

DEMETRIUS JOHNSON AND THE WEEP OF THE WORLD: A NOVEL

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By

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ABSTRACT

Demetrius Johnson and the Weep of the World is a middle-grade, dark fantasy novel for readers eight to thirteen years old. The novel uses dark fantasy elements as allegory to render grief's lived experience. The novel's protagonist is Demetrius, a ten-year-old who has lost his mother to cancer and is struggling to cope. Demetrius's grief emerges as the novel's primary journey, beginning six months after Mama's death as Demetrius and his father move to rural Virginia to live with family. Upon arrival at his grandmother's house, Demetrius meets the novel's antagonist—a promise-peddling inventor named Meraux the Magic Man, who claims that Dee's mother is not gone but lost and that he has *just* the gadgets to find her. Using steampunk-horror details, Meraux is grief personified, imagining grief as a force that spontaneously exerts itself upon the bereaved.

Demetrius takes Meraux's bargain and is hurtled into his ashen wasteland, the World In Between, where Dee discovers the lie and magical thinking embedded in Meraux's promise. Building upon the work of scholar Marta Bladek and writer Joan Didion, I render grief as a fantasy setting on macro and micro levels. First, grief's spatiality is rendered as the larger invented fantasy world of the novel, the World In Between, a place where bereaved people are stuck in time, space, and grief. Secondly, the novel's scenes are constructed as individual landscapes representing different emotional affects and atmospheres of grief.

In these spaces, Demetrius discovers a multicultural band of trapped bereaved people fighting to survive. The residents of Mourning Star warn Demetrius that Meraux doesn't just feed off grief, but that Meraux is building the Grief Eater, a machine to *weep* the waking world, and Demetrius is the perfect fuel. Demetrius must join the bereaved's ranks to stop Meraux, destroy the machine, and find a way home. Through this journey, the novel develops a kaleidoscope of non-Eurocentric mourning beliefs through the characters of Ellie, Raida, Aharon, and Nii. This exploration develops a theme of grief as a unifying force, wherein the bereaved through shared experience can heal via community.

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother, Hayley.
To write is to dream, and no one taught me to dream as far or as wide as you.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Grief unmoors everything it touches—including the self. In his essay “Grief,” Colm Tóbin illustrates the unmoored self through the example of Hamlet, driven to madness after his father’s death (261). Hamlet seems a walking contradiction, disconnected from all else. However, to Tóbin, it’s logical; Hamlet’s loss unmoors him, irrevocably and instantaneously upending his identity, severing his connection to the external world (261). When I read this, it was a truth I felt viscerally, a reality I instantly recognized as my own. I, too, had been unmoored after the passing of my own mother in 2015. I was just twenty-four years old.

For months after my mother’s unexpected death, I lamented to anyone who might listen that my life was now a chronology fissured in two. The timeline of my person, of my core self was marred forever on July 7, 2015 by a fault line deeper than the San Andreas. My metaphysical understanding and experience of time became two murky buckets: everything before my loss and everything afterwards. But I felt stuck in a state of liminality. Lodged between these two irreconcilable realities: a time with my mother and a time without her. I was not only unmoored mentally and emotionally but metaphysically. I refused to step forward into the bucket of everything after. I needed to stay, for as long as I could, in everything before. To do otherwise would mean leaving that spitfire, uproarious mother of mine behind. To do otherwise felt like a betrayal.

Our conversations on grief tend to be divorced from our experiences of it. The former are platitudinous, fixated on time healing wounds, as if wounds related to loss can be mended and forgotten. However, the relationship between temporality and grief is more nuanced than that; as scholar Marta Bladek explains, “grief continues to be perceived as a temporal phenomenon that unravels over time,” which “neglects...the varied ways in which mourning and its accompanying emotions are experienced in space” (938). With my mother’s death, grief became my world. It tinted everything around me. It hid behind every corner on the offensive. Every day, I found myself in seemingly innocuous moments suddenly reminded of my mother and shot into a spiral of memory.

Once, in a Virginia Wal-Mart, an old country song sent me running for cover near the bath towels. Tears misted my eyes. Onlookers with blue baskets and carts furrowed their brows, wondering what could ever be so troubling about towels. But I was back in Ohio, where I grew

up, sometime in the summer of 1997, using a coral-coloured hairbrush for a microphone, shuffling to Alan Jackson along the terracotta tile of our duplex. My mother—a New York-born, South Florida-raised city girl—trying out her best country twang. For me, grief was never a sprint of time but a space of perpetual shock and prolonged suffering.

