



## CHILDREN'S GOTHIC

### AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL HOWARTH

Marica Orrù

*Independent researcher*

**Michael Howarth** is a Professor of English at Missouri Southern State University and his main teaching areas are creative writing, film studies, American literature to the 1900s, British literature of the 19th century and children's and young adult literature. He is also an author of both fiction and critical texts such as *Under the Bed, Creeping: Psychoanalyzing the Gothic in Children's Literature* (2014) and *Movies to See Before You Graduate from High School* (2019), which is an analysis of 60 movies that he considers essential viewing for teenagers. He is also an author of fiction: in 2016 he published *Fair Weather Ninjas*, a young adult novel, and in 2021 his first Gothic novel titled *A Still and Awful Red*. He is a member of the Children's Literature Association and the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Associations, as well as Sigma Tau Delta.

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**Marica Orrù:** I'd like to start with asking something about yourself before we get into the topic, so my first question is: when and in what way has your passion for the Gothic started and, following up on that, how do you think feeding that passion has helped you to become the person you are today and also to pursue this particular career?

**Michael Howarth:** I have had a very long and productive relationship with the Gothic and it really started with my father. I didn't realize how different I was until I started talking with other classmates of mine in elementary school, but my most vivid memory of being terrified and scared in a good way was when I was five years old and my father rented *Jaws* and he said, "We're going to watch this movie." We sat down with popcorn and sodas and ice cream sundaes, we turned off all the lights, and we watched *Jaws*. It was terrifying and wonderful, and I just loved it. My father was very liberal with the films he let me see. I was probably the

only kid in my kindergarten class who had seen John Carpenter's original *Halloween*. Of course, he made me wear a blanket over my head during some of the nude scenes, but that was really my first introduction to horror films and to the Gothic. I remember in the early 80s when we would go to the video store to rent movies, my favorite section was always the Horror section and while my father was roaming around looking for something to rent, I was looking at the covers of *Friday the 13th* and *American Gothic* and *Halloween*. I read the descriptions on the back covers and let my imagination wander. It was wonderful.

So, all of that was the impetus for what started me on this creative and critical journey of being interested in the Gothic. My favorite season has always been autumn, and my favorite holiday has always been Halloween. I'm excited when the leaves start turning different colors and it stays darker for much longer. I'm never happier than when it's thundering and raining outside, when the sky is gray and overcast. That atmosphere is absolutely wonderful, and it's probably because I appreciate the duality of good and evil that the Gothic portrays, those negative aspects of humanity that to me are very realistic. And I also like the psychological and philosophical aspects of the Gothic. Sometimes, in realism, trying to present a message can come across as didactic or preachy, but when you wrap it in a Gothic story it doesn't feel so much like somebody is beating you over the head with a particular message. So when I was a kid, not only did I watch a lot of scary movies, but I also read a lot of horror books. I can particularly remember reading the *Scary Stories* anthology by Alvin Schwartz. Not only are the stories creepy and fascinating, like "The Thing" and "Harold," but so are the illustrations. I read that series over and over again. In fact, I just reread it a few years ago and those stories still hold up. The *Scary Stories* series was very popular and also banned in a lot of places. And if we know one thing about being a child or a teenager, it's that if something is banned, then you can rest assured that almost everybody will read it because people don't like being told they cannot do something. The word "no" almost always triggers some kind of resistance.

My imagination was constantly whirling in lots of different ways with lots of different ideas. I would picture scenarios in my head and write creative stories. In middle school, I wrote horror stories all the time and turned them in for assignments because they afforded me a passion not just for gothic literature but for creative writing and for wanting to teach. It was through the Gothic that I began to understand and appreciate the liberal arts, and this pathway of the Gothic made me want to discuss and teach the things I was learning about, especially because it's a genre that doesn't quite get the respect it deserves. There's a lot the Gothic can offer us if we just allow ourselves the freedom to explore it.

