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## ESSAY

# Houses of Death: Ruth Rendell's Domestic Gothic and the Emptying Out of Romance

GINA WISKER

### Abstract

*A blackened, burned dress hangs limply in an upstairs wardrobe in a dusty, deserted house in the Fens, in Ruth Rendell's The Brimstone Wedding (1996). This dress, like the airless, loveless, and love-lost houses in both The Brimstone Wedding and The Secret House of Death (1968) serves as a reminder of false romantic promises, the emptying out of desire into the mundane, the dangers and betrayals both of passion and of the everyday domestic. This is Rendell's domestic Gothic at its best. In both Ruth Rendell and her alias Barbara Vine's more psychological thrillers, the twin comforts of romance and a safe home and family give way to disturbance, discomfort, disease, and disruption. Romance is treacherous and betrayed. However passionate, stolen, turbulent, and filled with promise, it slips away at a single deceptive act or through the repetitive, mundane everyday. Its worst outcomes are cruelty following the end of love or the equally destructive, mind-numbingly banal winding down into lovelessness. Clandestine love nests are cleared out and shuttered up; suburban family life is devalued. Each is prone to absences, deceit, and death. Much of Rendell's domestic Gothic has echoes of Daphne du*

*Maurier's earlier, influential, genre-shifting, romantic, crime Gothic Rebecca (1938), and this novel's haunting of our reading of Rendell's texts underpins discussion of The Brimstone Wedding and The Secret House of Death. Both use strategies of women's crime entwined with romantic domestic Gothic to undermine thoroughly investment in romantic love, domestic bliss, and the security of the family home.*

## Ruth Rendell and Women's Crime Writing

The clothes of the dead won't wear long. They fret for the person who owned them.

(Rendell, *The Brimstone Wedding* 3)

Crime novelist Ruth Rendell is not predominantly known as a writer dominated by the supernatural, although superstition might infuse everyday life (*The Brimstone Wedding*), and there are odd ghostly walk-on parts, a suggestion of parallel worlds ("The Green Road" [1981]). Hers is usually more a haunting of place and a reminder of ill doing or madness than a spectral presence. Rendell's work, however, is recognizably romantic and domestic Gothic. Bodies are often found in domestic homes, and it is statistically proven that you are more likely to be murdered by someone you know, possibly the one you thought you loved and who loved you, than by a complete stranger. At Ruth Rendell's death, fellow crime writer and longtime fan Val McDermid commented on her engagement with social issues, her critical view on the conventional, and her artistry. In so doing, McDermid places Rendell in the forefront of the revolution in women's crime fiction. She starts by noting trends, beginning with Rendell's first novel *From Doon with Death* (1964), which normalizes a lesbian relationship at its core, and undercuts the complacently stable:

The classic Rendell hallmarks were all there from the beginning – the sense of place, the delicate filleting of the characters' psyches, the avoidance of the prosaic both in character

and in motivation. . . . Ruth also demonstrated a keen fascination with the collision between society and the individual, particularly where circumstances drive the individual to behaviour that society regards as somehow abnormal. Stable structures had only limited interest to her as a novelist; what set her creativity flowing was the point where things start to fall apart, and that was where Ruth excelled. Never content with mere description, she illuminated the human condition in all its obsessive complexity in a style that was invariably clear and compelling. (McDermid)

page number for the McDermid quotation?



Rendell's work marks an interesting development in the range of work produced by women detective fiction and crime writers. Its complex plotting, social engagement, sense of place, and diverse characters, among other features, counteract any potential criticism of it as lightweight because it is popular fiction. As Ros Coward and Linda

Sample note:

[. . .] detective fiction has received a most extraordinary boost from three women writers – P.D. James, Ruth Rendell and Patricia Highsmith. Not only have they revived the popularity of crime fiction but many critics also claim that their writing has blurred the earlier distinctions between 'genre fiction' (seen as lowbrow and inferior) and serious literature. (39–40)

Rendell is significant among women detective fiction and crime writers who refuse the hard-boiled male detective fiction representations of women as bimbos or victims, and exposes the variety of ideologically based roles for women popular in detective and crime fictions. To some extent, her work resembles that of the more radical writers who emerged in the 1980s, including these works by American authors: Amanda Cross's Kate Fansler mysteries; Valerie Miner's *Murder in the English Department* (1982); Barbara Wilson's *Sisters of the Road* (1987); and Mary Wings' *She Came Too Late* (1986).

Rendell's fiction rewards readers with fine plot and good writing, while challenging, disturbing, and undermining the complacencies and certainties on which crime fiction is built:

The characteristic of the detective novel is that of patriarchal bourgeois ideology; to challenge any aspect of that narrative seriously compromises the writer's ability to produce an otherwise conventional text . . . the genre conventions are encoded with ideological discourse. (Cranny-Francis 174)

The work of the women crime and detective fiction writers from the 1980s, including that of Rendell, queries any neat logical trajectory in which criminals are clearly identifiable, culpable wrongdoers, who can be exposed and punished. Their work questions a trajectory dependent on seeing crime from a positivist, fact-finding perspective, in a world where black and white are easily distinguishable, a worldview many women crime writers disturb. Their work, and Rendell's, sees crime as more complex, more rooted in accident, psychology, wrong choices, and social constraints and inequalities, not always a product of a criminal mind. More than just a cosmetic change, this challenges the ideology underlying male detective novels as noted by Sally Munt in *Murder by the Book* (1994).

