



Halloween interview: Berlie Doherty talks about her new book *The Company of Ghosts*

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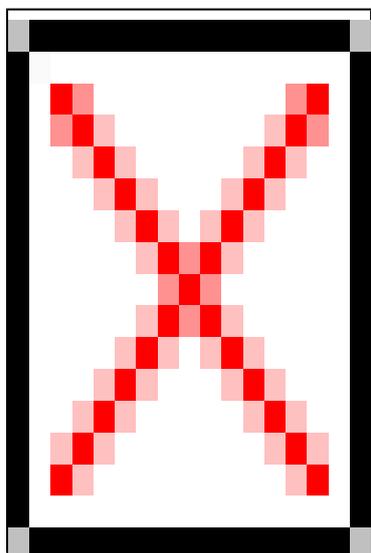
[Andrea Reece](#) [1]

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Berlie Doherty interviewed

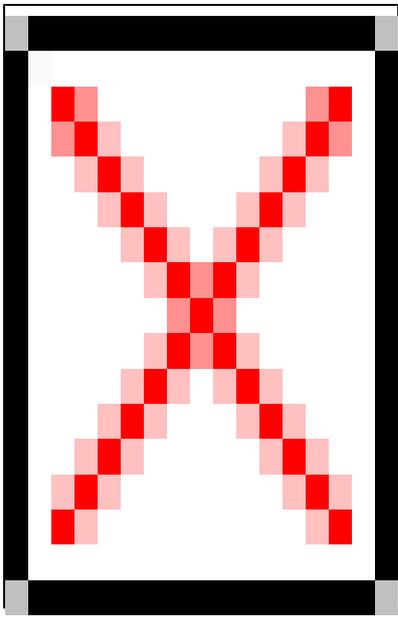
In her long and distinguished career, Berlie Doherty has written all sorts of books for all sorts of readers, from picture books and stories for young children through retellings of fairy stories and novels and drama for teenagers and adults.



When her publisher Andersen Press asked Berlie to write a ghost story, a literary ghost story for girls to be precise, she immediately said 'yes please'. The book, **The Company of Ghosts**, tells the story of fifteen year old Ellie who, angry and hurt by her parents' divorce, jumps at the chance to spend the summer with her friend Morag's family on the remote island they own. But things quickly go wrong. Shy Ellie has to spend the first night on the island alone with Morag's brother, George. Then, just as the two are beginning to become friends, George sails to the mainland for supplies. And doesn't come back. Marooned on the island with no other living soul for company, Ellie starts to hear footsteps, see strange lights, feel icy kisses on her cheek at night. Is she really alone? As the isolation and loneliness take their toll, Ellie is in real danger of reliving a past tragedy.

Berlie's editor's suggestion was inspired. **The Company of Ghosts** is classic Doherty - a delicate coming of age story, the action taking place in an island setting so perfectly described we can hear the gulls and the sea. It's absorbing, touching, full of sentences you want to share with others, and often very scary.

'I'd written a play with ghosts for adults, set in World War One, and contributed a short story to the Andersen collection **Haunted**, and the genre has always appealed,' Berlie says, 'It's not easy to be scary though and I quickly realised what a challenge I was being set. A short story is one thing, sustaining the tension for a whole novel is quite different. I felt like I had to learn a whole new skill.'



Berlie won't say whether she believes in ghosts, though "like most people, I have a sense of there being something other". She talks instead of the ghosts that we surround ourselves with, "There's a place I go to that I associate with a particular friend, and when I'm there I always think that she's left her ghost behind. That's a haunting not in a scary sense, but in a way that helps us feel at home in a place. When I go back to my old home, I think of my parents and my sister. Ghosts are a concept of memory." Ellie, alone on her island, is surrounded by people who aren't there, her own family, Morag's family, as well as the island's previous inhabitants. She's a talented artist and as she paints she talks out loud to her father, describing what she's doing; when she comes across George's t-shirt, draped over a wall to dry, she thinks "he's left his ghost behind".

Then, says Berlie, "there are ghosts we all have of our other selves. I was most aware of this when I was a young mother. I remember thinking "there's another one of me, she's waiting in the wings now but ready to step back out when the time comes". Alone on her island, Ellie wonders if we all have ghost other-self, "to have secret conversations with, that nobody else hears".

Ellie is the latest in a line of teenage girls Berlie has written about, but seldom have any of them been through such a terrible time, in such isolation. Ellie spends days on her own with no way of contacting the outside world, and only the barest essentials in the cottage. "Most writers look into themselves when they write, and I wondered how I would respond in a similar situation. I don't think I would have survived nearly as well as Ellie does! She learns so much about herself on the island, she definitely comes back as an adult. It is a coming of age story as well as a ghost story." There are two love stories in the book too: Ellie's growing feelings for George helps her understand the anguish of Anabel, the island's ghost, who lost the boy she loved.

The haunting strains of the folk song **Haste to the Wedding** often announce Anabel's arrival, and her story feels very much like a folk tale. It's not, Berlie invented the story herself, but she did want it to have that folk tale feel. "I feel the book is closest to my novel [Daughter of the Sea](#) [3]" "this is the novel that Berlie describes as "the book I always wanted to write".

And of course, the sea is such an important part of this story. Ellie trapped on the small island, imagines herself surrounded by the sea, "the weeping, surging, rolling, endless sea, the dragging weeds, the shifting sands, the creeping shells of the sea". As Berlie says, "When Andersen suggested the ghost story, my first thought was that the setting would be a haunted house, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted something different. I feel that the sea is part of me, I was born in Liverpool but "went over the water" to the Wirral to live. I've always been aware of the sound, the smell, the noise of the waves, and the gulls. It's this living, breathing thing that's always there. I really felt that I was coming home by allowing the sea to be part of this story".

For Berlie, **The Company of Ghosts** is already a favourite. "I've always loved islands and, as I said, I felt very much at

home writing the book, I felt that I knew the territory, that I knew where I was walking. The genre allowed me to go back to the more lyrical style of writing that is my natural writing voice. I feel in this book I found that voice again.

Indeed, it's hard to think of a setting or subject that would have suited Berlie's writing better. **The Company of Ghosts** is a superb novel, one of our finest writers at her very best.

The Company of Ghosts [4] is published by Andersen Press, 978-1849397292, £6.99 hbk.

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