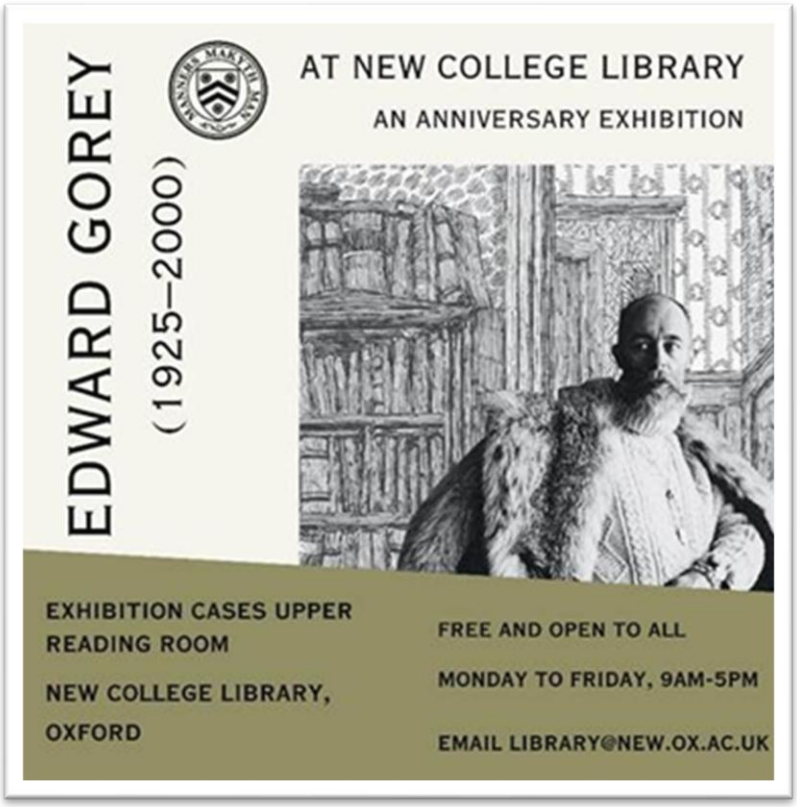
G is for Gorey: A Centennial Celebration of Edward Gorey and a Curious Collection at New College, Oxford

Edward Gorey—an artist who has prompted interest and fascination both in life and death—is experiencing a resurgence thanks to the many centenary celebrations taking place across the globe. The American illustrator is renowned for his inky drawings that are both humorous and unnerving, and 2025 marks 25 years since his death and his would-be 100th birthday. It therefore seemed only right that New College Library and Archives showcased its rich collection of Edward Gorey's works—kindly bequeathed to us by alumnus David Mann. This article aims to celebrate the centenary of Gorey by giving readers an insight into the life, art, and character of the polarising figure. By discussing select examples from the collection and highlighting the key themes explored in New College's exhibition this Note will demonstrate Gorey's enduring influence and his place within New College's diverse and remarkable collection.

In October 2025, a new exhibition in the Upper Reading Room of New College Library was installed showcasing the work of Edward Gorey. Through displaying a cache of his works, the exhibition commemorates the centenary of Gorey's birth whilst exploring the eccentric life, interests, and influences of one of the most influential American artists of the 20th century. The items in the exhibition provide a snapshot of Gorey's whimsical and mysterious world, promoting readers to celebrate the way Gorey would have wanted; 'I think there should be a little bit of uneasiness in everything, because I do think we're all really in a sense living on the edge'.[1]



This exhibition was made possible by the sheer number of Gorey-related material in the library's collection. The items shown in the exhibition are part of the Mann Collection, a remarkable collection bequeathed to the library in 2015 by New College alumnus and financier David Mann (1935–2012). David Mann was a bibliophile, philanthropist, and great supporter of New College. The Mann collection holds over 600 items, spanning the 17th to 21st centuries. Among this diverse collection are significant materials relating to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, the life of Marcel Proust (1871–1922), and the works of Edward Gorey.[2] The Edward Gorey collection at New College Library holds more than 100 of Gorey's books, many of which are

[1] Quote by Edward Gorey in his interview with Stephen Schiff: see Stephen Schiff, 'Edward Gorey and the Tao of Nonsense', in *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*. ed. Karen Wilkin (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 136–57, at p. 156.

[2] For information on other items in the Mann collection see Alexander Morrison, 'The Russo-Japanese War on the Shelves of New College Library', *New College Notes* 14 (2020) no. 7.

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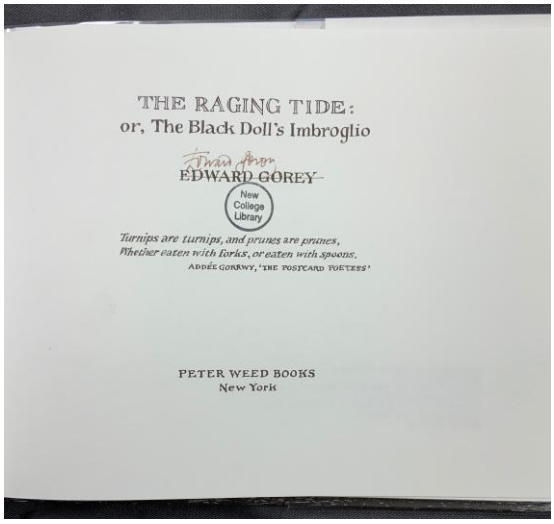
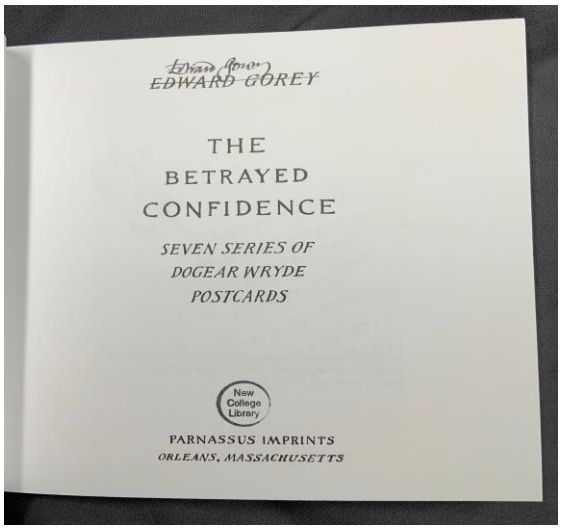
signed copies or first editions as well as extensive material relating to or written about the elusive illustrator.





