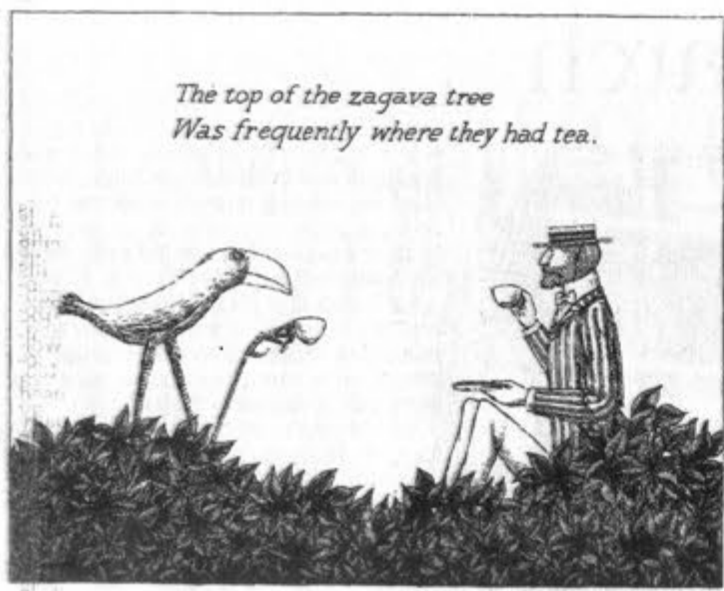
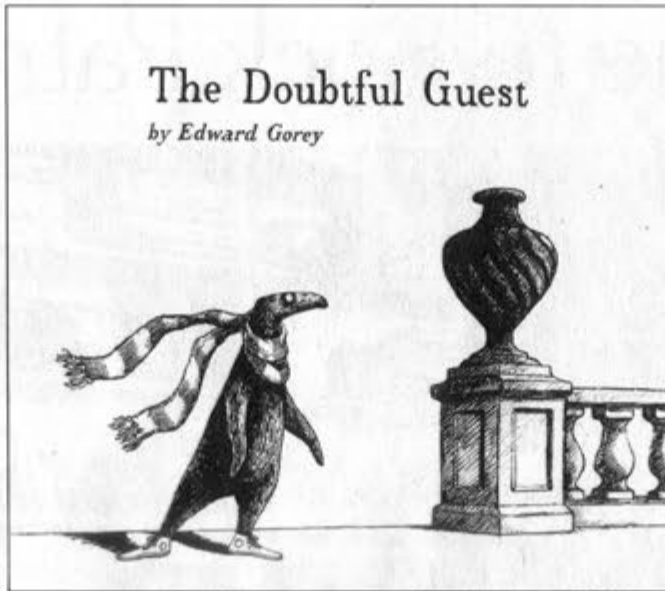


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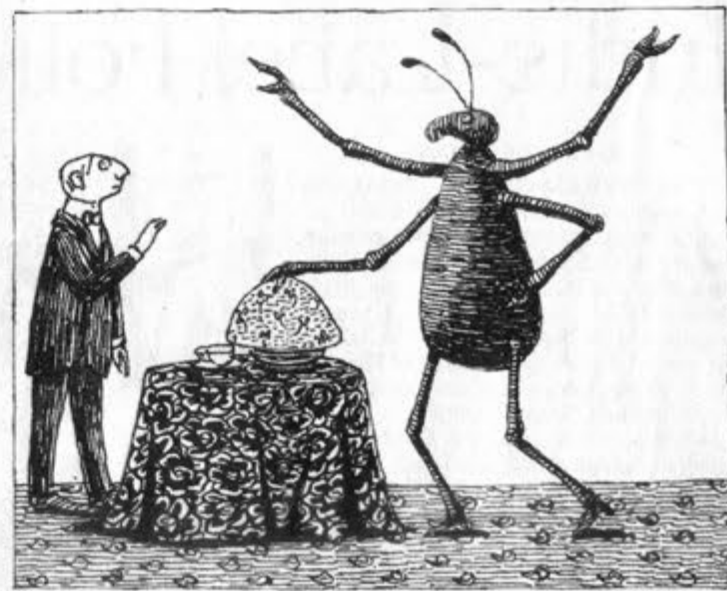
The top of the zagava tree
Was frequently where they had tea.

EDWARD GOREY CHARITABLE TRUST



The Doubtful Guest
by Edward Gorey

EDWARD GOREY CHARITABLE TRUST



EDWARD GOREY CHARITABLE TRUST

Nightshade Is Growing Like Weeds

By MARK DERY

NEWS bulletin from the spirit world: The specter of Edward Gorey, who died in 2000 at the age of 75, is haunting our collective unconscious.

In a sense that's as it should be; Gorey was born to be posthumous. His poisonously funny little picture books — deadpan accounts of murder, disaster and discreet depravity, narrated in a voice that affects the world-weary tone of British novelists like Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett — established him as the master of high-camp macabre.

