



Imagining the Nightmare: Empathy and Awareness in Post-Apocalyptic Young Adult Fiction

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Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

—William Ernest Henley, “Invictus”¹

We live in a “golden age” of young adult (YA) literature, proclaims YA expert Michael Cart.² But you only need to be an occasional reader of contemporary YA fiction to see the wealth of writing in and between all genres that addresses challenging issues for young adults. Its authors use the stories they tell as a medium

¹The full text of Henley’s poem, first published in 1888, can be found, for example, at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182194> (accessed December 28, 2014).

²Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (Chicago: ALA, 2010) 201.

Contemporary young adult literature is often set in times of apocalypse or in dystopian societies, or both. These stories help their impressionable audience understand and learn to navigate the grey areas of being human that their brains are primed to grow into: understanding oneself, understanding other people, and understanding that right and wrong are not so simple as black and white. Pastors and teachers need to know this literature in order to know their young people.

through which their audience can discover themselves and understand their world. John Green, author of the recent bestseller *The Fault in Our Stars*, writes that the teen years are when we “begin to ask the big questions of humanness: What, if anything, is the meaning to all this? What are my responsibilities to myself and to others?”³ This attitude stems from the neurological changes that the human brain undergoes in the teenage years. Cognitive neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore studies these changes and has found that certain areas of the prefrontal cortex are especially active during adolescence. This is the area of the brain involved in high-level cognitive functions like decision making, inhibiting inappropriate behavior, understanding other people, and self-awareness. Blakemore also suggests that the social, cultural, and educational environment surrounding a teenager has a profound impact on an individual’s development.⁴ This means that living in a “golden age” of young adult literature offers opportunities for facilitating psychological development and personal growth in teenagers, matters of particular interest to pastors and teachers.

Many young adult stories, from John Green’s realistic love stories to the two post-apocalyptic zombie novels discussed in this article, are about both empathy and self-knowledge, differentiating and sometimes deliberately confusing the blurry lines between right and wrong, and understanding one’s relationship with the real world. These stories help their impressionable audience understand and learn to navigate the grey areas of being human: that life is not black and white, that one’s actions influence the lives of real people, and that decisions are rarely as simple as “doing the right thing” or “following your heart.” This article examines two novels that explore these issues through the lens of zombies and apocalypse. These stories, Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* and Alden Bell’s *The Reapers Are the Angels*, help young people confront apocalypse and dystopia in ways that mirror their own complicated experience of coming to understand themselves and their world.

WHAT IS A ZOMBIE?

First: What *is* a zombie? Many cultural commentators labor exhaustively over this point, but in practice, a zombie is a reanimated human corpse with a voracious hunger for live human flesh. Once a zombie bites another human, that human will usually die and rise again as a zombie in his or her own right. Presumably, this zombification results from some sort of virus or other contagion present in the zombie’s bite and body fluids. In movies, books, and folklore, the zombie has a wide variety of implications and reasons for terrifying its audience; these reasons

³John Green, “#RealTalk: There’s No Age Limit to Loving Teen Drama,” *Cosmopolitan*, June 2014, 54; also <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/advice/a6686/too-old-for-young-adult-fiction/> (accessed December 28, 2014).

⁴Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, “The Mysterious Workings of the Adolescent Brain” (presentation, TEDGlobal, Edinburgh, Scotland, June 26–29, 2012); also http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_jayne_blakemore_the_mysterious_workings_of_the_adolescent_brain (accessed December 28, 2014).

vary with both the context of the story and the cultural context of the times. One consensus among various commentators describes zombies and other horrific creatures as “monstrous placeholders”⁵ or “containers”⁶ with a “blankness, or constitutive emptiness,”⁷ which both author and audience are free to fill in with their own fears and commentary. Later sections of this article will address specific features of zombies in both Ryan’s and Bell’s novels.

Similarly, it seems important to also discuss what “dystopian” or “post-apocalyptic” literature means. Like a zombie, you know it when you see it. Generally, in this fictional world, society has undergone some sort of catastrophic paradigm shift. Today’s government has been usurped or destroyed or otherwise radically altered from its current form. Society is structured much differently, often either under the control of an authoritarian government, or loose and individualistic, if not downright anarchic. Dystopian or post-apocalyptic literature, especially that written for young adults, tends to focus on one youthful protagonist navigating, understanding, and sometimes rebelling against these political and social structures. The teenagers in these stories, however bleak their situations, often still face the same teenage problems with growing up, finding love, and seeking independence. Because of this youthful perspective, these stories are often not as bleak as their environments seem. John Green writes that while teenagers “can be cynical about many things, they aren’t cynical about love, hope, and the stuff that really matters, like the future.”⁸ Dystopia and apocalypse are important stories to tell, and they are important stories for young adults to hear, because they are ultimately almost always hopeful.

