

## Painted on the Surface:

*The Marbury Lens* and Gore in Young Adult Fiction

**W**hen I worked as a human rights researcher in Colombia, my favorite city to visit was Medellín. Cupped by the Andes and experiencing mild weather year-round, the city offers poetry nights, packed art exhibits, and nightly promenades along the river. The locals, known as *paisas*, are also infamous for violence. In the 1980s, Medellín was home to the cocaine cartel run by Pablo Escobar, who utilized extreme violence to maintain control of his wealth and influence. Even by human rights standards, the violence was epic.

But to most Colombians, the gore was all too familiar. During the 1940s and 1950s, a civil war between political parties erupted, and both sides made a practice of mutilating cadavers. Escobar and the paramilitary army he helped assemble adopted similar techniques. In *More Terrible than Death* (2004), my book about Colombia and human rights, I explain that these tactics were meant not only to frighten but to speak. Gore became a macabre language, with body parts serving as words, sentences, paragraphs, and punctuation:

Cuts were elaborate, even artistic. There was the Colombian necktie (*corte de corbata*), when the killer cut a deep groove under the jaw line of the victim and pulled the tongue muscle down and through it, so that it lay like a necktie on the chest. In the flannel cut (*corte de franela*), the killer severed the muscles that keep the head forward, thus allowing the head to fall backward over the spine at a ninety-degree angle, like a sailor's square collar. In the flower vase cut (*corte de florero*), the killer dismembered the victim and inserted the head and limbs into the trunk or the neck of the body, arranged like flowers in a vase. The

monkey cut (*corte de mico*) took its name from a killer who decapitated the pet monkey of a victim and left the head in the man's lap. . . . Occasionally, the killers would leave bodies arranged in a *mise-en-scène*, sitting as if waiting for the next truck along a road, their heads like overnight bags in their laps. (pp. 26–27)

As I travelled, grieving families would press into my hands graphic photographs conveying these “messages,” convinced that gore would prompt the international outcry they yearned for. I knew better. Gore alone does not arouse compassion or even understanding. To the contrary, gore alone pushes most people away. People don't take an interest in human rights abuses because of gore, but rather through an emotional connection with the human beings who suffer.

This tension over gore is at play in fiction, also. Our culture is awash in gore, from the latest James Bond movie to television shows like *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010–2015) and digital games like *Halo* (343 Industries, 2013). Very little of this gore prompts people to care about the characters—or aliens—who are eaten or blown apart. To the contrary, pure gore can be a powerful turn-off and even boring. Reduced to our limbs and viscera, we all look pretty much the same.

But used to illuminate character and reveal emotion, gore can be an essential writer's tool. This includes gore used in books for young readers. The exploitation of gore is no excuse for serious writers to avoid it in their work, even if they are writing for children and young adults. To demonstrate the skillful use

of gore, I examine a key scene in Andrew Smith's *The Marbury Lens* (2010). In it, Smith uses gore to create compelling characters, convincing relationships, and a strong emotional connection to readers. For Smith, gore marks the deep brokenness of the central character, Jack, and helps spur him to take action to save his friends. Gore is literally "painted on the surface" as a way of inviting readers into a deeper emotional landscape. The alternate world of Marbury and its epic violence force Jack to accept his shattered emotional state and serve as a powerful metaphor for what it means to survive violence. Gore is ubiquitous and vile in Marbury; yet, the story never strays from the deep work of character and emotion. Even the most repellent passages feel sure and revealing because of Smith's deliberate technique.

## Gore

As any reader of fairy tales knows, people have delighted in gory stories for centuries, well before the Brothers Grimm first set pen to paper. The collection these German academics created in the early 19th century is a starting point for my discussion of gore in literature, including literature written for children. Literary scholar Maria Tatar (2003) notes that the Grimms' stories, which were not meant for children initially, included "murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest," among other horrors (p. 3). To be sure, the tales were systematically "cleansed" of gore as they were refashioned for children—a trend now in reversal with adaptations like Disney's *Maleficent* (Jolie & Stromberg, 2014) and numerous "fractured" fairy tales.

However, the point remains valuable. What fairy tales lack is complex character, which would make the violence more meaningful and interesting. "There is no psychology in a fairy tale," writes Philip Pullman (2012) in the introduction to his English version of the classic tales. "The tremors and mysteries of human awareness, the whispers of memory, the promptings of half-understood regret or doubt or desire that are so much a part of the subject matter of the modern novel are absent entirely" (p. xiii). While Pullman believes that the Grimms' gore goes beyond "Grand Guignol" (inspired by a 19th-century Parisian theater, the term "Grand Guignol" has come to mean the performance of extreme gore for mainly shock value), characters in these tales "are flat, not round. Only one side is vis-

ible to the audience, but that is the only side we need" (p. xiv).

