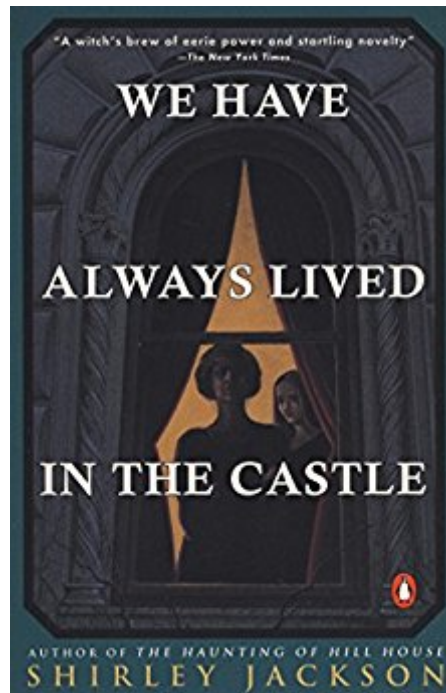




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We Have Always Lived In The Castle: (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition)



Synopsis

Merricat Blackwood lives on the family estate with her sister Constance and her uncle Julian. Not long ago there were seven Blackwoods—until a fatal dose of arsenic found its way into the sugar bowl one terrible night. Acquitted of the murders, Constance has returned home, where Merricat protects her from the curiosity and hostility of the villagers. Their days pass in happy isolation until cousin Charles appears. Only Merricat can see the danger, and she must act swiftly to keep Constance from his grasp.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I admit to choosing this book based entirely on the recommendation of Neil Gaiman, who listed this as one of his favorite books that influenced his style. It also fits neatly into my reading list as *A Book That Became a Movie* (the casting looks superb), although it hasn't been released yet this year. Following the lives of elder sister Constance and younger sister Mary Katherine (Merricat) six years after the death of their family, the story is told through the eyes of Merricat, the strangest of the two strange Blackwood girls. The story was presented to be as being gothic horror, but it seems more unsettling than truly terrifying (although

perhaps that's what it means to be gothic horror?). Merricat sees the world very different from the rest of us, full of dangers that can only be avoided by nailing books to trees and thinking of magic words to never again repeat. Oh, and of course, she's killed before. Merricat clearly has violent urges (thinking about the people around her dying gives her great pleasure, and she wipes out a whole nest of baby snakes that weren't bothering her simply because Constance didn't tell her she couldn't), and yet, she doesn't actively harm anyone during the course of the book, not even Charles. She destroys a great many things, but she doesn't actually attack or kill another person after she did away with most of her family. She even deliberately tries to be nicer to her Uncle Julian, the only poisoned family member to survive. This suggests to me that the true targets for her Merricat were her father, mother, and younger brother (who, as her father's heir, was probably turning out very much like him), a group that, through clues scattered through the book, seems to have been a truly dreadful group of people. Even sweet Constance said they had it coming. Uncle Julian and his wife, Dorothy, were likely incidental targets. Constance was, of course, deliberately spared, as she seems to be a surrogate mother figure for Merricat, even once calling Merricat her "baby". The ending of the book is rather happy, if you're Merricat, a hermit, or someone distrustful of people in general. For all that we might think of her as crazy, Merricat seems incredibly wise and capable of handling things. She's a truly remarkable heroine, not "strong" in the traditional sense, but loyal (in her way), perceptive, engaging, and rather charismatic. She's someone that will live in my head for years to come.

I now want to read everything Shirley Jackson has ever written. Her last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (published in 1962), is a dark and cool period mystery, following the wealthy Blackwood family in what seems like a century old New England. It's hard to tell how old the narrator, Merricat Blackwood, is, or what her mental state reveals. She's odd for sure, mad maybe, with a sharp eye for detail, and a shocking family tragedy in her past. The other main characters are her beautiful and mild elder sister, Constance, an elderly ill uncle Julian, and a motley cast of villagers and other high born. I was surprised and disturbed by each turn of events, and so I won't say much more except that *WHALitC* is a short thrilling read and well worth your time. Ms. Jackson's short story, *The Lottery*, garnered bags and bags of hate mail, when it came out in the *New Yorker* in

1948. You can bet that *The Lottery* is next on my list.

My first experience with Shirley Jackson's work, outside of reading the lottery in ninth grade English class, was *The Haunting of Hill House*. I read a substantial portion of the book in one sitting and came out of it drowsy and disoriented, as if I had watched a great movie. Jackson's prose in *Hill House* commands attention not through a particularly fast plot or horrifying premise, but by creating in Eleanor Vance a truly compelling character and by writing some of the most beautiful description in 20th century literature. My second experience, being *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, was yet more rewarding. Again we find ourselves in the beautifully bizarre world of a well built heroine (if one can call Eleanor or Merricat heroines) but in *Castle* we are even further immersed by way of first-person narration from the perspective of Mary Catherine Blackwell. Without divulging too much I can divulge that Mary Catherine Blackwood, 18 years old, lives with her sister Constance and her Uncle Julian in a beautiful house on the outskirts of a small, ugly town; that the townspeople hate the Blackwoods; and that the rest of the Blackwoods are dead. From there I leave you to wander through Jackson's vivid labyrinth of gorgeous imagery and tantalizing mystery. This is a novel that deserves more than the short time it takes to read.

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