



The Witches of Worm

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Jessica has read enough books to know that her cat Worm must be a witch's cat. He's cast a spell on her, but to whom can she turn? After all, no one will believe that Worm has bewitched her . . . or worse,

The Witches of Worm Details

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Miriam says

It's weird to reread this as an adult because as a kid (this is true of many of Snyder's stories) it seems ambivalent whether there is actually magical stuff going on. Is her cat [gasp] a witch?! As an adult it is obvious that this is an abused kid projecting crazy, rage-filled fantasies on her equally unlucky and abused kitten. Knowing what the score is makes it more disturbing, not less.

Lisa says

July 13, 2013

Although presented with evidence of having read *The Witches of Worm* when I was eight years old, I couldn't remember a thing about it. When I looked it up online and saw that it was about a cat appearing to "possess" a girl (say what?!) I decided it was time for a reread.

I always liked Zilpha Keatley Snyder's books, especially *The Egypt Game*, which I've reread every few years since I first devoured it in elementary school. In contrast, when I reread *The Witches of Worm* a few days ago, so much time had passed between when I last read it and now that I found the differences between my childhood and adult perceptions of the book truly striking. I see now, rereading it as an adult, how many of Snyder's observations about human nature and relationships I missed while I was focusing on the story's creepy mood and occult themes as a kid. (Then again, the fact that the edition I read this time contained a helpful author's note explaining the story's themes might have made me more receptive to the book's deeper meaning.)

For example, I love how the book starts:

"I'm sorry, Jessie Baby," Joy said. Jessica looked up from her magazine and stared at her mother, a point-blank unwavering stare that said something important by not saying anything at all.

As a kid, I don't know how much I appreciated that second sentence. As an adult, the line resonates with my copious experience giving such stares as a teenager and receiving them as an adult. And I love how the short story Jessica writes in order to confuse the school counselor reveals more about her interior world than she (or I as a child reader) imagined.

Essentially, *The Witches of Worm* is about taking responsibility for one's emotions and actions. I think it's the kind of book that some kids will enjoy for its suggestion of witchcraft (although others may find it slow) and that, with a counselor or book club, could be a valuable lens through which a kid could think about her own life.

Cameron Chaney says

I remember seeing this book everywhere when I was a kid, with hundreds of different covers, but I finally

decided to give it a go when I saw it on the Bookmobile. I really like this. It has that perfect vibe of the classic children's books I read as a kid, probably because it *is* one of those books. It's literary and doesn't talk down to its audience, but it is also simple to read.

Overall, it's a breezy, slightly spooky book that I highly recommend!

Joe Valdez says

Autumn's witch-a-thon continues with my introduction to the fiction of Zilpha Keatley Snyder, her Newberry Medal winner *The Witches of Worm*. Published in 1972, the book arrived on my radar by virtue of its stellar reviews and while I'm very critical of what's become known as the Young Adult genre, I'm not above enjoying them, particularly those in the vein of Lois Duncan where teenagers vulnerable to the whims of adults encounter the supernatural. Terror and adolescence go hand in hand in this sub-genre, something I find relatable. There were qualities I admired in this novel while I was reading it, but too little I found memorable.

The story concerns Jessica, a twelve-year-old latchkey kid who lives in the Regency, an apartment house with her single mother, Joy. While mom is a vivacious blonde who would rather turn to stone than stay home and bake cookies, daughter is a sullen loner who lives in her own imagination. Jessica is estranged from her only two friends. Brandon lives at the Regency but has gone from participating in adventures with Jessica to shunning her, or vice versa. Diane, who was never as exciting but easy to get along with, has deserted Jessica for a new friend who lives in the posh neighborhood up the hill, overlooking the Regency from the top of a steep cliff.

Climbing the cliff to a natural stone shelf near the mouth of a cave, she reads a book called *The Witches of Salem Town*, having found an article on witches in one of Joy's women's magazines and gone looking for more information at the library. She is reading about Ann, the most famous of Salem's witch accusers, who was also twelve years old at the time of her purge. She is interrupted by the sound of movement and at the rear of the cave, discovers a mute and hairless animal that could only be a baby kitten. Jessica dislikes cats and has no nurturing side to her, but lives in the same building as an old cat lady named Mrs. Fortune she feels might help.

