

“I think these chapters are not real”:

In a Dark, Dark Room and the Horrors of Early Reading

By Katharine Slater

In 1986, a group of parents in Lakewood, Colorado, attempted to remove Alvin Schwartz and Dirk Zimmer’s Early Reader *In A Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories* from the city’s schools and libraries on the grounds that the book was “inappropriate material” for young minds. That same year, *In a Dark, Dark Room* handily won the Colorado Children’s Book Award, an honor determined by votes from the state’s child readers from an adult-selected list (Otfinoski 83, Marcus 48). While some parents have been uncomfortable with Schwartz and Zimmer’s work, occasionally to the point of strenuous objection, many children enjoy its disquieting and unresolved narratives, a response the book encourages. *In a Dark, Dark Room*’s seven macabre stories include death, decapitation, reanimated corpses, ghosts, and long-toothed human predators, with illustrations that embrace and extend the boundaries of these tales’ implications. Yet, as Schwartz’s foreword and child-authored book reviews suggest, the numerous terrors that so frightened Lakewood’s parents are also fundamentally pleasurable for many child readers, a seeming contradiction that relies on the disquieting bliss of irresolution. As a work of horror invested in upending assumed epistemologies, *In a Dark, Dark Room* refuses narrative closure, reassurance, or settled knowledge, a practice that appears at odds with the intended purposes of Early Readers but in fact promotes an advanced method of textual engagement. The book encourages children to derive enjoyment from the indefinite, to play in uncomfortable and unsettling gaps rather than observe or participate in their closure. While reading skills can lead to acquired vocabulary and the ability to bridge signifiers and signifieds, the act of reading horror

also compels young children to begin questioning what they think they know. To privilege not-knowing over knowing is a practice that paradoxically leads to new forms of understanding.

This practice of questioning seems in conflict with one of the perceived functions of Early Readers: to gain some semblance of textual mastery. As a book in the I Can Read! line, *In a Dark, Dark Room* has an explicit didactic purpose signaled by the context in which it appears. Established by editor-in-chief Ursula Nordstrom at Harper & Row in 1957, I Can Read! is a line of beginning readers for young children “designed to aid the process of learning to read,” books that “increase in complexity to allow for greatest success in ability and interest” (HarperCollins Publishers). The trajectory supports and emphasizes children’s self-sufficiency as part of a gained skill set. Featuring a range from the “My First” level through “Level Four,” from the categories “Shared Reading” to “Advanced Reading,” the I Can Read! informational page inside *In a Dark, Dark Room* informs adults that the series shifts “from books your child reads with you to the first books he or she reads alone.” On the inside of *Dark’s* front cover (and inside the front covers of all I Can Read! books) an image-text proclaims “HOORAY! _____ can read this book!” urging the child reader to write her name in the blank space and proudly announce her achievement. The act of learning to read is therefore framed through this line of books as an act of independent control, a process that requires the child to distance herself from adult guidance and develop a monogamous relationship with a text, thereby legitimizing her ability to decode and synthesize language. The linear thrust of the I Can Read! line gestures toward a predetermined end, where the child has successfully accrued new skills she will carry with her as she begins to read chapter books. Level Two, “Reading With Help,” the final level that recommends limited input from adults, is the level assigned to *In a Dark, Dark Room*. Readers at Level Two are characterized on the informational page as “increasingly confident, but still [in]

need [of] some help,” presumably from parents or educators. These readers therefore occupy a transitional and liminal space where literary independence is imminent yet not wholly achieved. This is a space that suits *Dark*’s genre, aesthetics, and narrative. As part of the broader structure of the I Can Read! line, Level Two captures the emergent fragmentation of the developing reader, whose ambiguous and transitional literacy state mirrors the murky and unresolved possibilities of horror.

