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"SUPERPOWERS DON'T ALWAYS MAKE YOU A SUPERHERO"

Posthuman Possibilities in Michael Grant's Gone Series

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Recent dystopian fiction for young adults has been preoccupied with questions around norms of belonging, difference, and teenagers' potential for transformative reinvention. Series such as Scott Westerfeld's Uglies and Julianna Baggott's Pure novels have explored the interplay of control, desire, and anxiety regarding the dilemma of being human in a biotechnologically modified and consequently posthuman state, particularly in relation to how adolescence is conceptualized, experienced, and regulated. The dystopian world of Michael Grant's Gone novels similarly tests the limits to which the young human body and mind can be reconceived. The eponymous first novel begins with the abrupt vanishing of everyone over the age of fifteen from the fictional California town of Perdido Beach, just as an impregnable, opaque dome seals off the area that comes to be known as the Fallout Alley Youth Zone (FAYZ). Without adult authority, the FAYZ becomes a disorienting, violent world made even more unsettling when many of the teen inhabitants develop superhuman mutations. Grant's teenage characters must negotiate the boundaries between natural human abilities and unnatural, posthuman agency as they fight to survive within this new environment of the FAYZ and to resist the onslaught of the Darkness, a malevolent alien creature who crash-landed centuries before the series begins and who has since lurked under Perdido Beach, awaiting its chance to infect and dominate the planet. The alien entity gets its chance when the Perdido Beach nuclear power plant suddenly has a meltdown, and the town's children up to the age of fifteen find themselves isolated under the dome.

The FAYZ's young inhabitants initially believe that everyone who mysteriously disappeared is dead and that they too will disappear and/or perish upon turning fifteen. At the end of the first book, readers learn that FAYZ inhabitants who turn fifteen face different possible fates during that symbolic cusp of transitioning between child and adult: being killed by the Darkness, being teleported back to normal human society, or choosing to stay with their friends within the FAYZ. Due to the Darkness's viral influence, which imbues nearly all the main protagonists with unsettling powers that they must learn to control, the FAYZ becomes a zone of ongoing metamorphosis in which traditional concepts of heroism, villainy, childhood innocence, bodily purity, decency, and monstrosity are explored. However, despite the series's tantalizing depiction of posthuman transformations, Grant ultimately asserts a conservative humanist view regarding what constitutes being human and privileges conservative concepts of normality, adult authority, and hegemonic power regimes.

The adolescents soon find themselves divided into two factions, one headed by Sam Temple and the other by Caine Soren. Sam, the heroic protagonist, can generate light both as weapon and illumination and struggles to use this double-edged power to defend the town's human and posthuman residents against their enemies. Sam is aided by other teenagers who have similarly gained superhuman abilities, such as Astrid, who has the ability to perceive the relative scale of people's potential; Lana, who possesses the power of healing; Brianna, "the Breeze," who can move at super speed; and Dekka, who can manipulate gravity. Astrid's four-year-old brother, Little Pete, whose severe autism usually renders him incapable of communication with anyone, even his sister, possesses a godlike power of reality-warping and molecular manipulation. Later in the series readers learn that Little Pete's erratic control over his immense powers caused the accidental enclosure of the town and the associated teleportation of everyone over the age of fifteen outside the town's domed environs. Meanwhile, Caine (revealed during the series to be Sam's twin brother) draws upon his own imposing power of telekinesis; the ability of his girlfriend Diana to assess the degree and potential of transformed teenagers' powers; the unreliable support of the superstrong "Computer Jack"; and the unstable, sadistic, and monstrously mutated Drake to help his agenda of positioning himself as leader against Sam's authority.

Disappointingly, Grant does not fully engage with the radical potential of these young people's posthuman transformations. Instead, the series's ultimately humanist, conservative emphasis on the ideological primacy of traditional concepts of humanity presents a didactic cautionary tale about how young people who possess too much unnatural, revolutionary power pose a danger to themselves, each other, the laws of nature, and the traditional status quo. By the start of the sixth and final novel, "no one in the FAYZ [is] entirely sane" (*Light* 17) due to having encountered and inhabited diverse states of being which range from normal humans (such as the FAYZ's teenage sheriff, Edilio), to mutated humans with freakish powers (for example, Sam or Drake), an alien entity (the Darkness), an extraterrestrial-human hybrid such as Gaia (Caine and Diana's posthuman child, whom the Darkness transforms and inhabits in order to achieve corporeal form), and even a disembodied consciousness without a physical incarnation (Little Pete, who ascends to an existence of pure energy in the final books of the series).

Presented with the intertwined forces of biotechnological change, alien physiology, and extraterrestrial effect, young adult readers are challenged to consider their own potential feelings of uncertainty, ambivalence, and affinity regarding the evolution of humanity, what it means to be human, and how this hegemonic category might be reimagined. As such, this series offers an intriguing opportunity to consider the construction and mediation of the posthuman in young adult literature and to investigate the associated nexus of identity, norms, difference, and empowerment. However, despite this exciting potential, the series ultimately maintains and imposes a didactic, normative insistence on defining and ultimately enforcing identity in traditional, reactionary binary configurations against the perceived threats of posthuman transformation and change.

