



American Ghosts & Old World Wonders

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A collection of short stories which tear through the archives of cinema, of art and of the subconscious. A young Lizzie Borden visits the circus; a pianist makes a Faustian pact in a fly-blown Southern brothel; and a transfigured Mary Magdalene steps out of the canvases of Donatello and de la Tour.

American Ghosts & Old World Wonders Details

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From Reader Review American Ghosts & Old World Wonders for online ebook

Katie says

American Ghosts and Old World Wonders was published after Angela Carter's death from lung cancer in 1992 according to directions that she left. The book is a collection of nine stories, four set in the new world of America and five in the old world of Europe. Part one contains 'Lizzie's Tiger', 'John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore', 'Gun for the Devil' and 'The Merchant of Shadows' and part two comprises 'The Ghost Ships', 'In Pantoland', 'Ashputtle, or The Mother's Ghost', 'Alice in Prague, or The Curious Room' and 'Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene'. The new world stories have a more defined story to them, while the old world stories are more abstract and bizarre, although nowhere near as odd as I found Fireworks when I read it last year. The balance between the two halves of the book and the two different styles works well and it forms a good, coherent collection (unsurprising given how specifically Carter planned the contents of the book).

Two stories stick out in my mind from this short story collection and they are, interestingly, the first two in the book. 'Lizzie's Tiger' is about a young Lizzie Borden, who became famous for allegedly killing her father and stepmother, escaping for one evening from her poverty-stricken home to go to visit a nearby fairground. Lizzie is depicted as a serious little girl and Carter uses a wonderful phrase to describe her, saying that she has 'a whim of iron'. It's just perfect because it encapsulates the arbitrary nature and forcefulness of childhood desires, and I'm sure anyone who has ever met a child will be able to picture exactly what Carter means. It is impossible to read the story without it being shadowed by the knowledge that this isn't an ordinary little girl but one who later possibly commits a double murder with a hatchet, and Carter plays on that to change a story of a girl visiting a fairground and seeing a caged tiger into something altogether more sinister and unsettling. Although the story follows Lizzie she never speaks, but only observes in a way that becomes increasingly eerie as the tale progresses, so by the time she encounters the tiger there are obvious parallels between the two of them: both caged, whether literally or figuratively, both potentially lethal and both biding their time for now. I think Carter has written at least one other story about Lizzie Borden, so I'll definitely be investigating that to see what she does with the interesting character that she has created.

My other favourite was the story which caused me to buy the collection in the first place: 'John Ford's Tis Pity She's a Whore'. In this contribution, which is part story, part playscript, Carter plays on the fact that John Ford is the name of both a Jacobean dramatist and a maker of 20th century western films, combining the two forms to relocate Jacobean Ford's Italian play 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' to the prairies of North America, using setting and characters more at home in one of 20th century Ford's westerns. It's such a simple idea but so clever and effective and I loved it just as much this time as I did when I first read it sat in a lecture hall. If you read anything by Angela Carter, read this story.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

My Before and After

Over a period of almost 20 years leading up to her death, Angela Carter wrote or published four volumes of short stories (this collection, the last, was published posthumously in 1993, a year after her death).

All four volumes plus various previously uncollected stories were published in “*Burning Your Boats*”.

I read and reviewed each separate collection chronologically, which was a great opportunity to observe the progression in her writing over this period.

Initially, Carter revived the structure of the traditional fairy tale by injecting into its form a narrative that reflected contemporary feminist concerns. In the process, she made explicit what was previously only implicit in the traditional fairy tale – the patriarchal foundation of the original tale.

In the middle of this period, she created her own tales and fashioned them in structures analogous to fairy tales.

Impressions on Various Narrative Vehicles

In this, the fourth volume, she advanced even further, by inventing narratives and placing them in more recent or newly appropriated literary structures:

“*Lizzie’s Tiger*” (a prequel to “*The Fall River Axe Murders*”);

“*John Ford’s ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*” (a Jacobean tragedy reconceived as a western film);

“*Gun for the Devil*” (a western genre novel/story set in Vienna and a Mexican border town);

“*The Merchant of Shadows*” (a film student’s research into a film director and his lead actress widow that reads like (and could almost have become) a film noir murder mystery);

“*The Ghost Ships*” (a Christmas story that is more pagan than Christian);

“*In Pantoland*” (a fictionalised thesis on the sexual innuendo and explicitness of pantomime that reflects anthropological, carnivalesque and feminist interests);

“*Ashputtle (or The Mother’s Ghost)*” (three investigations into the mutilation of children);

“*Alice in Prague*” (a Freudian casebook inspired by an animated film made in “*an age in love with wonders*”: “*there’s a theory, one I find persuasive, that the quest for knowledge is, at bottom, the search for the answer to the question: ‘Where was I before I was born?’*”);

“*Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene*” (impressions on the portrayal of Mary Magdalene over time, including Georges De La Tour’s ‘*The Magdalen with the Smoking Flame*’):

Superficially, “*In Pantoland*” gives the impression that it’s an unfinished sketch containing Carter’s notes to herself about the subject matter and style of her piece. However, she obviously felt it was suitable to offer to The Guarniad for inclusion in the issue published on Christmas Eve, 1991, just months before her death.