Few books I've encountered take on the rawness of grief, let alone its sense of unmooring or liminality. A few months after my mother died, I stood in my local library, examining the dusty spines of the *Grief and Loss* section, dwarfed by the surrounding labyrinth of *Spirituality* shelves. Of course, religion is a perfectly valid means of coping after loss, but it wasn't mine. I couldn't imagine heavens or hells, certainly not angels or ghosts. When friends told me to look and listen at my mother's grave, that I'd feel her presence soon enough, I'd clench my jaw so hard my temples hurt, and yet, I nodded along.

Ultimately, I wanted to name what I felt. I needed to analyse it, categorize it, unpack all its layers. Grief was more than just sadness. Often, it was rage and betrayal. Jealousy and isolation. Longing and alienation. I needed something to see my very specific grief of parental loss in early adulthood for what it was. I wanted something to empathize and identify with me and this particular experience, at a time when so few people I knew could.

Grief is no stranger to adult-marketed memoirs. I checked out many that day at the library, but soon found they, too, were often divorced from my own lived experience of grief. I'd open one, begin to sink in, and soon find a narrative rooted in a struggle of faith. One text was Jackie Hance's *I'll See You Again: A Memoir* (2013). Hance, who lost her three daughters in a car accident, tracks her loss's impact on her Catholicism, but as the title might suggest, while tried, her faith remains unshakeable. Meanwhile, other titles dealt more in self-help, in finding ways to weather the storm and stay in search of clearer skies.

It was not until I entered the MFA in Writing's creative nonfiction seminar that I found the elusive memoir I'd been looking for: a text on loss that took on both grief's unmooring and its metaphysical consequences. Joan Didion's 2005 memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, recounts the sudden death of her husband, John Dunne, in 2003. Throughout the book, Didion hauntingly loops: "You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends" (3). After John's cardiac arrest, Didion spends the subsequent year excavating her loss, her past, and her memory while caring for their daughter, Quintana, during a series of hospitalizations.

Didion terms grief's unmooring and metaphysical experience as "the waves": rushes of memory, elicited by place, that transport her daily into a landscape of mourning (27). Didion writes, "Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life" (27). Moreover, Didion's waves are unconstrained by time. They occur whenever and wherever, taking on what she terms "the vortex effect," the way grief renders memory an all-encompassing space (107). Scholar Marta Bladek asserts that Didion's memoir "employs spatial imagery to convey the sense of loss and grief by describing her returns to familiar locations or visits to unfamiliar ones" (940). Didion experiences the vortex in a range of places and times, including homes and hotels she and John frequently occupied, such as the house at Brentwood Park, as well as unfamiliar locations, including the halls of Beth Israel North Hospital.

Bladek asserts that Didion renders the vortex, in contrast to the platitudes of time, to posit "interrelated concepts of grief as spatialized experience, place as preserver of and trigger for memories, and remembering as a crucial aspect of the mourning process" (940). However, the vortex Didion constructs is the underpinning of the memoir itself; truly, the vortex is the memoir's form by operating as the vehicle for the memoir's flashbacks. In the text, places in Didion's real world often operate as time capsules—physical markers of memory and thus elicitors of mourning. For example, Didion paces the halls at Beth Israel North during one of Quintana's hospitalizations, watching the ice floes outside the window (Didion 107). Suddenly, she views "a rose-patterned wallpaper border," and it shuttles her through a series of associative jumps/memories from her time at Vogue to Quintana at three years old to the writing of one of her books to a stay in Honolulu with John on the brink of divorce (Didion 107-12). This singular physical marker, the wallpaper, moves Didion through the vortex and into a whirlwind of memory.

On a surface level, Didion's narrative style seems stream of consciousness, but it is an intentional construction of lived experience under grief. Time and the narrative's chronology are often abandoned for the vortex of memory and Didion's endless excavation. Throughout the narrative, Didion exists in the liminal, in an absence of time, in only the *space* that is grief. Simply put, Didion's vortex *is* grief. Grief is that constant, awful instant in which the bereaved become whiplashed time travellers of their own past, crying in a Wal-Mart over towels because of an old country song.

Over time and with Joan Didion in my back pocket, I did gain the ability to reframe my grief, to find distance from its rawness, and eventually to reflect. As a writer, I began to consider new ways of using grief as the structure for a piece of writing, particularly fiction, my form of choice. I wondered: if our experience after loss was a *space*, and not a temporal phase, then could grief be constructed as a traversable landscape—as a novel’s setting? Perhaps as an invented fantasy world? Meanwhile, as a researcher, I questioned the authenticity and accuracy of grief rendered in fiction writing, particularly in fiction for younger readerships. Knowing how underserved I felt as a mourner in early adulthood, I hypothesized that gaps might exist for fiction’s youngest readers. So, I turned to the books.

