



Clarion Review

Mystery

Shadows Present, Shadows Past

J.H. Sanderson

iUniverse

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Three Stars (out of Five)

The house that Colleen Evans and her two sisters unexpectedly inherit from an old acquaintance seems to be the answer to their prayers. With all three women at various turning points in their lives, the timing couldn't be more perfect. The sisters are excited to move in and begin enjoying their new home.

It is not long before the trio realizes that the house possesses more than merely a good location in their hometown and friendly neighbors they already know. Not even one day passes before an eerie presence makes itself known through slamming doors, phantom footsteps, and midnight murmurs. While the sisters first shrug off the unsettling occurrences as the result of overactive imaginations or house settling, the incidents escalate in intensity. By the time Colleen has suffered a ghostly bedside visitation and her small son is endangered, she believes there is a reason for the incidents and sets out to discover more about the mysterious past of the previous inhabitants.

J.H. Sanderson's brief, entertaining ghost story, *Shadows Present, Shadows Past*, abounds with the genre's requisite inexplicable creaky staircases and bumps in the night. The structure of the plot is sound, and with the exception of a few omitted or confused words, such as "their" rather than "there," the book is relatively clean of typographical and grammatical errors. Sanderson's characterization is acceptable, although the main character, Colleen, comes across as somewhat cold and bland for the first half of the book; even her overwrought reaction to her sisters' good-natured teasing betrays her lack of a sense of humor. A recently divorced mother of a one year old, she is still coming to terms with her failed marriage and has an odd tendency to overreact to small annoyances and underreact to more significant situations. However, Colleen's tepid emotions warm up as the spooky occurrences intensify. She ultimately becomes the most expressive of the characters.

The story includes a subplot involving Colleen's rekindled romance with a high school sweetheart, a thread that in some ways echoes the theme of misunderstanding at the center of the house's ghostly mystery. While their relationship adds some variety to the novel, it serves mostly as a device to further the haunted house story line, with Colleen's old beau, Curtis, becoming an additional eyewitness to the increasingly threatening happenings.

Similarly, Colleen's small son and niece are mostly utilized as foils to expose the depths of ghostly madness. Readers may find themselves bemused by Colleen's continuous habit of leaving her son alone in his crib on a separate floor of the house, especially after doing so previously has proven physically dangerous for him. In one scene, the sisters discuss going to check out a suspicious noise, and one of them suggests staying behind to keep an eye on the babies. Colleen objects, whispering "They're fine. Besides, there's strength in numbers. Whoever or whatever it is can't get all of us at once." This lack of maternal concern may strike many readers as odd and affect the credibility or likability of Colleen's character.

The heart of *Shadows Present, Shadows Past* is the tale of the haunting, and Sanderson fleshes it out well, building the tension to a satisfying if speedy denouement. Despite a heroine that readers may find difficult to initially warm up to, the writing generally flows smoothly. The book will appeal to those looking for a quick, enjoyable, and capably written ghost story.

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