

WHISPERS FROM THE GR



AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:
GHOSTS

From creepy stories told around the campfire to the latest scary movie, ghosts have an enduring grip on our imaginations—even though there is no proof that ghosts even exist. As you read, think about why we are so fascinated by ghosts.

“They’re coming to kill you.”

Sarah Winchester stared in terror at Adam Coons, trying to comprehend the chilling words he had just uttered.

“Who is coming?” Sarah whispered, gripping the arms of her chair. Outside, rain lashed angrily at the windows.

“They’re coming for you,” Coons replied in a raspy voice.

Just then, the windows flew open with a gust of wind and a crack of thunder. Coons seemed to vibrate, his eyes rolling back in his head.

“I’m so scared! Make them stop!” Sarah cried.

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
Reads like fiction—
but it's all true

A TERRIFIED WOMAN, A HAUNTED HOUSE, AND THE MYSTERY OF ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS GHOST STORIES **BY KATIA BACHKO**

AVE

"They will not stop until you are rotting in the earth!" Coons shrieked.

Suddenly, the lights in the room went out, plunging Sarah and Coons into total darkness.

Out for Vengeance

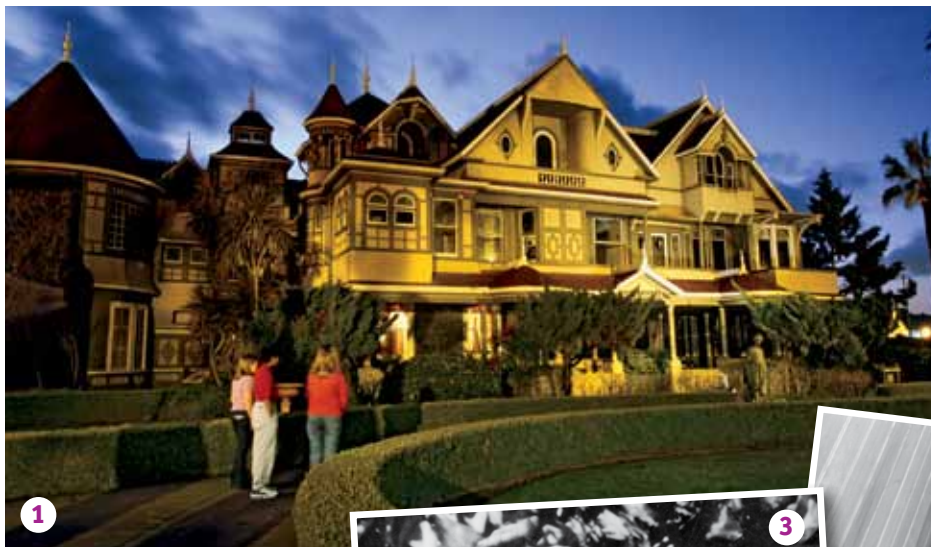
The year was 1882, and Coons was a famous medium. A medium

is a person who claims to be able to communicate with the dead. That fateful afternoon in Sarah's home in New Haven, Connecticut, Coons was attempting to summon the ghost of Sarah's dead husband.

It was a tragic turn of events that led Sarah to seek Coons's help. Not long before, Sarah had been a bright young woman with

a promising future and no reason to worry about ghosts. She was married to a wealthy man named William Winchester. They were deeply in love. They had a baby girl, and their fortune was vast: William's father had made millions when he invented the Winchester rifle—a famous gun used in the Civil War.





2



1

1 & 2: The Winchester House is well preserved—and a major tourist attraction; **3.** One of the few surviving photographs of Sarah Winchester; **4.** The Winchester House has many bizarre features, including this staircase that leads nowhere.



3



4

Life was grand.

But Sarah's happiness was short-lived. Just 42 days after she was born, Sarah's daughter suddenly died. Sarah was still mourning her child 10 years later, when William died of **tuberculosis**.

Utterly brokenhearted, Sarah was haunted by her grief. She felt she was being pursued by a menacing presence, some evil spirit that wanted to do her harm. She had hoped that Coons would soothe her **rattled** nerves and help connect her with the man she so desperately missed. Instead, he did quite the opposite. According to lore, he told her that the ghosts of men killed by Winchester rifles were after her. These **vengeful** spirits, said Coons, had murdered her daughter and husband, and now

they wanted to kill her as well. The only way Sarah would be safe was if she built a house—a place where the spirits of these dead men could go to find peace. But if Sarah ever stopped construction on the house, she would die.

Sarah, vulnerable and depressed, completely accepted what Coons told her. In 1884, she moved to San Jose, California, where she knew no one, and immediately began construction on what would become one of the most bizarre homes in America. For the next 38 years, carpenters worked on the house 24 hours a

day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

So goes the legend of Sarah Winchester.

Hunting for Ghosts

In Sarah's day—before movies or television—visiting a medium was an extremely popular form of entertainment. Many Americans thought it was possible to communicate with the spirits of those who had died. Mediums like Adam Coons were thought to be bridges to the “other side”—that is, the unknown world beyond the grave. They often achieved celebrity status. Imagine being able to have a conversation with a loved one who

1 - RICHARD T. NOWITZ/CORBIS; 2 - MANNY CRISOSTOMO/SACRAMENTO BEE/GETTY IMAGES; 3 - BETTMANN/CORBIS; 4 - BETTMANN/CORBIS



had passed away! People would wait in line for hours for the chance to consult the latest medium—in the same way fans today might wait in line to get tickets to a Justin Bieber concert.

