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**SCARY STORIES TO TELL IN THE DARK:  
PŮVOD, HOROROVÉ PRVKY A  
KONTROVERZE V DÍLE ALVINA  
SCHWARTZE**

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**ALVIN SCHWARTZ'S SCARY STORIES TO  
TELL IN THE DARK: ORIGINS, HORROR  
ELEMENTS AND CONTROVERSY**

**Klára Tříkačová**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

V Plzni, 30. června 2023

.....  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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This undergraduate thesis deals with the topic of the famous children's book series Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark by Alvin Schwartz and introduces the genre of horror to the reader. It consists of four main parts; the first one introduces the author, his other works and contributions to children's literature. The second part firstly defines the horror genre and its brief history and further elaborates on its subgenre classifications. Lastly, this part also establishes and describes the various horror elements most typical of horror literature. The third part is concerned with an analysis of three same stories, which can be found in both Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark and the series Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard by Mark Mills and a comparison from the point of view of occurring horror elements and overall similarity follows. The fourth part is dedicated to the introduction and explanation of the controversy surrounding the aforementioned horror series. The aim of the thesis was divided into four parts. The first, included in section one, was to introduce the reader to the most famous work of Alvin Schwartz. The second was to define the horror genre and describe its characteristic elements, which was the main focus of section two. And the last two aims were to determine through comparison whether the controversy surrounding it was founded if we take into account another author with similar work from the same time period, whose book was never challenged or banned. These aims were completed and included in sections three and four, respectively.

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## INTRODUCTION

Horror stories have always been part of culture and literature, dating as far back as Ancient Greek and Rome, where they began to circulate among people as orally transmitted tales. Later, the discovery of printing helped books become manufactured cheaper and faster, and thus with their popularity steadily growing over the centuries and with the evolution of the various literary genres and numerous tropes, it is no wonder even scary stories slowly became part of children's literature. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fear-inducing literature is sold in every major and minor bookstore with authors (both old and new) highly contributing to the bestseller sections with their works meant for adults and children alike. Though, due to today's society and the everchanging topic of sensitivity, many writers have found their books featured on the challenged/banned list by the American Library Association, especially if the stories were part of the children's literature section, due to parents and teachers who have found numerous topics and motifs inappropriate for younger readers in today's modern society.

While one of the aims of this thesis is to introduce readers to the genre of horror and its various subgenres, this work will also closely define the characteristic features of this type of literature and will comment on its importance to the genre itself. This thesis will deal with the famous person of Alvin Schwartz and his well-known book series *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, which features short horror stories for young readers and which has been continuously deemed as unsuitable for children by modern society. Therefore, this work will also attempt to clarify and present the controversy surrounding the mentioned series in more detail, while simultaneously trying to document whether the accusations and numerous challenges were justified, if we consider other similar works, namely Mark Mills' *Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard*, which on the other hand have not been challenged at all. To further illustrate this point, the thesis will include a detailed analysis of the horror features of several stories, which can be found in both aforementioned book series as well as a comparison of chosen stories in both Schwartz's and Mills' works in relation to their origin tales.

# **1. INTRODUCTION OF THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK**

## **1.1. AUTHOR**

Northwestern University graduate Alvin Schwartz was an American folklorist and journalist who later in his life became renowned for his impactful storytelling and writing of children's horror stories (Lambert, 1992). He is well known for the extensive research and work process, which he conducted while creating his books, such as hiring university students for translations of foreign folklore texts or reading his stories out loud several times in the bathroom (due to the great acoustics) until they sounded perfect. The latter was a very important part of his work procedure as he claimed in an interview for the *Language Arts Journal* because he wished for his stories to be recognized as oral folktales rather than only written stories.

Even nowadays, his work is considered an important part of children's literature and is acknowledged as great teaching material for numerous educators. Scholars compare his contribution to American folklore literature to being as meaningful as the Brothers Grimm in Germany or Charles Perault in France (Vardell, 1987).

## **1.2. WORKS**

During his life, Schwartz had published more than fifty titles which were mostly intended for young readers. In his work he focused on various topics and different genres such as riddles, secret languages, poetry, rhymes or scary stories. His first widely successful book titled *A Twister of Twists, a Tangler of Tongues* was published in 1972 and afterwards his work only grew in popularity. Although his books for the youngest readers (such as *Tomfoolery: Trickery and Foolery with Words* or *There Is a Carrot in My Ear and Other Noodle Tales*) are being published and are highly popular nowadays, the pinnacle of his career as an author had come after he published the first book of his (to be) horror series *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, which was meant to be read by children aged seven and upwards. Despite being completely different from all of his other works, the Scary Stories series became widely popular worldwide, especially among children, and as of 2017, over seven million copies of the books have been sold worldwide with the numbers continuing to increase. The series has also been translated into multiple languages thus proving its popularity even in the modern day.

Nowadays, the books are most known for their disturbing illustrations, graphic wordplay and "straight to the point short stories, where there are no tricks included" as stated



by Schwartz's editor, Robert Warren (Blades & Writer, 2021). Therefore, children know what kind of book they are about to read even without any warnings included.

It is important to note that towards the end of the 1990s, the horror nature of the books began to unsettle some educators and parents of the children and they attempted to ban the series from Children's Literature altogether. This led to the series being labelled as "one of the most frequently challenged books" by the American Library Association (2020). The controversy itself will be further discussed in the later chapters of this thesis.

## **2. THE GENRE OF HORROR**

### **2.1. DEFINITION OF HORROR**

In their article “Horror Story”, the English language encyclopædia Britannica (2020) defines the narrative genre of horror as “a story in which the focus is on creating a feeling of fear” (para. 1). Such stories often include phenomena of supernatural origin such as ghosts, werewolves or zombies, but they can also convey ideas of more realistic fears and play with the minds of their readers. The genre itself first began to gain popularity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the publishing of the book *Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, who is considered to be the founder of the horror genre. The popularity of fear-inducing literature only grew over the centuries, gaining traction in the Romantic era and continuing to preserve even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century fantasy and sci-fi authors (such as H. P. Lovecraft) took interest in the idea of creating stories full of fearful monsters and unknown worlds, thus creating horror subgenres of many kinds along the way (Britannica, 2020). The popularity of horror continues even to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where scary stories have become popular not only among adults but children as well.

