



The Gothic in Children's Literature

HAUNTING THE BORDERS

EDITED BY
**ANNA JACKSON, KAREN COATS,
AND RODERICK MCGILLIS**

The Gothic in Children's Literature

Children's Literature and Culture

JACK ZIPES, SERIES EDITOR

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term children to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

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INTRODUCTION

Walk into any children's bookstore and you will note a decidedly Gothic flavor to many of the titles on display. From creepy picture books to Harry Potter to Lemony Snicket to the Spiderwick Chronicles to countless vampire series for young adult readers, fear or the pretence of fear has become a dominant mode of enjoyment in literature for young people.

The essays in this volume represent a critical response to this publishing trend in children's literature. They seek to understand its history, to thematize its expressions, and to theorize its presence and importance in children's literature.

While adult Gothic has received much critical attention, and the popularity of Gothic narratives at the turn of the millennium has been analysed in studies such as Mark Edmundson's *Nightmare on Main Street*, surprisingly little critical attention has been paid so far to Gothic children's literature. Yet in children's literature today, the Gothic is mainstream.

This movement toward children's Gothic is an extraordinary development, given that, as Dale Townshend argues in *The Haunted Nursery*, children's literature emerged as a genre largely in reaction to the popularity of the adult Gothic romance. What could be more unsuitable for child readers than Gothic romances like *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Monk*, or *The Italian*, with their focus on the perverse and the forbidden, on adult sexuality and religious doubts and heresies? Instead, the eighteenth-century child reader was directed towards educational and improving texts, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and*

Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness. Children were expected to covet books that seasoned sound instruction with the tame delights that came from light whimsy rather than the more piquant pleasures of a good shiver.

It is difficult to see the appeal today. Children today would be more likely to enjoy the chapbook romances children used to read before a literature specifically created for children was developed, stories such as “Jack the Giant Killer,” “Robin Hood,” “Children in the Wood,” or “Whuppity Storie.” Indeed it is the stories that Enlightenment philosophers warned children against reading, such as the stories of Raw Head and Bloody Bones, that are likely to be the ones that children today would pick up first. Of course, the mere fact that Locke and others were so concerned about the prevalence of these grisly tales indicates that the children of the eighteenth century were no less likely to prefer these stories. Children, it seems, have always had a predilection for what we now categorize as the Gothic, for ghosts and goblins, hauntings and horrors, fear and the pretence of fear. As Townshend argues, this appetite was fed by their nursemaids, in part because fear effectively secures docile behaviour, and in part because the nursemaids themselves enjoyed the titillations of a good horror story. Perhaps the really strange development of the eighteenth century was the transformation of the Gothic narrative into an adult genre, when it had really belonged to children’s literature all along.

Nonetheless, transformed it was, and the Gothic was soundly suppressed in children’s literature in favour of morally uplifting texts that suited the desires of adults to construct an innocent child that could be trained up into a rational adult of Enlightened values. While there might always have been stories children particularly liked to read, it is usual today to recognise the marketing of books for children in the eighteenth century, usually dated back to the publication of John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* in 1744, as the beginnings of children’s literature as a genre. This view of the modern origins of children’s literature fits with an understanding that the eighteenth century saw the shift in thinking about childhood that made such literature seem necessary, with Locke and Rousseau among the first to thematize the different needs and psychology of children and make recommendations based on these beliefs. Despite their pronouncements and recommendations, however, we would do well to remember what Shavit terms the “literary polysystem” (1986: ix) in which children’s literature from the beginning has existed in two forms: the acceptable and the unacceptable, or the literary and the popular. The Gothic has had a place for much of this time in the popular. It forms

part of what Wordsworth called “gross and violent stimulants.” It is not polite or decorous or even sophisticated in that high culture way, nor does it serve the publicly sanctioned aims of education that have always been considered an important role of children’s literature.

While our understanding of childhood today can still, to some extent, be understood as inflected by Enlightenment and Romantic ideas of childhood, children’s literature has changed so dramatically since the eighteenth century it is arguably a different genre altogether. Children’s literature today, as a distinct genre distinguished not only by its intended audience but by stylistic and formal features, might be better dated back to the Golden Age of children’s literature in the Victorian period. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, originally published in 1865, arguably represents the first children’s book that children today still recognise as children’s literature and do in fact continue to read. Curiously, Alice disappears down a hole into a world which seems to invite exactly the same kind of psychoanalytic reading that the Gothic genre as a whole insistently calls for. All the same, *Alice in Wonderland* is not a Gothic text. Instead, the logic that is so displaced in this world, the morals and manners that are overturned, belong to the didactic texts that had been designed to take the Gothic story’s place. When the genre of didactic narrative is turned back on itself, and indeed turned upside down and inside out, the result is not a return to the Gothic stories children used to read before children’s literature was invented, but the beginning of a new children’s literature tradition, the tradition to which all subsequent children’s literature belongs. Just as the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, was already a pastiche and self-consciously parodic send-up of the genre that it itself established, modern children’s literature too arguably begins with a pastiche of its own generic conventions. Both the Gothic and children’s literature begin as genres haunted by both the future and the past.