Certainly, gore is not required for every manuscript. Outside the context of fairy tale, explicit gore is inappropriate for very young children (though explicit grossness remains a reliable crowd-pleaser). For some adults, gore is a taste they prefer not to acquire. In today's media-saturated world, gore pulsates, quivers, gels, pools, smears, drips, clots, spews, splatters, and coagulates in news, video games, movies, and television. Psychologists, criminal justice scholars, and policy makers agree that violent images in media have skyrocketed, with complex effects on people, including children (Gentile & Anderson, 2013, p. 225).

Children can also become numb to violence through media exposure and perceive it as a normal part of life even when they themselves are protected from actual violence. As scholars Judith Franzak and Elizabeth Noll (2006) point out, "The ubiquitous presence of violence is so much a part of our consciousness that for many of us it has a numbing effect. We are at a loss as to how to make meaning of the violent context of our social reality" (p. 662).

Rightly, people are concerned about how images of graphic violence are delivered to children. As Thomas Kullman (2010) asks in his collection of essays, *Violence in English Children's and Young Adults' Fiction*:

Are violent acts, as depicted in fiction, frightening or enjoyable? Do they traumatize young readers or do they help them to come to terms with the violent world around them? Do they contribute to educating young people not to be violent or to prevent violence in their social environment? Or do they render violence acceptable, making readers wish to engage in violent acts themselves, perhaps even advising them as to the best ways of using violence against adversaries? (p. 1)

One particularly sensitive issue is how gore is deployed in relation to the weak or vulnerable. As Tatar (1993) points out, "It is harder to get the cultural joke when the targets of violence are those already disempowered and victimized in real life" (p. 166). Tatar distinguishes "festive violence"—when the powerful or venal get their comeuppance, reasserting conventional morality—from violence against characters who can't fight back or prevail. "Most people will probably laugh when Punch hangs the hangman, but they will not feel entirely at ease when he bludgeons his wife and tosses the baby into the audience" (pp. 168–169).

The use of gore risks implicitly sanctioning or promoting violence against traditional targets: the weak, the different, females. In the gaming world, education professor Eugene Provenzo (1991) points out that violence has “the potential to amplify certain values (for example, women as victims; women as being dependent rather than independent). In doing so, the games reflect a larger cultural hegemony that functions on multiple levels” (p. 116).

For these and other reasons, some criticize what they describe as the overuse of gore in material for children. Kathleen T. Isaacs (2003), a middle school teacher, calls the increase in violence in children’s literature “troubling,” asking, “Do we need to know all the gory details?” For mother and writer Megan Cox Gurdon (2011), Smith’s *The Marbury Lens* is an example of how gore defines a large segment of young adult literature. Like Isaacs, Gurdon argues that the book exploits violence and gore:

So it may be that the book industry’s ever-more-appalling offerings for adolescent readers spring from a desperate desire to keep books relevant for the young. Still, everyone does not share the same objectives. The book business exists to sell books; parents exist to rear children, and oughtn’t be daunted by cries of censorship. No family is obliged to acquiesce when publishers use the vehicle of fundamental free-expression principles to try to bulldoze coarseness or misery into their children’s lives.

Certainly, gore is exploited for shock and sale value. Perhaps the urtext deploying gore in contemporary American literature is Stephen King’s *Carrie* (2011). Though this is not considered a work of young adult literature, that’s mainly because the book was published prior to the emergence of this category as a marketing tool. In important ways, the narrative is close to the young adult category now, since its protagonist is a teen, it takes place in high school, and it is deeply interested in how adolescents struggle with identity issues.

Gore marks the title character from the moment she is introduced in a school bathroom. Anyone who reads horror, watches *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010–2015), or plays games like *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2013) is familiar with the performative use of gore, well within the Grand Guignol tradition. In these creations, gore is meant to entertain and amaze, not evoke pity—or any other human emotion beyond appreciation for macabre artistry.

As an alternate example, writers who have set their stories in the Holocaust grapple with how the very real and devastating settings of concentration and death camps can be incorporated in ways that engage but do not push away readers, including children. Ursula Sherman (1988) worked as a researcher and translator at the Nuremberg trials before becoming a scholar of children’s literature. She opposes any work of fiction meant for children that includes graphic material on the camps, arguing that no novel on this subject matter can accurately portray what they were. “Nothing is gained by substituting an invention for the truth” (p. 182).

