



The Unsettled Dust

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Robert Aickman, the supreme master of the supernatural, brings together eight stories where strange things happen that the reader is unable to predict. His characters are often lonely and middle-aged but all have the same thing in common - they are all brought to the brink of an abyss that shows how terrifyingly fragile our peace of mind actually is.

'The Next Glade', 'Bind Your Hair' and 'The Stains' appeared together in **The Wine-Dark Sea** in 1988 while 'The Unsettled Dust', 'The House of the Russians', 'No Stronger Than a Flower', 'The Cicerones' and 'Ravissante' first appeared in **Sub Rosa** in 1968. The stories were published together as *The Unsettled Dust* in 1990. Aickman received the British Fantasy Award in 1981 for 'The Stains', which had first appeared in the anthology **New Terrors** (1980), before appearing in the last original posthumous collection of Aickman's short stories, **Night Voices** (1985).

'We are all potential victims of the powers Aickman so skilfully conjures and commands.' Robert Bloch

The Unsettled Dust Details

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From Reader Review The Unsettled Dust for online ebook

Jed Mayer says

Contains much of this master of the short story's best work, from the folk horror of "Bind Your Hair" to the fungal gothic romance of "The Stains." Only the title story and "Houses of the Russians" fall short of Aickman's highest marks, and even those tales have their merits. There is no one like Aickman, and Faber are to be commended for bringing these back into print.

Neale says

It seems to me that Robert Aickman is the most underrated British writer of the post-war era, in any field of literature, high or low.

Aickman made two mistakes, when it came to literary fame: he was a writer of short stories in an age that is too busy to read short literature; he was a writer of 'strange' stories, which have never appealed to highbrow critics. His work was too 'literary' for the 'weird' crowd; too 'weird' for the 'literary' crowd. And yet this split nature is what makes his stories so rewarding. They offer the pleasures of serious writing, and the pleasures of 'genre', in a single package, each amplifying the other, and in some way cancelling out the other's drawbacks: I can think of few writers who achieve this fusion so successfully.

Colin says

The Unsettled Dust contains some of my favourite Aickman stories. The Cicerones has haunted me with its subtle terror ever since I first encountered it in (I think) the Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories and the title story is a masterpiece of creeping unease, conjuring an unsettling atmosphere from simple resources. I came across The Stains and Bind Your Hair more recently, but they certainly made their mark. The rest of the stories here were new to me - they range from the strangely depressing The Houses of the Russians, set on a Finnish island to the out and out weirdness of The Next Glade and Ravissante. I haven't much of a clue what was going on in either of those, but the atmosphere that Aickman creates in both is highly disturbing.

fonz says

Curiosamente la mayoría de los relatos que aparecen en esta antología fueron publicados por Atalanta en el volumen "Las casas de los rusos" (y en el mismo orden). Sin embargo, por alguna razón, en la edición de Atalanta se eliminaron "The Cicerones", "The Next Glade" y "Bind Your Hair" para incluir "Growing Boys" ("En edad de crecimiento") que en mi humilde opinión no es precisamente lo mejor de Aickman.

El resultado es que esta edición de Faber resulta mucho más consistente que la antología de Atalanta. Además me gusta como se han organizado los relatos en un crescendo de calidad que culmina con el excepcional "The Stains", el mejor cuento de amour fou para señores mayores (yo) que he leído, con una interesante variación sobre los personajes femeninos fééricos y fatales que me ha recordado mucho a "Los ojos verdes" de Bécquer. Una narración angustiada acerca del dolor por la pérdida de un ser amado, la vieja Inglaterra conservadora que desaparece poco a poco en la marea post-colonial y la desesperada necesidad de

amar y ser amado para congelar el inexorable y destructor paso del tiempo en un momento efímero y eterno. Una necesidad que toma, irónicamente, la forma de un extraño súcubo del arcano páramo de la Inglaterra profunda y que no podrá ser satisfecha jamás.

