

‘Ghosts, murder and mutation’: Literary approaches to pandemic disasters.

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The coronavirus pandemic which began in 2019 has stimulated a number of texts which are aimed at helping children to cope with situations alien to them. To date one resource list produced by the New York City Library records (New York City Library <https://ncdoe.libguides.com/COVID-19ebooks/free> [accessed 12 April 2021]) two hundred and forty picture books, produced in a range of countries, about how coronavirus has impacted upon family life regardless of nationality. Tragically this pandemic is not the only such event in history: ‘The Black Death’ swept across Europe from 1347 to 1351, followed by ‘The Great Plague’, 1665-1666 and ‘The Spanish Flu’ from 1918 to 1920. These life-changing events have stimulated historical fiction for children, teenage readers and adults, however, historical fiction is not the only genre employed by writers to explore the effects on individuals and societies. Murder mysteries, ghost stories, memoirs, and dystopian science fiction have also been used to address the subject of the consequences of pandemics. The following discussion will consider the various ways that such texts have approached these world changing disasters and the common themes which emerge to give our current generation, and in particular our children, ways of thinking about their present and their future.

The new wave of picture books such as *Staying Home* by Sally Nichols and Vivienne Schwarz (Nichols, Sally and Schwarz, Vivienne. *Staying Home*. Andersen Press, 2020), are child-centred and depict the conditions of lockdown and family isolation and how to deal with and adapt to the present situation. Nichols and Schwarz use animal figures to universalise their family unit irrespective of race or ethnicity, for this pandemic has affected the human race across the board. Their focus is on the initial stages of lockdown when families had to stay at home; to adopt higher regimes of hygiene including very regular handwashing, social distancing and limited expeditions outdoors. Unable to go out to work the parents are at home with the children. The emphasis is on how the parents take the time to carefully respond to their children’s questions about the nature of the pandemic and also engage them in activities such as indoor exercise and shared games. The authors do not shy away from the tensions which arise from being together in an enclosed situation. When the children are squabbling their father calms the atmosphere by saying:

“Sometimes it’s hard being together like this. I know we annoy each other sometimes. But aren’t you glad we’ve got each other?”(Nichols and Schwarz, 2020, p.11)

Their parents also draw attention to the people who are still working, who are:

“..looking after people who are sick, or trying to find new medicines. They’re driving lorries and delivering post and growing crops and putting out fires.” (p.15)

The children are being made aware of what is going on outside to support them. Their response is to look forward to when they are grown up and can work to help others. This family-centred text is about everyday life and coping with a new normality. Other picture books, such as *Piperpotamus* by Annis Watts (Watts <https://forcecancercharity.co.uk/new-childrens-book-to-explain-coronavirus/> [accessed 12 April 2020]) take a more scientific

approach adapted to enable children to understand how the Covid-19 virus works, how it is spread and the measures to be taken to prevent infection.

The source and the prevention of infection is a central concern in the historical fiction for children and young adult readers which take the 'Black Death' and 'The Great Plague' as their subjects. One of the problems for people in the 14th and 17th centuries was understanding why and how these diseases were visited upon them. Whereas contemporary texts on the coronavirus pandemic can identify and address scientific reasons for the spread of the disease and measures to limit this, in the medieval period there was no such knowledge. As Philip Ziegler observes:

..in the Middle Ages the plague was not only all destroying, it was totally incomprehensible. Medieval man was equipped with no form of defence – social, medical or psychological – against a violent epidemic of this magnitude.

(Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death* Faber and Faber, 2008, p17).

In *All Fall Down* Sally Nichols (Nichols, Sally. *All Fall Down*. Andersen Press, 2019.) confronts this series of problems through the experiences of Isabel, a thirteen year-old peasant girl who is living in a village outside York in the North of England. She picks up her information from:

Travellers passing though Ingelforn on the road from York (who) told stories of strange happenings in faraway lands. Earthquakes and volcanoes and a new sickness that swept through the people of the cities, leaving not a soul alive.(Nichols, 2019, p.1)

At first this all seems so far away, and something to be relished as a scourge upon their enemies as punishment from God who, as the wandering holy men say: 'sends His angels to wipe the wicked from the earth!'(p.1) However, in the summer of 1348, the pandemic had landed upon British shores and was rapidly spreading throughout the country. What was initially a rumour was now a stark truth. The message from the clerics, pardoners and preachers changed to placing the blame on the very people who were suffering, crying: 'The end of the world is coming!' The only thing that people could do was to 'Repent! Repent!' (p.2) This was now very much their problem posited in terms which situated the disease as emanating from their moral behaviour, so that the burden of conscience was added to the physical devastation which was growing ever closer and would eventually kill 40% of the population in Britain, circa 200,000 people ('The Black Death in England 1348-1350' <https://www.britainexpress.com/History/medieval/black-death.htm> [accessed 12 April 2021]).