The content of most Early Readers generally supports the stated goals of skill and knowledge acquisition, supporting the child reader’s projected linear development. However, Schwartz and Zimmer’s book consistently suggests that becoming an engaged reader also depends on the pleasures and challenges of not-knowing, a focus that reinforces rather than undermines the I Can Read! project by identifying ambiguity as a native part of literacy. This emphasis on not-knowing is an important generic function of horror fiction in all forms of media, from literature to radio to television to film. While Leonard S. Marcus identifies Schwartz’s work as “scary stories . . . children’s fiction with sources as diverse as supernatural and surrealist fantasy, black humor, and the cautionary tale” (44), I see merit in understanding *In a Dark, Dark Room* within the more expansive field of horror while still allowing for the important formal and aesthetic differences between a horror text intended for adults and a horror text intended for very young readers. Reading *Dark* as horror allows us to recognize that the book’s narratives, like those within the horror genre, rely primarily on destabilizing readers’ certainties and assumptions.

The most effective horror immerses its audience in objectless states of anxiety, a condition that builds more dread than the visible constrictions of a defined source: “[I]t is not the monster . . . [that is] essential to the horror genre, but rather an ‘epistemic deficit’: an anxiety-

inducing not-knowing in relation to the events and entities of art-horror” (Hills 30). Although ontologies (states of existence, being, and becoming) participate in the production of horror fiction’s shocks and terrors, in that narratives often present as ghastly a given subject’s corporeality and existence, epistemologies (systems of knowledge) are arguably a more significant foundational component of horror’s creeping mechanisms. Chris Meyers and Sara Waller distinguish between ontological and epistemic horror as the difference between something wrong signaled by the explicit presence of a monster and a vagrant apprehension produced through a fundamental lack of certainty: “[M]aybe there is something wrong with a thing in the world, or may be [*sic*] something wrong with me, or may be [*sic*] I have no idea of what I am up against” (119). *In a Dark, Dark Room* presents both ontological and epistemological horrors, the former in the guise of corpses, ghosts, and men with uncanny teeth, the latter in narratives that for the most part refuse resolution or explanation. Occasionally, these ontological and epistemological horrors intertwine within the same story. However, *Dark*’s monsters are arguably far less frightening than the text’s refusal to answer raised questions or remain within the boundaries of single narrative realities.

And yet the horrors of *Dark*, despite their shocks and uncertainties, are fundamentally pleasurable without weakening their unnerving effects, a reality that contradicts our own epistemologies for children’s scary stories. Criticism that examines fear in children’s literature often identifies these terrors as teleological, with a resolved means, outcome, or response often directed by adults. Jackie Stallcup argues that frightening texts for young children commonly fall into one of three categories: books that intentionally induce terror as a mechanism of control, books that induce fear and subsequently alleviate it, and books that empower child readers and child characters to respond effectively to fearful situations. Regardless, the end result is the

same. The fear has been exposed, experienced, and subsequently handled, whether evaporated or followed through to a painful result for the child character. Late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century fear-based children's literature generally "offer[s] a model in which children overcome their fear" (Stallcup 127). These books close the coffin, presenting a linear narrative that moves successfully from uncontained fears to resolved ones. Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis suggest that recent Gothic children's literature centers on newly-informed child characters who, "rather than retreat from [their] uncomfortable knowledge," instead work "to find a way to either ameliorate or assimilate it . . . expel[ling] it from their world" (8). While this subgenre's appeal "has something to do with unrestraint, transgression, and the overturning of normalcy," their suggested example, Jack Prelutsky's frightening poem "The Ghoul," successfully "works to undermine fear" through its parodic elements, an action that they argue reduces the text's horror (11, 13).¹

In a Dark, Dark Room defies these critics' categories and analytic models, in that it actively undoes epistemological assumptions and refuses to sculpt the resulting devastation into a resolution. Importantly, this defiance does not undermine the Early Reader project of linear literacy, but in fact demonstrates that ambiguity is an important facet of reading experiences, legitimized for young readers by *Dark*'s inclusion in the I Can Read! series. At the same time it reinforces a sense of unresolved horror, *Dark*'s provocative irresolution reinforces a larger literacy goal: to show emerging readers that advanced textual engagement demands confrontations with open-ended narratives. Level Two readers, according to the I Can Read! stage descriptions, "use multiple strategies to read complex words" (HarperCollins Publishers), and that same commitment to multiplicity applies to the various connotations and uncertainties produced by these complex words. The liminal space *Dark* occupies seems to disturb the I Can

Read! emphasis on reading comprehension; however, this liminality is in fact indigenous, native to the production of literary meaning(s), and encouraging encounters with it ultimately buttresses advanced literacy skills. *Dark* shows us the dangers of assuming kinship between a commitment to ambiguity and a commitment to subversion. Schwartz and Zimmer's refusal to provide neat conclusions or to evaporate fear—while a departure from familiar fear-handling models in children's scary stories—plays an important role in supporting the Early Reader literacy project. The pleasures unresolved horror elicits are fundamentally aligned with one of I Can Read!'s stated goals: to “engage and excite” child readers (HarperCollins Publishers), to keep them involved and invested through the production of emotional intensity.

