



The Ghost Writer

John Harwood

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Viola Hatherley was a writer of ghost stories in the 1890s whose work lies forgotten until her great-grandson, as a young boy in Mawson, Australia, learns how to open the secret drawer in his mother's room. There he finds a manuscript, and from the moment his mother catches him in the act, Gerard Freeman's life is irrevocably changed. What is the invisible, ever-present threat from which his mother strives so obsessively to protect him? And why should stories written a century ago entwine themselves ever more closely around events in his own life? Gerard's quest to unveil the mystery that shrouds his family, and his life, will lead him from Mawson to London, to a long-abandoned house and the terror of a ghost story come alive.

The Ghost Writer Details

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From Reader Review The Ghost Writer for online ebook

Cheryl says

More of a gothic mystery than a horror story. I thought that the inclusion of the short horror stories written by one of the characters threw off the pace of the main story. (I really didn't find them scary or suspenseful.) The ending was a bit of a mess, too, and pretty melodramatic. An ok read, but nothing special.

Jonathan Briggs says

One hot day in January, a little boy named Gerard goes snooping thru his mother's dresser drawers while she's snoozing. He finds a battered, stained book and a photograph of a beautiful woman with a mysterious smile. Then his mother wakes up. "She sprang, hitting and hitting and hitting me, screaming in time to the blows that fell wherever she could reach." Hold up ... give me a minute here ... OK. All right. I'm OK. I must admit, I got a little misty reading this as it reminded me of my own dear sweet mum.

Gerard is a lonely, isolated boy. His overprotective mother is fixated on her past in the Elysian pastures of England, far from the man-eating bugs and reptiles of Australia. His father is cold and distant and spends all his time in the garage playing with his trains. Until he dies. The only person Gerard has to talk to is his "invisible friend," Alice. Shortly after Gerard enters his teens, he receives an invitation in the mail to join a "penfriend" society. Despite his mother's misgivings, Gerard is paired up with Alice, a girl in Sussex, who was orphaned and put in a wheelchair by a car accident. Although Alice refuses to send Gerard any pictures of herself, he falls in love with her thru her letters.

Still nagging at him are the contents of that tantalizing drawer. He sneaks back for another look and this time begins to read the book with the strange rusty spots all over the cover. It's a collection of ghost stories, most likely written by Gerard's great grandmother, Viola. Could she be the woman in the picture?

As Gerard grows into adulthood, he becomes desperate for a face-to-face meeting with Alice, now his "invisible lover." After his mother dies, he travels to England to find Alice and dig further into the family history and Viola's stories. The secrets buried deeply by his mother get more sinister, and the strange fictions, written long before he was born, begin to parallel and intrude upon Gerard's reality.

John Harwood knows his traditions and carefully hits the bases: fogbanks, ouija boards, rustling in the attic, malevolent doll children, hypnotic portraits, vampiric suitors. He's so careful to honor the form of the old-fashioned English ghost story that he brings nothing new to it, other than an artyfarty obliqueness and a seriously dopey ending, neither of which it needs. In two or three long chapters, Gerard explores a spooky old empty (or is it?) mansion. Room. By. Room. Perhaps describing every stick of furniture and all the different wallpaper designs is Harwood's way of building up unbearable suspense. "I had a sudden horrible vision of some monstrous creature concealed, scrabbling loose in the dark." I'll spare your nerves: No monster jumps out at him, and it's about as suspenseful as reading the real estate listings.

This kind of ghost story has long since lost whatever power it might have once had to frighten. By now, it's mental comfort food to be enjoyed with a cup of cocoa and marshmallows by a cozy fireplace. Well, I don't have a fireplace. "The Ghost Writer" goes bump in the nite very quietly, very discreetly, so as not to disturb anyone's slumber. Shhhhhhhh....

Cheryl says

I found it messy and not at all scary. It seemed pretty clear from the beginning of the book where the plot would lead. There were a few twists and turns but no real surprises. There were stories within stories - but I did not find they added anything to the book. I was ready to give up on the book but finished it just because I had invested so much time. Had I known the author got bored and seemed to decide to end the book I would have quite after half way thru. Arg, as a friend of mine would say...."Life is too short to continue to read a bad book".

