

The House with a Clock in Its Walls

John Bellairs , Edward Gorey (Illustrations)

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Orphaned Lewis Barnavelt comes to live with his Uncle Jonathan and quickly learns that both his uncle and his next-door neighbor are witches on a quest to discover the terrifying clock ticking within the walls of Jonathan's house. Can the three of them save the world from certain destruction?

The House with a Clock in Its Walls Details


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Author : John Bellairs , Edward Gorey (Illustrations)

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From Reader Review The House with a Clock in Its Walls for online ebook

Steven says

This was okay. I read it since the movie is coming out soon, but I should have saved the story for the movie, which I'm hoping has a tighter plot and that the clock plays more of a role than a side tale for 95% and then a last minute "big deal" in the last 5%.

Robin Hobb says

It has become harder and harder, I think, to find books for kids that are appropriately spooky without being gross out bloody or simply horribly dark.

John Bellairs walks that difficult line. The adventure is scary, and the danger is real, as is the magic. A huge plus is the boy's relationship with Uncle Jonathan who takes him in, and his uncle's friendship with Mrs. Zimmermann. Long before we were touting 'strong female characters with agency,' Mrs. Zimmermann existed! It's a pleasure to see adults portrayed as adults with lives of their own in a children's book. And Lewis is a refreshingly real protagonist as he discovers his delight in his unusual new home, and copes with the difficulties any kid finds in being different and the 'new kid' at school.

A great Halloween tale, but good any time.

Janine says

I actually had a woman come into the bookstore I worked at demanding a refund for this book. She had bought all of them for her nephew and it scared the bejesus out of him. She read one herself and was "shocked that anyone would let a child read such a thing." She said that one of our employees recommended it to her (Don, who is the only source I trust for children's lit. He is a God when it comes to kids books.) but she hadn't actually READ it before giving it to her nephew. Congratulations lady, you made your nephew cry and blamed it on someone who had better taste and better sense than you.

anyway, it's a creepy little classic and I wish I could find an original 86 edition in the library binding. The illustrations were awesome.

Obsidian says

Well I read this one and only realized now that it counts towards The Dead Writers Society October 2016 Genre challenge. So that's one less thing to worry about before the end of the month. I am also going to be reading this for the Horror Aficionados Fall Fear Challenge.

I read this as a kid and remember being haunted for a couple of days after finishing. The imagery, the illustrations, everything about the book scared me to (almost) death. I lived at the time in an old steel mill

town and all of the homes had some quirky aspects to them. We had Victorian style homes as well as hundred year old houses with random towers and odd shaped roofs. So for me, I was able to picture the town of New Zebedee, Michigan because it felt very similar to my own.

Now as an adult I was hoping to feel those same thrills and chills. Instead I felt mostly annoyance for Lewis who kept doing things in order to keep a friend and who seemed to be almost always crying. His personality does a miraculous change in the end, and we have a random new character introduced who we had heard nothing about before. I know that there are a bunch more books in this series. According to Goodreads there are 12 books. However, I don't know if I would want to continue on since the rest of the books may taint my memory further of this book.

"The House With the Clock in Its Walls" has the main character moving to Zebedee to live with his Uncle Johnathon after his parents died in a car accident. Being met by a giant of a man with red hair all over, Lewis is initially afraid, but is soon enchanted with the home that his uncle lives in. His uncle's best friend and general pain in the butt friend Mrs. Zimmerman lives next door and has the run of the home.

Though Lewis is fascinated by the home, he realizes early on that something weird is going on with his uncle getting up in the middle of the night and looking for something. And pretty soon Lewis due to him trying to impress his friend Tarby puts everyone in danger when he plays with something he does not have any real knowledge of at all.

Lewis is described as overweight and loves to read. You get to see illustrations of him in the book and he is depicted as roundish with his head always pointing to the ground it seemed to me. Lewis doesn't have a lot of self confidence and it seems that when things don't go his way (which is often) he runs away in tears. Things seem to be better when he meets a boy named Tarby who is the most popular boy at his school, who teaches Lewis how to play baseball. However, when Lewis feels Tarby pulling away he does what he can to get him to still be his friend.

Uncle Jonathon seemed clueless about things that Lewis was doing and how he was doing at school. I wanted more interaction with him and Lewis. Heck Mrs. Zimmerman had more sense about what was going on and I wish she had a conversation with Lewis. It would have been great if Lewis had learned earlier on that you can't keep someone in a friendship they are not feeling.

The writing was good, though I can see as a kid why the book scared the crap out of me. Bellairs is quite good at making you feel jumpy while you are reading. There are several points in the book you will hold your breath and be scared to death. The illustrations help with that too.

