Guardian Angels and Wicked Hearts: Storytelling as Trauma Therapy in Three Screen Adaptations

by Sarah Annunziato
University of Virginia

Introduction

In 1964, Maurice Sendak received the prestigious Caldecott Medal for his picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). During his acceptance speech, the author reflected on the interior lives of his young readers, saying that:

> I have watched children play many variations of this game. They are the necessary games children must conjure up to combat an awful fact of childhood: the fact of their vulnerability to fear, anger, hate, frustration—all the emotions that are an ordinary part of their lives and that they can perceive only as ungovernable and dangerous forces. To master these forces, children turn to fantasy: that imagined world where disturbing emotional situations are solved to their satisfaction. (Sendak 151).

Sendak's observations about children and their use of fantasy to overcome challenging emotional situations were later echoed by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Use of Enchantment* in which the psychologist wrote that young people could understand their feelings better through daydreams, rumination, and fantasy (7). For Bettelheim, children can use fairytales to reflect on their own problems and resolve personal challenges (25). Nevertheless, one potential critique of this idea is that fairytales are not the only type of literature that could be used to help younger readers manage upsetting situations.

In fact, while many contemporary examinations about the use of stories as coping mechanisms are somewhat similar to Bettelheim's original work, they surpass and update his conclusions in important ways. First, more recent studies of this theme do not limit themselves to exploring just one literary genre but acknowledge a variety of them such as historical fiction or mystery. Secondly, recent work also broadens the focus from emotionally challenging situations to events that could even be viewed as traumatic, like war or serious illness. For example, in her examination of trauma in literature for the young, Kertzer observes that many historical novels for younger readers explore children's roles in events like the Holocaust by presenting protagonists who either grapple with traumatic memories of these events or witness the trauma of others (405). Further, more recent scholarship is likewise not solely focused on how young readers interpret stories about traumatic situations but how those stories depict child and adolescent characters confronting those circumstances. Tribunella is interested in both of those topics in children's books, writing: "I argue that in these texts trauma works to transform the child-protagonists and, as I will claim, the child-reader in ways that are culturally valued" (xii). Therefore, for Tribunella, in children's literature trauma serves a dual purpose in that it

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helps both the characters and the young readers come of age. But what does trauma encompass?

The concept of trauma is commonly found today in popular culture, in numerous self-help books and as a well-worn topic on social media. However, the word trauma refers to specific conditions. The clinical psychologist John Marziller notes that this term is shorthand for a significant emotional shock that provokes a mental health crisis (chapter 1). Each trauma consists of two elements: an "external event" and an "internal reaction." (Marziller, chapter 1). Traumatic experiences frequently entail a very real threat of death, lead to disorganized thoughts, and patients may fixate on, or relive them, even after they are over. (Marziller, chapter 1). Furthermore, a traumatic event might be a single or repeated occurrence (Marziller, chapter 1). Obviously, emotional trauma befalls people from all backgrounds and age groups. If children and adolescents cope with it through reading or watching stories that in some way speak to their own experiences, can they also process traumatic events by creating their own narratives?

In fact, psychologists have already been searching for answers to this question for many years. Specifically, they have striven to understand whether writing about traumatic experiences helps people to better understand and cope with these events. The psychologist James Pennebaker reports that writing about upsetting circumstances often leads to long term improvements in mood and lifestyle ("Writing About Emotional Experience" 162). In fact, according to Pennebaker's research, some tangible benefits of writing about emotional turbulence are better grades and attendance at work (162). Building on these conclusions, Pennebaker and Seagal further discovered that storytelling makes managing emotional distress easier by allowing people to give structure and meaning to difficult experiences unfolding in their lives (1243). Additionally, the researchers conclude that writing about trauma leads to positive outcomes for people from many backgrounds and walks of life (1245). Finally, their work indicates that writing about personal challenges proves just as effective as talking about them (1246). Eventually, Pennebaker and his collaborators coined the term "expressive writing" to describe this type of narrative construction (Pennebaker and Evans). This genre of writing can help with both past and ongoing trauma (Pennebaker and Evans 37) and in some instances it might also take the form of storytelling (Pennebaker and Evans 163). Gergen and Gergen describe similar uses of words, however they refer to this technique as "self-narrative" (19). In their estimation, individuals construct self-narratives to make sense of the relationship between themselves and what is happening in their lives (19). Finally, all these research breakthroughs eventually inspired the development of written exposure therapy, whose foundation rests upon the basic concept of expressive writing.

