Horror Hosts in British Girls' Comics

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Abstract

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Many definitions of Gothic suggest a contradiction or internal tension, and this chapter explores this notion using an analysis of the host figures of British girls' comics. It draws on extensive archival research to identify, survey, and compare these characters: demonstrating how early authoritative and patriarchal hosts give way to more diverse figures, and arguing that these fall into two distinct types (serial and series). These hosts can raise questions, provide explanations or morals, interfere with plot events, step in and out of the storyworld, and break the borders between the text and paratext. The chapter concludes that they are liminal figures, who problematise the boundaries between fiction and reality, and that the subversive freedom of the comics medium allows them a range of transgressions that epitomise the tensions and contradictions of Gothic.

Defining Gothic is a difficult task. It has been claimed as a mode, a rhetoric, a poetics, a discourse, a habitus, an ur-form, and more.[1] These definitions all suggest that Gothic is something more than a genre or collection of typical tales, and is instead better understood a way of thought that has taken different forms at different times. This allows texts as diverse as the historical and melodramatic *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and the modern children's fable *Coraline* (2002) to be considered as manifestations of the same underlying drive. It does not, however, help us to define Gothic, or explain why we

continue to be drawn to it.

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Many scholars have commented on the definitional problem, for example, pointing out that '"Gothic" has not been the most supple or useful of critical adjectives'[2] and that it 'Typically resist[s] definition'.[3] Identifying Gothic becomes difficult without resorting to a 'tiresome catalogue of motifs'[4] or 'gothic shopping list'.[5] Often critical definitions are either so wide as to be useless or so restrictive that they exclude key texts. Many critics focus on the fearful affect or its textual presence[6] but this is just one facet of Gothic. The best definitions have a metaphorical quality that lets them be applied to many examples while still summoning the sense of uncanny dread and compulsion that underpins our sense of what Gothic might be. For example, Hogle's 'gothic matrix' (an antiquated space, a hidden secret, a physical or psychological haunting, and an oscillation between reality and the supernatural),[7] or Baldick's combination of 'a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space'.[8]

These definitions both hinge on a tension (space/time; reality/supernatural) and in many ways Gothic is a contradiction. It attracts and repels us. Its literature is both popular and sensational, and canonised and historical. Goth culture is characterised as reclusive and inward-looking, but it is also performative and dramatic. Gothic's most famous archetypes cross boundaries and break borders: between life and death (vampires), human and animal (werewolf), male and female (witch), and physical and ethereal (ghost). Gothic stories give us too much—the *super*natural or gory spectacle—but simultaneously not enough, as they remain mysterious, dreamlike, and obscured.

Comics are also a contradictory medium—ranging from children's slapstick (*The Beano*) to the darkest themes (*Crossed*), and often combining both (*Maus*). They are serialised and disposable, but also fetishised literary objects. Many comic books are read by adults, but the medium is often characterised as trivial and childish. Its audience are creative and imaginative (cosplay, fanzines) but also avid collectors and consumers. The comics page itself combines the contrasting signs of word and image: the abstract and the representational.

This chapter will analyse one aspect of comics that characterises this state of

tension: the host figure. Hosts are a common feature of the horror genre in many media, but it is argued here that the comics medium stretches their potential: enabling transgressions and excesses that are truly Gothic. After establishing the background to the American and British characters, the chapter focuses on the role and function of the host in British girls' comics—an area of comics studies that has received little critical attention to date. The creators of these comics were uncredited, and their content is in danger of being lost due to comics' ephemeral nature. This chapter draws on extensive archival research to identify, survey, analyse, and compare the host characters that appear in British girls' comics. In so doing it preserves these characters for future scholarship, and offers some preliminary suggestions for how we might consider their role within Gothic.

This chapter argues that there are two distinct types of host (serial and series) in British comics. It demonstrates that early authoritative and patriarchal hosts give way to more diverse characters and explores their differences. These hosts can raise questions, provide explanations, offer morals, or interfere with plot events. They may step in and out of the storyworld/diegesis, address the reader directly, or break the borders between the text and paratext (for example by introducing elaborately drawn titles or credits in their dialogue). Their speech shifts back and forth between different representational forms (such as narrative boxes and speech balloons) and layers of the story. The analysis concludes that these comics hosts are liminal figures, who problematise the boundaries between fiction and reality. The subversive freedom of the comics medium allows them a range of transgressions that epitomise the tensions and contradictions of Gothic.

The horror genre crosses media, and host characters are ubiquitous in many formats. The terms 'gothic' and 'horror' are often used interchangeably, with one a subsidiary of the other depending on the writer's critical perspective.[9] This chapter considers horror as a genre spawned by the overarching gothic mode, reflecting the distinctions Radcliffe draws between horror and terror.[10] The terror-gothic inflames our senses and draws us to hidden areas that we fear to venture (and yet still do). By contrast, horror-gothic overwhelms our emotions and disturbs normality with the shocking, taboo, and grotesque. The comics that will be discussed taking in both horror and terror.

Horror hosts date back to the radio programme *The Witch's Tale* (1931–1938, WOR), which was hosted by Old Nancy, 'the Witch of Salem', who introduced each tale. The show also spawned a short-lived magazine (*The Witch's Tales*, edited by Alonzo Deen Cole and published by Carwood Publishing) that only lasted for two issues (November and December 1936) due to a lack of cross-promotion. It was the first original horror anthology show on radio and the first to introduce an ongoing narrator—Old Nancy was the inspiration for subsequent radio narrators such as Raymond in *Inner Sanctum Mystery* (1941–1952, Blue Network), and also the basis for the EC Comics host the 'Old Witch' (see Hand 2012 for further discussion). Horror hosts would later appear in a number of television shows such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1965, CBS and NBC), *Boris Karloff's Thriller* (1960–1961 and 1961–1962, NBC), and *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964, CBS), which was hosted and narrated by creator Rod Serling. These were predominantly real-life figures, and the tradition is also represented in the UK by British television show *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979–1988, ITV), whose author Roald Dahl introduced each episode.