Signed copies of *The Raging Tide: Or, The Black Doll's Imbroglio* and *The Betrayed Confidence: Seven Series of Dogear Wryde*
New College Library, Oxford, Mann300 and Mann304
These and following images © The Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

This year is undoubtably the year of Gorey—it is 100 years since his birth and 25 years since his death—but the illustrator has long been the subject of articles, discussions, and memoirs. As Mark Deary alludes to in the title of his new publication, it seems that the elusive and curious figure was born to be fascinating in his posthumous state.[3] Gorey has always inhabited a peculiar space in literature as from the early stages of his career he was labeled as 'an acquired taste' and has lately entered a category that is entirely his own.[4] In modern discourse, he has been hailed as a 'master of the macabre and brahmin of the bizarre'.[5] Centennial commemorations range from showcases of Gorey collections like the one at New College Library, to a new compendium of his work, *E Is for Edward*, which was released in October 2025 by The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.[6] New College is not the only academic institution with a collection of 'Goreyana'.[7] Harvard University is showcasing their collection until January 2026 in their Houghton Library with an immersive exhibition titled: *Edward Gorey The Gloomy Gallery*. The Library of Congress also has an remarkable collection of Gorey's work; some 800 items which were donated by a collector of Gorey.[8] Other institutions are also celebrating the year of Gorey as earlier in the year Texas A&M Cushing Memorial Library and Archives put on *The Ubiquitous Edward Gorey* exhibition and The Society of Illustrators opened a new exhibition, S*omething Else Entirely: The Illustration Art of Edward Gorey*. In addition to the exhibitions taking place there have been countless blog posts, magazine and newspaper articles, social media posts, and publications dedicated to Edward Gorey. Originally created in 1992, *Goreygraphy* is a graphic galleria and online space dedicated to Gorey, and he often

[3] Mark Dery, *Born to Be Posthumous: The Eccentric Life and Mysterious Genius of Edward Gorey* (London: William Collins, 2020).
[4] James Mellow, 'Edward Gorey: Had the Vapours Lately?', *The New York Times* (31 December 1972), D17 <www.nytimes.com/1972/12/31/archives/edward-gorey-had-the-vapours-lately.html>.
[5] Jan Hodenfield, 'And "G" Is for Gorey Who Here Tells His Story', in *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*, ed. Karen Wilkin, (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 2–5, at p. 3.
[6] More information on events surrounding Edward Gorey's centenary can be found on the Edward Gorey Charitable Trusts website: <https://shop.edwardgorey.org/pages/trust> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[7] 'Goreyana' is the title of a long-running blog, and a term used by collectors and fans to refer to the life and work of Edward Gorey: <https://goreyana.blogspot.com/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[8] See The Library of Congress blog for more information: <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2016/03/a-gorey-story/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

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appears as a topic of discussion in other blogs such as *Blog of Bosh* and the *Library of Congress Blogs*.[9] When placing this exhibition in New College Library we could not help but wonder what the eccentric man would think of the string of exhibitions, publications, and celebrations surrounding his 100th birthday. Ultimately, we do not know, but if his reclusive habits, deeply ironic remarks, and avoidance of fanfare are anything to go by, it is safe to assume that he would have shunned the attention.[10] So, who was Edward St John Gorey (1925–2000)?

Edward Gorey was a prolific author who wrote over 100 books and illustrated countless other works by fellow authors. Edward St John Gorey was born on 23 February 1925 in Chicago, and claims to have had an 'ordinary' childhood and was 'happier than I imagine'.[11] However, many would find the fact that he had taught himself to read by the age of three and had read *Dracula* and *Alice in Wonderland* by the age of five a far cry from ordinary.[12] His literary endeavors continued, as by age eight, he had read the complete works of Victor Hugo, and his fascination with the literary nonsense author Edward Lear had begun. Edward Gorey had a successful career as an illustrator and author as well as being a figure of much study, thanks to his unique personality and sense of humor that is reflected in his gothic, whimsical, and quirky illustrations. In recent years, many have speculated about his sexuality; Gorey never married nor had any notable love affairs. Throughout his life he was described as eccentric, and his appearance certainly played into this rhetoric—Gorey sported a floor-length fur coat, long scarves, blue jeans, and white sneakers.[13] Gorey's appearance has always prompted speculative comments, and this has continued with Gorey's most recent biographer Mark Dery claiming Gorey was obviously gay by virtue of his 'flamboyant dress' and 'bitchy wit'. However, as Gabrielle Bellot points out, Dery falls into the age-old trap of equating eccentricity with queerness.[14] It seems more fitting for Gorey to remain unclassifiable, as he would have wanted: 'I'm neither one thing nor the other particularly . . . What I am trying to say is that I am a person before I am anything else'.[15] Gorey was a man who sparked interest and created more questions than he answered; as close friend and journalist Alexander Theroux commented, Gorey was 'a completely complicated, conflicted person in thousands of ways, as all brilliant people are'.[16]

The Rise of Gorey's Reputation as 'The Granddaddy of Goth'[17] and the 'Master of the Macabre'?

Gorey claimed that he was always drawn to art, having inherited his talent from his great-grandmother, Helen St. John Garvey, a 19th-century greetings card illustrator.[18] Gorey began exploring art at as an avenue of escapism as early as 1944; like many other young Americans he

[9] These two blogs are useful for further study on Gorey: Goreyography: <https://www.goreyography.com/info/info.htm>; Blog of Bosh: <https://nonsenselit.com/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[10] Gregory Hischak, curator of The Edward Gorey House, commented on Gorey's private nature in an interview with the BBC: 'he didn't like having himself displayed like that. He was a very private person'. Cath Pound, 'The mysterious, macabre mind of Edward Gorey,' *BBC Culture* (21 November 2018): <www.bbc.co.uk/culture/article/20181121-a-new-biography-looks-at-the-appeal-of-edward-gorey> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[11] Dery, *Born to Be Posthumous*, p. 21.
[12] ibid., p. 22.
[13] Robert C Harvey, 'Gorey, Edward (1925–2000), author and artist', *American National Biography* (October 2001) <https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1701640> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).
[14] Gabrielle Bellot, 'Edward Gorey and the Power of the Ineffable,' *The Atlantic* (28 December 2018): <www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/12/edward-gorey-surrealism-power-of-the-ineffable/579028/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[15] When asked about his sexuality by an interviewer, this was Edward Gorey's reply: see Lisa Solod, 'Edward Gorey,' in *Ascending Peculiarity*, ed. Karen Wilken (New York: Harcourt: 2001), pp. 92–109, at p. 101.
[16] Tom Spurgeon, 'CR Interview: Alexander Theroux on Edward Gorey,' *The Comics Reporter* (22 February 2011): <www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/cr_interview_alexander_theroux_on_edward_gorey/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[17] Referred to as the Grandaddy of Goth in: Steven Kurutz, 'Edward Gorey Was Eerily Prescient,' *The New York Times*, (30 October 2018): <www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/style/edward-gorey.html> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[18] Dery, *Born to Be Posthumous,* p. 210n.

