

The Goblins Will Get You!

Horror in Children's Literature from the Nineteenth Century

Charmette Kendrick

An' little Orphant Annie says, when the blaze is blue,
An' the lampwick sputters, an' the wind goes woo-oo!
An' you hear the crickets quiet, an' the moon is gray,
You better mind yer parents, and yer teachers fond and dear,
An' churish them 'at loves you, an' dry the orphant's tear,
An' he'p the pore an' needy ones 'at clusters all about,
Er the Gobble-uns 'll git you
Ef you
Don't
Watch
Out!



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James Whitcomb Riley first published "Little Orphant Annie" in 1885. The Indiana native's inspiration for the poem was a household servant from childhood. After she finished her work, little Allie (later changed to "Annie" due to a typesetting error) would delight young James by telling stories filled with goblins, witches, and other types of devilment. Riley's poem has endured through the years—a source of pride to Indiana natives, it remains a staple of little Hoosiers' Halloween festivities.¹

Throughout the ages, stories of ghosts and goblins, witches, and monsters have been handed down from one generation to the next. In her book *The Thing at the Foot of the Bed and Other Scary Tales*, Maria Leach writes, "For there is something in the human mind that loves to scare itself to death!"²

Although every land and people possess a folklore containing tales of the macabre, each culture has not taken an equal approach to sharing these stories with the young. English and American writers of the nineteenth century were especially concerned with protecting the innocent from exposure to harmful ideas.

"Children's literature emerged as a genre largely in reaction to the popularity of the adult gothic romance," according to the editors of *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*. "Children were expected to covet books with the tame delights that came from light whimsy rather than the more piquant pleasures of a good shiver."³

Consider this comment from the book *Traditions and Legends of the Elf, the Fairy and the Gnome*:

Conceiving that a well selected collection of the best specimens of the legendary writers of all countries would be an acceptable present to those who read for amusement, the following little compilation has been undertaken; at the same time it will be perceived that every thing of a pernicious tendency has been carefully expunged and every tale points forth the moral, that virtue has a sure, albeit a slow reward, and that vice as sure and as swift a punishment.⁴

Children of the nineteenth century were expected to use their time wisely and to limit their leisure hours to activities that would expand their minds and intellects. In *The Importance of Time*, the author writes,

There are very few children who have not heard silly stories of drarfs (sic), and giants, and giant-killers; as well as of dragons with forked tongues and tails, and monsters, sometimes with one head, and sometimes with two. But the time children spend in hearing, or in reading such silly stories, is not only thrown away, but misspent. It is thrown away, because no good is to be got from such silly stories; and it is misspent, because it increased a love of folly and falsehood, and lessens the desire for wisdom and truth.⁵

In nineteenth-century England and America, most scary stories written and published for the young had two purposes—to indoctrinate youngsters with the morals of the day and to expose superstition as a false belief system perpetuated by the foolish and the wicked.

In *Happy Hours at Hazel Nook; or, Cottage Stories*, English author Harriet Farley explains through her character's dialogue the prevailing viewpoint on horror stories during her time, the mid-1800s. The book is a series of stories told by each member of a family during the twelve nights following Christmas. Papa tells two scary stories on the tenth night. Before telling his first story, he explains to the children why they are often discouraged from listening to these types of stories:

There were many witch and ghost stories rife when I was a boy; and though many parents disapproved our listening to them it was because there was then a fear that our credulity might overcome reason. The witch stories were mostly too spiteful and gross to take pleasant hold upon the imagination . . . The ghost legends lay farther back upon the groundwork of the ideal, and were more creditable to the fancy and to the heart. The witch stories embodied some of the worst, the ghost legends some of the better elements in our nature . . . A witch story was usually a gross, unfeeling charge against some poor, helpless creature. . . . doubtless insanity was often mistaken for devilment and a wart or a mole a sure sign that the unfortunate possessor had cherished imps for nurslings.⁶

Although writers of the nineteenth century voiced reluctance to publishing horror stories for the young, most did slip one or two, albeit sanitized and mostly bloodless versions, into their story collections.

Most English ghost stories published during the nineteenth century conclude with the discovery that the “ghost” is in fact not a supernatural being after all. This is, in part, due to the Age of Enlightenment, which permeated the academic and literary worlds with its emphasis on reason and intellect and its disdain for superstition.

