

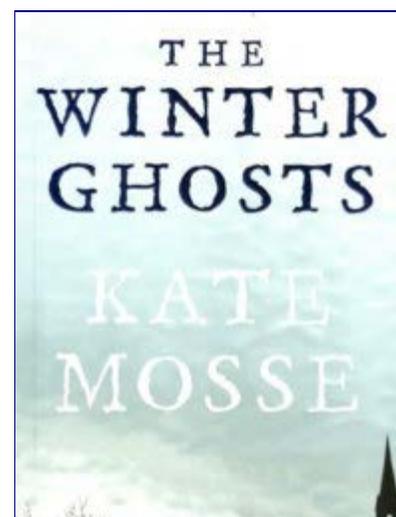
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Winter Ghosts
A Novel
by
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ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2014



This is a book of stories. Freddie finally locates a man who can translate a letter written in an obscure French dialect about

600 years old. The man wants to know how he got this letter, and thereupon hangs the long story which fills this novel. As this story unravels, other characters, such as Fabrissa, appear with stories to tell, and form a patchwork quilt of stories woven out of whole cloth and ghostly etheric fabric.

As Freddie drove his yellow Austin 7 saloon up into the mountains and encountered a blizzard, he remarked that "The temperature inside my little windscreen was barely higher than that outside." Reminds me of my 1951 MG TD who was so airy that on winter trips I found it best to carry a warm blanket for me and my passenger. Even with the top up and windows shut as tightly as possible, I could detect any slightest smell in my surrounding as I drove the tiny sports car, as did Freddie in his small British sedan.

[page 18] Through gaps between the window and the frame of the car slipped the acrid yet sweet smell of burning wood and resin. I saw flickering lights in little houses, waiters in long black aprons moving between tables in a café, and I ached to be part of it.

Are black aprons on waiter very common? I don't think so, but the author is setting a spooky table for her novel and pulls out words like *black*, *kill*, *dark*, or *shadowy*, etc. at every chance. Freddie had a passenger in his car, his brother George who died in the Great War and whose body was never found, but whose spirit haunted Freddie, and likely George accompanied his still-live brother, although unseen by Freddie, through the spooky mountains.

[page 20] Over ten years of mourning, my ability to engage with anyone other than George had ebbed away. He walked beside me and was the only person to whom I could unburden myself. I needed no one else.

This early in the novel, we earnestly wish for Freddie to find someone other than George that he could think about and unburden himself to. Fabrissa would become that person. Freddie's materialistic view of life shines somberly through when he called the desiccated corpses in a graveyard "sleepers in the damp earth."

[page 22] The stone tips of carved angels' wings and Christian crosses and the peaks of one or two more elaborate tombs were just visible above the high walls. I hesitated, tempted to visit the sleepers in the damp earth. I resisted the impulse. I knew better

than to linger among the dead.

One time he glimpsed a man who resembled his brother George, but the phantom disappeared as soon as Freddie's voice pierced the wintery night air, and he decided, "There was nobody there. There will never be." Like the best ghost stories, when Freddie encounters the ghosts as the title promises, he is not aware they are ghosts. But George is ever-present in his life as Freddie reminds us.

[page 25] The simple truth was that I was burdened by my life and the fact of George's death. The pointlessness of carrying on.

With hindsight, I see that all these emotions assaulted me simultaneously. Delusion and hope and longing, all tumbling one after the other like a falling line of dominoes. It was, after all, a path well worn. A decade of mourning leaves its footprints on the heart.

Whoa! I thought as I read that last sentence. Why should one trample one's own heart by a decade of mourning for a loved one? Especially when one could enliven one's heart with all the good memories of experiences of that loved one? As Eleanor Roosevelt is reputed to have said, "Many people will walk through your life, but only true friends will leave their footprints on your heart." These are the footprints one can benefit from: the loving acts of the beloved friend who has passed, which leave their loving traces behind like footprints on one's heart.

It was so bad for Freddie at the beginning of this novel that the telegram he received of George's death which read, MISSING IN ACTION. PRESUMED DEAD, would be a suitable metaphor for Freddie's own life for the past decade. Missing in action was George, in the war. Missing in action was Freddie, in life after the war. And now as the novel progresses, Freddie is also missing in action in a very real way, and could be presumed dead by others. Will George's epitaph become's Freddie's? Perhaps Freddie's cenotaph will read, "Known unto God", Rudyard Kipling's words which grace the unknown soldiers tombstones.

