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## Education Through Violence In Modern American Literature

Adam Griffey  
*University of South Carolina*

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EDUCATION THROUGH VIOLENCE IN MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

Adam Griffey

Bachelor of Arts  
Berea College, 2002

Master of Arts  
Appalachian State University, 2008

Master of Arts  
Appalachian State University, 2010

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Accepted by:

Sara L. Schwebel, Major Professor

Catherine Keyser, Committee Member

Robert Brinkmeyer, Committee Member

Susan Vanderborg, Committee Member

Northrop Davis, Committee Member

Paul Allen Miller, Vice Provost and Interim Dean of Graduate Studies

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Dedication  
for  
my mother  
and for  
Evan Coleman Griffey

## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

“Education through Violence in Modern American Literature” examines how violence is employed as a pedagogical tool in overseeing the transition of young people into adulthood in twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. Examining texts by Robert Cormier, John Knowles, Suzanne Collins, Orson Scott Card, Flannery O’Connor, James Baldwin, and Cormac McCarthy, this study demonstrates that a pedagogy of violence may be used as a coercive method to further the goals of the powerful, but it is equally interested in the ways that young people are able to rebel against structural systems of power that demand conformity and adherence to social, institutional, and familial discipline. In the process, this dissertation argues that, through the lens of imaginative literature, young people are shown not simply as victims in a dangerous world but also as dynamic and creative beings that respond to the pressures and traumas of their lived experiences.

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Chapter One:  
A Pedagogy of Violence

This dissertation examines the violence meted out to characters in American novels written for and about young people between the postwar and post-9/11 period, interrogating the different ways in which these characters respond to that violence. At times, the young people emerge victorious (though always at great cost to themselves), other times they are crushed; regardless of their characters' fates, the authors examined in this dissertation insist that we confront the way violence induces profound changes in young people. Because the crucial role of suffering in child development is a hard truth to digest, novels are a powerful means of articulating the relationship between pain and maturation, between violence and growth.

This dissertation arose from the belief that the experience of violence is a necessary (though problematic) mechanism by which children mature. As adults with moral pretensions, we quite understandably recoil at the idea of the possible benefits that violent experiences may have for young people. Because the principle role of a child's guardian is to ensure the safety and well-being of the child, we are left with a paradox when we consider the role that suffering plays in moving a young person into adulthood. But as the novels discussed below demonstrate, the experience of suffering allows young people opportunities to develop a mature



worldview, to enhance their capacity for empathy, and to achieve a more fully realized sense of self. At the same time, the novels illustrate how violence against young people is hurtful to both their bodies and psyches, as they emerge profoundly damaged from their experiences. While such a degree of suffering will not be the case for all children – how could it, when the most damaged often find themselves incapable of relating to peers who have not had the same depth of experiences – all children suffer in ways that are important to *them*.

I begin with a reading of Robert Seelinger Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, one of the few works of literary criticism that is willing to argue for the efficacy of childhood trauma in the positive development of young people. Trites argues that the YA novel functions primarily as a means for readers to imaginatively rebel against repressive systems, so that they may be transformed into adults that healthfully accept the limitations imposed on them by those same systems. Trites makes a compelling argument, but it rests on the idea that submission to the forces of violence and domination is inevitable. By rejecting the idea that those systems of power and indoctrination are themselves illegitimate, she necessarily reads the bleak world of adolescence presented in books like *The Chocolate War* (1974) and *A Separate Peace* (1959) as demonstrating that the defeat of children is really the children's victory. While Trites deals exclusively with children's and YA literature, by reading YA and "adult" texts together I come to very different conclusions. Because Trites is concerned with novels that have been recommended to young people, she is potentially more inclined to seek a positive message in the texts. But I do not see the submission of

children—whether flesh and blood readers or fictional characters—as being “healthy.” Rather, when young people are forcibly returned to the system of entrenched powers, the process demands their total defeat, even their deaths. In the novels discussed in this study, a combination of YA and adult fiction, the child protagonists are victorious only in their *refusal* to submit to the social and political demands that seek to either neutralize or harness their rebellious vitality. If we believe that young *readers* should follow the same path of social affirmation that Trites argues young *characters* undergo, then we only confirm for young readers the righteousness of the systems of domination that already have such a powerful control over them.

The novels that I have chosen are linked by their interest in how modes of education (whether they be state sponsored or localized to the family) utilize violence as a force for the conformity and obedience of young people. Though it runs throughout the novels, this connection between education and abuse is manifested most immediately in *The Chocolate War* and *A Separate Peace*, which enact the group-violence of the American high school. It is for this reason that the dissertation opens by examining these canonical adolescent novels. In the claustrophobic world of the all-male (and entirely white) institutions of the novels’ fictional schools, the social order is maintained and reaffirmed through ritualized violence that I argue is bound up in the combative relationships that are fostered among the boys. These relationships are policed, by both the adults and the adolescents, in ways that are intended to maintain normative social orders, whether that be the inculcation of elitist values or of heteronormative sexuality.

My interest with the image of the white, male adolescent continues throughout the chapters, allowing this dissertation to explore how those children born into the assumed privilege of that particular demographic are also subject to the coercive powers of social orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that seeks to further the power claims of a privileged subgroup. Two chapters deviate from the singular focus on the white male, however, and in doing so, they suggest how female and African-American children encounter heightened violence because they are even further circumscribed by the powers of patriarchy and white supremacy that demand that they “know their place.” At the conclusion to *The Hunger Games* (2008-2012), Katniss is shown to have entered into a normative heterosexual relationship that results in the birth of healthy children. Katniss’ becoming a wife and mother seems to reaffirm the social values of the Capitol, ending the hope of resistance kept alive through three novels as Katniss played a continual cat-and-mouse game with President Snow over her supposed romance with Peeta, which involved a faked pregnancy. For John Grimes, who grows up in an impoverished African-American family in New York, the specter of white supremacism looms over every aspect of his life, animating the violence John’s stepfather directs toward him in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). In these cases, the power of the white male is still present, but it is transfigured into a form analogous to that of the repressive state itself.

Part of what makes child characters such easy targets for violence by adult characters is a belief in their essential innocence, as they are thought incapable of adequately resisting the adults who wish to use or harm them. We see this belief in childhood innocence particularly clearly in *Ender’s Game* (1985), where Ender

Wiggin is intentionally and specifically created as a bridge between what the adults naively see as the pure sadism of his brother Peter, and the angelic compassion of his sister Valentine. As *Ender's Game* dramatizes, the very idea of childhood as a state of innocence is culturally constructed. Peter is not simply the ghoulish thug that the army believes him to be; Valentine is certainly no angel; and in Ender, the adults have confused innocence with naiveté. Ender appears to be innocent only until he gathers the necessary information to rip down the veil of ignorance in which adults have attempted to enwrap him. As Ender learns to command an army, he also learns to defy the adults. On one level, they know this; in fact, they chose Ender to liberate the galaxy of an alien threat. But despite the cruelty and effectiveness with which Ender annihilates his enemies (both alien and human), the adults assume that he remains innocent, and thus that he is simply a tool that can do no more than their bidding.

But Ender goes on to do much more than they had considered him capable of, as he will later upend the entire purpose of this genocidal war against the alien buggers. In later novels it will be the adult Ender who resurrects their leader, the Hive Queen, and who defends the buggers against another fleet of humans bent on their eradication. He does so in his new role as a kind of prophetic figure, but one who, in his commitment to rationality, is very unlike the impassioned child-preachers Francis Marion Tarwater and John Grimes in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1954). For these teenage protagonists, religion is a way to harness the madness of the irrational id, not to tame it, but to make use of its power. For Tarwater, this means accepting his destiny and returning

to the city as a prophet of doom. John endures his own dark night of the soul to be reborn as a preacher, a role that he hopes will protect him from both the violence of his father and his own sexual self-hatred.

Many of the protagonists in this dissertation learn to cope with and resist the violence around them, but they do not do so unscathed; resistance comes with a price. Writing on the ways that children wrestle with the dangers of the world, James Garbarino argues in *Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience: Confronting Global Realities and Rethinking Child Development*: “resilience is not absolute. Virtually every kid has a breaking point or an upper limit on stress absorption capacity. Kids are malleable rather than resilient, in the sense that each threat costs them something.”<sup>1</sup> The novels examined in this study weigh some of those costs. Several highlight the understanding that children, having apprenticed under abusers in the adult systems of violence that they inhabit, become a source of violence against their peers; they are victimizers as well as victims. Ender does not simply win his fights against the boys who antagonize him, he crushes his opponents. By the end of the novel, having left the corpses of both aliens and human in his wake, he is almost destroyed by the realization of the violence he has enacted. We also see this quite clearly in *A Separate Peace* as well, where the resiliency of Gene is shattered and the reader is privy to the devastating effects of young people reaching their breaking points.

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<sup>1</sup> James Garbarino, *Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience: Confronting Global Realities and Rethinking Child Development* (New York: Springer, 2008), 7.

The adults in these novels are characterized by an extreme ambivalence when it comes to their understanding of what role violence should play in the maturation of young people. In attempting to protect what they see as the basic foundations of society (the state, the church, the family—all of which function as the sources of their own personal power), the adults use children in brutal ways. One might argue that the adult authors of these texts, written both for fellow grownups and for young people, similarly show an ambivalence toward violence. In their insistence on exposing readers to descriptions of violence, they may inflict further pain on readers. But the greater evil would be to neglect our responsibility to those children who rely on the solace of deep, solitary reading in pursuit of meaning for events that – in their capriciousness – may appear utterly meaningless, and therefore even more painful.

Each of the chapters below examines how American novelists have conceived of the role of violence in the development of young people. Each is interested in how education—both that delivered in institutions and that fostered by experience—is bound up in acts of violence. Chapters are organized around four institutions that play enormously influential roles in young people’s lives: the school, the nation-state at war, the church, and the family. Of course, just as the influence of these institutions overlap in the lives of actual young people, they also overlap in the novels discussed. Each chapter, however, is centered on a separate theme, with the understanding that, because of their power and ubiquity, each of these themes will be found in all of the chapters to one degree or another.

Chapter Two: “Maturation through Pain in Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* and John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace*” takes on the role of the school. This chapter illustrates just how critical educational systems are to the indoctrination of America’s children into their roles as members of a social order that is sustained through violence. In every course that American children take – no matter the subject, the discipline, the instructor, or the institution – they learn one thing: obedience. The lesson is laced with fear. As these novels depict, such lessons extend beyond the classroom, and they are always undergirded by threats, whether subtle or direct.

This chapter argues that, contrary to Trites’ thesis summarized above, the violence turned on students in these novels does not constitute a positive good; rather, the novels’ protagonists are crippled by the brutality they encounter. They are not safely habituated into the systems of violence that shape their worlds, but instead are left broken and alone. At the conclusion of *The Chocolate War*, Jerry is so abused by his fellow students that the reader is left with the impression that he has been murdered. In *A Separate Peace*, we are introduced to a character, Gene, who bears more lasting scars from his time in boarding school than he does from his time in war. In these novels, the school serves as a locus for many of society’s most vicious institutional forces. And the students learn their lessons well. Confined within the school, adolescents are shown to be quite capable of carrying out acts of great, even imaginative, cruelty against their peers. They are not only victims, but also perpetrators.

There is no escape for those children who live in the hermetically sealed world of white male prep schools. We encounter greater violence in the novels to come, but no greater pessimism. This first chapter stands as a necessary contrast to those that follow – novels in which the extravagancies of violence may appear more spectacular, and the stakes (often that of civilization itself) far greater. Yet none of them conclude with the blunt hopelessness of these first two novels. It can be no accident that the School Stories which have the most direct connection to the lived experience of American youth are also the most pessimistic.

Chapter Three, “Manipulating Innocence: The Child Soldier in *The Hunger Games* and *Ender’s Game*,” centers on a figure that has become increasingly prominent in the scholarship on war and childhood studies, but which remains on the periphery of critical literary studies. Both Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* and Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* explore how the manipulation of the image of the innocent child allows for the mobilization of youth during times of war, as child soldiers are held up as the model of civic virtue even as they become imminently disposable when it suits the interest of the state. In these novels, “game” becomes a perverse synonym for war, and just as children learn through play, so may they be taught the art of murderous warfare through state-designed playgrounds and sports arenas. But in contrast to the protagonists of the School Stories discussed in Chapter Two, the protagonists of *The Hunger Games* and *Ender’s Game* are able (at least on some level) to subvert the interests of those who seek to control them. In this chapter I argue that this seeming paradox – that war zones are presented as less damaging than schoolyards – is a function of the very education that the state has



imposed on its youth. They have trained them, either intentionally, in the case of Ender, or largely through neglect, in the case of Katniss, to be soldiers; as a result, the youth are instilled with a capacity for enduring abuse that far surpasses that of the quintessentially average adolescent that peoples School Stories. Katniss survives the brutality of her young life and, in the end, is able to form a family of her own – one free of the violence that plagued her youth. In the process, she brings a tyrannical government to its knees and assassinates the figure most likely to continue that reign of violence in the new government. That Katniss’ last violent act is one taken to end the cycle of state violence against children is an apt summation of her victory against the powers of adult manipulation; and yet, in utilizing the state’s own tools against them, the novel implies that violence cannot be eradicated, it simply mutates form. For his part, Ender begins his violent training for war as a six-year-old who is lied to and manipulated for the gain of others; he ends the novel with ambitions that are galactic in scale and that take part in a messianic promise of universal peace through the spread of absolute truth.

Chapter Four, “Abuse, Trauma, and Religious Vocation in Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* moves to the religious sphere, examining the preoccupations of two fourteen-year-old boys (one white, one black; one southern, one northern; one country-bred and the other city-born) educated in the prophetic, apocalyptic tradition of fundamentalist Christianity, and the ways that religiosity and trauma are mutually sustaining. This chapter demonstrates how the atavistic violence of family life – the tyrannical cruelty of adults toward their young and that cruelty cycling down

through the generations – may compel young people into a life of religious devotion. These novels offer highly sophisticated explorations of the complexity of young people’s relationship to the divine, relations that are often accompanied by fears about sexuality, community expectations, and the domestic abuse that shadows every act and exchange between the characters.

*The Violent Bear It Away’s* Francis Marion Tarwater and *Go Tell It on the Mountain’s* John Grimes seem worlds apart, and not only because of their demographic differences. Tarwater is an intensely isolated character; we might expect him to end his days in some cave, in stubborn rejection of the world. And yet he is compelled to live out the destiny written for him by his grandfather, and perhaps also by a divinity that demands he bring his prophetic voice to the multitude he despises. His entire life has been a goad, whipping him towards his destiny. By contrast, John Grimes is in constant communion with the religious community of which he is a part. If Tarwater is an outcast, then John is the chosen one, meant to achieve even greater spiritual heights than his father by adoption. But here, too, violence attends the divine apotheosis of the novel, where John is visited by his own demonic forces of revelation. Yet it is not Satan, nor the antichrist, that John fears; rather, it is his father and his father’s hand. In both of these novels, the pain of young life prepares the way for profound spiritual insights, as the young protagonists answer the calling of a life of religious devotion. I argue that religiosity contains within it a self-replicating force – articulated through the liturgy, the “prayers of the saints,” and the glossolalia of those overcome by the spirit. It is acted out in the physical submission of the faithful in deep prayer, the exultation of limbs

cast in ecstatic abandon, the huddling of supplicants who kneel before the mercy seat. This force can sustain a system of traumatic violence over generations, even when individual family members may wish to end the abusive cycle. Tarwater seems unlikely to escape from the violence of his young life, as the choice that he makes seems fated to end with his own violent death. John's pain will be more of an emotional agony, and if we are to imagine him continuing the path that James Baldwin took, it will not end with him as a proud minister of the Christian faith.

Chapter Five, "Raising Children at the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," is the only chapter to deal with a single novel; the text itself demands it, as *The Road* is consumed by a threat of isolation that is closely associated with extinction. This chapter explores the relationship between an unnamed father and son in a post-apocalyptic world where children are subjected to cannibalism and sexual slavery. *The Road* is perhaps the most somber novel under consideration. It is somber, rather than hopeless, because while its characters inhabit a dead landscape, there is some sense of escape from the crushing despair that characterizes this new world; at the novel's conclusion the boy will, against all odds, find a new family to care for him. But before this happens, *The Road* raises difficult questions: how can adults prepare young people for the future when the world is dying all around them? When does demanding that a child acknowledge the truth of a horrific situation become itself an act of cruelty? This chapter argues that *The Road*, through the matrix of the father-son relationship, demonstrates the necessity of even young people's cognizance of the most debased and brutal aspects of human behavior. Only with this recognition can they begin to affirm their existence as human beings.

While the tone of this dissertation is necessarily dark, my hope is that my analysis of the novels examined will not be read as pessimistic. Violence, pain, suffering – these are some of the most fascinating parts of life. It is not because we are either masochistic or sadistic people that we prefer novels such as those discussed in this dissertation to those in which characters are always happy, where everything is always fine. Such works, in reality, are far more dangerous than those novels that confront the reality of young lives, the difficulties they endure, and how, should they survive, those experiences transform them into, not necessarily better adults, but certainly more interesting ones.

Chapter Two:  
Maturation through Pain in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and  
John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*

*"The world was made up of two kinds of people—  
those who were victims and those who victimized."*

—Archie Costello, *The Chocolate War*

In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Roberta Seelinger Trites details how "books for adolescents are subversive—but sometimes only superficially so. In fact, they are often quite didactic; the denouements of many Young Adult novels contain a direct message about what the narrator has learned."<sup>2</sup> This message may take many forms: the narrators may achieve a heightened degree of self-awareness, they may develop morally or intellectually, and they may even fail in these endeavors, perhaps to the young reader's profit. However, for Trites, the *essential* function of the Young Adult novel is to allow readers an opportunity to passively rebel against the established order, so that they may eventually be reintegrated into those same systems of

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<sup>2</sup> Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City: IA, 2000), ix.

power. For Trites, this is a positive, or at least necessary, process. It is how one becomes an adult.

Much of this unfolding of maturation through conflict occurs on school grounds as “school serves as an institutional setting in which the protagonists can learn to accept her or his role as a member of other institutions.”<sup>3</sup> The connection between schools and education is a direct one, but often much, if not all, of the essential education that the narrator/protagonist receives falls outside of the precincts of the classroom, typically at the prompting of other students and with adults figuring either as faint background noise or perverse mockeries of what we hope teachers should be in the lives of young people. As narratives of all-male preparatory schools, *The Chocolate War* (1974) and *A Separate Peace* (1959) provide rich examples of the ways that powerful social and institutional forces are set up to prepare certain young people for successful lives of privilege, so long as they are willing to accommodate themselves to the dictates of authority.

Such authority may come in the form of the rules and rituals of school life, but they also present themselves as the unspoken, coded, or contested mores, expectations, and conventions of the normative social order. In this reading, rebellion is a phase reserved for juveniles, and one role of the Young Adult novel is to establish the proper methods of converting that rebellious energy into productive action that maintains and confirms the existing systems of power. However, contrary to Trites’ argument, rather than validating a reading where the narratives’ protagonists (and by extension, young readers) are successfully reintegrated into

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 32.

the power structures of society, this chapter argues that both *The Chocolate War* and *A Separate Peace* demonstrate how the protagonists of these novels are either alienated, crippled, or killed by the forces of cruelty and conformity that oppose their attempts at any form of transgression that does not harmonize with the shallow rebellions permitted by the school. Acts of true rebellion that threaten the entrenched architectures of power are either (as is the case with Jerry in *The Chocolate War*) met with violence or (as we see with Gene in *A Separate Peace*) never actualized by the protagonist after they have been subsumed by the expectations of the social world around them. Those that emerge, if they survive at all, are broken and ghostly – specters haunting their own story.

### ***The Chocolate War***

Robert Cormier's novels revel in the darkest aspects of human existence. The young people that populate his books experience war (where one young man returns with most of his face blown off by a grenade), rape, murder, betrayal, insanity, and the full host of problems that plague the adult world. Cormier has written novels where a delusional adolescent is unknowingly scheduled for extermination; where a young woman who, obsessed with serial killers, attempts to "cure" a young man of his dark enthusiasms; and in which adults inflict cruelty on children for no reason other than the pure sadistic pleasure of the act. In publishing such challenging books for a young audience, Cormier has enlarged the acceptable terrain of representation in Young Adult literature, carving out the potential for novels that speak directly to issues of violence, abuse, neglect, and fear that shape the lives of young readers.

*The Chocolate War* concerns the students of Trinity, a fictional all-boys Catholic prep school in an unnamed city in New England. Along with rest of the students, freshman Jerry Renault is forced to take part in an annual chocolate sale organized by Trinity's official figure of educational authority, headmaster Brother Leon, as well as that of the school's unofficial student leader, Archie, the sociopathic center of the Vigils, a group of students that function as a kind of secret society within the school. Brother Leon has enlisted the assistance of the Vigils to ensure that the school's chocolate sale, for which the headmaster has surreptitiously (and almost certainly illegally) doubled the budget, goes smoothly. Each Trinity student is expected to sell a certain number of chocolates, and Leon tasks the Vigils with ensuring the full compliance of the student body. In addition to securing his recent (and currently temporary) promotion to headmaster, Brother Leon believes that by expanding the chocolate sale through the manipulative power of the Vigils, he will also rein-in Archie's rebellious group by giving it a target of his choosing. But Archie has other plans.

Against this seemingly innocuous backdrop of a school chocolate sale there lies a seething mass of conflicting allegiances, public humiliations, and violent altercations, through which a vicious battle for power plays out. Trinity is a spider's web of vicious intrigue, and as the action unfolds, we begin to see just how difficult it will be for Jerry (who in addition to navigating the difficulties of freshman year at a new school, in a new town, has only recently lost his mother) to maintain his individuality and integrity. In this, *The Chocolate War* becomes part of what Thomas Atwood and Wade Lee describe as a history of "American prep school literature,



[where] rather than nurturing independent thought and encouraging personal growth, schools enforce conformity and quash individual expression.”<sup>4</sup> As the creator of the Vigil’s “assignments,” Archie is the architect of much of the cruelty that helps to support the school’s regime of power. Assignments are the devious missions that Archie designs and then orders other students to carry out. One of these assignments is given to Jerry, then a relatively unknown and untested arrival to Trinity. Jerry’s job is simple; he is to be the lone student who refuses to sell the chocolates. Participation in the sale itself is voluntary, but no one else dares to publicly stand against the power of Brother Leon. Jerry’s act is in no way rebellious, he is simply cowed into submission by the fact that he is more afraid of Archie than he is of Leon. What begins Jerry’s true rebellion is when Archie tells him that the assignment is over, the message of mild resistance to Brother Leon’s rule has been sent, therefore there is no need for Jerry to continue. But he does. Jerry persists in his refusal to sell the chocolates, and his actions result in other students doing the same. In taking this step Jerry has rebuked both Leon and Archie. It is a doubly dangerous stand; Brother Leon is the most powerful adult in the school, and Archie is the most powerful student. By his action, Jerry has drawn the malign attention of Leon while simultaneously making himself a target for the full power of Archie’s brilliant, calculating mind.

