

*Women's Weird: Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940*

**Edited by Melissa Edmundson**

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*Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2013), which I reviewed for *Revenant's* inaugural Winter 2015 issue, established Melissa Edmundson as a scrupulous scholar whose meticulous examinations of women's supernatural and gothic fiction confirmed the crucial place female authors occupy in these genres. In scholarly publications, edited collections, and blog postings, Edmundson iterates women writers were prolific and popular authors of ghost and supernatural stories. They published regularly in their periods' most respected periodicals such as *Temple Bar* and *The New England Magazine*, or in their own collections by prominent presses. Edmundson's confident prose and obvious delight with the materials, make her analyses and collections illuminating and *fun* to read. Those familiar with or new to her work will not be disappointed in her latest collection, *Women's Weird: Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940*. Her brisk introductory chapter claims that it was 'perhaps only natural that women', long linked to the numinous and the otherworldly, would 'create their own visions of the supernatural world,

summoning spirits through their writing' (vii). A brief historical consideration deftly explains how women writers from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth century employed female ghosts as figures who articulated a posthumous self-defense. In the Victorian period, the supernatural story was fertile ground for women writers to represent women's issues: marriage, custody, and property rights; employment equality; and domestic abuse. Late-Victorian and twentieth-century anomie, coupled with the global terrors in realities like World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic, created a universal existential discomfort and uncertainty, an anxiety-shot atmosphere women writers wove into their supernatural fiction.

The publisher's website declares it prints books that '[tell] stories from scholarly research, in plain English' (Handheld Press), and Edmundson adapts a tone simultaneously informed and conversational as a sure way to engage her audience. The introduction sets itself two tasks: to define 'Weird Fiction' (viii) and a 'Women's Weird' (xi). Edmundson moves fluidly through her materials, grounding efforts to differentiate the weird tale from the ghost story with three early twentieth-century authors. H. P. Lovecraft's 1927 long essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', Eleanor Scott's 1929 supernatural collection, *Randall's Round*, and Mary Butt's 1933 essay, 'Ghosts and Ghoulies: Uses of the Supernatural in English Fiction' declared the 'weird' must create an uneasy atmosphere of dread, must evoke extra-sensitive feelings beyond simple fear, must reveal our apprehensive confrontation with blurred boundaries between what we comfortably regard as the naturally real and the unsettlingly inexplicable and unknown. Edmundson's rhetorical strategy with these three emphasizes her larger mission to bring into the foreground women writers relegated to the discourse's margins. Most readers will know the American Lovecraft, fewer the English modernist Mary Butts, and possibly none Eleanor Scott – also British. With an eye on that possibility, Edmundson's collection includes stories by both

women. The introduction's efficient survey notes important recent deliberations about weird fiction which continue claims regarding the 'indefinability of the term [weird]' (x). It is a both a feeling and a 'mode' (xi). Both terms reflect the inexplicable such stories explore and induce. A helpful list for 'Further Reading' follows the introduction; however, copy-editing oversight failed to catch the missing reference for Roger Lockhurst's 2017 research.

What, then, distinguishes a 'Women's Weird' and what determines a 'Women's Weird Tradition'? Edmundson's lucid discussion probes how 'it is through the Weird tale that we can begin to see the true range of [women's] work in supernatural fiction' (xxi). Women writers of the weird 'represent traumatic pasts that are impossible to escape' (xi). They address gender issues having to do with domestic abuse, emotional neglect, economic dependency, sexual exploitation, those commonplaces in women's writing about patriarchal power. They render the familiar in objects and garments as uncanny and malign. They portray secrets about inheritance, the malevolence in forbidden knowledge, the helplessness before indistinct and unresolvable threat. They stress the possible terrors in what Edmundson describes as the 'revenants' in 'the darker side of human nature' – 'jealousy, greed, ambition, morbid curiosity, and prejudice', and revenge (xiv). Edmundson links these themes to particular examples in her collection, ensuring readers have a firm understanding but does not spoil our shivery pleasure once we read on. These themes and preoccupations are endemic in any discussion about a female gothic, supernatural or ghost tale tradition, as Edmundson herself has shown in her studies on all three. The introduction demonstrates the rich nuances separating a 'woman's weird' from a 'man's weird', but refrains from probing the more provocative subtleties.

Most authors in *Women's Weird*, British and American, are well-known; some tales previously anthologised in collections qualified as "ghost" or "supernatural" stories. Mary

Cholmondeley's "Let Loose," for instance, anthologised by Richard Dalby in 1988 and Megan O'Regan in 2012, or Margaret Lawrence's "The Haunted Saucepan," in Dalby's 1987 collection. Other authors, such as Edith Nesbit, May Sinclair, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, perhaps acknowledged as authors of the ghostly, have been less frequently included in collections devoted to ghost stories. Several, like Margaret Irwin or Dorothy Kathleen Broster, perhaps even more obscure even though both had published collections of their supernatural fiction in their lifetimes. Edmundson justifies her choices as they provide a 'representative selection of stories that covers fifty years' and hopes they will 'inspire readers to seek other writers' (xxi). She portrays her excitement with her subject by listing six additional women writers not in this current collection – a generous encouragement to her audience.