Written Exposure Therapy refers to a method that asks patients to confront a traumatic memory by writing about it (Sloan et. al. 627). For example, Sloan et. al. constructed a study of patients who had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)[1] in which the researchers asked their participants to write about the same traumatic experience during several sessions (631). After the participants had completed their tasks, follow-up visits revealed that they all showed improvement in their PTSD

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symptoms (632). Thus, this study also supports the idea that writing about traumatic experiences does indeed often result in positive outcomes.

While all the above-cited scholars primarily worked with adults, other researchers believe that writing about trauma benefits children, adolescents, and emerging adults as well. Slivinske and Slivinske describe "the gradual self-disclosure storytelling technique, (chapter 1)" which usually unfolds across four stages. First, therapists ask their patients general questions about the characters in a story before proceeding to inquiries about how those characters remind them of people who they actually know. The third stage asks patients to reflect on how the stories relate to their own lives, and finally the fourth phase requires clients to finish the narratives themselves (Slivinske and Slivinske, chapter 1). The researchers affirm that art therapy and storytelling are in fact both key tools in healing psychological trauma in younger populations because each of these methods encourage a release of negative emotions (Slivinske and Slivinske, chapter 15). If this is the case, do stories about young protagonists ever illustrate them engaged in this process while they grapple with their own traumatic memories or bear witness to the trauma of others?

Three screen adaptations of literary works do indeed illustrate children, adolescents, and emerging adults doing just that. In *Stand by Me* (1986), *I'm Not Scared/Io Non Ho Paura* (2003), and the recent Netflix series *The Midnight Club* (2022) audiences watch as young characters cope with ongoing or recent traumas by creating original stories that in some way reflect their own experiences. All three adaptations can be classified as coming-of-age stories. Watson refers to this genre by another term, as "maturation" narratives in which young protagonists cross developmental boundaries leading to personal growth and a more profound understanding of the world in which they live. (2). All of the three stories cited above follow their characters on a journey towards maturation that is defined by a traumatic event.

In fact, in each adaptation, the characters achieve catharsis or overcome their own fears surrounding these events through the narratives that they weave. While not all these works were created specifically for younger audiences (although each adaptation might still be viewed by them), the pieces are important because they provide clear examples of how storytelling can work as a kind of trauma therapy throughout various stages of child development. *I'm Not Scared* looks at this process during childhood, while *Stand by Me* examines it in adolescence, and finally *The Midnight Club* explores its use in emerging adulthood.

Unlike in expressive writing or written exposure therapy, none of the younger characters generate stories that directly focus on their own traumas. However, all of them write or tell fictional tales whose characters resemble them in some way and whose situations mirror what each narrator is experiencing in their own life, which is similar to gradual self-disclosure storytelling. In this way, the main characters in these adaptations either learn to cope with their traumas or devise strategies of how to approach the frightening situations that are occurring around them. Thus, the adaptations provide visual examples of how storytelling benefits younger populations. But how exactly do they do

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this? We can only find the answer to this question by looking at each piece more closely, beginning with the 1986 film *Stand by Me.*

"It's Like God Gave You Something, Man, All Those Stories You Can Make Up."

Stand by Me originated from a novella by Stephen King entitled, "The Body," which the author included in the 1982 anthology *Different Seasons*. Four years later in 1986, Rob Reiner brought King's story to the screen with a new title, however the plot of this film hewed closely to that of the original. In 1959, four friends set out to find the body of Ray Brower, a child close to their own age who had gone missing several weeks earlier.

As the book begins, the reader learns the omniscient narrator's identity right away: "I was twelve going on thirteen when I first saw a dead human being. It happened in 1960, a long time ago…although sometimes it does not seem that long to me. Especially on the nights I wake up from dreams where the hail falls into his open eyes (King 301)." In the next section the action shifts back in time to that long ago era, which alerts readers to the fact that the story they are about to enter is told by the present-day version of one of the characters. In this case, it is Gordie Lachance, who we also know was twelve at the time of the events. Since adolescence is typically defined as the span of years between ages ten and eighteen (Arnett 9), Gordie and his friends fall into this category. Although the film adaptation of King's story shifts the action to 1959, the screen version of this tale also begins with a shot of a middle-aged man deep in thought near his car. A voiceover accompanies this image in which the audience learns that the man on screen is in fact the movie's narrator and he is about to recount the story of something that happened to him and his friends long ago. The lines quoted above from the source material confirm that as an adult, Gordie still thinks about seeing Ray Brower's corpse and in fact, even dreams about it regularly. This description suggests that he frequently revisits the experience of finding Ray's body and is indicative of trauma, under Marziller's definition. In fact, during the film adaptation of "The Body," the audience will see both the adolescent Gordie and the adult one narrate different stories to help each iteration of the character confront a traumatic event in his life. In the case of twelve-year-old Gordie it is the recent death of his older brother, whereas for his grown-up counterpart it is the murder of a childhood friend. However, it all begins for Gordie back in 1959, with his fateful journey to see a dead body.

