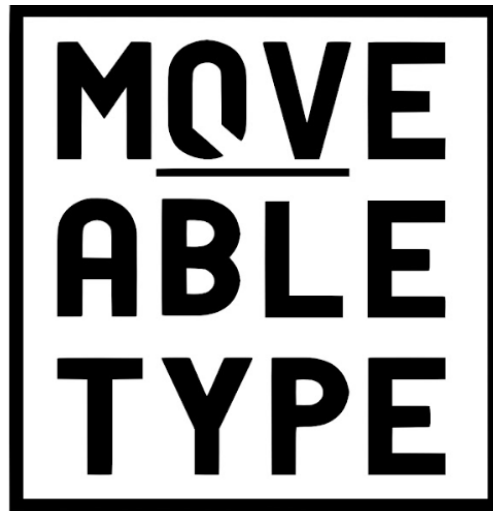




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Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 16, 'Promise' (2025-26)

DOI: 10.14324/111.444.1755-4527.2291

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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The Promissory Obligations of Ghosts in *Scary Stories*

SOHINI RAYCHAUDHURI

Alvin Schwartz's *Scary Stories* trilogy (1981–1991) revitalises traditional folklore for children aged eight to twelve. Diverging from idyllic fairy tales, Schwartz presents a macabre universe populated by spectres, skeletons, and punitive revenants, thereby allowing young readers to confront fear while internalising social and ethical norms. His stories, drawn from archival folk narratives and urban legends, exemplify the “Man from the Gallows” tale type, demonstrating formulaic conflict-resolution sequences in which transgressions are rectified by supernatural justice. In the stories of my selection, twofold misdeeds of human characters, stealing body parts and eating them summon ghosts, much as the Ouija board compelled them to breach the boundaries of common households that relatable characters in familiar neighbourhoods inhabited, thereby upholding the promise – the evil must perish. The books concluded with an exhaustive list of these sources which revealed the author's assiduous intent to acknowledge the orally transmitted roots of these old tales, urban legends, scary stories in the distant and obscure past of human existence.

Keywords: Alvin Schartz, *Scary Stories*, Stephen Gammell, ‘Man from the Gallows’ family tale type 366.

In the 1987 interview with *Language Arts* magazine, the respected American folklorist, Alvin Schwartz shared:

Everything I write is read aloud three or four times in the bathroom because the acoustics are so good. I'm listening to the way the sounds link up and work together, so I will lock myself in the bathroom and read the book aloud and put big red circles around those things that are not working in terms of sounds. Since a lot of this material is going to be told, the sounds are important. But, what I'm also after here when I'm dealing with tales, are stripped down tales – right down to the essentials, because traditionally, storytellers will take such a tale and embellish it themselves. I want them to be able to do this¹

Schwartz's retelling of folklore, traditional stories, and urban legends achieves its intended effects meticulously in his three-book *Scary Stories* series (1981-1991).² With their crisp vernacular, simplicity, coherent and linear progression devoid of parenthetical preaching, florid description, or hyperbolic details, the short tales were appropriate for storytelling and oral transmission. He upends the tradition of commonly read children's fairy tales and

¹· Sylvia M. Vardell, “Profile: Alvin Schwartz.” *Language Arts*, vol. 64, no. 4, 1987. pp. 426–32.

²· Alvin Schwartz, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. (New York, Harper Collins, 1981), *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). All further quotations will be from these editions and will be cited as *Scary Stories* in text in parentheses by volume and page number.

folktales with their idyllic plot, wish fulfilling narrative, talking animals and virtuous heroes, which universally wrought an unsaid covenant with parents by keeping in abeyance their shared anxiety of overexposing children's tender minds to anything age inappropriate. The world of these stories was formulaic and held a doorway to a realm where children could be left alone without parental supervision - at the end the universal virtues were always rewarded and evil punished. Unlike the rose-tinted fairylands and enchanted forests, what *Scary Stories* conjured was a world dominated by ghouls, skulls, skeletons, and spectres. But the question was why; a question that served as a fulcrum with the rage of parents wanting to sanitise these scary tales on one hand, and on the other, Schwartz underlining the necessity to allow young children to explore their fears and understand moral injunctions through folktales as well as the art and conventions of storytelling. In his *Prefaces*, Schwartz stressed the *fun* of telling and retelling scary stories that are transmitted orally through the ages to uphold the admonition that *justice will be served to those who violated the laws*. He stated in the *Preface* to the first book, *Strange and Scary Things*, 'Telling scary stories is something people have done for thousands of years, for most of us *like* being scared in that way. Since there isn't any danger, we think it is fun' (2). He remakes the promise to one made directly with children: that he will show them the joys and skills of storytelling, being safely scared whilst embedding guiding moral truths and a code of restorative justice.