Ironically, devout believers in Christianity shared the intellectual world's dislike for “true” ghost stories but for a different reason—a fear they would lead the innocent down a trail to wickedness. In *Right Is Might and Other Sketches*, published in 1854, three young boys are looking for something to do. One of the boys suggests telling scary stories, but another replies,

A person who is superstitious—one who believes in ghosts and witches, and such things—is very likely to fancy that he sees them. Such a one is always meeting with wonders, particularly at night. A stump, a post, a bush to his eye has arms, legs, eyes, and ears. Nay, it generally moves about and often seems to do more than mortals are able to perform . . . I believe that all the ghost stories are either invention of wicked people or the delusions of indulged and ill directed imagination.⁷

Many ghost stories from this time period involve people mistaking animals, inanimate objects, or other people for ghosts. In “The Cemetery Ghost,” townspeople discover the “ghost” several have been spotting near a local cemetery is actually a cow disguised with a sheet by his owner in hopes of protecting the animal from poachers.⁸ In “The Nightshirt,” a farmer shoots holes in what he thinks is a ghost only to discover in the morning it was his own nightshirt hanging on the line. When his wife complains, he replies, “Lucky I wasn't in it.”⁹

Robert Bloomfield's ballad “The Fakenham Ghost: A True Tale,” published in 1806, employs a similar theme. In the poem, an old woman is crossing the moors at night. Hearing a noise, she hurries faster home:

Her footsteps knew no idea
But follow'd faster still;
And echo'd to the darksome Copse
That whisper'd on the Hill;¹⁰

A herd of deer run in front of her, startling her, as the sky grows darker. She hears strange sounds coming from behind:

Darker it grew; and darker fears
Came o'er her troubled mind;
When now, a sharp quick step she hears
Come patting close behind.
She turn'd; it stopt! . . . naught could she see

Upon the gloomy plain!

But, as she strove the sprite to flee,

She heard the same again.¹¹

Suddenly, she can make out a shadowy figure in the gloom:

Now terror seiz'd her quaking frame

For, where the path was bare,

The trotting Ghost kept up the same!

Yet once again, a midst her fright,

She tried what sight could do;

When through the cheating glooms of night,

A MONSTER stood in view.¹²

The old woman hurries faster toward the gate to her home:

Loud fell the gate against the post!

Her heart-strings like to crack:

For much she fear'd the grisly ghost

Would leap upon her back.

Still on, pat, pat, the Goblin went,

As it had done before . . .

Her strength and resolution spent,

She fainted at the door.¹³

Her husband and daughter, hearing strange noises, rush out of the house to find the old woman fainted dead away and the cause of all the commotion:

The Candle's gleam pierc'd through the night,

Some short space o'er the green;

And there the little trotting Sprite

Distinctly might be seen.

An ASS'S FOAL had lost its Dam

Within the spacious Park;

And simple as the playful lamb,

Had follow'd in the dark.

No Goblin he; no imp of sin:

No crimes had ever known.

They took the Shaggy stranger in,

And rear'd him as their own.

For many a laugh went through the Vale;

And frome conviction too:—

Each thought some other Goblin tale,

Perhaps, was just as true.¹⁴

Unlike ghost stories, witch stories from the nineteenth century were of a more gruesome nature as they were used to warn children away from playing with demonic forces. *The Witches' Frolic*, published in 1888 in a large picture book format, depicts a cautionary tale told from father to son about a man named Rob Gilpin who, during King James' reign, encounters a trio of witches in a deserted house. During the story, Rob is seduced by one of the witches and nearly meets a bad end. The story concludes with this warning:

Now, my little boy Ned. Brush off to your bed,

Tie your night-cap on safe, or a napkin instead,

Or these terrible nights you'll catch cold in your head.

And remember my tale, and the moral it teaches,

Which you'll find much the same as what Solomon preaches,

Don't meddle with broomsticks—they're Beelzebub's switches;

Of cellars keep clear,—they're the devil's own ditches;

And beware of balls, banqueting, brandy and witches!¹⁵

Many scary stories written by nineteenth-century American authors are influenced by the Puritan ideal of instilling morals through fear and are much more graphic than those published in England. One example is *The Children in the Wood* by Lawrence Lovechild, published in 1847.

Part of a series of books entitled, "Uncle William's Nursery Stories," the plot involves a nobleman, his wife, and their two children—a "gentle" girl and a "delightful" little boy who lived long ago in Cornwall, England. Sadly, both parents grow ill, and as they lay dying, the father begs his brother, the Baron, to take care of the children.

Soon after the parents' deaths, the Baron makes plans to have the children murdered so he can take control of their estate. He

hires two ruffians to do the deed, but instead they collect their reward and leave the children to fend for themselves in the woods. The children succumb to hunger and die in each other's arms and are buried under leaves by a flock of robins.

Upon receiving the estate, the Baron fritters and drinks himself into bankruptcy and finally perishes in the woods as a beggar, where he is devoured by wolves and vultures.

The book, filled with garishly colored etchings, includes a picture of the young victims dead in each others arms and another of the wolves and vultures devouring the Baron's corpse. Despite the subject matter and artwork, the book was lauded by critics of the day as being entirely suitable for the young. *The Boston Daily Advertiser* said that all stories in the series of Uncle William's Nursery Stories were "interspersed with such sound morality that they may be read without danger by the tenderest mind."¹⁶

Although many writers in the nineteenth century attempted to shield children from the perceived noxious influence of gothic literature, a few brave souls pushed past Victorian constraints. According to the editors of *The Gothic in Children's Literature*, "The nineteenth century 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."¹⁷

This was also the time period when Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was originally published, and although not a gothic text, *Alice* was a call to arms urging children and adults to turn the staid Victorian world of strict morals and manners on its head. Along with Carroll, there were other authors who understood the need for children to delight in pure imagination and to experience the thrill of a good ghost yarn told for no other reason than the sheer pleasure of it.

