

Gothic, Girls and Comics: The Strange Case of *Misty*

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**GOTHIC, GIRLS AND COMICS:
THE STRANGE CASE OF *MISTY***

THE AESTHETICS OF GOTHIC: TERROR AND HORROR

GOTHIC FOR GIRLS: REAL LIFE AND METAPHOR

THE GOTHIC REALITIES OF RESEARCH

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my background in gothic and lit crit, but from pg level onwards comics. academic work - how gothic tropes can help us investigate the comics page. not just horror comics - unlikely places - care bears comics etc. led me towards British girls' comics, dominant 50s-70s but forgotten genre, disturbing content. narratives of trauma and fear, aim to rediscover this lost gothic.

just finished 5 year project investigating British girls' comic Misty - a girls' comic from the 1970s based around supernatural horror and mystery stories, aimed at 7-15 year old girls.

my research has involved:

- archival research, creator interviews, quantitative and qualitative analysis of scripts and completed pages, common tropes and themes in stories, lots of online discussions and close analysis of art and narrative, and much more...
- I've produced a critical book, searchable database, three pieces of short fiction and metafiction in comics format, and am currently working on extending my database into a live shared resource taking in more British periodicals.

Misty is a great example of one of the diverse and unexpected places where Gothic can be found. It is also basically my reality now, so I thought I'd talk a bit about it today, from a few different angles. I connect it to the conference theme in three main ways.

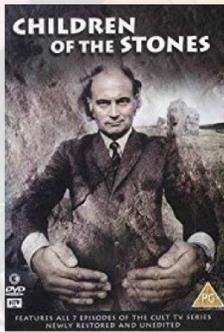
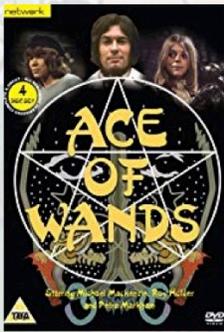
Firstly use it to explore **how Gothic works in a visual medium** like comics. What can Misty's aesthetic reveal about theoretical notions like terror and horror? How might they relate to the realities of Misty's branding and self-image?

Secondly, look at some key story themes. One thing Misty does consistently is **rework Gothic themes and tropes into metaphors for the real-life experiences of a female teenage audience**. In my book I've used this to help define my critical model of Gothic for Girls.

Finally, take a step back and reflect on **the realities of researching Gothic in a digital age** and the value of quantitative research and database tools

Argument: to demonstrate the ongoing mutability of Gothic as a mode that appears in unexpected formats and places, and has a flexible relationship to the real.

1970s



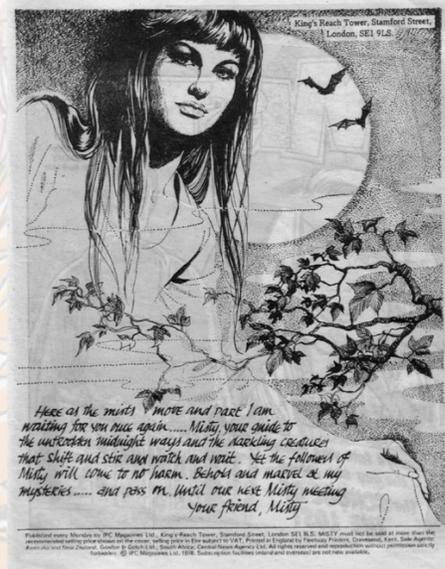
often combine a discourse of nostalgia with a narrow focus on a particular aspect: bad taste and fashion, political incorrectness, recession and power cuts, vulgarity or grottness. postwar consensus crumbled during this decade: important liberal victories (such as the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Race Relations Act 1976), but also restrictive legislation around drugs, immigration, criminal damage, terrorism, etc, foreign travel was on the rise, space travel was happening, tv and microwaves and digital watches and calculators, and computer games like pong and space invaders Also significant changes in treatment of horror: Horror cinema - move toward “pure” horror, unmotivated, violent, without explanation or backstory—Jaws bites because that’s what sharks do—that extended into films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978). Also move towards teenage concerns – from rosemary’s baby to Halloween, Carrie, etc.

Following the trend of horror getting younger, also a rise of children's gothic – on TV (*Ace of Wands* (re stage magician with supernatural powers), *Shadows* horror anthology covering everything from traditional stories of witches, ghosts, and myths to child abuse and dark urban fantasy. *Children of the Stones* (HTV/ITV, 1977) exploited the horror trope of the small, creepy village with strange or vacant inhabitants, combined with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978)

Factual horror books for children e.g. Hamlyn or Osborne books of monsters, etc. Public information films – dangers of drowning, playing on train tracks, fireworks, going with strangers, etc – brutal and direct, strongly coded as horror, with voiceovers from the likes of Donald Pleasance, etc.

(5m)

"PACTS WITH THE DEVIL, SCHOOLGIRL SACRIFICE, THE GHOSTS OF HANGED GIRLS, SINISTER CULTS, EVIL SCIENTISTS EXPERIMENTING ON THE INNOCENT AND TERRIFYING PARALLEL WORLDS WHERE THE NAZIS WON THE SECOND WORLD WAR"
(RAYNER 2012)



Misty - launched in January 1978, as 'all new mystery title for girls'. devised by Pat Mills and Wilf Prigmore for Fleetway/IPC.

Misty was set up to compete with rival publisher DC Thomson's comic Spellbound: a title dedicated to stories with supernatural and mystery themes (as you can see here, Jackie Raymer describes them a bit more luridly - absolutely accurate!)

101 issues, just under 2y, like most British comics it was an anthology that contained both serial and single stories. Also like other British comics, single female name as title: in this instance attached to its host character, a gothic Wiccan type woman, who welcomes us to every issue. Spirit guide, signs herself your friend, conjures atmosphere of mystery and magic.

Basic contents of each issue is average of 6 diff stories - a mix of serials and standalone tales - and some comedy cartoons. Longer serials tell tales of adversity and personal growth like Moonchild (rewrite of Carrie), vs single stories: vicious cautionary tales with bad endings for wicked protagonists.