However, to categorically dismiss the use of any gore in this or other circumstances or ignore its emotional potential is a mistake. Certainly, pointless gore can numb. But careful gore can contribute to emotional impact, creating the opposite effect—a heightened sense of fear or loss when a character suffers. Contrary to Sherman’s assertion, novels set during the Holocaust have been successfully—often wrenchingly—written. An example from young adult literature must include *The Book Thief* (2007) by Markus Zusak. Zusak’s unconventional and deeply moving story is told by Death, who follows the orphaned book thief, Liesel, as she finds a home and tries to save a Jew in Nazi Germany. *The Book Thief* is a remarkably restrained novel for its subject matter, yet gore is one element Zusak uses to great effect.

In the book’s opening pages, Liesel stands with her mother as two gravediggers attempt to crack open a hole for her dead brother in a frozen wasteland beside a stopped train. Once the deed is done, everyone but Liesel leaves. Kneeling, she attempts to dig through the snow to rescue him. Zusak’s prose is spare and uses body parts—scars, blood, skin, the heart—to masterful, wrenching effect:

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.  
Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.  
Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She realized her mother had come back for her only when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat. (pp. 23–24)

While it’s true that few consumers of children’s literature inhabit war zones or become involved with murder for hire, many do live within or close to

violence, whether it is in homes, schools, or neighborhoods. Perhaps we don't want to recognize this, but many children live with gore as an everyday part of their lives through street violence, domestic abuse, or out-of-control bullying, including that administered by their own families. Unlike Isaacs, fellow teacher S. Miller (2005) teaches young adult books that include violence and gore, among them *Shattering Glass* (2003), Gail Giles's *Carrie*-esque story about a high school clique's persecution of a nerdy boy. In that story, instead of isolating the fat and awkward Simon Glass, the clique follows the lead of a new alpha male student who tries to "remake" Glass into a popular kid. The results are not only tragic but gory, as the violence of bullying takes shape in a murderous attack.

Miller's students come from predominately urban, Hispanic, and poor neighborhoods in Santa Fe, New Mexico. When asked why they enjoyed reading about or playing with violence, students were eager to answer:

One young woman suggested that young adults gravitate toward violence "because they are desensitized to it and because it surrounds their lives." Another student suggested "violence is inescapable, trendy, and is sold to youth through video games, films, books, TV, and magazines." When asked how violence surrounds their lives, collectively they noted that they are observer-learners, desensitized by the media, consumers of the war and news, subjected to constant bullying in schools, exposed to pejorative dialogue and gossip, and witnesses to tagged bathroom walls and hallways. . . . A student suggested that in viewing violence, "It can become a projection of inner feelings of anger that we cannot act on and because of that, we vicariously experience the lives of others and act out our inner darkness." Another student concluded that because youth are susceptible and malleable to violence in all of its aspects, they are vulnerable to being subsumed by violence altogether. (p. 90)

For these students, lived and virtual experience exist simultaneously and permeably, as the hallway and virtual bullying mesh, and the ever-present armed policeman in the halls reminds students of the armed killers in places like Sandy Hook or in virtual settings like Liberty City in "Grand Theft Auto IV." Particularly in the United States, violence is a part of our culture. Like any element of "real life," it inevitably makes its way into the stories we tell ourselves.

Like any other tool, gore can be used well or poorly, indiscriminately or to help create just the kind of nuance and depth that fairy tales lack. Parents and

teachers are rightly concerned about pointless gore; however, a thoughtful use of gore can speak to our shared vulnerability and humanity, taking the "flat" characters of fairy tales into the multidimensional world of great stories. Bodies are sectioned metaphorically on the page as a way to evoke how we all feel broken by life. Zusak's Liesel literally sees her broken heart as it stubbornly beats, an apt metaphor for how human beings feel emotional pain. The question should not be, "Is gore used?"—thus introducing coarseness and misery. Rather, we should ask, "How is gore used?"—to merely titillate and shock, or to mount an effective, fresh, and meaningful exploration of the human condition?

### **Painted on the Surface: *The Marbury Lens***

*The Marbury Lens* (2010) begins with a boy who tells us that in other places, "boys like me usually ended up twisting and kicking in the empty air beneath gallows. It's no wonder I became a monster, too" (p. 3). Something is very wrong in this world. Smith uses gore to convey that wrongness.