DeAnna Knippling says

Really good...right up to the end. It ended the way it "had" to end - and because the book had had so many twists and turns, I was expecting another layer of twist. Plus the ending relied on a couple of characters being too stubborn to communicate, and that always annoys.

But: deliciously creepy, convoluted, and the house at the end does not disappoint. House porn. That's a valid reason to read haunted house books, right? I mean, the houses in a haunted house book *should* be memorable, and slightly displaced in time.

I read a fair amount of mystery. Maybe that's my problem: as a mystery, this was maybe not all that and a bag of chips, but as a ghost story it was quite nice.

Elaine says

There was so much I enjoyed about this book. I especially liked how Gerard's exploration into the mystery of his mother's past was used as a vehicle to present some nice classic ghost stories. However I didn't feel that the ending was very well constructed. I usually don't require a book to have a perfectly tidy ending but this one was just a little TOO loose.

Char says

This was a good ghost story/mystery. At times it was reminiscent of Peter Straub's Ghost Story, most especially regarding the story within a story aspect.

The Ghost Writer is a slow burning novel, so horror readers that are looking for lots of action and gore will be disappointed.

That said, horror lovers that enjoy well told intricate stories that include ghosts as well as some nasty humans, will like this tale.

Recommended!

Janet says

John Harwood sure knows how to write a ghost story. Sadly I don't think he knows how to end a ghost story - at least not this one. Until the last 6 or 7 pages I thought this was one of the best books for ghosts, hauntings, creepy houses, and family secrets that I had found in a long time. The story centers on Gerard who lives an unbelievably boring life in Australia with his unbelievably boring father and his mysterious, not especially loving mother. Gerard grows up with nothing to fill his life except his pen pal, Alice in England, and his attempts to unravel the mysteries behind his mother's odd behavior and reluctance to discuss her family (also in England). Via Gerard's quest we learn that his grandmother wrote ghost stories and these wonderfully spooky 'stand-alone' stories are embedded throughout the book. Gerard finds one of these stories in bits and pieces and it is woven throughout the book - it is this story that relates the secrets of his mother's family history. Eventually Gerard makes it to England - to his mother's childhood home - and it is here that the book takes a decidedly Gothic turn in this beyond creepy haunted house. And then there is the ending. I have read it 3 times now and it is simply not the ending I wanted, or maybe it is what I wanted but Harwood dropped the ball here and I don't know why. It's as if someone else wrote the ending after reading a brief summary of the rest of the book. This could have been a 5 star book, and I'm sorry that it isn't. But I certainly don't regret the reading if for no other reason than for the 'stand-alone' stories and for Harwood's writing.

Michael says

Review from Badelynge.

Gerrard Freeman is a young Librarian living in Australia with his secretive mother. As a child he found a mysterious photograph and a strange ghost story written by his great-grandmother Viola Hatherley. The discovery causes his mother to abandon any mention of her former life in England, a life until that point lit up by sunlit tales of an idyllic country house named Staplefield. Gerrard believes there is a dark secret to be discovered which he shares with his only confidant and object of near obsessive devotion, pen friend Alice Jessell - a woman he has never met. Discovering more stories by Viola, Gerrard soon becomes aware of strange similarities and portentous detail.

John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* is a complex puzzle of a story within a story with an unclear distinction between truth and fiction. It's very hard to keep the two separate and at times I tended to let Gerrard try to figure things out for me, which probably wasn't the wisest of actions on my part. Some aspects are much more clearly false to the reader than they are to our questing librarian which makes you rather want to give the poor guy a slap. Harwood switches styles pretty effortlessly between Gerrard's uncomplicated though bewildered narrative and the evocation of a hybrid chimera of Sheridan Le Fanu, Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James to breath style into Viola's macabre stories. The only real gripe I'd have is the rather abrupt ending, though in defense of Harwood there is very little left unresolved. The lack of any real concluding end-note had me holding up the blank end-pages and considering the possibility of hidden passages in lemon juice.

Beverly says

A fine book, the ghost writer of the title is the narrator's grandmother Viola. Her grandson, Gerard discovers these stories accidentally though out his life. One in particular seems to be the story of his own family, but he doesn't know how closely it fits until the knowledge almost kills him.