However much the pedagogues of the day sought to expunge the Gothic from the literary imagination of children’s books, it continued to seep in. The nineteenth century, for instance, saw the Gothic for young readers surface in books influenced by *Jane Eyre*. The most obvious example is Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* with its haunted house and grounds. L. M. Montgomery also plays with Gothic conventions in her Emily series and some of her stand-alone novels and short stories; indeed, there are many examples of Gothic influence along the byways of writing for the young particularly by women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Mary Molesworth, for example, domesticates this tradition, and L. T. Meade transforms the school into a haunted place.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the books children are reading are, as the essayists in this volume demonstrate, haunted once again by the Gothic. As Nadia Crandall and Julie Cross argue in their chapters, many contemporary texts for children are resolutely Gothic in form and substance; they invoke and parody specifically Victorian settings. Crandall locates Gothic contexts and subtexts as the controlling motifs in cyberfiction, demonstrating the similarities between the labyrinthine structures of Gothic castles and computer games, and revealing the common thematics of double consciousness, metafiction, and moral disintegration that plague both nineteenth century narratives and ultra-contemporary speculative fictions. Cross focuses her attention on the varieties of humour at play in child Gothic, from the exaggerated grotesqueries of the villains to the subtle play of parody that has been at the heart of Gothic since its inception. While few young readers can be versed in the Victorian melodrama that these texts parody, Cross argues that they nevertheless know the codes well through their familiarity with other pop-Gothic texts, including comic book narratives, television series, and films. She argues further that, rather than going over the heads of their readership, comic Gothic's use of irony and parody continues to stretch children's literary competencies.

Part of the reason for the persistence of the Gothic across centuries of children's literature must be due to the ease with which the typical Gothic chronotope can be allegorized as the mind. Though askew from the point of view of an historical present, Gothic tales often offer a sort of free-floating setting. The Gothic chronotope is often a place, very often a house, haunted by a past that remains present. As a child grows, more and more experiences, good and bad, displace into memory, forming the intricate passages where bits of his or her past get lost, only to re-emerge at unexpected times. The child's mind becomes a crowded, sometimes frustratingly inaccessible place at the same time as his or her body morphs in uncomfortable ways. As Anna Jackson and Anna Smith argue in their essays, Gothic motifs of the uncanny are particularly apt for the metaphorical exploration of the vicissitudes of adolescent identity. The uncanny emerges in the adolescent novels they explore to both highlight change and trigger it. It becomes a complex metaphor for the transition the characters undergo with respect to their place in their families and their family history. But, as Smith notes, the Gothic also offers fertile ground to explore beyond the conventions of the family to the adolescent's place in larger social and cultural constellations of identity. The results can affirm psychological models of development or they can open those models of development up to scrutiny

and critique, as is evidenced in Alice Mill's reading of Garth Nix's *Seventh Tower* series. The female adolescent in particular, as explored by June Cummins, undergoes what might be referred to as "Gothic moments" in an otherwise rational life. Key moments of feminine transition—menarche, marriage, childbirth, etc., marked as they are by blood, submission, loss of a firm sense of one's former identity, and loss of control—are potentially moments that are best represented with Gothic motifs. That is, they are moments when symbols of dark labyrinthine tunnels, monstrous trolls, ghosts, wayward fluids, murder, etc. are the best symbols we have for the bodily and social changes wrought by menstruation and the possibilities it closes and opens for women's subjectivity. Contemporary heroines in otherwise non-Gothic texts do not devolve into drippy Gothic heroines after their moment, but that is part of the persistence of the Gothic through cultural change. That is, in the time when the Gothic was emerging as an important genre, medical science was just starting to replace the mystery of the female body with scientific facts; hysteria was the dominant response to sexual confusion and abuse; cultural codes were still writing marriage as a loss of power and autonomous identity for women; and pregnancy and childbirth were just downright dangerous, messy, and awful; so the losses these women suffered were more or less entrees into a more or less permanent Gothic subjectivity. In modernity, all of that has been re-scripted, but despite frontier pragmatism, the transparency of today's medically understood body, the replacement of hysteria by depression, and the new approach to having it all in the revised feminist pop culture fairy tales, there are still those fear-enshrouded moments where the archaic body reasserts itself—those moments when our new scripts fail us in the face of the mute mystery of embodiment. We are quick to regain our footing these days, though, and to respond more often than not with the laughter that mitigates Gothic horror, but the Gothic landscapes and conventions remain familiar to us because they are, to some extent, inside us.