Severe hardship and death and were not new situations for Isabel. Her story begins with an account of the very wet weather from 'Midsummer to Christmastide' in when sheep died of disease and the crops failed or went mouldy. When 'Everyone was hungry most of the time, and in the village further up the valley, people died' (p.1) Tragically death in the family was a familiar circumstance, for her mother had died in childbirth, and her step-mother had miscarried three times (p.10). These were, however, the hardships and losses which were understood as part of life, whilst this scourge of a disease was a mystery. In desperation they to pray to God to:

'take the pestilence away. To spare us. We're asking His forgiveness for whatever crimes we might have committed against Him' (p.24).

However, Isabel is a pro-active personality who, rather than suffer in ignorance, goes to her brother Geoffrey who is training for the priesthood and also deciding whether to become an infirmarer, who would be in charge of the infirmary in a monastery. Geoffrey has studied the work of Galen, the ancient Greek philosopher and physician who believed in a 'corrupted atmosphere', (Ziegler, p.20). Ironically it is Isabel, rather than her learned brother, who realises the dangers of how infection is passed on via a corrupted atmosphere and the need for distancing from the sick. Irrespective of his studies Geoffrey has disregarded what he has learnt and carried out his duties in preparation for the priesthood by tending to the needs of the wandering hoards who have fled London and are travelling north to find safety in Scotland. Isabel begs him not to return to them for she is aware that they carry the disease. She pleads with him to 'Come back home with us and be safe.' (Nichols, p.27), but to no avail, and sadly Geoffrey will later die of the plague.

In the wider context it is this very lack of medical knowledge which compounds the situation for superstition is a substitute for science. Isabel tries to work through the possibilities of the causes of: 'a plague sent by God to destroy the wicked...which is perhaps why there is no cure' or 'a disease like any other, caused by bad air, poisoned air' (p.28). She wonders how to keep herself safe and considers the various remedies advised by the preachers such as: 'loving God and begging his forgiveness', or wearing a relic of St. William, 'a bone next to the skin' or the advice of not to 'look them in the eyes' (p.29). Other remedies are suggested to her, for example, a survivor from London recommends 'a silken pouch stuffed with lavender' (p.29), whilst later some villagers nail a homemade crucifix to their door and place a bucket of urine on the threshold (p.53). However, Isabel is not convinced by any of these answers based on superstition and holds to her belief that it is spread by contact with infected people, animals or artefacts. The strength of Nichols' text is the way in which she takes the reader through this questioning, this process of growing awareness and realisation in which Isabel engages. Yes, she is superstitious, a child of her time, yet through fog of supposed means of protection she is reasoning and deciding on the best actions to take. Isolation is her solution, where possible keeping herself and her family safe, for she is the one with all responsibility when her father and step-mother succumb to the disease.

Isabel achieves her aims through determination and resourcefulness, which finally means leaving the village and journeying to York. On the way they meet Thomas, a rich silk merchant who has lost his family due to the plague. He takes in Isabel and her extended family as a substitute for his wife and children who have died. This is a poignant twist in the text which adds an element of adventure. Despite the very comfortable circumstances of plentiful food, good clothing and living in a rich house where they do not have to do any work, Ned, Isabel's brother, is not happy. He joins the gangs of marauding thieves in York, as an act of rebellion, is caught and imprisoned. Thomas sacrifices himself by saying that he was the perpetrator of these crimes and is subsequently tried and hung. This episode of the time with Thomas in York does not sit easily within the text which has hitherto had a very realistic representation of possible actions and events. However, it does demonstrate two things; firstly the desolation of those who survived and secondly that Isabel realises her destiny which is to leave the comforts of city life and return to the land. Here Nichols embeds a feminist perspective. Whilst in York, Isabel has learnt that the widow of a merchant has successfully taken over his business by running it under his name, which evades the problem of a male line of inheritance. In like vein, Isabel decides to take on a pro-active 'unfeminine' role and joins with her brother Richard and becomes a successful farmer and landowner, which was not a normal position for a woman of peasant origin. She had always been interested in the farming practices of her villein father, and had learnt a great deal from him.

