

Zombies vs. Unicorns:
*An Exploration of the Pleasures
of the Gothic for Young Adults*

PATRICIA KENNON



Which makes for a better story: zombies or unicorns? This question, originally posed in 2007 as light-hearted banter on the blogs of young adult (YA) authors Justine Larbalestier and Holly Black, was the genesis of their 2010 edited collection of short stories, *Zombies vs. Unicorns*. Larbalestier, a zombie devotee, had taken issue with Black's advocacy of unicorns. Through their subsequent online debate about the possibilities offered by each of these mysterious figures, the self-styled 'Team Zombie' and 'Team Unicorn' were born. As their friends and other writers became embroiled in the discussion, it quickly spread and became a social media campaign with readers and authors arguing and defending the relative merits, weaknesses and popularity of each supernatural creature. The righteous and fierce unicorn – a hybrid of ordinary horse and fantastical beast – has the power to act both as healer and as killer, while the undead zombie challenges traditional systems for defining and regulating boundaries between the living and the dead. Black and Larbalestier then gathered twelve of 'the finest minds in our field to answer this urgent question' (iii) (including bestselling

YA authors such as Libba Bray, Maureen Johnson, Meg Cabot, Scott Westerfeld, Margo Lanagan, Carrie Ryan and Cassandra Clare) in order to 'settle the debate once and for all' (i) and to investigate the natures and appeal of these unearthly entities.

In a refreshing and welcome disruption of hegemonic adult-youth power relations and the Gothic's propensity for didacticism, this anthology acknowledges its YA readers as competent and positioned 'on the "knowing" inside alongside the adult narrator, rather than alienating them by placing them on the "ignorant" or patronizing outside' (Cross, *Humor*, 180). The editors' and authors' deployment of paratextual editorial debate, parody, irony, incongruity and evident sense of respect for their YA readers' agency and right to make their own conclusions and judgements destabilise traditional adult-centred authority and afford 'ludic and liberating effects', enabling 'the liberation applying to freedom of thought' (Cross, 'Frightening and Funny', 79). With its self-aware, playful juxtaposition of the funny and the fearful, the non-serious and the serious, and disruption of conclusive, adult-imposed arbitration of meaning-making and literary judgements, the anthology 'imagines an agile viewer able to negotiate its double-voiced nature' (Germaine Buckley, 137) who is recognised and respected as an active agent capable of determining their own preferences and investments for themselves. In its examination of the commingling of delight and terror posed by these monstrous figures, emphasis on dialogic playfulness, and empowering support of the agency and autonomy of its YA readers, *Zombies vs. Unicorns* advocates for the Gothic's transgressive and pleasurable possibilities for young adults, and offers an intriguing navigation of Gothic notions of innocence, abnormality and desire.

Spanning suburban realism, urban fantasy, high fantasy and the historical past, the collection of stories resists traditional genre boundaries and chronicles trajectories of curiosity, dread, playfulness and fascination regarding juxtapositions of the sublime and the dreadful. The stories explore a plethora of 'truly queer insights and perverse pleasures the Gothic tradition has afforded us: passion as both delight and disgust, love blended with hatred, the desire to penetrate another's body by sword, dagger, teeth, or penis,

all blurred together in narrative acts of seduction, consumption, and murder' (McCallum, 76). As such, the anthology admirably resists didactic, bowdlerising traditions in youth literature and incorporates and investigates complex issues including drug use, suicide, violence, homosexuality, pre-marital sex, rape, bestiality, cannibalism and animal cruelty, which might be considered by some adults as too risqué or even dangerous for teenage readers to be allowed access to or encouraged to read. This adult desire to protect the perceived vulnerability of youth from such Gothic dangers is set in uneasy counterpart with the significant role of adolescence within the Gothic tradition and how Gothic uncertainty regarding transgression of boundaries resonates in an especially charged way with adolescence's liminal status.

According to David Punter, the inversion of boundaries involved in adolescence is integral to Gothic writing: 'what is inside finds itself outside (acne, menstrual blood, rage)' and 'what should be visibly outside (heroic dreams, attractiveness, sexual organs) remain resolutely inside and hidden' (*Gothic Pathologies*, 6). Margarita Georgieva has likewise emphasised the 'ambiguity, mystery, liminality, violence and monstrosity' (12) of the Gothic child's trajectory of growth and transformation, 'the crisis of adolescence and the sometimes painful transition into adulthood' (13). As Roderick McGillis observes, Gothic narratives hold an especial appeal and resonance for young adults in light of how adolescents are 'as intensely haunted or even more haunted than the rest of us' (231) due to the transformations and fluxes that their bodies and identities undergo. However, the popularity of Gothic narratives in YA literature has been perceived by some adults (parents, teachers, politicians and concerned citizens) as undesirable, unsuitable and even as unhealthy for ostensibly vulnerable young people who instead should be shielded from such immoral, contaminating texts.