In an email exchange with me, Smith said he began writing the book with this image of a hanged boy. "I knew that my initial object was to tell a story about a victim who becomes a monster of sorts" (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013). Smith immediately gives us a visual map of the contrast between Jack, his protagonist, and what other, normal boys experience. Other boys mark defining moments by happy, traditionally masculine things: sports, cars, fishing. But what marks Jack is horror and gore, evoking powerlessness, not a traditionally masculine position.

As we learn, Jack feels powerless. At 16, "I got kidnapped." That central event mirrors the writer's own childhood, when he was kidnapped by a stranger:

When I was a kid, I was kidnapped by a complete stranger (much like Jack's story). The event is something that I still think about every day. I never wanted to make my mother or anyone else in my family feel bad about it, like it was their fault or something. But at this point in my life, everyone is either dead or very distantly removed from me, so I decided it was time to write a story about a kidnapping and the way it ripples through this kid's life afterward. While I was writing the novel, I started having these dreams about a place called Marbury, and I saw people I knew there who were monsters in this place. I thought it was a cool dream,

and I thought it needed to be part of this novel. (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013)

In the novel, Smith moves immediately to the fantastical land of Marbury. When the Earth comes apart, “[T]here’s Marbury, a place that’s kind of like here, except none of the horrible things in Marbury are invisible. They’re painted right there on the surface where you can plainly see them” (p. 3).

While life in the real world seems normal, life in Marbury is dominated by gore and a desperate war between humans and Hunters, who kill and eat boys like Jack. Smith declines to say if Marbury is meant to be real or only exists in Jack’s mind. What is clear is that Marbury expresses Jack’s broken self. Early in the book, we learn that after leaving a friend’s party, Jack is picked up by Freddie Horvath, a stranger who drugs, imprisons, and tortures him. Before Freddie can kill him—as Jack believes he has killed other boys—Jack manages to escape.

At that point, the experience is “painted right there” on his body, though no one in the real world can see it. He has become a boy who can be snatched and almost killed. In the opening lines, Smith sets up a powerful framework for how gore functions in *The Marbury Lens*. While Jack is broken in both worlds, his brokenness is invisible—though no less real—in our world. In Marbury, however, the brokenness is graphically present. Gore is the pain and fear that cannot be wished or counseled away, especially in a boy who never shows his emotions (p. 30).

We learn that Freddie’s violence is not the first Jack has experienced. He never knew his father and was abandoned by his mother. He has doting grandparents who give him everything he needs. Yet he has no emotional connection to them. The only person he really loves is his best friend, Conner. Jack never tells his grandparents about Freddie for fear they will cancel his planned trip to England. But his friend Connor wants revenge, especially since it is clear Jack is not Horvath’s first kidnap victim. An act of violence, Connor promises, will erase the fear Jack feels (p. 43). However, their plan to turn Freddie into the police goes awry, and the kidnapper dies. As Jack leaves for England, as planned, he feels himself coming apart (p. 53).

Perhaps the most vivid use of gore to describe Jack’s brokenness comes with our first entry into Marbury. Jack enters through a pair of purple glasses he receives from a mysterious stranger. As he casually

examines the glasses, everything changes. Without warning, he is thrust into the post-apocalyptic devastation of Marbury (p. 74).

Gore marks the chasm between them. It also reveals Jack’s true brokenness. A bug Jack glimpsed through the lens is now very real, crawling “out of a red-black hole the size of a soft rotten plum” (p. 75).

As more bugs appear and chew the hole, Jack realizes what the hole is: the eye socket of a human skull.

“Nothing more of the body was there; just the head. And it was nailed to the wall in front of me, held there as though in conversation, just at my eye level,

by a thick wooden stake that had been driven into the masonry through the other eyeball” (p. 75).

Here, gore is as performative and laden with meaning as a Colombian *corte de florero*. A skull doesn’t naturally get staked to a wall. Jack reacts viscerally, “vomit rising from [his] gut.” That is more of a reaction than Jack had to his own kidnapping and near-rape and death. Confronted with gore, he allows himself to experience deep emotion and to be horrified. For Smith, gore allows Jack, a broken boy, to feel (p. 75).

Then the horror reaches out to him in the form of bugs. When they crawl across his hand, he really examines the cave. He knows the dead man: the person who gave him the purple glasses. In Smith’s Marbury, gore forces the protagonist to actually examine his world. For the first time in the book, Jack experiences more than numbness or unfocused anger (p. 76).