It is in response to Archie’s machinations that Jerry begins to ask whether or not he should upset the order of the school. This desperate wish to be able to

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Atwood and Wade M. Lee, “The Price of Defiance: Schoolhouse Gothic in Prep School Literature,” *Children’s Literature* 35 (2006): 102.

confront the forces arrayed against him finds voice in Jerry's repetition of the question, "Do I dare disturb the universe?"—a quote from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" over which he begins to obsess. Prufrock is an interesting choice for a teenage boy's admiration. A middle aged man who spends his time contemplating the possibility of one day eating a peach and who feels utterly incapable of performing any effective action—in his dreams, even the mermaids refuse to sing to him—Prufrock himself can do no more than pose the question. But Jerry either hasn't read the whole poem, or hasn't assimilated it into his thinking. For him, the question is a dare, and it prompts him to attempt to answer it with action. He has no idea how forcefully the school—the world in microcosm—will respond.

In "Robert Cormier and the Adolescent Novel," Anne Scott McLeod has noted that Cormier's novels "violate the unwritten rule that fiction for the young, however sternly realistic the narrative material, must offer some portion of hope, must end at least with some affirmative message."<sup>5</sup> In this, McLeod's argument is in fundamental agreement with Trites', as each sees the YA novel as necessarily leading to a positive evolution for both readers and characters. Indeed, responses to *The Chocolate War* typically hinge on the reader's reaction to the novel's grim conclusion, where Jerry lies bloody and broken, following a rigged boxing match, while Archie remains undefeated and unpunished. It is a scene that Archie orchestrates in response to Jerry's defiance of his authority. Having gathered Trinity's student body (and

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Scott McLeod, "Robert Cormier and the Adolescent Novel," *Children's Literature in Education* 12 (1981): 74.

ensured that Brother Leon would be present to observe his display of power), Archie pits Jerry against the vicious Emile Janza, a brute of a boy who outmatches Jerry in both his skill at fighting and in his willingness to act with great savagery. Archie demonstrates his special genius by the manner in which he conducts the match. Rather than simply demanding the boys box, Archie arranges to have read aloud instructions written by the student spectators that dictate who should punch whom, and how he should do so. It is a lottery of violence, designed to demonstrate Archie's complete mastery of Jerry's fate and Archie's own puppeteer-like control over the students as a whole. It is as though the entire school is beating Jerry and not just the insipid Janza.

In sympathy with Trites, Betty Carter and Karen Harris have written in "Realism in Adolescent Fiction: In Defense of *The Chocolate War*," that "Cormier does not leave his readers without hope, but he does deliver a warning: they may not plead innocence, ignorance, or prior commitments when the threat of tyranny confronts them. He does not imply that resistance is easy, but insists that it is mandatory."<sup>6</sup> Yet the boxing scene is so overwhelmingly brutal that it is difficult, if not impossible, to see any escape from its bleak decisiveness. What liberatory moment is offered to the students of Trinity, or to the *Chocolate War's* young readers, by witnessing the beating of one of their peers? Instead of helping, his classmates decide who is hit and how, and then (with the exception of the Jerry's only friend, Roland "the Goober" Goubert) cheer on the one-sided fight taking place before them, delighting in Jerry's injuries. We see how:

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<sup>6</sup> Betty Carter and Karen Harris, "Realism in Adolescent Fiction: In Defense of *The Chocolate War*," *Top of the News* (Spring 1980): 283.

Horrified, the Goober counted the punches Janza was throwing at his helpless opponent. Fifteen, sixteen. He leaped to his feet. Stop it, stop it. But nobody heard. His voice was lost in the thunder of screaming voices, voices calling for the kill ... *kill him, kill him*. Goober watched helplessly as Jerry finally sank to the stage, bloody, open mouth, sucking for air, eyes unfocused, flesh swollen. His body was poised for a moment like some wounded animal and then he collapsed like a hunk of meat cut loose from a butcher's hook. (243)

The bloodlust that takes over the students makes it impossible for Goober to even begin to stop this scene – one that Cormier likens to a slaughter. When the fight is over Goober contemptuously observes how “the guys had vacated the place as if leaving the scene of a crime, strangely subdued” (247). Those characters with access to power—and specifically those who chose to employ their power as a method of controlling others—endure, even flourish, while those who struggle against them are broken. Perhaps it is as Jerry tells Goober in those last moments, “It is a laugh, Goober, a fake. Don't disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say ... Just remember what I told you. It is important. Otherwise, they murder you” (205–6). Here is Jerry's revelation. He has learned what he needs to know about cruelty and the limits of an individual's ability to change a rigged system. Further undermining Trites' argument for a healthy reintegration of Jerry into the system of abuse that has beaten him down, in the novel's sequel, *Beyond the Chocolate War* (1985), we learn that Jerry moves to Canada to convalesce after his assault, a beating so vicious and so damaging to both his body and soul that it is not enough that he must be “run out of town;” he is run out of the entire country.

Trinity sits at a nexus of power relations that stand in for institutions that reach beyond its grounds. It is at once an organ of the Catholic Church and its ecclesiastical power, while also serving as a source of indoctrination for the future elite, “the best and the brightest,” of postwar American society. Though it seems as though it is a world unto itself – with its own bizarre rules and traditions – the intersecting sources of power that permeate its halls are not unique to Trinity. Yet even when readers are given a glimpse outside of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the school, they are offered only pathetic palliatives or shallow and insubstantial versions of rebellion. Beyond its grounds, we are reminded of other sources of potential power when Jerry watches some protesters in a park near the bus stop; he has been observing them for several days, fascinated by their behavior:

Idly, he watched the people on the Common across the street. He saw them every day. They were now part of the scenery like the Civil War Cannon and the World War Monuments, the flagpoles. Hippies. Flower Children. Street People. Drifters. Drop-Outs. Everybody had a different name for them. They came out in the spring and stayed until October, hanging around, calling taunts to passersby occasionally but most of the time quiet, languid and peaceful. He was fascinated by them. (19-20)

If the dismissive tone that colors this description were not hint enough, we soon learn that this source of rebellion against the war in Vietnam has very little to offer Jerry. When one of the protesters approaches him, it is not to recruit, or to convince, but to argue and to make demands. The possibility of one of Trinity’s students taking an active role in something like the anti-war movement is absurd according

to the logic of the text. The Vigils exist to prevent just such opportunities from emerging. As Archie explains, “without the Vigils, Trinity might have been torn apart like other schools had been, by demonstrations, protests, all that crap” (27). Protesting is something done by *them*, those dirty people over there, people with no access to the levers of power and influence, and even if Jerry were to approach them he would only find more disharmony, more strife, and a shallow progressiveness that would do nothing to address his own inchoate rebellion.

The divide between Jerry’s fascination and what the text allows him to pursue is actively maintained by the power structure of the school itself. Such a divide is inculcated by Trinity in something as simple as its mandated clothing. “[Jerry} was fascinated by [the people he sees in the street] and sometimes envied their old clothes, their sloppiness, the way they didn’t seem to give a damn about anything. Trinity was one of the last schools to retain a dress code—shirt and tie” (19). Trinity’s demand that its students conform to at least the pretense of decorum and social respectability stands against the spectacle of rebellion that the protestors represent. Rather than principled protest, the examples of public rebellion that Jerry is privy to remain listless and without passion. However, through the underground power of the Vigils, and their coordination with the school’s leadership under the auspices of Brother Leon, the students are effectively shepherded into the controlled acts of rebellion offered by the Vigils, which function to divert any meaningful rebellion into hollow acts of cruelty localized in the confined setting of the school. Here the novel closes off possibilities before they even occur to Jerry.

The book's title suggests a kind of high school frivolity, playing off many readers' expectations of what constitutes a YA novel. But from its first paragraph, *The Chocolate War* announces Cormier's interest in systems of power, violence, and the possibilities of resistance.

They murdered him.

As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach. Engulfed by nausea, he pitched toward the grass. His mouth encountered gravel, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his teeth had been knocked out. Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges.

This amalgam of battle and football field is the reader's introduction to Jerry and the world of Trinity, a place of controlled brutality where both the administration and the Vigils seek to marshal any potential challenges to their power through displays of ritualized violence or psychological coercion. The reason why Archie chooses Jerry for the chocolate sale assignment is simply that Jerry refuses to quit after taking such a punishing beating at football practice. Watching from the stands Archie tells his lieutenant Obie, the secretary of the Vigils: "Don't let him fool you, Obie. He's a tough one. Didn't you see him get wiped out down there and still get to his feet? Tough. And stubborn. He should have stayed down on that turf, Obie. That would have been the smart thing to do" (15). Archie instantly recognizes potential threats to his power, and is quick to neutralize them.

As the most potent individual sources of power within *The Chocolate War*, Archie and Brother Leon play outsized roles in the life of Trinity. Of the two, Archie is the more skilled practitioner of coercion and intrigue. As Obie explains, “Archie disliked violence – most of his assignments were exercises in the psychological rather than the physical. That’s why he got away with so much. The Trinity brothers wanted peace at any price, quiet on the campus” (12). With the administration having turned a blind eye for so many years, the Vigils have managed to amass a vast store of psychological power over the other students, while generally acting from the shadows. Archie uses psychological warfare to manipulate those around him. His facility at bullying is what enables him to retain his position of power and influence in a school with boys who are more physically imposing. According to Lourdes Lopez-Ropero in “‘You Are a Fly in the Pattern:’ Difference and Bullying in YA Fiction,” bullying is presented in YA literature “not as dysfunctional adolescent behavior, but rather [is deployed] as a metaphor for intolerance and discrimination.”<sup>7</sup> Archie’s psychopathy is illustrative of a greater savagery in the novel. He is not the only bully at Trinity—he would not have been able to recruit so many of the students into the Vigils without their sharing a certain kinship with him—but he is by far the most adept.

As C. Anita Tarr has noted, Archie is so capable when it comes to matters of manipulation that his most prominent literary precursor is Milton’s Satan.<sup>8</sup> Archie sits in command of the Vigils as the Archangel “Satan exalted sat, by merit raised /

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<sup>7</sup> Lourdes Lopez-Ropero, “‘You Are a Fly in the Pattern:’ Difference and Bullying in YA Fiction,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 43 (2012): 147.

<sup>8</sup> C. Anita Tarr, “The Absence of Moral Agency in Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*,” *Children’s Literature* 30 (2002): 96-124.



To that bad eminence.”<sup>9</sup> Archie’s power, like Satan’s, is not physical, but rhetorical. Each practices a rhetoric of deception, of intrigue. Archie is a great tempter. For one assignment, Archie forces Goober to sneak into the classroom of Brother Eugene. With the aid of the Vigils, Goober loosens every single screw in the room, just as Arche had instructed him: “Don’t take out the screws. Just loosen them until they reach that point where they’re almost ready to fall out, everything hanging there by a thread” (35). When school begins the next day, all of the furniture in the room simultaneously falls apart, and with it, so too the world of Brother Eugene, a man of great sensitivity. In a fashion similar to the novel’s opening, the scene is described “as if someone had dropped The Bomb” (68). And all the while Archie watches with smug satisfaction from the hallway.

These pranks, which at times seem almost banal, are perfectly devised by Archie, who understands the psychology of his opponents with such uncanny precision that he is capable of achieving astonishingly vicious results while consistently avoiding punishment. His mastery of manipulation and his ability to detect the worst aspects of himself as mirrored in others, and then to take advantage of that insight, provides the most substantive source of power in the novel. As he puts it: “I am Archie. My wish becomes command” (174). We will see later how Jerry is incapable, as a result of the forces arrayed against him, in affecting his desire to resist the power of Archie’s authority, a desire reflected in the way Jerry “suddenly understood the poster – the solitary man on the beach standing upright and alone and unafraid, poised at the moment of a making himself heard

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<sup>9</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), II:5-6.

and known in the world, the universe” (186). But Jerry cannot defeat Archie; his voice will fall away against the background of raucous cheering during the boxing match. Indeed, Archie does Satan one better; whereas Satan is eventually confined to the prison of Hell, Archie and lieutenant Obie are seen in the last line of the novel as they “made their way out of the place in the darkness” (253). Archie has once again affirmed his authority over the dark underbelly of Trinity life.

As the novel’s author, Cormier himself becomes a powerful source of authority. As Trites notes, “two types of authority are especially pertinent to Young Adult novels: authority within the text and the authority of the author over the reader.”<sup>10</sup> Tarr goes so far as to argue that

Archie is, in fact, the character who functions most like Cormier does as a writer. As do all writers, Cormier creates new worlds and manipulates his readers to share in those worlds. But Cormier sees all readers as victims, just waiting to play his game. He has to be flexible, adjusting the fiction to forestall the incredulity that might make readers simply toss the book away. At the last page, Cormier can then spit in the reader's face and say, see, I made you do it; I made you read it; I made you believe me. And aren't you a chump for all that.<sup>11</sup>

Tarr again refers here to the concluding fight between Jerry and Janza. The responsibility for Jerry’s beating is not solely that of Janza, or even of Archie. The student spectators are a mirror for student readers, and thoughtful readers may

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<sup>10</sup> Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, xii.

<sup>11</sup> Tarr, “The Absence of Moral Agency,” 175.

suspect that they, too, are included in Cormier's critique of the human delight in public spectacles of violence. Are we not also, on some level, enjoying the novel's conclusion? Are we not impressed with Cormier's daring, with Archie's skill, with the savagery of total victory? Are we not complicit? And if young people acknowledge a kind of proximate responsibility to the scene of playground violence writ large, how should they respond? To answer these questions, readers will necessarily find themselves in conflict with the text.

Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*: "There is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case."<sup>12</sup> Each of the *Chocolate War*'s chapters focuses on one of Trinity's students. Each has his own fears and desires, each his own conception of the world he inhabits. But it is a claustrophobic worldview. The novel never allows the thoughts of any character other than the male students of Trinity to intrude. So we are shown the longings of Tubs Casper, who has begun stealing from his father and pocketing money from his chocolate sales to afford dates with, and to buy a birthday present for, his supposed girlfriend Rita, "a sweet girl who loved him for himself alone" (90). We are left to speculate what Rita thinks of all this, as the voices of women are conspicuously absent as narrators. Tarr has gone so far as to argue that *The Chocolate War* is "undeniably misogynist."<sup>13</sup> And for some readers, a sense of disgust will perhaps be the most productive response to the novel. As Tarr writes, "Nobody prevented

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 96.

<sup>13</sup> Tarr, "The Absence of Moral Agency," 103.

Cormier from writing and publishing ... and nobody is stopping anyone from reading his works. But if I want to read about an adolescent character who is facing a moral dilemma, I'll turn [elsewhere]."<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, any reader's right, but even a profoundly negative reading of a novel can be a constructive one.

In an early episode we see played out in miniature a scene that resonates with the novel's conclusion. In a class run by Brother Leon, the headmaster accuses Gregory Bailey, a shy boy who makes perfect grades, of cheating. He humiliates him in front of the rest of the class, asking him questions that there no appropriate answers to, all the while waiting to see if any of the other students will act. Aside from one lone voice who anonymously says "Aw, let the kid alone," no one does anything (44). Effortlessly switching his target from Bailey to his classmates, Brother Leon addresses them with contempt:

You poor fools ... you idiots. Do you know who's the best one here? The bravest of all ... Gregory Bailey, that's who. He denied cheating. He stood up to my accusations. He stood his ground! But you, gentlemen, you sat there and enjoyed yourselves. And those of you who didn't enjoy yourselves allowed it to happen, allowed me to proceed. You turned this classroom into Nazi Germany for a moment. (45)

Jerry is among those who sat and said nothing (even though he is supposed to be the one "disturbing the universe"). While Brother Leon does not acknowledge that, if this room has become Nazi Germany, then he himself is the class's Hitler, still his condemnation of their behavior is withering.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 130.

Trites offers a reading in which Jerry's suffering is ultimately redemptive, and her Christological understanding of the novel may appeal to some readers. But importantly, this reading shifts the possibility of affirmation from Jerry to his friend Goober. Trites writes: "Whether Goober will gain anything by that recognition is a matter open to debate, but at least one character in this novel has been given the opportunity to grow. The reader has been offered that opportunity, too. In that potential growth lies whatever redemption the novel might offer."<sup>15</sup> Yet what the novel actually offers us is an ending that emphasizes the vicious and public assault of Jerry, with a crowd of spectators (the voice of Goober helplessly drowned out by the noise of the cheering students) who are overcome by their desire to bear witness to (and to passively take part in) the mock-execution of a boy who they know does not deserve it. In this boxing match the audience clearly stands in for the novel's readers. This is the ideal moment for someone to step forward and rally the crowd, to appeal to their sense of shared humanity, or at least to their sense of shame. In almost any other Young Adult novel someone would do just that, and we, as readers, would be able to act through them, and to congratulate ourselves on having done so. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*:

now it was on this point that the people, drawn to the spectacle intended to terrorize it, could express its rejection of the punitive power and sometimes revolt. Preventing an execution that was regarded as unjust, snatching a condemned man from the hands of the executioner, obtaining his pardon by force, possibly pursuing and assaulting the executioners, in any case abusing

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 15.

the judges and causing an uproar against the sentence – all this formed part of the popular practices that invested, traversed and often overturned the ritual of public execution.<sup>16</sup>

But in *The Chocolate War*, there is no figure who assumes this responsibility. Instead, as “the ambulance’s siren began to howl in the night,” Jerry is driven away, having only inspired Goober to further despair. Their maturation does not leave them as more capable and integrated members of society; rather, each becomes further isolated from his peers.

What, then, does *The Chocolate War* have to teach us about the possibilities for revolt in our contemporary world, where the powers of repression are so entrenched and are willing to act with such lawlessness? Trites argues that “Jerry’s epiphany is a recognition that social institutions are bigger and more powerful than individuals.”<sup>17</sup> As a function of this, she contends that “although Jerry appears defeated and is even possibly dead by the novel’s end, the book still answers the question affirmatively: yes, he can disturb the universe. In fact, *he should disturb the universe*. Doing so may be painful, but Jerry has affected other people with the choices he has made.”<sup>18</sup> Yet there is a contradictory strain to Trites’ argument, as she believes that Jerry’s rebellion is important, even essential, but so too is his defeat. “Jerry’s defeat challenges adolescent readers to temporarily destroy the

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 59-60. Trites goes into greater depth on possible uses of Foucault, along with Judith Butler, Marilyn French, and Jacques Lacan in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, 3-7.

<sup>17</sup> Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

social order so that it may ultimately be preserved.” In doing so “[Young Adult] novels teach adolescent readers to accept a certain amount of repression as a cultural imperative.”<sup>19</sup> It is easy to see how Jerry’s rebellion is a failure; it is much more difficult to imagine how Jerry will ever be able to *healthily* accept “a certain amount of repression as cultural imperative.”<sup>20</sup> And this is the essential problem with the idea that YA novels exist to provide a place (both for their protagonists and for their young readers) to safely negotiate their place in systems of repression. It is an argument that is undermined by novels like *The Chocolate War*, where childhood is shown to be imbued with an intense social savagery, and where the only hope that a conscientious person has of surviving without experiencing significant and abiding trauma is to become an obedient servant of those violent systems. Those children who do not slavishly conform are beaten into submission.

### ***A Separate Peace***

In “A Special Time, A Special Place,” an essay on his time spent at the elite boarding school Phillips Exeter, John Knowles writes that “Exeter was, I suspect, more crucial in my life than in the lives of most members of my class, and conceivably, than in the lives of almost anyone else who ever attended the school ... and a few years later inspired me to write a book, my novel *A Separate Peace*.”<sup>21</sup> Like the narrator of his novel, Gene Forrester, Knowles was a West Virginian. He applied to Exeter on a whim, having read about the school in a catalogue: “I knew little else

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 35, 55.

<sup>20</sup> Cormier’s sequel, *Beyond the Chocolate War* (1985), shows only a further series of defeats for the “heroes” of his story, with Jerry eventually succumbing to delusion and a masochistic relation to authority.

<sup>21</sup> John Knowles, “A Special Time, A Special Place,” *The Exonian*, November 1, 1972.

about it, knew no one who had ever gone there, and, although my family visited New England most summers, I had never seen the school.” Knowles’ essay is full of a sense of warm nostalgia for his *alma mater*, which, as it was published in Exeter’s student newspaper, *The Exonian*, is perhaps unsurprising. However, *A Separate Peace* is a novel that is fully aware of the violence that imbues young life, as well as the ways that schools may work to facilitate this atmosphere of aggression.

Knowles’ portrayal of the fictional Devon in *A Separate Peace* is a subtler meditation on the role of violence in the inculcation of young people than *The Chocolate War*. Knowles’ novel tells the story of Gene and his best friend Phineas (Finny) during the war years of 1942 and 1943. A mismatched pair, Gene is the intellectual, Finny the athlete. Together they form the ridiculously named “Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session,” a group (which also includes their close friend Elwin “Leper” Lepellier) whose main purpose for existence is members’ daily jumps from a tree limb into the river. The relationship between Gene and Finny, at least as Gene conceives it, veers from deep affection to bitter hatred. In time, Gene’s jealousy of Finny and fear of what he represents reaches such a pitch that he causes Finny to fall from the tree, breaking his leg and crippling him, an injury that when rebroken will lead to Finny’s death.

