3.9 Ronald Searle

3.9.1 Life

Ronald Searle was born in Cambridge in 1920. His father William James Searle was a porter at Cambridge station. He had met his wife Nellie Hunt in Southern Ireland during the Great War, when he was a professional soldier in the Suffolk Regiment and Nellie was a girl in service at the castle of Glengarriff. They married in 1917 and they had two children, Ronald and Olive May, born in 1922.\textsuperscript{367}

Searle showed a penchant for drawing from an early age. As observed by Russell Davies, “he had always made drawings. Not even the earliest childhood memory of Ronald Searle went unaccompanied by the certainty that he was drawing at the time. He simply could not recall a time when he did not.”\textsuperscript{368}


\textsuperscript{368} Davies, Russell, Ronald Searle: A Biography, cit., p. 20.
Searle and his sister Olive spent a lot of time at the Free Library in Mill Road, and visiting the Cambridge museums. They even decided to set up their own museum at home. There they gathered the Egyptian beads brought back from the war by Uncle Sid Searle and the fossils which they collected during their walking or cycling outings. Their father—who in the meantime had become a Post Office worker whose task was to set up telephone lines—contributed to the museum, by bringing home seventeenth and eighteenth-century clay pipes and birds’ eggs which he found during his telephone excavations.

Despite the limited economic means of his family, Searle had a good education, attending St. Barnabas’ Church School and Cambridge Boys’ Central School. Between 1930 and 1931 he also became member of the choir of St. Andrew the Great. Thanks to the money earned with the choir and to other sources of occasional income, Searle could afford to buy books at Heffer’s Bookshop “for a few pennies apiece.”\(^{369}\) His personal library included about five hundred volumes, especially about comics and techniques of

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draughtsmanship. His favourite artists were George Grosz and the Punch cartoonists. Reading Spielmann’s History of Punch made him wish to become one of them.

The change of his voice forced Searle to leave the choir. As a consequence, he started a Saturday work at a butcher’s shop. In 1934 his formal education ended and he found a job as a solicitor’s clerk and then as a parcel-packer at the Cambridge Cooperative Society. The money earned allowed Searle to attend the evening-classes at the Cambridge Art School. In 1935 he heard that Sid Moon, cartoonist of the Cambridge Daily News, was leaving to join another magazine. Searle decided to submit a cartoon to Morley Stuart, the editor of the Cambridge Daily News. Stuart thought that Searle was a promising talent, published his cartoon and offered him a collaboration.

![Figure 124 - Ronald Searle’s first Cambridge Daily News cartoon (October, 26, 1935)](image)

In the same years Searle also contributed to The Granta, the students’ leading magazine of Cambridge University. In 1938 the Cambridge Education Committee gave him an Art Scholarship consisting of a one-year tuition at the Art School. In September Searle left his job at the Cambridge Cooperative Society and started his classes. The following year he received his Drawing Diploma and, as war threatened, he decided to enlist in the
Territorial Army, registering with the Royal Engineers and offering his services as an Architectural Draughtsman. Searle was not alone; a great part of his friends enlisted because “by volunteering, they had heard, one could choose one’s immediate destination, if not one’s destiny, in the armed forces.” Despite the war, Searle succeeded in submitting drawings and cartoons to the Cambridge Daily News. In 1941, embarking for Singapore, Searle sent some drawings at home and some to Miss Kaye Webb, the assistant editor of the magazine Lilliput. Searle did not know that he was writing to his future wife and that the drawing “about the schoolgirls” — which is generally considered the first St. Trinian’s cartoon — was to be published in Lilliput in October 1941.

One month after his arrival in Singapore, in fact, the city surrendered to the Japanese and Searle spent the following three and a half years as a prisoner, first at Changi Jail and then in Thailand, to work as a slave labourer on the Siam-Burma railway.

