

# RJ's Must Reads

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## WHY MY OWN LIST?

As I was compiling the *Top 107 Creepy Stories of All Time*, it was obvious that some of my favorite stories were not going to make the cut to be in the top 13, and a few aren't even on the list. That's okay, I'm not really into popularity contests, and this is subjective territory we've ventured into. So, since one of the main reasons I have this website is to share myself with the world, I figured why not?

Thus, I give unto you...in no particular order...

## RJ's Must Read Creepy Stories!

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Does the thought of reading 107 stories exhaust you? Yeah, me too.

## The Yellow Wallpaper, by Charlotte Perkins

Oh, my. There's nothing like serving up some darkness with a side of vengeance. Ms. Perkins wrote this story to give the world (and more specifically, her doctor) a stout middle finger. As a fellow depressed soul, I can relate. If you want to hear why she wrote it (in her own, slightly more polite words), check out this [link](#).

**What I like:** I love the slow, steady drip of her sanity going down the drain. It's like creepy burlesque.

## The Fulness of Life, by Edith Wharton

This delicious little haunt delves into one of the most ancient of everyday problems – being stuck in a bad relationship. You check the boxes, one after the other, as the newly departed approaches her fateful decision, where she determines how she will spend all eternity, and then...well – if you're like me – you shout, 'Stimpy, you *idiot!*' and slam the book down.

**What I like:** Ms. Wharton's prose is simply...amazing.

**Like a tepid tide it rose around her, gliding ever higher and higher, folding in its velvety embrace her relaxed and tired body, now submerging her breast and shoulders, now creeping gradually, with soft inexorableness, over her throat to her chin, to her ears, to her mouth.**

– Edith Wharton (*The Fulness of Life*)

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**But when you go mad you don't go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in.**

- Margaret Atwood (*Alias Grace*)

## Alias Grace, by Margaret Atwood

So, technically, this one is classified as *Fiction – murder* or *Fiction – women murderers*. I wouldn't call it horror and it's not supernatural, per se', so why is it on my list? Because Ms. Atwood hits on two of my favorite things – darkness and mental illness. Trust me, this isn't a simple who-done-it.

**What I like:** I love how we shift into first-person and hear what's going on in Grace's head – and I love Ms. Atwood's

cheeky sense of humor. Plus, I appreciate how she peels back the scabby, outer layers that scapegoat mental illness for murder and mayhem, and challenges you to look in the mirror and count the blemishes.

## The Haunting of Hill House, by Shirley Jackson

Ghost hunter recruits two psychic young women to help him catalog the haunting in Hill House. Sound familiar? I know, I know, but here's the thing – every time a new paranormal investigator series or movie pops up on your Netflix/Hulu/Prime/Roku feed, you can be like, 'Bitch – somebody did that before your *grandparents* were born!' And bonus, when you watch it, you can predict everything that will happen!

**What I like:** You are literally reading the book by the person who wrote the book on paranormal investigation. You'll see how this story has influenced television, movies (and podcasts) ever since.

## The Vixen, by Aleister Crowley

A twisted, lustful tale that features, well...just give it a go. Poor Margaret.

**What I like:** Mr. Crowley has been described as flamboyant, self-indulgent, and basically evil by his many critics and detractors. A master of the publicity stunt, he still inspires doomsayers and conspiracy theorists. Bottom line – he was born rich, and he lived his life like someone who didn't have to worry about money. You know – occultist, poet, novelist, and *mountaineer*. Can you imagine him with a twitter feed and a camera on his phone? Yikes. Many jump right into *The Drug*, or *The Testament of Magdalen Blair*, but I suggest a more gentle slide into his particular flavor of darkness and terror: *The Woodcutter*, *The Vampire of Vespuccia*, or *The Vixen*.

**Her babe-breasts heaved; her lips parted; her whole body and soul seemed lapped in ecstasy.**

- Aleister Crowley (*The Vixen*)

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## Carmilla, by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

In an era when vampires and their stories were becoming common, my man Joseph stirred the pot by making them lesbians. If you read this for no other reason, at least you'll know where all the fuss started. While you're at it, see if you can think of a better ending than what Mr. Le Fanu came up with. You'll see – the suspense builds, one thing after the other happens, the young noble is nearly lost, they rush to the cemetery, and – they literally sit down to listen to someone tell a story. Oh, yeah, and they kill the vampire or whatever.

**I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder and ceased whimpering. She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again.**

– Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (*Carmilla*)

**What I like:** Despite the lackluster climax, I really dig the innocent, coming of age vibe that's laid out here, and you'll see why Mr. Le Fanu is credited with taking vampire sexuality to uncharted territory. It's not porn by today's standards, but there are some really cool scenes when Carmilla comes to visit her young friend in those dark, lonely, solitary moments of the night. Since you know what's going to happen, it's got a voyeuristic quality, almost like watching a Gothic train wreck in slow motion.

