

Edward Gorey

Brief life of an artful author: 1925-2000

by SUSAN LUMENELLO



ALTHOUGH HE DIED almost seven years ago, Edward Gorey '50 has just brought out a new book. *Amphigorey Again*, the fourth anthology of Gorey's weird and wondrous tales, presents works previously unpublished and uncollected, including the saga of an admonitory hippopotamus and a meditation on the letter Z. Bad things happen to placid people.

To those with an absurdist sense of humor and fondness for the fine line, Gorey is the beloved author and illustrator of such neo-Edwardian tales as *The Doubtful Guest*, *The Curious Sofa*, and *The Loathsome Couple*. To television viewers, he's the creator of the animation that opens *Mystery* on PBS. To theatergoers, he's the Tony Award-winning costumer of *Dracula*. And to his Harvard classmates—before fame, success, and cult notoriety—Gorey was a campus dandy with a high-speed brain and large-size appetite for art, literature, and music. Born and raised in Chicago, he came to Cambridge, in that first post-World War II year, after a stint as a clerk at Utah's Dugway Proving Ground, where the army tested poison gas.

If the military left any impact on young Gorey, it didn't show. He arrived sporting a full-length sheepskin-lined coat, sneakers, and thick rings on his long fingers. His hair was combed forward, Roman style. A typical freshman he was not.

That first year he lived in Mower Hall, where he met another veteran, ex-navy man Frank O'Hara. The soon-to-be-famous poet and soon-to-be famous artist quickly became friends; O'Hara's biographer Brad Gooch described them as a "noticeable odd couple on campus," attending the ballet, discovering foreign films, and sharing a passion for stylized English writers like Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Later they cultivated a salon-like atmosphere in their Eliot House suite, listening to Marlene Dietrich records and lounging on rented garden furniture. ("They gave the best parties," poet Donald Hall '51 has recalled.) In this setting, Gorey began the drawings he later refined for use in his books.

Though they drifted apart midway through college—Gorey's natural shyness had no place in O'Hara's new and decidedly exuberant social circle—they remained connected, if not close. Together with a collection of other brilliant recent alumni—Alison Lurie '47, John Ashbery '49, and Hall among them—they founded the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge. Supported by faculty members John Ciardi and Thornton Wilder, they wrote and performed experimental works like O'Hara's *Try, Try*. Gorey's contribution was art: on programs and on stage. Years later, he rather flippantly described the period to an interviewer; "All of us were *obsessed*. Obsessed by what? Ourselves, I expect."

After a couple years' work at a Boston bookshop, Gorey moved to New York. Now-legendary publisher Jason Epstein, who had

married Gorey's friend Barbara Zimmerman '49, lured him down to illustrate covers for a start-up paperback line at Doubleday, Anchor Books. Gorey's familiar pen-and-ink scenes perfectly presented classic reissues of Gogol and Gide.

All the while he was working on strange little tales of his own. Equal parts Agatha Christie mysteries and Edward Lear nonsense verse, they feature a gallery of waifs in ballet slippers, doomed flappers, mustachioed men on primitive bicycles, and indefinable beings such as "wuggly umps." Occasionally he cameoed himself in these works as a bearded figure, cloaked in what had become his trademark raccoon coat, furtively writing down notes. *The Unstrung Harp*, about an unsettled novelist named Earbrass, appeared in 1953. He would go on to publish a hundred stories, alphabets, collaborations, and illustrated oddments.

Given his vivid artwork, it may surprise fans to know that Gorey considered himself a writer first. Every book had to begin with the text. He admired classical Japanese literature for "what is left out" and Surrealism for its oddball juxtapositions: "I do tend to...write the things that would make as little sense as possible." Still, story was uppermost. "I think of my books," he once said, "as Victorian novels all scrunched up." (Gorey didn't live long enough to keep up with his own literary productivity, leaving some 75 manuscripts, typed and ready for illustrating.)

He spent the last 17 years of his life on Cape Cod, where he had family and had often visited. Today his Yarmouthport, Massachusetts, residence is a cozy museum, the Gorey House, that displays his boyhood diaries, his Trollope first editions, and other artifacts. The *Mystery* titles play on a loop in "the cat room," which features a crimson divan disemboweled by claws. (He lived with as many as six cats at a time: the "people," he claimed, to whom he felt closest.) The famous raccoon coat is encased in glass.

About that coat...Rick Jones, curator of the museum, tells a good story. Gorey, who left his money to three animal-welfare groups (including one for bats), became guilt-ridden for parading around in those pelts for so long. Eventually he chose not to wear the coat, but still believed he owed the raccoons something more. Payback came when a family of the creatures moved into his attic. Most owners would have called in animal control, or at least a carpenter to seal off access. Not Gorey. He let the raccoons stay. ▾

Susan Lumenello's work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in the *Harvard Review*, the *South Carolina Review*, and *Rain Taxi*. She is the editor of *Colloquy*, the alumni quarterly of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Opposite: Gorey and friends at home in Yarmouthport in 1992

