

Calendar

E Is for Ernest Who Choked on a Peach

F Is for Fanny Sucked Dry by a Leech

Across the road from the churchyard/ Alberta Stipple returned home to/ find the wallpaper in the drawing/ room gone."
— from *The Haunted Tea-Cosy*
by Edward Gorey

He was tall and lanky with a bushy white beard and multiple cats. He wore earrings and big silver finger rings. A raccoon coat was his outer garb in winter. One of the genuine eccentric geniuses of our time, he was Edward Gorey, the writer and illustrator best known to the general public as designer of the animated credits for public

television's *Mystery!* series.

Born in Chicago in 1925,

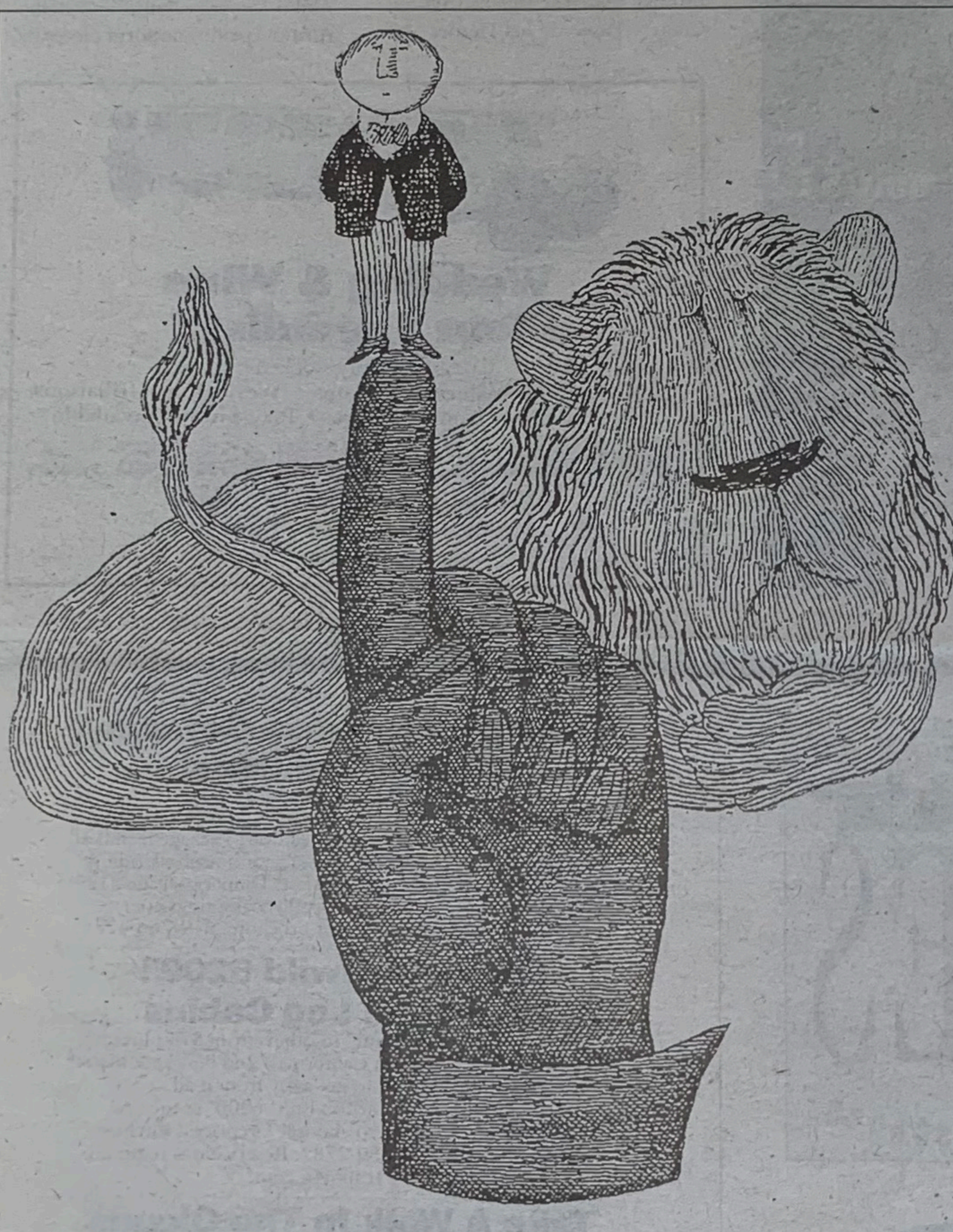
Gorey lived for years in Manhattan. He spent his last decade and a half on Cape Cod. When he died in 2000, he had written and illustrated more than 100 of his own books and illustrated 60 more written by others, including Samuel Beckett and T.S. Eliot.

