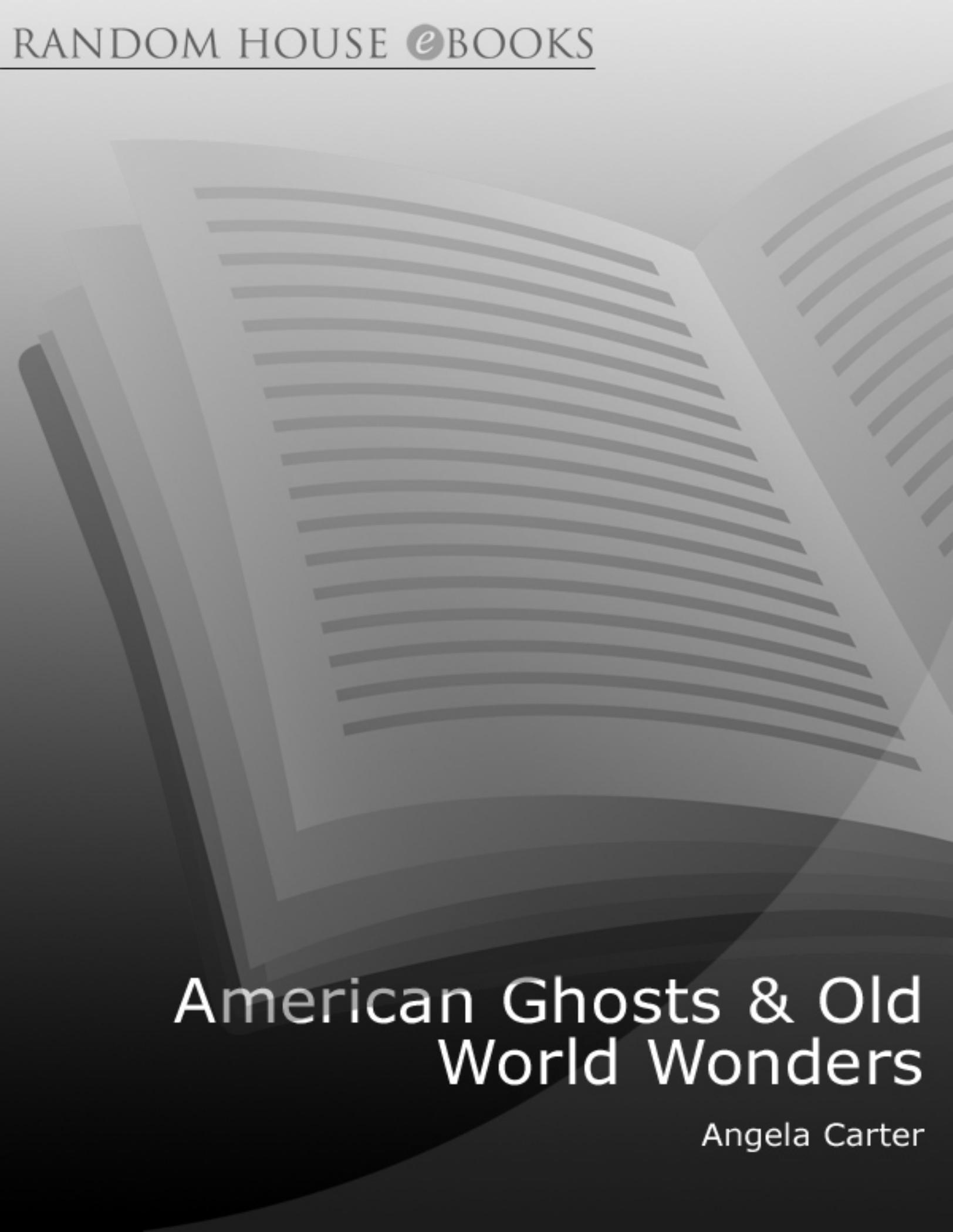


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



American Ghosts & Old
World Wonders

Angela Carter

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About the Book

This collection of short stories confirms a great writer's matchless imagination and talent. A young Lizzie Borden visits the circus; a pianist makes a Faustian pact in a fly-blown Southern brothel; an earnest student is taken on a gothic ride through the ambiguous residue of Hollywood's golden age; Alice is transmuted by a crazed fruit-grower in Prague, and Mary Magdalene steps out of the canvases of Donatello and de la Tour, transfigured by wilderness and solitude.

About the Author

Angela Carter was born in 1940. She lived in Japan, the United States and Australia. Her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, was published in 1965. Her next book, *The Magic Toyshop*, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the next, *Several Perceptions*, the Somerset Maugham Award. She died in February 1992.

