

The
**UNCANNY
READER**

— ❧ —
S T O R I E S
from the
S H A D O W S

— ❧ —
EDITED BY
MARJORIE SANDOR

H. P. LOVECRAFT, SHIRLEY JACKSON, JOAN AIKEN,
STEVEN MILLHAUSER, CHRIS ADRIAN, KELLY LINK,
JONATHAN CARROLL, *and* MANY MORE!

**THE
UNCANNY
READER**

Also by Marjorie Sandor

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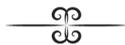
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Stories*

THE UNCANNY READER

Stories from the Shadows



Edited by

Marjorie Sandor

These short stories are works of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in these stories are either products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

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For Rory Watson,
Poet and Professor Emeritus, University of Stirling, Scotland,
with gratitude

UNRAVELING: AN INTRODUCTION



A few years ago, a friend and I stayed the night in an English farmhouse rich in ghost stories. As our host led us around, I found myself shadowed by my childhood reading self: that devourer of supernatural tales, that reader with her forbidden flashlight, lost in the story but dimly aware of—and pleased by—the little circle of light and the way it boldly resisted the dark. And so I roamed the thousand-year-old house as if it were a book. I peered into the old closet on the landing, where once a young housemaid read her own forbidden book and left her candle's scorch mark on the ceiling. I stepped cautiously around the boggy shoreline of the small lake where, we were told, the figure of that young maid had been known to appear.

I left unhaunted.

Or so I thought. Back home in America, feeling curiously bereft, I started looking—in stories of the supernatural old and new—for my old reading self and her simple pleasures. She was long gone, but someone

else began to show up. A reader who inclined toward stories fractured and stippled with uncertainty; stories set in entirely recognizable, earthly places and whose language undid the ordinary, button by button, then kept on going, until every last thread of the safe-and-the-known was unraveled. Sometimes these stories were set in romantic old houses far from home. But the newer stories took place in familiar cities and suburbs, in apartment buildings, commuter trains, and back gardens. Their strange acid dissolved the lines between public and private, animate and inanimate. Between the living and the dead.

In these stories—and increasingly in the newspaper, on the radio, and especially on the Internet—this reader was aware of a word that kept cropping up; everywhere she turned, there it was.

“Uncanny.”

Old and homely and volatile, this word. Old Scots/Northern English, it’s been traced as far back as 1593. In its simplest current usage, you’ll find such slim definitions as “seemingly supernatural” and “mysterious.” But then again, *seemingly*. Already a door has opened. Something is uncertain. We have stepped over the threshold into a haunted word, a way of perceiving, a way of saying. In fact, if you look back to its origins, you discover that the word “canny”—Scots-Gaelic for “cunning” and “knowledge”—also meant, very early on, “supernaturally wise.” You might say that from the get-go “canny” had a shadow self, a doppelgänger waiting to emerge.

Why am I telling you this at the beginning of an anthology of short stories? Because it was this capacity in the word itself that led me to collect thirty-one stories that do not fit neatly into one literary category—ranging as they do from the darkly obsessive to the subversively political, from the ghostly to the satirical.

By the late eighteenth century, the word “uncannie” can be found burrowing into stories and poems with homely force. Read the “Country Dreams and Apparitions” of Scots writer James Hogg or the poems of Robert Fergusson and you’ll find it there, a small lantern light held

over someone—or something—close to home but not home-like: a shepherd with the second sight, or two little children whispering about murder at bedtime. In some of these stories, the word hovers close to the exposure of a suppressed crime or socially taboo act within the intimate confines of family or village.

Over the course of the nineteenth century the uncanny migrates from rural to urban, from village and glen to the crowded cities with their factories, their soot-blackened tenements and jails. The railroad and its stations, its signal booths and waiting rooms. We are moving faster and faster, and as we do we bury our old buildings and their histories under new ones. We replace our old rituals, our language itself. We forget who we were. But something remembers. Something wants to speak from beneath the rubble.

The modern experience of alienation has come of age, and throughout the nineteenth century artists and thinkers—Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche among them—begin to reflect on it, to explore its sources, its peculiar traits and expressions, its possible consequences. Think—in the world of fiction—of Henry James’ 1898 novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, in which a story of “general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain” is offered up as a country-fireside Christmas tale. The story has been locked in a desk drawer in London for twenty years. It must be sent away for and unwrapped—the story we hear has been “transcribed” from the original, which was written in “the beautiful hand” of a woman long dead. Most disturbing of all: the gathered audience rubs its collective hands at the prospect of a tale of two children—not merely one—being the victims of a haunting. It has “the utmost price.” We want the story, and we will pay for it. But it is not “ours,” we tell ourselves. Our hands are clean.



