

Reading in the Dark, Sleeping with the Lights On: Uses and Abuses of Horror in Children's Literature

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McCort, Jessica R., ed. *Reading in the Dark. Horror in Children's Literature and Culture*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2016. pp. 256. ISBN 978-1496806444. Hb. \$56.99.

The University Press of Mississippi's *Children's Literary Association series* (edited by Jackie Horne), since its launch in 2012, has covered an impressive variety of topics ranging from collective authorship in the golden age of children's literature to comic books for dual audiences, historical materialist perspectives on children's literature, and posthumanism in contemporary young adult (YA) fiction. The eleventh volume of the series edited by Jessica R. McCort explores the intersection between horror, popular culture, and children's literature. The nine case studies authored by an international crew of established and emerging scholars analyze picturebooks, fairy tales, YA dystopias, and monster movies to demonstrate the pedagogically beneficial potential of scary stories, and to prove, in agreement with the volume's motto, that "horror stories provide a playground in which children (and adults) can play at fear. And in the end they'll be safe and, hopefully, reassured" (qtd. in Hood 3).

Horror and children's literature, are at first glance, not the most likely literary partners. This strange coupling in the title immediately evokes the unending debate about what does and does not qualify as appropriate reading material for underage audiences. On the one hand, a notion of childhood rooted in Romanticism prevails in our Western cultural imagery that associates children with an idealized innocence in need of adult protection, and is used to justify the careful censorship exercised over any cultural content meant for youngsters' entertainment and education. This overprotectiveness may yield absurd results: Maurice Sendak's by-now-classic picturebook *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) was banned in the early 1960s from many US schools because its dream-like narrative told the story of a boy who rebelled against parental discipline by running away with monsters and becoming wild—a plotline regarded as potentially damaging for sensitive young readers. Even today, many American parents refuse to read classic fairy tales to their offspring for fear that these proto-horror texts' amoral graphic violence, the neglect of political correctness, and the abundance of prejudicial stereotypes related to misogyny, racism, or classism involved in the "happily ever after scenario" (Bacchilega 11) might disturb youngsters' psychic development.

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On the other hand, the tremendous popularity of young adult dystopias and children's gothic fiction on the contemporary book market (from *The Hunger Games*, the *Divergent*, or *the Maze Runner* trilogies and the *Goosebumps* series to *Buff*, *Maleficent*, and *Coraline*—all discussed in McCort's volume) invites us to reconsider the role of children's/YA literature. Critical collections, like *Reading in Dark*, help us realize that children's/YA literature has always been engaged with serious, "adult" sociopolitical concerns and taboo topics like trauma, loss, and death (think of classics like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Little Prince*, or *The Moomins*); and that the honest discussion of these all-too-human experiences is perhaps a more efficient way of educating young people about the world they live in than shielding them from the unpleasant aspects of our vulnerable mortal existence.

As the case studies of *Reading in the Dark* reveal, horror is never pointless in children's literature, but rather holds the Bettelheimian psychotherapeutical function that Neil Gaiman, inspired by G. K. Chesterton, formulated as follows: "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten" (Gaiman 2). McCort calls this trope "the defeat of the Jabberwock, the triumph over a fearsome monster that is achieved by both the child within the text and the child without" (15). This optimistic message grounded in hope and empathy is particularly important in the postmillennial era when one must face at an early age "new monsters" including advanced information technology, financial crisis, environmental catastrophe, migration, or post-9/11 permanent threats of terrorism (Bradford et al., Wu et al.).

Despite the increasing number of children's/YA books dealing with delicate taboo topics as "unspeakable" as transgender identity, mental illness or incest; and the relentless commodification of pleasurable thrills by Disney theme park rides and 3D CGI blockbusters, the place of horror in children's culture remains a controversial issue because of the immediate violent corporeal reactions triggered by (and primarily associated with) the genre, a sensation we do not wish to expose our youngsters to. Still, in a time when global warming, school shootings, and cyber bullying belong to children's daily dreads, it is perhaps more timely and intriguing than ever to look the monster under the bed in the eye and ask ourselves what we should do about it. Eventually, we might conclude that the encounter with the fictitious beast is comforting because its predictable fantastic horror is so obviously distinct from the uncontrollable anxieties and fears of our lived reality.

Editor Jessica McCort suggests that *Reading in the Dark* fills a major gap in criticism devoted to children's literature and culture by bringing the

neglected genre of horror into focus. Although the collection fulfils an important mission because of the above mentioned reasons, the editor's claim about the unprecedented nature of her scholarly agenda does not do justice to important predecessors exploring a similar theme, like *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (2008) edited by Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis, or Simon Bacon and Leo Ruickbie's *Little Horrors: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Anomalous Children and the Construction of Monstrosity* (2016), just to mention two examples, which have contributed to solidifying the study of horror in children's literature as an established field of critical inquiry.

