



Witch Way to the Mall

Esther M. Friesner (Editor)

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Move over, urban fantasy--here comes "suburban" fantasy. What self-respecting witch, vampire, or werewolf would be caught dead--or undead--anywhere but the Big City, you may ask? Look, let's give the uncanny crew a little credit for intelligence: If they had the smarts to see the advantage in packing up and moving "into" the cities, why wouldn't they have the smarts to move "out" of said cities if it looked like they could get a better quality-of-life/death elsewhere? (Tough enough going about your otherworldly business and evading the occasional mob wielding halogen torches and designer pitchforks, but have you ever "seen" city real estate prices?) So let's welcome our first group of supernatural suburbanites, the witches. Their powers are awesome, their methods of coping with the lumps, bumps, and idiosyncrasies of Suburbia are ingenious, and they always bring the loveliest gingerbread to the PTA bake sale. But whatever you do, don't try telling them that life in a non-city setting is bland, banal and boring, or you might get turned into . . . "ribbit!"

Stories of suburban sorcery by Harry Turtledove, Sarah A. Hoyt, Jan and S.M. Stirling, K. D. Wentworth, and more--including Esther Friesner herself.

Witch Way to the Mall Details

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From Reader Review Witch Way to the Mall for online ebook

Margaret Moller says

Wonderful collection of humorous tales. Short and funny, I feel compelled to seek out one author in particular, Sarah A. Hoyt, author of "The Incident of the Inferno Grill," which had me chuckling the whole time I was reading it. The story is about a classical historian who, desperate for work, becomes an assistant to Nephilim Psychic Investigations. Her first case is to help her eccentric boss perform an exorcism of a barbecue grill that has become possessed by the forces of hell.

My other favorite stories are as follows:

"Witch Warrior" by Steven Piziks, about a suburban pagan father of two adopted children from the Ukraine, and what happens when the terrible Baba Yaga comes to take his children. To save them he must choose which path to follow, that of the witch or the warrior. (Sounds rather serious, but it's funny too. Inventive use of garden tools.)

"Tacos for Tezcatlipoca" by Kevin Andrew Murphy is about a young man who acquires a manticore cub at a garage sale and discovers that he has a hidden talent for magic.

"Making Love" by Brenda W. Clough is not so much humorous as sweet. An exasperated semi-retired woman searches for the best method for bringing the healing touch to her crotchety husband's ailing leg. Involves yarn. The title is more about love itself rather than the sex act.

"Valley Witch" by Julia S. Mandala is about a teenage dark sorcerer and his airheaded, but extremely powerful, witch mother. When her enemies try to kidnap him in order to use him for evil magic, she takes him to the Earthly dimension and hides him away in a high school. Young Drake must face the unfamiliar culture of the school and sex ed class. Contains an inventive use of a condom, given to Drake by a well-meaning teacher.

Lindsey Duncan says

Let me put my cards on the table first: I adore Esther Friesner as a writer – and having seen her at a few conventions, she is just as boisterous and witty in person. So even though I'm not a huge fan of urban (or suburban) fantasy, I came into this anthology with high expectations.

I admit, I did find the introduction over-the-top to the point of being too-obvious funny, which usually doesn't hit my laughter bone. It is clever, though, and sets a nice opening tone.

(FYI – if you don't want to read a story-by-story, flip down to the line of asterisks for a summary.)

"Birdwitching" by Harry Turtledove starts off the anthology with a witchery arms race – centered around the birdwatching count / competition between two neighboring counties. This is a folksy, funny tale with seamless integration of birding jargon. It builds well throughout and comes to a satisfying conclusion. The problem that muddled some of the reading for me was the fact that Turtledove wasn't wholly clear about how witches fit into the real world and how the birding count related to witch activity until very late in the

story. That marred some of the tension.

Steven Piziks’ “Witch Warrior” takes the legend of Baba Yaga and brings it to a world of suburban Celtic warriors when the famed witch attempts to claim a father’s adopted children. Another tight, witty tale, crackling with energy and well-incorporated personal knowledge. Here I found only one small quibble, that the protagonist’s inward debate was illustrated in a way that was a bit too on-the-nose, but it was definitely enjoyable.

“Nimue and the Mall Nymphs” by Lee Martindale has an amusing setup: a witch lost in the back corridors of a suburban mall runs into a group of bubbleheaded pretenders. The events are humorous, but it came off a bit flat and dry for me – a funny concept that didn’t wholly translate into a funny story. I also had trouble suspending my disbelief about the labyrinthine construction of the mall and honestly, expected it to have supernatural origins.