It is a creepy psychological mystery which made the hairs stand up on my arms several times, and I kept reading ahead a page to try and discover who the murderer was and who his mother was so afraid of that she spent her life in a self-imposed prison and made her son so timid that it nearly costs him his life.

LJ says

THE GHOST WRITER (Psy. Horror-Gerard Freeman-Aust/England-Cont) - NR
Harwood, John – 1st book
Harcourt, 2004, US Hardcover – ISBN: 0151010749

First Sentence: I first saw the photograph on a hot January afternoon in my mother's bedroom.

Gerard Freeman grew up in Australia with an uninvolved father and an overbearing mother who had grown up in England but, other than stories about the house, won't talk about her family. Searching through his mother's dresser he does find a ghost story written by his great-grandmother, Viola, which hints of tragedy in his family.

In his loneliness, he gains a English pen pal, Alice with whom he becomes so connected it is his ambition to gain his degree in library science and go to England. There he uncovers more of Viola's stories and begins to believe his mother had left England having murdered her sister. As the stories parallel family history, Gerard is drawn further into the past to find the answers in the present.

This is another example of the book that starts so well but goes awry. I was completely drawn in at the beginning and the first ghost story made me wonder whether I was old enough to read this on my own. It wasn't horror, but it was wonderfully, satisfyingly creepy.

After that, the stories felt forced and a bit absurd, particularly one that is a bad take-off on the Chucky movies. Gerard was a character about whom I really found I didn't much care. You also knew, almost from the very beginning, one of the characters was not going to be what they seemed.

As the story progressed, I felt it so did in a very predictable manner to a very predictable almost ending. But when you did reach the end, . No, I didn't forget the rest of the sentence, but am indicating that there was no end to the story unless you count four blank pages and an author who decided it would be clever to leave it up to the reader's supposition.

Call me old-fashioned, but I really like authors who actually write the endings to their books. I actually have the next book by Mr. Harwood on its way to me, and I shall read it, but I definitely hope for it being a vast improvement over this outing.

Marc says

A young Australian boy is fascinated by his mother's stories of her childhood home in England. Inspired by these and by his dreams of England, he starts a correspondence with a crippled English girl, and ends by falling obsessively in love. When he presses his mother to tell him more about her childhood, she becomes angry and refuses. His researches into his family history uncover a mysterious photograph, enigmatic letters, and a ghost story, apparently written by his grandmother. When he comes of age, the boy, a young man now,

travels to England to meet his mysterious correspondent and to uncover his family's past.

A common problem with writing ghost stories at novel length is that the atmospherics so necessary to supernatural fiction are difficult to sustain. Harwood finesses this by having the narrator discover and read ghostly short stories that seem to relate to his mother's mysterious history. These stories also seem to mirror the main character's life and hint at solutions to the mystery of his family's past.

In the end the shadow world contained in the ghost stories and the daylight world of the narrator are woven together. Like all great endings, the climax is surprising and seemingly inevitable at once.

I have very high standards for ghost stories, but this book did not disappoint me.

Michele says

Augh, poor Gerard!! Seriously creepy and entangled, I totally did not see the end coming. I knew it would be something twisty and weird, but did not suss out the specifics. I got a bit lost here and there in amongst all the names, and at times it was hard to tell what was real (i.e., part of the main narrative) and what wasn't (i.e., part of one of the stories-within-a-story), but overall it was really well done. The stories-within-a-story were intriguing, sort of High Gothic, and made me wish Viola had been a real person and written lots more. A great read for a gloomy snowy New Year's Day.

Rebecca says

I missed this when it came out but recently read a review of Harwood's latest book, *The Seance*. Couldn't get that one from the library, so I started with this one. It's a contemporary take on the traditional English haunted-house-and-ghost story, with lost letters, hidden documents, family secrets, generation-spanning mysteries, and other touches reminiscent of M.R. James, Wilkie Collins, and especially Sheridan LeFanu's *Uncle Silas*. Very well written, with some wonderfully eerie, suspenseful scenes in a deserted house. My favorite parts were the stories-within-the-story, not the story itself. And although it was clearly the author's intention to weave his threads into a unified tale, the whole fell short of convincing unity. The ending felt rushed and perfunctory, and a little disappointing. But I definitely liked this book--which was a fast, compelling read--enough to look forward to reading *The Seance*.

