



Emerging Voices

Michelle Abate, editor

"Haunted" : Architectural Manifestations of Adult Phobias and Admonitions in the Haunted Houses of Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Architectural metaphors abound in children's and young adult literature, where haunted houses are employed by authors and illustrators to convey elaborate semiotics about anxieties, social dynamics, and domesticity. Grotesque and ghostly mansions can be found as subject matter in all age-level books and they commonly operate through the assumption that readers will accept them as legitimate and comprehensible settings. Perry Nodelman comments that within various genres for young readers "strange events tend to be taken for granted. Part of the pleasure offered by such stories is the delightful pretence that nothing strange is going on at all, that this is the way things are" (17). Such is the case with books featuring haunted houses, which generally portray a plethora of ambivalent characters set against an emotionally-complex domiciliary realm. Despite growing discourse surrounding supernatural-themed literature for young readers, there has been less focus on the messages that are perpetuated by the architectural representations within these works. Questions arise about what adults are communicating to young people through this subject matter and how this metaphor is constituted in visual, psychological, and cultural terms. These concerns are imperative, given Nodelman's assertion that "children's literature is not so much what children read as what producers hope children will read...The actual purchasers of children's books are and always have been, overwhelmingly, not children but parents, teachers, librarians: adults" (4). Nodelman's statement is especially provocative against Jerry Griswold's observation that "scariness seems to play a larger role in stories for children than in those for adults. For grown-ups, the frightening seems a specialty market...For the young, however, fear seems so common as almost to be an omnipresent feature in their literature" (35). An overview of haunted houses in youth-oriented books demonstrates the varied and purposeful roles that haunted houses perform for readers of all age groups.

Books have the ability to envelop one in another time and place and such atmospheric effects are characteristic of haunted house-themed books. Not only do their backdrops transport readers to different environments but their illustrations and physical construction also blur the lines between reality and fiction. Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario's analysis of this concept affirms: "there is a Gothic architecture of books, both as objects of and within children's literature: books filled with secrets and potentially dangerous passages, the narratives as labyrinthine as any castle interior or ruin, the dust jackets as intimidating as any fortress walls. Entering such a book is, potentially, as perilous to the reader as to the characters within the story" (209). Tales of the occult often possess the ability to provoke heightened emotional responses from young readers because of their strategically-designed physical construction. Do Rozario notes how these stories feature covers which "recreate themselves as ancient relics, covers mimicking leather and stone with old-fashioned calligraphy...The Gothic lettering of the title may suggest something supernatural...The cover can even be embossed with creatures and objects that appear to be sitting upon or escaping from a book" (p. 213). Theatrical fabrications greatly contribute to the realism



of these books, and the unique emphasis they place on aesthetic modes of communication engenders their potency with youngsters. In her discussion of the interplay between the text and images of picture books, Pamela Fairfield explains that these works engage readers because their “words and pictures extend beyond their original roles of linguistic signs and pictorial symbols, collaborating as two integral parts of a larger work of art where one enhances and produces meaning within the other” (Fairfield). An excellent demonstration of the reciprocity between narrative and illustrative components can be found in pop-up books for very young readers.

Pop-up books especially demonstrate how a book's physicality can interact with readers both spatially and intellectually. In the act of being read, pop-up books literally project their images and storylines beyond the physical limitations of the page and into the personal space of the reader. When pages in a pop-up book ‘pop-up,’ the effect is as transformative as the thought process of the young reader who is engaging with the book, and this can make a story seem all the more real to a young reader because it materializes a storyline into three-dimensional tangibility. Maurice Sendak's 2006 book *Mommy?* showcases the dynamic possibilities that arise from pop-up books (see figure 1). In Sendak's plot, a young child travels through a haunted house in search of his mother; the infant encounters an array of spooky characters including a Mad Scientist, Frankenstein, Dracula, and ultimately the Bride of Frankenstein, who turns out to be the infant's missing mother. The dimensionality of the book's pop-up panels is remarkable; as an example of paper craft engineering Sendak's book well demonstrates Do Rozario's observation that “in the absence of an actual castle, books themselves create the architecture” (216). *Mommy?* projects an array of ghoulish characters and a dark, imposing architectural background into the minds - and personal space - of its readers, and it is noteworthy for its conventionality: the book defines a haunted house as a dark, cavernous building in which one encounters an array of freakish characters and events before ultimately encountering happiness. This definition is consistent within literary portrayals of haunted houses for very young readers; these buildings are defined as initially ominous - but conclusively upbeat - spaces. Other children's books that demonstrate the same pattern include Erica Silverman's *The Halloween House* (1997), Eve Bunting's *Scary, Scary Halloween* (1998), Alyssa Satin Capucilli's *Inside a House That Is Haunted* (1998), and Marjorie Dennis Murray's *Halloween Night* (2008). While the homes in these tales appear potentially threatening, they are never shown to inflict actual harm on the human characters that dare enter them. In keeping with this, *Mommy?* is rendered child-friendly because Sendak concludes his tale with a happy and humorous family reunion.