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370 Davies, Russell, Ronald Searle: A Biography, cit., p. 42.
371 Here Russell Davies is reporting Kaye Webb’s words. Davies, Russell, Ronald Searle: A Biography, cit., p. 50.
His experiences as a PoW — during which he suffered regular beatings and bouts of malaria and beriberi, and his weight fell to six stone — completely changed his outlook on life. “My friends and I, we all signed up together,” he recalled. “We had grown up together, we went to school together ... Basically all the people we loved and knew and grew up with simply became fertiliser for the nearest bamboo.”

Despite all his sufferings, Searle never gave up drawing. The sketches he realised — which he hid under the mattresses of men dying of cholera to prevent their discovery by Japanese guards — provide an intense evidence of the atrocities undergone by the prisoners of war.

In September 1945 Searle and the other prisoners were finally freed by the Allied Troops. Back in Cambridge, he exhibited some of his war drawings and he saw his childhood ambition realised when, on March 20, 1946, *Punch* published one of his cartoons.

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This event represented a great turning point in Searle’s career since he started to contribute not only to *Punch*, but also to several national and international magazines such as *Graphis, Holiday, Life* and *The New Yorker*. In 1946 he published *Forty Drawings*, a collections of his cartoons. Two years later he married Kaye Webb. They settled in London and had two children, the twins Kate and John.


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*Figure 127 - Ronald Searle, “Yes, Fido is just one of the family” (Punch; March 20, 1946)*

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In 1952 he founded Perpetua Books, his own publishing house.

In 1956 he took his place as a member of Mr Punch’s Table, “carving his initials with a chisel midway along the edge of the large oblong surface.” Work offers came also from abroad, especially from France and the USA and Searle started to spend some time in

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these two countries. In 1957, for example, he stayed in California for some months because Standard Oil commissioned him the short animated film *Energetically Yours*, which he realised with the collaboration of a group of animators working under the direction of Bill Melendez.

![Figure 130 - Ronald Searle, Part of the storyboard for *Energetically Yours* (1957)](image)

In 1961 the National Cartoonists’ Society named him Cartoonist of the Year, but when the news arrived Searle was not at home since *Life* magazine had sent him on assignment to Jerusalem for Adolf Eichmann’s trial. Back home, he stayed only to pack his suitcases again: he left his family and moved to Paris. After the divorce from his first wife, Searle married the artist, ballet and theatre designer Monica Koenig, whom he had met some years before during one of his business travels to the French capital. In 1973 Searle was the first non-French living artist to have the privilege to exhibit at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Pierre Dehaye, Director of the French Mint (La Monnaie), asked Searle to design a self-portrait medal to celebrate his exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Searle’s *automédaille* appeared the following year and obtained a great success. As a consequence, Dehaye proposed to Searle to start a collaboration for the design of a
whole series of commemorative medals in honour of the “Six Fathers of Caricature” (Carracci, Ghezzi, Hogarth, Gillray, Rowlandson, Cruickshank).

Figure 131 - Ronald Searle, Automédaille

Figure 132 - Ronald Searle, George Cruickshank’s medal

Figure 133 - Ronald Searle, Annibale Carracci’s medal
In the 1970s Monica was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. Chemotherapy had just been invented and doctors decided to experiment it on her, thus saving her life. In 1975 Searle and Monica moved to a house in Haute-Provence where they lived for the rest of their lives.

Searle never stopped working. In 1985 he illustrated a new edition of R.E. Raspe’s *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. He contributed cartoons to *The New Yorker* until 1992 and in 1995 his drawings started to be published in *Le Monde*. In 2007 he was appointed Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur. Some of his works are exhibited in the permanent collections of the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Imperial War Museum in London. One of his latest books, *Les Très Riches Heures de Mrs Mole*, published in 2010, is a collection of drawings he created for his wife Monica “to cheer every dreaded chemotherapy session and evoke the blissful future ahead.” Searle died in December 2011, some months after Monica’s death.

