

Dead Letters: The Sweet Perils of Isolation

It's September and the weather's changing—in many parts of the world, the air's turning snappish and some of us, although we love autumn, are already dreading the isolation that can accompany the silent snow in winter.

Because isolation, in fact, can make us sometimes see things that aren't there, it should be no surprise that some of the greatest ghost stories are set in the dead of winter. And Jeanne Mackin's novel [The Sweet By and By](#)—a well-researched fictional account about the rise of the famous Fox Sisters and the Spiritualist Movement told in tandem with the story of a writer named Helen who is haunted by her past—is no exception.

The story opens in the middle of winter in upstate New York in Helen's "rambling, drafty, turreted, many-chimneyed farmhouse situated at the top of an old Indian trail-turned-road." Helen is troubled by what was left unresolved between her and her dead lover, and—perhaps as a way of isolating herself even further—accepts an assignment to write an article about the Fox Sisters, only to find it was a brutal Hydesville, New York winter season, "when the earth sleeps under winter's lingering white shroud and life holds its breath", that sparked the Fox Sisters' rapping escapades. As the winter drags on and Helen becomes more obsessed with the Fox Sisters' history, she's convinced Maggie Fox herself is communicating with her through a series of rappings and that the ghost of her dead lover is cooking in her kitchen.

Perhaps, though, it is simply the winter itself, and the changes it brings about in Helen's rapidly deteriorating mansion—bursting pipes, animals in the walls looking for respite from the cold, chimney fires—that is the real specter. So, as we smell those first dying leaves in the air, let us look ahead to the silent snows and think about what loneliness and isolation can do to a person. Mackin's novel inspires us to remember that when you think you're not alone, you actually JUST might be—and that is probably infinitely scarier.

The Sweet By and By by Jeanne Mackin

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http://www.amazon.com/Sweet-Jeanne-Mackin/dp/0312269978/ref=pd_bbs_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1218569427&sr=8-1

Jeanne Mackin's Website

<http://jeannemackin.com/>