

REVIEW

An Itinerant House

By Emma Frances Dawson

(Thomas Loring & Co., 2007, US\$49)

Reviewed by Rollin Milroy

Amphora was pleasantly surprised to receive the debut publication from Thomas Loring & Co., a new small press “dedicated to bringing back into print the work of both familiar and unfamiliar authors of weird and supernatural fiction from the period of, roughly, 1850–1950.” The selection by publishers John Pinkney and Robert Eldridge of Emma Frances Dawson’s story collection *An Itinerant House* reflects their desire “to leave the well-marked trails of the genre and plunge into the forest to fetch back treasures from both ends of this spectrum of familiarity.”

In cataloguing this new Loring edition of *An Itinerant House*, the renowned specialist in the field of early weird and ghost fiction Lloyd Currey wrote that Dawson’s “stories, all of them tragic, all of them supernatural, almost all of them about doomed romance, and all of them set in the doomed San Francisco that was burned to the ground in 1906, have ‘an elusive something defying analysis, even description,’ as Ambrose Bierce put it, who called her 1897 collection ‘a work of supreme genius.’”

The scarcity of *An Itinerant House* in its original 1897 edition (a copy of which would be priced around \$1,000) has made it difficult until now to evaluate her work. Born in 1939, Dawson moved to San Francisco in the 1870s and earned a meagre living writing and teaching music. She fled the city after the earthquake of 1906 (which destroyed many of the copies of her early works, making them particularly scarce) and lived a solitary existence in a small house in Palo Alto for the last 20 years of her life. According to Currey, she almost never wrote fiction unless an editor commissioned it. Such was her regard as a significant member of the region’s writers of the time that the Book Club of California issued two limited editions of stories taken from *An Itinerant House: A Gracious Visitation* (1921, printed by the Grabhorn Press) and the title story (1936, an example of early Ward Ritchie printing).

This new edition contains three supernatural tales by Dawson not in the 1897 edition, a translation by Dawson of a weird tale from

the German, and a long introduction by Eldridge that provides biographical, historical and critical background for the stories.

“Her sense of the tragic and the inexplicable went straight into her stories,” Eldridge writes. “With more encouragement from the marketplace or private patronage, she could have become one of the major voices of American supernatural fiction. Even as it is, the small body of work she left behind—work that bewildered most readers of her day because it followed none of the current trends and adhered only to her own subtle aesthetic—can now help make the case that her itinerant shade deserves a permanent place in the house of American letters.”

Looking back to *Amphora* 144, readers will remember that interest in republishing classic ghost and weird fiction from the late 19th and early 20th centuries has grown over the past decade. Unfortunately, the poor design and typography committed by many of the small presses engaged in this work (many of whom seem never to have heard about the concept of *margins*) doesn’t help their cause. Based on its debut publication, Loring (www.thomasloring.com) appears to be taking a more sensitive and careful approach to these matters. While the design for *An Itinerant House* is simple, nothing about it makes reading unpleasant, and if anything its plainness suits the text.

MORE ALPHABET STORIES

Amphora readers who enjoyed Alan Stein’s review of Hermann Zapf’s *Alphabet Stories: A Chronicle of Technical Developments* in issue 147 may well have been frustrated by attempts to track down a copy of their own. The edition of 300 copies probably was already out of print when the review appeared. Happily, a second edition has been issued by RIT Cary Graphic Arts Press, “enhanced by the addition of a letterpress-printed broadside designed by Zapf. The insert was typeset and hand-printed on Kitakata paper at the RIT Cary Graphic Arts Collection using its collection of rare metal Virtuosa type—Zapf’s elegant script face originally released by Stempel Typefounders in 1952.” This second edition (US\$65) is available directly from the publisher (<http://library.rit.edu/cary/carypress.html>).