This volume is dedicated to Diane Long Hoeveler.
A stroll through the children's section of any bookstore or library in the United States, especially in the month of October, will reveal displays of colorful picture books featuring an array of ghosts, witches, monsters, haunted houses, and the like. But what browsers will quickly notice is that these images that are supposed to haunt our dreams are all drawn in styles that make them appear cute, cuddly, or comical. The scenes pictured on the covers of books for middle grade readers, by contrast, are more likely to be images that conventionally inspire fear and disgust—creepy ventriloquist dummies or dolls with bulbous eyes, weapons dripping with gore, noxious-looking vines populated by oversized insects. Wander over to the young adult section, and you'll find that the creatures, now most likely humanoid in form, are more sexy than frightening, draped in shadows, exuding an appealing whiff of danger behind their preternatural good looks. Clearly, Gothic tropes and motifs are treated very differently for readers of different ages.

What is striking beyond the content differences in books for different ages is the sheer number of books that focus on scary things. These books are obviously a publishing mainstay for young readers; whether they are written for preschoolers, middle graders, or young adults, scary stories sell. Even nonfiction for young readers borrows tropes from the Gothic, honing in on the gross and disturbing aspects of human existence with titles like *How They Croaked: The Awful Ends of the Awfully Famous* (Bragg, 2011) and *What's Eating You?: Parasites – The Inside Story* (Davies, 2007), and compelling true stories that mirror Gothic horror, such as *The Borden Murders: Lizzie Borden and the Trial of the Century* (Miller, 2016). In fact, it's not going too far to say that the literature of fear has become the dominant aesthetic category in youth publishing today.

Such enormous popularity raises questions about Gothic literature for young readers that we don't typically ask about such literature for adults. No one asks, for instance, whether the latest adult horror novel is too scary for its readers, and yet we do ask that question about books for children.
When we think back to our own childhood attitudes toward frightening texts, or recall intensely felt experiences like storytelling at a sleepover, visiting a staged haunted house at Halloween, or fighting our bedtime fears, most of us have memories that fall into conflicting emotional categories. On the one hand, we may remember enjoying a “good scare.” On the other hand, we can likely recall some terrifying experience that still makes us shudder before we wave it away with an embarrassed laugh. This ambivalence in our personal experience prompts us to have strong opinions about the presence of Gothic themes in literature for young readers; basing an assessment on our own experiences, we tend to practice a kind of moral or ethical criticism with regard to the monsters, witches, ogres, paranorm­al lovers, and other denizens of the underworld that populate literature for children and young adults.

Such moralizing tendencies are grounded in our attitudes toward childhood itself. While literary critics of peer literature – that is, literature written for adult readers by adult writers – can focus on the content of texts without considering the developmental needs of their audience, people who take children’s literature seriously have to factor in a certain asymmetry in the way adults and children process stories. Marah Gubar has noted that this asymmetry usually takes one of two forms – either a “deficit model” or a “difference model” (450). Under a deficit model, adult thinking and behavior is both the norm and the goal, and children are thought of as unfinished adults, “lacking the abilities, skills and powers that adults have” (451). Adherents to such a model might worry that children can’t “handle” Gothic literature, that they lack strategies for managing the fear it evokes, and that they will suffer harm from exposure to scary stories. A difference model, by contrast, positions children as “a separate species, categorically different from adults,” about which we can know nothing until they magically emerge out of their cocoons into their adult forms (Gubar 451). People who work within this model focus entirely on the children who are imagined in and by the texts themselves. Since real children are ultimately unknowable, adult authors and critics impose their fantasies of who children are and how they speak and think on their readers, believing that children’s responses will be exactly what they wish them to be. In this model, children can’t talk back, disagree, or present an alternate interpretation of what the story is presenting to them.

Gubar proposes instead that we adopt a “kinship model” (453) that would enable us to understand that children and adults are similar but not the same; that they have similar fears, anxieties and desires but that they may deal with these differently; and that children have some skills and abilities that adults no longer have. The kinship model is therefore an important rapprochement in thinking about the Gothic in children’s literature because the images, motifs, and themes of the Gothic symbolize fears, anxieties, and desires that are just as recognizable to children as they are to adults. Juliann Fleenor, for instance, argues that the Gothic world is “one of nightmare, and that nightmare is created by the individual in conflict with the values of her society and her prescribed role” (10). Though referring specifically to adult women, her assessment is particularly apt for children and teens, whose values and roles within society are always under active negotiation. The toddler, for instance, has no respect for social propriety, and no real power (other than the public tantrum) to change the fact that he or she has to follow rules adults insist on. Adolescents aren’t all that different. The power imbalance between large bodies and small ones, legal citizens and dependents, turns even the most beloved and carefully nurtured child into a victim of the way things are. And this is of course to say nothing of the very real threats that less fortunate young people may be exposed to in their daily lives.