Claire M. says

Ugh. This is a tough review to write. This author can write. The descriptions are so unbelievably lush and descriptive, with a gothic Victorian flavor about them that is reminiscent of Henry James' "Turn of the Screw." Indeed, this borrows a lot from James, which is no bad thing in my opinion, however, this is where James' genius shines through and where a similar concept in another author's hands doesn't work. As is my usual cry these days, this author needed a strong editor to curb his weaknesses, because, really, the strengths are wonderful.

The good: we have novels within a novel. A lot of readers thought that construction worked to a point and then failed. I loved it. I like competing story lines and while some of the "ghost stories" worked better than others, it did give us a needed break from the narrator. Why? Because nothing happens to this narrator until

the last quarter of the book. We NEED these other stories because how else does a novel move forward when a novel is not moving forward? They served to create an atmosphere and deflect the problem of a moribund narrator.

I noted how beautiful the language is in this book, and it's worth a second mention. In contrast to the last book I read where the prose was punchy and bright, this writer's voice harkens back to an older style. I happen to like both and this suited the concept of the book to a "T."

The bad: This book contains such a structural flaw that I'm not sure how the author could have written his way around it. It is central to the "gotcha" at the end, and yet it undermines our faith in the narrator (always fatal in a first person POV book). The narrator never moves beyond his teenage self. His level of innocence and sheer naivete became increasingly unrealistic as the novel lurched toward the end. At one point I said to myself, "Come on, you can't be that thick!" Or, even worse, "Please grow up." Because this protagonist does *not* grow and yet we the reader are expected to accept this. I didn't buy it, and this served to undermine my acceptance of the ending (what I think is the ending).

I have read similar reviews that complain mightily about the ending. Yes, he was striving for that same ambiguity that makes "Turn of the Screw" such a magnificent novel. Except that this ending fails and rather badly, in my opinion. Instead of being ambiguous, it's merely confusing. Like a lot of readers, I read this ending several times to get a sense of what exactly happened.

In short, I think this book is definitely reading for the language alone. But you will find yourself accepting a number of givens in order for the plot to work.

Blair says

To say this book is a page-turner is an understatement. Books containing stories within stories often suffer from one strand of the narrative being more interesting than the other, but I found Viola's ghost stories every bit as compelling (and authentic - they reminded me of Edgar Allan Poe and genuinely felt as if they'd been written by someone else) as Gerard's modern-day tale. A certain amount of suspension of disbelief is required to truly enjoy the story - if you really think about it, it's almost impossible to believe Gerard would truly forsake any kind of real relationship or even casual involvement with another woman, over the course of many years, for the sake of a 'lover' he's never even spoken to or seen a photograph of, let alone met. However, the narrative is written with such lightness of touch, and I suppose such deliberate (though barely perceptible) lack of detail, that it's easy to overlook this; the plot is so involving that you don't really notice its lack of realism.

But there are two problems with the book. The first, less important, issue is the confusing tangle of characters - with all Gerard's various ancestors, plus the many characters in Viola's stories, some of whom are clearly meant to correspond to real people, it's often difficult to work out who is who, what's fact and what's fiction. I never usually have any difficulty figuring out complex narratives, but at several points I just had to keep reading in the hope that things would become clear. Secondly - the ending. The rest of the book is subtle, intriguing, tense; I realised there would have to be a revelation regarding Alice's identity at some point, but the conclusion is disturbing in a schlocky kind of way, seeming to come from a different book altogether (a much poorer one), and then it cuts off very abruptly without Gerard being given any chance to reflect on all that's happened. It really feels like Harwood wasn't sure how to end the story, and it's the only part of the book that makes it feel like a debut rather than the work of an accomplished author. Despite this, I found the majority of the book so enjoyable that I'd still recommend it - just don't expect too much from the ending.

Jen says

OK, this is definitely going to have spoilers so STOP READING NOW if you don't want to know details.

I just finish the book today. I think I was so excited to find out the ended that I rushed through it and ended up confused (and apparently I'm not the only one). I've been pondering it and I think I've made sense of it. Let me know if you agree or if you have other ideas.