She looked terribly old, older than forever, and her faded dress of heavy brown material hung loosely on her thin body. Her long gray hair was tied at the back of her neck with a piece of string. People had always talked about Mrs. Fortune's strange appearance, but Jessica had never paid much attention to it. Now, suddenly, she found herself thinking. She does look weird. It's a good thing for her she doesn't live in Salem in the olden days. But out loud she only said, "Hello, Mrs. Fortune. I've come about this." She pulled the kitten out of her pocket and held it out. "I thought maybe you might want it."

Mrs. Fortune saddles Jessica with the responsibility of feeding and cleaning the kitten every two hours. Joy, who has long encouraged her daughter to adopt a pet who would keep her company, is repelled by the animal and urges her daughter to take it back to its mother. She offers Jessica a darling Persian from the pet shop. She tells Jessica the kitten looks like a worm and the name sticks. Through her lonely summer vacation, Jessica takes care of Worm, who does not develop attractiveness as it grows and while acknowledging Jessica, doesn't lavish her with attention. She talks to Worm nonetheless and begins imagining what he might say back if he could speak.

By the time school starts, Jessica is lonelier and more bitter than ever. Joy is spending more time with a new boyfriend named Alan, who Jessica does not consider the paternal type and might not want her around for long. She begins hearing a voice in her head which she attributes to Worm. The voice urges Jessica to do things. Her first stunt is to cleverly snitch out Diane after she catches her walking home from school with her new best friend past a certain arcade where Diane's mother has forbid her from parading around. Next, she tells a nosy neighbor named Mrs. Post obsessed with murderers and robbers that she saw a strange man in the apartment house, sending her into hysterics.

Confronted by her daughter's lies, Joy does everything she can not to get involved in parenting. When Jessica is put in charge of laundry before Joy takes off for the weekend with Alan, Jessica throws her mother's \$75 red dress in the wash and destroys it. Going into a catatonic fit when confronted with her behavior, Jessica is scheduled a visit with the school counselor, whose tests Jessica is confident she fools by telling a story about a baby being forgotten about in a park, where leaves slowly cover it up. Jessica's destructive behavior continues under the guidance of Worm, who seems to advise her that Mrs. Fortune knows more than she tells. Jessica goes to visit the old woman.

"Witches--about believing in witches--it's not a question I'd care to answer for just anyone who might ask. But I can see you have reason for wanting to know. So, I'll tell you this. Belief in mysteries--all manner of mysteries--is the only lasting luxury in life." She stopped for a while and nodded as if agreeing with what she had just said. Then she went on, "Yes, my dear. I'm quite prepared to say that I believe in witches." Her face crinkled into the cozy expression she used when she talked to her white cats. "I believe in the witches of yesterday and today--and in all shapes and sizes."

There were qualities that I admired about *The Witches of Worm*. Snyder is restrained in her exploration of the occult and allows the reader to decide whether supernatural events have enveloped Jessica, or she's suffering from an emotional breakdown. Parallels between her behavior and the Salem witch hysteria are made lightly by the author, who writes about latchkey children and single mothers a decade before the media acknowledged that the nuclear family was breaking up. The Newberry Medal is well-earned as many children who feel neglected and are on the verge of self-destructive behaviors might read this book and realize they are not alone.

My admiration never crossed over into emotional involvement though. Snyder skips over so many details, a characteristic that seems to be a requirement in a lot of Young Adult books, where forward momentum and high drama always trump any sort of retrospection or reflection. Nothing is explored about Joy's past, or the identity of Jessica's father. The details of Jessica's estrangement from Brandon remain unexplored until practically the climax of the novel, even though the hints Snyder drops involves physical abuse and is begging to be explored. While the Regency and Jessica's isolation there feels real, the tenants do not.

The Witches of Worm might appeal most to young readers or those who don't want to read a long novel, particularly if they have any interest in the paranormal. Snyder's prose doesn't allow for detail, but it does evoke a certain gothic atmosphere and creepiness, and the topics she explores concerning latchkey kids and single parenting do make the book important. I wasn't captivated by anything that went on in the story, but understand I wasn't the demographic Snyder was writing for either.

