

Ghost Hunter: Of Gods and Ghosts

“Another superb read from this author. His writing gets better with each book. The depth to his characters and the storyline, as well as his use of real places and knowledge of the subject, made this a cracking good read that I could not easily put down.” (5* Amazon Review)

Also by Martin J. Best

SHORT STORIES
THE MOTH TRAP
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Malachi Hunter Series
THE NOVICE GHOST HUNTER
GHOST HUNTER: A MATTER OF FAITH

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Introduction

For those of you who have read the previous Ghost Hunter stories, you may notice a pattern emerging: the first was a short story; the second, a novella; and now a full-length novel. However, this doesn't mean that the next offering will be divided into volumes of encyclopaedic proportions! The evolution of Malachi Hunter and his adventures, has been driven by my growing attachment to him and the others who share his world. It is strangely satisfying to bestow wealth, property, and happiness upon my fictional friends. Of course, I equally enjoy distributing misery and despair: and not only to those who deserve it!

As with all my work to date, *Of Gods and Ghosts* is set in and around my home town of Torquay. Some locations are still as I describe them, others, inevitably, have changed almost beyond recognition. The dell in Watcombe Woods, however, survives unaltered; as my daughter, cover photographer Gen Rodgers, discovered. Having decided on the shot that she wanted, we felt that, for authenticity, we should conduct the shoot in the dell under a full moon. She somehow persuaded her model, Rebekka, that this was a good idea, and off we went. Having gingerly negotiated the precipitous climb down, Rebekka, in costume as Lauren, was tied to a tree and photographed mercilessly. Afterwards, in an effort to avoid the slippery climb out in the dark, we took what became an equally challenging path, and found ourselves at the top of a sandstone cliff overlooking the beach where Molly and Tom are cornered. I think the resulting cover was worth the effort!

I try to make my stories believable, and in my efforts to achieve this, I have presented my characters, and myself, with some interesting problems. Mal's secular approach to ghost hunting is a good example. During my research, I was surprised to find how reliant most people are on religion to provide information on how to deal with the supernatural. Even many professional paranormal investigators who advocate using the latest technology, seem to defer to religion in the final analysis. This prompted me to wonder how the ghost of someone with no knowledge of a god could be

dealt with: and so the character Christopher Bray was born. The hard fantasy elements of the story are a similar creation. To make my Celtic Gods plausible, I have married speculative quantum physics to theories of collective consciousness, and produced offspring which, I would like to believe, could exist.

Anyway, the main purpose of this book is to entertain. If it does that, then we are both satisfied!

**GHOST HUNTER:
OF GODS AND GHOSTS**

CHAPTER ONE

“So, what do you think?” Shawn Riley asked his wife. He had just finished showing her the completed work in their new house.

“It’s looking good!” replied Louise. “Does this mean we can finally move in?” She looked down at her shoes. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate my mum and dad putting us up,” she looked up her husband, “but it’s not the same as being in our own place.”

After a year of living in rented accommodation, and being unable to save, Louise’s parents, the Harris’s, had suggested that they move in with them. It wasn’t ideal, but it had allowed them to save. When the 1930’s dormer bungalow had come onto the market, they had been attracted to it straight away. They had viewed it at the earliest opportunity, and even though the estate agent had described it as ‘a project’, were convinced that it was for them. Shawn, a general builder, would be able to perform much of the work, and had various friends and contacts with other skills on whom he could call as necessary. The only problem was that they hadn’t saved enough money for a deposit. Again, Louise’s parents came to the rescue, and volunteered to lend them the deficit from their savings, allowing them to make an offer. The first offer was rejected by the vendor, a solicitor acting on behalf of the deceased owner’s estate. The second, however, was accepted. In due course, the deposit was paid, a mortgage put in place, and the Rileys became property owners. For reasons of practicality and convenience, a number of jobs were to be completed before they moved in, and inevitably these took longer than anticipated. But finally, they were finished.

“I know it’s taken longer than we reckoned, but it really is habitable now.” He smiled at Louise. “The jobs that still need doing, we can do as we go along: when we’ve moved in!”

