Haunting Experiences

Thomas, Jeannie Banks, Grider, Sylvia, Goldstein, Diane

Published by Utah State University Press

Thomas, Jeannie Banks, et al.
Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9397.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9397

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=203763
Children’s ghost stories are among the most popular and most durable traditional narratives in the United States. The formulaic and often silly ghost stories that children tell one another—not necessarily those that they learn from storybooks or adult storytellers—are essentially different from the more threatening and psychologically disturbing tales appropriated by the mass media as plots for movies, TV exposés, and best-selling novels. Typical children’s ghost stories are usually quite short, monoepisodic, and conclude with an incongruous and jokelike punch line.

The rollicking ghost stories in which most American children take delight at Halloween, slumber parties, and campouts are grounded in imagery of rotting corpses, dancing skeletons, and wandering souls which stretches back at least as far as medieval times. Early European literature and history are filled with tales of the unknown and the supernatural, including a threatening and macabre *dramatis personae* of evil spirits and wandering souls of the dead who menace the living.

Some of these narratives apparently filtered down from the adult level of society into the realm of childhood, the so-called “children’s underground,” resulting in a wide variety of traditional and highly formulaic stories about ghosts and other aspects of death and the supernatural that still circulate widely in the
United States. As this body of knowledge lodged in the worldview of modern childhood, supernatural beings—especially ghosts, vampires, and witches—lost many of their horrifying aspects and instead became benign figures of amusement and derision. That such ghoulish images have become entertainment for modern children may seem perplexing at first glance, but is not really surprising to those who have studied children’s traditions. For example, according to the most eminent chroniclers of modern childhood, Iona and Peter Opie, “When children are about ten years old they enter a period in which the outward material facts about death seem extraordinarily funny. . . . Death, which when they were younger they may have regarded as a frightening and private subject, has now come out into the open. They have found that it is still a long way off, and these songs are a sign of their emancipation” (Opie 1959, 32–35). To “songs” I would add “and stories.” Today, most children tell ghost stories for their own entertainment, which often paradoxically includes frightening one another. This chapter will survey the various types of traditional ghost stories typically told by American children, as well as their possible historical antecedents and the settings in which children acquire and perform them.

Definitions and Background

The best way to determine what is and what is not a ghost story is to get comfortable with the fuzzy, circular definition that children most often use, “A ghost story is about ghosts.” To this emic definition we can add “and witches, and haunted houses, and monsters, and Frankenstein, and Dracula” almost ad infinitum. In other words, in common usage today among children a ghost story is any narrative which deals with the scary world of the supernatural dead/undead.

Although they are not strictly categorized as being supernatural, monsters nevertheless occupy a key role among many children’s “ghost stories.” According to Marina Warner, “Monsters have become children’s best friends, alter egos, inner selves. While the monster mania of the last few years has obviously
been fostered by commercial interests, it has also diagnosed an identification that children themselves willingly and enthusiastically accept” (1998, 15). The monsters are never described in children’s oral ghost stories, which is one way that children can control their fear of these nightmarish creatures that lurk in their closets or under their beds. “And then there was this big old monster,” is a typical reference in children’s oral stories. The media, on the other hand, provide ample cartoonish and nonthreatening portrayals of monsters, ranging from the “wild things” of best-selling author and artist Maurice Sendak to Sully and his friends in the animated movie *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). The pre-verbal toddler in *Monsters, Inc.* is terrified of the monster who haunts her closet, but she refers to the cuddly Sully as “Kitty” and does not regard him as frightening at all.

Defining “ghost” (and its many synonyms—“specter,” “phantom,” “wraith,” “revenant,” “apparition,” “shade,” “spirit,” and so on) is a bit more problematic. The metaphoric imagery of idiomatic spoken English further complicates the definition because we speak of having “a ghost of a chance,” “ghostwriting” a manuscript, or “ghosts” on TV or computer screens. Amputees suffer from “phantom pain” and people are “haunted” by unpleasant memories. Traditional ghosts are frightening figures, the unwanted and wandering spirits or souls of the dead which come back to interact with, or haunt, the living. For most children, however, these supernatural beings simply are, invoking a Zen-like acceptance of them. Children frequently solve the problem of definition by drawing a picture of a ghost as a sheet-shrouded figure with two eye holes (and sometimes a mouth) floating in the air and saying, “Boo!” These childish drawings, which appear regularly on Halloween greeting cards, party decorations, and such may represent vestiges of a venerable bit of cultural baggage that we have carried in our collective memories since the Black Death of the fourteenth century.

The bubonic plague which swept Europe and Asia was the most devastating catastrophe within human memory, and so many deaths changed the course of modern history. During the plague, hundreds of thousands of people died so quickly
that the corpses stacked up faster than they could be buried, and the living were surrounded by the unburied and decaying dead. At the height of the plague, with the deaths of so many clergy, victims often were buried without receiving last rites and thus provided an undercurrent of fear of their wandering, malevolent souls among the terrified survivors. Bodies wrapped in burial shrouds were carried to burial grounds in individual caskets whenever possible, but the caskets were not buried with the corpses because they were reused over and over for the transport of plague victims. Art of the period is filled with images of burials of corpses wrapped in winding sheets (figure 1) as well as dancing skeletons cavorting with enshrouded, rotting corpses (figure 2). We can only assume that the images on which such art was based were familiar to the children who survived the plague.

The emotional core of a persistent plague that has lodged among contemporary children appears to be the ubiquitous winding sheet or shroud. This shroud memory may very well be the source for the contemporary image of the sheeted ghost of children’s drawings and Halloween decorations. This possible connection between children’s ghost stories and the plague is a reminder that even the seemingly most trivial of traditions may, in fact, preserve vestiges of our venerable shared human past.