Smith ends the scene with another boy, a stranger, forcing Jack to recognize the danger they are in. Again, the scene is concerned first and foremost with getting Jack to see the truth of the world around him. Somehow, Jack knows the boy’s name, Ben Miller. As arrows fly through the air, Jack sees that the wall “was covered with impaled heads and other dripping, black-rot body parts: hands, hearts, feet, ears, penises.” His inner voice, used throughout the book in italics, whispers at him: “Welcome home, Jack” (p. 76).

The gore-cave is his emotional home, that of a boy sundered by two acts of extreme violence: his own kidnapping and the revenge murder he helped

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commit. Although in the real world, Jack runs from his feelings of terror and revulsion, in Marbury he cannot escape them. Those feelings are incarnate and drag him through the purple lens, crawl on him, and hunt him with ravenous determination, oblivious to his attempt at numbness.

This scene also propels Jack into action. He cannot run from the gore and hope to elude it as he ran from Freddy and escaped. He must do something to save himself from the arrows whizzing over his and Ben Miller's heads. Gore reaches out for Jack in the form of the black-feathered arrow that pierces his torso. As he watches himself bleed, he relates the pain to what he felt when Freddie tortured him with a stun gun. The pain is linked, though magnified in Marbury "a thousand times and more" (p. 77). Waking up in Marbury after he is pierced by the arrow, Jack feels the excruciating pain he hides from himself in London:

The smell of puke in my face made me want to throw up again, but I held it back. My stomach convulsed, tearing my insides. I traced my hand down my chest toward my hip. It was wet and sticky and I remembered that black arrow, but now it was gone. My fingertip tracked across the bumps of haphazard knots where someone has sewn my body shut with what felt like shoelace, the wound puckered out like pouting lips, swollen and stitched shut with a winding of tawny thread. (pp. 91–92)

Jack must accept the truth of Marbury's violence and work to survive and overcome it (p. 142). Jack also has to confront the damage he sustained—and wrought—with Freddie. In both worlds, Jack must learn to be his broken self with his family and friends, who also appear in Marbury, sometimes as adversaries. "Our connections in this world connect us to Marbury," the stranger who gave him the purple glasses tells him (p. 142). We are all broken and maimed and all must see each other as we are—people who have been wounded and survive only because of one another.

When asked about his epic use of gore, Smith says that nothing is "gratuitous . . . nothing is thrown in there just for the sake of shock or pushing any kind of imaginary envelope or testing the limits of what's acceptable" (Levy, 2012). Gore is a means to a descriptive end, to chart how deeply Jack has been broken and challenge him to search for a way to accept the brokenness in himself and others and find a way to live with and through it.

Marbury, as the location of gore, is like the real world inside out, where the psychological wounds Jack sustained at the hands of Freddie—and as one of Freddie's executioners—become vivid extrusions of flesh, bone, and blood. Marbury also embodies the end of childhood, when the young must confront the deceptions and violence of the adult world, experienced without the protection of parents or other caregivers. As Smith wrote to me about this scene, "When I was a kid, I went through the experience of the death of my father, and then within two years my brother (whom I was with when he died). I didn't really sense a greater sense of cruelty from the universe in either event" (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013).

In the climax of *The Marbury Lens*, Jack is able to put Marbury into the context of his life and the kidnapping he suffered. In Jack's words:

So the Marbury lens is a kind of prism, an elevator car maybe, that separates the layers and lets me see the Jack who's in the next hole made by the arrow. And that hole is Marbury. The one sure thing about Marbury is that it's a horrible place. But so is right here, too. And there's a certain benefit in the obviousness of its brutality, because in Marbury there's no doubt about the nature of things: good and evil, or guilt or innocence, for example. Not like here, where you could be sitting in the park next to a doctor or someone and not have any idea what a sick and dangerous sonofabitch he really is. Because we always expect things to be so nice and proper, even if we haven't learned our fucking lesson that it just doesn't work out like that all the time. (p. 282)

In a 2010 interview at the Manga Maniac blog (MacNish, 2011), Smith acknowledges that gore can thrill like the most terrifying roller coaster. "But that doesn't sustain interest," he notes.

A lot of young people read because they're looking for books with stories and characters they can feel a connection to. The sad truth is that many of us have had some really bad things happen in our lives. Sometimes, the trauma of those negative experiences diminishes over time, but you still never totally get over it. For a lot of us, there really is no "happily ever after." That's just how life is. When the only thing readers get are books with happy endings, in which all problems are perfectly solved, with plenty of "rising above" and "triumph" for the protagonists, it has a consequence of making some kids feel that there must be something wrong with them—that they're to blame for not having everything work out beautifully in their lives.

