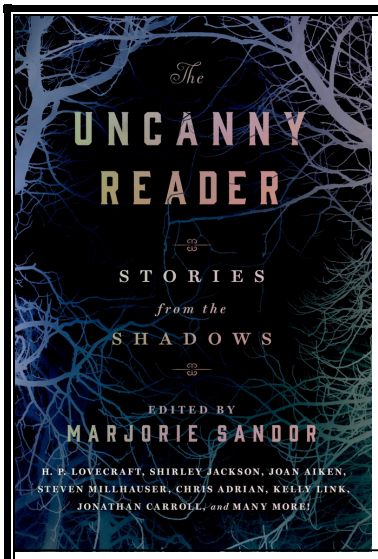

The Uncanny Reader

Marjorie Sandor

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READING GROUP GUIDE

About the book:

From the deeply unsettling to the possibly supernatural, these thirty-one border-crossing stories from around the world explore the uncanny in literature, and delve into our increasingly unstable sense of self, home, and planet. *The Uncanny Reader: Stories from the Shadows* opens with "The Sand-man," E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1817 tale of doppelgangers and automatons—a tale that inspired generations of writers and thinkers to come. Stories by 19th and 20th century masters of the uncanny—including Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka, and Shirley Jackson—form a foundation for sixteen award-winning contemporary authors, established and new, whose work blurs the boundaries between the familiar and the unknown. These writers come 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. Contemporary authors include: Chris Adrian, Aimee Bender, Kate Bernheimer, Jean-Christophe Duchon-Doris, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, Jonathon Carroll, John Herdman, Kelly Link, Steven Millhauser, Joyce Carol Oates, Yoko Ogawa, Dean Paschal, Karen Russell, Namwali Serpell, Steve Stern and Karen Tidbeck.

Discussion Questions

1. What's so alluring about robots and automatons—or any figures we can't quite decide are human. Why are we drawn to them, and what unsettles us about them? Take a look at Dean Paschal's "Moriya," Joan Aiken's "The Helper," E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sand-man" and even Jonathan Carroll's "The Panic Hand" and think about the conflicting human emotions these stories stir up.

2. Who am I? Some of the stories in this anthology are, at their heart, stories about the deep human need to have a secure identity, and to belong—and the dangerous aspects of our homes and cultures—our supposed "safe spaces" conceal. Take a look at these three stories with this struggle in mind: C. Namwali Serpell's '"Muzungu," Karen Tidbeck's "Reindeer Mountain," and Kate Bernheimer's "Whitework."

3. American suburbs and small towns: we think of them as safe, familiar places. Read a few stories

in which “something is not quite right” in the controlled world of the suburban—what attitudes, conventions and “feelings of safety” are getting messed with here? See Joyce Carol Oates’ “The Jesters,” and Steven Millhauser’s “Phantoms.”

4. What is it about bodies of water and the uncanny? Several of these stories take place on, in, or near water: Kafka’s “The Stoker,” Karen Russell’s “Haunting Olivia” and Guy de Maupassant’s “On the Water.” Play with the mysterious properties of watery places in these stories, and ask why water might be such a great medium for producing the feeling of the uncanny.

5. Domestic Bliss in Trouble: Edith Wharton and Marjorie Bowen explore the boundaries of married happiness in their stories, “Pomegranate Seed” and “Decay.” Have some fun comparing and contrasting these two—very different, yet still about the deep human desire to make the perfect home a sanctuary against…against…against what? Or check out Kelly Link’s “Stone Animals” with the same question in mind. What’s doing the haunting here?

6. Some of these stories are sly satires: “The Devil and Dr Tuberose,” and “The Puppets,” are two that make us laugh—albeit nervously. What “should have remained hidden” in these stories, but has “come out into the open?”

7. A writer’s ability to create an uncertain and moody atmosphere can create, in the reader, a deep sense of mounting unease. Take a look at a few of the following: Poe’s “Berenice,” Ambrose Bierce’s “One of Twins,” H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Music of Erich Zann, Robert Aickman’s “The Waiting Room,” and Mansoura Ez Eldin’s “Gothic Night.” All are stories of tremendous atmosphere and rising eeriness or dread. How do you think the writers created that atmosphere? Look at the endings in particular—did you get a feeling of resolution? Or something else? Where did the writer leave you?

8. Of the stories you’ve read so far in the anthologies, which one do you personally find most uncanny—and why? Have a debate—because what’s uncanny to one person may not be to another! What do our responses tell us about ourselves?

9. Our larger fears of change in our world—of war, of environmental disaster, of the loss of privacy, and of the future itself—arise in several of the stories in this anthology. Read some of these, and talk about how these writers approach—and make us think differently—about these fears in their most contemporary form. Consider “Tiger Mending,” by Aimee Bender, “On Jacob’s Ladder,” by Steve Stern, “The Black Square,” by Chris Adrian, and “Foundation,” by China Miéville, and “Paranoia” by Shirley Jackson.

10. Stories of the uncanny are apt to take something familiar and known and gradually turn it unrecognizable. Compare and contrast any of the four of the following stories, and ask: how does the writer create the effect of “making the familiar go strange?” Or “the strange becoming familiar?” “The Birds,” by Bruno Schulz, “Oysters,” by Anton Chekhov, “The Usher” by Felisberto Hernández, and “Old Mrs. J” by Yoko Ogawa.

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