Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016)

Despite enjoying critical success in the 1950s and '60s, Shirley Jackson's works lay nearly forgotten for several decades after her sudden death in 1965. Her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, published some of her works posthumously in 1966 and 1968, but his untimely death in 1970 ended his endeavours to guarantee her literary legacy. The Hyman family carefully packed the couple's papers carefully away in boxes, which were later donated to the Library of Congress. For the next three decades, Jackson's most popular story, 'The Lottery' (1948), remained her strongest link to a reading public. Only two of her later novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), stayed consistently on bookstore shelves. For those who became interested in Jackson's writing, the only places to go were libraries, used bookstores, and the archives of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress.

In contrast to that relative neglect, the 2000s saw her works finally recognised as vital to modern gothic canon, especially by scholars of female gothic and suburban gothic. Since the publication of Bernice M. Murphy's collection, *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* (2005), something of a resurgence in scholarly interest has been taking place. Many of the essays contain research conducted in the Jackson archive at the Library of Congress. Even more beneficially, previously unpublished material has been released from the archive, in the form of a new collection of short stories and essays, *Let Me Tell You* (2015). Coinciding with these, new scholarly material has also begun to emerge, such as Melanie R. Anderson and Lisa Kröger's *Shirley Jackson, Influences and Confluences* (2016).

Concurrent with the appearance of research, fiction writers who claim the gothic as either their favoured genre or as an inspiring influence, such as Neil Gaiman, Joyce Carol Oates, and Stephen King, have sung Jackson's praises in various print and social media. Oates's commentary on Jackson's works is both silently and outspokenly supportive of the value of Jackson's writing: Oates edited the Library of Congress publication *Shirley Jackson: Novels and Stories* (2010), and in 2016, wrote an article entitled 'Shirley Jackson in Love and Death' for the *New York Review of Books*, which reviewed Franklin's biography of Jackson, while discussing Jackson's life and literary works.[1] Similarly, Gaiman has mentioned Jackson's importance on several occasions, including in his list of female writers who

[1] See Joyce Carol Oates, 'Shirley Jackson in Love and Death', *The New York Review of Books*, 27 October 2016 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/10/27/shirley-jackson-in-love-death/> [accessed 27 September 2017].

influenced his writing,[2] in his blog as a recommended reading,[3] upon his nomination for the 2011 Shirley Jackson Awards (for best anthology and best short story; he won for best short story),[4] and in newspaper articles.[5] Stephen King is much more specific in his praise of Jackson's writing, significantly including her works in his book on horror fiction, *Danse Macabre* (1981), where he states that *The Haunting of Hill House*'s opening lines are 'the sort of quiet epiphany every writer hopes for: words that somehow transcend the sum of the parts'.[6] The value of these authors' praise of Jackson's works first and foremost lies in its power to capture the imagination a new generation of readers who will enjoy her books. Their praise also helps canonise her works as major contributions to classic twentieth-century American fiction.

Yet none of these recent publications have uncovered as much rich information nor have as much potential to inspire new scholarship as Ruth Franklin's award-winning *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, which has been acclaimed by numerous critics, fiction writers, and scholars as restoring/repositioning Jackson's literary legacy. The book has won several awards thus far, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography (2016), the Edgar Award for Critical/Biographical (2017), and the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Nonfiction (2017). It has been on major lists of recommended novels, such as that of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.[7] Most major news outlets have posted favourable reviews, but each seems to focus on a different aspect of the

[2] The list was a response on Twitter to literary journalist Gay Talese's inability to mention any women writers who had inspired him. Jackson was among the women in Neil Gaiman's list of inspirations. Interestingly, the list went viral and now has a permanent home on the New York Public Library website. See Lauren Weiss, *Neil Gaiman on Women Writers Who Inspired Him* <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/04/06/neil-gaiman-women-writers> [accessed 25 September 2017].

[3] The list of recommended reads moved to his publisher's website, but two of Jackson's books remain on the list: 'The Lottery' and *The Haunting of Hill House*. See 'Book Recommendations from Neil Gaiman', *All Hallow's Read* <http://www.allhallowsread.com/2012/10/02/from-neil-gaiman/> [accessed 25 September 2017].

[4] The blog entry not only explains how the awards honour Jackson's literary legacy (they're awarded to authors who have written a significant work in suspense, dark fantasy, and horror fiction), but also encourages readers to pick up her short stories, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. See Gaiman, 'From the Desk of Mr Amanda F Palmer' <http://journal.neilgaiman.com/2011/07/from-desk-of-mr-amanda-f-palmer.html> [accessed 21 September 2017].

[5] See for example Gaiman quoted David Barnett, 'The Haunting of Shirley Jackson: Was the Gothic Author's Life Really as Bleak as her Fiction?', *The Independent*, 1 August 2015 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-haunting-of-shirley-jackson-was-the-gothic-authors-life-really-as-bleak-as-her-fiction-10428397.html> [accessed 21 September 2017].