A Stranger Among Strangers

In “*Lizzie’s Tiger*”, Lizzie is attracted to a visiting circus, when she observes a poster showing the head of a

tiger, but she cannot afford the entrance fee. For Lizzie, the circus "signifies a profane church." She identifies with the other children who surround the circus:

"She was a stranger among these strangers, for all here were those the mills had brought to town, the ones with different faces." They had come variously from Lancashire, Canada and Portugal. There is something exotic about the circus: *"At sunset, the incomparably grave and massive light of New England acquires a monumental, a Roman sensuality"* that derives from the unfamiliar, *"a sense of profound strangeness."*

It was then that, swept up in the crowd, *"the devil got into Lizzie."* She was accosted by a drunken man who tries to kiss her in return for a nickel. Soon she is persuaded to buy a ticket to see the tiger, which *"walked up and down like Satan walking about the world and it burned...The tiger kept its head down; questing hither and thither though in quest of what might not be told."*

Then it fell to its knees, subdued by Lizzie, *"as if this little child of all the children in the world, might lead it towards a peaceable kingdom where it need not eat meat...It stopped roaring. Instead it started to emit a rattling purr."*

'Tis Pity She's Your Sister

Johnny and Annie-Belle are brother and sister, though motherless:

"I imagine him with an intelligence nourished only by the black book of the father, and hence cruelly circumscribed, yet dense with allusion, seeing himself as a kind of Adam and she his unavoidable and irreplaceable Eve, the unique companion of the wilderness, although by their toil he knows they do not live in Eden and of the precise nature of the forbidden thing he remains in doubt...For surely it cannot be this? This bliss? Who could forbid such bliss! Was it bliss for her, too? Or was there more of love than pleasure in it? 'Look after your sister.' [his mother had said to him before she died.] But it was she who looked after him as soon as she knew how and pleasured him in the same spirit as she fed him."

This is the incest taboo raised and just as quickly shrugged off.

Later on, though, when Annie-Belle discovers she is pregnant, she confesses:

"Oh, Johnny, you knowed we did wrong."

Banned Daemonology

In *"Gun for the Devil"*, Carter contrasts the old and new worlds:

"Out of the sandstorms, hallucinatory figures emerge and merge, figures of demons or gods not necessarily those of Europe. The unknown continent, the new world, issues forth its banned daemonology...The church seems to have disappeared."

Superstition is always just beneath the surface.

Flesh Becomes Her

The HOLLYWOODLAND sign represents the Holy Grail to a young London film student, "*a student of Light and Illusion*," who describes himself as "*the Innocent Abroad*" and an "*enchanted visitor*", come to visit the septuagenarian widow of a famous director, Hank Mann, (formerly Heinrich von Mannheim), "*the dark genius of the screen, the director with the occult touch, that neglected giant etc. etc. etc.*"

"The denizens of these deeps...belong to no mythology but their weird own."

Just in case you're wondering, the Oscar-winning widow, though possessed of "*some imperious arrogance...was no Gish, nor Brooks, nor Dietrich, nor Garbo, who all share the same gift, the ability to reveal otherness.*" Yet again, Carter is interested in the stranger, the exile, the abandoned, the rejected. The director's first wife had also been an actress, the star of Mannheim's "*The Fall of the House of Usher*", now lost, despite its interest to fans of Edgar Allan Poe.

The narrator, enchanted by the actress and her star quality, "*assumed the stance of gigolo*", in the manner of a private detective who gets too close to his female client. After three martinis, he acknowledges, "*Yes, there was something undeniably erotic about it, although she was as old as the hills...*" No wonder he mentions "*Sunset Boulevard*". "*I must admit I fell into a great fear. I even thought they might have lured me here to murder me, this siren of the cinema and her weird acolyte.*"

Safely back in his apartment the next day, he reveals that "*[I] grew glum to realise how peripheral I was.*"

The pupil in his study was no match for the secular gods and goddesses of the screen.

