

Dead Letters: Aura

This week I'm recommending the supernatural classic *Aura*, by Carlos Fuentes. It is not a novel -- its word-count is technically classifies it as a novella--but it is sold under separate cover, and if you like a good fright-fest that smacks of just about every single Poe story you've ever read, then this is the book for you.

Fuentes, a Mexican writer, is really best-known for his novels, but it is not atypical that he's penned this supernatural yarn: many people are surprised to find that most writers have tried their hands at ghost stories, and Fuentes is no exception.

Aura was written in the 1960s, when Fuentes was experimenting with narrative styles. It was ground-breaking because it was rendered in the 2nd person -- just like the Choose Your Own Adventure books back in the 80s -- and within this experiment he also experimented with something else: he used Poe-esque devices to explore the issue of identity, and what identity--how we view ourselves, how we view others -- really means. On the surface, it is a ghost story; underneath, it is about how we see ourselves, and even, how we see the spectral realm.

In *Aura*, a young, down-on-his-luck scholar sees a mysterious ad for a high-paying translation job. He's instantly convinced the ad was written specifically for him, and he reports to a decrepit, fecund-smelling house in Mexico City's famed Donceles Street to secure the position--and to be ignorantly lured into something else by the young woman of the book's title. I'm not big on spoilers, but I will tell you there are strange sexual circumstances and burning--yes, I did say burning, as in flames--huddles of screeching cats.

What makes this story so riveting is the way in which it is rendered; there is not one word wasted. Each word was chosen carefully to contribute to the overall disturbing effect of the story. In addition, fans of Edgar Allan Poe will spot allusions to *Ligeia*, *The Oval Portrait*, *Morella*, *The Black Cat*, and a host of others; fans of Dickens will certainly spot an even creepier *Miss Havisham*. And while all this is going on, Poe's theory of transmigration--which is the idea that souls of the dead can manifest in and overtake the bodies of the living--is used to force the reader to question his own identity.

In paranormal research, while we mostly try to use phrases like "phenomena" to describe what we've seen, when we are engaged in conversation, when we're exchanging stories around the water cooler, what do we say? We say, "I saw a ghost once." The very word ghost -- one of its dictionary definitions being the soul of a dead person, a disembodied spirit imagined, usually as a vague, shadowy or evanescent form, as wandering among or haunting living persons--implies that we have assigned the ghost human qualities, that we have actually committed a sort of anthropomorphism. *Aura* is a story that makes us question ghosts as separate entities. In fact, it posits that real ghosts are simply ourselves as we were in the past.

Amazon.com:

http://www.amazon.com/Aura-Bilingual-Carlos-Fuentes/dp/0374511713/ref=pd_bbs_2/103-9925971-8248669?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1183347790&sr=8-2

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