[6] See Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), p. 310. The quotation in full reads, 'I think there are few if any descriptive passages in the English language that are any finer than this; it is the sort of quiet epiphany every writer hopes for: words that somehow transcend the sum of the parts'. King also compares *Hill House* favourably to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* in the same passage, naming these books as significant psychological suspense novels which imply ghosts but have none. King has also included *Hill House* in his Stephen King Horror Library publication series (2003), penning the introduction himself.

[7] For a more complete list of awards and book list mentions, see Ruth Franklin's website <http://ruthfranklin.net/author/books/shirley-jackson/> [accessed 4 October 2017].

biography, emphasising its value as a multifaceted work. For example, the *Guardian* byline reads, 'a sympathetic biography argues for a feminist reappraisal of a tortured genius of American gothic', and considers Jackson's value as a gothic author whose fiction focused on the experiences of women.[8] Elaine Showalter's review in the *Washington Post* spotlights Jackson's use of writing as an expression of her inner world, her interest in the innate evil of human beings, and her desire for freedom.[9] These and many others are supremely complimentary; Showalter even states that Franklin has reawakened interest in Jackson's 'genius'.[10]

Although a biography of Jackson was already extant, namely Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (1988), it lacked depth, and de-emphasised Jackson's impressive ability. Instead, it primarily discussed her balancing of career and family. Citations are comparatively few, and Oppenheimer's opinions are inserted liberally throughout in ornate prose, lending a sensational feel to the text. Passages regarding Jackson's relationship with her husband are particularly purple and eyebrow-raising: 'Stanley's lively interest in good-looking women was certainly real enough. Yet the image of the mad Dionysian artist, wild and lusty, unbound by the rules, also happened to be one he was particularly fond of assuming.'[11] While some extant letters from the archive, such as those between Stanley and his friend Walter Bernstein, seem to imply extra-marital dalliances as both fact and fantasy, it hardly seems historically accurate to describe them as a penchant for bacchanal.

It therefore would seem that Oppenheimer did not thoroughly examine or perhaps did not have access to a great deal of extant archival material related to Jackson's authorial life. There is little in that biography to indicate that Jackson was a rising star in the American

[8] Sarah Churchwell, '*Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* by Ruth Franklin Review — Beyond Spooky', *Guardian*, 10 February 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/10/shirley-jackson-ruth-franklin-review-a-rather-haunted-life> [accessed 2 October 2017].
[9] Elaine Showalter, 'Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life', *Washington Post*, 22 September 2016 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/shirley-jackson-a-rather-haunted-life/2016/09/15/4293b85e-5f2b-11e6-af8e-54aa2e849447_story.html?utm_term=.a61754589491> [accessed 2 October 2017].
[10] However, not all the reviews are complimentary. Charles McGrath of the *New York Times* has few kind words about Jackson's work. He is more interested in Franklin's efforts to show Jackson as a writer caught between devotion to her craft and taking care of her family in the mid-twentieth century. See Charles McGrath, 'The Case for Shirley Jackson', *New York Times*, 30 September 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/books/review/shirley-jackson-ruth-franklin.html?_r=0> [accessed 2 October 2017].
[11] See Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988), p. 107.

literary world of the mid-twentieth century.[12] This is because, unlike Franklin, Oppenheimer relied mainly on interviews, publisher's notes, and newspaper articles (which tend towards the sensational). These she intermixed with interpolated correspondence from the archives and Jackson's fiction. More importantly, Oppenheimer's book is dismissive of Jackson's connections to other authors. For example, Oppenheimer is indifferent to the idea that Jackson could have had an intellectual relationship with Ralph Ellison, stating instead that Jackson befriended Mrs Ellison, and that Stanley Hyman, Jackson's husband, influenced Ralph. This codifying of their behaviour in a stereotypical mid-twentieth-century heteronormative fashion bolstered Oppenheimer's claim that Stanley was the driving force of Jackson's authorial vision.[13] Yet archival matter from both the Ellison Papers and the Stanley Edgar Hyman Papers at the Library of Congress would indicate that Oppenheimer's opinion is not based in fact. Franklin makes clear in her biography that both Jackson and her husband were influential intellectual forces for Ellison.[14] Even more unfortunately, the second half of Oppenheimer's book drifts away from Jackson's stories almost entirely, focusing primarily on family matters and speculation on her mental health at a time when Jackson was increasingly focused on her writing. At the same time, it ignores almost all of the material in the archive relating to issues with her publisher and her agent, as well as an increasing amount of correspondence with other famous contemporary authors towards the end of her life.