While Gothic conventions are readily familiar to child readers who find mental analogues in their formulaic landscapes and often humorous approach to psychic horrors, children are kept interested through the constant changes made to the conventions, the new twists and surprises that are always introduced. While the chapbook romances children were reading before (and during and beyond) the eighteenth century are remarkable from today's perspective partly for how very little the stories and even the renditions of them change over time, Gothic conventions and motifs are remarkable for how rapidly and consistently they change, in form and in significance. Its landscapes and conventions

change in response to cultural shifts in the fears, values, and technologies that inscribe themselves into our subjectivities. This makes it a genre, as a number of critics have commented, particularly responsive to its historical moment and cultural location.

Rose Lovell-Smith's essay on the Gothic beach in New Zealand literature discusses the importance of history in determining the significance of local landscape. The haunted history of the beach, she argues, makes it possible for the beach to take the place of Europe's ruined castles or America's haunted houses as a Gothic site in New Zealand literature. This shift in the location of the Gothic is then responsible for another whole set of changes to, and antipodean reversals of, Gothic conventions: trapdoors lead upward, not downward, houses extend into the landscape rather than open up with inner chambers, the family is not withdrawn and suspicious of strangers but dangerously free with its hospitality, the common motif of incestuous inbreeding is reversed with the family secret having to do with adultery—sexual relations inappropriately external to the family. And the cultural relocation of the Gothic genre Lovell-Smith argues is what enables Mahy to transform a genre in which “the realm of the Gothic house is the realm of the patriarch,” so that the Gothic house in Mahy's *The Tricksters* is ultimately identified with, and as the possession of, the central character Harry, one of Mahy's many astonishingly powerful young heroines.

The three novels that Karen Sands-O'Connor looks at similarly relocate the Gothic away from the traditional European setting in a ruined past, and give it a colonial setting. The difference is that these novels are all written from a British perspective. Sands-O'Connor suggests that the Gothic conventions in these novels reflect cultural anxieties that remain unresolved, and that this lack of resolution is reflected in a failure on the part of these texts to satisfactorily resolve the narratives, with the best option presented to the child characters, she argues, being “to retreat, leaving destruction in their wake.” Offering “little escape for these children from the hauntings of history,” these novels, she argues, fail to offer the sorts of resolution offered by “traditional Gothic novels.” Perhaps because the Gothic conventions are not sufficiently transformed and appropriated by a new, local tradition, the Gothic in these novels can only serve to indicate historical fault-lines and failures, but in doing so brings those fault-lines and failures in to the narratives themselves.

Children's and young adult texts have become veritable playgrounds for revising and expanding the Gothic chronotope. Indeed the children's book itself becomes a new location for the Gothic, with its intricate architecture of intertextuality and labyrinthine reference, as Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario cleverly points out. Children's Gothic thus innovates in ways

other than setting and family sexual dynamics. While traditional Gothic narratives introduced the ambiguously attractive character of the hero-villain, the moral lines have always been clearly drawn. That is, the Gothic maintains that evil is undeniably evil, no matter how attractive it may be, and its corruption must be as forcefully and completely expelled as possible. Nowhere is there any suggestion that evil might simply be misunderstood, or forgivable, or in any way assimilable to everyday life as a positive force. Nor is there a suggestion that the victims of the Gothic hero-villain are in any way complicit in their fate. Though no one essay in this collection takes on the challenge of articulating an ethics of children's Gothic, several show ways in which the Gothic is managed within the texts they discuss, and in so doing reveal a range of ethical responses. One would expect that in the most traditional scenario of children's Gothic, the child characters would mimic their female counterparts in adult Gothic as the innocent, unwitting victims of an external malevolence. Their rescuers would also come from outside their ranks, and the narrative arc would produce a climactic encounter between the forces of evil and the forces of good whose denouement would include the sound expulsion of the evil that threatened them. Indeed this is the way some children's Gothic plays out, even when it has its tongue in its cheek. Most children's authors, however, such as Roald Dahl and Lemony Snicket, while preserving the child's innocence and the utter externality of the evil that threatens, innovate by giving the child some clever weapon with which to fight their attackers. James' Giant Peach, Matilda's psychic energies, and Sunny Baudelaire's efficacious bite, for instance, enable the children to put up a good fight and sometimes even roundly defeat their enemies.

