



# GHOST- WRITER

SEPT. 7 - NOV. 12

AN OTHERWORLDLY TALE OF LOVE AND CREATION  
BY MICHAEL HOLLINGER

## *A Closer Look*

Compiled by production dramaturg Charlotte Stephens





# Ghost-Writer

by Michael Hollinger

Presented by the  
Commonwealth Theatre Company  
September 7 - November 12, 2017

## ESSENTIALS

### The Plot

It is 1919, somewhere in New York City, in an office with a view of the Queensboro Bridge over the East River. Myra Babbage is speaking to an unseen and unheard interviewer, the intent and purpose of whom we glean gradually from her one-sided conversation with him. Myra believes the interviewer has been sent by the wife of her late employer, the deceased novelist Franklin Woolsey, for whom she was typist over the course of many years.

Through Myra's narrative to the interviewer, we learn that she has been continuing to type the novel which Woolsey had left unfinished when he died, some weeks earlier. She believes the words are Woolsey's but she denies any claims, popularized by sensational newspaper accounts, that she is in contact with his "ghost"; she simply types "when the words come." She is at present ostensibly waiting for the next words to come, perhaps the final passage that will complete the novel. She is acutely aware that the interviewer is almost certainly skeptical of her claim, and suspects he will report back to Mrs. Woolsey that she, Myra, is a fraud.

Myra continues to describe her history with, and relationship to, the late author. Time becomes fluid as scenes and events she

recounts come to life before us, giving us glimpses into the past. We witness her first meeting with Woolsey, see them working together on his novels; we see also her first meeting with Woolsey's wife, Vivian, and sense, with Myra, the jealous suspicion with which she regards her husband's typists.

As Myra's narration (and our witness)

of past events continues to unfold, we learn more about the relationships among the three characters. Vivian, wary of this new typist, had at one time engaged Myra as a typing instructor—presumably so that she might take over the work and render Myra's service unnecessary. Throughout, Myra maintains her innocence of any



*Typewriters dominated industry and commerce for over a century.*

wrongdoing and insists she is merely typing Franklin's words.

Woolsey's publisher, having been taking the chapters from Myra as she completes them, finds the novel to be very good, perhaps his masterpiece. Vivian admits the style is at once very familiar and yet unfamiliar; she believes Myra to be a fraud and insists she will burn the book rather than allow it to be published under her husband's name.

At the end, inspiration comes to Myra and she completes the novel. She tells the interviewer to do what he must.



# GHOST-WRITER

by Michael Hollinger

Director	Michael Bigelow Dixon
Stage Manager	Philip Muehe
Assistant Stage Manager	Kelsey Heathcote
Costume Designer	Barb Portinga
Scenic Designer	Kit Mayer
Lighting Designer	Thomas White
Sound Designer	Ben Merz
Props Designer	Amanda Pyfferoen
Props Assistant	Patrick Vaughn
Dramaturg	Charlotte Stephens
Composer	Larry Barnes

## CAST

Myra	Adrienne Sweeney
Franklin	Hal Cropp
Vivian	Susan d'Autremont

## Setting

New York City, 1919, and points from the past.

*GHOST-WRITER* is presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York. Originally produced by the Arden Theatre Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This play was developed with support of PlayPenn (Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director).

## About the Playwright

Michael Hollinger is a playwright from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He received a Bachelor of Music from Oberlin College and a Master of Arts in Theatre degree from Villanova University. He is currently an associate professor of theatre at Villanova University. He has written dozens of plays, many of which premiered at Arden Theatre Company in Philadelphia.

He credits his family as having been incredibly influential in his work. Both were very involved in the theatre. They also were writers themselves, leading him to grow up in a household immersed in the craft of theatre and writing. "When asked how he comes up with such varying ideas for his plays, Hollinger laughs. 'God knows,' he says. 'I'm curious. I'm a good student. I like diving into worlds that allow me to be curious.'" (@*This Stage*, LA Stage Alliance, 2012)

Michael Hollinger's works include *Under the Skin*, *Ghost-Writer*, *Opus*, *Tooth and Claw*, *Red Herring*, *Incorruptible*, *Tiny Island*, and *An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf*, all of which premiered at Philadelphia's Arden Theatre Company and have since enjoyed numerous productions around the country, in New York City and abroad. Recent work premiered elsewhere includes: *Hope and Gravity* at Pittsburgh's City Theatre; a new translation of *Cyrano* (co-adapted with Aaron Posner) at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C.; and the musical *A Wonderful Noise* (co-authored with Vance Lehmkuhl) at Colorado's Creede Repertory Theatre. Michael workshopped his new musical, *TouchTones* (co-authored with composer Robert Maggio), at the Arden in January, 2016.