Told in verse and illustrated in a style that crosses Surrealism with the Victorian true-crime gazette, Gorey stories are set in some unmistakably British place, in a time that is vaguely Victorian, Edwardian and Jazz Age all at once. Though Gorey was a 20th-century American, he conjured a world of gramophones and cars that start with cranks, of boater-hatted men in Eton collars knocking croquet balls across the lawn while sloe-eyed vamps in cloches look on, and sinister things sink, bubbling, into the reflecting pond. His titles are instructive: "The Fatal Lozenge," "The Deadly Blotter," "The Hapless Child," "The Haunted Tea-Cosy."

A wide audience has long known Gorey's work from the 31-year-old animations used to introduce the PBS series "Mystery!" (now "Masterpiece Mystery"). The playfully perverse vignettes include a skulking villain in a cape and a swooning ingénue.

Before "Mystery!" Gorey's set for the 1977 Broadway production of "Dracula" — large-scale versions of his black-and-white drawings, each melodramatically highlighted with a single, blood-red detail — spread his fame far beyond theatergoers.

But until the last few years true Gorey devotees were a secret society, wearing Gorey-philis like a Masonic ring. Now, however, their numbers have swelled. The writer Daniel Handler, better known as Lemony Snicket, said, "When I was first writing 'A Series of Unfortunate Events,' I was wandering around everywhere saying, 'I am a complete rip-off of Edward Gorey,' and everyone said, 'Who's that?' Now, everyone says, 'That's right, you are a complete rip-off of Edward Gorey.'"

Tim Burton owes an obvious debt to Gorey, as do Rob Reiger, creator of the goth gamin Emily the Strange, and Neil Gaiman, the author of the novella "Coraline." Mr. Gaiman has an original Gorey drawing of "Children gathered around a sickbed" hanging on his bedroom wall; he wanted Gorey to illustrate "Coraline," he said, but he "died the day I finished it."

Gorey illustrations are even becoming vogueish as tattoos. Last year the ninth-season "American Idol" finalist Siobhan Magnus had a biceps tattoo of Death playing nanny to a flock of soon-to-be-doomed children, from "The Gashlycrumb Tinies," Gorey's grimly funny alphabet book.

The market for Gorey books and merchandise buoys indie publishers like Pomegranate, which brings some of Gorey's books back into print each year, and Fantagraphics, which is releasing a third edition of "The Strange Case of Edward Gorey," a portrait by the novelist and longtime Gorey friend Alexander Theroux. Attendance has been climbing steadily at the Edward Gorey House in Yarmouth Port, Mass., and curators of the first major traveling exhibition of Gorey's original art, "Elegant Enigmas" — originally shown at the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa., and now on view at the Boston Athenaeum — have been stunned by the

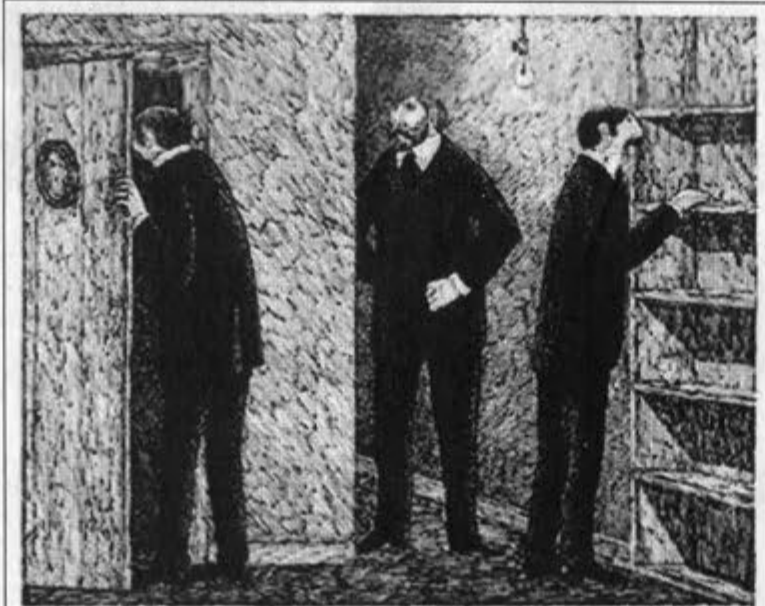


VINCE DEWITT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The sensibility of Edward Gorey, above in 1994, is generating interest at museums. Top, right, and below left, works in "Elegant Enigmas," a traveling show. Below right, the Tim Burton show at MoMA.



EDWARD GOREY CHARITABLE TRUST



They searched the cellars fruitlessly.

