

## ARTS &amp; LIVING



Nearly everything is a ghost story.  
CHRIS BORRELLI/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## WHAT WE'RE READING

## There are ghost stories all around us

Would you recognize these if you saw them?



Christopher Borrelli

I've been reading ghost stories. Partly because it's October, Halloween, Dia de Muertos, spooky time. Partly because, if you read enough and regularly, it's hard to avoid bumping into a ghost story. Nearly everything, read in the proper light, is a ghost story. In fact, "the best ghost stories don't have ghosts," Roald Dahl wrote, in the introduction to his 1983 anthology of ghost stories. Instead, the finest ghost stories often scare with social critique, metaphor, atmosphere. Not ectoplasm. "What the ghost really needs is not echoing passages and hidden doors behind tapestry but continuity and silence." Or so wrote Edith Wharton in "Ghosts," her own collection, just reissued by New York Review of Books Classics.

You have an idea of what a ghost story looks like. Cobwebs. Cold rushes of air.

Maybe you think of a ghost story as the work of hacks and adolescent minds. But the ghost story knows no heavy chains. It floats across genre, talent and ambition like so many walls. Before I wrote this column I read a bunch of new ghost stories and they were courtroom dramas, stories about technology, parenting novels, tales of identity in the 21st century Upper Midwest. Any list of great authors — Dickens, Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, George Saunders — is probably also a list of purveyors of Caspers. Henry James, Shirley Jackson — they found their truest voices with ghosts. Because we are all surrounded by the past, malevolent and harmless. Every place you live, and every room you sleep in tonight, has carried the traces of the people who once passed through it.

America is filthy with ghosts, haunted lands, legacies good and bad, the spirit of ideals rarely lived up to, lingering memories of people who were hurt, trampled on, cast aside.

Of course those are ghost stories. Fittingly for 2021, literature, the award-winning stuff and cheap crap alike, is a haven of haunts. But then the ghost story couldn't vanish if you wanted it to. The ghost story is a changeling, and less a reflection of who we are than a projection of what we are worried about — in the broadest existential sense. We're all spooked by ghosts of what might have been. Ghost children, taken too soon, become excellent specters because "what might have been" is what they offer. Ghosts rattle at limitations; ghosts nurse trauma; free of repercussions, ghosts float above injustice and question norms. Ghosts, conservative by the nature of being super dead, are progressive in action, often protesting the thing that made them invisible and hard to get in touch with.

Chicago, though, never short on ghosts, has been a weak conduit for ghost lit.

Which is one of the many reasons "This Thing Between Us" (FSG, \$17), by the Chicago-based Gus Moreno, feels welcome. It's unsettling, poignant and like the best ghost stories, I found myself telling the bare bones of the story to friends and family, just to see the reaction. It begins in Pilsen, which is exactly right — gentrification is inherently a ghost story, a tale of disrupted lives and new families moving into the homes of people passed over. In this case, it's a condo inside a brownstone, just off 18th Street, and the protagonist is Thiago, whose Mexican father tells him that he's not really Mexican when he flinches at spicy food. Thiago is full of guilt, and unsettled ideas of identity.

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*"I love pleasantly surprising people about who we are. They come to understand how relationships between jazz, the creative world, and new music all comes together. And if they don't like it, it's cool, but at least they know about some very, very different stuff created by Black people that's been around for a long time."*

— Coco Elysses



Coco Elysses during the 50th anniversary reunion concert of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians at Mandel Hall of the University of Chicago. NUCCIO DINUZZO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE 2015

# BOLD, UNBOXABLE SOUNDS

Concert will celebrate a milestone for the forward-looking AACM

By Hannah Edgar  
For Chicago Tribune

When Chicago went into lockdown last year, like so many of us, Coco Elysses turned to her phone as a lifeline — specifically Clubhouse, the invite-only social networking app that blew up during the nadir of shelter-in-place. She'd rub virtual elbows with R&B and hip-hop industry folks, everyone trading tracks on the app's audio interface. But whenever it was Elysses's turn, she'd offer up something a little different: the bold, unboxable sounds created by members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

"I just wanted to see what would happen, but people would say, 'Yo, that beat *hits*,'" says Elysses, who was elected as the venerable collective's chair earlier this year. "I love pleasantly surprising people about who we are. They come to understand how relationships between jazz, the creative world, and new music all comes together. And if they don't like it, it's cool, but at least they know about some very, very different stuff created by Black people that's been around for a long time."