While this conservative tradition has been increasingly interrogated by contemporary YA authors, literature for young readers has long been linked with the supposed need for strong closure and happy endings and, as such, these stories are expected to deliver conveniently reassuring, didactic lessons about life and relationships. As Maria Nikolajeva notes, 'the happy ending

is one of the foremost criteria in the conventional definitions of children's literature, as well as one of the most common prejudices about it' ('Beyond the Grammar', 7). Kimberley Reynolds, in her introduction to the collection *Frightening Fiction: Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature*, emphasises the subsequent challenge for authors of youth horror and dark-fantasy fiction who must negotiate their presumed educational and ethical responsibilities while also acting as creative artists. How far should youth literature go in disputing norms and conservative systems of control, normalcy and abnormality? How far *can* it go? To what extent are adult authors able to provide a more open-ended experience for adolescents to reflect in their own ways about their individual resonances and 'messages' of these stories produced for them by adults? Reynolds concludes that the temptation to conform to socio-cultural pressures proves too strong for the majority of YA horror writers:

adolescent horror is concerned with instilling a degree to belong to recognised social groups, teaching 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. (2-3)

Reynolds here restates Roberta Seelinger Trites' assertion that 'the underlying agenda of many YA novels is to indoctrinate adolescents into a measure of social acceptance' (27). According to Trites, although adolescents in YA narratives are empowered to a certain extent, their individual power ultimately becomes repressed and curtailed as they must come to 'learn their place' in existing power structures or 'learn to balance their power with their parents' power' (31). A pivotal component in Trites' conceptualisation of YA fiction is the centrality of death as 'the *sine qua non* of adolescent literature, [and] the defining factor that distinguishes it from both children's and adult literature' (118). While Trites' emphasis on the importance of adolescents' recognition of mortality, acceptance of death as a finality, and attendant re-inscription within the *status quo* is consistent with

many mainstream realist adolescent texts, this reading does not acknowledge the Gothic's destabilisation of boundaries policing death or accommodate the emancipatory potential of the Gothic for interrogating normalising presumptions around adolescence and binary dichotomies of young adults' submission or resistance.

Glennis Byron and Sharon Deans have argued that the reverse of Trites' argument holds for what they term 'teen Gothic' texts, which 'bestow upon the adolescent an alternative viewpoint which allows them to see the world in a different way and crucially allows them to escape the didactic and instructive nature of "realist" texts' (101-2). The Gothic 'frequently complicates or even resists a pedagogical imperative' (Spooner, 'The Gothic is Part of History', 133), and *Zombies vs. Unicorns* offers an intriguing example of teen Gothic's potential for enabling opportunities for alternate viewpoints and to act as a mobile and more expansive discursive space for exploring and challenging conservative binary systems around norms, adults' desire for didactic control and adolescents' agency and autonomy. The editors' energetic challenge to didactic assumptions of adult authority and the anthology's commitment to empowering teenagers' choices and their own decisions about where and how they take literary pleasure enacts teen Gothic's spirit and emphasis which lies 'in overcoming repression and leaving ultimately empowered teenagers' who 'do not succumb to institutional discourse' (Byron and Deans, 97).

The interrogation, problematising and transgression of normative boundaries between the human and the monstrous are key to this transformative potential. The figures of the zombie and the unicorn intriguingly thwart traditional binary notions and systems policing and demarcating the human and inhuman, normal and abnormal, the pure and the impure. In the Gothic imagination, the decaying, grisly figure of the zombie may be set in dialectic tension to the immortality and sublimity of the mystical unicorn. The anthology's ongoing debate regarding the allegorical capacity of zombies occurs within the wider context of much recent scholarly and informal discussion about zombies' widespread presence in contemporary popular culture. Critical attention has focused on how the figure of the zombie in films, computer games, television and fiction serves as a

platform for collective anxieties around regulations of difference, abjection, infection and feelings of alienation in an increasingly heterogeneous and uncertain world: 'zombies address fears that are both inherent to the human condition and specific to the time of their resurrection' (Platts, 547). YA zombie fiction series such as Charlie Higson's *The Enemy* (2009–15), Jonathan Maberry's *Rot and Ruin* (2010–20), Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009–11) and Darren Shan's *Zom-B* (2012–16) have become a staple of contemporary YA horror, post-apocalyptic and speculative fiction. The international popularity and success of these works would seem to support Justine Larbalestier's challenge for the readers of *Zombies vs. Unicorns* to identify which creature best 'symbolizes the human condition? The answer is obviously zombies, which can be used to comment on almost any aspect of our existence. They are the eventual death that faces us all. They are a metaphor for slavery, conformity, and oblivion' (i).