The most famous comics hosts are EC Comics' 'Ghoulunatics': the Crypt-Keeper, the Old Witch, and the Vault-Keeper, who hosted *Tales from the Crypt* (1950–1955)*, The Haunt of Fear* (1950–1954), and *The Vault of Horror* (1950–1955), respectively. These comics told tales of both horror and terror, often combining the two—for example, 'Seeds of Death' (*Haunt of Fear* #5) opens with the horrifying image of a severed hand in a city dump, while 'So They Finally Pinned You Down!' (*Haunt of Fear* #5) opens with a second-person narrative that places the reader in the centre of the tale, running in terror from an unseen threat. The following decades saw many imitators in American comics. Warren Publishing introduced Uncle Creepy and Cousin Eerie, hosts of *Creepy* (1964–1983) and *Eerie* (1966–1983), and Vampirella: a sexy, vampiric version of Barbarella (popularised in the 1968 movie) created by Forrest J. Ackerman and Trina Robbins for *Vampirella* #1 (1969) and then developed by Archie Goodwin from a host character (#8, 1970) into a fully fledged heroine starring in her own tales (today published by Dynamite). DC Comics created brothers Cain and Abel as hosts of their *House of Mystery* (1951–1983, 1986–1987, and 2008–present) and *House of Secrets* (1956–1978, 1996–1999) anthologies; and Marvel devised Headstone P. Gravely and Roderick 'Digger' Krupp for their anthology titles *Tower of Shadows* (1969–1975) and *Chamber of*

Darkness (1969–1974). These key figures sit alongside a number of other minor hosts from each company, and lesser publishers such as Charlton Comics also had numerous host characters in their horror and suspense titles from the 1960s onwards.

EC's Ghoulunatics' main function was humour. They provided a distancing frame around the stories, with terrible puns and jokes shielding the child reader from horrible events. For example, 'Horror in the Freak Tent' (*Haunt of Fear* #5) is a story about 'Looey' Glantz, a sadistic freakshow owner who blinds his knife-thrower and terrorises his other staff. They ultimately teach the blind knife-thrower to resume his act—using the gagged and bound body of the owner. The tale mobilises both horror and terror: images of the freakshow folk (such as the fat lady, contortionist rubber man, and the armless and legless boy) and visceral sound effects as the knives hit the owner's body ('CHOF') summon horror, while the unseen body and the teasing narration use terror. The Crypt-Keeper concludes 'Striking tale, eh? Piercing finish? Well, old Looey certainly had it coming… and it came! Ice-picks… knives… cleavers! Oh, that last cleaver was the topper… heh, heh… get it? After that, Glantz lost his head!'

The Ghoulunatics are best remembered for directly addressing their boys and girls (or 'boils and ghouls') in this manner—with awful puns and joking summaries. In this they accord with the arguments of Zlosnik and Horner, who claim that 'the comic [comedy] within the Gothic offers a position of detachment and scepticism […] foregrounding a self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse intrinsic to the modern subject'.[11] Gothic humour, it seems, exists in a characteristic state of tension: it 'engage[s] critically with aspects of their contemporary world' but also offers 'a measure of detachment from scenes of pain and suffering'.[12] The dynamic between the EC hosts and their terror- and horror- stories is exactly of this type. Ambitious wives, obsessive husbands, and bullied colleagues may crack with horrifying and macabre results, but at the story's end the reader is returned to a safe distance by the hosts, whose jokes trivialise the murderous action. Their humour creates an uncanny scepticism while the retelling and reframing of events summons the reflexive, dialectical impulse.

Jones points out that 'the distinctions between the [EC] hosts were minimal' and that the 'physical samenesses, the likeness of function, voice and attitude shared

by the three blurred their identities'.[13] He thus suggests that the three Ghoulunatics are best understood as a singular function rather than as distinct characters. They all have long white hair, bulging eyes, wrinkled skin, hooked nose, and missing teeth, and there is no real difference between their dialects. All address the reader directly, use interjections such as 'Hee, hee!' and 'Heh, heh', are fond of wordplay, and liberally scatter exclamation points in their concluding jests.

In the following decade, DC Comics created brothers Cain and Abel as hosts of their *House of Mystery* (1951–1983, 1986–1987 and 2008–present) and *House of Secrets* (1956–1978, 1996–1999) anthologies: arriving in 1968 and 1969 respectively. Cain and Abel also occasionally hosted the anthology *Plop!* (1973–1976). Like the Ghoulunatics, Cain and Abel also make puns and often have a tone of macabre glee. They address the reader with phrases such as 'Goodbye and Good Mourning' (*House of Mystery* #255) or 'Pay attention Little Fiends' (*House of Secrets* #107), and comment ironically on the stories' endings. For example, Cain closes 'Scared to Life' (*House of Mystery* #180), a tale about a man who has a ghostly premonition that helps him to avoid a grisly death, with the words 'Hee hee – You see, if Lord Dufferin had been on that elevator, he wouldn't had have had a ghost of a chance!'

Although these American hosts are best defined as framing devices that create gothic comedy, their role is also sometimes transgressive. Their speech constantly shifts form: moving from dialogue to narration to paratext, for example, by incorporating the drawn story titles ('And here it starts – the story of Paul Turner, appropriately titled "TURNER'S TREASURE"' [*House of Mystery* #184]). They can also break the diegetic border and participate in a story's events: for example Cain steals a piece of artwork in 'His Name is Kane' (*House of Mystery* #180), helps an animal in 'The Mask of the Red Fox' (*House of Mystery #187*), and is attacked by a character in 'The Gardener of Eden' (*House of Mystery* #192). Critics have noted that Gothic constantly tends towards formal 'transgression' and 'excess',[14] and so this type of meddling seems more than a simple transgression of form. Wolfreys claims that gothic narratives are 'in imminent threat or crisis' in both form and content as 'Something other arriving in or from the externalised space of the subject's material existence promises to invade the space'.[15] The anarchic and subversive lexis of the American hosts is paralleled by their behaviour as they trespass into

the story space: disrupting and undermining narrative and diegetic coherence.

British girls' comics are the forgotten 'herstory' of the medium. Please can we reinsert subheading here?

British Girls' Comics: Cover Girls and Hosts They dominated the market for the latter half of the last century, but have been all but forgotten today by publishers, critics, and scholars. Their reign began in 1950 when the paper *School Friend* was relaunched as a picture story paper by publishers Amalgamated Press. Anne Digby, writer for *School Friend, Girl, Tammy, Jinty*, and more, explains: '*School Friend* was the first UK weekly paper ever to publish stories for girls in picture strip form. It sold a million copies a week in its first few years and led directly to rival companies coming into the girls' market for the first time—Hulton Press with *Gir*l [in 1951] and DC Thomson with *Bunty* [in 1958]'.[16] The titles were incredibly popular straight away: Chapman cites a 1953 study of schoolgirl reading habits, which revealed that 94% of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls read comics and that within this nearly 60% read *School Friend* and 38% read *Girl*.[17] A back and forth emerged between two main publishers: IPC (which incorporated many other companies including Amalgamated Press and Fleetway), and the family-run DC Thomson based in Dundee. By the end of the 1950s there were at least fifty different girls' titles in the UK, with more emerging in the 1960s and 1970s. At their peak the girls' comics outsold the boys, and were read avidly by readers of both genders. By the early 1970s market leaders like *Jackie* were selling over a million copies per issue[18] and launch issues of a new girls' comic could sell up to a quarter of a million copies.[19]

