

The Christmas Ghost Story

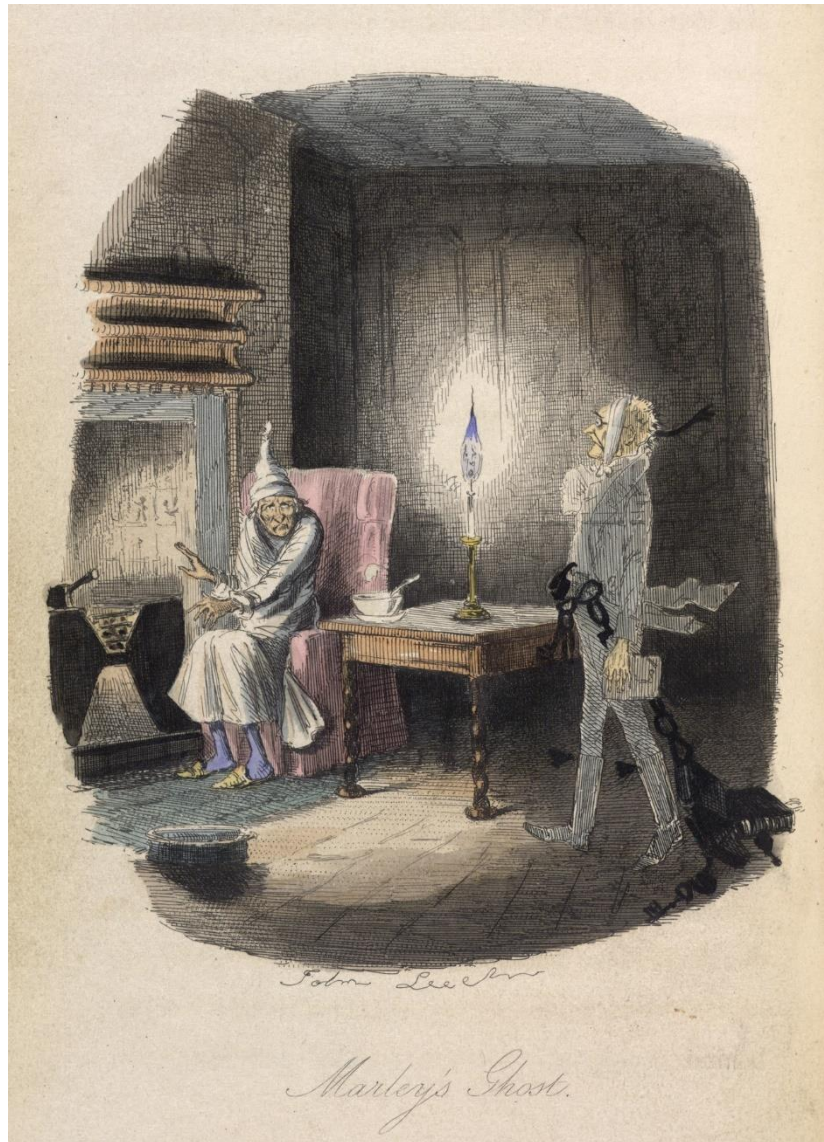
Anna Cusack

The history of Christmas ghost stories and spooky tales stretches quite far back in English culture, and it is difficult to pinpoint a specific time and place of their origin. Early references to the Christmas ghost story are hinted at from the medieval period.¹ In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* there is a reference to Winter ghost stories. 'A sad Tale's best for winter/I have one of sprites and goblins' states Mamillius towards the start of the play.² It was, however, during the Victorian period that this previously oral tradition was propelled by the steam-powered printing press. Authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, and Arthur Conan Doyle continued this tradition by creating stories in time for Christmas. These stories arrived in both cheap pamphlet form and expensive annuals displayed on coffee tables and became relatively accessible to all.³ Perhaps, the most famous Christmas ghost story has become Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* which fed into this earlier tradition.

¹ See stories in Andrew Joynes, (ed.), *Medieval Ghost Stories* (2001).