## CONTEXT – HISTORICAL SETTING

While the events of the play are focused around the three characters and the issues they're facing, they still exist in a larger historical setting. Playwright Michael Hollinger embraces this idea.

“Different subject areas, geographies, and time periods get to become characters in plays,” he says. “You could write a story about a writer and his secretary that takes place today, but if it's set in the period *Ghost-Writer* is set in, you have to ask what it's like to be in a place

where people are transitioning from carriages to motorcars.” Hollinger explains that when a play is set in a different time, the answers to questions like, “How do these people talk?” and “If they need to use the bathroom, what do they say?” create such distinctive atmospheres that they become just as important as characters.

—@This Stage

Following are some of the events and developments from the time period surrounding these characters.

### The Progressive Era

America in the 1910s was navigating an age of industrialism and changing values.

This was part of the Progressive Era, and with it came vast social and political changes. People began believing that the government could help provide positive change to improve people's lives. Reform targeted issues caused by new developments like modern capitalism and widespread industrialization—problems such as poverty, child labor and corporate greed. College-educated members of the middle class created the impetus for this reform. Muckraking journalists also helped to uncover scandals and conspiracies in the business and political sectors, which informed the public of the corruption within the country.



Women on strike for better wages and working conditions, 1909.

### The Titanic and World War I

The 1910s were also defined by the major cultural events that occurred within the decade. The sinking of *Titanic*, in 1912, shook the confidence of the entire nation—especially in technology which had seemed so unfailing. *Titanic* was supposed to be a state-of-the-art, unsinkable ship, after all.

1914 then brought a war unlike the world had ever seen. Sparked by the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, World War I spread across Europe, Asia and the Middle East. New techniques of war were introduced over the course of WWI, including tanks, air raids, and chemical warfare. World War I was referred to as “The Great War” or “The War to End All Wars.” It

remains one of the deadliest wars of all time.

Through much of the war, the United States remained neutral. The U.S. entered the war in 1917, after Germany continued unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic. The United States entering the war was a critical part to the Allies' victory, especially as the U.S. (not drained from years of war) was well-supplied and could provide a large number of soldiers. (The Selective Service Act of 1917 initiated the draft and helped mobilize millions of American troops.) World War I ended November 11, 1918, with the signing of an armistice with Germany.

During the war on the homefront, the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act





of 1918 targeted anyone professing anti-war sentiments or criticising the United States. Other groups were also victims of suspicion and increased prejudice—including those of German descent, African-Americans, labor activists, socialists, suffragists, and immigrants of all kinds.

Following the war, the United States was cemented as one of the Great Powers, especially as the war had left Germany and Britain struggling to recover. This gave the country global influence.

Because so many men left to go to war, a huge influx of women was required to enter the workforce. Munitions factories in particular hired a high volume of women due to the high demand for weapons. Women were also employed by government departments, public transport, post offices, and other factories. In certain countries, women served as members

of the armed forces as well. The outstanding number of women who joined the workforce during WWI helped push the women's suffrage movement forward. (The 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote, wasn't passed until 1920.)

Myra and Woolsey's final years together would span World War One and into the post-war period.



Women at work.

## 1919

January of 1919 began with the passing of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which established Prohibition. Prohibition banned the manufacture, shipment and sale of alcohol. Similar measures had temporarily been enacted during WWI to conserve grain for the war. Temperance legislation that had been in place in the 1800s set the precedent, however, for the passing of the 18th Amendment. Prohibition remained in effect through the 1920s.

In Russia, at about the end of WWI, Vladimir Lenin began the Russian Revolution. 1919 also saw the founding of the American

Communist Party. These events triggered the beginning of the first Red Scare in the United States. Blacklists were created as an outgrowth of a rising fear of communism.

Meanwhile, the first of the race riots was seen during the summer of 1919 in Charleston, South Carolina. These triggered more riots across the country in what was known as the Red Summer. For the most part, white civilians were attacking African Americans. The most violent of the riots were in Washington, D.C., Chicago and Arkansas. Massacres and lynchings were seen on a wide scale across the country.

## The Typewriter

If you haven't already done so, please visit our interactive typewriter display in the Events Hall, before or after a *Ghost-Writer* performance.