As many critics across diverse disciplines have noted, there is no standard definition of the posthuman. Likewise, there is a wide-ranging debate about how the posthuman can and should be conceptualized and manifested. The concept I am using here is commonly known as transhumanism, which asserts that the posthuman is something other or more than human and that posthuman capacity involves a new skill or capacity that had not existed previously but which holds a physical (although not necessarily moral or ethical) superiority to that possessed by current humanity. Francis Fukuyama has emphasized the dangers of posthuman alterity and its threat to traditional systems of subjectivity and systems of morality, while N. Katherine Hayles has strongly critiqued the earlier posthumanist theories' erasure of bodily experience and the privilege that the posthuman view accords to virtual intelligence and information over materiality. Questions about the extent to which human consciousness, selfhood, and corporeality are interlinked and even interdependent inform the ongoing debates regarding the posthuman. Scholars such as Cary Wolfe have agreed with Joel Garreau's definition that posthumans are beings "whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards" (qtd. in Wolfe xiii).

The remarkable powers that many of Grant's protagonists display are indeed perceived by characters within and outside the FAYZ as variously aligning them

with the superhuman, the inhuman, and the godlike. However, I disagree with Garreau's assumption that ambiguity does not play any part in the interpretative exchanges and judgments about similarity and Otherness between altered and normal humans. The borderland between the posthuman and current human experience is not so decisively defined. For example, Nick Bostrom has argued that "posthuman modes of being" need not be so radically estranging or different in scale ("Why I Want" 108). Instead, posthuman abilities such as possessing "a general central capacity [health, cognition, emotion] greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being without recourse to new technological means could be advantageous and desirable" (108). The Gone series investigates two popular fears about the posthuman observed by Bostrom: "that the state of being posthuman might in itself be degrading" and "that posthumans might pose a threat to 'ordinary' humans" ("In Defense" 204). Grant's series explores tensions between conservative assumptions of childhood innocence and young people's bodily purity as well as humanist anxieties about the disquieting potential of posthuman youth. As one character ruefully notes in the second novel, echoing the author's conservative and humanist concerns about posthuman difference, superior capacities are not necessarily linked to an evolution in moral or ethical abilities: "Superpowers . . . don't always make you a superhero" (*Hunger* 156).

The ambivalence that surrounds young people's symbolic potential for serving the forces of both continuity and change is particularly evident in dystopian young adult fiction. Much scholarship has been dedicated to tracing the ideological dimensions and didactic propensity of speculative narratives for teenage audiences, since the figure of the child "can be interpreted as the ultimate form of the posthuman: one that comes after the present generation; one that is supposed to possess a future, rather than a past" (Földváry 209–10). Susan Honeyman notes the potentially revolutionary force of youth's relentless forward momentum: "neoteny, which interprets children as evidence of evolutionary advancements, provides the key to child power—mutiny by mutation" (348). However, Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum argue that contemporary young adult dystopian fiction for teenagers offers a forum for constructively negotiating a relationship between the posthuman and traditional notions of the human: "the attempts to define a future version of humanity we find in such texts accords better with an alternative view that the posthuman does not necessitate either an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it means that difference and identity are being redistributed" (181).

Although Bradford et al. optimistically focus on the potential of young adult speculative fiction to problematize concepts of difference, norms, and mutual respect between posthuman and human capacities, many scholars remain

critical about the pervasive tendency by authors in this genre to sentimentally soften the complexity of their storyworlds when writing for younger readers. I agree with Elaine Ostry's critique of the failure of such dystopian narratives for teenagers to adequately acknowledge and engage with the complexities of posthuman futures: "much science fiction for young adults attempts to mediate the posthuman age to a young audience" while deploying biotechnology as "a metaphor for adolescence [that] . . . adds a dramatic dimension to the changing adolescent body and the identity crisis that arises from it" (223). Likewise, Farah Mendlesohn has criticized the failure of many science fiction narratives for teenagers to operate as true works of science fiction because the science fiction elements become secondary to the coming-of-age or bildungsroman aspects of the story (293). Grant's lack of interest in scientific details or coherence and his focus on the angst and relationship difficulties that his characters feel due to their posthuman alterity can be seen as part of this larger pattern. Throughout the series, Grant pays merely superficial attention to the scientific plausibility of "the awful blank monstrosity that was the Perdido Beach Anomaly" (*Fear* 525). For example, the process of how external light from the sun passes through the dome's barrier into the FAYZ and the lack of consequences (e.g., broken bones from the physiological pressures of superspeed) from the performance of posthuman powers are never adequately explained. He also does not seem concerned that his plots lack originality or that the premise of the enclosed FAYZ could be seen as derivative of Stephen King's *Under the Dome*. However, despite its lack of engagement with scientific and medical exposition and its conservative insistence on privileging hegemonic norms, the Gone series provides a productive exemplar for considering how young adult dystopian literature explores the possible reconfiguration of concepts of humanity and alterity.

