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How Writers use Ghosts to Explore Grief in Contemporary YA Fiction

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Abstract

In this paper, I interrogate how contemporary YA writers use ghosts in their novels to explore ideas about adolescence and grief. Ghost stories are a well-known genre that thrill and entertain and in turn, the key purpose of YA Fiction is to provide teenage readers with books that help them make sense of the world. I explore why teenagers might enjoy ghost narratives, to look at the juxtaposition between the youthful reader, full of vitality enjoying stories that deal with death and the afterlife. I look at three contemporary titles that explore ideas about what it means to haunt and be haunted: *The Astonishing Colour of After* by Emily X R Pan (2018) in which a grieving teen is haunted by the spirit of her mother, who manifests as a red bird; *A Skinful of Shadows* by Frances Hardinge (2017), in which the central protagonist Makepeace is haunted by several spirits including a desolate dancing bear, and *AfterLove* by Tanya Byrne (2021) where Ash dies suddenly and learns what it is to be *the* ghost. I look at how these writers craft the ghosts in these stories, explore ideas about grief, and create spectral landscapes.

Keywords: *ghosts, Young Adult*

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In this paper I'm going to look at how writers use ghosts to explore grief in contemporary YA Fiction. The ghost story offers a most satisfying reading experience: it thrills and entertains, offers a delicious frisson of fear, but unlike a film, is bound safely within the pages of a book. In turn, the purpose of YA fiction is to provide readers with books that help them make sense of the world.

Therefore, why might teenagers enjoy reading ghost stories to begin with? There is the thrill factor: the sheer pleasure of reading about what scares them, what Lucy Strange refers to as 'Halloween-ness' (Strange, 2023), if we unpack this a little further, there's something in the contrast between youthful readers enjoying stories about death and the afterlife. They can explore ideas about mortality that seem important but far off, and in YA literature, 'The idea of separation and transition is heightened, not least because death provides a stark contrast to the vitality of youth.' (Bovolino, 2022)

In this paper, I will look at how three YA writers use ghosts in their novels to explore ideas about adolescence and grief.

The three books I've chosen are *The Astonishing Colour of After* (2018) by Emily XR Pan, where Leigh is haunted by the spirit of her dead mother, who manifests as a red bird; *A Skinful of Shadows* (2017) by Frances Hardinge, where Makepeace is haunted by several spirits, including a desolate dancing bear; and *Afterlove* (2020) by Tanya Byrne, where Ash dies suddenly and learns what it is to *be the ghost* on the other side.

In *The Astonishing Colour of After*, Emily XR Pan writes a ghost story that stems from grief, Pan begins with her protagonist, Lee, stating, 'My mother is a bird. This isn't some William Faulkner stream-of-consciousness metaphorical crap. My mother is literally a bird.' (Pan, 1) This is an interesting way to begin. Pan cunningly second guesses the potential dismissal of the cynical teenage reader and undercuts it, putting into practice the tenet that YA writers must, 'grab the attention and hold it with little waffling or self-indulgent writing.' (Strachan, 2019).

We learn at the outset that the central protagonist, Leigh, has lost her mother, Dory, to suicide, but that days later she is visited by a red crane. Immediately the bird is flagged as a reassuring presence. 'I wasn't frightened. Even when the bird glided straight across the lawn,' (Pan, 9). Pan establishes the bird quickly with strong visual descriptions, so the reader is not encouraged to think that Leigh is imagining it.

Pan takes Leigh's overwhelming grief and gives it shape. The negative becomes positive, and Leigh now sees her mother formerly drained by depression, become colourful and vivid again. 'My mother is free in the sky. She doesn't have the burden of a human body, and is not made up of a single dot of grey. My mother is a bird.' (Pan, 11).

Pan paints her in red, the colour of blood, the colour of life. Leigh wishes her mother to be free. So, she makes her a bird, who can take flight.

The plot moves swiftly, taking the teenage protagonist to Taiwan to explore the reality of grief in a place where familiar routines are suspended. Leigh's father leaves too, and soon she is cut adrift from all she knows with no grasp of the language. This is a deft plot device to connect Leigh more fully with the ghost of her mother.

The further Pan takes her away from her ordinary life, the more real the ghost becomes. In Chapter 16, Leigh is visited again by the bird, thousands of miles from home and whilst this might suggest that the ghost bird is imagined, Pan's description only intensifies the physical presence of the crane.

My gaze locks on two eyes shining and round the colour of flames.
The inky in the centre that just be on the bars of my window.
Intensely focused on me. (Pan, 62)

From this point on, Leigh interacts with the crane and in doing so, begins to process her grief. As the narrative progresses, the ghost bird flits in and out of the pages, and we learn that in Taiwan, the spirit of the deceased must transition for 49 days before ascending to the afterlife. This allows Pan a vital timeline for the story and develops pace.