### 3.9.2 St. Trinian’s, or, the Boarding School before Harry Potter

This brief excursion in Ronald Searle’s life shows that he was an extremely eclectic and versatile artist. Russell Davies opens his biography of Searle by stating that he is “the foremost graphic artist of the modern age” and that it is impossible not to identify his particular style which is characterised by “a quality of nervousness, ricketiness, doubt.” Davies considers Searle as the perfect satirist because in his works he succeeds in creating a balance between humour and moralism, thus showing “how the serious man can take in the full horror of the world and still stay sane.” Searle’s artistic production is literally immense. I have taken into consideration his St. Trinian’s cartoons for two main reasons. First of all, I obviously notice in them some common features with Tim Burton’s work. Secondly, I think that these cartoons give full expression to Searle’s sarcasm.

As stated in the previous paragraph, the first St. Trinian’s cartoon was published in *Lilliput* in October 1941, but Searle found out about it only the following year. During

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377 Ibid.
378 Ibid.
the bombings in Singapore in 1942, in fact, he noticed a ragged copy of a little magazine: it was the *Lilliput* issue of October 1941. The second St. Trinian’s cartoon appeared in *Lilliput* after the war, in April 1946 and was followed by many others which were published not only in *Lilliput*, but also in *Punch*, in *Times Literary Supplement* and *Vogue*. The drawings are known as St. Trinian’s cartoons because they are all set in the eponymous boarding school, attended by a group of mischievous and wicked girls. In creating these characters Searle was probably inspired by the girls’ school attended by his sister Olive at Cambridge. As far as the name of the school is concerned, maybe Searle took it from St Trinnean’s Girls’ School in Edinburgh. He knew it thanks to Cécile and Pat Johnston, two sisters whom he met when he was stationed at Kirkudbright. The girls had attended the St Trinnean’s, which during the war was evacuated. Searle was surprised to see that the two girls were so keen to go back to their school, and he started to create funny drawings in which he represented it as a forcing-house for juvenile delinquency.

Searle also published four collections of his St. Trinian’s cartoons: *Hurrah for St. Trinian’s!* (1948), *The Female Approach* (1919), *Back to the Slaughterhouse* (1951), *Timothy Shy: The Terror of St. Trinian’s* (1952). He was astonished by the success obtained by the drawings and Russell Davies remarks that “the public’s enthusiasm for the genre easily outlasted its creator’s.” Even when Searle tried to blow St. Trinian’s up, the public wanted more of it. In a collection of cartoons published by Perpetua Books in 1953 and entitled *Souls in Torment*, in fact, Searle included a drawing in which St. Trinian’s is destroyed by an atomic explosion. His aim was to put a definitive end to St. Trinian’s but, notwithstanding this, he continued to be remembered and appreciated almost exclusively for the mischievous St. Trinian’s girls, who have also inspired several films: *The Belles of St. Trinian’s* (1954), *Blue Murder at St. Trinian’s* (1957), *The Pure Hell of St. Trinian’s* (1960), *The Great St. Trinian’s Train Robbery* (1966), *The Wildcats of St. Trinian’s* (1980), *St. Trinian’s* (2007), *St. Trinian’s 2: The Legend of Fritton’s Gold* (2009). As observed by the cartoonist

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Gerald Scarfe, Searle eventually would even despise his creation, because he was never able to completely get away from it. 381

Most critics agree in stating that St. Trinian’s cartoons were influenced by Searle’s experience as a prisoner of war. In The St. Trinian’s Story Kaye Webb, Searle’s first wife, supports this theory. Here she underlines the differences between the first and the second St. Trinian’s cartoons. The second drawing was published in Lilliput when Searle came back from Japan, but it was actually realised during his imprisonment. As far as this issue is concerned, Kaye Webb states:

It was inevitable that the debacle he had just witnessed, the atmosphere of cruelty and the smell of death in which he and his companions existed for the next four years, should permeate his drawings so that the next two schoolgirl jokes took on their first flavour of violence. It hardly seems necessary to mention that Searle does not really think of schoolgirls as murderous little horrors. But unconsciously he was seeking to reduce horror into a comprehensible and somehow palatable form. 382

