

PATRICK MCGRATH " GHOST TOWN " 2005

**'Sharp and haunting ... McGrath's prose is clean, lucid and utterly transfixing'** *Sunday Times*

**'Like a latter-day Edgar Allan Poe, McGrath probes the insanity and violence lurking beneath the skin of daily life'** *Financial Times*

Patrick McGrath excavates the layers of New York's turbulent history.

Beneath Manhattan's ever-changing skyline, familial betrayal and guilt remain hauntingly constant in these three novellas. The stories are built like New York itself on war, murder and betrayal.

The opening story, 'The Year Of The Gibbet' written by a man as he waits to die of cholera, in the epidemic of 1832, looks back more than 55 years, to the Revolutionary War of Independence, when he was a small boy, and his mother a Revolutionary fighting against the hated British oppressor, hanging these revolutionaries as subversive traitors.

The central character has been haunted by the horrific events around his mother's life and death, and, indeed, haunted by her ghost, and inhabited life of the margins of poverty

"There is little left to tell. Half a century has passed since The Year of The Gibbet, and the war has been transformed in the minds of my countrymen such that it now resembles nothing so much as the glorious enterprise of a small host of heroes and martyrs sustained by the idea of Liberty and bound for that reason to prevail in the end.

But I am haunted."

"Julius" moves ahead to the Civil War era to tell the Jamesian saga of a weak-minded art student who goes insane when his wealthy businessman father breaks up his love affair with a lowborn artists' model. In thrusting nineteenth-century New York, a ruthless merchant's sensitive son is denied the love of his life through his father's prejudice against the immigrants flooding into the city - and madness and violence ensue.

. "Ground Zero" is the tale of a man who begins a relationship with a prostitute who keeps seeing the specter of her lover, a man killed in the attack on the World Trade Center. It's told from the viewpoint of the man's jealous psychiatrist, who gradually allows her voice of psychoanalytic detachment to take on a vengeful tone of post-9/11 paranoia. McGrath (*Asylum*, etc.) sets these stories against the burgeoning city and its stew of sublime aspiration, corrupt failure, and sexual and class antagonisms. He writes in a range of registers, but complicates each with a subtle, empathetic humanism.

In the wake of 9/11, a Manhattan psychiatrist treats a favored patient reeling from the destruction of the World Trade Center, but fails to detect the damage she herself has sustained.

"Ground Zero" is an amazingly well-done portrait of a complex post-9/11 relationship where an analyst attempts to guide her patient in coming to terms with his new lover's past relationship, which involved both her former boyfriend (now dead) and his father. The pitiful yet magnetic characters are like Edward Gorey drawings brought to life. The stories contain subtly nuanced connections to each other not only in setting (that of the island of Manhattan) but also in specific geographic references, as well as themes of familial and romantic love, honesty, death and evil. Patrick McGrath uses such elegant and well-turned sentences, I felt like I was watching the ghosts of ballroom dancers waltz across a dimly lit stage in an old theater; the title is an apt fit.

The second story, Julius, recounts the rise and fall of the wealthy Van Horn family from roughly the end time of the previous story to a period some 50 years later, and shows how class and race prejudice can damage the lives of both oppressed and oppressor. The narrator of this story looks back at her family history, and the story she wormed out of her mother, when she was still small, about Julius, his sisters, and her grandparents.

The ghosts in this story are the ghosts of what might have been, if only' which haunt all lives, and the ghosts of former lives, wasted lives, memory, real and imagined, and history itself, pressing on the present.

The women in the middle story live in a time where women for the most part were without power.

"For the story of Julius, so painstakingly assembled by means of the fading memories of those who knew him, and the ghosts now clustered on my walls and sideboards - do they not all clamor the same sad warning? That love denied will make us mad? I think so"

The third story, Ground Zero, relates the story of September 11 through the effect on the lives of a female psychotherapist, her male client, and his obsession with a very powerful, very damaged woman who uses and is used by her predatory sexuality. The lives of the three, and indeed the lives

of all others in the city, are haunted by the before, the during, and the aftermath of the events of September 11. The terror of death, and the confrontation with mortality become conscious and unconscious forces. Sex and death are woven together in this final story.

I wonder about the woman from Battery Park, the one who wanted a funeral for her husband but had no body to put in the coffin..... Did she find closure? Did she,...

This is a short, and somber book, beautiful, melancholy and violent

Three short stories in this book: different time periods, different events. Each story has its own 'ghosts', all are set in New York.

In 'The Year of the Gibbet', a man is haunted by the memory of his mother standing under a gibbet with a rope around her neck. It is the American War of Independence and, as she has defied the British forces occupying New York, she must pay. Fifty years later, and about to die himself, her son still feels guilty for his inadvertent part in her discovery and downfall.

The next story, 'Julius' is set in the bustling New York of the 19th century. A ruthless merchant's sensitive son is denied the love of his life because of his father's prejudice against more recent immigrants who are flooding into the city. This results in a legacy of regret, madness and violence.

The final story, 'Ground Zero' is set in New York in September 2001. A Manhattan psychiatrist tries to treat a client after the destruction of the World Trade Centre. Unfortunately, in her focus on him and the damage he has endured, she fails to realize the damage that she has also incurred.

While these stories are not directly related to each other, they complement each other. The individuals depicted, and the events they take part in, each represent a particular stage in New York's history.

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The year of the gibbet

A man is haunted by the memory of his mother with a rope around her neck. It is the American War of Independence, and having defied the British forces occupying New York she must pay for her revolutionary activities. But fifty years on her son harbors a festering guilt for his inadvertent part in her downfall.

In "The Year of the Gibbet," set in the burned-out, British-occupied city of 1777, a boy inadvertently exposes his mother as a spy for General Washington; after she is hanged, her ghost returns to torment him.

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