For 56 years, in fact. The AACM — not yet so named — first convened on May 8, 1965, at former Sun Ra Arkestra trumpeter Kelan Phil Cohran's East 75th Street apartment. Before its inaugural meeting, Cohran, Muhal Richard Abrams, Jodie Christian, and Steve McCall circulated



Adegoke Steve Colson is a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians' New York chapter who first joined the collective in Chicago. SHARON SULLIVAN PHOTO

postcards with agenda items to be discussed that afternoon, the first order of business being to define "creative" and "original music." The ensuing philosophical debate wasn't so much about genre; even then, the AACM was largely past such superficial silos. Rather, attendees sketched out the group's commitment to Black musical autonomy — whatever that

music might be, and in whatever outgrowths, like the Art Ensemble of Chicago's famed quintet or the flexible, often orchestral-scale Great Black Music Ensemble of the 21st century.

That autonomy remains the trunk upholding the AACM's ever-

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## CELEBRITIES



Carrie Underwood and Jason Aldean will perform together at the CMA Awards. AP PHOTOS

## Underwood, Aldean to play CMAs

From news services

The CMA Awards will be a night of all-star collaborations between Carrie Underwood and Jason Aldean, Kane Brown and Chris Young, and Mickey Guyton with Britney Spencer and Madeline Edwards.

The Country Music Association announced additional performers Wednesday for the Nov. 10 show, including top nominee Chris Stapleton, Luke Combs, Miranda Lambert and Old Dominion.

Other nominees who will also perform include Eric Church, who is tied with Stapleton with five nominations, Jimmie Allen, Brothers Osborne and Dan + Shay. Blake Shelton is also on the lineup for the show hosted by Luke Bryan that will air on ABC.

**Megan Thee Stallion to graduate college:** Hip-hop superstar Megan Thee Stallion has announced that she is graduating college. “2021 finna graduate collegeeee, taking my graduation pics today,” she wrote Monday on Instagram, showing off her bedazzled graduation cap. The rapper, whose given name is Megan Jovon Ruth

Pete, pursued college studies at Prairie View A&M University before her career skyrocketed with songs such as “Savage” (with Beyoncé) and “W.A.P.” (with Cardi B).

She eventually switched to part-time, online courses to receive a bachelor’s degree in health administration from Texas Southern University.

“I want to get my degree because I really want my mom to be proud,” the three-time Grammy winner told People. “She saw me going to school before she passed.”

In March 2019, Megan Thee Stallion’s mother, rapper Holly Thomas, died after battling brain cancer.

Megan Thee Stallion plans to use some of her earnings to open an assisted-living facility that her classmates will operate.

**No more autographs for McCartney:** Paul McCartney has shared in an interview that while he’s happy to have a conversation with fans, he will not participate in giving autographs or posing for selfies.

“[It] always struck me as a bit strange,” the former Beatle told Reader’s Digest UK for a November cover story. “‘Here, can I write your name down on the

back of this till receipt please?’ Why? We both know who I am.”

McCartney, 79, has found that stopping those kinds of interactions are better in the long run.

“What you’ve usually got is a ropey photo with a poor backdrop and me looking a bit miserable,” he said. “Let’s chat, let’s exchange stories.”

**‘Dune’ sequel in the works:** Legendary Entertainment announced Tuesday that Denis Villeneuve’s “Dune,” which adapts the first half of Frank Herbert’s 1965 science-fiction epic, will get a sequel. Whether that would be the case had been an unanswered question throughout the film’s recent release.

Warner Bros. Chairman Toby Emmerich said the studio will release “Dune: Part II” in October 2023.

