



Editorial ? November 1994

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Editorial

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News and comment from the Editor.

Ghost Writing

Some years ago, with the Summer Fete pending, my daughter's headteacher had a bright idea. 'Would you write us our very own story, Chris?' he suggested. 'You could base it on this actual school - you know, the buildings and staff and children and so on. We'll print it up on our word-processor, bind it up with a proper cover and you can sign copies on Fete afternoon!'

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My heart sank a bit, I admit.

Even the shortest story, if it's to have any quality at all, takes me hours - not to say, days - of hard slog. And I've always found it much more daunting to write for readers who are known, to me than a more general audience.

Still, the cause was a worthy one and I'm a fully paid-up softie, so I agreed to give it a try,

Pretty soon, having settled on a ghost story as most likely to be popular with the children themselves, I'd even become interested in the project. Slowly, 'The Ghost of Itchen Abbas' began to take shape. It was based on a recent archaeological dig at the school and, as requested, incorporated personal appearances by the head and staff - though naming every single child on roll, as I'd originally intended, turned out to be a non-starter. By the time I'd handed the story over, seen the first-rate job made of 'publishing' it and sold pretty nearly every copy at the Fete itself, I was feeling a touch ashamed of my initial reluctance.

So what happened towards the end of the afternoon serves me right, perhaps.

He was a tall, smartly-dressed man with a military air. about him. As I signed his copy, he asked, 'Er? is this the real ghost of Itchen Abbas you're writing about?'

'Real ghost?' I said.

'Because there is one, you know.'

It haunts a local pub, he told me, which he could vouch for personally because he was an ex-policeman who'd just become landlord of that very same pub.

Straightaway, I believed him - or believed that *he* believed in the ghost at least. So did his wife, he insisted. If I'd like to drop in for a drink one evening, they'd be delighted to fill in the details...

Which they did, between serving customers, a week or so later. 'It's a man,' he confided. 'A tall, cavalier-type with a plumed hat and long, swirly, grey cloak.'

'No, it's a woman,' declared his wife, 'in a full-length, grey dress with one of those feathery Nell Gwynne hats.'

Smart co-ordination, I thought. The ghost was certain to sell a pint or two... especially as they were both agreed on their dog's reaction: quivering, whimpering fear whenever the apparition arrived.

Even more impressive, though, was the puzzled, matter-of-fact manner in which this practical, down-to-earth pair recounted their tale. Of course, they realised how suspicious everyone else would be so they'd be happy to show me the upstairs landing where this Phantom, or whatever it was, always appeared. Would I like that? 'You bet,' I said.

I mean this was *material*...

A little later, towards closing time, they led me up the back staircase to a tall, narrow corridor that ran the full-length of the house. I remember it as empty apart from a carpet which had faded to the same nondescript dinginess as the wallpaper.

For maybe a minute I stood there. Nothing, absolutely nothing, would have persuaded me to walk the length of that corridor. There were goose-pimples on my goose-pimples, I'm sure. I may not have whimpered but I was certainly quivering.

At what?

I still haven't a clue. All I can recall is a clammy sense of oppression, a sort of gap in the atmosphere only something uncanny could fill.

Well, I told you I'm a fully paid-up softie. From that day to this, I've never been back to the pub in case a glimpse of cloak or hat or plume confirmed the presence of the real Ghost of Itchen Abbas. Not long afterwards, apparently, the ex-policeman and his wife gave up their tenancy. They 'couldn't make a go of it', people said.

All of which is both completely true and highly pertinent to the theme of this November issue: Beasties, Ghosties and Things That Go Bump on the Page. Will we ever grow tired of scaring ourselves witless with what we can't bring ourselves to believe in but also can't ever quite dis-believe? Here, we celebrate this universal, timeless human characteristic in terms of picture-books, stories for readers in the middle years of childhood and narratives for teenagers. Naturally, or should I say, supernaturally, we're not committing ourselves to the reality of any of it. On the contrary, we'd recommend the canny scepticism of the Irish playwright Brendan Behan who once described himself as a 'daylight atheist'. After dark, he wasn't so sure.

Enjoy the spookiness!

New portrait of the Editor(!) and background dancing devil from **Poems that go BUMP in the night** (see page 4).

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