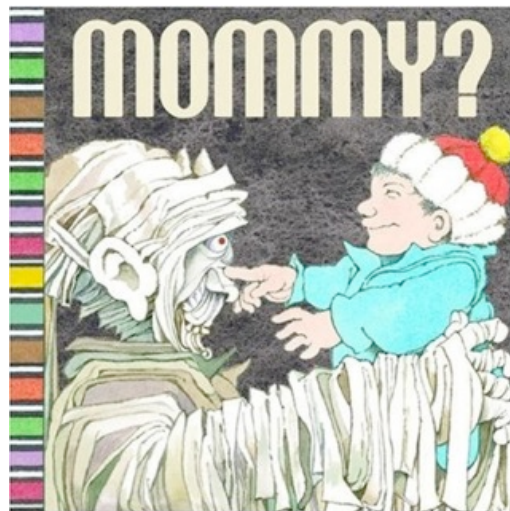


Figure 1: cover illustration from *Mommy?* by Maurice Sendak, illustrated by Maurice Sendak. Illustration copyright © 2006 by Maurice Sendak. Reprinted by permission of Scholastic Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved.

Humour is often used in children's books that contain dark themes; the inclusion of humour renders disturbing subject matter presentable for young readers. Discussing its role in children's Gothic fiction, Julie Cross suggests “the use of humour can introduce and make palatable the elements of horror” that pertain to “children's deepest and unspoken fears” (59). Judy Sierra's 1995 picture book *The House That Drac Built* demonstrates a merging of the comic with the supernatural. Sierra's verse follows the rhyme of “This is the house that Jack Built,” the cheerful tone of which helps satirize the zombies and monsters that inhabit the story's haunted house. Sierra's plot takes readers inside the home's interior spaces

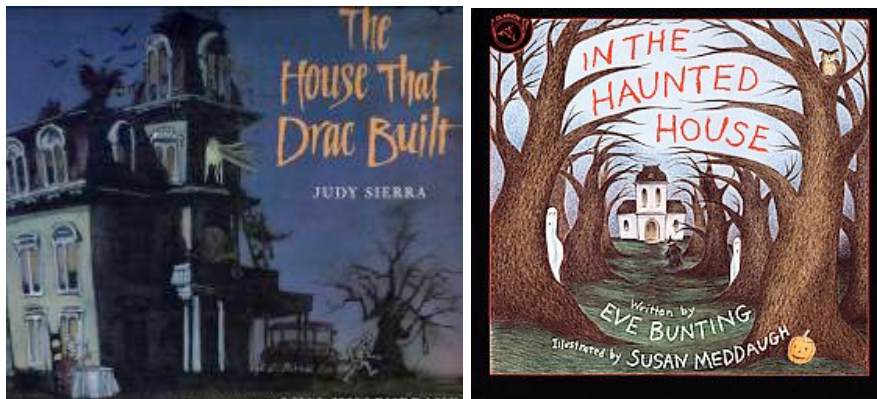


where we encounter spooky characters who systematically try to maim or devour one another. When a group of trick-or-treaters knocks at the door, the menacing-looking ghouls are tamed by the children, and the initially-foreboding atmosphere within the house is subsequently portrayed as hospitable and sociable. As with Sendak's *Mommy?*, no explanation is provided as to how this house came to be inhabited by such an array of spectral monstrosities; it is assumed readers of all ages will unquestioningly accept the notion that a substantial, antiquated residence is a logical architectural habitat for preternatural characters and events. The illustrations by Will Hillenbrand are clearly influenced by the American artist Edward Hopper; Hillenbrand's house (see figure 4) is a virtual replica of Hopper's 1925 painting *House by the Railroad*, in which a massive Victorian manse looms vacantly against a stark landscape (see figure 3).