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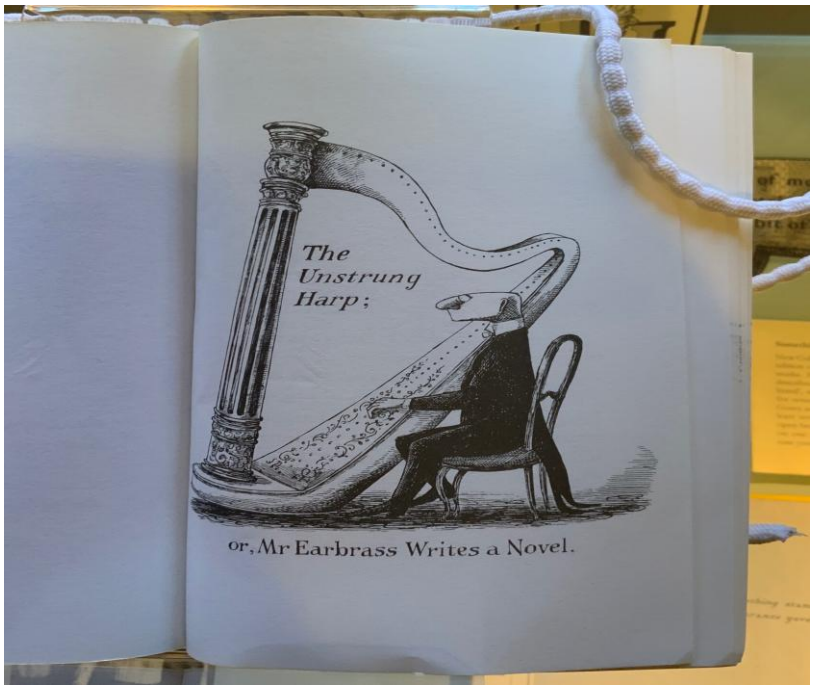
found himself drafted into the war. However, Gorey was never in any real danger, and instead found the whole affair disastrously diverting. Not only did this postpone his matriculation at Harvard, but he also describes his experience stationed at a weapons test facility as 'dull to the point of deadliness'.[19] By 1947 he was released from service and began studying French at Harvard, surrounded by fellow artists and literary minds such as Frank O'Hara and Alison Lurie. With this interlude his inclination towards the literary world grew, and once he graduated, he set about trying to get published as an artist. By 1950 he had appeared in a commercially published book illustrating six cartoons for the endpapers of *Illegimate Sonnets* by Merrill Moore.[20] By 1953 Gorey's friend, Barbara Epstein, an editor for Doubleday Books Publishing, suggested that Gorey join the team at Anchor Books. Gorey was particularly well placed at Anchor as it was blazing a trail for the paperback market; not only did it bring classics to the masses it was also home to talented artists like Gorey who enhanced book jackets into a popular and collectable art form.[21] This role truly launched Gorey's career as a paid artist, and in 1953 he published his first book, *The Unstrung Harp; or, Mr. Earbrass Writes a Novel*, with Doubleday. This eerily biographical book details how an author undertakes strange and experiential means to produce a new publication.[22]



The opening page of *The Unstrung Harp: Or Mr Earbrass Writes a Novel*
New College Library, Oxford, Mann318

Gorey's distinct style instantly made an impression, with his inky and elongated figures and cross hatching techniques setting him aside from the dull pulp fiction covers that were circulating in the market. Gorey's first book stands aside from his later pieces as the characters differ with their long-produced chins, rectangular heads, no mouths, and large noses. In addition, this work is decidedly longer in its prose content; Gorey become known for his concise yet unnervingly witty rhymes, but in *The Unstrung Harp* there are six or seven lines per picture.[23] By the 1960s his career at Doubleday had seen him produce some of his most popular works: *The Unstrung Harp, or Mr.*

[19] Part of a comment Gorey made in an email message to a friend in 2011: see ibid., p. 54.
[20] ibid., p. 111.
[21] ibid., p. 133.
[22] Edward Gorey, *The Unstrung Harp, or Mr. Earbrass Writes a Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953).
[23] Anthony Gunn, 'The Disembodied Theatre of Edward Gorey' (PhD thesis, Florida State University, 2018), p. 26.

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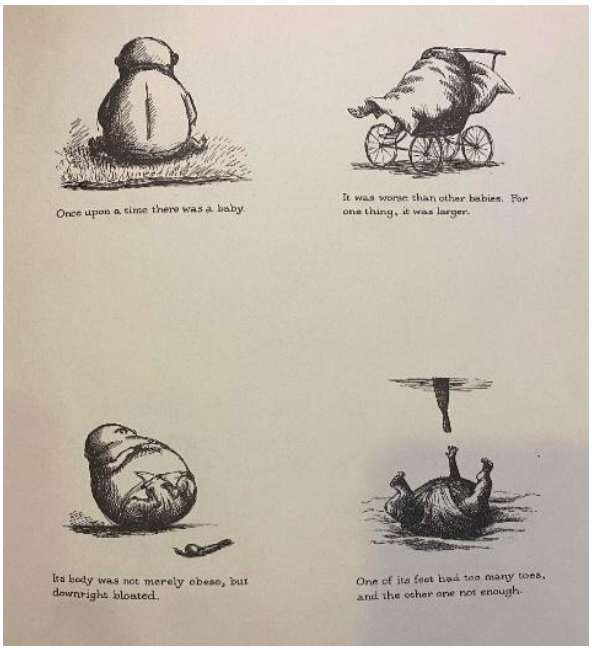
Earbrass Writes a Novel (1953), *The Doubtful Guest* (1957), and *The Fatal Lozenge* (1960).[24] However, Gorey left Doubleday for a role at another publishing house, Looking Glass which allowed him more time to develop his distinct and time-consuming cross hatching technique as well as taking up freelance work.[25] The often-traditional world of publishing seemed to restrict Gorey's desire to produce gothic themes as his work *The Beastly Baby* was refused many times by publishers due to its satirical exploration of dark content. As a result, Gorey established his own imprint, Fantod Press, in 1962. It was aptly named; *fantod* was a 19th-century word used to describe a state of nervousness, irritability and unease, feelings one often experiences when encountering Gorey's work.[26] His first title, writing as Ogred Weary, was *The Beastly Baby*, an unsettling narrative that invokes feelings of disgust as Gorey dispels parental emotions in a typical 'Goreyesque' style. Gorey was the master of illustrating horrific events in a calm and almost matter-of-fact tone, as this book's bizarre story follows a grotesque baby who everyone is trying to get rid of.[27]



Illustrations of Gorey's 'Beastly Baby', with his signature cross hatching technique and use of literary nonsense
New College Library, Oxford, Mann 334

Despite not conforming to standard illustrations, Gorey enjoyed continued success with the release of an anthology of his works *Amphigorey* serving as proof of Gorey's rising popularity in the 1970's. *Amphigorey* was released in 1972 to much success as the collection of Gorey's works into an anthology was more commercially successful and resulted in his art reaching wider audiences. It contained the Gorey books that were first published between 1953 and 1965, including *The Unstrung Harp* and *The Doubtful Guest*. The title sums up the Gorey aesthetic and equates Gorey to the Victorian tradition as 'Amphigorey' is derived from 'amphigouri,' a Victorian mode of 'nonsense' verse of complicated form on the surface but with no apparent meaning.[28]

[24] These titles are included in the Mann Collection: *The Unstrung Harp, or Mr. Earbrass Writes a Novel*, New College Library, Oxford, Mann318, *The Doubtful Guest*, Mann317, and *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, Mann330. Further details and shelf marks are available of Edward Gorey collection books at New College Library.
[25] Dery, *Born to Be Posthumous,* p. 196.
[26] Collins English Dictionary, 6th ed., s.v 'fantod' (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003).
[27] 'The Beastly Baby' can be found in Edward Gorey, *Amphigorey Too* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), New College Library, Oxford, Mann334.
[28] John Hollander, '*Amphigorey*; *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy*, by Edward Gorey', *Commentary* (January 1973): <www.commentary.org/articles/john-hollander/amphigorey-the-awdrey-gore-legacy-by-edward-gorey/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

