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WHAT DOES A HOUSE WANT? EXPLORING SENTIENT HOUSES IN SUPERNATURAL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Most haunted houses in literature are inhabited or visited by supernatural entities, often ghosts. At times, they are haunted not by the ghosts of previous inhabitants but by the “residual energies” such people have left behind. Most presences and energies that haunt a house are malevolent, but they originate in human beings—meaning that other human beings, whether the new inhabitants or paranormal investigators, are usually able to understand their objectives, if not necessarily foil their plans. But what if the house itself is haunting its inhabitants; what if the house itself is a malevolent sentient entity?

KEYWORDS

supernatural literature, haunted houses, sentient houses, ghost, ghost stories

Most haunted houses in literature are inhabited or visited by supernatural entities, often ghosts. At times, they are not haunted by the ghosts of previous inhabitants but by the “residual energies” previous inhabitants have left behind. Most presences and energies that haunt a house are malevolent, but they originate in human beings—meaning that other human beings, be they new inhabitants or paranormal investigators, are usually able to understand their objectives, if not necessarily foil their plans. As Mariconda writes: “At its simplest, a haunted house may be defined as a dwelling that is inhabited by or visited regularly by a ghost or other supposedly supernatural being . . . The number of variants within this definition—the house, the circumstances, and the potential physical and emotional repercussions—is limitless . . . The haunted house has to have a series of supernatural events; and the best tales will have a backstory (the history behind the situation that exists at the start of the main story) of the provenance and discovery of these events” (2006: 268–69).

But what if the house itself is haunting its inhabitants? What if the house itself is a supernatural entity, a so-called sentient house? And what do critics

mean by “sentience” when they refer to sentient houses? At the outset, it would be useful to clarify a few key concepts relating to haunted houses and sentient houses.¹

First, it would help to distinguish between a haunted house and any other haunted building. Critics who have studied haunted houses tend to group all haunted dwellings together, whether permanent or temporary. A dwelling could be, for example, a hotel or a boarding school, whereas “house” has the more limited meaning of a permanent residence. In his definition of haunted house, Mariconda prefers to use the word “dwelling,” rather than house, but usually critics tend to use “house” for any kind of building that allows them to include in their studies, for instance, the Overlook Hotel in Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977), the most famous haunted hotel in fiction.² Although a broader definition allows for the inclusion of more texts in an analysis of haunted houses, I believe that haunted houses and other haunted dwellings should be treated separately. A hotel room is a liminal space, which is not your *home*. It is one thing to spend a night in a haunted hotel room, and quite another to have your own home “violated” by unwanted supernatural guests or—perhaps worse still—discover that the house you want to make your home has a will of its own and a different plan.

If we look at the relevant studies, we immediately notice that the very same houses in the very same texts, for instance, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, have been described as “sentient” by some critics but not by others. This is not because, or not only because, critics may have different ideas of what sentience is, but rather because they do not distinguish between rhetorically personified and sentient houses, and between sentient houses and houses merely used as instruments by ghosts.³

As Wisker writes, ghosts are “stuck in an obsessive-compulsive loop” and are driven to haunt “whoever they need to take revenge on, directly or indirectly, or who needs to notice and to respond in order to settle their compulsive, stuck, unsolved problem” because “often they cannot take much direct action themselves” (2016: 228–29). In fact, ghosts usually possess limited ability not only to act, but also to interact with humans (some cannot show themselves, some cannot speak). Most of them have limited freedom of movement because they are confined to the place of the haunting. For these reasons, in order to manifest their presence and communicate with the living or take revenge against them, they use the only instruments they “possess”: the house and its contents. The houses are not, as Grider writes,

“partners in the supernatural assault upon humans who invade their domains” (2007: 144) because they are not acting as independent sentient beings, but merely as instruments under the control of ghosts. Similarly, Carroll refers to “tales of malevolent houses,” giving as examples Stephen King’s *The Shining*, Jay Anson’s *The Amityville Horror*, and Robert Marasco’s *Burnt Offerings* (1990: 98). But these houses do not, in fact, have wills of their own; rather, they are inhabited by supernatural entities.

Critics often describe houses that are personified in fiction as sentient. For example, Dale Bailey (1999), in his discussion of “sentient haunted houses” in American fiction, analyzes works in which the house is personified rather than sentient: Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables*, and Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*. Most haunted houses are rhetorically personified, whether by the narrator or a character. And whether or not they show any level of sentience in their interaction with human beings, they all tend to be labeled as “sentient-house narratives.” Yet very few of the great number of personified haunted houses in literature can really be considered sentient. Sentience has been defined in various ways; it may range from full consciousness and self-awareness to mere reaction to stimuli. A truly sentient house is one that has some kind of will of its own. It may not have human sentience but nevertheless displays a capacity to react to events and act according to an agenda of its own.

Personification, instead, is a figure of speech in which inanimate objects are given human attributes or qualities that can include any aspect or element of “intelligent, animated beings, like beliefs, desires, intentions, goals, plans, psychological states, powers, and will” (Turner 1987: 175). It is one of the most common and instinctive metaphorical expressions because it draws on anthropomorphism,⁴ a cognitive bias that makes people inclined to attribute human traits and qualities, such as feelings, emotions or intentions, to nonhuman entities and objects. It seems the tendency to anthropomorphize houses is ancient.⁵

But a rhetorical comparison between a house and a human being does not necessarily mean that the house acts like a human. Algernon Blackwood, for instance, compares houses to people at the beginning of his short story “The Empty House”:

Certain houses, like certain persons, manage somehow to proclaim at once their character for evil. In the case of the latter, no particular feature need betray them; they may boast an open countenance and an ingenuous smile; and yet a little of their company leaves the unalterable conviction

that there is something radically amiss with their being; that they are evil. Willy nilly, they seem to communicate an atmosphere of secret and wicked thoughts which makes those in their immediate neighbourhood shrink from them as from a thing diseased. (1906: 1)⁶

In fact, we discover that “the empty house” in the story is neither “empty” nor sentient, but inhabited by the ghosts of a murderer and his victim.

