A New Era of Gothic Horror
A look at the subversive power of the genre and its appeal to today's teens

Gothic horror fiction has become wildly popular in my high school library over the past few years, and series like Darren Shan’s “The Demonata,” Stephenie Meyer’s “Twilight” (both Little, Brown), and Libba Bray’s “Gemma Doyle” trilogy (Delacorte) have been in high demand. Last year, vampire novels were the most requested type of books by my students. Simply put, most teens adore horror and love being scared; they enjoy delve into the forbidden and the shock and terror that ensue. Moreover, Gothic-influenced young adult novels have begun to garner prestigious literary awards including David Almond’s Printz Award-winning ghost story Kit’s Wilderness (Delacorte, 2000), the Silver Award for the Nestlé Smarties Prize for Chris Wooding’s The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray (Scholastic, 2004), and Celia Rees’s The Wish House (Candlewick, 2006), which was short-listed for the Welsh Tir na n-Og award. Yet I can think of no other genre in children’s and YA publishing that is viewed more disparagingly by my peers.

Educators, librarians, and children’s literature specialists have long viewed Gothic horror as low-level, sensationalized pulp fiction, lacking moral, educational, and literary merit. Just mention R. L. Stine’s “Goosebumps” series (Scholastic) in the company of children’s librarians and you will inevitably be met with groans, sighs, eye-rolling, and comments like, “it’s junk, but at least they’re reading something!” Moreover, when the July 2006 issue of School Library Journal featured a cover article on horror fiction for teens, it included the disclaimer: “Great literature? Maybe not, but teens love horror.” These perceptions are not new; they date back to the early 20th century when children’s library services were being developed and school librarians played a key role in guiding young people’s reading choices.

Gothic horror stories were one of the chief targets of those educators and librarians. Mass-marketed fiction, such as dime novels, boys’ adventures stories, horror, the Oz books, comics, and series fiction, were deemed “sensational literature,” reading material thought to develop children’s taste for the lurid and the fantastic. Numerous educational studies concluded that these books were unwholesome and immoral. Children who read them were believed prone to juvenile delinquency, illiteracy, mental laziness, and disrespect for authority. Attacks on these books further increased as librarians’ role in guiding children’s reading became more clearly defined as the process for selecting children’s books in school and public libraries was standardized. Moreover, organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) began publishing reading guides that directed young people toward the classics and away from the “harmful” effects of sensational literature.

While many of these ideas have, thankfully, altered over time, the general view of Gothic horror fiction has changed little during the past hundred years. Authoritative guides to children’s literature such as Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard’s The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature (1999), Zena Sutherland’s Children and Books (Allyn & Bacon, 1997), and Anita Silvey’s The Essential Guide to Children’s Books (Houghton, 2002) do not include entries on horror and narrow their discussion to two aspects of the genre: supernatural mysteries (e.g., The House with the Clock in Its Walls; The Wolves of Willoughby Chase) and traditional ghost stories. The one exception I could find was the Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature, whose entry for horror fiction focused exclusively on series books of the 1980s by R. L. Stine and Christopher Pike. Collectively, these guides continue to reinforce long-held stereotypes about Gothic horror as a genre unworthy of serious study. It is, in fact, one of the oldest genres in modern literature, comprising horror, Gothic, the weird, ghost stories, the macabre, and the supernatural. Classics such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), Dracula (1897), Edgar Allan Poe’s Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840), and Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw (1897) set the standard.

Nearly all Gothic horror stories share five basic motifs: a castle/haunted house setting; a young innocent hero(ine); a villain/monster; a dark/oppressive setting; and the inclusion of societal taboos. For example, in Stephen King’s The Shining, the castle becomes the Hotel Overlook; the isolating winter snow, the oppressive setting; Jack Torrance, the axe-wielding villain; his son, Danny, the young innocent...
hero; and alcoholism and child abuse, the societal taboos. The best examples create an atmosphere of terror, but also subvert the status quo. The Gothic writer delights in exploring aspects of the human condition that polite society would like to pretend don't exist. Why are there serial killers? Why is society prone to violence? Questions like these are at the heart of the genre’s literary consciousness.