### **2.2. SUBGENRES OF HORROR**

Tales of horror have been told since Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. While some of these stories were meant to frighten people, other ones were meant to warn them about committing various sins or about the dangers of dealing with demons. The tradition of orally transmitted stories preserved over the centuries even to this day and it is important to note that according to Britannica (2020), “horror stories form a substantial part of the body of folk literature” (para. 1). When discussing the genre of horror, the topic of urban legends almost always arises as they are “stories about an unusual or humorous events that many people believe to be true but that are in fact not true.” (Britannica, 2022, para. 1). This proves them to be quite similar to folk tales as they also get transmitted through a word of mouth and change depending on who is telling them. The reason for the mention of urban myths is that this work will mostly be dealing with stories, which originated from tales that were told among people and changed significantly over the years, but also because these modern legends can be considered a subgenre of horror on their own. (Britannica, 2022, para. 2)

According to Strinati (2000, p. 83), the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov divides the genre into three main categories: the uncanny, which includes the elements of the supernatural, but ends on a realistic note; then the marvellous, which relies

on supernatural monsters such as vampires or ghosts; and lastly the fantastic, which is both of the aforementioned types combined, with the reader not knowing whether the events in the book could have happened or if they were simply part of the protagonist's imagination.

Similarly, the Literary Terms (2015) website divides the types of horror into three main types: the Gothic, the Supernatural and the Non-supernatural. Gothic fiction is known for its mysteriousness and seductive undertone and can contain elements of the supernatural, while the Supernatural subgenre relies heavily on the paranormal and different types of monsters. In the last type, the Non-supernatural horror, it is a rule to never include anything fully unrealistic as the story is supposed to scare the reader with the fact alone that the events happening in the book can happen as easily in real life (sec. 3). On the other hand, in her article "Your Guide to the Horror Sub-Genres", Rabeea Saleem (2020) claims that in the literature of horror there are significantly more subgenres (besides three types which were already mentioned) such as body horror, which mostly deals with the transfiguration of the human body, then the so-called splatterpunk, which is defined by violence and gore; and lastly the Erotic Horror, a subgenre that intertwines both romance and fear (para. 1-5). A more detailed categorization of the horror genre can be found in the article "Horror: Sub-Genres & Terms" written by Paula Guran (2008), archived on the Internet Archive website, where she mentions subgenres such as the psychological horror, the quiet horror (a story relying heavily on atmosphere) or even terms like noir or Lovecraftian horror. Based on these articles alone, we can conclude that the genre of horror is vastly diverse and that it only continues to evolve further.

### **2.3. CHARACTERISTIC HORROR ELEMENTS IN LITERATURE**

#### **PROTAGONIST**

In horror-themed literature, the protagonist is often a person with whom the reader can easily sympathize, especially if we as the reader recognize the circumstances the character is in from our own real-life experience. We often feel inclined to identify ourselves with the main character, which can later help amplify some of the emotions that the horror genre tries to invoke in us. According to Noel Carroll (1990), emotions play an important part in storytelling, especially in the horror genre. As he claims in his work *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), "Horror appears to be one of those genres in which the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of characters." (p. 89). This means that if the main protagonist feels relatable to us, we later learn to "mirror" their emotions and slowly "the characters in works of horror start

to exemplify for us the way in which to react to the monsters in the fiction.” (Carrol, 1990, p. 17-18). It is then easier for the author to amplify our feelings of dread or fear, which is typical for this type of literature (Carpenter, 2020).

## **SETTING**

According to Carpenter (2012): “Horror stories play on the reader’s private fears, exploiting the frightened child within” (para. 5), and therefore they usually occur in places, which fill the reader with feelings of uneasiness or dread. The location is often an isolated building (an old house, hospital, a castle), or a place that the character can easily get lost in and that can evoke the feeling of imprisonment, for example the woods or a maze. Another popular setting is that of a graveyard or any other place that is somehow related to the notion of death as these are the locations where monsters of any kind often appear.

Another important aspect, when it comes to choosing the perfect setting, is the time of the day when the story occurs. Horror authors often choose the night for their stories for the sole reason that many people in the world fear the dark even in adulthood as it is well known for the evils that lurk within. To increase the reader’s tension, the night is often the kind full of absolute darkness, such as a clouded sky without the moon, or the only source of light (e.g. a candle) being extinguished by the rain or the incoming storm. (Ruben, 2019)

To summarize, choosing the right place and the time of the day can help set the author the perfect atmosphere for their story and can lead to even further unnerving on the side of the reader. We can therefore conclude that the setting, as well as the atmosphere, plays an important role in horror literature as well (Ruben, 2019).

## **MONSTER**

In fiction, there are many types of monsters, which appear not only in horror literature but in other genres as well. For example, monstrous beings appear in sci-fi stories and even in fairy tales. According to Carrol (1990), what distinguishes a “horror monster” from the other types is the reaction and attitude the character has towards it. “In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order.” (p. 16). He then proceeds to describe these monsters as highly dangerous and associates them with the notions of fear, disgust or repulsion. Finally, Carrol (1990) describes the characteristics, which according to him, should be typical for any type of monster in horror fiction. It should always be threatening to the characters and most importantly impure, meaning it is unnatural and not generally accepted. He further elaborates on this

topic by dividing impureness into several categories such as fusion (a body built from different materials or parts), magnification (enlargement) or fission (shapeshifting) for example (pp. 43, 48, 52).

Even if monsters in scary stories can be of supernatural origin (vampires, ghosts, werewolves), there are other, more thought-provoking monstrous beings as well - human characters. The only difference between these characters and the people reading these stories is the fact that the fictional beings are quite often associated with evil-doing, such as murder, robberies or kidnappings. These types of characters can be associated with the title of a monster as well, and perhaps, although they are not of supernatural origin, can be described as more terrifying of the two types, because unlike the unnatural and fictional monsters, these are the ones the readers can encounter in real life.

