



Ten of the Best Gothic Novels

By *Richard Hill*

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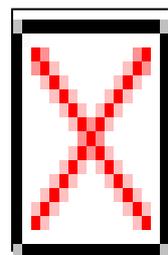
Ten of the Best

Byline:

Geraldine Brennan chooses her top ten titles.

‘The resonance of the setting and the truth of the emotions involved are key in gothic novels,’ Geraldine Brennan explains. ‘Many of last year’s vampire novels were made toothless by a bland US high school setting. The contemporary Yorkshire village in Matt Haig’s **The Radleys** is a very different setting from the South Carolina of Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl’s **Beautiful Creatures** but it is a real place, not sub-Emmerdale. The setting of a gothic novel is likely to include a home, or somewhere that has once been a home, or a retreat. This can vary in scale from Thornfield Hall in **Jane Eyre** to the forest hut that Agnes is banished to in **My Swordhand is Singing**. There is something unpleasant that must be kept out of the home, or expelled if it’s already got in. If there doesn’t seem to be a problem, there is.’

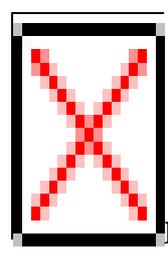
Here **Geraldine Brennan** chooses her top ten gothic novels.



The Spiderwick Chronicles Volume 1: The Field Guide

Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi, Simon & Schuster, 978 0 689 83738 8, £6.99 hbk

As a just-chilling-enough gothic fantasy choice for younger readers, Spiderwick defeats Lemony Snicket with the richness of its imagined world, illustrated as if by a Victorian obsessive, and its freedom from adult knowingness. The Grace children move into Aunt Lucinda’s creaky, decrepit mansion for thoroughly modern reasons – their parents are not dead or missing, but divorced. Troubled Jared finds Uncle Arthur’s guide to the creatures who are besieging them and five volumes of adventures follow. (7+)

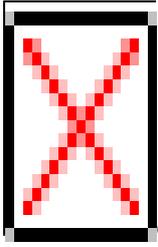


My Swordhand is Singing

Marcus Sedgwick, Orion, 978 1 84255 558 3, £6.99 pbk

A village on the edge of the Mother Forest somewhere in Eastern Europe in the days before electricity is forced to live with its ‘hostages’, which are never identified as vampires but are no less terrifying for that. The war between the feared

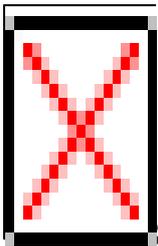
Shadow Queen and the Winter King has driven itinerant woodcutter Tomas to drink. In this tightly paced, understated and chilling story, his son Peter must fight the next battle. (9+)



Century

Sarah Singleton, Simon & Schuster, 978 1 416 90135 8, £5.99 pbk

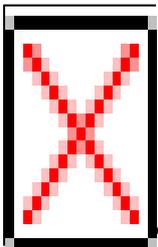
A huge world is contained in Sarah Singleton's slender debut novel, which won the Booktrust Teenage Prize in 2005. Mercy and Charity, sisters born in Victoria's reign, are doomed to an unending winter of long nights because their grieving widowed father has wrapped the family home in a spell. Mercy, whose sense of loss and powerlessness is channelled into rage against the uncommunicative adults, chases the truth like a terrier after she discovers a woman's body frozen in the lake. (9+)



Set in Stone

Linda Newbery, Definitions, 978 0 09 945133 4, £6.99 pbk

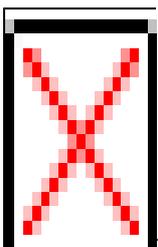
A young artist, Samuel Godwin, arrives at a solitary house in 1898 to tutor the daughters of a wealthy hermit with refined tastes. Rather than the traditional crumbling pile, *Fourwinds* is at the cutting edge of Arts and Crafts elegance. The contrast between the light and beauty evoked by the setting and the unsavoury family secrets that Godwin finds within its walls is just one of the pleasures of this masterfully composed novel. (11+)