**MO:** Do you think that growing up fully absorbed in these atmospheres and narrations of the Gothic has influenced both your research and your fictional production? And since we're talking about it, would you like to tell us more about your upcoming novel?

**MH:** I started writing creatively when I was in middle school. In fact, I can remember very clearly that my seventh grade teacher was not a fan of horror and I wrote a lot of imaginative

short stories, everything from killer vegetables to a chocolate monster running loose in a candy factory. But the story that upset my teacher the most was a Christmas story about a demonic Santa Claus who killed people. He had elves who were demons and they slaughtered people, and instead of garland hanging on the Christmas trees it was the victims' intestines. My teacher gave me an F because she said she was horrified. Though she did compliment my writing style. In her scribbled comments at the end of the assignment, she told me I needed to write something more upbeat. So, the next story I turned in was an overly sentimental story about orphans finding a home on Christmas. Later, I remember my teacher talking to my parents about the types of stories I was writing, and my parents supporting both me and my creativity. They sat me down and said, "We know there's nothing wrong with you. You're just being imaginative." That was a huge moment for me because I felt validated. I knew I shouldn't feel guilty about loving this genre and all of its characteristics.

It was writing those Gothic stories and reading a lot of children's literature that led me to focus specifically on children's literature when I got my Ph.D. And it was the gothic texts I read, like *The Secret Garden* and even some of the *Harry Potter* books, that made me start to wonder how the Gothic can be used not just as a teaching experience, but as a way to help children and young adults gain a sense of their own self-identity. That's one of the reasons why I wrote *Under the Bed, Creeping*. I wanted to explore that connection between literature and the growth and development of young people because I love the idea of being able to talk about issues like class and power and gender in ways that don't just feel preachy. Then I wrote my young adult novel *Fair Weather Ninjas*, which centers on a high school student dealing with a lot of past trauma, specifically the loss of his father. He thinks he's a real ninja, which allows for some funny moments in the story. But there's also a lot of pathos in the novel because those two elements—humor and pathos—are key parts of coming-of-age stories.

But I had always wanted to write a story about Elizabeth Bathory who is a famous Hungarian Countess and is considered one of the most prolific serial killers in the world. She murdered about six hundred peasant girls during a ten-year period. She would bathe in their blood because she thought it made her skin look younger. That story fascinated me because under the surface this is really a story about a woman who is afraid of growing old, a woman who did everything she could to retain her power and beauty. There have been a lot of stories about Elizabeth Bathory, many books and films, but I wanted to approach it from a different angle. I wasn't writing a biography, but a work of fiction that tackles the story from the perspective of a young woman who comes to the castle to work as a seamstress and begins to suspect that things in the castle are not quite what they seem. So there's a mystery that unravels over the course of the novel.

I tend to be working on multiple projects at any given time, usually a creative project and a critical project. That helps to keep me fresh. And if I'm not working on a chapter or an article, I'm at least jotting down ideas for future projects or outlining potential ones, or even creating a list of books I want to use for research. Currently, I'm almost finished with another

gothic historical novel, and I am also working on some research involving the Gothic in children's films. In fact, I recently wrote an article on Val Lewton's *Curse of the Cat People*, exploring how the film's gothic elements can act as a philosophical mirror for children to work through various issues in their lives.

**MO:** So, considering your studies on the topic obviously but also your personal experience, as we heard, in growing up as a fan of gothic stories, how do you think that gothic literature and more generally gothic elements in children's literature can help a child in the process of shaping his or her identity?

**MH:** Sometimes, when we read gothic texts in my children's literature class, students will ask, "Is this appropriate for children?" And I always repeat Madeleine L'Engle's famous quotation that states, "How can children appreciate the light if they've never seen the darkness?" Which is a great quotation because if you try to show children only the happy and sunny times, that does not prepare them well for when they need to face the darker times in their life. As much as we don't want to admit it, our lives are a mixture of good and bad times. There's sadness, there's depression, there's grief, and there's death. It's unavoidable. If you live on this planet, then you're going to have to deal with trauma at some point and preparing children and young adults for that is very important.