As he makes plans with his three friends, Teddy, Vern, and Chris to embark on their trip, the audience learns that Gordie's brother Dennis was killed four months earlier in a jeep accident. The adult narrator notes that since this tragedy he had "become the invisible boy" at home, as his parents are so consumed by their own grief that they pay little attention to their surviving son. Through a series of flashbacks to happier moments, the film depicts the close bond shared by the two brothers. We first see evidence of this as Gordie remembers speaking with Dennis in his room about baseball. They are filmed in a two-shot on Dennis's bed where the older boy gifts his sibling with a Yankees cap. They plan to go fishing together and the viewer can tell that theirs is a loving relationship because not only do they enjoy shared hobbies, but they also hug. This is in marked

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contrast to Gordie's interactions with his parents, who never touch him at all and show little curiosity about his interests.

The film further explores the family dynamic in another flashback in which Gordie remembers a dinner with Dennis and his parents where their father and mother spend the entire meal talking to Dennis and ignoring their younger son. It is Gordie's brother who attempts to shift the focus to his sibling by asking his parents if they read Gordie's story. Dennis later compliments him on his work, which once again illustrates the vital role that the older boy played in his sibling's life. All these scenes not only provide crucial glimpses into the relationships that stitch together Gordie's family but allow the audience to understand the intensity of the loss that he feels about his brother's death. The repeated flashbacks to past times with Dennis also suggest rumination[2] and signal the severity of Gordie's trauma because these memories do not appear to bring him comfort but only further grief. However before long, Gordie's skill as a storyteller makes itself known to the audience and proves to be a formidable tool in his healing process.

This moment occurs around midway through the group's journey to find Ray Brower's body. As they settle in for the night around their campfire, Gordie shares a story that he has recently been developing. This is the tale of Davey Hogan, a boy close in age to Gordie with a weight problem. In fact, Davey is an object of ridicule for most of his community who refer to him derisively as "Lardass." After years of enduring this torment, Davey finally devises a revenge scheme that involves entering a pie eating competition. As the story unfolds, the audience learns that before the contest, Davey ingested a bottle of castor oil. Just as he is on the verge of winning the substance goes into effect causing him to vomit everywhere, which in turn provokes mass vomiting among the attendees. As the story reaches its conclusion, Davey looks out at the chaos that he caused and smiles triumphantly after having avenged himself. A closer examination of this story reveals some interesting parallels between Davey and the characters in *Stand by Me.*

Like Gordie and his friends, Davey is a social outcast. While Gordie is considered intellectually talented and does well in school, his parents ignore him and frequently indicate that he matters less to them than his late brother. Chris, Gordie's best friend, comes from a family with a bad reputation in their hometown and he was once accused of stealing milk money at school. Teddy is the son of an abusive father who was institutionalized for assaulting him and who, based on descriptions provided throughout the plot, appears to be suffering from PTSD, or a similar disorder, following military service. Finally, Vern is considered unintelligent and not expected to become remarkably successful later in life. Like Davey, all four of the film's main characters experience bullying of various kinds from both their peers and the adults in their lives. As Gordie tells Davey's story, viewers will notice that members of the crowd in attendance at the pie-eating competition yell insults and taunts at him about his weight. Some of the offenders appear to be slightly older kids, while many are clearly grown-ups. Along similar lines, we learn that Vern's older brother and his friends frequently threaten and beat him up, see the owner of a junk yard mock Teddy over his mentally ill father, and learn that while Chris did steal the milk money, he tried to return it only to have a teacher appropriate the funds to buy a new skirt. Finally,

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there is Gordie whose parents not only ignore him, but whose father is also depicted harshly criticizing him on many occasions. Gordie describes himself as "the invisible boy," due to his parents' lack of interest in him. While Davey Hogan is not exactly invisible, no one in his community sees him as a real person but only views him as an object of ridicule. In this sense, he also faces a type of invisibility. In the end, the story of the pie eating contest is really the tale of a social outcast finally acquiring power over his tormentors. In this sense, the narrative that Gordie weaves resembles Zipes's observations about folktales that they, "gave vent to the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives. (Zipes 6)." For Gordie and his friends, the story of Davey Hogan is about making them feel powerful and capable of triumphing over those who mistreat them.

