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Lost Among The Living



Synopsis

England, 1921. Three years after her husband, Alex, disappeared, shot down over Germany, Jo Manders still mourns his loss. Working as a paid companion to Alex's wealthy, condescending aunt, Dottie Forsyth, Jo travels to the family's estate in the Sussex countryside. But there is much she never knew about her husband's origins and the revelation of a mysterious death in the Forsyth's past is just the beginning. All is not well at Wych Elm House. Dottie's husband is distant, and her son was grievously injured in the war. Footsteps follow Jo down empty halls, and items in her bedroom are eerily rearranged. The locals say the family is cursed, and that a ghost in the woods has never rested. And when Jo discovers her husband's darkest secrets, she wonders if she ever really knew him. Isolated in a place of deception and grief, she must find the truth or lose herself forever. And then a familiar stranger arrives at Wych Elm House |

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Customer Reviews

Simone St. James is a hit-or-miss author for me. I love the post-World War I British setting of her novels—a country haunted by the shadow of the deaths in the Great War is a perfect atmosphere for ghost stories. However, while I've enjoyed some of her books, others I couldn't get into all. This one is one of her better books, in my opinion. Jo Manders's husband Alex disappeared three years ago when he was shot down over France. Because his body was not found, he has been listed as missing rather than dead, so Jo doesn't get a widow's pension. In need of money, she agrees to work for Alex's difficult aunt Dottie. The two women have been traveling through Europe buying art, but as the book opens, they

are returning to the family's country home, Wych Elm House, in order for Dottie to arrange the marriage of her son, Martin, who is finally returning home after being badly wounded in the war. When they arrive, Jo finds herself in the midst of a dysfunctional family. Dottie and her husband are at each other's throats, and Martin is just waiting to die. Most horrifying of all, though, is the fact that Jo glimpses the ghost of Frances, Dottie's teenage daughter, who was mentally ill and committed suicide during the war. At first Jo thinks she is losing her own mind, a bitter possibility, since Jo's mother had been institutionalized with mental problems. However, Jo becomes convinced that Frances really is haunting Wych Elm House and that she was in fact murdered. When Jo learns that Alex was home on leave at Wych Elm when Frances died, something he never told her, she starts to wonder just what role he played in Frances's death, and whether or not her beloved husband was keeping other secrets, too. My favorite thing about this book was Jo herself. In the opening chapters, as she allows Dottie to take advantage of her, she doesn't seem very interesting. The other characters generally discount her as well, since she's a young woman from a poor and troubled background. However, her troubled childhood has given Jo a core of strength, and she is keenly intelligent as well. She's a very well written character, and it becomes clear why Alex so quickly fell in love with her. While the author is known for her ghost stories, I think that was actually the weakest part of this book. The central mystery of the book concerning Frances's possible murder and the secondary mystery of Alex's disappearance in France were enough to keep me interested. I found myself wishing that this book had been written as a straight historical mystery (maybe with just a hint of the supernatural), rather than with Gothic elements like a demonic dog haunting the woods around Wych House. That was especially true after the "familiar stranger" alluded to in the blurb showed up. At the conclusion of the story, I found myself hoping that St. James tries her hand at writing a historical mystery in the future. (And I wouldn't mind seeing more of Jo, either.) Highly recommended if you are a fan of St. James's other books or for anyone who is in the mood for a very good gothic novel. An ARC of this novel was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Another great addition to St. James's body of works, I loved the feeling I got from this book. I felt like I was getting all the good creepy vibes that drew me to her first books on top of getting a suspenseful mystery to boot that are so prevalent in her more recent novels. First off, I love her heroine. She's strong, courageous, feisty, driven, and a bit impulsive. Her grief from her war and personal losses didn't stop her from creating a life for herself and striving for

independence. I can think of other personalities that would have buckled under her plat but not Jo. I loved her guts and pluck. More than one chill went up my spine from the horror elements in the story. They weren't as in your face as her first books, yet they didn't take second stage like in another of her works. The horror and ghosts were a driving element in the mystery story and created some truly spine-tingling imagery to spice up the narrative. They whole clothes in the chair thing? *shiver* Still spooks me out. I actually liked the mystery in this one. While I wasn't that surprised at the eventual whodunit (there being after all a limited suspect pool), I enjoyed the journey and sleuthing along the way. I felt the clues and steps along the way were spaced out well and kept up a good pace. The reasoning behind the crime surprised me, though. I never saw that bit coming. That reasoning behind the crime tied in well with the historical details behind the story. I loved how the author tied in the developing situation in Europe pre-WWI, the effects that chaos had on the lives of ordinary people, and the beginnings of the British secret service all into her story. They brought the history behind to tale to life along with the little details like everyday life and the mourning process for late Edwardian England. The romance was as emotional as in the previous works as well. I can't say too much on this front as it would spoils lots of the story, but safe to say that I felt the story as much as read it. The romance is visceral in its strength and powerful in how it draws the readers in, making us root for both hero and heroine. All in all, this is a worthy follow up to St. James' other books. I loved everything: the romantic pull of the emotions, the great historical details, a chilling supernatural mystery, and a heroine I could get behind. This book illustrates why I keep going back to her again and again for my reading pleasure. Highly recommended!

I always have had time for a good ghostly, gothic story in my reading life and Simone St. James is one of the best contemporary practitioners of the genre. She writes stories set in the 1920's and addresses the great upheaval caused by WWI. Jo Manders's husband, Alex, went missing during the war and because he is missing, she is not formally a widow; thereby, not entitled to any benefits. Added to her grief is the fact that she has an insane mother that she must keep in a private institution, keeping her scrambling to keep her head above water. When Alex's aunt, Dottie Forsyth, offers a position as a companion on a European trip, Jo accepts. After all, her mother no longer recognizes her and the job will keep her from the necessity of paying rent for awhile. Dottie is no easy employer, though; grim, demanding and avaricious. Upon returning from Europe Dottie wants her to stay on and go Dottie's home, Wych Elm House. The house is full of discord from Dottie's rakish husband and rumors about the suicide of the daughter of the house three years before. As

soon as Jo arrives, she is aware of being watched and has frightening encounters with the ghost of the daughter. Can Jo be going mad like her mother before her? And did she know Alex at all? Lost Among the Living is a nicely spooky read with a tender romance at the heart of it. There are two romances, in fact, both with nicely satisfying endings. Highly recommended!

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