

Rollins College Rollins Scholarship Online

Faculty Publications

Summer 2010

Review Essay: Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis, eds., *The Gothic in Children's Literature* (2008) and Jarlath Killeen, *The History of the Gothic* (2009)

Patrick C. Fleming

Rollins College, pfleming@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Published In

Fleming, Patrick C. "Review Essay: Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis, eds., *The Gothic in Children's Literature* (2008) and Jarlath Killeen, *The History of the Gothic* (2009)." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 35:2 (2010)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

surprising how ungenerous Lerer is about previous critical histories of the genre by scholars such as F. J. Harvey Darton and Cornelia Meigs: “instead of analyzing, they celebrate; instead of discriminating, they list” (7). These books do lack nuanced analysis of the kind that Lerer provides, and yet it seems unjust to characterize them as merely celebratory rather than recognizing them as heroic acts of reclamation and legitimation. Indeed, past surveys of children’s literature are still valuable because so many of the titles they mention remain critically neglected. Much work still remains to be done on women and minority writers whose popularity has not saved them from obscurity; on ignored subgenres such as children’s drama and nonfiction; on texts outside of the Anglo-American tradition; and so on. Lerer declares that children’s literature has flourished within the academy. But it wasn’t so when Darton and Meigs were writing, nor has the field reached full acceptance even today: whereas most English departments recognize the need to employ at least one medievalist or Victorianist, the same cannot be said for children’s literature, despite the explosion of cultural studies and the centrality of children’s books to contemporary popular culture. Prestigious universities such as Stanford and Princeton may be pleased when senior scholars such as Lerer migrate over to this field, but they very rarely hire children’s literature specialists. Not the least reason to be grateful for Lerer’s intelligent, expansive, and well-written book is that it will continue the long process of legitimating children’s literature

studies and hopefully encourage a wide range of scholars to recognize the genre’s intimate ties to other related fields such as theater history, education, cultural studies, and the history of the book.

Marah Gubar is associate professor of English and director of the Children’s Literature Program at the University of Pittsburgh. Her book Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature (Oxford UP, 2009) was named a Times Higher Education “Book of the Week.”



The Gothic in Children’s Literature: Haunting the Borders. Edited by Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis. New York and London: Routledge, 2008.

History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature, 1825–1914. By Jarlath Killeen. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009.

Reviewed by PC Fleming

Pairing children’s literature and the Gothic seems at first like a strange idea. The supernatural terrors, sexual threats, and labyrinthine plots that characterize the Gothic seem contrary to most assumptions about children’s books. And yet, as the collection of essays edited by Jackson, Coats, and McGillis demonstrates, Gothic tropes have been central to children’s literature from its beginnings, and Killeen’s book reveals that the influence goes both ways: the Victorian Gothic was strongly influenced by changing notions of childhood.

The first essay in *The Gothic in Children’s Literature* is Dale Towns-

hend's "The Haunted Nursery: 1764–1830." Townshend begins with the outwardly mundane comment that, at least in the eighteenth century, culturally approved children's literature seems to be "everything the Gothic is not" (21). Yet both genres date their origins to the same period and even, if we choose the right texts as "firsts," to the same year (1764, the year in which both Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and John Newbery's *Goody Two-Shoes* were published). During the period of high Gothic characterized by Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis, conservative pedagogues like Sarah Trimmer kept Gothic elements out of children's books. But with Romanticism, the Gothic becomes "an appropriate mode for children while being denounced as a dangerous and aesthetically inferior form for adults" (29). According to Townshend's argument, then, the Gothic is in fashion for adults when out of fashion for children, and vice versa—a sinusoidal relationship that extends across the nineteenth century.

Townshend's is the only essay in the collection with an explicitly historical focus, and he provides a context for the subsequent essays, which deal primarily with twentieth-century texts. Nadia Crandall, Alice Mills, and Laurie N. Taylor each discuss the presence of the Gothic in distinctly modern genres. Crandall connects *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Dracula* to cyberfiction by Alexandre Jardin and Alan Gibbons, while Mills gives a Freudian reading of Garth Nix's *The Seventh Tower*, originally envisioned as a series of works that could be translated into a television series or video game. Taylor argues

that Goth comics like *Squee*, *Courtney Crumrin*, and *Gloomcookie* subvert the hyper-masculine, patriarchal values usually associated with comics.