Although there is a lesbian relationship at the core of *From Doon with Death*, Rendell is not as radical in terms of her questioning of sexuality and gendered roles as, for example, are Val McDermid (*Report for Murder* [1987]), Mary Wings (*She Came Too Late*), or Barbara Wilson (*Murder in the Collective* [1984]; *Sisters of the Road*), whose lesbian detective and crime fiction fundamentally upsets a heteronormative worldview. However, like this group of women writers, her contemporaries, Rendell also challenges the sources of and any reason for punishing crime, and she uses the domestic

Gothic to challenge the solidly based beliefs in romantic love, security of consistent identity, the safety and financial solidity of house and home, and the utter completion offered in the fiction of domestic bliss. Here the local knowledge and special social insider knowledge of Chief Inspector Reg Wexford are one form of insight about human behavior. In the non-Wexford novels, however, represented here by *The Brimstone Wedding* and *The Secret House of Death*, the instincts, intuition, fictionalizing practices, and organized forward planning of the leading women characters Stella and Jenny/Genevieve in the first novel, Susan in the second, both derive from their desire for romantic and domestic security, and their innate suspicions that such security is but a fiction hiding darker secrets. The dark disruptive energies of the Gothic play out in the duplicity, the undermining of complacency, the alternative narratives. This interfacing of crime and romantic domestic Gothic is not entirely new.

## Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938): Echoes, Ghostings, and Traces

In their own way, each of these two novels by Ruth Rendell, *The Brimstone Wedding* and *The Secret House of Death*, recalls Daphne du Maurier's Gothic romance for the twentieth century, *Rebecca* – with its romance, its deceptive offer of love in the fabric of twentieth century and historical security, and stability of a grand or everyday home.¶

Rendell's emptying out of the middle-class investments in love, financial security, and the family home write against the tradition of the stability of the English country house, the romantic plots in traditional Gothic where young women are threatened but the gallant appropriate romantic hero rescues them, into marriages. She exposes the rewards offered by these triple investments – love, finance, and home – as dangerous lies. She

does this through the specific formulas of the crime novel, nuanced by perspectives of gender and class and laced with irony. Hers are notably women's crime fictions, where although there are murders and plots filled with hidden secrets and deceits, and, often, there is no clear criminal – or there is one whose actions are explicable, given intense pressure and awkward circumstances. The very logical nature of the crime novel is troubled, and the crime novel combines both the everyday Gothic disturbance of comfort and conformity and investment in romantic economics and the home. The origins of much of this we can see in du Maurier's *Rebecca*, where a romantic idyll in a grand country home with a wealthy partner deteriorates into the revelation of a murder, the punishment of disruption, and a tediously secretive mundane existence. Grandeur, more magnificent, and magical even than the romantic hero Max de Manderley, Maxim de Winter's Gothic home. A house of one's dreams, it is nevertheless rather austere, its rooms, tableaux of another's artificial life, now empty of meaning and activity. On arrival at her new home, the second wife is expected to act up to the occasion, to be wearing something rather more suitable than her current clothes. Her domestic functions are entirely taken up by Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper, and it is Mrs Danvers too who largely suggests that the wife and mistress of the house functions are still, and much more appropriately, those of the dead first wife, Rebecca. Like the period and the class it romanticizes and deconstructs, Manderley exudes wealth. It is attractive but pointless, lacking meaning except for the hidden unpleasant secrets, the pretenses, and lies of the high-living lifestyle of the previous era: Rebecca's deceptive, partying existence.

For the second wife, there is an uneasy set of confusing contradictions and wrong decisions. The house not only looks like but is a Gothic (fictional) construction, an

illusion. The deceptive promise of the house is indicated from the start, with its long and winding drive that “twisted and turned like a serpent” (du Maurier 69), and bewildering, even shocking “huge rhododendrons” (70). “They startled me with their crimson faces, massed one upon the other in incredible profusion, showing no leaf, no twig, nothing but the slaughterous red, luscious and fantastic” (70), while her first view of house and retainers reminds her “they were the watching crowd about the block, and I the victim” (72). As the real plot surfaces, along with Rebecca’s real drowned remains, Max can be more fully understood as, on the one hand, more like the heroes of Gothic romances before secrets are revealed, or a kind of failed Bluebeard. The final collusion is a worse artifice than the partying.

Du Maurier’s Gothic romance crime novel lies behind Rendell’s *The Brimstone Wedding* in particular, but also *The Secret House of Death*. In both, there are historical secret liaisons that lead to death, behind the facade of a rural or a suburban love nest. Alan is no dashing hero, but he murders Gilda when she is thrown from the car, which hits the tractor in the stubble burning smoke. For Susan, in *The Secret House of Death*, the divorcee’s potential Prince Charming, the grieving husband across the road, is actually the murderer. Colluding with his victim’s rather “tarty” young foreign wife, he has murdered both his own wife and her trusting husband, having staged this innocent pair as a couple having an affair. In their conventional readings of a few traces glimpsed from behind twitching curtains, the local gossips will condemn them and miss the truth. Homes entrap; romance goes out not with an explosion but with a whimper.