Freddie was headed into a blizzard which would shake up his life, tear him loose from George, and weld him together with Fabrissa, but he drove on aware only of the outside air getting colder and colder. It occurs to me how difficult it is avoid common metaphors like falling and dropping for decreasing temperatures, but consider that in a century or so, maybe even now, children will ask what does this sentence fragment mean: "the mercury was falling", because mercury thermometers are almost nowhere to be found today, already having been replaced by the ubiquitous red alcohol which forms the red line our 21st century analog thermometers, themselves being replaced by digital thermometers whose numbers may decrease or increase but they do not literally "drop" or "fall" or "rise" or "climb" as they do in our old-fashioned red- and silver-line thermometers(1).

Overcome by the cemeteries and war memorials for young men dying in battles like his brother George did, Freddie had to stop, er, *kill*, the engine of his Austin on a remote mountain road.

[page 43] I pulled over and killed the engine. My fragile good spirits scattered in an instant, replaced by familiar symptoms. Damp palms, dry throat, the familiar spike of pain in my stomach. I took off my cap and leather gloves, ran my fingers through my hair and covered my eyes. Sticky fingers smelling of hair oil and shame, that grief should still come so easily. After all the talking cures, the treatments and kindness, the kneeling at hard wooden pews at evensong, that I still carried with me a cracked heart that refused to heal.

Ah me, that acne should *come* to a teenager! *Cher pitie!* A Dr. Ellerbroeck wrote in a short essay in the *Mother Earth News* back in the 1970s that, when he showed teens how to change acne from a noun (a reified condition) into a transitive verb (a fluid process), their acne dried up and went away. All they needed was to take control of their condition by replacing their hopeless plaint, "I have acne" to "I am acne-ing." Notice how Freddie complained "that grief should still come so easily." To be honest, he should have replaced "talking cures" with "talking non-cures". He needed a strong dose of accepting his part in holding onto his grief. He could turn his grief from a thing into a process by saying, "I have been *grieving*,

up until now.” That deft application of the *limitation eraser*(2) could set him on the right path, a path which replaces his stagnant grief with a living *grieving process* and adds it to his personal history from now on. Like the teenagers whose faces cleared up when they stopped acne-ing, Freddie’s grief will clear away, remaining only as a memory relegated to his past life.

In 1978 I learned the *phobia* and *grieving* processes from Bandler and Grinder in workshops I attended. I learned how the cure for one process can be had by switching to the other process. To grasp how this works, one needs to understand the First Person and Third Person processes for remembering an event.

In the First Person, one sees one's self inside the image of one's body in the memory. This is the *phobia* process. Whatever they might be feeling in the memory, they will feel in the present moment. If they see a snake at their feet, ready to strike at their ankles, their heart will race, their respiration rate increase, and they will feel the complex set of feelings we call fear. What I have just described, let us call that the *phobia process*.

In the Third Person, one sees one's self standing apart from one's body (like in a movie) and watching what happens. Let us call that the *grieving* process. They will have a feeling about the situation, perhaps interest, wanting to see if the snake just slithers away, which it indeed might if one stands still and quiet. Note: standing still and quiet is not an option for someone using the First Person process (the *phobia process*), all of which makes them liable to scream and move suddenly, provoking the snake to strike. For reasons which will become clear in a bit, let's call the Third Person process, the *grieving process*.

Using the Third Person way of remembering, Freddie remembers all the good times he had with his brother George as though he were watching a movie of the two of them together, perhaps we could call the movie, "The Family Life of George and Freddie", and Freddie, watching this movie, can only feel bad, knowing that he can never have those good times with George ever again. He is stuck, clearly up to his hiking boot tops, in the *grieving process*, unable to extract himself. He even disowns responsibility for what he is actively doing by saying "grief still comes so easily." Freddie has, in effect, nominalized the process of grieving, changed it from a living action (a *verb*) into a reified condition (a *noun*).

But soon he meets Fabrissa, he falls in love, and when she later goes away, missing in action, what does Freddie do? He keeps seeing himself with Fabrissa (First Person) and feeling the love he felt for her when she was with him. In other words, Freddie is now using the *phobia process* to create a good feelings in himself about his loved one. He is seeing himself sitting next to Fabrissa, perhaps, looking to his left, right into her eyes, and feeling loved.