It was Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*, translated into English as *The Uncanny*, that revealed the word’s capacity to speak to what

unsettles us now. (It's hard, these days, to find a place where the term hasn't found a home. Nicholas Royle, in his 2003 study, *The Uncanny*, finds it "transforming the concerns of art, literature, film, psychoanalysis, philosophy, science and technology, religion, history, politics, economics, autobiography and teaching.")

When Freud wrote his essay, he was following up on the work of another German psychologist, Ernst Jentsch, whose short essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" is well worth reading. But the Freud essay, driven by an impulse to be exhaustive, is a carnival ride of weirdness. Among other things, he gets drawn into the sticky web of the German word *heimlich*, which is just as capacious and unstable as "canny." For our purposes here, it's enough to note that like the old Scots word "canny," the word *heimlich* contained, among its early synonyms, not only "belonging to the house," but also "private," "secret," and "concealed."

Is it any wonder that the concept of the uncanny, emerging from a pair of words with such complex histories, would infuse the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? If ambiguity and uncertainty live in the very root of the word—a word that itself touches on all that we think most safe and familiar—then there's no end to its linguistic and dramatic potential, its capacity to reflect us and our times. As Royle declares, "the uncanny is a 'province' still before us, awaiting our examination."

Here are a handful of the experiences Freud catalogued as capable of causing the sensation of the uncanny. I include them, in a roughly paraphrased improvisation, here at the threshold of this cabinet of curiosities, to suggest just how tricky—how full of nooks and crannies and trapdoors—the uncanny-in-fiction really is. It's just a bare glimpse but might give you a sense of the full and glorious range of possibilities for uncanny effects, whether in a story by Ambrose Bierce or Franz Kafka or any of the contemporary writers included here.

When something that should have remained hidden has come out into the open.

When we feel as if something primitive has occurred in a modern and secular context.

When we feel uncertainty as to whether we have encountered a human or an automaton.

When the inanimate appears animate. Or when something animate appears inanimate.

When something familiar happens in an unfamiliar context.

Conversely, when something strange happens in a familiar context.

When we find ourselves noticing a repetition—such as the number 17 appearing three times in one day, in different contexts. Or when we catch ourselves involuntarily repeating a word, for instance the word “uncanny.” Or the word “word.”

When we see someone who looks like us—that is, our double.

The fear of being buried alive.

When we feel as if there is a foreign body inside our own. When we become foreign to ourselves.

There are many more uncanny-inspiring occasions listed in Freud’s compendium—too many to include here. Suffice it to say that they all, in some way or another, speak to the uninvited exposure of something so long repressed—whether by individuals or by whole cultures—that we hardly recognize it as ours. That may be why the sensation, at its core, makes us anxious about the stability of those persons, places, and things in which we have placed our trust, our deepest sense of identity and belonging.

Is that why so many of the stories here take place in dwelling places? The uncanny likes to let the lamplight fall a different way on a perfectly ordinary silver picture frame. Above all, it seeks out a recollected or half-neglected *physical place* to inhabit: childhood houses, houses under construction, houses revised by later occupants.

Maybe, too, this lean toward dwelling places—and the personal and secret lives held within them—accounts for the prevalence of first-person narrations in this anthology or, if not first-person, then a third-person voice that holds tight to the consciousness of one character. Because as

Henry James—and Sigmund Freud—understood so well, the uncanny is nothing if not idiosyncratic. It happens to one person at a time and isolates that person, heightening the terror or the exaltation.

Not all of Freud's examples will speak to you. But the marvelous thing about his essay is that for a good stretch of it he turned to a piece of fiction as a base from which to explore what was, in his day, a neglected corner of psychology. He sounds a bit wistful near the essay's end, as he remarks: "The uncanny that we find in fiction—in creative writing, imaginative literature—actually deserves to be considered separately. It is above all much richer than what we know from experience." Later he goes a bit further: "... In a sense, then, [the fiction writer] betrays us to a superstition we thought we had 'surmounted'; he tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. We react to his fictions as if they had been our own experiences."