## **PLOT**

In his work, Carroll (1990) mentions the importance of the structure of a horror story and he namely works with so-called “plotting”. According to the literary critic, horror literature usually follows one of the two types of plots.

The first one he calls the Complex Discovery Plot. Here the main idea is the discovery of something new or unknown to the protagonist. When creating a story with this type of plot, the author almost always follows the same steps: first, a horrific event unfolds, then the protagonist discovers what has transpired, afterward the character confirms the situation, and lastly a confrontation between the monster and the protagonist occurs, which leads to either his victory or defeat. The aforementioned steps must be followed in this order, though some of them can be omitted from the story. For this reason, the critic even more closely defines two subcategories of this plot. The Discovery Plot, where there is no confirmation on the side of the protagonist, and the Confirmation plot, where the part of confrontation is purposely omitted (Carroll, 1990, pp. 99-115).

The second type of plot often used by horror authors is called the Over-Reacher Plot. Carroll (1990) defines its theme in one simple sentence: “There is some knowledge better left to the gods.” (p. 118). It is a story based on uncovering forbidden knowledge, often by a mad scientist. Here, the steps are as follows: first, the scientist prepares his experiment, second, the experiment is conducted and lastly, the experiment fails and confrontation follows.

Though Carroll (1990) defines the plots as separate, he also claims that they can be freely intertwined and that the options are limitless.

## **TROPES**

As stated in the article titled *Trope* in the Literary Terms (2022) website, “the word trope can refer to any type of figure of speech, theme, image, character, or plot element that is used many times in literary work.” (para.1)

According to the writer Robert Lee Brewer (2022), tropes are an important part of any horror story as they “help set expectations and start building suspense for the reader” (para. 1). There are many kinds of tropes that have been frequently used by horror writers in their stories, even to the point that some of them have become overused and cliché, though this does not necessarily mean the story is of lesser quality. On the contrary, Brewer claims that readers always expect at least one of the popular tropes to be incorporated into the story as it makes the story more fun for them. In his article, he lists exactly twenty-one most popular tropes among the writers, including well-known ones such as the abandoned place, nightmares, splitting up, no communication between the characters, surly weather, unresolved endings or the so-called “one-last scare”, a final plot twist that none of the reader’s expected (Brewer, 2022).

Characteristic of horror literature is also the jumpscare, which could be considered a trope of its own. Widely popular among horror writers, jumpscare are supposed to scare the reader when they least expect it, they are supposed to make their heart beat quicker and jolt them awake. They often come in the form of an unexpected attack on the characters or a sudden appearance and they most importantly make the story seem more thrilling. On a similar note, cliffhangers play an important part in horror stories as well. They make the reader feel on edge and make them want to know what happens next (Saricks, 2001, pp. 116-117). It does not matter whether it appears at the end of a chapter or the end of the book, the cliffhanger is a great tool for enticing the readers and keeping them on their toes the whole time.

### **3. COMPARISON OF THE ADAPTATIONS AND ORIGINAL WORKS**

The following part of this thesis will focus on the introduction of the original versions of selected urban legends and the analysis of their two different adaptations by either Alvin Schwartz or the various authors of *The Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard* series, mainly by Mark Mills. The analysis will mostly be conducted based on the points from the second chapter and the observations of the author of this thesis.

#### **3.1. THE HOOK**

According to the *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2012), the original story of "The Hook" was supposedly first heard in the Republic of South Africa, namely in the Bloemfontein region. The urban legend specifically took place on Naval Hill, which is nowadays known for its statue of Nelson Mandela which can be found at the top. According to the local residents, Naval Hill was a place often visited by young couples as the top of the hill provided their outings with not only a great parking spot and a beautiful view but privacy as well. The myth itself tells the story of a young boy and girl, who are having a romantic date at the mentioned hill. The car radio is on and the mood is great when suddenly the music stops and is interrupted by an announcer warning the residents about an escaped patient from a mental hospital, which is near the area of Naval Hill. The most prominent is the hook attached to one of his hands, which labels him as highly dangerous. After the announcement ends, the girl becomes terrified and asks the boy to take her home, but he refuses. The boy continues his romantic advances but the young woman stops him and turns off the radio claiming she has heard a weird sound outside. A while later there is the sound of scratching on the door. The girl insists they leave and angry, the boy complies. When they finally arrive home, the boy goes to open the car door for his date only to faint right as he gets near. On the door there is a big scratch mark and, on the handle, hanging a bloody hook.

This myth has always been popular among American high schoolers, dating back as far as the 1950s. Over the years, numerous adaptations have been created and collected by folklorists, scholars or even the high schoolers themselves. Some folklorists interpreted the story as a warning for children/young adults or as a tale with many hidden meanings and symbolic references. One scholar even tried to compare more than 70 documented versions of the story in search of the typical or standard version of "The Hook."

She discovered that none of the adaptations are in any way typical as the only standard that the adaptations hold is the high variability of the story itself (pp. 303-307).

### **THE SCARY STORIES ADAPTATION**

Schwartz's version of the story of "The Hook" is included in the first book of the *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (1981) series and is placed in the "Other Dangers" subsection. This part of the book focuses on the dangers that people encounter in their daily lives and on the stories, which are of a more modern origin.

The main protagonists of "The Hook" are a young couple named Donald and Sarah, who decide to park their car at the top of the hill after a nice date in the movies. Just like in the original tale, a radio is playing some music when it is suddenly interrupted by an announcer warning people about an escaped murderer from a nearby state prison. And with this part, the story begins to differ slightly. The escaped convict is not only missing his left hand and has a hook attached to it but is also supposed to be in possession of a knife, which classifies him as highly dangerous. After the announcement ends, Sarah suggests they lock their car and Donald complies, though, much like in the original version, when the girl later suggests they should head home, scared that the prisoner might break the window of the car and get in, the boy only gets angry. He does comply in the end, when Sarah claims she has heard a weird sound outside their car, and the story ends in the same way as the original version, with the boy going to open his date's car door only to find a hook attached to the vehicle's handle.

