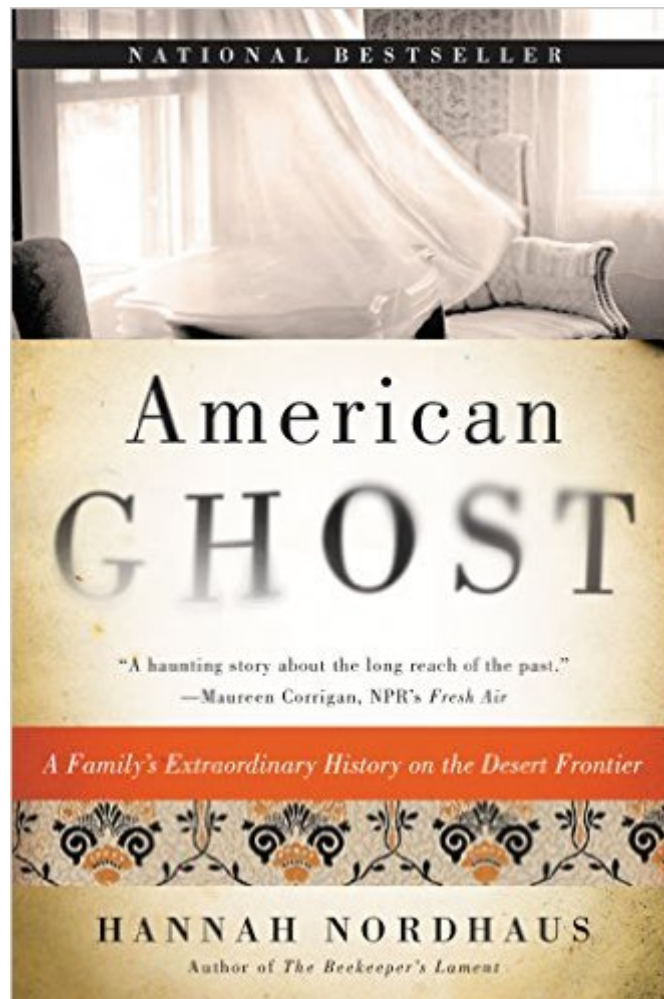


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American Ghost: A Family's Extraordinary History On The Desert Frontier



Synopsis

A haunting story about the long reach of the past. "Maureen Corrigan, NPR's Fresh Air In this intriguing book, [Nordhaus] shares her journey to discover who her immigrant ancestor really was and what strange alchemy made the idea of her linger long after she was gone. "PeopleLa Posada" place of rest "was once a grand Santa Fe mansion. It belonged to Abraham and Julia Staab, who emigrated from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. After they died, the house became a hotel. And in the 1970s, the hotel acquired a resident ghost "a sad, dark-eyed woman in a long gown. Strange things began to happen there: vases moved, glasses flew, blankets were ripped from beds. Julia Staab died in 1896 but her ghost, they say, lives on. In *American Ghost*, Julia's great-great-granddaughter, Hannah Nordhaus, traces her ancestor's transfiguration from nineteenth-century Jewish bride to modern phantom. Family diaries, photographs, and newspaper clippings take her on a riveting journey through three hundred years of German history and the American immigrant experience. With the help of historians, genealogists, family members, and ghost hunters, she weaves a masterful, moving story of fin-de-si cle Europe and pioneer life, villains and visionaries, medicine and spiritualism, imagination and truth, exploring how lives become legends, and what those legends tell us about who we are.

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Customer Reviews

"Now I know what a ghost is. Unfinished business, that's what. That's what. That's what."

a Salman Rushdie line (from "The Satanic Verses") but it's a perfect description of what Hannah Nordhaus sets out to do with *American Ghost*—chase down some unfinished business. In this case, the ghost is from her own past—a great-great-grandmother whose life and death deserved, well, fleshing-out. The woman was Julia Schuster Staab. Her life began in Germany. It ended half way around the world, as the lonely and disheartened wife of a Jewish dry goods merchant, in New Mexico. Julia Schuster Staab's life (1844-1896) forms the heart of "American Ghost." So does Julia's ghost—a ghost first seen by a janitor at La Posada (a place of rest, not hardly) in the 1970s. Other odd occurrences, straight out of heebie jeebie land, soon followed. Even without the added wrinkle of the (possibly) paranormal mixed in, the story of Julia Schuster Staab would have been ample on its own for a fascinating account of Santa Fe and settling the Southwestern frontier in the second half of the 19th Century. Julia's husband Abraham amassed the largest fortune in Santa Fe and was an active civic leader so we see Santa Fe take root out on the western fringes of the prairie ocean. Some of the tales here about the multi-cultural aspects of Santa Fe's early days, particularly that a Jew played a role in helping Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy (yes, the Death Comes to the Archbishop guy) with his cathedral construction, are fascinating. The ghost question—and our collective beliefs about the spirits and apparitions—add another layer of intrigue to this brilliant book. Nordhaus, in fact, had a longtime fixation with the ghost in her family's past. "I gravitated to her story simply because it was such a good one," she writes. "A child who loved stories, I could now claim my own piece of the past: a mail-order German bride dragged west, married badly, driven insane and trapped forever as a ghost in her unhappy ending." After college, in fact, Nordhaus moved to Santa Fe and read extensively about the lives of women on the frontier. She later wrote her first published article about Julia. It was heavy on self-dramatization and feminist surmise, she notes in one of many self-deprecating lines. At the time, she was certain that Julia was a victim—and that this victimhood lay behind her ghost. Nordhaus concedes that Julia "was the specter of my twentysomething angst." Twenty years later, she came across a document that reignited her interest in the story—and would perhaps give her a chance to recalibrate her opinions of Julia's life. The document, a family history written by a great aunt, Lizzie, in 1980, "was a tale of a family ecosystem deeply out of balance—'forbidden love, inheritance and disinheritance, anger and madness. There were drug addictions, lawsuits, brother against brother, madhouses, penury and suicides. There were fatal wounds to the bosom.' There were Julia's children; their story branched from hers. And it was clear to me, from