In his interview with me, Smith noted that some adults may find aspects of the adolescent experience honestly presented to be “too challenging” to handle (A. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 2013). I think Smith touches on something profound and also contradictory about young adults. Adults tend to romanticize those years and forget about how deeply challenging they are for anyone actually living them. At the same time, children experience the metaphorical and too-often actual horrors of growing up without any perspective, thus making events like bullying (*Carrie* and *Shattering Glass*) or crimes (*The Marbury Lens*) otherworldly, out of control, and literally life threatening.

## Conclusion

In 2008, I sat beside my father as he drowned in his recliner, a victim of the slow and inexorable hardening of the lungs caused by pulmonary fibrosis. Three months later, my husband of 27 years announced, without preamble, that he was leaving, putting my home, our children, and my career in jeopardy. Two months later, I had to put an elderly cat to sleep. A month later, the elderly dog lay on my back patio for the last time as the vet, indescribably kind, injected the drug that would stop her heart.

It was my *annus horribilis*, to quote Elizabeth II.

For months, I worked, shopped, ate, and slept with my torso split and flayed, blood and entrails spattering behind me and soaking whatever cushion I sat on. At least, that was how I felt. No one could see the gore, though it seemed as real to me as my own hands and feet. For the first time, I saw the image depicting the sacred heart of Jesus not as metaphorical but actual, the result of his apostles’ betrayal and his own father’s decision to force him to feel the pain of crucifixion and death. Of course, that left him cracked open, his beating heart exposed, his innermost tissues aflame.

In other words, I felt a lot like Liesel digging madly at her brother’s grave. I also felt like Jack in *Marbury*, when damage comes vividly to life in the fantastical world reached through the purple glasses. Always a fan of horror and gore, I saw these descriptive elements in a new light, as a way to make real and visceral the emotions we all feel when we are hurt, abandoned, or mistreated.

As a teacher, I’ve learned to pause at these moments in the text and help students examine even a few lines that contain gore. Too often, they skim over language similar to what I’ve selected for this article, feeling the impact of the words but failing to understand why they are moved. As a teaching tool, the pause to ask what is really happening in this line or paragraph and examining how it makes our feelings change is critical.

Also, I think a frank discussion of the role of gore in our super-saturated media culture is an essential part of teaching any literature, including the works cited here. Why do the thousand deaths in the latest thriller leave us cold, while the relatively subdued loss of Augustus Waters (in John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, 2012) move tens of thousands of readers to bookstores? One reason is because we are made to care. We see the characters as human, flawed, suffering, and vulnerable—qualities that aren’t highly valued by our culture. The vulnerability of the wounded, of the scarred, of the hurting, is a part of that.

Finally, I think that teachers can use their own personal experience with pain and loss—as I have in this piece—to connect with students and show them that these feelings are not only common, but shared. To be sure, teachers must limit any personal information to what is appropriate for the age and level of the students they are teaching as well as the comfort level of the teacher. But such sharing can enrich the teaching moment and draw out students who may feel profoundly alone and isolated by their own experiences of pain. Literature must be more than an intellectual exercise. Even great literature fails when it falls short of reaching us as individuals who can sympathize or empathize with the pain of others, either the people beside us in the classroom or the characters we come to love and grieve for on the page.

As adults, we don’t want to admit that children will experience violence and gore. But they do, often in surprising ways. I never pelted tampons at an ox of a girl bleeding in a gym shower, but through King’s muscular prose, I am able to connect with Carrie’s dumbness and shame while also feeling the struggle within the other girls, both elated by their violence and shamed by it. I’ve been Carrie, and I’ve been those girls, to my horror. I also feel powerfully Jack’s brokenness as he tries to understand the violence done to him and the violence he is capable of.

In a way, we all come from that place and return to it, patiently or not. Gore covers us as we enter the world and sometimes as we exit. When we think we are at our most elegant, protected, and powerful, gore coats us and splatters on the floor. Gore trips us when we want to be accepted. Gore leaves a bloody handprint on our clothes when we think we are doing good. Gore is our humanity, part of what makes us so inescapably human. Writers like Smith deploy gore to reveal what is deep and true about their characters. For all of us, how we handle the inevitable, inconvenient, and messy eruptions of the blood and guts in our lives is the real test of our humanity.

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