Undead revenants that inhabit the liminal territory between human and inhuman provide a compelling *tabula rasa* for constructing and projecting Gothic concerns about death, monstrosity and loss of personal autonomy, as well as modern preoccupations with the zombie's symbolic relationship with globalised capitalism. The relentless nature of zombies and audiences' uneasy mixture of fascination and alienation with the living dead are integral components of the ambivalent mixture of panic and pleasure that readers undergo while interacting with zombie texts. While the rebellious adolescent agency infusing Libba Bray's 'Prom Night' (the final story of the anthology which chronicles the defiant end days of a town of human teenagers besieged by undead hordes) may resonate with YA readers, they may also experience a frisson at the story's sense of impending doom and these characters' inevitable annihilation by zombie onslaught. As Gerry Canavan suggests, 'in a sense, the zombies are always the real protagonists of the zombie narrative; no matter how long they have been gone from the action, we are always awaiting their eventual, inevitable return' (455).

However, Team Unicorn's stories in Black and Larbalestier's anthology playfully pitch the mythological power of the unicorn against the symbolic power of the zombie. Traditionally, the

zombie has been associated with the enslavement, mindless consumption and the anonymous crowd, while the unicorn has been regarded as autonomous, solitary and reclusive.¹ Isolated by its purity but capable of benevolence towards those chaste individuals whom it deems worthy of its healing and blessings, unicorns have conventionally been perceived as aligned with virginity, aristocracy, inherited power, moral authority, justice, heraldic crests and privilege. For example, Garth Nix's story in the anthology, 'The Highest Justice', draws upon these associations in his depiction of an ancient unicorn as an agent and dispenser of ultimate moral and legal authority. Yet, as Holly Black argues in the anthology, unicorns should not be simplistically stereotyped or sentimentalised as unproblematically good: 'Unicorns are a study in contradictions. They are ... both gentle and fierce, spiritual and animal, healers and death-bringers' (109).

In keeping with the anthology's resistance to sentimentality and complacent depictions of unicorns, Kathleen Duey's 'The Third Virgin' and Diana Peterfreund's 'The Care and Feeding of Your Baby Killer Unicorn' examine the unicorn's capacity for invoking Gothic notions of wonder, trauma and violence. The only Team Unicorn story in the anthology to be narrated by a unicorn itself, 'The Third Virgin' addresses the darker nature of a unicorn-human relationship, especially its parasitic and perverse dimensions. Duey's story addresses the double-edged burden of 'what it means to have those healing powers – what the cost is, both to those who are healed and to the unicorn itself' (349). The unicorn narrator has become addicted to the 'exquisite physical thunder' (354) of secretly stealing life energy during its ostensible acts of healing people. Obsessed with trying to feel emotions such as love and devotion from the adoring humans that it encounters, the unicorn is delighted to meet Reeym, a physically and emotionally scarred, acerbic teenager, whose name means unicorn in Hebrew and who 'radiates both purity and pain' (364). Thriving on the titillation of milking Reeym's feelings of love, compassion, grief and empathetic pain, the unicorn offers to heal Reeym's wounds and to restore her to bodily and feminine 'normalcy' in exchange for Reeym's help with killing itself. Eventually Reeym sees through the unicorn's semblance of

mystical, heroic suffering and confronts the monstrous narrator with its psychologically twisted nature: 'You don't want to die. You just wanted to pretend that someone loves you ... You're addicted ... [to] terrible things' (380–1). In not shying away from the perverse fascination that the unicorn can invoke, Duey trusts her YA readers to make their own conclusions around what constitutes villainy and monstrosity, the pleasures afforded by this mythical creature and its Gothic hold on the human imagination.

Set within the world of her Rampant series where venomous, human-eating unicorns can only be defeated by adolescent female unicorn hunters, Peterfreund's story proposes a more optimistic vision of inter-species relationship, while also challenging the reader to consider the complexities of empathy and the bonds between humans and unicorns. The narrator, Wen, yearns to be an ordinary teenage girl and struggles with her uncertainty about whether her 'inhuman' (189) hunter abilities render her as unnatural and evil as unicorns are believed to be. While reluctantly visiting a freak show with her friends, Wen encounters an imprisoned pregnant unicorn and rescues its unicorn infant, whom she initially named Flower due to his pastoral cuteness. After he independently starts to hunt prey – 'Flower? Try *Flayer*' (225) – Wen comes to recognise and accept that both she and Flayer share a kinship and a stigmatised reputation as hunters but that this hereditary curse of violence might be redeemed to act as a gift for protection, hope and peace. By the end of the story, Wen pledges herself as Flayer's ally and undertakes the quest to persuade the unicorn-hunting academy, as well as wider society, that a peaceful relationship between humans and unicorns is possible. In the last line, Wen moves 'to stand beside my killer unicorn' (235) in a compelling gesture of inter-species comradeship, mutual affection and solidarity.