Memories of the plague endure at many levels, so children’s maintenance of burial shroud images as sheeted ghosts would not be inconsistent with other levels of cultural memory. There are first-person literary descriptions of the ravages of the plague, such as the writings of the Italian master Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) in the Decameron. In English literature, Thomas Dekker (1570?–1632), Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), and Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) all provided reliable descriptions of the plagues that swept across England, especially London. In architecture, the Duomo of Siena stands as a monument to the plague because so many artisans died in that city that the building was never finished. And according to local legend, the famous Oberammergau Passion Play originated as an attempt to assuage the epidemic.
Figure 1: Sixteenth-century painting of burials of shrouded plague victims. San Sebastian pierced by arrows that represent the plague is typical of the iconography that developed during this period. The tilted position of the head of the foreground figure with upraised arms indicates that he has just been stricken by plague. The bubo is visible on his neck. Note that corpses were buried in their shrouds; caskets were too valuable to bury. (Photo by permission of Walters Art Museum, 37.1995. Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken. Josse Lieferinxe, ca. 1500.)
Popular culture, too, perpetuates memories of the plague. For example, a persistent metatradition alleges that “Ring Around the Rosie” was originally a charm to ward off the plague. Popular articles by authors who are not historians or social scientists frequently appear in the press, online, and elsewhere which describe the pat but totally unsupported explanation of the children’s rhyme along the lines that the ring stands for beads of the rosary or the markings on plague victims’ bodies; posies represent the garlands of flowers that people wore to mask the smell of rotting corpses; ashes refer to the custom of burning the bodies of
victims; and “all fall down” means everybody died. Such fanciful explanations have been categorically refuted by scholars from the online Urban Legends Reference Pages (2005) to folklorists Iona and Peter Opie, who lament, “This story has obtained such circulation in recent years it can itself be said to be epidemic” (1985, 221). They go on to point out that “those infected with the belief seem unperturbed” that there are no references to this rhyme in any of the contemporary accounts of the plague. The game and the rhyme may not have originated during an outbreak of the plague, but the metatradition explaining its content persists and with every telling reinforces for modern audiences, including children, the imagery of plague infection and death. Children throughout the world turn catastrophe and devastation into mimetic play: children play at being terrorists and drive-by shooters as well as “cops and robbers.” With “Ring Around the Rosie,” they turn the plague itself into play.

**Children’s Oral Ghost Stories**

The sense of awe and mystery that characterizes the renditions of so many adult and adolescent narratives about the supernatural is absent from the highly structured, artistic, and whimsical narrative performances of childhood. During my many years of research on the topic of children’s ghost stories, I have observed that elementary school youngsters are sophisticated in the ways of Halloween and horror movies, but in their own storytelling sessions they attempt to keep the terror of the supernatural and the perverse under control by humor and parody. Their favorite ghost stories involve liberal doses of fantasy and imagination rather than direct confrontation with the horrible, unknown, and unknowable. Other types of serious, genuinely frightening narratives—such as urban legends about ax murderers and escaped lunatics—are acquired later, after children have more command of basic literary narrative technique (including plot sequence and development as well as dramatic timing) and after they have begun to understand more of the fundamentals of the overall supernatural belief network and an awareness of some of
the truly terrifying and threatening aspects of the everyday world. Telling urban legends about killers in the backseat and escaped mass murderers requires sophisticated dramatic technique and timing, as well as the ability to gauge and manipulate audience reaction. Learning to tell ghost stories is, for many children, the precursor to telling urban legends later. The formulaic, non-threatening content of traditional children’s ghost stories makes them good beginning narratives for novice storytellers.

In their storytelling sessions, children maintain control of the level of fright generated by their frequently formulaic stories. Their stories can be frightening, but not too frightening. In *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock*, Marina Warner proposes, “Being scared by a story or an image—scared witless, scared to death—can deliver ecstatic relief from the terror that the thing itself would inspire if it were to appear for real. The children’s word ‘scary’ covers responses ranging from pure terror to sheer delight, and the condition of being scared is becoming increasingly sought after not only as a source of pleasure but as a means of strengthening the sense of being alive, of having a command over self” (1998, 6).

Although, as discussed above, young children depict ghosts graphically as disembodied sheeted figures saying “boo,” not all children’s oral ghost stories contain these stereotypical sheeted ghosts. The concept and image of the ghost are so universal among children that a mere reference is sufficient in a storytelling session to establish the character during a story performance, as for example, “And then you hear this big old ghost.” Some ghost stories don’t even require a direct reference to a ghost at all; the audience knows the story genre so well that no character definition is necessary. For example, in this typical children’s ghost story told by a sixth-grade boy, the ghostly antagonist is merely “a voice”:

This boy’s mom told him to go to the store and get him some, get her some liver. But by the time he got to the store the store was closed. So there was a graveyard beside the store and so he went over there and dug up a person

A literary analysis of this seemingly simple but silly story, in which the narrator delights the audience by lunging at and grabbing one of them at the end, reveals a tightly structured narrative. This little cautionary tale encompasses a wide range of taboos: grave robbing, cannibalism, lying to mother. In the telling, however, these topics are merely implied or only superficially mentioned (“dug up a person and got the liver out of him and took it home and they ate it that night”). The lack of elaboration and description helps children maintain emotional distance from the genuine horrors that this story encompasses.

Opening in medias res, in the style of the traditional ballad, the story provides no context or explanation for the action, and gives no recognizable setting. The nuclear family provides the two main characters: the mother and the disobedient son. Nouns are clear and unadorned: liver, store, graveyard, bed, stairs, posters, dresser. The liver is always the purloined body part in these stories. This may be because the liver is one of the few human body parts that people might unwittingly eat without recognizing it; arms, legs, and so forth would be difficult to disguise. On the other hand, there are also widespread jokes about how much children dislike eating liver.