According to Russell Davies, in St. Trinian’s cartoons “the general principle is that the girls and their teachers are very much alike in villainy, and ‘in it together’. ” 383 St. Trinian’s girls are capable of mischief but, at the same time, they are funny and not deprived of human sympathy. Reporting Searle’s words he explains that a St. Trinian’s girl

‘would be sadistic, cunning, dissolute, crooked, sordid, lacking morals of any sort and capable of any excess. She would also be well-spoken, even well-mannered and polite. Sardonic, witty and very amusing. She would be good company. In short: typically human and, despite everything, endearing.’ It is in this usually detached view of what is ‘typically human’ that the lessons of wartime show. 384

384 Ibid. p. 102.
It may be suggested that the great success obtained by the St. Trinian’s cartoons was due to the fact that “to the post-war generation, in need of reassurance that British values of decency and fair play continued unscathed, Searle was a bracing shock.” He created a masterpiece of comic anarchism showing “how amoral, ingrown and septic” the old public-school system could be, and in a sense predicting the occurrence of school problems, such as juvenile violence and bullying. Through black and white cartoons in which the word-picture dynamic is complementary, counterpointing and contradictory, Searle has been the forerunner of the present success of many school stories and of the Gothic taste which characterises contemporary children’s literature.

But before Hogwarts, there was another fictional English boarding school ... It was called St. Trinian’s School for Girls, and its name called up all that is unruly and unholy and high-spirited and utterly terror-inducing to conformist society. But, to which add, clever and resourceful and engaging and charming and ever so brave. The schoolgirls of St. Trinian’s, created — drawing by mordantly funny drawing — by the elegantly twisted pen of Ronald Searle, represent a world as dark and bewitching in its way as that now very famous school for witches and wizards.

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386 Ibid.

Figure 134 - A compilation of St. Trinian’s Cartoons by Ronald Searle
Figure 135 - A compilation of St. Trinian’s Cartoons by Ronald Searle
Figure 136 - A St. Trinian’s Cartoon by Ronald Searle
3.10 Edward Gorey

3.10.1 Life

Edward St. John Gorey – Ted for his friends – was born in Chicago in 1925. His father, Edward Leo Gorey, was a Hearst journalist. Both he and his wife Helen Garvey were the grandchildren of Irish immigrants. They divorced when Gorey was eleven years old and remarried when he was twenty-seven. When he was a child, Gorey liked drawing, playing Monopoly and reading. His parents were fond of mysteries and detective novels and Gorey became a great fan of Agatha Christie. “Agatha Christie is still my favourite author in all the world,” he said in a later interview. “I must have read everything she wrote at least three times.”

Gorey learnt to read at three and a half years old and by five he had already read *Dracula* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. This allowed him to graduate at a young age at Francis W. Parker private school. He also taught himself to draw and his only formal

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training in art was a Saturday course attended for one term at the Art Institute of Chicago. Between 1944 and 1946 he served in the Army. Back home he entered Harvard University, where he took his B.A. in French literature in 1950. During the university years he contributed to the Harvard Advocate and illustrated some books of poetry. After the degree he went to Boston working part-time in a bookstore and designing sets and posters for the Poets' Theater. In 1953 Gorey moved to New York because he had found a job at the design department of Anchor Books. He illustrated book jackets and re-released out-of-print classics. At the same time, he created and illustrated his own stories and was determined to have them published. Unfortunately, he was unable to find a publisher because his stories were considered too ghoulish. As a consequence, Gorey decided to invent his own publishing house, the Fantod Press, and to sell his books directly to stores. In 1953 he published his first book, The Unstrung Harp. The great success arrived in 1958 with The Doubtful Guest. It was followed by may other titles, such as The Hapless Child (1961), the abecedarian book The Gashlycrumb Tinies (1963), The Gilded Bat (1966), and The Deranged Cousins: or, Whatever (1969). Naming the titles of all Gorey's works would be impossible because he wrote more than a hundred books. He also illustrated more than sixty books of other writers, including Edward Lear, H. G. Wells, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, John Updike, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Edmund Wilson, Virginia Woolf and John Bellairs.

