



Winter Ghosts

It's easy to imagine our ancestors in the depths of winter, huddled around fires through the dark, freezing nights, telling and listening to stories about their own ancestors. Some might even have been true, but there was a fair share of fabrication, heroes and gods and the like, but also about the supernatural. Death stalked them as it stalks us, and the mystery of what happens after this brief sojourn on Earth fascinated them as much as us. From the impenetrable darkness emerged spectres, hauntings, magic, fiends and fears.

At some point in the distant past, somebody, somewhere told a story of Creation with the devil tempting Adam and Eve. How many times had this been told before it was written down. The deadly snakes of the world must have been burned into the human psyche long before being rendered as Satanic creatures. And as mankind morphed from beast to conscious Being, countless tales must have been told about the differences between male and female. Longing and desire were etched into the deepest recesses of the human mind from which emerged the first witch.

The Witch of Endor, known by every quiz-goer but understood probably by none of them, appears in the bible, and spirits of one kind or another long before the first book of the bible was written. We don't know darkness any longer, not like these ancients. It isn't easy to find an unlit place on Earth where nighttime darkness is almost tangible. In cities, nights are almost as bright as day, but real darkness was a terrible threat to survival and a home for lurking terrors.

It is no surprise that Christmas Eve has become a traditional time for telling ghost stories. Apart from the redemptive Christmas Carol, most of them are designed to scare us silly and stop us sleeping, with no chance of redemption. The innocent suffer as well as the guilty. M. R. James, for me, is the most subtle storyteller, a public school voice relating tales for Everyman in a frighteningly, controlled manner, every word stewed in threat. E. F. Benson chills you in a similar way. A writer with the completely unscary name of Hilda Lewis wrote *The Witch and The Priest* which is an absorbing sexual black magic discussion essentially between God and Satan. *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov is a compelling story about the devil visiting Moscow. In this book, good and evil are intertwined and it isn't so easy to condemn one in favour of the other. The list of horror story writers is vast, as is the list of films, ever since the first *Nosferatu* back in the 1920s based on Bram Stoker's earlier blood-sucking fest.

Clearly, there is something in our nature that needs these monsters. Fear of the dark, fear of death, fear of the unknown, usually dark and death anyway. Maybe they are safety mechanisms. If we can read about them or see them, then they will go away, or at least be in our control. Some of the recent attempts on film and television fall into cliché, which is a pity, or gross cruelty, which is worrying. The fears disappear a little in Spring and Summer when the days are longer and night hardly here at all. But once the Earth starts spinning into darkness again, back they come, these disturbing visions of things beyond our ken, probably all untrue, but perhaps, ever so possibly, premonitions and warnings of things that on some realm or other, truly do exist...