The poetic cadence of the corpse’s progress up the stairs as well as the delicious suspense of waiting for the screaming and grabbing at the end all create verbal art on a level that children never seem to tire of. The story likewise enables children to control and deal with fears of the unknown. A child who is really afraid of monsters lurking in the dark after he has gone to bed may cope with his fear a little better if he can control the unknown
monster by trapping him in the story matrix and making the monster methodically climb the stairs. This story gives children a way to verbalize their fears in a controlled, predictable manner.

The chant as the ghost stalks up the stairs approaches the *cante fable* in form, especially when the audience joins in. The metronomic, formulaic repetition pushes the tension of the impending disaster to its very limits. The punishment visited upon the terrified and guilty young protagonist is too terrible to articulate. In aesthetic desperation to achieve a sense of absolute climax, the story literally reaches out and yanks the audience into its spell. For a split second, the fantasy becomes reality. The screaming and grabbing of a member of the audience by the narrator unleashes a rowdy catharsis as the audience suddenly shares the punishment of the fictional thief for his triple crime of grave robbing, disobedience, and cannibalism. Such ghoulish and bizarre imagery seems out of place in the entertainment repertoire of contemporary children and, therefore, deserves closer analysis.

The grabbing and subsequent screaming of this traditional tale are reminiscent of the play action in “Bloody Mary” discussed in chapter 1, in which children deliberately try to invoke the creature in the mirror to attack them by uttering a formulaic incantation. Using ghost stories to test the limits of reality was researched by anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the 1960s, when he “developed a theory of play, according to which testing the limits of safety and entertaining the terror of murder and torment help confirm the child’s sense of security with the parent or caregiver.” Furthermore, “Games of thrills and spills, stirring phantoms of bogeymen, snatchers and watchers, then become part of the process of learning the norms of social languages, and of differentiating oneself within them” (Warner 1998, 144).

Versions of this traditional tale of grave robbing and punishment have been collected by folklorists for decades, primarily from the American South but also throughout western Europe from England to Spain, with a heavy concentration in Denmark (Thompson 1946, 42). Today it is perhaps the most common ghost story told by American children; versions of it can be heard at practically any slumber party or Halloween gathering.
Its inclusion in a wide range of children’s storybooks may help reinforce its circulation in oral tradition.³

Folklorists know the tale as Aarne/Thompson Tale Type 366, “The Man from the Gallows.” The theft of a corpse from a gibbet provides the first clue to the antiquity of the tale.

A man steals the heart (liver, stomach, clothing) of one who has been hanged. He gives it to his wife to eat. The ghost comes to claim his property and carries the man off. (NB: The English and American forms are always used as scaring stories; the teller at the end impersonates the ghost or the victim and shouts directly at a member of the audience.)

Variants of this tale also have separate motif numbers in Stith Thompson’s Motif Index of Folk Literature: E230, “Return from the dead to inflict punishment”; E235.4.1, “Return from dead to punish theft of golden arm from grave”; and F235.4.4, “Return from dead to punish theft of liver from man on gallows.”

Ernest Baughman, in Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America (1966), elaborates upon the distinctive punch line of Tale Type 366:

The English and American form, except for the theft of a golden or silver arm from a corpse, usually involves the finding of a part of the body by a man who uses it in soup. The owner returns at night and takes the man away. All forms cited are used as scaring stories; the teller at the end impersonates the ghost or the victim and shouts at a member of the audience, “Thou hast it!” or “Take it!”

The dramatic punch line is so characteristic of this particular tale that Baughman catalogued it with a separate pair of motif numbers: Z13.1, “Tale-teller frightens listener: yells ‘Boo’ at exciting point”; and Z13.1(a), “Man coming to get girl calls out from each step of the stairs that he is coming. Final line: ‘Sally I have hold of thee!’ (Here the teller grabs the listener.)”

Corpses left hanging on the gibbet were common in medieval Europe. A gruesome, chilling pre-plague image tells of “people
eating their own children, of the poor in Poland feeding on hanged bodies taken down from the gibbet” during a period of famine in the early fourteenth century (Tuchman 1978, 24). No record exists of whether these Polish peasants feared that the ghosts of their ghoulish meals would haunt them, but the innocuous children’s story cited above provides such revenge for cannibalism, in an incongruous, jocular setting. The ravaged corpse of the children’s ghost story also punishes the young protagonist for disobedience to his mother, a crime that would be more familiar to contemporary children than cannibalizing the corpse of a criminal. A final point of interest regarding the content of the story is that in all known collected versions, the protagonist is always a boy. Oral tradition apparently has no tolerance for a girl who would steal a corpse and then lie to her mother.

A fairly stable repertoire of traditional ghost story plots has circulated among American children for decades and probably much longer. All of these stories follow a rather distinct and predictable structural pattern, which has enhanced the stability of this story cycle. In general the pattern consists of:

1) A child is the protagonist, often the same age as the narrator, but usually a boy
2) A disembodied ghost is the antagonist
3) Adults are flat, ineffectual background characters
4) A haunted house is the most common setting
5) The stories are clearly presented by the narrator and recognized by the audience as “not true” or “not real”
6) The stories are short and frequently formulaic
7) The ending is generally a comic or surprise punch line

More than any other feature, this distinctive comic or surprise punch line is an essential structural feature of children’s traditional ghost stories that sets them apart from the more serious narratives of adults and older adolescents. The ubiquitous “Boo!” of cartoons and practical jokes reinforces children’s awareness
of the dramatic function of surprise endings, especially when the children play at grabbing and scaring one another. The ending helps keep these stories from ever being truly frightening because the grabbing and screaming usually dissolves into giggles and laughter.