The meeting with Andreas Brown, the owner of the Gotham Book Mart, represented a turning point in Gorey's career. He started to exhibit his works in the store gallery, which also sold his books and several collectibles inspired by his works, thus giving him an international fame. During the 1970s and the 1980s Gorey published some anthologies of his works: Amphigorey (1972), Amphigorey Too (1975) – which inspired the 1978 musical stage adaptation, Gorey Stories – and Amphigorey Also (1983). In 1978 he won a Tony Award for the costume design of the 1977 Broadway production of Dracula. He also designed the title sequence animation of the PBS Mystery series (1980).

Gorey died in Cape Cod, where he had moved years before, in 2000. In his book The Strange Case of Edward Gorey, his friend Alexander Theroux remembers that Gorey never travelled, but was one of the most curious men on the planet; he lived alone and never married, but most of his books have children as protagonists; he was an
enthusiastic reader but also an “incontrovertible watcher of TV”, keen on the soap opera *All My Children*. “He was a man of astonishing extremes”\(^{390}\) whose works continue to be a source of inspiration for contemporary artists.

### 3.10.2 Amphigorey: Adults’ or Children’s Picturebooks?

In 2007, seven years after Gorey’s death, a new anthology of his works entitled *Amphigorey Again* was published, showing the fact that the interest in his books is still alive. Considered as a whole, the four anthologies of Edward Gorey’s works are a useful means to analyse the artistic production of an artist who has always been regarded by critics as controversial.

His friend Alexander Theroux observes that “Gorey’s is an unclassifiable genre: not really children’s books, neither comic books, not art stills”,\(^{391}\) and describing his books he states:

> With their hand-lettering, queer layouts, their framed and ornate borders, the small books seems frightfully old-fashioned and biscuity, as if they had been secretly presses out and printed in suspiciously limited editions in the dark, damp cellar of some creepy railway warehouse in nineteenth-century England by some old pinch-fisted joy-killer in a black claw-hammer oat with red-hot eyes, a black scowl, and a grudge against the world — and then managing to survive the must of long years by their sheer grotesquerie and horror.\(^{392}\)

In addition to this, according to Theroux “violence is the essential Gorey ingredient”,\(^{393}\) and maybe this is the reason why critics have always found difficult to consider his books suitable to children. As far as this issue is concerned, Kevin Shortsleeve points out that “scholars, critics, and everyday readers have been unsure how to classify the picture books


\(^{391}\) Ibid., p. 7.

\(^{392}\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^{393}\) Ibid., p. 11.
Gorey authored. Faced with a canon that appears to link childhood and the macabre, may, at first glance, are challenged and may refuse to validate the connection.”

Shortsleeve suggests that the confusion about the classification of Gorey’s books could have been caused by the way in which his picturebooks have been anthologised. Amphigorey, Amphigorey Too, Amphigorey Also and Amphigorey Again, in fact, mix up works which address to an adult audience and books which are mainly for children, such as The Wuggly Ump, The Listing Attic, The Doubtful Guest, The Untitled Book and The Stupid Joke. Some of these titles show the great influence that children’s books read by Gorey when he was young, especially Edward Lear’s nonsense, have had on the American artist. Among the picturebooks addressed to children, Shortsleeve does not include Gorey’s alphabet The Gushlycrumb Tinies. This work is generally considered too violent and macabre to be suitable for young readers but it may be suggested that, like many other picturebooks realised by Gorey, it recalls the past tradition of the cautionary tales which I have already analysed with the work of Heinrich Hoffmann’s and Wilhelm Busch. Also Gorey’s world, in fact, is populated by common objects which can “take on sinister lives on their own” and the protagonists of his stories are often children who are “innocent victims of surroundings that are animate, like the walking dead, and have minds ad motives of their own. Such supernatural motives are inaccessible and incomprehensible to us. – When the world around us is incomprehensible, we have lost control of it.”