Through my review of children’s literature, I found that our written treatment of grief often depends on our chosen genre. Regardless of targeted audience age, books dealing in realism tend to tackle grief head on. This is true even in works such as picture books directed towards early childhood readers. Two examples include Carolyn Beck’s *That Squeak* (2015), which follows Joe after the loss of his best friend, Jay, and Melanie Florence’s *Missing Nimâmâ* (2015), which follows Kateri through early childhood into adulthood after the loss of her mother, a missing and murdered Indigenous woman. In both works, grief and loss are the narrative’s prioritized concern. Their young protagonists face various emotional facets of grief (anger, envy, sadness, etc.) and work to reach some sort of resolution. For example, in *That Squeak*, Joe learns to open up about his loss to a classmate, Carlos, who has lost his own mother, and thus, Joe ultimately learns to open his heart to the possibility of a new friendship (28, 32-34).

This treatment only deepens for realistic fiction aimed at middle grades (9-11 years old) and young adults (12-18 years old). For instance, Sharon Draper’s novel, *Tears of a Tiger* (1994), follows high schooler Andy Jackson after he survives a drunk driving accident that kills his best friend and basketball teammate, Robert Washington (1-2). What Andy can’t reconcile, however, is that he was the one behind the wheel and the one who helped buy the beers (1-7, 11-14). Here, Andy’s grief and the initial fallout of Robert’s death at Hazelwood High School are the narrative’s primary drives. The book uses dialogue to prioritize grief’s lived experience through the perspectives of coaches, friends, and a therapist; it also implements found materials, such as homework assignments and letters. Andy attempts resolution, but his ending is far from happy. While the themes are more sensitive and more complex than those in titles for younger readers, such as *That Squeak*, the narrative goals remain the same for texts rooted in realism.

Andy's (and the surrounding community's) response to Robert's death focuses as the narrative's core drive.

However, grief's treatment in speculative fantasy for middle-grade and young-adult readers tends to differ significantly from its realistic counterparts. In my survey, I found that most fantasy books use grief and loss only as colouring devices for a larger, separate narrative, rather than the genesis and crux of the fantasy narrative itself, i.e. a direct grief journey. This is true of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008), Lois Lowry's *Gathering Blue* (2000), and Arthur Slade's *Jolted: Newton Starker's Rules for Survival* (2009). Each novel begins with the recent death of a parent; in fact, Gaiman's story begins, "[t]here was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife," resulting in the mysterious death of both of the protagonist's parents (2). An unattended infant, the protagonist, Bod, wanders into a local graveyard, where a community of ghosts step up to raise him (22-23). The narrative follows Bod and his caretakers as he adventures in the graveyard through *Jungle Book*-inspired stories, grows into a teenager, and reconciles with his need to join the living. While Bod worries that the man Jack who killed his parents might be after him, most of his emotional struggle is centred on leaving his adopted, paranormal parents, the Owens couple, and his guardian, Silas (295-307). His biological parents' deaths are more of a prophecy—a fate Bod hopes to escape.

This arc works similarly in Lowry's *Gathering Blue* and Slade's *Jolted*. Both follow a teenage protagonist in a coming-of-age story. Lowry's Kira has lost her mother to a "brief and unexpected sickness," which renders her an orphan who must find her place as a disabled person in a dystopian community that prizes utility above all else (1); Slade's Newton Starker doesn't believe that the Starker family is cursed (that's crazy talk!), despite the fact that "lightning ha[s] blotted out nearly every member of [his] family tree" (3). Two years after his mother's death, Newton enrolls at a survivalist academy in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, to defy the cloud that hangs over him and his family, and he embarks on a story of recipes, new friends, and growing up (3). In these texts, death, again, is treated more as a prophecy—a fate to resist and overcome. Loss exists only in the fringes of these narratives, as Kira mostly contends with her new role as a weaver and as Newton attempts to succeed at his competitive new school. Newton's and Kira's grief, just like Bod's, are not the narratives' primary drives. Each work's included grief often heightens characterization, provides an emotional atmosphere, and works to shape the narrative in some way, but that grief is not depicted as a journey in and of itself, and thus, grief's

emotional facets, lived experience, and vortices are not accounted in great detail. Each book is a story of growing up and overcoming difference, not of grief's reality.

However, in my survey, I uncovered one particular fantasy novel that treats grief and its emotional vortices as a journey in itself. *A Monster Calls* (2011) by Patrick Ness is a young-adult novel that follows thirteen-year-old Conor O'Malley. At the novel's start, Conor is awakened by "[t]he nightmare," a recurring night terror with "darkness and the wind and the screaming," "with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he trie[s] to hold on" (1). For much of the novel, Conor refuses to acknowledge the nightmare's entire plot to the reader, avoiding all discussion of it, even when faced by a talking yew tree demanding his truth. That's because Conor is busy with other things. His mother is dying of cancer, and her illness has bled into all areas of his life. At school, Conor is the invisible man, alienated by bullies and distanced from his friends. Paradoxically, Conor also feels like an obvious sore thumb whom teachers and neighbours pity. Then, on the first night of the novel at 12:07 AM, the monster begins to visit; and, each night, the yew tree shares stories to help Conor work out his own truth, to make sense of his new reality, and to implore him to share his secret (4-9).