Schwartz's note of assurance, however, failed to convince the parents of the target readers - children aged between eight and twelve years - and they continued to feel affronted to find in these narratives elements too nightmarish for tender minds. Furthermore, following the publication of the third and the final book in the series, *The Seattle Times* published an article in 1991, 'Hair-Raising Stories For Kids Also Raise Parents' Hackles on the pressing demand to ban the volume of *Scary Stories*'. 'Several parents here say the "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark" trilogy is too gruesome for young children.'³ Earning the title the 'hobgoblin of school libraries' from the contemporary newspapers for creating foreboding narratives, portraying frighteningly familiar neighbourhoods, characters and settings, Schwartz's stories remain at the centre of contentious dialogues that rage between parents, school authorities, and publisher. While the publisher HarperCollins firmly stood their ground refusing censorship, Schwartz never ceased to win spontaneous adulation from his target readers and favourable critics. Katelyn Nelson wrote in her essay, 'On Literary Censorship: Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark':

The Scary Stories books are some of the most banned and challenged I've ever come across. They were the #1 banned book series of the '90s, and in the top 10 banned books of the 2000s... As Disney takes traditional fairy tales and sugarcoats them for the masses, Schwartz talks to children about folklore and life and death as if they are just subjects that need to be addressed. Instead of happy endings, he seems to say, here there be monsters. Here is the world and all of its dark corners. But it's okay! To be afraid is natural. Death is natural. And you don't have to be alone in facing it.⁴

Unfortunately, *Scary Stories* remain relegated as trivial frightful tales for children. Later in this article I discuss how the trilogy, as a synthetic revival of old and obscure tales, besides rendering a bite of scary delight, harked back to the generic promissory obligation of folklore in oral

³ Mary Elizabeth Cronin, *Raising Stories For Kids Also Raise Parents' Hackles*, Dec 6, 1991.

<https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19911206&slug=1321458>

⁴ Katelyn Nelson, *On Literary Censorship: Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, Jun 13, 2019.

<https://katelynwrites.medium.com/on-literary-censorship-scary-stories-to-tell-in-the-dark-e03eff82bec7>

tradition, such as, ‘maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour’.⁵ Schwartz recreated the typological function of ghosts as the corrective agents of misdeeds and restoration of social order and justice. On the one hand, they drew attention to rectitude and aphorisms like ‘justice is served’ and on the other, provided guidelines for acceptable ‘behaviour...either through emulation or avoidance’.⁶ The world of formulaic folktales was governed by the thumb rule; the worthy succeeded and the unworthy failed. The idea of worthiness was nonetheless deeply rooted in the sense of universal compassion and justice as opposed to incidental morality. Before revisiting my selection of Schwartz’s retelling of ancient cannibalistic stories, I would briefly like to discuss the standard index system or the international catalogue of folktale tale-types, the Aarne - Thompson - Uther Index (ATU Index); a system of classification that the folklorists commonly used to identify the underlying building blocks of tales and cross-reference them with the tales collected from around the world. Schwartz comments that in his folklore research ‘patterns emerge...and typify the genre’.⁷ This system highlights the persistence of themes and tropes across cultures, suggesting the importance of these tales to moral coding. The variants underscore the flexibility of the tales to particular circumstances. Folklorists widely use the catalogue to identify and classify tale-types into seven broad categories. Among these, my subject of interest and one of the most familiar conflict - resolution formulaic ghost story tale-type was the *return from the dead* to complete an unfinished task or retrieve what was rightfully his, such as a body part, golden limb or piece of jewellery. The ATU index identifies this tale-type as index number 366 – ‘The Man from the Gallows’, cross-referenced with folklorist Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, a compilation of motifs present in European and Eastern folktales between 1932 and 1958.⁸ The latter assigns to this motif an identification alphabet and numbers:

E200—E299: *Malevolent return from the dead*.