So whether their chief terrors are metaphorical or existential, children recognize in Gothic literature fears of being consumed, lost, victimized, or overwhelmed that have their seeds in childhood but persist into adulthood. In addition, the Gothic also transcribes desires common to both adults and children, in particular the desires for mystery and transcendence – for a responsive, enchanted universe outside the material world that we access through our senses. As our walk through the bookstore indicates, however, there are some important differences in the treatment of Gothic themes in literature for children than in literature produced for adults or even teens, and there are certainly differences in the way children respond to fantasy and threat. At the risk of being overly simplistic, I would suggest that the goal of Gothic literature for young children is to achieve mastery over turbulent emotions, most often through humor and the domestication of personified inner demons; the goals of middle grade books are to help readers imagine transcendence and inspire heroism in children and young adults.

The Gothic in American Children’s Literature

An Overview of the Development of American Children’s Gothic

Theorists of storytelling suggest that stories arose out of our need to negotiate the challenges of social life in harsh environments.1 Stories enable us to
tical narratives, using scissors if necessary! The goal was to evict all mentions of the supernatural from children's books, including those in mythology that, while it carried the traditions of the past forward, altered "supernatural" in their tales, but to "explain supernatural" appearing anywhere. Others were self-consciously participating in the creation of a national literature written for adults, such as Washington Irving's and Edgar Allan Poe's tales, were eagerly consumed by children and eventually became part of children's literature that excludes all ghostly and supernatural beings from the central realm of belief to the outlying realm of unbalanced imagination.

But in the unforgettable words of Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke) in Brian Gibson's Poltergeist II (1986): "They're baaack."

In fact, the return of the supernatural in American children's literature came through Evangelical texts in the early 1800s, which deployed conventions we now consider Gothic in order to drive home the horrors of hell and damnation. The folk narratives that Locke found objectionable and the rational texts written in reaction to them were British in origin, but the book-loving Puritans brought their own Gothic imaginations to the American shores. Consumed as they were with the demonic elements of the supernatural, the stories Puritans shared with children had to have a healthy dose of Hell to contrast with the glories of Heaven in order to seduce children into repentance. This religious impulse, combined with the terrors, real and imagined, of the violent confrontations with indigenous and enslaved people and the Romantic literature that was both imported and produced locally led to Gothic motifs appearing in Mark Twain's tales of American boyhood, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868-69), Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden (1911), the works of Canadian writer L. M. Montgomery, and the Little House books of Laura Ingalls Wilder. In addition, as has always been the case, literature written for adults, such as Washington Irving's and Edgar Allan Poe's tales, was eagerly consumed by children and eventually became part of youth culture through school assignments and screen versions in the twentieth century.

The impulse of the Gothic in this new crop of North American stories was not to walk readers through Hell on the road to salvation, however. These works were secular, and their writers wrote to support themselves financially, so the need to entertain children was paramount if they were going to gain a wide readership. Alcott's Jo March, for instance, "rashly took a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature" (1911), selling Gothic tales to a youth culture through school assignments and screen versions in the twentieth century.

While it is tempting to scoff at such overwrought pronouncements, early writers and reviewers of children's literature took them very seriously. Dale Townshend notes that the stories Locke and Churchill object to are strictly speaking "Gothic" since this category hadn't been invented yet; he highlights a curiously parallel development of properly Gothic novels and a distinctive children's literature that excludes all ghostly and supernatural superstitions. As the genre of Gothic literature developed in Europe in the 1700s, a concomitant strand of the "explained supernatural" appeared in literature for children, wherein a seemingly paranormal event is given rational, human explanation, a twist that we are well familiar with through the exploits of Scooby-Doo. Townshend goes on to catalogue the strenuous efforts of eighteenth-century writers and critics not merely to resort to the "explained supernatural" in their tales, but to expunge mention of the supernatural from children's books, including those in biblical narratives, using scissors if necessary! The goal was to evict all manner
their power to effect social critique of the wealthy (Lurie 8). L. Frank Baum, in his introduction to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900), took particular exception to the transmission of what he felt were outdated European sensibilities into his new ideas about what American children’s books should look like, saying that “the time has come for a series of newer ‘wonder tales’, in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale” (5). Despite Baum’s call to replace “heartaches and nightmares” with “wonderment and joy” (5) in children’s fantasy, however, the Gothic remained a significant part of child culture in the late 1800s and early decades of the twentieth century. Walt Disney certainly flirted with the genre in his early work, offering Gothic fear in quick- animated bites; several of the Silly Symphonies produced in 1929 are decidedly Gothic; Mickey Mouse himself visits a haunted house in 1929, and a segment of Fantasia (1940) offers young viewers a storyline of restless demonic spirits summoned to a midnight revel before morning’s light and a line of monks reclaim the cathedral.