Now with the weakening of the feudal system due to de-population, she does not have to be a tied to a lord of the manor, working his land. One of the effects of the 'Black Death' was to make labour hard to come by, and therefore more profitable for the working people. Unlike her father she can claim her freedom and become a landowner. As Nichols notes in her Afterword:

I wanted to write a book which showed that catastrophes have happened here, and could happen again. And I wanted to show that human beings have an astonishing ability to stand in the ruins of their world and to build it up again from the ashes' (p.272)

The Last Hours by Minette Walters, (Walters, Minette. *The Last Hours*. Allen & Unwin, 2018.), like many of the other texts in this discussion, demonstrates how people can take the ruins of their world post a pandemic and re-build. Written for teenage and Young Adult readers this text, like that of Nichols, is about the time of 'The Black Death' in the 14th century. It does, however, have a wider sweep across medieval society, as the narrative is set within a feudal manor, including events in the lives of the lord and lady of their manor in Dorsetshire plus those of the reeve and the villeins. Walters takes the opportunity to explore the effects of the plague upon the social strictures of the feudal system, particularly with regard to the positioning of women. Furthermore the text explores the understanding and wider effect of measures to reduce the spread of the infection which are instituted in her husband's absence by Anne, Lady of the Manor. Such measures lead to effectively to salvation from the plague and the beginnings of a social revolution with the breakdown of the previously rigid feudal system.

The setting of the feudal manor in Dorsetshire is pertinent for 'Geoffrey the Baker' cites the county as being a central point from which the plague spread 'and so wasted the people that scarce the tenth person, of any sort was left alive', (Walters, frontispiece, 2018, n.p.). Sir Richard, the Lord of Devilish Manor, is one of the perpetrators of contamination. Albeit reluctant, but persuaded by his wife, he journeys with his entourage to a demesne, two days ride away, to complete the betrothal of his daughter, Eleanor, to the son of this richer manor (p.5). His absence leaves Lady Anne in charge, thus enabling the development of a narrative which sees the freeing of both a repressed noblewoman and the villeins for whom she is responsible. This is a complex plot which incorporates romance, murder and Gothic twists, such as revealing that Eleanor is in fact the illegitimate daughter of Sir Richard.

That given, the pertinent elements for this discussion are how this community reacts to and deals with the pandemic. Educated by nuns and having worked in the convent infirmary, Lady Anne has knowledge of herbal remedies and knows the importance of isolation from the sick. Whilst Sir Richard is away she hears of the spread of the disease and orders all those belonging to the manor to retreat to inside the moat which surrounds the manor house. Here she further enforces the regimes of cleanliness and hygiene which she had previously instituted within the community, such as educating them about washing and having latrines dug at a distance from habitation and insisting that they be used. She also orders a dwelling to be built 'away from the houses for the purpose of tending the sick' (p.17). Her approach is through education rather than the brutality used by her husband. Consequently her people see the effectiveness of her methods and readily adopt her leadership and approach. Having instituted this protected society it is a matter of maintaining it over a long period of time.

Here the problems arise, problems which can be seen to be common to the need for isolation during a pandemic. Lady Anne intelligently extends her revolutionary approach further by promoting able peasants as her advisors in recognition of their knowledge and skills pertaining to maintaining the well-being of the manor, including consulting with and taking advice from the women. They are thus not situated as passive prisoners but as having an active part in the decision making which affects their lives. Consequently key figures emerge as having capacities for organisation and wise judgement which would otherwise have gone unrecognised and undeveloped. This exacerbates the situation with both her daughter and her husband's steward, who would wish to see the villeins kept in their 'proper' place. The difficulties are not confined to within the moat for they must also protect themselves from the troops of marauding wanderers who are both starving and very likely carry the sickness with them. These outsiders include Sir Richard and the remains of his entourage who return laden with sickness. Showing great strength and seemingly a lack of compassion, Lady Anne refuses them entry, banning them from crossing the moat. She can only do this with the confidence that she is protecting the many at the expense of the few, who would die anyway. The fact that one is her husband, the Lord of the manor, adds further to the drama and pressure. She provides food and what herbal medication, nonetheless they quickly succumb to the plague.