Based on the various purposes of “the malevolent return from the dead” there are variants:

E230: *Return from the dead to inflict punishment*;

E235.4.1: *Return from the dead to punish theft of golden arm from grave*; and

E235.4.4: *Return from the dead to punish theft of liver from man on gallows*.

Folklorists also identify the traditional tale of grave robbing and punishment as Aarne/Thompson Tale Type 366, *The Man from the Gallows*. In the medieval period, leaving corpses to rot on gallows and gibbets in clear sight of the town as a demonstration of the rule of justice was a common practice in different parts of Europe. In the fourteenth century, famine afflicted pre-plague Europe and soon people were in the grips of terrible food shortages. In the words of Ben Johnson: ‘Everyone was affected, from nobles to peasants. Things got so bad in the winter of 1315/1316 that the peasants ate the seed grain they had stored for planting in the spring. By 1316 there were even rumours of cannibalism. In their misery and starvation, many people begged, stole, and murdered for what little food they could find. Even law-abiding

⁵ William R. Bascom, ‘Four Functions of Folklore’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 67, No. 266, Oct. - Dec. 1954, pp.333-49.

⁶ Roger D. Abrahams, ‘Personal power and social restraint in the definition of folklore.’ *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 84, no. 331, Jan. 1971, p.16.

⁷ Vardell op. cit. p.427.

⁸ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*. Revised edition, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960. pp.865 884.

people resorted to criminality in order to feed themselves.’ Parents who could no longer feed their families abandoned their children to fend for themselves. Indeed, the fairytale of *Hansel and Gretel* may have originated at this time. In the story, the siblings are abandoned in the woods by their parents during a time of famine. They are taken in by an old woman living in a cottage. She starts to heat the oven, and the children realise she is planning to roast and eat them. Gretel manages to trick the old woman into opening the oven, and then pushes her in⁹

Such flagrant violation of humanity gave birth to the revenant tales to intimidate the culprits. Promulgation of moral injunction through generations by orally transmitting narratives which assigned vengeful ghosts, replacing princes in shining armour on horseback or fairy godmothers bestowed with magical power, the responsibility to punish unacceptable behaviour. This gave currency to *what* should be emulated and *what* avoided. In his three-book series, Schwartz retells several old and obscure stories from this repertoire. He reanimates ghosts in their traditional role of corrective agents to sustain the generic trajectory of folklore towards the attainment of moral code, punishment of evil, and restoration of order: ‘The Big Toe’, ‘Cemetery Soup’, and ‘Just Delicious’, appear in each of the three anthologies of *Scary Stories* series consecutively. The first volume of *Scary Stories* opened with ‘The Big Toe’, one of the most infamous of all the stories considered too ghastly for young readers. Schwartz extracted it from ‘The Golden Arm’, a widespread traditional story, and in the notes provided at the end of the book, he adds the episode of Mark Twain sharing valuable advice ‘on delivering the jump lines’:

You must wail [‘Who’s got my golden arm?’] very plaintively and accusingly; then you [pause, and you] stare steadily and impressively into the face of ... a girl ... jump suddenly at that girl and yell, ‘*You’ve got it!*’ (*Scary Stories* 1, p.91n)

His illustrative episode is exemplary of Schwartz’s stripped-down tales that storytellers like Twain would take and embellish themselves. The importance of delivering jump scare in oral storytelling not only encompasses a major performatory aspect, woven into the fabric of orality, but also simulates the retributive experience of violating moral codes. The carefully wrought fright of the listeners foregrounded a glimpse of the promissory obligation of ghost stories, when *justice is served*. What makes these scary tales that are directed to punish the culprits who destroyed moral codes distinct from a legal injunction is their theatrical performances.