In the main these titles are anthology comics, combining single tales (stand-alone), serials (with continuity), and series (recurring characters with no continuity). A typical issue contains a mix of these: around six different tales, each averaging 3 pages long. There would also be an editorial welcome, a readers' letters page, a horoscope section, features (such as craft or recipes), quizzes or puzzles, and adverts for other titles and external products. The majority are titled with a girl's name (*Diana, Tammy, Jinty, Lindy, Bunty, Misty*, and so forth*)*, creating an implied host figure that is often attached to a 'cover girl' image backed up by an editorial message or letters page, and so contributes to the distinct identity of each publication. As these comics were created

predominantly by men, the female cover girls and fictional editors provide a means to directly address the audience on their level. They range in complexity and some characters are not particularly well defined: for example, *Jinty*'s earliest issues suggest the existence of this character through the letters page ('Jinty's Bits and Pieces') and in features such as a crafts page entitled 'Jinty Made It Herself… so can you!' (*Jinty* #14, 1974), but there is no space that presents Jinty as a character or allows her to speak to us. Another similar example is *June*, who initially appears as a dark-haired girl on the 'June's Postbag' letters page, and is then reinvented as a blonde with pigtails when the comic merges with *Tammy*, joining Tammy (the older girl) on the cover (see Fig. 4). They have a dramatised story in an issue c. 1978 but their appearances are otherwise limited to this paratext. However, other hosts are much more developed. *Lindy*'s first letters page ('Lindy's Letter Box') contains a photograph of a young teenager with the message: … the Ed. said that as the paper's named after me, I'd better have the first say'. The comic's editorial 'Laurie's Life' reinforces this, often namechecking Lindy within the fiction that the two girls share an office and work on the comic together.

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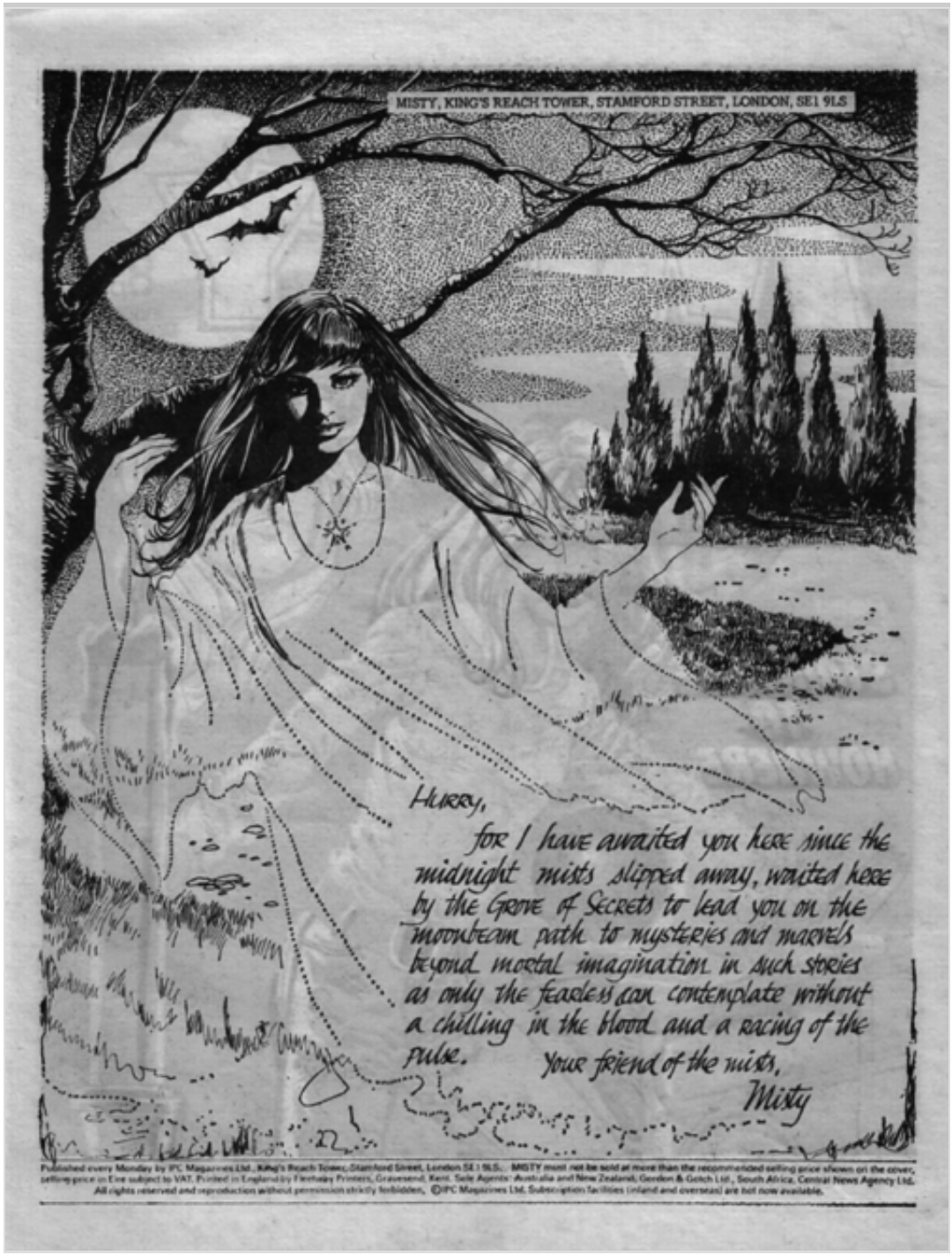
Perhaps the most fully realised of these characters is Misty: a seductive gothic woman who acts as the fictional editor of her own eponymous comic (IPC, 1978–1980). *Misty* is a girls' comic with a supernatural and mystery theme that appears towards the end of the heyday of British comics, and its namesake is a good example of how such liminal characters developed. Its cover girl/host/editor Misty appears on the inside cover of each issue than the cover itself, where she welcomes us to each issue with a poetic greeting. She also answers letters on the 'Write to Misty' page, and occasionally bookends a tale in the annuals or specials (but never in the main run of weekly issues). Her inside cover greetings are highly gothic in their aesthetic and lexis (see Fig. 1): drawn by comics artist and portraitist Shirley Bellwood, and hand lettered by the comic's art editor Jack Cunningham. Misty is a ghostly figure (her image often tails away and she is never shown with feet) with long black hair, flowing robes, and star charm necklace. In this she accords with the new age witch, and generally appears in a natural wild environment (water, forest, and mountain) or sometimes among rocky ruins. Roper points out that such natural landscapes became part of the iconography of witchcraft and that the witch's flight through

these terrains were journeys with significance.[20] Misty's welcomes constantly use images of the journey and the body as we are urged to 'walk', 'journey', 'quest', 'venture', 'come with', or 'follow' her; and to 'take my hand', 'step with me', or 'look […] through my eyes'. She addresses us as a friend or guide and offers up her stories for our 'delight'. Although Misty names a number of locations in her realm (such as the Cavern of Dreams, the Pool of Life, and so on) these are never defined and remain empty signifiers—dislocated and abstracted. So both she and her realm are ghostly and shadowy: straddling the border between here and elsewhere—supporting her liminal and gothic status as she is both far away and yet 'always with you'.