Kevin Andrew Murphy provides us with “Tacos for Tezcatlipoca,” the story of a young man who buys himself a stuffed manticore and finds himself a magician. This story has a more subdued sense of humor than the first two, but in this one, it works, providing smiles along with the grins that the absurd situation conjures up. Unfortunately, I thought the story flatlined at the end. I was expecting more drama and consequence from the conclusion, though there are hints ...

I thought Hildy Silverman’s “The Darren” was one of the best stories so far. It takes place at a dance for a school where witches are segregated from the normal population. Mariah has to chaperone a wayward friend and gets more than she bargained for. Typical teenaged shenanigans take on a mystical cast with an intriguing glimpse into how publicly known witches would interface with the rest of society. (I thought it was fairly realistic, too, or maybe I’m just cynical.) There was an element late in the story that I thought didn’t walk the silly-scary line quite properly, diffusing some of the tension, but that was a minor flaw.

Sarah A. Hoyt’s “The Incident of The Inferno Grill” is another entertaining story that peters out somewhat at the end – though more forgiveable as this is a very relaxed story to start with. The fun is watching the bewildered narrator cope with his new boss, a psychic investigator, and the possessed grill they have been called in to deal with. File this under cats, properties of, and be prepared for a few real bellyLaughs in this otherwise low-key humor story.

Dave Freer’s “Soot” features a charming feline narrator whose sarcasm and superiority are the highlights of this story. The plot follows a witch, her familiar and a local troll as they attempt to stop the opening of a door to the world of the fey. The background and goal of the story are somewhat muddled. However, it is enjoyable sharing Soot’s point of view for a while.

Storm Christopher’s “The House of Lost Dreams” starts with vivid descriptions and a lush, metaphor-laden tone that perfectly suits the story that follows. A restless salesman stops at this mysterious store and finds unusual merchandise within its array of boxes. I loved this story: it’s sweet, sorrowful and absorbing, with the perfect conclusion. If I have to pick any nits, the narrator’s angry outbursts early in the story seemed excessive – but a minor point in a lovely tale.

“Queen of Suburbia” by Selina Rosen is one of the highlights of this anthology. This the story of a witch with a plot to take over the world with good luck generated from an email chain-letter ... and the writer who runs afoul of her. The build and tone of this story are pitch-perfect, and I loved the ending. Rosen should have foreshadowed her protagonist’s knowledge of sorcery earlier, but that’s the only thing I could point out that could possibly be improved. Great story.

Esther Friesner has a knack for writing great humor stories intimately involving mundane professions, and “Twice A Year” is no exception – about a dental hygienist and her yearly struggle against an entity of the sea. If there is a flaw here, it’s the over-the-top, expository dialogue. People don’t explain things they know to each other in quite the fashion herein, and the rest of the story is close enough to real-world logic that it didn’t quite jive for me. However, the story is intriguing and whacky both and builds slowly to an entertaining – and walrus-y – conclusion.

David Vierling’s “Neighborhood Witch” delivers a delightful tale of a husband and wife pair who arrive in their new neighborhood … and stumble not just one but three bizarre local communities. In attempting to find peace and quiet in their new surroundings, they provide the reader with an excellent tale, good to the stomach-turning conclusion. Very well-done.

K.D. Wentworth’s “Hex Education” is an entertaining story that begins with a soccer mom – literally – and her suddenly uncooperative Honda. Suspecting magical meddling from her well-meaning husband at first, she soon discovers there is more afoot. This is a nice, solid story that puffs out a bit with a too-mild climax, but the turns it takes are fun to read.

Jan and S.M. Stirling’s “The Importance of Communication” is a lighthearted story about a retired witch whose old friend and evil-battling buddy shows up on her doorstep to discuss her daughter’s potential gifts. This is another one of those stories that doesn’t really seem to climax, maybe through a lack of tension. It’s frothy and enjoyable, though, and has a few perfect snicker-worthy lines.

From David D. Levine comes “Midnight At The Center Court,” a story set in the seventies about a young boy discontent with the gender division of magic, his best friend, and a haunted mall. The references to popular television shows of the era were lost on me, but might be more familiar to older readers. I thought this was a sweet, simple story of friendship, though one of the central issues posed – the reasons why certain kinds of magic are reserved for women – was never answered.