“When the world around us is incomprehensible”, then it becomes Kayser’s “estranged world”, which Gorey describes through picturebooks in which the black and white prevails and in which the word-picture dynamic is complex and can cover all the different types of the text-picture interaction analysed by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott.

In an interview issued to Tobi Tobias in 1974 Gorey said: “A lot of things I’ve done, I’ve intended for children. I don’t know many children. And I don’t know if I really remember what it was like being a child, or not. I use children a lot, because they’re

396 Ibid., pp. 182-183.
397 Cfr. p. 49.
so vulnerable.” And maybe the appeal that Gorey’s works still have on children is due to “the honesty with which Gorey depicts danger.” It may be suggested that the stories written and illustrated by Edward Gorey are a perfect example of the problematic nature of children’s literature, to which I have briefly made reference at the end of the second chapter. Andrew Casson points put that

Defining children’s literature is notoriously difficult and the problems it raises have been if not endlessly, at least thoroughly discussed. Most agree though, and few fail to point out that although it is most often about and at least ostensibly for children alone, it is, throughout the entire production process, by adults. It is written by adults, published and reviewed by adults, bought by adults and in many cases read by adults both for their own enjoyment and for that of the children.

In addition to this, Gorey’s work supports the ideas recently expressed by Sandra L. Beckett in Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages. Here Beckett states that picturebooks should be considered as part of crossover literature because they are multileveled and because “more than any other genre, they can genuinely be books for all ages.” As a matter of fact, “they invite different forms of reading, depending on the age and experience of the reader.”

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400 Cfr. p. 67.
403 Ibid., p. 16.
Chapter 3 - Illustrators of the Grotesque and the Gothic

Each night Father fills me with dread
When he sits on the foot of my bed;
I'd not mind that he speaks
In gibbers and squeaks,
But for seventeen years he's been dead.

There was a young curate whose brain
Was deranged from the use of cocaine;
He lured a small child
To a copse dark and wild,
Where he beat it to death with his cane.

The first child of a Mrs Keats Shelley
Came to light with its face in its belly;
Her second was born
With a hump and a horn,
And her third was as shapeless as jelly.

Augustus, for splashing his soup,
Was put for the night on the stoop;
In the morning he'd not
Repented a jot,
And next day he was dead of the croup.

Figure 138 - Edward Gorey, The Listing Attic (from Amphigorey, 1972)
Figure 139 - Edward Gorey, The Doubtful Guest
(from Amphigorey, 1972)
Figure 140 - Edward Gorey, The Gashlycrumb Tinies (from Amphigorey, 1972)
3.11 Illustrators of the Grotesque and the Gothic: Conclusive Remarks

The present dissertation opens with a quotation from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland in which young Alice asks what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations. In Looking at Pictures in Picture Books, Jane Doonan identifies three main reasons which make useful the presence of illustrations in children’s books:

- Pictures “provide children with sensuous pleasure for the eye: an affective visual experience”
- Pictures are “an aid to literacy and language development” thus providing also a “verbal experience”
- Picturebooks “enable the book to function as an art object: something which gives form to ideas and to which we can attach our ideas.”

The analysis of the works realised by the illustrators I have taken into consideration in this chapter should provide further evidence in support of Doonan’s point of view. Here I want to emphasise the fact that my list is not all-inclusive, because the illustrators and their works have been chosen according to their role within my project. The criteria of selection which appear at the beginning of the present chapter are not meant to include all the grotesque and Gothic illustrators who operated between the nineteenth and the twenty-first century. My purpose is rather that of identifying those artists who share a stylistic coherence characterised by the joint-presence of visual and literary grotesque and Gothic images, whose imaginative worlds have influenced the Burtonesque style of Tim Burton.