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The Penguin Book Of The Undead: Fifteen Hundred Years Of Supernatural Encounters (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The walking dead from 15 centuries haunt this compendium of ghostly visitations through the ages, exploring the history of our fascination with zombies and other restless souls. Since ancient times, accounts of supernatural activity have mystified us. Ghost stories as we know them did not develop until the late nineteenth century, but the restless dead haunted the premodern imagination in many forms, as recorded in historical narratives, theological texts, and personal letters. The Penguin Book of the Undead teems with roving hordes of dead warriors, corpses trailed by packs of barking dogs, moaning phantoms haunting deserted ruins, evil spirits emerging from burning carcasses in the form of crows, and zombies with pestilential breath. Spanning from the Hebrew scriptures to the Roman Empire, the Scandinavian sagas to medieval Europe, the Protestant Reformation to the Renaissance, this beguiling array of accounts charts our relationship with spirits and apparitions, wraiths and demons over fifteen hundred years, showing the evolution in our thinking about the ability of dead souls to return to the realm of the living—and to warn us about what awaits us in the afterlife. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

Series: Penguin Classics

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics (September 27, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143107682

ISBN-13: 978-0143107682

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.8 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #44,150 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Occult & Paranormal > Ghosts & Hauntings #27 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Angelology & Demonology #31 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Occult

Customer Reviews

“The scariest stories you’ll read this Halloween were written 1,000 years ago. This wonderfully fun and creepy anthology, lovingly curated by Scott Bruce, . . . is ideal for anyone fond of zombies, ghosts, ghouls, ancient horrors, and dread warnings from beyond the grave. . . . Along with Penguin’s *A Book of Ghost Stories* and *A Book of Witches*, it completes a sort of trilogy of spookiness that is wickedly entertaining, accessible, and surprisingly informative.”

• *The Philadelphia Inquirer* “A marvelous treasury of ghostdom. It’s exactly what I wanted to read. Scott Bruce has done a great job of assembling these accounts of the uncanny, and I know I shall keep it close by my bed for a long time.”

• Philip Pullman, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Golden Compass* “This exceptionally well-curated compilation shows that the wide variety of accounts of the undead have been rampant in literature long before the Gothic era. . . . Bruce has chosen selections from numerous cultures, including ancient Greece, Anglo-Norman England, and medieval Scandinavia. . . . He presents the contents with an enthusiasm that makes these . . . works accessible to the casual reader.”

• *Publishers Weekly* “It succeeds well as an education in how stories of wandering spirits have reflected throughout history common human anxieties about death, the disposal of mortal remains, and the fate of the soul [and] how these fears have changed through the ages and the ways in which otherworldly accounts have been used to address them.”

• *Library Journal*

Scott G. Bruce (editor) is a professor of medieval history and the director of the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. An expert on medieval monasticism, he has written two books about the monks of the abbey of Cluny. He worked his way through college as a grave digger.

This cleverly titled anthology relies on a suggestive subtitle to warn the curious inquirer. The fifteen centuries of "supernatural encounters" span not medieval times up to our zombie- and vampire-obsessed nights. Rather, this purview begins in ancient apparitions recorded by Homer, Pliny, and Lucan. Ghosts and spirits long captivated listeners before they were ever written down, and these glimmers into the underworld betray a primeval and persistent human urge to peer beyond the grave. Editor Scott G. Bruce translates most of the Latin texts that make up the bulk of