As most of the stories in this series, "The Hook" is quite short length-wise, being only a page and a half long. An illustration of a bloody and rusty hook placed at the beginning of the story slightly foreshadows the events that are about to unfold and perhaps helps create a sense of dread in some of the readers, though strangely, in the story there is no mention of the hook being covered in blood or rust as it is simply described as being "a hook". Though the author named his protagonists, perhaps to make them feel real, there is no real depth to their characters as there is no background information included about any of them. The setting of the story is described quite curtly with only a single sentence about the hill being located at the edge of the town and the characters being able to see "the lights up and down the valley." (Schwartz, 1981, p. 62) Afterward, Schwartz only mentions that the event takes place at ten o'clock in the evening, implying it is already dark outside. The monster in this story is the escaped convict, who fills the protagonists with fear, even though they



never exactly see him in the story and only encounter him indirectly. According to Carroll's criteria, the monster of this tale can be considered a fusion, since one of the man's hands is replaced by a different material – a hook possibly created from metal – which is highly unnatural. As for the plot, it follows Carroll's idea of the more specific Diversity plot, as some of the steps such as confirmation or confrontation are omitted. There are only a few important tropes used in the story such as the idea of an abandoned place (the hill), the event happening at night, one of the characters ignoring the warnings of another and hearing weird noises outside. Lastly, the story is ended on small a cliffhanger as the reader does not know whether the dangerous man was still nearby or if he was caught in the end. The rest of the story is simply left up to the reader's imagination.

### **THE SCARIEST STORIES ADAPTATION**

Unlike the other adaptation of "The Hook", this version of the story is slightly longer being four and a half pages long as the author Mark Mills (1988) presents the myth with more depth. The protagonists are (as in the other versions) a young boy, Jimmie Morrow and a girl called Suzanne. We learn that they are both still in high school and possibly in the last grade as they start planning for their upcoming prom dance as well as the fact that Jimmie is quite popular in the school as he is the captain of the basketball team. The protagonists even use nicknames for each other, giving us more insight into their relationship. Mills also profusely uses various negative word types to describe the state and emotions of his characters, for example: scarcely breathing, huddled in misery, overpowering uneasiness, voice with a note of panic (Mills, 1988, pp. 7-10). With all of these added details, the characters feel quite relatable to the reader and the story seems more realistic as well.

The author describes the setting of the story in depth as he mentions even the warm temperature or a breeze lightly blowing. Though the story starts with the couple leaving the movies and driving to their favourite spot, Mills changes some parts of the story from the other two versions right at the beginning. The couple does not drive up a hill but instead stops by their favourite lake in the woods, where the scenery is described as quite peaceful with "the moon shimmering on the lake, and a line of ducks floating by." (Mills, 1988, p. 7) The rest of the story quite closely follows Schwartz's adaptation with only some minor changes such as that in this version, the girl senses that something is wrong long before the radio announcement plays based on the fact that the animals have suddenly gone quiet. The characters argue for a while before the boy decides to drive them home. When they finally arrive after fifteen long minutes, the girl gets out of the car and (unlike

in the other version) starts screaming as she is the one to discover the bloody hook on the handle of the car.

The monster is once again a man with a hook on his right hand, which is once again a minor change to the story. And though he is an escaped criminal, his character is given more depth as well, since he has fled from a mental asylum for the criminally insane and that he supposedly lost his hand in a train accident.

The type of plot in this version is the same as in the first adaptation. The tropes are similar as well with the addition of a sudden unexplainable strange feeling, getting the chills and the bright moonlight as the only source of light.

## **COMPARISON**

Based on the two comparisons above, we can conclude that Mills' version of "The Hook" has more depth to it due to the numerous added details to the story such as the all of characters having their own backstories, displaying various emotions (not only fear) or mentions of other events, past or future, that somehow impact the characters' lives. Mills also does not hesitate to use numerous tropes or negative word types in his writing, which in turn helps him create the perfect horror atmosphere for his stories.

Unlike Schwartz who closely follows the original myth and leaves it mostly unchanged, Mills takes some of the aspects of the story (such as the scenery, place of the event and even slightly the ending) and makes it more original and compelling all the while without changing the core of the tale. Needless to say, the similarities between the two versions are still more prominent than the differences.

### **3.2. THE BABYSITTER**

As stated in the *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2012), the story of "The Babysitter" first gained popularity in the 1970s, especially among teenagers, who regularly looked after children to gain some form of income. The legend became widely popular to the point that a horror movie was created with the same premise. The story itself follows a young girl, who babysits several children. During the evening, a strange man calls her several times and asks if she has checked on the children lately. This call is repeated several times and the man even threatens her. The girl cannot stand the pressure anymore and calls the police, where the operator tells her to keep the man on the line for as long as possible when the next call comes. The girl complies and the operator manages to find the perpetrator. He immediately calls the girl and urges her to run away from the house, as the strange man

is calling from the room above her. After the girl runs away, the police arrive, only to find that the children are already dead and the attacker is still in the same room upstairs, getting ready to murder his next victim – the young babysitter.

Though the premise of the story is almost always the same, several variations have been created over the last fifty years. One university student thought of a version in which the killer is one of the looked-after children, who in the end murders the babysitter. Another version by two teachers plays with the idea of there being two phones in the house, and the intruder does not call from the one that is located above the children and the young girl, but from the phone which is in the room downstairs, right next to them, which makes the story seem even more terrifying (Brunvan, 2012, pp. 46-48).

### **THE SCARY STORIES ADAPTATION**

In the first book, “The Babysitter” legend is included in the subsection “Other Dangers” much like the previous story of “The Hook” as it deals with realistic dangers as well.

The main characters of the story are a young babysitter called Doreen, and the three children she is taking care of for the night – namely Richard, Brian and Jenny. The first call happens at nine o’clock in the evening while they are watching television together. The only sound that can be heard is hysterical laughter of a strange man. Thinking it was simply someone playing a prank on them, the girl returns to the children and continues watching the movie. Exactly thirty minutes later the phone rings again and the man warns the girl about his soon arrival. Ignoring the threat, the babysitter resumes her prior activities once again. Then, half an hour later the man calls again and Jenny, one of the children, answers the phone and gets terrified as the man claims they have only one hour left. After another similar call, Doreen finally calls the operator who tells her that she will try to trace the next call. The story ends with the operator telling Doreen to take the children and leave the house as the calls have been coming from upstairs the house. Up to this point, the story is almost identical to its original version. The only difference between these two versions is the actual ending as at the same moment of the call with the operator, the man comes out of the room and attacks the children, though they all manage to get away safely (along with the babysitter) in the end and the intruder gets arrested by the police.