The remaining bulk of this article will focus on how *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* and *The Reapers Are the Angels* approach young adults in a zombie-infested, post-apocalyptic world. These novels are in different ways typical of the YA “zombie” genre, and becoming familiar with them can help readers of *Word & World*—that is, pastors and teachers, many of whom might well have never read such literature—better understand the world in which their young people live.

THE FOREST OF HANDS AND TEETH

In Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, main character Mary is about sixteen years old. She lives in a small village surrounded by a chain-link fence to keep out the “Unconsecrated” zombies in the Forest—a slow-moving but insis-

⁵Margo Collins and Elson Bond, “‘Off the Page and into Your Brains!’: New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses,” in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (New York: Fordham, 2011) 187.

⁶Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 149.

⁷Phillip Mahoney, “Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Zombie: From Suggestion to Contagion,” in *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, ed. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011) 113–129.

⁸John Green, “#RealTalk: There’s No Age Limit to Loving Teen Drama.”

tent, numberless mass. A group of nuns called the Sisters rule Mary's village, and they insist that their village is the only human society left on earth. Mary, however, grew up hearing stories from her mother about the Ocean, and believes that a world outside the village exists. Her belief appears to be confirmed when an outside girl wearing a red vest comes to their village, and the Sisters keep her secretly locked in a room in the Sisters' cathedral. Rather than reveal that they are wrong about being the only town left on earth, the Sisters choose to secretly release Gabriella, the girl in the red vest, into the Forest, where she is bitten and joins the ranks of the Unconsecrated. Gabriella, however, becomes "the fast one," not plodding and moaning like the others, but quick, agile, and fierce. She instigates a break in the fence, and the village is overrun. Mary, along with a group of six other young people close to her, escapes the carnage via a fenced-in path through the Forest, along which she leads them in search of safety and, maybe, an outside civilization.

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In this novel, Mary is the prototypical heroine of young adult dystopia stories. Her nonconformist thinking is based on a closely held faith in the Ocean, which represents an unspecified *something more* to her, a world outside of the isolated and extremist one she knows. Early in the novel, the Sisters tell Mary, "This is why we are here, how we survived—by cutting ourselves off. By letting the rest of humanity perish."⁹ Such societies founded on authoritarian and exclusivist extremism, in this or in any young adult dystopian novel, are corrupt and hypocritical and their leaders embody the worst of modern politicians or religious leaders. In these stories, the people who preach extremism, exclusivism, fire and brimstone have their plans revealed as nothing but destructive and oppressive. In an article on science fiction dystopias for the *New York Times*, Nick Bilton paraphrases a number of authors regarding the importance of these stories: "[W]e need to imagine the nightmare so it doesn't become real."¹⁰ They suggest to audiences what could happen if these leaders are allowed to have their ideological way. *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* is the political zombie novel—the Unconsecrated represent both the result of political and religious extremism, and the source of that structure's downfall. The Sisters created Gabriella, "the fast one," who ultimately destroys them. She wears red as a symbol of her difference, and of her ability to destroy; like the red hourglass on the back of a black widow spider, it is a poisonous warning.

Meanwhile, the normal, slow-moving Unconsecrated in Ryan's novel also

⁹Carrie Ryan, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (New York: Delacorte, 2009) 67–68.

¹⁰Nick Bilton, "Science Fiction Writers Take a Rosier View," *New York Times*, September 17, 2014, E10; also http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/18/fashion/science-fiction-writers-take-a-rosier-view.html?_r=0 (accessed September 28, 2014).

serve as a warning against political complacency and religious passivity. Ryan associates the Unconsecrated with the members of the Forest village, drawing on Philip Mahoney's observation that "cultural commentators in general often employ zombie rhetoric when they describe the masses as hypnotized automata, easily manipulated by those in power."¹¹ Finding their way through the Forest after the perimeter breach, Mary explains to her friend Cass, "We're already dead. We're surrounded by it every day. And we shuffle along in our lives just like they shuffle along in theirs."¹² Ryan's zombies are slow and stumbling instead of fast and vicious, because they reflect the slow and stumbling backwards ideology that the Village and its leaders cling to. The Sisters use their apocalypse as a tool to maintain social order and psychological control:

Theirs is the word of God, not to be questioned. They are the ones to teach us in school, who tell us that we are all that is left of the world and that the time of the Return [of the dead to reanimation] is behind us and unimportant in our new world. They are the ones who teach us not to second-guess their proclamations, not to second-guess our survival after the Return and the new world they have built for us.¹³

After her mother's death, the God that Mary loses faith in is the God whom the Sisters create. Their word has usurped God's; their only complete scripture is kept locked in a vault under the cathedral. Withholding the truth and supplanting it with their own, while refusing to allow doubt, is the foundation of the Sisters' power. By proclaiming that theirs is the only civilization left on earth, the Sisters create a myth "we all came from [...] not the Garden of Eden, but the ashes of the Return."¹⁴ The Sisters' insistence on base literalism creates a culture of fear and oppression and complacency, symbolized in the weak and ultimately fallible human-made fence surrounding the Village.