I really enjoy summarising Misty stories for captive audiences, so just very briefly and to give you a feel of what it was like, here's three that I think capture it quite well:

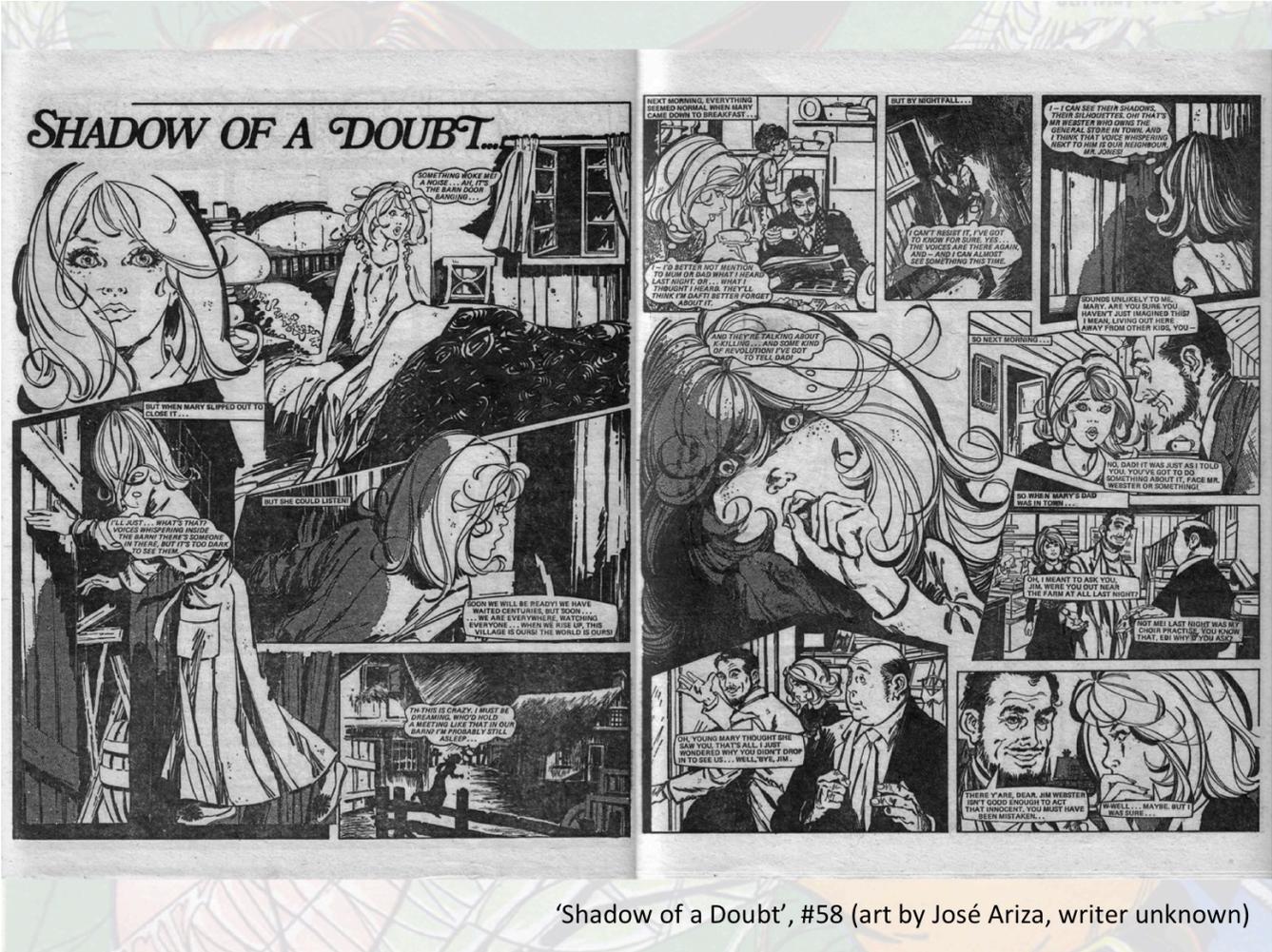


'The Cult of the Cat', #1-12 (art by Homero, poss. written by Bill Harrington)

The Cult of the Cat:

Serial in 12 episodes - typical Misty structure of a protagonist with a weird or spooky problem that they must try and solve.

Schoolgirl Nicola Scott and her acceptance of her destiny as the Chosen One of Bast. The story cuts between Egypt and England, as a messenger, Charmian, is dispatched from the Temple of Bast to awaken Nicola to her gifts. Charmian follows Nicola around, placing a cat ring on her finger while she sleeps that Nicola can't remove and Nicola then begins to develop catlike traits (fear of water, ability to climb and balance, light-reflective eyes) and has new knowledge/visions of Egypt. Terrified she is turning into a cat and has nightmares about this, and up until the final episode we are unsure whether the Cult wishes Nicola harm or not. The story finally resolves in a dream where Nicola accepts her destiny, sends her secret spirit self to Egypt, is ordained as Priestess of the Temple of Bast, to help them in their fight against evil.



'Shadow of a Doubt', #58 (art by José Ariza, writer unknown)



Shadow of a Doubt:

In “Shadow of a Doubt . . .” (#58), Mary hears whispers coming from their barn at night. She goes to investigate and recognizes the voices as belonging to her friends, neighbors, and even family, who are “talking about k-killing . . . and some kind of revolution.” She runs away to lock herself in her room but is confronted by her shadow, which turns to her and speaks, saying it is the shadows that have been plotting: “We are shadows . . . thousands of us . . . millions . . . and soon we shall rise up!” She tries to tell people but nobody believes her, they just laugh, and so the story ends, with an ominous shadow rising up over its owner...



'Mirror...Mirror', #37 (art by Isidre Mones, writer unknown)



Mirror ... Mirror:

Linda, a plain girl who is teased about her looks. She bumps into an old woman who gives her a magic mirror and says it will make her beautiful if she follows its instructions correctly.

And it works! But as she got more lovely she also became mean and vain, and one evening she slams the door after arguing with her mother, and the mirror cracks. She decides not to worry about it and goes to bed, but when she wakes up in the morning her beautiful face has cracked, just like the mirror, and the story ends 'would you want to face yourself every morning like this?'

Strong stuff! But stories also noteworthy for their dramatic and dynamic artwork – bringing me to my first section looking at the aesthetics of Gothic.

THE AESTHETICS OF GOTHIC

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHOD

- (1) EXPLORE THE USE OF ARTISTIC LAYOUT IN *MISTY*
- (2) INVESTIGATE THE SUFFICIENCY AND USEFULNESS OF EXISTING COMICS THEORISTS' TAXONOMIES OF PAGE LAYOUTS
- (3) CONSIDER THE RELEVANCE OF GOTHIC THEORY TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ASPECTS OF PAGE LAYOUT



Misty's layouts were so dramatic that one thing I really wanted to do was explore the visual storytelling by focusing on the page layouts.

Funding CsJCC – Paul Fisher Davies – tagging a random sample of page layouts.

The project aimed to explore the use of artistic layout in *Misty* and then to use this to reflect on the usefulness of relevant comics scholarship and Gothic theory. Today – just focus on the third (you can ask me later if you're interested in the other two) 😊

Random sample of ten issues:

Impactful features of these pages were then identified and manually tagged using NVivo, with the list of possible classifications developing as the study continued.

List on left of image shows what we were looking for – three main categories: borders (could be angled borders, round borders, open borders, jagged borders, and so forth), page layout features (arrows, colour, inset panels, and splash pages), and tiering (number of rows of panels per page).

– you can see here 2 pages from MM with colour-coded tags showing the different elements we flagged up.

First discovery: there is always something happening and no pages in our 300 or so page sample received no tags.

Even pages that look quite simple, eg p1 here, have panels of varied shapes (circular, angular), missing borders (all except the circular one), angled tiering (the top edge of the bottom row), a nested layout (circular panel overlays the first one), and broken borders (the speech of the boys which cuts into the circular panel).