The Gone novels especially offer an opportunity to consider issues of didacticism and suitability regarding young people's potential for destruction and how the posthuman challenges and even ruptures traditional human boundaries and taboos. The series has generated much controversy in its unsentimental depiction of adolescent brutality and grotesque, disturbing violence, especially when performed by ostensibly innocent youths who are enabled by posthuman abilities for aggression and destruction. Kay Sambell has written extensively about how adult authors negotiate various educational and ethical responsibilities traditionally associated with writing for young people. Observing that all too often adults assume that young readers need to be reassured and supplied with explicit closure via a happy ending (however unconvincing this might be within a dystopian scenario), she concludes that this didactic tradition compromises the narrative strategies of much young adult dystopian fiction. Thus

"the child as an emblem of hope for the future, capable of transforming and transcending adult mores, and the image of the child as helpless victim are often held in acute tension in dystopian writing for young readers" (252). These tensions are further intensified when traditional, nostalgic concepts of childhood purity, innocence, and vulnerability are problematized by the empowering yet estranging opportunities created by posthuman transformations.

Throughout his prolific career writing for young adults, from the bestselling Animorphs series to his recent novel *Messenger of Fear*, Grant has demonstrated a fascination with themes of dehumanization, insanity, morality, freedom, the pleasures of violence, biotechnological mutations, and the ethical use of power—a fascination that exists in intriguing counterpart to his commitment to humanism and his privileging of conservative norms. If Roberta Seelinger Trites is correct in her assertion that "death is the *sine qua non* of adolescent literature, the defining factor that distinguishes it both from children's and adult literature" (*Disturbing the Universe* 118), then the Gone series with its preoccupation with the myriad and creative ways in which humans can die arguably serves as a preeminent representative of young adult literature. As Jane Howarth stated when reviewing the first novel in the series, *Gone*, this "potent mix of *Lord of the Flies*, *Heroes* and *Lost* . . . does not hold back at showing the feral nature of humans when faced with a world without order" (8).

The serialized nature of the Gone sequence affords Grant the opportunity to devise startling scenarios that push the human and posthuman bodies of his young protagonists to their limits and beyond while simultaneously replaying and perpetuating a fascination with potential transformation through psychic and physical suffering. Each novel starts with an explicit countdown of days, hours, and minutes to its respective denouement, underscoring the series's preoccupation with exploring what it is like to be enmeshed within intense, relentless cycles of violence. In many ways, Grant's dark imaginings about life and death within the dystopian territory of the FAYZ resonate with Elana Gomel's observation about post-disaster narratives: they seem to be concerned "not with the sharp moment of death but rather with the interminable duration of dying. If the apocalypse promises glorious rebirth, postapocalypse is enmeshed in the backward-looking narrative of trauma" (408). Normal and posthuman characters alike struggle with traumatic experiences, including the loss of family and friends, torture, bereavement, survivor guilt, the dilemma of sacrificing others to save oneself, the price of eating human flesh in order to avoid starvation, and the catastrophic effects of alien contamination and control.

While all these traumas are deeply enmeshed in bodily experience, the tone of Grant's investigation of the estranging, graphically described effect of

posthuman alterations to the human mind and body aligns this series with the horror genre. As Norah Campbell and Mike Saren argue,

> [Posthumanism] is not just an epistemology but an aesthetic that blends three elements—the primitive, technology and horror. . . . [Posthuman transformations] depict the visceral, painful and embodied experience that results from ontological boundary clashes; . . . mutation conveys the other side of the posthuman utopian imagination by hinting at the pain and difficulty of the flesh in becoming its ontological Other. (152, 165)

Grant's series certainly does not sentimentalize or shy away from slaking his young readers' curiosity about some of the harrowing and disturbing aspects involved while transitioning to and becoming posthuman during the series's "unhinged version of evolution" (*Light* 387). Many adult readers have expressed dismay and disapproval at what they consider the graphic and even gratuitous treatment of pain, violence, and gore in the series. For example, the fourth novel, *Plague*, tracks the contagious effects of a virus that forces bodies into such convulsive coughs that the infected eventually vomit pieces of their own lungs; meanwhile the characters face a parallel threat of "the surging horror of insect bodies" (474) of evolved parasitic larvae that infest and consume their hosts as they emerge "like a chicken out of an egg. Being born" (113).

Many critics have debated the appeal, suitability, complexity, and ideological dimensions of horror literature for teenagers, especially regarding its attitudes toward morality, norms, and difference. For example, Roderick McGillis has concluded that this genre is cynical and cliché-ridden, ultimately offering "titillation without apparent consequences" (103). However, Kimberley Reynolds argues that adolescent horror literature is fundamentally concerned with promoting conformity since, despite its superficial "delighting in the attractions of misfits and outsiders," these works teach "readers how to behave in ways that will make them acceptable rather than monstrous. The *modus operandi* is still fear, but it is fear of the consequences of behaving in ways other than conventional and acceptable ways" (3). Reynolds's insight illuminates the fundamentally didactic, conformist agenda and binary systems of normal/abnormal and human/posthuman that inform the obvious relish with which Grant presents disturbing figures of hybridity, the monstrous, the grotesque, and the perverse, and yet ultimately silences these transgressive voices in favor of humanist, conservative power regimes.