Schwartz’s version of the story ‘The Big Toe’ began:

A boy was digging at the edge of the garden when he saw a big toe. He tried to pick it up, but it was stuck to something. So he gave it a good hard jerk, and it came off in his hand. Then he heard something groan and scamper away. The boy took the toe into the kitchen and showed it to his mother. “It looks nice and plump,” she said. “I’ll put it in the soup, and we’ll have it for supper”. (*Scary Stories* 1, pp.7-9)

The boy, the garden, the kitchen, and the mother could be any place or person. They were not characters endowed with supernatural powers, residing in some mystical fortress atop a secret mountain bewitched by an incantation. They were relatable. The story ended with the ‘voice’ of the ghost seeking its toe back. I read it as a reverse mirror image of the story ‘Cemetery Soup’ in

⁹ Ben Johnson. “The Great Flood and Great Famine of 1314.” Historic UK. 2014. .

which a woman replaced the young boy and a big bone replaced the big toe. The author classified both 'The Big Toe' and 'Cemetery Soup' as old 'jump stories', the latter dating back to 1925 (*Scary Stories 2*, p.93).

On her way home from the market, the woman took a shortcut through the cemetery. There, sticking up out of the ground, she saw a big bone. She picked it up and looked it over carefully.
"This will make a very good soup bone," she said. "I think I'll take it home. It's perfect weather for hot soup" (71-3).

What followed was a detailed recipe of the soup with all its ingredients! Just like the previous one, 'The Big Toe', in this tale the woman heard the voice of the ghost: "Please give me back my bone" (73). Unlike the ghost in 'The Big Toe', here the ghost sounded meek and polite. Soon after making a few requests, it lost its patience and spoke in a voice 'so loud that the whole house shook. "I WANT MY BONE BACK!" The woman reached into the pot, grabbed the bone, and threw it out the window. In a voice just as loud, she shouted, "TAKE IT!" As soon as the ghost got back the bone for which it appeared, footsteps could be heard "scurrying away from the house down the road toward the cemetery"' (73). In my opinion, the exact same formulaic narrative progression primarily concerned these two scary stories. The woman who made the ghost "scurry[ing] away from the house" figures as the alter ego of the child "Shaking with fear ... as the footsteps moved through the dark toward his bed." (*Scary Stories 1*, pp.7-9)

In his third version, Schwartz reworks the idea again with the appetising title 'Just Delicious', acknowledging its roots:

This is one of hundreds of stories that make up what folklorists call the "Man from the Gallows" family, or tale type 366. They are found in America, Great Britain, Western Europe, and parts of Africa and Asia... Such stories have their roots in the ancient tale of the man with no work whose family was starving. Searching for food, he comes to a gallows where a criminal has just been hanged. He cuts out the dead man's heart (or some other part of his body) and takes it home (*Scary Stories 3*, pp. 95-6).

Mutilating the dead, cooking a severed body part, enjoying the delicious meal, and the dead returning as the avenger were the common motifs this story shared with the other two. But here the stock conflict - resolution plot makes a slight departure with the character of Mina who was a victim of domestic violence. Martin makes this plain:

George was a bully, and Mina was a timid woman who did everything he asked because she was afraid of him.
On his way home for lunch one day, George stopped at the butcher shop and bought a pound of liver. He loved liver. He would have Mina cook it for dinner that night. Despite all his complaints about her, she was a very good cook.
When Mina cooked it, she tasted it and could not stop and ate all of it. Then she started panicking. 'What would he do when he found that she had eaten all of the liver? Some men would laugh - but not George. He would be angry and mean, and she did not want to face that again. But where could she get another piece of liver that late in the day?'

Then she remembered the old woman lying in the church next door waiting to be buried... (12-14)

Fearing the temper of her husband, Mina did what we and the reader/listener could easily presume after discussing the other two tales on mutilation of corpses. At the end, after feeding the cooked liver stolen from the dead body to her husband, when the ghost came to retrieve it, asking, "Who has my liver?" Mina pointed at her husband who had no clue what transpired while he was away. The tale ended with George Flint screaming under the punitive measures of the ghost and Mina. The typical folkloric narrative movement revolved around the journey, encumbered by trials and tribulations of the virtuous hero, from slaying dragons to fighting spells of dark magic, in order to rescue the damsel in distress whom I saw as Mina's alter ego. Contrarily, *Scary Stories* focused on the ends and not the means of flouting codes with a sense of urgency. In this story, Mina alone procured the liver from 'the old woman lying in the church next door waiting to be buried' without anyone finding out. Schwartz left it to the readers and their fertile imagination, primed by the codes of previous stories.

