



# Beasties and Ghosties and Things that Go BUMP on the Page!

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A spooky round-up by **Jill Burridge**.

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*'But round the end of a cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr McGregor!'* Though I've read **Peter Rabbit** countless times, that moment still sends a shiver of anticipation through me as Peter plunges into his frantic bid for freedom. It's a story that rarely fails to grip young readers as Beatrix Potter takes them to the brink of disaster and, thankfully, back home for camomile tea. That, after all, is what scary picture books are all about.

Jez Alborough has created just this sort of tension in his **It's the Bear!**, the sequel to **Where's My Teddy?**. Once again Eddy ventures into the wood with Freddy his teddy to enjoy a picnic with his Mum. She may be oblivious to the danger but poor Eddy is petrified that he'll encounter the great big; bear again. And the bear is really big. One full-page spread before he arrives, poor Eddy looks up to the tops of the trees, wide-eyed with horror. Panic ensues and Eddy hides in the picnic hamper, but for the reader there's a safety valve - the huge bear is clutching his own teddy, With a sort of pantomime humour, Jez Alborough's illustrations bring to life the hidden danger and the mutual fear the bear and Eddy feel when they finally confront each other Thank goodness they've both got their teddies!

A more traditional type of tale comes from Jenny Koralek with **The Boy and the Cloth of Dreams**. The pen and ink illustrations by James Mayhew are quite stunning. With hues of dark blue, greens, purples and gleaming gold, he creates a safe haven from which to encounter the terrors of nightmare most children experience. A boy tears his bedcover, woven with golden suns and silver moons, and from the holes in the cover, monsters and hags come out to haunt his dreams. To get help, he has to cross the dark landing where unfamiliar shapes loom to threaten him. In the telling, Jenny Koralek uses some strangely old-fashioned phrases, but it's a story many children will find reassuring as the little boy finds the courage to face his fears.

A short selection of **Poems that go Bump In the Night**, selected and illustrated by Gillian McClure, bring Will-o--the-Wisp, witches, graveyards and ghosts with poems from Charles Causley, James Reeves, Spike Milligan and Roger McGough, as well as Walter de la Mare and e e cummings. I wanted more of this selection. There's good contrast between creepy and calming verses. but I could have done with greater choice even at the expense of some illustrations.

Sam Llewellyn's **The Magic Boathouse** has villains and bullies who get their just desserts at the hands of a kindly ghost, Joe and Doris are bullied and teased and given all the rotten jobs to do on the school trip, until they find the magic boathouse where an old man shows them how to use his very special foghorn. Hey presto? an army of Romans or Normans arrives to take charge of their chores and, even better; the invaders take back with them nasty Fat Ern, Sippy

Emmer and even the villainous Mr Barge. Arthur Robins' illustrations add a wickedly grotesque flavour to the story so, with speech bubbles and snort, racy chapters, this is a good read for beginners.,

Martyn Beardsley returns with another yarn about the worst knight in the world. **Sir Gadabout and the Ghost** is a chance for this hopeless knight of the round table to prove his worth h helping a ghostly knight wrongly accused of stealing tinned pilchards from King Arthur's kitchen The story is pure farce with disguise and deception creating chaos and confusion. Dreadful puns make it instantly appealing to read aloud, but its also a book young readers can enjoy for themselves and Tony Ross's wonderful illustrations reflect the mad mood of the story.

**BfK's** own editor has been busy with ghostly matters of late. **The Kingfisher Book of Scary Stories**, compiled by Chris Powling with illustrations by Peter Bailey, brings together ten authors with stories from Britain and America, Israel and the Caribbean There s plenty of variation in the tone of the tales too. Anthony Masters will make your flesh creep with 'Mine' as Jo, trapped in the dark, disused mineshaft, reaches: out to help the miner she thinks is there. Adele Geras blinds you with sunlight to disguise 'Tsipporah', the ghost girl who can transform herself into a bird, whereas Sid Fleischman just makes you howl-with laughter as his ghost-raising con-artists meet their match in 'The Ghost on Saturday Night Chris Powling's own story 'The Oddment' will strike a chord with many a reader who's wedded to their 'comforter or 'cuddly'\_ The 'thing' assumes a homing power of its own which just might make current owners take a dispassionate look at their habit! Younger children- will enjoy having these stories, read aloud while older readers can happily scare themselves under the bedclothes.

The current craze for horror stories among older children and the success of series like 'Point Horror' has led Scholastic to launch a new series for younger readers. From the 'Goosebumps' series comes **The Haunted Mask** by R L Stine which proclaims on the cover 'Reader beware - you re in for a scare!' and that's how subtle the book is. The plot was utterly predictable - girl goes out on Hallowe'en to get her own back on boys who've been picking on her, but things go wrong when the mask she's wearing takes possession of her and she can't get it off? please don't read on. The characters aren't developed, the plot hasn't any real depth to it and the twist at the end is just grotesque. The cover will ensure it gets picked up and read, though.

Rather than having everything spelt out for you, a good scary story allows your imagination to flow and leaves behind haunting memories. Three collections of short stories still for 10-year-olds and upwards, fulfil these objectives really well and they're told against a variety of settings which demonstrate that scary stories are much more than tricks and treats.