² W. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* Act 2, Scene 1.

³ Elizabeth Yuko, '[How Ghost Stories Became a Christmas Tradition in Victorian England](#)', (2021).



"Marley's Ghost", original illustration by John Leech from the 1843 edition of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. ©Public Domain.

M. R. James who was born at Goodnestone Parsonage, Kent in 1862 and died in 1936, wrote some of the best-known Christmas ghost stories. These were not written with 'long, gory, gruesome descriptive passages in order to achieve his aim of frightening the reader. Instead, he merely suggests the horror by a surprising and unnerving phrase, mentioning an unexpected or incongruous shadow or an eerie sound, and then the reader's imagination takes over, feeding on these hints in order to conjure up the full disturbing picture'.⁴ James began writing his ghost stories as a *divertissement* from his academic work as a medievalist at the University of Cambridge for the entertainment of his colleagues. He also was known for his translation of early medieval ghost stories.

⁴ David Stuart Davies, 'Introduction', M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories* (Wordsworth Editions, 2007), p. V.

Around 1400 an anonymous monk of Yorkshire's Byland Abbey added in his own hand to a manuscript that was already two centuries old a collection of eleven ghost stories and one story about a wizard, that he claimed he had heard from the region. These stories first came to historians' attention due to transcriptions published in 1921 by M. R. James.⁵ James had also previously translated the work of Walter Map, another author of medieval ghost stories.⁶

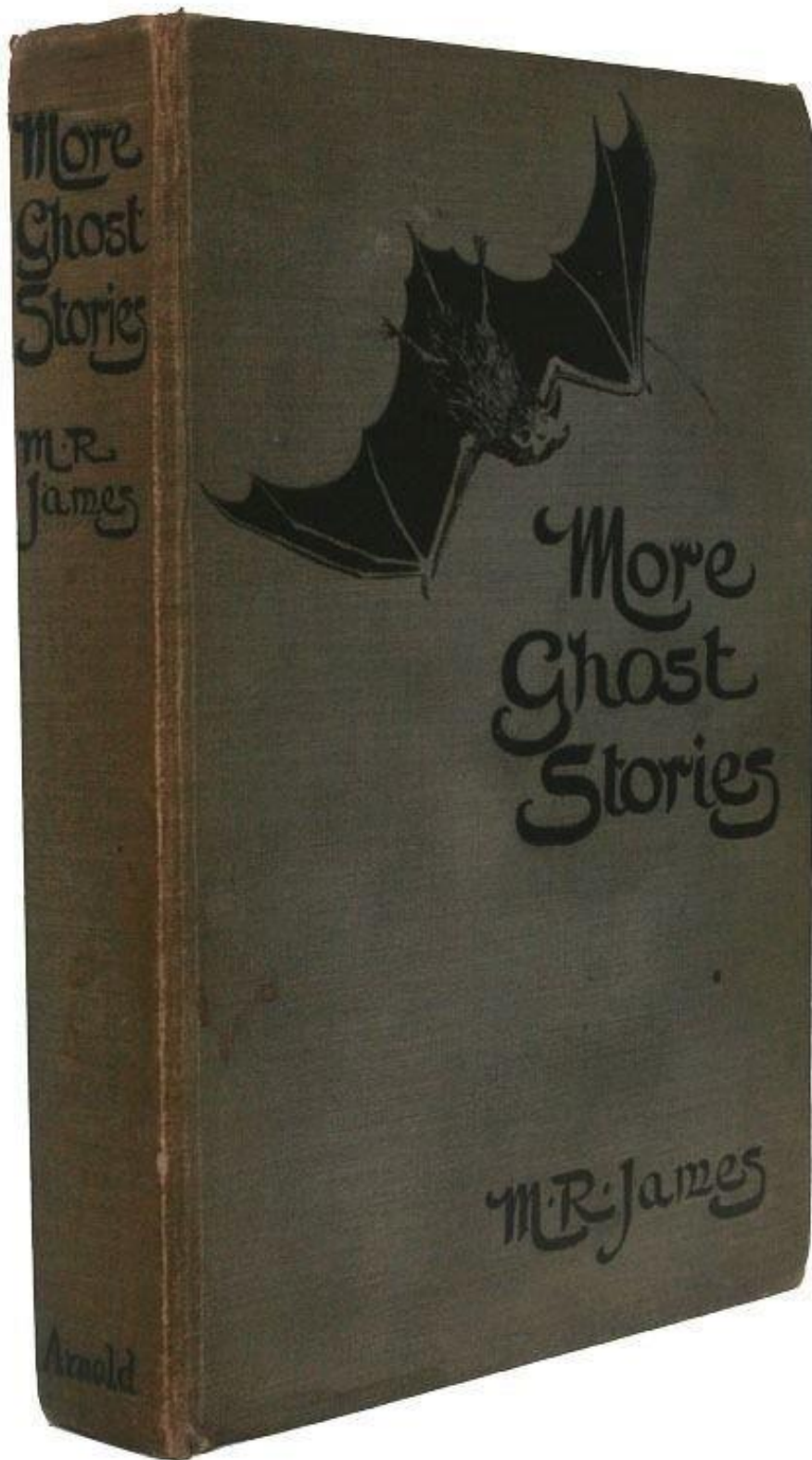
The ghosts in these tales seek assistance from the living and occasionally offered services in return. This idea of reciprocity is apparent in the second story recorded by the monk of Byland, translated by James. The story concerns a tailor named Snowball who late one night was attacked by a crow which had sparks of fire leaping from its side. The tailor struck the bird with a sword. The bird then turned into a dog with a chain around its neck that when addressed spoke, possibly taking human form, saying he had performed many crimes and had been executed. It requested Snowball fetch a priest and ask for absolution for him. There is a lengthy account of actions the ghost required, and a future appointment is set up between the two. When Snowball again meets the ghost, he is in the form of a goat, before turning into a huge grotesque man. The ghost refers to his current punishments and torments but confirms that due to Snowball's help, he would be able to move on. The ghost also refers to others in a similar situation. When Snowball enquires as to the ghost's greatest sin the ghost replies that it is what he has done to Snowball's reputation, as now people will think he communes with the dead. After this encounter, Snowball fell sick for several days but there is no mention of him meeting the ghost again.