Grant's explicit use of the device of intertextuality through links to such authoritative classics such as the Bible and *The Lord of the Rings* seems designed to counter potential allegations of shallow titillation and to increase

the perceived literary density and thus legitimacy of the series. The most obvious examples in the series occur when Astrid ponders the alien nemesis of the Darkness and the associated "awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts" in the FAYZ while reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and later when she exchanges dialogue from Frank Herbert's *Dune* with Lana about the importance of managing fear, "the mind-killer . . . the little death that brings total obliteration" (*Fear* 17, 154). Despite Astrid's conviction that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" (*Gone* 50) and Sam's ongoing efforts to reduce tensions and to build cooperation between different factions of humans and posthumans, the FAYZ inhabitants are deeply sensitive and hostile to markers of difference from normal humanity. Elaine Ostry has argued that young adult fiction posits the posthuman body "as a lesson in tolerance. Can others look beyond the unusual bodies and origins these young adults have, and see their humanity?" (237). The residents of the FAYZ ultimately fail this test, instead displaying impressive creativity in creating new terminology for any posthuman, abject aberrations: "Moofs, muties, freaks. We're out of food, but we've got plenty of nicknames" (*Hunger* 17).

The posthuman mutations and metamorphoses occurring within the FAYZ range across a continuum of estranging abjection and difference and blur the comforting, traditional boundaries between the human, the inorganic, the animal, and the alien. Julia Kristeva has argued that this abjection is caused by that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

Grant tracks the struggles of the FAYZ's inhabitants with the dilemma of successfully negotiating the fascination and repulsion they feel when encountering various abject mutations whose bodily integrity is so distorted by their posthuman alterations that their possession of humanity is in doubt. While some transformed, posthuman characters such as Sam try to retain their humane principles and their capacity for compassion in the face of agonizing ethical dilemmas, the "Human Crew," a paranoid hate group of physically normal humans, quickly succumbs to xenophobia and hatred and lynches anyone suspected of being a freak, that is, anyone who displays superhuman powers. Tellingly, Zil (the leader of this vigilante group of unaltered humans) uses the façade of legitimacy conferred by the endorsement of the hegemonically normal and popular teenager, Lance, to overcome his occasional internal doubts about the Crew's acts of persecution, crime, torture, and murder.

The participation and support of the "tall, cool, smart" Lance (*Lies* 241) serves as a crucial mechanism for authorizing this otherwise racist and vicious regime. In contrast to the admirably masculine and phallically named Lance, the transformed body of the town's teenage bully, Charles "Orc" Merriman, becomes nearly all subsumed during the series into a behemoth of superstrong, living gravel with just some facial scraps of skin still viable as human: "The tiny human portion of him seemed like the creepier part. Like someone had cut the flesh off a living person and glued it onto a stone statue" (*Gone* 116). The villainous Drake Merwin undergoes even more intense posthuman transformations by the Darkness. Drake's initially human form is mutated in the first novel to accommodate a monstrous whip-like arm, "such as no human ever had" (452). When the Darkness reassembles and resurrects Drake for its own purposes later in the series, Drake's psychic and physical existences are unnaturally juxtaposed with that of Brittney, a posthuman girl who possesses the unnatural ability of being immortal. Drake and Brittney become a "twinned undead creature melded . . . with two minds and two bodies" that switch back and forth with the emergence of each personality (*Plague* 7, 33).

Intriguingly, a posthuman anomaly exists who poses a disquieting impact surpassing even that of "the something outside of nature" (*Hunger* 268) that constitutes the monstrous twinned status of Drake/Brittney: Taylor, who initially possesses the power of teleportation and whom the ultimate superpowered child, Little Pete, later modifies into a "monstrous parody" of herself (*Fear* 150). This unique, golden-skinned hybrid exists in the liminal space between human, posthuman, mammal, and reptile. Some of the uncanny affect posed by Taylor's unnerving ambiguity after her transformation is attributable to her lack of familiar and reliable markers for human systems of sexual or gender identity. Taylor's lack of human genitalia is related indirectly through characters' hesitant dialogue and is never openly discussed or directly represented to the reader. Despite Grant's tendency to linger on the minutiae of physical pain and bodily suffering through violence, he significantly remains coy whenever conveying any sexual details. While Grant does not shy away from representing extreme pain and physical violence, even seeming to relish portraying the intricacies of extraordinary violence, he never addresses the threat or possible incidence of sexual violence and rape during the series, despite the strong likelihood that sexual attacks would be ongoing in an unregulated, brutal world like the FAYZ, inhabited by superpowered posthumans and groups of human vigilantes. Grant's sanitized, evasive approach to the realities of rape, gendered violence, and abuse of power is consistent with what Trites has argued is young adult literature's conservative tendency to regulate and police adolescent sexuality because teenagers' erotic curiosity and active desire compromise adults' positioning of young people as relatively innocent and needing protection from the dangers of sexuality ("Queer Discourse" 144).