Fig. 1

Inside front cover from *Misty* #15. Art by Shirley Bellwood, lettering by Jack Cunningham, writer unknown but likely editor Malcolm Shaw. Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd. Copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., All Rights Reserved



Jones points out that the Ghoulunatics were also fictional editors and curators of their comics: responding to readers and sometimes also appearing in opening editorials. This is the closest parallel to Misty's most dominant function, which is to welcome us to the issue every week. However, in contrast to the Ghoulunatics, Misty's persona developed in a tantalising manner as the editorial team slowly unveiled an entire storyworld and constructed her character with the help of readers. The comic's letters page is full of questions about the

character (‘How old are you?’ ‘Who taught you to read and write?’ ‘How do you get our letters?’ and so forth). Misty’s elusive responses to these slowly reveal fragments of information about her realm (‘*The daughters of the mists were all taught to read and write as well as strange and mystic practices by the ancient Lords of the Mists who now, alas, are no more*’ [*Misty* #57]). But whereas the Ghoulunatics are authoritative and jocular, Misty is supplicative and serious, encouraging the reader to actively question herself and her stories. She also uses this tactic when she takes on the role of series host to bookend a tale (discussed below). Here, like other later examples of the figure, she casts doubt on story outcomes and undermines certainty.

~~Like the titles and associated cover girls, horror hosts became another key feature of British girls’ comics. They were more developed than the cover girls, and often limited to the scary sections of the comic: addressing the reader directly and introducing the weekly tale or instalment. They also appeared within the stories themselves~~.

The next logical step was for host characters to appear in different sections of the comic. Subheadings have been removed from some parts of my essay so I’m not sure the above summary paragraph now works. I have deleted it and incorporated into this paragraph as follows:

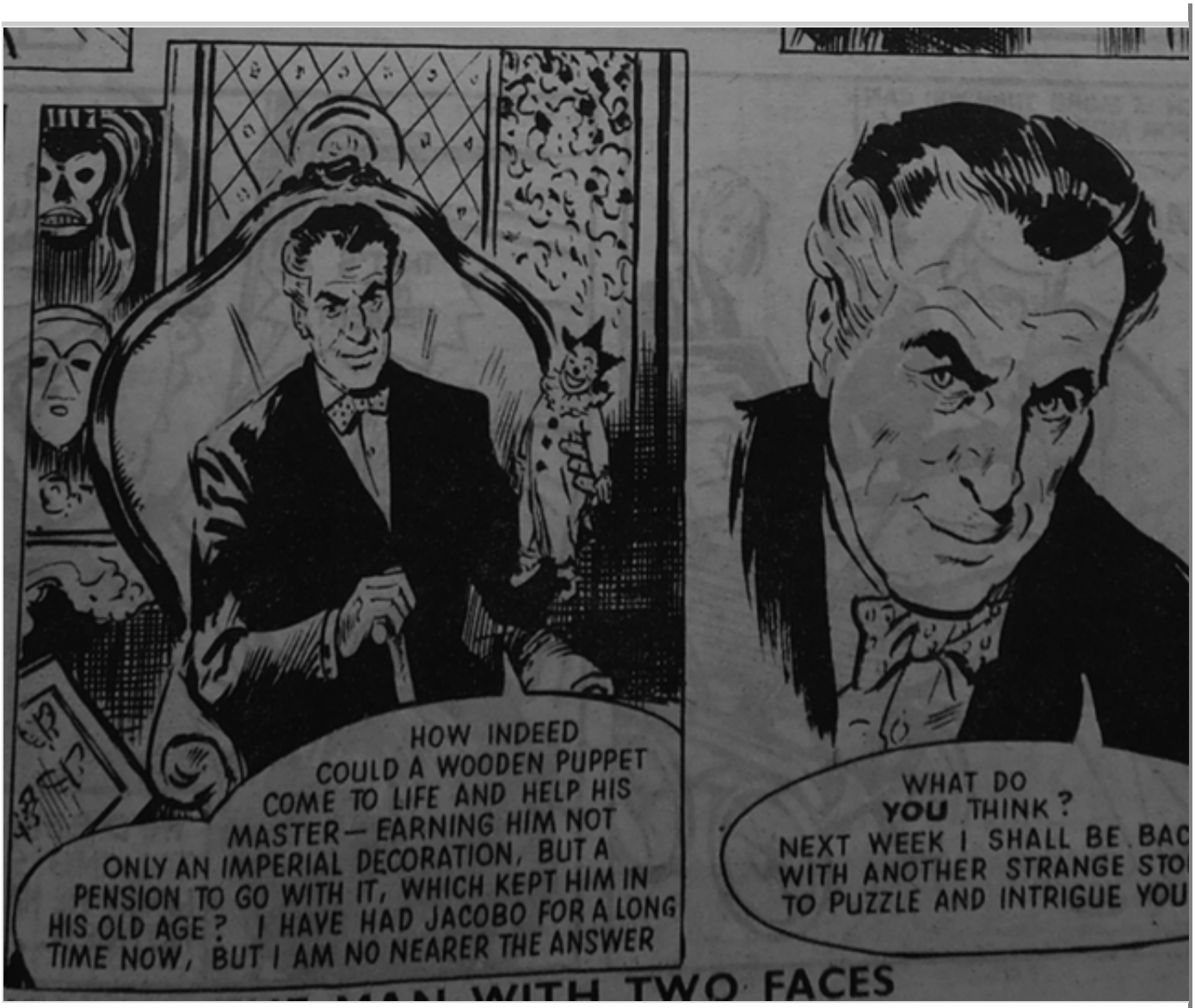
The next logical step was for host characters to appear in different sections of the comic. These characters were more developed than the cover girls, and often limited to the scary sections of the comic. They addressed the reader directly, introducing the weekly tale or instalment, and sometimes even appeared within the story itself. In this way the horror hosts became another key feature of British girls’ comics. The 'series host' is the first type to emerge… The series host is the first type to emerge: a character that bookends an unrelated, non-sequential group of stories, in a similar manner to the Ghoulunatics. The first and one of the most enduring series host in British girls’ comics is the Storyteller, an older gentleman in a spotted bow tie, who features in various titles between 1965 and 1982. He first appears in the newly merged *June and School Friend* on 30 January 1965, narrating ‘The STRANGEST Stories Ever Told’: ‘a new series of stories that will thrill and intrigue you’, which appears weekly throughout 1965. These are tales that flirt with the supernatural: for example, as a bank employee is