In *The Brimstone Wedding*, two illicit love affairs take place in the one house, Molucca (the exotic name of which, rather than its size as a cottage, reminds us of



Manderley), owned off the grid. The Norfolk house is secretly purchased by Stella Newland, a (now elderly) woman, one of the well-heeled, elderly patients at Middleton Hall care home, who has terminal lung cancer. Her house purchase and sudden economic freedom from her domineering, controlling husband Rex are made possible through a legacy from her father. Now she is cared for by the friendly Genevieve (Jenny/Genevieve) Warner who is partly responsible, Stella says, for her choosing that particular care home. When Jenny/Genevieve admits she is in love with Ned Saraman, a film-maker who rents a weekend cottage with his wife and sick child (actually he rents a series of weekend cottages along with, it is revealed, a series of affairs, each of which is cut short when the woman buys his lies of permanence), Stella suddenly starts to tell of her own loveless marriage. She relates her 20-year-old doomed romance with her old school friend, children's illustrator Alan Tyzark, with whom she plays house at Molucca, only using the main rooms.

In *The Secret House of Death*, a trapped suburban housewife, Susan, whose annoying, self-opinionated, writerly husband has left her for a younger model, observes what is contrasted as one version of a murder in suburbia, but which turns out to be much more convoluted and deceptive. *Rebecca* is an unnamed background for each of these in different ways:

He drove faster, much faster. We topped the hill before us and saw Lanyon lying in a hollow at our feet . . . The road to Manderley lay ahead. There was no moon. The sky above our heads was inky black. But the sky on the horizon was not dark at all. It was shot with crimson, like a splash of blood. And the ashes blew towards us with the salt wind from the sea. (du Maurier 397)

Written across the inky sky is a violent revenge for death and secrecy. Flames conventionally cleanse guilt, but these, like blood, remind of the crime itself. All that is left for this couple, as for the deceptions and partying of their period, the false hopes, is waste – ashes mixed with the bitter sharpness of salt. *Rebecca* itself as a novel goes out with a bang, and then a whimper, in a conflagration recalling the burning of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Bronte's novel reemphasizes romance and the grand house, while questioning colonialism, the economic position of women; it is a relatively conventional (happy-ever-after couple) but troubled ending. Maxim de Winter and the second, nameless wife, however, who survive the labyrinth of the house, Manderley, its secrets and its histories, and Maxim's secrets and his histories, are stuck in a life of repetition. Theirs is the end of a romantic fiction, an idyllic turned oppressive life together, keeping their secrets and listening to Test matches on the radio. *Rebecca's* explosion and conflagration is followed by disorder, decay, and the paralysis of a relationship based on complicity, affected by a form of tarnished gentility and transient stuckness. Du Maurier's novel retains no romance, only shared guilt and the restraint that goes with it, dull coupledness, ironically in hotels and rented apartments, without a house of their own.

Space, romance, lies, death, and burning run through these two precedents as they do through Ruth Rendell's *The Brimstone Wedding* and *The Secret House of Death*. Rendell's *The Brimstone Wedding* has only an unconvincing hint of ghosting built on the superstitions of Jenny/Genevieve's grandmother, based on avoiding red flowers and green clothing, some ritual behaviors and talismans. However, this novel, above all, emphasizes her romantic domestic Gothic of the mundane, quotidian, rural, urban, or suburban entrapments for women, which the love nest or family home represents. Ros

Coward and Linda Semple argue, “Woman’s powerlessness and isolation is a theme which runs through many contemporary feminist thrillers” (44), and we see this entrapment and emptying out of promise in the Gothic romances lying behind Rendell’s work. *Manderley* and *Thornfield* are the charred stuff of romantic dreams, where (seemingly) gallant, titled (immensely flawed) men whisk impoverished young beauties off into their rich homes. There is even less illusion for the women and their houses in Rendell’s domestic Gothic. In *The Brimstone Wedding*, for Stella, and then Jenny/Genevieve, there is the performance of romance and domesticity. *The Secret House of Death* offers only the deadening atmosphere of life in a cul-de-sac for Susan, the captive and rejected housewife. Each house resonates with guilt, silence, loss, debt, and deception. The novels discussed here, *The Brimstone Wedding* and *The Secret House of Death*, each intertwine real or potential betrayed romance with murder.

In *The Secret House of Death*, Susan, a suburban housewife, whose writing support turns a Barbara Cartland type romance writer’s scrawl into readable prose, observes what the neighbors all determine is a murder/suicide – and unwittingly brings into her own house the actual murderer masquerading as a form of Prince Charming, the bereaved husband. All the relationships go sour; all are empty and treacherous. Rendell undermines fantasies of romance and the domestic stability of coupledness, and connections between romance and domestic bliss in any version of a house, whether a grand house, a suburban family home, or a love nest. However, while du Maurier’s English country house, *Manderley*, also hides terrible secrets, Rendell’s women are relatively financially self-sufficient, and their houses, those deceptive romantic and domestic traps, are significant in this respect. Stella, then Jenny/Genevieve, benefits

through ownership of the house, Molucca, and Susan retains then sells the family home on the suburban estate while coping as a mother of a small son, surviving financially through her typing.