**The Golden Arm**

The story about Johnny and the stolen liver is only one common variant of Tale Type 366: “The Man from the Gallows.” Most of the children’s variants of this traditional tale type are so deeply embedded in the child-to-child conduit of the childhood underground that they are unfamiliar to American adults. However, adults do know and tell the version of the story entitled “The Golden Arm,” which may be how many children first hear and then learn the story (Hudson 1953). The following version was collected from a sixth-grade girl:

> Once upon a time, there was this lady that had a golden arm. She was in a wreck, and her arm got cut off, so she had, they took her to the hospital, and they decided that they would put a golden arm on her, so they did. And, the next night when they went to sleep, someone came in and killed the lady, and so, a week after that they had buried her and, with the golden arm. And so it started snowing that night when they buried her, and then someone thought, decided that they would go dig up the woman and get her golden arm. So they, he went and dug her up, dug the woman up, and got her golden arm... and so he took it home, and he always kept it under the bed, and every time that he would hear a creepy noise, he would always go up, get up and see about it because he was afraid that someone would get her golden arm. And so, one night he heard someone coming up the stairs and heard someone say, “Who’s got my golden arm? Who’s got my golden arm? Who’s got my golden arm? HAVE YOU GOT MY GOLDEN ARM?” (Burrison 1968, 31)
British storybooks for children picked up versions of this and similar tales as early as the 1860s. In the United States, attention was first focused on it by two distinguished nineteenth-century authors, Mark Twain and Joel Chandler Harris (Burrison 1968). Twain sent a summary of the tale to Harris, suggesting that the latter use it in some of his Uncle Remus material. Twain mentioned that he had first heard the tale when he was a child from a family slave. Harris responded that he had not heard the story before and requested more information about it. Not long afterward, Harris published a version of the tale (1881), substituting silver coins for the golden arm. Twain frequently told a version of “The Golden Arm” during his public lecture tours and readings and also published the tale (1897).

Although Twain and Harris both credited oral sources for their versions of the tale, many contemporary tellers trace their knowledge of it directly to these two widely read and still popular authors. Many children’s storybook anthologies include at least synopses of Twain’s version of the tale. This tale is an outstanding example of the interplay between print and oral performance. It has also been interpreted as a parody of adult literary horror stories (Stewart 1982, 45).

The main question that this branch of the tale raises is why a golden arm is the object of the theft. One possible explanation involves the general aesthetic of the traditional fairytale, or Märchen, which focuses on primary colors, fantasy, and hard glittering surfaces. Since the story is told for entertainment and not as a memorate of a real ghostly encounter, the audience must simply exercise a “willing suspension of disbelief” and accept the golden arm as part of the story. The incongruity of using gold for a prosthetic arm provides a clue to the audience that this story is fantasy and is not really “real.” On the other hand, greed for gold also helps make the heinous crime of grave robbing more plausible for a modern audience.

The other branches of Tale Type 366 in the United States are most commonly told by adults to children. The first of these, “The Big Toe,” is the form best known in the South and emphasizes local foodways and customs. In this story cycle, a human toe
is accidentally dug up in the garden or potato patch. The poor, hungry hero cooks the windfall meat in a pot of beans or greens, a staple of the Southern diet, and then unexpectedly encounters the wrath of the rampaging ghost in search of its missing digit. The other category, “Tailypo,” is another Southern, regional adaptation told to children by adults. The creature seeking revenge is not supernatural, but rather is an infuriated animal in search of its tail, which has been chopped off by accident. In oral tradition, this form of the story can function as a kind of cautionary tale advising children not to abuse animals. Many versions of this story as commonly told by professional storytellers and librarians play down or eliminate the dramatic ending and emphasize instead the righteous fury of the mutilated animal. Both “The Big Toe” and “Tailypo” have been published as illustrated children’s books (Galdone 1977; Rockwell 1981).

Tag, You’re It!

A popular children’s narrative with structural affinity to Tale Type 366 but with totally different content and ambiance is known as “Tag, You’re It” (Brunvand 1961; Paredes 1960). The concluding punch line ironically parodies “The Golden Arm” versions of the tale type by failing to satisfy the frightening expectations that the narrative deliberately creates. Jan Brunvand cataloged this tale as Shaggy Dog #100, “The Encounter with a Horrible Monster.” It is also motif Z13.4* (i), “Escaped inmate from insane asylum chases man. They run and run until the pursued falls. The inmate with a long knife approaches, touches victim with free hand and says, ‘Tag.’”

In addition to being an entertaining story, it brings the everyday world of other children’s traditions into the realm of ghost stories by parodying the almost universal children’s game of “Tag.” According to William Wells Newell, an early American folklorist who published a book on children’s games in 1883, *Games and Songs of American Children*, “As in several other games of chase, the pursuer represents an evil spirit. . . . The chaser, it seems, was conceived as . . . a malignant character. Thus we get
a vivid idea of the extent to which such representations once affected the lives even of children, and see that an amusement that is now a mere pleasurable muscular exercise followed the direction imposed by belief” ([1883] 1963, 158–59).

As told by most contemporary children, the story features a generic and undescribed monster instead of a ghost as the antagonist. As long as they are entertained by a good story, children are uncritical about including monsters and other creatures from popular culture in what they regard as ghost stories. The following version, collected from a sixth-grade boy, features a “monster” that for all practical purposes functions the same way a ghost does in a haunted house, and at least in the introduction parodies the plot of the cult movie Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975).