The story Freud chose as his focus is Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann's 1817 tale "The Sand-man," which you will find at the beginning of this anthology. Every reader—Freud included—will be distressed by something slightly different in it. But perhaps its most universal feature is the childhood fear of the legendary figure gone real. The terrifying Sand-man is at first the boy's proudly imagined creation and, in that way, stands in for creativity itself. It's when the *real* Sand-man shows up—the advocate Coppélius, a friend of young Nathanael's father, with his creepy hair-bag and habit of touching the children's favorite foods with his hairy hands—that the real terror sets in. A terror entirely earthly and one that threatens to foul childhood's last pure sanctuary: the creative imagination itself, that place from which we learn to perceive the world.



E. T. A. Hoffmann and his contemporaries (among them Heinrich von Kleist, Jean Paul, and Ludwig Tieck) called their stories *Kunstmärchen*—art fairy tales—and revolutionized literary fiction by setting their tales

in the market squares and coffeehouses, at the homely firesides and sleeping alcoves of their own towns and cities, and then, like crazed chemists, injecting a trace of the extraordinary into those known places, sending their heroes and the reading public on a journey into the unmapped terrains of our own minds. A new sort of fictional hero emerges: a flawed, rather sensitive figure—often an artist or student—a young idealist, a morose dreamer. The grown-up Nathanael, the student-poet at the heart of “The Sand-man,” cannot reconcile his inner vision with that of the world. His vulnerability—however foolishly he behaves—is heart-breaking and spookily contemporary.

It is that irreconcilable feeling, as it expresses itself from 1817 to the present, that binds these thirty-one stories together. As I followed the trail of authors chronologically from Hoffmann to the most recently born, I tried to honor the tradition of the *Kunstmärchen* and, whenever possible, listened for the expression of something from Freud’s catalogue. As a result, most of the stories you’ll find here take place in a recognizable world, in which something, or someone, begins to go unfamiliar. And because the German word *unheimlich* and the Scots word “uncanny” come from far away, I aimed for as international—and geographically diverse—an atmosphere as I could. So you will find here writers from Egypt, France, Germany, Japan, Poland, Russia, Scotland, England, Sweden, the United States, Uruguay, and Zambia—although their birthplaces are not always the terrains they plumb in their stories, nor do they confine themselves to their own eras.

From E. T. A. Hoffmann we move on to Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, and Guy de Maupassant, all of whom were in some way influenced by the writers of *Kunstmärchen* and all of whom have their own distinctive ways of showing us just how unknown we are to ourselves. The narrator of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Berenice” has, like Nathanael, a rising terror of his own slipping consciousness as he sits in his library, wondering how that “little box . . . of no remarkable character” made it to his lamp table. In “One of Twins,” Ambrose Bierce takes us to the

night streets of San Francisco and into our fear of doppelgängers and their sinister acts. Acts that might—or might not—be attributed to us. Or are they ours? In Guy de Maupassant’s “On the Water,” a local fisherman finds his beloved home river transformed overnight as he sits trapped in his boat, its anchor held fast by a mysterious weight from below.

And because I don’t think of the uncanny as a literary genre so much as a genre buster, a kind of viral strain, I have included here a story of Anton Chekhov’s with nothing remotely supernatural about it. The Russians—through early-twentieth-century critic Viktor Shklovsky—have a word for what Chekhov does in “Oysters”—*ostranenie*, “to make strange,” to defamiliarize. This aesthetic principle lies at the heart of this anthology: Every writer in this collection strips away the armor of familiar, overused language. They pass through walls; they silence the numbing din out there; they make us *see* and *hear* anew.

As we make our way across the border of the twentieth century, the uncanny burrows deeper into that sacred institution called home. Edith Wharton traces the fragile path of a new marriage haunted by an old one, just as the new century roars in with its telephones and motorcars, its “devouring blaze of lights.” The perfect marriage and the perfect house go suspect in Marjorie Bowen’s “Decay.” H. P. Lovecraft leads us into a warren of old Paris and up under the eaves of an ancient apartment house; only then can an impossible music begin to haunt the listener. Our megalomania and our dreams of safe escape play themselves out on increasingly dream-like stages: in the Schulzian universe a father is slowly turning the family home into an aviary, while Kafka tugs us, along with his adolescent hero, ever deeper into “the uncertain hold of a ship moored to the coast of an unknown continent.”