Louise grabbed both of his hands, and they danced an impromptu jig of celebration in their new front room.

The following weekend, Shawn and Louise borrowed a van and moved their possessions into the new house. Louise’s father and brother helped

Shawn with the heavy work, whilst she and her mother directed their efforts. They didn't have enough furniture for the whole house, only ever having occupied a one-bedroom flat before moving in with Louise's parents, but had sufficient for their immediate needs. When they had achieved as much as they could, Louise's father drove to a nearby fish and chip shop and bought them all dinner. After Louise's parents and brother had departed, with a promise to return the following morning, she and Shawn relaxed together on their battered settee.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am to your mum and dad," Shawn said.

"I know, love." She looked fondly at him.

"I feel bad that my family haven't been able to help."

"That's not their fault." Louise put a hand on his arm. "It's not as though they live locally."

"Even if they'd been here, they've no money to spare." He shook his head. "Since me dad passed on it's not been easy for ma on her own."

"I know, don't let it worry you." She stood up. "Come on, it's been a busy day, let's go to bed."

They had chosen the largest downstairs bedroom as the master. It was at the front of the house, and had a bay window that looked out onto a small lawn that was separated from the road by a bank planted with shrubs. The room looked under furnished, containing only a small wardrobe, a chest of drawers, and a double bed. Louise grimaced as she pulled the faded gold coloured curtains that had belonged to the previous owner.

"We need to redecorate, as soon as we can afford it."

"You're not wrong." Shawn, turned down the quilt. "I've got plenty of work coming up, so we can budget for what we need." He wagged a finger at Louise. "Bearing in mind that we need to start paying your parents back as soon as we can."

"I know, I know," said Louise impatiently. "Come on let's get into bed, I'm cold."

"I haven't looked at the timer for the heating yet," apologised Shawn. "I'll sort it out in the morning." He finished undressing, leaving his clothes in a heap on the floor, and quickly got into the bed. "Are you coming to bed, or what?"

Louise gave up neatly folding her clothes, dropped them on the floor, and joined her husband in the bed. He pulled the cord to turn off the light, and they snuggled together, tormenting each other with cold hands and feet until the bed clothes warmed up. As the temperature in the bed rose, so their teasing took a different direction, and soon they were celebrating their arrival in a far more mutually satisfying fashion.

Louise didn't know what had awakened her, or what time it was. She lay quietly, taking her bearings in the as yet unfamiliar room. Shawn lay on his

side, facing towards the window, away from her. He was snoring gently. A little light filtered through the curtains, allowing her to distinguish the outlines of the furniture, but no detail. Louise was about to turn over and try to settle down again, when she heard a creak from upstairs. Perhaps that was what had disturbed her. She knew that it was an old house, and it would take time to become familiar with all its idiosyncrasies. Dismissing the sound as settling, she turned over and closed her eyes. She was just drifting off, when the creak was repeated. This time it sounded as though it came from directly above. Louise sighed, and rolled onto her back, listening in the dark with her eyes open. She ran through the floor plan of the house in her mind. Above their bedroom was one of the two small double bedrooms. If the noises were going to be a nuisance, she would have Shawn see what he could do to improve the situation. She closed her eyes, letting her mind swirl with ideas for decorating and new furniture, until she began to drift into sleep. Four separate thuds across the floor above snatched her instantly back to wakefulness. She sat up, startled. Shawn grumbled incoherently beside her. She must have been nearly asleep, and her imagination had turned a perfectly innocent noise into something ominous. Louise was about to settle back down, when she heard the sound again. Four distinct footfalls, crossing from one side of the room above to the other. This time she was in no doubt. Someone was moving in the room upstairs. For a moment she was frozen with fear, then she galvanised herself into action. She reached over and shook Shawn by the shoulder.

“Shawn! Wake up. There’s someone upstairs!”

Shawn rolled onto his back, and opened his eyes blearily. “What’s the matter?”

“There’s someone upstairs!”

“No there isn’t.” He made to turn over. “Go back to sleep.”

“I heard someone walking upstairs.” She grasped his arm. “Please go and have a look.”