Grant's approach to sexual politics is similarly conservative regarding the gendered dimensions of the posthuman capacities he affords to his male and female

characters. All the various societies established within the FAYZ stereotypically expect and assume that girls will act as healers and caregivers for younger, orphaned children. Moreover, nearly all of the posthuman female characters in the series have been bestowed with passive powers (such as super speed, healing, manipulation of gravity, immortality, and prophecy) while the two major female protagonists, Astrid and Diana, possess the decidedly non-martial abilities of being able to read people's potential destinies and posthumans' power levels. All the female posthumans' abilities are employed to serve the interests of posthuman male characters rather than empowering female agency. In contrast, the posthuman male characters' superpowers tend to be directly active with aggressive potential: Sam's ability to create laser beams, Caine's telekinesis, Andrew's power to create shock waves, Computer Jack's enhanced strength, and Hunter's ability to project killing microwaves. The only non-alien female character who is represented as possessing an active, potentially combative ability is a "nameless girl" (*Light* 336) with fire-generating powers whom Sam tries to save early in the first novel. Tellingly, however, she is quickly killed by her own uncontrollable, self-destructive power while her death becomes merely an additional source of guilt to fuel Sam's heroic journey.

Grant makes the provocative decision to align all the physical incarnations of the Darkness with female bodies. Early in the series, the Darkness exists purely in the form of radioactive crystals whose thoughts and actions are relayed through the male pronoun "he." Yet as the books progress, the Darkness physically transforms itself into various corporeal female figures, first by drawing upon Lana's healing power to create a temporary avatar, then appearing in the form of Nerezza (a human girl transformed to be the Darkness's avatar), and finally by occupying the mutant infant body of Gaia, Diana and Caine's child. Gaia's status as posthuman/alien hybrid offers intriguing opportunities for problematizing a range of hegemonic concepts. The quasi-taboo and potentially revolutionary dimensions of "a hybrid child of a teenager union" have been noted by Clémentine Beauvais: "Born of very young parents . . . and astride socio-political divides, it . . . is a seditious entity, which forces both the adult world and the young adult reader to recenter their attention onto this threatening bearer of social change" (61). However, although the Darkness welcomes the capacity to physically interact with the world that any corporeal form affords, the reader is explicitly led to regard this female incarnation as compromised and limited, even inciting "contempt. This girl's body had . . . the emotions of a girl. The weakness of a girl" (*Light* 322). Victoria Flanagan has compellingly argued that "the female body's engagement with technology is a topic that offers limitless ways of rethinking concepts of the self" (51). Yet Grant fails to explore this exciting opportunity regarding the promise of new

experiences of female embodiment and the agency of his female characters and instead privileges and normalizes male bodies and masculine superiority.

Grant's ostensibly supportive but ultimately conservative perspective on gender roles is further demonstrated through his assimilationist treatment of gay human and posthuman characters in the series. Many critics have noted the presumption of heteronormativity in much fiction for teenagers along with these texts' didactic inclination to associate deviancy with any other forms of desire. In light of Trites's suggestion that "queer discourse in young adult literature creates contradictory discourses because of the way sexuality is defined by the relationship between power, knowledge, and pleasure" ("Queer Discourse" 144), the Gone novels are to be commended for recognizing the importance of diversity and incorporating the presence of several homosexual characters: Dekka, Roger, and Edilio. Dekka reveals in the third book that she was sent to the Coates Academy by her parents in order to be rehabilitated from being a lesbian: "her parents imagined she would be under constant discipline. After all, Coates had a reputation for fixing damaged kids" (*Lies* 28).

This adult reliance on Foucauldian disciplining of transgressive bodies and desires superficially appears to be withdrawn and arguably irrelevant in the new child-led world of the FAYZ. For example, Dekka attains what appears to be acceptance from other characters such as Orc, who is initially "shocked" that the apparently normal, desirable Dekka is "one of those lesbos": "This was making Orc feel very uncomfortable. Lesbo was just a name to call an ugly girl back when he'd been in school. He hadn't really thought much about it. And now he had to think about it . . ." (*Fear* 458). Dekka's rapport with Brianna is ruptured when the latter realizes that her friend is a lesbian who is in love with her, but their platonic friendship is later reassuringly and conveniently restored. Edilio and Roger's relationship is accidentally outed in front of Sam as they mutually reach out to intimately touch each other for comfort. Sam's response is to stand "very still, and for a few very awkward seconds no one spoke" (*Fear* 373). Sam predictably displaces his confusion and surprise by confronting Edilio about why he had not told Sam that he was gay and in a relationship. Edilio responds by stating that he does not feel ashamed but rather that "I have a lot of responsibility. I have to have people trust me. And some kids are still going to call me a faggot or whatever" (405).