OK, now see, there was this boy and he was delivering papers and it started storming and so he ran up to this one old haunted house and it had a, there was a man living in it still, though. And um he knocked on the door and asked if he could stay until the rain stopped and he goes, “Yeah, but don’t go down in the basement.” And so he said, “OK.” And um, so that night it, it rained all night, you know. He stayed all night, you know. And about the middle of the night he got up and he went down and he was curious, you know, and he wondered, “Now what could be in that basement?” And um, he started to open up the door and that guy ran up to him and he said, “No, don’t!” And he slammed the door back shut. And said, “Don’t go down there!” So he said, “OK, I won’t” and went back to bed. And it got to be about three o’clock and he got back up and that guy didn’t know he got back up and went down there and opened the door and he went in and there was the great big monster and it took off after him and chased him all over the house. And it got him cornered in this corner by the refrigerator and it walked up to him and it touched him and it said, “Tag, you’re it.” (Grider 1976, 162–63)
Speaking Ghosts: “The Ghost of the White Eye”

Another distinct and popular cycle of children’s ghost stories with joke or catch endings features a disembodied ghost that identifies itself by calling out its own name, much as Rumpelstiltskin did in the well-known Grimm tale (Vlach 1971). The humorous punch line is the play-on-words retort of the diminutive hero to the vociferous ghost. The punch line puts the emphasis on the successful “man of words” who fights words with words rather than emphasizing the gratuitous violence and mayhem so common in some other narratives and certainly in many movies and video games. Child narrators and listeners differentiate the various stories in this cycle according to the punch line, no matter how the story has developed up to that point. The punch lines are also used as titles for some of the stories. Following is a typical example of “The Ghost of the White Eye” as told by a sixth-grade boy:

There’s this baby and he was going across the floor and he dropped his bottle down the stairs and so he went and told his big brother, “Big Brother, will you go get my bottle?” And so the big brother started down there and the ghost goes, “I’m the Ghost of the White Eye.” And so the big brother ran up there and so the baby told his second biggest brother, and he goes, “Second Biggest Brother, will you go get my bottle?” And so he gets down there and the ghost goes, “I’m the Ghost of the White Eye.” So he runs back up there and the baby tells his next to the biggest brother, “Will you go get my bottle?” So he goes down there and comes back up because of the ghost saying, “I’m the Ghost of the White Eye.” And so the baby goes down there and goes, “You better shut up or you’re going to be the Ghost of the Black Eye!” (Grider 1976, 212–13)

In storytelling sessions, children generally howl with delight at the punch line, regardless of how many times they may have heard the story or told it themselves. The image of the baby getting
the best of an adversary that frightened away the big brothers is especially satisfactory for younger children. Another entertaining feature of this story is the opportunity it provides for a talented narrator to use different voices to depict the characters: a high-pitched lisp for the baby; a low, menacing snarl for the ghost; and a strong, assertive voice when delivering the punch line. The *Märchen* characteristics of this tale are immediately apparent. There is sophisticated triple incremental repetition as the baby asks others, in descending order, to go downstairs and retrieve his bottle. When all are frightened and run away from the ghostly voice, the baby himself performs the task, thus becoming the “victorious youngest child” so common in folktales. The amorphous, disembodied voice is a neutral character; only the fright of the baby’s superiors signifies that the voice is malevolent. But in this tale, the loquacious, precocious, and belligerent baby openly threatens the ghost instead of vice versa. Although it is not carried out, there is potential violence suggested in the baby’s threat to blacken the ghost’s eye. In some ways, the fearless little baby is an alter ego for all children who wish that they could vanquish the terrors of the night with such assertive but casual aplomb.

The only attribute of the ghost present in the narrative is its voice, making it a Genderless Presence, as described in chapter 3. This lack of description could stem from the assumption that everybody already knows what a ghost looks like. A more plausible explanation is that some children really are afraid of ghosts. One way to rationalize this fear or at least to keep it under control is to keep the data as superficial as possible by avoiding prolonged, gruesome descriptions that conjure up explicit and frightening visual images. Apparently what frightens children most about late-night TV or videos is not the voices but seeing what the creatures look like. In response, children (and some adults) commonly cover up their eyes (but not their ears) during especially graphic or frightening sequences. In the narratives, children achieve essentially the same detachment or emotional distancing by omitting any description of the ghost.

Young children who are just learning the aesthetic and worldview of the typical ghost story sometimes misinterpret or
misunderstand what they are hearing, as the following anecdote related by an instructor of clinical psychiatry who researches the supernatural illustrates. The frightening “Black Eye” creature the child fears can only be a fragment of an elliptical, misunderstood version of “Ghost of the White Eye,” of which his father, in his search for empirical reality, is unaware:

I am not aware of any dictionary that defines the term “ghost hunter.” However, nearly all of us have at one time or another acted as one. Even my five-year-old son, Damien, is not immune. He has insisted on being present at more than a few “haunted” locations when I have been involved in filming television documentaries on the paranormal. While he has never seriously reported any strange occurrences at these sites, he occasionally claims that a witchlike ghost he calls “Black Eye” is lurking in our home. His tears attest that he is not joking. Does this specter derive from a scary television show, a fleeting glimpse of an unrecognizable shadow, or some inner turmoil that is expressed through the imagery of ghosts? I still do not know despite my repeated attempts to understand the source of his experiences. (Houran 2004, xiii)

Children’s ghost stories often garble traditional plots by fusing different tales into one narrative. The following story, told by a first-grade girl, demonstrates the precocity of a six-year-old narrator as she blends together her apparent revulsion toward dirty diapers and the name of an ogre who is common in English and southern American folklore, “Raw Head and Bloody Bones” (Taylor 1956; Wilgus 1960). Appropriately for a girl narrator, she includes a sister and a “mommy” as characters.