Kirsten says

This book scared the bejeezus out of me when I first read it in middle school. It didn't scare me as badly this

time (thank goodness; last time I had to sleep with the lights on and locked my cat out of my room for two days), but it still is an incredibly creepy novel. It concerns Jessica, a lonely and angry girl who finds a blind, nearly hairless newborn kitten, and ends up raising it with the help of her catlady neighbor. Although she feels compelled to care for the cat, she finds it gross and creepy, rather than cute, and names it Worm. As Worm grows to adulthood, Jessica becomes convinced that he is a witch's cat and is telling her to do terrible things.

What's most disturbing about it is that Snyder never settles the question of whether there is actually a supernatural element to the story, or if it is all in Jessica's head. Snyder is a masterful storyteller, and there's a lot going on in this book that I missed the first time around.

Melki says

I suggest reading Joe's review - <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...> - if you want a better plot synopsis.

Essentially, Jessica becomes convinced that her kitten Worm is a witch's cat, and he is getting inside her head, making her do bad things.

This is honestly a very good book, and the author certainly deserved the Newberry Award. It is a troubling look at a disturbed girl's life, and I think it works better as a book for adults, rather than children. Snyder's scenes between mother and daughter are particularly well written, simmering with tension and mistrust.

I just didn't like the book. Normally I'm fine with unlikable characters, but I could not stand Jessica. I know that I'm meant to feel sorry for her, but she was a brat long before she started blaming her problems on her cat. She is bossy and overbearing with friends, or ex-friends, I should say, and lashes out at people who try to help her. I know, I know . . . I should sympathize; she has no father figure, and her mother is awful, but I don't care. I didn't like her, and I didn't like reading about her.

Mariel says

I read the award-winning (why does this fact stick out in my mind? I've never given any Rhett Butler damns about awards. Probably because I've never won any) The Witches of Worm a long ass time ago. Basing this on my memories of a long ass time ago I'd say it was ultimately not THAT great (not because of expectations built up from awards, I swear).

I'm thinking of it now 'cause I feel paranoid and crazy like the young chick in this book. I was lonely and had emotional problems like her (ahem not anymore). She gets this black cat, whom she names Worm, and he "talks" to her and she does really mean things to other people in the name of Worm. He's a witches cat, or so she claims, and she is becoming his bitch- I mean, witch. She's pretty much one mean little girl. I felt bad for the cat. (I, um, might make my sennie, Pagoda, talk to me and call me "Evil white man". But I agree with him! Even when he takes it too far and tacks on atrocities, when he's on a roll, such as genocides, Idi Amin, and Rick Astley doing a Little Mermaid voice theft. And I give him those two figs that I don't give to awards that I don't care about.)

But I hate it when I feel bad for being the recluse who slinks off and mutters to herself when fitting into

society was more trouble than it was worth.

I also hated the ending. What kind of ending was that? I actually barely remember the ending. Is this wrong? Like was that "exorcism" supposed to be like therapy? Because I don't believe that any quick fix like that is going to work. I'm not going to give Snyder any awards for good endings (or fig newtons).

My awards to evil little girls:

1. Jessica from The Witches of Worm. That poor kitty.
2. The Bad Seed's homicidal and tap-dancing Rhoda Penmark. I've only seen the film. Rhoda was hilarious, though. We'd use her lines to my mom sarcastically. She loved it.
3. Shirley Temple. My mom had dolls of her all over the house and tried to make little me and my twin (mostly my twin). She believed to her soul that I was "the ugly twin". Ahem we are identical and she misidentified us in photographs) be little Shirley Temples. It isn't Shirley's fault but... C'mon that stupid dance with the good ship something or other? Heinous!
4. Maucely (however you spell his name) Culkin in The Good Son. Poor Elijah Wood!
5. Dakota Fanning in that one movie she did.

Cute little kitties should rise up against their oppressors! Turn that Hello Kitty no-smile into a furious roar!

Catherine says

I'm not sure how many stars to give this book. The writing is good, the characters are well developed, but the story is quite disturbing. I worry that this book will cause people to be mean to cats like Jessica is to her cat. Although she nurses this cat from an abandoned newborn, she is so mean to it.

I don't like the occult theme of this book either. I find it all so creepy. I didn't like the neighbor playing into Jessica's delusion. Jessica needed to be hospitalized before she really hurt someone.

Creepy, creepy, creepy. Even the cover is creepy - and would make people hate cats.