Like Jerry at the end of *The Chocolate War*, Gene has left school – though by graduating, not by fleeing as Jerry did. Gene’s “examination” of his “convalescence” is the precipitating event for the novel itself. Whereas *The Chocolate War* presents a claustrophobic view of school life, where there seems no hope for escape from its terrible realities, *A Separate Peace* maintains a sort of dream-like distance from



Gene's past, as it is told as a series of reminiscences. This connection to the past acts as a sustaining force for Gene, as he considers how "everything at Devon slowly changed and slowly harmonized with what had gone before. So it was logical to hope that since the buildings and the Deans and the curriculum could achieve this, I could achieve, perhaps unknowingly already had achieved, this growth and harmony myself" (12). Telling his story is how Gene attempts to find that harmony. To the adult Gene, "Devon seemed more sedate than I remembered it, more perpendicular and strait-laced ... but, of course, fifteen years before there had been a war going on" (9). Gene refers here to World War II, but it also calls to mind the intense psychomachia that he endures as he continues to battle his own confusion over his relationship with his best friend, a love that threatens the strict code of masculine heteronormative identity that determines the acceptable boundaries for male affection at Devon.<sup>22</sup>

With war on the horizon, the events of the summer session and the boys' senior year could seem petty, but Knowles makes it clear that the two are linked. The war invades every aspect of the boys' lives at school, and their day-to-day existence is shown to be full of risk. Significantly, the only Devon boy to die during the war does so on campus. As Atwood and Lee summarize it: "Gene loses his humanity, Phineas his life, and their friend "Leper" ... his sanity."<sup>23</sup> It is through Gene's wrestling with his sexuality, his injuring of Finny, and the tragedy of Leper's enlistment that we see most clearly Gene's contending with the expectations of

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<sup>22</sup> See Eric Tribunella, "Refusing the Queer Potential: John Knowle's *A Separate Peace*," *Children's Literature* 30 (2002): 81-95.

<sup>23</sup> Atwood and Lee, "The Price of Defiance," 109.

society. His reactions to these expectations, and the violence that they occasion, are what make him into the man we meet at the novel's beginning; they are what form the narrative voice, and just as crucially, they are what contribute to the elisions in the text where we might expect an adult narrator to be more forthcoming. Trites uses *A Separate Peace* to further her argument, where small acts of failed rebellion become the grounds for proper social adjustment. She contends that:

Gene has internalized the necessary message: rebellion is good to a point. It helps adolescents release pent-up energies, perhaps even prevents worse disruptions of the social order. But the rebellion is only portrayed as effective in literature as long as it ultimately serves to sustain the status quo at some level."<sup>24</sup>

And in this case, the protagonist *has* "internalized the necessary message," but rather than effecting a positive maturation into an adulthood in accordance with the dictates and expectations of society, Gene is haunted. Alienated from large parts of himself, he is unable to fully address his agonized love for – and loss of – his childhood friend.

In recalling his relation to the war and his coming of age, Gene is forced to confront the less-than-idyllic aspects of his time at Devon. When he returns to the school for a visit, he notes that despite the new paint and upgrades to the school's facilities:

Preserved along with it, like stale air in an unopened room, was the well known fear which had surrounded and filled those days, so much of it that I

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<sup>24</sup> Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 36.

hadn't even known it was there. Because, unfamiliar with the absence of fear and what that was like, I had not been able to identify its presence. (10)

It is this childhood fear, a fear so pervasive, so ingrained in his daily life at Devon that it is only noticeable by its absence in his adult life, which forces Gene to confront his own capacities for rage and violence. Trites argues that "Gene as an adult narrates his *Bildungsroman*, so we know he has grown to accept his place in society. As an adult, he seems to exist within his culture far more functionally than he did as an adolescent."<sup>25</sup> And yet we see no examples of him existing "more functionally" in the adult world. He mentions no adult friends, no spouse or partner; there are no details about how he lives, or what he does for a living. The adult Gene remains a cypher, one that the reader can only approach through Gene's own memories of his youth.

What inferences we can make from Gene's initial recollections of Devon are provisional and suspect. Speaking further about the fear he experienced at Devon, he remarks in language that begins with assurance and then slips into uncertainty: "looking back now across fifteen years, I could see with great clarity the fear I had lived in, which must mean that in the interval I had succeeded in a very important undertaking: I must have made my escape from it" (10). He continues: "I naturally felt older – I began at that point the emotional examination to note how far my convalescence had gone – I was taller, bigger generally in relation to these stairs. I had more money and success and 'security' than in the days when specters seemed to go up and down with me" (12). If we take him at his word, he does seem, as Trites

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<sup>25</sup> Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 37.

says, to have integrated into society, at least in the sense that he has been financially successful. Yet he also seems to contain a deep sadness, and in his recollections of his time at Devon it is as much the things he cannot talk about as it is those he can that signal to the reader just how much progress the adult Gene has – or has not – made.

But it is not the grounds, nor is it the buildings, that stand as the unifying image for Gene's memories of Devon; rather, it is that single tree with a branch that hangs over a river. To Gene, its power is talismanic: "It had loomed in my memory as a huge lone spike dominating the riverbank, forbidding as an artillery piece, high as the beanstalk" (13). This thought encapsulates many of the novel's themes. As a "spike" it suggests danger, as "an artillery piece" it conjures the threat of war looming in the novel's background, and as a "beanstalk," it includes an element of the fantastic. Because this is not just some tree that adorned the grounds of Devon, it is the place where Gene betrayed his friend, where he intentionally caused Finny to fall. From that fall (and surely the biblical, as well as the phallic, resonances re intentional) the cracks that have begun to appear in Gene's self-image widen until his personality almost seems to be split.

And where are the instructors and supervisors who have been tasked with watching over these young men? Even more than at Cormier's Trinity, the faculty and staff of Devon appear peripheral to the lives of the students. For the most part, the boys seem to be on their own, and what attention they do receive comes mostly in the form of mild scoldings. There is certainly no figure that resembles Brother Leon. The adults are never actively cruel, yet their casual indifference, along with

their acquiescence in allowing Devon to become part of the nation's war machine, creates the necessary space for much of the tragedy that is to come. During the summer session, the Devon adults seem mostly bemused by the antics of their young charges, and they are easily manipulated. When Mr. Prud'homme, a summer substitute, discovers Gene and Finny having skipped their mandatory dinner, he is easily redirected by Finny's charm:

[Finny] pressed his advantage because he saw that Mr. Prud'homme was pleased, won over in spite of himself. The Master was slipping from his official position momentarily, and it was just possible, if Phineas pressed hard enough, that there might be a flow of simply, unregulated friendliness between them, and such flows were one of Finny's reasons for living (22).

At Devon the students typically get away with their small acts of rebellion, and no one in the staff or faculty ever suspect that Gene was the cause of Finny's injury.

There are hints that Devon is not quite so lax during the normal school term, and there are echoes of the fear of student unrest expressed by Trinity's faculty. Gene remembers the teachers' "usual attitude of floating, chronic disapproval. During the winter most of them regarded anything unexpected in a student with suspicion, seeming to feel that anything we said or did was potentially illegal" (23). However, it is not just the fact that they are at summer term that accounts for the lack of an engaged faculty that can relate to the teenage students. This new leniency and neglect is partially a byproduct of the war. As Knowles noted in "A Special Time, A Special Place:"

Returning to Exeter for the fall term of 1943, I found that a charged, driven time had come to the school. I remember how virtually all the younger masters disappeared one by one, and old men became our only teachers. Too old to be in any way companions to us, they forced the class of 1943 to be reliant very much on itself, isolated.

But in making this argument, Knowles also shifts any blame for the school's deficiencies to the War, a problem that it could not possibly be blamed for. In "Unseen Academy: John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*" Alex Pitofsky criticizes Knowles disinclination to portray the administration of Devon (since it might reflect poorly on Exeter) in a bad light

Instead of raising doubts about exclusive private schools, Knowles carefully shields his fictional academy from criticism. First of all, he keeps the Devon School and its routines offstage throughout the novel. Second, when the students in *A Separate Peace* suffer physical and emotional trauma, Knowles makes it clear that their injuries are self-inflicted and therefore Devon should not be held responsible.<sup>26</sup>

Knowles doesn't disagree, as he himself has written: "The novel has one peculiarity for a school novel: It never attacks the place; it isn't an exposé; it doesn't show sadistic masters or depraved students, or use any of the other school-novel sensationalistic clichés. That's because I didn't experience things like that there." But in addition to Knowles's personal reasons for defending his *alma mater*, by

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<sup>26</sup> Alex Pitofsky, "Unseen Academy: John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 49:4 (2013): 391.

placing the emphasis on the students, rather than the staff, he reinforces the importance of their own ethical decision making.

Devon offers just enough latitude for its students to mistake their mischief for true freedom, even as larger societal forces limit such possibilities. The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session, a less vicious but still powerful example of a student run secret society like the Vigils, is an example of this. Because such societies are expected to exist in places like Devon, many of the students quickly join up as “Finny began to talk abstractedly about it, as though it were a venerable, entrenched institution of the Devon School” after all “schools are supposed to be catacombed with secret societies and underground brotherhoods, and as far as they knew here was one which had just come to the surface. They signed up as trainees on the spot” (33-4). Where the Vigils use threats, compulsion, and sadism to consolidate their power, Finny’s group is, at least in Gene’s eyes, constructed around the charisma of their leader.

At Devon, the students police themselves, often according to the unspoken cultural norms that they bring with them. We can see this dynamic at work most clearly in Gene and Finny’s self-enforcement of the proper sexual mores of the school. There are acceptable ways to perform homosociality; clear boundaries still exist. The text registers the times they cross those boundaries as moments of both erotic excitement and real danger. Tribunella writes how

Finny’s and Gene’s relationship is characterized by a subtle homoeroticism in which Gene eroticizes Finny’s innocence, purity, and skill, and Finny eroticizes the companionship provided by Gene ... The boys initially engage

in the ritual of taking off their clothes and jumping from a tall tree into the river below as practice for the possibility of having to jump from a sinking ship in battle. Jumping from the tree acquires special significance for Finny and Gene; it serves as a sign of loyalty and as an act that cements their bond and stands in for sexual play.<sup>27</sup>

It is for this reason also that the tree limb is the place where Gene causes Finny to fall. They have literally gone out on a limb, with Finny the farthest out, both of them in their underwear, as Finny coaxes Gene to go further: "Come out a little way ... and then we'll jump side by side" (59). This is when Gene acts; he "jounce[s]" the limb, and it is difficult to know if he does so consciously or not. Part of the "appropriate" moral order that Gene must accustom himself to is a careful control of sexuality, and it is by refusing to accept such limits that Finny must eventually die. Tribunella argues that

Gene's "maturation" throughout the novel represents his movement away from an effete intellectualism and "adolescent" homoerotic relationship. His "moral" progression involves abandoning the queer possibility and accepting a hegemonic and necessarily heterosexual masculinity that adolescent readers of the novel are tacitly encouraged to emulate and valorize.<sup>28</sup>

Gene is at first more comfortable with his potentially queer relationship with Finny. Early in the novel Finny playfully criticizes Gene's "West Point stride," and trips him, "not out of true antipathy, but because he just considered authority the necessary

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<sup>27</sup> Tribunella, "Refusing the Queer Potential," 83.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.



evil against which happiness was achieved by reaction, the blackboard which returned all the insults he threw at it" (19). Gene desperately wants Finny to know that he is not like the other conforming students, hurrying off to class: "And there was only one way to show him this. I threw my hip against his, catching him by surprise, and he was instantly down, definitely pleased. This was why he liked me so much. When I jumped on top of him, my knees on his chest, he couldn't ask for anything better" (19). Their attraction can only be communicated under the mask of playful fighting. This scene of mock violence as a way to express homosocial or homosexual desire is an important element in the novel's connection of masculine fear and the War. The closest that Gene ever comes to acknowledging the depth of his feelings for Finny is when the latter tells Gene he is his best friend.

It was a courageous thing to say. Exposing a sincere emotion nakedly like that at the Devon School was the next thing to suicide. I should have told him then that he was my best friend also and rounded off what he had said. I started to; I nearly did. But something held me back. Perhaps I was stopped by that level of feeling, deeper than thought, which contains the truth. (48)

That too, is as far as the narrator will come in clarifying the situation. Even as an adult, Gene is not capable of voicing just what that truth is.

Early in the novel Finny proudly flourishes a pink shirt that his mother has sent to him. "Out of one of the drawers he lifted a finely woven broadcloth shirt, carefully cut, and very pink" (24). Gene reacts with astonishment, yelling "Pink! It makes you look like a *fairy!*" But Finny is unperturbed and proposes to turn it into a victory flag, celebrating the Allied bombing of Central Europe. He is more inquisitive

than he is concerned, only asking, “I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone” (25). Finny, as the star athlete, is first able to violate this social norm, but he is special in this, as Gene acknowledges: “He did wear it. No one else in the school could have done so without some risk of having it torn from his back” (25). Finny’s popularity and athleticism protects him, but eventually the other students catch on to the transgressive potential of the two. The precipitating act for Finny rebreaking his leg is when another student, Brinker, calls for a secret tribunal to adjudicate Gene’s culpability for Finny’s fall. The “trial” is a farce, a more passive, but ultimately actually fatal, version of Archie’s boxing match. But here it is the student body’s leader who is on trial. James Holt McGraven argues that this is possible because

the real though unspoken motivation for that ultimately fatal event is not justice or truth—to find out who made Finny fall or to force him to accept his disability, as Brinker claims—but the other boys’ combined homophobic fear and jealous curiosity at the closeness of his relationship with Gene and what the two of them might have been able to get away with.”<sup>29</sup>

The trial itself takes place in First Building, “burned down and rebuilt several times but still known as the First Building of the Devon School” (165). In a revealing aside, Knowles writes that, above the main door, “in Latin flowed the inscription, Here Boys Come to Be Made Men.” This motto can be read as both a demand that the boys become adults, but also that the only way to do this, to be a “real man,” is to be a

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<sup>29</sup> James Holt McGavran, “Fear’s Echo and Unhinged Joy: Crossing Homosocial Boundaries in *A Separate Peace*,” *Children’s Literature* 20 (2002): 70.

*straight* man. It is through physical pain and the moral judgment of their peers that this metamorphosis into “men” takes place.

There is an understanding among the students that there are certain duties that a “Devon Man” will undertake, both for his personal honor and also for the reputation of the school. In the lead-up to America’s entry into World War II, there is an almost subliminal shift in the students’ attention towards their responsibilities as men: “we members of the class of 1943 were moving very fast toward the war now, so fast that there were casualties even before we reached it, a mind was clouded and a leg was broken” (187). The looming war is part of the climate of fear that has shaped Gene’s recollections of his school years. Recalling Gene and Finny’s brief squabble over Gene’s “West Point walk,” Atwood and Lee write that “the mention of West Point alludes to the dual nature of the academy as a place of preparation for, and simultaneously a respite from, the encroaching war that adds its own layer of foreboding to the students’ experiences at Devon.”<sup>30</sup> The school acts as a haven from the violence of the world but it is also a place where violence is enacted; the war only brings this violence into focus.

The narrator recalls how during the war, the adults began to treat the boys differently as they aged: “when you are sixteen, adults are slightly impressed and intimidated by you. This is a puzzle, finally solved by the realization that they foresee your military future, fighting for them” (41). When Devon is given over to the war effort, Gene watches how “the jeeps looked noticeably uncomfortable from all the power they were not being allowed to use” and “they reminded me, in a

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<sup>30</sup> Atwood and Lee, “The Price of Defiance,” 109.

comical and poignant way, of adolescents” (196). Here Gene makes a direct connection between his education and the way that it is used to convert him and the other boys into tools of war. For the most part this remains unspoken; it only comes to the surface when the boys rebuff the casual inevitability that those around them ascribe to their future roles as soldiers.

When he visits his son, Brinker’s father speaks directly to this expectation on the part of the adults, underscoring how the martial and the masculine are bound together. Spotting the military’s sewing machines at Devon, he declares in exasperated confusion, “I can’t imagine any man in my time settling for duty on a sewing machine. I can’t picture that at all ... But then times change, and wars change. But men don’t change, do they?” (198). It is not enough to play an active role in supporting the war, a man must do so through manly acts, not through the use of sewing machines. Mr. Brinker encourages the boys to enlist and is disappointed that Gene is signing up for the Navy, where the young man says he will “probably have a lot of training, and ... never see a foxhole” (199). Brinker – whose strategy is similar – consoles his father by saying, “you know Dad ... the Coast Guard does some very rough stuff, putting the men on the beaches, all that dangerous amphibious stuff” (199). His father remains unconvinced. His incredulity threatens to overwhelm him; after all, “your war memories will be with you forever ... don’t go around talking too much about being comfortable, and which branch of the service has too much dirt and stuff like that ... you want to serve, that’s all. It’s your greatest moment, greatest privilege, to serve your country” (199-200). No mention is made of the elder Brinker’s time in the military, leaving us with the suspicion that he never himself

served. He lectures the boys out of an abstracted sense of what the virtues of sacrifice and heroism should entail.

Finny claims to see the war as a construct, as something unnatural, conceived and executed by madmen. As he says, it is as though “the whole world is on a Funny Farm now. But it’s only the fat old men who get the joke” (116). When Gene asks him, “why should you get it and all the rest of us be in the dark,” Finny’s answer is succinct: “Because I’ve suffered” (116). Finny believes that pain has granted him a certain intuition into what awaits the boys should they enlist. It is impossible to know whether he has achieved any real insight; after all, much of his contempt for the war comes from his knowledge that his injury has made him ineligible for service. Regardless, this anger, coupled with regret, is what allows him to respond to Mr. Ludsbury’s (the dormitory’s master and arch-disciplinarian) admonition that “all exercise today is aimed of course at the approaching Waterloo. Keep that in your sights at all times, won’t you.” To which the typically loquacious Finny replies with a simple, “No” (121). But these small defections from the conventional can do nothing to halt what is coming. There is an air of inevitability, of the futility of action in the face of what must be, that pervades the text, as we see in one the novel’s most magnificent passages.

So the war swept over like a wave at the seashore, gathering power and size as it bore on us, overwhelming in its rush, seemingly inescapable, and then the last moment eluded by a word from Phineas ... leaving me peaceably treading water as before. I did not stop to think that one wave is inevitably

followed by another even larger and more powerful, when the tide is coming in. (109-110)

All of the boys, in one way or another, will be swept up by that wave.

Among the students, the most dramatic casualty of the war is Leper, who has gone AWOL after being confronted by the regimented conformity of military life. Leper believes, and the text seems to agree, that he has gone at least temporarily mad from his experience. It is not a madness without purpose or clarity of vision, though. It brings him back to Devon, purportedly to share what he has seen with his friends, but also to return to a more familiar form of institutional control. Atwood and Lee write that “while Leper may escape from the army, he does not escape Devon. Like every character who is defeated by the conservative forces of the academy environment, he ultimately returns to the school.”<sup>31</sup> For Leper, Devon plays a dual, and conflicting, role. In its familiarity it seems as though it might serve as a refuge from the war, but in actuality it only brings him into a more parochial sphere of conflict, and one where he will, inadvertently, help to bring about the death of his friend.

Leper must also return to Devon for the same reasons that the adult Gene has returned, as Devon exerts a powerful magnetism on the boys. They come for solace, but also to explore the profound scars that the world has left them with. Throughout the novel the narrator has seemed to float along almost ghost-like, apparitional, as though he were haunting his own story. “I could not escape feeling that this was my own funeral,” Gene says (194). It is as though he had never really left Devon, had

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 110.

never really moved beyond his experiences there – as though his adult life were an experience he was already beginning to forget, as he drifts deeper into memories of the past. He must return to the scene of his crime, because if he can make sense of it he might be able to make sense of the war, both the actual worldwide conflict that he played a part in and was ushered into by his time at Devon, but also what he considers his real war, that emergence from the violence and death that he took part in at Devon. Gene connects these two when he recalls how

People were shooting flames into caves and grilling other people alive, ships were being torpedoed and dropping thousands of men in the icy ocean, whole city blocks were exploding into flame in an instant. My brief burst of animosity, lasting only a second, a part of a second, something which came before I could recognize it and was gone before I know it had possessed me, what was that in the midst of this holocaust?" (188).

Gene's own experiences of battle seem limited to training. "I never killed anybody and I never developed an intense level of hatred for the enemy. Because my war ended before I ever put on a uniform; I was on active duty all my time at school; I killed my enemy there" (204). It is always to Devon that he returns, even an actual war is not a ghastly enough experience to remove Devon from its place of paramount importance.

Who then is his enemy? Surely not Finny, for whom Gene retains a rapturous view as one who died immaculate and unsullied, since "only Phineas never was afraid, only Phineas never hated anyone" (204). This is opposed to the rest of the students: "All of them, all except Phineas, constructed at infinite cost to themselves

these Maginot Lines against this enemy they thought they saw across the frontier, this enemy who never attacked that way – if he ever attacked at all; if he was indeed the enemy” (204). Gene believes that none of them, with of course the exception of Finny, were capable of truly confronting their actual adversaries. Each of his friends has lived a lie, each has been tricked into believing in other people’s versions of reality, and of behaving in ways contrary to their true natures.

Gene’s romanticized view of Finny makes it difficult for us to know the “real” Finny. He is almost insufferably good, and never seems to have an existence outside of Gene’s hagiographic recollections. Yet in functioning as an ideal he allows us an understanding of what it is Gene is so desperate for; that is, to defeat the enemy within himself. More than anything Gene desires the quality of completeness that he grants to Finny. Finny has no enemies, he seems unmarked by indecision and self-doubt. His body may be crippled but his spirit only grows as a result, whereas the more Gene comes to know himself, the more his vitality dwindles. He becomes estranged from the world, which was “real, wildly alive and totally meaningful, and I alone was a dream, a figment which had never really touched anything. I felt that I was not, never had been and never would be a living part of this overpoweringly solid and deeply meaningful world around me” (186). Gene’s education is an education into the inherent hostility of the world, but also to his alienation from it. He learns how all people “at some point found something in themselves pitted violently against something in the world around them” – for most of his generation this being the war – and that “when they began to feel that there was this overwhelmingly hostile thing in the world with them, then the simplicity and unity



of their characters broke and they were not the same again” (202). Perhaps they are wiser for it, but still they remain broken. When Gene returns to the school he speaks with no one, he invites no one to meet him, he brings no one with him. In what sense is he even really alive? Gene’s life is all in the past, there is no future, at least none that the reader is aware of.

