Teratology as Ideology Critique, or, A Monster Under Every Bed

One thing that children know, and that many adults have forgotten or repressed, is that the world is terrifying. Children's literature has often registered this all-too-real horror. The popularity of horror within children's literature is itself a sign of the respect given by readers to authors who refuse to deny the existence of monsters. The presence of monsters, and of horror more generally, offers a figural representation of the world which reveals the unreality of the so-called "real world." In this sense, the monstrosity explored in horror literature is a form of ideology critique, as China Miéville has suggested in his discussion of radical fantasy. That is, the world as seen through realism is itself unreal, inasmuch as it masks the underlying "truth" in its very surface-level realism. In other words, in a world where reality is itself unreal, the non-realism of fantasy may offer the means to get at these hidden truths. Similarly, with horror, these hidden realities may be rendered visible through the legitimate emotion of fear, combined with the imaginative process of projecting new models for understanding that allow one to overcome the fear. The horror in the text helps to engender a political or historical sensibility, in which the pervasive feeling of generalize fear may crystallize into a more concrete sense of the underlying reality. Note that this activity, within the text and outside of it, is not rooted in any ethical program. Regardless of what the author, parents, or booksellers might think, the point is not to scare the reader into behaving a certain way, but to create means of understanding the world itself. In this presentation, I will focus on the ways in which fantasy-horror functions in children's literature as a means of demystifying and mapping the so-called "real world." I will likely draw upon several examples, including Harry Potter and the Hunger Games, as well as works by Poe, Tolkien, Gaiman, Miéville, and others.