In the previous narratives, the non-corporeality of ghosts manifested in the *voices* of justice, serving as the fulcrum between the two antithetical axes of popular culture: one dominated by the bedsheet ghost of elementary school Halloween parties, and the other by the hyperbolic supernatural of the big-budget Hollywood movies. The excerpt from Schwartz's interview discussing his obsession with sounds with which I opened my essay would be an appropriate endnote to this. The writers and scholars of literature almost always relegated ghosts to the margins in children's literature, as the unwanted guest or the strange other, hideous and wicked; their sudden visitation disrupted the ostensible harmony of human residence. In 'Just Delicious', for instance, the self-sacrificing angel in the house, Mina turned into a Deviant Femme in order to punish her intimidating husband with the help of the ghost of another woman. Schwartz thus breathes fresh air by reversing the axis and bringing ghosts to the centre as the supreme voice of justice to establish social order. In fact, etymologically, the words "guest" and "host" share the same root, originating in the Latin word "hostis", meaning "stranger" or "enemy". Moreover, the spatial movement of these voices across two different realms, the living and the dead, was significantly not restrictive in opposition to the commonplace haunted house tale types, in which ghosts frequented only the coordinates of a given house. Generally, as the living crossed a door the narratives transported them to the other world as Sylvia Ann Grider explores in her essay, 'Haunted Houses':

Ghosts and their haunted domains are inseparable in ghost stories because the presence of the ghost is what changes an otherwise mundane place into a portal through which the living encounter the realm of the supernatural... Children explore the limits of reality through imaginative play in various kinds of metahouses - dollhouses, playhouses, tree houses, carnival fun houses, etc. - and haunted houses function much the same way for them.¹⁰

In the stories of my selection, twofold misdeeds of human characters, stealing body parts and eating them summon ghosts, much as the Ouija board compelled them to breach the boundaries of common households that relatable characters in familiar neighbourhoods inhabited, thereby upholding the promise - the evil must perish. Schwartz did not write these stories to scare little children, rather he collected them from a wide range of sources as extant texts of oral literature

¹⁰ Diane E. Goldstein, et al. *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*. University Press of Colorado, 2007, p. 143.

and retold them in his own way for this age group. The books concluded with an exhaustive list of these sources which revealed the author's assiduous intent to acknowledge the orally transmitted roots of these old tales, urban legends, scary stories in the distant and obscure past of human existence. His wide range of work on folklore earned him veneration from children's literature scholars whom parental cavil could not dissuade. Professor Sylvia M. Vardell championed his oeuvre: "Who has done for children in the United States what the Grimm brothers did in Germany...? Alvin Schwartz, that's who!"¹¹

Scary Stories turned, with a stroke of mastery, the orally transmitted traditional tales and their supernatural elements into vehicles for enculturation of young readers, providing entertainment, demonstrating the art of storytelling, and furthering cognitive development. Mitigating the concerns of the parents, Schwartz repeatedly proclaimed the edifying functions of his *Scary Stories* in the *Prefaces*. In the *Preface* to the second book he wrote,

We still tell stories about creatures we fear, but not all of them are about bogeymen and demons. Quite a few are about living people. You'll meet some of them...who, at best, are not to be trusted. Scary stories of this kind often have a serious purpose. They may warn young people of dangers that await them when they set out in the world of their own (xii).

As a folklorist, Schwartz also stressed the performance aspects of storytelling:

Many years ago a young prince became famous for a scary story he started to tell, but did not finish. His name was Mamillius, and he probably was nine or ten years old. William Shakespeare told us about him in *The Winter's Tale*... Most scary stories are, of course, meant to be told. They are more scary that way. But how you tell them is important. As Mamillius knew, the best way is to speak softly, so that your voice sounds scary (2).