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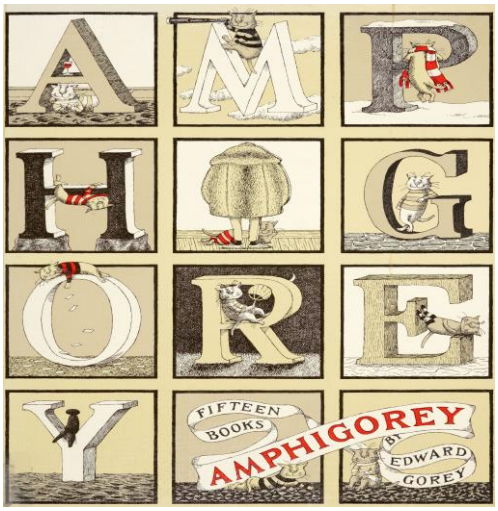
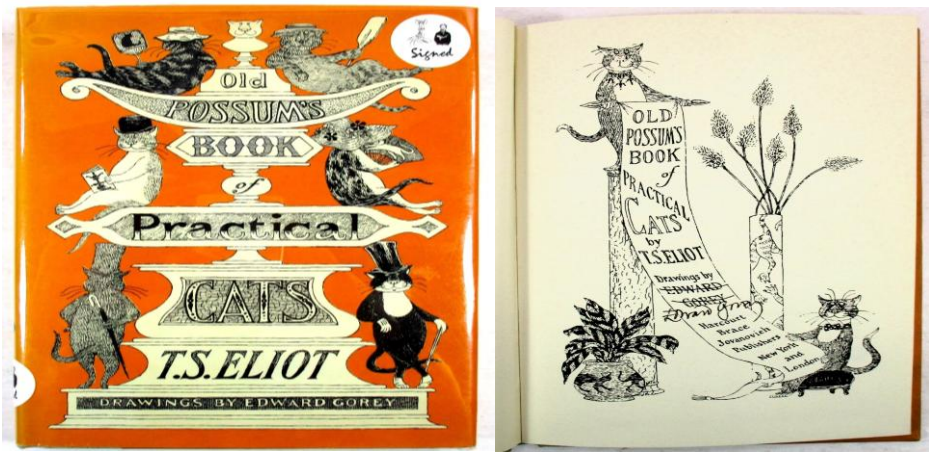


Front cover of *Amphigorey* by Edward Gorey—New College Library, Oxford, Mann342

Amphigorey gave rise to following anthologies, with *Amphigorey Too*, and *Amphigorey Also* being released in 1972 and 1983 respectively.[29] Gorey's universal appeal and growing following resulted in these anthologies becoming readily available to the public, decorating coffee tables and bookshelves across the US and beyond.

Gorey was prolific in his creativity, and during his long career he utilised several pseudonyms, which were often anagrams of his real name, such as: Ogred Weary, Dogear Wryde, and Ms. Refera Dowdy.[30] Along with producing hundreds of books he also earned a Tony for his costume and set design for the Broadway production of *Dracula* in 1977, and became a household name thanks to his animation of the title sequence of *Mystery!* for PBS in 1979.[31] He also produced hundreds of illustrations for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. Gorey straddled the literary world, and often appeared in the most unlikely places, illustrating works by other authors such as Charles Dickens, Samuel Beckett, H. G. Wells, and T. S. Eliot. New College Library is fortunate to house a copy of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* illustrated by Edward Gorey in 1960 and a first edition of T. S Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which is also signed by Gorey.



Front cover and title page of a first edition of T. S Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*
New College Library, Oxford, MannAdd1

[29] Edward Gorey, *Amphigorey Too* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), New College Library, Oxford, Mann344.; Edward Gorey, *Amphigorey Also* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1983), Mann359.
[30] Harvey, 'Gorey, Edward'.
[31] Dery, *Born to be Posthumous*, p. 324.

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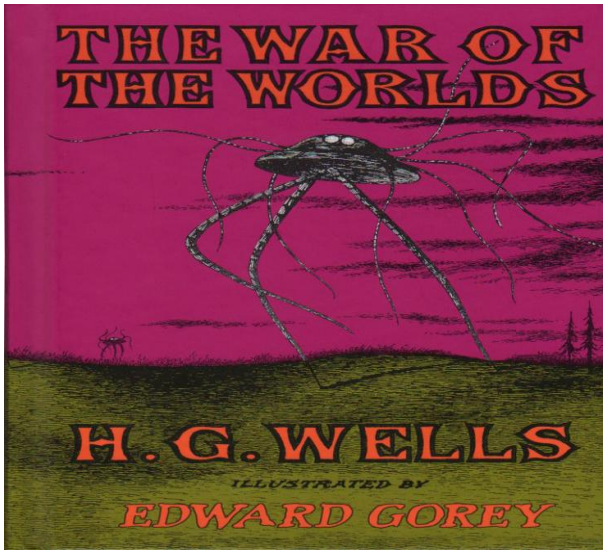

Front cover of *The War of the Worlds* by H. G Wells, illustrated by Gorey
New College Library, Oxford Mann391

Edward Gorey's whimsical world is ultimately undefinable, as in some illustrations children suffer unfortunate ends whereas in another, swish Edwardians in fur coats write novels, and in another a black dog searches for an umbrella. In short, Gorey's work defies genre, with many commentators attempting to put Gorey into a box he simply cannot fit into. As a result hyphenated categories such as ironic-gothic, witty-macabre, Victorian-surrealist often accompany discussions of his works.[32] In line with his mysterious art, Gorey was famously characterized a recluse, however as art historian Karen Wilkin reveals in her assessment of Gorey, he could be loquacious when asked the right questions:

> Routine or ill-informed questions bored him, although he would answer politely, gently correcting errors of fact and interpretation, almost without appearing to do so. But when an interviewer had deep, specialized knowledge of something Gorey was obsessed by, then he held nothing back.[33]

Gorey gave more than 70 interviews between 1973 and 1999, with many interviews appearing in such US publications as *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, and *People*. Despite Gorey speaking about his processes and influences, he has always been an enigmatic figure, in fact one could write a whole book analysing Gorey in close detail, and many have.[34] However, in the interest of brevity this article focuses on Gorey's style, techniques, and peculiarities, whilst discussing key titles housed in New College Library's collection.

Curious Covers: The Style and Inspirations of Edward Gorey

Gorey's style of illustration is certainly unique, but nevertheless he drew from many inspirations. Gorey's works often resemble 19th-century engravings, but he was also a great

[32] Mark Dery, 'Edward Gorey's Gothic Nonsense,' *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 27 (January/February 2020): 18–21, at p. 18.
[33] Karen Wilken, 'Edward Gorey: An Introduction,' in *Ascending Peculiarity*, ed. Karen Wilken (New York: Harcourt: 2001), pp. ix–xxi, at pp. x–xi.
[34] Biographies and discussions of Gorey can be found in: Dery, *Born to Be Posthumous*, Karen Wilkin, *Elegant Enigmas: The Art of Edward Gorey* (Pennsylvania: Brandywine River Museum, 2009), and Gregory Hischak and the Edward Gorey Charitable Trust, *E Is for Edward: A Centennial Celebration of the Mischievous Mind of Edward Gorey* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2025).