It's difficult to pinpoint the beginning of any invention. There are years of influence, prototypes and failed attempts. "The typewriter was an identifiable object before its creation" (Wershler-Henry, *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting*). But it took years of development before it emerged as the machine with which we're now familiar.





The typewriter can be said to have its roots in the pantograph. This device links two pens together, so that while a document is being written, it is also being duplicated. Pantographs were very useful in offices beginning in the 1600s. In the 1800s, type wheel machines were developed. Though dubbed “typewriters” they weren’t yet what we think of as typewriters.

Some of these were laid out with concentric rings of keys. Most of them pressed a lever down onto the proper key. On some designs the keys were worked by pulling upwards instead. But these early machines helped develop the type bars that were key to typewriters (until the 1960s).

By the mid-late 1800s, dozens of inventors were obsessed with perfecting the typewriting machine. They explored a variety of design options, with some variety in the purpose of their machines. Many of them still followed circular patterns for their layouts. Some were designed for the purpose of assisting the blind to write or to quicken communication for the deaf. Some of these machines only wrote in capital letters. Many were large and ungainly.

Some machines were inspired by the piano or harpsichord and were laid out like keyboards (perhaps drawing too on older machines that would record notes on paper as they were being played).

The design continued to be innovated and improved, and numerous inventors vied for the title of the “first” inventor of the typewriter. Because the typewriter’s history spans so far and it took so many little steps before the recognizable and fully functional typewriter emerged, it’s difficult to identify an actual inventor of the “first” typewriter.

Many credit Christopher Latham Sholes and Carlos Glidden as the inventors of the first typewriter, in 1867. This is a controversial claim, as their machine stands firmly on the shoulders and inventions of countless people before them.

The machine that Sholes and Glidden created was inspired by a piano (like some earlier typewriters). It was laid out like a keyboard, and in the way that the hammers of a piano strike wires to produce the sound, the type bar of the typewriter struck paper against a platen to print a letter. The machine didn’t

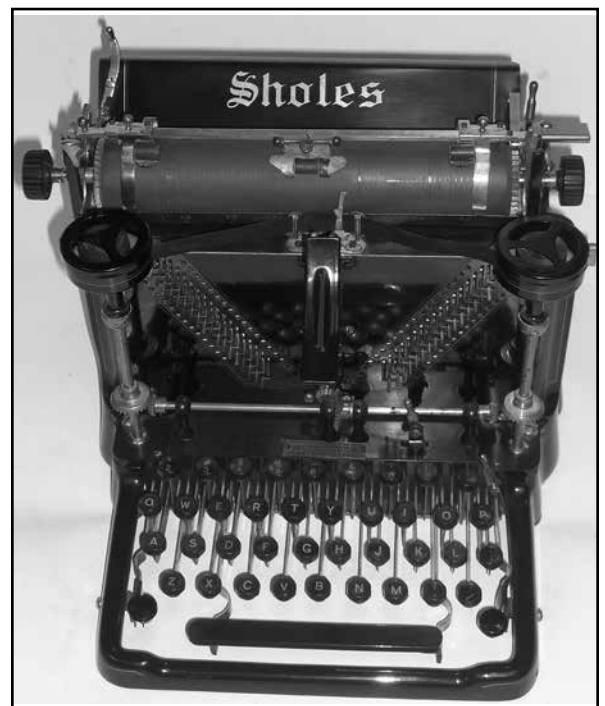


have lowercase letters. Its keys were also not arranged in the way we know keyboards today. With the early typewriters, manufacturers tried to lay out the keyboard alphabetically. It made sense, but unfortunately they hadn’t considered that commonly used letters often sat close together. This close proximity tended to jam the machine.

Sholes’s new QWERTY key layout arose to solve that problem by separating common letter pairings. (QWERTY was not the only layout option for keyboards, and there was some contention over whether it was best. However, when the U.S. Government adopted QWERTY as its preferred style, other layouts soon lost momentum.)

In 1873, the machine developed by Sholes and Glidden was sold to the E. Remington & Sons company (primarily a manufacturer of arms). Remington began producing typewriters later that year. In 1874, the first Sholes and Glidden typewriter was sold.

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## The Amanuensis

Amanuensis (n.) a·man·u·en·sis \ə-,man-yə-'wen(t)-səs\ — one employed to write from dictation or to copy manuscript.

Etymology: In Latin, the phrase *servus a manu* translates loosely as “slave with secretarial duties.” (The noun *manu* meaning *hand*)... In the 17th century the second part of this phrase was borrowed into English to create **amanuensis**, a word for a person who is employed (willingly) to do the important but sometimes menial work of transcribing the words of another.”