Combined quantitative analysis of these features with close reading of a randomized selection of tales, to identify if particular features have a common function. Found that while panels of a particular shape (a cat, a puff of smoke) often had a modalising function (i.e. related to the story events), most of the common features such as borderless panels were entirely decorative with no significance to the narrative events.

“SHARING ARRESTING DISTORTIONS IN MOOD AND CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE . . . OFTEN IN THE SETTING OF LUSH, OMINOUS DECAY . . . A VERY DISTINCTIVE KIND OF BAROQUE AND SELF-CONSCIOUS EXPRESSIONISM, RELYING ON UNUSUALLY OVER-RIPE, EVEN VIOLENT VISUAL EXAGGERATIONS AND REFRACTIONS”

(FARBER 1972, 95)

(SEE ALSO WHEATLEY 2006: 9)

“FEATURES INCLUDING INTENSIVE CHIAROSCURO [*STRONG CONTRASTS BETWEEN LIGHT AND DARK*]; CROWDED SPACE; INTRICATE DETAILING; AN EMPHASIS ON LINE; DISTORTED PROPORTIONS; A SATURATED COLOR PALETTE OR COMBINATIONS OF BLACK, WHITE AND RED; ORNATE FONTS; AND DELIBERATELY RETRO OR ARCHAIC STYLING.” (SPOONER 2017, 49)



Edward Scissorhands

It's obviously tempting to argue that the dynamic, inconsistent layouts reflect the comic's themes: transgressive and uncontained, focusing on rule breaking and its consequences. But they can also be read as more directly Gothic.

Stephen Farber gives us one of the first definitions of cinematic Gothic (1972), arguing that G films: have “arresting distortions in mood and cinematic technique . . . often in the setting of lush, ominous decay . . . a very distinctive kind of baroque and self-conscious expressionism, relying on unusually over-ripe, even violent visual exaggerations and refractions” (1972, 95). He draws attention to key visual components that include black costumes and settings, “weird” lighting and unsettling camera angles, exaggerated shadows, and large, asymmetrical settings and composition (Wheatley 2006, 9).

Writing nearly half a century later, Catherine Spooner (2017, 49) considers the aesthetics of various pop culture Gothic, including the films of del Toro and Tim Burton, Chris Riddell's illustrations, and merchandise and products such as *Emily the Strange*. She offers the following definition of twenty-first-century Gothic style, as varied but recognizable through its "combination of features including intensive chiaroscuro [*kiaro-scuro*]; crowded space; intricate detailing; an emphasis on line; distorted proportions; a saturated color palette or combinations of black, white and red; ornate fonts; and deliberately retro or archaic styling."

She provides a number of readings of this in practice including the castle from Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, noting:

a lack of symmetry. [...] Architecture is apparently constructed without right angles: the few straight lines are broken and jagged [...] the curving lines of the staircase and windows are suggestive of organic forms. The overall effect is both stark and overelaborate, creating a distinctive sense of timelessness, in which the architecture evokes Gothic precedents but cannot be matched to any specific historical style. (Spooner 2017, 63)

- ◆ CHIAROSCURO OR EXAGGERATED SHADOWS
- ◆ DISTORTED PROPORTIONS
- ◆ SKEWED ANGLES
- ◆ ASYMMETRY
- ◆ BAROQUE OR INTRICATE ORNAMENTATION
- ◆ MOTIFS OF AGE OR DECAY



Ariza, 'Catch the Moon if you Can', #95



Delaney, 'Midnight Masquerader', #40

Taking the two definitions in combination produces a list of Gothic visual features that include exaggerated shadows or chiaroscuro; distorted proportions; skewed angles; asymmetry; baroque or intricate ornamentation; and motifs of age or decay.

Of this list, those that relate to the page's formal properties rather than panel content (such as shadows or motifs of age) are all present in the pages analyzed from *Misty*.

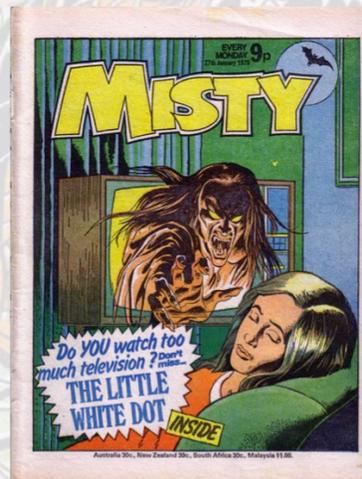
- uses panel sizes that vary from splash pages to small proportions, creating an effect that is non-regular and resulting in distortion
- Acute and oblique angles appear on one-third of the pages examined, creating asymmetrical layouts that are further emphasized by varied border shapes and patterns
- Particular features such as the torn or misty border (shown on right here as smoke from candle) or curved or circular panels also help create an asymmetrical organic effect and

avoiding rigid lines. Varied tiering also contributes to the asymmetry and is so dramatic that one-tenth of the pages cannot be clearly defined or classified.

- The page layout as a whole thus becomes intricate and baroque in its excess.

TERROR: THE OBSCURED, UNSEEN HORROR: THE SHOWN ATROCITY

‘TERROR AND HORROR ARE SO FAR OPPOSITE, THAT THE FIRST EXPANDS THE SOUL, AND AWAKENS THE FACULTIES TO A HIGH DEGREE OF LIFE; THE OTHER CONTRACTS, FREEZES, AND NEARLY ANNIHILATES THEM.’
(RADCLIFFE 1826: 5)



Having got quite into random sampling and quantitative research, I thought I'd extend this sort of analysis in a more basic way to look at other Gothic concepts. Obviously a good starting point is Ann Radcliffe's critical distinction between terror and horror

Radcliffe (1826) claims Gothic is composed of two opposing impulses: the expansion of terror and the contraction of horror. So the terror-gothic awakens our senses and draws us to obscured places, relying on the unseen and impending threat, whereas the horror-gothic overwhelms us and disturbs our complacency with a shocking, grotesque or obscene image

Later critics and creators have continued to explore this famous distinction:
HP Lovecraft divides fear into: archaic, pre-psychoanalytic fear, and 'mere' physical repulsion (1927).