There was this baby and its bottle fell down the stairs and he told his mommy to go down and get it and he said, “Mommy, will you go get my bottle?” And while she was down there getting the bottle, and she said, “OK.” And while she was down there getting the bottle she heard this,
“Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers. Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers. Bloody Bones.” And she went upstairs and said, “Tell your dad to get it.” And so they went to the daddy and he said, “Will you go down and get my bottle?” And so he went down the stairs and he started to pick up the bottle, and “Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers. Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers.” And so he went back up the stairs and said, “Tell your sister to get it.” And so he went to his sister and she went down the stairs and as she was picking up the bottle, goes, “Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers. Bloody Bones.” And then she went back up the stairs and said, “Tell your brother to go get it.” And he went and got his brother to get it. And his brother went down and started getting it, and “Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers. Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers.” And then he ran, ran back up the stairs and said, “Why don’t you go get it?” And so he went downstairs and he said, and he started to pick up the bottle, and, “Bloody Bones and Dirty Diapers.” And then he said, “Um, throw away the bloody bones and clean up the diapers.” (Grider 1976, 179–80)

The young narrator has mastered the incremental repetition, the chanting, and the concept of a ghost in the basement, but the white eye/black eye pun has totally escaped her as she resorts to an anticlimactic practical injunction to “throw away the bloody bones and clean up the diapers.” It is even possible that the narrator has incorporated her quotidian reality of dirty diapers into the story because she finds them so inherently disgusting and hates being told to “clean up the diapers.” Nevertheless, this version gives us insight into how young children learn the basic components of oral storytelling competence, even as they mix up and misinterpret various components of the stories.

Another first grader in the same storytelling session resorted to a stream-of-consciousness version that clearly indicates his lack of understanding of plot development or the significance of an appropriate conclusion. Nevertheless, he had obviously heard several different types of ghost stories and was practicing
and trying to learn, much as children do when they struggle with learning knock-knock jokes and what makes them funny. Frankenstein, robots, and violence replace any semblance of ghosts and the narrator’s editorial comment, “Now here comes the stupid part,” underscores his overall lack of understanding of this traditional story form.

This little boy dropped his bottle in the trash and when he went to get it Frankenstein appeared. This is true! And Frankenstein got the bottle, no, the baby went to the cliff. And Frankenstein went over to the cliff and Frankenstein fell off the cliff and he wasn’t hurt at all. And now he can’t move ’cause he’s just a robot. And then the baby went back and got his bottle, got a new one from inside the cabinet from the house. And do you know what happened next? A dead man! And he got blood all over the cabinet and his head, and his legs off, his legs cut off! Now here comes the stupid part. Not Frankenstein, the guy was dead. And when he, the baby killed Frankenstein with a knife and when he went, when the baby went down in the basement and when he went down there he said, “I’m the White Eye of Frankenstein.” And he said, “Shut up and be quiet and clean up the dirty diapers.” (Grider 1976, 188–89)

**Speaking Ghosts: “Bloody Fingers”**

Another less well-known cycle of talking ghosts is generally told by older children who are sophisticated enough to deliberately control the fear levels generated during storytelling sessions by breaking the tension with a story that more closely resembles a joke than a ghost story. Designating the protagonist as a “hippie” may also provide insight into the relatively recent origin of the story, perhaps in the late 1950s or 1960s. By comparison, the morbid cannibalism of “The Man from the Gallows” indicates its possible antiquity. The story of “Bloody Fingers” is a useful tension-breaker in storytelling sessions because even though it follows the structure of the stories described above, it lacks any
really frightening elements. In fact, the sixth-grade girl who told this story prefaced her performance with the caveat, “It’s in some, in some ways like a ghost story but it’s not really scary though.”

Um, there was these, there was this guy and he went to a hotel and he goes, “I want to rent a room.” And the guy says, “Well, we only have one room left and it’s haunted. There’s already been one guy killed in there.” But he said, “I’ll take it anyway.” And he went up there and heard somebody saying, “Bloody fingers!” And, um, and it scared him you know, real bad, so he jumped out the window and killed hisself. And there’s this, another guy come and he said, “I want to rent a room.” And he said, “We only have one and there’s been two people killed in there.” And he says, “Oh well, I don’t care.” And he goes in there and he hears, “Bloody Fingers!” And he jumps out the window and kills hisself. And then the hippie comes in, he says, “I want to rent a room.” And he says, “We’re all filled up and three men have already been killed in there.” “Oh, I don’t give a damn.” And so he goes up to his room and hears, “Bloody Fingers!” And the hippie replies, “Bandaids in the bathroom.” (Grider 1976, 217–18)

Haunted Bathrooms

Just as the hippie in the above story vanquishes the ghostly voice with a bathroom reference, another cycle of whimsical children’s stories deal with ghostly voices emanating from the toilet in the bathroom. These moderately scatological tales are apparently parodies of the narrative form and aesthetic of some of the ghost stories with comical punch lines described earlier in this chapter. These stories also foreshadow the “haunted toilet” tales told by adolescents and young adults, discussed in chapter 1. The children’s cycle of humorous stories about talking toilets may, in fact, help prepare children for the genuinely frightening legends about haunted bathrooms in which malevolent beings, such as the infamous Bloody Mary, emerge from the mirrors or stalls of
the restroom and literally attack the children who summon them through play rituals and formulaic chants (see chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of this topic).

