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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Power, Fear, and Children's Picture Books

Jackie E. Stallcup (bio)

One of my students in a recent children's literature course wrote a paper on Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, an alphabet book that traces in upbeat rhythm and rhyme the gruesome deaths of twenty-six children. My student noted that its format suggests that it is a children's book: it is small, just the right size for small hands and a size that often indicates a children's book; it is short, for the supposedly short attention spans of children; it has pictures of children on every page; and, finally, it is an alphabet book, traditionally a form designed for children learning to read. But my student argued that despite these elements, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* is an adult book because of the overt violence enacted upon children's bodies in the depictions of their deaths—deaths that in some pictures occur in the midst of ordinary daily activities. Underlying her argument were the unspoken assumptions that children would be psychologically damaged by witnessing, in print, the grisly deaths of other children and that children's books depicting violence will instill fear in their young readers and, hence, are problematic and inappropriate.

The Gashlycrumb Tinies is part of a long tradition in children's literature in which young characters meet with violent punishments and even death because they transgress social boundaries and challenge adult authority. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts were designed to frighten young readers into obedience through threatening dire punishments for disobedience. But for modern adults, books that purport to *relieve* children of their fears of everything from monsters to nightmares are preferable to the older, fear-inducing texts. Many of these modern "fear-alleviating" books are explicit attempts at bibliotherapy, designed to help children, psychologically and emotionally, by demonstrating how young characters overcome frightening situations.[1] Yet, their ideological functions are more complicated than this informal definition suggests. In fact, the varied cultural work performed by these texts reveals the many conflicting assumptions **[End Page 125]** adults hold regarding children. Because the overt goal of some of these modern, fear-alleviating books is to free children of fear, they appear at one level to be liberating and possibly subversive of adult power. Underlying these possibilities, however, are unspoken issues of authority and control that add layers of complexity and suggest parallels with older texts that sought to control children through implicit and explicit threats of violence.

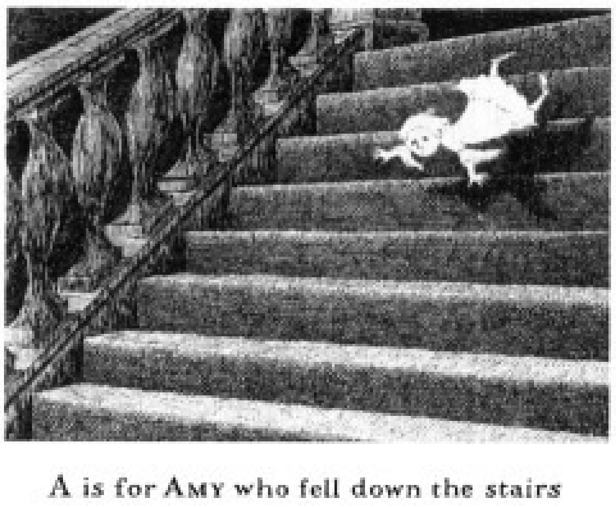
A is for AMY who fell down the stairs

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Figure 1.

Edward Gorey. Illustration from *The Gashlycrumb Tinies or, After the Outing*, copyright © 1963 and renewed 1991 by Edward Gorey, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

While such threats are considered unacceptable by modern adults (as my student's reaction to *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* suggests), the goal of securing adult authority has not changed—only the means of attaining it have been inverted. Rather than invoking threats of violence to frighten children into submission, many modern picture books seek to reassure children that they have nothing to fear from imaginary dangers while at the same time demonstrating that there are very real **[End Page 126]** dangers that only adults can defuse. Indeed, in some cases, parental control of the child's environment forms the foundation of a child's sense of security. Thus, many of these books consolidate and disseminate adult authority while diminishing the possibilities for children's empowerment and emotional growth. But this potentially oppressive pattern is not the only one offered. In some cases, fear-alleviating books offer a model in which children overcome their fear not simply through relying on adults but through developing adultlike characteristics themselves; more rarely, a book encourages the child reader to reject the adult world altogether. Alleviating children's fear, thus, is not the only goal of such texts; their subtexts reveal some of the unstated ideologies that shape our relationships with children.

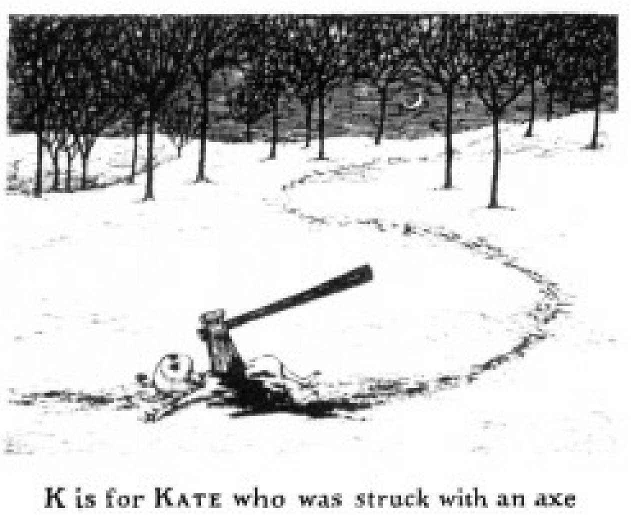
K is for KATE who was struck with an axe

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Figure 2.

Edward Gorey. Illustration from *The Gashlycrumb Tinies or, After the Outing*, copyright © 1963 and renewed 1991 by Edward Gorey, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

There are many criteria one can use to evaluate these books to determine...

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