The difficulties do not end with the practicalities of protection, provision and the rationing of food and water, for the extended period of a repressed freedom results in Eleanor, the selfish, ill-behaved and sexually aware adolescent, indulging herself in midnight reveries. Using her powers of status and physical attraction she draws a group of adolescent peasant boys to her, teasing and flirting with them as to which should gain her favours. The result is that rivalries and jealousies arise, resulting in one of them being murdered. The behaviour of the priest intensifies the debauchery, for he is a voyeur and a drunk with no sense of spiritual responsibility for his flock. Despite Lady Anne's efforts to create and maintain an harmonious, safe society, the side effects of isolation are crime, depravity and division which arise between the families of the adolescent boys because there is no clear perpetrator. Her means of dissipating the tensions is to send these weak adolescent boys out of the compound to search for food stocks, for supplies are running low. They are under the command of Thaddeus, a trusted and respected villein who is a demanding, but fair and strong role-model. They go out with poor self-esteem and the fear of being hung for a murder which they did not think that any one of them had committed, for none are truly sure of what happened that night when their friend was stabbed. This is a testing ground for them, but they come through having proved themselves worthy members of the community. The dénouement is that none of them were guilty of the murder for Eleanor has accidentally stabbed the boy.

Around this melee of tension and drama Lady Anne is carrying out her own mission of giving the villeins respect and self-respect, plus teaching them to become literate, which was against feudal law. The process of isolation finally results in hope from desolation; positive change from decay and stultification. A new society arises due to the determination and strength of a woman who assumes far more than would have been seen to be possible at that time as she stimulates what is effectively a social revolution breaking the bonds of feudalism paradoxically when they were bound by the pandemic of 'The Black Death'.

Lady Anne's courage in instituting the strategy of isolation was employed in reality by the people of Eyam in the Peak District surviving through the realities of 'The Great Plague' of

1665-1666. Berlie Doherty and Jill Paton Walsh have both produced novels for children set against the quarantine executed at Eyam. Berlie Doherty's *Children of Winter*, (Doherty, Berlie *Children of Winter*. Catnip, 2019.) is a text for younger children. *A Parcel of Patterns* by Jill Paton Walsh (Walsh, Jill Paton *A Parcel of Patterns*. Penguin Books, 1988.) is an historical novel for mid-years readers.

Children of Winter is a time-slip novel. A contemporary family are on a long walk but become separated because of a severe storm. Their mother leaves the children in an old barn for shelter whilst she goes to find their father. The oldest daughter has an eerie sense of connection with the past in this place. Taking responsibility for the youngsters she tells them a story about 'The Great Plague' drawing on her history lessons from school. As she does so she changes the names of her siblings to Clem, Dan and Tessa which identifies them with the spirits of the past that she feels to be present. The barn is situated outside Eyam. Catherine's connection results in a time-slip narrative recounting the isolation of a family of children in a shepherd's barn during the 'The Great Plague'. What Doherty explores and demonstrates is how a group of young children survive a highly stressful and demanding time by away from their parents, surviving through their own courage and resourcefulness. Why they been left they are not sure. Catherine thinks that:

'something terrible is happening in the village, but I don't know what it is. There is sickness and there are more deaths ...I think Mother and Father want us all to get away from it if we can...' (Doherty, p.31)

Food has been left in the barn by their father and there are blankets and warm clothing. What Catherine does realise is that this is going to last for some considerable time. Catherine is right. Their period of isolation lasts across the year. They have to learn to fend for themselves using the skills they have, problem solving and finding ways of doing things with which they are unfamiliar. Doherty is demonstrating what children can do if needed. This is not a tale of high adventure, rather a didactic text which teaches children about the conditions children experienced in and around Eyam. It also focuses on what children can do, and how they find the inner strength to support each other to come through a crisis by being aware of each other's needs and their own capabilities.

A Parcel of Patterns by Jill Paton Walsh takes a different approach to the story of Eyam so deeply affected by the 'The Great Plague', for this is an historical novel in the form of a memoir written by young Mall Percival. At the end of the novel it is revealed that she has been urged by her friend Francis to write down 'this doleful history' (Paton Walsh, 1988, p. 136) and to treat it as if it is 'a ridding charm'. Such a device was a superstitious way of getting rid of 'a heart's sorrow' (p.136), and was usually burned, but Mall is to leave it for those who come after to discover and learn of their history. It also highlights the tension between superstition and religious faith which runs throughout in the lives of these people, for they are very likely to be joining a Puritan community in New England.