King – terror unseen; horror grotesque, and adds own category of the 'gross out'

Wheatley ref TV – supernatural ghost story vs effects driven horror



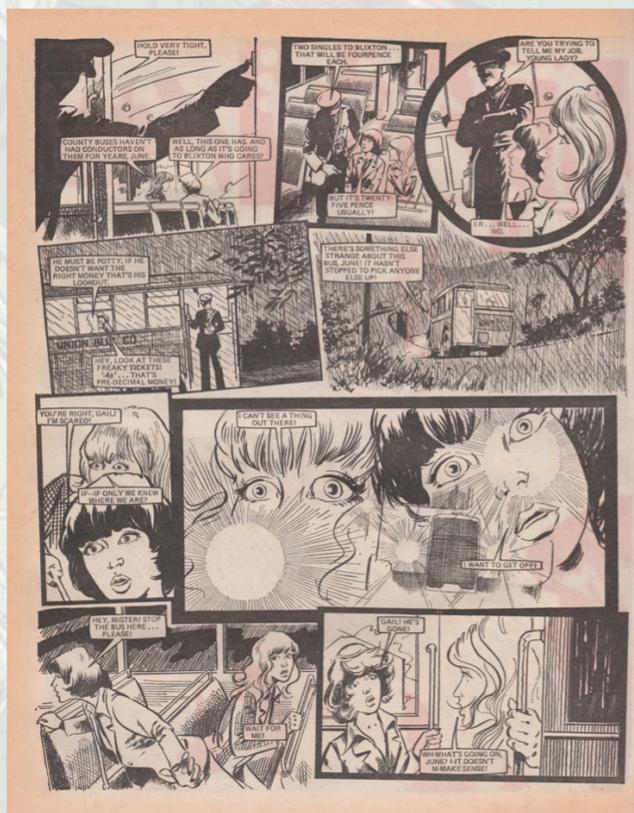
With this in mind I turned to other aspects of *Misty*, including its covers, story titles, and story content.

I found that the majority of *Misty* covers rely on terror (by showing us fear without a source), although horrifying images were a close second. (40%) of covers showed a fearful reaction (wide eyes, screaming, running) whereas (36%) showed a horrifying image (a skeleton,

monster or animal), Of the others, (14%) showed an image of Misty herself; and (10%) contained some other non-threatening or abstract image (horses, fairies, etcetera).



But by contrast, the story titles didn't use terror or horror that much. Instead, they tended strongly towards the mysterious and suggestive e.g. by referencing a mysterious item ('The Jukebox' (#28), 'The Dummy' (#4), 'The Swarm' (#9, Annual 1979), 'The Silver Racer-Back' (#83-#91)) or making puns on the story's content ('Examination Nerves' (#47), 'The Writing on the Wall' (#76), or 'Prize Possession' (#19)') Gothic words like monsters, dark, evil, etc, seldom feature – less than 10% of the time in total.



78%: TERROR

'Hold Tight Please' (#29), art by Peter Wilkes



22%: HORROR

'Queen's Weather' (#18), art by Josép Gual

Finally, I looked at a discrete random sample of ten issues of *Misty* (containing sixty-four individual story episodes). I firstly discovered that all (100%) use some instance of fear. However, just (22%) rely upon a monstrous image or effect to horrify (such as skeletons, or spiders, or fire). The remaining (78%) didn't show anything horrifying, and although dramatic events like accidents or gothic characters like witches feature there is no grotesquery or gore. Instead they raise tension through their narrative stance and by suggesting an impending doom.

e.g. The terror-Gothic informs stories such as "Hold Tight Please" (#29) (fig. 9.4), where June and Gail catch a mysterious, ghostly bus home from the disco. The story ends happily, but before this it creates a creeping terror that is emphasized through their wide eyes, isolation, and the obscuration of any information ("I can't see a thing out there"). Peter Wilkes's art uses

heavily shadowed images (conductor top right), contributing to the feel of increasing nervousness and awakened senses.

Vs the horror-Gothic: “Queen’s Weather” (#18) (fig. 9.3), where Sally swats a bee and is attacked by a swarm that traps her in its hive. The page layout highlights her fear in the central panel, and Josép Gual’s art also emphasizes horror, depicting the bees as monstrous and alien with detailed, hairy bodies.

So this demonstrated that *Misty’s* content relied mostly on images of terror and mystery rather than outright horror, and that this was strongly supported by its paratextual elements.

This focus on mystery and terror over outright horror... was interesting as it doubtless contributed to *Misty’s* success and is representative of its positioning regarding class and gender.



‘THE TWIHARDS ARE THE NEW CATHERINE MORLANDS’

(PRIEST, 2011)

Misty was always branded as ‘mystery story paper’ not a horror comic – Wilf Prigmore told me that girls’ titles were always called story papers, perhaps to sound sophisticated, or to appeal to parents/gatekeepers by reminding them of the prose papers from their youth.

Use other taglines, often ‘dare you read...’, ‘stories not to be read at night’, or ‘enter the midnight world of...’

I think this finds a parallel in the elegiac discourse around Gothic (where newer, popular works are contrasted unfavorably with older, more serious texts and practices) and that this can be read with gender in mind

Although Gothic’s appeal to female creators and readers is undisputed, the contributions of female writers and the tastes of female audiences have frequently come under fire, whether it is early critiques of Frankenstein, or more contemporary attacks on Twilight. Scholars such as Chloe Buckley (2018) and Hannah Priest draw attention to the numerous critics who are intent on claiming an elite marginal position for Gothic and its themes even though it comes from pulps and mass marketing (*noting, e.g., Joshi 2001, 2004; Botting 2008; Beville 2009*), and who often sweepingly dismiss feminine Gothic forms to do so (see Botting 2008). As Priest (2011) summarizes – in a guest post, I think, on Stirling Uni’s Gothic Imagination blog back in 2011: “The Twihards are the new Catherine Morlands.”

This brings me to my second section, which will explore the ways in which Misty addressed the concerns of its readers by twisting Gothic themes into metaphors for the **real-life experiences** of a female teenage audience.

25 mins

GOTHIC FOR GIRLS: REAL LIFE AND METAPHOR



NICOLA SCOTT IS CONVINCED HER BODY IS UNDERGOING A SLOW FRIGHTENING CYCLE OF CHANGE FROM GIRL INTO CAT EVER SINCE SHE DREAMED OF A MYSTERIOUS GIRL WHO PLACED A CAT RING ON HER FINGER. NICOLA HAS YET TO LEARN THE GIRL IS AN EMISSARY FROM AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CULT. THEN AT A PARTY GIVEN BY FRIENDS TO CHEER HER UP, THE SIGHT OF A CAT MASK THROWS HER INTO A STRANGE TRANCE, AND FILLED HER MIND WITH HORRIBLE VISIONS. . .

Misty #7

NICOLA SCOTT IS CONVINCED HER BODY IS UNDERGOING A SLOW FRIGHTENING CYCLE OF CHANGE FROM GIRL INTO CAT EVER SINCE SHE DREAMED OF A MYSTERIOUS GIRL WHO PLACED A CAT RING ON HER FINGER. NICOLA HAS YET TO LEARN THE GIRL IS AN EMISSARY FROM AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CULT. THEN AT A PARTY GIVEN BY FRIENDS TO CHEER HER UP, THE SIGHT OF A CAT MASK THROWS HER INTO A STRANGE TRANCE, AND FILLED HER MIND WITH HORRIBLE VISIONS. . .

'EACH GOTHIC HEROINE IS [...] BORN INTO A WORLD THAT IS BLIND, INDIFFERENT, OR HOSTILE TO HER SPECIAL QUALITIES. EACH MUST PASS THROUGH A LIMINAL STATE IN WHICH HER TRUE IDENTITY IS CONCEALED, AND ALL ARE RELENTLESSLY PURSUED BY A GOTHIC VILLAIN...'