EDWARD GOREY CHARITABLE TRUST

Right, Gorey has inspired the fashion designer Kambriel. Below from left, the films "Coraline," "Alice in Wonderland" and "Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events" all owe a debt to Gorey.

enthusiasm surrounding the show. "I knew Gorey had a wide following, but I had no idea of the mania," said David Dearing, an Athenaeum curator, before the exhibition opened there in February. News media inquiries and calls from the public had been coming in for months, he said then, "and the show isn't even here yet." Since the opening, he said last month, "the response has been phenomenal."

Opinions differ about why Gorey — whose name increasingly serves as shorthand for a postmodern twist on the gothic that crosses irony, high camp and black comedy — is casting a longer shadow these days. Mr. Handler attributes Gorey's growing popularity partly to the sophisticated understatement of his hand-cranked world, a sensibility that stands out sharply against the exuberant vulgarity of our age of jeggings, "Bridalplasty" and "Jackass 3D." "That worldview — that a well-timed scathing remark might shame an uncouth person into acting better — seems worthy to me," Mr. Handler said.

Undoubtedly such romanticized visions of a more decorous, dapper past, which also inform the neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian street styles of goths and



MARILYNN K. YEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES



TINA DOLIN

steampunks, have as much to do with escapism as historical fact. But accurately or not, such subcultures see in Gorey's work an invitation "to return to a time of gentility," to quote the promoters of the annual Edwardian Ball, a celebration of Gorey.

In contrast, some fashion designers see Gorey's anachronistic use of historical references as perfect for our age of mash-ups

and remixes. The neo-Victorian couturier Kambriel, whose shows have featured Gorey-inspired sets and models reciting Gorey limericks, said that in her designs, as in Gorey's tales, "the propriety of the past" is infused with the "playful mischief and irreverence" of the present.

Even a more established designer like Anna Sui has drawn inspiration from him. "My big attraction to Edward Gorey is that he picked up on all those cultures and was inspired by them but kind of spun them in his own brain and made his own world," she said. Similarly, Martyn Jacques, the singer for the British "dark cabaret" act the Tiger Lillies — whose Grammy-nominated collaboration with the Kronos Quartet, "The Gorey End" (2003), set unpublished Gorey tales to the band's seaxick accordion and castrato vocals — celebrates Gorey's refusal to bow to a boomer-dominated culture.

"When I was growing up you'd hear all these musicians, and they were all inspired by the Rolling Stones or Jimi Hendrix," said Mr. Jacques, 51. "I thought to myself: 'Why only be inspired by the 1960s? Why can't you be inspired by the 1860s?'"

Mr. Dearing attributes Gorey's appeal to what he sees as the rise of cynicism in America since the '60s. "I don't mean cynicism in a totally negative way," he said. "It's the same kind of attitude that would look back and enjoy Jane Austen but enjoy Trollope even more. There wouldn't be a Gorey, if there hadn't been this late-20th-century fascination with camp and irony and cynicism."

Gorey was an early adopter of this sensibility. At Harvard from 1946 to '50, where he roomed with the poet Frank O'Hara,

More than a decade after his death Edward Gorey still haunts the collective imagination.

Gorey borrowed a page from the bourgeois-mocking wit of writers like Firbank and Oscar Wilde to create a deadpan, ironic worldview, one that appears strikingly contemporary in retrospect.

Such historically minded analyses can lose sight of the straightforward delights of Gorey's art — his astonishing draftsman-ship and pitch-perfect composition, informed by a lifelong love of film, theater and ballet. Many of the images "look like theater sets, so there's that dramatic appeal to it," Mr. Dearing said. "They're very well composed, easy to read, yet there's enough detail in them that every time you look at them you'll see something you hadn't seen before." Dizzily cross-hatched or stippled, Gorey's exquisitely rendered images reveal an encyclopedic knowledge of period architecture, wallpaper, fashion and interior design. They rejoice in repeated patterns, which contribute to what Mr. Dearing called their "wonderfully decorative quality."

Gorey-philis who take in the Boston Athenaeum show may be amazed to learn that Gorey's original illustrations were no larger than their reproductions in books, typically just a few inches on a side. "You can picture him with his nose right on the paper, practically, and the pen just making tiny, tiny little strokes, each one where it's supposed to be," Mr. Dearing said. "The amazing thing is that the mind that's creating this already knows what it's going to look like when you step back from it."

Intriguingly, explanations for the mounting popularity of Gorey's art rarely touch on its air of hidden, maybe even unknowable meaning. Whatever Gorey's work appears to be about, it's forever insinuating, in its poker-faced way, that it's really, truly about something else. The philosopher Jacques Derrida might have said it is this very elusiveness — the sense that meaning can never be pinned down by language — that is Gorey's overarching point.

For his part, Gorey, who rolled his eyes at anyone looking for deep meaning in his work, would doubtless have groaned (theatrically) at any attempt to make intellectual sense of his posthumous popularity.

As he liked to say, "When people are finding meaning in things — beware."



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