**Oct. 28 birthdays:** Actor Joan Plowright is 92. Actor Jane Alexander is 82. Actor Dennis Franz is 77. TV host Sheryl Underwood is 58. Comedian Andy Richter is 55. Actor Julia Roberts is 54. Singer Brad Paisley is 49. Actor Joaquin Phoenix is 47. Actor Gwendoline Christie is 43. Actor Matt Smith is 39. Singer Frank Ocean is 34.

Much of this transformation has been happening behind the scenes — for now. So, take the AACM’s deferred 55th anniversary concert on Oct. 30 as a public celebration of its new endeavors. Even that performance, featuring the Great Black Music Ensemble, heralds a milestone: With support from the Minnesota-based nonprofit American Composers Forum, it marks the first time the AACM has ever commissioned nonmember musicians for new works. Ultimately, three artists were selected from some 100 submissions, each with varied degrees of connection to the organization: Adegoke Steve Colson, a veteran member of the AACM’s New York chapter who first joined the collective in Chicago; the searingly inventive saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, who soaked in the sounds of AACM musicians while attending DePaul University in the 1990s; and the Honourable Elizabeth A. Baker, a self-described new renaissance artist getting to know the AACM for the first time.

“It was a life-changing, made-me-want-to-cry experience,” Baker says

of the commission. “I’m from Florida, and being a Black mixed woman in experimental music of an underground nature, there are not many other people (doing what I do). I would say this was one of two life-changing moments where I was encouraged that my life was unique, but not impossible.”

Initially, the commission guaranteed a yearlong incubation process, kicked off through an in-person workshop with the Great Black Music Ensemble in fall 2019 and culminating the following year. Due to the pandemic, however, one year became two, during which the works readily took on a life of their own.

Mahanthappa’s “Finding Our Voice” — a modular work he’ll join the Great Black Music Ensemble in performing on the concert — morphed from its initial sketch into a rumination on the social upheaval following George Floyd’s murder. “Writing a piece ‘for’ George Floyd is a massive undertaking... It’s too heavy a subject to tackle. What I wanted to highlight was the reaction,” Mahanthappa said in an online conversation facilitated by the American Composers

Forum. “What does it mean to be an activist? What does it mean to stand up? ... And are people in it for the long haul?”

Meanwhile, Baker’s commission mirrors her own hyper-interdisciplinary output: the first movement sees Great Black Music Ensemble musicians react spontaneously to individual video scores, the third explores the acoustic effects created by overlapping different scales, and the wall-rattling middle section — a string quartet like you’ve never heard it — will, in Baker’s words, “let them eat bass.” (“In my ideal world, this would be performed in a parking lot with four Impalas, with subwoofers, on hydraulics,” she jokes.)

But it’s Colson’s work that spotlights the AACM as an entity. His “Incandescence” is structured as a six-part narrative, with each chapter representing a decade in the AACM’s history. Now 72, the New Jersey-based pianist, composer, and bandleader witnessed his fair share of that history: He remembers helping set up chairs at AACM-organized concerts while still a student at Northwestern University

in the late 1960s, and he still knows the vast majority of the musicians in the Great Black Music Ensemble. That personal connection guided not only the piece’s architecture but its finer-grained instrumental details.

“Being around the AACM every week, I would have different ideas associated with each individual. You see people’s personality; everybody definitely had one,” Colson remembers with a chuckle.

The AACM’s real-life sixth chapter, of course, is still in progress. The organization’s myriad new initiatives are bearing fruit after a period that could have easily been among its darkest. Despite the circumstances, however, Elysses feels the organization has never been stronger.

“During the pandemic, we came back together in something we call ‘the revival.’ This is the first time that we’ve had such a large mass of members come back in and rededicate themselves,” she says.

In that regard, Colson’s musical vision of the current decade isn’t too far off from the truth. In “Incandescence’s” sixth section, the more tradi-

tional orchestration of prior chapters unfurls into all-out experimentalism; novel crises, after all, demand novel responses. But no matter how new the sounds, their spirit honors the forever-new, forever-independent ethos honed during that inaugural meeting 56 years ago, and the departed visionaries — Cohran, Abrams, Christian, and McCall included — who saw it through.