I tell my students all the time that Gothicism helps children deal with the problems they're facing because childhood itself is scary. It's a time when you're making friends, losing friends, and being bullied. You're living in a world controlled by adults, a world in which you have no power. For example, children are often told when to eat, where to go, and how to behave. They make few important decisions on their own. But gothic literature is all about power and control. In fact, some of the best gothic literature is about characters who are struggling to assert power over other characters, and even over other landscapes, that seek to control and manipulate them. Gothicism also externalizes our internal fears, and so it takes abstract ideas like grief or anger and it puts them in concrete terms that children can understand. Children, especially young children, have a difficult time verbalizing abstract ideas. They know they experience a certain emotion, and they know when they get mad or jealous or depressed, but they have a very difficult time articulating those emotions and expressing themselves in a way that gives them control over their own emotions. The Gothic helps them to do that.

If you look at *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, that's a book about dealing with anger, and it becomes very clear that the wild things symbolize Max's anger toward his mother, and in taming the wild things he's essentially taming his anger. So, the book helps children to understand what anger means while also showing them how to deal with that anger and how to process it in a positive way.

This is much different from how Gothicism was often used in children's literature, which was as a deterrent to bad behavior. If you look at Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, you will

notice how different it is from the Disney version, especially because the puppet is stabbed and hanged and beaten and caught in a steel trap, and almost eaten alive twice. That book is very dark because Pinocchio goes through hell to become a real boy. The gothic elements in that book are used to scare children into behaving properly and listening to the adults and respecting adult authority. The problem with that approach is that it doesn't allow for an intelligent and insightful conversation between either the child reader and the book, or between the child reader and the adult. This is because the child is so scared and often doesn't want to talk about those issues and conflicts. There has to be a safe space, and I think we're seeing a lot more of that now where the Gothic is not used as necessarily a punishment.

Gothic literature and film are approaching issues of diversity a lot more than they have in the past. There's a nice message in some of these stories that not all monsters are bad. In Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard* book the characters that are normally associated as being evil are the good characters and the characters that are normally associated as being good are the evil characters. He completely flips the reader's expectations and allows us to have a conversation about not just diversity, but how we label people and how we have certain prejudices.

When we look at children's gothic texts, we have to remember that these books were not written by children, and what's fascinating about this idea is that you have adults making decisions about how they think a child should act and how they think a child should think and what types of character and stories they think a child will enjoy. To complicate these ideas, there are artists like Roald Dahl and Tim Burton who tell stories that are accessible not just to children but to adults. Their stories, for instance, show how eccentric and strange adults can be in their own way of thinking and approaching the world, and especially how those adults approach the idea of childhood. *The Secret Garden* is another good example. It's a book many adults can relate to because it's about a parent coping with grief and dealing with a child who is sick. It's about trying to reestablish a relationship with your child. But for children, *The Secret Garden* is about making connections with friends and discovering nature and exploring the unknown. So it's clear there are always different layers in a book, and different ages can relate to different layers.

In many ways, children's literature, especially the gothic texts, are more than just a reflection of the frustrations and conflicts that can surface during childhood. They're also a commentary on how children view adulthood. *Alice in Wonderland* is a great example because all of the adult characters in that book are crazy: the Mad Hatter the Queen of Hearts, the Cheshire Cat. Poor Alice wanders around looking at all these adults and thinking how weird they are and how their words and actions don't make any sense to her. And that's realistic. Many times, children don't understand why adults do the things they do. Many of these Gothic children's books are important because they offer well-rounded characters that children can relate to and themes that children can understand, thus reminding child readers they are not the only ones who harbor some of these thoughts.