Young people live within a limited area of possibility, and to violate that boundary means facing a host of repressive forces, whether through institutional intent or cultural inertia. There is a compelling argument that novels for adolescents help to mature their readers into the systems of power and repression, but it does not necessarily follow that doing so affects a series of *positive* changes in their development, or that it is necessary for young people to accept as legitimate those things that so injure them. To say that the protagonists of *The Chocolate War* and *A Separate Peace* have become healthily integrated into the adult world is to ignore the wounds that they carry with them. Certainly they have matured, but there are important parts of them – their idealism, their daring, their hope — that have withered, or been completely excised. Trinity and Devon are each emblematic of the powerful role that schools may play in channeling and amplifying the violence of young life.

There is no actual war in *The Chocolate War*, though there are certainly battles, as well as significant defeats. For the students in *A Separate Peace* the experience of war is much more real, though with the exception of Leper, it is a war that is deferred. Chapter Three will look at novels with children in actual combat,

where young people are forced to kill or be killed, and where the fate of nations, of worlds, of two sentient species rest, whether they are fully aware of it or not, in the hands of child soldiers. They are used by the adults around them to serve an end, that of victory over the enemy, but the young people who are brought into these battles have their own desires, they make moral choices, and they suffer the consequences of their actions.

### Chapter Three:

#### Manipulating Innocence, Adjudicating Guilt: The Child Soldier in

#### *The Hunger Games and Ender's Game*

*"Momentarily, I'd felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat."*

*-Katniss Everdeen, The Hunger Games*

*"He was a soldier, and if anyone had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he wouldn't have known what they meant."*

*-Ender Wiggin, Ender's Game*

This chapter looks at two novels that specifically address the lives of young people in combat, and considers how adult conceptions of childhood and young adult innocence can be manipulated by the state to further its own goals. Both Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) reveal how adults may delude themselves into overstating the innocence of young people, to the point where they mistake innocence for powerlessness. In each of these novels the assumed innocence of the young is used by state actors to weaponize them, and as a result, those young people become indoctrinated into a world of experiential violence. This is an education which they

can then use as a means of resisting the very people who had hoped to control them. In the act of fighting back, the question of guilt emerges, as the protagonists are forced to wrestle with the violent actions that they take part in. A key pressure point for the convergence of these two opposing images of childhood (that of innocence and violence) is embodied in the figure of the child soldier, where notions of innocence and guilt clash.

Both *The Hunger Games* and *Ender's Game* involve children engaged in brutal variations on warfare previously reserved for adults: gladiatorial arena fighting in *The Hunger Games* and the hierarchal command of entire armies equipped with weapons of mass destruction in *Ender's Game*. Each book attests to the ways that the deep economic, social, and political estrangements of young people in periods of extreme duress may produce landscapes where youth with weapons are fixtures, rather than anomalies, on the battlefield. It is at these times that the supposed innocence of the young can be most effectively used as models of propaganda by the state. Together, these novels help to demonstrate the means by which young people can be habituated by powerful actors into regimes of violence, and how the image of the innocent child may be used to manipulate communities.

At the same time, this chapter will argue that each novel also offers readers opportunities to question the narrative of the child as victim, as it provides areas of exploration regarding young people's potential to escape from the recapitulation of violence and its attendant traumas. There is an overwhelming irony at the heart of the adult characters' use of children to carry out vicious acts, as the adults actively cultivate the image of youthful innocence, but then expect those same young people to act with

great savagery. As innocence itself is a constructed concept, and one that requires a certain blindness to the realities of young life – lives that are themselves often full of violence and dangers similar to that of adult life – the adults in these novels are never quite able to fully control their charges, and so they risk these young killers turning against them. As a result of this fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of childhood innocence, each of the protagonists is able to find room for individual action that resists the will of those seeking to control them. Katniss, perhaps because she is the older of the two, is more immediately successful in her rebellion, as she takes part in an all-out confrontation with the brutal forces of state control. Ender's rebellion is more passive, but it ends with him formulating a spiritual and religious movement that spans many worlds and millennia.

The contradictory nature of the use child soldiers extends to its very definition. From at least the time when the ancient Spartans enlisted boys at the age of seven, and continuing into the present when US forces engage them on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, child soldiers have played active roles in warfare. No definition of the child soldier will be entirely satisfactory, as the age of adulthood changes as we move from culture to culture and as those cultures transition over time. Recognizing that, in order to promote efforts to address the issues facing contemporary youth, some kind of basic definition of what a child is would have to be agreed upon, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child set forth a definition of childhood with the intention of offering clarity: "A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable

to the child, majority is attained earlier.”<sup>32</sup> In essence, people become adults at the age of eighteen, unless the nation they live in defines adulthood at an earlier age. With an understanding of how the limitations of this definition may hinder the enforcement of laws governing child soldiers, the 2000 Optional Protocol on Children and Armed Conflict made the following amendment:

States Parties shall raise the minimum age for the voluntary recruitment of persons into their national armed forces from that set out in article 38, paragraph 3, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, taking account of the principles contained in that article and recognizing that under the Convention persons under the age of 18 years are entitled to special protection.<sup>33</sup>

These attempts to protect children acknowledge that young people are not exempt from the dangers of the world, and that unique safeguards are necessary to even begin the process of ending their participation in war.

Though they are not to actively go to war before the age of eighteen, American children are not immune from concerns over violence in their own lives, nor of the violence that takes place outside of their nation’s borders. Localizing this theme for American children, Steven Mintz writes: “There has never been a time when the overwhelming majority of American children were well cared for and

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<sup>32</sup> United Nations General Assembly, “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, November 20, 1989.

<sup>33</sup> When, as the introduction comments on, the United States itself has never ratified. United Nations General Assembly, “Optional Protocol on Children and Armed Conflict,” *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, May 25, 2000.

their experiences idyllic. Nor has childhood ever been an age of innocence, at least not for most children.”<sup>34</sup> Innocence is the key term here. Though childhood may, as Mintz argues, have never been a time of real innocence, the belief that such innocence exists still has consequences for child readers.

### ***The Hunger Games***

In *The Hunger Games*, the occasion for the use of child combatants is prepared by the vast inequalities of wealth distribution between the districts (those areas of the nation that provide the raw materials and basic commodities), and the Capitol (the political hub of the nation and the place where the majority of those materials and commodities are consumed). The totalitarian Capitol, run by a Caesar-like figure named President Snow, utilizes the annual Hunger Games as a symbol of its power over the districts. Each of the twelve districts must send two tributes (a boy and a girl, between the ages of 12 and 18), every year to fight in the Games, as punishment for an earlier rebellion – a rebellion which was crushed and which ended in the districts’ subjugation.

*The Hunger Games* follows 16-year-old Katniss on her torturous journey from the coal-fields of District 12 (a fictionalized Appalachia, and the poorest of the districts), to the annual tournaments of child murder that are the Hunger Games themselves. Here, in her vulnerability, she is used both as a child combatant, but also as a figure of youthful propaganda to entertain the Capitol’s viewers. Later she will enlist as a soldier in the districts’ rebellion against the Capitol, when the citizenry revolts for a second time. In the final stages of the war, Katniss will fall under the

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<sup>34</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, vii.

direction of the supposedly destroyed District 13 and its leader, Alma Coin; district 13 will prove to be just as ruthless in its use of Katniss as a figurehead for its cause – a cause that requires only a powerful enough catalyst to erupt after seventy-five years of the districts watching their children butchered as symbols of the Capitol’s economic, political, and cultural dominance.

It is understandable that a post-9/11 generation would be drawn to novels that deal explicitly with the ways the media and acts of political violence are mutually reinforcing. The novels makes it clear that Katniss and the other citizens of District 12 lead a life that is characterized by widespread suffering, where young and old alike die from starvation, and so the reader’s sympathies are enlisted early on. When Katniss speaks of her home in District 12, she speaks of it as a place, “where you can starve to death in safety ... Who hasn’t seen the victims? Older people who can’t work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines” (6, 28). District 12 is a stand-in for every blighted area, where the populace is forced to hollow out resources for a bitter existence, the profits of which flow elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> Simple domination is not enough though, for the Capitol, the Games are a show of political dominance. As Katniss relates:

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch – this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy ... Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. “Look how we

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<sup>35</sup>As Collins has said, “the sociopolitical overtones of *The Hunger Games* were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations.” James Blasingame, “An Interview with Suzanne Collins.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52.8 (2009): 726.



take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you." (18-19)

Children are the repositories for the districts' hopes for the future, but their function is dual. They stand in as the potential for future growth – for a society's continuation of its genetic and cultural history, but, crucially, in *The Hunger Games*, they are also the sacrifice that must be offered up for others to survive. It is the idea of the children's guiltlessness that is essential for the power of the ritualized sacrifice. This is the reason why they are chosen by lottery, what they refer to as the reaping. The only specific guilt associated with their being chosen is the guilt of poverty and youth.

This guiltlessness is made manifest by the selection of Katniss' sister Primrose as tribute during her first reaping. Katniss is held in a state of shock as, "somewhere far away, I can hear the crowd murmuring unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair. And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps toward the stage, passing me" (21). The power of Prim's innocence, made even more compelling by her grim determination as she walks to the podium, will be transferred to Katniss when she volunteers as tribute in her sister's place: "a shift has occurred since I stepped up to take Prim's place, and now it seems I have become someone precious" (24). Such an act has imbued Katniss with a virtue that is extraordinary, but it is also an early clue to the strength that lies behind her youthful veneer.

At that same time that Katniss is demonstrating a selflessness that will later inspire the community to take up arms against the Capitol, there is also a perverse sense of group guilt in the district that has accumulated over the years of these lotteries, as families are forced to watch as their young people are taken away for slaughter. David Aitchison has argued in “*The Hunger Games, Spartacus, and Other Family Stories:*”

the problem is not so much that the Games demand child sacrifices each year but that they draw the whole population into an affect realm of fear and uncertainty ... [F]or those who survive the reaping period, adult life seems marked by a sense of utter powerlessness: that is—and confirmed by the fact that the Games thrive for three quarters of a century – those who survive the reapings are unlikely to challenge the awful order of things in this coercive state.<sup>36</sup>

And yet that is just what they will do. While it is true that the reapings and the Games force the districts into compliance, they are also what inevitably lead to the ferocity of the district’s resistance. In some ways, the Capitol’s plan to use the Games as a method of controlling the population of the districts is positively absurd. Rebellion is exactly what one would expect from a desperate population who is starved, humiliated, and who must endure the yearly spectacle of their children fighting to the death. The lust for revenge accounts for part of this oversight on the

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<sup>36</sup> David Aitchison, “*The Hunger Games, Spartacus, and Other Family Stories: Sentimental Revolution in Contemporary Young-Adult Fiction.*” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39:3 (2015): 254-274.

Capitol's part, but there is another component to the Capitol's plan for keeping the districts perpetually subservient.

Part of the process of maintaining the obedience of the tributes and of the districts themselves lies in the Capitol's methods of education and indoctrination. On this point Katniss remarks: "somehow it all comes back to coal at school. Besides basic reading and math most of our instruction is coal-related. Except for the weekly lecture on Panem. It's mostly a lot of blather about what we owe the Capitol" (42). Knowledge of the non-productive arts, as well as the subtler machinations of power that prop up the Capitol, and indeed, of anything occurring outside of the nation of Panem, is intentionally and forcefully excised from what passes for a curriculum in District 12. It is as if the Capitol's intent is to keep the districts in a suspended state of intellectual immaturity, and they do this by a relentless program of indoctrination and educational privation. Eventually, however, Katniss will discover the utility behind her own education in deprivation, and will bring her hard-earned survival skills to her fight to stay alive, her war against the Capitol, and later her personal insurrection against District 13 and its leader Alma Coin.

For the poor of Panem, everyday life is a battle for existence. What the children of the districts learn is how to survive, but also who to hate. In their terror over a new rebellion, the Capitol has overplayed its hand. They have built a country where children are sacrificed for sport, and in turn, they have created districts where people are willing to sacrifice everything, including their young people, and where those same young people are willing to sacrifice their own lives if it means striking even a symbolic blow against the Capitol. The Capitol has raised the power

of the Games to a stage where the relatively small number of deaths in the arena count for much more than the daily deaths in the districts. They have cheapened young life by fashioning their deaths into entertainment, and at the same time they have elevated those young people to the position of potential martyrs and heroes. By making the Games and the children who compete in them the focal point for their political strength, the Capitol has provided powerful targets for the districts' frustrations and rage, and they have set the stage for Katniss to emerge as a potential threat to their sense of power and control. They have held her up as an image of innocence and youthful purity; they make a hero out of her, and then seem bewildered when others begin to view her as their champion.

Even the relative privilege of those in District 2, where stone is quarried and weapons are produced, and which has more access to material wealth, is predicated on their children being raised as Peacekeepers, the shock troops of the Capitol. "It's a way for their people to escape poverty and a life in the quarries. They're raised with a warrior mind-set. You've seen how eager their children are to volunteer to be tributes" (83). While other members of District 2 enjoy a somewhat easier life than those in many of the other districts, the potential Peacekeepers are "Trained young and hard for combat" (193). The Capitol values the people in this district specifically because of the use to which they can put their children as soldiers.

In *The Hunger Games* both the districts and the Capitol attempt to use Katniss as a piece of propaganda. Because she volunteered for her role as tribute, Katniss is immediately set apart for this self-sacrificing act as "the word *tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *corpse*, volunteers are all but extinct (27). This, along

with her youth, beauty, and her carefully manufactured relationship with Peeta, the boy from District 12 who was chosen as tribute at the same time, make her a perfect image for both the nobility of the child combatant, but also a reminder of just what is being taken from the districts. To prepare her for televised presentations before the nation, the organizers of the Games have Katniss plucked and pruned, her dress and style carefully choreographed to appeal to both the television audience and also to the whims of President Snow. At times she seems to be a hopeless case in this regard, but she learns, because to remain ignorant, even of things she is openly contemptuous of, would mean to die. Her image is everything to the Capitol, as the Games are both a warning and entertainment. She is made to look both enticing, and also virtuous. Part of Katniss's difficulty in playing the role of helpless, youthful vitality is that she herself has left behind much of the trappings of youth. Her father died years before in a mine accident, and ever since then she has taken care of her younger sister and her mentally ill mother. For the purposes of the Capitol, Katniss is a child, but in her own life, Katniss is an adult, indeed, for her family, Katniss is the real parent.<sup>37</sup> Once again, the Capitol has misjudged her, believing that her naiveté when it comes to her public presentation means that she will be easy to control. They turn her into the Girl on Fire, and then wonder when she burns down their world.

In order for the Games to be a success Katniss (along with the other tributes) must be more fully educated into the violence of her new life. She is resentful and challenging. Far from being respectful, she is furious over how her training is

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<sup>37</sup> See Kathryn Strong Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen: *The Hunger Games*, Myth, and Femininity," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 40:2 (2015): 164-178.

evaluated. At her final test, where she is supposed to be judged and ranked, those who are supposed to be paying attention instead are engaged in a feast with a roast pig as its center-piece. This ranking is pivotal, as it can lead to the sponsorships that decide life and death in the arena.

Suddenly I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief (101-2).

And yet these small displays of rebellion intrigue the rich who hold power over her survival. What they do not realize, what is perhaps unthinkable to them, is that she will use those same qualities in their destruction. She is, after all, just an innocent child, and in Panem, children are useful objects for the utility and pleasure of the powerful. The Capitol cannot see the evidence of just how effective Katniss's experience could prove to be in their destruction, even when she demonstrates her abilities for them. They continue to dismiss her as a plaything even as they train her to be a warrior.

One significant irony in the war between the districts and the Capitol is that it is the districts themselves that utilize child soldiers in battle. The Capitol's murder of children is usually built around propaganda and spectacle, but the districts, specifically District 13, also uses them as regular members of the military: "those

over fourteen have been given entry-level ranks in the military and are addressed respectfully as 'Soldier'" (8). But if Katniss is a child soldier, she's also a child actress, and much of her power for District 13 lies not only in her fighting, but also in her being filmed. She is an example for the districts' masses, though one that is consistently taken advantage of by Coin and the other leaders of the rebellion. They, just like the Capitol, believe that they can control her, that as a child she is a problem that can be easily dealt with. But because she is known for fighting for the benefit of the districts, and because of the symbolic value she has attained by constantly being on television, she is actually extremely dangerous. When she is questioned as to whom she will give her support for leadership after the war, she is told: "If your immediate answer isn't Coin, then you're a threat. You're the face of the rebellion. You may have more influence than any other single person" (266). District 13's use of Katniss is just as confused as that of the Capitol's. Each insists on utilizing the power of her image as the embodiment of youthful innocence, but each greatly underestimates her capabilities.

Katniss learns enough about Coin to know that she could never support her. As Snow awaits execution he reminds Katniss of the strategic bombing of a large group of children which included her sister Prim, and tells her: "We both know I'm not above killing children, but I'm not wasteful. I take life for very specific reasons. And there was no reason for me to destroy a pen full of Capitol children ... However, I must concede it was a masterful move on Coin's part" (357). What Snow reveals is that the same cruelty that was the foundation for the Capitol's control, is also being laid as the foundation for District 13's. They have intentionally murdered young

children and blamed it on their enemy, knowing that there is no more affecting spectacle than that of the murder of innocents.

Katniss understands that, despite her age, she has matured into the full role of protector by the war's end: "I think it's been a long time since I've been considered a child in this war" (358). And so when she learns of Coin's plan to go on holding the Games, but now with the Capitol's children as the victims, she only pretends to acquiesce, because "I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despite being one myself ... because something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children's lives to settle its differences" (377). In a final act of misjudgment, Coin believes that she has harnessed Katniss' anger and effectively re-channeled it to the now powerless Snow, so she stands by and waits for Katniss to execute him. But Katniss knows that Coin and District 13 are simply another manifestation of the same abuses of power that characterized Snow and the Capitol. Rather than allow matters to continue, this "child" soldier, her arrow trained on the captive Snow (that older symbol of the violent acts that adults are willing to perpetrate against children), surprises the crowd as "the point of my arrow shifts upward. I release the string. And President Coin collapses over the side of the balcony and plunges to the ground. Dead" (372). Here in her last act of violence, Katniss is finally the orchestrator of the spectacle, and she utilizes all of the martial skill and the political cunning that she has learned throughout the course of the books to finally finish the Games.



## ***Ender's Game***

*Ender's Game* presents us with another wartime scenario, where a child once again finds himself placed in situations where he is forced to kill other children. If Katniss has many of the qualities we associate with adulthood, Ender is more a figure of traditional childhood innocence. The adults in the story use this innocence or naiveté as a way to control him, and to turn him into a weapon of extraordinary destructive power. In *Ender's Game* the motivating force behind the conscription of children is the fear of an alien invasion by an insectoid race, the buggers. Ender, a six-year-old prodigy, has been recruited to attend Battle School. In response to the buggers' first invasion, Earth has begun a program of selective education of its youth, where the most talented are trained to command a fleet of starships that has already been dispatched – the discovery of faster than light communication through the ansible making it possible to do so from the supposed safety of near-Earth positions. This decision to concentrate on Earth's most gifted children is in keeping with *Ender's Game's* Cold War publication. As Christine Doyle writes in "Orson Scott Card's *Ender and Bean: The Exceptional Child as Hero*," "the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957 concentrated the American mind wonderfully, as it were, in terms of attention paid to identifying gifted young people and developing their talents."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Doyle elaborates as to some of the specific actions that were taken by the United States in order to assess the readiness of American children for an intellectual battle with the Soviet Union post-Sputnik: "A series of legislative measures post-Sputnik led in 1969 to the Gifted and Talented Children's Education Assistance Act, a comprehensive study of the current status of education for the gifted and talented called the Marland Report (1972) and the establishment of the National Office of Gifted and Talented. It was the Marland report that established criteria for giftedness that have essentially remained part of state and federal guidelines since that time. Areas of giftedness included "general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual or performing

In Ender's world, this interest in "identifying gifted young people" extends to recruiting them for the military.

For Ender to reach his potential, even more so than that of the other students who attend Battle School, he must be placed in a world that is never safe; he is exposed by his adult superiors to a near-constant regiment of isolation and violence. As Colonel Graff, the head of Battle Schools, says

Ender Wiggin must believe that no matter what happens, no adult will ever, ever step in to help him in any way. He must believe, to the core of his soul, that he can only do what he and the other children work out for themselves. If he does not believe that, then he will never reach the peak of his abilities.  
(142)

Graff is no monster, sadistically pushing Ender into threatening situations. The military and civilian leaders of Earth are desperate for a general to lead the fleet when it reaches its destination, the bugger home-world. Ender has been tapped to be that general, and so they are willing to bet a six-year-old child's life on the chance that he will be ready to take command when the fleet reaches its destination. There have been other recruits for this job before Ender, but each of them failed, defeated by the magnitude of the task before them. Ender is desperate to know what happened to them. But all he is told by Mazer Rackham, his final instructor and the man who defeated the buggers in the last war, is that "they didn't make it. That's all.

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arts, [and] psychomotor ability.'" With the possible exception of "visual or performing arts (though surely the elaborate choreography of his tactics in the Battle Room would qualify him), Ender fits excellently in each of these criteria." Christine Doyle, "Orson Scott Card's Ender and Bean: The Exceptional Child as Hero," *Children's Literature in Education* 35.4 (December 2004), 302.

We don't punish the ones who fail. They just – don't go on" (200). That pause is vital. Even if we believe that the government simply would allow these children to go back to their old lives, if they have experienced what Ender has experienced, how could they? When Ender presses him all Mazer will say is, "What does it matter, Ender ... None of them failed at *this* point in the course." Mazer's pause, and his unwillingness to give Ender any specifics gives the reader reason to suspect that the experience has crippled them, that the government did not *have* to do anything after the children's failure, they had already done quite enough.

