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Finding a Good Read: Houses

A regular column to help you find a good read.

Houses in books – as in life - can offer sanctuary and security. Or they can be places of horror. Finding a home and a husband (or wife) may be the happily ever after ending of a novel or it may be the start of a tale of misery and terror.

The excitement of many children’s books involves leaving the security of home and family for adventures outside. But the house can also be a place of mystery and danger as in Alan Garner’s **The Owl Service** or Neil Gaiman’s **Coraline**, novels loved by children and adults alike.

We usually think of houses as familiar spaces that are easy to get around in. But they can also be frightening and dangerous, full of strange twists and turns that mirror the book’s plot. Classic examples from the 1800s include Emily Bronte’s **Wuthering Heights**, Charlotte Bronte’s **Jane Eyre**, and Edgar Allan Poe’s **Fall of the House of Usher**:

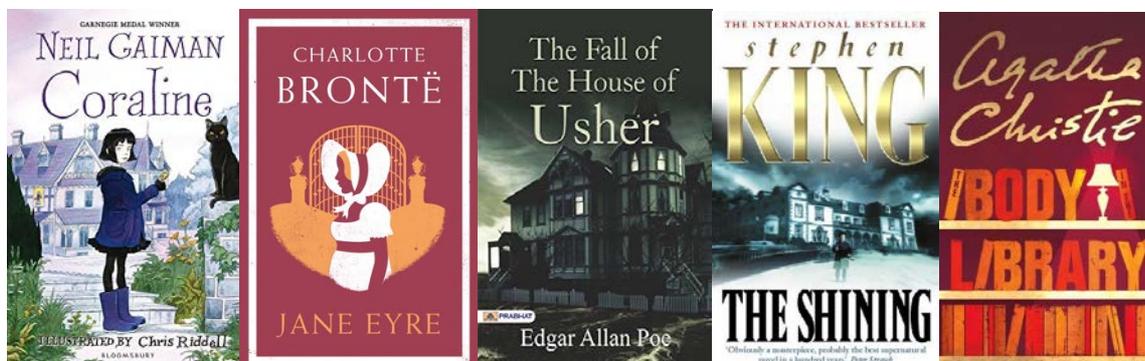
‘I know not how it was but with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.’

For more recent books with unsettling houses, try any of these: Daphne Du Maurier’s **Rebecca**, Sarah Waters’ **The Little Stranger**, Susan Hill’s **The Woman in Black**, John Boyne’s **This House is Haunted** or Peter James’s **The House on Cold Hill** and its spine-chilling sequel **The Secret of Cold Hill**.

Shirley Jackson’s **The Haunting of Hill House** has inspired two films and a Netflix series and one of its greatest fans is Stephen King. It may be stretching the house genre a bit but King’s own Overlook Hotel in **The Shining** is one of the true nightmare locations of fiction:

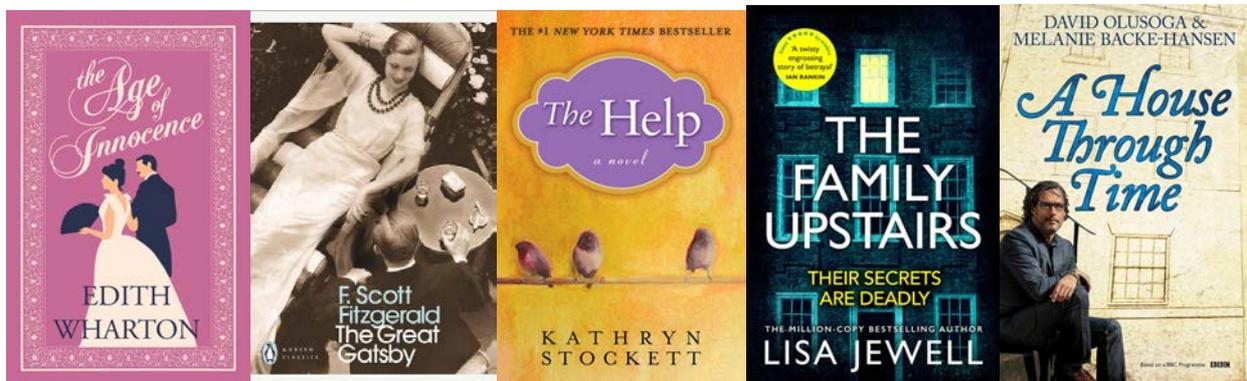
‘Sometimes human places create inhuman monsters.’

Houses are also frequent settings for murder, especially in classic ‘country house’ crime fiction by writers like Agatha Christie, PD James and Catherine Aird, and titles like **The Stately Home Murder** and **The Body in the Library**.



Many of us are fascinated by huge houses and the wealth that produced them, from the slavery fortunes that financed many of the National Trust's great houses to the vast sums that Russian oligarchs use to buy and sell UK properties. And TV programmes from **Grand Designs** to **Mega-Mansion Hunters** feed this interest. Downton Abbey fans might enjoy Kate Moreton's **The House at Riverton**. Or for a blackly funny take on the great house, try Molly Keane's brilliant **Good Behaviour**.

Edith Wharton's novels are set amid the enormous houses and extravagant display of huge wealth by those who made ruthless fortunes from America's industrial development in the late 1800s – men like John D Rockefeller (oil), Andrew Carnegie (steel), John Jacob Astor (real estate), JP Morgan (finance). In novels including **The Age of Innocence** and **House of Mirth** Wharton describes these houses and their contents in eye-popping detail. F Scott Fitzgerald's **The Great Gatsby** is another classic novel about a fabulously wealthy American home-owner with an even dodgier past.



Relations between house owners and those who work for them is a popular theme. Kazuo Ishiguro's **The Remains of the Day** is a brilliant novel about class, belonging and betrayal told by a loyal butler in the service of an aristocratic traitor during the Second World War. Kathryn Stockett's **The Help** is set in Mississippi in the 1960s where black maids raise white children but aren't trusted not to steal the silver. For a gripping real-life account of murderous relations between servants and masters, try Kate Summerscale's **The Suspicions of Mr Whicher**.

Houses may also bring different families together in weird or complicated ways as in Lisa Jewell's **Family Upstairs** series, Louise Candlish's **Our House** or Tim Winton's **Cloudstreet**.

In his TV series and book, **A House Through Time**, David Olusoga traces the histories of individual houses through the stories of the generations of people who have lived in them. A fascinating history of the British way of life viewed through its houses. Or try Bill Bryson's very readable **At Home: A Short history of Private Life**. George Orwell's **The Road to Wigan Pier** documents the bleak homes and living conditions among working class people in Lancashire and Yorkshire in the 1930s. And in **Down and Out in Paris and London** Orwell explores the experience of homelessness and being forced on the move.

If you've read a good book recently send a review in no more than 100 words and mark it 'Finding a Good Read'. We'll print the best ones.