Blackwood’s passage is echoed in the celebrated opening of Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, in which the house is personified as an insane living organism:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (2009 [1959]: 3)

The omniscient third-person narrator first describes Hill House as a “live organism,” then personifies it as an insane person, and then refers to some kind of (apparently) supernatural entity that “walked alone.” By the end of the novel, the reader wonders whether the house is inhabited by ghosts; whether the phenomena experienced by some of the characters have a supernatural origin or are a collective hallucination; or whether they are somehow provoked by Eleanor, the protagonist, who may possess telekinetic powers. Quite possibly, the supernatural has no role in the novel and, as Hattenhauer writes, “there is no haunted house,” but only Eleanor, who “haunts herself, or rather the traces of history make one part of herself haunt the Other part—the conscious being Other to the real home of the subject: the unconscious” (2003: 172).⁷ The fact remains, however, that although Hill House may be frequently personified, and although Eleanor may feel the house interacts with her at an emotional level, the house never behaves as an independent sentient organism.

The family mansion in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) is another case of personification that does not entail sentience. The Ushers’ mansion is personified by the first-person narrator in his initial description and by Roderick Usher who, in his madness, perceives it as evil. However,

the house does not interact in any way with the characters; rather, it only contributes to the general atmosphere of decay that surrounds the house/family of the Ushers.⁸

Most haunted houses are almost invariably personified (they “watch,” “lie in wait,” etc.) as writers are aware of the power of personification to convey a sense of dread and threat. For instance, Dean Koontz advises prospective authors not to treat the haunted house “permeated with evil” as a mere setting, but “as much a character in your story as any of the people who live in it” (1973b: 126). A cursory look at the many blogs and websites advising budding horror writers reveals how they are regularly encouraged to give a “personality” to their haunted houses. Moreover, haunted houses often have a sinister appearance or air (e.g., old Victorian or Second Empire houses in typical Gothic fiction). Even if their exterior is not threatening, those who enter them invariably perceive something wrong. Yet even though the design of these houses may have a disturbing effect and/or reflect a haunted mind, this influence is not actively directed against the occupants.

In this article, I use “sentience” to describe houses that react to and/or interact with their environment and human inhabitants in various ways. I leave aside so-called sentient-house narratives in which houses are not, in fact, sentient but rather are controlled by a ghost who is responsible for all the supernatural phenomena that occur there. Likewise, I will not discuss the so-called sentient houses, or automated houses, that appear in many works of speculative fiction, as they constitute an entirely separate category. In fact, as science fiction usually eschews the supernatural, the “sentience” of such houses lies in the artificial intelligence that controls it, a machine created by human intelligence, supposedly for the well-being of its inhabitants. Although computers cannot be intrinsically “evil” (unless so programmed), they can still “go crazy,”—malfunction, that is, which is what often happens in speculative fiction narratives,⁹ which belong to the broader theme of “technology going awry” rather than to the supernatural.

A further category of haunted houses often labeled as “sentient” by critics, those controlled neither by a ghost nor a computer but by the disembodied (evil) thoughts and obsessions of their previous occupants, is also not under consideration here. In these cases, the house itself is not alive but serves as a mere container for the human psyches left behind by former inhabitants. The haunted house becomes a “psychic battery,” to borrow the expression used by Stephen King in *Danse Macabre* (2010 [1981]: 280), or a “shell,” as Jennifer Uglow points out: “In a profound and powerful way, buildings, however normal they

look, become shells imbued with disembodied passions" (1990: xiv).¹⁰ Again, the opening of Blackwood's "The Empty House" comes to mind:

Perhaps with houses . . . it is the aroma of evil deeds committed under a particular roof, long after the actual doers have passed away, that makes the gooseflesh come and the hair rise. Something of the original passion of the evil-doer, and of the horror felt by his victim, enters the heart of the innocent watcher, and he becomes suddenly conscious of tingling nerves, creeping skin, and a chilling of the blood. He is terror-stricken without apparent cause. (1906: 1)

At times, a house described as sentient is merely an extension of the evil personality of the man who built it, like Hugh Crain in *The Haunting of Hill House*,¹¹ or the "possessed" architect Kim Dougherty in Ann Rivers Siddons's *The House Next Door*, whose creations bring disaster to their occupants.¹² The geometry of these houses can be obviously "wrong," fostering a sense of unease and possibly causing hallucinations (*The Haunting of Hill House*), or it may be beautiful and modern (*The House Next Door*) but still host something evil.¹³

The numerous examples of haunted houses that appear at first to be sentient but are not hint at the difficulties writers know they will have in engaging readers if they attempt to portray a truly sentient house. As Jennifer Uglow writes, "fictional spirits need to have motives and goals to drive on their narratives and the reader has to discover them" (1999: xv). That is why writers nearly always opt for houses that either have ghosts or contain the energies of dead people. They personify and psychoanalyze the house as if it were a human being; the house has a traumatic past, witnessed some evil deed, was exposed to evil thoughts, or was inhabited by evil people. In this way, the house can be understood in human terms, not only by the reader but also by the protagonists, who are therefore less helpless in facing and possibly defeating a supernatural antagonist.

Anthropomorphism provides a sense of understanding of a nonhuman agent, and therefore the simplest way to describe a nonhuman agent is to make it as similar as possible to a human being. A very special case of sentient houses concerns the anthropomorphic houses that appear in literature for children and young adults, for example in M. D. Spenser's *The Haunting House* (1996)¹⁴ and in Nina Kiriki Hoffman's *A Stir of Bones* (2003).¹⁵ These houses display human feelings and can be befriended if approached in the right way, just like a human being.

In Spenser's novel, an old country cottage features as one of the protagonists along with the two girls, aged ten and twelve, who have moved there with their parents. The house, as the title points out, is not haunted by ghosts; it has no "bad energies" in it, it has not been designed by an evil person, and it is not a mirror to the haunted minds of the protagonists. It simply has feelings and motives just like a human being: "It helps to think of haunting houses as similar to old angry men who want no one living nearby. The buildings become like hermits resenting the human race for ignoring them" (Spenser 1996: 64–65). Eventually, the family makes plans "to start repairs" and to "turn the old abandoned home" into "a beautiful place" (116–17), and the house, which only wanted to be cared for and loved, is satisfied and stops haunting them.