In the preface of *Is It True? Tales Curious and Wonderful*, the editor summarizes her philosophy in the preface:

"Is It True?"—a question children are sure to ask about any curious or wonderful story; and they may well ask it of some of these tales. I can only answer, that many people must have believed them to be true, since each is founded on a tradition, current in the place where it is supposed to have happened. Probably at the root of all lies a grain of truth, that in course of years has grown up and blossomed into these extraordinary fictions, which of course nobody can be expected to believe.

But they are generally amusing, and sometimes pathetic. Besides, there is a clear thread of right and wrong running through them, as it does through most legends which deal with the supernatural world. There (as here, soon or late) virtue is always rewarded and vice punished. . . . It is this spirit which consecrates the true untruth, the wise foolishness, of fairy tales and indeed of all imaginative literature. Nor, I think, will any sensible child mistake the vast difference between imagination and falsehood: between the weaving of a mere romance ("all pretence, all out of my own head, mamma," as

The Bechtel Experience

By Charmette Kendrick

I conducted research for the Bechtel Fellowship in February, 2008, at the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature at the George A. Smathers Libraries on the University of Florida campus in Gainesville. One of the highlights was accompanying curator Rita Smith on a behind-the-scenes tour of the closed-stacks collection.

Unlike most collectors, Ruth Baldwin, the eccentric woman who spent her life compiling the collection, was not interested in books in pristine condition; instead, she focused on those that children had actually handled and loved. One of the most amazing aspects of my research was handling the old books and viewing a bevy of diverse illustrations, including etchings and hand-painted chap books. Even the inscriptions on the inside covers of the books could be interesting. For example, inside a science book, I found an inscription that showed the book was a gift for a medical student at King's College, England, in 1865.

My research was like stepping back into history. The collection includes hundreds of Aesop's Fables collections published as far back as the 1600s; every mystery series for young people published in the 1940s and 50s; as well as one of the largest collections of Little Golden Books in the world. Other collectors laughed at Baldwin and called her books trash. But she had the last laugh when her collection was appraised to be worth more than a million dollars in the 1970s.

I focused on horror in the nineteenth century. As a child, I scoured the shelves of libraries for stories about witches, ghosts, and vampires. As an adult, I still have a passion for these stories, and that passion is shared by the children I work with, especially the boys, who are my most finicky readers.

I work in a multicultural urban branch, and I find that reading ghost stories to my after school kids as they make a craft is the surest way to keep them quiet and engaged. As I did my research, I kept my eyes open for stories that could be transformed into readers theater and puppet plays or were simply good for telling and reading aloud. I found many great stories from around the world.

I was thoroughly thrilled by all aspects of my experience, and I am extremely indebted to the Bechtel Committee for choosing me; the staff of the Smathers Libraries who assisted me; and to Baldwin herself for preserving a treasure of children's literature so that legions of children's librarians could gaze into the past as they inspire readers of the future.

a little girl sometimes says, who tells me the most astonishing stories, but who never told an untruth in her life), and that deliberate inventing or falsifying of facts which we stigmatise (sic) and abhor as lying.

Therefore, I do not think any child will be the worse for reading these tales. They have been collected out of the folk-lore of various countries, and written, at my suggestion, by various hands. I have written none myself, but I have revised the whole; and with as much pleasure as if I were again a child, and believed in fairies as earnestly as I once did, and as the little person before named does now. But it is only with her imagination: not to use her own phrase, “really and truly.” She quite understands the difference; and never expects to meet a fairy in every-day life; though I dare say she would like it very much—and so would many of my readers—and so should I.¹⁸

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Growing Up Around the World: Books as Passports to Global Understanding for Children in the United States is a project undertaken by the ALSC International Relations Committee (IRC) in memory of Zena Sutherland. The project includes bibliographies representing five regions—Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, and Europe. *Children and Libraries* published the Africa and Americas lists in the Spring 2006 issue.

Through these bibliographies, we hope to make books that accurately depict contemporary life in other countries more widely available to American children. Because the primary goal of the project is to identify fiction and nonfiction that will help young people in the United States understand the lives of children living in other countries today, the bibliographies virtually exclude genres such as fantasy and historical fiction. Rather than including the best books about other countries written by outsiders to those countries, the list seeks to identify children's books written or illustrated by people who have lived for at least two years within those cultures.

With very few exceptions, we limit the lists to books written in the last ten years and currently available in the United States. The updated bibliography, featuring books published through 2007, can be accessed online at www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/compubs/booklists/growingupwld/GrowingUpAroundWorld.cfm