A Monster Calls is a poignant portrait of the varied and often contradictory emotions grief and its sister, sickness, bring. As Conor struggles to accept his mother's impending, inevitable death, the monster embodies the scope of emotions Conor experiences. Conor even acts and speaks through the monster. In one instance, the monster tells Conor a parable of the parson and the apothecary (99-116). The monster transports Conor to the parson's house, where he watches the parson discount the apothecary's knowledge, which eventually leads to the death of the parson's daughters. Because of this tragedy, the monster and Conor decide to destroy the parson's house, enacting Conor's very real rage and frustration. Conor finds that the release of his anger feels good, but when he wakes to reality, Conor finds he has destroyed much of his grandmother's sitting room, not the parson's fictional house (116-8). Here and in other instances of the novel, the monster is Conor's troubled and difficult truth, as well as his complex, contradictory, and sometimes even foolhardy emotional state.

At the very end of *A Monster Calls*, Conor finally reveals his nightmare to the monster and the reader; he dreams of grasping his mother on a cliffside, attempting to save her from a terrible monster in the valley below, but Conor cannot hold on; he is losing his grip and must let his mother go, and truthfully, a part of him is ready to do so (171-192). Upon his admission,

Conor is overwrought with guilt, but the monster counsels him that this emotional response is completely natural. The monster says, “*Stop this, Conor O’Malley... This is why I came walking, to tell you this so that you may heal. [...] You do not write your life with words... You write it with actions. What you think is not important. It is only important what you do*” (192; novel’s own emphasis). Then Conor leaves for the hospital to finally say goodbye to his mother, and the novel ends just as Conor is about to let her go (204).

In *A Monster Calls*, the protagonist is only beginning to experience loss and grief in its rawest state. Most of the novel deals in the anxiety and isolation of impending, inevitable loss—a type of grief, without a doubt, but not the grief rendered by Didion, not the grief experienced after death occurs. Ness’s monster is a foreboding, yet wise creature—neither a hero nor a villain—merely an entity that exists in scales of grey. An entity that shows Conor that the truth is often hurtful, muddled, and multifaceted—that the truth is often many things all at once. So too is grief. But Ness’s monster is not a landscape or a rendering of space. Ness’s monster is not an antagonist or a capture of grief’s enactment after death.

Thus, in my creative thesis, I chose to fill these gaps and create the text I have long sought: a work of fiction for middle-grade readers that uses writing as a tool to explore the authentic, lived experience of grief, challenging the notion of grief as mere colouring device and, instead, employing grief as the novel’s core priority via a narrative journey and a conceptual framework. In my novel, *Demetrius Johnson and the Weep of the World*, I have constructed an age-appropriate, post-death grief journey for a middle-grade audience, in which the spatiality, liminality, and enactment of grief are explored. In some ways similar to Ness, my creative thesis investigates the grayscale, complicated relationship between grief, emotion, and identity; in dissimilar ways, it builds upon the work of Didion and Bladek, examining grief not as a singular event upon a timeline but an ongoing process—a space we enter that renders us fundamentally changed. In exploring this spatiality, the enactment of vortices, and the activeness of grief processing, my novel renders grief in three ways: first as the fantasy landscape the protagonist must navigate; second as my novel’s antagonist, a force that continually shapeshifts, enacting emotional trauma on those bereaved in the narrative; and finally as the thematic cornerstone of the novel’s usage of diverse characters and mourning rituals.

From a high level, *Demetrius Johnson and the Weep of the World* follows Demetrius, an African American ten-year-old who lost his mother to cancer 176 days ago and is struggling to

cope. Beginning roughly six months after Mama's death, the novel opens with Demetrius and his father moving to rural Virginia to live with family. Upon arrival at his grandmother's house, Demetrius meets the novel's antagonist—a promise-peddling mechanist named Meraux the Magic Man, who assures Demetrius that he can help him find whom everyone says is gone forever: his mother. Through the Magic Man's caravan, Demetrius hurtles into the twilight of the World In Between, where he discovers a wasteland desperately in need of his help, a lantern-wielding woman working to save it, and a grief-eating machine ready to destroy the world as he knows it.