Joy, Jessica's mother is selfish to the max. I was surprised the counselor didn't figure out the meaning of Jessica's story - the one she felt didn't mean anything.

I am surprised this is a Newberry book, but the writing is good. I don't think I want my students to read it though. I am bothered that she became friends again with Brandon after he was abusive to her. That bothers me as well. I don't want anyone to think it is okay for someone to hit them and they can just forgive and forget. There are too many young girls abused by boyfriends. I don't want them to think this is okay.

Chrissie says

"We invite our own devils and we ourselves must exorcise them."

This was an *interesting* read. Jessica is a lonely preteen girl whose mother, Joy, neglects, and her friend, Brandon, abuses (he hits her). Jessica herself is rather mean-spirited with no compassion for animals. She finds this kitten, a rare breed called an Abyssinian, and Jessica is disgusted by the kitten. She reluctantly takes care of it and her mother names it Worm.

Jessica becomes more and more unhinged as the book progresses. She imagines this cat talking to her, imagines it being a witch's cat, and uses the cat as an excuse to act out and contemplate doing truly terrible things (murder). She doesn't understand the difference between "playing pretend" and lying and hurting others.

There's a lot of repressed anger in Jessica. She's also bored with an over-active imagination that's channeled in a destructive way. Her non-existent mother certainly doesn't help, and the fact that she doesn't have any friends makes for a good recipe for cooking up bad things. Seriously, the ideas in her head ARE alarming.

I did feel sorry for her, but mostly, I felt sorry for the cat, Worm. This was an interesting story about how we can let our own demons run away with us.

On a side note - this book has a little controversy attached to it. It has been banned because it talks about witchcraft. Well meaning adults will be horrified at Jessica's behavior, but I think this is still a relevant book that kids should read today.

Robyn says

This is an awesome children's horror story, which is really and truly frightening and psychological. Worm, the possessed cat, makes for both an object of sympathy and a terrifying villain. When the main character finds him, he is so pathetic, that you feel sorry for him, even as the main character is annoyed at all the extra work she has taken on to keep him alive. When he changes, it is a frightening change, the thing that makes it truly eerie is the subtlety of it. This is probably the first story I ever read that toed the line between some thing magical and strange happenings, and the first time I, as a reader, questioned the main character's sanity. Snyder's writing really crackles, pulling you into this really riveting, strange, and slightly surreal story. I loved the main character's voice as a child, as it was in many ways very different than anything else I had ever read before. If you know a young reader who is looking for a bit of nightmare fuel, this is the book to recommend. I do remember being honestly and deliciously frightened by this book as a child, so be careful who you give it to.

Anastasia says

Originally posted at [Here There Be Books](#) (goes live 7/12/13).

I think this is the darkest Zilpha Keatley Snyder book I've read yet. It's got the standard 1970s bad parent(s), a very mixed up kid, and a really creepy cat. I felt bad for everyone in this book, but especially for Jessica.

She doesn't really have any positive role models and everyone ignores her, so much so that she has to resort to something drastic to get people to pay attention to her. If this were a Stephen King book, Jessica would have probably slaughtered the entire apartment complex, but *The Witches of Worm* is a little more subtle and sadder than that. Zilpha Keatley Snyder is really good at making things less obvious than you'd expect them to be, including the paranormal/fantasy elements. Is Jessica a witch, or is she just a messed up kid? Or both!

The worst part about the book, though, is how desolate most of it is. Jessica doesn't have any friends, she hates everybody, and there's a cat who's (maybe) making her do things. (Or possibly she's making HERSELF do things; it's very vague.) The scene where she writes a "fake" story for her school counselor almost made me cry: it's about a baby abandoned in a park and, just, SO SAD, because the baby is totally Jessica and she didn't even see that. Hopefully the school counselor DID see it, and did something about it after the book ends-- SOMEONE has to help her! I mean, yeah, she gets her friend back which is nice, but that's not going to be enough in the long run.

Sooooo, *The Witches of Worm*: creepy, depressing, empty of happy things like friendship and family and love. Maybe don't read it if you're feeling sad-- it'll probably make you sadder. However! If you like those sorts of books, you'd definitely like *Witches*.