Lizzie's book, that the family was haunted well before Julia became a ghost. I wondered what had gone so wrong. Unfinished business. Nordhaus traces threads wherever she can find them and what unfolds is a fascinating portrait of a stranger in a strange, barren land. "American Ghost" follows the history of Julia's life, including her roots in Germany and life in the booming outpost of Santa Fe. The threads lead her back to Europe (how American) and Nordhaus' research and digging in Germany are as colorful and as haunting as anything else in this account. Interspersed with the historical detail are Nordhaus' takes on modern-day efforts to detect or stay in touch with the spirit world—ghost hunters, psychics, and drugs (medical marijuana). Her account of a ghost tour at the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park is hilarious. Nordhaus also spends a night in what was Julia's room and, even if her scientific, fact-based approach to reporting, recounts a chilling moment but offers no conclusion. "Ghosts are not innocent until proven guilty," writes Nordhaus. "They are always guilty: present until proven absent. Absence of evidence, as they so often say in the world of the paranormal, is not evidence of absence. We so badly want the dead to stay with us." As she notes, ghost hunting and ancestor hunting are kin. "They both involve sifting through heaps of supposition, extrapolation, and unmoored clues interspersed with brief, infinitesimal wisps of evidence. The wisps come together. As both a human being and as a lingering spirit, Julia left a powerful story that comes into sharp focus in "American Ghost." In the hands of Hannah Nordhaus, the resulting narrative is indelible.

spoiler alert! - AMERICAN GHOST is a memoir, a ghost-story, a romp through the history of frontier Santa Fe. It starts out as a titillating giggle of a book "the author's great-great grandmother Julia lives in a hotel in Santa Fe? And is a GHOST!?" yet AMERICAN GHOST takes us deep into the frailty of the human heart, and the family ties that bind us all.

Hannah's a skeptic with a sense of humor. She does a great job with her family history, helped by a fascinating set of forbears—German Jews who migrated to New Mexico in the 1800s to make a fortune as merchants, along the way posing for formal photographs of themselves with Kiowa Indians in full regalia, having their stagecoaches threatened by Billy the Kid, and being protected from same by a nun named Sister Blandina. Oh, and then there's the Archbishop Lamy—later immortalized in DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP by Willa Cather. The Bishop was a close friend of Hannah's forbears, most notably with the book's main character, Hanna's great great grandmother Julia, with whom he would linger in the garden, speaking French, and grafting European fruit trees. This all sounds like a blast. But Julia is frail, and

the Santa Fe of the 1860s was a far cry from the artistic mecca it is today. Julia was unhappy, and became more so as the years wore on. She loses her 8th baby three weeks after she is born, and a subsequent restorative trip to Europe goes terribly wrong when she suffers a mysterious accident. Back in Santa Fe, she becomes a recluse in her room. She dies "no one knows exactly how" at age 52. But she doesn't go away. As the family home changes hands and morphs into what it is today "La Posada" a luxury hotel "She appears as a cold breeze, as dancing lights, as the outline of a white haired woman in Victorian dress. She's very very sad. This is the story Hannah has brought to life. It took her to a number of psychics, and ghost hunters. It took her to archives, to relatives she never knew she had, to long buried family diaries. It even takes her back to Germany, to the village from which Julia and her husband Abraham hailed, as well as to the concentration camp Julia's sister Emilie was taken to at age 80, where she died. The book has won critical praise, and there are inklings from psychics that it has also earned the gratitude of her dead great great grandmother, and given her peace. It also left its author with a greater understanding of the humanity of her family and the vulnerability of the human heart.

...that you have an interesting ancestor. Aspects of her life are suspect and the family was very important in the early history of New Mexico. Very important. Did I mention they were VERY important? Did I mention they knew very important people? Very, VERY important people. Then imagine you're going to do some genealogical research to find The Truth. Now write down EVERYTHING you did and found out. Include fastening and crucial information such as the fact that said ancestor's second daughter bought a silver spoon on a particular day. Don't leave out ANYthing, including what people were wearing when you met them. Now turn all this information into a book. I have read about one third of it. I kept hoping it was actually going somewhere. I really started to want the ghost of the author's ancestor to come screaming out of the dark, scaring the living daylights out of her just so something would actually happen. But I suspect not. I'm starting to think the ending will only confirm that you can't find out everything about the dead. I started out interested, but the author has pounded that interest out of me. I quit. I bought the Kindle version. I can only hope I didn't spend much.

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