In Hoffman's *A Stir of Bones*, teenage protagonist Susan Backstrom and her friends visit an abandoned house and discover that it is alive. It is a fully sentient being and can communicate telepathically with Susan, who says that "House is a person" (2003: 89). The house is referred to as "House" and is like a mother figure: "House breathed for her. It welcomed her in its heart. Its pulse throbbed in the floor, its strength and affection surrounded her" (170). The sentient house is the dwelling of a teenage ghost, Nathan, but they are two separate entities: "the house was alive, and the boy wasn't" (35). When he joins the group of friends, he explains he has no control over it because "House has a mind of its own" (35). This is the only example I came across of a sentient house that is also haunted by a ghost. Hoffman wants her novel to have a strong appeal to her readers and a motherly house and a romantic teenage ghost are a winning combination. *The Haunting House* and *Stir of Bones* are only two examples of anthropomorphic houses,¹⁶ and separate research could and should be devoted to an analysis of sentient anthropomorphic houses in literature for children and young adults, and in folklore, as these are separate fields and beyond the scope of the present study.

Anthropomorphic houses do not feature in adult literature perhaps because an adult readership would find them too far-fetched, difficult to engage with, and possibly even funny rather than uncanny. A sentient house that has nothing human about it and nothing human in it (like ghosts or energies), yet is genuinely threatening, is very difficult to portray. Only a few writers rise to this creative challenge and describe sentient houses that are not human in terms of psychology and motivation, but are still "alive" and "sentient" in the sense of showing awareness of themselves and their environment. These houses pose a deadly threat to their human inhabitants, whilst the source of their powers and their motives remain incomprehensible. As Keith Eggener writes, "buildings are

just cold bricks and mortar. They do not want to hurt us. They do not want anything. But imagine if they did. Imagine that a building really did have will, that it wanted to be something, and that what it wanted was to be bad. Now that would be scary" (2013). My own survey of haunted-house literature suggests, in fact, that there are very few examples of such houses, although perhaps others will be able to identify more and add to the debate. Daniel Z. Danielewski in *The House of Leaves*, Eric Heisserer in *The Dionaea House*, and Ruth Rendell in "The Haunting of Shawley Rectory" and "Hare's House" have tackled in various ways the challenge of constructing truly sentient houses.

THE "MORPHING" HOUSE IN DANIELEWSKI'S *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

One type of house that "wants to be bad" is what Stephen J. Mariconda calls the "morphing house" (2006: 294). These houses are not sentient in any strictly human sense, but they interact with their human occupants as though they wish to harm them.¹⁷ The most famous example is the Navidson's house on Ash Tree Lane in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). The novel, just like the house, is an intricate maze the reader has to navigate, an ergodic text that requires effort to follow logically from beginning to end and one that eludes categorization. For the purpose of this study, I shall concentrate only on the section entitled "The Navidson Record," which relates the story of Will Navidson's encounter with a morphing house.

The protagonist, a famous photojournalist who has traveled the world, moves to a country house in Virginia with his partner, Karen, and their two children, Chad and Daisy. He wants to record their new life in the country, and so installs a number of video cameras equipped with motion detectors around the house. He explains:

It's funny. I just want to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children. Sort of see how everything turns out. No gunfire, famine, or flies. Just lots of toothpaste, gardening and people stuff. Which is how I got the Guggenheim Fellowship and the NEW Media Arts Grant. Maybe because of my past they're expecting something different, but I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it. Settle in,

maybe put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better. Personally, I just want to create a cozy little outpost for me and my family. A place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sun set. (8)

The video camera footage and film recorded later make up a documentary entitled "The Navidson Record" which is described by a mysterious author called Zampanò in his typescript of the same name. He reports how the family, on their return from a short trip, discover that the house is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. A new door and a hallway then appear from nowhere: "In their absence, the Navidsons' home had become something else, and while not exactly sinister or even threatening, the change still destroyed any sense of security or well-being" (28).

Will's bucolic dream of settling down in a place where he could "explore the quieter side of life" is shattered (9), and the house soon becomes sinister and threatening. The space beyond the hall keeps growing, and Will calls his brother Tom and a professional explorer and his team to survey the new areas. The house grows passage after passage, room after room, with walls that expand and contract, with staircases that suddenly get longer or shorter, and with impossibly deep drops appearing out of nowhere. From time to time, a low groan can be heard in this labyrinth as if a Minotaur or other creature might inhabit it, but nobody sees any monsters or ghosts. Occasionally, provisions and water disappear. After several explorations, most of the survey team are "allowed" to return to the hall unscathed, but others are injured or vanish entirely. None of them is able to shed any light on the nature of the phenomenon, as Zampanò points out:

Is it merely an aberration of physics? Some kind of warp in space? Or just a topiary labyrinth on a much grander scale? Perhaps it serves a funereal purpose? Conceals a secret? Protects something? Imprisons or hides some kind of monster? Or, for that matter, imprisons or hides an innocent? As the Holloway team soon discovers, answers to these questions are not exactly forthcoming. (111)

The house seems to engage in a cat-and-mouse game with the men, but is this what is really happening? Is the house really predatory? Or is it that, in the same way that the house cannot be physically mapped by humans, so it cannot be intellectually comprehended by the human mind? The house is an independent

sentient organism, but there is no logic in its activities, or at least no logic that human beings can make sense of. Zampanò points out that “just as a nasty virus resists the body’s immune system so . . . the house resists interpretation” (356).

The comparison with a virus, a simple living organism, is an apt one. The house on Ash Tree Lane is sentient in that it is able to respond to stimuli and change its shape accordingly and react to the presence of extraneous (human) bodies. Maybe, like a microorganism on a Petri dish placed under a microscope, the house started mutating under the eye of the cameras.¹⁸

ERIC HEISSERER’S *THE DIONAEA HOUSE*

In 2004, at the beginning of his career as a scriptwriter, Eric Heisserer decided to promote the plot for a script using the internet.¹⁹ He bought a domain and created an online hypertext, *The Dionaea House*, made up of websites, blogs, a chat log, and text messages.²⁰ The *Dionaea House* used “fake social media accounts to create the illusion of different people independently interacting with the mysterious house at the heart of its story, each of them separately recording their experiences on the internet” (Crawford 2015: 44). This ergodic text, clearly inspired by Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, appeared online between 2004 and 2006. It centers on a group of friends determined to unravel the mystery involving Andrew Hughes, a friend of theirs they had not seen since he left Houston a few years earlier, who had inexplicably killed two people in a diner and then shot himself. Readers were invited to contribute helpful information and comments and many of them, thinking the story was true, did so. They also copied and pasted the original texts, posted them on their own blogs and shared them on social media. Before long, *The Dionaea House* went viral and remains one of the most successful internet horror stories to date.