Why, though, is the largest-ever public Gorey exhibit opening at SDSU next week when fans of his macabre sensibility and distinctive, cross-hatched pen-and-ink drawings are chiefly to be found back East?

The mystery is explained when one learns that Gorey's greatest champion is a San Diego native. A sort of benign Colonel Parker, he is Andreas Brown, whose family history in the city goes back to 1868, when his great-grandfather, Dr. Charles Merwin Fenn, bought acreage south of what would become Balboa Park. Brown was born in Coronado in 1933 and graduated from SDSU in 1955. Since 1967, he has owned the Gotham Book Mart of New York City.

Almost since that ownership began, Brown, one of Gorey's earliest fans, made the bookstore Gorey Central. He has published 15 Gorey titles under the Gotham Book Mart imprint and regularly exhibited Gorey's art in the bookstore's gallery. It was Brown who started getting Gorey reviews and publicity and arranged for him to illustrate Beckett's work.

"Gorey admired Beckett immensely," Brown said by phone from his office in New York last week. "The occasionally gloomy but always



From *Cautionary Tales for Children*

existential Beckett, the absurdist writer tiptoeing to the edge of nonsense literature, appealed to Gorey greatly. He admitted Beckett was one of his idols. And Beckett was very pleased with Gorey's drawings."

Gorey's images are almost balletic. His hapless old maids fall face first onto the railroad tracks with aplomb. It makes sense that Gorey was perhaps George Balanchine's greatest fan.

The characters, all a bit dotty, often meet quick and terrible fates, like mystery-story characters. No one mourns.

And no one escapes. *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Gorey is an abecedarian composition about 26 children's deaths. *E is for Ernest who choked on a peach/ F is for Fanny sucked dry by a leech...*

There is a British feel to the work. But Gorey visited England only once,

Brown said, and went directly to Scotland's Outer Hebrides and nowhere else. The barren landscape, with its lone tree and thick-coated sheep, suited him.

"He never saw London, and that astonishes people because his work is so well-informed about all things English," said Brown. "That's because he read literally every English novel of the second half of the 19th and the first 20 years of the 20th Centuries. He's very tuned into the class society, the snobbery, the repression. He gets all of that down. It's very much like Monty Python. It's out of the Dickens tradition."

When strange things happen in Gorey books, the characters try not to notice. "It's inappropriate," said Brown. "In *The Doubtful Guest* they're all very uptight, stuffy, very 'country-gentry,' and even though this strange

entity has entered the house, it would be in poor taste to ask him to leave."

Gorey's wordplay is akin to Nabokov's. He loved to anagramize his name. The introductory note to *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy* is penned by E.G. Deadworry.

He would have done well to illustrate books by Borges.

After his death, the house on Cape Cod was emptied of 8000 pieces of art. "All was removed, because of their value and importance. It's just a nice, old expanded saltbox with lots of windows and glass-paneled doors — a security disaster." Brown moved it to the bookstore. "But once the appraisal came in at just under \$5 million, I said, 'Get it out of here.' We put it in fine-arts storage in Long Island City."

The exhibit at SDSU consists of some 300 items that Brown, a longtime SDSU library supporter, cherry-picked from those holdings — sketchbooks, notebooks, annotated manuscripts, original finished drawings, unpublished drawings, photographs, and other ephemera. And books by Gorey.

"Many are Gorey's own copies, which I thought gave a little mystique to them," Brown said. "Some of the very rare things that nobody has readily or would be willing to lend I took out of my collection."

Brown will speak about Gorey later this month. So will SDSU emeritus professor Peter Neumeyer, whose children's books, *Donald and the...* and *Donald Has a Difficulty*, illustrated by Gorey in the late 1960s, have just been reissued.

— Jeanne Schinto

"From Prodigy to Polymath: The Singular Journey of Edward Gorey"
March 8–May 31,
Donor Hall

Presentation by Andreas Brown and Peter Neumeyer:
"Genius Compounded in the Words and the Art of Edward Gorey"
Monday, March 22, 2:00 p.m.
Room LA2203
SDSU Library
5500 Campanile Drive
San Diego
Free
619-594-4991

Local Events
page 71

Classical Music
page 86

Art Museums & Galleries
page 88

Theater
page 90

Pop Music
page 95

Restaurants
page 118

Movies
page 133