## The Turn of The Screw, by Henry James

This is a classic Gothic ghost story. A young woman, and the children in her care, are haunted by malevolent spirits from the recent past. Fair warning, though, it is not a quick read – Mr. James uses ridiculously complex sentences with *a lot of words* – but it's worth the effort to experience this classic haunt.

**What I like:** I love the visual techniques that Mr. James uses - spirits that come into view momentarily through a window, on the roof, or across the lake - but I especially love what others call his 'ambiguity.' He keeps you guessing about who can see the ghosts, if they are putting the children in peril, and if they even exist.

**The great question, or one of those, is afterwards, I know, with regard to certain matters, the question of how long they have lasted.**

– Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw*)  
#ComeAgain?

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## The Body Snatchers, by Robert Louis Stevenson

Nowadays, you can donate your body to science. I used to live in a university town, and trust me, everyone knew where the cadavers were kept for the med students. Ever wonder why that practice started? The best thing about this story is that it was based on a well-documented, contemporary reality that played out in Scotland.

**What I like:** There truly is no rest for the wicked.

## The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas, by Ursula K. Le Guin

A highly touted, genre-bending story, from a master of the craft. Equal parts high-fantasy medieval fair and dark, twisted broom closet, this one forces you to look in the mirror and confront the comforting stereotypes that help you drift off to sleep at night.

**If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood.**

- Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*)

**I was an ass till I knew you.**

- Robert Louis Stevenson (*The Body Snatchers*)

**What I like:** Written in 1973 (post-Vietnam and underwear burning), she dismisses the banality of everything from religion to gender stereotypes – not to mention mindless, creepy social contracts. Standard fare for college literary students (so I'm told), this one should be on your list too.

## The Raven, by Edgar Allen Poe

Right, so this one isn't a story – it's a poem – and I don't even think it's one of Mr. Poe's creepiest stories – and yes, I know I've already professed my man-crush for him in my inaugural edition of *The Crypt* – but I just can't shake the hold it has on me. Just...can't...Lenore! Is that you? I'm coming Sugar Booger!

**What I like:** This is where madness and torment meet rhythmic perfection. If you're like, 'yeah, whatevs, I read this when I was 14,' maybe you'll take Neil Gaiman's advice and read it aloud this time.

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## Casting the Runes, by M.R. James

Roundly regarded as the greatest spinner of ghost stories to ever walk the earth, M.R. James knew how to evoke fear, panic and terror without going into graphic, grisly detail. Part of the reason he still gets kudos is that he lets the reader's imagination take over, and since we have such a vast library of horror films to pull from since he died in 1936, well...we're pretty much screwed.

**So he put his hand into the well-known nook under the pillow: only, it did not get so far. What he touched was, according to his account, a mouth, with teeth, and with hair about it, and, he declares, not the mouth of a human being.**

– M.R. James (*Casting the Runes*)

**What I like:** While I don't like how runes – the ancient, mystical knowledge of yore – are cast in the role of being evil, this one is still good fun. It reads like a well-plotted detective novel, with layers and pieces of the puzzle locking into place as the story unfolds. There's plenty of fill-in-the-blank imagery to explore, and you are left with a sense of karmic satisfaction when the bad guy gets what's coming to him.

## Extract from Gosschen's Diary: No. I, by Anon

Published in 1818, this one has many of the standard traits of the horror genre. There's a priest, interviewing the insane criminal, and the whole story is written like a scattered fragment of some forgotten diary. Despite the boiler plate (and the tendency to write for shock value), you might have an epiphany at the end, wondering if the priest is just as wicked as his insane confessor.

**What I like:** Anon clearly has a fetish, and goes into detail about how he made out with the corpse of his dead lover. In 1818? Yeah, dude. I suppose it's not hard to see why they didn't want their identity revealed. You'll also see the word *foredoomedst* used in a sentence.

**I lay with her bleeding breasts to my heart, and many were the thousand kisses that I gave those breasts, cold and bloody as they were, which I had many million times kissed in all the warmth of their loving loveliness...**

– Anon (*Extract from Gosschen's Diary: No. 1*)

**What I don't like:** If you've read my fake interview, you know how I feel about mental illness being scapegoated every time something bad happens. This is an early example of how the crazy guy killed someone and their insanity is used to explain away their actions, and to justify their subsequent execution. But, it makes my list because it proves that writers have been doing that shit for a long, long, time.

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