During the 21st century, young adult Gothic horror has become a formidable genre. The once-dominant formulaic series of the 1980s and 1990s (“Fear Street,” “Scholastic Point Horror,” “Bantam Bloodlust”) have been largely replaced by contemporary literary novels that focus more fully on plot, characterization, symbolism, and language.

One of the most impressive in recent memory is M. T. Anderson’s award-winning historical novel, The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation (Candlewick, 2006), an examination of the dark underbelly of 18th-century philosophical and scientific thought. The complex narrative structure uses diaries, letters, and other manuscripts to chronicle the experiences of Octavian, a young African American who is brought up by a group of rationalist philosophers seeking to determine his capacity for reason during the Revolutionary War era. In Anderson’s hands, the Gothic castle becomes the Novanglian College of Lucidity, a closed, scientifically controlled environment where his innocent, captive hero, Octavian, discovers the horrors that lie within. The monsters are the Rationalist professors who enact their experiments on human subjects, while the societal taboos are slavery and racism. Anderson uses a Gothic atmosphere to create genuine moments of horror and repulsion in this critique of America during the Age of Reason.

Jack Gantos’s The Love Curse of the Rumbaughs (Farrar, 2006) uses morbid, dark humor to examine issues of incest, taxidermy, and eugenics. The story focuses on Ivy, who at seven years old discovers the preserved remains of the late Mrs. Rumbaugh in the basement of the family pharmacy. Over the next nine years she uncovers family secrets and struggles to come to terms with the Rumbaugh family curse: loving one’s mother too much. Like Shelley’s Frankenstein and H. G. Wells’s The Island of Doctor Moreau, Gantos’s novel explores the darker side of human nature, deftly balancing issues of scientific inquiry with illicit personal obsessions that Ivy feels are “so natural.”

Obsession, control, and sexuality are also examined in Celia Rees’s The Wish House and Kathe Koja’s The Blue Mirror (Farrar, 2004). These two veteran writers seamlessly craft realistic, coming-of-age stories that contain delicate brushstrokes of the macabre. Rees provides a fascinating exploration of the darker sides of desire and creativity. Richard, a lonely, naïve 15-year old boy, spends every summer in Wales with his family. There he meets the eccentric, artistic Dalton family: the ominous patriarch, J. A. Dalton, a painter; his wife, Lucia, a self-proclaimed witch; and Clio, their uninhibited teenage daughter. Told in a series of flashbacks, Richard, now an adult, summons painful memories about his first love, Clio, and her bohemian world of art, drugs, and casual sex. The lyrical prose creates a mood reminiscent of Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca, in which the past holds exhilarating and terrifying secrets.

Koja similarly explores first love in her chilling tale of obsessive power, sexuality, and abuse. Maggie, an artistic 16-year old loner, seeks refuge from her alcoholic mother by hanging out in a local café. There she meets Cole, a charismatic homeless teen who provides her with the love and affection she so desperately needs, but their relationship soon turns as Cole becomes increasingly cruel and manipulative. Koja’s experimental poetic prose creates a moody, evocative world of power and seduction. In her portrait of Cole, Koja creates a Byronic hero in the tradition of Emily Bronte’s Heathcliff.

Beneath its trappings of ghosts, monsters, and psychopaths, quality Gothic horror asks important philosophical questions about human nature.

Each of these authors integrates Gothic horror conventions into postmodern narratives that are distinct in style and approach. Beneath its trappings of ghosts, monsters, and psychopaths, quality Gothic horror asks important philosophical questions about human nature. It can be an invaluable aesthetic tool for helping teens develop their own moral compasses. Themes of murder, incest, and dark sexuality can help young people understand the whole spectrum of human behavior. After all, “the work of horror is not interested in the civilized furniture of our lives...our socially acceptable and pleasantly enlightened character” as Stephen King has suggested. But it is interested in all of those things that are not talked about in school or at the dinner table—those very aspects of life that so many teens are desperately struggling to understand. And what better type of reading for them than books that they perceive to be appalling to those in authority: parents, teachers, and librarians.

Philip Charles Crawford is the library director for Essex High School in Essex Junction, VT.