Dark may effectively work to undermine certain epistemologies, particularly those associated with children's horror, but the book also reinforces other institutional assumptions: namely, reading is good, and reading in challenging ways is even better. Without attempting to assuage readers' fear, the collection proposes to young readers that the horrors of not-knowing can be enjoyable, a commitment to play and openness that simultaneously upholds the larger objectives of text comprehension and fluency. Schwartz's foreword sets the tone and approach for the narrative to come, gesturing toward unsettling and delightful ambiguities:

Most of us like scary stories
because we *like* feeling scared.
When there is no real danger,
Feeling scared is fun.
The best times for these stories
is at night—

In front of a fire or in the dark.

Tell them s-l-o-w-l-y

and quietly,

and everyone will have

a good time. (9)

There are reassurances here—the words “no real danger,” as well as an accompanying illustration of a cozy living room—that appear to lessen anticipated anxieties, but the language and design ultimately refuse closure. By using the word “danger,” a word young children in the 1980s would associate with physical perils (“stranger danger”), Schwartz makes an important and nuanced distinction between ontological vulnerabilities (“Will I be okay?” “Will the monster get me?”) and epistemological fears (“What’s happening? What are the rules of this world? Where is the threat coming from? What am I up against?”). While reading these stories might not pose a threat to child readers’ bodies and physical safety, there is no reassurance to counteract the unsettling doubts these stories encourage. Numerous elements of textual design and illustration support the survival of disconcerting fears, and although subtle, their accumulation advances a creeping sense of unease. The latter section of Schwartz’s foreword is riddled with subtle pauses, gaps, breaks, and breakdowns in meaning, all the more apparent in a text with spare language and designed for careful and possibly hesitant readers. The caesura in the sixth line replaces the comma that might otherwise have taken its place, a strong pause that through its proximity to “night” encourages emphasis on the word’s disquieting possibilities. Although the dashes in between the letters of “slowly” might function as a spelling aid, or a mechanism to explicitly link form and meaning, they also denaturalize and distort the word, injecting unnatural gaps that threaten to break it apart entirely. Multiple lines are enjambed rather than end-stopped

(“The best time for these stories/Is at night,” “and everyone will have/a good time”) (9).

Schwartz delays the lines’ intentions, an interruption that playfully raises the specter of other, more gruesome possibilities: everyone will have—what? What will everyone have?²

Dirk Zimmer’s illustration, facing Schwartz’s foreword to complete a page spread, complements its associated text by depicting a scene the words describe, but also by reinforcing Schwartz’s commitment to retaining pleasurable yet disconcerting epistemological uncertainties. The illustrated living room is inviting and enjoyable in many ways, with plump cushions, a roaring fire, and appealing details, including books, a candelabra, and a bust of a mustached man on the mantle. Yet the room is empty, with six seats waiting for occupants, and a poker is abandoned in the fireplace seemingly mid-action, lying with its end still wedged in the burning wood. A cat lies on the rug in the illustration’s foreground, its head turned away from the viewer, its absent face far more suggestive than a discernable one might be. Where is the “everyone” mentioned in Schwartz’s foreword? Why was the poker abandoned? Is the image on the wall of a gnarled and bare tree a painting, or is it a window? Why is the cat turned away from viewers, and what might viewers see if it turned back? Neither Zimmer’s illustration nor Schwartz’s words provide us with answers, and the lack of resolution prefaces the book’s commitment to a pleasurable aesthetics that nevertheless revels in uncertainty.

