



Jabberwocky

David Beagley, editor

Mapping the undiscovered country: a brief introduction to contemporary afterlife fiction for young adults

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Born in Jakarta, Indonesia, of French parents, Sophie Masson spent much of her childhood moving back and forth between Australia and France, growing up between worlds, and between languages, an experience which has formed a lot of her work. A bilingual French and English speaker, she has a BA and M.Litt in French and English Literature from the University of New England in northern NSW, and is currently undertaking Ph.D. study in Creative Practice at the same university.

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In the last fifteen years, fiction set in or about the afterlife has become a popular and critically acclaimed sub-genre within contemporary speculative fiction for young adults especially, but not only, in English-language publishing. These narratives, where the main characters die at the beginning of the story and find themselves in an alien world, the world beyond death, have developed into a fertile ground for imaginative and intellectual challenge and discovery, as a means both to depict the ultimate culture shock and a challenging exploration of otherness and alienation.

In *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, her ground-breaking study of afterlife adult fiction, UK scholar Alice Bennett positions the growth of afterlife adult fiction within a cultural context that both reaches back into mythology, religion and classical literature written by authors such as Dante, Shakespeare and Henry James, and also forward to contemporary works, including screen-based fictions, as well as science, such as in the theory of the multiverse. In examining contemporary adult afterlife fictions such as Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, Will Self's *How the Dead Live*, Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, and Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*, she proposes that afterlife fiction subverts traditional narrative conventions—such as in its use of dead narrators—and also upends traditional cultural references, through its potent and often disturbing blend of cultural influences.

Aside from a short discussion on aspects of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*--which is not specifically an afterlife fiction, but contains some episodes set in an afterlife--Bennett does not, however, look at afterlife fiction for young adults, but her observations make a useful point of reference, as do those of another writer in the field, Greg Garrett, whose study, *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination*, examines popular screen-and book-based contemporary fictions, mostly targeted at adults, but also including some young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter*. However, somewhat curiously, he does not include any Young Adult novels with specific afterlife themes. In young adult literature, as critic Patty Campbell observes, 'spiritual exploration is not the point' but instead the afterlife is a literary trope and 'the dead narrator gives the narrative a sense of immediacy that is so characteristic of YA fiction' whilst at the same time allowing for 'a degree of reflection and self-awareness that would probably otherwise seem jarring in a young adult narrator.' [1]



The rise of afterlife fiction for young adults has occurred against a wider cultural context of great creative interest in the exploration of aspects of the afterlife, not only in adult book-based fiction but in screen-based narratives, especially in TV series. The earliest and most prominent of these was the phenomenally successful series *Lost*, which premiered in 2004 and went till 2010, but more recent ones have included the French series *Les Revenants (The Returned)*, the US series *Resurrection* and the Australian series *The Glitch*. This zeitgeist ferment of interest is part of the intriguing nature of this sub-genre, but its roots also go deep into the past, into myth, religion, and classic literature, including the Gothic mode and the Victorian ghost story.

This article, based on research for the Creative Practice Ph.D. I am currently undertaking, presents a short introduction to contemporary afterlife fiction for young people. These works, a sub-genre of speculative fiction, are specifically centred around an exploration of the afterlife, and are usually, but not always, fantasy adventure stories set in afterlife territories, and where the main characters are dead. The works under study include, but are not limited to, Neal Shusterman's *Everlost* (US) and its sequels, Laura Whitcomb's *A Certain Slant of Light* (US), Patrick Ness' *More than This* (UK), Lynnette Lounsbury's *Afterworld*, Claire McFall's *Ferryman* (UK), Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* (Chinese-Malaysian US), Gary Soto's *The Afterlife* (US), Karen Healey's *When We Wake* (New Zealand), Richard Scrimger's *Me And Death: An Afterlife Adventure* (Canada), and Kinga Wyrzykowska's *Memor: le monde d'après* (France/Poland). These novels, and other afterlife fictions for young people, form the primary focus for the exegesis which is a part of my Ph.D., along with the creation of my own afterlife-themed fiction for young people, a novel titled *The Ghost Squad*.