Ender was never supposed to be alive. He is, in part, a creation of the state, a useful tool they have allowed to come into being, and also a raw material that must be refined. His body, his essential physical self is, in this sense, owed to the state. As he says when he is being recruited for Battle School: "It's what I was born for, isn't it? If I don't go, why am I alive?" (19). Card sees this as indicative of the state of childhood itself: Children, he has written, "are a perpetual, self-renewing underclass, helpless to escape from the decisions of adults until they become adults themselves."<sup>39</sup> But if Ender is "helpless," then he may also be guiltless, as his very existence is a product of long-term governmental policy. In *Ender's Game* families are allowed two children, making Ender a "Third," a source of ridicule that follows him to Battle School. The human race fears leaving the confines of Earth over the perceived bugger threat, so strict limits have been placed on family size because of fears of overpopulation, with a maximum of two children per family. Ender's family is given a dispensation, however, in fact, it is mandated that the family have another

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<sup>39</sup> Orson Scott Card, "Introduction," *Ender's Game* (New York: Tor, 1985), xx.

child after their two elder children, Peter and Valentine, are passed over for Battle School: Peter because he is too sadistic, Valentine because she is too empathetic. Ender is supposed to be the perfect mix of the two, innocent enough to be malleable, yet, through training, experienced enough in the art of violence to be lethal to anyone he perceives as his enemy.

Perhaps it is because Orson Scott Card has used his fame to make various public pronouncements on morality that much of the criticism of *Ender's Game* centers on Card's own character, and the potential for his books to act as corrupting influences: promoters of violence, imperialism, and Nazism.<sup>40</sup> John Kessel has leveled a powerful critique against the novel, arguing in "Creating the Innocent Killer: Ender's Game, Intention, and Morality," that Card's narrative claim that Ender is innocent of the crime of xenocide – here, genocide as applied to an alien race – rests on the premise that intentionality is of primary consideration in adjudicating guilt. If Ender does not know what he is doing, then he cannot be guilty, and consequently he expiates any guilt his readers might feel concerning their own actions (or inactions) in the world:

[If] intention alone determines guilt or innocence, and the dead are dead because of misunderstanding or because they bring destruction on themselves, and the true sacrifice is the suffering of the killer rather than the killed—then Ender's feeling of guilt is gratuitous. Yet despite the fact that he is fundamentally innocent, he takes "the sins of the world" onto his shoulders

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<sup>40</sup> See James Campbell, "Kill the Bugger: *Ender's Game* and the Question of Heteronormativity," *Science Fiction Studies* 36.3 (2009): 490-507.

and bears the opprobrium that properly belongs to the people who made him into their instrument of genocide. He is the murderer as scapegoat. The genocide as savior. Hitler as Christ the redeemer.<sup>41</sup>

Kessel's critique of the novel requires young readers to *not* identify with Ender's feelings of guilt and self-hated, that is the only way he can be used as a scapegoat, but this sense of identification is exactly what the novel sets up. In as much as we can, we become Ender, and his guilt, to whatever degree of empathy we are able to muster, becomes our guilt. Fundamentally, *Ender's Game* is a novel about culpability and empathy. Our empathizing with the guilty is meant to extend to the adults who believe they are saving the human race from an existential threat. Because the bugger threat is thought to be imminent, there is a desperate rush to find a particular child, a savant of war, who will have the empathic ability to fully understand his enemy, but who is childish enough to be fooled into thinking he is only playing a game, when he is really wiping out a race in an act of aggressive war, what Justice Robert Jackson called "the supreme international crime," at the Nuremburg Trials, "differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole." In *Ender's Game* the guilt of an entire world for the greatest of all crimes – with a still greater burden as it is meant to eradicate not just a race, but an entire species – is placed on the shoulders of a preteen.

In "Why Sci-Fi Keeps Imagining the Subjugation of White People," Noah Berlatsky broadens this critique of the novel to address what he reads as the neocolonial message of some science fiction, which "use[s] the invasion of the

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<sup>41</sup> John Kessel, "Creating the Innocent Killer: *Ender's Game*, Intention, and Morality," *Foundation, The International Review of Science Fiction* 33:90 (2004): Online.

superior aliens not as a critique of Western expansion and genocide, but as an excuse for those things. The bugs invade human worlds, and the consequence is that the humans must utterly annihilate the alien enemy, even if Ender feels kind of bad about it.”<sup>42</sup> But Ender feels more than “kind of bad about it.” Each of these arguments demands that we not only ascribe a preternatural innocence to Ender, but also a static ignorance to him that is never challenged by his experiences. Ender changes, he learns and grows, he feels shame and remorse, and he attempts to make amends. It is not with murder that the novel ends, but, as we will see, with Ender traveling among the newly colonized worlds, carrying with him the last living remnants of the bugger species in the form of a cocoon, “looking for the world where the hive-queen could awaken and thrive in peace. He looked a long time” (324). These are not the actions of a Hitler disguised as a little boy.

Yet there is a long way to go in Ender’s development to reach that point. In the very first chapter we see Ender murder a bully by the name of Stilson, who uses the removal of Ender’s monitor (a device the state employs to track and record potential child recruits) as an opportunity to attack the smaller boy. Ender manages to defeat Stilson, but he does not end there.

For a moment, the others backed away and Stilson lay motionless. They were all wondering if he was dead. Ender, however, was trying to figure out a way to forestall vengeance. To keep them from taking him in a pack tomorrow. I

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<sup>42</sup> Noah Berlatsky, “Why Sci-Fi Keeps Imagining the Subjugation of White People,” *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2014.

have to win this now, and for all time, or I'll fight it every day and it will get worse and worse. (7)

In a mirror of the trick that will be used at the novel's conclusion, we find that this was actually a test of Ender's resolve, a kind of graduation into the world of Battle School, where he will be called upon to kill again.

But first he must make it there. While the struggle for daily existence is much more violent in Panem than it is in the community that Ender is born into, Ender himself is in constant danger from the violent jealousies of his sociopathic brother and other children who were passed over for Battle School. From a very early age Ender is educated into this climate of fear. In a version of "cowboys and Indians," Ender's brother Peter forces him to play "buggers and astronauts."

It will not be a good game, Ender knew. It was not a question of winning. When kids played in the corridors, whole troops of them, the buggers never won, and sometimes that games got mean. But here in their flat, the game would start mean, and the bugger couldn't just go empty and quit the way buggers did in the real wars. The bugger was in it until the astronaut decided it was over. (11)

Ender's generation of children has grown up in a world where these localized battles act as a "safe" stand-in for the larger war that seems to threaten them. A war that they, as potential recruits, may be asked to take part in. These events find resonance in the novel's own Cold War era publication, when, as Stephen Mintz writes "there was a symbolic connection between the struggle with the Soviet Union

and the battles boys acted out in recess and in backyards.”<sup>43</sup> And though they may not know the extent of the violence that takes place during these “games,” the parents are complicit in this early indoctrination into violence.

Peter opened his bottom drawer and took out the bugger mask. Mother had got upset at him when Peter bought it, but Dad pointed out that the war wouldn’t go away just because you hid bugger masks and wouldn’t let your kids play with make-believe laser guns. Better to play the war games, and have a better chance of surviving when the buggers came again. (11).

The entire world is on a wartime footing, as even the games of children have become a part of the process of martial readiness. And Ender is always the bugger in these games. He is always the victim, not by his own choice, but by the demands of his brother. Even at this early stage, Ender, when he puts on the bugger mask that he and Peter use to “play” fight, attempts to see the world as though he were that other that he will one day destroy: “But this isn’t how it feels to be a bugger, thought Ender. They don’t wear this face like a mask, it *is* their face. On their home worlds, do the buggers put on human masks, and play? And what do they call us? Slimies, because we’re so soft and oily compared to them?” (9). Ender’s ability to empathize with his enemy becomes a critical weapon that the military and political forces use in their war against the buggers, and it is an empathy that undercuts the claims that Ender’s purpose in the novel is to allow its readers to embrace the othering powers of imperialism or fascism.

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<sup>43</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 283.



In *Ender's Game*, children are potent images for state propaganda. We see this at work when the boys are filmed by television crews, "perched like animals on the shoulders of crouching, prowling men" (28). The media appears like enemies stalking Ender and the other boys. Ender fantasizes about being interviewed, wishing that "the TV guy was letting him be a spokesman for all the boys," even though, by appearances, "Ender was barely competent to speak for himself" (29). Though it is only a small mention here, later on Ender will take on the role of a true "Speaker," writing moving treatises that will transform humanity's relationship to both the alien race that Ender himself destroys, and to his own hated brother, the eventual hegemon of all of humanity. But for now Ender is mere fodder for propaganda, an image to make the folks at home proud. Once again he imagines what would happen if you spoke directly to the camera:

Will Valentine see me disappear into the shuttle? He thought of waving at her, of running to the cameraman and saying, 'Can I tell Valentine good-bye?' He didn't know that it would be censored out of the tape if he did, for boys soaring out to Battle School were all supposed to be heroes. They weren't supposed to miss anybody. (29)

It is important that the home audience see their childishly small forms, their frames slight and still lacking the musculature of adulthood. But it is equally imperative that they be seen as brave, as boldly advancing against an implacable enemy. How can *you* not do *your* part for the war when there are children marching off to battle?

The war has allowed for the breaking of both law and social compact in Ender's birth. Having used this to convince Ender to go to Battle school, similar

biological and familial pressures are placed on Ender when he temporarily has stopped participating in the brutal training that he discovers at school, and it is his sister Valentine, the same one who was rejected for her supposed excess of empathy, who is dispatched to talk him into returning. Ender, though, is aware of this manipulation: "Valentine too; she was another one of your tricks, to make me remember that I'm not going to school for myself" (253). Valentine is the person that Ender loves the most in the world, she sustains him, protects him, but she is also what is used to coerce and control him. This relationship between Valentine and Ender is a close mirror to that of Primrose and Katniss. In each novel, the protagonist is motivated out of a sense of protective love for their sister, and in each the state is willing to take advantage of that love to further its own goals. Both Ender and Katniss know, at least on some level, that they are being coerced, but neither is prepared to rebel against the entrenched power structures in these early stages. For each the cost is too great.

This sense of duty to his family, most specifically to his sister, is gradually migrated through the subtle maneuverings of his supervising adults into a duty towards his fellow soldiers and to the survival of the state. Ender is carefully excluded from any experience that might make him question the interests of the army or the world-state that it serves. When he is being asked to join up, Ender thinks of

the films of the buggers that everyone had to see at least once a year. The Scathing of China. The Battle of the Belt. Death and suffering and Mazer Rackham and his brilliant maneuvers, destroying an enemy fleet twice his

size and twice his firepower, using the little human ships that seemed so frail and weak. Like children fighting with grown-ups. And we won. (250)

Michael Wessells and Kathleen Kostelny describe this in “Youth Soldiering: An Integrated Framework for Understanding Psychological Impact” as “nonforced recruitment,” where, “even without explicit coercion, youth join military forces and armed groups for diverse reasons ... In highly oppressive, conflict-torn societies, youth may learn to define themselves in part by opposition to the enemy.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most painful aspect of this novel built on child abuse and the murder of children by other children is that, with the exception of his breakdown from exhaustion when Valentine talks him into continuing, up until the moment when he learns that he has been tricked into committing xenocide, Ender is a true believer, dedicated to the cause and willing to sacrifice both his physical and mental health in pursuit of total victory.

Ender’s inability to fully grasp the scope of his actions points to an important factor in why child soldiers are so valuable. Wessells writes in *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*:

A child’s entry into an armed group marks a profound life transition. Separated from parents, the supports of family and friends, child recruits enter a new world governed by strict military rules, harsh discipline, multiple hardships, and frequent exposure to deaths...this social world is a culture of violence, because violence saturates daily activities, children face

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Wessells and Kathleen Kostelny, “Youth Soldiering: An integrated Framework for Understanding Psychological Impact,” *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence*, Ed. Brian K. Barber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 209), 110.

constant danger, and the armed group deliberately uses violence as a means of achieving its objectives.”<sup>45</sup>

But keeping Ender alone is not enough. For the military to make use of his mind they must also have access to an equally powerful weapon, and significantly, its effects can be relayed in real-time to Ender via a simulator that functions as an elaborate video game. They create what is known as Dr. Device (the Molecular Detachment Device,) a new kind of bomb that produces an explosive wave which, when it comes into contact with other objects, reignites into a potentially infinite series of explosions. It is this weapon that the now twelve-year-old Ender turns on the bugger home-world, sending the fleet on a suicide mission, all the while believing he is playing a game, his final requirement for graduation. Here the creation of a weapon suitable and usable for a child takes on its most perverse form, and Marie Montessori’s adage that “play is the work of the child” becomes quite sinister.

All along, Ender and the other student-soldiers believe that they have been both playing and learning. Ender is kept ignorant of the fact that the final exam will decide the fate of two species. Though he will later have deep reservations about the outcome, the adults believe that humanity’s future hinges on the result of this last battle. After he achieves victory, Ender is told: “it had to be a child, Ender ... Any decent person who knows what warfare is can never go into battle with a whole heart. But you didn’t know. We made sure you didn’t know. You were reckless and brilliant and young. It’s what you were born for” (329). Here, after being tricked into

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7.

committing the greatest of crimes, Ender is told that it is his very innocence that enabled him to accomplish an act of such evil.

But Ender never, not for a minute, feels innocent, and his entire life after this, in all the novels that follow, is a series of attempts at atonement for an act carried out in childish ignorance. He will become the “Speaker for the Dead,” a quasi-religious figure that travels the many worlds that humans colonize after the buggers are defeated. He goes from place to place, his role as Speaker requiring that he tell the truth about a person’s life, after having been called by a relative of the deceased. And so he delivers speeches over graves, giving a sort of eulogy for those that have passed, but always a eulogy that lays bare the truths, both great and horrible, of the person’s life. After a childhood of being lied to and used, Ender embarks on an adulthood of truth telling and service. He has told such truths for both for the leader of the buggers, the Hive Queen, and for his brother Peter when he wrote *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon*, a book that allowed the rest of humanity to see these reviled creatures in a new light. It is an act of both generosity and atonement, and it is Ender’s way of dealing with the trauma of his young life. From a childhood filled with deception and acts of horrific violence, Ender heals himself through writing about his first tormentor, and his last enemy.

After they have won the war against the buggers, there is intense fighting on Earth to see which faction will be in control now that the external enemy has been defeated. There are several warring groups that have only been held together by their fear of the buggers. When there is a halt to the hostilities, Ender would find no

peace on Earth, though he has only turned twelve. As Graff explains to Anderson, the man who succeeded him as the head of Battle School, Ender is

All the more dangerous because he could so easily be controlled. In all the world, the name of Ender is one to conjure with. The child-god, the miracle worker, with life and death in his hands. Every petty tyrant-to-be would like to have the boy, to set him in front of an army and watch the world either flock to join or cower in fear. If Ender came to Earth, he'd want to come here, to rest, to salvage what he can of his childhood. But they'd never let him rest.

(307)

There is no childhood left for Ender on Earth; all that was taken away the day he left for Battle School, if not on the day the government decided his parents should produce a Third. Ender's lieutenants do return home, and many of them become the leaders of great armies. But while they sit and await the outcome of the initial struggle over control of Earth, they remind him that "there's a million soldiers who'd follow you to the end of the universe" (302). None of them are sure at this point what they will do, or how their home countries will choose to use them, though one of them says, "We're kids ... they'll probably make us go to school. It's a law." And they all laughed, after all; it is absurd, none of them are children anymore.

Both *The Hunger Games* and *Ender's Game* examine the extent to which children can be inculcated into systems of power, and both take the concept of a game to its most perverse form. Each calls attention to the ways in which the child soldier has become a means to underscore the power of the repressive state through the spectacle of children committing murder, and of that violence mutating

out into the larger world. Children have long been a hunting ground for those who wish to prop up various forms of nationalism. They are perfect pieces for propaganda. Smaller, uncorrupted versions of ourselves, they are a fantasy of what we use to be. No dry battlefield report can muster the propagandistic power of a child killed in combat. It is a way to elide the complexities of war, to boil them down to a sentimentalized image of the nation as unfairly aggrieved. Consequently, the powerful are able to harness the emotional cache that has been built up around the killing of innocents. But it also has the potential to grant great power to those same “innocents.”

Ender makes a choice to enter into a life of spiritual atonement. It is a story that is carried on in the novel's sequels, and that will end with him entering into a type of monastic order. Chapter Four takes up this theme of children and their religious experiences, but it does so not just through the choices they make, but also the ways that adults can act as coercive forces in the spiritual lives of young people, and in how those young people relate to their own sense of the divine.

Chapter Four:

Abuse, Trauma, and Religious Vocation in Flannery O'Connor's

*The Violent Bear It Away* and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

*"I have found that if one's young hero can't be identified with the average American boy, or even with the average American delinquent, then his perpetrator will have a good deal of explaining to do."*

*–Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature"*

*"Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets."*

*–Numbers 11:29*

In mid-1959, while finishing *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), Flannery O'Connor famously had the opportunity to meet James Baldwin, who was planning a tour of the American South. O'Connor's friend, Maryat Lee, had recently encountered Baldwin in New York and wrote to O'Connor in Georgia, suggesting that she meet with Baldwin during his southern visit. O'Connor declined, responding to her friend: "No I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him;



here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on – it's only fair."<sup>46</sup> Perhaps it is just as well that the two writers never spoke; in a letter dated May 21, 1964, O'Connor wrote:

About the Negroes, the kind I don't like is the philosophizing, prophesying, pontificating kind, the James Baldwin kind. Very ignorant but never silent. Baldwin can tell us about what it feels to be a Negro in Harlam [sic] but he tries to tell us everything else too.<sup>47</sup>

If O'Connor had been more familiar with Baldwin's work she might have been more receptive to a meeting, having told Maryat Lee, "I have read one of his stories and it was a good one."<sup>48</sup> If she had had the opportunity to read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) she might have been even more inclined. There is a kinship between the novels, both in their visions of young adulthood and in their understanding of how abuse and neglect can drive children's acceptance of their religious obligations. *The Violent Bear It Away* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* share compelling similarities in plot as well: each is the story of a fourteen-year-old boy growing up in an atmosphere of fundamentalist fervor, neither having known his biological father. Each of these boys finds himself pushed by powerful forces to lead a sanctified life, to adhere to the stringent demands of fundamentalist Christianity, and to enter into

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<sup>46</sup> "To Maryat Lee," April 25, 1959, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 329.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 580.

<sup>48</sup> There has been interesting work on how this non-meeting relates to O'Connor's views on race, see Carole K. Harris's "On Flying Mules and the Southern Cabala: Flannery O'Connor and James Baldwin," *Renascence* 65(5): 327-349 and Robert H. Brinkmeyer's "Taking It to the Streets: Flannery O'Connor, Prophecy, and the Civil Rights Movement," *Flannery O'Connor Review* 4 (2006): 99-109.

full participation with a religious calling. This chapter will argue that in both *The Violent Bear It Away* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, rather than regarding the mistreatment of young people as solely inimical to the spiritual development of the child, both novels offer visions of childhood where abuse and neglect can further their acceptance of a religious vocation.

### ***The Violent Bear It Away***

O'Connor had a keen interest in the religious lives of her young protagonists. She saw them as possessing a spiritual existence just as complex and meaningful as that of her adult characters. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the teenage Francis Marion Tarwater lives a life of physical deprivation, after having been abducted as an infant by his great-uncle, Old Tarwater, a fanatical fundamentalist who claims to be a prophet. Old Tarwater insists that Tarwater is destined to follow him in the prophetic tradition, but when Old Tarwater dies, his nephew must find his own way, which leads him to his uncle Rayber and Rayber's mentally challenged son, Bishop.<sup>49</sup> The novel is presented partially as a series of flashbacks, and when we first meet Young Tarwater, he has effectively been orphaned. Old Tarwater has only recently died, his mother had died in a car crash years earlier, his father is also dead, and his uncle Rayber has not had contact with him for years after Old Tarwater kidnapped the boy to shield him from Rayber's secular influence.<sup>50</sup> The life the two Tarwaters

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<sup>49</sup> Because of the similarity in names a brief summation may prove helpful. Francis Marion Tarwater, the protagonist, is the nephew of Rayber, and the grandnephew of Old Tarwater. Old Tarwater is also the uncle of Rayber. They are referred to in the novel as Tarwater, Rayber, and Old Tarwater, and so they will be here as well.

<sup>50</sup> For an interesting early essay on the antagonism between Rayber's secularism and Old Tarwater's fundamentalism, see Robert M. McCowen's "The Education of a Prophet: A Study

have led has been so removed from the rest of society that the boy is sure neither of his great-uncle's age, nor of his own, though he supposes it to be around fourteen. Old Tarwater had demanded that Tarwater baptize Bishop, but caught in a compulsion that he cannot understand, he instead seeks to drown the boy. By the novel's conclusion young Tarwater's path to an acceptance of his prophetic mission will bring about his murdering of Bishop, and Tarwater's own sexual assault. However, the great narrative high wire act that O'Connor attempts to pull off by setting the stage with so much trauma and death (all brought to an even greater pitch of pain since it is directed against children) is meant to lead the reader towards a recognition that it is all necessary if Tarwater is to become the prophetic figure that he was born to be.

Tarwater enters the world via pain and death, his mother having "lived just long enough after the crash for him to be born. He had been born at the scene of a wreck" (41). His great-uncle cannot understand the centrality of this trauma to Tarwater's self-conception: "he had never seemed to be aware of the importance of the way he had been born, only of how he had been born again" (41). Indeed, Old Tarwater seems aware of very little, other than his own manic desire for Tarwater to become a prophet. He is so overcome with passion that at times his fanaticism works against his own ends. His frenzied action and histrionic manner is played off against his nephew's outward stoicism and laconic use of language. Because Old

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of Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*," *Kansas Magazine* (1962). McCowen writes that "Rayber too, in a sense, is one of the 'violent.' The zeal which he has inherited from old Tarwater, twisted and pharisaical now, is a fine symbol of the 'apostolic' spirit by which militant atheism apes Christian charity" (76.)

Tarwater is incapable of truly understanding his nephew, he misses an opportunity presented by the bizarre nature of Tarwater's birth. After all, the very fact of his miraculous survival, of emerging from his dying mother while his grandmother too lay dead along the road, is part of what Tarwater believes

set his existence apart from the ordinary one and he understood from it that the plans of God for him were special, even though nothing of consequence had happened to him so far. Often when he walked in the woods and came upon some bush a little removed from the rest, his breath would catch in his throat and he would stop and wait for the bush to burst into flame. It had not done it yet. (41)

From the very beginning of his life, Tarwater is marked by isolation, violence, and loss, as the moment of his birth coincides with the death of his only female blood relatives. Because of his upbringing, he cannot help but retrospectively place these events in the context of a life that has been heavily influenced by the overwhelming presence of Old Tarwater.