Like the foreword and accompanying illustration, *In a Dark, Dark Room*’s first story, “The Teeth,” relies on textual meaning not made explicitly clear to the reader, its delights produced through the absence of closure or explanation. The narrator, a young boy “hurrying home in the dark” on an urban sidewalk, asks a strange man the time (11). The trenchcoat-wearing man grins at him, revealing “teeth . . . three inches long,” and the narrator runs away in fear. Immediately thereafter, he encounters another menacing man, whose teeth, when revealed,

happen to be “longer than” the previous three-inch set (13). Finally, the narrator, desperate to get away, meets a third man, whose teeth—only depicted in Zimmer’s illustration and not described in Schwartz’s words—are obscene in their exaggerated dimensions. The narrator takes “one look” at the man’s horrifying mouth and runs “all the way home” (15-17). Much of this story is ontologically terrifying. There are definable and verifiable monstrous sources: unfamiliar adults who pose an unnamed but apparent threat to the child narrator, and who evoke contemporary cultural perceptions that children were particularly vulnerable to criminal strangers (Fritz and Altheide 474).³ Yet the weight of the narrative’s horrors is arguably *not* on the potential dangers suggested by the physical presence of these men, as the narrator’s easy and successful escape seems to indicate, nor does the horror primarily derive from the composition and limits of the bodies themselves, as the absent descriptions make clear. Schwartz increasingly refuses detail, retaining vague references to teeth “longer” than the first set, teeth “*this* long,” therefore directing attention away from the specificities of corporeality (15, emphasis in original). The horror of “The Teeth” is therefore less object-focused than its monsters would seem to indicate, instead originating from implicit misgivings and uncertainties. A single man with overlong teeth is an object-centered and exceptional threat: a monster. Three successive men, however, suggest through their increasing numbers the painful violations of a new and ghastly reality, a world where strange men have progressively elongating teeth and nobody bothers to explain why to the terrified child narrator or child readers.

“What is at risk in [scary] stories,” writes Susan Stewart, “is our good faith in our ability to know the world by means of a socially given system of interpretation . . . [O]ur assumptions of the social . . . are suspended, put into brackets” (48). The I Can Read! informational page suggests that Early Readers help children “become more competent” in their ability to

comprehend and synthesize textual information. *Dark*'s concentrated efforts to produce epistemological doubt may seem to undermine this goal but in fact encourage advanced forms of textual engagement, resulting in unresolved and oscillating contradictions between text and context that produce a complex extravagance of meaning. The horrors of "The Teeth" derive from the readers' inability to understand what is happening and why, an understanding that would provide them with the ability to "close down" the text in part by identifying diegetic circumstances as either natural or supernatural. Schwartz's simple sentences and pervasive narrative gaps resist confirmed knowledge. The complete absence of descriptive adjectives, transitional phrases, or contextual information leaves readers with the (undead, walking) skeleton of a story and far more questions than answers, suggesting that the experience of reading is not about finding resolution.

It is precisely the narrative's emphasis on questioning over answering that provides *In a Dark, Dark Room* with its peculiar set of pleasures. Many critics have argued that the attractions of ontologically-based horror lie in the fascination the monster proposes through its blatant violation of cultural, psychological, and physiological norms, as well as in the confirmed distance between self (reader) and other (monster). Echoing Schwartz's assertion that "when there is no real danger/feeling scared is fun," Noël Carroll identifies the distressed fascination of horror's avid readers/viewers as "a response to the thought of a monster, not to the actual presence of a disgusting or fearful thing" (190).⁴ Horror appeals to certain consumers through the disclosure of impossibilities, Carroll suggests, and although this emphasis on discovery is clearly significant, its inverse is key as well. Horror *also* appeals through the paradoxical pleasures of epistemological doubt, denial, and confusion within a relatively safe space—a fictional text—that encourages readers to luxuriate in uncertainty. For young readers in particular, there may be

real pleasure in not-knowing: in not being directed toward an end, a singular meaning, a finite goal, or an objectively correct answer. This liminal space promotes an advanced method of textual engagement, in the process contradicting assumptions regarding the ease or simplicity of Early Readers. Through foregrounding the horrors of ambiguity, “The Teeth” also emphasizes the pleasures of ambiguity, challenging children to reconsider what they know to be possible.