Francis brings her a blank book of paper and says:

You shall write down all this whole doleful history that has befallen us, every name, every misery. All those voices that speak to you...and every memory that bruises your sore-troubled heart... Then, when we go, we'll leave the book behind!' (p.136)

On completion of her task Mall thinks:

Tonight I will close the book, and lay it in the chest, and go on my way.
Tomorrow Frances takes me with new heart, to a new home, new hope,
New England!' (p.137)

The action of writing the memoir is a way of providing a record, and also finding closure to this devastating time.

The approach taken by Paton Walsh affects the tone in which the text is written, for there is a greater certainty and authority on behalf of the narrator about what happened, unlike the previous texts discussed. The novel opens with a clear statement that the parcel of patterns for George Vicars the tailor, which was sent from London, 'brought the Plague to Eyam.'(p.7) Mall reveals herself as a thoughtful and knowledgeable narrator for she also considers that it might also have come from London via Derby carried by a noble family, even though Derby was some distance from Eyam. Her certainty is that the parcel of patterns arrived centrally in the village and was used to make fine and colourful clothes, the finery and colour they desired after the institution of drab clothing under the edict of the Puritan Lord Protector post the English Civil Wars (1642-51), and their stern Parson Stanley who had replaced his corrupt predecessor. As Mall recalls:

'But now the King was back, and we had a new parson, who wore lace at his cuffs himself and preached not against tucks and dyestuffs. There were many of us wanting new garments for the Wakes' (p.8)

'The Wakes' were a festival celebrating re-dedication of the parish church and removal of the old floor rush coverings followed by feasting and drinking. Hitherto banned by the Puritans, Parson Stanley was not as strict as he might have been and had allowed the celebrations to take place in modified form with dancing only between boys and girls and no maypole. But this is now a time of revival of the old customs. Ironically these celebrations are associated with the root cause of the plague coming to Eyam. More than a direct account of the tragedy of 'The Great Plague', Paton Walsh's novel is a reconstruction of life in the period of the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 highlighting the religious tensions in the village which are exacerbated by the new parish priest's wife, Mrs. Momphesson, who orders the first garment. The tailor will also be busy making clothing for the people of the Squire's new and expansive hall which will bring wealth and people requiring clothing. This is a time of change which is welcomed by the villagers, yet the events will bring upon them change which is sorely unwelcome as the Plague takes hold.

On realising that the disease is with them Mall's mother and Parson Momphesson discuss ministering to the sick. He advises her to stay away from the stricken families and only to meet with others outside in 'the clean air' (p.48). She sees helping the sick as part of her relationship to her community, while he remarks that it is his duty as a parson. There is evidently more knowledge about contagion than in the previous epidemic of 'The Black Death', but they do not know how to treat it. Parson Momphesson seeks advice by letter from his contacts in various parts of country and makes provision for dealing with the sick by 'building pesthouses on the common... to which the sick might be carried until they died or recovered, out of the way of others of their kin' (p.73). Finally this measure of quarantine is applied to the whole village which cuts itself off from the outside world and eventually

emerges after the epidemic has subsided. It is this which has made the village of Eyam famous for the part they played in limiting 'The Great Plague'. It did, however, take the cooperation of all of this small populace of three hundred and fifty or so and that of Parsons Mompheyson and Stanley to bring them together as a community undivided by religious allegiance. Although the measure saved the people of Eyam, it also drove division between relationships such as that of Mall and the man she hopes to marry, as he is from another village. She does finally marry the shepherd, Thomas, who has helped her with her small flock of sheep, sadly their happiness is short-lived for he perishes from the plague. His name becomes but one of the two hundred and sixty-seven in the church register of those lost; their names being a formal record and their histories remembered in the stories told by those who survived.

The emphasis in the texts discussed thus far has been, broadly speaking, on historical fiction, however, in those dealing with the Spanish Flu pandemic, authors for teenage and Young Adult readers have employed genres of the Gothic, and the murder mystery within the context of World War I. Cat Winters' *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*, (Winters, Cat. *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*. Amulet Books, 2013.) explores the effects of Spanish Flu on an American community in San Diego, whilst *An Unmarked Grave* by Charles Todd (Todd, Charles. *An Unmarked Grave*. William Morrow, 2012.) is the story of a murder, the victim being hidden amongst the bodies of those struck down in battle or succumbed to flu in the British forces. Both have a strong focus on the effects of the pandemic on their communities and the measures taken to try to combat the disease.