Of course, not everyone was convinced; many mediums were exposed as liars who tricked their grief-stricken customers for money. Yet reports of ghost encounters became so widespread that in 1854, the Senate debated whether to create a scientific commission to investigate **paranormal** activity. (In the end, it decided not to do so.) Soon, “ghost hunters” were exploring haunted houses and looking for paranormal activity all over America.

Things haven’t changed much in the past 100 years. Today, ghosts are as fascinating (and sometimes as terrifying) to us as ever. Many best-selling novels and blockbuster movies center around the supernatural. And currently, more than 10 reality shows on TV are about the real-life search for ghosts.

One of the most popular is *Ghost Hunters*. Each week, some 3 million viewers tune in to the SyFy Channel to watch cast members investigate haunted houses around the country. Often, the ghosts they pursue are not the punishing, menacing spirits of Hollywood horror flicks or the vengeful ghosts that **allegedly** frightened Sarah. They tend to be gentle spirits that linger because of unfinished business, something that must be resolved before they can move on.

Fact or Fiction?

Why does the idea of a ghost—real or fictional—resonate? After all, the existence of ghosts has never been proved.

In part, ghost stories are a good

source of harmless entertainment. Most viewers watch shows like *Ghost Hunters* with the same **skepticism** that they bring to *Jersey Shore* or any other reality show. In each episode, producers use scary sounds, dark lighting, and shaky camera effects to create an air of excitement and suspense—even when nothing is happening. Part of the fun is guessing how it might be faked.

But there is also something **alluring** about the idea of a ghost, something that plays to our deepest curiosity about life after death. It’s common for people in mourning to talk out loud to someone who has died—not because they expect an answer, but because they





One way *Ghost Hunters'* Grant Wilson (left) and Jason Hawes look for paranormal activity is by measuring temperature changes in supposedly haunted rooms.

think that person is watching over them and can hear them. Believing that the ghost of a lost friend or relative is with you is a way to hang on to them.

“People want to know what’s happening to their loved ones, and what they themselves are going to go through when they pass away,” says Adam Berry, an investigator on *Ghost Hunters*. “They are always looking for hope that there is something beyond this.”

Still, not everyone is convinced that trying to communicate with ghosts is a good idea. “Every person is going to deal with grief at some point in their lives,” Andrew Getzfeld, a psychology professor in New Jersey, points out. “If you say someone’s ghost is still here, you may not be dealing with reality.”

That seems to be what

happened to Sarah Winchester. At her most vulnerable, Sarah was set on a bizarre path that would come to rule her entire life.

A Cursed Obsession

There are many theories about what really happened when Sarah moved to San Jose. According to some, the rumors about her obsession with the spirit world were just that—rumors.

Other accounts claim that she spent the rest of her days alone with her sadness, tormented by fear of angry spirits. She was said to spend her nights shut up in her room, speaking to her dead husband. Each morning, she would draw up a new **blueprint** for the carpenters based—she said—on what William’s ghost had told her. She built whole floors, then

demolished them. She ordered carpenters to construct rooms with 13 walls and staircases that led nowhere. Some thought these dizzying floor plans were meant to confuse the ghosts that pursued her through the dark hallways of her cursed mansion. Others speculated that Sarah simply made mistakes in her designs that she never bothered to fix.

As Sarah’s mansion grew, so did her **eccentricity**. She became a **recluse**. It seemed she had more interest in the dead than in the living. The only people allowed inside her home were workers and her closest friends and relatives. Wild reports circulated around town of strange noises coming from the estate. It was widely believed that the Winchester House was, indeed, haunted.

A Tragic Legacy

Construction on the Winchester House did not cease until Sarah's death in 1922. By then, the house had more than 150 rooms, including 40 bedrooms and two ballrooms, 47 fireplaces, 17 chimneys, two basements, and three elevators. In the end, Sarah spent \$5.5 million on the estate.

Soon after Sarah's death, the Winchester House was declared a landmark. Today it is a tourist destination that attracts thousands of curious visitors every year. Many of them report hearing voices and feeling the touch of ghostly hands. It is rumored that the ghost of Sarah Winchester herself can be seen drifting through the corridors.

Numerous psychics have declared that the Winchester House is haunted. However, when the cast of *Ghost Hunters* investigated the estate, they found no evidence of anything supernatural.

No matter what you choose to believe, though, one thing is certain: The Winchester House stands as a haunting monument to a broken heart. ●

A POETRY CONNECTION

Ghosts often represent a connection to the past, as in this beautiful poem by Valerie Worth. **Why do you think this poem is titled "Haunted House"?**



Haunted House

By Valerie Worth

Its echoes,
Its aching stairs,
Its doors gone stiff
At the hinges,

Remind us of its
Owners, who
Grew old, who
Died, but

Who are still
Here: leaning
In the closet like
That curtain rod,

Sleeping on the cellar
Shelf like this
Empty
Jelly jar.

FROM ALL THE SMALL POEMS AND FOURTEEN MORE BY VALERIE WORTH. TEXT COPYRIGHT ©1994 BY VALERIE WORTH. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX.

CONTEST

Write About Ghost Stories

You just read a story about one of the most famous ghost legends in America. Why do you think ghost stories have an enduring grip on our imaginations? Write a paragraph answering this question. Be sure to use the poem, details from the article, and the photographs and captions to support your opinion. Send it to **HAUNTED HOUSE CONTEST**. Five winners will each receive *Dark Waters* by Catherine MacPhail.

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