(ORIANNE SMITH 2013, 129)

'A NEW ACCOUNT OF THE GROTESQUE REVEALS THAT FEMALE ADOLESCENCE MIGHT, RATHER, EMBODY THE POSSIBILITY OF ENDLESS METAMORPHOSIS.'

(GLEESON-WHITE 2001: 112)



One of the things I found so interesting about Misty was the tension between its serial stories and the one-off cautionary tales, but the way that both nonetheless addressed themselves to a young female audience.

While transformation and sometimes the grotesque are used threat or punishment in the single stories, the serials explore these ideas from the opposite angle.

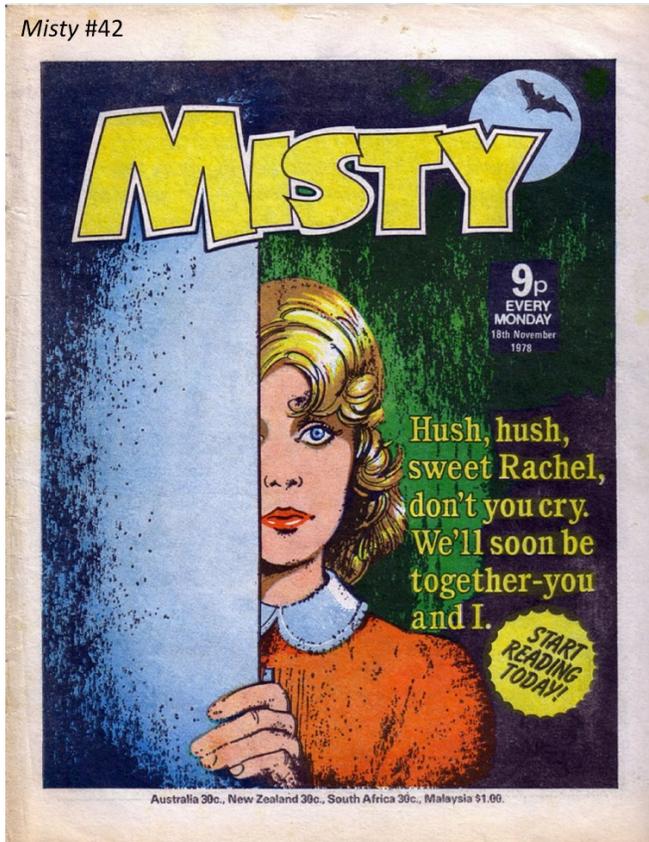
They all follow the same outline, broken down into two main types. We are introduced to a female protagonist, who quickly develops a problem of some kind, which might be a supernatural power (visions, telekinesis, telepathy) or the discovery of a mysterious or magical object (a box of paints, a ring, a mirror, a car, a swimsuit). Alternatively in the second type of story the protagonist may

find herself trapped in an unhappy situation (a new family, school, or world) or becomes aware of some deception (a secret, prisoner, or plot of some kind).

However, one particularly common feature of both types of serial is that the protagonist has to accept or overcome some aspect of herself, which underpins a third of all the serial stories. This is often a hidden part or special power or could be revealed by the mysterious or magical object, or reason she has been trapped or imprisoned, or the means for her to escape. A good example is “The Cult of the Cat,” which I mentioned at the start of this talk. As I described, it's a story of increasing tension and fear as Nicola worries about why Charmian is following her, and the “slow frightening cycle of change” that is happening.

The first thing that struck me that Nicola can be read as a persecuted and pursued Gothic heroine in flight – with special qualities, who only slowly realizes her true identity, and is chased by seeming antagonists who may or may not wish her harm.

But of course, the notion of a ‘slow frightening cycle of change’ can also be read as a clear metaphor for puberty, with the loss of control Nicola feels over her own body repeated over and over again, as here where she pleads ‘leave me alone’ and ‘keep out of my head’. She is also scared by the changes she sees in her body, examining it one morning and finding that “everything’s changing—my nails, my eyes . . .” (#6).



BODILY DEVELOPMENT/MATURITY 'EITHER IGNORED, DIMINISHED, OR TREATED AS ABNORMAL' IN BRITISH GIRLS' COMICS 1920-1950 (TINKLER 1995: 161)

Similar metaphors in other serials.

In 'Don't Look Twice', Sammy gets terrifying visions of the open sea (it turns out that these are the experiences of a twin sister she doesn't know about).

In 'Wolf Girl', Lona finds out that she was raised by wolves as a baby before being adopted, and again she starts to experience a loss of control as she begins to behave more and more like a wolf.

In "Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" (#42–52) (rewrite of Audrey Rose), our protagonist Lisa begins to believe she is the reincarnation of a little girl called Rachel and experiences a series of frightening lapses where she loses all control over her body and actions. During these

being carnivalesque or performative, or allow for self-transformation. Masks both reveal and conceal, and evoke doubleness in this way: but ‘their horror frequently lies in its collapse; in the loss of control of the mask or the disguise, so that it estranges the bearer from his/her “original” identity’ (422). In ‘Mask of Fear’ (#39) Sue steals a mask from her Uncle’s creepy collection and wins first prize at the Hallowe’en party she attends – but when she tries to remove it she only finds another underneath... ‘and another... and another... and another...’ Her mirror plays a central role in this unveiling, as this is where we see the mask repeated uncannily, and a jagged panel also marks the moment of this reveal. Sue’s own face is completely hidden throughout this page, removing all trace of her identity and agency. The composition of panels two, three and seven emphasises this further as her back is turned to us, allowing the reflected mask to leer at the reader alongside Sue in the final panel. She is reduced to simply crying out ‘Oh, no! No! No!’ – losing control over her identity and her words and unable to return to her previous self.

Fears of uncontrollable change, endless metamorphosis, or loss of control over one’s actions or self underlie a significant number of the *Misty* serials. Penny Tinkler’s research into girls’ story papers between 1920 and 1950 found while appearance and beauty were appropriate topics of discussion, the development and maturity of the girl’s body “[were] either ignored, diminished, or treated as abnormal” (1995, 161), despite large numbers of letters received on the subject (Hemming 1960).

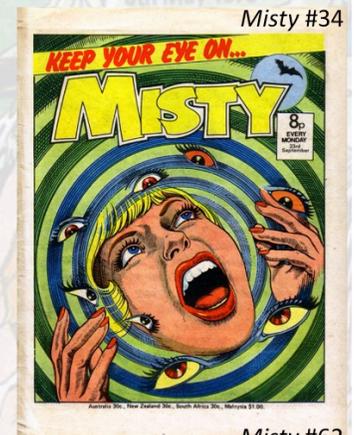
Appleyard argues that teenage horror is often a metaphor for experiences of change and separation that are characteristic of adolescence, in particular the growing sense of “a split between the ‘me nobody knows’ and a changing personality” (1991, 109), Gleeson-White (2001, 112) also draws attention to “the felt ‘freakishness’ of the adolescent, particularly female, experience,” and this sentiment is one that the *Misty* serials often explore and try and reconcile.