So what causes Mary to resist the Sisters' dogma, to question their proclamations? She possesses the stories that her mother told her about the Ocean. The first sentence of Mary's narration at the beginning of the book is about these stories, and she returns to them again and again, obsessing over them while in the village and clinging to them while running away from it. The stories, for Mary, are hope. They redeem her faith, detaching God from the Sisters' dogma and allowing her to explore the individuality and independence that a society comprised of living zombies robs. Deep in the Forest after running from her village, with no possibility of turning back, Mary asks herself, "Who are we if not the stories we pass down? What happens when there's no one left to tell those stories? To hear them? Who will ever know that I existed?"¹⁵ This passage, and ultimately this book as a whole,

¹¹Mahoney, "Mass Psychology," 113.

¹²Ryan, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, 144.

¹³*Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 207.

speaks to a distinctly young adult need to have one's autonomy recognized, to be heard and understood while at the same time feeling very alone, as though no one else is capable of understanding. In *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, Mary is telling her story, and the reader hears it. And maybe that reader, teenager or adult, finds some common ground with Mary, personally or politically or spiritually, and doesn't feel quite so alone.

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THE REAPERS ARE THE ANGELS

Alden Bell's *The Reapers Are the Angels* approaches many of the same questions about identity and independence in young people, as well as the human relationship with God in the context of apocalypse. The novel's main character is Temple, about fifteen years old, alias Sarah Mary Williams. Set in a Deep South that is overrun by zombies (here known as "meatskins" or "slugs"), with no clear government and too few people to have any societal structure, the book resonates with southern Gothic imagery and a highly poetic and deeply introspective style. After she has lived alone for years, a new wave of meatskins forces Temple out of her Florida island home and into a city where she encounters a settlement of live humans. One of them makes unwanted sexual advances toward her, and she kills him. The man's brother Moses, despite coming to deeply respect Temple's will to survive, pursues her the remainder of the novel with the intent of killing her to exact vengeance for his brother's life. Temple's companion for most of her flight is a mentally disabled man named Maury, whom she eventually seeks to return to his family in Texas. Along the way, Temple is haunted not only by the threat of Moses and the burden of Maury, but also by the memory of a time before her solitude, when she took care of a young boy named Malcolm after they lost their guardian to a meatskin bite.

The zombies in Bell's novel are more a simple nuisance than a real threat: they are about as dangerous as a rabid raccoon. Throughout the book, Temple talks to the meatskins as though they were live human beings, and she has full conversations with Maury even though he cannot answer. Though Maury's state closely resembles that of a meatskin (slow, mute, and apparently mindless), Temple recognizes the difference between him and the meatskins following him in a macabre parade down the road and feels compelled to help him. Temple's initial interaction with him represents her first real act of compassion in the story: she helps him bury his dead grandmother, literally takes her out of his hands with the understanding that she should be in the ground instead of above it and "creepin

around again.”¹⁶ Instead of fear, the reader almost feels sorry for Maury’s granny and the other meatskins, who are “choked and gagging and rotted and crusty and eminently pathetic, yes, brutally, conspicuously, outrageously pathetic.”¹⁷ The reader wants to help them by putting them in the ground like a normal dead person. But like Temple, we are uncomfortable with what they reflect: the confused state of the novel’s post-apocalyptic world, in which “the livin and the dyin [are] just half an inch apart.”¹⁸ There is little distinction between living and dead, past and present, divine and human, or between good and evil in this novel, but these blurred lines drive Temple’s growth as a person.