discouraged from stealing by an uncanny warning (‘The Haunted Bank’, 30 January 1965); a woman who wishes to be smaller experiences the peril this would bring in a sequence that may or may not be a dream (‘The Shrinking Woman’, 6 February 1965); and an ugly man adopts a mask and does good deeds, which changes his face to a handsome one (‘The Mask’, 20 February 1965). The Storyteller introduces and wraps up each tale, providing an epilogue or sometimes questioning the events shown. He often ends early stories on a question, for example, asking ‘Did Miss Dangerfield dream it…or did it really happen?’ (‘The Shrinking Woman’), ‘What do YOU think?’ (‘The Puppet that Came to Life’, 13 February 1965), and ‘WAS it a dream?’ (‘The Riddle of the Mary Lou’, 13 March 1965). He sometimes also offers a moral: for example, ending ‘Turn of the Year’ (*Tammy*, 5 January 1980) by explaining: ‘Beryl had been granted her wish to have another chance – and she never looked back. And, in a different way, each new year is a new chance for all of us, isn’t it?’

He doesn’t directly participate in the tales, but the diegetic borders between his world and the storyworld are hazy, as he ends many tales with possession of an object that has been key to the story (see Fig. 2). His tales take place across a diverse range of places and times, from Queen Victoria’s London (‘The Mask’) to Old Vienna (‘The Puppet that Came to Life’). Although he is generally drawn in a bow tie and with a pipe in his hand, his backgrounds are sometimes more precisely matched to the story, as for example, in ‘The Roman Brooch’ (*June and Pixie*, 15 June 1974) where he appears in safari gear. He is thus a mobile and liminal figure whose location is somewhat uncertain and who has a flexible relationship with the tales he tells.

Fig. 2

‘The Puppet That Came to Life’. *June and School Friend*, 13 February 1965.



The Storyteller lived for nearly twenty years and survived many mergers with other titles. After his initial run in *June and School Friend* he reappeared in *June and Pixie* (13 April 1974) with the caption 'Back again, by popular demand!' and then joined *Tammy* when it merged with *June* on 22 July 1974. He was a reader favourite and often gained approval in the letters page (for example, see *Tammy* 17 May 1975). He is most commonly named simply as 'Your Storyteller' although he takes on various other guises. He is sometimes called the Mystery Storyteller in *Tammy* (1971–1984), and also appears as Uncle Pete in *Jinty* (1974–1981), and in the Spanish comics *Lily* (Editorial Bruguera 1970–1982) and *Super Lily* (Editorial Bruguera 1976–1983) as host of 'Los Extraordinarios Relatos del Tio Arthur' [The Extraordinary Tales of Uncle Arthur] (RuthB 2010).[21]

Diana's Man in Black is the next character to appear, in 'Star of Doom' (*Diana* #197, 26 November 1966), the first in a new series of 'tales of mystery and horror'. He is a Dracula-esque character with black hair, widow's peak and Victorian clothing, and addresses the reader directly with a preface and epilogue to each tale. He appears weekly in *Diana* until 'The Phantom Stag' (*Diana* #204, 14 January 1967) where he concludes 'That is my last tale of mystery for the present. If you would like more of my stories write to "The Man in Black" and who knows, we may meet again before long'. Readers certainly did want more and he next returns with 'Double Vision' (*Diana* #223, 27 May 1967), remaining for a series of 11 weekly one-page stories (now in full colour on the back cover). This sequence ends with 'Card of Doom' (*Diana* #232, 29 July 1967), and he continues to return in a similar manner for short runs or individual tales in later issues.

The Man in Black was often drawn by David Cuzik Matysiak. In general, his bookending panels are black and white while the story appears in colour—further separating the two-story worlds two storyworlds . The epilogues he gives are generally explanatory, wrapping up the tales rather than raising questions. For example, he closes the story 'Vera the Ventriloquist' with the coda 'Mike the circus dwarf never performed again – other people copied his sensational act. But they still talk of Vera the ventriloquist'. (*Diana* #200, 17 December 1966) Although he does not interact with the tales' events, his explanations occasionally blur the lines between him and the story world, for example in 'The Two Faces of Perlita' (a *Dorian Gray* style story), which ends on his words: 'The Princess died within the hour. She was two hundred years old. Her vanity had gained her nothing. The carving came into my possession – but I've no elixir, which is just as well'. (*Diana* #232, 22 July 1967) The Man in Black also transgresses formal textual borders as his speech often incorporates the drawn title of the tale.

The next significant series host is Damian Darke (*Spellbound*, 1976–1978). He is another patriarchal authority figure: an older man in period dress (high collar, ruffled shirt) with a raven on his shoulder. He holds a big book from which he seems to be reading the story: an image that creates an implied layer of story and further embeds the tale within his framing panel. Darke appears weekly throughout *Spellbound*'s run, and survived two mergers, first with *Debbie* and

then with *Mandy* (although these stories were mostly reprints). His introductions and codas to the stories vary in their function: more like the Storyteller than the Man in Black. Sometimes he acts as summariser and closer of the events, for example, in 'Another Pair of Hands…' (#54) where he informs us that after the events of the story Biddy's ghost was never seen again and the family lived happily in the cottage. But in many other stories his closing comments leave endings open or cast doubt on the shown outcome, for example, as he concludes 'The Rocking Chair' (#22): 'Well, did Beryl really see a figure in the old rocking chair? Only Beryl knew, but one thing is certain – she won't offer to look after Miss Agnes's cat again – ever!' In other issues he is even less conclusive, for example, closing 'The Cavalier's Cloak' (#37) with the question 'Well, what do you think? Was it just a tattered old rug, she had picked up while sleepwalking? Or was it INDEED the Cavalier's Cloak?'