—Merriam-Webster

When we refer to the typewriter, there are two possible meanings. The first is the one that immediately comes to mind: the machine used to mechanically transfer words to a page. The second refers to the person employing this machine. They, too, are the typewriter. This person was usually a woman, taking dictation from a man.

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In our first year, Mr. Woolsey treated me merely as an amanuensis, an adjunct to the type machine, albeit an efficient one.

Myra, *Ghost-Writer* (p. 18)

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The emergence of large corporations in the late 1800s meant an increase in paperwork that needed to be handled by clerks. This increased need in industries pulled women into the workforce. In 1870, only 4% of typists were women. In the next ten years, that number had increased to 40%. “In 1881, the Young Women’s Christian Association began its first typing class for girls, with eight students” (Wershler-Henry). Typewriter companies began to advertise using women to demonstrate their products. Campaigns featuring female typewriters helped normalize the idea and make it more positive, further helping women become part of the workplace.

There was still plenty of backlash about women entering the workforce in this way. The public was shocked by women being taught to type and being hired by businesses to do so. Some predicted this would bring an end to family values and morality. Despite this fear, the numbers of female typists still soared. The U.S. Census of 1910 reported that over



80% of employed typists were women. Plenty of others championed the cause and said that (even though women became typists and then proceeded to be dictated to by men), the typewriter was a major player in the feminist movement.

Wages for women working as typists were barely enough to live on. Businesses argued that men had to support not only themselves but their families, so could be paid more. Furthermore, as women became clerks, companies were restructured so the job didn’t include any decision-making or anything beyond simple secretarial duties.

Even though being an amanuensis meant being dictated to, usually by a man, it still offered women a degree of freedom and agency they may not have had access to before.

Being in control of the words is a strong position. Words have power. The amanuensis gets to take control of part of the creative process. Her access to the work allows her to take it over in subtle ways. The process is “capricious and subject to hijackings and rebellions of various sorts” (Wershler-Henry).

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Woolsey stops speaking, waiting for the next sentence to come. But Myra keeps typing, well beyond the point where she should have stopped had she merely been transcribing his words...

Myra: Is that what you were going to say?

Woolsey: Not exactly...Leave it...I like it better this way.

*Ghost-Writer* (p. 33)

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We see in the play how quickly the amanuensis-dictator relationship becomes one more of collaboration. From early on, Myra makes herself part of the creative process. She shows from her interview that she isn't going to be passive, and when Woolsey is wrong, she will make sure he knows it (p. 13). She's stubborn, and very clear that punctuation is vital. (As "the panda who eats, shoots and leaves" would confirm.) Gaining control over the punctuation allows Myra to make a distinct and noticeable mark on Woolsey's work (even affecting the titles of his books). It helps make

her indispensable to him. It gives her power in a position where she could be powerless. It forges a bond between them, establishing them as creative partners.

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"Then where do the words come from?"  
From where they always came. From waiting, and from moving the fingers.  
"But are they his words?" (*Beat.*) Who else's? Or else they never were his to begin with.

Myra, *Ghost-Writer* (p. 12)

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## Henry James & Theodora Bosanquet



**Henry James** (1843-1916) was an American-born British writer. Some of his notable works include *The Turn of the Screw* [Common-

weal produced the Jeffrey Hatcher stage adaptation of this novella in 2010] and *Portrait of a Lady*. His longtime secretary and amanuensis was Theodora Bosanquet.

Like every genuine friendship it had its open, physical expression. She sat quite still, except that her fingers played on the keys of the typewriter. He stood at the window, looking out over the river, or paced the room, gesturing with his head, eyes, and hands, dictating; or he would collapse on the mantel with a groan, audibly searching for the word that they both awaited.

—Sheldon M. Novick,  
*Henry James: The Mature Master*

A notable quirk of James's was his need for the typewriter's sound. He was quite particular about which typewriter his amanuensis used, and required a Remington. He found this superior to other models and preferred the sound. When he would get stuck, he

would require the sound of it (even just typing anything) to spur his brain forward.

When I began to work for [James], he had reached a stage at which the click of a Remington Machine acted as a positive spur. He found it more difficult to compose to the music of any other make. During a fortnight when the Remington was out of order he dictated to an Oliver typewriter with evident discomfort, and he found it almost impossibly disconcerting to speak to something that made no responsive sound at all.