In addition, new landscapes as well as encounters with people from other cultures and religious traditions through colonization and slavery offered expanded visions for the representation of fear in realistic American children’s literature as well as in wonder tales. The Gothic, an insatiably hungry genre that gobbles up anything it can use, welcomed these new monsters and locales into the New World stories. Working through symbols that represent the repression of sexual anxiety and a fear of the “other,” the Gothic intrudes in these early adolescent texts through singular moments in the course of ordinary lives, however, rather than treating the entire story as a Gothic nightmare. Twain’s Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, for instance, are consumed with superstitions and tales of violence and horror, and Tom has his Gothic moment when he is lost in the cave with Becky Thatcher and, possibly, Injun Joe — a variant of the Gothic trope of being buried alive. June Cummins points to a nightmarish Gothic moment in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s These Happy Golden Years (1943) when Laura awakens to find her landlady about to murder her husband with a knife. Cummins places this episode within the tradition of the Female Gothic as an externalization of Laura’s conflicts and anxieties about her own sexuality and her socially prescribed role in the lead-up to her marriage. (On the Female Gothic, see Hoeveler [Chapter 7] in this volume.) While Cummins argues that the other books in the series have no similar Gothic motifs, the Gothic does in fact appear earlier in the series when, in Little House on the Prairie (1935), Laura and her family spend an anxious night listening to the eerie sound of Native American preparations for war. The moments of terror in these books reflect the ways both adult sexuality and the “other” — and in these cases it is notable that the other is specifically encoded in the American imagination as the indigenous and enslaved people victimized by white settlers — haunt the child characters on their own paths to adulthood.

Montgomery and Burnett deploy Gothic tropes to more romantic ends. Montgomery’s heroines are avid readers of Gothic romances, as was Montgomery herself. Kathleen Miller argues that, as a result, Montgomery advocates for an embrace of Gothic sensibility as a form of female empowerment. Though she sometimes parodies the excesses of Gothic literature, Montgomery ultimately comes down on the side of showing “what can be achieved through a good Gothic imagination that is allowed to go a little wrong” (141). Burnett’s setting in The Secret Garden of a large manor house with a haunting secret has been mined for its Gothic tropes as well. As with Montgomery, Burnett’s invocation of the Gothic has positive outcomes: The protagonist, ten-year-old Mary Lennox, braves an encounter with her brooding uncle, investigates the eerie sounds of a boy crying in the dark, and opens the locked garden, thus bringing light and life back to the house and its inhabitants.

Such mastering of Gothic adventures on the way to redemption and empowerment may perhaps be indebted to earlier Puritan sensibilities, as the pattern sometimes surfaces in literature aimed at setting to rights the sins of America’s past and present, particularly in the tradition of Southern Gothic (on the Southern Gothic, see Crow [Chapter 10] in this volume). In R. A. Nelson’s Days of Little Texas (2009), for instance, a young faith healer joins forces with a ghost girl to do battle with the devil on the grounds of a defunct plantation where horrendous atrocities were perpetrated against the slaves; his frightening supernatural ordeal exposes the villains and brings about healing and retroactive justice. Rosemary Clement-Moore’s Texas Gothic (2011) draws on spooky local history and lore, contemporary ghost-hunting techniques, and an appetite for heroines with psychic powers to attack greed and environmental abuse. Lesley M. M. Blume’s Tennyson (2008) follows a less energetic though no less moralistic path through its Southern Gothic landscape as its main character, shunted off to her grandmother’s crumbling old plantation while her father searches for her wayward mother, begins to write about the house’s troubled history, which is revealed to her in dreams; like many texts in this tradition, the emphasis is on the character coming to terms with her own power and responsibility as she takes up a more adult role within a family with a troubled legacy.