The physical and emotional changes experienced by the Misty heroines are perhaps metaphors for these worries, as the stories emphasize their positive journeys of acceptance and growth. They are also emblematic of the Female Gothic. I personally find FG a problematic term, but I was forced to engage with it for this work. Critics such as

(Wollstonecraft 1792; Fitzgerald 2004), have identified physical transformation and anxieties about the body as key to the Female Gothic, along with symbols of isolation and live burial (Irigaray 1987; Hoeveler 1998). These are brought together in the “feminine carceral,” where the female body either is imprisoned or is itself experienced as a prison (Davison 2009).

GOTHIC FOR GIRLS

- EXPLORES AND ENACTS IDENTITY
- ISOLATED OR TRAPPED PROTAGONISTS
- MAGICAL REALIST WORLD, WHICH JUXTAPOSES THE MUNDANE AND THE SUPERNATURAL
- CONFRONTS READERS WITH THE UNKNOWN OR THE OTHER
- NARRATIVE IS DRIVEN BY SIMULTANEOUS FEAR (TERROR) AND ATTRACTION, OFTEN RE: INCARCERATION, TRANSFORMATION (PHYSICAL OR MENTAL), AND DOUBT
- TEMPTATION AND TRANSGRESSION AS CATALYSTS
- SELF-CONTROL OR SELF-ACCEPTANCE PROVIDE THE MEANS OF ESCAPE
- CONSTRUCTS AND ACKNOWLEDGES GIRLHOOD AS AN UNCANNY EXPERIENCE



Misty #34



Misty #62

In *Misty* these freakish bodies and uncontrolled changes are also set against a backdrop of uncertainty and doubt, and so become tools for destabilising identity. As Sammy exclaims to her mother in “Don’t Look Twice,” “Wouldn’t it be absolutely awful, Mum? To wake up and not know who you really are!” (#62). Her parents have not told her the truth about her adoption, and many of these other *Misty* tales also foreground a fear of falsity, particularly patriarchal mistrust, which can have devastating consequences. [add robot story?]

So as well as conveying explicit girlhood worries (friendship, bullying, etc.), Gothic concerns

about identity, control, and falsity are reconfigured into metaphors for negotiating puberty and femininity. This led me towards theorising a definition of Gothic for Girls as something that explores identity development through themes of isolation or incarceration, set in a magical realist world that is both uncanny and uncertain, and driven by themes of transgression and transformation. It's a subgenre that constructs and acknowledges girlhood as an uncanny experience, building on ideas about the liminality of childhood, interrogating expectations and reimagining its fears.

THE GOTHIC REALITIES OF RESEARCH

AIMS:
INTERDISCIPLINARY (SUITED TO FIELD)

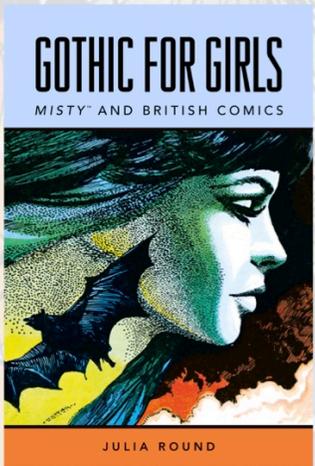
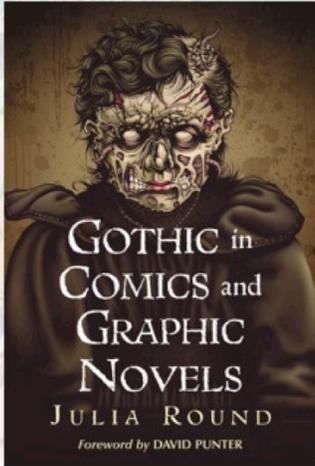
CORPUS:
MANAGEABLE
FINITE
AIDS OBJECTIVITY?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
ADAPTABLE! ANSWERABLE

METHODS:
MIXED
QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS, THE FEAR, THE BENEFITS
SCRIVENER, NVIVO

ACCESS:
OPEN ACCESS: ANNOTATIONS, NOTES, INTERVIEWS
WHERE TO PUBLISH THESE?
ADDITIONAL OUTPUTS: COMICS, ONLINE DATABASE

WHAT NEXT?
SQL AND ABCD



As a mode that deals with fear and transgression, Gothic is (to me) endlessly interesting. But also, maybe, it's a symbol that can be transposed onto some of the complexities of research practice.

I wrote in the epilogue to my book on Misty that:

Finishing a book feels a little like standing on a precipice—or perhaps I would just like to imagine myself as this sort of Gothic heroine. I look back over my shoulder and worry about what I have left undone, what I have not included, what I have not been able to uncover.

So to wrap up I just want to reflect on **the realities of researching Gothic in a digital age** and the methods available to do so. In particular want to point to the ways in which quantitative research and database tools have enhanced my analysis and conclusions, and enabled more collaborative and open access research practice.

Humanities research and teaching is changing fast and we might sometimes feel like gothic writers living in the Enlightenment – buffeted by tools and programmes that are developing faster than we can keep up, options to explore vast sets of big data, and unprecedented levels of access to the thoughts of readers, writers, and the dialogues between them.

Diving into the world of quantitative analysis, spreadsheets and SQL databases was never my plan when I began this project. But I found that my methods were forced to change to fit the type of research I wanted to do and the questions I wanted to ask. So I thought I'd wrap up by reflecting on some of the things I discovered during this project, in the hope that it's helpful.

Not my first book! – but it was a v different project than most of the writing I've done before. Learnt a lot about writing and structuring a book from my first book (esp how not to do it); I learnt a lot about conducting research from this one.

Aims: part cultural history of Misty and its production, part critical theory of how and why to read gothic comics. Not ideal (giant bibliography, massive 350 page book that came in 20,000 words over the proposal – UPM were nice but I do not recommend this speaking as editor as well as academic!), but where my research has been headed for a long time. Felt quite organic – work on horror, children's lit, comics and formalism, memories from my youth – all came together.

Decided to embrace it! – timely approach as interdisciplinary drive in academic culture today, and also suited to comics studies in particular as a field – open to different approaches.

Corpus: manageable, finite. Objective.

The joys of working with something clearly delineated: 101 weekly issues, 8 annuals, 3 specials, best of misty monthly (8 issues in 1980s)

Edges always murky though – reprints in Europe, and contained many reprints itself (annuals especially)

Can help lead to clearer and more objective research questions and aims – e.g.

Encapsulations mission statement

Learnt the importance of being adaptable, in particular when it came to my research questions!

The page layout analysis grew out of the detective work that comics scholars have to do to identify artists in these publications as not named.

Initially I was hoping to identify particular layout features and link these to particular artists (just as fans recognise their drawing style).

BUT interviews undermined this as Misty's art editor Jack Cunningham told me that he changed a lot of the layouts, esp by removing panel borders to create a sense of movement, creating a 'house style', and artist and critic David Roach confirmed that this sort of 'bodging' was often used to deliver the dynamism, e.g. by blowing up one panel, and particularly on the work of certain artists (*Carlos Guirado, Rafael Busom*).