The Gothic provides a safe space, meaning children can work through many of these themes and issues in the context of an engrossing story. They understand how other characters react to those issues, they understand the actions those characters make, the consequences those characters face, whether they're good or bad, and they can learn from those actions. When children face similar situations in their own lives, perhaps they are more prepared because they've read about those situations in a book and had ample time to think about those unique situations.

With COVID being so prevalent at the moment, there is always the topic of vaccinations, and I bring this up because in many ways each of the books or stories or poems that children read is like a small vaccine. You can give it to children to prepare them for when they get older, for when they have to deal with similar situations in their own lives. Literature, and even film, can adequately prepare them for dealing with lots of themes and issues and problems that the world might throw at them when they become adolescents and then adults. And isn't that a huge part of a parent's job, or any adult for that matter? To prepare children for the larger world they will someday inhabit? To teach them how to make good choices? And to move them away from constant dependence to confident independence?

Added to that, gothic literature also promotes a feeling of victory, which is especially important for an age-range that, as I've already mentioned, does not enjoy a lot of power and control. Gothic literature often celebrates some type of victory at the end of the story. It might not always be quite the victory that the character or the reader wants, but it's still crucial for child readers to see another person, even if he or she is fictional, learn and mature and achieve some level of success. Those moments, which can lead to a sudden realization or an epiphany, are instrumental in shaping a child's growth and development.

I also admire how the Gothic is honest when it comes to presenting a level of realism within a fantastic or supernatural story, meaning this is a genre that is not afraid to portray how the real world functions. Whether we like it or not, the real world is not always fair. Good does not always triumph over evil. We don't live in a fairy tale, and gothic literature forces us not only to understand that idea, but to confront what scares us. It forces us to question what we can do to survive in such a world. A lot of times, people don't want to admit they are scared of something or someone, but gothic literature creates that safe space in which readers can deal with those issues and then process a multitude of emotions. And if the reader becomes scared, then he or she can just close the book and return to the story at a later time when he or she feels more settled and comfortable.

**MO:** Yes, very true. As we already mentioned, you teach children's literature at Missouri Southern State University. Why do you think it's important to teach gothic literature and also what would you say are the most common responses to the gothic themes from students who attend your classes? Do you find that these responses have evolved during your years of teaching? And finally, do you think that could be a correlation between young people's relationship with the Gothic and great changes in our society?

**MH:** Whenever I use gothic literature in my classroom, or even when I teach books that contain Gothic elements, I always have some students who are a bit leery and question whether or not those elements are appropriate for children. And that's a great conversation to have. There's not one specific age where children are suddenly able to handle gothic elements, or to understand the symbolism and how those elements connect to the story and characters and setting. Every child is different. Clearly, I was an anomaly, watching *Jaws* and *Halloween* and *Aliens* when I was still in elementary school.

Children can always handle a lot more than adults give them credit for and that's something I constantly tell my students. I tell them it's important to teach gothic texts because at some point in our lives we are all going to encounter the Big Bad Wolf, in whichever form that takes. Gothic texts can help to illuminate the way we view the world. They help us to learn what frightens us, and they help us to learn what fascinates us. What most children remember about the fairy tales they read are usually the scary parts and the violent parts and the gory parts. They're somewhat fascinated by that dark side, as are most people, even those who are afraid of horror films. Some people who watch horror films cover their eyes with their hands, but they still peek through their fingers. Why? It's because they are still intrigued by what is happening, and they are equally intrigued by the possibility of what could happen.

Therefore, the Gothic becomes an important mechanism for learning how to conquer our own fears and how to keep them at bay, or how to communicate them to other people. It helps us to establish a sense of our own independence and thus develop our own self-identities. Gothic stories help children explore their surroundings. If you want children to be engaged in literature, then you have to give them something to think about, and Gothic literature always gives you something to think about. Right now, we are seeing the Gothic becoming more established. More children are reading gothic stories, and part of that reason is because of social media and streaming services. Children nowadays are more in tune with what's going on in the world, so they are not quite as sheltered as children in the past have been. More and more, it seems children are questioning how the greater world functions and how they fit into that world, and so many authors are writing gothic books that deal with social themes and issues that children deal with on a regular basis.