Infused with the questioning and subversive impulse of teen Gothic, this story and the wider anthology demonstrate the turn in Gothic youth narratives since the millennium in which monsters are increasingly represented sympathetically and have even 'become the heroes' (Jackson, 'New Directions', 1). While Fred Botting notes how 'the fear and horror of monsters that underpinned Gothic fiction's cautionary project' has returned to

a general 'romantic investment in otherness' (*Limits of Horror*, 48), many critics emphasise the especial centrality and preponderance of romance within YA Gothic texts: 'often because the protagonists typically occupy the liminal space between childhood and adulthood demarcated by sexual experience' (Smith and Moruzi, 14). Margo Lanagan's unicorn story, 'A Thousand Flowers', displays a fierce and provocative commitment to challenging adult expectations and judgements regarding human-creature unions, the sanctioned limits of adolescent sexuality, and what constitutes the pure, impure and monstrous. While the Gothic is widely regarded as 'erotic at root' (Punter, *Literature of Terror*, 191), 'A Thousand Flowers' pushes the erotic dynamics involved in the Gothic trope of the animal bridegroom to what is regarded by some readers as the final depravity – bestiality – and by others as a uniquely transcendent and loving union. Renowned for the unnerving intensity of her dark-fantasy writing, Lanagan poses disquieting questions around what constitutes a healthy and natural or depraved and unnatural bond between human and unicorn. In doing so, she unflinchingly confronts and confounds traditional concepts of wholesomeness, depravity and obscenity.

By this stage of the Team Unicorn stories in the anthology, the maiden narrator of Novik's earlier story, 'Purity Test', has already contested the presumption of heteronormativity embedded in traditional concepts of virginity and contests the idea that being a lesbian automatically means being a virgin, regardless of that person's gay sexual experiences: "Are you a lesbian? I'm pretty sure that doesn't count towards virginity." "I am pretty sure it *does* ..."

(54). Likewise, in the earlier story, 'The Third Virgin', Duey's narrator unicorn has dismissed 'the narrow, idiotic way most people' deploy physiological criteria and norms about heterosexual penetrative sex for determining virginity, instead emphasising this state's 'older, deeper meanings. Virginity means unmarred wonder, belief, new green grass, continuous rebirth' (353). Novik and Duey argue that virginity is a socio-cultural and artificial construct depending on what a particular culture or community says that it is: for example, an unmarried young female, any female who possesses a hymen or someone who has not participated, voluntarily or involuntarily, in a specific kind of sexual act.

Although Larbalestier professes to be revolted by the premise of human-unicorn sex in 'A Thousand Flowers', calling it 'by far the grossest story in the anthology ... I think I'm going to be ill', Black delights in her co-editor's prudish distaste and her inability to engage with unicorn's potential for Gothic taboo: 'Now, Justine, don't tell me a unicorn story made you feel squeamish? I *thought* we were supposed to look into the face of darkness? *Face our fears?*' (109). Lanagan sets this theme from the first page when the first of the story's three narrators (a drunken peasant) spends a significant portion of his section searching for a safe place to urinate since he is too abashed by his own filth and unworthiness to spoil the nearby 'innocent' flowers, even though he knows that the apparent sacredness of nature is really 'rooted in all kinds of rot and excrement' (111–12). Guided by a male unicorn that appears before him, he stumbles upon an unconscious princess whose clothes are in disarray: 'The skirts of the underclothes were wrenched aside from her legs ... and there was blood up there, at the highest place I could see, some dried and some shining fresher' (116). While attempting to cover up her indecency, he is detained on suspicion of assault and rape and is only spared by the princess's public pledge that she is still 'pure': 'no man has ever touched me, and certainly not this man' (121).

While the royal court temporarily accepts this carefully worded profession of heterosexual, human virginity, the princess is later revealed to be pregnant and the narrator is assumed guilty as a rapist and executed. The story then moves to two female narrators – a serving girl and the midwife assigned to serve and simultaneously act as wardens for the now-exiled princess during her socially unacceptable pregnancy. This night scene is rich with Gothic associations, especially preoccupations with blood, female virginity and female embodiment. As Anna Jackson, Roderick McGillis and Karen Coats argue in their introduction to *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*, 'key moments of feminine transition – menarche, marriage, childbirth etc., marked as they are by blood, submission, loss of a firm sense of one's former identity, and loss of control – are potentially moments that are best represented with Gothic motifs' (5). The blood that the first narrator witnessed could be interpreted by readers either as

an effect of a nefarious, brutal rape or as the rupture of a maiden's hymen during consensual intercourse. Likewise, the princess's unconsciousness could be the result of languor after intense acts of intimacy or as a fortunate escape into oblivion as a way of escaping the trauma of violation. Lanagan's skilful use of ambiguity over what exactly happened in the pastoral forest mirrors various characters' ambivalent feelings regarding the delights of forbidden and aberrant behaviour. The soldiers who arrest the male narrator experience a complex 'mess of disgust and delight' at the prospect of this low-born nobody daring to get his 'spawn upon our princess, spoiling and soiling the purest creature that ever was' (124), while the second narrator insists on seeing and touching the first narrator's decapitated head. Despite being repeatedly warned that the grisly sight 'will haunt your dreams', the girl claims that 'I will *die*' if she is not allowed to handle and explore these ghoulish remains: 'I could not hurt him; I could push as hard as I liked. But I was gentle. I felt gentle; there is nothing like the spectacle of savagery to bring on a girl's gentleness' (126).

