



BOOK REVIEW

Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life

By Ruth Franklin
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2016

607pp.

I first read Shirley Jackson at a very young age, having, like so many other kids in the U.S., read “The Lottery” in primary school. It wasn’t until my early teens, when I started to be curious about longer-form fiction, that

I picked up one of Jackson’s novels—I still use that same paperback copy of *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), filled with layer-upon-layer of marginal notes, as my teaching copy of the book. Over the past twenty-odd (very odd) years, I’ve read it, reread it; taught it, and retaught it many times. But nothing compares to the feeling of reading a work by Shirley Jackson for the first time; that is, to experiencing the unnerving way she creates a substructure of shocking violence, despair, and alienation beneath a surface of mundanity—all rendered in an often savagely comical, ironic mode. I still remember distinctly how acutely Jackson had captured in Eleanor Vance many of my own anxieties as a teen, but particularly the painfully fragile feelings of the outsider who is afraid she’ll never belong to anything, or anyone: “They’ve started without me,” she panics, waking up on her second day at Hill House. Eleanor spends the entirety of the novel ensuring herself that she has a place among not only her new friends, but in the world, in reality. She assures herself that she is an individual among others, that she is unique, separate from them, though guaranteed a rightful place among them. In short, Jackson’s treatment of Eleanor is a full-scale investigation of the slippages of self into Other against the need for connection, and of the diminishing and disintegration of self into character and spatial doubles that are so endemic to Jackson’s Gothic investigation of identity across her body of work.

Published in the 100th year of Shirley Jackson’s birth, Ruth Franklin’s award-winning biography *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* is no mere

reconsideration of an overlooked and misrepresented artist, but a full-scale recovery act, and a major contribution to scholarly studies of Jackson's work. What Franklin does here is a feat of character analysis of Jackson herself that does not pander to easy generic play—turning her into a troubled Gothic heroine whose writing is merely a projected call for help. Rather than placing or pitting Jackson herself within and against the genres and modes she experimented with, Franklin takes the time to trace connections between Jackson's emotional and intellectual life and historical moment without essentializing her, or the varied body of work she produced. She avoids reading Jackson's work as though it were the wholesale product of a troubled mind (à la Judy Oppenheimer's 1988 biography, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*), and rather shows Jackson responding critically, often through personal conflict, to the exigencies of her era. The reference to "haunting" in her title thus indicates Franklin's interest in all of the connotations that the word "spectre" brings with it, from the individual and personal to the communal and cultural.

Jackson lived until 1965, and the most compelling aspects of her life, as presented by Franklin, occur from the mid-50s to 1965, encompassing the entire latter nine chapters of Franklin's 18-chapter opus. 1965 was the year Jackson had just gotten back to work after the massive critical and financial success of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)—a success that sent Jackson even further into a troubled seclusion due to sustained anxiety, resulting in a concomitant decrease in her usually prolific output. The withdrawal into frustration was in part undergirded by anxiety around producing a worthy follow-up to *Castle*, and in part Jackson responding to the shocks imposed upon her by her time. Key among the frustrating variables in Jackson's life that Franklin identifies was the tension between Jackson's domestic role as housewife and mother, and her professional role as a writer of bestsellers. Franklin also anticipates Eric Savoy's (2017) contention that the straightforward humour about these conflicting roles in Jackson's two wildly popular books about her family life—*Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957)—offer parallels rather than contrasts to the darker undercurrents in Jackson's novels. Critics, especially feminist intellectuals like Betty Friedan (author of the influential *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963), found these two Shirley Jacksons difficult to reconcile. But Franklin's book makes it amply clear that the irreconcilable dichotomy some critics found between the darkly pessimistic proto-feminist of works like *Hangsaman* (1951) and *Castle*, and the comical domestic chronicler of works like *Savages* and *Demons*, was the result of a consistent, often disturbing vision of the

multiple roles women had to take on in the mid-twentieth-century U.S. The result is a comprehensive reconsideration of Jackson's body of work as visionary and critically consistent, rather than characterized by the irresponsible aesthetic flightiness that feminist critics such as Friedan—or, more typically, misogynist critics of the time—would assign to Jackson.