—Theodora Bosanquet,  
*Henry James at Work* (p. 248)

James and Woolsey aren't the only ones who appreciate the sound of the typewriter (James went so far as having his Remington brought to his deathbed to help ease his passing). In the 1940s, Remington released a new innovation: the Remington Noiseless Typewriter. The keys produced a dull thud sound, rather than the usual sharp clack. Remington believed that it would be all the rage and everyone would want it. On the contrary, no one was interested, and the noiseless typewriter was unsuccessful.

### *After His Death*

While the use of the typewriter as inspiration provides a strong parallel between James and Woolsey, there is an even stronger similarity between their amanuenses. Just like Myra, Theodora Bosanquet claimed that she was still receiving dictation from Henry James following his death in 1916.

She had already been very interested in the





spiritual. She began attending séances where she was supposedly contacted by James and a number of other writers. She then began transcribing messages from them.

Bosanquet's "fantasy of recognition" culminated in the ghost of James reading her monograph of him, *Henry James at Work*. The spirits tell her that James "thought you were a very uninteresting young woman who had a marvellous gift for transcribing his words correctly, but he...finds now that all the time you were observing his style and taking mental notes and that afterwards you wrote a little book about him which he has never had the courage to look at, but he thinks he will now if you don't mind." Bosanquet becomes interesting to James's ghost precisely because she has become like him through absorbing his

style...and because she retains the ability to type for him long after he's turned to ectoplasm.

—Darren Wershler-Henry (p. 104)

### The Play

*Ghost-Writer* was inspired by research Michael Hollinger had done into James and Bosanquet. Though this fueled the story of the play, Hollinger is adamant that Woolsey is not a substitute for James. He did, however, read the works of Henry James, as well as Charles Dickens, to settle into the time period and voice of *Ghost-Writer*. "Woolsey's voice is not James, but I needed to hang out in that era in order to find my own... I wanted to find the cadence of this turn-of-the-century language," he says of the research. In particular, he focused on "the longer, elegant sentences and paragraphs." (@*This Stage*).

## Journalism in the Early 1900s



New York's *The World* headline about the *USS Maine*

By the 1919, newspapers were a crucial part of mass media. The reach of papers extended across the country as newspapers created affiliations and would share big stories—from bigger cities to small town affiliates. The news cycle had also shortened to 24 hours, a process beginning in the mid 1800s. This heightened pace drove competition between papers. As a result, different journalistic styles developed to sensationalize news and attract

more readers, such as yellow journalism and muckraking. By 1919, such practices reached an all-time high with tabloid journalism.

### Yellow Journalism

The gentlemen who preceded you here these past few weeks, the... yellow journalists, were not, to my eyes, patient.

Myra, *Ghost-Writer* (p. 8)

Yellow journalism values sensationalism over facts to hook a larger audience. This was originally motivated by competition for readers increased by the shorter news cycle.

Stories would be inflated and altered so papers would sell better. The term "yellow journalism" was coined due to the rivalry of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer II, who worked for competing newspapers in New York City. Yellow journalism reached its peak in 1898 after the *USS Maine* sank and Hearst and Pulitzer published rumors of Spanish plots against the United States. This rivalry helped ignite the Spanish-American War. However, yellow journalism persisted well into the 1900s.

Sensational stories with over-dramatic headlines were common during this period.



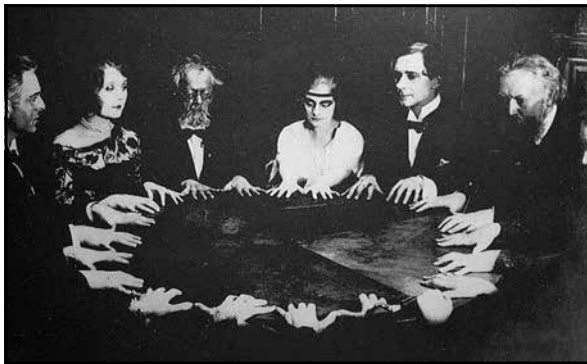
Muckraking was a trend that went hand in hand with yellow journalism. Muckrakers—a term coined by Teddy Roosevelt—were investigative journalists who uncovered industrial and political corruption and then employed the sensational tactics of yellow journalism to help the stories sell. These two modes of journalism helped newspapers dominate mass media.

### *Tabloids*

June, 1919, saw the very first tabloid paper in New York City: *The Daily News*.