While this tale does not specifically address the death of Gordie's brother, it does mark a turning point in the film's overall narrative. After the pie-eating contest episode, the group continues its journey, which eventually takes them to a pond that they attempt to forge. As they are resting there, Gordie talks to Chris about his feelings. During this conversation, Gordie confesses his deep sadness about his brother's passing and says that he should have died instead. He also declares writing a frivolous talent. Chris admonishes him for all these views saying, **"**It's like God gave you something, man, all those stories you can make up." Following this important encounter, Gordie undergoes an interesting transformation and seemingly decides to no longer accept mistreatment from the people around him. This is evidenced by the climactic scene at the site of Ray Brower's body where it is Gordie who confronts the older kids who have shown up to claim credit for the discovery and threaten their younger peers. By using Chris's gun, Gordie convinces these bullies to leave thus providing a moment of triumph for him and his friends. Therefore, the tale of Davey Hogan presages a final cathartic moment for the film's protagonist. As in the gradual self-disclosure storytelling technique, Gordie's narrative about Davey seems to be the catalyst that finally allows him to release the many negative and intrusive thoughts he holds inside about his brother's death and his family dynamics.

Stand by Me ends with the revelation that as an adult Chris attended college and eventually became an attorney. However, tragically he was killed during a fight at a local fast-food restaurant one week earlier. During the film's closing moments, the adult Gordie is revealed seated before a computer where he has been authoring the story of that fateful trip in 1959. As he finishes his work, he suddenly deletes everything, suggesting that this was a tale that he wrote only for himself. Thus, just as he did during his adolescence, it seems as though in later life, Gordie processes his traumas by writing about them. In adult Gordie's case, his storytelling mirrors the approach used in expressive writing to assuage emotional pain. Reflecting on his friendship with Chris and its significance to his development allows him to cope with his friend's death. In this way, *Stand by Me* depicts the therapeutic properties of storytelling not only in adults, but also in younger populations through its importance to the same character during distinct phases of his life.

The message of this film and its source text would eventually ripple across the ocean to influence another adaptation, *Io Non Ho Paura.* Although set in a different era and country, *Io Non Ho Paura* follows a similar structure as *Stand by Me* and also features a child

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protagonist not only witnessing another child's trauma but also processing his own traumatic memories from the vantage point of adulthood.

"Are You the Guardian Angel?"

Like *Stand by Me* before it, *Io Non Ho Paura* evolved from a literary source, Niccolò Ammaniti's 2001 novel of the same title. Just as *The Body* begins with an explanation about its narrator's identity, *Io Non Ho Paura* provides the reader with similar hints during its first pages. While describing the plot's setting, the anonymous storyteller writes: "Non avevo idea di quanto faceva caldo uno di nove anni, di gradi centigradi se ne intende poco, ma sapevo che non era normale. (Ammaniti 6) ("I had no idea how hot it really was, at nine years old you don't understand centigrade very much, but I knew that it wasn't normal)."[3] The use of the verb form, "avevo" (had) alerts us to the fact that the novel is narrated in the first person and since the author deploys the imperfect tense, we also understand that the narrator is recounting past events rather than present ones. During the book's first chapter, the storyteller also refers to his younger sister Maria, who we immediately find out is the protagonist's sibling. Thus, the events we are about to read about are being related to us by an older version of the story's primary character who is looking back at a distant summer.

During this summer of 1978, nine-year old Michele Amitrano finds another boy, similar in age to him, held captive in an abandoned well. Eventually, through observing the behavior of the adults in his community, overhearing their conversations, and piecing together a series of clues (like finding dishes from his house near the site of the other child's captivity), Michele realizes that his parents and the families of his friends have conspired to abduct and hold Filippo Carducci for ransom. This epiphany leads Michele to witness several traumatic events such as: Filippo's mistreatment at the hands of trusted adults in the young protagonist's life and repeated threats of violence directed both at children and adults. In addition, Michele himself is eventually shot accidentally by his own father. As Adamo observes, the novel mixes elements of both mystery and coming-of-age stories (172), which is a combination that the film reproduces. Both texts center their action around a nine-year old, Michele. While the primary characters in *Stand by Me* could be described as adolescents, Michele's age places him in the period of childhood (Montessori 19). Yet, Michele also uses his skill as an aspiring writer to better understand and cope with the circumstances surrounding him during that fateful summer. Four episodes from the movie depict how he does this.