Pan also intensifies Leigh's experience by creating a character who has synaesthesia. This device makes Leigh express some of the emotions of grief where there are no sufficient words. Towards the end of the book, when she's getting closer to the spirit of her mother, the colours intensify around her. 'I see colours in the dark now. Sometimes they form shapes or even faces. Sometimes they get angry with me, turn a dirty Crimson' (Pan, 294).

Pan shows grief as a tangible thing: it can shift shape and meld and take on a physical form. The ghost bird, as an incarnation of grief, can be physically seen, understood and perhaps more readily processed.

Here is my mother with wings instead of hands and feathers instead of hair.
Here is my mother, the reddest of brilliant reds. The colour of my love and my fear and all my fiercest feelings. (Pan, 413).

Francis Hardinge's novel, *A Skinful of Shadows*, is a truly inventive take on the ghost story genre. She explores grief in a dazzlingly original novel. The theme of loss is introduced early in the novel. Makepeace, like Leigh, loses her mother in the first few chapters. However, where Pan creates a vivid, reassuring presence with the red bird, the spirit of Makepeace's mother is a craven, frightening spirit clawing at her daughter.

The loose pieces of it flailed senselessly like severed worms and tried to bury their way into her soul. It grappled and clung and raked at her. It was barely a face at all, but somehow it was still Mother. (Harding, 31).

These descriptions are unnerving for the reader and do nothing to reassure that the afterlife is a peaceful place. The novel is heavily populated with ghosts who seek to infiltrate the living, rattling around, searching for a place to rest. So far, so ghostly. But then Harding introduces a *ghost bear*. 'In the case of *A Skinful of Shadows*, the first half-formed idea that came to me was that of the ghost bear. The idea had been lurking in my head for several years and I had the notion that the bear would form a bond with a young person.' (Harding, 2022).

The bear is a symbolic choice of animal ghost. He becomes a fierce element of Makepeace's character and as much as she helps him, he helps her character develop and become stronger too. 'Bear does sort of represent Makepeace's anger and her grief, and that wounded part of her, and he doesn't always make things easy. But he is a source of strength.' (Harding, 2018). His sadness becomes her sadness. His strength becomes her strength. By accepting Bear, she becomes more whole. The YA reader learns that sadness and grief must be accepted, integrated, and processed in order to move forward and grow. 'Makepeace stood her, surroundings came to her in pulses. She was Bear and Bear was she.' (Harding, 174).

The animal ghost is described in a way that prompts an emotional response, and when Makepeace first sees him, she is overwhelmed by his presence. 'The bear was a dark, smoky pucker in the world. Four-legged and humpbacked, translucent holes marked its eyes and its gaping maw.' (Harding, 39). Harding establishes the powerful presence of the ghost there, his sadness and bewilderment are so strong that Makepeace cannot just see, but *feel* his pain. The reader can sense the cruelty that he's endured. 'She felt an awful wave of sadness, stronger than her fear or revulsion. Stronger even than the smell.' (Harding, 37).

Afterlove by Tanya Byrne explores ideas about ghosts and grief with a very modern protagonist. Ash is a feisty young girl living in Brighton and finding love for the first time. The book has been a big hit with the YA market and explores sexuality, growing up, race, and grief in a relatable city setting. The supernatural element is presented in an unusual way for Ash haunts the novel. Rather than being haunted, the central protagonist is a ghost.

Byrne presents a spectre who seems startlingly human when she dies in a tragic accident. Ash herself can no longer believe she's not alive. 'How can I be dead? I don't feel dead. I can't be.' (Byrne, 163) This creates a ghost that the reader can really identify with. Byrne structures her novel into two parts *Before* and *After*. In the first half of the novel, we get to know the character of Ash. Byrne makes her a real person, whose feelings for Poppy are described with an honesty that readers can identify with. So, when Ash is killed, the reader must acclimatise to the afterlife along with her. Byrne

conveys the surreal nature of the accident, with Ash talking the reader through the moment of death.

Broken glass crunches under my feet as I stagger back, I look around and there, lying across the street, is a body. It's me. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing comes out. (Byrne, 149).

Here, she captures the disconnect between the ghost and her human body and the effect is akin to slow motion. It feels so real because in the first half of the novel, we've come to know Ash, who seems too alive, to be a ghost and too nuanced for a spectre. However, slowly, she hints at what she's become. 'It's me, but it's not me. Everything that makes me unique, my nose ring, the mole on the bridge of my nose. My fierce red lipstick and my black eyeliner smudged away.' (Pan, 154)

Her main protagonist is a ghost, learning what it means to be dead with no desire whatsoever to frighten those around her, but only to connect. Ash is desperate to see her girlfriend Poppy and Byrne captures this frustration and fear. At one point she sees Poppy but realises that she is invisible to her when she turns away.

'Her feelings knock as if there were a glass vase balancing on one of my ribs. And now it's falling down, down.' (Byrne, 245) Poppy does not see her, and the effect becomes doubly powerful as the concerns of both the ghost and teenager merge: What if I'm not heard? What if I am not seen? What if the identity I've constructed is not recognised?