To explore grief's spatiality, I render grief as a setting on both macro and micro levels. First, on the macro level, I spatialize grief as the novel's larger invented setting: The World In Between. The novel's antagonist, Meraux, whisks Demetrius into his caravan with a promise of magical thinking—that Dee's mother is not dead but kidnapped and awaiting saving. Once in Meraux's caravan, Demetrius is throttled from his mother's graveyard through a vortex, or fantasy portal, into the Magic Man's world of grief, the World In Between. The World In Between is a wasteland of scorched earth, crowned by the Mountains of Ash, "smoothed ebony mounds, skirted by dusk," and Meraux's volcanic machine reactor, flashing hellfire and "breath[ing] a tarry rattle of death across the world" (88, 168). The World In Between is a lifeless badlands, littered with the husked shells of the bereaved, caught in a permanent state of twilight. These choices represent grief's destruction of normalcy and time. In entering this world, Demetrius's own sense of time is fractured, casting him into a space and stasis between his life before and his life after loss—that metaphysical unmooring of liminality. At the novel's end, Demetrius escapes the wasteland and returns to the real world just at dawn.

Moreover, grief is rendered as a landscape on the micro level through the setting of each of Meraux's trials on the smoke trail and even at Demetrius's entry into the World In Between. When Meraux makes his initial offer to Demetrius in Granny's driveway, he convinces Demetrius of the delusion that his mother is simply lost and exploits the magical thinking that grief often brings—a hope and disbelief surrounding one's loss. Once in the fantasy realm, Meraux leads Demetrius into Muckmire Barrow, an underground connection of cavernous tunnels and rivers of industrial slime run-off (known as the sick sad) that lead to Meraux's fortress (90-110). A hotbed of Meraux's husking traps, this location reveals Dee's magical

thinking as the deep-seated lie it is—a truth buried deep underground, like the *sick sad* coursing through the barrow (95-100).

After his attack on Mourning Star, Meraux coaxes Demetrius onto a trail of trials, attempting to weaken him, so that Dee’s light can be stolen to fuel Meraux’s machine, the Grief Eater. From there, each trial explores a specific emotional facet of grief, including guilt, alienation, and the fallibility of memory. In each trial, each emotion is again spatialized through the setting of the scene. The trials begin in Singeheart Swamp, where Meraux’s choir of swamp wraiths drag Demetrius to the bottom to their cauldron of bones while serenading him with a haunting melody of blame—some lyrics truthful, others not. A final wraith emerges from the bony cauldron: a corrupted apparition of Dee’s mother. Dee’s friends free him from the wraiths, but Demetrius is forced to face his most hurtful guilt once and for all, in order to escape the swamp and float back to freedom.

On its surface, the swamp mimics the destruction of the World In Between; it is a “steamy and foul-smelling” place, “fester[ing] with flies and the air of rotten eggs and meat. Like the bathwater of the devil” (170). Once underwater, Demetrius feels “[t]he weight of the swamp coil...around [him], wedging between his ribs,” and soon, Dee worries he will drown (172). But Demetrius can’t see a way out because “the swamp’s bottom burn[s] black,” making only “Meraux’s choir of guilt...glowing blurs of colour, spectres swimming through the swamp,” coloured like “a bruise,” visible (172). Here, Demetrius becomes lost in the swirl and song of the wraiths and their drowning sensation of guilt—be it earned or unearned—and the only way to be free is to work toward the truth with the other mourners and process the emotion.

The other trial locations operate similarly. The Mist of the Barrens pits Demetrius against a faux version of his father, exploring the way grief often forces us to alienate ourselves from those we love through miscommunication and a lack of trust (190-199). Because of their move and the usual activities after death (i.e. removal of clothes, donation of personal items, post-death cleaning, etc.), Demetrius is sceptical of his father’s grief and worries his father is moving on. This tension acts as one of the catalysts for Demetrius joining Meraux. In the trial, the mist preys upon that conflict, whispering Dee’s doubts and playing on his mistrust (196-198). The mist consumes all of Dee’s senses, blocking out reason and ultimately leading Demetrius to push his father’s apparition into the crater below (198-9).

Finally, the train station and town of Melancholia Place explore the anxiety grief creates regarding the fallibility of memory. Demetrius knows his memory of Mama is going fuzzy, and Meraux steals the bereaved's memories of the deceased as he suffocates the bereaved in deeper and deeper grief. Near the book's end, Meraux constructs Melancholia Place as a dream-like facsimile of Granny's town in Virginia. The town is filled with strange, formless people, who appear to have "been moulded in clay and left half-done" (223). Meraux shapeshifts around the town and station, playing a variety of roles, including a station master, an old man and his dog, a police bobby, and a little boy (224, 225, 227, 228-9). He taunts Demetrius that this is his memory now, a formless sham, lacking particularity (225, 227). Finally, he exploits Demetrius's ultimate fear, wiping his friends' faces into a clay-like blur: not only has Dee forgotten his mother, but he has already forgotten his friends, too (229-31). Then, the only face Demetrius can see or remember is Meraux's (229, 232). Using the logic of dreams, facelessness, and structural impermanence, this trial preys on Demetrius's fear of forgetting, showing him the anxious reality of a mind that cannot recall those it loves most.