De entre el resto de relatos destacan "Ravissante" una bizarra historia sobre posesiones frustradas y el hecho artístico que entra en los terrenos del fetichismo sexual en un ambiente grotesco entre el giallo y David Lynch. "The Cicerones" o los peligros de entrar a una iglesia a turistar cuando ya están cerrando, una especie de versión de "El ceremonial", de Lovecraft pero sustituyendo los antiguos cultos impíos a criaturas pulposas por la morbosa iconografía cristiana fascinada con el martirio y la muerte. Curiosamente, este es el único cuento de Aickman que he leído en el que sabía lo que iba a ocurrir desde el minuto uno, pero aún así resulta satisfactorio por su cuidada ambientación y la capacidad de crear inquietud en el lector por medio del absurdo.

"The Next Glade" es un típico relato Aickman en el que el conflicto psicológico de la protagonista se manifiesta exteriormente en una serie de acontecimientos muy extraños sin que ella sea consciente de que esta serie de movidas muy raras tienen su origen en sus deseos reprimidos: el adulterio y la necesidad de desprenderse de las responsabilidades familiares. Otros rasgos muy aickmanianos del cuento son el bosque como símbolo del subconsciente y esa corriente de sexo chungo soterrado que Aickman emplea creando una atmósfera inquietante e irreal. Y finalmente, "Bind Your Hair", un estupendo relato de "horror folk" británico sobre extraños cultos de la Inglaterra arcana, un poco en la línea de las películas "El hombre de mimbre", "La garra de satán" o "Kill List", donde de nuevo el conflicto psicológico de una mujer de visita a su familia política en el campo se funde con los extravagantes acontecimientos que habrá de contemplar, las relaciones sociales de un villorrio inglés interpretadas como un arcaico y extraño culto.

Finalmente quisiera dejar claro que estas son únicamente interpretaciones más de los cuentos de Aickman, porque quizá lo más interesante de los relatos aickmanianos sea su riqueza temática y su ambigüedad, su vaguedad subconsciente, dejando la puerta abierta a nuevas relecturas, nuevas interpretaciones, nuevos significados, como si le hablara más a nuestro inconsciente que a nuestro yo racional, ese pequeño y retorcido homúnculo que cree, erróneamente, estar al mando de las turbulentas mareas que gobiernan nuestra mente.

Blair says

After finishing *The Wine-Dark Sea*, I went straight into *The Unsettled Dust* without pause, and raced through it so quickly that when I sat down to review it, I was surprised to discover it contains the same number of stories as *The Wine-Dark Sea*. There's a sort of unevenness about this collection - it contains some of the briefest and the longest stories I've read by Aickman; some of the most conventional and some of the most difficult to define; and throughout the book, the characters seem to be quite weakly drawn. As a result, I enjoyed it less than I'd hoped, and would recommend both *Cold Hand in Mine* and *The Wine-Dark Sea* above it, although there are some gems, with 'No Stronger Than a Flower', 'The Cicerones' and 'Ravissante' being my favourites.

The Unsettled Dust - a man working for the Historic Structures Fund has a ghostly encounter at one of the estates he is asked to review. More of a traditional ghost story than most Aickman tales, although it has a number of typically weird touches.

The Houses of the Russians - a group of friends listen to a story told by a man in a pub; he recounts an experience from his youth concerning a group of apparently deserted houses in a bleak corner of Finland. Again, quite traditional, and could have come from any number of ghost story anthologies, but that doesn't

mean it isn't enjoyable.

No Stronger Than a Flower - a plain woman, Nesta, is encouraged to put more effort into her appearance by her lover, Curtis, but when she complies, he finds he is disturbed by the changes this brings about in her... I loved this one, which seemed quite unlike anything else I've read by the author. It's has a peculiarly modern feel that brought to mind, for some reason, a dark, minimalist stage set.

The Cicerones - another of the shorter stories. A traveller visits a cathedral in Belgium and meets several odd characters, ultimately allowing himself to be led into the crypt by a rather uncanny child. After reading this I discovered the brilliant 2002 short film adaptation by Jeremy Dyson, which I think helped me to appreciate the story more. (It lends itself wonderfully to film, and made me wish there were more to watch; Aickman's Wikipedia page says that others exist, but it doesn't seem like they'd be very easy to track down.)

The Next Glade - a woman is persuaded to take a walk in the woods with a stranger, who announces his intention to step into 'the next glade' and promptly disappears. She assumes he has walked away, and it's only later that she discovers this next glade appears to have a strange, dark power. This one annoyed me a bit - the setup is so odd; there's no explanation of the reason(s) why Noelle would acquiesce to John's request in the first place, so the whole episode just doesn't seem to make sense. And then the ending is practically science fiction... It's an odd mixture and I didn't find it entirely successful.