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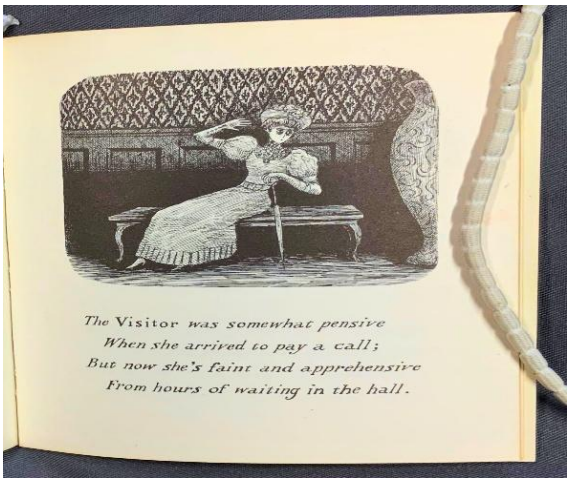
admirer of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics and in particular Japanese woodcuts and impressions; he believed that cross hatching techniques provided a depth that colour did not.[35] His primary techniques were hatching and cross-hatching as it creates depth and dimension by building on thin parallel lines. Gorey stated that he had a 'natural tendency toward black and white . . . Line drawing is where any talent lies'.[36] This process was meticulous and was done using a quill dip pen with India ink on Strathmore paper, he also preferred writing the text before adding his illustrations.[37] Gorey admitted to the laborious nature of this work, stating that he had to pause work for a time because he 'couldn't face the notion of drawing any more wallpaper'.[38] He composes his images to the scale of book jackets, and was consistent in the size of all his illustrations, measuring no more than four inches by five.[39] Gorey's infamous illustrations are often accompanied by rhyme or alliterative short lines and nonsense phrases. Through this unique style Gorey is able to underpin the often gory nature of his tragedies, his singular use of rhyme creates an ironic wit and timed comedy.[40] We can see Gorey's techniques in *The Fatal Lozenge*. In the image below, hatching and cross hatching are used to create layers, shadow, and excruciating detail. This illustration is certainly 'Goreysque' with his hallmark features of Edwardian fashions, intricate wallpaper, and funeral urns. *The Fatal Lozenge* is a fan favourite as it is one of Gorey's abecedaria.[41] These were used expertly by the illustrator, as its form allowed him to deliver shocking yet ironic statements in a minimalistic way.



The Fatal Lozenge—New College Library, Oxford, Mann 332

Gorey made unique choices in terms of his style, setting, and plot points. Even though he was born and bred in America, his settings conjure up images of a dreary and smog-filled England in the 1800s. Whether his work is labelled as grim, ghastly, or genius, his drawings never fail to spark curiosity in his readers. Therefore, in order to analyse Gorey illustrations, it is essential to understand how he saw the world and what inspirations he drew from. Gorey was undoubtedly

[35] Dery, *Born to be Posthumous*, pp. 13–14.
[36] Jane Merrill Filstrup, 'An Interview with Edward St. John Gorey at the Gotham Book Mart' in *Ascending Peculiarity*, ed. Karen Wilken (New York: Harcourt: 2001), pp. 72–85, at p. 76.
[37] Harvey, 'Gorey, Edward'.
[38] Edward Gorey, and Peter F Neumeyer, *Floating Worlds: The Letters of Edward Gorey & Peter F. Neumeyer* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2011), p. 86.
[39] A. Robin Hoffman, "'A Wonderful Horrid Thing": Edward Gorey, Charles Dickens, and Drawing the Horror out of Childhood Death", in *Reading in the Dark: Horror in Children's Literature and Culture*, ed. Jessica R. McCort (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), pp. 61–89, at p. 64.
[40] Eden Lee Lackner, 'Genre Games: Edward Gorey's Play with Generic Form' (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2015), p. 135.
[41] Edward Gorey, *Fatal Lozenge: An Alphabet*. (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1960), New College Library, Oxford, Mann332.

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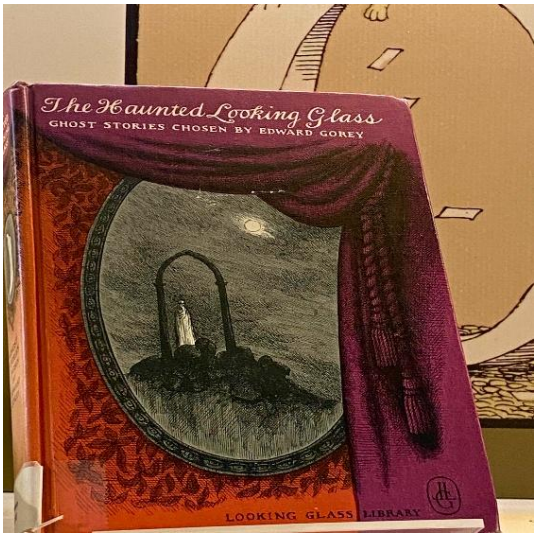
an admirer of the Gothic genre and its literary figureheads; he cites Charles Dickens and Ann Radcliffe and their veiled and melodramatic worlds as his major inspirations. He also favoured Agatha Christie who wrote in his favourite genre: 'sinister-slash-cozy'.[42] Gorey never wanted to appear as a modern artist, and described his works as 'Victorian novels all scrunched up'.[43] Despite his admiration of the Gothic, Gorey firmly rejected being forced into the genre; his close friend Alexander Theroux describes how Gorey disliked explaining his work and being typecast as Gothic and macabre.[44] Nonetheless, Gorey was captivated by darkness and gothic sensibilities and even complied a selection of his favourite ghost stories for a 1959 publication, asserting Gorey's fascination with and place amongst horror literature.[45]



In situ as part of New College Library exhibition—*The Haunted Looking Glass: Ghost Stories* by Edward Gorey
New College Library, Oxford, Mann 293.

GOTHIC OR NOT? WHAT GENRE DOES EDWARD GOREY FIT INTO?

As stated previously, Gorey defies categorisation: through his work he explores a number of themes, displays numerous motifs, and straddles multiple genres. Nonetheless, Gorey classified his own work as literary nonsense—a genre that combines sense and absurdity, often by subverting logical reasoning and language conventions through playful and nonsensical means.[46] The genre was made famous by Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, authors that Gorey greatly admired and took liberal influence from.[47] Despite his own assertions, Gorey work has been classified as both literary nonsense and a form of Gothic-Surrealism.[48] The Gothic literary genre first exploded in the 1790s

[42] Schiff, 'Edward Gorey,' p. 156.
[43] Christopher Lydon, 'The Connection,' in *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*, ed. Karen Wilkin (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 216–27, at p. 226.
[44] In an interview with Robert Dahlin, Gorey rejected classifying his work as macabre. When Dahlin asked Gorey to describe his work Gorey simply responded with, 'I don't really know what it is I'm doing; but it's not that': Robert Dahlin, 'Conversations with Writers: Edward Gorey,' in *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*, ed. Karen Wilkin (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 24–49, at p. 35.
[45] Edward Gorey. *The Haunted Looking Glass : Ghost Stories* (New York: Random House, 1959), New College Library, Oxford, Mann293.
[46] Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), p. 47.
[47] Kevin Shortsleeve, 'Edward Gorey, Children's Literature, and Nonsense Verse', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 27 (2002), 27–39, at p. 34.
[48] Gothic-Surrealism blends the dreamlike qualities of surrealism with the macabre motifs of Gothic literature and art. 'Surrealism' is defined as 'a 20th-century avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005):