While the Gothic's preoccupation with the vulnerability and violation of female bodies is well-known, Lanagan's juxtaposition of girlhood, curiosity, tenderness and bloodthirstiness subverts the Gothic's traditional preoccupation with the vulnerability and violation of female bodies and allows the teenage reader to explore and enjoy the ambiguity and complexity of desire itself. Lanagan further traces this interconnection between female agency, savagery and gentleness through the juxtaposition of pain and creation that are involved in the biological process of labour. The princess gives birth prematurely to 'a child so strange, a horse might almost have been less so ... a tiny godlet ... powerful like nothing [the servant] had seen before, like nothing I had seen since' (132–3). The hybrid baby is stillborn, and its mother later commits suicide by throwing herself out of her tower window. Yet this apparent act of despair and self-destruction is presented as the legitimate and only means to allow the princess and the unicorn to be together. The story concludes with the third narrator's conviction of 'rightness and joy ... like a birth pain and a love pang together' (141) at the unearthly sight of the princess's spirit reuniting with her beastly lover.

While the animal bridegroom with its dark fantasy allure has long been a trope of Gothic literature, there has been a recent intriguing evolution of YA fiction that crosses the genre boundaries of horror and romance in its exploration of 'zombie romance' and the possibility of the undead to act as lovers as well as threats. Novels such as *Warm Bodies* (2010) by Isaac Marion, *Generation Dead* (2008) by Daniel Waters, Adam Selzer's *I Kissed a Zombie and I Liked It* (2010) and Stacey Hay's *My So-Called Death* (2010), consider what Steven Shaviro has called 'the seductiveness of horror', especially the dilemma of zombies' 'weird attractiveness: they exercise a perverse, insidious fascination' (95). The six Team Zombie stories in *Zombies vs. Unicorns* traverse the spectrum of imaginative visions of human-zombie relations. 'Prom Night' by Libba Bray, 'Bougainvillea' by Carrie Ryan and 'The Children of the Revolution' by Maureen Johnson follow the tradition of zombies as incompatible Other, while Cassandra Clare's 'Cold Hands', Alaya Dawn Johnson's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' and Scott Westerfeld's 'Inoculata' chart the simultaneously pleasurable and unsettling possibilities for challenging the anathema of inter-species intercourse through erotic relationships with zombies.

As the editors note, the zombies in 'Cold Hands' (set in Lychgate, which is also known as 'Zombietown'), are influenced by the voodoo tradition of the possessed dead: 'they have no interest in eating anyone's brains ... [and] are emo zombies who will love you forever. Entirely up to you to decide whether that's a good thing' (323). The conservative status quo of the town is challenged when the narrator and her zombie lover, James (the heir to Lychgate who was murdered by his power-hungry uncle) publicly confront and overthrow the villainous Duke with the aid of all the zombies in an unprecedented show of undead agency and revolution. These teenagers' subsequent marriage – 'a union of living and dead' (346) achieves a symbolic synthesis across the forces of life and death which offers the possibility to transform traditional power systems into new and uncharted configurations: 'Everything is different now. Everything is changing' (347).

While Clare's story presents the radical political nature of this human-zombie union and emphasises the pleasurable potential of Gothic monstrous romance, the relationships presented in the

story presume and privilege heterosexuality. Many YA critics have observed how regimes and discourses of heteronormativity have traditionally dominated youth literature. Even though LGBTQIA+ fiction has been increasingly published and available, the YA romance text still tends to invalidate queer experiences and the 'experiences of gays and lesbians as it reifies and glorifies heterosexual romance' (Pattee, 156). As Caroline Jones notes, 'teens who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer ... are significantly underrepresented in young-adult literature' (74). Informed by the Gothic's transgression of traditional boundaries and empowering potential to subvert hegemonic norms, Scott Westerfeld's 'Inoculata' and Alaya Dawn Johnson's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' challenge this paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality and demonstrate the power of queer human-zombie romances for social change and (r)evolution.

Set in a post-apocalyptic encampment besieged by relentless zombie hordes, 'Inoculata' chronicles the boundary lines between the living and the dead as they begin to blur when Kalyn – the focus of the lesbian narrator – Allison's, crush, is scratched by a zombie and becomes infected but does not die. Rather, she becomes a new class of being who combines human and inhuman qualities. Kalyn's hybrid superiority is accompanied by an erotic allure that she never had as a mere mortal and which is responsible for Allison's sudden romantic fixation: 'like a switch [had] flipped ... Like something had come along and made Kalyn better' (255). As Allison and the other children allow themselves to be altered by transfers of Kalyn's blood, they begin to 'start feeling ... better' (259), metamorphosing into 'something halfway between, eternal but not rotten' (259), which combines health with contagion and youth with longevity. Since the now 'different species' of the stagnating adult community is 'broken and stuck in the before' (259), this transformed group resolve to escape the camp in order to be free to explore themselves and their unknown potential. Initially startled when more and more zombies start to follow them, they realise that adult dogma about the zombies surrounding the camp being mindless monsters was wrong. Instead, the zombies were 'just bored, waiting for

something better to happen. And that better thing is us' (271). This final line of the story contains a paradox: Allison uses the reductionist term 'thing' to describe herself and her kind while also emphasising their agency, dynamism and promise for being 'better' than either humans or zombies. In leaving his story on an ambiguous note, Westerfeld poses for his YA readers a thought-provoking scenario about these transformed youths' challenge to conventional systems of normality and deviancy.