Jackie Vivello's **Chills Run Down My Spine** is a collection set in America with evocative black and white pencil drawings by Jennifer Eachus which are haunting in themselves. The title story, about Mickey who finds himself abandoned in a haunted house, is not so much concerned with the ghostly sensations that he encounters there but far more about the chilling effect his experience has on his relationship with his brother. *'Haunted houses can send chills down your spine, but there's nothing - in life or after - half as cold as hate.'* Many of the stories rely on sensitive children, receptive to forces and feelings that parents can't appreciate. Mind you, there's innocent fun as well with a story like 'The Good Neighbour Policy' when Miss Fisher finds herself overwhelmed with visitors. The children next door come to her rescue with Hector. Whoever he is, he's guaranteed to clear the house of unwanted relatives.

For sceptics and disbelievers the first story in **The Young Oxford Book of Ghost Stories** is a must. Vivien Alcock's 'The Rivals' takes John Pearce into the haunted house next door. John has logical explanations for every sensation of wind or noise, but as the apparition tells him *'I need your fear. I can only exist in your mind'*, every twist and turn of the story draws him further from his world of logic. Here you have a collection of stories from top writers including Jane Gardam, Grace Hallworth, Jan Mark, Ann Pilling and Robert Westall. Dennis Pepper's choice also includes less well-known names and, with 'Fat Andy', Stephen Dunstone uses a past and present voice to unfold his sinister story; a church is due to be closed and the vicar wants to pay tribute to Andrew who has lovingly tended the grave of a young girl for many years. But there's more to her death than people realise and without God's protection the past will catch up with Andrew. John Gordon uses that same element of surprise with 'The Black Pies'. A warm kitchen where two sisters pass the time of day conceals the part malice and jealousy have played in their lives. The stories are gripping; I just find

the illustrations intrusive, depicting figments which I'd rather leave to my own imagination.

For an older reader, Josephine Poole's **Scared to Death and Other Ghostly Stories** focuses mainly on adult characters; a windsurfer possessed by a recurring nightmare is enticed to sail far out in gale force winds, a woman on holiday in an old French chateau is haunted by the cries of a baby and a tragic secret of the past, a girl back-packing in Greece is mesmerised by ghosts of ancient Crete, They are taut tales with suspense, mystery and sometimes grizzly endings.

*'I thought it was a dream, but there was a piper. He was playing a pibroch. He stood up on a high crag till all the grown-ups reached him then he went off. They went with him. Followed him like sheep. Followed the music he was making.'* Echoes of **The Pied Piper** and **Lord of the Flies** ripple through Garry Kilworth's gripping story, **The Phantom Piper**, for older readers. The children of Canlish Glen are abandoned and, according to legend, they have to break the piper's spell by Hogmanay or their parents will never return. They're cut off from the outside world by deep snow and blizzards but, relying on their own resources, the children assume their parents' responsibilities and an array of characters emerge from Angel MacPhearson, who takes the role of church minister, to Hamish Cairns in charge of his father's farm. The survival of the young community is threatened, however, by the arrival of two strangers. Garry Kilworth plays with time through this story in a way that's chillingly effective and the tension builds up to a high crescendo. Perhaps some readers will find the Scottish dialect a hindrance at first, but the lure of the story is strong enough on characters and plot to overcome that.

A future world turned on itself. where machines are evil and demons are worshipped as gods, is the setting for John Christopher's **A Dusk of Demons** From the first there's a sense of uncertainty, foreboding, the perpetual threat of attack from demons, which haunts the boy Ben worst of all in his nightmares. The threat becomes reality for Ben when the fabric of his life on Old Isle is torn apart after the death of the master. John Christopher heightens the suspense with a narrative to taunt and challenge - do the demons really exist? What happened to the world we know? How and why has a society come to reclaim medieval values? Ben finds himself with no identity, a past that he has to fight to discover and no safe haven which will give him the time to answer these questions. It's a nightmare scenario which is compulsive reading. The awakening is plausible, not flawless, but leaves you looking back at the book and forward to life here and now. The haunting surely worked.

**Jill Burridge** is Producer of BBC Radio 4's **Treasure islands**, the children's book programme presented by Michael Rosen.

#### **Book details:**

**It's the Bear**, Walker, 0 7445 3701 0, £8.99

**The Boy and the Cloth of Dreams**, Walker 0 7445 2533 0, £8.99

**Poems that go Bump in the Night**, Simon & Schuster, 0 7500 1430X, £8.99; 0 7500 1431 8, £3.99 pbk

**The Magic Boathouse**, Walker, 0 7445 2473 3, £4.99

**Sir Gadabout and the Ghost**, Orion, 1 85881 061 2, £8.99

**The Kingfisher Book of Scary Stories**, Kingfisher, 185697 248 8, £9.99

**The Haunted Mask**, Scholastic, 0 590 55668 1, £2.50 pbk

**Chills Run Down My Spine**, Dorling Kindersley, 0 7513 7028 2, £8.99

**The Young Oxford Book of Ghost Stories**, Oxford, 0 19 278126 X, £ 12.99

**Scared to Death and Other Ghostly Stories**, Hutchinson, '09 176155 7, £9.99

**The Phantom Piper**, Methuen, 0 416 18913 X, £9.99

**A Dusk of Demons**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 13378 5, £8.99; Puffin, 0 14 036420 X, £3.50 pbk

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