The first of these occurs at the beginning of the film. Michele and his friends have been racing each other to see who arrives first at an abandoned farmhouse. Whoever finishes last must undertake a dare decided by their group's unofficial leader, il Teschio. To spare his friend, Barbara, from a particularly misogynistic challenge, Michele offers to take the dare himself. He must walk across the exposed and rotting floor beams that separate the first and second floors of the house and then jump back to safety through an open window. This task is particularly dangerous. To highlight that, the scene begins shot from below the floor beam to depict its distance from the ground, and then the camera swings

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above to focus on Michele as he prepares to walk across. The focus then shifts again to a low-angle from underneath the dilapidated structure and then to a high-angle pointing downward at the beam itself to emphasize its narrow size and unstable quality. As Michele nimbly navigates his way across, he recites the lines of a story to himself about the lizard man. According to Michele, this character could walk on walls, but if he falls, he becomes the glass man and breaks. The description of the lizard man reflects Michele's precarious situation at the moment, as he too attempts to walk across walls while facing the very real threat of falling to certain injury. He uses this narrative to reassure himself while undertaking the dare. While it is but a brief scene, this moment establishes Michele's use of fantasy and narration to help him manage frightening events in his life and therefore, it foreshadows the disturbing challenges that lie ahead for him.

The audience learns more about those challenges very quickly when Michele heads back to the abandoned farmhouse to retrieve his sister's lost pair of glasses. While he is there, he discovers a large piece of scrap metal covering a well and peers beneath it to see a human foot sticking out from beneath a blanket. Later that night, he stays up under a blanket composing a story about people who bury a body in a hole in the ground. This is his first effort at using narrative to understand what might be happening in his town and how it relates to the contents of the abandoned well. Eventually, his curiosity wins and he returns to the hidden spot to discover what it contains.

It is then that Michele finally meets Filippo who upon their initial encounter asks Michele if the latter is his "angelo custode," or guardian angel. Due to his long captivity in darkness, Filippo appears irrational and disconnected from reality, which scares Michele who does not understand the other child's state of mind. Once again, Michele flees from the well in fear, but later that night composes another story in his bedroom after his sister has gone to sleep. The viewer sees Michele sitting on his bed under his covers, which are illuminated from within by a flashlight. The camera first arcs around him and then swoops underneath the blankets to film him from a low angel. This is an interesting choice that emphasizes Michele's need to keep the discovery of Filippo a secret. However, his inability to share what he knows with others leaves him with no one to talk to about it, and so he confronts his feelings through writing about them instead, which allows him to examine his confusion and fear in a way similar to what is done during gradual self-disclosure storytelling or expressive writing. The story he tells is about twins, one brunette and one blond, like himself and Filippo, respectively. He describes one twin as "normale (normal)" and the other as "pazzo (crazy)," which reflects his perception of his own state of mind in comparison to that of the other child. In Michele's story, one day the crazy twin bites his mother while nursing and she orders their father to kill him. However, the child's other parent cannot bring himself to do this, so he takes his son to a mountain and hides him in a hole. Of course, this situation deftly mirrors Filippo's own imprisonment in the abandoned well. The fictional father in Michele's story cares for his child by bringing him food so that he does not die, just as Filippo's captors bring him leftovers from their tables. Michele's story not only reflects his efforts to better understand both Filippo's physical and emotional state, but also the role that the adults around might play in this scenario. Although he does

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not yet know about the kidnapping plot, clues that he finds at the scene of the abandoned well begin to arouse his suspicions, which are eventually confirmed by eavesdropping on conversations that occur in his home late at night. As he slowly pieces together the truth, Michele continues to visit Filippo bringing him bread, water, and keeping him company. At one point, he even briefly frees Filippo from the well so that he can spend time in daylight. Thus, as Michele's understanding of the other child's circumstances increases, the protagonist gains the courage to offer him more help and comfort.