Likewise, Eve Bunting's 1990 picture book *In the Haunted House*, aesthetically demonstrates the same prototype. The architectural details in this tale, drawn by Susan Meddaugh, appear to use the same Hopper painting for inspiration; the story's haunted house features white-clapboard siding, arched windows, a turret, and a bell-cast mansard roof (see figure 5). Readers are told "this is the house where the scary ones hide" and we are encouraged to "open the door and step softly inside" (1). Provoking readers to enter an evidently threatening dwelling is a typical plot device in such books and upon doing so we are provided with a tour of the home's various interior spaces. Inside this decidedly elaborate space, with its "cracked chandeliers" and "dark, paneled walls," (5) we encounter an array of ghosts and witches. The book concludes with an image of people lined up outside the home near a sign that states "Halloween House," thus revealing the house is really a carnival fun-house. Again we find the juxtaposition of presenting a haunted house in an initially foreboding and subsequently cheerful manner. The architectural structures that serve as the stage settings within these books denote a particular archetype and the potential reasons for this suggests much about why adults perpetuate haunted house-themed stories for children.



Figure 3. *House by the Railroad*, 1925, by Edward Hopper.



Figures 4 and 5. Left: cover illustration from *The House That Drac Built* by Judy Sierra, illustrated by Will Hillenbrand. Illustration copyright © 1995 by Will Hillenbrand. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Right: cover illustration from *In the Haunted House*



by Eve Bunting, illustrated by Susan Meddaugh. Illustration copyright © 1990 by Susan Meddaugh. Reprinted by permission of Clarion Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

The characteristics uniting the different structures in these books indicate that a stereotypical image of a haunted house is widespread within North American culture. This image is worthy of analysis, given Jack Zipes observation that, “in popular culture, critics generally exclude children when they talk about ‘the people’ who consume all sorts of cultural artefacts or make liberating use of them...The intersections between so-called children's art and adult art are rarely studied” (8). Distinct architectural traits are to be found within the haunted house formula: they are decidedly upper-class residences, with turrets, dormer windows, mansard roofs, and verandas, and an array of wood-paneled interior spaces that would have been built to satisfy the pretences, power structures, and social customs of Victorian bourgeois lifestyles. These are homes that require servants and a great deal of finances to be maintained properly - and much of the basis for their classification as ‘haunted’ appears to stem from the fact that they are *not* properly maintained. Judging by the peeling paint, festooned cobwebs, and overgrown gardens of these residences, the servants have long since been dismissed.

The lack of human presence, combined with the mouldering physical state of these homes suggests the homeowners have encountered social and financial ruin. Since expensive residences are created as showplaces, one has to wonder what has happened in the passage of time to break down the status-oriented purpose these homes were designed to fulfill. From this, an explanation arises as to why these houses are presented to children as ‘haunted’: adults base this classification on their own economic and social paranoia. To construct a palatial residence is viewed by mainstream North American culture as one of the greatest achievements an individual can carry out; owning a mansion is understood to demarcate the financial success, enlightened artistic sensibility, and social *éclat* of the individual who pays for it. Ownership of and residency within a derelict house is seen in contrasting terms; such a building represents failure and a lack of control, and is interpreted as a source of shame, disease, and dread. It is not surprising then, that adults perpetuate haunted houses in children's literature as chilling reading material: a decrepit mansion is the antithesis to all that adult life in Western culture champions as respectable and desirable. The monsters that inhabit these dark, forlorn homesteads represent the financial and social monsters that foster adult nightmares.

Portrayals of haunted houses in children's literature are also deeply intertwined with adult concepts about domesticity. Nodelman states that the notion of home in children's literature “represents above all a place where change is unlikely or even possible, a safely static enclosure designed to keep uncertainty and flux outside” (67). What about haunted houses then, since they clearly overthrow this? The idea of presenting a haunted house as something that is normative, something that doesn't require explaining, is commonplace within literature for young readers, and this is compelling because it upholds a remarkably subversive view of domesticity. Dale Bailey emphasizes that the most effectively-portrayed literary haunted houses “deploy their conventions in startling ways...They often provoke our fears about ourselves and our society and, at their very best, they present deeply subversive critiques of all that we hold to be true” (6). But not all of these dwellings are whimsical spaces inhabited by far-fetched characters; there are other methods to portray haunting experiences within a household setting.