“The Price of Beauty” by Robin Wayne Bailey is about an appearance-fixated woman whose trips to a charmingly-named witchery salon are the only thing – as far as she believes – that can keep her on top. Can a shallow siren learn the true meaning of beauty? While the story leads the reader on to find out, the spoiled-brat behavior of the lead character makes it hard to sympathize with her. (Also, way too many exclamation points.)

I would classify Brenda W. Clough’s “Making Love” as slipstream, a story where you’re not entirely sure whether it’s fantasy or simply the perception of the character, but it’s a quiet, touching tale nonetheless. Milly’s magic is in her knitting, small works of art that bring love wherever they go – but she’s at a loss how to convince her husband of their curative powers. Nicely done.

Ellie Tupper’s “Yo Moms A Dragon” takes on the idea of a dragon banished from another dimension and trapped in human form and pits her against a trio of too-perfect self-help divas. It’s an energetic story with one of the best food fights I’ve seen in fantasy (now there’s something you don’t type every day) and great twists and turns. I felt there were a few too-convenient loose ends that weren’t properly addressed, but this is still a fun ride.

“Witch’s Brew” from Berry Kercheval is the cute tale of a reluctant witch who finds that doing homework while serving as a barista can lead to unexpected complications, as she and a school crush chase after an imp. While not dramatic, it’s fluffy and enjoyable.

Daniel M. Hoyt's "The FairWitch Project" follows a group of mortalos – children of witches who choose to live non-magical lifestyles (?) – as they plan to play the biggest prank yet on the magical community. That question-mark indicates my main problem with the story: I was never a hundred percent sure what the exact definition of a mortalo was. The conclusion is certainly worth the read, though. Overall, this story is a nice examination of the perils of using magic to the exclusion of the real world.

Julia S. Mandala's "Valley Witch" is a (sometimes painfully) exaggerated story of a cross-world sorceress and her son hiding out in high school. I loved the description of the Evil Academy which the main character (the son) attended, and the references to it were gems. It's a good clash of humor and tropes, though I found Tiffany's character to be overdone.

Jody Lynn Nye closes the anthology with "There's No 'I' In Coven," the story of a competitive Pentacle mom and one memorable game where both her children have an opportunity to shine. Sports stories are always hit and miss with me; after a certain point, I tend to lose interest in the play-by-play. This was a very well-done example, though I found the amount of parental interference from adults who were portrayed as seasoned spectators stretched my credulity. (This could, however, just be because I don't have any personal experience with sports parents!) Sometimes, it's all right to have a narrator who's just a spectator ... and the engaging tale of the two siblings would have held up without their mother taking part.

Overall, this was a strong anthology, with no stories that I would classify as really "bad," several solid stories, and a few gems – one of the best being the only non-humor piece in the anthology ("The House of Lost Dreams"). Some of the jokes flatlined for me, but the majority worked – which, the sense of humor of individuals and authors both being so varied, is quite an achievement. As far as the construction of the anthology, I thought the pace from story to story was well-constructed, though the opening – two boisterous, in-your-face stories followed by one of the weakest in the anthology – could have been improved.

The virtue of this anthology is that every story takes the mundane, the ordinary, the tiny rituals and patterns of modern life, and brings them to life – sometimes with magic, sometimes athwart it, but always putting it in a new light. And if urban fantasy draws on the vast, sometimes ineffable power of the big cities, then this is the heart of what suburban fantasy should be. On that count, forging a new definition (however tongue-in-cheek) and living up to it, this anthology succeeds.

Erin Penn says

A 2009 Anthology from Baen having 21 stories about Witches and witch-kin in suburbia. Urban fantasy step aside - soccer moms with possessed minivans, gingerbread at PTA bake sales, and finding the right spices and charcoal for a sacrifice (of fast food) are the challenges on the plate. A series of comedic fantasy stories about ticky-tacky houses, family, and shopping, Witch Way to the Mall has the typical unevenness of anthology - but being a big-name publication instead of an indie the starting point is higher.

The lead story for this book is "Birdwatching" by Harry Turtledove. The inter-town competition of spotting birds takes on a whole new side when the feud of two witches burns over to the annual population count. As I like neither birdwatching, nor Harry Turtledove's writing, this is the only story in the anthology I could not stomach finishing. If you like Mr. Turtledove's writing, you may enjoy it.

Standouts

"Nimue and the Mall Nymphs" by Lee Martindale - The description of the mall is worth the price of admission for anyone who has tried to find a bathroom in one of these trendy architectural monstrosities. And the story is nice too.