From the first novel onwards, Sam struggles to promote and enforce inclusivity between humans and posthumans, but this campaign for social justice is undermined by his denial of the complicated interstices involved in systems of prejudice and Othering: "'There aren't going to be lines like that, between freak and normal,' Sam said firmly" (*Gone* 250). Dekka challenges the unrealistic sentimentality involved in this assertion, drawing an uncomfortable link

between the reactionary treatment of posthuman mutants and members of marginalized queer and ethnic groups: "Sam, that's a great concept. And maybe you believe it. But I'm black and a lesbian, so let me tell you: From what I know? Personal experience? There are always lines" (250). In the fifth novel, Sam is again forced to consider his own naiveté and unconscious privilege as a white, middle-class, heterosexual male, which continue even during times of apocalypse when he unsuccessfully attempts to dismiss Edilio's concerns: "'Seriously? We're about to be plunged into eternal darkness and you think those kids out there are going to worry about who you like?' Edilio didn't answer. And Sam had the feeling maybe Edilio knew more than he did on the subject" (*Fear* 406).

However, these fleeting moments of reflection around the dilemma of various heroic characters' complicity in social injustices and systems of othering are few and far between. Instead of Dekka, Roger, and Edilio's relationships being afforded an equal depth of attention and longevity as the heterosexual ones, the gay characters' romantic explorations and difficulties are mediated and repurposed by the FAYZ's inhabitants into fodder for titillating gossip (*Fear* 173). Moreover, only heterosexual relationships such as Sam and Astrid's bond triumphantly survive the series, while Dekka and Brianna's potential lesbian relationship and Edilio and Roger's actual relationship are terminated by the death of Dekka and Roger. Grant's privileging of heteronormativity and apparently inclusive though conservative treatment of queer characters is in keeping with Trites's observation that a "double-voicedness" pervades mainstream young adult publishing regarding the representation and repression of queerness ("Queer Discourse" 144).

Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins have examined the heteronormative tradition in young adult literature and note the disturbing tendency of the few homosexual characters present in these texts to be "hideously injured in a car wreck" or to die prematurely (22). It is thus difficult to regard Grant's treatment of his gay characters as coincidental and not to interpret these character deaths as a kind of punitive erasure of the threat of non-heterosexual desire, despite the superficial presence of a small number of gay characters in the novels. Grant's underlying ideological emphasis on heterosexuality as the normal, dominant orientation is therefore consistent with Balaka Basu, Katherine Broad, and Carrie Hintz's conclusion that "very few YA dystopias include queer relationships as a central focus, suggesting a reluctance to subvert dominant mores" (8), despite these narratives' ostensible veneer of investigating opportunities for social transformation and progress.

Similarly, Grant seems to present an inclusive panorama of characters from diverse backgrounds, yet he ultimately privileges the perspectives and preoccupations of traditionally white, middle-class, Christian protagonists. At first glance, the Gone series seems to have made respectable efforts to incorporate voices from a range of ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. Albert, Dekka, and Howard are African American, Lana has Chumash Indian heritage, Penny and Taylor are Chinese American, Sanjit is Indian, and Virtue is Congolese. This range of ethnicities and experiences is wider than Grant's nod toward diversity when he includes a Hispanic boy and an African American girl as members of the shapeshifting team of five heroic protagonists in his 1990s Animorphs series. However, whiteness is still presumed and normalized throughout that series, and Grant's apparent inclusiveness is a superficial gesture toward a "liberal form of multiculturalism . . . in which racial differences are seen as naturally necessary to an effective team . . . [and] in which differences never reflect competing interests or signal histories of genocide, slavery, rape, or exploitation but instead are brought into accord as examples of good managerial theory" (Sturgeon 114).

In his Gone series, Grant attempts to engage in a deeper way with issues of white privilege in his occasional acknowledgments of the casual micro-aggressions of racism and classism that are perpetuated in the FAYZ community. For example, Edilio's Honduran parents work as housekeeper and farmhand for the white, professional families of Perdido Beach, and despite his ongoing heroic leadership, Edilio is still called "wetback" and "Mexican" throughout the series by white, middle-class characters (e.g., *Gone* 84). Edilio succinctly summarizes what he considers to be the inevitable human attraction to this scapegoating process: "Some folks with the power, some folks without. . . . [P]eople are going to be jealous and they're going to get scared and, anyway, they're all weirded out so they are going to be looking for someone to blame" (*Gone* 183). The vigilante Human Crew intensifies this culture of fear and suspicion even further by juxtaposing resentment against the perceived empowerment of marginalized communities with their animosity against posthumans: "See, that's what's happening: it's all these minorities hooking up with freaks. . . . We're normal people. We're not black or queer or Mexican. And we're the ones digging toilets. How come?" (*Plague* 153).