Finally, however, the authorities zero in on Michele's small town. As the police close in, the conspirators decide to kill Filippo and destroy any evidence linking them to his abduction. Michele overhears them plotting this new crime and races to save his friend from death. In a call back to the earlier scene at the abandoned farmhouse, Michele jumps from his bedroom window and speeds off into the night on his bike while reciting a nursery rhyme to himself. This poem, entitled "Quei Ragni Pelosi," or "Those Hairy Spiders" is an exhortation to various potentially dangerous critters to stay far away from a child.[4] The poem closely resembles verses from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* in which the fairies implore various malevolent actors to keep away from their queen, Titania (170-171). Michele recites an altered version of these rhymes that replaces Titania with an unidentified child. Just as he intoned the story of the lizard man to gain the courage to walk across the floor beams during his dare, he uses this nursery rhyme to prepare himself to rescue Filippo, which he does by sacrificing himself in the process. As his father arrives to kill the other child, he accidentally shoots his own son. However, Filippo is able to escape just as the police finally arrive.

Astute viewers of Salvatores's film will detect familiar notes in some of Michele's stories. For example, the tale of the twins resembles both the biblical account of Cain and Abel and the story of Oedipus, whose father, upon hearing the prophecy about his son's future gave the baby boy to a shepherd and instructed him to take the child to the mountain and murder him. Of course, the nursery rhyme that concludes the film also comes from another famous source. Hence, Michele is effectively using these other tales to weave his own narratives that reflect the circumstances in which he finds himself. In this way, his actions very closely adhere to the principles of the gradual self-disclosure story-telling technique.

Throughout the film, Michele's narratives allow him to make sense of the events occurring in his town and also to overcome his fears surrounding Filippo's abduction and his parents' role in the crime. Once he is able to accomplish both of these goals, he is also able to act first to provide aid and reassurance to Filippo, and later to rescue him from probable death. Thus, this particular adaptation illustrates how, much like adolescents, children can also create stories as a means of coping with their traumas.

Like in *Io Non Ho Paura,* death is also a recurring them in *The Midnight Club.* However, in this series the threat does not come from forces external to the characters but rather from their own bodies.

"Dying is a Very Shitty Reason Not to Live"

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The Midnight Club is a horror series that debuted on Netflix U.S. in 2022. However, before its transition to the small screen, this program began as a novel by Christopher Pike, which was published in 1994. The story in both texts focuses on Ilonka, a teenager who learns that she has terminal cancer. Eventually, she decides to spend her final months in a hospice for young adults, which is called Brightcliffe in the series. It is there that she meets several other people close in age to her with similar diagnoses. The patients at Brightcliffe secretly meet in the facility's library every night at midnight and take turns telling each other original stories. In the series these tales would mostly be characterized as horror, thriller, or science fiction. The narrators who the audience meets also represent yet another age group.

During the first episode, the viewer learns that Ilonka is seventeen at the time of her diagnosis. She undergoes treatment for one year before learning that her situation is terminal, thus making her eighteen when she arrives at Brightcliffe. Although most of their ages are never explicitly stated in the series, the friends who she makes there appear to also be in their late teens or early twenties as evidenced by references to events like attending prom, already being able to drive, and showing an interest in college life. Arnett defines this period, which ranges from 18 to the mid-twenties, as emerging adulthood (9). While each episode of *The Midnight Club* explores how the characters use their stories to confront their impending deaths, five stand out in particular.

The pilot, entitled "The Final Chapter," begins with Ilonka writing in a notebook as a voiceover of her thoughts intones, "we are the authors of our own stories." With this opening, the series announces the pivotal role that narration and writing will play in the plot and more importantly, signals how storytelling will give the characters' agency. Ilonka's personal story quickly takes a sad turn when she learns that she has thyroid cancer. As she sits in her doctor's office listening to the diagnosis she asks repeated questions about timelines. Specifically, Ilonka wants to know how long her treatments will take and whether she will be able to attend Stanford in the fall as she had originally planned. The action abruptly moves one year into the future, where we see Ilonka, her foster father, and her doctor celebrating her eighteenth birthday in a hospital room. Not long after this, she overhears her physician telling her father that her condition has become terminal. As she eavesdrops on their conversation, her father also asks repeated questions about how much time she has left.

What leads Ilonka to Brightcliffe is the story of Julia Jayne, a former patient there with the same diagnosis as her who experienced a spontaneous regression of her cancer in the 1960s. In fact, the first story that Ilonka narrates upon joining the Midnight Club is a fictional version of Julia Jayne's situation. In Ilonka's variation, Julia disappears from Brightcliffe for several weeks and upon her return, her tumors begin to shrink, and she is eventually pronounced cured. However, she develops the ability to predict death dates of everyone she encounters. Hence, like Ilonka, Julia is also obsessed with knowing how much time separates the people she meets from their demise. Both Ilonka's obsession with timelines and the fact that she transfer it to the fictional version of Julia Jayne that she creates are examples of rumination, which as previously noted, often accompanies

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traumatic experiences. Ilonka spends the next several episodes fixated not only on time but also on ways to cure her illness so that she too experiences the same outcome as the real Julia. Therefore, her first story reveals Ilonka's unwillingness to accept her terminal diagnosis, which is significant because the rest of the series will focus on how she comes to terms with it.

