

Historical Landscape

STRANGE FANCIES

Lantern-lit Arrowhead tours explore ghost stories and Melville's supernatural inspirations



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY ROBERT OAKES

A promotional image for Robert Oakes' new tour, "Strange Fancies," shows Herman Melville's Arrowhead in a peculiar light. The tour centers on the influence of the paranormal and folkloric in the author's work.

By MATT MARTINEZ
The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — When the skies dim behind Mount Greylock, and night settles in on its wooded slopes, it's said that twinkling lights can be seen amidst the trees.

At least two sources are easily accounted for, according to local lore enthusiast and author Robert Oakes — a radio tower and the beacon at the top of the mountain's Veterans War Memorial Tower. But in other stretches visible from the piazza at Arrowhead, Herman Melville's Pittsfield estate, some lights reportedly appear far more numinous and inexplicable.

Those were the lights that inspired Melville to write about the "fairy-mountain" in his "Piazza Tales," a collection of short stories from 1856, which casts Mount Greylock as a fantastical domain alive with the glow of fairies. The story, "The Piazza," traces its narrator's imagined journey through this land beginning from the titular veranda, all flowing from Melville's view from the real-life piazza on the north side of Arrowhead.

That piazza is the last stop on Oakes' "Strange Fancies"

tour, a first-of-its-kind look at the historic estate's ties to folklore and phantoms. The tours, conducted by lantern light in the Holmes Road manor, examine the influence of perceived supernatural phenomena on Melville and his contemporary/colleague Nathaniel Hawthorne, while also peppering in some ghost stories about the estate itself.

"Just after hearing about Melville's 'fairy-mountain,' we go out there and stare at it ourselves, and watch it, and get inspired by the same view," Oakes said.

The series began in July with a pair of tours delving into Pittsfield's ghost stories. The next walk-throughs kick off 7 p.m. Aug. 15 and Aug. 29.

Following in line with Oakes' ghost tours at Ventfort Hall and The Mount, the program is equal parts spooky anecdotes and literary analysis. In Hawthorne's case, Oakes spends time discussing his short story "Graves and Goblins," told from the perspective of a ghost speaking through a medium who may or may not be getting everything right through the "distortion" between the spirit world and

If You Go

What: "Strange Fancies" tour with Robert Oakes

Where: Herman Melville's Arrowhead, 780 Holmes Road, Pittsfield

When: 7 p.m. Aug. 15 and Aug. 29 (Tour lasts about 2 hours)

Tickets: \$25, \$20 Berkshire County Historical Society members

Reservations: 413-442-1793, berkshirehistorical.org

the mortal one.

Similarly, for "The Piazza," Oakes devotes part of the tour to an in-depth reading of the short story, allowing participants to see through Melville's eyes as they gaze out at the mountain he called the "Charlemagne" of the surrounding hills from the very same vantage that he did.

"I really wanted to try to see ... how is he trying to express this influence that he says he has?" Oakes said. "What's he doing with it as a writer? How is he trying to get across to people what it is that he sees when he looks at the mountain? ... What's he doing with this stuff that

starts to percolate in his imagination?"

While less obvious, Oakes said he's also spent part of the tours discussing Melville's story "Bartleby, The Scrivener," a tale of an obstinate Wall Street clerk who refuses to leave or do his job. The story, also featured in "The Piazza Tales," ends with the scrivener's colleagues moving the office to get away from him — causing some to interpret it as a ghost story in disguise, Oakes said.

"I don't know that Melville intended it that way, but it's an interesting interpretation," Oakes said.

The Arrowhead tours are more reading-heavy than Oakes' other tours, in part because there are fewer ghost stories to tell (so far) at Melville's estate than that of Edith Wharton — The Mount has been a frequent feature on ghost hunting shows.

That's not to say there aren't any — Oakes said at least one "mischievous" spirit has been reported at Arrowhead, known to open and shut doors and misplace objects. Other ghost stories pertain directly to the authors themselves, as Oakes recounts a story Hawthorne

told at a dinner party of his alleged ghost sighting at the Boston Athenaeum.

Both sides of the program are meant to spark the imagination, Oakes said — to engage with participants' sense of mystery and inspire them to tell their own stories. When tourgoers feel that there's something more to the world around them than what they normally perceive, as Melville, Hawthorne and Wharton did, then they can follow in their footsteps and try to pen their own masterpiece.

"In doing these tours, I

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hope to encourage not only to get that little bit of a spooky feeling that ghost tours can bring, but also to get inspired in the same way that these artists were inspired by these places," Oakes said. "To feel some sense of magic — an otherworldly kind of quality that might inspire their lives."

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