Ravissante - the narrator is left a collection of paintings when an artist of his acquaintance dies. Among them he finds an account of this man's visit to the widow of an artist who inspired him. In comparison to most of the others, this was deliciously over-the-top and I loved it.

Bind Your Hair - a young woman makes her first visit to her fiancé's family. There, she meets the vibrant, lustful Mrs. Pagani and her odd band of acquaintances. Can't say I retained much of an impression of this.

The Stains - taking up about 25% of the book, 'The Stains' is almost a small novella. It's a horrible 'love story' that deals with the ancient battle between man and nature, incorporating many fairytale elements (of the Grimm rather than the Disney variety). After the death of his wife, a man named Stephen visits his brother in the country, where he falls under the spell of a girl who appears to live in the wilds of the forest. It's powerful and complex, but nevertheless I struggled with 'The Stains'. Throughout it, I felt a magnified version of something that often plagues me when reading the author's work - a feeling of repulsion that made me feel almost physically nauseous and made me desperate, at certain points, to just get the story over and done with. The depiction of the girl, Nell, is particularly troubling, and yet in the end it becomes apparent that the relentless focus on her young body, childishness and manifest ignorance, often bordering on stupidity (all of these being the reasons Stephen is attracted to her) has a purpose within the story, that in fact it's kind of the whole point of the thing. Likewise, the sickly depiction of the 'affection', or whatever I should be calling it, between Stephen and Nell creates great unease precisely because of its contrast with the decay that surrounds them. Like many of the most memorable Aickman stories, 'The Stains' is both technically brilliant and so uncomfortable that its end comes as a relief.

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

Having read a few of Aickman's more anthologised stories - particularly 'Stains', as perfect a weird tale as there ever was - and been impressed by them, I think I at first expected too much from this collection. As you can see, I came around to thinking very highly of it anyway, but with some reservations.

Let's get those reservations out of the way. First of all, Aickman mainly deals with characters who are past

their first youth, isolated and somewhat depressed. That's all very well as far as it goes, but sometimes I felt stifled by all these quietly desperate types with their poised, elegantly bitter reflections on life. Secondly, Aickman too often posits the weird elements of his stories around standard MR Jamesian hooks - things from the past, and from outside the main characters' experience or context. The title story is essentially a traditional ghost story with an added layer of desolate prose and telling characterisation. 'The Homes Of The Russians' is full of arresting images but it boils down to finding something supernatural and weird via the customs and revenants of a foreign culture. Even in the otherwise very good 'Bind Your Hair', the name Mrs. Pagani with its obvious overtones make it very clear where the strange stuff in the tale is coming from.

My problem here is that all this makes the strangeness somehow externalised, somehow merely the irruption of something otherworldly into our narrators' tidy if bleak little lives. Even the single most perfectly-pitched tale here, other than 'Stains', 'The Cicerones' has the weird stuff being tied into some foreign cult, possibly.

I love Aickman's style, love his quiet upsetting of reality, the subtle ways in which he creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and supernatural foreboding, but he is a far more normative writer in these ways than I am completely comfortable with. On the other hand, his use of the sexual element in 'Stains', 'No Stronger Than A Flower' and 'The Next Glade' is most effective, subtle and not at all explicit, but evoking the power of sensual passion to dislocate our personalities and lives. However, even this is sometimes evoked to unintentionally farcical effect in 'Ravissante'.

All in all, a strong collection of tales about quietly dispossessed people adrift in an unhinged universe. It's just a pity so much of the unhinged-ness comes from the usual sorts of sources that have been invoked for such things ever since the heyday of the Gothic novel - things ancient, occult and foreign.

Simon says

I know; it's getting boring isn't it. Another Aickman collection again rated five stars. Well, what can I say? He is simply brilliant. Or perhaps it's just that he offers exactly what I'm looking for in a book; Well written prose that both delights and disturbs in equal measure. Stories that stick with you for days afterwards as you turn them over in your mind, wrestling with their meaning and intent.

