

Character Development? Not a Ghost of a Chance

By June Pulliam

Mitchell, Mary Ann. *The Witch*. New York: Medallion Press, 2007. 463 p.

Readers will enjoy the first 100 pages of Mitchell's new novel, *The Witch*, where they learn that Stephen, a little boy, is haunted by the malicious ghost of his mother, who hung herself in the basement only a short time after she discovered her husband's infidelity with Stephen's teenaged babysitter. Cathy, the ghost, is not your run of the mill revenging revenant; rather, she is one who potentially has an army of malicious spirits at her command.

In life, Cathy was a practicing witch, and with the help of her five-year-old son, she conjured creatures she dubbed "the uglies" (they take various unattractive forms such as that of a dwarf, a hag, a snake or a crow—though to be fair, I don't see what is so inherently ugly about snakes or crows). Now the uglies are imprisoned in the basement in a wooden box, awaiting Stephen's touch so they may awaken. Unknown to Stephen, he too has magical powers, powers he was endowed with by Cathy when she was alive. It is Stephen's grief for his mother that has brought Cathy back to the land of the living in a spirit form that no human save her son can detect, and now she must cajole her child to unleash the uglies in order to get revenge on not only the baby sitter, but on her unfaithful spouse, and even her own mother and sister, against whom she nurses longstanding grudges.

Woven into this main story is a frame tale about a witch who lives in a house of bones and imprisons people in her basement. This frame tale is first introduced as a story in progress being told to Stephen in parts by his father, but as the novel continues, Stephen himself will carry on the narrative's fabrication, using it in the way Bruno Bettelheim describes how children employ fantastical narratives to understand events for which they have not yet developed a frame of reference.

The astute reader will find him or herself saying, so far, so good. But after the first 100 pages, I began to be put out of all humor by the author, who seemed incapable of developing any of her characters. As the novel progresses, Cathy's anger with so many of the living seems unreasonable, not so much because we come to care any more about these other characters, but because we don't learn too much more about what they did or did not do to provoke her wrath. While Cathy's mother is a bit unpleasant and is more religious than her agnostic son-in-law, there is no evidence that she is the sort of hell-bat whose actions were so terrible in life that they could perpetuate beyond the grave her daughter's white hot hatred. Nor is Cathy's perfidious spouse further developed in one direction or the other. We later learn that he also diddled his sister-in-law just before the wedding, but we also find out that his wife's suicide has made him feel sufficiently guilty about sleeping with the babysitter, forcing him to eventually find a new one, regardless of

Stephen's attachment to the first sitter. As I result, I just don't really care when either of these characters fall victim to the uglies. I barely know what the characters look like, or what Cathy's husband does for a living for that matter.

Then there's Stephen, whose inconsistent development really grated on my nerves. Stephen is supposed to be a fairly precocious five year old, yet it strains credulity that he is able to articulate so clearly what the uglies want. I understand that the author wanted a child character whose love for his mother would permit him to become the innocent agent for her fury. However, perhaps Mitchell should have made Stephen a bit older, maybe ten instead of five. Five year olds, even really bright ones, have very limited vocabularies and abilities of comprehension, and it is extremely disconcerting when at one moment Stephen is able to make a fairly sophisticated distinction between the person that was his mother and the "shade" she has now become, and the next moment he reverts to being a child again who can't pronounce words like "pneumonia."

Finally, there's Cathy's own lack of development as a character, the result of which reproduces the tired old *Psycho* family dynamic. All we learn about the pre-dead Cathy is that she practiced witchcraft as a teen, that she experienced her relationship with her mother as one fraught with maternal rejection and aloofness, and that she was angry enough about her husband's affair to take her own life as a means of punishing him. Ultimately, Cathy is just a pale imitation of Mrs. Bates—with a supernatural twist. For all intents and purposes, she is nothing more than a fantastical carbon copy of the domineering Hitchcockian woman who rules her son from beyond the grave.

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