“For me, there’s an illuminating or incandescent quality when I think of them — like a charge in your circuitry,” Colson says. “Hopefully, people will get some of that out of what they hear.”

*The Great Black Music Ensemble performs 7 p.m. Oct. 30 at Logan Center for the Arts, 915 E 60th St. at the University of Chicago; free with RSVPs required at tickets.uchicago.edu.*

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*The Rubin Institute for Music Criticism helps fund our classical music coverage. The Chicago Tribune maintains complete editorial control over assignments and content.*



## ASK AMY

By Amy Dickinson

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## Molester should be outed to protect children

**Dear Amy:** My youngest brother was arrested 19 years ago and jailed for eight weeks for molesting a 4-year-old child.

He was on probation for 10 years. This was horrible for the child’s family and for my family.

We thought it was a one-time thing. My brother went on with his life, got married and has a good job.

Very recently five family members (now adults), say he had molested them, too, when they were young. Each has to decide if they are going to step forward and report it ... now or ever.

His wife has no clue that all of this has transpired, but she has grandchildren.

Should any of us family members tell her for the sake of her grandchildren? It’s a Pandora’s box, but it seems that something should be said.

My brother has no clue that his secret is out.

Blowing up the family will indeed happen if this gets out.

— *Unsure*

**Dear Unsure:** My thoughts are that someone (your parents, perhaps) could have — and should have — done more to protect the first generation of children who were victimized by your brother, after his initial conviction.

In addition to his (very light) sentence, he should have received therapeutic help, and he should not have had access to children.

But because this crime is so painful for your family to face, your brother didn’t get help, the news that he is a convicted child molester was swept under

the carpet, and it seems that he went on to victimize more children, who now carry this burden with them.

Yes, his wife should be told, immediately.

The phrasing of your letter suggests that your brother has step-grandchildren. Their parents should also be notified of your brother’s conviction of child molestation and that it likely was not a “one-time thing.” He should not have any access to children without their parents present.

There is a public perception that a high percentage of child molesters reoffend, and while my reading about this suggests that the recidivism rate might be lower than most think — five credible accusations in one family means that your brother did continue to offend.

**Dear Amy:** My boyfriend and I have been together for over three years. After a year, we moved in together. I was buying a house, and he would sell his house and move in with me and my two teenagers.

Prior to buying the house, we reviewed our finances.

I was aghast at not only how in debt he was, but at the realization that it didn’t seem to bother him. He has \$60K in unsecured debt and has since had his wages garnished.

He hasn’t fully paid his taxes from 2018, so far this year he still hasn’t filed his taxes. I’ve tried talking to him, letting him know filing taxes is not optional.

Aside from his financial woes, he is the most caring and kind human I’ve ever met.

He may not be financially sound, but he is an amazing person.

I thought that I could help him learn to be financially responsible, however, any time I try to bring it up, he shuts down. I know he’s embarrassed.

How can I help him want to become financially responsible?

Everyone always asks when we are getting married.

I do not want to marry into that type of financial carelessness, but I don’t want to “out” him to his friends/family either.

What would be the appropriate response when people ask when we are getting married?

— *Worried*

**Dear Worried:** You two should meet with an experienced accountant, who would review your finances calmly and openly and help him arrive at a reasonable plan to prioritize his financial issues and start to deal with them.

A third neutral party can often make headway where a partner cannot and can also help to negotiate settlements with creditors.

Your guy needs to understand that taking care of his finances is a caring and kind thing to do — it is an extension of his willingness to be a fully-functioning partner.

No, do not marry into this mess. If people ask about marriage, you can simply say, “We haven’t decided.”

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## AACM

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flowering canopy. Led by a watershed majority-women executive committee, the organization plans to launch its own label next spring, reinvent the AACM School of Music as a virtual academy with global reach, and oversee the production of a documentary, supported by a grant from the Chicago’s Cultural Treasures initiative. Elysses hopes these moves will continue to raise the AACM’s profile across artistic circles — like the ones she huddled in Clubhouse rooms with last year — while never losing sight of the organization’s founding *raison d’être*.

