**Talk About Literature in Kansas** is a program for every Kansan who loves to read and discuss good books. For more information about TALK and other programs for libraries, museums, and non-profit groups, contact

www.humanitieskansas.org

**GHOST STORIES**

King Saul asks the Witch of Endor to call up Samuel’s ghost; Odysseus tries to embrace his mother’s wraith in Hades; Hamlet asks whether his father’s image is ghost or demon: literature, like folklore, is full of the spirits of the dead. People tell stories to try to explain what death is, where loved ones go, why the good suffer. The books in this series represent some classic explanations.

The Victorians such as Dickens in A Christmas Carol built the literary ghost story and explored the corners of the genre, presenting traditional ghosts who seek revenge, provide warnings, or re-living events, as well as ghosts who appear only as a heavy despair, or who may haunt only the psyche of the teller. In every case, a good ghost story must produce certain feelings in a reader.

First, horror is not the goal of the ghost story, and the reader will not find blood and gore in these titles. Eeriness, a completely different emotion, is essential to a ghost story: the feeling that something isn’t right, that life isn’t quite running along the rails of normalcy. Sometimes the eerie is also frightening, but not always; sometimes it’s sad; sometimes it might be a comfort.

Another emotion the ghost story arouses in a reader is the same one that draws us to mystery fiction: the desire to solve the problem of the past: a newly-minted coin rests on a table in a house that burned fifty years ago – why?

***The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson**

A lonely woman is strangely drawn to a house that others find hateful. We gradually discover what it is in her past – and in the house’s past – that draws them together. This story provides some truly scary moments.

***The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill**

In this modern ghost story all the classic elements are brought together: the isolated mansion, rumor-haunted; the dark past, described in riffs from yellowed letters; the young innocent charged with telling a dead woman’s story, and the devastating final turn.

***The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman**

“There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife,” so begins Neil Gaiman’s Newberry Medal winning work of fiction. A small child wanders off into a graveyard pursued by a mysterious man named Jack who murdered the child’s family. The boy is dubbed “Nobody Owens” by his adoptive ghostly parents who nickname him Bod. Bod’s companions include an undead guardian named Silas and a graveyard full of ghosts who grant Bod the Freedom of the Graveyard. NPR anointed this group as the “Ghostly Baby-Sitters Club.” As Bod grows he learns to read from gravestones, is someone’s imaginary friend, and develops a crush on a witch to name a few of his adventures.