The main section of the *The Dionaea House* takes place from September to October 2004 and reads like an epistolary narrative. It features the emails and texts exchanged by the characters Mark and Eric (who shares his name with the author), two friends of Andrew Hughes. Other, shorter texts can be accessed through hyperlinks within the main narrative. Mark remembers the last time he and his friends saw Andrew: he had spent ten nights housesitting at his stepfather’s house in Houston and was no longer himself, as if something had “emptied him” and “gutted him like a fish” (12 September 2004). Prompted by the murders, Mark decides to investigate and discovers that the house in Houston and the house that Andrew was renting in Boise, Idaho, at the time

of his death, are absolutely identical in every detail. Another identical house in Phoenix, Arizona, is described in the online journal of sixteen-year-old Danielle Stephens, who spent ten nights babysitting there. In this house she finds a bunch of keys Mark had dropped in the house in Boise because the three houses (but there may be many more) exist in different places at the same time and are inexplicably linked. The girl eventually returns to her home but seems to have become “emptied” of her personality just like Andrew.

The houses are quite ordinary from the outside, but people who spend time in them either vanish, run away to spend their lives as homeless nomads, or are sucked dry and then spat out. They become, as an anonymous text received by Eric, reads, “flesh puppets” with no will of their own, controlled by the houses (28 October 2004). The title of the narrative draws a direct comparison between the houses and *Dionaea muscipula*, a carnivorous plant commonly known as the Venus flytrap, whose identical pod-like leaves recall the identical houses.

These “carnivorous” houses are predatory and also morphing; they are bigger inside than outside, like the Navidsons’ house in Danielewski’s novel. Although the houses have only one story, both Mark and Danielle discover stairs that go up to a second story invisible from the outside. When Mark explores the house in Boise, he remarks on its “bizarre layout” and the unexpected number of rooms inside (21 September 2004). He also notices a closed metal door at the end of the hall, and his last text message to Eric, sent at the impossible time of 5:77pm, reads “THE DOOR IS OPEN.” Evidently, he entered it, the door snapped shut like the leaves of a Venus flytrap, and he vanished. After Mark’s disappearance, Eric writes down his thoughts in his personal blog:

So there is a house, a set of houses. Identical. How? I don’t know. The houses are inexorably tied . . . So this house is like that photon particle. It’s in different places, but also in the same place. See, this explains the strange sounds and voices people hear inside; the sound is bleeding through from other locations, other iterations of the same hallway . . . Then there’s the way it regurgitates things, like keys. They don’t show in the same place either. But then again the entire second story isn’t supposed to exist, so all bets are off . . . Okay, so the house can do one of two things to you:

1. digest you
2. sort of partially digest you, “hollow you out” as Mark would say, and make you a subserviant [sic] tool to obey the house (Oct. 28, 2004).

On 31 October 2004, Halloween, Eric and his friend Cameron decide to explore the house in Houston. They take flashlights, a camcorder, Swiss army knives, and a handgun, like the characters in *House of Leaves*. They are never seen again.

There are a number of inconsistencies in *The Dionaea House* in the description of the houses as sentient and the effects they have on those who enter them. The houses are described at various times as some kind of portal, as voracious living organisms that eat people or hollow them out, or as morphing houses. This seems to be a deliberate choice on Heisserer's part, as the text was created as a marketing strategy and different ideas have been mixed together to attract as many readers as possible. If *House of Leaves* invites multiple critical readings, Heisserer's "house of hyperlinks" seems intended to shock. Possibly it is aimed at a younger audience that spends more time watching horror movies and reading blogs than reading books. It was certainly a successful idea, and is still attracting appreciative comments online.

SENTIENT HOUSES IN RUTH RENDELL'S "THE HAUNTING OF SHAWLEY RECTORY" AND "HARE'S HOUSE"

If the house in *House of Leaves* is not a home, a stable environment, but a constantly shifting labyrinth, the houses in *The Dionaea House* do not nurture, but devour those who enter. In both narratives the houses are uninhabitable, threatening, and inscrutable. How did they come to exist? Why are they "alive"? Celebrated mystery novelist Ruth Rendell describes two houses that are "alive," albeit neither anthropomorphic nor morphing, in her short stories "The Haunting of Shawley Rectory" (1979) and "Hare's House" (1984), two of the very few supernatural narratives she ever wrote, originally published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. In these narratives, which also display her characteristic dark humor, Rendell plays with some of the conventions of the haunted-house genre and subverts them.

The typical ingredients of a haunted-house story appear in "Hare's House": Norman and his wife Rita buy a house in London being sold at a bargain price because a murder had occurred there. The house had been built fifteen years earlier and had been occupied only by Mr. and Mrs. Hare for three years before he killed her.²¹ It then lay empty for twelve years. The new owners decide not to inquire into the details of the murder. The husband, ominously called Norman (like Norman Bates in *Psycho*), cannot help thinking about the crime, but at the same time he fears learning the truth. In a public

library, he catches sight of a book that refers to the murder but will not look at it. He avoids the subject with his neighbors, as does his wife Rita. She is a housewife who thinks she may have inherited her mother's psychic powers, another haunted-house cliché. In fact, far from having second sight, Rita, whose appearance is compared to that of a mole, cannot or does not want to see what is in front of her. In particular, she seems to be blind to her husband's shortcomings.

They move in at the end of September and can see only two flaws in the house: the extra stairs they have to go up and down,²² and the upstairs bathroom window:

This bathroom had a very high ceiling and the window was about ten feet up. It was in the middle of the house and therefore had no outside wall so the architect had made the roof of the bathroom just above the main roof, thus affording room for a window. It was a nuisance not being able to open it except by means of the pole with the hook on the end of it that stood against the bathroom wall, but the autumn was a dull wet one and the winter cold so for a long time there was no need to open the bathroom window at all. (51)

When the weather gets warmer and Norman tries to open this window, he discovers that "the two parts of the catch, a vertical bolt and a slot for it to be driven up into, had been wired together," so he has to undo the wire. He thinks "the builders doing the painting had wired up the window catch, though he couldn't imagine why" (54). The window is mentioned only in passing, as the focus of the story appears to be the history of the murder, and the reader expects the couple to discover something about it that will affect them.