“The Babysitter” is a short story of only one page and a half and is accompanied by the illustration of a little boy holding a baby/doll with a creepy face and with a phone

placed right next to him. The protagonists are – as mentioned in the upper section – three children and a babysitter. Once again, there are no additional details added to these characters as we do not learn of their separate ages or even visual appearances, though we do learn that they have a mother. The setting of the story takes place in a two-story house, which is a fact we learn at the end, and we only further learn of the time that passes in the story. The man, an intruder in this case, is clearly the monster in this story as he deliberately threatens the group of children and even tries to attack them towards the end. His only prominent feature is the fact that he maniacally laughs or smiles strangely whenever someone interacts with him. There is no explanation for his actions or how he hid in the house. Plot-wise the story is the typical example of the Discovery Plot once again due to the omission of several given steps. The typical few tropes that Schwartz includes in his version are: the event happening at night, no adult figure nearby and a possibly insane antagonist.

#### **THE SCARIEST STORIES ADAPTATION**

This adaptation of the story is once again created by Mark Mills and is considerably longer than Schwartz's version, as it is eight pages long.

The main protagonist is a girl named Jennifer, who is still attending school, which we learn from the fact that she tries to do her homework once the children are asleep. She is also portrayed as smart and cautious as when the man on the phone first threatens her, she calls the operator right away without waiting for anything else to happen. The other characters are the two children she is looking after, the five-year-old well-mannered Abbey and the nine-year-old Andy, who seems quite interested in modern technologies and comic books. At the beginning of the story, we also learn that the children's mother is quite caring and responsible as she tells Jennifer about a note that she left for her on the fridge and repeats everything the girl might need to know once again before she leaves. Lastly, we also learn about their father, who is a doctor at a nearby hospital and who has his laboratory with blood samples in the house where he conducts experiments.

The setting of this adaptation is the same as in the other two versions with only some slight differences and abundantly added details. The events unfold in a renovated three-story mansion, which is described as spacious with an office and a library on the third floor and a private laboratory in the basement as well as other typical rooms like a kitchen, living room and several bedrooms. Andy's bedroom especially is described in detail with there

being “all kinds of electronic gear – a tape deck with a stereo, a computer and a keyboard and several other pieces of equipment Jennifer did not recognize”. (Mills, 1988, p. 38). Most of the story actually happens in the kitchen where the family phone is located and where the grandfather clock chimes as time passes, which informs us that the calls happen from nine o’clock to eleven o’clock in the evening.

The monster is once again an unknown man on the other side of the phone, who calls the babysitter several times throughout the evening. He only heavily breathes into the phone at first to unsettle the young girl and starts speaking only after the third call, when he informs her that he is coming to get her/kill her. We do not learn much more about this character and the truth about his identity is discovered at the very end of the story.

The plot of the story is once again the Discovery type and the tropes used in this version are the same as in the previous adaptation with the addition of a big plot twist and a cliff-hanger at the end that greatly differentiates Mills’ version from the other ones. Most of the story stays true to the original legend but starts to differ when the operator calls the police and tells the babysitter to wake up the children and run with them outside. Jennifer takes hold of the woken-up Abbey but when she gets to Andy’s room, she discovers the boy is gone and that on his bed there is only a pool of blood - and thus she has to flee without him. The police search the house moments later and they manage to find Andy in his father’s office. His hands are bloody, but he is unharmed otherwise. Next to him is an electronic voice-changer and a phone, and on the desk lay an empty blood bag. The boy greets the policemen with a sly grin: “I really scared her, huh?” (Mills, 1988, p. 43). The story itself ends on a small cliff-hanger as even though we do learn who the culprit is, we can only wonder about the boys’ motivations and punishments – was he simply playing a prank or was he somehow mentally unstable? Will he get punished for the events that have transpired? The plot twist brings many questions to the reader’s mind and is a very original and unnerving interpretation of the story.

## **COMPARISON**

To summarize, Mills’ version of the story is the one that differentiates the most from the original source/Schwartz’s adaptation out of the three tales included in this thesis due to the unexpected ending and the unforeseen change in the monster depiction.

As in all the other stories, there is once again the added depth to the characters and their surroundings in Mills’ version, which at least partly includes their backstories or interests

and depicts the family relationship dynamic. Throughout the story, there are a few hints (such as the detail in which Andy's room is described), which can help the reader decipher what might be happening at the end. Otherwise, the story itself stays true to the original tale in both Schwartz's and Mills' adaptations with only minor details changing.

### **3.3. THE GRAVEYARD WAGER**

The tale of "The Graveyard Wager" is considered a traditional European folktale among the folklorists as it dates back as far as the Middle Ages and continues to be popular even today. According to the *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2012), the most recent versions tell the story of a young teenage girl who invites her group of friends for a sleepover at her house, which is coincidentally located near a graveyard. The girls spend the evening talking about their problems or playing games and once it is midnight, they decide to start scaring each other by telling ghost stories. A while after, a bet arises about one of the girls proving her courage by going to the graveyard alone and leaving behind proof of her presence in the form of a knife stuck to the ground. Most often, the protagonist's parents are not at home, so this proves to be an easy feat. Once at the graveyard, the girl quickly plunges the knife into the soil near a grave and tries to quickly run back home, but she learns she is unable to move as there is a force pulling her back, in her mind a ghost. She is found dead by her friends and family the next day, a knife piercing her sleeping garments and being stuck to the ground. There were never any supernatural forces, the girl has died of fright, supposedly of a heart attack.