Recent children's Gothic, however, reflects our culture's changing attitude toward the innocence of children, as well as what seems to be a cultural shift in our willingness to unilaterally assign blame. When ten-year-olds kill two-year-olds for kicks, when children take weapons to school and rain down death on their classmates, when they post sexy pictures of themselves on myspace.com, when they enthusiastically join in their culture's jihad, we have to revise our sense of what they know and who they are. Sure we blame the adults who shamelessly exploit them, but we also begin to experience a sense of unease about the degree to which they are complicit in their own exploitation. In keeping with a more general trend to complicate victim/abuser status, we begin, in a strange way, to dignify the child by granting him or her complex motivations that are not the results of a bland innocence. Perhaps they are not blank slates after all, or, if they are, all the protection in the world can't keep them from the tangled web of what we once located as a teratology, but might have to revise into a more

nuanced understanding of what it means to be human. Laurie N. Taylor argues that these ambiguities of childhood innocence, children's need for protection, their ability to be resilient and competent in the face of adult corruption, and the relocation of the monstrous find a ready home in Goth comics, which directly challenge traditional paradigms of a neglectful and often oppressive patriarchal adult culture.

The ethical innovations of some recent children's Gothic, then, seem to hinge on children assuming at least some responsibility for the irruption of the Gothic in their worlds, and/or actively working to find a way to either ameliorate or assimilate it. Rather than seeing the Gothic as an anomalous intrusion into their lives from some external and alien force, the children in many contemporary Gothic novels court their dark side, and own it as an aspect of the self. They don't nurse any illusion that they are innocent victims in the drama in which they find themselves. Mahy's Harry, for instance, realizes that the evil and dangerous Trickster brothers are as much her creation as the gentle, good brother, and that anger and fear are useful tools in crafting a life worth living. This is a very different response to haunting than that proposed in the texts Sands-O'Connor analyzes; rather than retreat from the uncomfortable knowledge she has gained, Harry acknowledges her responsibility for bringing the evil into the world and asserts her agency in the face of it. A similar stance is taken in the texts by Neil Gaiman that Karen Coats examines. In each text, the child is in some way implicated in the appearance of the evil in her world—it is not a purely external foe. Knowing that, the characters turn to face the evil for which they are partly responsible, and work to expel it from their world. How unlike their innocent Gothic foremothers, whose stock response was flight, and whose only hope lay in rescue.

The intruding of the Gothic into children's culture, then, speaks among other things to our social order's sense of unease with the knowingness of children and the ambiguity of victimization; were it a purely reactionary or conservative trend, however, it would respond with calls for ease or social stability, with the simple if violent expulsion of evil and the restoration of the status quo. On the other hand, by allowing for the return of the repressed, children's Gothic just might be a site for recalculation, reassessment of how things are, and hence even the disestablishment, dismantling, or at least a questioning of the status quo. The most radical texts in recent literature seek not to expulse or contain the Gothic, but rather to make a viable space for it in the topology of the human. The main character in M. T. Anderson's *Thirsty*, which Rod McGillis treats in his chapter, can't join in his culture's hatred of the monstrous, for he has discovered it within himself; either to kill himself or to accept his fate would be reactionary, whereas to find a way between those two

alternatives will change his culture. Finding this middle ground is the imperative that informs the new ethics of children's Gothic.

Where, then, do we find ourselves with respect to contemporary children's Gothic? It is a genre that presents us with structural consistencies that accommodate historical change, innovations and appropriations that suit it to new anxieties, and an ethics that boldly challenges our cherished beliefs about childhood. Perhaps it is time to assess children's Gothic on its own terms, as a pure form destined for a decidedly knowing audience, who hears its parody and excess as a call to know ever more about what really haunts us. A closer look at what might be called a pure irruption of the Gothic into children's literature might help us locate its cultural and personal importance for contemporary child readers. Consider the following poem:

THE GHOUL

The gruesome ghoul, the grisly ghoul,
without the slightest noise
waits patiently beside the school
to feast on girls and boys.

He lunges fiercely through the air
as they come out to play,
then grabs a couple by the hair
and drags them far away.