this book. Although Hebrew accounts in Deuteronomy and 1 Samuel betray a prohibited necromancy, nevertheless, King Saul dares to consult the Witch of Endor to overcome his fear of a Philistine defeat. For the earliest Christians, Jesus appears on the Sea of Galilee, not a ghost as his apostles thought, at the walking figure. Similarly, the legend of martyrs Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas reveals a more encouraging message. The nursing mother Perpetua, before her death at Roman hands, writes down that her pagan brother Dinocrates had been saved by her own prayers, guaranteeing her departed sibling salvation. This intervention by the living to aid the dead dominated medieval Catholic tales. While St. Augustine denied the efficacy of the dead communicating with the living within dreams, St. Gregory the Great encouraged this exchange. In what Bruce labels an "autopsy" of these spirit communicators, the tension shown between the disapproval of the Mosaic Law and the indulgence of Saul resonates. As the "ecology" of the next world tempted explorers, the visions of Barontus and of Bede's Drythelm revealed the persistently imploring figure of the revenant. As the term "undead" originated with a preacher's acclaim of God's immortality around the first millennium's end in Old English, it today adapts itself to our Modern English meaning attached to those who rise from their tombs. Or, for the Middle Ages, those who would not remain interred, or were refused the peace of the buried. This unrest tied into the evolving Catholic invention of "spectral servants." Monasteries promoted prayer and endorsed the efficiency of intercession. Cluny's many monks popularized testimonies from those among their benefactors who were convinced that a shriven soul was then put to a silent rest in the grave. Souls who had left their duties to the living, or their debts unpaid, found themselves in a tormented peregrination as ghosts, haunting their relatives or confreres until the matter was resolved. Often this relied on financial payments. Caesarius of Heisterbach's exemplary tales taught the faithful that pious deeds alone might not secure eternal reward. Rather, penance had to be undergone, in the intermediary state, the temporary hell of purgatory, until bail (as it were) could be gathered by the living. Here monks advised, and the importance of a sincere intention for any holy actions done in this life was emphasized. Visions dramatized the shock of meeting one's loved ones, specters bereft. Their ransom from post-mortem agony could be hastened by the prayers and works of those living. Yet, this arrangement did not calm all such spirits. Malicious tales abounded about the deception carried out by corpses. A dramatic chapter tells of dead warriors summoned by the Duke of Sardinia to counter gains by the Duke of Sicily. This "army of white riders" here "formed a battle line forty thousand strong" to win back a contested city. Therefore, even ghosts had their uses to win glory. As long as proper tribute was paid to clerical intermediaries, who prayed to settle accounts, all was well. In Northern Europe, Old Norse sagas presented a very sinister sort. Ghouls terrorized there.

These vignettes, once Christianized, prompted laity to confess and repent, lest they meet the same fate of the ghosts they conjured up and then challenged as to their bona fides. This deal meant that the living had to assist in balancing whatever accounts lay in arrears. Their ghostly visitors reported on what needed mending, and after these changes had been made by the living, the absolution of the spirits settled it. Although *The Penguin Book of the Dead* understates the reaction against the accumulation of enormous wealth by the Church and the abuses which followed this arrangement into medieval and early modern times, Bruce does offer relevant depictions of the aftermath of the Reformation. Protestants cited Augustine to prove the diabolical origin of revenants and apparitions, as well as the non-canonical and extra-Biblical nature of the proof-texts employed by Catholics to assert purgatory. Ludwig Lavater's *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Night* (1579) related a Zurich reformer's zeal in undermining Catholic arguments. He admitted many apparitions revealed themselves to the living.. But their credibility was suspect. Likely they were bad angels disguised as good. Until the spirit's intentions were manifested, the recipient best should keep silent. This connects to the final entry. Hamlet's reaction to the report of Horatio and his companions to the "goblin damn'd" on the ramparts of Elsinore, in Bruce's brief interpretation, demonstrates a distinction. Horatio and his comrades see the spirit as evil, in Protestant terms. However, Hamlet regards the ghost of his father as legitimate. Bruce propounds that not only does the ghost urge revenge for his untimely and unshriven demise, but that in "Remember me" bonds with his grieving son in a common acceptance of purgatory as the place from which the late King will not be rescued until the Prince carries out his promised plot. While I remain skeptical of this anthologist's closing argument, the value of his edition as a whole endures. The puzzles placed within *The Penguin Book of the Undead* provide venerable reminders of the questions many today still repeat. For today's readers inherit a temptation to peek inside the grave, or beneath the curtain dividing the living from the "undiscovered country" Hamlet longed to discern.

Strange book, but I liked it.

Professor Bruce provides the very best collection of primary source material regarding the Necromantic Arts and the science of the undead in literature. The text is in clean prose translation with excellent and accurate end notes. This book read first will put all other works in context. Get it.

not scary

not at all what i expected it to be.. very strange..

Boring. Dull. An unfortunate purchase. Largely a copy & paste job from letters of ancients & monastic texts. Didn't realize talk of spirits could be so dull and dry.

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