The supernatural occurrences start, not by chance, on the 1st of April, when the weather changes and Rita closes the window for the first time. A little later, while she is relaxing in the kitchen with a cup of tea, the window opens with a bang that makes her "almost jump out of her skin":

She had heard of haunted houses where loud crashes were due to poltergeist activity. Her mother had always been able to sense the presence of a poltergeist. She felt afraid and sweat broke out on her rather large pointed face. Then she noticed the bathroom door was closed. Had it

been that door closing she had heard? Surely not. Rita opened the bathroom door and saw that the window had fallen open. So that was all it was. (54–55)

She is relieved that nothing supernatural has occurred and that a window “was all it was”—but she is seriously mistaken. A few days later, Norman “is awakened by a crash” shortly after midnight when the window opens again (55). The third time the window opens itself, Norman, who previously had thought it was simply a question of learning to close the window properly, starts to blame his wife. He becomes “petulant” and he “sulks” (56). He accuses Rita of failing to close the window properly. On this occasion, Norman has just returned from work and the timing seems calculated to annoy him, as does the increasing frequency of the episodes.

Subsequently, Norman is awakened at two in the morning by the bang of the window opening. This time he becomes furious. He tells Rita that it is her fault and his “nerves can’t stand it” (56). On the next occasion, Norman is “just starting on his pudding” when the window crashes open again (57). He shouts at Rita:

“You’re going to come with me into that bathroom and I’m going to teach you how to shut that window if it’s the last thing I do!” He stood behind her while she took the pole and inserted the hook into the ring on the bolt, pushed the bolt up and gave it a firm twist. “There, you see, you’ve turned it the wrong way. I said clockwise. Don’t you know what clockwise means?” Norman opened the window and made Rita close it again. This time she twisted the bolt to the right. The window crashed open before they had reached the foot of the stairs. “It’s not me, you see, it’s the wind,” Rita cried.

Norman’s voice shook with rage. “The wind couldn’t blow it open if you closed it properly. It doesn’t blow it open when I close it.” “You close it then and see. Go on, you do it.” Norman closed it. (58)

But during the night the window opens again and, this time, Norman loses control completely:

The crash awakened him at three in the morning. He got up, cursing, and went into the bathroom. Rita woke up and jumped out of bed and

followed him. Norman came out of the bathroom with the pole in his hand, his face red and his eyes bulging. He shouted at Rita:

“You got up after I was asleep and opened that window and closed it your way, didn’t you?”

“I did what?”

“Don’t deny it. You’re trying to drive me mad with that window. You won’t get the chance to do it again.”

He raised the pole and brought it down with a crash on the side of Rita’s head. She gave a dreadful hoarse cry and put up her hands to try and ward off the rain of blows. Norman struck her five times with the pole and she was lying unconscious on the landing floor before he realized what he was doing. (58)

Rita does not die. She tells the doctors that she fell down the stairs in the dark and we are told that “she seemed to believe this herself” (59). As for Norman, he keeps on “thinking how odd it was there had nearly been a second murder under his roof” (59), although he never asks himself how he could have done what he did. He goes back to the library to look at the book that he had glimpsed before and reads that:

Raymond and Diana Hare had been an apparently happy couple. One morning their cleaner arrived to find Mrs Hare beaten to death and lying in her own blood on the top landing outside the bathroom door. Hare had soon confessed. He and his wife had had a midnight dispute over a window that continually came open with a crash and in the heat of anger he had attacked her with a wooden pole. (59)

Soon after, Norman sells Hare’s house while Rita is recovering in hospital from “a fractured skull and a broken jaw and collarbone” and puts a deposit on another house (59). The narrative concludes with some uncharacteristic introspection on Norman’s part:

But how could I have tried to do the same thing and for the same reason? Norman asked himself. Is Hare’s house haunted by an act, by a

motiveless urge? Or can it be that the first time I looked into that book I saw and read more than my conscious mind took in but not more than was absorbed by my *unconscious*? A rational man must believe the latter. (59–60)

Norman is mistaken: the house is not haunted by any “act” or “motiveless urge.” It is “bad” for reasons we cannot comprehend. It appears to know how to play its trick at the right moment, when it can cause the most damage. It even seems to have a sense of humor, starting its campaign of harassment on April Fool’s Day. Its behavior becomes even more puzzling when we learn that the next-door neighbors had had the same problem with an identical bathroom window, which they had solved by the simple expedient of replacing it with “a blank sheet of glass with an extractor fan” (53). Are we meant to infer from this that the house can only influence inhabitants with some kind of vulnerability, such as a couple in a dysfunctional relationship? Will future occupants of the house be affected? The story has an open ending and the mystery of what Hare’s House is trying to achieve, beyond seeming to toy with its occupants, is never disclosed.

If all that Hare’s house wants is to torment whoever lives there, Shawley Rectory in “The Haunting of Shawley Rectory” has a more specific mission. In this short story, Rendell introduces the familiar elements that parody the Gothic haunted-house tale in the tradition of Wilde, Jerome K. Jerome, and Wodehouse and, once again, subverts the reader’s expectations. The name of the rectory recalls Borley Rectory, a famous haunted house in England, while the story’s title recalls *The Haunting of Hill House*, whose protagonist Eleanor has the same name as the wife of the unnamed narrator. The story, told in the first person, as many Gothic tales are, opens with the narrator’s assertion that he does not believe in ghosts. Those acquainted with the genre know what to expect; that is, that the story about to unfold will change his mind.