Although the promise of “home” at the end of “The Teeth” suggests a kind of sanctuary, another one of *In a Dark, Dark Room*’s stories, “The Pirate,” subverts that possibility by portraying the homespace as something breached, violated, and threatening. Susan informs her visiting cousin Ruth that a pirate once died in the room where Ruth is staying. “His ghost is supposed/to haunt that room,” Susan says, and while Ruth counters that she doesn’t believe in ghosts, she is nonetheless sufficiently unnerved to investigate (51). Schwartz and Zimmer depict Ruth’s detective work through a complementary text-image relationship that verges on symmetrical, with each action illustrated in detail: Ruth looking under the bed, under the rug, inside the closet, in the drawers, and behind the curtains. Satisfied that she’s explored anywhere “a ghost might hide,” Ruth gets into bed, confidently stating out loud that there “is no one in this room/but me” (56-7). In response, an unidentified “big voice” announces, “And ME!” (59). The story ends abruptly without further information or resolution, and numerous details are left up to the reader’s imagination: the source of the voice, its supernatural or material qualities, and the terrified Ruth’s ultimate fate.

Again, obvious ontological terrors mask subtler epistemological ones. “The Pirate” provides an identifiable foundation for the story’s horror, located right in the title and in Ruth and Susan’s discussion, but that source eludes definition. Instead, Schwartz and Zimmer prioritize lexical and visual gaps, challenging readers’ perceptions of the story’s perimeters. As

in “The Teeth,” Schwartz avoids detailed description altogether, inviting readers to wade in the vast trenches between what confirmed information his story provides. (The only adjectives are a pair of related words that link victim and threat, blurring the boundary between self and other: Ruth is scared “a little” at the thought of a pirate haunting her room, while the voice at the end is “big,” a mutual relationship where each word invites the ghost of the other.) Zimmer’s illustrations open up unsettling options through the inclusion of elements not referenced in Schwartz’s sentences. Ruth’s bedroom windows are ajar in the final two images, wide strips of dark night masking any exterior visibility and therefore expanding the possibilities of what—and who—might enter or exist within the narrative. The one element Zimmer adds that Schwartz does not reference is a small black dog who accompanies Ruth on her investigations, looking into closets, drawers, and behind curtains. In the last illustration, however, as the disembodied voice announces its presence and Ruth sits up in bed, her face expressing terror, the dog sleeps on its side, its face turned away from the viewer in a manner that explicitly recalls the cat from the illustration accompanying Schwartz’s foreword. The dog’s position and unresponsive body in this final image raise another set of questions that potentially invalidate readers’ prior assumptions. Although the third person narrator implicitly supports Ruth’s experience of events through the legitimacy of distance, the dog’s lack of response to the “big voice,” certainly loud enough to wake it up, suggests that perhaps Ruth is imagining the voice, or that the dog is allied with the voice, or—alarmingly—that the dog itself is not all right, all new elements that drastically reorient what readers believe to be true about the storyworld. The voice explicitly evokes the threat of uncertainty while the dog’s lack of response redirects the story’s climax away from monstrosity and toward a wide-ranging objectless doubt. And yet, despite these unresolved elements, the conclusion also invites a playful response that stresses the delights of

not-knowing alongside its terrors. The absence of confirmed presence or resolution invites readers to participate actively and fill in the gaps: “[Children] regard the material in part as game material . . . [for example,] the ones with the awful ending or the non-endings that permit you to use your own imagination as to what might happen” (Marcus 48). While Ruth may not have the ability to determine where the voice might be coming from, or if it poses a threat to her, readers can potentially resolve her situation in ways they find personally enjoyable, an open choice that affirms unpoliced child agency and, at the same time, that reinforces the overall momentum of the *I Can Read!* line.