These are all concerns for readers, 'who want to read books that feature characters looking within themselves. I'm thinking about identity and life choices.' (Strachan, 2019). It just so happens these are explored through the experiences of a ghost. The metaphor of the glass vase is a strong one, capturing the vulnerability of the teenager perfectly.

The writers featured in this paper have written ghost stories set amongst notably diverse backgrounds: Taiwan, Reformation England, and Urban Brighton, which feel far from the traditional tropes of churchyard and spooky house.

Emily X R Pan is from a Taiwanese American background with the Taiwanese landscape central to her book. The portrait that Pan creates of Taipei is rich in detail and central to the writing. Once in Taiwan, Pan describes both interior and exterior settings in observant detail, and the beliefs of the ghost world are then peppered throughout the book. There's a character named Feng who spends a great deal of time with Leigh's grandparents.

We discover later that Pan has seamlessly woven another ghost into the narrative. With hindsight, we discovered that Feng was Jingling, who was her mother's sister. Jingling died as a young woman, and she exists alongside her elderly parents who accept her ghost presence as normal. Pan explains that 'Taiwan is a country where temples and ghosts are so much part of physical culture and therefore a huge part of the conversation around life and death.' (Pan 2018) It's as if Lee, along with the reader,

begins to assimilate fully into the culture and beliefs of Taiwan. Lee begins to accept she must respect the ghost world, obey its rules, and let her mother go.

In contrast to Pan's ghost-ridden Taiwan, Hardinge's Reformation England in a skinful of shadows offers a dynamic historical backdrop. Hardinge set her book during the English Civil War, and her reasoning for this was that she wanted to explore ideas about feudal inequality.

The reason I set the story during the Civil War is because so much was turned upside down during that conflict. The Fellemottes are essentially feudal in their mentality, and they think of their existence as eternal. Their social systems are unshakeable. I asked myself what a noble family would be like if they had the gift of immortality and power, and that's how the Fellemottes take advantage of centuries of experience. (Harding, 2022).

So, in the case of Harding's novel, the world that the book is set in, and the beliefs that accompany it are essential to the plot. The book is a multifaceted exploration of how a grieving young person might seek agency in a hostile spectral landscape full of politicised ghouls.

Tanya Byrne's novel by contrast offers a bang-up-to-date urban landscape. Byrne lives in Brighton, and when she set out to write *AfterLove*, she explained 'I wanted Brighton to be a character I wanted elements to feed into the book' (Byrne, 2021).

This certainly rings true. 'Ghost Girl' Ash along with her Reaper friends spend their days wandering around a very recognisable Brighton. There are references to The Pier, The Lanes, and several well-known shops in the town. Characters take coffee in cafes that really exist, and Ash's girlfriend lives in trendy Kemptown. So, when Ash and Poppy in the first part of the book, newly in love, wheel through the city, it's a shock when Ash is killed and left wandering the same landscape as a ghost. The effect is startling: 'We were sitting here, weren't we? The pier to our right, the wind farm to our left. I know I can't, but I'm sure I can see the impression we made in the pebbles.' (Byrne 174)

The city becomes central to the success of the storytelling, and we believe even more in Ash's grief, sadness, and feelings of alienation because now she exists like a shadow in the place she loves so well. It's as much of a grieving for her lost life and lost love as for the place she calls home.

So, what can we conclude from reading these books about what the ghost story offers? The YA writers in all three novels present protagonists with whom the teenage reader can identify and relate to. They can learn ways to cope with the prospect of grief that they will inevitably face. 'It's a very, very strange thing, but we all have the weirdest hang-ups. About what we're allowed to feel and how we're supposed to react.' (Harding 2018) Harding is articulating here that there is no correct way to grieve.

In their ghost stories, these YA writers offer the young reader different ways to process ideas and feelings that may not have had form. What if how you felt could be characterised in the shape of a big red bird, or a raging bear?

In the case of *The Astonishing Colour of After* and *AfterLove*, the narratives allow readers to consider other critical issues that affect teenagers too, such as mental health and depression, as well as gender and sexuality. So, *A Skinful of Shadows* could be read as a take on what it means to live within a dysfunctional family that imposes its will on the young people within it.

All three novels offer teenage readers something to recognise the ghost story. That sense of liminality that 'in-between-ness' in a fresh and relevant way, these writers use their toolkits to make sense of complex feelings, and the ghost story offers a very useful vehicle for these ideas.

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Author Biography

Charlotte Taylor is a postgraduate student at Bath Spa University, currently studying for an MA in Writing for Young People. Charlotte comes to the programme from a teaching career spanning almost 30 years. She has a passion for Language and Literature, particularly for young people. In the course of her teaching career, she established a strong reading culture within her school and implemented and devised a rich and diverse schedule of visiting authors. Inspired by her guests, in 2018 she took a

MA in Children's Literature at the University of Roehampton, where she wrote her dissertation on the significance of Time-Slip in 20th and 21st Century Children's Literature. She has a fascination with all things ghostly, is an avid reader of supernatural fiction, and is currently writing a teen gothic story that features twins, dark water, and drowning.