So, Alice never existed. Something I guessed about halfway through, but still somehow shocking. Alice was made up by Anne, Phyllis' scorned sister. Anne exchanged letters with Gerard for years to keep tabs on her sister and also to exact a very long and undeserved revenge on her sister's son. This part is a bit disturbing when you think of the graphic messages they sent each other. Then Anne also created Miss Hamish to further string along poor Gerard and bring him to the truth. Anne had been hiding in that room the whole time, making the creaking noises in the attic and leaving the planchette notes.

So, now that I get that the whole thing was Anne and she was motivated to do all this by the horror of finding her fiance in bed with her sister. But some questions remain. Why did Phyllis decide to bring her grandmother's tale to life? Did Phyllis really intend on radiating Anne to death? Or was that all part of the plot to make Gerard think Phyllis was to blame? And if not, how was Anne disfigured? Was that Hugh in the cellar? Was Phyllis really a terrible person or was she just vilified after her indiscretion? And this is a bit off topic, but why was Harry so obsessed with "The Drowned Man"?

But basically, the events really do explain why Phyllis was so strange. She felt guilty for her actions and was also terrified that any day Anne would show up to take her revenge. Oh a thought just occurred to me!! Did Phyllis suspect that Alice could really be Anne? Is that why she was so angry and why she quit talking about Staplefield? Hmmmm...

Either way, I define a good book by it's ability to entertain me and this book definitely entertained me. I would have liked a clearer ending, but not everything gets wrapped up with a bow.

One last thought, funny that a ghost story book filled with ghost stories didn't actually have a single ghost in it. :-) Other than that doll-child. What the heck was THAT thing?!

Becky says

I picked up this audiobook because Simon Vance read it. I love his reading style (and his voice), and so I took a chance on this book. And as far as the reading went, it was great. The story, however, didn't quite live up to it.

This is quite an intricate story about family history and secrets, and contains more than a few stories within the story. That's usually not anywhere in the vicinity of my favorite thing, and that was the case here as well. I like a good gothic mystery as much as the next person, but sometimes they can get a bit convoluted, and that definitely happened with this book. Especially listening to this on audio, I had a hard time keeping track of what was going on, where we were (Australia or England), whether we were listening to the main narrative, or a story, or a story in a story that the main character found. There was a bit too much going on, and though I think that it did work, and the similarities and the layered unraveling of the plot did WORK - it was just a bit too tedious for me to really enjoy as much as I would have liked. I can't say that this was a bad book, because it wasn't, and there was a lovely old-timey feeling that lent a lot to the creepy feel of the story and I really liked that.

Plus, I figured things out pretty early on. I kept listening to find out the whys and hows, but I had it pegged regarding the who. I hate that. I want to be kept on my toes and not be able to figure out the twist!

Also the main character frustrated the hell out of me. I liked him the most when he was digging into his family's past, and borderline hated him whenever his penpal Alice was mentioned. I have had that sort of relationship before, where you're writing to someone you've never met, and you feel you've made a connection that is more real than one based on physical attraction because you understand each other's hearts and minds, etc. But there is only so much I can take before it just becomes utterly ridiculous.

Gerard started writing to Alice when he was 12 or 13 as a penpal situation. They formed a connection, fell in "love" (as only tweens can do), and kept writing for years. Gerard would pour his heart out in declarations of love, and Alice would do the same, but with caveats - she claimed that she was crippled in a car accident and there's a possibility that she might never walk again, and she doesn't want him to feel sorry for her. She doesn't want him to see her like that, she doesn't want him to pity her, she doesn't want to meet until she can stand on her own and walk into his arms... so on and so forth. For at least 13 years. Nearly a decade and a half of being "in love" with someone he'd never met, someone who kept refusing to meet him, someone who kept stringing him along with promises of "soon"... and he never thought that to question it.

