold the legacy of childhood trauma.

With echoes of Lisa Jewell’s 2019 hit *The Family Upstairs*, Dean’s novel explores what happens to a group of siblings who flee their abusive parents, and their upbringing in a “house of horrors”. In both novels, the childhood home functions as a lasting reminder of mental and physical pain. Dean’s protagonist Lexie must decide what to do with the house on the moors she and her siblings have been bequeathed. The horror is all too real, and yet Lexie’s quest to reconcile herself with the early life she has spent years trying to escape is haunted by ghosts from her past.

Ward’s protagonist is equally haunted by memories of the day her sister disappeared, and as the author leads us through the stories of Dee and her neighbour Ted, we discover the real horror lingers not in the creepy house on Needless Street, but inside the psyches of its inhabitants. The supernatural takes a back seat to the psychological and, by the time the all-important twists are revealed, the reader might be more concerned about things that go bump in the mind.

Charlotte Northedge is joint head of books at the Guardian. Her second novel, *The People Before*, is published by HarperCollins. To support the Guardian and Observer order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

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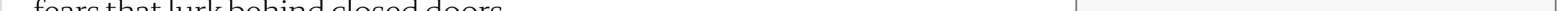
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