"The House of Lost Dreams" by Storm Christopher - Another where the location description is so spot on, as anyone who has navigated through a pothole filled parking lot would agree. The story itself is bittersweat as a Lost Dream.

"Witch Warrior" by Steven Piziks - may be the best story in the book, but unfortunately I recently took a class on Baba Yaga, so this one was a huge fail for me on the fantasy side because it broke the fairy tale rules for her according what I learned. (Like vampires-who-sparkle level of fail - sigh - sometimes knowing too much can be a deterrent to story enjoyment. Again very nice story aside from my issue with Baba Yaga walking.)

"The Darren" by Hildy Silverman has a sweet (and, ultimately, sad if you think about it too hard) ending. Plus has a nice Big Battle scene.

"Witch's Brew" by Berry Kercheval - A favorite of mine simply because the major device for creating havoc is one I have used as a DM on my players. Do not sound out spells without the proper protections in place. The relationship between teenage student and patient teacher is pretty awesome and reminiscent of my favorite teachers. The love-hate respect-frustration patronage-success emotions are captured perfectly. This short is one of the most believable simply because of the relationships between characters.

"There's no I in Coven" by Jody Lynn Nye - Another entry into magical sports; Pentackle is equal to Quidditch in pure gangbusters action - and I would love to see this story play out in the visual medium. Tied with "Witch Warrior" for best story in the book.

Julia says

I quite liked most of the stories in this collection of suburban stories about witches, but I would have liked it more if there were fewer of the stories. Twenty-one is just too many. Here's a description of five of them.

"The Darren" by Hildy Silverman is about Mariah and her first school dance. Her friend Sarah gets too close to a "Darren" while Mariah meets another who is quite bright. "The Incident of the Inferno Grill" by Sarah Hoyt is about a backyard grill "more complex than some upper model cars" that is possessed. "Some grills are," tells Ken to his skeptical, broke, new employee, who is unnamed. "The House of Lost Dreams" by Storm Christopher is his first sale and quite wonderful. Howie rediscovers his childhood dream: to be a clown. "The Price of Beauty" by Robin Wayne Bailey is about three witches operating a suburban Birnam Wood Mall beauty store called Crab, Tree and Eva Lynn. The story ends with Miss Crab asking, "'When shall we three meet again?' Miss Tree sighed and sounded bored 'In thunder, lightning or in the goddamn neverending rain.' Eva Lynn shrugged, 'Personally, I'm for Sheboygan.'" "Witch Warrior" by Steven Piziks finds a Dad who is less powerful as witch than his wife, but when Baba Yaga comes to claim his Ukrainian-born children he fights back: with his lawn tractor.

Sbuchler says

Genre: Urban Fantasy

This book was exactly what I wanted: light, amusing short stories. None of the stories are hugely memorable, or immediately made me go out and hunt for other books by the author. However, nearly all of them made me laugh. They're short, they're cute, they're light-hearted, and they all deal with witches in suburbia - from the first story about how magic raises the stakes in a local bird watching contest to the final story of how parents try to affect the outcome of their children's Quidditch-esque game.

Phoenix says

Like picking your way through a box of rewarding cream filled chocolates

Loved every minute of this enjoyable anthology and discovered a number of new (for me) writers that I'll be looking for in the future. Pretty much every item is a gem and no real clunkers.

The book starts out with the amusing "Birdwitching" by veteran Harry Turtledove about competitive suburban witches. Lee Martindale's "Nimue and the Mall Nymphs" gives a nod to Buffy (which might appeal to fans of the character Willow) and "The Darren" with its pop culture reference to Bewitched is more about teen angst and ethnic identity. Punny references abound. "Neighbourhood Witch" is really just a shaggy dog story, but a fun one, and in "Soot" told from a familiar cat's POV we meet a "Neander troll" and learn that Neanderthals and Trolls are the same thing. I especially enjoyed "Witch (which) Warrior" by Steve Piziks, "Queen of Suburbia" for its takes on chain letters and politics, and the poignant "Twice a Year" by anthology editor Esther Freisner.

The humour would also appeal to fans of Terry Pratchet, Neil Gaiman, Piers Anthony or Larry Niven's The Magic Goes Away Collection. I was not familiar with Esther Freisner and I will certainly look up more of her work.

This was a library read but I enjoyed it so much that I'll be adding it to my purchases next time I need a topper to get free shipping. A book this strong makes it a keeper. Excellent stocking stuffer or small gift to a teenager given that just over half the stories are teen oriented or involve children, suitable for ages 13 and up; some parents might object because sexual references.