I get that as an adolescent he wouldn't know better, would think that it was real and perfect and rewarding even in the fact that it's secret and his own piece of life that isn't controlled. Maybe even as a teen it wouldn't be too far fetched to keep things going, because his hormones would be running rampant and he'd probably think that if he's just patient, it will all pay off and there will be ALL OF THE SEX. But as an adult? As he's turning 24, 25, 26... as he's reaching and passing these milestones, and nothing has changed and the "soons" are still being promised - why would he continue on? Clearly he's shown that the physical isn't important to him, and yet that's the excuse continually called upon for the other party's inaction when it comes to meeting. Their goals aren't in sync, but he's basically too invested to call it off even though he should have years ago, and doesn't even realize that he's being manipulated.

Anyway... that was my major pet peeve about the main character - I wanted him to be like "Look... this isn't working. We don't seem to be on the same page here. If you ever decide that you want to meet and take the next step, let me know. Until then, I'm going to have a life and stop living in limbo."

I get why he didn't, for the story's sake anyway, but it just felt unrealistic to me. Too contrived. I guess there was a lot of the plot that felt the same way, but I didn't dislike the story, it just wasn't as good as I would have hoped.

FP says

Las historias de fantasmas son bastante más difíciles de escribir que las que incluyen otros seres sobrenaturales, en gran parte porque requieren de construir la atmósfera adecuada más que de utilizar al espectro y ya. El final del libro es algo extraño y confuso, al punto que puede parecer un poco anticlímax dependiendo de cómo es interpretado; los cuentos que aparecen dentro del libro definitivamente logran ser más efectivos en ese aspecto. Sin embargo, la construcción atmosférica de la novela es excelente, lo suficiente como para apreciarlo incluso sin el final, y definitivamente me deja con ganas de leer otros libros del autor.

Carol says

What to make of this book. I really had to think about it. I really liked the first chapters, the middling' part found me a bit bored, and then came confusion, and then I got back into the story full swing. It's difficult to rate *The Ghost Writer*. I wouldn't say "you have to read this" but liked it well enough. Perhaps this is a bit vague but something didn't quite work for me in the end.

The Ghost Writer is a moody story, gloomy, dark and a bit gothic in tone. I don't think I'm giving anything away in saying it is a ghost story. The things that I loved about the book are that there are actual short stories or pieces of manuscript as part of the story, like reading a book within a book. I felt immediate sympathy for the main character, Gerard Montfort. He first appears as a young boy, living a very sheltered life, in his homeland of Mawson, South Australia. Gerard's mother won't let the poor kid do anything. One day Gerard is snooping in his mother's bedroom, and finds a portrait of a woman in her locked dresser drawers. The portrait is hidden amongst a bundle of papers. It is just at this time that his mother catches him in the act and gives him the beating of his life. "Prying into other people's things is a terrible sin, she said finally—'sin' was word she seldom used—'like opening their letters or reading their diaries or listening at doors. Promise me you'll never, never, never do anything like that again.'" Of course he does and this begins the quest for the truth of his mother's past. Having few friends and few outlets for any pursuits out of his own, Gerard, against the wishes of his mother, starts a correspondence with a young English woman, Alice. Alice is a few years his senior and is confined to a wheelchair. Alice has tons of secrets of her own. The two begin a relationship that will span many years. The relationship between Gerard and Alice was one of the best parts of the story for me.

I liked Harwood's descriptive passages, particularly those describing the countryside and things that Gerard encounters in his travels. The plot with its many twist and turns too ambitious is where I had problems. I truly had trouble following the story. I learned a few new words, like "pleached", always fun.

The Ghost Writer is Harwood's debut. I heard about it while reading a review by Gary Niebuhr of Harwood's latest book, *Séance*. I will read this at some point but hope I understand it better. My overall feeling of perplexity may have been no fault of the author and perhaps my own distracted reading. I still intend to give Harwood another chance, even given my reservations.

TheGirlBytheSeaofCortez says

Although certain elements (veiled specters, haunted mansions, a porcelain doll that comes to life, and the finding of hidden photographs, for example) of John Harwood's stylish debut novel *The Ghost Writer*, could be termed cliché, the story this book tells is such an old-fashioned "ripping good yarn," I didn't care if he occasionally made use of the cliché or not.

