

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Ghost in the Mirror

In spooky stories by Ben Hatke, Remy Lai and the team of Rebecca Stead and Wendy Mass, the secrets of the undead lead perilously close to home.

By Soman Chainani

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In fall comes a darkening, in the tenor of the stories we tell and in the feelings they evoke. Summer light fades and ghosts emerge, revealing deeper mysteries. But in a world in which young readers are skeptical of well-worn tropes, how can these tales still haunt? In three middle grade ghost stories, child sleuths pierce the veil and find that the secrets of the undead lead perilously close to home.



From "Things in the Basement." Ben Hatke

In Ben Hatke's graphic novel **THINGS IN THE BASEMENT (First Second, 240 pp., \$14.99, ages 6 to 9)**, Milo's mother, preoccupied with infant twins and moving into a new house, asks her young son to find one of the babies' missing socks. A sock now possessed by Milo's nemesis: the *basement*. The fear of dark subterranean spaces is as innate as the fear of spiders and snakes, but in this basement/laundry room a trap door holds the first of many additional staircases that lead farther and farther down

to entire worlds: a chamber of belle epoque and baroque portraits, a hall of Greco-Roman sculptures, a cave of Lascaux wall paintings. It's when ghosts start appearing, however, that Milo realizes the enormity of his task, his sister's lost sock stolen into a maze of spirits that are puckish (a caped skull flies through the air, speaking only in emoji-style icons), ethereal (a nymph hunts her own lost sock) and alarming (a monstrous green blob inhales everything in sight).

Hatke ("Zita the Spacegirl," "Mighty Jack") is a wondrous artist with a cogent vision. Milo is drawn with no eyes and only sometimes a mouth, so mostly we see his nose; emoting is done with his body and rag-doll hair, which gives each fright a visceral twist. The book's storyboarding is itself a tour of darkness and delight. Hatke follows a melancholy encounter with a bell-faced nun, for instance, with a comic crew of mushrooms who babble in musical notes. All along, Milo's mother is too distracted by her newborns to worry about him. In her world, his shading is drab, almost colorless. Only down below does he take on the vibrant tint of new realms.



From "Things in the Basement." Ben Hatke

Given the sophistication of Hatke's work, which exhibits the heft of a "Pan's Labyrinth" or "A Monster Calls," I anticipated a tragic end for Milo, a heavy toll for invading the underworld. It is a tribute to Hatke that he makes the boy's ascent cathartic: Milo is enlivened by his experience and still innocent enough to celebrate his return, lost sock in hand.

If Hatke's "Basement" is a quiet, haunted museum, Remy Lai's graphic novel **GHOST BOOK (Holt, 320 pp., \$14.99, ages 8 to 12)** is a crackle-pop of melodrama. Twelve-year-old July Chen can see ghosts that aren't visible to anyone else — a useful skill during Hungry Ghost Month, when ghosts invade the world of the living.

But there are complications. Her father acts as if he doesn't believe in ghosts and yet secretly communes with them (for a reason that, we later learn, involves the circumstances of her birth, and a recurring payment of dumplings). A boy ghost her age named William is at once friend and foe (turns out he's not dead but in a coma; for him to live, she must die). And lords of the underworld are on the march to punish July and William for attempting to break ghostly laws to save them both. (The bureaucracy here is worthy of New York City Building Code: a Birth Register, a Death Register, a Life Register, an Underlings Register.)

All these scenes are drawn with a dreamlike zaniness, hewing closer to anime than Lai's past work ("Pawcasso," "Pie in the Sky," "Fly on the Wall").

Like Hatke, Lai finds that razor's edge between life and death, light and dark, fairy tale and ghost story.

In Rebecca Stead and Wendy Mass's novel **THE LOST LIBRARY (Feiwel & Friends, 224 pp., \$17.99, ages 8 to 12)**, the ghost stalking the town is an unexplained fire, which claimed both the Martinville Library and one of its librarians.

Twenty years later, a little free library has sprung up, and Evan McClelland, a fifth grader, is one of the first to borrow from it. Inside two books, Evan happens upon clues to who started the fire, evidence that points toward a most unlikely suspect: his dad.

As in Lai's and Hatke's stories, mystery is the muscle but family is the nerve. Evan's father is a mirror of July's, an uncommunicative cipher who could shortcut a chunk of the narrative by being honest with his child.

Evan also dreads ghosts of the future — the specters of middle school, puberty, hairy legs and an adolescence as out of control as a library blaze.

But the ultimate ghost here is the loss of books, not just to the town but to a larger world.

Adding the points of view of Al, an assistant librarian who almost perished in the fire, and a book-loving cat named Mortimer who guards the free library, Stead and Mass (collaborators on the 2018 novel "Bob" as well) light a candle for reading. "I am not upset when others don't love the books I love," Al says. "We each have our own book spaces inside us, and they do not match up perfectly, nor should they."

The same could be said of the ghosts that haunt us, all three of these books suggest, as they pull us into unexplored places and dare us to find our way out.

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