This strategy of macro- and micro-settings exhibits grief as an active process and solidifies grief as Demetrius's sole journey. Each trial location is a space in which Demetrius is liminally stuck until he can work through the problem at hand with his friends and fellow mourners. In each scene, grief is not a temporal, temporary state but a vortex of emotion that opens into a scalable landscape—an elicitor of emotion and bereavement that must be waded through in order to attempt healing.

The shaper of this world and its various locations is the novel's antagonist, Meraux the Magic Man. As I set out to define the central conflict and antagonist of the novel, I questioned if the conceptual framework of grief as setting could be pushed further. Grief is not a singular emotion, such as sadness, but a compendium of complex feelings. More so, grief is fluid; it can shapeshift with ease from one emotional dimension to another. In one moment, you might be angry at your loss, and then, in the next, you might be in complete disbelief of it. Grief is even an inventor, creating anxieties, guilts, and hopes that are often not based in reality. Truthfully, grief is a predator that exploits our magical thinking and often drowns us until even our happiest memories are so painful we'd sooner erase them than suffer anymore.

Because grief is such an aggressive force, it only made sense to personify grief as the novel's antagonist. Using steampunk-horror details, Meraux is grief come to life. With "long

grasshopper legs,” “toes pointing into sharp tips,” and a “smile stretched as wide and as toothy as a jack-o-lantern’s,” Meraux, too, is a shapeshifter (81). He enters the novel as a door-to-door salesman of sorts, a mechanist who invents solution-slinging gadgets and sprouts mechanical arms at will (34-36). But Meraux also moonlights as a magic man with a mysterious opalescent cane that is darker than midnight (38). As the novel progresses, Meraux and his cane take more forms, including vicious smoke hounds and a giant matchstick, respectively (157-8, 100). Then, as discussed, Meraux shapeshifts across Melancholia Place in quick succession from stationmaster to bobby to boy. Meraux and his cane shapeshift because, like grief, they are each an amalgamation.

As Meraux works to weaken Demetrius, he becomes an unavoidable force that exerts himself upon the bereaved at any moment. He attacks the bereaved’s sanctuary city, Mourning Star, and kidnaps their best resistance fighter, Raida the Lantern Woman (157-62). He husks bereaved people, sapping their grief and leaving them as casts of ash in the wasteland. He leads Demetrius on his trail of trials to wound him emotionally just enough to feed him to the Grief Eater machine. He rushes in and out of the narrative’s scenes, existing sometimes on the fringes as a lingering, disembodied presence, such as in the swamp (171); other times, Meraux exists at the heart of the momentum, working as a present, active villain, such as when he traps Demetrius, Ellie, and Margot on the train to his fortress (236-7). While Meraux’s machine might be named the Grief Eater, it is Meraux whose main objective is to steal the light, happiness, and hope from the bereaved individuals he traps in his world of grief. It is Meraux who wishes to *weep* the entire world.

Finally, my last, major strategy in the preparation of my thesis was using grief as the thematic cornerstone for the novel. Grief is a unifier of human experience. Death is often said to be the great equalizer of humanity, but I believe grief acts as an equalizer—a unifier in creating communities of shared lived experience amongst the bereaved, despite cultural differences in mourning. In my own grief journey, I was always looking for empathy, for someone to understand my variety of grief and, thus, me. Shortly after my mother died, a dear childhood friend lost his own mother to cancer. For a while, we exchanged letters, discussing the “awful club” to which we both now belonged. Just through that simple act of receiving a short letter in the mail, I saw the deep catharsis in finding empathy through community as a griever. More than platitudes, we desperately need one another.

That theme is central to my novel. Demetrius's strength comes not from being magical or a chosen child, but from the friendships he creates with other mourners, including Ellie, Margot the Magpie, Raida the Lantern Woman, and the citizens of Mourning Star. Together, with the same set of abilities and tools, they work continuously to help one another take small steps to emotional recovery, realizing that their journey is ongoing. Their journey is forever. And, ultimately, their power is secular: a unity of understanding that memory and grief processing, while bittersweet, are vital to the bereaved's survival.