“This is a time when artists are really taking a fine-toothed comb through contracts and making sure we can have ownership of what we create,” Elysses says. “It’s completing a circle that was already there within the organization: We’ve always been recording, but (now) our members don’t necessarily have to look outside to support or promote their records. And we’re well overdue for our own documentary.”

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Ghosts step into the turbulence. Thiago and wife Vera buy the Alexa-like voice-activated Itza.

Though HAL is more like it.

Still, why give away a book so simultaneously mournful and *fun*? I’ll just say, late at night, around the whispering hour, Itza begins whispering to unseen figures. After Vera is killed in a freak CTA accident, Thiago leaves Chicago. Itza follows. Which, sure, sounds dumb. But Moreno’s playbook is old and knowing: Our uncertainty about technology can hold very serious heart-break about what’s lost. The ghost in the machine, no shocker, is an ideal,

ready-made 21st century ghost trope. “**Reality and Other Stories**” (Norton, \$27) by John Lanchester, reads like a contemporary stab at the gothic austerity of dusty old ghost stories. Its centerpiece, “Signal,” which made a splash a few years back in the New Yorker, walks that line between gag and warning, the unsettling real estate of ghost stories. It tells the tale of a big old country house on New Year’s Eve and a strange man seen wandering through, unable to get a signal on his cellphone.

Yes, he’s a ghost.

Connecting with another person — dead, alive, etc. — is the great metaphor of ghost stories. So, no surprise, a new novel like “**Reprieve**” (Morrow, \$28) feels haunted by the promise of a nation unable to

see eye to eye. As Moreno’s protagonist often relates through pop references, characters in James Han Mattson’s absorbing book, set in the late ‘90s, are so steeped in violent horror movies, they rarely recognize what’s haunting the marginalized characters and people of color in their lives. The plot turns on a murder in an haunted attraction but legacies of hurt weigh heavier.

Same with “**The Sentence**” (Harper, \$29) by Louise Erdrich, who won the Pulitzer for fiction earlier this year. This new one chews off a lot, because it’s set right now, in Minneapolis during the pandemic; the killing of George Floyd happens in real time to its protagonists. Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain

Band of Chippewa, features Native characters condescended to by sometimes well-meaning white characters, though the land itself, diversifying with Somali and Laotians, holds ghosts many more characters simply look past. The engine, though, is Flora, who dies on All Soul’s Day. She’s also — here’s the gag part of this ghost tale — the most annoying customer at a local bookstore. “At every event, she’d stay to the bitter end,” Erdrich writes. So when Flora dies, she continues to return to the store. “The last to leave. So in death as in life.”

What does this ghost want from us might seem like a minor question for an author as important as Erdrich, but again, she’s working important territory. Even a bestselling

paperback as once ubiquitous (and really bad) as “**The Amityville Horror**” arrived here, summoning a so-called “ancient Indian burial ground,” noting the guilt beneath American ghost stories. No wonder some of our best contemporary ghost books are by Black women — Angela Flournoy’s “**The Turner House**,” Jesmyne Ward’s “**Sing, Unburied, Sing**.” But then women in general often have a finer hand with ghosts than men. Jackson’s “**The Haunting of Hill House**” might be one of three books I’d save from a fire. Chicago’s Gillian Flynn followed “**Gone Girl**” with “**The Grownup**,” a 2015 novella about a young fraudulent spirit medium who stumbles across real spirits. If the men in ghost stories tend to see a ghost

as a challenge to the natural order, the women in a ghost story often become vessels for unaired resentment and potential. The mother in “**The Upstairs House**” (Harper, \$27), Chicagoan Julia Fine’s unfairly overlooked novel from early this year, is struggling to connect with her newborn daughter. Until the long-dead children’s book author Margaret Wise Brown (“**Goodnight Moon**”) moves into her home.

Unpack that attic. Or as Wharton once wrote in a ghost story: “The moon, swinging high above the battlements, sent a searching spear of light down into the guilty darkness of the well.”

Boo.

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