

How to Write Spooky Stories for Children

By Paul Westmoreland

Young readers love spooky stories filled with haunted houses, creepy castles and ghostly goings on. But they don't like being frightened.

As my children have gotten older, I've seen first-hand how something even mildly creepy can give them weeks of nightmares. Once, just the opening titles of the *Goosebumps* TV series from the 90's were enough to mentally scar my two! And if I ever pushed the scares in my books too far, half my young readers would be put off ever opening another book!

So how do you tip-toe across the creaking floorboards of writing spooky stories, without being so bland you become boring, or falling through into an abyss of genuine terror?

As an adult, it's easy to push it and think – *This is soooo scary the kids are bound to love it! I'm gonna down in history as the scariest children's writer EVER!* But the place to start isn't your story or characters, it's actually with your audience.

The categories of children's books vary greatly because these readers are very different, and a lot more sets them apart than their ages. The older ones want realism and genuine horror – graphic gore depicted so sharply that even the pages carry the threat of severe paper cuts. Middle-graders want danger and daring heroes who take the knocks as they beat the bad guys, all set in fantasy worlds where you can really push the fear-factor. Young readers, however, love the spooky sense of Halloween-frights, drenched in something disgusting, but the slime should only be stinky and the hairy monsters should make you smile rather than scream.

I still love the original Scooby Doo cartoons. My children love them too, and Steven Moffat cited them as his key reference when he was creating the scares as showrunner of *Doctor Who*. Scooby's monsters are perfect for a young audience. They all look scary. They chase Shaggy and Scooby with their arms outstretched but never quite catch them. And they always turn out to be someone mundane who's only trying to scare people away from an old amusement park. Deep down, behind the scare, they're never really monsters and remembering this is vital if you want to avoid giving young readers nightmares.

This also illustrates a vital lesson in creating scares for children: You must always decide from the outset where your scares are going to come from.

Granted, a master horror writer can squeeze a scare out of anything, but the motivation behind your monster or whatever is lurking inside your haunted castle is what counts here. For instance, you can give the youngest readers the scariest-looking monster they've ever seen so long as their motivated by something innocent or just a misunderstood buffoon. Whereas older children are more likely to be interested in a smiling bus driver, whose passengers mysteriously disappear never to be seen again...

Roald Dahl famously created a formidable cast of classic villains who were mostly motivated bullying. Whether it was The Fleshlumpeater in *The BFG* or Miss Trunchbull in *Mildred*, they were great for several reasons. All of us, Dahl's readers included, can relate to the horrors of bullying, and bullies can behave despicably! Dahl also loved building up his villains so his heroes could knock them down with a satisfying, crushing *THUMP!* But most importantly, Dahl always kept his villains on the right side of fearsome without ever straying too far into the realms of terrifying his readers. And although Dahl isn't classed as a horror writer, the principles behind his characters and stories work the same way.

R.L. Stein, the wonderful author of the classic *Goosebumps* series, knows just about every trick in the book of creating scares for children. While fans of his books are most likely to recall the chills induced by Slappy the Dummy, Stein is especially proud of creating a scary story about a kitchen sponge – *It Came From Beneath the Sink*. Stein said that the challenges of creating scares out of something so mundane, that's in every home and is small and wet were huge, but he managed it! And thus proved that if you give something enough threat, it really is possible to make anything scary.

My books are for children aged between six and eight so they come from the opposite end of the scary story spectrum. Rudy, our hero, is a wear-wolf and his best friends are a mummy and a ghost. Their town of Cobble Cross is an urban-gothic sprawl surrounded by creepy castles and dank, gnarly forests all bathed in moonlight. It's easy to imagine how scary this world could be to young readers. But this isn't a problem when you understand your audience and give all the Halloween-costume characters the right motivations. I also swap out the real dangers so Rudy and his friends explore more personal problems and have adventures in growing up that the audience can relate to and enjoy.

Another useful trick that helps scale back the scare-factor is that I only allow the settings and characters to seem scary for a few lines or paragraphs before bursting the bubble. This gives the readers' a taste of fear without turning up the dial to full-on terror, and they never lose the reassurance that Rudy and his friends are always safe.

This way, young readers get to visit a scary, spooky world through stories that I hope will begin a love of reading that gets them binging on books.

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*Paul Westmoreland is the author of the Rudy series for children aged 6-8,
published Oxford University Press*

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