Quick note: don't read the forward first because it ruins the rest of the book by telling you exactly what's going to happen and why. So annoying! It's good for background stuff (ZKS took real life events and put them into the book), but it totally messes up the experience of figuring parts of the plot out for yourself.

jess says

I picked this up because I loved *The Egypt Game* as a kid, I haven't read anything else by Zilpha Keatley Snyder and I have thing for 1970s Newbery Honor books. The main character shares my name (how very 1970s) and the central storyline is about an ugly, evil cat she sort of accidentally adopts. In a very childish way, this made me really connect with Jessica, as I also have a sort of ugly, definitely evil cat who I occasionally resent and despise and I'm pretty certain he's got a demonic possession, too. I hope my cat does not read Goodreads. He will certainly murder me in my sleep.

This book also garners a mention for its breezy portrayal of a negligent, attractive, single divorcee of a mom. It is very 1970s, how she calls Jessica "Jessie Baby," how she leaves the TV dinners for her, doesn't listen when her daughter talks, dates a series of guys who don't want to be fathers to her daughter, introduces her kid as "my daughter, believe it or not," etc.

In any case, the reason I'm rushing to write about this book mere moments after I finished it is this: I was so profoundly touched by how seriously dark and scary this book is. The main characters are like, 12? and usually kids appreciate books with characters a few years older than them, right? so we're talking about 8-10 year olds as the target audience here. This book is about Worm, a witch's cat who tells Jessica to do horrible things, like ruin her mother's clothing, frighten old ladies with lies about men breaking into their houses and punish a "witch" by setting her house on fire. But then (view spoiler) I mean, I know kids can handle some dark shit, but planning to set your neighbor's apartment on fire while she's napping is more *We Need to Talk*

about Kevin than Newbery in my estimation. Also? There is a scene where Jessica tries to *exorcise her cat*. And in general, she is really mean and fairly abusive toward the cat, who she blames for her behavior. It's OK to blame an imaginary friend for things, but if you are 12 and you are blaming a live animal, going so far as to lock him in a closet to keep him from controlling your mind, well. That is different. And fucked up. And you should know better.

So, I don't know. I enjoyed the book and the weird, witchy outsidery-ness of Jessica, in the same way I appreciated Snyder's outsider kids in the Egypt Game, but I was put out by the treatment of animals and the outright creepiness of a kid who wishes so much harm and suffering on the people around her.

Carmen says

First-class, A1 horror novel.

There are so many levels to this.

Jessica goes out to a cave that she likes to play in. It's night. She's reading a book about the Salem witch trials. She hears a scratching, scuttling sound in the cave and discovers an abandoned kitten. It's hairless, eyeless, ugly and silent. She tries to give it to the local cat lady, who refuses to take care of it - it needs to be fed every two hours and helped to eliminate its waste.

Jessica hates the kitten and is disgusted with it, but finds herself inexplicably drawn to it, waking up every two hours to care for it. While she feeds it she heaps verbal abuse on it, letting it know how disgusting she thinks it is.

She names it Worm. It's thin, grey, and sightless, and squirms around like an ugly worm.

Worm grows up, but he never becomes a cute kitten. Instead he transitions immediately from ugly, eyeless Worm to thin, grey, silent, slinking fully-grown Worm.

Unlike other cats, Worm never plays. He never meows. He's completely silent, exuding an anger and haughtiness that almost frightens Jessica.

Then he starts talking to her. Worm's howling, growling, scratchy voice tells Jessica the truth: "I am a witch's cat."

Who is the witch? Who would send this familiar to Jessica? (view spoiler)

Then Worm starts telling Jessica to do awful things. Evil things. Malicious things. And Jessica feels helpless to resist.

This book received a Newbery Award Citation in 1973. It is one of the most chilling and disturbing pieces of literature I've ever read. I was introduced to it as a child and it's haunted me all my life. I adore it, and hold it up as one of the best examples of children's literature ever written.

The book has been banned multiple times for themes of witchcraft and demons.

Another great facet to the book are its characters. Mrs. Fortune, the old, slightly "off" cat lady who lives in Jessica's building. She has a palsy - shakes constantly - and is bone-thin. She owns so many cats that the building stinks of them. But she loves the children in the building - Jessica and Brandon. Even though she looks like a witch, or a crazy loon, or a feeble old lady - she is none of these things. She's a person with a rich past and a vivid imagination. She's very mysterious, but loving and fair.