In line with its participatory elements, some of *Dark*'s pleasures also rely on an undercurrent of humor that participates in the collection's production of horror, a complex interplay that heightens the narratives' impacts. One story in particular combines humor and horror to great effect. In “The Green Ribbon,” Alfred meets and falls in love with Jenny, who always wears a green ribbon around her neck. Despite his persistent questioning, Jenny refuses to tell Alfred why she wears the ribbon, answering only that the reason “is not important” (27). Eventually, they marry, growing old together. On her deathbed, Jenny informs Alfred that the time has finally come to reveal her secret, asking him to remove the ribbon from her neck:

Slowly and carefully,
Alfred untied the ribbon,
and Jenny's head fell off. (32-33)

The story's concluding clause, which receives its own page, is accompanied by one of Zimmer's illustrations: Jenny's head on the floor, her decapitated body in bed (the neck hidden from viewers by a strategically-placed pillow), and a wary cat staring at the head, its gaze anticipating the viewer's. While these details are relatively gruesome for a book aimed at very young readers,

the lengthy tension-building and abrupt release in “The Green Ribbon” are also sources of considerable humor, providing a possible explanation for the story’s fame among its devotees.

Schwartz notes the story’s infamy in his 1988 interview with Leonard Marcus:

One of the most popular stories in the book is the one about the woman whose head falls off when the ribbon she wears around her neck is taken off. Some kids think the story is very funny, and so do I. Others think it’s scary. I spoke in an elementary school once and the entire fifth grade walked in with green ribbons around their necks, which pleased me. [. . .] Of course, it is a very scary thing to think that your head might fall off! And we do get letters. (47)

Both horror and humor rely in part on incongruity, a form of epistemological subversion, where narrative progression emphasizes the gulf between known and unknown facets of experience, resulting in unanticipated consequences (Cross 58). The pleasures of an unexpected punchline following a significant build-up and the pleasures of an unexpected terror following a significant build-up are inextricably intertwined; the shocks of both inspire a similar physiological response. Jenny’s decapitation is scary because it’s sudden, because it’s unexplained, and because it proposes the body’s unforeseen and total vulnerability, suggesting unanticipated possibilities to child readers. Jenny’s decapitation is funny because it’s sudden, because it’s unexplained, and because it upends and subverts with violent speed the assumed performance of a human body. The story’s reveal is so dramatically incongruous with what children know to be true about body integrity that the profound gap inspires astonished laughter. Rather than allay or assuage provoked terrors, humor contributes to the story’s production of horror by depending on a similarly aggressive inversion of epistemological expectations and assumptions.

“The Green Ribbon” is one of *Dark*’s most popular chapters, in part due to this interplay between horror and humor. The Spaghetti Book Club, a website that hosts book reviews from young readers, contains multiple reviews of *In a Dark, Dark Room*, many of which discuss “The Green Ribbon” to the exclusion of any other story in the collection. Seven-year-old Jonathan H. refuses to reveal the story’s ending, concluding his review mid-narrative: “[Jenny and Alfred] became old. Read this one if you like surprises.” Although Jonathan does not describe his personal response to the story, his reluctance to reveal the ending to others implies the pleasure he may have derived from reading it. The use of the word “surprise” neatly straddles humor and horror, playfully acknowledging the dual functions of “The Green Ribbon” while participating in the story’s practice of tension-building and delaying his own readers’ encounter with the shocking reveal. Like Jonathan, seven-year-old Chris F. sees “The Green Ribbon” as humorous and horrifying. For Chris, the story is so overwhelming it constitutes the entirety of *In a Dark, Dark Room*:

I like this book because it is scary and it is about a girl that took a ribbon off of her neck and her head fell off of her neck. This is a good book for children. [. . .] My favorite part is when her head fell off. This is my favorite part because it [is] exciting. I felt scared when I read this book.

I recommend this book to people who like scary books and funny [books].

Uninterested in reconciling humor with horror, Chris oscillates rapidly from fear to excitement to fear to amusement. His review eliminates Schwartz’s narrative and arrives directly at the ending reveal. (Alfred is nowhere to be found, having

no purpose in this end-focused revised version; Chris believes Jenny is perfectly capable of removing her own ribbon.) Much like Jonathan, Chris participates in extending the story's narrative functions within his own writing, producing incongruities of his own through the juxtaposition of two potentially incompatible ideas. He sees a story about a girl whose "head fell off of her neck" as "good" reading for young people. By identifying these seeming incompatibilities in successive and confident sentences, Chris challenges resistant or conservative responses from some parents, stating unequivocally that a frightening book with references to decapitation is a "good book for children," one to which children, in particular, should have access.⁵

Written as evaluative summaries that highlight particular aspects of the text, these child-authored reviews are also insights into how *Dark*'s young readers might respond to Schwartz and Zimmer's emphasis on not-knowing. The youngest Spaghetti Book Club reviewer of *In a Dark, Dark Room*, six-year-old Leah S., shares Jonathan and Chris's overall positive sentiments, but not without a few slight equivocations that gesture provocatively toward the disruption of her particular epistemologies:

I really like *In A Dark, Dark Room*. I think it is very scary. Every character in the book has freckles. There are 7 scary chapters in the book. I think these chapters are not real. On the cover there is a picture of a character from every chapter.