Children regularly deal with heightened emotions and a heightened imagination, two elements that are often prevalent in gothic texts. So it makes sense that children would gravitate toward a genre that contains many of the same levels of emotion and imagination which children often experience themselves. Children are constantly finding themselves in power struggles, not just with their parents but with their friends and their communities, or even with how quickly or slowly their own bodies are changing. In gothic texts, they are able to watch those struggles play out through various characters and plots and settings. They get to live vicariously through other characters and test out what happens when they want to act like a character who succeeds, but then when a character fails they can ask also themselves questions about what that specific character could have done differently. Interacting with

those gothic elements is important because it's a reminder that such struggles and conflicts are an unavoidable part of life. But those hardships are also crucial in helping each one of us figure out who we are and who we want to become. We can grow from these experiences as long as we make good choices and learn from our mistakes.

In my university classes, all the students in the teacher education program must take a class on child psychology, so by the time most of them enroll in my children's literature course they have studied some aspects of psychology and are better able to grasp some of the gothic elements we read during the semester. As a professor, I like to focus on the choices and decisions the characters make, and how those characters change as a result of their decisions.

When I teach literature, I try to emphasize the importance of universal connections because one of the great things about literature, and especially all of those well-written characters that live within the pages, is that regardless of what country a reader is from, regardless of their race or ethnicity, there is something about the characters' behaviors and traits that strike a chord within the reader. Readers enjoy connecting with certain characters, relating to similar passions and desires and interests and fears.

So I always try to find ways that readers can connect to the characters and ask questions about how they are both similar and dissimilar to the characters in a given novel. One exercise I often ask my students to do is to write a paragraph about how they are like a specific character and then write another paragraph about how they are not like a specific character. Then I will ask them to write about a good decision made by a character, as well as a bad decision made by that same character. Questions like those really allow readers to explore the psychology of the characters. Because then you can have a conversation that centers on the idea of what makes a good choice and what makes a bad choice. And then you can discuss the repercussions of those decisions.

And every time we have those discussions in my classroom, we talk about what lessons children can gain from a particular text. Because the first question you always want to ask when choosing a book to share with a child is: What do I want my students to learn from this text? What is my reason for teaching this text? And if you can answer that question, then you can provide a roadmap for the readers to follow. When I teach a text, I always begin by telling my students what concepts I want them to understand, and I ask them to focus on important themes in the text and how the main character changes from the beginning to the end, or how a secondary character is pivotal in the main character's growth and development.

What I love about discussing literature in the classroom is that every person has his or her own response to a given text because we are all different people, meaning we all have different life experiences. We've all made different choices, we've all succeeded, and we've all failed. We've all experienced happiness and sadness and pain, so whenever we read a text we tend to gravitate towards those characters and conflicts that we relate to personally. Everyone has a favorite scene or character or line of dialogue, but the readers also disagree as to whether the ending is satisfying or the character has grown sufficiently over the course of the novel.

And those differences and similarities are what allow us to engage in those inspiring and interesting conversations. To really understand and appreciate a text you need to reread it a couple of times. We don't have that luxury in a college classroom, but the closest we can come to that experience is having twenty different students read the same book and then have each of them share their own interpretation of the text.

Overall, the responses in my classroom have been largely positive whenever I have incorporated gothic texts into the curriculum, whether it be through novels or stories or poems. At the very least, my students have gained a deeper appreciation for the Gothic and can now understand its importance.

**MO:** I have one final question: in the epilogue of your book *Under the Bed, Creeping*, which we have already mentioned, you write, and I quote, "Children's literature is for all ages." Can you explain what that means and why you think it is so important to keep this idea in mind when dealing with children's books?

