

DRIZZLEVILLE

A Novella

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By

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## ABSTRACT

*Drizzleville* is a novella in which four estranged young adults who used to be in a closely-knit writing club converge on the weird, fictionalized town of Drizzleville, Alberta to attend their high school reunion— an event that happens to fall on the tenth anniversary of their friend Nick's death. Buddy Werkman drives a decommissioned hearse and holds onto souvenirs from his time spent with Nick and the other members of the club, specifically an audio cassette recording of a club meeting, which he listens to on the way to Drizzleville. When the four characters —Buddy, Regi Philips, Jill Olsen, and David Leroy— meet in the rustic Hotel Siobhan, the persistent presence of Nick in Buddy's psyche threatens to unveil the secret they've kept all these years regarding Nick's death.

The novella is interrupted by flashbacks of the five principle characters as adolescents, as well as excerpts from their own myths and tall-tales written in a binder they share, which has an uncanny influence on the world outside their book.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

*Drizzleville* is a post/modernist Weird fiction novella in which four estranged young adults who used to be in a closely-knit writing club converge on the eerie, fictional town of Drizzleville, Alberta to attend their high school reunion— an event that happens to fall on the tenth anniversary of their friend Nick's death.

*Drizzleville* slaloms between modernism and postmodernism. An early scene of the novella involves the four main characters writing their own creation myths much in the way that some modernists constructed their own mythologies (Murfin & Ray 307). However, these myths do nothing to explain the origins of Drizzleville the town in any meaningful way, leaving the weirdness of the town unexplained by any formal order. In *Drizzleville*, postmodernist magical realism and modernist surrealism circle round one another like fighters in a cage, in one instance the novel is magical realist for the bizarre but accepted-as-mundane events of Slug Night (Wilson 36) and the story of the Murkmaids (Wilson 137), but then Nick's odyssey through the Drizzleville night-scape in search of Buddy also has the incongruity found in surrealism— a modernist genre (Murfin & Ray 306, 501). Fish swim through air like water and an airborne serpent/dragon, known only as Thing, cries in perfect mimicry of a train whistle (Wilson). Because postmodernism is a response to modernism, the two will always be in conversation with one another— just as Buddy is haunted by Nick, postmodernism is haunted by modernism. Rather than exorcising or rejecting the inheritance that modernism granted to that which came after it, *Drizzleville* embraces the incongruity of the two movements in a effort to be truly weird Weird fiction.

Literary postmodernist fiction and the generic Weird fiction of Lovecraft et al. have more in common than one might think at first glance. Postmodernism revels in chaos and absurdity, refusing to present existence as logical or orderly (Murfin & Ray 397). Weird fiction is a “pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane” (Vandermeer & Vandermeer). Albert Camus was led to the absurd in his attempts to think beyond the limits of thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (10), and writers of the Weird and so a strange lineage can be traced from weird fiction to postmodernism and modernism before it.

As a postmodern work, *Drizzleville* is an interaction with and reflection on previously established conventions, such as the gothic. Murfin and Ray define gothic literature as “characterized by a general mood of decay, suspense, and terror; action that is dramatic and generally violent or otherwise disturbing; loves that are destructively passionate; and landscapes that are grandiose, if gloomy or bleak” (205). *Drizzleville* meets this definition in a number of ways. Nick's love for fellow club member Regi Philips is certainly destructive, if only self-destructive; when his drug-fuelled advances are spurned by Regi, Nick storms away into the woods to his untimely demise. Buddy's devotion to Nick's memory threatens to destroy not only his future but the futures of the other club members as his long-festering guilt tempts him, demanding that he finally come clean about their role in Nick's death. *Drizzleville* achieves the gothic sense of grandiose landscapes by describing the parkland locale in vivid and evocative detail, such that the town itself is a character. The town gets its name from the near constant presence of rain clouds in the sky above and the ever-present threat of rain. To say such a place is “gloomy” would be understatement. The dilapidated and country-western hotel Siobhan that

Buddy, Regi, and David stay in exudes decay with its water-stained ceilings and creaking bones. The action of *Drizzleville* is less dramatic than other gothic works, but there is suspense found in the tensions between each character, their own hidden anxieties about what it means to them if the secret behind Nick's death gets out.

The gothic is more than a mood, it also requires a terror of the idea that institutions and conventions from the— usually medieval— past still enact their twisted, outdated “delusional” violence upon a more sensible, rational present (Baldick xv). What is the past in *Drizzleville*? Being set in Canada there are no crumbling medieval estates and obsessive counts and princes. But Canada does have a past it wants to forget, and that past lives on in Regi Philips, a woman of indigenous and white descent raised by her white grandmother. The gothic of Regi Philips is that she is for the most part assimilated, her childhood is the successful end-goal of the settler-colonial project, but within her there is resistance to assimilation. As an adult, Regi lives this resistance with less subtlety, having moved far away from the town of Drizzleville and its influences. The missing pieces of Regi's identity are meant to bring the reader up short, and to question alongside Regi: why? If I have come up short in representing the full indigeneity of Regi Philips, then it is to show how Canada itself has failed to respect the nations that lived on the land before settlement.