These early hosts are all older men: sharing an authoritative demeanour, elderly appearance, and implicit horror genre markers (psychiatrist, vampire, and Romantic). They frame their stories variously with morals, explanations, and occasionally questions. Their longevity also speaks to the tales' popularity. However, they then give way to more diverse figures, whose abilities are also more complex. Early examples of these were not as long lasting and are less well remembered. For example, 'Gipsy Rosa Remembers' was published in *Diana* for a time (ndat), and *Judy* (1960–1991) occasionally featured a character called She of the Shadows; a glamorous looking veiled lady in long black dress and gold jewellery. As she introduces herself in the 1976 Annual: 'I am She of the Shadows. I know many things and have strange stories to tell. Come closer and listen to one of them'. The story she tells is about student nurse Jill Nash whose repeated sightings of a mysterious nurse near the hospital war memorial ultimately help her lead her colleagues safely away from a fire. She concludes the tale by explaining 'Jill never saw the nurse again. Was it really Ann Paxley, returned because she was needed again? Jill will always be convinced of it. What do YOU think?' Like Darke, she combines explanations with questions, offering closure that is tinged with ambivalence by inviting the reader to question these outcomes.

Judy's most famous host character is Bones, who presents 'Tales from Skeleton Corner'. He first appears in 'Flower Power' in *Judy* #1632 (20 April 1991), in which Carly uses a home-made flower lotion on her face that makes her skin

wither like dead flowers. Skeleton Corner remains for the last few weeks of Judy's run and Bones then returns after the merger of *Judy* and *Mandy* into *M&J* (1991–1997), in *M&J* #11 (27 July 1991). He appears weekly throughout the rest of this year and then in intermittent runs between 1991 and 1995.

Bones is more EC Comics than paternal storyteller, and (like the Storyteller) he often matches his speech, jokes, and attire to the story's events, for example, appearing in stereotypical Australian beach clothing and on a surfboard in 'Living Ghost', with the greeting 'G'day, cobbers!' The following stories have him in a woollen knitted hat (for 'That's Someone's Seat', #12); a bow tie ('A Week in the Country…', #13); a baseball cap with the slogan 'I'm not negative' and camera ('A Picture of You', #15); and mortarboard and gown ('The Most Frightening Teacher', #16). His comedy clothing is matched by his tone, which is direct and irreverent. For example, 'A Week in the Country' (*M&J* #13, 10 August 1991) ends with the reveal that the tapping that has disturbed Jilly and her family comes from a ghostly disembodied hand, and Bones then concludes 'Well, that's me all ready – and, of course, I haven't forgotten my gloves. It's not HANDY without them! Hee! Hee!' Later, in 'The Gate Story' (*M&J* #140, 15 January 1994) Sally takes down an old picture of some gates from her room at boarding school (despite advice not to) but is then tormented by noise and disruption from the wall. Bones ends the story with the moral 'However, she never took the painting back down! And that's a thing to remember about GATES, girls – they can be needed to keep things IN, as well as out!' The stories are short (2–3 pages), spooky and can end ambiguously or badly. Sometimes Bones only hints at the ending or does not provide one at all ('What's in a Name?', #14), and in others the protagonists meet a nasty fate, as in 'The Most Frightening Teacher' (#16), where Gemma and her friends are tricked by the seemingly nice Miss Whitehead and turned into figurines for her collection. His last appearance seems to be in 'Skeleton Corner' in *M&J* #194 (28 January 1995), wrapping up a spooky story in which Sal gets sucked into a painting, although there is no formal goodbye.

Gypsy Rose first appears in *Jinty and Lindy* in 1977 in 'The Ring of Death' (29 January 1977), launching 'Gypsy Rose's Stories of Magic and Mystery'. This is altered slightly to 'Gypsy Rose's Tales of Mystery and Magic' in the next issue, and she continues to appear weekly in this section throughout the year, with only a few brief gaps in the summer. She often appears on the comic's cover and

her stories get the lead position for the first few months. Her name seems to have come from the comic's paratextual material (which perhaps in turn harks back to *Diana*'s Gipsy Rosa) since the advertisement for her first appearance proclaims 'Your own Gypsy Rose features in riveting complete stories of magic and mystery!' (22 January 1977) and the comic's horoscope section is already named 'Gypsy Rose looks at the stars' although her image does not appear here until 19 February 1977. She breaks with the previous dominant type of storyteller by being young and female, and also by participating in her own tales. In the majority of these she acts as a 'supernatural consultant', advising on hauntings, and other troubling events. For example, in her first appearance she helps Gina Rapalli by discovering the poison hidden in a family heirloom, prompting the family to exclaim 'Thank you, thank you, Gypsy Rose!' This structure continues across all the early tales, which see a troubled girl seeking Gypsy Rose's help with a ghost ('Hide and Seek with a Ghost', 19 February 1977), haunted object ('Haunted Ballerina', 26 February 1977; 'The Magic Tambourine', #16 July 1977), or other spooky problem. In 'The Haunted Ballerina', Gypsy Rose identifies the malevolent spirit of a crippled ballerina who has been interfering with Deanna's dreams of being a dancer. She ends this tale with the explanation 'My friend Deanna did pass her audition, and one day, she will be a prima ballerina…like Irina Feodorovna!'—but here her phrasing is arguably transgressive as it moves from past to future tense, positioning Gypsy Rose as an omniscient and omnipresent character. A similar tension is apparent as she ends other tales on a questioning note while confirming the truth of the events shown: 'The verdict on Harris was accidental death by drowning… but we know better, don't we?' ('The Hound from Hades', 19 March 1977) However, later tales begin to reduce her to a bookending role and by 1980 her appearances are all reprints: not just of previous Gypsy Rose tales but also of old Strange Stories from *Tammy* and *June*, where the Storyteller's bookending panels were are simply replaced with ones featuring Rose. This repositions her as narrator rather than actor, but also leads to a greater diversity as the stories are no longer limited to being in her present-day.

As noted, Misty is a combination of cover girl, fictional editor, and occasional storyteller and so also takes on many roles. In the *Misty* weeklies she never bookends a story, but she often does this in the holiday specials, the annuals, and in *Tammy and Misty* after the two titles merged.[22] But when Misty does

introduce or close a tale, But when Misty does act as a series host to introduce or close a tale, her function is consistently questioning, and thus quite different from the Ghoulunatics and the other girls' comics hosts. For example, she ends 'The Haunted Library' (Annual 1981) with the comment 'So now what is your verdict? *Was* the turret room haunted or was it the work of a joker?' What do *I* think? Well, I must confess I wouldn't choose to spend a night in that turret room. *Would you?*' Unlike the American hosts she provides little closure. She follows the earlier British series hosts by asking questions, but (like her introductions to her comic) combines this with addressing the reader on their level, and actively involving them in speculation about the tale's ending.