So like any good researcher, I changed my aims! Instead: use my findings to reflect on and develop the existing theory and critical models already out there, and to identify whether the use of different panel borders, shapes, size, etc had any meaning in terms of the story events.

Methods:

Mixed - quantitative. Bringing logical support for close reading. Representative, etc .

Triangulation – panel types etc can't tell us much on its own

NVivo is a data analysis package organize and analyze non-numerical or unstructured data. The software allows users to classify, sort and arrange information; examine relationships in the data.

Used this to analyse the page layouts (creating tags etc); also used programmes like Voyant tools to analyse the language used in Misty's inside cover welcomes.

Once we'd entered all the data, could test theories, identify trends and cross-examine information in a multitude of ways using its search engine and query functions.

Also Scrivener – a large multimedia notepad type programme where we could save all this data alongside metadata, image scans, supporting notes, etc. [word-processing program and outliner designed for authors]



[owe a lot to Paul my res assistant for introduction to these programmes – but even if like me not tech savvy can use wordle etc – enter a bunch of text and it formats into a picture, with most common words in largest size. Basically sort of thing Voyant does, although Voyant allows you to group words etc and is more accurate]

Because of its dual focus, project challenged me to think about what else I could do with my research and how I could effectively share it, esp with readers outside academia

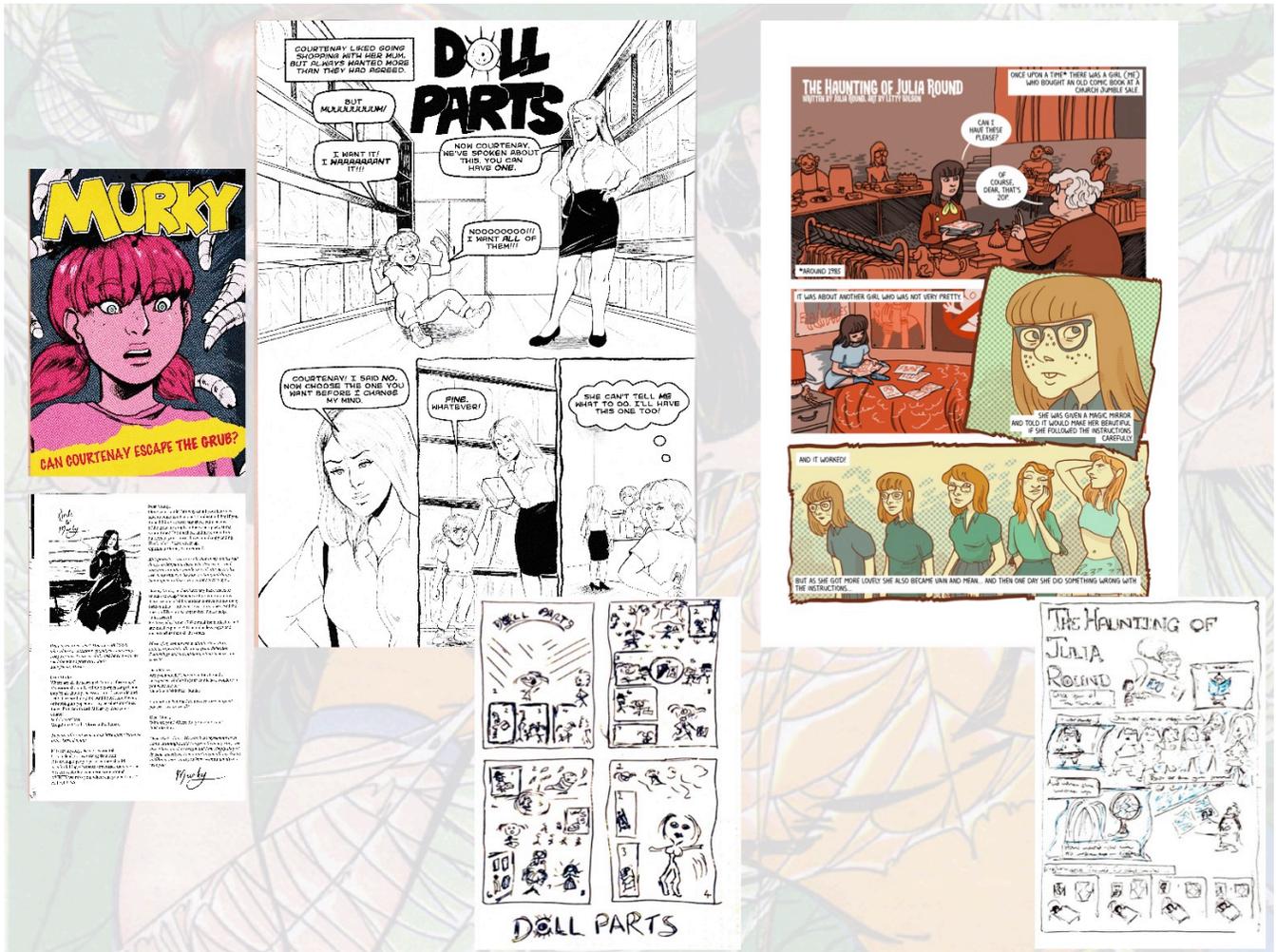
Desire to make widely available vs institutions' requirement to publish

Financial support from uni for one open access article published Palgrave Communications journal

Colleague advised me open access not just about finished product – open access for annotations, notes and data – sometimes more useful to other researchers than the finished argument-driven book.

Three main types:

1 - Interviews – my website – also published in journal



2 - Additional outputs: comics



-COMICS AND GOTHIC-
JULIA ROUND



STORY TITLE	ISSUE NUMBER	ARTIST	WRITER	SUMMARY	TYPE	CATEGORY	REPRINTED IN/FROM
...Yet Another Teacher For Molly! - Nightmare Story	046	John Richardson		Conman jack applies for tutor job but when he gets there turns out they are vampires?/cannibals? and he is the main course.	Single, Graphic	Nightmare	
A Breath Of Life... - Nightmare Story	003	Ken Houghton	Wilf Prigmore	Colette tricks classmate (and us) in waxwork museum pretending to be vampire, rejects the garlicky food, that night classmate repels vampire with garlic breath assumes it is another joke and goes to find others but they have all been turned into vampires (dead empty eyes)	Single, Graphic	Nightmare	
A Date...With Destiny -Nightmare Story	022	John Armstrong		Karen dreams about grappling with a stranger and falling off a cliff while running away, wakes and reveals she is in wheelchair. Taken to clinic for 'miracle' treatment and realises it is the one from her dream, bursts into tears as dr says she can't wait to run along them.	Single, Graphic	Nightmare	
A Duet For Three Hands	060	José Canovas		Karen is pressured by her parents into piano exams, wishes for another hand, and one appears but won't let her stop playing, she crushes it in piano but it is her own hand that ends up damaged so her pianist career is over (happily for her).	Single, Graphic		

3 - Online database

- how it works, what it's for

UK Comic Database: [Login/Register](#)

A British Comics Database

- [Bunty](#)
- [Buster](#)
- [Champion](#)
- [Diana](#)
- [Eagle](#)
- [Emma](#)
- [Jet](#)
- [Jinty](#)
- [Judy](#)
- [June](#)
- [Lindy](#)
- [Lion](#)
- [Mandy](#)
- [Misty](#)
- [Nikki](#)
- [Penny](#)
- [Sandie](#)
- [Scream!](#)
- [Spellbound](#)
- [Starlord](#)
- [Tammy](#)
- [Thunder](#)
- [Tiger](#)
- [Warlord](#)
- [Wildcat](#)
- [Wonder Woman Annual](#)

```
select title from story where title ~ '([A-Z]).*\1.*';
```

Finds titles with alliteration!!!!