*Drizzleville* is not a purely gothic tale. Because Nick haunts Buddy and the town itself, would the novella not also be a ghost story? Baldick defines the ghost story by summarizing its central ethos: science cannot always be trusted to explain phenomena that older or outdated ways of knowing declare to be ghosts (xv). This is insufficient to describe *Drizzleville*, but it does describe the characters of Higgins the graveyard caretaker, and Buddy Werkman, his one time

apprentice. Buddy is a man who believes he is in a ghost story. When he is convinced that there is a ghost of Nick haunting him, Buddy resorts to his ritual on the third trestle (Wilson 52). The childhood ritual is meant to contact the Thing, a weird, amorphous being that Buddy blamed for all manner of problems as a child such as nightmares or tangled shoelaces. Buddy gives credence to an outdated and dangerous stunt (or belief system) because he believes it will get him closer to Nick's ghost. Higgins has a belligerent relationship with the Mayor of Drizzleville. Despite being in the mayor's employ to keep the Drizzleville Municipal Cemetery in order, Higgins frequently engages in disruptive trombone practices and concerts, which the caretaker claims is done to soothe the spirits of the dead.

*Drizzleville* does not seek to completely replicate or emulate gothic fiction, but to adopt the aforementioned conventions to create mood. *Drizzleville* is a work of Weird fiction—in the vein of Robert W. Chambers, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, and even Stephen King. Weird fiction is that which doesn't fall safely into the category of either the gothic tale or the ghost story, and eschews more traditional monsters for wholly new ones like Lovecraft's fabricated god-priest Cthulhu (Vandermeer & Vandermeer) but uses elements of horror and gothic to create suspense and horror. The uses of Weird fiction tropes and conventions in *Drizzleville* work as agents of plot but also as markers of inheritance. The wish-granting alley cat who stalks the rain-slick locals of Drizzleville is a Lovecraftian monster whose tumour-like eyes open up all over its body when threatened. Buddy Werkman's personal boogiemaniac has no name but Thing, and is thought to have little to no form but “takes the shape of its container (Wilson 68). The Thing makes its home in a drainage conduit and speaks to Buddy and Nick in clear homage to King's IT, which is itself a magnificent work of Weird fiction.

*Drizzleville* is not the first work of Weird fiction to be influenced by postmodernism. The novella takes inspiration from *Dr. Sax* by Jack Kerouac. Kerouac's novel is a postmodernist combination of bildungsroman and of Weird fiction, replacing the alien monsters of Lovecraft with pastiches of more contemporary horrors such as B-Movie incarnations of Count Dracula, who Kerouac redevelops into a sort of American Dracula, Count Condu. As well, Kerouac disguises radio, newspaper and pulp fiction phantom *The Shadow* as the eponymous *Dr. Sax* (Kerouac). Like the human characters in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* who find themselves to be the unwitting pawns of cosmic empires (Lovecraft), Jack Duluoz finds himself in the midst of an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of evil and "anti-evil" (Kerouac), Kerouac uses popular—or pulpy— stories to explain the state of the world— or in Kerouac's case, the state of himself. Despite coming after postmodernist *Dr. Sax*, Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is a more modernist take on Weird fiction by having a more disciplined approach to form and subject matter. Stephen King remarks on its resistance to analysis in *Danse Macabre* (34) but calls the mythological book a "descendant from that tradition that has brought us stories about Paul Bunyan [...] Pecos Bill, and Davy Crockett". Bradbury writes a condensation of the tall tale, which is the new sort of mythology developed by colonists in North America. Weird fiction such as Lovecraft's famous Cthulhu Mythos is an inheritor of this need to mythologize that gave us tall tales, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* as well as *Dr. Sax*. Lovecraft's mythologizing of natural history, Bradbury's mythologizing of place, and Kerouac's mythologizing of the self is what inspired the setting and themes of *Drizzleville*.

What makes *Drizzleville* different from Lovecraft, Bradbury and Kerouac is its metafiction-ality. Metafiction is the postmodernist convention of "fiction about fiction" (Murfin

& Ray) and *Drizzleville* accomplishes this in two ways. Stories from the writing club include some critical analysis or reaction to the “text itself” as it influences those who read and write the stories. When Buddy, Regi, Nick, and David first read their stories to one another, they judge the merits and faults in one another's writing, in particular Nick's writing, which is not up to the others' standards (Wilson 37). Unlike John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Helen Humphreys' *Machine without Horses* in which author-narrators acknowledge the fictitious nature of their own work, *Drizzleville's* narrator –and monster– is the book itself. Rather than reproduce Lovecraft's infamous fictitious tome, the Necronomicon, I looked to Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow* for inspiration, as it is a book about the fictitious, madness-inducing play from which its gets its name. I wanted to go beyond Chambers and write a work about a dread book that creates wonders and horrors, but write that book as if it were the thing itself.

First, the opening chapter of *Drizzleville* contains a preamble by Nick that alludes to the sentience of the book, but he seems to linger on the sentience of the town itself, saying “Drizzleville likes you,” (Wilson 1). Is he referring to the town in his preamble, or is he subtly showing his hand and referring to the title of the very book he inhabits?

Second, *Drizzleville* features frequent, jarring flashbacks and flash forwards. The timelines compete for primacy in the novella while still telling a cohesive story, but are still fragmentary enough to elicit some wonder, as if the book is choosing to tell itself in a certain way, or struggling to remember its own story.

In achieving this goal I was met with a significant craft challenge. Books that make readers aware that they are books can be rather tedious. A book that knows it's a book can break the “dream of fiction” that John Gardner found so critical to writing (30-31) and breaking the

dream of fiction leaves readers cold and disinterested in a work. Fowles averts breaking the dream of fiction by acknowledging the agency a fictional character seems to take once they are fully developed by an author. Humphreys makes it clear her characters were developed from real historical figures, and so the wish that her story could happen carries the reader on. I chose to lower the twist of my novella into subtext, leaving the possibility open for readers to miss or overlook what is implied by the preamble and Nick's final remarks. Making the twist subtextual freed me to focus on the textual twists of *Drizzleville* and develop a story that readers can engage with, while the experiment lurks below.

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