The narrative takes place in a well-to-do village in Dorset where rumors and gossip circulate freely. The eponymous rectory, built in 1760, is a large house that is “a bit stark to look at, a bit forbidding” (72). In the best Gothic tradition, this gloomy building is personified and “seems to stare straight back at you” (72). Some of the clergymen and their families who had lived there never experienced any supernatural occurrences, but others heard mysterious noises (the crunch of wheels on the drive, a door slamming, footsteps in the house followed by the sound of a door opening and closing). This always happened at nine o’clock in

the evening, but no harm ever came to the occupants. The general tone of the narrative is quite light as none of the characters believes in ghosts and they all report the events in a very matter-of-fact way. But when Reverend Galton, his wife, and his mother-in-law move in, they flee two days later. Mrs. Grainger, the mother-in-law, is later interviewed for local TV and explains:

“There were people, two figures, I don’t know what to call them, between the windows. One of them, the girl, was lying huddled on the floor. The other figure, an older woman, was bending over her. She stood up when I opened the door and looked at me. I knew I wasn’t seeing real people, I don’t know how but I knew that. I remember I couldn’t move my hand to switch the light on. I was frozen, just staring at that pale tragic face while it stared back at me. I did manage at last to back out and close the door, and I got back to my daughter and my son-in-law in the kitchen and I — well, I collapsed. It was the most terrifying experience of my life.” (80)

The key to a haunting lies in the past, and a typical character in Gothic tales is the local historian with detailed knowledge of the area who is therefore able to shed some light on the mystery. Joseph Lamb, the “local antiquarian” in this story, remembers what his nanny told him as a child:

“These two [women] are supposed to have lived at the Rectory at one time,” he said. “The story is that the mother had a lover or a man friend or whatever, and the daughter took him away from her. When the daughter confessed it, the mother killed her in a jealous rage.” (81)

It is curious, though, he observes, that he has “not been able to find any trace of these women in the Rectory’s history” (82). However, as he also adds that “there was another house on the site” before the Rectory (82), the reader is led to believe that the murder took place there and the ghosts still haunt the site.

As in the best Gothic and parody Gothic tradition, someone decides to investigate, and the narrator’s friend Gordon suggests that they spend an evening in the house, which is up for sale because the Anglican Church no longer needs a local Rector, and which is currently unoccupied. The manifestations take place at nine o’clock, and at three minutes to nine they hear a very faint “pattering sound” as if made by “something less than human, lighter than that, tiptoeing” (86), which terrifies them. It turns out to be a neighbor’s

cat, nothing further occurs, and the two self-styled paranormal investigators go back home.

The Rectory is subsequently bought by Carol Marcus, a wealthy American, a familiar stereotype in Gothic parodies.²³ True to the stereotype, she finds the idea of a haunted house appealing rather than frightening:

She had heard rumours that the Rectory was supposed to be haunted and these had amused her very much. A haunted house in the English countryside! It was too good to be true.

‘Well, for goodness’ sake, I didn’t believe it!’ she said, and she laughed and went on to say how much she loved the house and wanted to make it a real home for her children to come to. She had three, she said, all in their teens, two boys away at school and a girl a bit older. (88)

Carol, who is a widow and about to marry a man called Guy, does not spare any money to renovate the rectory, which is “no longer sinister or grim” (89). In the Gothic parody tradition, the reader would expect the fearless American lady to solve the mystery of the haunting leading to a happy ending. Instead, it is exactly at this point that the tone of the narrative changes and a murder takes place:

Carol Marcus moved in three weeks ago, on a sunny day in the middle of April. Two nights later, just before eleven, there came a sustained ringing at Gordon’s door as if someone were leaning on the bell. Gordon went to the door. Carol Marcus stood outside, absolutely calm but deathly white.

She said to him, “May I use your phone, please? Mine isn’t in yet and I have to call the police. I just shot my daughter.” (90)

She explains that her daughter, who was nineteen, had arrived at the Rectory in her car at nine o’clock and told her that she and Guy “were in love with each other” and had been seeing each other:

Carol Marcus told Patsy [Gordon’s wife] she felt nothing, no shock, no hatred or resentment, no jealousy. *It was as if she were impelled by some*

external force to do what she did — take the gun she always kept with her from a drawer in the writing desk and kill her daughter. (91; my emphasis)

The people in the village see the death as a “sordid murder, a crime of jealousy committed by someone whose mind was disturbed” (92), but the narrator believes that the Rectory itself is responsible:

The Rectory was waiting for the right people to come along, the people who would fit its still un-played scenario, the woman of forty, the daughter of nineteen, the lover. And only to those who approximated these characters could it show shadows and whispers of the drama; the closer the approximation, the clearer the sounds and signs. (91)

In a reversal of the classic Gothic tale in which the past and the present coexist in the haunted building, in the Shawley Rectory the temporal dislocation concerns the present and the future. It is as if the house is waiting to stage a tragedy, but must find the right actors. As it searches for them, it enacts fragments of the action, as if rehearsing. We do not know why it does this nor do we know if it will stop after achieving its goal. As the narrator reflects: “The play is played out, but need that mean there will never be a repeat performance . . . ?” (92). Maybe, as the narrator says, Shawley Rectory will continue staging the same tragedy, or perhaps it will choose a completely different one, requiring new roles. As its motives are obscure, the ending of the story remains open.

CONCLUSION

Once we define what a sentient house is—a house that interacts with/reacts to humans and not simply a figure of speech, a rhetorical personification of an inanimate object—we realize that there are very few examples of truly sentient houses in literature for adults. Unlike the ghosts who inhabit haunted houses, sentient houses have motives and agenda that cannot be unraveled. Knowing their past, who built them or who inhabited them before, offers no clue as to their intentions or how to defeat them. It may be possible to destroy a sentient house (many haunted houses in supernatural literature are burnt down) although none of the characters in the narratives examined in this paper tries to

do so. In fact, Hare's house could have been foiled simply by wiring the window catch shut or by removing the window altogether. But stopping the problem does not solve the mystery behind it. At the end of a ghost story, readers are offered some kind of explanation of the haunting. Ghosts were once people and their motives can be understood, but a sentient house remains an insoluble puzzle, like an alien artifact in speculative fiction.

Sentient-house narratives are short because the possibilities for plot development and characterization are limited. The villain in question, the sentient house, has no psychology that can be investigated or understood by the protagonist/reader. The clash between the house and its inhabitants can be satisfactorily explored within the limits of short fiction but would be difficult to sustain throughout a novel. In fact, rhetorically personified houses in novels described as sentient by critics turn out to be haunted by ghosts with dramatic histories and personalities that engage the reader. A truly sentient house, in contrast, does not offer the same scope for development, nor for a satisfactory resolution. In classic haunted-house tales, the relationship between the protagonists and the ghost is crucial to character and plot development. In true sentient-house narratives this is not possible because the protagonists cannot significantly relate to the house. Their battle of wits, so to speak, is doomed to failure as the house cannot be understood and hence defeated.