I think the flow wasn't very good though. It seemed like the book went almost through an entire year. And we really only focused on the summer months and then October and November. There is a significant event that takes place right on Halloween, so those who need to read this book for some bingo squares, it fills quite a few.

The ending was a bit of a letdown. I wanted more an epic battle I guess. And then to have the book kind of just go to Lewis being fine about things because hey he met another friend was a bit funny to me.

Stephanie says

4.25

I really enjoyed my first John Bellairs book!

I really enjoyed the character of Lewis. Well I enjoyed his uncle Johnathan and his next-door neighbor Mrs. Zimmerman too. Lewis felt like a real 10 year old to me. He wants to have a friend, he gets teased for being fat, he cries and it's ok. Uncle Johnathan is a good uncle too and I enjoyed seeing their friendship between him and Mrs. Zimmerman.

I also really liked how, yes there is evil people using magic but Johnathan and Mrs. Zimmerman use magic too and are good. I've seen a lot of "all magic is evil" stuff and it gets on my nerves, so I like seeing how it can be used for good or bad.

It was a nice easy read that flowed pretty well. I know it would have scared me had I been a kid, and I would've loved it, and I still very much enjoyed it. It made me smile, laugh, and even surprised me at times. I also really liked the illustrations as they really fit the story.

If you are looking for a quick middle grade mystery/horror novel i'd definitely recommend this, and I look forward to reading more John Bellairs books!

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Cameron Chaney says

This isn't my favorite of John Bellairs books, but it is definitely charming and spooky. A must if you enjoy children's horror! I'm looking forward to the movie coming later this October.

Michelle Isenhoff says

This book was odd. Recommended to me by a friend, I had high expectations that simply weren't met. It starts out with ten-year-old Lewis Barnavelt on his way to his uncle's house after his parents' deaths. Uncle Jonathan is a minor magician, and he lives in an old mansion formerly inhabited by an evil wizard. Strangely, the walls in the house tick. Jonathan's neighbor, a peculiar old woman named Mrs. Zimmerman, also dabbles in magic. Together they try to learn the old house's secrets. At one point, Lewis dips into one of his uncle's forbidden magic books, then he and his friend sneak into the graveyard to try a spell to raise the dead. Their success nearly leads to the end of the world.

The whole setup has a bizarre, creepy feel. Yes, Uncle Jonathan and Mrs. Zimmerman are good wizards, but they are so odd. I never warmed to them (or any other character). They have strange personalities and do odd, random things. I never felt I had a handle on who they are or why they did what they did. They didn't make sense. And some plot events, like the time the three are chased in their car in the middle of the night, are never explained. What was that all about, anyway? It just builds on a series of weird events that don't really make a solid picture at the end. It feels disjointed.

It was fairly predictable. I didn't like the characters. The pictures were even stylized in a way that didn't appeal to me. Twice it put me to sleep. I almost didn't finish. I don't usually rate books on my blog, but this one gets a two. That's mostly because the suspense was okay and the old mansion was really cool. So why did I bother reviewing it? Because I know this book has been highly acclaimed and the series has sold well (maybe later books explain some things?). But I just didn't get it.

How's the content? Wikipedia calls it "children's gothic horror," though it isn't terrible. A dead person comes to life via a spell, but most magic is innocent. Scenes from Harry Potter are far worse. Lewis' hand is once guided by an unseen force. A Ouija board is mentioned but not used. It's mostly creepy hype. I think there may have been one mild profanity, but I'm not sure. Like I said, I fell asleep twice and had to reread portions.

Can you tell I was disappointed? But obviously a lot of people like it.

Scott Rhee says

John Bellairs published "The House With a Clock in Its Walls" in 1973. I was one year old at the time. I had somehow managed to skip over this one when I was a young reader, or, if I had read it, I don't recall doing so. I found a dog-eared, faded Dell Yearling edition at my local library's used book sale recently. I wish I could say that it beckoned me, but, alas, it was merely one in a pile of books that I bought that day. It has, until a few short days ago, rested comfortably, anonymously, on a shelf in my bedroom. I picked it up arbitrarily, as I tend to do with books, and I began to read.

The joy of reading is one that I developed early, thanks in large part to my parents and grandparents, as well as my many elementary school teachers. I was fortunate to have liberal parents who did not discourage me from reading certain types of books. They did not steer me away from the books I tended to like---books with spaceships, green scaly astronauts, haunted houses, werewolves, and unicorns on the cover. They did not tell me my reading choices were "silly" or "immature". They encouraged me to read anything and everything, which I did. I still do.