## Ruth Rendell's Supernatural and Domestic Gothic Horror

Ruth Rendell decries the supernatural; indeed, even in the story “The Green Road” (1981), which purports to have a supernatural occurrence at its heart, her ghosts are rather unconvincing, more latent memories or suggestions rather than fully fleshed out, haunting, walking apparitions. Before outlining the depression, relative impoverishment, and pointlessness of a fantasy sci-fi novelist (undercutting this genre also), her narrative voice declares:

[. . .] but this is not a ghost story. Who could conceive of a ghost, not of a person but of a place, and that place having not existence in the natural world? Who could suppose anything of a supernatural or a paranormal kind happening to man like himself? who is quite unimaginative and not observant at all. (Rendell, “The Green Road” 46)

However, there is some ghosting and supernatural in this story, which describes possibilities of shifting into parallel locations, times, and events on a secret, grassy route, which is itself a spur from an equally somewhat unknown, alternative, grassy, wild-flower-filled walk through and out of London on a defunct railway line. The narrator's strange experience in the parallel world, one familiar to the novelist, shifts him temporarily into his friend's imaginative space, a momentary alignment that presages the novelist's death. Place is significant in Ruth Rendell's work; it has a kind of “psychogeography” (Debord), and resonates with memories, lies, deceptions, conflagration, and deadly events, the history of which these places hide, like the burned dress and the blackened car in *The Brimstone Wedding*. Rather than conjured ghosts

appearing for warning or revenge, instead, hidden histories are layered into place for the sensitive to respond to. Still vital, influential traces on places of events that earlier take place there creep back up and out in the short story as hidden routes, the ghosts of trains, and in *The Brimstone Wedding* as the cover up of death, the destruction of dreams.

Ruth Rendell is not usually considered a writer of Gothic horror, nor am I arguing here that this is a revelatory insight into her work as a whole. Rather I take up *The Brimstone Wedding* and *The Secret House of Death* to explore Rendell's stepping into the world of domestic Gothic horror. This is hinted at in other works, such as her final novel, *Dark Corners* (2015), also partly about the overwhelming presence of a house. This novel resonates more obviously with the work of her predecessor du Maurier, particularly in *Rebecca*, which also involves locked rooms, hidden marital secrets, duplicity, lies, lost keys, and contradictory histories as cover-ups for deceit and murder.

## Domestic Gothic and Houses of Horror

Stephen King is clear about the domestic everyday of Gothic horror, emphasizing its domesticity and spatializing psychological disturbance: “the good horror tale will dance its way to the center of your life and find the secret door to the room you believed no one but you knew of” (149). Domestic Gothic is characterized by its location, the home, which seems safe but in fact imprisons physically and psychologically, and undermines from within its walls the certainties of identity, love, family, nurturing, and security. It suggests that the home is actually a place of imprisonment and danger. According to Chris Baldick, Gothic fiction is itself a prison, where gender is power: “The imprisoning house of Gothic fiction has from the very beginning been that of patriarchy” (Baldick xxii), and domestic settings, “simply the confinements of a family house closing in upon

itself” (xxii), are themselves terrifying and incarcerating. We see this in the work of Edgar Allen Poe, particularly in the deadly incestuous relationship emanating from and through the very physical shape of the imprisoning house in “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). Poe’s House of Usher builds upon the conventions of its literary Gothic antecedents, for example, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), later spoofed by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). It also foreshadows the reappearance of the house (or hotel) of horror in contemporary horror films, for example, *The Shining* (1970), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Others* (2002), and *The Ones Below* (2016), and numerous tales where the location of house or home and/ or the family or couples enact and embody the dubious destructive secrets of past actions, while present covert or overt tyrannies are its legacy. Such tyrannies of domestic oppression, the trap of stalled or prevented romance, or the constraints of conformity, are frequently the focus of women’s domestic Gothic. One such example is Angela Carter’s “The Fall River Axe Murders,” collected in *Black Venus* (1985). In this tale, Carter’s interpretation of a real event subsequently routed into popular cultural memory, Lizzie Borden experiences domestic entrapment in a house full of locked rooms and labyrinthine corridors, representing the local Puritan mindset and her claustrophobic family, dominated by the undertaker father. She lives in “A house full of locked doors that open only into other rooms with other locked doors, for, upstairs and downstairs, all the rooms lead in and out of another like a maze in a bad dream. It is a house without passages” (Carter 74). Lizzie finally turns on the abusive family and carves them up with an axe.

The women in Rendell’s work do not erupt. They save wisely, they have their own jobs, and they move on. From oppressive dangerous relationships, fantasies, and

homes, they break out of the romantic fiction straitjacket represented in new versions of these locked, terrible houses of domestic Gothic, and refuse to be victims. Domestic Gothic offers a disquieting peek behind the curtains of the everyday, the familiar, and the complacently secure, revealing such an everyday world as an artifice, a socially conventional pretense. Disturbances in the romantic and domestic lies are embodied spatially, physically, and psychogeographically (Debord). While traditionally this is staged in terms of the Gothic contexts of castles, dank corridors, or graveyards, in domestic romantic Gothic, the suburban house and the little love nest in the Fens are equally disturbing places and just as likely to hide deceit and incarceration, both physical and psychological, and threats in the everyday. Rendell reveals herself to have much in common with domestic Gothic horror writers in the two novels under discussion, not least because of their similar tales of adulterous relationships, secret or misread locations, and incarcerating romantic and domestic narratives and spaces. In each, what seems “normal” gives way to an alternative reading of events and behaviors, offering insights into romantic and marital hypocrisies and hidden dangers, which have run alongside seemingly domestic security and romantic or marital fidelity.