It would be difficult for a writer to keep the reader interested in such an asymmetric confrontation. In fact, Danielewski, who is extremely concerned with form, limits the number of explorations of the house and keeps the whole "Navidson's Record" section of his novel relatively short, knowing that if he were to add more explorations, he would either repeat similar scenes or be compelled to introduce new elements that might suggest some kind of explanation. All three authors are careful not to offer any clues as to why or how these houses became alive or to their motives.

Why does the Rectory in Rendell's story wait centuries to stage a murder? Why is Hare's house tormenting its inhabitants? There is no answer because the "mind" of a house is alien to us. But, unlike an alien artifact, a house is built by humans to provide a safe refuge, a place to call home. A house that does not offer safety and comfort and has an agenda of its own that clashes with that of its inhabitants, a house that rejects human authority, is an abomination or a kind of sick joke.

The authors of these narratives are not interested in offering explanations for the actions of the houses. They are playing with the conventions of the haunted-house genre and exploring an idea: what if a house had a will of its own? The inexplicable nature of the phenomena offers writers the opportunity to confound

the expectations of readers familiar with the haunted-house genre, which are mirrored in the (incorrect) conjectures of the protagonists. The motives of the houses must remain inscrutable for the tales to be sinister and open-ended. And so, to return to the initial question: what does a house want? These narratives seem to suggest that we can never know, but that we should beware because houses and humans do not want the same things. A sentient *house* is a very dangerous place to make a *home*.

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NOTES

1. There is an extensive body of criticism on haunted houses in literature and cinema, although none of these works addresses specifically truly sentient houses. See, inter alia, Manuel Aguirre's *The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (1990), Dani Cavallaro's *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (2002), Mark Curtis's *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* (2008), Robert Miles's *Gothic Writing, 1750–1820: A Genealogy* (2002), Jack Morgan's *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film* (2002), Piatti-Farnell and Lee Brien's *New Directions in 21st Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass* (2015), David Punter's *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, vol. 2: *The Modern Gothic* (2014), Catherine Spooner's *Contemporary Gothic* (2006), Susan Stewart's "The Epistemology of the Horror Story" (1982), Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995).

2. However, critics hardly consider King's short story about a sentient hotel room, "1408," first released in audiobook in 1999 and then published in 2002. An early example of a haunted hotel room is M. R. James's short story "Number 13" (1904) about a hotel room that appears at night and disappears in the morning. Stephen King's choice of "1408" as the title of his short story may have been a homage to James. In *On Writing*, King explains that the numbers 1, 4, and 8 "add up to thirteen" (290), but he does not mention James's short story.

3. H. P. Lovecraft, in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, uses personification to describe houses that are not sentient. He writes of "the overshadowing malevolence of the ancient house" in Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* which is "almost as alive as Poe's House of Usher, though in a subtler way" and of "the ancient house of strange malignancy" in Brett Young's *Cold Harbour* (1973 [1935]: 64–65, 79).

4. See Epley et al. 2008.

5. Sharon R. Steadman writes that models of anthropomorphized ceramic houses “in which the house forms the lower or middle portion of a human body” were recently discovered by archaeologists in Neolithic houses in the Balkans suggesting that “for people living in the sixth and fifth millennia BCE of South Eastern Europe, houses were not just dwellings but had a life cycle that ran parallel to the that of the family inhabiting the structure” (2016: 349).

6. Blackwood uses paronomasia, as “diseased” and “deceased” are homophones.

7. In haunted-house literature, the house often becomes a metaphor for the haunted psyche and inner demons of the protagonist. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng points out how “lived space” can “assume monstrous proportions when it becomes a repository for the subject’s unconscious; the home becomes the locus of the subject’s projected anxieties, bringing into relief the repressed other and (possibly) transforming the subject into a monster” (2004: 16). Within a Jungian framework, Bachelard (2014; originally published in French in 1957) and Cooper (1974, 1995) also study the house as a symbol of the self.

8. The twisted design of Hill House only mirrors the personality of an individual, Hugh Crain. In contrast, the ancient, decaying Usher mansion stands for a dying dynasty. Roderick would be characterized differently without the house. Possibly this is also true for his sister, who is mad(eline) like him, but it is more difficult to say as she is not a fully developed character—she does not say a single word or interact in any way with the narrator; we only hear her “low moaning cry” (Poe 1983 [1839]: 245) in the end. The peasants identify the family with the house. We read that “the appellation” the “House of Usher” “seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.” Everything is “ghastly”: the property surrounding the house, the house outside and inside (“An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all”). Likewise, Roderick is sick “outside” (e.g., “cadaverousness of complexion”) and “inside” (e.g. he talks like “the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement”). An interesting recent example of an apparently haunted house (the supernatural presence is never ascertained) embodying a family declining to ruin is the Ayres’s dilapidated mansion in Sarah Waters’s *The Little Stranger* (2009). It is not by chance that the male member of the family is called Roderick.

9. The list of narratives centered on automated houses controlled by AI is lengthy. It includes works by leading science fiction writers such as Arthur C. Clarke (“House Arrest,” 1986), Ray Bradbury (“There Will Come Soft Rains,” 1950; “The Veldt,” 1951) and Harlan Ellison (“I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,” 1967) but also non-science fiction writers like Dean Koontz (*Demon Seed*, 1973a) and Philip Kerr (*Gridiron*, 1995). An early example is E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909). In speculative fiction, computers that control houses are less common than those that control spaceships or habitations on other planets.

10. The idea of the haunted house as “psychic battery” or “shell” is not new. It has been explored in Bulwer-Lytton’s “The Haunted and the Haunters; or, The House and the Brain” (1859), Peattie’s “The Room of the Evil Thought” (1898), Rudyard Kipling’s “The House Surgeon” (1909), Hester Gorst’s “The Doll House” (1933), and many more. In Algernon Blackwood’s “A Psychological Invasion” (1908), John Silence, one of the first supernatural investigators to appear in fiction, is called by a writer of humorous stories who, since renting a house, has been afflicted by tragic thoughts and unable to write. Silence explains that “

certain violent emotions, desires, purposes, still active" in the house were "produced in the past by some powerful and evil personality that lived here" and they act "automatically with the momentum of their terrific original impetus" (19–20; my emphasis). A humorous take on this type of story is P. G. Wodehouse's "Honeysuckle Cottage" (2008 [1927]) in which a writer of hard-boiled thrillers is haunted by the "energies" of his dead aunt, a successful writer of romances.