AQ3

The second type of host in British girls' comics is the serial host Put in quote marks for first usage

'serial host'

. This character's function is limited to a particular serial story. This character's function is limited to a particular serial story. They exist in a coherent framing storyworld, from which they tell us their stories. The first of these seems to be Jackie Flynn, the narrator of 'Bridget at War', who first appears in *Diana* #146 (4 December 1965). This story opens with a brief sequence of six unframed panels, which begin with a direct address from an unnamed narrator, who states 'The scene is a country lane in Ireland. The time – a hot afternoon in July. You are on holiday and have decided to go for a stroll…' The narration continues to explain that you are enjoying yourself, but growing tired, when an old man greets you. It then gives way to Jackie's dialogue, as he hails us:

Hello there! 'Tis a fine day, is it not? You must be t'young lass staying at the hotel, aren't you? […] Aye, there's many a tale I could tell you […] You're sure to like this one, so I'll be telling you all about the brightest little girl in Ireland – Bridget Casey.

Jackie bookends the ten episodes of this serial story, where he addresses the reader directly and sometimes interjects in a single panel with commentary on the events. The descriptive narration also continues from an unnamed source in some panels and Jackie's function is primarily to flesh out characters where needed, often with an ironic tone, such as 'He was quite honest, of course. Wild

horses didn't drag it out of him—he spread the news quite willingly' (#148). He draws the reader in and out of the tale, for example, closing with 'Now I'll see you next week' (#148) and wrapping up the final instalment with 'Goodbye, girls! Goodbye!' (#155) After his first panel he only ever appears against an empty background, drawn only in pencils, and so is a slightly ghostly presence. He is followed in the 1970s and 1980s by many other examples, such as 'Madame Marlova Remembers' (*Debbie*) who inspires her pupils with stories of famous ballerinas; Miss Hatherleigh who tells visitors the history of 'Cremond Castle' (*Spellbound*), Megan Dolwyn of 'Dolwyn's Dolls' (*Bunty*) who shares the story of each doll, Beverley Jackson who gives us the tale behind each button in 'The Button Box' (*Tammy*), and Jade Jenkins (*M&J*), whose market stall is made up of objects with stories to tell.[23] Coote names this category of stories the 'Collective Storyteller' as the stories often come from a collection of sorts, but 'serial hosts' seems a better fit since many (including the prototype Jackie Flynn) do not have a physical collection of objects, and also because 'collective' confuses the issue by implying they are multiple.

These characters exist solely within their storyworld and are confined to it, although they may then narrate a number of unrelated embedded stories. Their speech takes on different forms, as for example in Fig. 3, where Bev's speech balloon ('Well you might like to hear the story behind this button, Kelly!') gives way to a narrative box ('This novelty button was made in Cornwall…')—a commentary that then continues throughout the tale. Some panels are even completely abstracted, such as the one introducing the button, which has a patterned background. Their The host's voice is doubled by appearing in both speech balloon and narrative box, suggesting a tension in the host's position—are they inside the storyworld or outside it? There is often a similar doubling in the themes of the embedded tales—as in this example, where Bev teaches her friend Kelly not to lie to make herself look more wealthy; the same lesson learnt by Linda in the story she tells. So even serial hosts So despite their coherent framing storyworld, even serial hosts like Bev exist in a liminal position: at the threshold between the two tales. The threshold has been argued to be 'part of the Other'[24] since by standing here we have already crossed into the other side, even if only in our minds. Lieshout claims similarly that the threshold is an abject space, where borders are crossed and binaries break down.[25] The internal tension of this position undermines the diegetic existence of the host character

and seems very Gothic.

Fig. 3

'The Button Box', *Tammy* #632. Tammy™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd. Copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., All Rights Reserved

As the British comics market faltered in the 1970s it was the fate of many of its publications to be merged together to shore up the sales of a failing title. Serial

hosts that were attached to long-running and popular stories were mostly unaffected, but many of the series hosts disappeared, or were forced to share their spot with another. The case of *Misty, Tammy*, and *Jinty* is indicative. The first issue of the combined *Tammy and Misty* (Fig. 4) is heavily weighted in favour of *Tammy*, with the *Misty* title around a quarter of the size of the former, and Misty herself redrawn quite differently. She appears just once inside this merger issue, where she explains 'Regular "Misty" readers will know that I have been called away on an urgent mission. But I shall always be with you in spirit – and sometimes in person, to bring you stories from the mists. When I am away I shall be sending my stories to my friend, "The Storyteller"'. Over the following months her appearances become less and less frequent and her bookending image shrinks in size. She appears approximately once a month from March to May 1980, while the Storyteller is in almost every issue, sometimes with more than one tale. The comic's title and logo also shrink and move off centre on the cover, before finally vanishing a few weeks before the *Tammy and Jinty* merger on 28 November 1981. The Storyteller and Gypsy Rose then rotate as hosts of the Strange Story slot (with new material) until July 1982, when *Tammy* was relaunched with a new look.[26] The Storyteller last appears on 3 July 1982 in 'Veronica's Visions', and the final 'Strange Story' ('Punchinello's Dance') appears on 10 July 1982 with no host. Although spooky stories continue to appear after this (first weekly, then intermittently), the slot is rebranded as a 'Tammy Complete Story' and has no narrator. The themes remain dark though, with a 'vampire-wolf' ('Moonlight Prowler', 17 July 1982), a living statue ('Sign of the Times', 31 July 1982), and a malevolent blackbird ('Bird of Fear', 23 October 1982). The Storyteller appears once more, in 'The Fireside Friend' (a 'Tammy Complete Story' in the 15 December 1982 Christmas issue), which he opens with a warm welcome and closes with some characteristic questions, but after this he simply vanishes—a quiet end to a character that had endured nearly twenty years.

Fig. 4

Tammy and Misty, 19 January 1980. Cover by John Richardson. Tammy and Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd. Copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., All Rights Reserved

Liminality, Transgression, and Tension on the Comics Page

Formalist approaches to comics often draw attention to three things: the space of the page, the role of the reader, and the interplay between word and image. Groensteen argues that narrative meaning is constructed from the interplay of various elements within the page.[27] McCloud's concept of closure emphasises the work of the reader filling in the events in the 'gutter' between panels.[28]

Hatfield's critical model focuses on the tensions produced by word/image, surface/sequence, and so forth.[29] My own work synthesises and builds on these critics to propose a three-part critical model based on the gothic concepts of haunting, the crypt, and excess.[30] I argue that the space of the page tends towards spectrality, as symbols are echoed from previous pages. The reader must decode the meaning and provide the additional events hidden in the gutter, which I redefine as the crypt: a space whose contents are known but will never be shown.[31] The comics page is wildly flexible, combining many different visual and verbal means for conveying meaning, and constantly shifting perspectives, which creates a sense of excess in the reading experience.