The Bluebeard story ([Perrault \[1697\]](#)) of fairytale and folktale also underpins these novels, as it frequently haunts romantic and domestic Gothic, offering a blueprint for undercutting and exposing the economic, psychological, and physical power relations behind traditional romantic love’s promises of eternal care and attention. In versions of the Bluebeard tale, such promises are followed by entry into, then entrapment by the grand (or small) house, where the man has the power, the money, the keys, and control over the scenarios that lead to the woman’s punishment (and ultimate death) for her

independence and curiosity. Perhaps ironically, the keys are owned by Rendell's women, Stella and Susan, but they hand them over to men who could betray or endanger them in the name of love. Alan Tyzark plays house with Stella, but after the car crash, he almost casually asphyxiates his dying wife, Gilda, because she is in the way. Ned also has keys to this house, but refuses the very domesticity he has constantly urged Jenny to accept, and he deserts her for the next woman in his series of philandering affairs. Susan Townsend is the most vulnerable. Lonely, half dazed after her divorce, and believing that ostensibly betrayed widower Bob North finds her attractive and is falling in love with her, she gives him her house keys. But she is letting a murderer into to her heart and into her house, and his comings and goings casually threaten to undermine her safety. The houses of death in Ruth Rendell have several of the characteristics of the Bluebeard tale: failed promises of romance, remnants of hidden secrets and loss hidden in wardrobes (rather than locked rooms), and stories of love, which are emptied out. They lead both in *The Brimstone Wedding* and in *The Secret House of Death* to murder, though not of the protagonist, who in each becomes more independent, finding a voice and financial independence. The women finally hang onto the keys.

### The Brimstone Wedding

A somber house dominates *The Brimstone Wedding*, used decades apart as a trysting spot for lovers, ultimately two pairs of lovers, who need to keep away from their formal legitimate lives by meeting in the little house. It is set in view of the care home in which wealthy Stella lives and dies, succumbing to lung cancer from a lifetime of smoking, and not far from where Jenny/Genevieve lives with the DIY-focused, run of the mill, husband Mike, who is as much part of the wallpaper as the house improvements he insists on. In



Stella's secretly owned house, Molucca, there is a ghosting, not a real ghost, but a ghosting of previous women. For Stella – in her 70s when we meet her in the care home, particularly well dressed, well polished, and overdressed, according to the care home manager, who doesn't like to see anybody retaining their identity when they get past 60 – the house has been a house of specters.

Stella owns this house herself, and it initially represents a form of independence from her domineering husband Rex, because the money for it is left to her by her father. This is actually her only money, because Rex will not let her work and does not give her any financial support apart from the bare housekeeping, so she buys herself a space, her own space. Initially, Stella uses the house, Molucca, as a place to meet her lover from school, Alan Tyzark, an illustrator of children's books, whom she re-meets almost by accident with his wife in the village in Norfolk. Alan and Stella carry on their relationship as if they are a married couple, resembling figures from Alan's own illustrated children's stories, which line the walls. Hidden in a drawer, however, is the only photograph of the two of them, dressed up as characters from one of his stories, taken one day when they are playing house and have their pictures taken by a passing couple who knock on the door because they are lost. In this house, they construct their own home and their own ways of life. They drink wine, smoke, and play house. It stops being a potential home as opposed to a trysting place after the night when Alan's wife Gilda dies.

The first secret is revealed to Jenny/Genevieve when Stella begins to settle her affairs, and receives the deeds of the house. When things come in important letters in the care home they are quite often wills. Some carers express hope that the old folks will die and leave them a legacy, so some begin to believe that Jenny/Genevieve will come into

some money from Stella. Initially Stella wants to find her voice, settle her thoughts, and talk to Jenny/Genevieve about her past, and while she does much of this in conversation, her secret taping of her darkest memories are read by the readers, and heard through the door by Jenny/Genevieve. Stella wishes to share and then erase. She asks Jenny/Genevieve to open Molucca up and clean it, with a view to selling it in the future. When she actually unlocks, enters, and begins work to return the house to something fit to live in, she finds deception and loss. What she uncovers is the trace elements of this homemaking relationship of Stella and Alan that never quite turned the house into anything other than a partial version of home. She also notices that the upstairs rooms, apart from the bedroom, are not furnished, as if the pretense only needed to be maintained in the essential central rooms, making the domestic world a kind of limited performance. Downstairs, the pictures are of children and animals (as illustrations) rather than of families. In the drawer is a single photo of a young man and woman looking as if they too have walked out of a children's book. It is clear that this is not really a fully managed home. Beyond the ghostly remains of their relationship, what Jenny/Genevieve also finds is a beautiful dress covered in smuts, burned and messy, hanging in the wardrobe, like the ghost of somebody else; it's a ghostly dress, a dress that has lost its owner. Worse still, heading into the locked garage she finds an old red Ford Anglia. It too seems to have suffered burns, as well as scratches. The charred dreams of a secret past of homemaking, of a car, of a burned out dress, linger twenty years after the events in a house covered in dust. Jenny/Genevieve is a very superstitious person. This is seen as a country trait handed on by her grandma, so she constantly checks for men who whistle in the dark and gives people four leaf clovers to enable them to have good luck. She does

not really feel a ghostly presence, but the traces of other women, of traumatic events, lingering in this house, its secrets waiting to be told, as in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*.