11. I am not aware of any woman who designed a "crooked house" in haunted-house literature, except for the witch Keziah Mason in H. P. Lovecraft's short story "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933). This is rather odd considering that the model for most haunted houses in American literature is the Winchester house that was built by a woman, Sarah Winchester. Robert Heinlein's short story "—And He Built a Crooked House" (1941) is not considered here because it does not involve the supernatural. The architect who builds the house in the shape of a tesseract is neither evil nor cursed but instead bears a resemblance to the "mad scientist" character often found in speculative fiction.

12. Kim Dougherty is a rather ordinary man in his appearance and in his behavior. However, he has an extraordinary power to design buildings that look so beautiful and functional that they seem to "bewitch" those who see them. But once they are realized, no human being can enjoy them and their inhabitants die or have gruesome, disabling accidents or are forced to leave. At some point, the architect comments on the fact that he has no recollection of how he planned the house in *The House Next Door* and that in the house there's something "wrong" that he "didn't put" there (Siddons 2007: 72). The protagonists, Colquitt and James Kennedy, are aware of the evil surrounding the house next door to theirs, but do not suspect him to be the source of the problem until the very end: "It's not *just* in the house . . . it's in him first. In Kim. That's where it starts. It was born in him. He's a carrier, some kind of terrible carrier, and he doesn't even know it" (282; my emphasis). There is a mystery surrounding his birth, which may explain his curse. Kim was adopted and his birth parents are unknown: has he inherited some kind of supernatural power? Is he the carrier of a demonic entity that first inspires his drawings and then inhabits his creations causing all sorts of harm to those who claim ownership to them or even trespass their boundaries? The "house next door" is not sentient, it is possessed by whatever the architect carries with him from birth.

13. Haunted houses that are often described as sentient, that is, those controlled by ghosts, those that work as "psychic batteries," those reflecting the haunted mind of a character (frequently the owner/architect), are not mutually exclusive. For instance, the house in *The Haunting of Hill House* was designed by an evil man, it may contain negative energies, it may have one or more ghosts, and it may be a mirror to Eleanor's neurotic personality.

14. *The Haunting House* is book no. 6 in the popular "Shivers" series. M. D. Spenser published thirty-six horror novels aimed at children between the ages of eight and fourteen between 1996 and 1998.

15. *A Stir of Bones* is the prequel to *A Red Heart of Memories* (1999) and *Past the Size of Dreaming* (2001). In the latter House appears, but is not one of the main characters and does not provide the main setting as in *A Stir of Bones*.

16. An anthropomorphic sentient house features in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1983), originally published in German in 1979 as *Die unendliche Geschichte*, although it only appears briefly at the end of the novel. Dame Eyola explains to Bastian, the protagonist, that

the House of Change is “all in all,” “a well-behaved house,” she feels “very comfortable in it” and they “have good laughs together” (362). The “monster house,” that is a house that is literally part of the monster who inhabits it, is another type of anthropomorphized house we can find in literature for children or young adults. In Clive Barker’s *The Thief of Always* (1992), the attic of the house does not contain the monster; it *is* the monster.

17. A precursor of the morphing-haunted-house subgenre can be considered Madelene Yale Wynne’s “The Little Room” (1895) in which a space in the house of the protagonist’s aunties appears at times as a little room, at other times as a china cupboard. The house is not sentient in any way and the cause seems to be found in the “magic” contained in a trunk that one of the aunties owns. In Elia W. Peattie’s short story “The House That Was Not” (1898), the protagonist sees the “ghost” of a house in the place it used to stand before a fire destroyed it. The house is not sentient; rather, it is some kind of ghostly presence that can still be seen at times. Although the ideas behind the two narratives are potentially very interesting, regrettably, they are not developed by the authors. A morphing house appears in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Lunar Park* (2005) in which the family house of the protagonist, a writer who has the same name as the author, starts morphing into his childhood house, shedding its exterior paint like a snake sheds its skin, and rearranging the furniture inside. Although this particular house is morphing, it is not sentient in that it does not seem to interact with the protagonist. It may be haunted by the ghost of his dead father, by the fictional characters in his books, or may be a product of the protagonist’s imagination as he descends into madness. A recent example of a house that may be haunted/morphing, or a reflection of the protagonist’s deteriorating sanity, is found in Daniel Kehlmann’s novella *You Should Have Left* (2017) which was originally published in German in 2016 as *Du hättest gehen sollen*.

18. Although I believe that the cameras play an important role in the novel, I am fully aware of the fact that Danielewski’s novel invites many different interpretations that do not exclude each other but coexist.

19. Warner Brothers bought the film rights, but the film was never produced. Heisserer is now a successful scriptwriter, producer, and director. His script for the film *Arrival* directed by Denis Villeneuve, earned him a Best Adapted Screenplay nomination at the Academy Awards in 2017. He has published a number of comics and a book about screenwriting.

20. The idea may have occurred to him when Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez created a promotional website a year before the release of their film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). They presented the story as true and included reports, expert opinions, and comments from family and friends of the filmmakers, who had allegedly disappeared while shooting the documentary. The low-budget film became an unprecedented success due to the innovative marketing strategy used to promote it, and it established a record for the highest box-office-to-budget ratio.

21. The family name Hare brings to mind the notorious “Burke and Hare murders” that took place in Edinburgh in 1828 when William Burke and William Hare murdered sixteen people to sell their bodies to an anatomist.

22. A British house typically only has two stories and one staircase. This is a “town house” which has three stories and two flights of stairs, that is, more stairs than normal.

23. Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" (1887), in which an American, Mr. Otis, buys a haunted house in England, provided the inspiration for many subsequent humorous ghost stories. Whereas in Wilde's narrative the pragmatic Mr. Otis treats the ghost of Sir Simon Canterville as a nuisance, in P. G. Wodehouse's *Ring for Jeeves* (2008 [1953]), Rosalinda Spottsworth, a rich American widow, is determined to buy a haunted house in England as she is an enthusiast for the supernatural. In a reversal of "The Canterville Ghost," it is the English who are pragmatic and the American who believes.

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