This story is consistent with Christian themes of ghosts. The ghost assisted by Snowball was being punished before their meeting which alludes to torture in purgatory. The emphasis on good works and deeds stresses the obligations between the living and the dead. James likened all the stories in the Byland collection to similar ones from Scandinavia.⁷ Were these stories early Christmas ghost stories? We do not know, but their influence on James's own stories is apparent.

⁵ M. R. James, 'Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 147 (Jul., 1922), pp. 413-422.

⁶ M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories* (2007). To understand more of Map's work, see J. Hinton, 'Walter Map's de Nugis Curialium: Its Plan and Composition', *PMLA*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1917), pp. 81-132 and R. E. Edwards, 'Walter Map: Authorship and the Space of Writing' *New Literary History*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring, 2007), pp. 273-292.

⁷ James, 'Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories', p. 414; examples of Scandinavian ghosts can be found in E. Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland* (2003), pp. 183-188.



More Ghost Stories - M.R. James. © Public Domain.

The Christmas ghost story became a feature of BBC Christmas television between 1971 and 1978 and has been revived sporadically since 2005. Most are adaptations of M. R. James's stories, and much of this revival has been directed by Mark Gatiss.

So, for Christmas, why not tell a Christmas ghost story? You may be surprised by how well they fit with the season.

References and Resources:

Andrew Joynes, (ed.), *Medieval Ghost Stories* (2001)

Any of M. R James's works including, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919), and *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* (1925)

Elizabeth Yuko, '[How Ghost Stories Became a Christmas Tradition in Victorian England](#)', (2021)

W. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* Act 2, Scene 1

M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories* (2007)

M. R. James, 'Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 147 (1922), 413-422

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E. Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland* (2003)