In contrast, Franklin provides us with a biography that not only goes beyond the Oppenheimer's insufficient efforts; it also details Jackson's personal and literary lives with clear prose and little speculation. Even when Franklin integrates literary analyses of Jackson's novels and short stories, she never loses sight of the important separation between fictional characters and their author. That is to say, Oppenheimer often gives in to the fantasy that Jackson's narrators are in some sense the author herself, but Franklin makes a clear separation between the two. In parallel examinations of *The Bird's Nest* (1954), a deeply psychological novel about a young women's struggle with multiple personality disorder, the two come to totally opposite conclusions. Oppenheimer interpreted the book as a reflection of Jackson's personal dissonance: 'The subject of multiple personality disorder attracted her in a

[12] As Franklin helpfully points out, Jackson's name is mentioned alongside Truman Capote, Eudora Welty, and others as one of a 'group of emerging writers' in the early 1950s. See Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016), p. 277.
[13] See Oppenheimer, pp. 103-04.
[14] For example, Ellison asked for her advice on *Invisible Man* (1952) from both Stanley and Shirley, but it was Shirley's page proofs from *Hangsaman* (1951) that he used to help with his editing. See Franklin, pp. 276-77.

very personal way — Shirley knew that she too, in a sense, had several different personalities, all jostling against each other in uneasy truce.'[15] She merely examines the characters/personalities in light of Jackson's own background. In contrast, Franklin treads very carefully, knowing that Jackson's interest in personality disorders went back to her college days, when she took a course on abnormal psychology, or perhaps even before.[16] Franklin admits that writing *The Bird's Nest* caused Jackson deep emotional distress, enough to make her physically ill.[17] She also mentions how the themes of the novel — feeling motherless, implied physical abuse by a partner or carer, yearning for affection — might have been unresolved sources of stress and angst for Jackson. Nevertheless, as Franklin helpfully points out, these themes reappear many times in Jackson's work: in *Hangsaman* (1951), in *The Haunting of Hill House*, and in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as well as in her short fiction. Franklin states that the more disturbing content of these novels, such as matricide and molestation, are not meant to be read as literal desires or events in Jackson's life.[18] Thus, Franklin's *Shirley Jackson* shows the biographer's devotion to fastidious and sensible analysis of fictional works, considering the events of the author's life and the emotions that surrounded them.

In addition to her observations on Jackson's interest in the psychological both in real life and for her fiction, Franklin comments at length on Jackson's use of the house as a focal point of mental disease.[19] Further, she remarks that the houses in all of Jackson's major works, especially her final three novels, are significant: '[each] has its own distinct personality and indeed functions as a kind of character in the book'.[20] In her discussion of the house in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Franklin states it is 'physically at a remove from the village beneath it, surrounded by a barrier'.[21] Removing the characters from the town shows their physical isolation as well as the mental obstacles that prevent them from participating in village life. Jackson carefully planned such physical spaces in her novels (she even drew sketches, which are reprinted in *Shirley Jackson*) to reflect the themes as well as

[15] Oppenheimer, p. 162.
[16] Although it appears Jackson did not save all her college notebooks, she seems to have kept quite a lot of information from a course she took at Syracuse on abnormal psychology. These are stored in the Library of Congress archive.
[17] Franklin, p. 348.
[18] Franklin, p. 350.
[19] This should be of interest to gothic scholarship, as the house is a major motif in gothic fiction. For examples of commentary on the house in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle,* see Franklin, pp. 444-46, 449-50; for *The Haunting of Hill House*, see pp. 409-19.
[20] Franklin, p. 409.
[21] Franklin, p. 444.

the mental state of the characters. Franklin's insights are therefore important to the inclusion of Jackson's house-centred stories in the domestic-gothic sub-genre.

What is more, although the houses in works like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* or *The Haunting of Hill House* have been treated as gothic in previous scholarship, Franklin implies that we might also consider Jackson's semi-autobiographical works, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), as possessing similar themes and imagery. Franklin reminds us that the title *Raising Demons* was not the book's sole allusion to the occult: 'the book again included a nod to her studies in witchcraft, with an epigraph describing the conjuration of demons taken from the Grimoire of Honorius, a compendium of magical knowledge from around 1800'.[22] The house, as a locus of familial emotion, is also a place of magic and horror, even when Jackson is discussing the antics of her children.

Equally significant to these valuable textual and biographical analyses, *Shirley Jackson* contains the information that Oppenheimer overlooked, or perhaps could not make sense of — that is, the jumble of notes, letters, and discarded drafts belonging to Jackson and her husband, currently housed in the US Library of Congress archives. This archive is especially confusing, with many unlabelled and misfiled materials, so Franklin's creation of a clear and concise timeline of Jackson's personal and literary life should be considered a laudable achievement. As a fellow scholar who has conducted research in these achieves over the past decade, I cannot help but stand in awe of how Franklin has made sense of Jackson's earlier diaries from her teenage and college years, as well as her ability to read between the lines about Jackson's difficult relationship with her family, and later, her husband. As well as the archives at the Library of Congress, Franklin has also drawn extensively on other archives and private collections related to Jackson's life and works. Free of numbered footnotes that might break up the text for many readers, but nevertheless containing copious annotations, *Shirley Jackson* uses the convention of indexing citations at the back of the book. At the same time, the book generously contains a list of the relevant archives and persons that provided the source material for the book, so a scholarly reader would know where to conduct further research.