“It’s just the boards,” Shawn rubbed his eyes, “or the pipes or something. Go back to sleep.”

“All right, if you don’t believe me, I’ll have to go and look!” Louise had no intention of going on her own.

Shawn, fully awake now, gave an exaggerated sigh. “For Christ’s sake, Lou! It’s an old house, it’s bound to grumble and groan a bit.” He sat up, resigned to the fact that there was only one solution. “But if it’ll make you happy, I’ll go and see.” He reluctantly swung his legs from under the duvet into the cold air, stepped across to his pile of discarded clothes, and pulled on a pair of jeans and a jumper. “I’ll be back in a minute.” With a private thought concerning hysterical women, he set off. He left their bedroom, walked down

the hall, and stood at the bottom of the stairs for a moment, deciding whether to turn on the light. The staircase looked awfully dark, and despite his earlier bravado, he flicked the switch. Nothing happened. He flicked it again with the same result. Bugger! He tried the switch next to it, and the hallway light came on. Something must've tripped the upstairs lighting circuit; perhaps a bulb had blown. These new RCD consumer units were so sensitive. Ah well, he had some light, and he knew his way well enough. He walked carefully up the stairs, becoming increasingly uneasy the higher he climbed. His feet were painfully cold, but he barely noticed as he crept along the gallery landing to the third door. Now he was here, he felt strangely unwilling to open the door. He placed his ear against the painted wood, and listened intently. A cold hand grasped his shoulder and he jumped, letting out an involuntary yelp. Shawn spun around and found himself facing Louise.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I came to see if you were all right."

"Mary mother of God!" he whispered back harshly. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!" He glared at her. "Why the hell are we whispering?" he asked at a normal volume.

"I don't know." She sniffed, looking hurt, before adding caustically, "I'm sorry I scared you."

"You didn't scare me," Shawn lied. "Just surprised me a bit, that's all." Before she could say anything else, he opened the door. "Let's have a look in here then!" He stepped into the empty bedroom with more confidence than he felt, and immediately caught his breath. The room was freezing. He watched his breath plume in the air. Louise stepped in beside him.

"Why is it so cold in here?"

"I don't know," he admitted reluctantly. "The heat should rise, not that there's much anywhere just now. The insulation's good, I did it myself."

They stood shivering, looking around the patently empty room. Light entered unobstructed through the window in the side wall, leaving no doubt that the room was truly unoccupied.

"Come on," began Shawn, "let's go—"

He was interrupted by four clear footsteps. They approached from the far side of the room, passed in front of their petrified bodies, and stopped at the near wall in front of the window. Both of them felt the bare floorboards vibrate with the unseen impacts. For a moment the tableau held. Then Louise screamed and bolted for the door. Shawn, a fraction of a second behind her, slammed the door as he exited the room.

The following morning found them embarrassed and uncertain. After their scare, they had dressed, turned on all the downstairs lights, and sat up for the remainder of the night talking and drinking coffee. By the time the sun began to rise, there had been no repetition of the sounds, and between them they

had been able to rationalise the event. When it was sufficiently light, they ventured back into the upstairs bedroom. The incandescent lamp had shattered, showering glass over the floor, which explained the power outage. Shawn carefully removed the remains of the lamp from the fitting, and successfully reset the circuit, whilst Louise cleared up the broken glass. After a thorough inspection, they were able to discover absolutely nothing unusual about the room. Shawn even went to the length of lifting a floorboard to see if a pipe was knocking against a joist, but there was no obvious cause for the noise.

“It must have been the sounds of the floorboards contracting due to the cold,” he concluded for the umpteenth time.

“Yes, I suppose so.” Louise wanted to be convinced. In the light of day, it all seemed rather laughable. Two rational adults frightened by some creaky floorboards. “Can you make sure the heating’s sorted out today, please love?”

“Be sure I’ll see to it.”