Once again, pleasure and fear are not mutually exclusive categories. Leah, however, is an exceptionally attentive reader, as the freckle observation makes clear, and her review grapples with the doubts *Dark* provokes. In a statement sandwiched between sentences that cement

undeniable ontological realities, Leah reveals the extent of her uncertainty by questioning the ontological status of the “7 scary chapters,” which may or may not be “real.” Schwartz explains in his foreword that these stories pose “no real danger” to readers, but neglects to clarify sufficiently for Leah whether or not the stories derive from verifiable events.⁶ Leah’s language denotes a kind of liminality; she *thinks* the stories are not real, but she does not *know*. Though her concern here is primarily with the book’s relationship to her known reality, signaling an ontological preoccupation, Leah’s hesitation indicates epistemological doubts about the physical and social laws of the world she occupies. These doubts stem directly from the collection’s stories, which indicate the treachery of assumed knowledge through unexplained elements that lack clear resolution.

In an attempt to negotiate the reality (or unreality) of these seven chapters, Leah’s lengthy review tackles each story separately, with the exception of “The Pirate,” which she leaves out altogether. Her language extends rather than resolves the gaps of Schwartz and Zimmer’s text, while wavering between what she knows and what she doesn’t:

In the chapter In A Dark, Dark Room there is a box, and when the box opens something happens.

In the chapter The Night It Rained, I do not understand because Jim’s mom said his son has been dead for almost a year, but the man met him yesterday. [. . .]

In the Graveyard is a very short chapter. Corpses are in the book.

Corpses are dead bodies.

I think that you should read this book in the dark because it will get scarier.

I do not think the ghost of John would be alive because the book said he would be chilly with no skin on. I think the older a scary book gets the scarier it is.

In her summary of “In the Graveyard,” Leah shares what is likely a new addition to her vocabulary, signaling a more familiar form of textual engagement. Her other statements, however, are riddled with equivocations and arbitrations, signs of the shaky epistemological ground on which Leah explores her relationship with the text: something happens, I do not understand, I think, I do not think. The summary of “In a Dark, Dark Room,” the chapter that gives the book its title, is far more vague than the story itself. “In a Dark, Dark Room” takes readers from “a dark, dark wood” inside “a dark, dark house,” becoming progressively more restricted in space until “a dark, dark box” exposes “A GHOST!” hiding inside, concluding the story (35-40). By eliding the ghost reveal, Leah reframes the horrors of the story away from its ontological anxieties, shifting them to reflect her state of general uncertainty. “Something happens” is a statement that invites readers’ questions in a way that mirrors Leah’s own questioning process. The abstraction of the phrase redirects readers away from an object-centered emphasis—the ghost—and toward nearly limitless possibilities. (An earlier summary of “The Green Ribbon” makes much the same rhetorical gesture, referring to “something scary happen[ing]” when Jenny ages.) And yet, despite her considerable uncertainty, Leah still seems to enjoy *Dark*’s terrors to the point of recommendation, not alleviation. Suggesting that others read the collection in a setting that exacerbates their fear, she sees no incongruities between the pleasure she clearly takes and her statement that *Dark*’s stories are “very scary.” As a developing reader, Leah exhibits an ability to enjoy both knowing and not-knowing. She confidently announces the definition of “corpse” while acknowledging that the rest of her observations are

contingent upon perspective and subjective comprehension. Her review shows us explicitly how *Dark* and the I Can Read! series successfully encourages new readers to take apart texts while putting them together, an act that favors irresolution and manufactures a potentially endless supply of meaning.