This more positive developmental inflection on the Gothic might also reflect a trajectory for girls’ growth modeled on the proto-Gothic myth of Persephone. Although it is generally understood that Persephone is not a
willing party to her marriage with Hades, variants of the myth question the degree to which she is complicit. In some versions, for instance, she disobe-
diently plucked the one flower that would allow the earth to open up so that Hades could capture her, and while in the underworld she ate several pome-
granate seeds knowing that this would doom her to stay there. So while her mother does rescue her by working out a deal whereby she would stay part of the year above ground with her mother and part of the year as the Queen of the Underworld, the character of Persephone provides a perfect metaphor for a young girl’s ambivalent desire for a dark, powerful lover played against her desire for a life lived in the light and under the protection of her mother. Holly Virginia Blackford locates this Gothic pattern of American girls descending into underworlds, flirting with broody boys, doing battle with controlling mothers, and emerging into womanhood in texts such as Little Women, The Secret Garden, Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight (2005), and Neil Gaiman’s Coraline (2002) among others. Indeed, today’s teen girls who regularly fall in love with tortured vampires, sexy werewolves, malevolent fairies, and misunderstood demons could well have their own Gothic reality show entitled The Real Housewives of Hell, but that is getting ahead of my history.

American Gothic in print literature for children went into something of remission during the mid-twentieth century. Realism and historical fiction dominated youth publishing in the States, and what fantasies were produced, such as those by Edward Eager, were mild tales of pleasant wish-fulfillment. But the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s ushered in an explosion of American folk-literature for young readers. Despite appearing regularly on banned and challenged books lists, Alvin Schwartz’s collections of scary stories drawn from folklore and urban legends have become elementary school staples since the first book, Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark, was published in 1981. Richard Peck and Robert Cormier introduced the psychological grotesque into young adult literature with novels such as Are You in the House Alone? (1976), We All Fall Down (1991), and Tenderness (1997), which feature teenage girls terrorized by mentally unbalanced men. Christopher Pike and R. L. Stine adopted a publishing strategy that was working well in other kinds of genre fiction by producing a book a month in their horror series for middle graders and young adults. The Goosebumps series, in particular, brought Gothic horror into suburbia, with its white, middle-class protagonists encountering monstrous intrusions into their ordinary lives. Children’s literature critic Perry Nodelman suggests that it is the marketing of these books that is the real monster; each book encouraged ownership by including an excerpt from the next book and having a number on its spine, making a gap in the collection noticeable (118). But he goes on to suggest that the worse horror of these books is their affirmation of the white, egocentric, amoral, consuming child as the desirable norm, as that child gleefully takes on the mantle of “most frightening of all” (122).

This more recent inscription of the monstrous as desirable has come to fruition, according to Victoria Nelson in what she explores as the “rehabil-
titation of supernaturalism as an aesthetic mode—brighter, more Romantic, and more culturally heterodox”; the Gothic genre, she argues, has evolved “from horror story to fairy tale” (xi–xii). Certainly, the monsters of twenty-first century American children’s picture books are more sympathetic than their predecessors, Sesame Street critters notwithstanding. In fact, more often than not, the monsters are in need of understanding and friendship, as is the case in Katherine Tegen’s Dracula and Frankenstein Are Friends (2003), where the monstrous buddies work through a difficult social situation, and Mo Willem’s Leonardo, The Terrible Monster (2005), where Leonardo is not so much a terrible monster as he is terrible at being a monster. Amanda Noll’s I Need My Monster (2009) tells a tongue-in-cheek story of a boy who can’t sleep because the monster who lives under his bed has gone fishing, and no slimy substitute will do. And as the children grow into teens, these amiable monsters move from under their beds to in them, as vampires are redeemed into brooding Byronic heroes who regret their appetites, and wity, amoral, smokin’ hot demons, apparently, make awesome boyfriends.

This is not to say that horror has disappeared completely from Gothic fiction for the young. To the contrary, the dark stories, such as Daniel Kraus’ Rotters (2012) and Scowler (2013), Dia Reeves’ Slice of Cherry (2011), and Andrew Smith’s The Marbury Lens (2010), are as terrifying as any adult horror novel, and perhaps even more so given the uncanny innocence of children and teens as both victims and perpetrators of unthinkable acts of violence. These novels often fall into the category of the psychological grotesque, with the evil located in disordered minds rather than in eruptions of the supernatural. In addition, traditional Gothic novels in the form of adaptations of or homages to the classics appear with frequency. Lynn Messina’s Little Vampire Women (2010), for instance, teases out latent Gothic themes in its source text with uncanny and creepy precision, while April Lindner’s Jane (2010) offers a contemporary revision of Jane Eyre (1847) that works weirdly well with Rochester’s character transformed into an aging rocker who has damaged his first wife through excessive drug use before falling in love with his pragmatic teen nanny. Teen zombies, on the other hand, almost can’t help being funny, so they most often appear in social satire, upsetting proms and exposing adult corruption and corporate malfeasance.
This litany of the many faces of the Gothic in youth literature could go on ad infinitum, as each of the types and genres treated in this volume are represented many times over in youth literature. Generally speaking, however, we can summarize by saying that contemporary books written for very young children and middle grade audiences tend to be brighter, or at least resolve into endings where the child protagonists are safe and the evil is contained. Young adult novels, on the other hand, tend to be evenly split between the bright Gothic, where traditional villains are redeemed, and its darker twin, where the extremes of human and supernatural evil are relentlessly explored. The outcomes of young adult novels are also less cheerful; as in the last book of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, 2007), good ultimately wins, but not without significant loss.