Franklin's study is consistently engaging, nuanced, and impeccably researched. The details of Jackson's early life before the infamous short story, "The Lottery" made her a household name in 1948 take up the first half of the book. Early chapters in the book highlight illuminating facts in Jackson's family history in 1920s and 30s San Francisco, and trace her relationship with her overbearing mother (a character type that appears frequently in her fiction, often posthumously) and Stanley Edgar Hyman, whom she met at Syracuse University and would eventually marry. For those ready to settle in to the intricate relationship between struggle and inspiration in Jackson's life during this period, Franklin's book offers nothing but rewards. Others not quite ready to throw themselves entirely into Jackson's life before she found and began to deal with literary fame, may find the first eight chapters long in detail.

In many ways, Franklin does nearly as much for Hyman as she does for Jackson, opening up the case for reconsideration of the work of the man whose presence in Jackson's life was both an inspiration and a frustration. Hyman's own work—difficult, dense, and ahead of its time—was produced laboriously over many years. The long gestation between Hyman's critically successful *The Armed Vision* (1948) and lesser-so *The Tangled Bank* (1962) was made possible because of the luxury of time provided him in no small part by Jackson herself, as she worked furiously to produce increasingly affecting, best-selling masterworks, while entertaining their friends, raising their children, and struggling with Hyman's need for an open relationship (open infidelity, in Jackson's estimation). The circle of close friends that gathered around Jackson and Hyman included literary luminaries like Dylan Thomas, J.D. Salinger, and Ralph Ellison, the latter of whom cited both Hyman and Jackson as a key reason for his ever completing *Invisible Man* (1952), and who read and discussed Jackson's work with her.

For those more interested in Jackson's life after her first literary successes made her a household name, chapters 8 through 18 enact a simultaneous act of powerhouse character development in Jackson, Hyman, and family, and extended act of literary analysis of all of Jackson's major works. Franklin blends historical and cultural context seamlessly with analyses of Jackson's fictional and epistolary output, so that the study is not only a corrective to the essentialist view of Jackson's output after her death as "mere" genre fare, but

also a significant contribution to scholarship of the author's entire body of work. The extensive focus on the author's letters alone (primarily to her mother, Geraldine) constitutes a major unearthing of a new, essential Jackson text. Franklin unearths in the author's marginalia Jackson's identification of a key theme in her work, via her assertion that the possibly imaginary character Tony in *Hangsaman*, her disturbing 1951 tale of a traumatized female university student, is

not a he or she but the demon in the mind, and that demon finds guilts where it can and uses them and runs mad with laughing when it triumphs; it is the demon which is fear and we are afraid of words. we are afraid of being someone else and doing the things someone else wants us to do and of being taken and used by someone else, some other guilt-ridden conscience that lives on and on in our minds, something we build ourselves and never recognize. (quoted in Franklin, 2016: 63, preserving Jackson's punctuation)

The fact that Jackson's letters—by turns wry, witty, worrying, introspective, despairing, analytical, and bitingly comical—remain unpublished is a shame, and Franklin's coverage of them is a call to literary arms to an ambitious editor to bring them to light. The sustained epistolary friendship (60 pages of letters) that Jackson maintained with Jeanne Beatty, a fan who shared many of her domestic frustrations, is a highlight in this vein, intriguing enough to warrant its own book.

As the pressures around Jackson grew stronger with fame, Franklin's book grows increasingly darker, each of the last ten chapters periodized around Jackson's creation of one of her major works. Franklin's insights are often so keen and straightforward, they can be unsettling. Of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, she writes, "It is about two women who metaphorically murder male society and its expectations for them by insisting on living separate from it, governed only by themselves" (2016: 442). And in a later statement on *Castle*, she nails down a key meta-theme in Jackson's work that makes seemingly tragic endings—where characters turn entirely away from reality to a world of fantasy that "kills" them—read like triumphs: "Witchcraft [...] is again best understood as a metaphor for female power and men's fear of it. It is a last resort for women who feel that they are powerless, the only way in which they can assert control over their surroundings. Even imaginary control is preferable to no control at all" (2016: 449).

If there has been a recent resurgence of interest in Jackson's work, I would suggest that it starts here, with Ruth Franklin's masterful study. Let this piece stand as less a review than as a reminder that scholars of Jackson, seasoned or fresh, can do no better than to start the next phase with Franklin.

— Kristopher Woofter

Ruth Franklin is a book critic and former editor at *The New Republic*. Her work appears in many publications, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Harper's*. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in biography, a Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library, a Leon Levy Fellowship in Biography, and the Roger Shattuck Prize for Criticism. Her first book, *A Thousand Darknenses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), was a finalist for the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature. *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography, among many other honours. Franklin lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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