

A Specter is Haunting New Zebedee: Reading John Bellairs as Queer-Kid Gothic

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"When you are hiding something, you get the feeling that every other secret is connected to your secret." John Bellairs

When diversity in children's literature is celebrated, queer theory isn't usually invited to the party. Few scholars and even fewer practitioners are looking at children's literature as a site of struggle between heteronormativity and the (potentially queer) reader. Queer theory enriches and enlivens our understanding of children's literature, children reading, and the unlikely places in which proto-gay kids find the books they need to save their lives. One of the tasks queer theory undertakes is revealing and interpreting the queer subtexts and underpinnings of "straight" discourse, "queering" the apparently straight. Following out the clues in books, television, and film that reveal the presence of the unspoken, the code that simultaneously connects and alienates the queer reader, is one critical practice which characterizes queer theoretical readings.

In the case of young readers, such plausibly deniable strategies are informed by personal safety as well as queer theory. In a 2005 survey of school climate in the U.S., the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that homophobic language is pervasive in most schools, that 64% of glbt youth surveyed had been verbally harassed and 37% physically harassed at school over sexual orientation and 45% and 26%, respectively, over gender expression. At the same time, studies on lgb adolescents suggest that on average, youth self-identify around 8 to 11 years old, and come out at 15 to 17 (Savin-Williams 609). While young adult fiction has broken significant ground in the last ten years in fiction with lgbt protagonists and themes, what fiction is available and of interest to those readers who, at age nine or ten, are already aware of their attractions, their "difference," but who aren't developmentally or emotionally ready for young adult fiction? Moreover, what's around that won't make him/her more vulnerable to peer assault, parental interrogation, or teacherly intervention? One such source, widely available and sufficiently encrypted—perhaps even cryptic—for the young reader, is in the contemporary Gothic: a mode in which, as Fred Botting asserts:

Objects of anxiety take their familiar forms from earlier manifestations: cities, houses, archaic and occult pasts, primitive energies, deranged individuals and scientific experimentation are places from which awesome and inhuman terrors and horror are loosed on an unsuspecting world. (158)



Illustration by Edward Gorey for *The House with a Clock in Its Walls*.

Structurally, Lewis is a Gothic heroine. Orphaned by a midnight accident and cut off from his old life, he travels to a remote town where he lives with his mysterious guardian in a splendid mansion with a supernatural curse. Lewis is a bookworm; he does the requisite skulking, eavesdropping, exploring abandoned rooms, and discovering horrible secrets. He doesn't faint, although he comes pretty close when a scary moth gets in his hair. He seeks the affections of a cold, insulting, hyper-masculine figure of romance—Tarby, the class troublemaker, who is at a Rochesterian low ebb with a broken arm. His misplaced affections lead him into disastrous attempts to prove his love. And through resourcefulness, courage, and openness to cosmic forces, Lewis triumphs over the curse which pervades his home and torments his uncle.

Works Cited

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The affinity of the Gothic with the queer has been well-documented. John Bellairs' popular Lewis Barnavelt books exploit this affinity to explore the identity development of non-gender-conforming kids. Lewis, the "sissy," and Rose Rita, the "tomboy," are pre-adolescent gender outlaws cared for by Uncle Jonathan and Mrs. Zimmerman, who are wizards.

The first novel, *The House with a Clock in Its Walls*, moves the newly orphaned Lewis into his uncle's home, which is haunted by the Doomsday plot of a semi-dead husband and wife team. In *The Figure in the Shadows*, Lewis's search for masculinity is abetted by a powerful and deadly amulet. In the third novel, *The Letter, the Witch, and the Ring*, Rose Rita looks for a magical escape from conventional femininity as she approaches adolescence.

In all three books, Mrs. Zimmerman and Jonathan affirm the children's value, understanding their dilemmas and pain, and assuring them that adulthood will offer choices and possibilities beyond their current situation.

Understanding the queer subtext of Bellairs' books permits a much richer reading, one which brings them solidly into an influential tradition in American literature, and which helps readers develop interpretive and symbolic vocabularies. For practitioners, recognizing these connections may allow them to connect children with books which meet their needs without subjecting them to intrusive or stigmatizing commentary from classmates and parents. And even when it is not possible to discuss matters of gender and emerging sexual identity, Bellairs and other writers may mediate between a hostile world and young readers.