**MH:** Children's literature is certainly taken more seriously as a genre than it was in the past. Even still, there are people who think the vocabulary in children's books is always simple and the stories are straightforward and not complicated. But children are very complex, and so the best children's literature needs to be complex, too. Once we start exploring children's literature in my classroom, my students are always shocked by the serious issues and advanced vocabulary words that exist in those texts, not to mention the big themes and ideas. And I always share with them, at the beginning of the semester, one of my favorite quotations by the author Philip Pullman, who says, "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book."

People tend to think that children's literature deals with only the emotions that children deal with, but there's really no emotion that is specific to children. If you're a human being, then you experience anger and depression and happiness and grief. Plus, no one ever escapes his or her childhood, which is one of the reasons why children's literature is for all ages. We don't just cut loose our childhood when we reach a certain age. Our childhood is like a shadow that is with us throughout our lives. We may not always see it, and there are times when it might be bigger than it really is or more pronounced, but it's always there. And the books we read as children, the conversations we have about those books, and the use of our imagination all work together to help shape our identities. We carry those experiences into adolescence and adulthood. Stop for a moment and think about who you are as an adult and then ask yourself how your childhood experiences helped to shape your identity. At what point did you begin to separate from who you were as a child and start to make your own decisions and to act more independently?

An important theme in children's literature is the idea of home away home, in which the child starts off at home, is supported by parents, is dependent on adults and then must go off on his or her own and make choices on his or her own, whether those choices are good or

bad. The child character learns from those decisions, and oftentimes from any mistakes, and returns home at the end of the story changed and now more aware of his or her place in the world, as well as having a better understanding of how to make important decisions.

When I wrote *Under the Bed, Creeping*, I made a conscious effort to write it in a way that non-academics could understand it. I don't want to target just one specific group of people. I would love for parents and teenagers to read some of these critical texts and connect with them to the point of saying, "I understand how this relates to me." If you have kids and they're interested in this type of literature, or if you're looking for literature to use with them to get them thinking about certain issues or ideas that they might feel uncomfortable talking about with you, then why not read some of these critical articles and texts? They can help people to learn more about what specific books to use with children and students, as well as how to approach them in regard to discussing certain issues and ideas.

As I read more and more children's literature, and the accompanying critical analysis, I continue to be fascinated by how many details have been changed over the years, like Cinderella's stepsisters chopping off parts of their feet to fit inside the slipper, or the wicked queen wanting to eat Snow White's lungs and liver. I suppose adults believed those details would terrify children too much and warp their growth and development. But that's a mistake because in changing many of those stories, they remove the opportunities for the main characters to make their own choices, which hinders that character's maturity process. In life, we all have to make good choices and bad choices. We all have to understand and live with the consequences, otherwise there is no room for growth. How can children be expected to mature if someone else is always making choices for them?

And let's not forget that children are smart enough to know it's just a story. Plus, they enjoy those darker and more violent details. That's one of the reasons why we are seeing the original versions of many of these stories becoming more popular and being read more and more to children. Perhaps adults are understanding the positive aspects of Gothicism and realizing that children can indeed handle a lot more than we often give them credit for.

If I could give two or three book and film recommendations to someone who is interested in exploring Gothicism in children's literature and film, I would recommend *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, especially if they are familiar with Disney's *The Jungle Book*, which addresses some of the same key themes and ideas. I would also recommend a novel titled *Peppermints in the Parlor* as well as a book geared toward middle-grade readers titled *Scar Island* that deals with bullying and grief and abandonment. In terms of films, I recommend *ParaNorman*, Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*, and Val Lewton's *Curse of the Cat People* from 1944, which deals with childhood trauma in a way that's spooky but also very touching. These books and films are important because they use Gothic elements, sometimes in fantastical settings, to explore realistic issues and conflicts that feel both personal and universal at the same time.

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