Grant's ideological insistence on the importance of hegemonic privilege and a normal physical body as criteria of humanity takes on a disturbing aspect in light of his treatment of able-bodiedness and disabilities. Little Pete, Astrid's younger brother and the most powerful posthuman within the FAYZ, is represented as possessing unidentified physical and cognitive impairments, which many readers might interpret as an autism spectrum disorder. He is described thus: "Little Pete was four years old, blond like his big sister, but freckled and almost girlish, he was so pretty. He didn't look at all slow or stupid; in fact, if you didn't know better, you'd have thought he was a normal, probably smart

kid" (*Gone* 112). The use of the second person (unusual for the series) and the direct address to the reader are significant as the narrative voice calls attention to how Little Pete's appearance both performs and subverts traditional markers of gender conventions and difference. Grant had previously investigated some hierarchies of normality and abnormality in the Animorphs and Remnant series, which he co-authored with his wife, Katherine Applegate.

However, the Gone series presents a disturbing argument about the alleged inadequacy and limitations of the disabled body. Robert McRuer has critiqued this ideology of "compulsory able-bodiedness" which has dominated the literary imagination, arguing that "able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things" (1). Troublingly, Little Pete is represented throughout the series as imprisoned within the pain, confusion, and limitations of what is repeatedly described as an aberrant body. He spends most of the second novel trying to escape the confines of corporeality through manipulating reality and conjuring physical monsters inspired by his dreams. Pete's experimentation with conceiving and modifying ostensibly superior posthuman bodies has the dangerous consequence of allowing the Darkness to learn the act of "creation" (*Hunger* 185). The Darkness uses this mutating ability to transform Diana and Caine's child into its monstrous avatar, Gaia, while plotting the design of an even more powerful, ever-evolving body: "Regeneration. Adaptation. Each new incarnation as dangerous and as deadly as the one before . . . the perfect biological machine" (549).

Pete's hunger to abandon his impaired bodily existence is granted as he shifts into a purely virtual, quasi-godlike existence that seems to emblematize a transhumanist vision of informational purity: "He was free at last from the disease-wracked body. And he was free, too, from the tortured, twisted, stunted brain that had made the world so painful to him. . . . Pete Ellison had never been more alive" (*Hunger* 525–26). This new, transcendent status is beyond the comprehension of any of the series's human and posthuman characters, including that of Pete and his sister, Astrid: "He's like a spirit. His body is gone. He's outside. Not in his old brain. Like a data pattern or something, like he's digital. . . . It's not something I understand. It's like a slippery thought, and Pete can't explain it" (*Fear* 485). When Pete's disembodied self starts to fade without the anchor of an organic body, he and the Darkness reluctantly come to dismiss the possibility of transhumanism and to share the same conclusion about the importance of corporeality, whether for a human, posthuman, or alien: "Bodies were definitely a mixed blessing—they kept you alive, they focussed power, and they allowed you to move about. But they felt pain, and they could be killed" (*Light* 220).

Grant's commitment to the importance of corporeality and associated norms of the supposed naturalness of the human body over disembodied states

of being ultimately positions him alongside critics such as Hayles, who argue that consciousness cannot be separated from materiality. It is telling that when Pete has to decide which body to select as an avatar during his final confrontation with Gaia, he dismisses Diana and Astrid as prospective hosts. He instead chooses to occupy Caine, a handsome, physically perfect, and hegemonically masculine figure who could be considered to be the binary opposite of Little Pete's original effeminate, childish, and so-called defective body. Grant's implicit assertion that there are "right" and "wrong" kinds of bodies is consistent with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's argument that conceptualizations of disability in general are "not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do" (270). In light of its concern with prioritizing hegemonic cultural and ethnic norms, this standardizing tendency is another example of how Grant's series does not fulfill its promise of providing a satisfyingly rich, equitable range of representations of alterity and difference.

In the final novel, Grant faces the question of whether these aberrant, posthuman youths can be assimilated into conventional human society and, if so, what the ripple effect would be regarding the viability of adults' traditional systems of regulation and cultural rules. His exploration of posthuman transformations is not sustained past the unnatural environment and duration of the FAYZ as the surviving adolescents' posthuman alterations are stripped from them upon their return to the normal human world. In the second, third, and fourth novels, Grant mentions the diverse responses of the global media and adult audiences to the opaque, impenetrable dome surrounding the FAYZ: "every species of doomsayer from Luddite to End Times nut had had his say. It was a judgement. On America's technological obsession, on America's moral failure. This. That. Something else" (*Hunger* 116). The enjoyable and even titillating aspects to this hypothetical speculation are stripped away near the end of the penultimate novel when the barrier suddenly turns transparent due to Little Pete's fluctuating control over his powers, revealing a scene of violent confrontation between Sam, Gaia, and the "filthy and starved . . . savages" that the children of Perdido Beach have become (*Fear* 544). The world is not prepared for witnessing or accepting the shocking savagery that the FAYZ's young inhabitants have developed in order to survive within the up-to-then non-translucent dome which blocked adult surveillance and intervention.