The reason for stating this is because I had friends who had parents and teachers that, unfortunately, taught them that there are "silly" books not worth reading, as opposed to "serious" literature, the kind that has stood the test of time and taken on the label of "classic". Literary snobs would call these types of books "canonical". Everything else, according to these people, is fluff. "Popular" literature is beneath them. It's sad to say, but many of those friends of mine have children who are probably banned from reading the likes of J.K. Rowling, R.L. Stine, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Stephen King, Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Walter Dean Myers. Oh, what they are missing...

Reading Bellairs's wonderful novel reminded me of my days in school, when going to the library was better than an evening at the movies or spending time at an amusement park. It triggered that excitement that I had, looking at the vast shelves upon shelves of ancient wisdom bound within the pages of those glorious tomes, knowing that I had access to all of it. To think that some people purposely deny themselves the luxury and excitement of reading is a depressing thought, and to deny one's children such a pleasure is unacceptable. But I digress...

Bellairs was the forerunner for dark fantasy authors like Rowling, Neil Gaiman, and John Connolly, and his stories were a perfect blend of supernatural creepiness and tween angst black humor.

"THWACIIW" introduces readers to Lewis Barnavelt, a ten-year-old who, at the beginning of the story, has lost his parents in a car accident and is forced to live with his Uncle Jonathon in New Zebedee, Michigan.

Uncle Jonathon is a bit eccentric, to say the least, but he is friendly and is excited to have Lewis stay with him. He has a thing with clocks---the house is full of them, tick-rocking away---and a weirdly flirtatious relationship with the widow next door, Mrs. Zimmerman, with whom Lewis is immediately enamored due to the fact that she is constantly bringing him fresh-baked cookies.

Nights are odd in the large, beautiful, but somewhat eerie house. Before bed, Uncle Jonathon walks through every room of the house, turning off all the clocks. Late at night, in bed, Lewis can inexplicably hear the rhythmic ticking of a distant clock, seemingly within the walls.

After some initial investigating, Lewis discovers some very frightening things. Some of them turn out to be not-so-frightening: Uncle Jonathon, it turns out, is an amateur wizard, and Mrs. Zimmerman is a witch. They aren't bad witches, though. The frightening thing he learns is that the original owner of the house, a man named Izard and his wife, were also practitioners of witchcraft. The bad kind: black magic. They despised everyone in the entire world and hoped to destroy it, but their deaths prevented them from getting around to it. Unfortunately, Lewis accidentally releases the ghost of the late Mrs. Izard, who is searching for her late husband's clock in the walls, which has the ability to end the world. On top of that, Lewis is dealing with bullies at school, and he isn't doing well in math class.

To say that I loved this book is an understatement. It is a truly fun, creepy little Gothic horror story with just the right amount of humor to make it palatable for most children and take the edge off the truly scary bits. It is, also, apparently the first in a series featuring young Lewis Barnavelt. I'm not sure how many books in the series Bellairs wrote, but I am sure that they are all wonderful.

If you don't mind reading something "silly", and if you especially don't mind letting your children read such silly fluff, you could certainly do worse than finding a copy of this wonderful book.

mark monday says

one day when i was about 8 or 9, living in some chilly state, i bundled myself up until i looked like a little gray egg, hood over head, the hood's furry fringe making my face a cameo portrait of a round genderless blob, and proceeded to wait for my ride in the lobby of my apartment building. a young man came down to use the vending machines there, looked at me, and asked conversationally, "Are you a little boy or a little girl?"... i died a little bit, then squeaked out: "I'm a little girl".

i laugh at the story now but i also can't help but remember the sharp flash of humiliation, the quick decision that it was less embarrassing to be a girl mistaken for a boy than to admit that i could have been a boy who looked like a girl, and then of course the ample self-loathing that followed. it is interesting to think about the complicated emotions that my youthful self had to wrestle with.

i recently re-read House with a Clock in Its Walls and was taken aback by the memory of reading it for the first time at age 10 or so - and the memory i had had back then of my moment of mortification and sudden femininity. *a memory of a memory!* i was never a bullied or angst-ridden child, so that memory pops out as almost uniquely painful. the protagonist Lewis Barnavelt of House With a Clock was the first time i'd read about a hero who was unheroic, who lied to avoid embarrassment, who rather despised himself. reading about him, reading the story of a boy filled with anxiety and doubt and even self-loathing, was almost like a tonic: now here was an author who lived in the real world! here was a protagonist who knew exactly how i felt that day. Lewis Barnevelt is akin to Narnia's Edmund or Eustace - except Aslan does not step in to help him slough off his self-hating nature. he has to do it on his own. he does not go on a quest and he does not save the day; instead he grows by bits and starts, the shedding of each of his dark layers a small triumph - quickly forgotten by Lewis, almost unbearably affecting to me.