In this light, the host's behaviour and potential seems extremely Gothic. Both types of host problematise the boundaries between fiction and reality, as their status within the storyworld is uncertain. They may appear both inside and outside of it, or in an abstract and undefined space. Their speech may be conveyed as dialogue (speech balloon) or narration (narrative box) and become disembodied as the tale goes on. They might incorporate paratextual material such as the story's cover or its title in their image or word. They can interfere with plot events during the telling, or recast things ironically (or otherwise) at the story's close. They can also raise questions, provide explanations, offer morals, or undermine certainty. They are transgressive (breaking story borders, narrative borders) and excessive (shifting speech forms) and they play with perspective as they address the reader directly and in many different formats.

Jones claims that the function of the host character is to tell the reader how to read the story.[32] I would extend this and argue that the host's behaviour is a clear indication of the gothic potential of comics at the widest level. I would extend this and argue that the host's behaviour alerts readers to the gothic potential of the comics page and its narratology. In many ways, the behaviour of the British girls' comics hosts echoes the textual strategies used by other gothic novels. *Frankenstein* (1818) contains multiple layers of narrative which collapse when their characters meet at the tale's close, in *Dracula* (1897) all of our encounters with the vampire himself are framed through the eyes of the other protagonists, and Arthur Machen's stories use a 'Chinese box' style embedded structure. Nielsen offers a close reading of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell Tale Heart' that demonstrates how the story's original published form conflates text and paratext; undermines the boundaries between place (here and there) and time

(then and now); and breaks the rules of grammar in its treatment of 'you' and 'I'.[33] These gothic techniques are all present in the examples of girls' comics discussed above. The host's voice adds frames of doubt and distance to the stories: problematising narrative certainty. Their actions are frequently transgressive, for example, as they break the borders between text and paratext by delivering titles or existing in empty space. Their behaviour may even collapse these distinctions, as they gain possession of an artefact from within the story, or step into the diegesis to interact with events and characters. These transgressions of expected diegetic boundaries and the embedded nature of the stories they tell support a gothic reading of the host character. In the medium of comics, which often combines the antithetical by using drawn words and symbolic images, the hosts' liminality becomes a destabilising device. Horror hosts may be a ubiquitous feature of the genre, but when they appear in comics the medium's freedom enhances the hosts' abilities—to transgress fictional boundaries, problematise authenticity, and create narrative excess, all exemplars of the Gothic.

Notes

1. See the following: David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998); Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Tabish Khair, 'Gothic Remains in South Asian English Fiction', *The Gothic and the Everyday*, ed. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maris Beville (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Timothy Jones, 'The Canniness of the Gothic: Genre as Practice'. *Gothic Studies* 11(1) (2009); Timothy Jones, *The Gothic as Practice: Gothic Studies, Genre and the Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 2010); and David Punter, 'Theory'. *The Encyclopaedia of the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013).

2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1986): 3.

3. Monica Germanà, *Scottish Women's Gothic and Fantastic Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 13.

4. Gilda Williams, 'Defining a Gothic Aesthetic in Modern and Contemporary Art'. *The Gothic World*, ed. Glennis Byron and Dale Townshend (London: Routledge, 2014): 413.

5. Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017): 53.

6. See for example Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (London: The Women's Press, 1978 [1976]); H.P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature. *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive* (1927); and Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2004).

7. Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Introduction: the Gothic in Western Culture'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

8. Chris Baldick, 'Introduction'. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): xix.

9. See for example Gina Wisker, *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2005); Xavier Aldana Reyes, 'Introduction: What, Why and When is Horror Fiction?' *Horror: A Literary History*, ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes (London: The British Library, 2016).

10. Ann Radcliffe, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry'. *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 16(1) (1826).

11. Sue Zlosnik and Avril Horner, 'Comic Gothic'. *The Encyclopaedia of the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013): 122.

12. Zlosnik and Horner, 'Comic Gothic', 124–125.

13. Timothy Jones, *Gothic and the Carnivalesque* (Cardiff: University of

Wales Press, 2015): 127.

14. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996).

15. Julian Wolfreys, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (London: Palgrave, 2008): 98.

16. Anne Digby, Personal Correspondence with Julia Round (2017).

17. James Chapman, *British Comics: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011) citing L. Fenwick, 'Periodicals and Adolescent Girls'. *Studies in Education* 2(1) (1953).

18. Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London: Phaidon Press 1996): 84.

19. Pat Mills, 'Misty: The Female *2000AD*'. *Pat Mills Blog* (2012).

20. Lyndal Roper, *The Witch in the Western Imagination* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012): 6.

21. See for example https://www.tebeosfera.com/numeros/lily_1976_bruguera_-super-_20.html , accessed 19 January 2019.

22. These appearances are presumably to replace the opening panels of stories taken from older sources. Please see my online database at www.juliaround.com/misty for the original sources of all reprinted stories where known.

23. Dates where known: 'Madame Marlova Remembers', *Debbie* #186–#211 (4 September 1976–26 February 1977). "Cremond Castle", *Spellbound* (ndat). "Dolwyn's Dolls", *Bunty* #1287–#1291 (11 September 1982–9 October 1982; Annuals 1983 and 1984 and subsequent issues of *Bunty Picture Story Library*). "**A Tale from the Toy Museum**", *Bunty* #1493–ndat. (23 August 1986–ndat; Annuals 1988 and 1989). "**The Button Box**'" *Tammy (ndat)*. "**Jade Jenkins' Stall**", No titles in bold please.
'Madame Marlova Remembers' should be in double quote marks rather than

single for consistency.
The '(ndat)' after *Tammy* should not be in italics.
The '(ndat)' after *M&J* should not be in italics.
The extra spaces before and after 'www.girlscomicsofyesterday.com' should be removed. *M&J (ndat)* (www.girlscomicsofyesterday.com , accessed 3 January 2019).

24. Manuel Aguirre, *Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990): 5.

25. Joy van Lieshout, *The Gothic and the Graphic Novel. Voicing Postmodern Fears in Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. Unpublished MA thesis (2013).

26. Mistyfan. "Gypsy Rose's Tales of Mystery and Magic." *A Resource on Jinty: Artists, Writers, Stories* (2014).

27. Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comic*s (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).

28. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 1993).

29. Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* (Jackson, MS: University Press Mississippi, 2005).

30. Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach* (Jefferson, CA: McFarland, 2014).

31. Jodey Castricano, *Cryptomimesis* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

32. Jones, *Gothic and the Carnivalesque*.

33. Henrik Skov Nielsen, "Fictional Voices? Strange Voices? Unnatural Voices?" *Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, GmbH, 2011).

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