Brandon, Jessica's ex-best friend who threw her over for some boys from class. He's shockingly violent, punching Jessica when he doesn't get his way and displaying an awful temper. He also has a vivid imagination, and they've spent 7 year together acting out every book or movie they've ever seen or heard of. He's also, in some ways, a better person than Jessica, as (view spoiler)

Joy, Jessica's only parent and a mostly absentee one. Pretty, thin, flirty, blonde - the spitting image of a famous Swedish actress - she is always out late with a man or working long shifts at her low-paying secretary job. She's concerned about Jessica but has no idea how to engage with a person who is technically her daughter but whom she has spent almost no time getting to know or understand. She sometimes criticizes herself for being a "terrible mother" but does absolutely nothing to modify or change her behavior. Jessica's obvious used to taking care of herself - going out on her own, cooking for herself, and doing the laundry.

A third layer is added as (view spoiler)

I really, really love this book. When I was a little girl the library owned it on audio cassette tape and I would listen to it over and over and over again. It's so dark and disturbing and delicious. I highly recommend it to any kid, teen or adult.

P.S. The illustrations are astonishingly creepy.

Josiah says

"Belief in mysteries—all manner of mysteries—is the only lasting luxury in life."

—*The Witches of Worm*, P. 116

"But now and then, beneath the outer numbness, something stirred, like a living pain waiting for the anesthetic to wear away."

—*The Witches of Worm*, P. 101

This book is one of the most pleasant surprises in literature that I have had in quite some time.

The Witches of Worm is a wonderfully smooth, completely enjoyable read, marked with evocatively descriptive language and enchantingly colorful simile all the way through. Zilpha Keatley Snyder seems to be at her absolute peak in this fantastic volume, having created very real atmospheres of taut suspense and echoing loneliness, deeply hidden anger and the unpredictability of close relationships in this sometimes searing look into the life and thoughts of a troubled girl named Jessica.

Rarely has this subject matter been tackled with such superb skill. The framing of Jessica's friendship (or non-friendship, as might more accurately be the case) with Brandon is so original and resonant as to vault it

up there with some of the best such candid views in all of juvenile lit. In the same vein, the complexities that fill the scenes in the extraordinarily rendered relationship between Jessica and her mother, Joy, will cause just about anyone to pause and think, to consider what it says about connections between people in general and what it speaks about their own families.

The most significant message of this book has not as much to do with the supernatural elements themselves as with the major issue that they reveal: one can try to find an escape path for one's own problems by looking to the actions of those around oneself, but even if it is true that one has been hurt by others, it is only when one learns to take personal responsibility for the results, regardless of any outside influence at all, that one puts one's own success or failure into his or her own hands. It is an easy lesson to recite but so terribly difficult to learn in one's innermost parts, deep down where it truly can settle in and be believed by oneself.

The Witches of Worm truly is a splendidly affecting book, and a genuine pleasure to read. I gained a great deal of valuable insight by experiencing this novel, and I am very happy to have done so. I gave much thought to upgrading this book to three and a half stars.

"We all invite our own devils, and we must exorcise our own."

—*The Witches of Worm*, P. 157

Victoria says

An awesomely creepy book from Snyder, who I love for her unique treatment of the supernatural; always leaving it realistic, ambiguous, and not always totally evil.

Jessica feels abandoned; her glamourous mother is gone most of the time, her (former) best friend seems to have forgotten her, and she spends most of her days alone, bothered only by the nosy landlady.

Then Jessica finds Worm, a tiny black kitten, in a cave on a stormy night. He doesn't behave anything like a normal kitten; he wails, he has piercing yellow eyes, and he frightens Jessica in a way she doesn't understand.

And then she starts hearing him in her head. Is Worm really evil; a witch's cat sent to turn her into someone terrible? Why is Jessica suddenly playing cruel pranks and lying to her mother? And why is she so unable to resist Worm? Is he really the demon...or is Jessica the witch?

Creepy in an utterly psychological way, the interplay between Worm's supposed evil nature and Jessica's own mental state is fascinating. In the end, it will take a unorthodox exorcism, a reconciliation with her best friend, and a chilling climax chase to reveal the true natures of both Jessica and Worm. A great read for supernatural fans that's appropriately scary but still has a warm ending.