Wolgan says

The stories listed below are worth reading, in my opinion. The rest were pretty forgettable.

Best stories in the book: All of these had excellent world building in a limited format, great characters, good twists, lots of humor, and satisfying endings. 5 star stories.

Neighborhood Witch by David Vierling

Soot by Dave Freer

Yo Mom's a Dragon by Ellie Tupper

Honorable Mentions: 3.5-4 star stories.

Nimue and the Mall Nymphs by Lee Martindale: Main character really carried this story. Just a really enjoyable read.

The Darren by Hildy Silverman: Interesting concept, liked the pacing.

The House of Lost Dreams by Storm Christopher: Interesting concept that delivered really well on its potential.

Twice a Year by Esther M. Friesner: Another good one that had great world building, enjoyable characters, and is laced with good humor.

The Importance of Communication by Jan and S.M. Stirling: Fairly simple story, but relationships between the characters were really well portrayed and the dialog was well written.

Meredith says

Some of the stories in this collection were quite clever, but about 2/3 was just meh.

Sarah says

This was a delightful set of stories, all featuring witches (duh), who are trying to live somewhat normal lives in suburban environments. Out of the book, only two stories were "just ok," and the rest were funny, delightful, or a somehow else an enjoyment to read.

A definite recommendation for anyone who enjoys light supernatural.

Jolanta says

It's hard to rate a book with short stories by different authors, because some of the stories in this collection were quite good, and well written. I especially liked "The House of Lost Dreams" by Storm Christopher. "Tacos for Tezcatlipoca" by Kevin Andrew Murphy is worth reading as well, especially because it has a different angle - instead of witches and wizards, and magick, it's about magicians and beliefs from other, non-Western, religions and cults. I also liked "The Darren" by Hildy Silverman, "The Incident of the Inferno Grill" by Sarah A. Hoyt, and "Witch's Brew" by Berry Kercheval.

Melanie says

A series of short stories by a variety of authors. As is typical of anthologies--some good, some okay, but none of them left me wanting.

Melki says

Hmmm...how does one squeeze in the necessary sabbats and coven meetings, what with all the schlepping

the kids to soccer practice and the mall? Can a young, modern, suburban witch really have it all?

Here's a collection of vaguely amusing but mostly forgettable short stories to answer those questions. Keep in mind - the stories were SO unengrossing, it took me over two years to finish this book.

The one bright spot was "Birdwitching" by Harry Turtledove (no pun intended, I'm sure!), about two rival birdwatching witches using magic to inflate their Christmas day bird counts.

This story alone, raised the star-count by one, and is truly worth the price of the book.

Andrew Swanson says

As with any collection some were better than others. The best of them left me wishing to follow the characters further. In "Tacos for Tezcatlipoca" by Kevin Andrew Murphy, a young man goes to a garage sale and purchases a stuffed manticore cub on a base (which he believes to be the product of a mad taxidermist) for an unusual price. He finds it does indeed bring wonderment.

"Midnight at the Center Court" by David D. Levine features a teenage boy struggling with the gender dichotomy of Goddess spells (which he feels cover all the cool spells, but are reserved for women) and God spells which he finds boring. He detects a great evil gathering at the local mall and tries to locate it using a Goddess spell, for which he is grounded by his parents. Upon doing some studying related to his punishment, he realizes that something needs to be done that night.... At the end of the story, I wanted to know what the consequences of his actions were...

These were just a few of the highlights. I don't think there was a bad story in the lot.

Ryan says

During the summer I was heading downtown one afternoon, and I started thinking about how popular urban fantasy has been over the past several decades, and that I'd never heard of anyone publishing suburban fantasy, which seemed a little odd. I started plotting out a possible such story, and after I'd started writing it out, did some research to make sure I wasn't going over well-trod ground, which is how I found this book.

So, what we have here is a collection of stories about witches, all linked by the setting of suburbia. All the classic suburban stereotypes are there: SUVs and soccer moms, strip malls and PTAs, housewives and urban sprawl. The authors manage to interpret that in a variety of unique ways, however, and manage to give you a fun glimpse into how magic would change the suburbs, and how the suburbs would change the practice of magic.

Jeni Clark says

Esther Friesner is a goddess. I will always give 5 stars to anything she puts her name to. Even a cookbook. So I may not have an unbiased opinion.