Edmundson arranges the thirteen tales chronologically,<sup>1</sup> with Louisa Baldwin's appropriately titled 1889 'The Weird of the Walfords' first. Baldwin registers the supernaturally lethal power in a massive ancestral bedframe, in which generations of the Walford family are found dead with no understandable cause. Baldwin's tale shows the hubris in human nature and an unending guilt when we refuse to acknowledge forces beyond our mortal control.

In 'The Giant Wistaria' (1891), Charlotte Perkins Gilman locates the ominous in a magnificent blossom-laden vine. As a precursor to 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Gilman's story portrays women trapped by patriarchal authority. Reminiscent of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Gilman's tale transforms an ornamental plant into a metaphor for an ahistorical male control.

In a very different vein, Margery Lawrence's 1922 'The Haunted Saucepan' centres on the perils of modern urban life; the haunted house becomes the haunted London flat. By making

an unremarkable kitchen object the ‘smooth and harmless instrument of a ruthless woman’s crimes’ (195), Lawrence passes an unnervingly droll commentary on the domestic angel’s greed and blood-lust at the heart of some Victorian sensation fiction.

Cholmondeley’s 1890 ‘Let Loose’ highlights beyond-the-grave malice. An architect-historian’s curiosity about some unusual and undocumented frescoes in an ancient crypt take him to Yorkshire and into a past darkened by superstition and disbelief. The tale shows the consequences in man’s intellectual ambitions and what those curiosities may set loose on the world. (Dog-lovers please read with caution.)

In ‘Kerfol’ (1916), Edith Wharton also employs canine loyalty in the silent pack that assembles in the story’s opening pages. Acquired by Anne, wife to Yves de Cornault, the estate’s possessive and heartless lord in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, the spectral dogs bear silent witness to their poor mistress’s loneliness, her abuse, and subsequent trial for de Cornault’s murder. A dog-lover herself, often writing in bed with her pets as company, Wharton describes the unhappiness, cruelties, and violence women frequently experience in marriage.

D.K. Broster’s 1933 ‘Couching at the Door’ also foregrounds women’s victimisation. With its aesthete libertine male protagonist, its lavish descriptive details, and its Wildean resonances, the story conjures an especially disturbing effect, commenting on the deadly influence of aesthetic debauchery.

Like Broster’s story, Francis Stevens’s 1919 ‘Unseen – Unfeared’ and Eleanor Scott’s 1929 ‘The Twelve Apostles’ use the ‘Weird body’ (xvii) trope to represent human nature’s darkest side and the disastrous consequences in pursuing mystical, forbidden, *unnatural* knowledge. Stevens’s narrator, unable to resist the carnival-like advertisement on a tenement

building, sits through a terrifying display of exactly what, he (and we) never completely know, while in Scott's story, the American Matthews's dream to rent an Elizabethan manor complete with ghost becomes a nightmare from which he barely escapes.

Elinor Mordaunt's 'Hodge' (1921), Margaret Irwin's 'The Book' (1930), and Mary Butts' 'With and Without Buttons' (1938) also draw on man's fascination with knowledge. In 'Hodge', Rhoda and Hector Fane's 'passionate absorption in' their Somerset legends, flora, fauna aligns them with an ancient natural wisdom, though the creature they discover, Hodge, 'is an exception to the typical Weird creature' because he is 'a sympathetic figure' (xvii). Corbett, Irwin's well-read main character, prides himself for his discerning literary tastes, crowding the story with books, making the tale a female-modernist reflection on the canon, and on Victorian literature and reading tastes in particular. In 'With and Without Buttons' Butt constructs a skilful narrative which complicates women's desire for power. 'We wanted,' the narrator explains, 'the power women sometimes want to have over men, the pure, not erotic power, whose point is that it shall have nothing to do with sex' (274). The authority in women's storytelling, as intoxicating as it can be, sometimes brings unanticipated consequences.

Most striking, however, are Edith Nesbit's 'The Shadow' (1905) and May Sinclair's 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' (1922) two stories haunted by a peculiarly female poignancy. Edmundson says Nesbit 'complicates the ghost story formula' since the ghost is not "exactly a ghost" and the house is new rather than old (xiv). Nesbit plays with Victorian ghost story standards, but surprisingly, Edmundson refrains from providing more particulars about Nesbit's clear indebtedness to her Victorian predecessors, such as her intertextuality. Sinclair's story locates the horror in a woman's sequential emotional bereavements and with her truly scary

closing line, Sinclair shows that the greatest of horrors in a woman's weird are the constrictions placed on female sexual passion and agency.

Handheld Press prides itself on producing beautifully bound books with high-quality paper, fine binding, and well-printed pages. That attention to detail could have been extended to the simple glossary included at the end. The list itself came as a surprise given that the stories lack any numbers to signal explanations for colloquialisms, proper nouns, or dates. Similarly, the glossary's identifications merely hover beneath their stories' titles without page numbers designating where the word or name appeared in the book. This neglect of common practice with annotations and notes does a disservice to the reader, to the tales, and certainly to Edmundson who never lacks for professionalism and expertise. Nonetheless, *Women's Weird* more than fulfils any craving for more by women authors who wrote in this 'mode' and Edmundson, once again, shows the amazing vitality in this peculiarly female creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> This review's discussion will break with that chronological organization.

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