Although Grant acknowledges the U.S. government's interest in the military value of children with unnatural powers being used as weapons, wider society recoils in disgust and panic at the prospect of such radically changed young people: "Horror. Distance. Both sides, parents and children, now saw the huge gulf that had opened up between them" (*Fear* 545). Although a few people try to defend these "children trying to survive" (*Light* 89), the majority of adults

are not able to accept this rupture of stereotypical assumptions of childhood innocence and purity. The possibility for empathy and imaginative connection between ordinary adult humans and the FAYZ inhabitants is shattered by the sight of Gaia, an ostensibly "defenceless little girl" (*Fear* 539), killing and eating a human adult whom Gaia has pulled through the now-transparent dome into the FAYZ. The adult, human world is confronted with the stark realization that traditional power dynamics between adult authority and young people's subordination no longer apply: "The effect had been electric. Suddenly, it was clear: this wasn't child's play. Whatever power was in there could kill adults as well" (*Light* 89). The immediate reaction of the adult spectators when their privilege is threatened is to dehumanize all the dome's citizens to the abjectified status of "dangerous wild animals in a zoo" (*Light* 88).

After the barrier surrounding the FAYZ is destroyed and the young characters are returned to the human world at the end of the sixth novel, the final chapters of the series chart the various processes for the medical and social rehabilitation of the FAYZ survivors. While these young people still bear psychic and physical scars, Grant implies that the most important aspect of these posthuman experiences is that these scenarios allowed the characters' inner qualities and supposedly true selves to appear rather than involving any radical change, subversion, or reconfiguration of their identities and capacities. Astrid the Genius, Sam the Hero, and Diana the Desirable emerge from the dome stripped of their unnatural powers but crucially possessing the same presumably essential qualities that they started the series with. Through their trials, they have acquired the traditional human qualities of friendship, loyalty, and courage and have learned to be distrustful of the professed freedoms of posthuman power. Despite the awesome posthuman sights and feats they have witnessed and enacted, their simple goal at the end of the series is to live as quietly and inconspicuously as possible in a normal home as normal members of humanity. Likewise, the wider world is all too happy to assimilate these temporarily aberrant youths back into recognizable, familiar systems and to forget the anomaly of the FAYZ and its posthuman threat as quickly as possible.

When considering the conformist, normalizing drive of this otherwise stimulating series, Bradford et al.'s questions about the competing didactic, emancipatory impulses of young adult fictions that explore the posthuman are valuable: how far do such novels succeed in representing "an ideological move away from dominant conceptual paradigms? To what extent do they use posthuman motifs to simply reinscribe and recuperate a humanist metaethic?" (180). Despite appearing to interrogate traditional systems of power, norms, and difference, Grant's novels, alongside all too many other recent dystopian narratives, align with the conservative humanism seemingly inherent in this

genre's recent engagement with issues around biotechnology, embodiment, alterity, and posthuman possibilities. I therefore agree with Ostry's assertion that despite these narratives' speculation about "the excitement of a changing, flexible definition of the human being" (235), young adult novels often "play it safe" (243) and do not sustain a posthuman challenge to conventional norms and associated, traditional anxieties about change and evolution. Grant's Gone series, with its didactic and reactionary ideology, perpetuates this tradition of a reassuring yet conservative message regarding the purportedly natural truth of a universal and ultimately hegemonic humanity.

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7

POSTHUMANISM IN *THE HOUSE OF THE SCORPION* AND *THE LORD OF OPIUM*

Donna R. White

What does it mean to be human? Science fiction has been posing this question since 1818, when Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* first appeared, although Shelley was not the first to ask it. It has been a foundational question in religion and philosophy for thousands of years. Enlightenment thinkers proposed a definitive answer to the question, based on Protagoras's proclamation in the 5th century BCE: man is the measure of all things. Humanism, as the philosophy came to be called, declared that being human means having a self that is rational, autonomous, coherent, unified, and universal. For six centuries, this answer satisfied the Western world. In the 1960s and 70s, however, critical thinkers pointed out that this liberal humanist self was also male, white, heterosexual, and European—in other words, far from universal—and that humanism was responsible for many of the excesses of nationalism, imperialism, racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism. These anti-humanists raised new questions about what it means to be human, and in their wake others proposed that we have been asking the wrong question entirely. What we should be asking is, what does it mean to be posthuman?

This is one of the many questions that Nancy Farmer addresses in *The House of the Scorpion* (2002) and its sequel, *The Lord of Opium* (2013), which tell the story of Matt Alacrán, the clone of a powerful drug lord. The first book follows Matt from birth to the age of fourteen as he discovers his identity and purpose as a clone, runs from his intended fate into a different kind of bondage, and finally returns to the land of Opium to find that the drug lord is dead and thus his clone, Matt, has legal claim to the identity of the original. The second novel follows Matt through his first year as the new drug lord as he establishes his