The two essays by Julie Cross and Karen Coats address the role of humor in the Gothic. Cross argues that the comic Gothic rose to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Key to the comic Gothic, Cross argues, is that readers remain aware of villains' fictionality, "which is made evident by their ludicrous proportions and behavior" (59). She bases her reading in psychological theories of humor.

Coats reads children's Gothic as a symptom, asks what possible traumas could produce this symptom, and suggests that the Gothic offers a way of indirectly coping with such traumas. She argues, convincingly, that the Gothic allows readers to address the "irrational, affect-driven aspects of human experience" like fantasy and wish fulfillment. By casting these experiences into story form, "and taking them to their hyperbolic extreme, we are more readily able to see their absurdity, to turn them into moments for self-deprecating and subsequently empowering laughter" (79). Coats backs up these claims with extremely insightful readings of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, *The Wolves in the Walls*, and *Mirrormask*.

Like Mills, Cross, and Coats, Anna Smith and Anna Jackson take a psychoanalytic approach to children's Gothic. Smith examines the connection between family and place in works by Gary Crew and Sonya Hartnett and questions whether scary

stories necessarily “have to address—or spring from—scary families” (139). Jackson, in one of the strongest essays in this collection, plays on the etymological similarity but semantic difference between the words “canny” and “uncanny.” Jackson argues that in Diana Wynne Jones’s *The Time of the Ghost*, Penelope Farmer’s *Charlotte Sometimes*, and Margaret Mahy’s *The Haunting*, the sense of the uncanny “is very clearly related from the start to the central theme of the protagonist’s uncertain sense of identity” (160). Protagonists can face this uncertainty only when they recognize their own abilities and sense of purpose—that is, when they become “at ease with their own canniness” (174).

Though she is more interested in issues of family than of nationality, both of the writers Smith addresses are Australian, and she argues that they “consolidate a local Australian version of a Gothic landscape” (137). Rose Lovell-Smith and Karen Sands-O’Connor take a more explicitly regional approach to Gothic children’s literature. Lovell-Smith argues that the beach is a Gothic site for New Zealand authors, and that in *The Tricksters* Margaret Mahy gives the Gothic a significant local flavor. Sands-O’Connor contrasts the West Indies as portrayed in early twentieth-century texts like Richard Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica* and Arthur Ransome’s *Peter Duck* with the West Indies of more recent works like Philip Pullman’s *The Broken Bridge*. Sands-O’Connor’s argument is grounded in postcolonial and transatlantic theory, and she concludes that, “Even in a West Indies now conveniently

emptied of its non-European population, racial fears haunt the English characters” (124).

Two of the most compelling close readings come from Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario and Jane Cummins. Rozario argues that in a world as technology driven as ours is, the book itself becomes a relic, and she supports her claim with readings of Jonathan Stroud, Cornelia Funke, and Marcus Sedgwick. Cummins brings Gothic criticism to bear on the Harry Potter novels and claims that Gothic tropes are most apparent with respect to female development. She grounds her argument on an insightful reading of the scene in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* when Hermione is attacked by a troll in the girls’ bathroom. This is the only moment in the series when Hermione plays the part of Gothic heroine, and Cummins reads the scene as a description of Hermione’s first period. This event solidifies Hermione’s retreat from her bossy, unpopular self into a friendship with Harry and Ron, which marks, according to Cummins, Hermione’s first image of herself as “feminine” (182). Readings of the troll and of Moaning Myrtle round out Cummins’s perceptive argument.

Roderick McGillis’s essay ends the volume on a contemporary note and serves as a kind of conclusion to the collection of essays. McGillis argues that the Gothic is particularly in vogue right now because “we live in fearful times and the Gothic reflects fear, and maybe even combats this fear in some strange way” (229). McGillis frames his essay as a response to Mark Edmundson’s claim (in *Night-*

mare on Main Street) that the Gothic represents paralysis and social inertia, and he argues that, on the contrary, the Gothic can “elicit the shock that prompts desire for change” (230).

The essays in *The Gothic in Children's Literature* range significantly in quality. The best of them increase our general understanding of both children's literature and the Gothic. Some of the essays, though, would benefit from a broader understanding of Gothic criticism outside the realm of children's literature. And it is the goal of Jarlath Killeen's *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature, 1825–1914* to provide just such a context. In the final chapter, a “Survey of Criticism,” Killeen nicely summarizes Gothic criticism from the last thirty years, and his mastery of this criticism is evident throughout the work. He historicizes not only the primary texts he addresses but also the critical tradition. Studies of the Victorian Gothic, Killeen suggests, were strongly influenced by twentieth-century reactions against the Victorians and the conservative social and political values associated with Margaret Thatcher (7–10).