What followed was a short excerpt and a direct address to his readers, "If you started as he did, what would you tell?" (2). Throughout the three-book series Schwartz probed valuable instructions on the art of storytelling and performance techniques, as one of the most significant aspects of folktales, with a heuristic note. Stimulating narrative competencies in young readers, Schwartz did not fill in their imaginative spaces with "Once upon a time in a far far away land..." and "they lived happily ever after" creating dreamlike fantasy realms. The seven-line story which Schwartz wrote for the *Preface* to *Scary Stories 3*, a year before he passed away in 1992, was exemplary of his simple narrative style offering scope to the narrator to adorn it with verbal tapestry, especially epithets and proper nouns:

The girl was late getting home for supper. So she took a shortcut through the cemetery. But, oh, it made her nervous. When she saw another girl ahead of her, she hurried to catch up. "Do you mind if I walk with you?" she asked. "Walking through the cemetery at night scares me." "I know what you mean," the other girl said. "I used to feel that way myself when I was alive" (3).

In place of Shakespeare, in the second volume of *Scary Stories* Schwartz referred to T.S. Eliot

¹¹. Vardell, p. 426.

and his poem “Fragment of an Agon”:

Some people call those shivery, shaky, screamy feelings the “heebee jeebies” or the “screaming meemies.” The poet T. S. Eliot called them the “hoo-ha’s” (xii).

Schwartz dedicated the entire preface of his third and final volume of *Scary Stories*, named ‘*Boo Men*’ to write a closing statement of substantiation for his readers, validating his role as a folklorist collecting tales, legends, poems etc. from different sources,

This is the third book of such stories I have collected. I learned some of them from people I met. I found others: tales that had been written down or in folklore archives and in libraries. As we always do with tales we learn, I have told them in my own way. (3)

The books contained several such formulaic cautionary tales revolving around the rightful vengeance of ghosts returning to avenge grave digging, mutilating corpses and cannibalism, humans transforming into animals, dark magic, witches and fortune tellers. Stories like ‘The White Wolf’, ‘The Dead Man’s Hand’, and ‘Just Delicious’ shared a common theme: justice will be served. *Scary Stories* thus unlocked an eerie smell that wafted out through the American libraries of elementary and middle schools, disseminating socially acceptable behaviours, shared values, and approved practices, thereby filling the air with a fear of the unknown dangers lurking in the depths of darkness. He also delved deeper into more profound discussions of what scared us. But in place of Freudian analysis, he explained in much simpler words, ‘The dark scares us, for we don’t know what is waiting in the dark.’ (*Scary Stories 3*, p.3)

A crucial element of scary stories perpetuating the sense of horror was its environment. In these stories darkness prevailed as a major character, inseparable from the appearance of ghosts and fearmongering on which the horror genre thrived. In *Scary Stories*, the depths of the night shielded ghosts and otherworldly creatures and often appeared as the negative mirror image of the faraway kingdom, magical realms or enchanted forest of folktales. Writers of horror fiction used darkness, as the portent of all that was threatening and horrific, in a formulaic pattern. Stephen Gammell’s black and white charcoal and tenebrous strokes which contributed to the supernatural, horrific nature of the texts, brilliantly captured the timelessness of Schwartz’s narratives. The artist’s illustrations aggravated the brewing resentment among guardians giving them more reasons not to consider *Scary Stories*, beyond the familiar purview of children’s story books, suitable for kids or sing-song parentese. His illustrations conjured up the macabre world of ghouls, skulls, skeletons and spectres staring directly at us from the pages of the books, transcending the constraints of time and space in tandem, in sharp contrast to the vivid drawings of children’s fantasy books supplementing the winsome enigma of their enchanted world with which parents of that decade were familiar. These monochromatic sketches, blurred silhouettes, crevices and holes, complementing the element of textual vagueness, unfolded a feeling of uneasiness and creeping sense of dread. They also seemed to overturn authoritarian third-party interventions by directly bringing the young readers to the centre of the narratives, offering them the image of an empty chair on the opening title page of the first book in the series.

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