



Casting the Runes: And Other Ghost Stories (Oxford World's Classics)

M. R. James, Michael Chabon

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When we think of ghost stories, we tend to think of cub scouts cringing by a fire, s'mores at the ready, as some aging camp counselor tries to scare them witless with yet another tale from the crypt. But as Michael Chabon's marvelous introduction reminds us, the ghost story was once integral to the genre of the short story. Indeed, as he points out, it can be argued that the ghost story was the genre. Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw"--most of the early short story writers wrote ghost stories as a matter of course. And the best writer of ghost stories, the acknowledged master, was M.R. James.

In *Casting the Runes*, we have twenty-one tales that, in Chabon's words, "venture to the limits of the human capacity for terror and revulsion...armed only with an umbrella and a very dry wit." The stories here represent the best of James's work. They are set in the leisurely, late-Victorian, middle-class world of country houses, seaside inns, out-of-the-way railway stations, and cathedral closes, where gentlemen of independent means and antiquarian tastes suddenly find themselves confronted by terrifying agents of supernatural malice. But what these tales are really about, writes Chabon, "is ultimately the breathtaking fragility of life, of 'reality,' of all the structures that we have erected to defend ourselves from our constant nagging suspicion that underlying everything is chaos, brutal and unreasoning."

The tales in *Casting the Runes* are both chilling fun and, as Chabon concludes, "unmistakably works of art." Anyone who loves short fiction or who enjoys a good scare will find these stories an irresistible delight.

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