He cracks their bones and snaps their backs
and squeezes out their lungs,
he chews their thumbs like candy snacks
and pulls apart their tongues.

He slices their stomachs and bites their hearts
and tears their flesh to shreds,
he swallows their toes like toasted tarts
and gobbles down their heads.

Fingers, elbows, hands and knees
and arms and legs and feet—
he eats them with delight and ease,
for every part's a treat.

And when the gruesome, grisly ghoul
has nothing left to chew,
he hurries to another school
and waits . . . perhaps for you.

(Jack Prelutsky 1976)

“The Ghoul” is one poem in a collection of Gothic poems in Jack Prelutsky’s *Nightmares: Poems to Trouble Your Sleep* (illus. Arnold Lobel). This book contains a dozen poems that deal with a haunted house, a vampire, a werewolf, an ogre, a witch, a troll, a bogeyman, and other creatures that terrify. The audience for “The Ghoul” and the other poems is undoubtedly children of primary school age, say 6 to 12 years of age. In other words, both Prelutsky and his publisher assume that a poem such as “The Ghoul” will appeal to a young readership, and that it contains something purposeful for that audience. And indeed, the poem does offer an accomplished example of form, nicely capturing the familiar 4/3 beat lines of nursery rhyme, using monosyllables and two syllable words carefully, shaping alliterative lines, and rounding the poem structurally to echo the beginning in the ending. Extended paratactic sentences give the impression of anaphora—seven of the 24 lines begin with “he,” and another eight begin with “and.” In effect, the poem is a long list of items the ghoul will find tasty: bones, back, lungs, thumbs, tongues, stomachs, hearts, flesh, toes, heads, fingers, elbows, hands, knees, arms, legs, and feet. Seventeen items for the ghoul to chew, and then he’s off to find another meal. Clearly, this poem is not intended to traumatize its young readers, but it does offer a brutal vision of little children eaten outside their school. Just as clearly, this poem indicates the connection between children and the Gothic. It takes the second most familiar place for many children—school—and posits a malevolent creature waiting just outside the doors to snag unwary children on their way outside. To put this another way, we might note that school in this poem is an uncanny place. That which

is familiar now has a haunting presence. As in familiar Gothic narratives, the innocent are victims of insensitive violence. They are prey to a Gothic villain of monstrous proportions.

And without a doubt, this poem is dramatic in its delight in the ghoul's cannibalism. Whatever dreams this ghoul comes from, he haunts the schoolyard the way the bogeyman might haunt a dark wood. He is a presence that disturbs with the very sense that he is somehow real, even as we know he is a fiction. He is real because he represents something—just what this something might be is the mystery. What does he represent? Why is he lurking about the school? Where has he come from? And from what dread hand has he taken his existence? And what dread heart can withstand his presence? The ghoul is a Gothic monster because he frightens and because he transforms the familiar into the strange and threatening. The school and its yard become castle and forest of traditional Gothic, and the ghoul is the fearsome figure who just might be as close to us as our own family. The haunting here might remind us that schools can, indeed, be dangerous places.

But what makes this poem and its Gothic posturing appealing and purposeful? The appeal, of course, rests in the safe distance of reader from text. The reader or listener can experience a frisson, the pleasure of a good shiver, confident that he or she does not live in the world the poem evokes. Everyone likes a good shiver because it shakes us free of security while leaving our security intact. The appeal is the appeal of danger, beckoning us to be just a bit more daring, a bit more wild than our normal lives might allow for. The Gothic world of “The Ghoul” gives us a space for safe fear. We can safely indulge our instinct for death. “The Ghoul,” too, is funny, as the Gothic often is. Typically, it achieves its humour through excess; it presents a vision ridiculous in its extremes. Just as the labyrinthine corridors, dark forests, rampant escapades of Gothic deliver location and action beyond the familiar and the contained, so too does this short poem deliver a content that spills over its 24 lines. The Gothic releases forces usually repressed; mere anarchy is loosed and contained at the same time. In Gothic, we have the return of the repressed. Our enjoyment is visceral: the cracking of bones and the snapping of backs. Parts of the body are delicious morsels, tasty tarts, and candy snacks. The appeal of the Gothic has something to do with unrestraint, transgression, and the overturning of normalcy. In “The Ghoul,” the creature is a cannibal; he breaks a taboo as surely as the famous Gothic villains break various taboos. Here the delicacy, innocence, and even sanctity of little children are vulnerable to the worst abuse imaginable, and the poem ends with a turn directly to the reader. The reader too may be next. The force of this turn is not dissimilar to

the force of the “jump” at the end of a jump tale. The appeal is directly to the reader.