The Moth Diaries

Rachel Klein, Faber, 978 0 571 25948 9, £6.99 pbk

For a 16-year-old grieving for a lost father, life at a girls' prep school on the East Coast of the US in the 1960s is traumatic in its claustrophobic intensity, even before she forms the theory that her best friend is the prey of a vampire masquerading as the aloof new girl down the corridor. The narrator's troubled relationships with her peers and herself emerge through her intriguingly unreliable diary, which leaves the reader to be the judge. (12+)

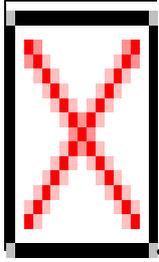


Wuthering Heights

Emily Brontë, Pocket Penguin Classics, 978 0 14 102354 0, £6.99 pbk

The grandmother of **Cold Comfort Farm**, *Wuthering Heights* itself is the archetypal lower-class gothic dwelling and the weather on the gothically bleak moors with their tortured thorn trees is usually gothically tempestuous. The stranger who unleashes turbulence into the family fold is also a gothic figure (Mr Lockwood reasonably compares the adult Heathcliff to a ghoul or a vampire) and the passion and thirst for revenge that drives the story are key gothic themes. No

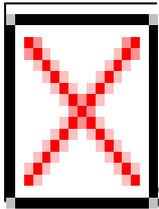
hint of parody, though: this story is intended to pierce the heart and it does. (12+)



Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë, Pocket Penguin Classics, 978 0 14 102816 3, £6.99 pbk

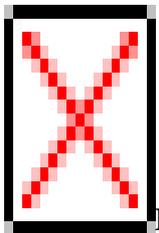
From the moment she is locked in the Red Room, Jane's journey is through gothic terrain of mystery and melodrama, complete with feverish dreams, deathbed scenes, a tormented hero and a mansion harbouring grotesque inhabitants. Although this book's significance stems from its observation of the Victorians' dismissive treatment of the genteel poor female from childhood, and the obstacles in the way of true love, the images that stay in the mind are from the gothic tradition. (12+)



Salem Brownstone: All Along the Watchtowers

John Harris Dunning and Nikhil Singh, Walker, 978 1 4063 2052 7, £15.00 hbk

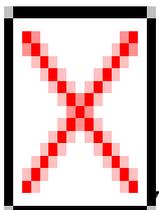
This lovingly produced graphic novel has a flavour of 1970s underground comic book art with Art Nouveau leanings and sharp contemporary humour. An impoverished young launderette owner is saved from a life in service washes by a legacy from his estranged father, goes to view his inherited mansion and discovers that he has also been bequeathed the task of defending the earth from other-worldly threats. This could lead readers to H P Lovecraft and Edward Gorey. (12+)



Beautiful Creatures

Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl, Puffin, 978 0 14 132608 5, £6.99 pbk

There is no padding in this doorstopper novel which works wonders with the well-worn theme of forbidden love between a mortal and a supernatural being. Crucially, Ethan and Lena, drawn together by a family curse, are characters we care about and the Southern Gothic setting is well realised. Gatlin, South Carolina, under the twin influences of the Daughters of the American Revolution and voodoo, is a stifling environment for teenagers but rich territory for the war between good and evil. (14+)



The Radleys

Matt Haig, Walker Canongate, 978 1 4063 3028 1, £10.00 pbk

This account of the lives of reformed vampires (also known as 'abstainers' and 'vegetarians' in a contemporary English village is witty as well as deep. Mr and Mrs Radley are beset by guilt, that intensely gothic emotion. As well as remorse for their past dark deeds, there's parental guilt at denying the young Radleys their true nature. The 'some adult content?' coverline gives due warning that teen readers might be bored rigid by references to adults holding dinner parties and contemplating affairs, but the story should carry them through such longueurs. (14+)

Geraldine Brennan is the former Books Editor of **The Times Educational Supplement** and a freelance journalist.

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