In constructing this theme, I purposefully chose a kaleidoscope of cultural responses to mourning. To show the secularity of the mourners' collective power, I developed four diverse characters to share multicultural traditions and ideas on death and loss with Demetrius, including Ellie, Raida, Aharon, and Nii. Ellie, one of Demetrius's primary companions in the story, is a military brat from Montana with Plains Cree heritage on her mother's side of the family (56). While she and her mother are largely secular, Ellie speaks often of her Kookum and the Plains Cree and greater Indigenous spiritual concept of ancestors (77-8). Like Ellie, Raida is an important supporting character in the novel; she is a lesbian Japanese-American, who practices Shintoism with her wife, Uta. Raida mourns at a hokora, or spirit house, she constructs at the lagoon (119, 266). She uses lion guardian statues in the Mourning Star sanctuary (126); Raida also wears a ghost pendant, a *teru teru bōzu*: a Japanese good luck charm, wishing for clear skies and sunny weather (102, 275).

Demetrius also meets other bereaved individuals on his journey, whom he then escorts to safety via his lantern. First, he meets Aharon the Turtle in Singeheart Swamp. Aharon followed his sister, Bina, to the swamp, where she was husked. Aharon has covered her husk with plant fronds and laid stones at the site. He explains to Demetrius that he is a cantor, or Jewish synagogue leader of song, and then instructs Dee on the Jewish tradition of leaving stones at gravesites (184).

Later, Demetrius meets Nii the Mongoose, a Ghanaian man hiding out in the crater of the Barrens below the mist. He saves Demetrius from the searching hounds and faux apparition of Dee's father. In Nii's hiding spot, he has an array of carvings he's made from gnarled wood. Nii tells Demetrius the story of losing his best friend, Jacob, and how he encountered the mist. Then, Nii describes the Ghanaian tradition of grand, fantasy coffins (209-10). Stuck in the crater, Nii whittles figurines in remembrance of Jacob. While each mourner brings a different intersectional

lens to the *World In Between*, they share a similar journey in traversing its landscape, fighting its antagonist, and working to heal as individuals and as a community.

I think this choice to represent diverse mourning practices is important because the representation of grief in most mainstream media tends to only reflect white, Christian funeral/burial practices and spirituality. Moreover, children's literature specifically has a dire gap in representation and diversity of non-white characters and narratives, at large. In 2012, researcher Sabrina A. Brinson conducted a study of 113 early childhood educators in Shelby County, Tennessee, U.S.A., in which “[s]tudy participants were asked to identify two children's books featuring characters from five different cultural groups, as well as two books featuring specifically multicultural characters. The results showed that the majority of the participants (61) were only able to identify two books for just one group—Anglo American” (Brinson 30). Additionally, Brinson noted the alarming nature of this gap, given that “[i]n the United States, children of colour make up about 40% of the population” and roughly 70% across the world (30).

Unfortunately, things have not improved much since 2012. In 2018, according to the *School Library Journal*, of 3,653 books published that year and submitted to the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, only 10% featured Black children as protagonists (“An Updated Look...”). In fact, more books featured anthropomorphic animals (27%) than children of colour combined (23% = 1% First Nations, 5% Latinx, 7% Asian Pacific Islander/Asian Pacific American, and 10% Black/African American) (“An Updated Look...”). Consequently, I chose a range of non-white and/or non-Christian characters and mourning rituals to represent marginalized, underserved persons while broadening children's understanding of the human experience of death. My hope is that these differences in traditions and/or beliefs still illuminate a commonality in the shared lived experience of grief. Grief is an immense trauma that we all endure at some point in life, and it is our active processing and empathy that helps us build community with one another and, ultimately, begin to heal.

However, given that most children's books lack protagonists of colour, I wondered if there was opportunity to further improve representation within my own project. Children of colour (and truly of all marginalized communities) seek to see themselves reflected on the page. They seek to see themselves cast in a host of stories and, while surely of utmost importance, not just in those centred on oppression or marginalization. Thus, in crafting my own protagonist, I

chose to make Demetrius a young, Black boy, exploring not a story of slavery but one of grief and growth, where he could heal, find friendship, and rise as a hero in his own right.

As a white writer, this came with significant challenges. I did not want to objectify Demetrius's race in any way, despite my best intentions, nor did I want to play into any stereotypes or racial tropes, even unintentionally. Consulting books like *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (2005) by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward, as well as works by Black authors and authors of colour, such as Sharon Draper and Christopher Paul Curtis, I made particular choices in my representation of Demetrius.

One choice was to defy the bigoted stereotype that African American men are absent fathers who create broken homes. According to researchers Maria S. Johnson and Alford A. Young, “[p]ublic discourse and even research approaches to Black fathers often proceed according to a problem-based approach with a focus on urban, impoverished, and disconnected fathers” (6). Because reports indicate “that 51% of Black children live in single mother headed households” in the United States, public discourse infers an absenteeism and abdication of Black fatherhood when, in reality, the data merely shows residence (Johnson 9). As Saeed Richardson puts it, “[f]atherlessness is not defined by living arrangement” (“Breaking Myths...”). While white families also divorce and parent amidst separate households, this notion of absenteeism does not culturally transfer to white fathers in American political life or media.