In order to deliver a prophet's education, Old Tarwater isolates Tarwater from the outside world and teaches him only what will further a religious vocation. He begins when the boy is seven, the traditional age of reason; he abducts his great nephew from Rayber and brings him to Powderhead, a place "not simply off the dirt road but off the wagon track and footpath, and the nearest neighbor, colored not white, still had to walk through the woods" (12). Here, he has complete control as Tarwater is shielded from other models of adult behavior and other forms of worship. Old Tarwater has provided his grand-nephew with what he considers a full

education: "Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment" (4). The inclusion of U.S. presidents in this essentially theological history of the world is interesting in that it underscores Old Tarwater's obsession with power and leadership, though why Hoover is singled out is unclear. He was not president at the time. The Stranger informs us of the year the novel takes place when he tells Tarwater, "Well now ... don't you think any cross you set up in the year 1952 [incidentally, this is also the year of the publication of *Wise Blood*] would be rotted out by the year the Day of Judgment comes in?" (36). As a Quaker and wealthy mine owner, Hoover seems to have little to endear him to Old Tarwater. One possible explanation is that having presided over the 1929 Wall Street crash, and the nation's subsequent decline into the Great Depression, Hoover serves as a symbol of the possibility of large-scale catastrophe, with the Depression functioning as an economic End of Days.

Old Tarwater's pedagogical intentions are essentially aimed at biblical literacy and the formation of a prophetic temperament. As he says, "I brought you out here to raise you a Christian, and more than a Christian, a prophet!" (15). Old Tarwater's explicit objective is to keep his nephew ignorant of the outside world, as any secular influence may confound his plans for the boy's prophetic future:

The old man had always impressed on him his good fortune in not being sent to school. The Lord had seen fit to guarantee the purity of his up-bringing, to preserve him from contamination, to preserve him as His elect servant,

trained by a prophet for prophecy. While other children his age were herded together in a room to cut out paper pumpkins under the direction of a woman, he was free for the pursuit of wisdom, the companions of his spirit Abel and Enoch and Noah and Job, Abraham and Moses, King David and Solomon, and all the prophets, from Elijah who escaped death, to John whose severed head struck terror from a dish. The boy knew that escaping school was the surest sign of his election. (17)

In performing the abduction, the great uncle claims to have rescued Tarwater from participation in what he considers absurd secular holidays (here identified as the cutting out of Thanksgiving pumpkins) but also from Rayber's dangerously rationalized and utilitarian worldview. Both the state-run schools and Rayber's own reliance on reason are threats to a sacramental understanding of the world. But the consequence is that Tarwater grows up friendless and ignorant of the greater world; his closest companions, famous prophets from antiquity, having all been dead for at least two and a half millennia.

Old Tarwater cuts a striking figure, embodying much of what O'Connor admired about southern fundamentalism. As Robert H. Brinkmeyer has noted in "A Closer Walk with Thee: Flannery O'Connor and Southern Fundamentalists," O'Connor "took these religious fanatics very seriously and saw her affinities with them as running very deep."<sup>51</sup> Almost any other writer would have presented Old Tarwater as a buffoon or a madman. But there is something strangely seductive in

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<sup>51</sup> Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., "A Closer Walk with Thee: Flannery O'Connor and Southern Fundamentalists," *Southern Literary Journal* 18.2 (1986): 9.

the certainty of Old Tarwater's severe interpretation of the faith. After his sister dies, in the car crash when Tarwater's mother also died, Old Tarwater is committed to an asylum. He remembers this time with both resentment and pride: "Ezekial was in the pit for forty days,' he would say, "but I was in it for four years,' and he would stop at that point and warn Tarwater that the servants of the lord Jesus could expect the worst" (62). For Old Tarwater, his suffering is proof that he is a prophet; any behavior or action, no matter how extreme, is permitted if it is in service to God. But Old Tarwater is no mere lunatic; as O'Connor said, he "is the hero of *The Violent Bear It Away* and I'm right behind him 100 per cent."<sup>52</sup> Such admiration for zealotry allowed O'Connor to portray the actions of Old Tarwater as outsized but also essential in laying the path for young Tarwater to accept his prophetic calling.

Old Tarwater had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it. He had schooled him in the evils that befall prophets; in those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean; for he himself had been burned clean and burned clean again. He had learned by fire. (5)

Tarwater's essential education is in the "hard facts of serving the Lord" (6). There will be no well-appointed church for Tarwater to preach in, no house purchased by his devoted parishioners; we will not find him dispensing the Gospel of Wealth, or moderating his vision to make it palatable for a skeptical audience. When Tarwater returns to the city at the novel's conclusion, we can be sure that he will either

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<sup>52</sup> Granville Hicks, "A Writer at Home with Her Heritage," *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), 83.

achieve the restoration of the Kingdom of Heaven or, more likely, his own martyrdom.

But before this can happen, Old Tarwater demonstrates what lengths a person must go to in order to live righteously by violently confronting Rayber when he comes to rescue Tarwater. Rayber has no desire for another child to experience what he did as a child under Old Tarwater's control. However, Rayber's plans are frustrated when Old Tarwater pulls a gun and begins firing: "the second shot flushed the righteousness off his face and left it blank and white, revealing that there was nothing underneath it" (7). The righteousness that Old Tarwater has "flushed" from Rayber's face is not that of living in accordance with God's laws, but the self-righteousness that comes with Rayber's belief that he knows what is best for the boy. Tarwater here witnesses one of his family members attacking another; it is a lesson that he will carry with him. Violence is not only forgivable, it is essential when it is righteous.

The two nephews react to their abductions in very different ways. Yet neither is ever able to divorce himself from the power of this experience, when they were under the mercy of an uncle who believed that any suffering they might endure was acceptable if only they could fulfill his own failed prophetic mission. Rayber recalls his time with Old Tarwater with great resentment, telling him, "You're too blind to see what you did to me. A child can't defend himself. Children are cursed with believing. You pushed me out of the real world and I stayed out of it until I didn't know which was which. You infected me with your idiot hopes, your foolish violence" (73). And Rayber hasn't been able to shed those them; even though he has



rejected his uncle's plans, a yearning for those "idiot hopes" and "foolish violence" lingers. Tarwater believes that, unlike Rayber, he is capable of refusing to participate in his great uncle's schemes, though Old Tarwater warns him that if he does "judgment may rack your bones" (10).

Yet Old Tarwater himself has not proven to be a great success as a prophet. In recounting Rayber's failed attempt to take back Tarwater, "the old man sometimes admitted ... his own failure as well, for he had tried and failed, long ago, to rescue [Rayber]" (7). Old Tarwater's life is a string of such failures, the most important being his own inability to go to the city and stand as a prophet. In his "early youth" he had begun a journey to the city:

to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Savior. He proclaimed from the midst of his fury that the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire and while he raged and waited it rose every morning, calm and contained in itself, as if not only the world, but the Lord Himself had failed to hear the prophet's message. (5)

Old Tarwater was likely close to the same age as his nephew now, when, in his zeal, he ventured out to the new Sodom to declare its forthcoming doom. But the sign that Old Tarwater calls forth never appears to those that live in the city; the sun remains unbloodied. Instead, there came a morning when "he saw to his joy a finger of fire coming out of [the sun] and before he could turn, before he could shout, the finger had touched him and the destruction he had been waiting for had fallen in his own brain and his own body. His own blood had been burned dry and not the blood of the world" (5-6).

Old Tarwater is not the type of person to take such a sign as a final defeat. Like a father whose dreams of glory have long since passed him by, Old Tarwater lives through the possibility of his nephew performing the acts that he could not. He has cultivated Tarwater's entire existence towards that success. After all, "having learned much by his own mistakes, he was in a position to instruct Tarwater – when the boy chose to listen – in the hard facts of serving the Lord" (6).

Old Tarwater's success depends upon controlling the boy, so with a characteristic lack of subtlety, he convinced Tarwater that no one else in his family wants him. When Tarwater asks why Rayber "didn't bring the law out here and bring me back," Old Tarwater tells him, "it was because he found you a heap of trouble" (74, 75). With a dead mother and a father who followed soon after in suicide, Tarwater is enmeshed in isolation and loneliness. He begins to hear a voice in his head that he cannot control, a voice that offers advice in a devilish, ingratiating tone. If nothing else, the voice offers companionship. Tarwater never suspects mental illness, as he was raised to believe in the intercession of the divine into the mundane world, and the novel does nothing to suggest insanity as a possibility. Neither is the voice some imaginary friend that Tarwater has dreamt up to keep him company.

Proffering words that appear consoling but that seek only to further alienate the boy, the voice, who Tarwater thinks of as the Stranger, says, "You're left by yourself in this empty place. Forever by yourself in this empty place with just as much light as that dwarf sun wants to be let in. You don't mean a thing to a soul as far as I can see" (36). The Stranger's voice is a whisper that seems to work softly in

opposition to that of Old Tarwater's declamations. However, it too compounds Old Tarwater's efforts to isolate Tarwater. Tarwater can choose either the way of the prophets and of God, or that of the self and the ego (each close kinsman to the devil). The voice is not altogether a thing of this world. It is something deeper and more mysterious, perhaps a part of Tarwater's psyche that lurked within his subconscious, or perhaps the Devil himself. The text is content to let this ambiguity stand. However, this struggle over Tarwater's soul will play out all the way to a violent confrontation with another figure of satanic coloring who propels Tarwater towards a fiery vision that enjoins him to take his prophetic message to the city. It is only when he accepts this role that the Stranger leaves him.

Tarwater is never spared by the adults in the novel on account of his youth. For O'Connor, the necessity of submitting to God's will and to the dictates of the soul's desire for a sacramental life was as true for children as it was for adults, and she uses her child characters to convey that message in stark terms. As George Toles writes in his perversely titled essay "Drowning Children with Flannery O'Connor:" "young and old have identical membership privileges in the blind confederacy of the unredeemed. Until God catches up with us, and we submit to the indignity of baptism, we are little more than ambulatory, prideful meat."<sup>53</sup> However, Tarwater has already undergone his baptism; Old Tarwater is not asking that his nephew become born again, or that he lead a life free from sin. He is demanding a life of total commitment, despite (or perhaps because of) the great dangers that such a life entails. These dangers are manifold and not to be avoided, but rather to be gladly

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<sup>53</sup> George Toles, "Drowning Children with Flannery O'Connor," *Raritan* 31:3 (2012): 142.

accepted as signs of a prophet's calling. Recalling Rayber's dismissive attitude to Old Tarwater's own calling he says:

"Called myself to be beaten and tied up. Called myself to be spit on and snickered at. Called myself to be struck down in my pride. Called myself to be torn by the Lord's eye. Listen boy," he would say and grab the child by the straps of his overalls and shake him slowly, "even the mercy of the Lord burns." He would let go the straps and allow the boy to fall back into the thorn bed of that thought, while he continued to hiss and groan. (20)

Old Tarwater speaks here of that same "terrible mercy" that Tarwater will be told of in the novel's climactic vision. Even if we allow that Old Tarwater's sanity may be in question, his sincerity never is.

Old Tarwater is not content with intervening in the lives of Tarwater and Rayber. As one of the steps along Tarwater's path, Old Tarwater demands that Tarwater baptize Rayber's son, Bishop. Having failed in the task himself, Old Tarwater insists that "if by the time I die ... I haven' got him baptized, it'll be up to you. It'll be the first mission the Lord sends you" (9). By this time, though, Tarwater longs for greater glories than to "baptize a dim-witted child," as his thoughts turn to the great prophetic figures: "Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit" (10). An element of Tarwater's resistance to Old Tarwater is the banality of the task that he has set for him. Old Tarwater's hopes are for Tarwater to complete the work he will

leave unfinished at his death,<sup>54</sup> but not necessarily to eclipse him by performing even greater deeds. In this he is caught in the dilemma of wishing to live through his nephew, but not wanting his own self-worth to be diminished in the process.

After Old Tarwater's death, the novel's use of children as agents of providence only intensifies, as Tarwater is now forced to come into his spiritual inheritance. Even though we have known that Old Tarwater will die, still, his exit leaves a great void in the text that the other characters lack the vitality to fill. This is Tarwater's fallow period, during which he is forced to choose in which direction he will go, towards Jesus, or towards the self and Satan. Having internalized his great-uncle's lessons, but still fighting their implications, Tarwater becomes obsessed with Bishop:

[Tarwater] stood like one condemned, waiting at the spot of execution. Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared for him. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. (91)

Tarwater is loath to take on such an ignoble task. He longs for an escape from his destiny, and so he decides to murder Bishop, thus refusing the call to become a prophet. But as though trapped in the throes of some ungovernable familial destiny, Tarwater's drowning of Bishop will become instead a baptism. Tarwater must

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<sup>54</sup> This also includes burying, not burning, his body, so that he will be whole for the bodily resurrection.

submit to the violent grace that draws him to Bishop. As Toles writes, such an act of surrendering “must manage to break the resisting sinner's will utterly and harrow the body till its core disfigurement is revealed, without ever involving direct emotional expression. There is no cave-in, no trembling, no fit of weeping, or, to push the metaphor closer to the murdered child, no drowning in tears.”<sup>55</sup> The baptizing of Bishop occurs by compulsion and not by active will, as though Tarwater were overthrown by a force that comes from a place either beyond himself, or else buried so deeply that he is incapable of rooting it out.

Rayber is fully aware of this atavistic tendency towards violent spiritualism: “The affliction was in the family. It lay hidden in the line of blood that touched them, flowing from some ancient source ... those it touched were condemned to fight it constantly or be ruled by it” (114). It is something that his wife, Bernice, who has left the family (thus making Bishop another child who has been abandoned by a parent), first noticed when they came to rescue Tarwater. She becomes terrified by the cold, impersonal manner in which Tarwater reacts to his great-uncle pulling a gun on them:

Its face was like the face she had seen in some medieval paintings where the martyr's limbs were being sawed off and his expression says he is being deprived of nothing essential. She had had the sense, seeing the child in the door, that if it had known that at that moment all its future advantages were being stolen from it, its expression would not have altered a jot. (181)

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<sup>55</sup> Toles, “Drowning Children with Flannery O’Connor,” 153.

Even at the age of seven Tarwater is being hardened into a figure of ascetic strength, and the rigidity and pain of his upbringing will fashion him as an agent of prophetic power. Tarwater's journey to this prophetic mission may be disturbing, but his motivations were clear to O'Connor. As she wrote in a letter, "I feel that in his place I would have done everything he did. Tarwater is made up of my saying: what would I do here?"<sup>56</sup>

Still trapped in his past, Rayber is infuriated at the way that children are used as what he considers to be spiritual props. When he watches the performance of Lucette, an "eleven or twelve" year-old girl who travels with her parents, preaching a fiery fundamentalist gospel, he thinks of her as just "another child exploited" (124). Lucette's message continues the novel's interest in the intermingling of violence, religion, and childhood, reminding her listeners that Jesus emerged as "this blue-cold child" and how "the world hoped old Herod would slay the right child, the world hoped old Herod wouldn't waste those children, but he wasted them. He didn't get the right one" (132). This speech sends Rayber into a kind of paroxysm, where he declares that the raised dead did not include "the innocent children, not you, not me when I as a child, not Bishop, not Frank! And he had a vision of himself moving like an avenging angel through the world, gathering up all the children that the Lord, not Herod, had slain" (132). But Rayber will become no avenging angel; instead, he will stand by, knowing his own son is about to be murdered. Indeed, he puts the idea into Tarwater's head, saying "nothing ever happens to that kind of

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<sup>56</sup> "To 'A,' 14 November 1959, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 358.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 580.

child ... in a hundred years people may have learned enough to put them to sleep when they're born" (168). He even admits that "once I tried to drown him" but did not succeed because of a "failure of nerve" (169). He tells this to Tarwater as though he were daring him, a dare that Tarwater takes up, telling him "you didn't have the guts" (169).

Tarwater wrestles with what to do about Bishop, as he moves back and forth from a compulsion to baptize the child, to a desire to murder him. For Tarwater, as with O'Connor herself, questions of salvation and damnation have become questions of life and death. Even after he has drowned Bishop he cannot reconcile his mind to what exactly he has done, admitting to a truck driver that "I drowned a boy," but also that "I baptized him." What is crucial here is that Tarwater feels the greater guilt for having baptized Bishop, declaring, "it was an accident. I didn't mean to ... the words just come out of themselves but it don't mean nothing. You can't be born again ... I only meant to drown him" (209). Tarwater behaves like a sleepwalker who awakes with bewilderment to his new surroundings. Yet he stubbornly convinces himself that his duty has now been fulfilled: "I proved it by drowning him. Even if I did baptize him that was only an accident. Now all I have to do is mind my own bidnis until I die. I don't have to baptize or prophesy" (210). But Tarwater's destiny is not complete, and though he believes he can return to Powderhead for good, there is a final violent encounter awaiting him – one that will cause him to fully commit himself to his prophetic future.

During his return to Powderhead, Tarwater is given a ride by "a pale, lean, old looking young man with deep hollows under his cheekbones" (227). This



devilish figure induces Tarwater to get drunk: “it burned his throat savagely and his thirst raged anew so that he was obliged to take another and fuller swallow. The second was worse than the first and he perceived that the stranger was watching him with what might be a leer” (230). This man in “a lavender shirt and a thin black suit and a panama hat” is the actualization of all of the novel’s satanic impulses (227). The voice in Tarwater’s head has, for a moment, taken physical form, and with its ghoulish demeanor and its violent behavior, it has brought home to Tarwater what it could mean to live entirely for the self, to choose the devil over Christ. When we last see the man he is skulking away: “his delicate skin [having] acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood” (231). Tarwater wakes to find himself naked and he “began to tear savagely at the lavender handkerchief” that the man had bound his hands with “until he had shredded it off” (232). Like an insect struggling in thick syrup, Tarwater up until this point has seemed to barely move at all. Now he is filled with a frantic energy: “he got into his clothes so quickly that when he finished he had half of them on backwards and did not notice ... his hand was already in his pocket bringing out the box of wooden matches. He kicked the leaves together and set them on fire” (232). He knows exactly what has been done to him, and in his hysteria he proceeds to

[tear] off a pine branch and set it on fire and began to fire all the bushes around the spot until the fire was eating greedily at the evil ground, burning every spot the stranger could have touched. When it was a roaring blaze, he turned and ran, still holding the pine torch and lighting bushes as he went. (232)

This rape is the violent intervening act that instigates Tarwater's final transformation. Now "he knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They look as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (233). Tarwater's fires trails him all the way to Powderhead, where they rise into the tree line from which "a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame" (242). Casting himself upon the ground Tarwater is emphatically commanded to "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (242). Why should mercy be associated with terror? And why would we be warned of it? It is a powerful, though enigmatic, command. But it becomes clearer if we look at Tarwater's own journey to his destiny, especially when we consider the rape that makes his final vision possible. For O'Connor, the discovery of one's religious calling is worth any price, and because that price must often come in an act that startles the individual out of complacency, God is most merciful when He is most terrible. André Bleikasten has argued in "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor:"

O'Connor's heroes are indeed sleepers: they traverse life in a dream-like state, and with the sense of impotence and anxiety experienced in nightmares. They go through the motions of revolt, but their violent gestures toward independence are all doomed to dissolve into unreality. They are nothing more than that starts and bounds of a hooked fish.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> André Bleikasten, "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor," *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*. Eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), 148.

Tarwater is no longer held by the tenterhooks of indecision. He is no fish on a line, but rather a true prophet, and when we leave him, “his singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set towards the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping” (243). Here, at the novel’s conclusion, O’Connor expands the notion of childhood to encompass all of humanity, and it seems as though there is a great deal of pain in store, not just for Tarwater, but for all those who are still asleep.

### ***Go Tell It on the Mountain***

O’Connor writes as a believer; Baldwin writes as a survivor. Unlike Old Tarwater, who we never actually see strike his nephew, the Grimes’ household overwhelms us with physical violence. The Grimes are a working class family living in 1930s Harlem. John’s father Gabriel is a deacon in the church; his mother Elizabeth is a housewife. Though his brother Roy is constantly testing the boundaries of social norms and the rules of the family, Roy is the beloved son, while John feels only scorn and anger from his father. As readers we will learn that John is actually Elizabeth’s son from a previous relationship, though John never finds out. Gabriel, too, has another son, Royal, whom he has never acknowledged and who is now deceased. This son was the product of an affair Gabriel had as a younger man while married to a woman named Deborah.

Although *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is filled with humor, it lacks the emotional distance from its subject that allows it to revel in the absurd; unlike *The Violent Bear It Away*, it is a thinly veiled autobiography. As Baldwin writes in “Down at the Cross – Letter from a Region in My Mind:”

I underwent, during the summer that I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis. I use the word “religious” in the common, and arbitrary, sense, meaning that I then discovered God, His saint and angels, and His blazing Hell ... and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous ... I become, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid – afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without.<sup>58</sup>

His alter-ego, John Grimes, experiences the same conversionary experience, and he too does so to escape “the evil within” and the “evil without” by aligning himself with the power and holiness of the church. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* tells the story of how John’s father’s violence, along with John’s fear of his own homosexuality, propel him to accept baptism in the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal church, the same path that had led Baldwin himself to becoming a teenaged preacher.

As patriarch of the family, Gabriel plays an outside role in John’s development. Gabriel, like Old Tarwater, is larger than life; each overflows with strength to the point where everyone in their presence seems diminished. Gabriel appears to John as someone giant and monstrous, a creature of wrath and derisiveness. As a younger man, Gabriel was as wild as his son Roy. The young Gabriel drinks, and fights, and exults in his sexual exploits. It is from his dissolute past that Gabriel is in constant flight, and because he fears his past actions have damned him, he looks to Roy, his “natural born” son, as opposed to Gabriel, his adopted son, to make things right with his life.

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<sup>58</sup> James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross – Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *The Fire Next Time*, 1963 (New York: Vintage, 1993), 15-16.