It’s been said that what is frightening to one generation will not be to the next. Virginia Woolf put it thus in her essay “The Supernatural in

Fiction.” “If you wish to guess what our ancestors felt when they read *The Mystery of Udolpho*, you cannot do better than read *The Turn of the Screw*.” So it’s no wonder that the nearer we get to our own age, the more the shapes and shadows of uncanniness reflect our contemporary fears. It gets harder to locate the source of the disturbance. Who is our “Sandman”? and where is he hiding? For like Nathanael, we still feel watched by a force much larger than ourselves and we still ask, Did I have something to do with its dark making? That feeling—of being watched, listened in on, followed all the way home—is timelessly rendered in Shirley Jackson’s “Paranoia,” while Joan Aiken’s “The Helper” takes us into the haunted space of a grief shadowed by an unshakable sense of deliberate menace. Our bodies go uncanny to us as we discover, with Felisberto Hernández’s lonely young theater usher, a disturbing physical power over which we have no control. Robert Aickman’s northern train station—a place we hope will provide a moment’s rest and haven from the chaos without—is only waiting until the deep solitude of a winter’s night, and a solitary, undefended guest, to bring a warm hearth glow and a forgotten horror back to life.



By Virginia Woolf’s time we were no longer afraid of “ruins, or moonlight, or ghosts,” and her question “But what is it we are afraid of?” is one that shifts with every hour in the twenty-first century. Let’s just say that the uncanny-in-literature has the power to reflect—and allow us to reflect on—our increasingly unstable sense of home. How do we cope with the contradiction of technologies designed to improve our communications, but which seem to isolate and alienate us further, technologies that proliferate beyond our control? Are we fracking ourselves to pieces, turning our planet *unheimlich*?

The late-twentieth-century stories included here speak to our new anxieties in a variety of forms and in a variety of voices. Dwelling places continue to seduce us with their promises of safety, then begin to show

how fragile they are, how haunted by the histories repressed by their inhabitants—by us, with our unrelenting drive to contain, improve, and control. The foundations of apartment buildings whisper of state-sanctioned horrors more vast and more thoroughly concealed than those beneath Aickman's waiting room, and we must strain all the harder to catch the past trapped in the groomed and genteel borderlands between twin suburban mansions. And strain we do: we listen to our town's phantoms until they are more alive than we are. Grief and loss send us back to old childhood places—to islands and underwater caves and the edges of legendary mountains—but what we find there speaks more to the present and the future than the past. And sometimes, the terrain in which we grope and search to find ourselves is a place purely of the mind: no less real—and no less labyrinthine—than the passages of a ship's hold or the lost streets of Paris.

Train compartments reveal us to ourselves, as do streets slated for demolition. The uncanny takes us into the tightest of spots, both metaphorically and physically; thus you may find yourself negotiating the terrifying darkness of a death camp chimney. Travel to postcolonial Zambia, where a child witnesses the ghostliness of race and class in her own family.

And if earthly places go unfamiliar here, so do voices. Think of "The Sand-man" as a Pandora's box of voices, out from which has emerged a mad host of urgent storytellers, from the voice of a whole town gradually revealing its secret self to a handful of desperate letter writers, one of whom is a little marionette. Obsessed narrators abound: Some confess; some bear witness. Some are secret puppeteers themselves, concealing their subversive intent in playful satire, in acts of ventriloquism, and by hiding inside the very language of institutions.

We go uncanny to each other, breathtakingly so, in adolescence and adulthood; public spaces go unnervingly intimate, and our bodies cry out when they should have remained silent. Keep a wary eye on fathers—and the friends of fathers. Beware the aged advocate, the optician with

too many coat pockets. Beware uncommonly beautiful women who seem eager to know you; beware their daughters. The odd policeman, the stranger who looks oddly familiar. The spectacular antique automaton placed just so on a couch. Beware the carrot shaped like a hand; beware the stone rabbits by the front door. Worry about the mysterious self-destructive behavior of tigers in the forest. Come home again and ask yourself, Am I trying too hard to create a perfect body, a perfect home? A perfect world?

We turn to stories to slow ourselves down, to experience the thrill and dislocation of our world transformed. To experience, if only for an instant, what Bruno Schulz meant when he described his work as an expression of rebellion “against the kingdom of the quotidian, that fixing and delimiting of all possibilities, the guarantee of secure borders.”

Therefore, dear reader, get out your flashlight and read in the dark. Read and, for a little time, let those borders dissolve.