What if Freddie began using the phobia process whenever he thinks of George from then on? Then instead of feeling bad, he will begin feeling good. Maybe that is indeed what happens as Freddie begins to focus more on Fabrissa and less on George toward the end of the novel. (3)

When Freddie found lodging at Madame Galy’s Inn, she nursed him back to health and invited him to go to the Feast of St. Etienne’s at the Town Hall. In Nulle, a tiny village in a remote mountainous section, there were few clues as to whether Freddie was in the 13th Century or the 20th Century. While being introduced, Freddie offered his hand to Guillaume Marty, a friendly man who welcomed him to the feast, but who did not offer his hand in return. This would be a clue that perhaps Freddie was not in modern times, but there were scant other clues, since this was an ancient feast which was celebrated as in olden days, but modern day handshakes would remain even though ancient flambeaux replaced more modern lighting and everyone was in ancient modes of dress. When he sat down next to Fabrissa, it was love at first sight as Freddie was hit by a time wave of feeling from the future which sent his pulse racing.

[page 105] Slowly, we managed to find a way of talking to one another, Fabrissa and I. With the help of the sour, rich wine, my pulse slowed to its usual rhythm. But I was aware of every inch of her, as if she were giving off some kind of electric charge. Her white skin and blue dress and her hair the color of jet. I felt clumsy in comparison,

awkward. I took refuge in innocuous questions and managed, against the odds, to keep my voice steady and calm.

In an eerie comment during Freddie's relating to her the effect that the death of his brother George had on him, Fabrissa explains her own presence in Freddie's life, which Freddie misses.

[page 122] "The dead leave their shadows, an echo of the space within which once they lived. They haunt us, never fading or growing older as we do. The loss we grieve is not just their futures but our own."

At this point it becomes clear to the Reader if not to Freddie that the Feast is happening some six hundred years in the past and that Freddie has left his body in a fevered sleep at Chez Galy to join with these *winter ghosts*, ghosts who have haunted these hills for centuries and have now chosen Freddie as their savior. The plot of this novel is "Freddie the hero comes to town." Freddie has come to save two sets of residents of the town, the quick and the dead, by locating the bones of the winter ghosts so that they may have a proper burial and stop troubling the still-living residents.

When Fabrissa tells Freddie her story, it contains the story of St. Etienne's Feast which matches what Freddie had just experienced, two soldiers coming in and a brawl ensuing. Fabrissa and others escaped the hall through a tunnel and took refuge in a large cavern in the mountains which the soldiers eventually found and blocked up the exits from. As she leaves Freddie, she gives him his marching orders, "Come and find me" and "Find us. Then you can bring us home."

We begin to understand the spirits in the mountains as the source of the book's title as Guillaume who came with his father to repair Freddie's Austin translated his father's old words.

[page 212] "He says that although they sing of the Cers winds crying in the trees when the snows come, it is the voices of those trapped in the mountains." He hesitated. "The winter ghosts."

This novel is a ghost story with a pedigree, with a long history which unwinds before our eyes as we follow our hero Freddie on his path to redemption as he redeems the long-dead of the mountains and helps bootstrap the region to a full and vibrant life in the modern age.

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1.

Note: given that the first barometers used a column of mercury to indicate the atmospheric pressure, "falling mercury" could also be used to refer to an approaching storm because the higher the winds the lower the barometric pressure. Mercury's low vapor pressure made it the only suitable liquid for barometers which have a vacuum over a column of liquid, and mercury's heaviness made for a short 30" column of mercury to represent average atmospheric pressure at sea level.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

Footnote 2.

The limitation eraser is a way of releasing one's limitation as soon one recognizes its presence. One simply pauses (after recognizing one has stated a limitation) and adds the closing phrase to the sentence "up until now". The comma indicates the need for a pause to take a deep breath before saying *up until now*. Without the pause, one can hold onto one's limitation because one's inner state is not changed. See Matherne's Rule [No. 9](#) for further explication.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

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**Footnote 3.**

Bandler and Grinder in the workshop explained how one can use the Third Person or *grieving process* to cure someone of a phobia. By leading the phobic to switch from First Person to Third Person, they become able to watch peacefully while their lifetime phobic event is played out. With this example of one-time learning, the dreaded phobic event will no longer contain the charge of fear it did before, and they will be cured.

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