

THE VENGEFUL SPIRITS OF JAPAN

for The Midnight Society



presented by

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INTRODUCTION

Being in the market of writing dark fiction, it follows that much of my time is spent mired in the shadowy stuff. What you have in front of you is the results of my efforts researching, documenting, and dallying in everything from the supernatural to the scary.

I've been writing fiction for several years, and have acted as a contributor for a number of online publications in the same timespan. Where possible, articles have been researched and referenced with citations.

You're holding a sampling of the the fun stuff that fuels my practice that other institutions, organizations, communities, and blogs were kind enough to publish.

If you'd like to work with me, make a suggestion for future articles, or alert me that the world is ending and I ought to backup my hard drive, feel free to send a note.

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THE VENGEFUL SPIRITS OF JAPAN

for The Midnight Society

We horror writers are made of sturdier stock than most, right? We can handle a good scare without much psychological scarring. I think? Maybe?

This is the lie I usually tell myself as I pop in another horror movie: “I can handle it.”

Telling myself that “I could handle it,” I sat down for the first time to watch a series of Japanese horror films that basically destroyed my sleeping patterns for the following months. I bought a nightlight. I developed a habit of dashing from the bathroom, which is three feet away from my bedroom, once I’d shut off the light. My partner thinks it’s hysterical when I use a pillow to “defend myself” from the images on the television, or, in this case, the thing crawling out of it.

THE RING

Not every horror movie has this particular effect on me. I know it’s not real. I’m a logical, mostly pragmatic sort of girl who enjoys the occasional scare. So what happened? What could possibly have such an adverse effect on a stable discerning individual who still slams the closet door shut on occasion (Thanks to Mama), is wary of hotel bathtubs (The Shining), was okay with the idea of the tooth fairy in her early years (Darkness Falls).

The playing field of horror was levelled the very first time I watched The Ring, an adaptation of the Japanese version of the film, Ringu. The situation was made worse by following this feature with Ju-On, The Grudge.

I lost all rational methods of coping with horror. Like a big sissypants.



HOKUSAI - ONRYO

J-Horror has a particularly iconic breed of haunted offering to play with, but today I wanted to address my favourite scare: the vengeful ghost. You might recognize them by the white burial gown, the lank hair covering their faces, or the listless way their arms hang at their sides.

According to traditional belief, every person has a spirit called reikon. At death, the reikon leaves the body and enters a purgatory-type state to wait for the proper funeral rites to be performed to ensure that they may join their ancestors in the afterlife. When preformed properly, the reikon returns once a year to visit with the family and look after them from the afterlife.

If those rites are not properly performed, if the person dies under bad circumstances, the reikon becomes a yurei that can bridge the gap between the living and the dead, and returns restless, unsettled, and properly pissed off.

That's where the fun begins.

ONRYO

The types of ghosts that exist in Japan are usually determined by the circumstances of a person's death. A sudden or violent death such as murder or suicide, or experiencing powerful emotions such as revenge, jealousy, hatred, or sorrow at the time of death produces a very particular type of spirit if the person was a woman.

Yeah, guys, the premise for *The Grudge* has basis in legend.

Onryō are often the spirits of abused or neglected women, hurt by their lovers preceding their death. They return seeking revenge for the cruel or unnatural events that brought about their demise, but often times do not seek revenge against their former lover — which makes anyone in the vicinity of the haunting fair game. The name consists of two kanji, (On), meaning “grudge” or “resentment” and (ryo), meaning “soul” or “spirit.” Why only women, you might ask: Because in life, a woman's gender rendered her powerless to defend herself against her lover's mistreatment, but in death she found the strength to exact revenge.



THE GRUDGE

In Kabuki, the traditional appearance of Onryō that we know today from Ju-On and Ringu was developed in the Edo period in Japan. These spirits were often dressed in a white burial gown; white being the colour symbolic of purity and death in Shinto. The long, dark hair of Japanese women was often worn pinned up, but for their funeral and burial it was left loose. Arms and hands hung limp and the sides, and often both actors depicting revenge spirits were hoisted into the air. Typically, the vengeful ghost floated above the ground with feet unseen.

And the thing that creeped me out the most? Those eerie-blue white faces peeking through the shroud of hair? Blue is a colour representative of negative emotions such as fear or jealousy. Kabuki actors used Seitai — a cosmetic paint used on the lines of their makeup to achieve the effect. A blue face represents a ghost, spirit, or other magical creature, and indicate that Nothing Good is going to come from running into one of these creepy looking gals.

ANNA DRESSED IN BLOOD BY KENDARE BLAKE

When Kendare Blake's Anna Dressed in Blood came out, I was all over it. Little did I expect to find one of my favourite and most feared elements from Japanese horror lurking in the pages, so imagine my surprise and delight when we first catch a glimpse of the ghost rising through the floorboards of the home where she died.

THE SUMMARY: ANNA DRESSED IN BLOOD

Cas Lowood has inherited an unusual vocation: He kills the dead.

So did his father before him, until he was gruesomely murdered by a ghost he sought to kill. Now, armed with his father's mysterious and deadly athame, Cas travels the country with his kitchen-witch mother and their spirit-sniffing cat. They follow legends and local lore, destroy the murderous dead, and keep pesky things like the future and friends at bay.

Searching for a ghost the locals call Anna Dressed in Blood, Cas expects the usual: track, hunt, kill. What he finds instead is a girl entangled in curses and rage, a ghost like he's never faced before. She still wears the dress she wore on the day of her brutal murder in 1958: once white, now



stained red and dripping with blood. Since her death, Anna has killed any and every person who has dared to step into the deserted Victorian she used to call home. Yet she spares Cas's life.

The haunting in Anna definitely shares links to Onryo legend, wrapping the circumstances of her death in a tight little plot with interesting characters. If you're interested in a good creepy spook bent on retribution, I highly recommend it.

Likewise, if you enjoy a good revenge spirit, let me know what you've got on your reading list. I'm always open to another good haunting, even if that means leaving the lights on at night for a few days.



ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The Midnight Society

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<http://midnightsocietytales.com/2014/06/07/vengeful-spirits-japan/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Butler writes speculative fiction for adults, new adults, and young adult readers. She especially appreciates dark urban fantasy and low key horror, and likes to write about everything in between. She lives in Montreal, where she is working towards the completion of her first young adult horror novel.



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