Sixteen-year old Mary Shelley Black, the protagonist of *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*, is sent for safety to join her Aunt Eva on Coronado Island off the coast of San Diego as her mother has died and her father arrested for treason. He has been accused of helping men avoid being drafted into the army. Her experiences on the train journey make it very evident how people are living with fear and anxiety due to the spread of the flu virus. As she enters the railroad car the other passengers eye her with suspicion.

Gauze masks concealed the passengers; mouths and noses. The train smelled of my own mask's cotton, boiling onions, and a whiff of something clammy and sour I took to be fear. (Winters, Cat. *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*, 2013 p.1)

Without a vaccine to fight the virus the approach taken by the American Government was to emphasise hygiene and the highly transmissible nature of the disease. People looked to folk remedies such as wearing garlic scented gum around the neck and eating large quantities of onions, hence the odours Cat picks up in the carriage. Aunt Eva ensures that Mary follows strict hygiene rules and feeds her large quantities of onions. Eva is widowed and has to work in a factory as part of the war effort, so Mary has a good deal of time to herself which is mostly spent in the safety of isolation.

There is a positive for Cat amidst the precautions, fear of infection, and worry about her father, for Coronado Island is where Stephen, her childhood sweetheart lives. Her elated mood is cut short for when she and Aunt Eva visit Stephen's home it is to find that he has enlisted in the army and will be off to the battlefields in France. Shortly after news comes of his death while on duty, although there is little detail of the circumstances. Like so many others Cat has suffered the loss of a loved one in the war. Stephen's brother Julius is taking

advantage of the grief of those bereaved by setting himself up as a ‘spirit photographer’ and becoming involved with seances. Winters is drawing on the history and practice of spirit photography begun by William H. Mumler in 1860 in Boston Massachusetts

Mumler, the first documented spirit photographer, set up shop in Boston in 1860. He charged between five and ten dollars—a huge fee at the time—for cartes-de-visite featuring the customer in a family-portrait pose alongside spirits of his or her deceased loved ones. The pictures undoubtedly comforted sitters, who might be treated to the sight of long-gone mothers or lost children. Mumler claimed that this extraordinary effect flowed from his powers as a medium. He and other spirit photographers assured customers that while they might not be able to see the ghosts around them, *the camera could*. (Phantoms and Frauds <https://blog.oup.com/2013/10/history-spirit-photography/>[accessed 15 April 2021])

Mumler’s practices were continued by other photographers into World War I with some believing that they were true and others that it was all fake. Despite her scepticism Mary does go to one of the seances determined to prove that this is a confidence trick. Mary’s mother was a doctor and she has followed her example of taking a scientific and questioning approach to life. Mary’s belief that this is all fake is complicated by her having been visited by the ghost of Stephen in Aunt Eva’s home. This tale continues in its gothic twists and turns for Mary discovers that Stephen did not die on the battlefield, but suffered from shell-shock, now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. His family are ashamed, fabricate the news of his death and take him from the hospital to be hidden away in their home, chained to his bed. Dramatically Stephen is murdered by his brother and an accomplice. Mary manages to expose their foul deed and Stephen’s spirit is laid to rest. This somewhat melodramatic, gothic plot is heightened by the context of the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 to which both Mary and Eva fall victim, and thankfully recover. For Mary this period of the pandemic and the heightened sense of urgency takes away the unreality of Stephen appearing as a spirit for nothing seems to be normal and the abnormal becomes accepted.

In *An Unmarked Grave* by Charles Todd, young Bess Crawford, is living in a new ‘normal’ as a nurse on the battlefields of France. As said she uncovers a murder mystery, the sad implication being that despite all other dangers such as the fighting and the deadly epidemic, jealousy and violence continue on personal levels. Here the emphasis is not on the experience of the men engaged in battle but instead the bravery and sense of duty of the nurses, who are barely past school age themselves. The novel opens with Bess reflecting on her day:

I stopped just outside the ward and leaned my head against the cool wood of the doorframe. I couldn’t remember when I’d last slept, or for that matter eaten more than a few biscuits....

