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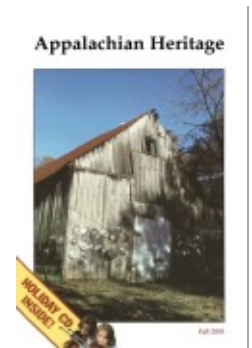
*Ghosts across Kentucky* by William Lynwood Montell (review)

Marshall Myers

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can be. In short, he uses the bizarre circumstances of his rebirth as an opportunity to make some real differences in lives around him.

Mr. Burgess, a native West Virginian, does an excellent job of coloring his characters with language and imagery, depicting the regional environment with flavor. He has whittled an old theme into an unusual but very relevant story about life, fate and the personal choice to change one's destiny. Balancing clever humor with hope, *Once to Die* is an engaging, entertaining and thoughtful read.

—Deirdre H. Gage

Montell, William Lynwood. *Ghosts across Kentucky*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 258 pages. Paperback. \$17.00.

Rattling chains! Lights that come on by themselves! Headless bodies mounting the backs of horses! Ghosts of people murdered! Spooky cemeteries where spirits mysteriously appear! It's all enough to scare a poor reader spitless.

Folklorist and former professor at Western Kentucky University, William Lynwood Montell, with a little help from his students, newspapers, and libraries, has collected a book full of these delicious, scary, puzzling, mysterious and unexplained happenings throughout the state.

In his intriguing introduction, Montell notes that Kentucky was settled by people from everywhere—from England to Ireland to Germany to parts of Africa. This rich mix of different nationalities brought with them the belief in the supernatural and the need to pass on a wide variety of tales, especially gruesome, grisly ghost tales. Many of these horror stories from the Old World display recurring themes like ghosts under bridges, headless riders and eerie ghosts of those who seem bent on finding their murderers. But when the tales and the tellers arrived in Kentucky, the characters and locations changed to fit the circumstances of the Commonwealth. Yet one thing remained the same: The stories dealt with events that the tellers were unable to explain any other way than as paranormal happenings.

Ghost stories, Montell maintains, "often provide Kentuckians with meaningful historical ties with their ancestors and with the family home place." Such stories introduced younger family members "to the names and actions of dead family members whom they never knew personally." A way, if you will, of using stories to bind generations together.

Montell explains that before the days of radio and television, sitting on the back porch late at night telling ghost stories was a vivid and popular form of entertainment for families living in the far reaches of the mountains and rolling prairies. Given that Kentuckians as a whole are masterful storytellers anyway, readers will quickly understand how frightening these tales could be to young and old alike. Amazingly, though, even well into the latter days of the twentieth century, reports of paranormal phenomena still exist across the state. In fact, many of the stories contained in *Ghosts across Kentucky* happened in recent times, a sign that this brand of tale will surely survive competition from radio, television and the movies, as it ought, since stories this powerful deserve re-telling many times over.

Their popularity, Montell asserts, is due, in part, to a very important factor: The storytellers actually believed in the stories themselves, an element that adds depth to the believability of the tale. Ghost stories, Montell argues, "are typically told by individuals who firmly believe they encountered, through sound, sight, or feeling, the disembodied spirit of a deceased person or animal, which, by means unknown to them, has materialized or manifested itself." Readers will quickly understand why the teller *does* believe these stories, which seemingly have no plausible explanation other than as visitations from the spirit world.

Particularly disturbing can be spirits that appear to several different people at different times. How could it be, the believer asks, that separate people could see a vision rising from a river, only to learn later that other people had seen the same young girl in the same pink nightgown at the same spot? This is not a book you want to read alone at night in an old, crooked house. Readers will often try to explain a ghostly event using the tools of science, but they will come away wondering, indeed, are there really such things as ghosts? Three professors from Western Kentucky University, perhaps bent on explaining the Middle Bridge Ghost in Warren County, found themselves experiencing what others before them had: a blazing light that took the form of a long dead girl.

Although Montell doesn't strictly adhere to the classification system he uses to organize the book, generally speaking, the book surveys such themes as unnatural sounds, animals ghosts, suicide victim ghosts, unexplained lights, Civil War ghosts, and even ghosts that appear on college campuses. The indexes provide the reader with a quick reference to the counties where the stories originated and a convenient list of the cities, towns and locations of the tales.

Montell has compiled an impressive group of ghost stories that will live on long after both the tellers and readers have passed on, for they tell what is extraordinary about ordinary life in the hills, hollers, plains, and backwoods of Kentucky.

—Marshall Myers