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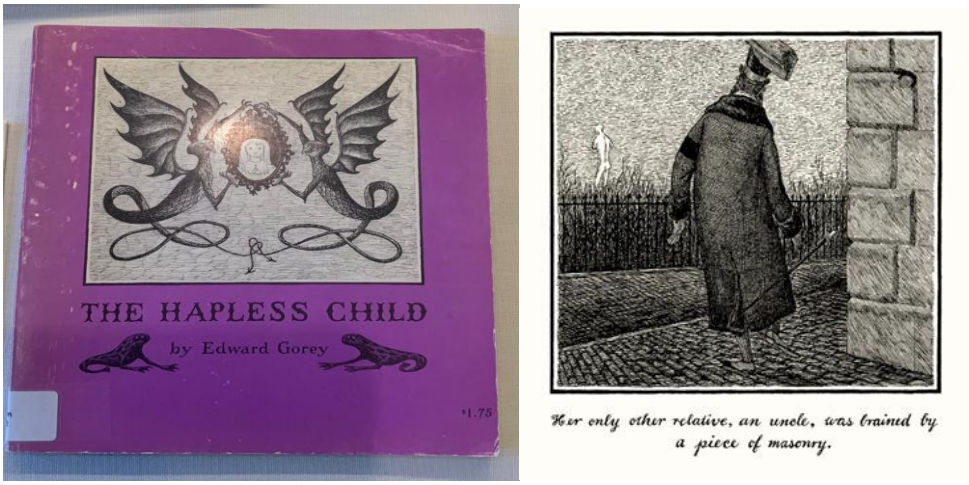
in Britain and was easily satirised for its melodrama and excessive motifs. As one commentator states, Gothic literature by its hyperbolic nature 'allows for constructive commentary through its excessive nature'.[49] The casual reader may assume that Gorey's Victorian and Edwardian settings suggest he was an admirer of that age, however this is far from the truth. Although Gorey followed the conventions of these eras and emulated their imagery, he in fact used his subscription to the world as a means to parody the genre of sentimentality and its absurd fascination with morality. The Victorian fascination with death resulted in Victorian literature possessing an inclination towards sentimentality and sympathy, as it stated that literature should provide moral instruction and contain characters with a 'good heart'.[50] The era of sentimentalism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries emphasised heightened emotion and moral feeling, but ultimately contained layers of artifice and 'insincere display of sentiment'.[51] Through his work, Gorey satirised the excess of sentimentality that was popularised in Victorian literature, as Wilken points out, Gorey attempts to 'mercilessly parody them, underscoring both the inherent pathos of these tales and their inadvertent over-the-top absurdity'.[52] By adopting Victorian and Edwardian motifs and styles Gorey was able to invert them for his own particular use of irony. His world of forlorn faces, unfortunate children, and beasts of all shapes and sizes is ultimately ironic as it evokes fears and dispels them with tongue-in-cheek humour. [53] Gorey's playful underpinning of Victorian sensibilities is clear in *The Hapless Child*. This is one of Gorey's 'classics', filled with detailed line drawings, Victorian backdrops, nonsense language, and multiple deaths. In this book, Gorey parodies death, with three successive characters meeting unfortunate ends without much comment. Gorey satirises expectations of sympathy by displaying death in its random nature, a man is killed by a falling of a piece of masonry in a bizarre and random circumstance. Gorey further parodies Victorian fascinates with death as he combines a Victorian setting with modern phrasing, the man is not just killed, he 'was brained'.[54]



The Hapless Child by Edward Gorey—New College Library, Oxford, Mann 292

<www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609810.001.0001/acref-9780198609810> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

[49] Lydia Horne, 'A Peculiar Approach to Death: The Work of Edward Gorey' (Honours thesis, University of Vermont, 2016), p. 10.

[50] Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature*, (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 27.

[51] 'Sentimentalism (noun)', in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press): <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5389926149> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

[52] Karen Wilken, 'Mr. Earbrass Jots Down a Few Visual Notes: The World of Edward Gorey', in Clifford Ross and Karen Wilkin, *The World of Edward Gorey* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), pp. 43–111, at p. 47.

[53] Victor Kennedy, 'Mystery! Unraveling Edward Gorey's Tangled Web of Visual Metaphor', *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 8 (1993), 181–93.

[54] Edward Gorey, *The Hapless Child* (New York: Ivan Oblensky, 1961).

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In this way, Gorey mocks the death and unfortunate fate of the orphan Charlotte Sofia with language that is perfunctory and hyperbolic. Gorey's manipulates the formal language expected by the institution of death to enhance the comic nature of his work.[55] Throughout his other work Gorey confronts the reader with death constantly, it is through this practice that he demonstrates the pervasive nature of death: death is an inevitable and random process but it can elicit a dark yet humorous reaction.[56] In his characteristically sarcastic tone Gorey parodies Victorian sensibilities and rigid expectations of sympathy and employs both the Gothic and Victorian aesthetics as effective techniques in his redesign of traditional storytelling. Rather than conjuring up sympathy for the characters, Gorey incites feelings of amusement, discomfort, or bewilderment, and at times all three.[57] He succeeds in creating a universe entirely of his own making — his stories never feel predictable no matter if you are an established fan or a new reader. While Gorey's jumbled wording, bizarre phrases, and lack of plot may confuse casual readers, it is these features that enrich Gorey's work and make his stylistic choices purposeful.[58] In conclusion, Gorey's invented world is not necessarily fully Gothic or fully nonsense. Gorey uses techniques from both genres, in addition to a skillful application of humour, to produce an engaging and unique piece of art and prose.

A Satire of Traditional Children's Literature?

At first glance Gorey's work may appear as children's books but Gorey was not interested in heroes, happy endings, or perfect families; he was interested in victims and dark ironies. As he admitted to Robert Dahlin, 'I've been murdering children in books for years'.[59] Gorey believed in widening the scope of children's literature, deeming that children could appreciate and understand a wide variety of books—including his own ironic and often gruesome tales. As Sibley reported in *The Independent*, Gorey 'resolutely refused to believe that youngsters were easily scared by the sinister or bloodthirsty'.[60] He was against moralizing children's literature, choosing instead to satirise it mercilessly. In order to dispel the tendency for sentimentality, Gorey adopted the abecedarium as his weapon of choice: he produced *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963), *The Utter Zoo* (1967), *The Chinese Obelisk·* (1972), and *The Glorious Nosebleed* (1974) to much praise. His slightly macabre approach resulted in a somewhat anti-alphabet with these ironic and ominous books appealing more to the adult audience. Nevertheless, Gorey succeeds in blurring the lines between adult and non-adult books, making his peculiar world open to all.[61]

In a great use of juxtaposition Gorey used light-hearted forms, alphabet books, rhyming couplets, and limericks to illustrate how children were lost, exploited or simply polished off. One of Gorey's most popular works, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963) is an abecedarium that explores how 26 different children are on the brink of 26 untimely deaths, all without a responsible adult in sight. With Gorey starting with 'A is for Amy who fell down the stairs' and proceeding to 'Z is for Zillah who drank too much gin' without pausing for remorse.[62]

[55] Horne, 'A Peculiar Approach', p. 58.
[56] ibid., p. 78.
[57] ibid., p. 32.
[58] Wilkin, *Elegant Enigmas*, p. 19.
[59] Dahlin, 'Conversations with Writers', p. 40.
[60] Brian Sibley, 'Edward Gorey', *The Independent* (18 April 2000), R6.
[61] George R Bodmer, 'The Post-Modern Alphabet: Extending the Limits of the Contemporary Alphabet Book, from Seuss to Gorey', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14 (1989), 115–17.
[62] Hoffman, '"A Wonderful Horrid Thing"', 63.