Before looking at the contemporary works, it is worth mentioning an earlier title, Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's 1973 novel for children, *The Brothers Lionheart*. This novel, set around the adventures of two brothers who die at the beginning of the book, and find themselves in the afterlife world of Nangiyala, a place of 'camp-fires and sagas', is something of an anomaly in the genre. Nangiyala is first evoked by the older brother, Jonathan, in comforting stories he tells to his terminally ill younger brother Karl before he himself dies in a fire, and perhaps that is why that, unlike the main characters of contemporary afterlife novels, the brothers seem to have no trouble fitting into the new world in which they find themselves. In fact, they seem happy to be there and never mention the world—or the grieving mother—they have left behind. Somewhat puzzlingly, there is even a second death possible in this afterlife (though the first one could be interpreted as a near-death experience), and yet another layer of afterworld after that—a feature which is one of several unexpected elements in a novel that blends elements of Narnia-like fantasy with a gentle exploration of brotherly love.

Contemporary young adult afterlife novels, however, present a very different picture. The earliest of these, Gary Soto's *The Afterlife*, was published in 2003, a year after the publication of the bestselling adult novel which first focussed attention on contemporary afterlife fiction, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. Sebold's novel was very popular with adolescent as well as adult readers: it is told from the point of view of a murdered teenage girl speaking from Heaven: her aim, post-life, is both to console her family and expose her murderer. Interestingly, Soto's novel also features a murdered teenager—a boy in this case—who sets out both to confront his murderer and see how his family is coping. But despite the surface similarities, the two books are very different. Chuy, Soto's main character is not in anything resembling Heaven, but drifting in a shadowy part of this life, invisible to the living; and though he half-heartedly tries to confront his murderer and investigate what his family is doing, revenge and consolation are minor themes in the novel. Rather, it is centred around the idea that life should not be wasted, but lived to the full.

Since Soto's ground-breaking work in this field of contemporary young adult literature, there have been many other such novels published for young people, with the most recent being *Memor*, published in France in late 2015. With rich narrative and prose styles as well as strong plots and interesting characters, they have attracted much critical acclaim as well as very good sales. In the US alone, several of these novels—including *The Ghost Bride*, *Everlost*, and *A Certain Slant of Light*-- have won major literary awards, as well as being bestsellers.

Most strikingly, with very few exceptions, such fiction depicts 'the undiscovered country', as Shakespeare's Hamlet called it, as a transitional, liminal world, not a final end-point. That is, these are not the 'absolute' territories of heaven, or hell, but rather afterworlds resembling Purgatory or Limbo, or



similar in-between territories found in traditional beliefs around the world. The notions of Purgatory that Alice Bennett identifies as having a strong influence on adult afterlife fiction are also present in afterlife fiction for young people. This is not because of a religious predisposition. It is for a narrative purpose. As Bennett points out, 'the first aspect of purgatory to note is that it has long been recognised as the best fit for the purposes of narrative' [2], because of its liminal, 'in between' nature. Simply put, things can still happen there, development of character can still happen, unlike in the extremes of heaven and hell, as characters are tested through being thrust into alienating—but not hopeless-- new circumstances. This holds true even in narratives which position the afterlife as simply a shadowy dimension of this life, as in Laura Whitcomb's *A Certain Slant of Light*, or Gary Soto's *The Afterlife*. It also holds true in narratives which use similar 'in-between' traditions from non-Western cultures, as, for example, in Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*, which uses elements from Chinese culture to create the afterlife world. This 'in-between' setting makes a great locus for adventure, quest, and ordeal: the great tropes of speculative fiction. It also offers scope for character development and second chances. As Greg Garrett puts it, 'What the story of purgatory tells us is this: When suffering and pain have burned away everything that doesn't matter, we can at last be found in every way that human beings can be found.' [3] In a chapter in her 2016 Ph.D. thesis, *Postsecular spirituality in Australian young adult fiction*, Dale Kathryn Lowe looks at the afterlife motif in several contemporary Australian young adult novels, such as Gary Crew's *The Diviner's Son* and David Metzenthen's *Gilbert's Ghost Train*, which may be placed in the related sub-genre of the ghost story. But she does not survey any of the novels I have studied (including the two Australian examples) or indeed novels specifically set in a world after death. However, she makes the telling point that the afterlife theme is handled in a very particular way by contemporary authors:

Unlike much didactic children's fiction of earlier eras, there is an absence of moral judgement in the traditional religious form of heaven, hell or purgatory. Most of these texts depict the afterlife, at least in the imaginations of the protagonists who contemplate it, as a continuing state similar to their earthly life. [4]

Two afterlife fictions which are however not set in a purgatorial, in-between afterlife world are Karen Healey's *When We Wake*, when the afterlife turns out to actually be a terrifying version of the future; and in Kinga Wyrzykowska's *Memor: le monde d'après*. In this novel, the afterlife is complete, comprising several planets. Not only is there no 'in between' place, there are also no extremes, no heaven and no hell.

It is notable that the authors of afterlife fiction blend many different cultural influences in creating their fictional worlds. Cultural diversity is an important part of these fictions, a diversity reflected in setting, characters, and themes. Many of the authors are themselves of culturally diverse backgrounds. And despite the importance of the purgatory theme, none of the afterworlds depicted in the novels are taken entirely from one cultural source, not even *The Ghost Bride*, whose setting has the most cultural coherence. Blended elements drawn from Ancient Greek, Egyptian, Judaic and Celtic beliefs are also present in several of the novels: a high degree of individuation is present in all these fictional afterworlds, in which in nearly all, aside from one exception, Lynnette Lounsbury's *Afterworld*, God is either absent or in some inaccessible unspecified place. This is intriguing in light of recent research which appears to indicate that belief in the afterlife is common but very eclectic and individuated amongst young people today. For instance, in a study published in 2012, based on an extensive survey of young people from many different religious and secular backgrounds, Australian sociologist Andrew Singleton pointed out that more young people in Australia believe in the afterlife than believe in God; and that only a small minority espouse a religiously orthodox view of it, with most having a personal, self-authenticated vision of the afterlife [5]

As if to underline that, there is a certain shifting, dreamlike nature to the afterworlds depicted in most of the books: little is fixed, with the instability of territory reflecting the instability of characters' cultural and personal identities in the world of the dead. However, by way of contrast, certain mundane 'this life' details—especially aspects of economics and food—still seem important in the new world of the afterlife as depicted in these fictions. It is striking that money, or at least some form of currency, is a feature in nearly every novel, but there is little mention of class, except in *The Ghost Bride*, where the afterlife still has similar social stratifications as in the world of the living, reflecting traditional Chinese afterlife beliefs. As to food, it is an aspect that is not only of importance to a young readership—but also the difference



between 'this life' food and food in the afterlife, for instance a lack of taste, as in *The Ghost Bride*, or the odd ways in which food emerges, as in *Everlost*--serves to emphasise the alien nature of the imaginative territory the reader is in. Inventiveness not only of concept but also of language is a feature of many of the novels, demonstrating the culture shock experienced by both characters and readers in the face of the reality of this very different world.

