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Edward Gorey, Children's Literature, and Nonsense Verse

Kevin Shortsleeve

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

Edward Gorey, Children's Literature, and Nonsense Verse

Kevin Shortsleeve (bio)

"A lot of my books I've intended for children primarily."

"Ted Gorey is perfect for children; and that's the saddest thing of all, that they [his books] weren't allowed to be published that way."

—Maurice Sendak

On April 15, 2000, Edward Gorey, author of a notorious canon of verse and prose, departed this life. In the wake of his passing—and during his own lifetime—there appears to have been a great deal of disagreement as to whether or not the works of Edward Gorey should be categorized as children's books. Obituaries on and critiques of the curious author run the gamut on this issue. Kate Taylor of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* affirmed that "Gorey is not a children's author" (R-5), while Mel Gussow commented in *The New York Times* that Gorey was "sometimes mistakenly categorized as an author of children's books" ("[Edward Gorey](#)" B-8). For others, Gorey's obituary was the perfect opportunity to warn any who might make that very mistake: in London, Brian Sibley of *The Independent* reported that "It might be argued that [Gorey's verses] were, by their subject matter, quite unsafe for children" (R-6). With less conviction, Myrna Oliver, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, offered that his texts were merely "hard to categorize as children's books," suggesting that indeed, they *might* be children's books after all (B-6). *The Daily Telegraph* reported that "most of his material was aimed at reasonably small children" ("[Edward Gorey: Recluse](#)" 31), and Celia Anderson and Marilyn Apseoff, in *Nonsense Literature for Children: Aesop to Seuss*, confirmed that many children do appreciate Gorey's verses (139) and suggested that the dark themes depicted in them are indicative of their affiliation with a subgenre of nonsense literature (35). Completing the spectrum, Amy Hanson exhibited no apprehension whatsoever when, in a 1998 article in *Biblio*, she enthused that Gorey "has written many gently humorous books that are suitable for young readers" (20).

My purpose in this essay is to confirm that Edward Gorey was a children's author and, further, that his contributions to the field of

nonsense verse are both unique and valuable precisely because his work and career raise doubts about the accuracy of current understandings of children's literature. I will begin by examining why Gorey's work has been so difficult to categorize, suggesting that an unusual publishing decision and Gorey's steadfast ambivalence about his own career combined to prevent his acceptance as a children's author. An examination of Gorey's thematic concerns and personal background confirms that childhood was one of his principal themes and that Gorey worked solidly in the tradition of nonsense literature, his verse inspired by the nonsense rhymes of Lear, Carroll, and Hoffman. The violence in Gorey's work is both largely innocuous and, indeed, necessary to this genre. Ultimately, I will suggest that because his verses combine the traditional mores of the fathers of nonsense with a liberating blend of modern and postmodern tendencies, Gorey's works represent a valuable advance in nonsense literature. The author's dark verses are, in fact, uniquely situated to offer a rewarding set of challenges to the child reader.

Because of Gorey's complex public persona, we must dismantle the legend before we can examine the mechanics of his verse. It is significant that throughout his career, Gorey was involved in the field of children's literature and, particularly, children's poetry. In 1959, shortly after he began publishing his rhyming picture books, Gorey became a founding editor at The Looking Glass Library, a short-lived imprint of Random House, dedicated to releasing children's classics in hardback, including Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* and *The Looking Glass Book of Verse*. In the 1960s and 70s, Gorey worked tirelessly as an illustrator of children's books. He provided art for numerous volumes and was especially effective when accompanying the verses of children's poets like Lear and John Ciardi. For many years, in fact, Gorey's main source of income was as an...

Edward Gorey, Children's Literature, and Nonsense Verse

by Kevin Shortleese

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The course will emphasize the creative and imaginative aspects of illustrating—and writing—children's books and give practical experience in techniques, media, design, and typography. Included will be an informal history of children's books...and a survey of the field now, ranging from the picture book for the youngest child to the novel for the young adult... The course will deal, also, with the nature of illustration[...], its relationship to text, and the two conceived as one entity. (1)

Later in life, in addition to his own work and illustration for others, he created dolls for children and produced puppet shows annually on Cape Cod.

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