

Ghosts of Shanghai and Shadow of the Yangtze, by Julian Sedgwick

Jun 28, 2017 | [Extended Reviews](#)



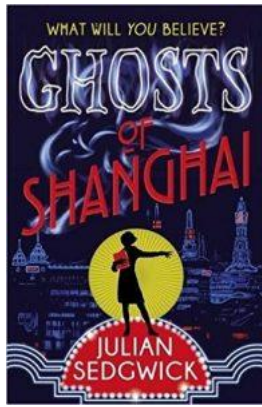
Ghosts of Shanghai and Shadow of the Yangtze by Julian Sedgwick

Last year every other book that came into the shop seemed to have the word 'Girl' in the title. This year we have been inundated with books called 'The (something) Wife'. When so many books in young adult and adult fiction are trend-driven, or follow a standard best-selling formula, it is wonderful to be presented with a story that is distinctive, unpredictable and extremely well written.



Shanghai c1929

Ghost of Shanghai is the first novel in this adventure; the events begin with a ghost-hunt in the ruins of the ancient White Cloud Temple in Shanghai in 1926, a year before the outbreak of civil



war. We meet Ruby, a fair-haired English girl whose family has moved to the cosmopolitan and multi-cultural, but deeply troubled city of Shanghai. Ruby is one of the best young female characters I have read in ten years as a bookseller. She is complex and disorientated, jealous, anxious and flawed, but committed to her friends and, in a young teenage way, a little in love. When we first meet this young woman, she is twisted by the misplaced guilt over her younger brother's death, and her adolescent energy is crushed by her parent's overwhelming grief. The parents too make an interesting study. There is a joke among booksellers that the definition of a YA novel is one in which, in the first two pages, the parents are killed off or, at the very least, irretrievably lost. Ruby's parents are very alive, and themselves tangled in the plot. In the world outside their clouded windows, the tension between the loyalists, the violent street-gangs and the communist fighters rises. Ruby finds that her closest friends have vanished, and the world is suddenly filled with ghosts. When the disappearances start, here are the guiding wraiths of lost friends, and spectral animals to help; but also deadly shadow-warriors brought from the Otherworld as henchmen for the violent gang-master, Moonface. Ghosts are quieter than gunshots, but many times more powerful. As Ruby and her friend Charlie set off to find out what has happened to Charlie's little sister, Fei, they find that the nomadic and unearthly Taoist monk, Lao Jin, is the only person they can trust – but trust is difficult in a world like theirs.

The long Chinese Civil War began in April of 1927 and was a conflict in China between the Chinese Communists and Chinese Nationalists. There is a wealth of historical research about this period in China, and many accounts survive. If you are interested to find out more, take a look at this page, which gives a good introduction to these events. <http://totallyhistory.com/chinese-civil-war/>



An illustration to the tale of the Magic Fox, painted by Utagawa Kunioshi c1849.

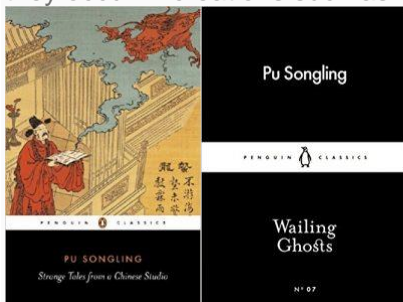
Today we talk about the way we treat newcomers to our own country, but in these books the mirror is held up to reflect our own pale faces, with our distinctive and diverse colouring and our

difficult language; we see ourselves as we are seen when the country and the culture is not ours. We are the foreign devils, and it is us who have the reputation for ignorance and treachery. Shanghai in 1926 is a dangerous city, unstable both in terms of its crumbling buildings and its collapsing society; and it forms a perfect and pleasingly gothic backdrop to this fast-paced and exhilarating adventure story. The city itself is the darkest and most difficult character in the plot of the first novel; it shape-shifts constantly, one moment it is a vivid patchwork of cultures and the next it is unstable fenland, a mire of decaying civilisation. Sedgwick gives us an insight into the tangle of languages and half-languages that hold this city in its mind-forged manacles. As a plot device alone it works beautifully; the myriad languages allow some characters to be kept in the dark, while secrets can be passed around swiftly. This city really is a problem. Even with a beautiful little map at the front to help – I do love a good map in a book – the city is difficult to



grasp.

Each time you think you know where you are, another door opens, or another passageway appears and suddenly you are not so sure which is the way home. It is unnerving and claustrophobic; it simultaneously traps the characters, while also enabling them to flit between this world and the other. Don't expect a nostalgic portrait of glittering Eastern promise, this Shanghai is giving up its spirits and trembling on the edge of devastation. Into the mix is thrown the supernatural world of the Far East. The spirits that haunt the Eastern imagination make the usual English spectral population look quaint and tame. We meet the six-tailed fox spirits of the East whose presence is a signal from the dead, along with guardian spirit dogs and the jiang shi, the revenant vampires of China. There are glowing swords that can destroy Shadow Warriors, dusty almanacs found in tucked-away bookshops and the delicate red threads of fate that in Chinese legend enable two people to find each other. By the end of the first book, the Otherworld is so close that it is often difficult to tell apart from our own. The folklore and mythology of the Far East is wonderful and very different from our own. Some of the folkloric creatures of the East are however increasingly familiar to us in the West because they occur in creations such as Pokemon and films like Spirited Away and The Monkey King.