Leah Adams says

This is a book that I have read since I was 11 years old. I love it so much, and it has been so influential in my life, that I even have a tattoo of the Ace of Nitwits.

It is the story of 11 year old Lewis Barnavelt and is set in the fictional town of Marshall, Michigan in the 1950's. He is a young boy whose parents have just died. He is overweight and generally an outcast from his schoolmates. He has been sent to live with his Uncle Jonathon, who lives in an old ramshackle mansion next door to his best friend Mrs. Zimmerman, who has an obsession with the color purple and anything with "Z" on it. Both Uncle Jonathon and Mrs. Zimmerman are witches. The house has a doomsday clock somewhere in it's walls, left there by it's former residents, the Izzard's, who were evil warlocks. It is up to Lewis, Uncle Jonathon and Mrs. Zimmerman to find it before it winds down and rings in the end of the world.

Brian says

This book scared the tar out of me when I was ten. I could barely fall asleep at night but I loved it. I used it as a read aloud to my fourth graders and they would BEG each day to hear more. Occasionally I would look up from my reading to see 20 horrified faces with their eyes wide open in anticipation of what would come next. Plus cool drawings by Edward Gorey.

Danielle The Book Huntress (Back to the Books) says

I enjoyed this book quite a bit. I liked young Louis and his Uncle and his next door neighbor friend, who both happened to be powerful Sorcerers. They had some fun discussions, and did some cool little magic tricks to keep little Louis from feeling so lonely since he's not terribly popular. The house was a character in itself. Definitely creepy, especially knowing what it was built for. There were some moments scary enough to give a grownup a good start, but not too scary for a kid, particularly at the climax. I look forward to reading the rest of the books in the series.

C. says

An outrageous fact: the more magical and creative a book, the more authors gear it to children. If in doubt that there is a grown-up market, let me set it straight! **John Bellairs** wrote "**The House With A Clock In Its Walls**" in 1973. I wish I had known of it after I was a child! I would have been even more delighted with every nuance of mystery, suspense, and humour when its protagonist Lewis Barnavelt, matched my age. This book dwells on no sadness but our introduction to Lewis is poignant: he is orphaned and headed to live with his Uncle Jonathan in another town. I can't contemplate how difficult it would be to leave a home of memories when I needed to wrap them around me.

Fortunately his new home is welcoming and too intriguing to bar enthusiasm. From the get-go this book stands apart because Uncle Jonathan and next door neighbour Florence Zimmermann are best friends; adults with a child's abandon, who are fun. They might be a comfortable married couple if they didn't have their own dwellings. The banter between them was unheard of in the 1970s, along with opposite-sex adult pals; immediately emanating whimsy and titillation I would have relished as much as Lewis. I laughed at the way

Florence declared: “I get a funny hum that goes *dooooo* for a while”!

Jonathan’s dense house is peculiar. We wonder what he and Florence worry about within it, strange behaviour delights us, and evidence of magic! My favourite moment is a spell concocted in the backyard. Everyone hears insects underground and disused tunnels or streams. Temporarily, we perceive a host of natural workings and knowledge right where we stand. What a surreal moment! I loved it! Everything but Lewis’s age, makes this the book for me.

Lauren Stoolfire says

I saw the trailer for the upcoming movie adaptation and thought it looked like a lot of fun, so naturally I wanted to try the book before I saw it. Unfortunately I wasn't as big of a fan as I thought I would be, but either way I'm still really excited for the movie.

Richard Denney says

3.5 STARS!!

As much of a huge fan of John as I am, this was one I never got to read. I'm so glad I was able to read it before the movie adaption hits theaters in September and I'm 100% excited to see it. There were some parts that were pretty boring and that has never happened with me reading one of John's books. I felt pretty bad that I felt one of his books had some boring parts but then I have to remind myself that this was his first children's/middle-grade book and of course debuts can be rocky at times.

I've read several of his books and none of them were remotely boring to me, so I can give this one a pass haha It had the classic Bellairs humor, scares, and chilling scenes that I love so much and I look forward to seeing how Eli Roth adapts this into a feature length film. There was already an adaption that came out in the early 80s that wasn't very good but it was still fun. If you're interested in John's work, please don't be turned away by my thoughts on the boringness, his other books are amazing as hell, more specifically The Lamp from the Warlock's Tomb. :)