In this cycle, as the story progresses, listeners realize that the “ghostly” voices are coming from talking insects floating in the toilet. The structure of the stories at first implies that the voices are from supernatural beings (i.e., ghosts) and humor depends in large part on the audience’s familiarity with the “Bloody Fingers” prototype, which makes the stories much closer to jokes than traditional folktales or ghost stories. To many adults, if they know about them at all, these jokifications of the ghost story form are offensive, surreal, or nonsensical. But considering the barrage of talking animals and insects to which children are constantly subjected by popular culture and the media, the talking insects in the toilet are not so unusual. Except for the obvious scatology, the insects in these stories are little different from Jiminy Cricket in Walt Disney’s *Pinocchio* (1940) or Flik in *A Bug’s Life* (1998). The following example told by a sixth-grade boy is typical:

This man came and he came to this hotel and he asked for a room and the man said, “Yeah.” And he went upstairs into the room and he heard some words and it was, “Roll over, roll over.” And he came down, he ran down the stairs, tripped over a rock, tripped over a rock and killed himself. Another man came and, and asked for a room and the man just said, “Yeah. I’ve got a room but it’s haunted.” And he went up there and he heard some words going, “Roll over, roll over.” And he ran down the stairs and ran into a tree and killed himself. And then another man came up, another man came and asked for a room and um, the man said, “It’s haunted.” And he said, “I don’t care. I’ve got my flashlight with me.” And he went upstairs and heard some words, “Roll over, roll over.” And he turned his flashlight on and started looking around and he went into the bathroom and looked in the bathtub. Nothing there. And then he looked in the sink and nothing there. And then he looked in the toilet
and he seen this turd and these two termites saying, “Roll over, roll over.” (Grider, 1976, 595–96)

Locating the floating termites with a flashlight is reminiscent of the *Ghost Hunters* (2004–2007) programs that are so popular on TV—i.e., the use of modern technology exposes the haunting hoax. But the main reason that this story cycle is so popular with children is that it gives them an excuse to say the word “turd” and other scatological terms. This scatology is the main reason that most adults don’t know about these stories because most children know better than to tell these stories to adults, who they know will disapprove. The “bathroom humor” of these innocuous and silly stories provides children with yet another opportunity to express cultural taboos in a controlled setting, much as they do when telling stories about grave robbing and cannibalism in stories of “The Golden Arm” type. Other punch lines are popular in stories of this type, including: “Now I gotcha where I wantcha, and I’m gonna catcha”; “I see your hiney, all black and shiny; if you don’t hide it, I think I’ll bite it”; and “Going down the river on a little brown log.”

**Acquisition and Performance**

Humorous ghost stories with catch endings are among the first traditional narratives that children hear and repeat among themselves without adult assistance or intervention. Most children are well aware that adults and most adolescents regard these stories as silly and childish. In order to avoid possible ridicule or censure, therefore, children are generally cautious about telling these stories when adults are listening. For many children, these are the first stories that they learn to tell themselves. They can practice with one another until they master the structure and sequencing of the formulaic narratives, thus preparing them to learn more complicated stories when they are older. Some children never quite master the telling of these stories, but others become young virtuosos and are much sought out and respected by their peers. Such positive reinforcement in childhood can result in becoming master storytellers later in life.
Most young children recognize some of these stories by the time they are in the first or second grade, whether or not they can tell the stories themselves. Older siblings are the most common sources for learning the stories, but classmates and other peers are also an active source. Most children stop telling these stories at about age ten or twelve, when they enter puberty and have more adolescent concerns. A mastery of these often comical and sometimes superficial childhood tales prepares the way for the extensive story repertoire of adolescence, which includes macabre and gruesome tales which are too frightening and intense for the sensibilities of young children. Many of these more sophisticated and psychologically disturbing tales, commonly referred to as “urban legends,” have been widely anthologized in a popular series by folklorist Jan Brunvand and today have almost dropped out of oral tradition because they are circulating so widely on the Internet (Brunvand 2004). Children’s humorous ghost stories, on the other hand, have generally remained comfortably ensconced in oral tradition.

The telling of children’s ghost stories usually takes place in a very predictable context, which evokes what folklorists term as the “legend climate,” which can include darkness, spooky sounds and music, candles, flashlights, and so forth. As Iona and Peter Opie describe these typical settings, “Yet another entertainment is the ‘spooky’ rhyme or story recited when the lights are low, as when members of a gang gather together in their hut or den, and the wind whistles through the chinks of the door, fluttering the candle flame. One of them tells a story to the new-comers in a slow blood-curdling voice, saying the traditional words very quietly so that the listeners have to crane their heads forward to catch the words . . . ” (1959, 35). Children most frequently tell these traditional tales at Halloween parties or late at night, either at camp or during a slumber party after all the lights have been turned off and the supervising adults have told everybody to go to sleep. Then, amid whispers and clandestine flashlights, the storytelling begins. Many children learn new stories in such sessions and then relate them to their peers when they return home, which helps spread the tales. Another type of storytelling
session involves a camp counselor or other benign older authority figure telling a few of these stories around the campfire at night before bedtime (Ellis 1981; Leary 1973; Mechling 1980). Often these campfire storytelling sessions are the prelude to elaborate pranks involving taking the children into the woods where costumed “monsters” jump out at them and enact other scary tableaux.

The children who have never heard such stories before are sometimes frightened so much that they whimper and cry, which only adds to the overall spooky atmosphere. Ghost stories with catch endings are frequently interspersed among more serious and frightening tales and usually function as tension relievers, especially when very young and impressionable children are present. Young children quickly learn to recognize the formulaic structure and format of these distinctive humorous ghost stories and frequently will ask somebody to tell one of these stories which is “not real.” This tension-relieving function is essential for keeping some particularly intense storytelling sessions under control so that the children will not become excessively frightened or upset, which disrupts and ruins a good storytelling session.

Since telling ghost stories is an integral part of the celebration of Halloween, this holiday is another significant setting in the perpetuation and popularity of these stories. Each year the parties and informal get-togethers at Halloween introduce more children to the wonders of spook houses, trick-or-treat, and ghost stories; due to the popularity of Halloween, the storytelling repertoire annually is added to, reinforced, and perpetuated. Because children say that conditions must be “just right” for a good storytelling session, these stories generally are not told at school or in the daytime. Storytelling will normally develop at a slumber party, campout, or Halloween party if the appropriate mood develops as the evening progresses.