More Gothic elements occur, particularly in the parallels between Jenny/Genevieve and Stella. For both carer Jenny/Genevieve and the elegant Stella, the maintenance of a double life, a life of illicit love with a secret lover, dominates their everyday thoughts, memories, plans, and notions of the importance of life, yet it needs to be kept entirely hidden from their families, friends, and the villagers. Stella's wealth means her illicit relationship is featured in a house, a white house on a hill, which is almost off the local grid, unnoticed and unseen. It now stands semimaintained, internally laden with gray dust and infringed on by damp, with a legacy of years of this silent, hidden, relationship and its calm silence. The house's ownership is the illegal embedded in the legal, the illicit relationship represented in the tone of the documents of the house deeds, which are posted to Stella. Jenny/Genevieve's role as a kind of accomplice is necessary to provide an insight into the state of the house, the remains, and the relics of the long gone love. Stella and her lover partly buy into the domestic and the legal, with the house, the car, and the photo, but their lives, though represented in these outward shows of conformity, are actually entirely hidden from neighbors, friends, and family. Stella's children have no idea about the long-term affair conducted by their mother, which would perhaps undermine the safety of their family behaviors, based on supporting her now that she is frail but still wealthy, with regular visits, routines, expectations, and norms. Stella's overt parallel history with her lover is a version of the life that she would like to revisit vicariously through the experiences of Jenny/Genevieve, entrusted with the keys and testifying to the state of the house, which gives Stella her illicit, hidden, non-

family history some more palpable existence. Jenny/Genevieve cleans the house and then begins to take on Stella's historical role, inviting her lover to share it with her, waiting for his arrival at the window, and setting up a temporary home. Stella has led her into this collusion and safe haven. But Jenny/Genevieve initially has no idea of the link between the burned dress and car, and the love nest. Her involvement is greater, but ultimately (as Stella intends), more enabling for her, when she makes this link through listening to Stella's testimony and unburdening, in the taped tale. The missing wife, the missing link in the tale, is Gilda Brent, B movie star, Alan's wife. Gilda eventually discovers their secret home and spends one last lengthy, ill-fated drunken afternoon with Stella and Alan. Gilda is immensely performative. In her own house, she keeps a painting of herself, naked, above the sofa, so when she sits on the sofa it is impossible to avoid the pictorial parallel. She overdresses, and is somehow permanently preserved in her films, which she constantly replays, ghosting her former self in her conversations about actors and actresses she's known and men she says are in love with her. Most of her conversation also is a ghostly echo of the words from her films, so after a while, Stella is able to hear her adopting the roles that she plays in those films. Gilda is unsettlingly unaware that she's using their language to talk of herself as a wife who's been scorned, somebody who's been left behind, or somebody who's been belittled and marginalized, or whatever the role she happens to play, which she now parallels in her own life. As if in one of her own films, Gilda stalks Alan and Stella to Molucca in her little red car, and like a pantomime witch, appears out of a cloud of black smoke, caused by the fields being burned back at the end of the harvest. Dense smoke hides everything. They drink and

smoke excessively, and then Gilda goes off in the car with them, insisting on sitting in the front as befits her wifely role.

He drove very fast round those bends and faster along those long straights. The car bounced over a humpback bridge that crossed a stream and Gilda gave a thin shriek. He must have been driving at more than fifty when the smoke rolled across the road in front of us. It came suddenly, a dense black cloud, almost horizontal, pouring over the hedge, engulfing the car. (Rendell, *Brimstone* 285)

In the ensuing accident with a parked combine harvester, Gilda dies. Stella's explanation is "that cloud blinded us" (286), followed with "a huge explosion" (286). This scene is reminiscent of the burning of Manderley, though the earlier conflagration is at a distance. This is the end. In the terrible smoke, Gilda is thrown clear, but dies. The truth is also clouded, and eventually Alan admits that he sees she is fatally injured, but smothers her just to make sure that she dies.

The combine harvester is driven, it turns out, by Genevieve/Jenny's father, who then leaves his wife for Kath. Stella's choice of carer is deliberate. Another weird Gothic romance parallel is that Ned directs films with Gilda Brent in them. These lives weave together, and each is damaged by passion or love as Genevieve/Jenny defines it:

For it's love that was responsible, love that overcomes your better nature and casts all those fine feelings of friendship and duty and the other kind of love, loving-kindness, to the winds. It's so urgent, it's so demanding, a force like a gale that blows you over or a wave of the sea that throws you on the shingle, you can't resist and you don't want to. (233)

The secret of Gilda's murder hangs over and permanently sours the relationship of Alan and Stella. They can no longer sleep together, live together, or continue any kind of relationship. This parallels the haunting of the house Manderley in du Maurier's novel,

and also the dull, harmed tone of the collusive relationship of Maxim de Winter and the second Mrs de Winter, who cannot in any sense be as powerful, as beautiful, or as influential, as the daring, rather amoral but highly romanticized Rebecca herself. In a parallel with the second wife's dressing up on the fateful night when Rebecca's body is thrown up by the storm, the dress in the wardrobe at Molucca is the one Stella wears on the day of the destructive house party for three, the conflagration in the stubble, and the road crash leading to Gilda's murder. This dress is the ghost of the hopeful life that Stella has had. Molucca, like Manderley, is a house with a ghostly story, of performance, of dressing up, and of pretense of long-term relationships (Stella and Alan; Jenny/Genevieve and Ned) undercut by being found out, by discovering the relationship is a sham, and of death.

