

*A Jealous Ghost* by A.N. Wilson (Hutchinson) R175

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In his 1898 novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James set out to scare the living daylights out of his readers with a tale of a governess put in charge of two eerily beautiful children in a remote country house, who, it transpires, are in touch with the ghosts of an earlier governess of the children and of a valet of the absent owner of the estate. James succeeded admirably in his aim: his tale is infused with an almost palpable sense of evil, all the more chilling for never being named or explained. At least two films have been made of the book, and Benjamin Britten turned it into a fine opera.

The critical debate around the novella centres on the fact that, since the story is told in the first person by the governess, we have only her word for what she sees and believes, and some commentators have argued that the ghosts were the figment of the sex-starved governess's imagination: in love with the absent master, far from trying to save the children from the ghosts, she want to possess them herself. The jury is still out on that one.

Now A.N. Wilson gives us a short novel about a governess who is appointed to look after two children, Frances and Michael, in a remote country house. His governess, however, is a young American, in England to write a PhD on James's *The Turn of the Screw*. She has, after a single interview, fallen in love with the father of the children, Charles Masters, a successful lawyer who spends most of his time overseas, and instructs her never to let the children out of her sight.

Where Wilson deviates from his source and model is in the character of the would-be governess, Sallie Declan. It is evident from quite early on in the story that she is a few bunnies short of a warren. She self-consciously thinks of herself as a Jamesian heroine, "and she had, from the very beginning, the strange, not to say uncanny, sense that she was walking into her own thesis subject."

She also decides that, since her employer wants her to look after his children, he wants to marry her. Her only slight misgiving about this is that she has a horror of what she calls BL, for Between Legs, that is, male sexuality and all it involves. She consoles herself, however that Charles, being a gentle and considerate man, would never require more of her than a warm cuddle.

Wilson has a fine ear for the kind of English speech that sounds like a subtle put-down even when the speaker is pretending to be friendly. Frances and Michael are polite in that supercilious English way that is calculated to make foreigners act even more gauche than they are; and the housekeeper, instead of being the comforting simpleton of James's story, is a competent, no-nonsense Amazon whose rough kindness and splendid shepherd's pies Sallie takes for condescension.

The effect of this on an already unstable mind is extreme. Sallie takes to sleeping in the absent master's bedroom, cuddling up to his shaving brush and his socks, and she starts seeing the ghost of the dead mother of the children.

It's all in all a gripping little tale, with a truly horrific climax. But if the novel fills one with disquiet it is not so much because of the mental disturbance of its main character, unsettling as that is, as because of Wilson's obvious contempt for her. Many readers have

hated James's governess, but he is himself scrupulously fair to her; Wilson, by contrast, has quite as much fun as Frances and Michael at the expense of his governess. She is, in the first place, a not very bright product of a mediocre American college; she has earnestly imbibed, without altogether understanding, a stock dose of literary theory, which she hopes will cover up her lack of real understanding. In her more lucid moments, she wonders "whether she had not ... been trying to use such language as a way of disguising from herself the absence of any substantial or original thoughts." She is physically as well as mentally infantile, her appearance a parody of squeaky-clean Americanness: "Sallie's hair, a mousey brown, was worn in a ponytail held by elastic bands. She wore an off-white fleece top emblazoned with a motif of teddy bears, who themselves wore red ribbons round their necks and had blue paws." She also wears "very clean black-and-white Pumas" and for travelling she carries "a vast tortoiseshell of a backpack" plus a knapsack and a laptop in a plastic case; she is, in short, every inch the American student in Europe, and Wilson, himself a product of Rugby and Oxford, mercilessly captures the cultural gormlessness of his unfortunate heroine. Not content with making Sallie psychotic, he saddles her with a variety of lighter but socially more disabling misfortunes: she can't play tennis, she can't play Monopoly, she breaks out in pimples, and when she unwisely submits to the pressure to go riding, the horse bites her in the backside, and, once she has managed to get onto his back, "as he broke into a trot, the saddle pounded both her buttocks. It was as if she were being spanked by a pair of baseball bats." The governess becomes, in short, a naughty child being punished for her presumption. It's funny, of course, but Wilson's enjoyment, and thus ours, is indistinguishable from the snobbery of the ten-year old Michael. Reading this book is like spending an evening with an intelligent but unkind person discussing a common acquaintance. It's entertaining, and it's flattering to be invited to share the malice of such a clever chap; but you can't help wondering what he will say about you when you've gone.