In the first chapter Killeen investigates the relationship between the Gothic and notions of history, with particular attention to deep time, nostalgia, and progress—all key concepts in Victorian studies. Killeen argues that the Gothic is neither nostalgic nor progressive and provides insightful readings of William Harrison Ainsworth (who he sees as a bridge between Charles Robert Maturin and Charles Dickens) and of H. G. Wells.

Killeen's second chapter, “The Horror of Childhood,” will likely

be of most interest to readers of the *Quarterly*. Killeen argues that, during the Victorian period, novelists recast the child in place of the Gothic heroine, and society in place of the Gothic villain. He separates the chapter into sections on the threatened child (for example, *Oliver Twist* and *Paul Dombey*); the threatening child (for example, Miles and Flora in *The Turn of the Screw*); the primitive child (for example, Heathcliff and Cathy); and perpetual boyhood (in Wilde, Stevenson, and Stoker). Killeen's extended readings make use of an impressive knowledge of Victorian culture, from latent anti-Semitism to the Victorian obsession with the athletic body and the advent of the professional body-builder.

The absence of children's literature from this chapter is lamentable, and surprising. But Killeen is, after all, more interested in childhood than in children's literature. He discusses Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* but not *Treasure Island*, and he makes no mention at all of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear, though both seem especially relevant to his argument. None of the essays in *The Gothic in Children's Literature* is devoted specifically to the Victorian period, either. Given the importance of both children's literature and the Gothic during the Victorian period, this is an area that is ripe for further study.

Killeen's third chapter addresses regional Gothic narratives, with emphasis on the “Celtic peripheries” of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales (91). He argues that novelists see these regions (like the past, and childhood) as simultaneously revolting and desir-

able. The final chapter addresses the Victorians' obsession with the occult, and particularly with ghost stories. Killeen relates ghost stories to cultural anxieties about the presence of the past and argues that the ghost story should be read as an extension of the genre of autobiography.

In his conclusion Killeen includes *Peter Pan* among the "Imperial Gothic adventure stories and Gothic nostalgia fests" (163) that dominated the Victorian period, and he ends with the "unmediated Gothic of horror of the First World War" (165). This conclusion returns us to an argument that runs through both Killeen's book and *The Gothic in Children's Literature*: the power of Gothic fiction, whether for children or adults, is its ability to help us deal with the horrors of war, terrorism, and death that are, sadly, all too real.

PC Fleming is a PhD candidate at the University of Virginia. His dissertation, entitled "The Moral Tale and Its Legacy," investigates connections between late eighteenth-century children's fiction and the early nineteenth-century novel.



***Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women.* By Harriet Reisen. New York: Holt, 2009.**

Reviewed by Roberta Seelinger Trites

Harriet Reisen's *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* is a love story. It is not the story of the romantic love Louisa May Alcott felt during her life, although it does include a satisfying account of her affection for Ladislav Wisniewski;

rather, it is a biography written by an author who is in love with her subject. "Like so many other girls, I fell under the spell of Louisa May Alcott when my mother presented *Little Women* to me as if it were the key to a magic kingdom," Reisen writes (xi). Later in her life, while visiting Alcott's bedroom at Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts, "Louisa May Alcott emerged to make herself real and claim me" (xii). In writing about a historical figure with such respect—and even love—Reisen captures the spirit of many Alcott devotees who have been similarly enraptured by this nineteenth-century writer: Ursula Le Guin, Gertrude Stein, Bobbie Ann Mason, Simone de Beauvoir, and J. K. Rowling (302). Reisen might just as well have listed many of Alcott's biographers—Ednah Dow Cheney, Madeleine B. Stern, Madelon Bedell, Martha Saxton—as members of the fan club. In the interest of full self-disclosure, I must admit that I, too, am a fan.

Thus, I have often wondered what it is that readers find so compelling about Alcott's life. Reisen's biography—and the PBS documentary she wrote with the same title—explores this fascination with sensitivity and integrity in a book that is produced for the general public and is both accessible and smoothly narrative. Reisen responsibly recounts how Alcott's intellectual life was formed in the crucible of Boston and Concord intellectual life; she details how various historical figures influenced the Alcott family, including the Peabody sisters, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and