Also by Angela Carter

fiction

Shadow Dance

The Magic Toyshop

Several Perceptions

Heroes and Villains

Love

The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman

Fireworks

The Passion of New Eve

The Bloody Chamber

Black Venus

Nights at the Circus

Wise Children

non-fiction

The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History

Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings

Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings

American Ghosts
&
Old World Wonders

ANGELA CARTER

CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

Introduction

When Angela Carter died from lung cancer in February 1992, her directions to those dealing with her literary estate were expansive. Her agent, her publisher and her literary executor (me) were to do 'anything to make money for my boys' - her husband Mark and son Alexander. No vulgarity was to be spared; any one of her fifteen books could be set to music or acted on ice. She also left particular notes about two books she hoped would be published soon. One was *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, which she had compiled and for which she had prepared half the notes. The other was to contain seven stories: 'all together, these *might* make a slim combined volume, to be called *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*.'

She was anxious about the length - the sheet on which she listed the stories is decorated with word-counts and sums - but she was, as usual, completely confident about the material and its arrangement. These stories, written late in Angela's life, are about legends and myths and marvels, about Wild Western girls and pagan practices. They divide between Europe and America and between old and new ways of story-telling and celebration: Angela enjoyed carnival in different forms, as music hall or pantomime and as film - 'I like,' she said, 'anything that flickers.' Several further uncollected pieces were discovered after her death and considered for this book. Two were included: 'Gun for the Devil', an unfinished draft

for a screenplay, attached itself naturally by form and content to the more polished and punning 'John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore'*; it also has things to say about the New World being not so new. 'The Ghost Ships', running with its magical cargo between the Old World and the New, bridged the two sections. Other items - written for page, screen or stage over the years - will be published later.

The pieces appear here as they were published in various magazines, with one or two exceptions. The Mary Magdalene story incorporates some additions Angela made to the text after it had been published: notably a new opening sentence, which provides a less stately beginning, and, in the first half, a few typical wrynesses - 'self-punishment is its own reward,' for example. (On the other hand, a scribbled instruction in the margins of this story to 'describe the picture' has been understood by the editors not as an authorial emendation but as Angela bullying herself.) A few Carteresque spellings have been brought into line with convention (at the risk in one instance of crushing a coinage - 'indistinguished'); one sentence, in 'Ashputtle', has been reworked because it lacked a main verb.

The preoccupations and style of these pieces give some glimmers of what Angela might have written next. They also contain a glimpse of an unachieved novel. When Angela died she left with her publishers the synopsis for a novel about Jane Eyre's step-daughter, *Adela*, but some years earlier she had had a different idea. She had wanted to write about the parent-killer Lizzie Borden. A story which appeared in the *London Review of Books* in 1981 under the title 'Mise-en-Scène for a Parricide' (later published in *Black Venus* as 'The Fall River Axe Murders') describes in scorching detail the day of the murder; 'Lizzie's Tiger', collected here, deals with events earlier in Lizzie's life. The stories are quite different; both are

characteristic. Taken together, they show what a fine, fierce book we might have had.

SUSANNAH CLAPP

PART ONE



Lizzie's Tiger

WHEN THE CIRCUS came to town and Lizzie saw the tiger, they were living on Ferry Street, in a very poor way. It was the time of the greatest parsimony in their father's house; everyone knows the first hundred thousand is the most difficult and the dollar bills were breeding slowly, slowly, even if he practised a little touch of usury on the side to prick his cash in the direction of greater productivity. In another ten years' time, the War between the States would provide rich pickings for the coffin-makers, but, back then, back in the Fifties, well - if he had been a praying man, he would have gone down on his knees for a little outbreak of summer cholera or a touch, just a touch, of typhoid. To his chagrin, there had been nobody to bill when he had buried his wife.

For, at that time, the girls were just freshly orphaned. Emma was thirteen, Lizzie four - stern and square, a squat rectangle of a child. Emma parted Lizzie's hair in the middle, stretched it back over each side of her bulging forehead and braided it tight. Emma dressed her, undressed her, scrubbed her night and morning with a damp flannel, and humped the great lump of little girl around in her arms whenever Lizzie would let her, although Lizzie was not a demonstrative child and did not show affection easily, except to the head of the house, and then only when she wanted something. She knew where the power was and, intuitively feminine in spite of her gruff appearance, she knew how to court it.

That cottage on Ferry - very well, it was a slum; but the undertaker lived on unconcerned among the stiff furnishings of his defunct marriage. His bits and pieces would be admired today if they turned up freshly beeswaxed in an antique store, but in those days they were plain old-fashioned, and time would only make them more so in that dreary interior, the tiny house he never mended, eroding clapboard and diseased paint, mildew on the dark wallpaper with a brown pattern like brains, the ominous crimson border round the top of the walls, the sisters sleeping in one room in one thrifty bed.

