

Alma Q&A

1. How did you first learn of the haunting of Alma Fielding?

I came across Alma's story in a book by the Hungarian ghost hunter Nandor Fodor, who investigated a poltergeist attack in the Fieldings' house in London in 1938. To the horror of his colleagues, Fodor came to believe that the supernatural activity was generated by Alma's subconscious mind. I had always been intrigued by poltergeists, especially their connection to female rage and confusion, and I wanted to know whether Fodor was right to ascribe Alma's haunting to a dark childhood experience. I decided to find out what became of them both. Since Fodor had disguised his subject's identity, my first task was to discover her real name.

2. Was her case well known? Did it contribute to the larger cultural conversation at the time, or was Nandor Fodor just ahead of the curve?

For a few days in 1938, this case made headlines, but it was quickly forgotten: Fodor's four-month investigation ended in failure and humiliation, and his fellow ghost hunters disowned him and his radical theories. But Sigmund Freud — shortly before his death in 1939 — read Fodor's report of the case, and endorsed his conclusions. In many ways, Fodor's interpretation of this story anticipated the way we now understand traumatic shock, amnesia and repression.

3. How was this book a departure from your previous work?

Like other books I have written, this story takes the shape of an investigation — I follow the ghost hunter in his attempt to get at the truth of Alma's haunting — but the period and the subject are very different. The investigation took place in the 1930s rather than the Victorian era, and it concerned a haunting rather than a crime. Even more than before, this book deals with the overlap between fact and fiction: it is a documentary account of magic.

4. Where and how did you tackle the research?

In an archive in Cambridge, I found Fodor's case files — manila folders crammed with photographs, X-rays, transcripts, lab reports, sketches, diagrams, handwritten notes. And in New York, I found his 'diary' of the poltergeist investigation, a minutely detailed document hundreds of pages long. Over the three years of my research, I also tracked down the descendants of the main characters in the story. I visited Alma's grandson in Devon, and he talked to me about his family, showed me photographs, a court summons, a contract for experimental seances. In Manhattan, I met Fodor's daughter, Andrea, now in her late nineties, who had met Alma Fielding in 1930s London. She had adored her father, she told me: when he died, a knife twisted in her heart.

5. What was the most exciting part of writing *The Haunting of Alma Fielding*?

When looking through Fodor's correspondence at his daughter's apartment, I learnt that Shirley Jackson had read his work before writing *The Haunting of Hill House*, and that he had been employed as a consultant on the movie of that book. I had sensed that his ideas about 'poltergeist psychosis' were reflected in Shirley Jackson's novels, and was thrilled to have this confirmed. And in England, Alma's grandson showed me a photograph of a baby boy, taken in 1926, which transformed my understanding of her life.

6. What was most surprising to you about the story?

I had thought this was a strange and singular story, but when I started to read the newspapers of 1938, I realised that Alma's poltergeist was one of hundreds of contemporary ghosts. The people of Britain seemed besieged by revenants, demons and haunted furniture, fascinated by horoscopes and seances and clairvoyants. I came to believe that supernatural experiences were relaying some of the terrible memories of the First World War, in which hundreds of thousands of Britons were killed, and also a deep dread of the next conflict. By early 1938, with Hitler and Mussolini threatening their neighbours in Europe, Britain was braced for another catastrophe. I was fascinated by how these national fears leaked into Alma's private world.

7. What do you most hope readers take away from the book?

Like Fodor, I became less interested in establishing the truth or falsity of Alma's supernatural experience, and more compelled by the secret story it told. I hope the reader will be drawn to the magic and comedy and creepiness of Alma's manifestations, but will also become curious, as I did, about the emotional disturbance that lay behind them. I love the way that a ghost can be a form of self-expression, a way of telling the truth about an interior life.