Similarly involving a same-sex human-zombie relationship, Aleya Dawn Johnson's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' investigates Gothic tropes of anti-heroism, hegemonic masculinity and monstrosity as its adolescent, cannibal narrator, Grayson, falls in love with Jack, his perfect match who also happens to be a monster hunter. Despite Grayson's hybrid condition – a result of having been only partially cured from 'Zombie Spongiform Encephalopathy' (40) – and his compulsion to consume people, he gradually builds a connection with Jack that challenges his stereotypical view of all mere humans as prey to seduce and then kill: 'Liking a meal too much to kill him? That's a first' (22). The young reader, like Grayson, is left uncertain regarding how to interpret Jack's 'countervailing waves of awkwardness and ferocity' (35), especially his mysterious set of scars. These unexplained injuries could be attributed to 'natural' causes received while hunting or to a more disturbing 'unnatural' reason and Gothically repressed secret: physical and/or sexual abuse by Jack's father, a respected and presumably 'heroic' hunter.

Johnson deploys a range of intertextual references from the poetry of Robert Frost to the Gothic rock music of Joy Division (the title of the story invokes the name of one of the band's most famous songs) and interweaves ongoing allusions to Lewis Carroll's satirical heroic ballad, 'Jabberwocky' (a disorienting poem written in mirror-writing about the slaying of a mythical monster that Alice encounters in *Through the Looking Glass* [1871]) into the story. This device contributes to uncertainty and further confounds the YA reader's ability to apply binary and unreflective stereotypes of human as automatic hero and zombie as monstrous Other.

In one of the most powerful scenes of the story, the binary systems of violent predator and innocent prey, and consumer and

the consumed, break down during the turbulent consummation that occurs when homo sapiens and zombies make love: 'Hands and lips and teeth, and you'd forgotten – no, you'd never known – this way of knowing someone, this dissolution of self, this autophagy' (41). Johnson's metaphor of autophagy (the physiological process of the destruction of cells and subsequent formation of new cells) illustrates the taboo complexity of these characters' homosexual and inter-species romance and its fusion of mutual consumption and transformation. Johnson skilfully shifts between deploying 'I' (a first-person pronoun) and 'you' (a second-person pronoun) throughout the story as Grayson muses about the dilemmas, violent impulse and sense of vulnerability involved in his burgeoning romance. This has the pleasurable disorienting effect of further drawing readers into empathising with Grayson's perspective while also problematising their ability to reliably differentiate between the narrator's deviant status and complacent biases around the assumed 'normality' of their own subject positions.

An engagement with interrogating fixed perspectives, destabilising norms and transgressively crossing boundaries animates the anthology. Although the book seems to be organised in a linear, formal sequence wherein each chapter officially alternates between a 'pro-unicorn' and a 'pro-zombie' narrative, this binary structure and oppositional atmosphere is continuously undercut and reframed. A key device that the editors of the anthology deploy to establish a 'carnavalesque space of playfulness and experimentation ... where allegorical and displaced versions of cultural debates and concerns can be played out' (Jackson, 'New Directions', 1) is their paratextual debate that unfolds between each story of the collection. During these interstitial spaces between stories, Black and Larbalestier spar and exchange banter and quips regarding the respective appeal, qualities, liminal nature and Gothic potential of these two monstrous figures. The editors' deployment of irony of narration foregrounds self-reflexivity, parodies the trope of 'the overt, intrusive, opinionated' narrator of melodrama, which provides 'comic distance from the horrors of the Gothic', and potentially produces the empowering effect of 'beneficial detachment from any unthinking identification with the

ideologies of the text' (Cross, 'Frightening and Funny', 77). This arch and playful editorial tone is self-knowing, consciously wide-ranging and richly intertextual and echoes the shifts of the stories from poignant to terrifying and from humorous to haunting.