The concept that a house can be haunted by something just as frightening, but more real, than ghouls, is conveyed in Patricia Combs' 1970 book *Dorrie and the Haunted House*. Intended for readers around the age of eight, Combs' story contains interesting dual portrayals of isolation within domestic environments. The main protagonist, a young witch named Dorrie, lives with her mother “in a house with a tall, tall tower. Inside the tower is a little secret room where the Big Witch mixes up magic” (1). Combs' illustration of Dorrie's house aligns it with the standard haunted house prototype; we are shown an old-fashioned wooden residence with a mansard roof, surmounted by a soaring, bat-shrouded tower (see figure 6). What sets this residence apart from the previous examples is the way it is portrayed as a home in which an essentially recognizable daily life is acted out. This is demonstrated by a picture of Dorrie in her bedroom: surrounded by piles of her clothes, books, and toys, and standing next to a wall of her artwork, Dorrie appears as any young reader of the book might within their own bedroom (see figure 7). When the local Witch and Wizard community converge at the house, and climb en-masse to the secret room in the tower to mix magic, Dorrie is shunned from taking part in the group's activities: the Big Witch tells her “it is only for grown-ups. You must be very good and very quiet” (8). Dejected, Dorrie languishes in the cavernous front hall, and her isolation is heightened when she is accidentally shut out of her home as a result of her mother's magic.



Figures 6 and 7. Images taken from: Combs, Patricia. *Dorrie and the Haunted House*. (New York, Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., 1970).

Seeking shelter, Dorrie heads to the nearby woods where she discovers “a big gray house looming between the trees” (13). Rather than appearing apprehensive Dorrie scurries “up the broken steps to the old porch” where “broken shutters banged in the wind” and “vines and branches skreeked” against the clapboards (14). Without hesitation, Dorrie enters the house and eagerly tours its grandiose rooms. She soon discovers she is not alone, for the house is also sheltering two criminals, whose presence prompts Dorrie to scramble from one space in the house to another, trying to escape the men’s voices which start “yelling louder and louder” and sound “madder and madder” (27). After falling into a bale of flour, Dorrie becomes aware that the Big Witch and her counterparts have come to find her: upon seeing Dorrie’s ghostly-white appearance her potential saviours turn and flee. Terrified at the prospect of being alone in the house with two malevolent criminals, Dorrie flees for home. The most disturbing threats she encounters in the “haunted house” are therefore not ghost-related. Rather, the verbal aggression – and potential physical hostility - of the two male criminals, as well as the abandonment by her network of family and friends are the warranted concerns in this tale.

Dorrie’s trials are not over; arriving at her mother’s house she find herself locked out once again, and she regains entry after much yelling. An ambiguous element in Combs’ story is the way the two homes in the plot can be perceived as ‘haunted.’ The abandoned house Dorrie encounters in the forest can be quickly interpreted as the “haunted house” that the book’s title refers to, yet it can be suggested that Dorrie’s own home, as the scene of isolating events and an environment that repeatedly devalues its young inhabitant, is also an emotionally disconcerting space. Nodelman notes that within children’s literature, the concept of “home as a safe place is so centrally significant that it exists even in contexts where home is unsafe” (80). The dynamics within Dorrie’s home are impacted by dysfunctional matriarchal tensions that are carried out in a routine manner. As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum reflect, “real horrors and monsters do not lie in some dimension behind or beyond the everyday, but inhere within ‘homeliness.’ The façade of the family home may conceal worse things than vampires, ghosts, or the living dead” (170). Embedded within this is the acknowledgement that a domestic realm can not only harbour, but heighten, the vulnerabilities of its young inhabitants.

Susceptibility within one’s own home is a theme that repeatedly materializes in supernatural stories; there is an extensive history of tales that centre upon this concept. The Gothic novel began in 1764 with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and the genre has flourished to include Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), Francis Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1910), and Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938). These celebrated examples represent a handful of many English stories that situate psychological and cultural tensions within spectral ancestral estates. In his overview of the Gothic literary tradition in adult literature, Allan Lloyd-Smith states: “among the most striking features of the...genre is the style of its architectural settings. In early Gothic these were often medievalist, involving ancient stone buildings” (7). British authors have had a vast range of architectural models to inspire appropriately dramatic backdrops for stories of the occult, whereas North American writers have relied upon other methods for creating ghostly environments. Dale Bailey observes that the “principle problem faced by Gothic novelists in America” was “the problem of place” given “the absence of



any handy ruined castles or monasteries" (7). A device that American authors have relied upon is that of folklore; myths, regional tales, oral history and legends have been employed to transform commonplace settings into melodramatic contexts. An early example is Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) which is based on a German folktale that merges superstitions with innate human fears about isolation, the dark, strangers, and the concept of home.

Folklore has subsequently impacted Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and the numerous ghost stories of Edith Wharton, all of which position unearthly events and anxieties in household settings. These are the precursors to the current abundance of supernatural-themed narratives that are specifically published for a young adult audience, including Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, and Stephenie Meyer's successive vampire stories. Responding to the intellectual and emotional sensitivities of their intended audience, haunted houses in books for teenagers frequently suggest that psychological turmoil can be just as troubling as ghosts.