Louise’s parents arrived around mid-morning, as promised, to help with unpacking and tidying up. Shawn and Louise had already decided not to mention their nocturnal adventure, so despite several pointed comments from Louise’s mother about them looking tired, the day passed pleasantly. At around four thirty, as the daylight was fading, Mr and Mrs Harris made their excuses, and left them to it. An hour and a half later, Louise cooked for the first time in their new home. They sat on the settee, and ate sausages and chips whilst watching the television. Apart from feeling tired, the experiences of the previous night were consigned to that set of memories which, although never quite explained, have lost their initial impact. By nine o’clock, they were both yawning, and decided to go to bed. Louise felt a little nervous as Shawn turned out the light, but was soon sound asleep.

The following morning, it was back to the usual workday routine. Shawn was up at his customary six o’clock, and Louise rose in time to see him off at a quarter to seven. She resisted the temptation to return to bed, and had a bowl of cereal and two cups of coffee whilst watching the breakfast news on the television. At a quarter to eight, she took a quick shower, and got ready for work. As Shawn had taken their car, Louise made the short walk down the hill to catch the bus into town. She had worked for the last two years at one of the larger department stores as a counter assistant, a job she mostly enjoyed even if the pay wasn’t spectacular. She spotted the bus waiting at the traffic lights, and just managed to cross the busy main road and beat it to the stop. Breathing heavily in the cold air, she boarded the double decker, paid her fare, and found a seat near the rear of the lower deck. Looking through the misted window as they passed by Chapel Woods, she smiled to herself. They had their own house at last. Her dream was finally coming true.



Shawn turned into their drive and parked the car, feeling rather foolish. Finishing work for the day when the light began to fade, he had driven home on autopilot and found himself parked outside the house of his in-laws. Before he could get out of the car, he realised his mistake, cursed, and set off quickly for the correct destination. He could only hope that none of the family had spotted him. He sighed. He would have to own up to Louise just in case. At least she'd get a laugh out of it. Hell, it was funny, really. Shaking his head, he picked up a carrier bag from the passenger foot well, exited and locked the car, then entered the house. The right house. Their house. It was already gloomy inside, so he switched on lights as he made his way from the hall, through the dining room, and into the kitchen. He filled the kettle, switched it on, and put the makings for coffee into a mug. During the day, he had made the journey to a trade supplier for some materials, and had also purchased sufficient LED lamps to replace the mixture of incandescent and old style energy savers that were currently in the house. The water boiled, and he made the coffee. Putting the spoon in the sink, he decided to replace the lamps while his coffee cooled. He walked into the hall carrying the bag containing the lamps, and took a set of steps from the cupboard. Shawn proceeded to work his way through the ground floor rooms swapping lamps, then went upstairs. With a precarious balancing act that he was glad Louise hadn't witnessed, he replaced the stair lamp, then repeated the process in the first bedroom and the box room next door. That left the bedroom where they had heard the noises. Shawn paused at the door. He was not a man subject to flights of fancy, but he couldn't help feeling a little nervous. He pulled himself together. It was five o'clock in the afternoon for heaven's sake! He had spent hours working in the house on his own without any qualms.

"You soft eejit," he muttered to himself, and entered the bedroom.

Standing, looking out of the window, was a young man. For a moment Shawn was frozen in surprise, but quickly regained his composure. There was an intruder in his house!

"What the hell are you doing in here?" he shouted angrily, and began advancing threateningly on the man. The young man turned to face Shawn, his expression utterly blank. "Well?" yelled the furious Irishman. The young man frowned slightly, but didn't answer. Shawn lunged across the intervening space, and his hands met the cold glass of the window. Astonished that he had missed the man, he turned quickly to face the room, fearful of an attack. The room was empty. There was no possible way the man could have avoided him. Where had he gone? Shawn backed cautiously out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. He walked quickly down the stairs into the hall. The front door was closed. There was neither sight nor sound of the man. He

stopped in the hall, and thought about it. The evidence forced him to only one conclusion. The man hadn't left the bedroom. Shawn had seen a ghost.

When Louise arrived home from work at ten past six, she found Shawn sitting on the settee, tightly gripping a mug of cold coffee.

"What's the matter, love?" she asked, concerned by his expression.

Shawn looked up, and swallowed. "Either I'm losing my mind," he said softly, "or there's a spirit in this house!"