To read in the increasing absence of adult support and interference is an act that requires the child reader to be intensely vulnerable. “The older a scary book gets the scarier it is,” Leah suggests, and although she arguably misuses the word “older” in place of “longer,” I find her substitution revealing, reflecting back on the shifting state of the reader rather than on the book in question. The I Can Read! series accompanies children along a predetermined path that takes them from shared reading with parents or other adults to reading without help. The stated goal of these series is a linear form of textual mastery, but that goal in and of itself may be a frightening end. Independence achieved is also a form of isolation. By emphasizing the terrors of unsettled knowledge and the breaches left by unresolved narratives, *In a Dark, Dark Room* not only advocates for the pleasures of an advanced form of textual engagement, it validates the fears child readers may be experiencing while they still function within the liminal space of an intermediary reading level. These fears can co-exist without resolution alongside the joys of possibility and meaning, producing a reading experience that fails productively to resolve into coalescence. A book is a playground; a book is also a gaping maw of maybes. Heads may fall for no reason, unseen ghosts might announce their presence, and men with long teeth might gnaw at readers’ assumed certainties. Learning to read alone—all alone, in the dark of nascent understanding—can be terrifying and exciting, a process that rides on the undeniable thrills of uncertainty.

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¹ I hesitate to identify *In a Dark, Dark Room* as Gothic literature, on the grounds that the Gothic is significantly concerned with ontologies over epistemologies (as Jackson, Coats, and McGillis implicitly acknowledge in their introduction). The Gothic is famously impossible to define and limit, but critical consensus suggests that it presents a subject "in a state of deracination . . . the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation" (Miles qtd. in Rintoul 702). With perhaps one exception provided by the title story, *Dark's* terrors are sourced in general epistemological doubt rather than the subject's disintegration.

² *In a Dark, Dark Room* is prose, not poetry, and in identifying line breaks through the language of poetry, I realize that I am neglecting important formal differences. However, the arrangement of Schwartz's text on the page—particularly the fact that the line breaks often do not correspond to full sentences or clauses—suggests that *Dark* bears some stylistic resemblance to poetry and might therefore be read through a lens that acknowledges its similarities.

³ Despite data that showed the disappearance of most missing children could be traced to family members and family friends—in other words, people with whom the children were familiar—U.S. media in the 1980s stressed that these cases were usually attributable to unrelated persons, an assertion implicitly supported by widespread attention to the stranger abduction and murder of six-year-old Adam Walsh in 1981 (Fritz and Altheide 479). Many of Schwartz and Zimmer's contemporary young readers, already familiar with this "stranger danger" strain of popular discourse, would have also been exposed to popular bibliotherapeutic books that directed them on how to avoid or respond to malevolent adult requests and actions.

⁴ Carroll's theories as presented here assume the textual presence and centrality of a monster within a given horror narrative. As many other critics have argued, not all horror narratives contain a monster figure or an object-centered source of anxiety.

⁵ In his interview with Marcus, Schwartz notes that children "are more apt to find the ribbon story funny than parents are. Parents are very protective" (Marcus 47).

⁶ As in all of Schwartz's folklore-based collections, *Dark* includes an end section that lists the tales' sources, but the smaller font and more complicated words ("traditional," "motif," "variants," "compiler") suggest this page is not intended for young audiences. Regardless, readers would need to be familiar with the concept of folktales in order to have more information as to their veracity.

By Alvin Schwartz, Illustrated by Dirk Zimmer. Paperback \$3.99. BUY NOW Online Retailers. Amazon Barnes & Noble Books-A-Million Indiebound Target Walmart International Retailers. Other Formats. Hardcover. His collections of scary stories "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark, More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark, Scary Stories 3, and two I Can Read books, In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories and Ghosts!" are just one part of his matchless folklore collection. Illustrated by Dirk Zimmer. Details. Imprint: HarperCollins. In a dark, dark wood. Nora hasn't seen Clare for ten years. Not since Nora walked out of school one day and never went back. And in the dark, dark house there was a dark, dark room. But something goes wrong. Very wrong. And sometimes it's sometimes it's emails from readers. Generally if people write to you, it's because they liked the book, although I have had a few messages telling me what a terrible person I am. But even when they're nice, it's still odd and uncomfortable, someone telling you their reaction to your private thoughts, like reading someone's opinion on your diary.