Unravelling the mystery of the archives has enabled Franklin to provide her readers with minute details regarding the literary value of Jackson's marriage to her professor/writer husband, the connections they both had to the East Coast and Midwestern literati (friends included the Ellisons, the Malamuds, and the Burkes), her love of music (especially folk

[22] Franklin, p. 364.

songs and jazz), and her increasing popularity as a speaker and teacher at literary retreats and seminars in the last decade of her life (she became a regular at the Middlebury Bread Loaf writers' conferences, where she worked with the likes of Robert Frost and Julia Child). *Shirley Jackson* carefully illuminates the relationship that Jackson had with her editors, publishers, and agents, extrapolating the story from diary entries and letters, and not just from interviews. Franklin also adds details contextualising these relationships, explaining that Jackson eventually shared an editor with authors like John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, Marianne Moore, and Graham Greene.[23] While these details are fascinating, perhaps the only drawback to *Shirley Jackson* is this copious detail, which some readers may find superfluous, especially in the case of information on Jackson's husband.

While she was alive, Jackson's writing spanned a broad range of genres, from humorous 'housewife' tales to serious psychological horror. But contemporary critics, who preferred women writers to produce either serious fiction or light-hearted, family-centred stories, had an immense amount of trouble labelling her work.[24] In several interviews, she became annoyed with their pigeonholing and ironically played up her interest in the occult. This led the news media to link her with images of witches, tarot readings, and ghosts.[25] Yet Franklin does not shy away from considering Jackson as a horror author, or as an author with an interest in the occult, the supernatural, and the gothic. She also does not try to overlook Jackson's semi-autobiographical family stories. Instead, *Shirley Jackson* provides a balanced examination of both Jackson's uncanny fiction and her family-friendly stories, considering the advantages of the duality in juxtaposition. Franklin concludes that Jackson was able to manage both genres because they are two sides of the same coin. She also uses this conclusion to explain why the duality of Jackson's works has led to them being misread and

[23] The editor, Pascal (Pat) Covici, became an important influence on her writing and believed in her talent as an author. She dedicated *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* to him. See Franklin, p. 187. See also pp. 420-424.
[24] In letters to her mother and father, Jackson defended herself against the idea that negative reviews of her serious fiction might damage her public image as a wife and mother and prevent her success as a writer of domestic stories (her mother encouraged her to concentrate on the 'family stories'). But from a modern perspective, writing in both genres lends great significance to Jackson's work. A. M. Holmes has considered this problem at length in her introduction to *The Lottery* and elsewhere. See A. M. Holmes, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), p. xi-xii. See also Holmes's podcast interview with *The New Yorker*, 'A. M. Holmes Reads Shirley Jackson' <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/fiction/a-m-homes-reads-shirley-jackson> [accessed 18 October 2017].
[25] One strong example may be found in her *New York Times* obituary, in which the editors assign her to both genres of the 'domestic' and the 'macabre'. Further, they problematically assert her eccentricities and wifeliness over and above her authorial abilities: 'Because Miss Jackson wrote so frequently about ghosts and witches and magic, it was said that she used a broomstick for a pen. But the fact was that she used a typewriter — and then only after she had completed her household chores.' See 'Shirley Jackson, Author of Horror Classic, Dies', *New York Times*, 10 August 1965 <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1965/08/10/101560334.html?pageNumber=29> [accessed 18 October 2017].

miscategorised not only during her life, but also after her death; even Jackson's obituaries marked her as 'witchy', despite the fact that even her so-called horror classic, *The Haunting of Hill House*, arguably has no ghosts and no monster, only psychological terror. Franklin insists we take Jackson's oeuvre seriously for what it is, not for how the press labelled it and its author.

Overall, Franklin has written a biography with all the detail and finesse that a writer of Shirley Jackson's calibre deserves. It stresses that Jackson wrote valuable and complex fictions and that as an author she lived a rich, imaginative, and productive life. This biography has reawakened a reading public's interest in the full range of Jackson's oeuvre, from her gothic tales to her darkly humorous family sketches. *Shirley Jackson* will hopefully serve as a point of reference for existing scholars interested in Jackson, as well as a point of departure for new scholars to discover the multifaceted nature of Jackson's life, works, and connections to the twentieth-century literary world.

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