Now, part of the poem’s success has to do with its form and language. It moves along nicely, tripping off the tongue as easily as the ghoul might chew on a thumb or pull apart a tongue. In some way, the Gothic always relies on sound, even if this is the sound of silence, the silence that forces us to guess, to imagine, and to worry. Something waits, and waits patiently, without the slightest noise. The alliteration and the openness of the accents accentuate the silence. The only sounds this poem offers are the sounds of a body crunched and wrenched apart. Form carries the force of the Gothic horror while at the same time it deflects this force. For example, in a literary move familiar since Homer, the poem delivers a figure just when we might be overwhelmed with the horrific nature of what we are reading. In the midst of a stanza describing cracking bones, snapping backs, and squeezing lungs, we read that the ghoul chews thumbs like candy snacks, and in the next stanza while the ghoul slices stomachs, bites hearts, and shreds flesh, we read that he swallows toes like toasted tarts. The similes shift register; we might recall a story such as “Hansel and Gretel,” in which two children find a cottage of candy and gingerbread and also a cannibalistic witch who intends to eat them as one of her treats. The connection between children and sweets seems appropriate, even perhaps natural. Remember what little girls are made of—sugar and spice and everything nice. Children are sweet things. Suddenly, we might notice how this poem challenges the implications of our association of children and candy. Perhaps this poem surveys territory more recently travelled by James Kincaid.

Once we establish the appeal of the poem, we might reasonably see the purpose the poem might serve. If the Gothic has any direct connection to children’s literature and its history, then this is most likely to the cautionary tale, as Dale Townshend’s survey of late eighteenth-century children’s literature and the Gothic suggests. Whereas the appeal of the poem may be psychoanalytic, the purpose is social. Little children beware; dangers lurk in the large world, right outside your school. The poem ultimately serves to caution children against strangers; it serves to remind them of the dangers they may encounter right in their own familiar spaces. The narrator ends the poem with a direct warning. Why this warning is socially important is because it warns readers to be vigilant, to stay close to home, to remain with their friends, to avoid straying even a short way. The Gothic has this effect. It warns of the dangers mysteriously close to even the most familiar places. It reminds us that the world is not safe. It challenges the pastoral myths of childhood, replacing these with myths of darkness drawing down, creatures

in the forests of the night. Reading a poem such as “The Ghoul,” we might be reminded of the potential for Gothic fear and darkness in just about every story we have. For example, think of Sarah Moon’s version of “Little Red Riding Hood” (2002) in which the wolf drives a large sleek black automobile, Red Riding Hood travels wet noirish city streets, and grandma’s house is a sleazy hotel room. The empty bed and dishevelled sheets that confront us in the final picture of this book are a challenge. They challenge us to look boldly into this world’s underbelly, to know that the underworld is not simply a metaphor, to take the hauntedness of our lives as an opportunity for strength—the strength to dream strong dreams, to capture the energy of the Gothic villain and put it to positive use. The Gothic is a paranoid mode, but only if we succumb to its fears, fears exacerbated by the violent eruptions of and against children that have so dominated the media’s imagination in recent decades.

We might succumb to fear when we read “The Ghoul”; however, the parodic force of the poem works to undermine fear. The poem is overcharged, its language exaggerated to the point of humour. It might make you squirm. Arnold Lobel’s illustration situates the ghoul on top of the monkey bars. He stares down at the school from the bars that are almost as high as the school itself. Three small faces peer anxiously from a window. The texture of this illustration invokes the work of Edward Gorey, and like Gorey’s work, this illustration is wry. Its humour is sophisticated. The monkey bars are just inches away from the school’s front steps. The compression works both to render the picture unreal and also to evoke the Gothic’s Freudian work of condensation. The focus in the illustration is on eye contact between the children and the monster. He is the center of their attention and they are of his. This monster has something fascinating about him with his concentrated stare, his pointy ears, long chin, bald head, sharp nose, and devilish eyes. The ghoul is very much the Gothic villain.