This version of the story has become especially popular in the United States of America and the British Isles and is often told as a ghost story at teenage sleepover parties. Though the premise and setting of the story stays the same, the oldest preserved versions unsurprisingly slightly differ from the modern tales we know of today, especially in the manner of the protagonist. While the stories from the Middle Ages frequently tell of a male soldier with a long cloak who uses a sword for the bet, some Swedish adaptations tell of a farmer that hammers a nail into a coffin instead. Many other variations include the usage of a pitchfork, wooden stake or even an axe.

### **THE SCARY STORIES ADAPTATION**

"The Girl Who Stood on a Grave" is Schwartz's alternative title of "The Graveyard Wager" legend and like the other two stories mentioned in this work, it is also included in the first book of the Scary Stories series. This particular tale is once again only a page and a half long and is part of the third section of the book titled,

“They Eat Your Eyes, They Eat Your Nose”, which tells of “scary stories about all kinds of things. The ones told here are about a grave, a witch, a man who liked to swim, a hunting trip, and a market basket. There also is one about worms eating a corpse—your corpse.” (Schwartz, 1981, p. 37). Unlike all the other sections of the book, this section is the only one without a particular motif (e.g., ghosts, real-life dangers, etc.). At the end of the story, a slightly blurred illustration of a screaming girl in a dark dress can be found. She is surrounded by branches and blurry figures that at first glance seem to resemble ghosts, though if we take the setting of the story into account, then they are most likely supposed to be graves.

Schwartz’s adaptation of the story only differs slightly from the original versions of the folktale, the only difference being the protagonist. Unlike in the older versions, where the main character was mostly male, in this adaptation the author chose to work with a female heroine instead. To summarize, at a party a boy talks about how one should never stand on a grave at night as the person would get pulled under by the corpse. A girl claims it is only a superstition and that the graveyard is not that scary. And so, the boy bets the girl to go stand on a grave at night and plunge a knife in it so that he knows she was there. She accepts and does the deed as she was supposed to, but when she tries to leave, she cannot and is immensely terrified. A while later, the boy and his group find her dead, her dress has gotten caught in the knife and thinking it was a ghost, she had died of fright just like in the original versions of the tale.

As is the norm in Schwartz’s writing, the characters in this story are nameless and there are no further descriptions of their looks or personalities, with the slight exception of the main heroine, who at first pretends to be fearless as she accepts the bet from a boy, and who once at the graveyard seems to be losing her cool composure as she is described as “being scared anyway despite telling herself there is nothing to be scared of” (Schwartz, 1981, p. 41).

The setting is only shortly described by the author as there is a mention of a party being held, which both the girl and the boy are attending, and later a graveyard, which the main protagonist marks as “being filled with shadows and as quiet as death.” (Schwartz, 1981, p. 41). The time when the event occurs is only mentioned as being at night.

Defining the monster in this story is quite a daunting task as it mostly depends on the point of view the reader decides to see the story in. One could claim that the main

“villain” of the story is the fear of the girl herself, which caused her to die. On the other hand, according to Carroll’s criteria, the monster could have been of supernatural origin, as the girl did truly believe that a corpse or a ghost was trying to pull her underground. And lastly, the boy who started the bet and scared the girl with the superstition could be considered the antagonist of the story as well, though this take on the story can be debatable.

In terms of the plot, we can classify it as a Complex Discovery Plot, as a terrifying event unfolds, the protagonist discovers it (though she does not unravel the truth) and a confrontation takes place (the girl tries to run away, screams for help) all at once, possibly in the span of a few seconds.

And last but not least, the tropes Schwartz used in his story are that of the isolated place (graveyard), the main protagonist being alone, the event occurring at night and all of it being triggered by a bet.

#### **THE SCARIEST STORIES ADAPTATION**

“Never Walk There at Night” is the second story in the Scariest Stories You’ve Ever Heard series by Mark Mills and it is the adaptation of “The Graveyard Wager” story, though in terms of similarity, it is closer to Schwartz’s “The Girl Who Stood on a Grave” as it also works with the modern setting of the tale. Mills’ version is only slightly longer than the other mentioned adaptation as it is three pages long, which makes it the shortest story in the whole book. The premise of the story is almost identical to Schwartz’s version with there being more depth to the characters and setting once again.

The protagonist is a young girl called Diane, who is having a group sleepover at her friend Annie’s house, which is located only a block away from a graveyard. After it gets dark, the girls start telling each other scary stories. Annie mentions her grandmother’s warning not to go to a graveyard at night and not to step on graves. Diane, trying to sound brave, calls it an old wives’ tale. The girls then proceed to tease her relentlessly about being a scaredy cat until she agrees to go to the graveyard and stick a letter opener to the ground. The rest of the story is the same as in the other adaptation, in the end, Diane dies of fright.

The author plays with the atmosphere of the story quite often, for example by describing how the girls grew quiet and turned down the light while they were telling ghost stories or by implying that the trees full of leaves in front of Annie’s house blocked the view to the graveyard which was otherwise clear to see from her bedroom. This



is supposed to fill the readers with an uneasy feeling that while Diane goes alone to the graveyard, there will be no one to help her if anything were to happen. The setting itself changes from a two-story house full of laughter to an eerie graveyard where only “the rustling of leaves could be heard as clouds passed in the sky, causing the moon shadows to dance on the tombstones.” (Mills, 1988, p. 14). The whole story unfolds at midnight and the night is described as being warm and windy, hence why Diane wishes she had worn more clothes instead of only a nightdress. The author also adds a small detail as to why it is windy in the story, which proves to be quite chilling. When the girl’s dress gets stuck on the grave, she screams out of terror and “normally, her scream would have been heard at the house a block away but the wind carried it off into the night.” (Mills, 1988, pp. 14-15)

As mentioned in the prior adaptation, the monster in this story stays the same. It can once again be considered either the fear, the supposed ghost/corpse or even the girls who taunted Diane to the point she felt like she had no other choice but to go.

The plot is of the Complex Discovery type as in Schwartz’s adaptation as the versions do not differ in terms of the plot itself.

And finally, the tropes used in this story are that of the abandoned place, the protagonist being alone, a sleepover party and ghost storytelling, a bet, the event happening at midnight and cloudy weather with only the moon as a source of light (casting shadows).