The complex silences and total memory kept on hold are ways to cope with trauma and avoid recriminations, discovery, and the upsetting of a version of life history of a troubled but respectable marriage. Stella keeps her alternative life hidden in the house, which is shut off following the death, accidents, murder, and smothering of Gilda, which ends the relationship of trust she has with Alan. The wardrobe hides the burned clothing as well as the finery, and pictures are in shut drawers; the memory stays in an equally shut drawer of her mind until she seeks out Jenny/Genevieve to entrust it to, to release it through the taped confessional memories, and to give herself peace. This is also to recognize the man, Jenny/Genevieve's father, who supplies an alternative narrative to that of the day's drinking and accident, and through that narrative gives them the opportunity to move back into relative normality, as long as the dark, old, abandoned

house retains its shuttered up truths: the car in the garage, the clothes in the wardrobe, and the memories trapped in Stella's mind.

On the night on which Gilda dies, we have descriptions of fire and the word *brimstone*. As a parallel, Jenny/Genevieve's brimstone wedding, her 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary, occurs when she leaves Mike, but finds Ned does not return to her. Ned thrives on persuasion and possibilities, rather than resolutions and agreements. He has won agreement from Jenny, he sighs, setting down the phone, and never comes back. He cannot cope with a woman agreeing to live with him, permanently changing his duplicitous life. Fire and brimstone, witchlike figures (the woman who reveals Ned's serial infidelities to Jenny/Genevieve), and conflagration are essentials here. However, this is actually not really a Gothic horror story, though it is littered with symbols and superstitions, and the lingering presence of the first wife; rather it is a romantic, domestic crime Gothic tale.

Stella finishes her story and dies, leaving Jenny/Genevieve some of the tapes (most she erases). But she also leaves her the house, so Jenny inherits the house of secrets and of two failed relationships. Gilda's domineering and death haunts the two relationships that attempt to take place in the house, Molucca, the white house on the hill which overlooks at a distance the care home where Jenny/Genevieve works and Stella dies.

## The Secret House of Death

*The Secret House of Death* is also a novel of entrapping lifestyles and entombing houses, of the circling of real lives and stories, of romances based on deception, and of sordid marriages growing even more constraining as the links between the characters are

revealed. In this novel, Rendell chooses an oppressive, dull London suburb, Matchdown Park, emphasizing its poorly built variations on pretentiousness, its empty husk of an existence filled with soap opera cardboard characters who rush to their windows and tweak their curtains whenever the large Airedale alerts them there is a stranger. We focus initially on Susan Townshend's life (homage to but not entirely based on the author of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 ¾* [1982]). Divorced, bitter, lonely, a young single mother, she types for someone resembling Barbara Cartland, whose scrawl gets more indecipherable and hard to determine as the popular fiction she writes goes on, something which Susan corrects as she types, so that, unacknowledged, she improves the text. *Foetid Flesh* is the current novel, torrid probably, though we hear little of it, but neither as torrid and tawdry nor ultimately as deadly as the goings on in this little road in the suburbs. Susan's own loneliness and sense of loss, rejection of and the disillusionment about the lies of social narratives concerning romance and happy families dominate the tone and the interpretation. Worse than this is her worldview, grown from sadness, loss, and dread, which matches up to and is fulfilled by what happens. Susan's sadly soured perspective actually does not quite reach the complexities or the mundane nastiness all around her. When we interpret these characteristics of the little housing estate, we read an undercurrent of lurking threat, deception, and a genuine sense of fear, and these are most evident in the homes closest to her own. All the doors are always shut in Braeside, including the house opposite Susan's, and the windows are locked against fresh air. Louise North, the neighbor opposite, is thought to be having an affair with a thickset man (Heller), who visits frequently and whose cover is that he is selling her central heating, something in short supply in the road and definitely required, as it is



constantly far too cold everywhere. The workers' thuds and drills reverberate round the novel and the area, as the intertwined tales also reverberate and reappear, though they are mostly seen huddled around a brazier brewing tea to keep them warm. Louise is very sad, desperate, and tiny, and Susan is reluctant to offer support because of her own outsider status as newly divorced. Susan is no longer asked along by friends in a couple; she is kept short of money and dependent on the whims of the intolerable, self-opinionated editor Julian, whose self-aggrandizement and constant holding forth as if his views written or shared at parties or on the phone are always right, make him obnoxious to the reader.

Susan is locked in the house psychologically, having her papers delivered to her doormat and her son delivered from school. The house and lifestyle have become prison-like. However, the house only seems threatening when a kind of amateur sleuth and friend of Bernard Heller, David the set designer, blunders in pretending to want to buy it and trying to find out about the murder/suicide across the road. David believes he might enroll Susan into some detective work. Actually, David is not a threat, but the ostensible, potential new lover, Bob North, the new widower from over the road, is very threatening, even though his grief insinuates itself into Susan's life after his notice of her initially lightens up her emptied out life. Bob North is introduced as a reckless driver, whose extreme mood swings are shown on the road when he gives Susan a lift. This is a hint of his violence, which Susan ignores as she is drawn into the performance of grieving husband and potential partner, when he insinuates himself into her life, ultimately in order to silence her. Bob is a perfect fictional partner, and Susan even (foolishly, trustingly, and hopefully) gives him a key, which means he can come and go as he

wishes. But her initial gratitude that a life as a normal couple might restart gives way when it eventually emerges that he is the engineer of the murder/suicide. Dressed as one of the workmen endlessly digging up the road and drilling, Bob killed both Louise, his wife, and Heller, the man who is installing central heating, the husband of Bob's own lover. The plot is complex and tightly wound. The deaths of quiet Louise North and bluff Heller look like suicide/murder, but it seems this couple is not a couple, whereas their partners are a couple.

