



## In a dark dark room and other scary stories teeth

As I continue my quest to present the world's most thorough and scholarly examination of the Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark series of youth horror books as well as an opinion piece about the audio books), I would be remiss to ignore another book that is closely related to the series in spirit if not name. If I'm going to write this series of articles, after all, I must do it correctly. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and all that. So imagine: you're a folklorist that enjoys frightening children, and you're doing a pretty bang-up job of ensuring that the nation's youth can only slumber in nightmare-haunted fits and starts. But there's a problem: what about the particularly young children? The ones that can read but whose parents still shield them from imagery of blood-soaked corpses? What is to be done about them? The answer to these questions is fright this way... In a Dark, Dark Room, as you can see, is "An I Can Read Book," which means that it's basically the next step up from Sesame Street. Unlike Alvin Schwartz's Scary Stories books, which were intended for thrillseekers of age nine or older, this book gives the all-clear for even first graders to join in on the fun. Hell, even you particularly advanced kindergärtners can get in on this action. It's this sort of all-inclusive horror that the tykes have been clamoring for, to provide a chill without the gore of the older-skewing books. The stories are shorter and tamer, the illustrations more cartoony, and the subject matter a bit more goofy. However, as the old adage goes, you're never too young to soil your shorts, and don't be fooled: In a Dark, Dark Room gives ample material to necessitate such a soiling. This may be horror with training wheels, but just take a gander at that crew on the cover, looking like they're about the murder whoever is unfortunate enough to be inhabiting that room. Incidentally, there is a second cover to the book: Personally, I think this is less sinister than the original and a bit less effective; the ghosts and ghouls inhabiting this book are substantially less intimidating when you bear witness to them recoiling in terror from a pair of eyes peering out from the darkness. I suppose one could interpret this as the contents of the book being so terrifying that even ghosts and monsters are afraid of it, but whatever. I had the other cover as a child, so I'm sure this is colored by nostalgia (as is this whole project), but I tend to disregard this one and consider the other cover that has a second cover that has a mummy on it, but as far as I'm concerned, the original cover is the real one, and that's that. This is to say nothing of the illustrations that have replaced the originals entirely in the current print run of books, but I've already discussed that at length elsewhere. When Let me take a moment to let my nerd rage settle. So anyway, the first story here is called "The Teeth." And by rights, this should be the undisputed lamest story in the world. The gist of it is that a boy is walking alone at night, and asks a stranger what time it is. Total rookie mistake, especially once you get a look at the guy he asks. Jeez, was a NAMBLA convention in town? Now, when the man responds, the boy gets a look at the guy he asks. Jeez, was a NAMBLA convention in town? series of shady dudes, each with teeth larger than the last. It sounds book-thrown-into-the-fireplace ridiculous, and yet HOLY HELL is it disturbing when you're a frightened urchin, roaming the streets at night, and you run into these amply-toothed assholes. If your pants are still dry after those three encounters, you truly are a juvenile Übermensch. The story thus serves as a pretty apt avatar for this book as a whole, deftly combining the absurd and the alarming. This is actually a good time to point out the creeper-tastic audio book for In a Dark, Dark Room, which, in an interesting twist, is narrated by the illustrator, Dirk Zimmer. Zimmer assumes his best Ken Kaniff from Connecticut persona throughout, which is especially appropriate for this tale. Give it a listen: "In the Graveyard," the next story, is an interesting case in that it is a modified version of "Old Woman All Skin and Bone" from Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark. As such, it highlights the differences between the two books in a very specific way. For one thing, it immediately becomes obvious that this woman is this story is, err, not all skin and bone: But like her skinny, bony old counterpart, this woman enjoys spending her leisure time in the graveyard. Now, the Scary Stories version of the story is a reflection on mortality, as the old woman is informed by her shockingly callous spiritual adviser that someday she, too, will be a worm-ridden corpse. This version, however, is either more light-hearted or even grimmer, depending on your personal views of life after death while trapped within a rotting husk. You see, in this version of a story, it is the corpses that inform the woman that she, too, will be dead like them someday. Now, these corpses don't have the same level of gruesome rot as the one in Stephen Gammell's haunting Scary Stories artwork does; they actually just kind of look like hipsters in coffins. You probably never heard of any of the bands whose songs they played at their funeral. In a way, though, the assurance that this is what your final reward consists of is a fate worse than death. Up next is "The Green Ribbon," and this is where the trauma kicks into high gear. The sweet, tranquil portrait that introduces this tale is in no way adequate preparation for the terror that is to come: Isn't that adorable? It's like one of those American Girl dolls that cost way too much money. The darling young lass in the picture is Jenny, our protagonist, and in the space of a few pages we see literally her entire life flash by. She meets a young man, they fall in love and get married (with the groom showing up to his wedding looking remarkably like Howdy Doody) and they grow old together. There is, alas, one disturbing constant to this coupling: no matter how much her husband may inquire about it, Jenny refuses to ever remove the green ribbon she wears around her neck. Inevitably, though, the day finally comes when a sickly, withered Jenny gives her husband permission to remove the ribbon, which is when this happens: Uh-huh, that's a severed head hitting the floor. Try showing this image to a child sometime. You'll have plenty of time to formulate your apology while they weep uncontrollably. This is probably the single gruesomest image I have ever encountered in a book intended for seven year-olds. On the plus side, if you're the sort of parent that thinks that your kids just haven't been exposed to enough decapitations, this is a wonderful entry point to the topic. I do like the fact that the cat in the image above seems pretty ambivalent about its owner's head rolling on the carpet next to it. Honestly, the cat is probably just wondering if it's OK to start nibbling on the carpet next to it. Jenny was basically dead the whole time, since her head was apparently already severed even when she was a child. It was just being held in place by the ribbon. No doubt her husband descended into madness immediately after this unfolded, possibly hanging himself upon the realization that he had been married to some sort of ghoul. I'm sure the cat didn't care about that, either. The following story is the eponymous "In a Dark, Dark Room." It is brief, even by the standards of this book, and frankly kind of dumb. It's definitely the most "kiddie" of the included tales, though since that's kind of the point here, it may also be the most appropriate. Basically, it's more like a poem than a story. There's a house, you see, and it's dark, and it contains a chest, which contains a chest, which contains a box, which contains a box, which contains a box, which contains a chest, which contains a c tells the audience of an encounter he had one night. It is pouring rain, and during his drive home he sees a sad little boy standing by the side of the street, all alone. Pitying the child, he gives the young man a ride home, and allows the child to borrow his sweater to keep warm. He drops the boy off, and returns to the same house the next day to pick up his sweater. He is greeted (in the bleakest sense of the word) by the boy's mother, who informs the narrator that her son, Jim, has been dead and buried for some time. You can probably guess where this is going, but if you're new to this whole "reading books" thing: Bonus points for the return of Ambivalent Cat, who just ain't got no time for the supernatural. Anyway, this is all terribly sad, unless you're a big fan of the inherent cruelty of this world. This story serves to assure children that even though they are young, they could still die at any time, and when they do, their lonesome souls will haunt rainy backroads until the end of time. Cheery. The Pernate," concerns a girl who is visiting her cousin's house. She is warned that the room she will be staying in is haunted by a pirate ghost? Is this girl vacationing on a haunted houseboat? Did Alvin Schwartz write this after watching a Scooby Doo marathon? In any case, the girl spends the entirety of the story looking through every nook and cranny of her room until she is satisfied that there is, in fact, no pirate ghost hiding out in there. Just as she settles into bed, she has the following response: Pets in this book's universe sure are calm. Anyway, I must have spent hours of my childhood combing this image for the location of the pirate ghost, hoping that he was lurking somewhere in the image, but alas! The only actual visual we get of him is on the cover of the book, and it took me a while to make that connection. Ah, well. Now, leaving aside the incredible rudeness of shoving one's quest into a haunted bedroom, this story was pretty freaky for little me. First of all, it showed that just because you can't actually see something doesn't mean that it isn't a threat, why is probably why I wash my hands seventy times a day. Secondly, it demonstrated that you're never safe, no matter where you are. You could be lying in bed, all snug and secure, not knowing that you are mere moments away from an invisible pirate cutlassing you to death. Sleep tight, kids! It really makes you feel bad for poor John, because having no skin really would be chilly, especially outside on a frigid autumn night. Look at the poor thing, shivering like that! This is easily the most sympathy I've ever felt for an animated skeleton. Not only is John's skull cracked open (probably from the assault that caused his death in the first place) but, much like the kid from "The Night it Rained," he's cold and alone. Man, the afterlife really sucks. Incidentally, I remember singing this song in an elementary school assembly one October. Do schools even still have those? The lyrics were on a transparency that was placed on an overhead projector and blown up onto a screen (this is how mass communications were handled in the pre-email days). I was never a big fan of group sing-alongs, finding most of the songs insipid, but I was pretty enthusiastic about this one. I guess all you need to do to get me to sing a song is to corpse it up a bit. So that's In a Dark, Dark Room. It obviously won't be keeping any adult readers awake at night, but it was never intended to. Considering the target audience, it's remarkably dark and unflinching, and manages to walk the cute/creepy line pretty deftly. If you think kids today are too soft, give them a copy of this to toughen them up a bit. You'll practically be able to hear the hair growing on their chests, which, fittingly enough, somewhat resembles a whisper from beyond the grave. Joey Marsilio wrote a book too, and though it is for an older audience than this one, it somehow features less decapitations. Check it out here!