In the Introduction, the editors start by 'helpfully' explaining that each chapter has been explicitly marked with a helpful visual icon of a unicorn or zombie to ensure that 'No unwary zombie fan will accidentally start reading a unicorn story or vice versa. We can all rest easy' (v). This explicit chaperoning and 'safely' maintaining a dividing line between fans of zombie stories and fans of unicorn stories would seem to didactically assume that readers are (and can be) clearly differentiated by their fixed fealties and also that zombie and unicorn stories are (and can be) clearly distinguishable and incompatible with each other. The adversarial title of the anthology was also visually reinforced in the original hardback publication through the representation of a confrontation between a cut-out of a zombie lurching towards an opposing cut-out of a rearing unicorn on the thin black dust jacket which wrapped around the book. Rendered in cartoonish, eye-catching and hyper-colourful style, the same melee was replicated across the illustrated front and end papers inside the book, which further implies an eternal yet inconclusive 'deadlock' between these two ostensible opponents.

However, these adult editorial gestures to support the policing of boundaries and the either/or options of committing to being pro-zombie or pro-unicorn are deliberately undermined throughout the collection as the editors paradoxically recognise and even celebrate that it is possible and welcome to enjoy creating stories and reading about both zombies and unicorns. For example, the very first story in the collection, Garth Nix's 'The Highest Justice', presents a unicorn and a zombie peacefully co-existing and operating as allies rather than as enemies, thus explicitly breaking the ostensible rules of authors and readers having to definitively align with either Team Unicorn or Team Zombie. Black and Larbalestier discuss frankly their uncertainty about how to classify this narrative and how to resolve the predicament posed by Nix's alliance of zombies and unicorns, and the wider question of whether these ostensible antitheses can

(and can be allowed to) intersect. This ongoing self-conscious engagement with uncertainty between the two editors and, significantly, between the editors and the reader demonstrates a commendable trust in young adults' capacity for independent, autonomous thinking, and promotes a shared, reflective and discursive space for debate and differences in perspectives, arguments and voices. Resisting the all-too-often didactic role and regulatory impact of narratorial presences in youth literature, the editors' irreverent, playful commentary and addresses to the reader enact and encourage 'a sense of unity and collaboration' and of being on the 'reader's side', which empoweringly serves to remind the YA reader of 'his/her role as a reader, potentially lessening any chance of unthinking absorption into any ideology of the text' (Cross, *Humor*, 205).

Significantly, Black and Larbalestier deploy humour as their mechanism for refuting traditions of adult editorial and authorly authority and supporting YA readers' right and capacity to determine for themselves the dilemma of zombies versus unicorns. The anthology's ludic hybridisation of comedy, romance, popular culture and traditional Gothic tropes demonstrate what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik have termed the 'comic turn' in Gothic: 'an exploitation of the stylized theatricality of the Gothic device, which is always teetering on the edge of self-parody. The result is not so much an abdication of the powers of horror as a process of turning them to creative purpose' (Horner and Zlosnik, 329–30). Arguing that 'comedy has always been a critical component of Gothic writing', Horner and Zlosnik rightly observe that the comic dimension of Gothic 'has only recently begun to receive critical attention' (321). The anthology brings together multiple *New York Times* bestselling authors and winners of Michael L. Printz Awards, World Fantasy Awards and Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy and rarely has a collection of YA short stories harnessed such a literary pedigree and mobilisation of award-winning, 'rock star' authors. However, the editors' wisecracking tone, playful engagement with wider popular culture, and the anthology's populist origin in online informal banter rather than a suitably 'serious' provenance pose an interesting challenge to traditional systems for value judgements,

literary categorisations and the didactic assumption that narratives for young people should encourage reverential, passive compliance to and with adult authority. The collection thus presents an intriguing exemplar of how the dialogic, liberatory impulse of YA comic Gothic texts may promote opportunities for criticality, encouraging young readers 'not to be passive ... They have to work at the text and draw their own conclusions, thinking for themselves, and hence the texts are more genuinely child centred' (Cross, 'Frightening and Funny', 71).

The traditional presumption of Gothic's serious and lofty nature and the relatively nascent critical openness of comic Gothic are evident in reviews of *Zombies vs. Unicorn*, which grapple with how to evaluate the editors' gleeful and meta commingling of comedy and horror. The very choice of unicorns for the anthology has been seen by at least one literary critic as 'hitting a ludic and ludicrous height' in stretching acceptable limits of 'YA paranormal romances ... and the supernatural saturation of YA fiction' one monstrous creature too far (Priest 275). The editors' deployment of 'team zombie' and 'team unicorn' parodies this reactionary approach in leveraging the terminology and affect of the Twilight fandom's debate regarding the inter-species romantic rivalry of 'Team Edward' and 'Team Jacob'. Echoing the editors' satirical and sassy approach, many of the stories in the collection consciously play up to and satirise conservative assumptions regarding what might be considered 'ludicrous'. For example, Naomi Novik's 'Purity Test' and Meg Cabot's 'Princess Prettypants' delight in lampooning saccharine stereotypes and clichés about unicorns' supposedly dewy natures. Novik deliberately exploits and satirises stereotypes of indescribably pretty and twee unicorns, while Cabot's story combines 'a send-up of the dread rainbow-farting unicorn' (273) with a rousing celebration of feminist awakening and female adolescent empowerment. Similarly, Maureen Johnson's story, 'The Children of the Revolution', presents a darkly hilarious parody of celebrity culture and contemporary society's fascination with stars' zany religions such as Johnson's invented cult of 'Lazarology', which creates zombie children who will never die.

