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Tales of Terror from the Black Ship

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Reviewer: Alison Canar
Reading Level: Intermediate, Young adult
Rating: Excellent
Genre: Ghost stories; Occult fiction; Adventure stories
Subject: Brothers and sisters--Juvenile fiction; Taverns (Inns)--Juvenile fiction; Storytelling--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

Ethan and Cathy delight in tales that give most children nightmares. They grow up in a seaside inn, mingling with sailors daily. Unfortunately, their happy childhood is soured when their father becomes an alcoholic after their mother’s death. Still, their father hurries to summon the town doctor when a sudden illness strikes the children. Father warns them not to let anyone into the house, but Ethan and Cathy can't deny refuge to a mysterious seafarer. They are amazed at the stranger's talent as he passes time telling ghostly stories. However, Ethan's growing unease is magnified by the final tale about a black ship of undead sailors, which their visitor claims has returned to collect him. Yet the children encounter a new revelation that they might not be out of place aboard the black ship themselves.

The bulk of the novel is comprised of the visitor's stories, but the overarching plot framing the tales is what truly makes the work memorable and terrifying. Priestly invokes the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe in the short stories, which are filled with macabre motifs and glimpses into the psyche of cold-blooded killers. Although the children's fate is not entirely original, Priestly adds new twists which keep it exciting. Priestly refrains from spelling out all of the implications to the readers, allowing them to enjoy piecing together clues for themselves. Children with dispositions similar to young Ethan and Cathy will be enthralled with the stories. Even reluctant readers may be intrigued by the interwoven pirating theme.

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