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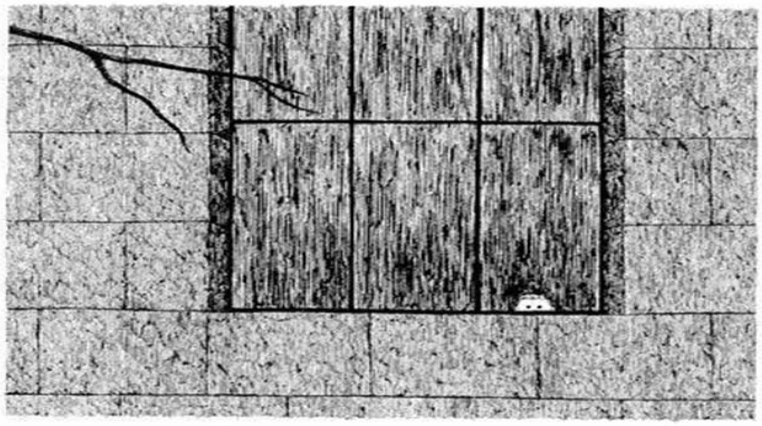

In perhaps the most famous of Gorey abecedaria, children meet unfortunate yet darkly ironic ends.
The Vinegar Works: Three Volumes of Moral Instruction; the Gashlycrumb Tinies; the Insect God; the West Wing
New College Library, Oxford, Mann330

Throughout his works Gorey underpins expectations of sympathy, and questions how the reader should react. As we can see in the above image, Gorey employs a sparsity of text to further isolate his detailed illustrations, the brevity of text absolves the reader of the need for empathy. We do not feel sympathy for 'Neville', instead we laugh at the ridiculousness of his situation. His abecedaria act not as exemplars, but rather, portraits of the messy and somewhat humorous ends of invented characters. By juxtaposing 19th-century images and motifs with 20th-century dark humour, Gorey shows his disturbing yet witty sense of humour, using banal scenarios to depict the children's untimely ends.[63] Gorey portrays tragic accidents and even suicides with touches of humour, nonsense, and absurdity, creating a unique story that prompts laughter even if it is an uneasy, nervous laugh.

EDWARD GOREY'S PLACE IN THE WORLD—ADMIRED OR MISUNDERSTOOD?

Gorey's reputation as a multifaceted artist has persisted for decades as the public has attempted to come to terms with the enigma of Edward Gorey. Edmund Wilson—the first journalist to comment on Gorey in 1959—accurately described Gorey's world as 'equally amusing and somber, nostalgic at the same time as claustrophobic, at the same time poetic and poisoned'.[64] When Edward Gorey passed away on 15 April 2000, hundreds of obituaries, dedications, and words of praise circulated as the world marked the passing of a prominent artist and cultural figure. Gorey's legacy has been established these past 25 years, with fans and critics alike discussing his art and quirky personality to no end. Mel Gussow, writing the *New York Times* obituary for Gorey, delivered perhaps the best assessment: 'He was one of the most aptly named figures in American art and literature. In creating a large body of small work, he made an indelible imprint on noir fiction and on the psyche of his admirers'.[65] The question of why we are drawn to his work is one that frequently appears in discussions of Gorey. His drawings walk the fine line between darkness and humour, between playfulness and macabre. In this sense, they are timeless, as he expertly portrays the very human emotions of loneliness, curiosity, and absurdity. Gorey's work is ultimately unclassifiable, but his unique ability to blend mystery, humour and the macabre has undoubtably earned a place in the heart of art enthusiasts. Gorey's impact on all things weird and

[63] Kennedy, 'Mystery!', 189.
[64] Edmund Wilson, 'The Albums of Edward Gorey', *The New Yorker* (19 December 1959), <www.newyorker.com/magazine/1959/12/26/1959-12-26-060-tny-cards-000069093> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[65] Harvey, 'Gorey, Edward'.

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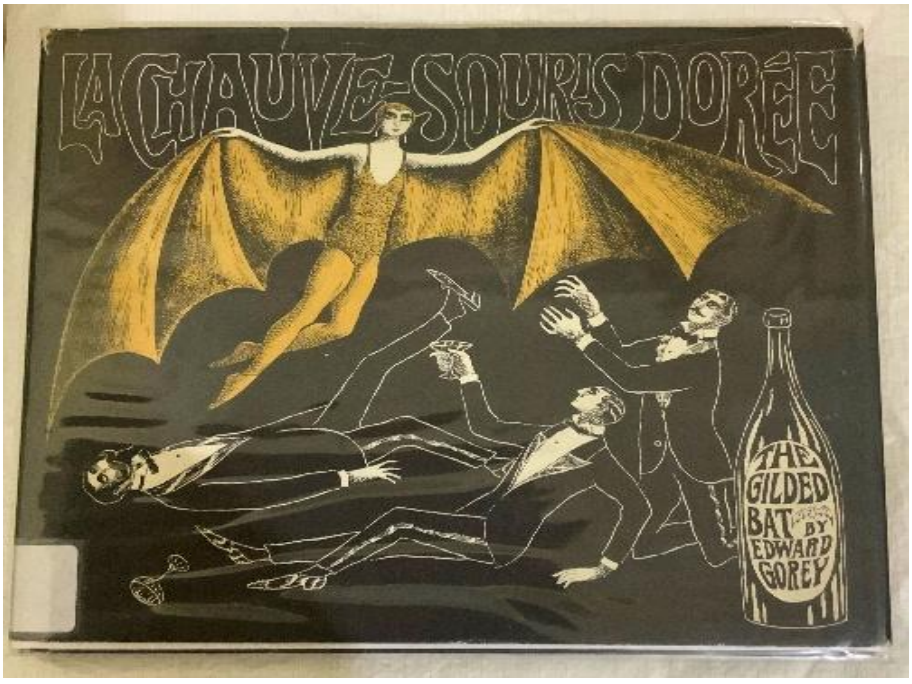
wonderful is clear from the influence he had on the Gothic genre, from Tim Burton to Neil Gaiman and Lemony Snicket. More recently, the critically acclaimed and Oscar-winning director Guillermo Del Toro cited Gorey as a major influence on his work revealing that he has a wide collection of illustrations by Edward Gorey, and his acclaimed work *Crismon Peak* (2015) was a 'blood stained valentine' to Gorey.[66]

Gorey's appeal may lie in his paradoxical nature. In a typical defiance of literacy norms Gorey does not fit into prelabeled boxes; he is neither gothic nor whimsical, nor does he subscribe to being a fine artist or commercial illustrator. He inhabits multiple spaces, and the way he is interpreted very much depends on what one sees in the work they are reading (or illustrations they are looking at).[67] In a way Gorey's work is timeless. As he does not comment on modern contexts, unlike other art that emerged post war—like Pop Art and Abstract expressionism—Gorey remains apolitical in his work, seemingly uninterested in commenting on politics or debating topical issues. Instead, he prefers to inhabit bygone settings, and explores mundanity in a peculiar way: 'I have, occasionally, drawn contemporary stuff, but I wouldn't do it on my own work, simply because my ideas don't lend themselves to contemporary life'.[68] However, Gorey did live in the modern era, and behind the gory façade and eccentricity there was a man of many talents and passions. In a breakaway from expectations of a man who drew the deaths of children and brought monstrous creatures to life, Edward Gorey was an avid admirer of ballet. Shortly after arriving in New York in 1953 he attended his first performance of the New York City Ballet. This would kickstart a lifelong love affair with the company, as he attended nearly every performance over the next 23 years, which works out at approximately eight performances a year for five months of the year.[69] In his book *The Gilded Bat*, Gorey combines his love for dance an typical unnerving story—recounting in only 30 sentences the rise and spectacular fall of a fabled ballerina, Maudie Splaytoe. Ballet dancers appear frequently in his work, as he drew inspiration from their graceful movements and elongated forms.



