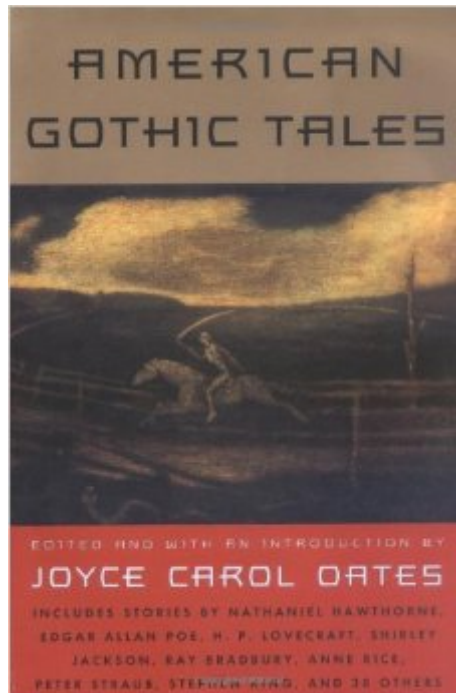


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American Gothic Tales (William Abrahams)



Synopsis

Joyce Carol Oates has a special perspective on the "gothic" in American short fiction, at least partially because her own horror yarns rank on the spine-tingling chart with the masters. She is able to see the unbroken link of the macabre that ties Edgar Allan Poe to Anne Rice and to recognize the dark psychological bonds between Henry James and Stephen King. This remarkable anthology of gothic fiction, spanning two centuries of American writing, gives us an intriguing and entertaining look at how the gothic imagination makes for great literature in the works of forty-six exceptional writers. In showing us the gothic vision "a world askew where mankind's forbidden impulses are set free from the repressions of the psyche, and nature turns malevolent and lawless" Joyce Carol Oates includes Henry James's "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes," Herman Melville's horrific tale of factory women, "The Tartarus of Maids," and Edith Wharton's "Afterward," which are rarely collected and appear together here for the first time. Added to these stories of the past are new ones that explore the wounded worlds of Stephen King, Anne Rice, Peter Straub, Raymond Carver, and more than twenty other wonderful contemporary writers. This impressive collection reveals the astonishing scope of the gothic writer's subject matter, style, and incomparable genius for manipulating our emotions and penetrating our dreams. With Joyce Carol Oates's superb introduction, *American Gothic Tales* is destined to become the standard one-volume edition of the genre that American writers, if they didn't create it outright, have brought to its chilling zenith.

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Customer Reviews

American Gothic Stories ed. and with an introduction by Joyce Carol Oates. Highly recommended. In this 1996 anthology, noted American author Joyce Carol Oates collects American tales of horror and/or the supernatural, from an excerpt from *Wieland, or the Transformation* (1798) by Charles Brockden Brown, to "Subsoil" (1994) by Nicholson Baker, so that the 50 stories here represent nearly 200 years of the darker side of the American psyche. The stories, arranged in chronological order, show some clear trends. In early stories, by Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and even Edgar Allan Poe, religion plays a prominent role. Interestingly, God and his creation are seen as at odds with one another. For example, in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," the forest and the darkness are where Satan meets humanity. "The Tartarus of Maids," an industrial creation of Herman Melville's, is set in a remote rural location, contrasted to another Melville story (not included here), "The Paradise of Bachelors," set in a London gentlemen's club. Perhaps this conviction that nature is a place of mystery, evil, and fear, explains the early (and current) American drive to conquer it. Another theme is denial of responsibility for one's own terrible actions. When called to account for committing some of the most heinous crimes possible, *Wieland's* defense is inarguable: He has proved his faith in God by doing that which God desired of him. (Unlike *Wieland*, the reader will recognise that the "shrill voice" expressing God's bloody will from behind a "fiery stream" is more likely that of the fallen angel Lucifer.) A second example is the famous Poe story, "The Black Cat," in which the narrator, noted from infancy for his "docility and humanity," becomes a cold-blooded maimer and killer of that which he loves most. To what does he attribute his violence and subsequent fall in fortunes? Not to himself, but to the "Fiend Intemperance," saying, "for what disease is like Alcohol!" While Poe, a self-medicating alcoholic and bipolar sufferer, seems to have had an early understanding that alcoholism is not a moral deficiency but a disease, his narrator's choice of scapegoat does not explain the obvious: Most alcoholics do not maim and murder. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman also beats the medical establishment in recognising a pathological condition rather than a purely emotional one: Postpartum depression. Gilman gets her digs in at the predominantly male medical profession—the narrator's own husband, who makes every misstep conceivable in his attempts to "help" her, is a physician. Feminism and the gothic meet. As the collection progresses in time, the stories become less religious and psychotic in tone, and some, such as "Snow" by John Crowley and "The Girl Who Loved Animals" by Bruce McAllister, are more science fiction than gothic. "Exchange Value" by Charles Johnson translates the tradition of