Thematically varied as usual, this is another quality collection showing that range of Aickman's ability. Alienation, repressed sexual desire, frustration, lack of a sense of purpose and boredom are the kinds of things his characters have to deal with. The horrors that they face are sometimes of a supernatural nature and sometimes simply man's inhumanity. Whatever form it takes, it is usually abstract, never spelled out in much detail, much being left for the reader to imagine. Exactly how much is real or merely psychological it is left for the reader to judge. Precisely what is going on is left to the reader to fathom.

I've now read the three collections of his made available by Faber and I'm left wondering where to go next. I've only read half of his published stories (ignoring his two novels) but I'm now left with the choice between expensive, limited edition prints made available by the likes of Tartarus press or chronically expensive second-hand copies of earlier, now out of print collections. Maybe someone will bring more of his work back into print more cheaply soon.

Szplug says

As for this excellently entertaining collection—so eerie, imaginative, intense and fluid within such formal and elegant stylistic constraints, and in which Aickman demonstrates to the full the power of *less is more*, wielding ambiguity and undeclared and/or unresolved events to stir the readers mind to a roil that the author does not explicitly assist in settling; which are possessed of the dexterous ability of provoking strangeness, evoking wonder, and stoking sensuality from within a narrative voice that little hints at such range; whose two shortest tales, *No Stronger Than a Flower* and *The Cicerones*, are just masterful executions of sustained tension, uneasy humour, and magnetic prose, while lengthier sublimities like *Bind Your Hair* and *The Next Glade* and *Ravissante* mirror supernatural evocations from a dead past with psychological disorders of the modern world, without delineating which is the reflection (or the more unsettling) and reaching its apogee amidst the rolling moors of *The Stain*, with its stagnating civilized standards, oreadic lichens, and full-moon feyness—I got nothing: like Mr. Sammler, I'm juiceless. Let me add that I would much enjoy seeing Aickman translated to the screen and/or his novel *The Late Breakfasters* reprinted by Faber Finds (if only as a sloppy publisher of last resort). Simply one of the best short story writers I have read, period—and one who, in my estimation and together with M. John Harrison, should be better known.

Randolph says

The thing I'm finding about Aickman's later and posthumous collections is they only contain reprints of stories I've already read. This is no detraction to the quality of the content, always excellent, but caveat lector. I have already read all but one of these stories here.

I'm going to stick with the more expensive, way more expensive, Tartarus reprints since I can buy one of those for what it is costing me to get two of these retreads. Besides they are more beautiful to look at, keep their value, and seem to be definitive.

That said this is a five star collection which I would only warn one off of for the above caveat, look carefully at the contents of Aickman collections before you buy them, you may have read most or all the stories.

All that said, the stories are uniformly great, full of baffling allegory. The rest are some of my favorite Aickman stories. All of these are in some way disturbing and some truly frightening: *Ravissante*, *The Cicerones*, *The Stains*. In all cases you will be saying: "What exactly is going on here?" although in many cases nothing overtly supernatural is happening. If you dig deeper you will find layers and layers of potential meaning but in most cases this meaning will be somewhat relative to what the reader puts back into the story. Aickman is never going to provide you with a nice neat explanation like a Stephen King would.

These are best savored in small bites. Take your time and read one story at a time. Take at least a day to think about it before moving on to the next. There are precious few Aickman stories anyway, and each is a little gem, so you don't want to race through his oeuvre but enjoy it in the slow fashion it deserves.

Cameron Trost says

Having read and quite liked "The Trains" and "Ringing the Changes", I was hoping to find a handful of great Aickman stories. This collection, although rich in atmosphere and architectural detail, was a little disappointing. The tales lack narrative and direction, thus coming across as dream sequences rather than

works of fiction. This may have been Aickman's point, but it gave me the impression that they had been poorly planned or left unfinished.

Paul Christensen says

The Unsettled Dust (4 stars)

Painfully bleak, dust-enshrouded England.

The Houses of the Russians (5 stars)

Eerie narrative about the buried soul of Russia; an amusing minor character (in the form of an obnoxious leftist called Rort) reinforces the strong anti-Marxist theme of this story.

No Stronger Than a Flower (5 stars)

A blackly humorous satire on the cosmetic industry.