Gothic villains, from Victor Frankenstein and Montrose to Count Olaf and Chet the Celestial Being, attract us because they are flamboyant and irrepressible. Their desire refuses to be contained. They are audacious, living with sublimity as a common occurrence of the everyday. They are, in that psychoanalytical sense, both ourselves and our “other.” We have been thinking through a Blakean language that might see the Gothic villain as, potentially, either the Prolific or the Devourer. This figure might turn destructive and chaotic or it might offer energy for creative and constructive action. In other words, the Gothic may either deliver subversive possibility or demand the safety of conformity. In either case, it presents us with a fantasy of desire, and desire, we know, is out of reach. We can never fully conform and remain active

and engaged in life unless we become automatons, and we can never fully subvert the social order without destroying our own foundation. The Gothic is a form that examines our fear of desire. In children's fiction, it often takes the form of a fantasy, as in the fantasy of the lurking ghoul. As Slavoj Žižek (2002) asserts, fantasy teaches us how to desire, and perhaps this is true of Gothic fantasies. Reading "The Ghoul" just might result in a readjustment in our desire for escape from the confines of the educational institution.

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1

THE HAUNTED NURSERY: 1764–1830

Dale Townshend

Nothing, in my opinion, can be more reprehensible than the too common practice in nurses and servants, of alarming the tender minds of children with the idle tales of hobgoblins, haunted houses, &c. the effects of which are to impress them with that timidity, which is afterwards removed with the greatest difficulty, even when advanced in life, and with minds naturally superior to such little things. Sporting with the passions is always a dangerous project, for by such imprudence the mind may be so deranged as to be incapable of ever acting again with regularity and composure. [. . .] Many from the sudden impulse of terror, have, from such wanton frolics, lost their lives; whilst others again have had their intellects so much impaired, as to be rendered miserable, and altogether disqualified for the occupations of life ever after. (Dr. Churchill, *Genuine Guide to Health*, as cited by James Plumptre in a footnote to *The Truth of the Popular Notion of Apparitions, or Ghosts, Considered by the Light of Scripture: A Sermon* [1818])

It is late 1764. *The London Chronicle or, Universal Evening Post* for December 27–29 announces the publication of a book for children entitled *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* by a certain Mr. Newbery. As the history of children’s literature so frequently rehearses, writer, publisher, and book merchant John Newbery had opened up the market for children’s fiction twenty years earlier with the publication of *A Little*

Pretty Pocket Book. But late 1764 demands attention in another respect: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was published in a modest edition of 500 copies on Christmas Eve of that year. For all their temporal coincidence, the differences between these two texts are salient, and not only in terms of the ages of their respective intended readerships: while Walpole had succeeded in introducing to the world of narrative fiction what the second edition of *Otranto* would term a "Gothic" taste for the supernatural (Clery 1995), Newbery subjected the apparition in *Goody Two-Shoes* to a spectacular act of exorcism.

In the inset tale, an orphaned Margery, the eponymous Goody Two-Shoes herself, attends the funeral of Lady Ducklington in the Parish Church. Long after midnight on the day of the service, the parishioners are awoken by a chilling sound of the bell inexplicably tolling in the church steeple. Unsurprisingly, their susceptible imaginations conjure up thoughts of the spectral return of the recently buried woman, for "all thought it was Lady *Ducklington's* Ghost dancing among the Bell-ropes" (Newbery 1977: 48). But of an instance of supernatural haunting, Mr. Long, the Rector, remains unconvinced, and returning to the darkened church to confirm his scepticism, he throws open its doors to reveal no ghost but the figure of Goody Two-Shoes herself. Having fallen asleep on the pew during the funeral service, she had accidentally been locked in the church, remaining there for much of the night until it occurred to her to ring the church-bells in order to alert the parishioners to her whereabouts.

Although such a version of the "explained supernatural" would not be out of place in Ann Radcliffe, *Goody Two-Shoes* takes off in a direction quite different from that of the emergent Gothic tradition in refusing, from the outset, to countenance the ghost as anything other than the figment of a foolish, irrational mind. The second section of the book undertakes a similar dismissal of superstition when the now married heroine stands fallaciously accused of witchcraft: "Mercy upon me!" the narrative voice cries out, "People stuff Children's Heads with Stories of Ghosts, Faries, Witches, and such Nonsense when they are young, and so they continue Fools all their Days" (1977: 119); "After this, my dear Children," the narrator continues, "I hope you will not believe any foolish Stories that ignorant, weak, or designing People may tell you about *Ghosts*; for the Tales of Ghosts, Witches, and Fairies, are the Frolicks of a distempered Brain. No wise Man ever saw either of them" (1765: 56). The same month in late 1764 which saw, with *Otranto*, the hard-earned admission of the ghost to the pages of popular adult romance, the spectre—or, more accurately, the mere ghost of a ghost—was expelled from the realms of respectable literature for children.

