

The Hungry Ghosts

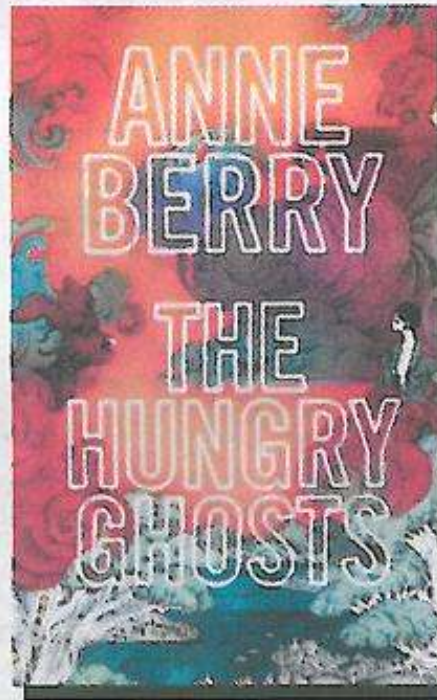
By Anne Berry
(Blue Door)

What informs the worldview of the mentally disturbed or insane? Why do they think and act the way they do? Anne Berry's debut novel *The Hungry Ghosts* attempts to give an alternate view to that proffered by psychiatry, plunging us into a mix of the temporal and the spectral against the backdrop of colonial-era Hong Kong.

Twelve-year-old Lin Shui is raped and murdered during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, but she refuses to join her ancestors. Instead, she clings to life until she finds a host in the disturbed Alice Safford, daughter of one of the leading figures in the British colonial government.

As she grows older, Alice is quite a handful, wrecking untold havoc in her wake. At 16 she too is raped and becomes pregnant, but the pregnancy is terminated, at which point she acquires her second ghost – the spirit of her unborn child. Other ghosts are acquired as time goes by, and with this menagerie of spirits instructing her, Alice's life is better realised.

In following Alice's life through the story, we are encouraged to believe that our own lives are



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somehow influenced by happenings in the spiritual world and, more often than not, we do not have any control over it. It makes for an interesting allegory for the unrest unleashed by the people of Hong Kong as they struggled to unshackle themselves from British rule.

It is also remarkable how Berry neatly ties in the behaviour of her characters – who seem to effortlessly pass through life in a haze, never conscious of why they do the things they do – with the various social issues she raises.

This novel is a pleasure to read. It's painstakingly researched; Berry was brought up in Hong Kong, and her first-hand knowledge of the place – its geography, its people, the unpredictable climate – really shows.

But most intriguing for me is the structure of the book, which lends for an easy read with its first-person narratives, through which each character tells his or her own story.

I recommend this book for those of us that tend to sweep issues under the carpet, as a reminder that they never really go away.



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