McCort's "Introduction" argues convincingly for the importance of being frightened and provides a concise overview of various literary theoretical approaches to the uses of horror for children, ranging from more well-known notions like Maria Tatar's "pedagogy of fear" or Noel Carroll's "philosophy of horror" to less familiar ones like Elizabeth Bird's "pedagogy of bravery" and Victoria Nelson's "bright Gothick." She attempts to offer a working definition for horror as a critical category while acknowledging the Protean malleability of this classificatory label applied to a dizzying variety of narratives, including faux horror that domesticates terror to turn fears funny, literary horror that subverts cautionary tales and offers pastiche of canonized monster novels, serialized tween/YA horror of the paranormal romance type, and horror tales specifically written with child audiences in mind that emerged in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. She gives a glimpse at the richness of this multi-faceted genre that holds recreational, social critical, moral philosophical, and pedagogical potentials alike via complex layers of meanings which are deciphered in the nine chapters of the collection.

In the first study, Justine Gieni examines the delight and discipline of body horror in the fearful-fascinating cautionary tales of nineteenth century German psychiatrist Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845). She argues that the grotesque punishments of the abject child satirize the conventional didacticism of the era's children's literature, mock heavy-handed pedagogical practices and pathologizing patriarchal-medical regimes, while they offer cathartic forbidden pleasures to young readers who are allowed to revel in socially prohibited, deviant bodily unruliness. A. Robin Hoffman's comparative analysis demonstrates how Edward Gorey and Charles Dickens "draw the horror out of childhood death" (61) and how *The Gasblycrumb Tinies* (1963), a mid-twentieth century American picturebook, creates a grotesquely sinister replica of Victorian England by shifting the focus from sentimentality to ghoulishness. Rebecca A. Brown's chapter tellingly entitled "From Aggressive Wolf to Heteronormative Zombie" explores interconnections between performing monstrosity and masculinity in classic and postmillennial narrative picturebooks, from Sendak's

Where the Wild Things Are to Kelly DiPucchio's *Zombie in Love* (2011). Jessica R. McCort is interested in the allure of horror in contemporary revisionist fairy-tale novels for children. The postmodern YA novels she examines (Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* [2002] and Adam Gidwitz's *A Tale Dark and Grim* [2010]) match today's Grimmification trend—a counter-reaction to bowdlerizing, sanitizing Disneyfications—in so far as they augment the macabre nightmare aspects of the fairy-tale tradition and blend it with gothic horror themes and effects to reveal some lessons about the child-protagonists' personality development. The fact that McCort reads *Coraline* as a combination of “Hansel and Gretel,” “Bluebeard,” and *Alice in Wonderland* sheds light on the diversity of the fairy-tale dreads and desires. Peter C. Kunze devotes his chapter to the discussion of didactic monstrosity and postmodern revisionism in contemporary digitally animated cinematic blockbusters for children through the examples of *Shrek* and *Monsters, Inc.* He reads these as political texts which comment on the unequal distribution of power positions and urge empathy with marginalized other(ed)s. Nick Levey and Holly Harper suggest that contemporary YA horror novels—namely, Charlie Higson's *The Enemy* (2009) and Michael Grant's *Gone* (2008)—may successfully introduce young readers to complex debates about collective responsibility, social crisis, the choice of altruism, and democratic dynamics. Janani Subramanian and Jorie Lagerwey's analysis of horrifying girlhood in *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) points out how the contradictions inherent in mixing the gothic mythology of horror with teen TV melodrama's coming of age narrative are mirrored in the raced and gendered contradictions of post-feminist girl culture. Emily L. Hiltz's chapter on hybrid horror in *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) studies how genetically engineered, chimeric, interspecies “mutts” act as prime vehicles for questioning the bodily, psychological, and moral make-up of both human and animal monstrous behavior. Kirsten Kowalewski—editor of the *Monster Librarian* website dedicated to helping readers of horror fiction find another book to read and assisting librarians in developing their horror collection—explores in the last chapter the place of scary books for children in schools and children's libraries, and attributes the popularity of the genre to the engaged, enthusiastic reading elicited by frightening fiction.

Reading in the Dark will likely captivate the attention of scholars, students, and aficionados of horror and/or children's/YA literature alike. The collection proves that horror is so much more than “junk food book” or disciplinary instrument. It allows us to test from an early age our own boundaries, and see how far we dare to go into the unknown.

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