



Murder for Kids: Children's Literature and the Making of an American Tradition

—Cathrine O. Frank

Abate, Michelle Ann. *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children's Literature*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2013. 208 pp. \$55.00 hc. ISBN 978-1-4214-0840-8. Print.

In *Bloody Murder*, Michelle Ann Abate confronts the familiar but no less puzzling prevalence of violent death—namely, murder—in literature for children and young adults. If children's literature is didactic, if its social function is to acculturate children (to say nothing of the pleasure it gives young readers), what can it mean that this same literature has what the subtitle identifies as a "homicide tradition"? Abate addresses this question in a variety of ways in the six chapters of her book and extends its implications by questioning how much this violence becomes integrated into children's identity (32), although that is not quite the main point of inquiry of the study. Rather,

she introduces readers to an obsessive American interest in murder that has spanned centuries, assumed myriad representational forms, and become the object of multidisciplinary study. In light of this broad and persistent interest in representing, consuming, and (as the author's statistics show) doing murder in the USA, children's literature offers yet another mode and approach to understanding this preoccupation. Indeed, a good deal of the book—from the general introduction to the framing of individual chapters—foregrounds contemporary American crime statistics and methods of policing and punishment and, in doing so, suggests that its subject is more properly murder. In other words,

this study at times seems less concerned with what the presence of homicide and other forms of killing tells readers about children's literature than it is about the new insights into murder that looking at children's literature might afford. This tension between what is text and what is context has other effects, principally concerning the overall coherence of the book and the integrity of the conceptual field. Nevertheless, Abate's close readings of texts and of the specific discourses with which they are paired in individual chapters give readers new literary and social perspectives to consider as they think about the forms and functions of literature for children.

In addition to an introduction and an epilogue, the book is composed of six chronologically ordered chapters. Abate makes clear that no progressive relationship between the chapters should be inferred and that she favoured instead a model of "ongoing socio-cultural dialogue" between texts (34). The nature of these conversations, however, especially *between* the six chapters, could be clearer, so that readers might understand better the selection of texts and the way they are grouped in chapters beyond their dates of composition. For example, neither of the first two chapters concerns American literature, but each is clearly about forms of homicide and allows Abate to consider potential psychological effects and social impacts of reading fairy tales and fantastic literature. In other words, although what these works tell us about

"the homicide tradition" in America is unclear, they do establish important parameters for that tradition and the rest of the book.

In chapter 1, "'You Must Kill Her and Bring Me Her Lungs and Liver as Proof': 'Snow White' and the Fact as well as Fantasy of Filicide," Abate focuses on the "most homicidal" version of the tale, that by the Brothers Grimm (37). Reminding readers that adults were originally the audience for fairy tales, she argues that the Queen's repeated and increasingly ingenious efforts to do away with Snow White speak to actual parents' imaginings about doing harm to their children, so that the literature provides an expression of and outlet for these impulses. This argument is interesting, not least because it *does* engage with questions of audience, of the difference between books for and about children, and with the changing conception of "the child." Yet the chapter places an odd emphasis on American statistics about the prevalence of filicide and the incidence of abuse by step-parents to support speculation about the Grimms' intent when primary research on the texts themselves would have been more compelling (as, for example, when she refers to Jack Zipes's work with the manuscript edition of the Grimm texts [57]). This attention to contemporary American statistics would be appropriate if the chapter had been more clearly concerned with the reception history of this particular tale, but then it draws on data from across the nineteenth century and from a



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range of cultures (for example, about women and child murder [52]). Here, the methodology creates an uneasy sense of division between original context and contemporary reception as well as one between the workings of the text itself, as a story, and its psychosocial context.

Chapter 2, “The Queen Had Only One Way of Settling All Difficulties . . . “Off with His Head!”: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and the Anti Gallows Movement,” draws very interesting connections between *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and Lewis Carroll’s participation in the anti-gallows movement in England. In a neat etymological analysis, Abate suggests that the Queen of Heart’s knee-jerk calls for beheading, instead of the more common hanging, make the entire practice of “capital” punishment an object of Carroll’s satire. Furthermore, she suggests that Alice’s “verbal activism” (89), her use of language to resist the Queen’s power and to end the dream itself, is Carroll’s way of teaching children to see what is ludicrous in the adult world and empowering them to challenge it (87). This chapter offers a historically grounded argument about the relationship between one of the most canonical works for children and state-sanctioned violence, but as with the preceding chapter, the effort to make it fit an American context seems forced. The idea that the American popularity of Carroll’s text lies in continued American debate about capital punishment better justifies its inclusion than references to numbers of American holdings of the book (none of which specifies the editions of the text in question) or the popularity of Alice in film, but questions remain about how Alice mobilizes this debate and for whom (parents, teachers, activists?) and about the reasons for the popularity of the text in countries that do not practise capital punishment.