The Cicerones (5 stars)

A short but extremely powerful story about a typical lukewarm modern man exposed to the Inexplicable in the depths of a gothic cathedral.

The Next Glade (4 stars)

Lost in the thickets of the unconscious...

Ravissante (4 stars)

A painter's loathing and self-doubt in the occult world of fine arts.

Bind Your Hair (3 stars)

Ambiguous animal horror in a Celtic labyrinth.

The Stains (5 stars)

Stephen is a civil servant of the conservative, Humphrey Appleby type; yet his relatives are 'modern' and love multi-culti. Stephen's dislike of Instinct (shown by his detestation of a statue of Shiva) doesn't prevent him falling in love with a daughter of Nature...yet with devastating consequences, as he is too weak to hold his own against her dread Father.

The story can be read as an extended metaphor for the inadequacy of conservatism, and **the necessity of revolutionary nationalism.**

Patrick says

This is the third volume of Aickman's short stories that I've read, and while in personal preference I'm tempted to rank it slightly below the recent reissues of 'Cold Hand in Mine' and 'The Wine-Dark Sea', it's still another basically peerless assortment of strange and haunting tales. There's something about his work which seems somehow calculated to apply very specifically to my own tastes and sensibilities; each story seems enchanted with (to borrow Poe's title) a sense of mystery and imagination that goes beyond simply the generic elements of a ghost story.

One aspect that particularly applies to this collection is the sense I often have when reading this author: that his fiction is shot through with an allegorical aspect that lies somewhere just beyond my own understanding. This is especially true in three of the strongest stories here. The titular story sets the scene in what appears to be an entirely conventional country house ghost story, but which refuses to grant any individual trope the security of a clear literary meaning. 'Ravissante' is a typically Gothic and grotesque piece that appears based within the psychosexual anxieties of an artist, but it seems to end almost before it has begun, leaving behind a series of images and suggestions that are in themselves more potent than any explanatory confrontation. Perhaps strangest of all is 'The Stains', which invokes a combination of ancient mythology, opera, and the biological science of lichens in a uniquely effective and unsettling story.

What makes the author such an interesting figure is that he is supremely uninterested by questions of literary realism. Elsewhere in books and films, when something extraordinary happens, there is a tendency to want to ascribe this to either an actually occurring supernatural event, or the manifestation of some kind of psychological breakdown, or a kind of trick — or any combination of the above. But here, none of that stuff matters. All that matters is what is happening, and what it could mean. Questions of why or how are temporarily rendered irrelevant. The result is a prose which, though quite calm conventional in style, approaches a poetic sensibility through a masterful use of tension, imagery, and atmosphere.

The experience of picking up one of Aickman's books is much like wandering alone through an art gallery hung heavy with the idiosyncratic works of a single artist. Encountering each story is like being drawn slowly into the canvas of a painting — each one divorced from the context of the wider world, full of profound ambiguities, somehow both inviting and rejecting an expressly symbolist interpretation — and you are drawn in further and deeper still with every turn of the page, until the end of the story comes, and you are spat out, blinking and confused, into the world outside. You might not be any wiser but you are, perhaps, changed.

Stephen Curran says

The fourth of the available Robert Aickman collections that I have read and I'm sad that it's the last. Unusually for a book of short stories, it gets better as it goes along. The first two are great but they make use of a more conventional form than the author's fans might be used to. It's when things get weirder that the writing begins to soar, starting with 'No Stronger than a Flower', where a newlywed visits a beauty consultant and an unstoppable transformation begins. Aickman's best stories feel like they possess an internal logic, but the logic is just beyond the reader's grasp. Like nightmares, they are constructed from familiar parts that don't quite fit together as they should but seem to make some kind of terrible sense at the time. Who can say what the budding painter really encounters when he visits the old woman's apartment in 'Rivissante'? I've can only guess, but it's one of the most entertainingly unsettling passages of weird prose I've ever come across.

Bibliophile says

This is the second collection of Aickman's stories I've read, so this time I knew what to expect: beautiful, eerie tales of the supernatural - or not. With Aickman, you just don't know. Maybe his characters are simply delusional. Or maybe the world really is a dangerous place where at any moment you might get lured into a maze full of bodies while avoiding your in-laws, or meet weird and alluring creatures on the moor, or be cornered by strangers in a Belgian cathedral. I'll certainly be looking over my shoulder the next time I'm in a crypt, and should I run into a kid lost the woods, well, he better not expect any help from me.

