

Top 10 scary short stories for Halloween

1. A Little Place Off the Edgware Road by Graham Greene

This is a superbly creepy and grotesque short story by the great Graham Greene. It has more than a little Edgar Allan Poe about it, scuttling among the shadows at the edge of madness. A trip to the cinema proves to be a nightmarish experience for Craven as he finds himself seated next to someone very disturbing indeed in the darkness. Horrible. And I mean that in a good way.

2. The Monkey's Paw by W W Jacobs

Surely any list of creepy short stories would have to include The Monkey's Paw? It is still the best of the 'be careful what you wish for', sting-in-the-tail stories. A old army comrade of Mr White comes calling one cold, rainy night. He tells the family about a mummified monkey's paw he is carrying - a magical object that can grant the owner three wishes. And so the nightmare begins. If you haven't read this you're in for a nasty treat.

3. The Family of the Vourdalak (aka The Curse of the Vourdalak) by Aleksei Tolstoy

I only read this quite recently, although I have it in several collections. It's a very unsettling story. A father goes off, hunting a Turkish bandit. He tells his family that if he hasn't returned within 10 days to assume him dead. If he comes back after 10 days then they are on no account to let him in, for he will have become a vourdalak - a vampire. Luckily for us, they don't do as they are told. Creepy. Very, very creep.

4. Berenice by Edgar Allan Poe

There were so many Edgar Allan Poe stories I could have put in the list. Although Berenice may not be as famous as say The Tell-tale Heart or The Pit and the Pendulum, I think it sums up what the best of Poe is all about: an obsession with the dead and the not-quite-dead, and a nightmarish

descent into madness. Poe's writing is very florid and not to everyone's taste, but if you just go with it, you will find yourself sucked into the weirdest of weird worlds. And what a grisly ending this story has! Sleep-troubling strangeness.

5. The Signalman by Charles Dickens

I first became aware of this story through the Lawrence Gordon Clark-directed adaptation in *A Ghost Story for Christmas* on the BBC, back in the 1970s. It is a lot sparer than most Dickens stories. There are no eccentric caricatures here. This is a very dark tale. A signalman tells a stranger a disturbing story of haunting and premonition. Everything, from the vividly imagined setting of that signal box at the mouth of a dark tunnel, to the story's grim conclusion, is flawless. Genuinely spooky.

6. Lost Hearts by MR James

James is often thought of as a bit of a cosy writer, his stories set in country houses and cathedrals - the kind of author who would be read at a National Trust Halloween event. But they are often darker and more disturbing than expected. If you have never read M R James, this would be a good place to start. A boy goes to stay with his guardian, an elderly gentleman who seems obsessed with boy's age for some reason. MR James at his most sinister.

7. The Inner Room by Robert Aickman

I was lucky enough to have this story read to me – very skilfully – by Jeremy Dyson at the Halifax Ghost Story Festival last year. I did not know Robert Aickman, but after this story I realised I had examples of his work in several collections. Like Poe or HP Lovecraft, it is almost impossible to describe what makes his writing style so hypnotic, but once sampled there is no turning back. This tale about a doll's house is deeply unsettling. A creepy Toy Story.

8. Fever Dream by Ray Bradbury

This is a deliciously creepy story by the master of the uncanny tale, Ray Bradbury. Like all the best short stories, the premise is a simple one: a boy on his sick bed feels that his body is being taken over by more than a mere disease. But he can't make the adults believe that, of course. They think he's

making a fuss. And then, suddenly, he feels much better. Don't read this if you are going down with a cold.

9. Sredni Vashtar by Saki

Saki is a curious writer. He veers between whimsy, humour and a surprising amount of cruelty - often in the same story. His stories deserve to be more widely read. They often - as in this one of a boy's devotion to his ferret - involve precocious children getting the better of adults. "Sredni Vashtar went forth. His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white ... " Saki at his nasty best.

10. Thus I Refute Thee Beelzy by John Collier

I have a few John Collier stories in various collections. They are always very crisp and satisfying. This story of a little boy's invisible friend and his father's ill-advised attempt to persuade him (by force) of Mr Beelzy's non-existence is a very fine thing indeed. "'You are not going to beat the child?' cried Mrs Carter. 'No,' said the little boy. 'Mr Beelzy won't let him.'" A story that bites back.