Newbery's endeavor here was informed by at least two things. First, *Goody Two-Shoes* self-consciously signals its aims to counteract the perceived effects of a particular brand of storytelling for children, pitting the virtues of print culture over the antediluvian trappings of orality in the process. At least since the early modern period, British culture had consistently associated ghosts and children with the oral tradition in storytelling, and this primarily through that most maligned and misunderstood of cultural personae: the Old Wife. Although, as Mary Chamberlain (1981) has argued, the Old Wife had originally dispensed such crucial services to her society as advice concerning pregnancy, childbirth and the administering of herbal remedies and cures, the rise of science during the early modern period served severely to de-legitimize the modes of knowledge in which she traditionally dealt. This denigration of feminine forms of knowledge fused seamlessly with a growing cultural prejudice against the belief in the existence of ghosts (Nashe 1594). Re-enacting the scientific devaluation of her medical practices, the Old Wife's orally transmitted tales of supernatural activity would become a particular object of cultural derision in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Lady Macbeth, for instance, dismisses her husband's horrified, somewhat feminized reactions to the appearance of Banquo's ghost as analogous to the ridiculous effects of an old woman's story of ghouls told to impressionable child-listeners at a fireside: "O, these flaws and starts / (Impostors to true fear) would well become / A woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authoris'd by her grandam" (III.iv.164–167).¹ Indeed, so pervasive had these associations between women, orality, and ghost stories become that, in 1595, George Peele would produce and publish *The Old Wife's Tale*, a short dramatic entertainment in which Madge, the eponymous old wife herself, resolves to "drive away the time with an old wife's winter's tale" (1595: 89–90). What follows is a dramatised story replete with atmospherically suggestive thunder and lightning, spirit possession, a disembodied head that rises from a well, and the unburied corpse of one Jack which issues forth a ghost.

The female storyteller recurs in contexts of closer temporal proximity to the rise of the Gothic aesthetic too, and in the *Spectator* on March 14, 1711, Joseph Addison invoked the scenario of the Old Wife, the fireside, and the child-listener as a means of launching a familiar Enlightenment critique of superstition.

I remember last Winter there were several young Girls of the Neighbourhood sitting about the Fire with my Landlady's Daughters, and telling Stories of Spirits and Apparitions. [. . .] pretending

to read a Book that I took out of my Pocket, [I] heard several dreadful Stories of Ghosts as pale as Ashes that had stood at the Feet of a Bed, or walked over a Church-yard by Moon-light. (Clery & Miles 2000: 14–15)

Strictly speaking, of course, there is nothing inherently “Gothic” about these and other such cultural representations of the Old Wife and her dealings in terrifying tales for children, and we might only approach the back-dating of what appears to us now to be their characteristically “Gothic” concerns with scenes of horror and terror, ghosts and ghouls, death and haunting with extreme caution. As Alfred E. Longueil has pointed out, only in the late 1790s did “Gothic” assume some of the senses in which we most frequently employ it today, that is, as “a mere synonym for that grotesque, ghastly, and violently superhuman” strain in fiction (1923: 459). Even so, this oral tradition of supernatural storytelling is central to the history of the Gothic in children’s literature because it assists in the reconstruction of the historical context in which the devoutly anti-oral, anti-supernatural impulses of a book like *Little Goody Two-Shoes* could play themselves out.

The philosophical underpinnings of Newbery’s fiction are no less salient, for in asserting that children, having been exposed to tales of spectral activity in their youth, were likely to “continue Fools all their Days,” *Goody Two Shoes* disclosed its affinities with the education theories of John Locke as outlined in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693).

The first Step to get this noble, and manly steadiness, is, what I have above mentioned, carefully to keep Children from frights of all kinds; when they are young. Let not any fearful Apprehensions be talked into them, nor terrible Objects surprize them. This often so shatters, and discomposes the Spirits; that they never recover it again; but during their whole Life, upon the first suggestion, or appearance of any terrifying Idea, are scatter’d and confounded [. . .]. (1693: 176)

As it turns out, Locke’s account of the permanent and irreversible effects of fear would enjoy a particularly extended cultural afterlife, and almost one hundred years later, the same reservations would be expressed by the radical Catharine Macaulay in her *Letters on Education* (1790). Here too, the tales of the haunted nursery are said to leave their indelible traces upon even the least craven of grown men: “Many men . . . have confessed to me . . . that they could not go through a church yard in the dusk of the evening, without feeling the full weight of the stories of the nursery” (1790: 72).