Black and Larbalestier's emphasis on the funny, romantic and celebratory aspects of Gothic texts and the editors' tone

of 'whimsical macabre' exemplify what Catherine Spooner has called 'the happy Gothic', which 'reconfigures the gruesome and grotesque as playful, quirky and even cute, and often draws on imagery associated with childhood' (Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, 99). Charting new inflections of Gothic during dramatic cultural shifts and anxieties since the 1999 Columbine high-school killings, the turn of the millennium and the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Spooner stresses the 'sense of lightness, playfulness, comfort, joy or even euphoria' (*Post-Millennial Gothic*, 186) of this new Gothic mediascape which poses the simultaneous invitation and challenge to reconsider the critical frameworks through which the Gothic is defined, conceptualised and approached. Spooner's study identifies the summer of 2012 as the starting point for the rise of post-millennial Gothic's popularity in wider consumer culture and the appropriation of Gothic into interior design products, lifestyle television, museum exhibitions and advertising. However, *Zombies vs. Unicorns*, which was published in 2010, may be seen as an early instance prefiguring this shift in the US and British popular imagination towards comedy, romance and consumption, which are intertwined in 'a Gothic of celebration' (Spooner *Post-Millennial Gothic*, 183). Agreeing that 'Gothic is no longer where it used to be, but rather than lament its passing,' Spooner 'seeks to map its new territories' (*Post-Millennial Gothic*, 8), and powerfully argues for a re-assessment of conservative value judgements and ideological biases regarding the traditional categorisation of the Gothic as pedagogical, didactic and serious.

While presenting an appealing, dynamic and confident assertion of the significance and pleasures of this reimagining and re-inflection of the Gothic for twenty-first-century YA readers, *Zombies vs. Unicorns* is not always successful in managing the creative tensions and discursive energies involved in its juxtaposition of fun and fear. The anthology does contain some tonal inconsistencies and editorial outbursts of partisanship by both team captains. Moreover, the editors' metatextual repartee inevitably possesses some didactic dimensions (in attempting to sway each other and by extension the teenage reader), as Black and Larbalestier interweave their own biases and arguments

throughout the metafictional editorial commentary framing the collection. Yet, importantly, this anthology does not conclude with an editorial epilogue instructing the reader to follow its precepts. Instead, its deployment of comic Gothic invites 'a conscious, self-reflexive engagement with the Gothic mode that sets up a different kind of contract between the reader and the text' (Horner and Zlosnik, 329), and resists the all-too-prevalent urge of adult-produced literature to set closure to the story and to thus control young people's autonomous thinking and responses.

In conclusion, Black and Larbalestier's Gothic collection challenges the pervasive tendency of YA fiction to act as a 'tool for transmitting the ideology of those in power (adults) to those who will soon be endowed with power (adolescents)' (Kokkola, 11). Rather, the adolescent readers of *Zombies vs. Unicorns* are regarded as already possessing the power of their own thoughts and the ability to form their own individual conclusions and meanings. In an admirable act of sharing power, the editors yield their traditional presumption of adult authority in granting the teenage reader the final interpretative power regarding the relative attractions and desirability of both 'sides' for themselves, instead of just being didactically told what to think by their elders. In its interrogation of trauma, desire, taboo, romance, horror and violence, and its problematising of conventional norms and binary systems around innocence, monstrosity, sexuality and embodiment, the collection offers an intriguing opportunity to explore the appeal of post-millennial Gothic for YA audiences in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the anthology poses a commendable and open-ended invitation for each adolescent reader to respond to the Introduction's challenge in their own: to 'know' and to resolve for each of themselves 'which is better: zombies or unicorns' (5).

Notes

- ¹ See Fred Botting's 'Zombie Death Drive' and Juliette Wood's *Fantastic Creatures in Mythology and Folklore*.

Genre Mutation in Young Adult Gothic:
The Dialectics of Dystopia and Romance in
Holly Black's *The Coldest Girl*
in Coldtown

BILL HUGHES



Genres mutate, perhaps because they exhaust their potential or because of dramatic social change. This chapter is particularly interested in the mutation engendered by the fusion of the vampire paranormal romance genre with the apocalyptic landscapes of dystopia such as those found in Julie Kagawa's Blood of Eden series, beginning with *The Immortal Rules* (2012) and Holly Black's *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown* (2013). Paranormal romance is in turn hybrid, as is the Gothic that forms one of its components. The novel form itself can be characterised by its eager consumption of other genres. Genres bring with them perspectives on the world, and the collision of genres allows for an interesting dialectical play between worldviews.

In this chapter I argue that Black's *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown* uses the genre of the dystopic vampire romance to unmask the workings of a neoliberal world characterised by expansive, generalised commodification and oppressive technology, particularly that of surveillance. This world also has a strange