Gabriel's abuse of John does not emerge *ex nihilo*. Like many abusive parents, Gabriel learned how a child should be treated from his own. His sister Florence remembers how their mother

cut a switch from a tree and beat him – beat him ... until any other boy would have fallen down dead; and so often that any other boy would have ceased his wickedness. Nothing stopped Gabriel, though he made Heaven roar with his howling, though he screamed aloud, as his mother approached, that he would never be such a bad boy again. And, after the beating, his pants still down around his knees and his face wet with tears and mucus, Gabriel was made to kneel down while his mother prayed. (79)

Gabriel confuses power (and the power to control and injure others) with godliness. After he has his own conversionary experience, he is honored by an invitation to speak at a great revival meeting. Each of the other twenty-four ministers has already established himself in the revival circuit, and so Gabriel is placed in the middle, a position designed to ensure that the somewhat amateur performance will be buttressed. But although he is privately apprehensive, Gabriel is anything but meek when he has the eyes of the crowd on him. He preaches the need to submit before God as, “when we cease to tremble before Him we have turned out of the way” (116). As he stands before the crowd, his heart was “great with fear and trembling, and with power” (117). The allusion to Kierkegaard is no accident as his sermon asks those gathered, “Fathers have you ever had a son who went astray? Mothers, have you seen your daughters cut down in the pride and fullness of youth? Has any man here heard the command which came to Abraham, that he must make his son a

living sacrifice on God's altar?" (118). The question of whether or not to punish the son for the glory of God is the great wound that runs throughout the novel. John will not be the child who goes astray. It is both Royal and Roy, Gabriel's biological sons, who spend their time in the streets, seemingly caring little for the business of the church. But it is on John, who appears like a usurper to his father, that Gabriel's wrath falls.

When the novel opens it has been years since Gabriel has enjoyed such an exalted status; it is inherent even in his name. As Roger Rosenblatt notes in "The Negro Church: James Baldwin and the Christian Vision:"

everything in Gabriel's life is a contradiction. His life is hell because the elements of each contradiction are at war inside him. His name, Gabriel Grimes, is a contradiction of terms: the angel of filth. The name Gabriel means 'man of god,' and that, too, is a contradiction, as Gabriel is not a man of God in any sense but the professional.<sup>59</sup>

John is aware that his father has fallen in his station: "having to earn for his family their daily bread, it was seldom he was able to travel farther away than Philadelphia ... His father no longer, as he had once done, led great revival meetings, his name printed on placards that advertised the coming of a man of God. His father had once had a mighty reputation" (52). Gabriel has lost that reputation, and instead the parishioners refer to him as "a holy handyman" for the way he is expected to attend to the less important aspects of the church's ministry (53). In this he again resembles Old Tarwater – each of them a failed preacher who looks to the second

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<sup>59</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, "Out of Control: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*, James Baldwin, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 78.

generation for the fulfillment of their own potential. But where Old Tarwater demands the obedience of his nephew, Gabriel's wrath is confused and without real purpose. Though he will play an active role in John's revelatory experience, that is surely not his intent. Gabriel also acts under a compulsion, but it is a compulsion to injure and to subjugate.

John believes that Gabriel is his biological father. As a result, Gabriel's preference for Roy, and his violent behavior towards John, seems to John a great mystery that can only be explained by some dark stain on his own soul. He has tried for years to earn his father's love. He does not know that Gabriel only married Elizabeth (who as a mother with no husband Gabriel considered a fallen sinner) as an act of self-mortification, a way to expiate his own guilt over fathering a son (Royal) out of wedlock, a son who was later murdered. Rather than accepting John as his true son, however, Gabriel passes his hopes onto the son that he and Elizabeth share, Roy, who in his very name is shown to be a substitute for the deceased Royal. After all, "How could there not be a difference between the son of a weak, proud woman and some careless boy, and the son that God had promised him, who would carry down the joyful line his father's name?" (131). When Gabriel returns home to find Roy has been stabbed (though he, unlike Royal, will survive), he is initially solicitous. John's first thought is, "Whatever this meant, it was sure that his father would be at his worst tonight" (41). He knows the depths of his father's distaste for him, "And [he] knew, in the moment his father's eyes swept over him, that he hated John because John was not lying on the sofa where Roy lay" (41). Gabriel's fear over losing Roy causes him to lash out and hit Elizabeth. His anger grows into a fury

when Roy, in his own childish rage and pain, calls Gabriel a “bastard.” Gabriel cannot believe that his chosen heir, the boy that he has put all of his future hopes into, would call him that. It is as though Roy carefully aimed a needle at the poison sack of Gabriel’s heart, and the toxins that had previously only slowly leached out now gushed: “John and his father were starting into each other’s eyes. John thought for that moment that his father believed the words had come from him, his eyes were so wild and depthlessly malevolent, and his mouth twisted into such a snarl of pain.” John thinks to run away “as though he had encountered in the jungle some evil beast, crouching and ravenous, with eyes like Hell unclosed; and exactly as though, on a road’s turning he found himself staring at certain destruction” (49-50). We see here Gabriel’s easy transference of his fear and anger from Roy to John. Eventually he will return to punish Roy, but he does so almost out of a sense of duty, knowing that the world has worse things to offer a young black person who acts without the discretion demanded by racist social codes of conduct.

This confrontation, as the culmination of all of the anger between Gabriel and his son, is what sends John from the house to the church, where his hallucinatory conversionary experience awaits him. As John both loves and hates his father, he is both drawn to and repelled by the church. Clarence E. Hardy writes in *James Baldwin’s God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*: “Christianity was Baldwin’s adopted father that he sometimes despised but still loved. As he told Jordan Elgrably and George Plimpton in an interview, ‘*Go Tell It on the Mountain* was about my relationship to my father and to the church, which is the same thing



really.<sup>60</sup> So too, in John's mind, they are intermeshed, and in a telling passage we learn how

He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed. And this was why, though he had been born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by their prayers and their rejoicing ... John's heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father. On his refusal to do this had his life depended, and John's secret heart had flourished in its wickedness until the day his sin first overtook him. (15)

John's confused attitude to the church is here typical of his feelings towards that institution that he both loves and hates. He goes from wanting to be a member, to despising its power over him. He cannot decide whether being fully accepted into the faith will hurt his father, or signal his submission to the power Gabriel holds over him.

What changes this is "the day his sin first overtook him." That secret sin is his awakening to his sexuality, and in his flight from his feelings for the young preacher Elisha (who was named after a follower of the prophet Elijah, who himself became a prophet), John will seek safety in the comfort of the church. After all, "His father had always said that his face was the face of Satan" and John begins to see that "in [his] eye there was a light that was not the light of Heaven, and the mouth trembled, lustful and lewd, to drink deep of the wines of Hell (23). Elisha, the

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<sup>60</sup> Clarence E. Hardy, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 107.

nephew of Father James, who leads the church, is himself only seventeen, but already a preacher. The community has similar expectations for John as “everyone always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (3).

Because of this, John attempts to act the part, and

with all the pressures of church and home uniting to drive him to the altar, he strove to appear more serious and therefore less conspicuous. But he was distracted by his new teacher ... John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha’s voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admiring the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit, wondering if he would ever be as holy as Elisha was holy. (6)

When Elisha asks him a question during Sunday school, “John was ashamed and confused, feeling the palms of his hands become wet and his heart pound like a hammer” (6). The two great influences on John’s life, the violence of his father and his confusion over his sexuality, are both tied directly to his relations with the church. Like Gabriel’s marriage to Elizabeth, John’s embrace of his faith is an act of self-mortification.

The community polices the sexuality of its young people with great severity. Elisha is chastised by Father James for simply walking alone with another of the young members of the church, Ella Mae, and he does so before the entire congregation to shame the couple into behaving with proper decorum. But when John imagines the scene he “was afraid to think of it, yet he could think of nothing else; and the fever of which they stood accused began also to rage in him” (11). The shame that is brought down on Elisha and Ella Mae would be nothing compared to

the ostracization (and very likely physical harm) that John would experience were his feelings for Elisha made public. For John, the awakening of his sexuality is a torment.

He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father ... he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare speak. (12-13)

Later he will wonder, "what were the thoughts of Elisha when night came, and he was alone where no eye could see, and no tongue bear witness, save only the trumpetlike tongue of God? Were his thoughts, his bed, his body foul? What were his dreams?" (64-5). John never specifically articulates his homosexuality, certainly not to anyone else, but also not to himself. Yet this aspect of his identity is just as powerful a motivating force in his acceptance of Christ as is his father's abuse. John does not have just one, but many crosses to bear. In *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*, Douglas Field argues that

although Baldwin toned down the explicitly homosexual relationship between John and Elisha ... it remains ... deeply buried within the narrative, a point that Baldwin acknowledged, noting that it "is implicit in the boy's situation" and "made almost explicit" in his tentative relationship with Elisha.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 100-1.

In fact, early reviews of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* seemed to have either missed, or else purposely avoided, this “almost explicit” inclusion of the homoerotic in the novel. In hindsight it seems quite clear that the relationship between the boys, at least from John’s perspective, is fraught with sexual desire.

When John arrives at church the night of Roy’s stabbing, he and Elisha are alone. The two young men tease each other flirtatiously. In a back room they begin to wrestle: “with both hands John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees against Elisha’s belly” (55). This is not the first “fight” that the boys have had but “usually such a battle was soon over, since Elisha was so much bigger and stronger and as a wrestler so much more skilled” but this night, “John was filled with a determination not to be conquered, or at least to make the conquest dear.” As he watches Elisha’s body respond to his resistance John “was filled with a wild delight” (55). Nothing is consummated, and Elisha quickly begins to talk about girls, bragging to John he has “a carnal mind” and asking if “you think about girls.” John grows increasingly angry as Elisha talks about the girls in his school and “he stared in a dull paralysis of terror at the body of Elisha ... He looked into Elisha’s face, full of questions he would never ask” (57). Even in his expressions of physical love John encounters violence, though here it is more a sublimation of sexual desire, and yet his inability to truly connect either physically or emotionally with any other male has led John to the point where, in only a few moments, he will find himself writhing on the floor, caught in a vision of his own damnation.

In his confusion, John is casting about for an answer when he hears a mysterious voice tell him, “salvation is real ... God is real. Death may come soon or late, why do you hesitate. Now is the time to seek and serve the Lord” (168). Unlike with Tarwater, the voice calls John to serve in the church, which would mean to accept what John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement and an inspiration for Pentecostalism, referred to as “the second work of grace,” a transformation of spirit through a direct interaction with the divine. John Grimes believes that if he does so “then he would no longer be the son of his father, but the son of his Heavenly Father, the King. Then he need no longer fear for his father, for he could take, as it were, their quarrel over his father’s head to Heaven – to the Father who loved him, who had come down in the flesh to die for him” (169). And perhaps more importantly “then his father could not beat him anymore, or despise him anymore, or mock him anymore ... His father could not cast out, whom God had gathered in” (169). The church becomes John’s final refuge, a way to escape the torment of everyday life. Like a small child on the playground, he has befriended the largest person he can find to protect him from the schoolyard bully.

After John and Elisha’s “fight” the church begins to fill with people, until John’s father, mother, and aunt Florence arrive. John’s mind cannot take the comingling of such powerful emotions at the same time. Having just had the most intimate encounter of his life, he is now surprised by the entrance of the man he most fears. Elisha, in his role as preacher, has fallen to the ground and begun to speak in tongues, and it is at this moment that Gabriel looks into John’s eyes

Satan, at that moment, stared out of John's eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet John's staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother's eyes when she beat him, of Florence's eyes when she mocked him ... And John did not drop his eyes, but seemed to want to stare forever into the bottom of Gabriel's soul. And Gabriel, scarcely believing that John could have become so brazen, stared in wrath and horror at Elizabeth's presumptuous bastard boy, grown suddenly so old in evil. (175)

Gabriel thinks to beat John, but instead he commands him to "kneel down." "John turned suddenly, the movement like a curse, and knelt again before the altar" (175-6). His mother is witness to this too, and she sees that "on the threshing-floor, in the center of the crying, singing saints, John lay astonished beneath the power of the Lord" (224). The subjugation of John has reached a crescendo, with all of his fears uniting before the altar and his father standing in as God.

There on the floor John feels as though his body is invaded, and is overcome by pain so intense that it is beyond his rational comprehension. He feels himself dropping down into hell and is filled with a desire to "usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and, with that authority, to confound his father" (229). What follows is a series of visions where the reader observes John falling under the wrath of his father. Like his namesake, John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, John Grimes is privy to the promise of future wrath, but this time, the torment will fall not on the world, but only on John. It is a wild, Freudian, hallucinogenic ride. John spends all night in a fugue state, constantly praying, but he comes out of it a new person, jubilant and joyful, having found a

place of refuge. But as those present rejoice in his sanctification the following morning, John “stood before his father ... [who] did not move to touch him, did not kiss him, did not smile” (244). Nothing has changed his father’s mind about John’s place in the family; if anything, the attention devoted to his experience only further hardens Gabriel’s heart. But at least now John has a place of safety, and as a future preacher he will have a standing in the community to help protect him from the violence of the one man who should love him without question.

Both Old Tarwater and Gabriel Grimes are figures of almost unchecked intensity, and each is certain that their hold over their wards should be absolute. Though neither is the biological father of the child he is raising, each has an investment in that child’s willingness to accept their leadership. Whether through abduction, or mental and physical trauma, each of them drives (whether this is their plan or not), the boys towards a religious vocation. Tarwater and John, despite their young age, share a fierce individualism that enrages their elders and makes them difficult to manipulate. Each of the novels employs the enigmatic pronoun “it” in their title. Certainly this “it” refers to an aspect of the Christian doctrine, either to the “good news” of salvation through Christ, or the revealed glory of God to his chosen prophet. In the case of *The Violent Bear It Away* it is a thing being taken by force. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* it is a gift that is given for all who wish to receive it. However, in both cases, the road to this mysterious gift is paved with pain.

Chapter Five will take up another father/son pair. In the post-apocalyptic world of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, what is good and what is necessary are often

in conflict. But rather than a family at war with itself, what we find is an attempt at an emotional balancing act, where the survivalist father educates his son into the dangers of the world, but whose instincts to protect his child at any cost are tempered by the boy's goodness. What emerges is a relationship that is not always harmonious, but it is far from the extreme examples of child abuse and neglect in *The Violent Bear It Away* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In *The Road*, threats to children come from outside of the family, from the world burning all around them.



## Chapter Five:

### Raising Children at the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

*"But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?*

*Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again."*

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Though many of the novels discussed have, to one degree or another, touched on eschatological themes, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is perhaps the most immersive in its modeling of post-apocalyptic America. Along with *The Hunger Games*, it is certainly the most brutal in terms of its portrayal of a world where children are exposed to raw physical violence. *The Road* is a novel of murder, starvation, pederasty, cannibalism, and apocalyptic violence – familiar topics to McCarthy's readers. Speaking about another of the author's novels, playwright and critic Peter Josyph wrote that he began to question, "why a writer would want to be siring all the bad boys in this book with none to believe in, none to look up to."<sup>62</sup> It is a common response and one that turns many people away from McCarthy's books. But if McCarthy's violent account of life can be off-putting, it is also part of what draws readers in. McCarthy excels in the oscillation between the worst and best

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Josyph, *Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy* (Lanham, MY: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 53. Josyph is addressing *Blood Meridian* (1985), McCarthy's exploration of scalp-hunting along the Mexican border in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

parts of humanity. Perhaps because of this, his novels seem the very definition of adult literature.<sup>63</sup> If we understand adolescence as a time of relative safety, familial security, measured growth, and chaperoned maturation, McCarthy's books depict a world far removed from this life stage. However, for all of McCarthy's fascination with the violent action of adults, he is equally interested in the lives of young people, because he sees the treatment of children as one source for the cyclical nature of violence, arguing that "the real culprit is violence against children. A lot of children don't grow up well. They're being starved and sexually molested. We know how to make serial killers. You just take a Type A kid who's fairly bright and just beat the crap out of him day after day."<sup>64</sup>

McCarthy's interest in violence and youth has been present from his first novels and short stories, but has become most fully realized with the publication of *The Road*. Significantly, this fascination with children and young adults has persisted and redoubled at the same time that McCarthy has become increasingly invested in stories that center on eschatological questions: How should children be educated, practically and morally, in a world populated by a rogues' gallery of violent

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<sup>63</sup> In this, *The Road* takes part in the challenge presented by Kenneth Kidd in "T is for Trauma: The Children's Literature of Atrocity," when he argues, "we need children's books that reckon with the world violence to which our nation handily contributes and that challenge the master plot of childhood innocence that has transformed our very understanding of citizenship."<sup>63</sup> *The Road* can serve as a bridge between what are too arbitrarily roped off as "children's" or "young adult" literature, and that which we assume has been written for adults. We can see this very tension in the dialectic between the father and son, where McCarthy wrenches us back in forth as to whether the parent or the child is the possessor of true authority. Kenneth Kidd, *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 203.

<sup>64</sup> David Kushner, "Cormac McCarthy's Apocalypse?" *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 27 – Jan. 10 2007. Online

predators? What do you teach children when the only plentiful source of food is other people; when the stranger you meet may offer you a plate of food, all the while casting covetous glances at your child? How do you prepare young people for the future when, all around them, the world is dying? These questions seem to have been taking shape in McCarthy's mind from at least as far back as *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), where we see the young John Wesley Rattner and his quasi-adoptive father-figure Marion Sylder walking "like the last survivors of Armageddon."<sup>65</sup> But as much as *The Road* is a novel about end times, it is also a novel of education, of pedagogy through violence and through bearing witness to horror.

When *The Road* opens, following some cataclysm whose origin is only hinted at, the familiar world has burned nearly beyond recognition. Virtually all animal and vegetable life has been obliterated, leaving roving bands of human scavengers to live off what can be salvaged from the hollowed cities and emptied storehouses. Humanity is, quite literally at times, picking the bones clean. Amid this desolation, a father and son struggle towards the southeastern coast of North America, looking for warmer weather, as the sun lies hidden behind the clouds of ash.<sup>66</sup> This is the world – one given over to slavers and cannibals, the desperate and the bestial, hunter and hunted – in which the unnamed father is expected to raise his son.

Because of the world's complete desolation, it is easy to come to the conclusion that all of this has been brought about by some sort of natural disaster. But even if the

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<sup>65</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 1965 (New York: Vintage, 1993), 98.

<sup>66</sup> For more on their route, including speculation as to their intended destination, see Wesley Morgan's, "The Routes and Roots of *The Road*," *Carrying the Fire: Cormac McCarthy's The Road and the Apocalyptic Tradition*, Ed. Rich Wallach (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, in galley).

world had simply been consumed by fires brought about by natural processes, there would still be numberless horrors that humanity had inflicted on itself before those that we witness for ourselves. The man remembers:

People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it. (28)

Although the novel itself never answers the question of what exactly has brought about this near total devastation, McCarthy's interview with *Rolling Stone* provides this insight: "[w]hile McCarthy suggests that the ash-covered world in the novel is the result of a meteor hit, his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in. 'We're going to do ourselves in first,' he says."<sup>67</sup>

The father takes on the role of surrogate author as he exposes his son and the readers to the horrors of the world. Acting for McCarthy, the father argues (and in his treatment of his child, he puts this belief into action) that people must recognize the most debased and brutal aspects of human behavior. McCarthy presents us with an initiation in which there is an attempt to instill a fundamentally martial and Darwinian worldview into a child as he is educated into a world of violence. However, the child is not a passive recipient. As David Harris argues in "Life on *The*

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<sup>67</sup> Kushner, "Cormac McCarthy Apocalypse?," 54.

*Road: Breaking the Borders of the Child*,” unlike the father, the son “exhibits a capacity for transformation through connection, a desire to maximize what he can do in the world and an openness to affect.”<sup>68</sup> The ever-present tension between father and son allows the author and reader to inquire into ethical difficulties that might not be quite so evident without the presence of a life or death struggle. The father is consumed with guilt and despair over what he must put his son through. *The Road* presents us with a demanding pedagogical mystery. What should you teach a child about evil if they are to survive in an evil world? This is one of the gifts of the apocalyptic; it allows us to see matters *in extremis*, where the familiar is taken to its extreme and even the most banal of choices take on a significance usually lost in the muddle of our mundane lives.

McCarthy employs both understandings of the apocalyptic: that of a story that tells of the end of the world, and that of the revelation of a new (though not necessarily better) world. Because it is invested in revelation, the apocalyptic is, at its most basic, a pedagogical moment. When even those things we consider essential to life are stripped from us, we may find opportunities to reevaluate what we mean by essential, or what we mean by living. As the father puts it:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How

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<sup>68</sup> David Harris, *Carrying the Fire*, 53.

much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (75)

Throughout the novel, the father agonizes over his educative responsibilities to his son. As the previous quote suggests, at times they lack even a common vocabulary. The father cannot put into words a world that no longer exists. Those things that have gone “into oblivion” include some of the most fundamental aspects of human existence. The color palette of the world has diminished to a grayscale, with only the occasional pinprick of blood. The names of living creatures have ceased to have meaning, as the creatures themselves no longer exist. So too, and perhaps most importantly, concepts that the father once held as sacred, including that of the sacred itself, have, if not disappeared altogether, then been shorn of much of their centrality. The father’s challenge, then, is to teach his son about both the practical concerns of daily existence and the conceptual world of ethical behavior. However, in his very agony over their disappearance, the father retains a portion of their prior existence, and so through his behavior he teaches his child about many things that the father himself believes to have been lost: duty, family, perseverance, love.

McCarthy forces his characters to acquaint themselves with the realities of annihilation and to reach a compromise with hopelessness. *The Road* seesaws between creation and destruction, as the father is torn between engendering a world within his son and destroying one in order to keep his son alive. The reader can feel the tension of a writer who imagines a world that he and his own son could possibly inhabit. McCarthy is describing a parent’s nightmare, and so it seems appropriate that the novel begin with one:

They stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (3-4)

In this dream, the man confronts an image of pure horror, at once feral and repulsive, ancient and inexplicable. The man can see directly into the innards of the creature, into its exposed organs of digestion and apprehension. But beyond the terror, there is a sorrow and a longing in this creature that it sounds out with its pitiful moaning. Here McCarthy considers just how mystifying the confrontation with our most basic of fears remains. The creature is vaguely humanoid, though its grotesque adaptations to a life underground have been coupled with a loss of sight, sight being useful only to those that live in the light. It is no accident that the father and son themselves live in a world largely devoid of light. There is a kind of kinship between the spectators who look upon this grotesque form, as if with the passage of slow eons, they too could come to this state. This is the fear that drives the novel. It is a fear that both the father and son share when they consider just how close they are to becoming "bad guys," like the human monsters that populate their world.