	Alliterative titles	Total Titles	Percentage
Sandie	15	21	71.4285714285714%
Lindy	11	16	68.75%
Tammy	15	26	57.6923076923077%
Jinty	99	184	53.804347826087%
Spellbound	114	238	47.8991596638655%
Penny	7	18	38.8888888888889%
Misty	97	342	28.3625730994152%
Scream!	10	37	27.027027027027%

This database contains information on UK comics as a resource for researchers. It is currently in the early stages of development, and the level of detail varies considerably across different publications. Girls comics of the 70's and 80's are the most complete. We hope to open up direct access to the raw data soon.

What next? Again, unexpected – ABCD

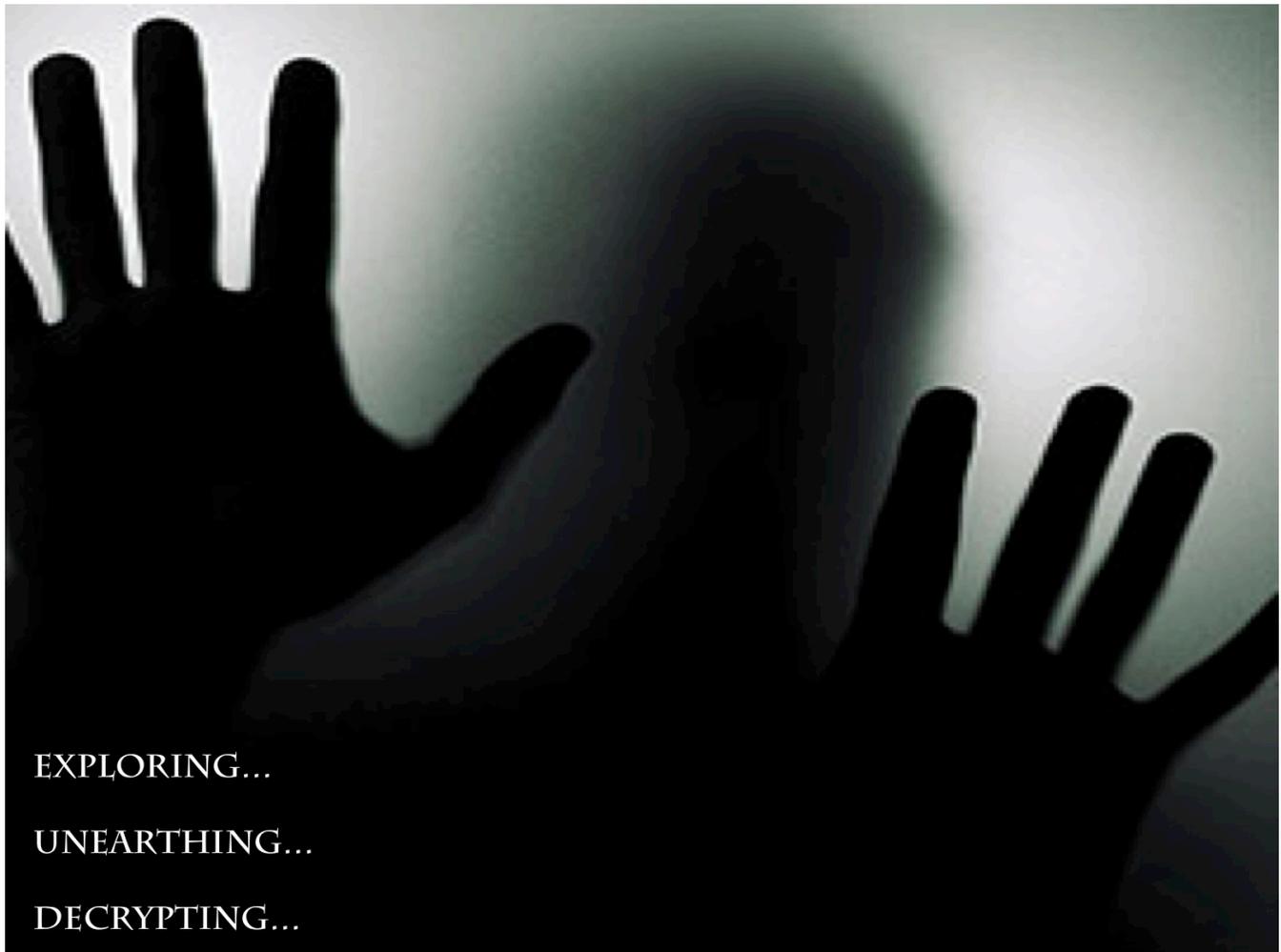
Blogs, spreadsheets out there at present – but what if we could allow researchers to both share and re-use existing knowledge to answer new questions.

We have developed a relational database which to-date includes information on 30,000 issues, 1000 stories, and over 20,000 scanned pages. The data is most complete with respect to UK Girls comics of the late 70's (Misty, Spellbound & Jinty). It can be accessed as a website, but directly accessing the database backend in SQL allows us to explore the data in exciting new ways.

Using SQL (Standard Query Language), we can ask questions like “What was the average price of a UK girls comic in 1974?”, “Did series get shorter in Jinty between 1974 and 1981?”, “Which month saw the most new title launches?”, “What story was on page 17 of Sandie Issue 10?”, or “Which publications used the most alliteration in their titles?” (eg inset). We will show

how these sort of 'big data' questions can quickly provide a context for any specific comic, story or artist.

We hope to make this resource fully public, and welcome any contributions to help improve the dataset.



So to conclude, then, for me, research feels like quite a Gothic process, with sometimes unexpected results. Seems to hinge on processes of exploring, unearthing, and decrypting? – Derrida's notion of crypt as sealed closed space whose contents are known but always hidden...

Has the potential to disturb identity – I thought I was a textual analyst. Never considered myself an investigative researcher, digging into cultural and corporate histories, interviewing creators and so on.

My research has also led me into uncertain surroundings, and to some unexpected and surprising places. Never thought I'd be researching cultural history and the 1970s, or that there was so much gothic and horror in children's literature and other media from my own childhood.

So I think I'd conclude by saying that Gothic retains its ability to surprise me! Hopefully today I've managed to demonstrate some of its ongoing mutability and flexibility to you. I think it is a mode that consistently appears in unexpected formats and places and whose symbols and ideas can be manipulated to address a range of meanings and audiences, and many realities.

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