## **COMPARISON**

Both Schwartz’s and Mills’ versions of this tale are almost identical to the original story and each other, even in their length, which is quite uncommon. Only the setting and the initiator of the bet differ slightly, but none of these aspects change the story drastically. Once again, Mills’ adaptation can be considered as the one with more depth and with more realistic characters. The setting is described in detail and the author emphasizes on the usage of tropes and atmosphere of the story. Other than these points, the story does not differ.

#### 4. THE CONTROVERSY

The controversy surrounding *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* first surfaced at the beginning of the 1990s in the United States of America, more precisely in the city of Kirkland, Washington. Despite the first book of the series having been published in 1981, the concerns over Schwartz's most famous work appeared much later - in 1991, the year the last book of the Scary Stories series was published (DeLuca, 2021).

The same year in November, copies of the Scary Stories books were taken from the John Muir Elementary School library (Kirkland) by Nancy Allen - a concerned mother of a younger child, in whose possession she had found the books. Supposedly appalled, she reached out to Sandy Vanderburg, the president of the Parent Teacher Student Association at the time, and together they petitioned for the books to be banned from the school's library. The petition itself gained the support of over seventy parents and teachers from the city and a meeting was held to vote about the series' removal. Vanderburg even appeared on *Good Morning America*, trying to gain more support for the protest. Afterward, the effort to ban the books became widely known across the country and many parents supported the idea, which led to more people attempting to get the series banned across the US. Schwartz was considered by many to have no morals and his work began to be labelled with words such as "devil, occult or satanism" and adults believed the books would turn children to be more violent. The story, which caused the adults to worry the most, is included in the second book of the series *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and is titled "The Wonderful Sausage". To summarize, a butcher murders his wife and grinds her meat into a sausage, which he then sells to other people. Due to this story, some people even began to compare the author to the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who was known for deeply disturbing murders and cannibalism, and who was arrested the same year the final book was published (Blades & Writer, 2021). Vanderburg even claimed that: "This is adding fuel to the fire, giving kids ideas of what to do to frighten other kids. There is so much violence in them." (DeLuca, 2021)

All of these events led to Schwartz's trilogy gradually becoming the most challenged books of the 1990s and later, according to the *American Association Library*, one of the most challenged children's books of all time (ALA, 2020).

The controversy itself was centred not only around the stories themselves but the illustrations as well, which were created by Stephen Gammell, an unknown artist

at the time, who mostly became famous through the books and obtained an award for his artistic skills in 1989. He was known for being able to precisely capture the essence of horror with his illustrations and that may be why the pictures in the books were considered disturbing by many parents as they featured highly detailed distorted human and animal figures, rotting corpses and other similar images.

In addition to the graphic nature of the illustrations, some have also condemned the book for being culturally insensitive. The book features stories and characters from various cultures and backgrounds, but some have argued that these stories are presented in a way that is disrespectful or stereotypical. Therefore, many parents and educators criticized the book for being too frightening and graphic as well as unsuitable for younger readers (DeLuca, 2021).

Potential examples of this argument regarding cultural appropriation in Schwartz's work can be found in his two short stories about "The Wendigo", a legend of Native American origin, and "The Drum", which are both contained in the first book of the Scary Stories series. Especially in the latter, the young gypsy girl is depicted purely as an antagonist with great emphasis put on stereotypical features that are commonly associated with the gypsies. In reality, they have always been portrayed as groups of people that are able to hurt others with curses and that live a nomadic type of life, i.e. we can meet them outside of civilization (in a forest, in a meadow, on a river bank), which is the same depiction used in the book as well. Additionally, in many stories there is a stereotypical black-and-white description of criminals, which may or may not have a good effect on children. Because of this depiction, which is also typical of fairy tales, children learn to avoid potentially dangerous people and the basics of moral principles. On the other hand, the criminals in these stories are portrayed grotesquely and rather than as people, children perceive them as monsters, which can raise certain ethical questions. For example, if children were to take away from the story "The Hook" the belief that people who are missing a limb are evil and thus criminals, it would give them a wrong view of physically disabled people, whom they would then negatively judge at first glance. Which is the exact opposite of what literature should try to explain to children as it should teach them that not everyone is the same in terms of cultural background or body proportions.

Later in 1993, despite there being hundreds of people who were against the books being included in the Children's Sections of libraries, there were still many others who refused to conform to the protester's wishes, one of them being the principal of the John

Muir Elementary School, who along with the support of the school librarian, was unwilling to compromise about the matter according to Vanderburg. Other academic figures and teachers also supported the principal's stance on the matter and Betsy Hearne, the editor of the academic journal *The Bulletin of the Centre for Children's Books*, claimed that suppressing the children's fears was unhealthy and that it would only make them more terrified of things around them (DeLuca, 2021). Afterwards, the controversy slowly seemed to end and therefore, the book was never banned at the school despite numerous tries. Though, the same cannot be said about every school and library in the US. According to the Banned Library site, the books gained restricted access in some Arizona schools and were repeatedly removed after 2007 from several Vancouver elementary school libraries for being too violent (Banned Library, 2018). In 2018, the second book of the series was removed from a Texas Elementary School and the decision about its return to the library shelves is still unclear (Marshall Libraries, 2022).