The Ghost Writer is the story of Gerard Freeman, a lonely, awkward, sexually repressed boy growing up in Mawson, Australia in the 1960s. An only child with few, if any, friends, Gerard finds solace in the stories his mother, Phyllis, tells him of her childhood at Staplefield, an English country estate in the grand manner. One day, however, the ten-year-old Gerard, who is given to very serious snooping, discovers a photograph of a beautiful, unknown woman and the manuscript of a ghost story written by someone identified only as "V.H.," presumably, Gerard's maternal great-grandmother, Viola Hatherley, who lived and died at Staplefield. Although the discovery only whets Gerard's appetite for more of Staplefield and Viola, his reclusive and neurotic mother chooses, for reasons unknown to Gerard, to stop talking about both instead.

Gerard's dreary life seems to brighten a little when he, by chance, obtains a penfriend...in England, of course. Alice Jessell is something of a mystery herself. Injured in the accident that killed both of her parents and confined to a wheelchair, Alice is resolute in her determination to neither meet Gerard nor send him a photo until she's "cured" and walking again, something that, by her own admission, will require a miracle. How she looks is left to Gerard's rich imagination and he conjures images of a voluptuous and seductive pre-Raphaelite beauty with cascades of coppery hair.

As Gerard grows into adulthood, his friendship with Alice is a growing constant in his life as is his obsession with Viola and Staplefield. When his mother dies, Gerard, who has nothing to live for in Australia, sets off for England in search of Staplefield and Alice, with whom he now fancies himself deeply in love.

Threaded throughout the first person narrative of *The Ghost Writer* are Gerard's letters to Alice (and vice versa), and just as importantly, Viola's ghost stories, which seem to turn up at the most improbable times and quite by chance. The ghost stories make up approximately one-half of the narrative of *The Ghost Writer* and each is written in a distinctive style and voice that is quite different from Gerard's. The stories are both elegant and genuinely "creepy," and it's important to read them carefully for they're integral to a full understanding of the very convoluted plot of this book. I felt the pace of the book slowed a little during the telling of the ghost stories, but that might be "just me." Overall, I think this is a very even book, with extremely good writing and flow throughout.

As Gerard's investigation of his ancestral roots in England leads him deeper and deeper into a labyrinthine and intricately-constructed web of fact, fiction, and fantasy, the lines that define that fact, fiction, and fantasy begin to blur, just as some of the paintings so integral to this story's plot blur. This is definitely a story of shapeshifters *par excellence*. All the signs point toward a macabre and horrendous Hatherley family secret, but at this point, can Gerard really trust his own reasoning? And who is the real ghost writer? Is it Viola? Alice? Or perhaps Gerard, himself? Like all ghost stories of the highest quality, *The Ghost Writer* raises more questions than it ultimately answers.

Because of the stories and letters that make up much of the narrative of *The Ghost Writer*, comparisons with A.S. Byatt's *Possession* are going to be inevitable. Although the structure of the two books is certainly similar, the mood and atmosphere of each is totally different. *Possession* is a story of intertwining loves; *The Ghost Writer* is, well, a ghost story. It owes far more to Henry James (with even a nod to Dickens' Miss Havisham) than it does to Byatt. In fact, people very familiar with James' masterpiece of horror, *The Turn of the Screw*, may feel *The Ghost Writer* to be slightly derivative. I wasn't one; I felt Harwood's material was both fresh and original. Though he was evocative of James, I didn't find him at all derivative.

Like *The Turn of the Screw*, however, *The Ghost Writer* is a very interior - even claustrophobic - book, but though we are privy to Gerard's thoughts, Harwood keeps him at arm's length. I never really felt I got to know Gerard and so had little empathy with him or sympathy for him. This didn't diminish my enjoyment of the book in any way, however. In fact, I liked the fact that Harwood resisted the possible urge to psychoanalyze his character and simply gave us a first rate story instead.

I couldn't conclude this review without touching on the criticism many people have leveled on the ending of this book. No, Harwood doesn't tie everything up in a neat and pretty package, but he has definitely played fair with his readers. Anyone who's paid close attention to the narrative will understand the ending and realize the clues that have liberally laced the story as well as the "stories-within-the-story." Enigmatically, while many questions will be raised, all the pieces will simultaneously fall into place.

I loved this stylish, elegant and erudite ghost story and believe it deserves a far wider readership. It's psychological horror in the grand tradition of James' *The Turn of the Screw* and horror certainly doesn't get any better than that.