Just as in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, individual autonomy and identity are essential to the heroine’s survival in *The Reapers Are the Angels*. The difference is that instead of rejecting and rebelling against her world, Temple’s self-discovery is about compassion and empathy, learning to live as a part of her world rather than apart from it. Maury is the catalyst for this growth. And as they drive away from burying his grandmother, Temple talks with him about the past: “I wonder if you remember it. Does that gone past still haunt up your dummy skull?...Did you recognize them [meatskins] as somethin different, or does everything walkin on two feet look the same to you?”¹⁹ Here, Temple tries to put herself in Maury’s position, tries to see the world through his eyes. This is the definition of empathy: to willingly *be* someone else, to imagine their perspective. Again, according to Blakemore, “the ability to take into account someone else’s perspective...is still developing in mid-to-late adolescence.”²⁰ At the most basic biological level, Temple’s growth in *The Reapers Are the Angels* is the same growth that every teenager on the planet experiences. She may have a grasp on the blurry half-inch difference between living and dead, but her real growth comes with the ability to discern the fathomless difference between living soul and living soul.

Temple’s understanding of others and of how she treats them, however, is predicated on her own understanding of good and evil and right and wrong. In *The Reapers Are the Angels*, the story’s constant refrain, from beginning to end, is “Temple knows.” On the story’s first page, she stands on her lonely Florida island under the stars, and reflects:

Here’s what Temple knows: She knows that whatever hell the world went to, and whatever evil she’s perpetrated her own self, and whatever series of cursed misfortunes brought her down here to this island to be harbored away from the order of mankind, well, all those things are what put her there that night.²¹

As the story progresses, the reader learns more about Temple’s past, about “what-

¹⁶Alden Bell, *The Reapers Are the Angels* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010) 55.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 64–65.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰Blakemore, “The Mysterious Workings of the Adolescent Brain.”

²¹Bell, *The Reapers Are the Angels*, 3–4.

ever evil she's perpetrated" and whatever "cursed misfortunes" she's experienced that made her into the person she is. For Temple, her history with Malcolm drives her relationship with Maury and her questioning: "If I ain't evil, than what am I?"²² It takes until nearly the end of the book for Temple to confess that Malcolm was killed because she followed her own curiosity and left him unprotected against the marauding meatskins. Malcolm haunts her past, and she sees in Maury an opportunity to put her past at rest, to save him when she failed to save Malcolm. If the meatskins are the "beasts of our lost pasts, spilling out of whatever hell we have made for them like an army of the damned,"²³ then every meatskin Temple kills is a manifestation of her regret, her desire to destroy the part of herself that left Malcolm to die. But near the book's end, she even questions whether killing the meatskins is wrong: "[I]t's a sin as big as the world we live in, bigger even—to lay your hands on a creation of God's and snuff it out."²⁴

High-school brains may be especially aware of their own anger and grief, and they may be especially receptive to learning about identity and empathy and right and wrong, but we don't stop learning these things after high school. Adults read contemporary young adult literature just as much as teenagers.

While the brain development involved in discerning between good and evil and right and wrong peaks in the adolescent years, Blakemore explains that the brain as a whole "continues to develop right through adolescence and into the twenties and thirties."²⁵ *The Reapers Are the Angels* is a crossover novel—stylistically, it bears more resemblance to an adult novel, but the protagonist is a teenager and many themes in the story relate to young adults. Temple's story and her confusion are important things for a reader, whether teen or adult, to hear, because they are universal. In the end, Moses assures Temple that she's not evil; she's "just angry. Just grievin like everybody else."²⁶ And this "everybody else" is not just teenagers. High-school brains may be especially aware of their own anger and grief, and they may be especially receptive to learning about identity and empathy and right and wrong, but we don't stop learning these things after high school. Adults read contemporary young adult literature just as much as teenagers,²⁷ and we don't relent in our hope that there "ain't no hell deep enough to keep heaven out."²⁸

²²Ibid., 161.

²³Ibid., 64.

²⁴Ibid., 161.

²⁵Blakemore, "The Mysterious Workings of the Adolescent Brain."

²⁶Bell, *The Reapers Are the Angels*, 212.

²⁷"New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults," *Publisher's Weekly*, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-book-bought-by-adults.html> (accessed January 4, 2015).

²⁸Bell, *The Reapers Are the Angels*, 147.

Each of these books, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* and *The Reapers Are the Angels*, portrays a different type of post-apocalyptic society, a different type of zombie, and a different type of heroine. But in the end, they both address thoroughly young adult issues of empathy, independence, and moral differentiation. Temple's unconquerable will simply to *stay alive* and Mary's unconquerable faith in another world free from tyranny are uniquely humanizing traits for these characters. Temple and Mary's zombies "challenge audiences to become more fully 'human': more reflective, and simultaneously more cooperative and more self-reliant."²⁹ In spite of their posthuman setting, these stories humanize their audience. In spite of the bleak fictional worlds in which both our contemporary notions of human civilization and human life have ended, these stories remain hopeful in a younger generation. ⊕

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²⁹Collins and Bond, "Off the Page and into Your Brains!" 188.