Nearly all the novels feature some kind of portal, or entry-place, to the afterworld, once the central character or characters have embarked on their journey beyond death. These are often liminal themselves, in some way: for instance, a cruise-ship in Elsewhere; the shore of a lake, in *Afterworld*; an abandoned house, in *More than This*; a tunnel, in *Ferryman*. Even those portals which do not at first glance appear to be obviously liminal, such as the wood which is the entry to the world of *Everlost*, the first book in the *Skinjacker* trilogy, the shadow-street in *The Ghost Bride*, which is like a ghostly copy of the real-world street, or the glass room full of photographs in *Memor*, are not quite what they should be: they exist uneasily, fading at the edges, neither here nor there. The landscapes and townscapes of the afterworlds are more solid than the portals but they are prone to unexpected changes and reversals which will make them a highly challenging locus for the main characters' quests.

In contemporary afterlife fiction, the young people who feature as main characters have died suddenly and violently—as a result of accident, suicide or murder—with very few of even the minor characters having 'passed on' due to fatal illness—in striking contrast to the earlier title, Lindgren's *The Brothers Lionheart*. This narrative choice serves to emphasise the abrupt disconnection between the former life and the afterlife in contemporary novels—there is no time for preparation for the alien world, unlike in *The Brothers Lionheart*--and it applies equally where it becomes apparent characters are not actually dead but in a coma or other in-between state—as in *The Ghost Bride*, *When We Wake*, *Memor* and *Afterworld*.

In terms of character development, the contrast between knowledge—the 'gnosis' of long-term afterlife dwellers, as compared to the naivety/innocence of the newly-arrived-- is an important theme in all the contemporary novels, and learning about this life underlies much of what the characters endure in the afterlife. Richard Scrimger's *Me And Death: An Afterlife Adventure*, narrated by Jim, a teenage bully and self-confessed 'piece of crap' who is given a second chance when he dies, and Gary Soto's *The Afterlife* are most overt about this theme; but all the novels include at least some exploration of it.

The concept of 'the other' is also an important one in this strand of fiction: but transformed from its usual meaning. In fact, everyone in these imaginative territories is 'other': disorientation and alienation from everything a person once knew and took for granted is at the centre of these fictions (again, in contrast to the Lindgren title). Even in Jane Abbott's *Elegy*, where the main characters are reincarnated lovers from Greek myth, who in various incarnations have returned again and again to the world, there is a sense of dislocation, confusion and alienation. Furthermore, monsters and supernatural beings are frequently encountered in the novels and some of these may be transformed by their encounters with the newly-dead main characters. In others, the monstrous is not just defeated, but reversal occurs as it is embraced; in other texts, the monstrous does not change but represents an important challenge. Interestingly, a romantic element is also present in all the contemporary novels, with the notion of unusual, impossible or even forbidden love a strong feature in all the relationships depicted: whether that be love between human and non-human or super-human characters; between characters separated by radical age difference (for example characters who have died a hundred years apart); between characters separated by life—or afterlife—circumstances; or between characters whose chances in the afterlife are not equal.

In the work I am undertaking, the first specific sustained analysis of contemporary afterlife fiction for young people, I expand on the themes within this short introduction by focussing on aspects of setting, characterisation, language, and cultural context. And what is coming out of this research is that mapping the undiscovered country is an effective and thoughtful way for authors to explore questions of identity and alienation within a new and unusual setting. Afterlife fiction has become a vibrant and richly imaginative strand of contemporary young adult literature, displaying both a breadth of cultural reference and a willingness to take risks with narrative conventions and philosophical questions, whilst remaining accessible and engaging to young adult readers.



Notes

1. Campbell, Patty. 'Death and the Afterlife,' in Campbell, Patty. *Spirituality in YA Fiction: The Last Taboo*, Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2015 (pages 55-56).
 2. Bennett, Alice. *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, page 10.
 3. Garrett, Greg. *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, page 158.
 4. Lowe, Dale, Kathryn. *Postsecular spirituality in Australian young adult fiction*, Sydney: Macquarie University 2016, p.174.
 5. Singleton, Andrew. 'Beyond Heaven? Young People and the Afterlife, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2012, 27:3, 453-468, DOI: 10.1080/13537903.2012.722291.
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