Drawing upon the American Gothic tradition is Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* of 1960, which is regularly read and studied at a young adult level. Lee's story partly grows out of the Southern Gothic genre which, as Allan Lloyd-Smith notes, tends to exhibit "a string of distorted figures trapped in structures that have lost their authority but not their power" (121). The narrator, Scout Finch, recounts how her world at the age of six was primarily limited to the city block she lived on. For Scout and her brother Jem, a local landmark of morbid fascination is the nearby Radley house. Architecturally, this dwelling is not the elaborate Victorian prototype but is comparatively modest: "the house was low, was once white with a deep front porch...Rain-rotted shingles drooped over the eaves of the veranda; oak trees kept the sun away...Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom" (9). The "phantom" is the reclusive Arthur 'Boo' Radley, who, after a troubled youth, no longer leaves his parents home and has become a subject of myth and speculation among his neighbours.

Scout reports the belief that Boo "went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows...Any stealthy small crimes committed in Maycomb were his work...The school grounds adjoined the back of the Radley lot; from the Radley chicken yard tall pecan trees shook their fruit into the schoolyard, but the nuts lay untouched by the children: Radley pecans would kill you" (9). The Radleys are regarded by their community as outcasts and the nonconformist appearance of their suburban home represents their stature as pariahs. Adult townspeople avoid the home's inhabitants on a social level while their children avoid the Radley residence, and even Radley pecans, on a physical level. The behaviour of both the adult and child characters towards the Radley property is based upon anxieties about contamination; the adults view the house as socially contaminating, and the children interpret the house's mysterious presence as a potentially deadly threat.

A clear correlation is drawn between the problematic dynamics within the Radley family and the 'haunted' state of their home. This is significant; unlike haunted houses in most children's literature, books for young adults tend to offer psychological explanations for 'haunted' households. In the case of the Radley house, implications of depression, emotional duress, and physical confrontations are conveyed to the reader (11). Scout suggests to Atticus, her father, that Boo can't leave his home because "Mr. Radley kept him chained to the bed most of the time. Atticus said no, it wasn't that sort of thing, that there were other ways of making people into ghosts," (11) and this hints at the troubled family relationships contained under the decaying Radley roof.

Towards the end of the novel we see a broadening of Scout's perspective: after an incident where Boo emerges from his home to assist Scout, she lingers for a moment on the Radley porch and remarks: "I had never seen our neighbourhood from this angle" (279). Scout is able to view the world from Boo's perspective and this brings forth profound catharsis for her: "Atticus was right...he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough" (279). Scout's physical position on the formerly forbidden territory of the Radley porch prompts her to recognize the humanity of Boo, and this becomes a moment of transition between childhood and maturity for her. The Radley house is suddenly exorcised in Scout's mind from a mysterious house of horrors into an ordinary home, no longer inhabited by a "malevolent phantom," but by a friend.

Discussing the role of 'scariness' in children's literature, Jerry Griswold summarizes the points made by Bruno Bettelheim in his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, in which Bettelheim delineates three arguments



to endorse the more fearful aspects of fairy tales: "(1) instead of deceiving children, the tales frankly and honestly acknowledge that evil exists in the world; (2) instead of belittling or ignoring children's fears...fairy tales directly present and address them; and (3) these old stories present models and lessons suggesting that...children, themselves, can...master evildoers and their own fears" (45). The same arguments can be applied towards endorsing haunted houses in literature for youngsters, which carry out an array of meaningful purposes. Because pop-up books and picture books for children often present these buildings as naturally-occurring phenomena, they suggest to young readers that unusual settings are normal and legitimate. They also imply that appearances can be deceiving: these seemingly threatening environments often transform into inclusive and uplifting spaces and this technique enables the presentation of spooky themes to developing minds. Books for young adults build upon this and offer psychological explanations for 'haunting' events. Haunted houses in literature for young readers can be seen then as fulfilling a role as educational metaphors: they encourage consideration of the notion that diversity exists within domestic life, that people live under drastically different circumstances, and that an individual's home can be haunted by issues far more unsettling than imagined ghosts. Encouraging young minds to contemplate these ideas can foster awareness and acceptance of these concepts and can promote greater understanding of people, reality, and the world in general. Reading about haunted houses is itself a haunting experience: what resonates with these fictional homes is not so much their depictions of bizarre environments as the way some feature of them will appear recognizable and relevant for readers.

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