On Ferry, in the worst part of town, among the dark-skinned Portuguese fresh off the boat with their earrings, flashing teeth and incomprehensible speech, come over the ocean to work the mills whose newly erected chimneys closed in every perspective; every year more chimneys, more smoke, more newcomers, and the peremptory shriek of the whistle that summoned to labour as bells had once summoned to prayer.

The hovel on Ferry stood, or, rather, leaned at a bibulous angle on a narrow street cut across at an oblique angle by another narrow street, all the old wooden homes like an upset cookie jar of broken gingerbread houses lurching this way and that way, and the shutters hanging off their hinges and windows stuffed with old newspapers, and the snagged picket fence and raised voices in unknown tongues and howling of dogs who, since puppyhood, had known of the world only the circumference of their chain. Outside the parlour window were nothing but rows of counterfeit houses that sometimes used to scream.

Such was the anxious architecture of the two girls' early childhood.

A hand came in the night and stuck a poster, showing the head of a tiger, on to a picket fence. As soon as Lizzie saw the poster, she wanted to go to the circus, but Emma had no money, not a cent. The thirteen-year-old was keeping

house at that time, the last skivvy just quit with bad words on both sides. Every morning, Father would compute the day's expenses, hand Emma just so much, no more. He was angry when he saw the poster on the fence; he thought the circus should have paid him rental for the use. He came home in the evening, sweet with embalming fluid, saw the poster, purpled with fury, ripped it off, tore it up.

Then it was suppertime. Emma was no great shakes at cookery and Father, dismissing the possibility of another costly skivvy until such time as plague struck, already pondered the cost-efficiency of remarriage; when Emma served up her hunks of cod, translucently uncooked within, her warmed-over coffee and a dank loaf of baker's bread, it almost put him in a courting mood, but that is not to say his meal improved his temper. So that, when his youngest climbed kitten-like upon his knee and, lisping, twining her tiny fingers in his gunmetal watch-chain, begged small change for the circus, he answered her with words of unusual harshness, for he truly loved this last daughter, whose obduracy recalled his own.

Emma unhandily darned a sock.

'Get that child to bed before I lose my temper!'

Emma dropped the sock and scooped up Lizzie, whose mouth set in dour lines of affront as she was borne off. The square-jawed scrap, deposited on the rustling straw mattress - oat straw, softest and cheapest - sat where she had been dropped and stared at the dust in a sunbeam. She seethed with resentment. It was moist midsummer, only six o'clock and still bright day outside.

She had a whim of iron, this one. She swung her feet on to the stool upon which the girls climbed down out of bed, thence to the floor. The kitchen door stood open for air behind the screen door. From the parlour came the low murmur of Emma's voice as she read *The Providence Journal* aloud to Father.

Next-door's lean and famished hound launched itself at the fence in a frenzy of yapping that concealed the creak of Lizzie's boots on the back porch. Unobserved, she was off - off and away! - trotting down Ferry Street, her cheeks pink with self-reliance and intent. She would not be denied. The circus! The word tinkled in her head with a red sound, as if it might signify a profane church.

'That's a tiger,' Emma had told her as, hand in hand, they inspected the poster on their fence.

'A tiger is a big cat,' Emma added instructively.

How big a cat?

A *very* big cat.

A dumpy, red-striped, regular cat of the small, domestic variety greeted Lizzie with a raucous mew from atop a gatepost as she stumped determinedly along Ferry Street; our cat, Ginger, whom Emma, in a small ecstasy of sentimental whimsy presaging that of her latter protracted spinsterhood, would sometimes call Miss Ginger, or even Miss Ginger Cuddles. Lizzie, however, sternly ignored Miss Ginger Cuddles. Miss Ginger Cuddles sneaked. The cat put out a paw as Lizzie brushed past, as if seeking to detain her, as if to suggest she took second thoughts as to her escapade, but, for all the apparent decision with which Lizzie put one firm foot before the other, she had not the least idea where the circus might be and would not have got there at all without the help of a gaggle of ragged Irish children from Corkey Row, who happened by in the company of a lean, black and tan, barking dog of unforeseen breed that had *this* much in common with Miss Ginger Cuddles, it could go whither it pleased.

This free-ranging dog with its easy-going grin took a fancy to Lizzie and, yapping with glee, danced around the little figure in the white pinafore as it marched along. Lizzie reached out to pat its head. She was a fearless girl.

The child-gang saw her pet their dog and took a fancy to her for the same reason as crows settle on one particular