Nowadays, Schwartz's Scary Stories series do not cause as much of a turmoil as they did decades ago. Due to popular demand of the books and in response to past criticism, the publisher has released a new version of the book with less graphic illustrations by Brett Helquist, which as some argue, have toned down the horror of the stories (Woerner, 2015), (Miller, 2019). Despite the publisher taking this action however, there are still supposedly some parents that do find the books inappropriate for their children from time to time according to Pat Scales, a journalist for the School Library Journal website. In her article "Parental Demands and Accusations", she advises various librarians about their concerns. One of them being parents that complain to librarians about the books because they did not include a trigger warning and that they caused 12-year-old children to have nightmares, which is similar to what used to often happen in the 1990s. Scales (2018) claims that librarians are not in the library to overlook and control the children about which books they borrow, especially in the children's section, and that it is the parents' job to inquire about what their children are reading and to talk about it with them if they deem the book inappropriate. She also adds a point about the trigger warnings and the fact that: "...such warnings label books and are a form of censorship." (para. 3)

Such label could perhaps be of use to some extent but it would also prevent children from exploring various genres or topics and prevent them from experiencing fear and horror stories healthily and comfortably. (Blades & Writer, 2021)

In addition, over the past 30 years, many have argued that the controversy is unfounded, as children have been enjoying horror stories and other similar works for generations without such books being challenged by the public. As such, Schwartz's books have been praised for encouraging children to read more and some readers claim that the graphic illustrations are simply a reflection of the horror genre and are therefore not unsuitable for children, but rather serve as a means to spark their imagination while also supporting their development in creativity and arts. (Nelson, 2022)

To support this claim and argument, I have compared Schwartz's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* with similar work by the name of *Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard* by A. Mills, which are both further analysed in Chapter 3 of this work. Based on the comparison and the short summaries of the stories in the aforementioned part of this thesis, I have concluded that Mills' versions of the stories contain more horror elements and depth than Schwartz's versions do, which according to the parents and teachers' arguments, would prove to be several times more unsuitable for children. But despite both of the series being published in the early 1990s, only *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* were considered inappropriate and controversial. The reason for Mills' Scariest Stories series not suffering the same fate may have been due to a lesser popularity of his work, which may have been partly due to Schwartz's controversy taking the spotlight. Furthermore, we can base the popularity claim on the small number of reviews on the Good Reads site as well. While to this day, Mills' work only counts 111 ratings and 13 reviews, Schwartz's work has accumulated over 64 thousand ratings and 3500 reviews (GoodReads, 2023). To further prove this point, the author of this work wanted to include and compare the sales data of both book series, but due to the unavailability of the data to the general public, it proved the need for further complex research, which would be impossible at this moment in time and is beyond the scope of this work.

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the thesis, we have defined the genre of horror and discovered its long and rich history that spans across cultures and literature. From its origin in ancient oral traditions to its prevalence in modern-day literature, horror stories have captivated audiences of all ages. However, in today's society, the sensitivity of certain topics and motifs has led to the challenging and banning of many books, particularly those aimed at young readers.

One of the aims of this thesis was to explore the genre of horror and its subgenres and to examine its defining characteristic elements such as typical protagonist, setting or types of plot, which are included in Chapter 2 of this thesis. This later served as a basis for the analysis and comparison of the main focus of this work, more precisely the Scary Story series by Alvin Schwartz and *Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard* by Mark Mills. In selected short stories by these two authors, we have presented their similarities and differences in terms of occurrence of characteristic horror elements, and at the same time we have compared them with traceable original versions of these stories, whether they were of folklore origin or considered a modern urban legend. This analysis formed the main part of this work and is included in Chapter 3. Furthermore, to analyse the controversy surrounding A. Schwarz's books, we first focused on both his life and work in Chapter 1. We discovered that he was one of the most prominent figures in children's horror literature. Despite the popularity of his aforementioned series, it has still faced numerous challenges and accusations of being unsuitable for children. The final aim of this thesis was to further examine the controversy surrounding his work and to determine whether the accusations were justified compared to similar works such as Mark Mills' *Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard*, which have not faced the same level of hostility despite their similarity. We can therefore proclaim that all of the aims have been achieved as through a detailed analysis and comparison of the selected stories from both series, we have discovered that Mill's work contains characteristic horror elements, which are written and shown more thoroughly than in Schwartz's works and are noticeably more frequent in terms of occurrence in his stories. Therefore, according to the logic of the parents and teachers who started and supported the controversy, Mills' work should have been challenged as well. In fact, it was not met with the same reaction and outrage at all, though we can only speculate about the reason. The uninterest of people in Mills' work could have been due to the books' low sales or their minimal popularity among young readers.

Unfortunately, due to the unavailability of data from both bookstores and libraries (as they are only accessible by the people working in this branch of work), we can only theorize about the reasons themselves.

In conclusion, from the point of view of this thesis, the controversy was unfounded, because while the protestors decided to try and only ban Schwartz's series, they neglected to look at other, from their point of view perhaps even more horrifying, stories. Therefore, if according to their logic, Schwartz's stories were supposed to be banned or removed from school libraries, all other similar works should have been treated the same, which in the end did not happen. And this only proves that while sometimes terrifying for children, horror stories do not in any way damage their mental health and are an important part of literature that helps children deal with concepts not typically found even in fairy tales, and are rightfully part of our children's sections in school libraries and bookstores; which is also the opinion the author of this thesis shares.

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## SUMMARY IN CZECH

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem slavné dětské knižní série *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* od Alvina Schwartze a dále přibližuje čtenáři žánr hororu. Skládá se ze čtyř hlavních částí, kdy první představuje autora, další díla a jeho přínos dětské literatuře. Druhá část nejprve definuje samotný hororový žánr, představuje jeho stručnou historii a dále se věnuje jeho dělení na různé podžánry. Tato část také definuje a popisuje různé hororové prvky typické pro hororovou literaturu. Třetí část se zabývá analýzou tří stejných příběhů, které lze nalézt ve *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, i v sérii *Scariest Stories You've Ever Heard* od Marka Millse a dále také jejich srovnáním z pohledu vyskytujících se hororových prvků a celkové podobnosti. Čtvrtá část je věnována úvodu a vysvětlení kontroverze kolem zmíněné hororové série. Práce měla čtyři cíle. První, obsažen v první kapitole, měl čtenáře seznámit s významným dílem Alvina Schwarze a jeho osobou. Druhým cílem bylo definovat žánr hororu a popsat jeho charakteristické prvky, na což jsme se zaměřili v druhé kapitole. Posledními dvěma cíli bylo pomocí srovnání a analýzy několika příběhů určit, zda je kontroverze opodstatněná, vezmeme-li v úvahu jiného autora s podobnou tvorbou ze stejného časového období, jehož práce však nebyla nikdy nijak zpochybňována ani zakázána. Tyto cíle byly splněny a zahrnuty ve třetí a čtvrté kapitole.