The front cover of a first edition of *The Gilded Bat* by Edward Gorey—New College Library, Oxford, Mann329

[66] See Pound, 'The mysterious, macabre mind of Edward Gorey'.
[67] Dery, *Born to be Posthumous*, p. 15.
[68] Tobi Tobias, 'Balletgorey', in *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*, ed. Karen Wilkin (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 10–23, at p. 22.
[69] Dery, *Born to be Posthumous*, p. 154.

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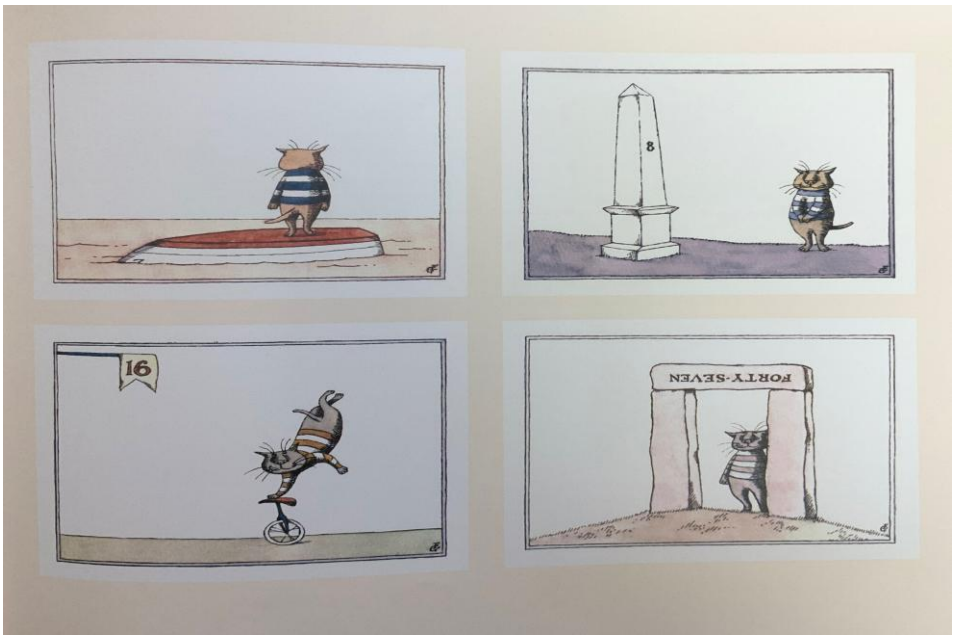
In addition to his dedication to ballet, Gorey was also a lifelong ailurophile, stating in several interviews his devotion to cats: 'I can not imagine my life without cats. I don't believe I've ever forgotten any cat I had'.[70] The journalist Donald Week explains the authority cats had over Gorey:

> I was speaking to him on the telephone and—quite abruptly—one of my eardrums almost split. Calmly talking one second, Gorey suddenly shrieked: 'Agrippina! Get down from there!' He was shrieking to one of his five cats who was, at that very moment, walking across the top of his drawing-board, where reposed an opened bottle of ink. (Agripinna, Kanzuke, Koliden, Murasaki and Fujisubo are the names of the five cats he had before his sensitive nature acquired a sixth, and unwanted, cat this year.)[71]

Gorey's love of cats was closely tied to their carefree attitude as well as their playful antics, solitary nature, and complicated relationships with humans. He often used them as subject studies in his later works, drawing on the felines that surrounded him. Gorey's illustrations of cats evolved as his career progressed—his illustration of feline figures ranged from plump and lazy to scrawny and mischievous. Interestingly, his human characters' deadpan expressions play into the grim settings of his books whereas cats are often shown with grinning, round muzzles that appear to smirk at the reader.[72] By the time *Amphigorey* was published in 1972, the signature 'Gorey Cat' was well established. This cat was a fixture in Gorey's work, with its recognisable roundness, prominent whiskers, and playful energy. The 'Gorey Cat' takes centre stage in the cover art for the *Amphigorey* series as well as *Category,* a book of 50 cat drawings by Gorey.



Printed illustrations from *Category: Fifty Drawings* (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1973)
Compiled images found in *E Is for Edward: A Centennial Celebration of the Mischievous Mind of Edward Gorey*, MannAdd3

Edward Gorey's adoration of animals was all-encompassing, as he valued all creatures from the smallest ant to the mighty elephant. Upon his death, it was his wish that the Edward Gorey

[70] In fact, Gorey references cats so frequently that a compilation of all of his quotes became the subject of an article in 1978. See Jane Merril Filstrup, 'The Cat Quotes of Edward Gorey', in *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*, ed. Karen Wilkin (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 66–71.
[71] Donald Weeks, 'Portfolio *Edward Gorey*', *Maatstaf* 27 (1979), 32–48: <www.dbnl.org/tekst/_maa003197901_01/_maa003197901_01_0020.php> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[72] Dery, *Born to be Posthumous*, p. 330.

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Charitable Trust be created in order for the income generated from his 'literary and artistic property' to serve animal welfare. Today, the Trust continues to support a wide range of organisations, many as non-conventional as Gorey himself. These organisations include the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald Tennessee, the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation in Oregon, and Bat Conservation International in Texas.[73]

2025: The Year of Edward Gorey

Thanks to the buzz surrounding the centennial anniversary of his death, new life has been bred into the cult of Gorey as fans both old and new seek out his work. The exhibition at New College Library, Oxford has been a great success. Since its opening in October, it has had over 100 visitors, with some avid Gorey fans travelling to Oxford for the sole purpose of viewing our collection. Going forward, New College's Librarian hopes to expand the Gorey collection with pieces that will enhance the collection whilst paying homage to the original generosity of David Mann. Without David Mann's initial love of Gorey, we would have sorely missed out on this curious collection of 'goreyana' in our library. Gorey takes our everyday feelings—fear, boredom, anxiety—and masterfully expresses them in his illustrations. Due to its unquantifiable nature, Gorey's work throws readers into a space that is both ironic and unsettling, and constantly makes the reader second guess which parts they should react to.[74] We are therefore drawn to Gorey's work not only for its wild and wonderful content but also to explore our complex reactions to it, and it is perhaps the reason his work has endured in the literary and artistic spheres. I shall end on a quote that perfectly sums up Gorey's eccentricity, and perhaps reveals what he would have thought of his place within library special collections: 'I wanted to have my own bookstore until I worked in one . . . Then I thought I'd be a librarian until I met some crazy ones'.[75]

Edward Gorey at New College Library: An Anniversary Exhibition
Upper Reading Room, New College Library, Oxford

Leah Duffin
Graduate Trainee Library Assistant
New College, Oxford

[73] This is the mission statement of The Edward Gorey House. See The Edward Gorey House, 'About the House': <https://edwardgoreyhouse.org/pages/about-the-edward-gorey-house> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).
[74] Nikola Novaković, 'From *Fantômas* to *The Black Doll*: The Aesthetics of Silent Cinema and the Nonsense of Edward Gorey', *The European Journal of Humour Research* 12 (2024), 215–234, at p. 230.
[75] From an interview with *The Boston Globe* in 1998: see Sarah A. Dolgonos, 'Behind the Macabre In Memoriam of Edward Gorey', *The Harvard Crimson* (5 June 5 2000): <www.thecrimson.com/article/2000/6/5/behind-the-macabre-ponce-asked-what/> (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

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