Obviously, Ilonka is not the only character who must address their mortality. Her roommate Anya also plays a prominent role in the series. Anya is a former ballet dancer currently suffering from bone cancer that has resulted in the partial amputation of her leg. The lone story she narrates is entitled, "The Two Danas." In this tale, a ballet dancer from Ireland receives a scholarship to study dance in the United States and consequently relocates there with her family. The protagonist, Dana, shares many characteristics with Anya. Both are Irish, and as we learn later, both are also dancers. Dana is a perfectionist with extremely exacting standards; however, she also chaffs against all the restrictions that her ballet career demands. As a result, she makes a pact with the devil to duplicate herself. The second Dana can enjoy all the things that the first Dana cannot, like parties or fast food. Meanwhile, the original Dana can still train as a dancer and live a disciplined life. This seems like a perfect compromise until Dana number one begins to feel the effects of her doppelganger's reckless lifestyle and struggles both at school and at home. Dana One eventually flubs an important audition and begins to show signs of drug addiction. When her parents suggest that she enter rehab, she steals their car and gun and goes in search of her twin to destroy her. This results in a fatal confrontation between the two Danas that kills one of them and costs the other her leg. The fifth episode of the series follows up on this when Anya tearfully confesses to Ilonka that she feels responsible for her parents' deaths. As Anya unburdens herself to her roommate, we learn that much of what she described in "The Two Danas" actually occurred. She did win a prestigious dance scholarship and became addicted to heroin due to the immense pressure of her studies. Anya blames herself for her parents' deaths because they were killed in a car crash while out looking for her. She also draws a connection between her drug abuse and eventual cancer diagnosis, noting that the second event came soon after the first problem arose.

The parallels between Anya's own life and Dana's make it clear that "The Two Danas" is a thinly veiled version of Anya's autobiography. By narrating it in the third person and substituting a fictional character for herself, she decouples her real life from the events in her tale. As Pennebaker and Evans note, writing about traumatic events in the third person distances the author from these experiences and can therefore feel safer, thus making it easier for patients to reflect on their circumstances (91-92). Doing the same thing allows Anya to explore her feelings around her addiction and the loss of both her parents and her dance career for the first time.

It is this initial step that later enables her to confront all of these issues more directly by confessing to Ilonka that they really happened. Her admission to her roommate results in Anya acknowledging that she does not want to die and permits someone else to comfort and reassure her. Ilonka not only develops a close friendship with Anya during her stay at Brightcliffe but also begins to fall in love with another patient, Kevin.

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Before being diagnosed with Leukemia, Kevin was a popular track star in high school. He is also the elder of two children belonging to a single mother. In "The Wicked Heart," the audience meets Kevin's family and learns that his brother feels pressure to replicate Kevin's achievements while their mother is in denial about the severity of her older son's condition. Kevin later confirms that she suffers from a drinking problem. The story he narrates revolves around Dusty, who is portrayed by the same actor who plays the role of Kevin. Dusty is a star student at his high school who is popular among his peers. However, he holds a dark secret, which is that he is also a serial killer. A visit to Dusty's home shows us that his mother is incapacitated by some kind of physical or psychological impairment. Once again, Dusty's circumstances parallel Kevin's, like in the previous stories mentioned. The primary conflict in "The Wicked Heart" occurs when Dusty becomes enamored with Sheila, a close friend to one of his murder victims. He finds himself caught between his impulse to kill and his growing feelings for her. Meanwhile, back at Brightcliffe, during her visit with him Kevin worries about his mother, as evidenced by his observations that she looks tired and drinks too much coffee, suggesting a late night. He also reassures his brother that the latter should not feel obligated to join the track team as he did, which suggests concern for his sibling as well. Finally, Kevin has a girlfriend who he wants to shield from his impending death. He agrees to attend prom with her and to prepare for the event he receives a blood transfusion and asks Ilonka to put make-up on him so that he both looks and feels more energetic than he really is. Thus, like Dusty in his story, Kevin is burdened by familial pressures and appears to be leading a double life of sorts.