All eight stories are marvellous. They are told in very precise prose and are firmly grounded in an ordinary, mundane world, yet retain a disturbing, dreamlike quality. And I mean disturbing in the best way possible!

Andy says

WOW, short story collections don't get better than this. Aickman rarely tries to truly scare his reader, he wants to unsettle the reader. These are stories I find myself thinking about, days, weeks later. Images and situations presented really get under the skin, and stay in the mind like few others. Sometimes a story will build and build, then just end. Many concepts here feel fresh and original too.

I think my favorite thing though was the sense of atmosphere Aickman pours into these stories, they really generate their own sense of place and setting, in some of the longer novellas, by the end I almost feel as if I've settled into the place myself. I don't re-read a lot of stories, but I could see revisiting these in a few years.

The Unsettled Dust - A novella. This is a good ghost story, atmospheric, sad, unsettling, really gives a good sense of place. It's not as satisfying as some of the best, and it ends with a bit of a whimper. A man who is to oversee the cleaning of a river for a preservation society stays in an old manor house nearby, also kept up by the society. Two old sisters live there with their housekeeper, silent, mysterious types all. He is troubled by the inordinate amount of dust that is always swirling and settling in the house – and later meets a ghost which perhaps explains the dust.

The Houses of the Russians - Weird little ghost tale, a rather vague ending, but it's got lots of atmosphere, a great setting too; a foggy island in a small Finnish village. Mild, but unsettling. A young apprentice surveyor travels to Finland with his employer to look over some land, and he comes across an island with houses on it, which looks utterly uninhabited, yet still seem to have some sort of "presences" about.

No Stronger Than a Flower - Really weird, shorter story, unsettling in a way too, well-told and to-the-point. Good themes here on loss of identity, subtly achieved. A man encourages his wife to "pretty herself up" a bit, but after she visits a mysterious beauty parlor in an ad, she starts to change into a totally different person.

The Cicerones - Another shorter story and one of my favorites. It's certainly creepy at times, unsettling, realistic and memorable. An Englishman exploring a Belgian cathedral finds it deserted, except for some odd people who continue to show him increasingly grotesque paintings and images in the ancient building.

The Next Glade - This is a sad, weird and subtle story, we don't know for sure what happened exactly when we come to the end of it. Was it all in the protagonist's mind, or was it a ghost? A woman meets a man at a house party who promises to come see her. The next day they take a walk in the woods, and he mysteriously disappears through some trees. Months later when she returns there with her husband, and goes in the direction he disappeared in, she sees him digging a hole in a frightful state. Meanwhile her husband cuts himself in the woods and dies sometime later.

Ravissante - Wow, this story is just messed up, and I still think about this one's disturbing imagery. It really builds up nicely, the atmosphere is just pitch-perfect, unsettling and sad. Thanks to the internet I was able to look at the art of many artists mentioned in this story, and it adds to the overall tone of it. A man uncovers an artist's manuscript, which recalls his visit to the very strange widow of an artist he admired.

Bind Your Hair - Definitely one of the better Aickman stories I've read, although it's subtle to start out, he soon puts subtlety aside like in his horrific "Ringing the Changes" where he goes going for a real horror ending. Very weird, memorable and scary. A girl goes with her fiancé to the country to meet her family.

While there she meets a strange local woman who lives near a maze where queasy Pagan rituals are held.

The Stains - Another novella, the longest story in the book. This is the type of story you need some time to digest! It's begins very sad, feels hopeful in the middle, but there's a real unsettling undercurrent to it that just disturbs all the way through. The end is devastating frankly. This is a very Arthur Machen-ish tale too, it feels like it has a deep pagan sensibility to it. At the same time it's about people being at the mercy of nature, getting out of their normal life and routine, and realizing how "at sea" they are once that normal pattern is broken somehow, and they have to start over. Powerful stuff. A man who has been recently widowed, falls in love with a beautiful, mysterious girl he finds in the country, who seems to live in the wild. They start a life together, but he notices more and more "growths" around him, and on his own person.