Because of this hurtful generalization, I endeavoured to make the character of Daddy a present, active, and empathic role model in Demetrius's life. While tried through their grief, Demetrius's relationship with his father is strong and grounded in love. Daddy, Mama, and Demetrius might have once lived in an urban area, just known as “the city,” but Demetrius's father is an average man, who is college-educated and works at a bank—not unemployed or, worse, the racial caricature of a thug (Houston 24, 48). Prior to her death, Daddy was happily married to Demetrius's mother, and he became a devoted caretaker through her illness. Daddy often gives Demetrius hugs, verbal expressions of love, and tearful expressions of grief, projecting positive masculinity to his son.

Likewise, with Demetrius, I tried to embody a fully realized person on the page, not a caricature, with a unique lens that resists tropes. I made this choice because, historically, children of colour have been conditioned to see themselves as less smart, less brave, and less likeable than their white counterparts. In 1947, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark investigated the self-

concept and self-perception of 253 Black children, aged three to seven (Clark 170). The Clarks' study asked participants to identify positive and negative qualities amongst different races of dolls, e.g. "[g]ive me the doll that is a nice doll" or "[g]ive me the doll that looks bad" (Clark 169). Overall, participants largely linked positive qualities, such as niceness, with white dolls and negative qualities with black dolls (Clark 175). This study, along with others by the Clarks, became a deciding factor in the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, ultimately desegregating U.S. public schools (Billante and Hadad, "Study: White and Black..."). Unfortunately, these perceptions persist; in 2010, CNN worked with University of Chicago researcher and psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer to perform an updated version of the Clarks' famous doll test (Billante and Hadad, "Study: White and Black..."). CNN and Beale's pilot study revealed that, while Black children's self-perception has improved, "even black children, as a whole, have some bias toward whiteness" (Billante and Hadad, "Study: White and Black...").

With Demetrius, I tried to create a character who possesses a range of positive qualities. And boy, is Dee sharp! He's a budding scientist after all, who loves dinosaurs. He is bullied at the novel's start, even called the derogatory term "nappy," but Demetrius retains his strength and spars with wit (28). Demetrius is contemplative and weighs the big questions; he wonders about faith, religion, and the concept of forever throughout the novel. Ellie sees these qualities in him, loves his unique name, and crowns him Emperor Demetrius near the novel's start (54). Together, Ellie and Demetrius forge a strong friendship, and what tests that is not his race but his emotional vulnerability, all because of his grief. As Demetrius learns to connect with the mourners around him, he learns how to help them and himself through their grief, rising as a collaborative, strong, and brave hero by the novel's climax, as he destroys the Books of Weeping and shatters the Grief Eater (253-4).

A fair objection to this decision is: as a white writer, why write a non-white character at all, if you can't guarantee you'll get it right? I believe, as an ally, it is my obligation to educate myself, find resources to aid my writing process, research with due diligence, read diverse voices, and work carefully to write diverse characters. Through writing non-white/hetero/cis/male/Christian/etc. characters, I can do my part in diversifying our canon of literature, widening the array of experiences and identities on the page. Writing a character like Demetrius (or Ellie, Raida, Aharon, and Nii) challenges the idea of the unmarked state, or "the

state of possessing only those characteristics that are literally not remarkable,” which “allows the reader to read the action of the story without colouring it with his particularity” (Shawl 11). In other words, the unmarked state assumes that a character is that of the dominant, normative group, meaning white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and male. Challenging the notion of the unmarked state with a diverse cast normalizes characters, names, and stories of different identities. It shows our commonality while acknowledging and celebrating our differences, all while fostering a greater social empathy.

In conclusion, in my creative thesis, I have endeavoured to represent accurately and respectfully the unmooring of the bereaved self, as well as the spatiality, liminality, and antagonism of grief, amidst a diverse cast of characters and mourning practices, highlighting a need for empathy and community amongst the bereaved. Through the creation of this novel, I have borne my own grief journey, in many ways, on the page, and my greatest hope is that one day this novel will sit in the hands of children who seek what scholar Lee Galda terms the “mirrors” and “windows” that reading offers into our lives and the lives of others, finding a reflection of a boy under siege by that swindling shapeshifter, grief (8). When the twilight of their own lives feels darkest, I hope this novel whispers kindly and gently to all who need it and find it: “I know. Me too.”

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CREATIVE MANUSCRIPT

DEMETRIUS JOHNSON AND THE WEEP OF THE WORLD

by Hope Houston

Word Count: 89,523

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