Repeated telling of these ghost stories with catch endings makes them so familiar that many children can recognize a given type from the opening lines. The tales have such fixed aesthetic limits that many performances sound like memorized recitations,
and the linear, predictable texts of most of the stories not only make them easy to learn, but also help make the scary seem safe. Some narrators even introduce their stories by title, much as they would a poem or other formal recitation. The young audiences never seem to mind these stylized conventions. Their interest is usually more in hearing a familiar story told interestingly and well than in hearing a completely new story. This predilection for the familiar is not surprising; small children feel the same way about storybooks which are read to them regularly. They want the storybooks read to them the same way each time, with no adlibs or omissions. Serious narrators are nearly always interested in picking up new variations or twists to make their own renditions more effective, so sometimes several children will deliberately tell their versions of the same story for comparative purposes. Some gifted and popular narrators even take pride in having their style and repertoire copied by apprentices who are trying to master the genre, and they will help along the beginners with prompting or sound effects.

As opposed to adult and adolescent storytelling, children do not seem to mind too much if these tales get garbled or presented in fragmentary form. The tale corpus is so familiar that the listeners can recognize the basic and familiar story type from very scant and garbled cues. Under such favorable conditions, beginning storytellers are comfortable trying to tell these tales for the first time without fear of audience rejection if they “mess up.” Truncated or hybrid versions also serve as additional tension relievers or mood breakers during intense sessions. Children will often suspend storytelling temporarily to discuss the effectiveness of a new hybrid or to point out where a performance went awry. They will also argue about which version is right or the best. In fact, such fledgling oral literary criticism or dialectic sometimes becomes more important to the children than the actual storytelling. Since a talented storyteller occupies a position of great prestige among most young peer groups, the standards of what is or is not a good story are very important.
Conclusion

The overall American worldview is complex, but one undeniable component of that worldview is a persistent interest and certain level of belief in the world of the supernatural, especially the undead. Generation after generation, children actively participate in this supernatural worldview by learning and telling the same basic corpus of ghost stories to one another. These stories have three basic functions: enculturation, cognitive skill development, and entertainment.

General knowledge of the supernatural is reinforced by the barrage of images and information from the mass media and advertising. The enculturation of young children into a worldview that encompasses ghosts, haunted houses, and other supernatural entities reinforces a sincere belief in the reality of these beings in later life, or at least reduces skepticism. Adolescents and adults who grew up hearing and telling ghost stories may very well be more likely to believe in ghosts and such than those who were not enculturated into this supernatural worldview at an early age.

Another clear function of telling ghost stories is to enhance the development of cognitive skills, especially literary and dramatic competence, among young narrators. Good storytellers are highly regarded by their young peers. In order for ghost (or traditional) stories to make sense the narrator has to understand the importance of episode sequence and plot development in addition to character development and dramatic timing. Good listening skills are also important to enable children to learn these stories so that they can tell them themselves. By listening to and telling ghost stories, children broaden their overall aesthetic awareness.

Perhaps the most significant function of children telling ghost stories is entertainment. Because children enjoy the stories so much and have such fun telling and listening to them, they keep the story corpus alive generation after generation. In spite of their sometimes grotesque subject matter, such as cannibalizing the corpse of an executed criminal, children regard the content
of most ghost stories as funny. Of course the incongruous, joke-like punch line further enhances the overall entertainment value of the stories. They also enjoy the camaraderie of snuggling together around a candle or a campfire or a flashlight and sharing the mood of suspense and suppressed tension created by a good storytelling session. They know that as soon as the lights are turned on, they will be back in the safety of everyday reality.

The so-called “triviality barrier” still constitutes the greatest obstacle to the documentation and understanding of this small but distinctive group of traditional folktales (Sutton-Smith 1970). Research with children and investigation of their traditions, including narratives, still does not have the credibility and prestige of some other types of folkloric research. Few scholars are working in this field, and their work is not always well received. Professional storytellers and performers with no theoretical folklore training, as well as authors of simplified popular children’s storybooks, have practically co-opted the field of children’s storytelling. Whether this adult participation has inhibited or changed the way children tell stories to one another when adults aren’t present is another field of inquiry that needs to be undertaken.

One result of the limited research in this field is that accurate texts of narratives told by children and contextual data about when children tell these stories to each other are rare in folklore publications, which causes a lack of reliable comparative data for research purposes. The bulk of research on children’s narratives is found in dissertations by folklore graduate students. There seems to have been little cross-fertilization of ideas among the various academic disciplines, and this lack of interchange further inhibits serious and ongoing research into the phenomenon of children’s storytelling.

In addition to the need for more in-depth fieldwork and collecting, including accurate textual documentation as well as contextual and ethnographic data, a number of theoretical questions still need to be addressed. The classification by genre of children’s ghost stories with catch endings presents some basic problems, even though the texts *per se* are clearly folktales. For
example, we need a better understanding of the relationship between these distinctive stories and the more pervasive narrative genre of the joke. The brevity and distinctive ending ally these tales structurally almost as much to the joke as the Märchen. Their relationship to the subcategory or subgenre that Jan Brunvand classified as the “Shaggy Dog Story” is also open to investigation (1963). To further complicate the issue of genre classification, in performance the stories also take on many characteristics of the legend. For example, the stories are frequently elliptical, communally performed, and highly localized.

Although children’s ghost stories may not be widely known and respected by adults, they nevertheless constitute an incredibly stable and widespread oral tradition that has resisted being overwhelmed by the media and popular culture. These formulaic, jokelike tales are one of the cornerstones of contemporary ghost lore.