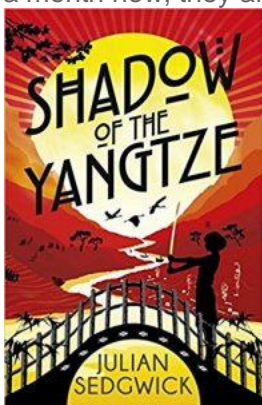
17th Century Chinese teacher, Pu Songling wrote a collection of ghost and fairy tales called 'Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio' which is still in print and available. It is almost the equivalent of Europe's Grimm's Fairy Tales. You can dip in and have a read with Penguin's issue of his tale 'Wailing Ghosts'.



Steamboats on the Yangtze River c1929

The second book, *Shadow of the Yangtze*, has a shift of mood. As the political storm breaks behind them, we leave oppressive and clammy Shanghai behind and escape with Ruby and Charlie along the sprawling Yangtze river. The landscape is different. Where there were nights filled with gunshot, there is now silence. Julian Sedgwick's knowledge of the Chinese landscape is a delight, and we get a glimpse of a living river that spreads its long limbs out across the land and through the villages, sometimes bringing life and sometimes death. The contrast between the slow-breathing, stretching river and the pounding race against time to rescue Fei creates a thrilling tension for the reader. In their desperate search, the pair take every route they can find, drifting over drowned towns and sunken temples, climbing the crumbled remains of burial sites and searching for ghosts in abandoned villages. Keeping pace with Ruby and Charlie is a host of half-seen spirits, some of which are themselves groping for path to the next world. The Yangtze crashes and tumbles between this world and the other. At the end of the second novel we also reach the end of the river, and the edge of the known land; with one final plunge it surges out into the foaming whirlpools that separate the worlds. Here we leave Ruby and Charlie; and now we hold our breath and wait for the final part in this trilogy! The next book is expected out early in 2018.

I hope I haven't given away too much about this fabulous piece of storytelling, it is fascinating in all sorts of ways. The only criticism I can make of the books is nothing to do with its contents at all, but only the cover. Contrary to popular sayings, everybody judges books by the cover! I adored these novels, but I read the second book first – an embarrassing mistake for a bookseller to make! I noticed too that other reviewers on line had made the same mistake. The cover of *Shadow of the Yangtze* begs to be picked off the shelf and explored. The cover of the first book, *Ghosts of Shanghai*, doesn't even seem to belong to the novel; for a start, the white-and-wobbly 'whooooo' sort of Goosebumps 1990s 'ghosts' is completely wrong for a novel set in 1920s China. If anyone is in any doubt how important a good cover design is, let me say this: both *Ghosts of Shanghai* and *Shadow of the Yangtze* have been on display at the front of the shop for about a month now, they are in a prominent position and next to each



other. During this time I have watched with interest as customers do exactly what I did – they don't notice the *Ghosts of Shanghai* at all, but they pick up the second book and read the back cover. I've lost count of the number of times I've said 'Oh, no, the other one is the first in the series.' ('Which one?'). The cover of the second book is a thing of beauty and most certainly belongs to the story that it encloses – but the books really don't look like they belong together. When the third in this trilogy comes out next year, I'd love to see the first book reissued with a design that does this wonderful book some justice. Please.



Bubbling Well at the Jing'an Temple, photo c1925

To end a review of a book I loved by criticising the cover would be a terrible thing to do! I'll end it like this instead: this piece of storytelling has everything. The series is not only written beautifully, but done so with a profound knowledge of Chinese landscape, history, politics and folklore. This is modern Gothic fiction at its very best. In the way that only the best YA and MG fiction can manage, this book is also deeply political. It leads you to question your understanding of things far outside the plot, not least the fault-lines that tear us apart when society allows itself to descent into civil war – and the threads that hold it together at such times. The age we live in is crying out for more novels like this, more writing like this, more research and knowledge as lightly-worn as this – and fewer books that have huge publicity just because they have the word 'Girl' in the title.



Julian Sedgwick

Ghost and Shanghai and **Shadow of the Yangtze** are published by Hodder Children's Books ISBN 9781444923902 / 9781444944497 £6.99 each. You can find out more about Julian Sedgwick, contact him to arrange a school visit, or find out about his other books on his website <http://www.juliansedgwick.co.uk/>



Entrance to lanes Shanghai c1925

All old images of Shanghai are from Virtual Shanghai – more can be found here: <http://www.virtualshanghai.net/>