Bob depends on the limited soap opera versions of relationships common in the estate to confuse any imaginative versions. Unusual relationships in terms of class, age, and origin would never be suspected outside of the estate, but, accidentally, Susan has seen and heard of alternative ways of behaving. In the end, these ill-matched relationships and crimes of passionate violence are less of a shock for her. Although an unwelcome narrative in such close proximity, it is not so surprising that there are parallel lives resembling the pulp romances she types up.

Things are not what they seem in the sleepy road, neither in the contrasted journalistic stories about the place, nor in the romances Susan types. Houses and domesticities are not places of security or safety. Behind facades of conformity, of roles and narratives, lie jealousy, pretense, camouflage, and death. These domestic homes are houses of horror, entrapping and claustrophobic as the stories their inmates tell of their own lives and the problems in those of others. In this domestic Gothic, relationships and sex lead to deceit and death, domestic comforts to sickness, incarceration, home invasion, deception, and murder. Nothing is as it seems.

## Conclusion

Ruth Rendell uses strategies of the domestic and romantic Gothic alongside those of crime, playing back echoes of *Rebecca* and undercutting grand romantic narratives. Like other radical women crime writers, she shows that crime is neither simple and logical, nor easily punished. Although the adulterous pair in *The Secret House of Death* does seem to be caught at the end, no one is punished in *The Brimstone Wedding*. She shows houses to be imprisoning or liberating depending on their inhabitants' mindset and independence, exposing the activities of romantic frauds and, more so, the lies and entrapment offered by complacent or collusive coupledom. Beneath both tales lies *Rebecca*, seen as an undercut Gothic romance, and a version of Bluebeard. Bob North dominates and plots the death of his own wife and then insinuates and woos his way into the empty life of a woman who should know better than to consider turning her life into the kind of pulp romantic fiction she corrects for a living.

The party in *Rebecca* resembles the excessive drinking-smoking party in *The Brimstone Wedding*, which also leads to death. The second wife inadvertently wears what Rebecca wears on the night of her death, a grand concoction simulating a grand relative in one of the paintings on the staircase. Max is infuriated and, like a child, she is sent to her room to change. But this is the final party of the age of pretense for Manderley and Max. Fireworks and celebrations presage the final conflagration that will destroy the house and evidence of its past. This magnificent party display is illusory, threatening, and nightmarish:

Again and again the rockets sped into the air like arrows, and the sky became crimson and gold. Manderley stood out like an enchanted house, every window aflame, the grey walls coloured by the falling stars. A house bewitched, carved out as the dark woods.

And when the last rocket burst and the cheering died away, the night that had been fine before seemed dull and heavy in contrast, the sky became a pall. (du Maurier 237)

In *The Brimstone Wedding*, the drunken afternoon of wine, cigarettes, and a kind of threatening atmosphere with Gilda present leads to an explosion of sorts, the car crash. The pall is that of burning stubble, which covers all, even Alan's smothering of Gilda, and, hushed up, it permanently sours the relationship between him and Stella.

In *The Brimstone Wedding*, as if in a positive version of the disastrous moment when the second wife appears at the party wearing the dress of a de Winter/Rebecca, Jenny/Genevieve finally puts on Stella's lovely short silk blue coat, which has come back into fashion. Rendell celebrates Jenny/Genevieve's position. She is neither taking on nor stealing a false life, nor walling herself up in a house she has suddenly inherited, but rather beginning a new life. Rendell works outward from the limitations of women reproduced in du Maurier's powerful precedent, *Rebecca*, and enables her aspiring young countrywoman, Jenny/Genevieve, to reject the constrained lies of a romance. In that scenario she is always watching and waiting from a window or in a car, only awake when Ned, her lover, is playing through this particular version of his repetitive romantic dramas, in which, in this instance, she is temporarily starring. She moves on from the performative, enjoys and moves out from the house, the money, the clothes, and the history. With a twist, in many ways, Jenny/Genevieve comes into an actually quite traditional romantic Gothic scenario with enough money, a house of her own, freedom of thought, and agency. Rendell reverses the trajectory.

Ruth Rendell both replays Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, a tale of a wayward woman who is murdered by her husband, and of a relationship that starts out rather romantic and idealized but goes stale, and then moves it on in the parallel relationships of

the two women centered on and with Molucca. This is not a very grand house, but a house of financial freedom for Stella when she is younger, and which becomes a house to Jenny/Genevieve, who is financially free when she inherits it, at which point she decides she is going to take up nursing and be more self-sufficient. Susan Townshend realizes giving another man a key to enter and own her life like her house is a dangerous mistake, albeit an accident since she does not suspect North. She eventually puts it up for sale, and moves on to a new life. So both Rendell's novels end not with somebody who is trapped in a loveless, narrow, haunted relationship (the second wife in *Rebecca*), but thirty years later in the 1960s, or sixty years later in the 1990s, with self-sufficient women who decide that education, paid work, and independence are their future. The lies and deceit are over and settled, Stella has gained her voice and revealed her tale; Jenny/Genevieve and Susan have moved on from their false romances into homes of their own, with financial independence.

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## Note

☐ Sophie Hannah also links Rendell's work with du Maurier's when commenting on the sudden newness of "grip-lit," identified by reviewers noting the success of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). They define work by both du Maurier and Rendell as psychological thrillers, which they are, but they are notably also Gothic novels that refuse the supernatural.

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