**Children and the Gothic Imagination**

The robust presence of the Gothic throughout the history of children’s literature proves that it is perennially appealing, but doesn’t answer why children are attracted to scary stories or ones with more complexly veiled Gothic themes. It helps here to know something about the way children’s thinking differs from that of adults. Without going into the weeds of cognitive science, I will pull out two salient differences that affect our engagement with the Gothic. First, empirical research shows that preschool children are much better at metaphorical thinking than they will be after that age (Gardner and Winner 130). The Gothic relies heavily on symbols and images that allegorize things that might be too disturbing to look at straight on. Frankenstein’s monster stands in for the fragmented self and the anxiety of one’s origins; a crumbling old house full of ghosts might represent the fragility of the past and the shame of buried secrets; a mansion with many sealed-off rooms may symbolize the complexity of the mind as it represses some things and seeks to open up others; a looming figure stands in for anyone who has power over a child or poses a threat. Hence, the scary stories that attract young children are those that stage mastery over these fearful elements, and they don’t need to be literal to be effective; in fact, it probably helps more if they aren’t. When Max goes into his imagination and has a wild rumpus with his Wild Things, he is experiencing the purgative value of the Gothic imagination; he transforms his aggression and anger at his mother’s reprimand into monsters and becomes their master (Sendak n.p.). Other stories that domesticate scary creatures or treat them with warmth and humor, such as Samantha Berger’s Crankenstein (2013) and Adam Rex’s Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich (2006), place child readers in a position of either empathy or superiority, giving them options for metaphorical mastery over emotions that threaten to overwhelm them. In fact, Michelle Knudsen’s Marilyn’s Monster (2015) strongly indicates that kids need inner monsters for comfort and to manage bullies. Moreover, it is a downright adorable affirmation of how a Gothic imagination can lead to female empowerment, as young Marilyn, tired of waiting for her perfectly suited monster to find her, must seek him out on her own.

A second difference in the way children process stories is related to the sometimes overwhelming power of emotion. At birth, our limbic systems are more fully developed than our prefrontal cortices. This has interesting implications for understanding how children work with fiction. The limbic system is largely responsible for the generation and expression of emotion, while the prefrontal cortex is the brain’s CEO, in charge of functions like regulating behavior, performing reality checks, assessing risk, and suppressing emotional or sexual urges. The upshot of this is twofold: First, children process stories with their emotions rather than with cool-headed reason. This continues through their teenage years, when the flood of hormones augments the desire for sexy melodrama. Second, the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex allows children to enter into fantasy more fully, because there isn’t that pesky inhibitory function that tells them something is impossible or unreal. This is not to say that children don’t know when they are pretending, but it is to say that they can be more fully absorbed in the world of fiction; they have a greater capacity for belief. As they enter middle childhood, this capacity starts to close down, which may be why they seek transcendence and mystery in their fictions – to hold on to belief, but also to sort out the differences and connections between belief and imagination. As Nelson argues, “outside the purview of organized religion, the genre of supernatural horror [and, I would add, bright supernatural Gothic as well] has been the preferred mode, or even the only allowed one, a predominantly secular-scientific culture such as ours has for imagining and encountering the sacred, albeit in unconscious ways” (xi).

When we put these things together, we have a better understanding of the draw and power of Gothic literature to help children manage existential fears, anxiety, and desire. In their real worlds, young children have very little power; in their fictions, they can have monsters composed of their own aggression who do their bidding, giving them practice in the beneficial exercise of power as well as protection from being overwhelmed by their emotions. In their physical worlds, middle graders and teens are limited by what they can see; in their Gothic fictions, they can encounter transcendence. In their social worlds, teens feel trapped in confining roles and unruly bodies; in their fictions, these roles and bodies are parodied, transformed, and
acknowledged for the horrors they sometimes are. Hell may indeed be story-friendly, but the effects of Gothic stories can lead young readers out of the shadows.

NOTES

1. See Boyd; Gottschall; Gregory.
2. See Krüger; Silver.

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