Dream, That Uncensorable State

The next story pits the liberty of the imagination against the constraints of Puritanism, as personalised by Cotton Mather:

"The greatest genius of the Puritans lay in their ability to sniff out a pagan survival in, say, the custom of decorating a house with holly for the festive season; they were the stuff of which social anthropologists would be made! And their distaste for the icon of the lovely lady with her bonny babe - Mariolatry, graven images! - is less subtle than their disgust at the very idea of the festive season itself. It was the festivity of it that irked them. Nevertheless, it assuredly is a gross and heathenish practice, to welcome the birth of Our Saviour with feasting, drunkenness, and lewd displays of mumming and masquerading. We want none of that filth in this new place. No, thank you...No; the imagination must obey the rules of actuality. (Some of them, anyway.)"

It's the role of fiction, especially the carnivalesque festival of Angela Carter's pagan stories, to subvert Puritanism. The master of these revels was the Lord of Misrule himself, the clown prince of Old Christmas... "*He is mirth, anarchy and terror...During the twelve days of Christmas, nothing is forbidden, everything is forgiven...The Romans called it Saturnalia, when all was topsy-turvy...A merry Christmas is Cotton Mather's worst nightmare.*"

The Infinite Riches of a Dirty Mind

Angela Carter deconstructs the commercial and cultural aspirations of Disneyland in "*In Pantoland*".

"In Pantoland, which is the carnival of the unacknowledged and the fiesta of the repressed, everything is excessive and gender is variable...Now they talk in double entendre, which is a language all of its own and is accented, not with the acute or grave, but with the eyebrows. Double entendre. That is, everyday discourse which has been dipped in the infinite riches of a dirty mind...Filthy work, but somebody has to do it...Saturnalia, the topsy-turvy time, 'the Liberties of December', when master swapped places with slave and anything could happen..."

She then investigates the role that women play in Pantoland, *"this rude femaleness...flirting, flattering, fluttering...in the most salacious manner...I have come back to earth and I feel randy!"*

Then she recognises,

"As Umberto Eco once said, 'An everlasting carnival does not work.' You can't keep it up, you know; nobody ever could. The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment...after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened...Things don't change because a girl puts on trousers or a chap slips on a frock, you know. Masters were masters again the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind..."

Angela Carter's short stories are truly excessive (they question and transcend social and literary boundaries), even transgressive, without being merely long and verbose. Her work is infinitely superior to the self-conscious pretence of the white male American post-modernists, even if, like Robert Coover, they purported to endorse her.

SOUNDTRACK:

(view spoiler)

Belle Wood says

A collection of short stories by Angela Carter, exploring the psycho-social roots of fairytales. Actually, that could be a quick review of much of her work, and that is certainly worthy. But this volume concentrates on American legends, with a few English, non-fairytale inspired pieces thrown in at the end. Her exploration of the roots of the Christmas pantomime tradition in Pantoland is really informative, if not quite fiction. Her treatment of Lizzie Borden's first encounter with a big cat in 'Lizzie's Tiger' is more fictive, less insightful. The mixing of Alice in Wonderland with the John Dee mythos is intriguing, even if it doesn't really shed any light on anything-it's nice to see what pure imagination can bring. Carter's writing is ethereal, intellectual, incisive and often, revealing of a politic that is concerned mostly with women and their collective place in the world.

Mary says

I enjoyed the first three stories immensely. Things started to unravel a bit in the fourth story and what followed in the rest of the collection was less successful. It seems to be a whole lot of weird for the sake of weird. I liked her creativity but about half of the stories were just ok.

Andrew says

American Ghosts And Old World Wonders (1993) is a strangely mixed bag - compared to the equally strange yet more uniformly excellent Black Venus (1985), aka Saints And Strangers.

The best of them - Lizzie's Tiger, John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' and The Ghost Ships stand far apart from the others, although, having now finished the collection, Gun for the Devil sticks in the mind in an unsavoury yet Clint Eastwood Pale Rider kind-of-way, and The Merchant of Shadows feels like a cross between Kerouac and Hemingway, but a tale I would be glad to drive away from, with its double-crossing stars.

· Lizzie's Tiger - 8.47

A gorgeous little cameo of a ferociously self-contained little 4-year-old from an impoverished slum-dwelling, motherless. But the twist at the end is like the final clue of a whodunnit suddenly dropped on the table before you, and it all falls into place.