This paper was smaller in size and featured lurid headlines plastered on top of sensational pictures. Tabloid journalism took the practices of yellow journalists to new heights and featured stories of celebrities and ordinary people alike—all over-dramatized and sensationalized to suck in readers. Tabloids targeted a largely undereducated audience as well as the growing immigrant population. A story about an amanuensis channeling the spirit of a dead writer to finish a novel would have fit perfectly into this era of journalism.

## Mediums, Séances and Spiritualism



The era into which typewriting was born was swayed almost equally by the discourses of science and mysticism.

—Darren Wershler-Henry, *The Iron Whim*

Though humans have been fascinated by the concept of ghosts and channeling spirits from “the other side” for thousands of years, the obsession with mediums and séances can be traced back to the mid 1800s. Living in a supposedly haunted house, two young girls in New York, Margaret and Kate Fox, claimed that they were able to contact the ghosts in their house through a simple code of taps. After publicizing this supposed fact, these girls sparked the Spiritualism movement. Spiritualists believed fervently that the dead could communicate with us—using mediums and séances.

Spiritualism gathered momentum through the end of the 19th century (even when the two girls admitted their encounter with spirits was a hoax). And though spiritualism wasn’t as strong a movement in the 20th century, mediums and seances were still prevalent cultural phenomena.

### *Séances*

The séance dates back to Margaret and Kate Fox—the little girls whose hoax sparked the Spiritualism movement. Once they realized they could trick people into believing their ghost stories were real, they discovered that they could make money by putting on their pretense before an audience. Popular obsession with séances followed.

Séances became incredibly popular during the Victorian era, along with the Spiritualism movement. Spirits would typically “communicate” through tapping of some kind—provided by the mediums. Mediums were also prone to tipping tables or lifting them in the air. Audiences eventually grew tired of these tricks. Daniel Dunglas Hume helped to make séances more dramatic in the 1850s. He was able to make himself levitate. He was also able to produce ghostly, glow-in-the-dark hands. Mediums eventually began to pretend to materialize as ghosts themselves (by putting on different costumes).

### *Ectoplasm*

Ectoplasm, according to spiritualists, is an externalized form of psychic energy that exits the body of a medium, usually during a séance. These manifestations have generally been proved to be false—constructed elaborately by the mediums from rubber, tissue paper, animal fats or body parts, or cheese-cloths. Ectoplasm was typically assumed to be the manifestation of a spirit, channeled by the medium.



## Ouija Boards



“Do you ascertain them letter by letter, through the Ouija board?” I have learned patience, over the years, but not enough to divine a whole novel one letter at a time.

—Myra, *Ghost-Writer* (p. 12)

The “talking boards” first appeared in Ohio in 1848. A few years later, the Ouija board appeared on the market. It was made up of a board with the alphabet printed on it, the numbers 0-9, and the words “yes,” “no” and “goodbye.” A small planchette, a wooden device to point to the letters and numbers,

accompanied the board. It was wildly popular and swept up by the Spiritualism craze.

Spirit communication devices took off during the Civil War when there was massive amount of death, when every family lost a father, son, grandpa or nephew... Times of economic depression and wars seem to be when lots of “talking boards” take off .

—Robert Murch, *Ouija: Origin of Evil and the True History of the Ouija Board*

The board’s popularity saw a resurgence during the 1910s with the death and destruction wrought by World War I. The suggestion that Myra receives dictation via a Ouija board wouldn’t have been unheard of at that time:

In 1916, Mrs. Pearl Curran made headlines when she began writing poems and stories that she claimed were dictated, via Ouija board, by the spirit of a 17th century English-woman called Patience Worth. The following year, Curran’s friend, Emily Grant Hutchings, claimed that her book, *Jap Herron*, was communicated via Ouija board by the late Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain.

—Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, *The Strange and Mysterious History of the Ouija Board*

## The Queensboro Bridge



The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.”

—Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby*

The Queensboro Bridge spans the East River to connect Manhattan and Queens. It’s a cantilever bridge with two separate levels,

on which the designated types of traffic have changed over the decades. Construction began in 1903. Both the design and construction phases were fraught with political and union struggles. Additionally, over 50 workers died during construction.

Construction began at both ends of the bridge and met in the middle on Blackwell’s Island (now Roosevelt Island). The bridge officially opened in June, 1909. It was originally named Blackwell’s Island Bridge.

Myra’s reference to Woolsey watching the construction of the bridge from his window (p. 7-8) places their workroom on the East River, either on the edge of Manhattan or Queens. The fact that Woolsey was able to watch the construction also places their “early years” together prior to March, 1909, when the bridge was completed. This means the play spans at least ten years.