In the last episode of the series, entitled "Midnight," Kevin finally concludes Dusty's story. The viewer learns that his grandfather was a serial killer who passed the tendency on to his mother who in turn transmitted it to her son after she suffered a stroke. Dusty wills himself to break the harmful pattern by sparing Sheila and confessing his crimes to her. Therefore, in the end Dusty comes to terms with his complex situation and ends the cycle of violence that has plagued his family. In the same episode, Kevin reflects on his feelings for Ilonka, which he has been reluctant to act on because of his medical condition, saying: "Dying is a very shitty reason not to live." The conclusion of his fictional narrative coincides with this epiphany suggesting that developing Dusty's story helped Kevin to gain insights into his own.

In the end, "Midnight" weaves together all of the previous tales as not only Dusty but the other heroes and heroines of unfinished stories find closure. In addition, some of the characters from previous narratives return. Together, all the patients at Brightcliffe take turns finishing these stories. In the episode's second half, Ilonka's father comes to visit her, and she is finally able to discuss her living will with him, which she had been unwilling to do previously. Ilonka also admits that she is dying, and notes that while everyone is, she will sooner than most. It is these two developments that alert the viewer to the fact that Ilonka has finally accepted her diagnosis and is now able to move forward to savor however much time remains for her. The fact that this change coincides with the conclusion of all the stories once again points to the therapeutic nature of the Midnight Club for its participants. But, what lessons can viewers glean from Gordie, Michele, and Ilonka's stories?

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Conclusion

All three adaptations are connected by their inclusion in the coming-of-age genre. In fact, in *Stand by Me* Gordie and his friends move closer to adulthood thanks to their trip to find Ray Brower's body. Michele and Filippo are pushed into maturity through their shared involvement in a brutal crime while the characters in *The Midnight Club* make the transition to adulthood more rapidly than most because of their terminal illnesses. In *Coming of Age in Children's Literature,* Watson observes that writing is a central motif in many coming-of-age novels (27), especially in personal journals, observing "A journal is a potent way of exploring maturation because it enables its writer to see her life in time and context." (27).

In fact, in *Stand by Me, Io Non Ho Paura,* and *The Midnight Club* writing not only enables the characters to reflect on their lives but also to come to terms with the traumatic events that surround them. In this way, each adaptation suggests that learning to cope with trauma is part of coming-of-age and the ultimate evolution into adulthood. Therefore, it is not solely the traumatic experience itself that helps the characters to mature, but specifically how they learn to confront and respond to it. There are also lessons for younger audiences in each adaptation.

Given the disturbing themes in *Io Non Ho Paura* children similar in age to the main characters would be unlikely to watch alone but they might watch with an adult. Certainly, adolescents and emerging adults could view *Standy By Me* or *The Midnight Club* either with their peers or caregivers. In fact, research illustrates that adult mediation or watching and discussing content with grown-ups can help younger audiences understand and learn from media (Lemish 31). Thus, all three adaptations could help their younger viewers to manage the upsetting circumstances in their own lives. Ultimately, the moral of all these stories whether for their characters or audiences is that words can indeed heal.

Notes

1. PTSD first appeared in the *DSM-III* in 1980 (Horwitz 100). An external event triggers it and eventually the disorder leads to intrusive thoughts, rumination, diminished affect, and detachment (Horowitz 100). Some individuals may report suffering from poor sleep, hyper vigilance, and recurrence or worsening of symptoms in the presence of a reminder of the original traumatic event (Horowitz 100). The most current definition of PTSD explains that symptoms consistent with this diagnosis must last for over a month and should be associated with each of four categories that include: "intrusion symptoms, avoidance symptoms, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and arousal symptoms" (Barnhill, "Trauma and Stressor Related Disorders").
2. Rumination refers to repeated or intrusive thoughts about distressing situations. This type of thinking can worsen mental health, especially with respect to conditions like depression or anxiety ("Rumination: A Cycle of Negative Thinking").

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3. Translation mine.
4. The nursery rhyme that Michele recites in the film is:

Quei ragni pelosi, quei tassi barbassi, lumache bavose e gechi orbettini: restate lontani dai nostri bambini. Voi bestie notturne, amanti del buio voi che non dormite se non al mattino, vegliete sul sonno di questo bambino ("Quei ragni pelosi").	Those hairy spiders those bristly badgers, slimy snails and slow worm geckos: stay far away from our children, You creatures of the night, lovers of the dark, you who do not sleep until the morning comes, watch over the sleep of this child ("Those hairy spiders")

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