psychological horror into inner-city terms. "Replacements" by Lisa Tuttle is telling commentary on the battle of the sexes; a literal vampire is preferable as an object of affection, attention, and obsession to the emotional vampire the human male of the story represents. Other highlights include "The Veldt" by Ray Bradbury, which combines gothic sensibilities with science fiction; the unforgettable "Cat in Glass" by Nancy Etchemendy, in which the narrator's implausible reality is the only one that makes sense; and "In the Icebound Hothouse" by William Goyen, where erotic elements predominate. A personal favourite, "The Lovely House" by Shirley Jackson, succeeds in evoking the surrealism of that most tangible and ordinary of places—a home. In some cases, I wish Oates selected more obscure works of equal quality by the same author; for example, I wonder if there are any H. P. Lovecraft short-story alternatives to the oft-anthologised "The Outsider." Still, it is innovative of Oates to include "The Enormous Radio" by John Cheever, who is not traditionally seen as a gothic writer—although "The Swimmer" might have been an even better choice. With the exception of a handful of selections (most notably Oates' own "The Temple," which is unoriginal and uninteresting), this is a rich, diverse collection. In the end, it does leave one wondering, What exactly is gothic? As helpful as some of the information Oates provides in the introduction may be, she offers few if any insights into the nature or history of the American gothic or the authors whose works are found here. One quibble: I would like to have seen each story's year of publication included at its end, as is the case with many anthologies. Although the authors' birth and death dates are part of the contents page, some dates are mentioned in the introduction, and there is a permissions page with copyright dates, there is neither a comprehensive nor an elegant way for the interested reader to place each tale in its historical context—a serious deficiency in an otherwise excellent collection. Diane L. Schirf, 13 May 2003.

I don't necessarily agree with Joyce Carol Oates' definition of Gothic literature in her introduction or that all of the stories in this collection are Gothic. The editor does a good job on the back cover, in her biographic section, and in the final page, of trying to advertise herself as being not only a "genius" but "rank[ing] on the spine-tingling chart with the masters". I beg to disagree. Traditionally, Gothic literature deals with the dark and mysterious and with the tortured soul. I had great difficulty seeing some of these stories as being gothic at all. Some of these stories would better fit the category of "tales of the weird", but some don't even fit in that category. For example, there's a two-page story of a man leaving his wife and trying to wrest the baby from her arms in the dark. There's another with two men in a spaceship contemplating life. Another is merely a story of someone tripping on drugs. Granted, there are some good gothic and weird stories here. The stories

are placed in the book chronologically. Many of the earlier stories are anti-climatic with endings that are little more than a tiny "Boo!" (if that). Such a story is Oates' own attempt at a gothic story, "The Temple". Others are page-turners. In trying to put in some more obscure stories, she's left out better ones by the same author. For example, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" would have been a better Gothic literature choice for displaying Nathaniel Hawthorne's talents. And authors like H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, who greatly inspired writers of this genre, should have more inclusions in the book. If this book were to truly be a book of good gothic literature, the following stories would remain (favorites starred): *Brown's excerpt from *Wieland*, *Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow", Hawthorne's "The Man of Adamant" and "Young Goodman Brown", Poe's "The Black Cat", Perkin's "The Yellow Wallpaper", James' "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes", Bierce's "The Damned Thing", *Wharton's "Afterward", Anderson's "Death in the Woods", *Lovecraft's "The Outsider", Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", Derleth's "The Lonesome Place", *Jackson's "The Lovely House", *Cheever's "The Enormous Radio" (more twilight zone than gothic), *Bradbury's "The Veldt" (more science fiction than gothic), Doctorow's "The Waterworks", *L'Heureux's "The Anatomy of Desire", Oates' "The Temple", *Rice's "Freniere", Millhauser's "In the Penny Arcade", *King's "The Reach", Johnson's "Exchange Value" (good but not really gothic), *Crowley's "Snow", *Ligotti's "The Last Feast of the Harlequin" (a wonderful story in memory of Lovecraft), *Tuttle's "The Replacements", *Etchemendy's "Cat in Glass", and Baker's "Subsoil". Even though I felt that some of the selections for this anthology were poor choices, the good selections makes this a worthwhile read. Had she replaced the non-gothic and anti-climatic stories with more good stories by the above authors, the book would have been perfect. I will definitely be looking more into works by some of the authors like Ligotti and Wharton. I will not, on the other hand, be seeking out works by the editor. Her self-advertisement has fallen upon deaf ears.

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