· John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore - 8.47

A combination of the 1633 play and a John Ford Western, comprising narrative prose and scriptwriting passages, the tale of the isolated love between brother and sister is beautifully wrought. Carter gives a sense of place in mere phrases - the 'prairie: the vast, elegiac plain' - and the sense of intimacy between the two teens in glimpses: holding hands, heads bowed, kaleidoscope images of their blonde-topped faces in the broken mirror, the discarded petticoat - and builds a world of love in a world where sin is the primordial vestige of civilisation in the middle of nowhere, a frontier land of Calvinist thin-lipped tightness. Wonderful stuff, to mix the two media, the two forms, and tell a tale of tragic love as wrenching as Romeo And Juliet.

· Gun For The Devil - 6.7

A seedy tale of revenge in a lost niche of the world nobody wants to live in - so why do they go to live there? Hopelessness is juxtaposed with some vain semblance of hope like a tentative thread of need clinging onto life, but lives without purpose, without aim - until the seventh bullet. I didn't enjoy it - but it stuck in my mind, somehow.

· The Merchant Of Shadows - 6.07

If I had not known this was by Carter, I would never have ascribed it to her. It's out of her oeuvre, had no fixed style and seemed to be as much a left-over scrap of former glory days as her subject's. Nasty little bit of a story, redeemed only by the sad fate of the old Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion.

· The Ghost Ships - 8.4

'Boston Bay, calm as milk, black as ink, smooth as silk.'

' [...] the imagination must obey the rules of actuality. (Some of them, anyway.)'

Look what the Puritans have given up - that riotous festivity older than Christmas, older than Christ.

· In Pantoland - 6.53

In Pantoland is a piece which passes me by - since I neither like, nor am interested in pantomime - except for the astute recognition of the Bakhtian:

'As Umberto Eco once said, "An everlasting carnival does not work." [...] It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension, not a reconstitution of order....'

· Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost - - 7.6

Three grotesque versions of the Cinderella story. The first is a feminist treatise; the second an object lesson in cruelty; the third a quick-fire revenge. I prefer the Disney version.

· Alice In Prague or The Curious Room - 6.63

A very strange concoction of the alchemist's lair in Archduke Rudolph's Czech castle and the appearance of a displaced Alice in Wonderland. I liked the riddles, though could answer none.

· Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene - 7.47

Carter's tale of the three Mary's is inspired by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652), a French Baroque painter, who painted mostly religious chiaroscuro scenes lit by candlelight, and Donatello's Magdalene Penitent. La Tour's paintings are dark indeed, but the scarlet dress of Mary Magdalene, dimly done, is offset by the lambent creamery of her blouse and skin in a penitent light. Donatello's sculpture, however, has the eyeless sockets of the dead. But this is the woman who, after washing Christ's feet, dried them with her hair, a dually erotic yet tender gesture. The duality of the reflected candle flames in the mirror upon which she meditates are her symbols. But what is that her hands rest upon?

Nearly 8/10.

Geoffrey says

Mixed feelings. I enjoyed the sheer audacity of the concept of "John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore;" and "Gun for the Devil," a relatively straightforward (by Carter's standards) transplant of the Freischütz legend into the American southwest, is very cool. But the later stories--more deconstructions of European mythology than anything else--were sort of fun but can't help feeling pretty inessential.

Pamela Scott says

American Ghosts & Old World Wonders was published after Carter's death. It contains nine stories, not the seven I originally thought including Lizzie's Tiger, John Ford's 'Tis a Pity She's a Whore, In Pantoland and Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost.

The collection is split into two parts.

Part One could be subtitled American Ghosts and contains four stories set firmly in America. The stories deal with childhood trips to a sinister circus, incest, jealousy in the form of black magic and Hollywood ghosts.

Part Two could be subtitled Old World Wonders and contains five stories set in different parts of Europe. The stories deal with Christmas hauntings, haunted theatres, the ghosts of murder victims and haunting desire.

The strongest stories in the collection are Lizzie's Tiger, John Ford's 'Tis a Pity She's a Whore, In Pantoland and Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost.

Lizzie's Tiger features a young Lizzie Borden who sneaks away from her home one night to visit a circus and gets to come face to face with her heart's desire – a tiger.

John Ford's 'Tis a Pity She's a Whore deals with the controversial subject of incest. A brother and sister who live on a farm make love on stormy night and she subsequently becomes pregnant. She chooses to marry a man she doesn't love to hide her dirty secret and tragedy ensues.

In Pantoland is a weird story but in a wonderful way. The story is set in a formerly grand but now haunted theatre where the ghosts of well-known Panto characters (i.e. the dame) come to life and re-enact their glory days. Carter plays around with gender and sexuality and it's all a bit beautiful if a little off-kilter.

Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost is Carter's take on 'Cinderella' with the ghost of Cinder's (Ashputtle in Carter's story) murdered mother seeking revenge. The story is told from the viewpoint of three different characters including the young Ashputtle and you don't know what one's the truth.

The other stories are all excellent especially Gun for the Devil where a jilted lover sells his soul in exchange for black magic and vengeance.

American Ghosts & Old World Wonders is a very strong collection of short stories that contains Carter's trade-mark weirdness, wonder and beauty.

Natasha says

I think I liked the first half of the book more than the second. Sometimes her weirdness is just a little too weird for me but loved John Ford's 'Tis pity she's a whore and Gun for the devil.

Mizuki says

This is a short stories collection which I definitely would revisit later on! Ms. Carter's love for fun fairs and freak shows(?) really does show in these short stories, and she did have an outstanding way to use these elements in her stories.

kari says

Having wanted to read Angela Carter for a while, I snatched the first one I found at my local library, and can't shake off the eerieness that it was this one, of all. I might be in love with Carter's imagination.

Steve says

I read a book of Angela Carter short stories years ago and found them original, dark, quirky, and captivating. This compilation, however, is very short (capitalizing on what the estate could pull together after her death?) and, I find, not completely what I had expected. The first two stories, "Lizzie's Tiger" and "John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore" I found to be as I remembered the earlier book of stories I had read - quirky and thought provoking with Ms Carter's unconventional take, confounding readers' expectations. The next two stories in Part One were not, I felt, as good as the first two, but nonetheless reflecting the same twist of viewpoint that I expect from her work. Part Two, however, contains what I would call five short essays rather than stories - essays in which she attempts to turn on their head various (mainly) old world fairy tale legends (the last work being an essay assaying a painting of Mary Magdalene, with characteristic unconventional insights). Interesting thoughts, but difficult for me to follow not being familiar with some of the old world fairy tale characters mentioned and not nearly as entertaining as her stories. Short, quick read - definite feminist viewpoint - but not the best Angela Carter out there to be had.

Maria Beltrami says

Difficile dare un giudizio sui fantasmi della Carter, anche perché i racconti che compongono il libro sono piuttosto differenti nello stile, anche se, in ogni caso, mostrano una enorme potenza immaginativa, una estrema padronanza del linguaggio e un gusto per l'assurdo che è esattamente come la giusta dose di peperoncino in un piatto di pastasciutta.

Due i racconti che mi hanno incantato: "Il mercante di ombre" e "Covacenere", una rilettura molto inquietante della favola di Cenerentola.

Sarah says

fair enough these were published post-humously, but they really weren't great

Lee Foust says

I should have been writing reactions to the stories from the start but I was just enjoying them too much to stop between texts to pontificate. Sadly, this is Carter's last collection, at least partially posthumously edited. (Yes, I thought I could tell here and there--a word repetition, maybe a line that could have been cut--despite her rather florid use of language she seldom has a hair out of place, to coin a metaphor.) This collection lacks the intertwining of themes and images that makes *The Bloody Chamber* so amazing and, I must say, a tad of the raw force of the best stories of *Venus*. Still, Angela Carter's merely good writing is way ahead of so many writer's best. Anyway, her surreal style, her associative quality, lavish use of language, startling images all float my boat. I feel we're kindred spirits as I'm working on a collection of tales right now, many of which stray into similarly abstract and imaginative territory. Imitation, then, is a higher form of praise than Goodreads. Below are the updates--a few notes on individual stories of the latter half of the collection.

...

"The Merchant of Shadows." Another wonderful tale peppered with classic film references. Carter's stories grip my psyche so well, already swarming with all of these historical, literary, and cinematic images with which she effortlessly toys, evoking, re-arranging, renewing. I can't get over how similar these tales are to the stories I'm working on now--I'm a decade and a half behind her.

"The Ghost Ships." I hate Christmas Too.

"Pantoland." Patriotism, utopia, and obscenity--the very core of literature. A wordy Saturnalia done up for children. Exquisite!

"Ashputtle." A tad schematic, of course--but a nice insight into how Carter twists fairy tales (like those in *The Bloody Chamber*) into so many beautiful shapes in her imagination. She finds gems in the bedrock every time.

"Alice." There's an old liner note proclaims that Ella Fitzgerald could sing the phone book and it'd be more than sufficient. Angela Carter could write nonsense but the images and luscious cadence of the syntax would still be better 'n most. (This tale was a tad too derivative but well worth it if only for the phrase "tawny pippit.")

"...Magdalene." A nifty prose ekphrasis. I dig it.

Sofia says

nah