Chapters 3 and 4 together take on the issues of defining criminality and detecting the criminal, on the one hand by learning to recognize the murderer (often through empirical observation of physical traits) and on the other by utilizing an intuitive sixth sense. In chapter 3, “‘Swarthy, Sun-Tanned, Villainous Looking Fellows’: *Tarzan of the Apes* and Criminal Anthropology,” Abate situates Tarzan’s prowess as a killer of humans and animals alike within Cesare Lombroso’s *Criminal Man* and the emerging field of criminal anthropology. Details from Edgar Rice Burroughs’s biography and non-fiction writing (105, 111) provide relevant context and support of his interest in this area, but Abate argues for a different, Nietzschean strain in Tarzan’s characterization. Far from embodying the throwback imagined in Lombroso’s schema, Tarzan resembles more closely an *Übermensch* whose natural superiority places him above social convention and the rule of law as well. Abate’s efforts to reconstruct Tarzan as an “anti-Lombrosian man” rely rather too heavily on a discussion of Lombroso’s concepts and comparatively too little on Nietzsche’s (where work with the primary text would have been preferable to an encyclopedia of philosophy). Her observation that all aspects of Tarzan’s high status, even among the most evolved group, are heritable leads, however, to the observation that the fortunes of *Tarzan of the Apes* often correlate with moments of renewed cultural interest in “biocriminology” (115).

Reclassifying *Tarzan* as crime fiction, Abate moves to the detection of crime in chapter 4, “‘A Sixth Sense Seemed to Tell Her That She Had Encountered Something Unusual’: Psychic Sleuthing in the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories.” Taken on its own, this chapter makes a contribution to studies of detective fiction and draws connections to the contemporary status of criminal parapsychology, but it is less successful as a study of the homicide tradition in fiction, especially because, as Abate observes, most of Nancy’s cases do not involve murder (119) and Nancy’s ability actually “keeps murder at the periphery of the novels” (121). *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm* may be exceptional in this regard, which is why Abate’s close reading of that novel and the connections it makes to the immediate cultural context of the book (Nancy’s possible source in practitioner Eugenie Dennis, for instance) are the most valuable sections of the discussion.

Bloody Murder is by far at its best in the final two chapters, focusing on S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*; here, the choice of novels, the provision of more extensive textual analysis, and recourse to conceptually relevant contexts combine to illuminate the meanings of homicide in American children’s literature. Chapter 5, “‘How’d You Like That Haircut to Begin Just Below the Chin?’: Juvenile Delinquency, Teenage Killers, and a Pulp Aesthetic in *The Outsiders*” is the best conceived in the book, and its opening paragraphs are likewise

successful for signalling the place of this chapter in the larger study. Abate works with the received idea that Hinton's novel revolutionized children's literature and complicates it in two ways: first, by showing that its innovation in children's literature is achieved through a conventionality borrowed from post-war paperbacks about juvenile delinquency, and second, by showing that its "highbrow" claims to literary realism derive from more popular, sensational elements of the "pulp aesthetic" (150). In this way, Abate sets out to demonstrate the "aesthetic, material, and literary" (150) influences of this once groundbreaking and now canonical novel and uses them to comment on the ambiguous category of "young adult" fiction (172).

The final chapter, "'My Job Is . . . to Make You a Human Being in the Eyes of the Jury': Confronting the Demonization—and Dramatization—of Murder in Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*," is very well placed insofar as it extends the interest shown in the preceding chapter in teenage murder and popular genres by connecting literary style to dramatic, cinematic conventions. Furthermore, its focus on the language of monstrosity creates a bridge to the attention in the epilogue to zombie fiction and the implications for homicide in a post-human age (itself a provocative discussion). One of the most interesting elements of this complex analysis is Abate's account of the way monstrosity emerges from the secularization of criminal narrative (197). Instead of the sermons that prefaced

colonial-era executions, which encouraged audiences to identify with the condemned and recognize their own liability, post-Enlightenment narratives schooled readers to distinguish themselves from the criminal as well as from the dead body (197). "Murderer" thus became a category of fundamental deviance instead of one every person could potentially occupy. For Abate, *Monster* draws on some of the contemporary stylistic devices that mark these modern narratives (such as sensational mood, explicit description, reconstruction of the crime, and the presentation of evidence), but its "more historically grounded" (202), didactic purpose derives from the seventeenth-century practice of examining the escalation of bad choices or minor infractions into the perpetration of major crimes. In this way, it is the crime rather than the criminal that Myers's novel makes monstrous (203).

Titles need to be both memorable and marketable, and *Bloody Murder* certainly achieves both goals. Titles should also distill the content of a book, offering it in its most concentrated form, but "the homicide tradition in children's literature" seems to diffuse rather than distill Abate's suggestive ideas in a way that foreshadows some of the conceptual dissonance of the project. The singularity of the definite article, the idea that there is but one tradition, and the omission of whose tradition it is are not quite in agreement with her broader point that race, class, gender, and historical moment work together to produce children's

literature. The problem is that the subtitle points to a level of generality or a lowest common denominator that obscures the different ways this “tradition” has been invoked over the long span of time and across the divide of national literatures from which her chosen texts derive, as well as from historical differences in a slew of other conceptual categories, including childhood and criminality. The title thus strikes me as being more aspirational than definitive, in the sense that Abate is working to establish this tradition out of otherwise varied texts and contexts. In this respect, a

less catchy but more applicable subtitle would specify the progressive, formulative nature of her intervention into the field of children’s literature. On this view, *Bloody Murder* makes better conceptual sense as three paired chapters on disparate elements of crime and punishment rather than six chapters of a single project on murder, but even so, readers interested in these dimensions of crime and certainly in the individual texts Abate discusses will find much to consider as they confront the violence that surrounds childhood and the literature about it.

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