Nightmares of this sort have paradoxically become desirable to the father. They are the only dreams he welcomes. When he wakes from a pleasant erotic dream of the wife that abandoned him and their child with her suicide, we are told that the father

mistrusted all that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. (15)

The man fears that his dreams will become a *pharmakon*, a drug in all senses, both narcotic and restorative, capable of healing and destroying. When they come in pleasant forms they are the ambrosial dreams of Odysseus's sailors, promising peace and quietude, but equally sure to deliver numbness and death.

This understanding of the danger of dreams is something the father attempts to instill in his son. He warns him that "when your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up" (160). Rather than assuming the traditional parental role and offering comfort, the father teaches his son that happiness, even in dream form, is a



delusion; that the nightmare is what is real. Cathy Caruth helps us to understand this in relation to Freud's thinking on dreams:

Unlike the symptoms of a normal neurosis, whose painful manifestations can be understood ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable even that has not been given psychic meaning in any way ... Freud ultimately argues ... that is its traumatic repetition, rather than the meaningful distortions of neurosis, that defines the shape of individual lives ... [and he] ultimately asks what it would mean to understand history as the history of a trauma.<sup>69</sup>

For his part, the father believes that not only is the past a "history of trauma," but the future will be one as well, and to prepare his son, he must make these distasteful dreams and experiences part of his son's life.

In this apocalypse, memory, as close kin to dreams, also becomes problematic. It offers respite, a kind of vacation from the actual, but it can also dull the senses and lead to carelessness. The father's grueling emotional struggle is a war between comforting his son and preparing him for the realities of their world. The father attempts to shake off these images of past beauty, though they reappear with regularity. For a portion of their journey this conflicted hindsight is represented by the presence of "a chrome motorcycle mirror that he used to watch the road behind them" (5). The son is taught a hyper-vigilance in the present, a living in the moment

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<sup>69</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 59-60.

that lacks joy, but that is necessary for continued existence. If the man's dreams are at times sirenic, then conversely, the nature of their daylight retrospection is of backward-looking dread.

Memories are a liability, but it is with one of these tantalizing memories of the father that McCarthy chooses to conclude *The Road*:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (241)

It is a memory of the world lost so lovingly rendered that it is often misread as a hopeful conclusion. Yet this is the world that "could not be put back," and whether or not a new world could be created remains an open question that, as we will see, is not answered by the novel's resolution.

In order to make the boy's survival possible, the father, already dying, insists on confronting a host of gruesome sights, but only in those situations where doing so may lead to another trove of neglected food or supplies. He demands that the boy experience a cycle of terror, near misses, and narrow escapes. This is not some caprice on the part of the father, nor is it evidence of a sadistic nature. Rather, this type of risk-taking is an essential reaction to the apocalyptic setting of the novel. With the world dying, the only possibility for survival involves desperate gambles.

The father is training the son in a kind of bravery that would be criminal without the imposition of the eschatological imperative. For all the father's insistence on engaging in the "reality" of their miserable situation, the child, quite naturally given his terror, resists him and has to be compelled to venture into situations of possible danger. The most vivid of these disagreements occurs when they come upon a seemingly abandoned farmhouse after numerous days of starvation. Inside is a padlocked door. The boy does not want to know what is hidden in the basement and begs the father to leave, but the father insists saying, "there's a reason this is locked" (93). Despite the child's terror, the father

started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous (93).

McCarthy consistently manages to take his horror to an altogether different level. It is not enough that the prisoners are being turned into food, but by cauterizing their limbs, their captors are able to keep them alive for far longer than their dressed flesh would last without refrigeration. The man and boy flee, escaping the return of those who have been keeping these people as food, but also their own sense of

disgust, outrage, and guilt, both at what they have witnessed, but also their unwillingness or inability to help.

This encounter with a slaughterhouse of humans typifies one of the overriding fears of *The Road* – the threat of cannibalism. The consuming of food is an unavoidable necessity of life. To live we must eat. But if we are the things that we are eating, then the very act of sustaining ourselves becomes our destruction. McCarthy makes this point most emphatically when the father and son come across “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (167). As readers we had earlier seen evidence of the child’s imminent birth in the form of a woman “walking with a waddling gait and as she approached he could see that she was pregnant” (165). This woman has been used as a human farm; the point of her pregnancy is to produce food. It is the very definition of unsustainable, as survival and extinction are here united.

McCarthy has quite a few corpses of children in his novels, and because of this, many early readers of *The Road*, were surprised, even disappointed, that the son is seen to survive at the novel’s conclusion. It was as though McCarthy had gone soft, their expectations having been set by scenes like those in *Blood Meridian* where we are shown “a bush that was hung with dead babies.” The scalpers pause and observe how the corpses “had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky” (57). Later there is a scene in which “one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the

stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew” (153). One of the most effecting examples of this is comes near the conclusion to McCarthy’s second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968). Culla Holme, having abandoned his sister after abandoning their infant son in the wilderness, comes across a trio of outlaws who have mirrored his peripatetic journey in a mysterious synchronicity. Culla watches as

The man took hold of the child and lifted it up ... Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat’s eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child’s throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat. He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils rippled delicately. The man handed him the child and he seized it up, looking once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face in its throat. (253)

The murder and cannibalism of children is not unknown in McCarthy’s novels, and the performance of such acts is a particularly effective way of expressing the absolute evil of those who have left them that way. However, in *The Road*, it is not just “evil” people who wrestle with the specter of cannibalism; the threat is pervasive. Later in a scene almost duplicating the one in which they discover the storehouse of human bodies, another lock is broken. Beyond this second door, however, they find shelves full of canned food. The situational irony here is of the darkest sorts, since each discovery reveals a cache of edibles. The possibility that the

father and son could descend into cannibalism is disturbingly persistent. The boy himself recognizes this and asks the father:

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now...No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire. (108-9)

The father assures the boy that they do not eat other people because they are "the good guys." It is a peculiar world when your definition of a "good guy" is that he is not a cannibal. The father and son consistently employ this language of "good guys" and "bad guys" in their personal mythology. This is the simple moral calculus that the father attempts to inculcate into the child. Yet at times their articulation of absolutes becomes muddled:

There are other good guys. You said so.

Yes.

So where are they?

They're hiding.

Who are they hiding from?

From each other. (155)

The child never asks why the "good guys" would be hiding from each other and the father never offers an explanation. What we do know is that the father looks on

everyone they meet with intense distrust. Even the harmless figure of Ely is questioned to an almost ridiculous length as to whether or not he is a “shill for a pack of roadagents” (145). This deep-seated distrust on the part of the father, a distrust that is passed onto the son, is evidenced again at the novel’s conclusion when the boy comes across the man in whose care he will eventually entrust himself. The first question the boy asks him is “are you one of the good guys?” (237). When the child finds out that the man has children of his own, he asks him “[a]nd you didn’t eat them” (239). Reassured on this point, the boy agrees to join up with this family, but it is instructive that not eating your own children is the main qualification for the formation of this agreement. What should strike the reader as a remarkable exchange has become entirely reasonable. The viciousness of the world portrayed in *The Road* is such that it necessitates this type of questioning. Readers may find themselves just as surprised as the child is to find other people in this novel who are not cannibals.

Each time the father and son venture into a possible confrontation they gamble with the unknown. But the father seems to feel that there is no chance of their survival without the willingness to explore situations that force them to confront the grotesque nature of their world. As he says to his son’s sleeping form, “[a]ll things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (46). He may whisper it now, but when the child is awake, the man’s every decision is an acknowledgment of this belief. It is not enough for the child or for the reader to ignore the monstrous, not if either is to survive it.

The specter of self-destruction permeates the text. Whether it is through cannibalism (especially that of a person's own child), suicide, or internecine warfare, there is a consistent subtext on humanity's troubling fascination with the abyss. When all other hope is stripped away, there still remains the recourse to self-annihilation, though it is an option that McCarthy seems to look on with a mixture of pity and disgust. We see this with the mother, who committed suicide sometime after the world's transformation. The father remembers trying to convince her to go on; he pleads with her, he bargains, he reminds her of their son. She responds: "What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film ... as for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (47, 49). For the wife, this indeterminate existence is resolvable only through death. She gives over to a despair so encompassing that she leaves her husband and son behind, along with "the hundred nights they'd sat up debating the pros and cons of self-destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall" (49). As the husband continues the journey, he does not shrink from the ghoulish sights they encounter; instead, he necessitates the boy's facing the appalling. It is not that the father wishes this horror upon the son. If he could avoid such confrontations he would. Early in the novel there is just such a scene. Looking inside a barn, they find "three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light. There could be something here, the boy said. There could be some corn or something. Let's go, the man said" (14). In fact, and contrary to his arguments with his wife, the father knows very well that sometimes suicide is an appropriate response to their world. He goes so far as to instruct his son in how



to effectively kill himself: “If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? (95). This scene is perhaps the most important instance of the father educating the son into a practice that is inconceivable to most of us. Here an education in self-destruction seems like the act of a responsible parent.

As their desperation grows, it is simply not possible to continue to avoid exposure to danger. This is the source of a great deal of the father’s anguish. He knows he must submit his child to these things if they are to survive, but what kind of father would he be if such expeditions were undertaken without deep reservations? There is always a war within the father between confrontation and avoidance. The disagreements over whether or not to venture into greater danger become constant between the son and the father. Increasingly, the son will seek to avoid the possibility of another confrontation with such dangerous situations, but the father will insist that they investigate because, as the father says in a way that makes it clear he is talking about not just one specific situation, “it’s better to know about it than to not know” (177).

In his first national interview, McCarthy told *The New York Times Magazine*: “[t]here’s no such thing as life without bloodshed...I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea.”<sup>70</sup> And at times his work has reveled in this bloodshed. As Leo

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<sup>70</sup> Richard B. Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” *The New York Times Magazine*. April 19, 1992: 31.

Daugherty writes, concerning violence in McCarthy's work, "it has always been bizarrely energizing, bracing, cathartic and joy-producing to feel the delirious pity and fear when the protagonist takes his or her heroic bloodbath at the end – to read it and weep."<sup>71</sup> That is the problem with the idea of catharsis. When examined too directly it comes off as depressingly vampiric. Does the fact that the human race finds itself constantly engaged in war and violence mean that there is no room for any other type of activity? Does war leave no room for creation? Is violence all that we have inherited? A first reading of McCarthy's novels seem to suggest that this is the case. Yet despite the constant presence of violence there exists a moral realigning that takes place in McCarthy's vision. The problem is to find this quality in a world, "soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (152). This is why the presence of the child is so vital. Here at the end of the world, all of humanity's hope for an existence worth living finds its source in one small boy. Any hope for the future is inextricably bound up in the two forces that have been at war in the father / son relationship: the ability to survive and to see the ugly truth of the world, without sacrificing the desire to live a life that is more than just brute existence, a life that retains a moral sense.

Throughout the novel, the boy is wary of fully accepting his father's decisions to confront the dangers that threaten to engulf them. The father is never reckless; he can be quite practical when it comes to protecting his child. Yet even though the son is always learning from their experiences, through his acts of resistance he never

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<sup>71</sup> Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Eds. Arnold, Edwin T. and Dianne C. Luce. Revised Edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 35.

completely becomes a part of the damaged world. There is an innocence to him, despite all that he has endured, that seems to be bound up in the very fact of his youth. He escapes the negation of ethics to which the other characters fall prey. Despite every possible pragmatic argument his father can muster, still the child holds onto his desire for the ethical relationships that existed in the pre-apocalyptic world, perhaps because this is a world he has only experienced through his father's stories. In this understanding the father does not simply play out the role of instructor in the arts of survival. He has also tutored his child in an ethical understanding that does not find immediate resonance in the world that they inhabit. Where would the child learn kindness if not from the father? We are told of a time when "they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (35). The boy still has time to become part of the broken world and to give in to the temptations for destruction, but we are left with the sense that this is not how the story will end, even after we leave the child behind.

Despite evidence that the boy has been deeply shaped by the memories the father tries to repress, memories of the world before destruction, the father despairs "that he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (130). Yet if the father's hope for this world has largely run out, the boy's still remains. The boy is a kind of ethical anchor for the man, the one thing that keeps him from simply doing whatever it takes to ensure their survival. This tension is the ethical crux of the novel, determining how far the father is willing to descend into the world that surrounds them. This is made explicit near the conclusion when their

supplies are stolen by a solitary wanderer. When this thief is caught and their goods reclaimed, the father forces the thief to strip off all of his clothing, and then leaves him there in the freezing cold to die. It is the boy who refuses to allow this act of revenge to take place, reminding his father that “he was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die ... He’s so scared” (218). So they return the man’s clothes to the spot where they last saw him, thinking he will retrieve them when they leave. But still it is not enough for the boy, because the thief will eventually die without food. The father tells the child, “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything,” here speaking of their daily existence. The boy replies, “Yes I am ... I am the one” (218). The boy knows that there is something more vital than the mere fact of their continued existence. The boy is learning how to live in the world on his own terms.

McCarthy dedicates *The Road* to his young son, and this may provide a key to his newfound (though still deeply buried) sense of possibility. The father-son relationship in *The Road* is characterized by profound love in the midst of a world that seems to have dispensed with the concept. They come to reach a sort of strained accommodation with this before the father’s death, which is epitomized when they reach a stretch of the road littered with mummified corpses, “figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling” (160-1). The father does not want the child to have to walk through this scene. He says as much when they come upon a desiccated corpse:

He pulled the boy closer. Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that.

You forget some things, don’t you?

Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget. (10)

The father knows the power of memory, how it can come to dominate a person's thoughts and poison any hope for a present worth living.

In each case the father and son walk on. But they do not do so callously. They survive with a sense of gratitude (tempered with an almost overwhelming anger on the part of the father) that it is they who are eating this day, they who have escaped torture, they who are the fortunate. It is because of the boy that these emotions survive in the pair, but it is the dialectic between the two that makes possible the boy's survival. If the father is set up as the instructor for the son into the ways of survival, then so too the son is shown to be the source of an almost unfathomable pedagogy of hope, his very existence a testimony to both the father and to the reader that something good may survive even the greatest of traumas. This is a reading that McCarthy himself has spoken of, claiming a kind of co-authorship with his own young son, telling *The Wall Street Journal*:

a lot of the lines that are in there are verbatim conversations my son John and I had. I mean just that when I say that he's the co-author of the book. A lot of the things that the kid [in the book] says are things that John said. John said, "Papa, what would you do if I died?" I said, "I'd want to die, too," and he said, "So you could be with me?" I said, "Yes, so I could be with you."<sup>72</sup>

We see this furthered by the father's despair and vacillation over what to do with the child before his own death. Early in the story he asks himself as "he watched the

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<sup>72</sup> John Jurgensen, "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy," *The Wall Street Journal*. Nov. 20, 2009. Online.

boy sleeping. Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?" (24). The father believes he is prepared to shoot his child rather than allow him to be set upon by the horrors that await.

He has termed the child his "warrant," his "god," and the only reason he continues to exist. The existence of the child is the difference between the father and those who have resorted to cannibalism or suicide. For the father, the child is an absolute good, the only absolute good. But this goodness can be violated through the influence of the world. In that sense it is conditional and the father thinks that he will destroy the child before he is no longer there to ensure his safety. Yet when he is actually forced to choose, he chooses to give his gun to his child and to send him onward. It is an act of faith that seems to have no relation to the events that led up to it, but that has been incarnate in the child all along. Before he dies, he tells his son that "goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236). Though we know that the child finds another family, we do not know what becomes of them. We see the father, we see the son, but we can only sense the presence of the spirit, though it is given symbolic form in the image of the fire. Here at the end of the world there is a simplicity that emerges in McCarthy's writing. There is a telescoping of reality, where only the most essential of things can enter into our vision. The father says that "he knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (4). But even now any sense of surety cannot last, and as soon as we as readers think we can know even the most basic of things, we are driven from that comfort.

At the novel's close all of these concerns are brought into sharp focus. There is a final accounting of despair between the father and son. As the father prepares to die, he and the boy share this exchange:

I want to be with you.

You can't.

Please.

You can't. You have to carry the fire.

I don't know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don't know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (235)

The father goes on to tell his son to be brave, to continue to be "the best guy" (235). He promises he will always be there for the son, if only as a spirit with which to talk. A callous reader (and who could totally avoid such a label after all the bruising of this novel?) might say that this is suspiciously sentimentalized in light of McCarthy's previous works. What is all this talk about fire and goodness? There is a similar image in the conclusion to *No Country for Old Men* (2005). The retiring Sheriff Tom Bell remembers a dream he had of his own father:

He just road on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it.

About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.<sup>73</sup>

More sinisterly, McCarthy uses this image of the fire in the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* (1985), where an enigmatic figure “uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there.”<sup>74</sup> McCarthy uses “the fire” as an image of both moral enlightenment and destructive potential.

Yet in the end, we are left with the essential goodness of the child and the comfort he takes in this idea of the fire, while we are also aware that it is strange that fire should be the chosen substance for this hopeful vision, when it is fire that has burned to ash all of the life around them. It is both the destroyer of the world and the sustainer of life.

Cormac McCarthy published *The Road* when he was 74 years old and his son was 8. Of the novel’s genesis, McCarthy recounted how he and his son were staying in a hotel room when, while looking out the window in the early morning, “I just had this image of what this town might look like in 50 or 100 years... fires up on the hill and everything being laid to waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy. So I wrote two pages. And then about four years later I realized that it wasn't two pages of a

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<sup>73</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 309.

<sup>74</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 337.



book, it was a book, and it was about that man, and that boy.”<sup>75</sup> It is difficult to imagine this novel as not in some way acting as a kind of living testament to McCarthy’s thoughts on how his son might find a way to live in this violent world without him. As he has said, “I think about John all the time and what the world’s going to be like,” he says. “It’s going to be a very troubled place.”

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<sup>75</sup> Tim Adams, “Cormac McCarthy: America’s Great Poetic Visionary,” *The Guardian*, December 19, 2009. Online.

## Conclusion

The central argument that I have made in this dissertation – that there are unexamined benefits to the violence that young people endure – is not one I have always been comfortable advancing. However, what I have attempted to show is that, given the prevalence of childhood trauma in novels for and about young people, there are aspects that can be identified as potentially constructive, even as we understand that the world seems inclined to pile still further occasions for trauma upon its youth. It is a commonplace that adversity brings out greatness in adults. But we are not so quick to make this assumption about children, and quite rightly since an overabundance of adversity can arrest, or even reverse, their emotional development. However, if we look closely at how authors respond to the lived experiences of children navigating the dangers of modern American life, we can begin to see how young people may also find profit in experiences that harm them.

Considering the power of educational institutions over the lives of American youth, my interest has not been in violence for its own sake but in violence as a method or byproduct of educational indoctrination. By linking novels in which violence contains a pedagogical element, I have presented a case for the interconnectedness of pain and education, but I have also been careful to point out that much of what young people learn in these novels is how to resist violent

methods of coercing their obedience. Consequently, much of the result of their education is antagonistic to their teachers' designs.

This dissertation is bookended by wars, examining novels set between World War II and the aftermath of 9/11. American children born after 2001 have, so far, never known a day when their nation was not at war. These post-Cold War youth, then, have been brought up in a nation where their own safety has been in doubt and where state-sponsored violence abroad has been ever-present. It is for that reason that warfare plays a critical role in this dissertation, both as backdrop to the events of the novels, but also as symbolic of the authors' conception of childhood itself as a state of war. At times the novels' child protagonists have been identified directly as soldiers, with both Katniss and Ender deployed as combatants on the field of battle. As such, they achieve a paradoxical status, neither fully child nor fully soldier. Figures of agonized liminality, they suffer the pains of warfare, but the choices available to them are still circumscribed by their status as children.

This idea of childhood as a battlefield is extended to Jerry in *The Chocolate War* and Gene in *A Separate Peace*—the very titles spell out the stakes: war and peace. In these novels, where the protagonists are not trained for war, the enemies are their fellow students. Here violence is shown to be deeply internecine, taking place among friends, siblings, and classmates, caught up as they are in a constant state of fratricidal friction, where the small battles between peers become emblematic of the larger forces of social, political, and religious coercion.

If war is inevitably a source of pain, then religion should act as a balm. But this is infrequently the case in these novels. As a religious school, *The Chocolate*

*War's* Trinity acts as a source of ironic religiosity. There is no development of the children's spiritual lives, no attempts made to cement positive bonds between members of a religious community, and seemingly no consciousness of a larger duty to the world outside Trinity's grounds. Faith, or any consequences it might have for a social gospel, is simply not an important aspect of student life there, and it cannot possibly provide relief for Jerry. In *The Violent Bear It Away* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, contrarily, faith and questions of the spirit are essential and inescapable. Through the characters of Francis Tarwater and John Grimes, religion is depicted as a source of both freedom and bondage. The Americas that these novels manifest are deeply sacramental, and each shows how integral a spiritual existence can be for the development of young people. Although neither book depicts the extreme forms of religious violence at which *The Road* hints— with its talk of bloodcults and “balefires on the distant ridges” – both novels allow readers to explore the kinship between fanaticism and freedom, as each of the young protagonists undergoes an ecstatic and revelatory vision of the divine through their experience of prolonged child abuse.

Finally, the family may utilize coercive acts against their young as a means of control. In *The Road*, this reaches a kind of terminal irony, where the father is forced against all of his better instincts to lead his son through a series of horrific experiences, not just so they may survive their immediate danger, but also so the boy can grow up with the necessary knowledge to survive a brutal world after the father has died. The father's intentions are far more honorable than that of Gabriel Grimes, who seeks only to grind his adopted son down into insignificance. Gabriel's

abuse of John wears the mask of love, or at least paternal concern, but underneath it, all he has to teach John is who it is the boy should fear, and should flee – a flight which takes him directly into the arms of a church with its own methods of coercion and control.

Taken as a whole, the novels that populate this dissertation speak to the impressive resiliency of youth despite the existence of the vast dehumanizing forces of state, family, and ecclesiastical violence that are arrayed against them. It is a resiliency and a determination that should inspire optimism, even as the pages that attest to this youthful strength are littered with examples of extreme misfortune under their many guises of emotional, spiritual and physical peril.

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