It was an insidious killer, this influenza...(Todd, 2012, p.1)

She recounts how swift was the onset of the symptoms and how quick death was to follow. Despite falling ill with flu herself on recovery she pursues the trail of the murder for not only did the victim serve in her father's former regiment, he was also a family friend. Bess is

astute, tenacious and determined; she is also courageous in uncovering the murderer and her dedication to her duties to care for the sick in these extreme circumstances.

An Unmarked Grave emphasises and demonstrates the courage of young women in working to help people in the pandemic of the Spanish Flu as does Makiia Lucier's , *A Death-Struck Year* (Lucier, Makiia. *A Death-Struck Year*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.) Set in America in 1918 Cleo, an orphan, is caught up in the epidemic as it has spread to the East Coast. She thinks of herself as 'sad, sorry, and unambitious' and is somewhat at a loss when her private boarding school is closed by order of the Portland Public Health Department as a measure against the spread of the pandemic. Cleo decides to run away from being quarantined at school and to stay with her brother. She is at a loss as to what to do and surprises herself by responding to a newspaper advertisement asking for volunteers to distribute public health leaflets giving guidance on how to protect oneself during the pandemic. As she makes her rounds into the poorer parts of the city she sees scenes which shock her as she has hitherto lived a protected and privileged life in the boarding school. She witnesses cases of families suffering from the flu with no one to care for them, and is urged to intervene by a mother who cannot tend to her sick baby. Cleo takes the infant to the hospital and thus begins her journey from an inexperienced teenager, lacking confidence to discovering that she can do so much more thereby evolving into a young woman who works tirelessly in the hospital under the direction of the young doctor who is to become her love. Both *An Unmarked* and *A Death-Struck Year* are about raising the consciousness and standing of teenage girls. To some extent they are conducive with the genre of teenage romance fiction, however, using the context of the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic they portray positive and strong female role models whilst informing the reader of the realities of life at that time.

The subject of the effects of pandemics also arise in fantasy science fiction such as *Plague* by Michael Grant (Grant, Michael. *Plague*. Dean, 2019.) and M.P. McDonald's *Infection: Sympatico Syndrome, Book One* (McDonald, M.P. *Infection: Sympatico Syndrome, Book One*, Copyright M.P. McDonald, 2016). In *Plague*, the fourth book of Grant's *Gone* series, all of the children under the age of fifteen have been trapped in a transparent dome following a freak accident in a nuclear power plant which has allowed an evil ancient mutated alien Gaiaphage to embed itself in this coastal American town. The effect of the Gaiaphage is to cause genetic mutation so that the surviving teenagers have various super powers taking them into a posthuman state. The series is about the forces of good versus evil; how to survive in a state of independence; how to manage their various superpowers and the rivalries which erupt from the situation. They have to confront a myriad of difficulties and new and supernatural situations and rapidly mature from ordinary teenagers to dealing with and re-making their world. One of the key decisions early on in their process of getting organised is to run a hospital in the extant facilities; something which they have to teach themselves to do. Their success all round is admirable and they succeed in many challenges, but a virulent 'flu-like plague threatens the whole community. Lana is the character with super-powers of healing through touch. She mends broken bones; is able to get severed limbs to re-grow, albeit that they make develop a mutation, such as a whip-like hand; extracts parasites from the bodies of her comrades when a plague of insects attack, all such wondrous feats are within her extraordinary powers. Yet when this virus attacks her powers are ineffective. These teenagers

are highly competent in many respects, especially with their enhanced powers. They can, for instance, use and adapt advanced technology; their weakness lies in other areas of scientific development for they do not have the knowledge to develop a vaccine. Their only recourse is to adopt quarantine as a defence which requires organisation and the co-operation of all parts of the community. Thankfully for them, the virus rages finally burns itself out. Interestingly in these epic work of fantasy science fiction, where all manner of obstacles can be overcome the decision of the author has been to leave a virus as that which cannot be conquered, only dealt with by measures of social organisation, which is a reality in such circumstances until there is a scientific solution in the form of vaccination.

M.P. McDonald's *Infection: Sympatico Syndrome*, rather than fantasy, plunges the reader into the realities of a pandemic. Published five years before the outbreak of Covid McDonald vividly evokes the tensions and emotions associated with the sense of threat emanating from a contagious disease. This is science fiction which is disturbingly close to the experiences of the Covid pandemic transposed into a dramatic situation. The novel begins with Cole Evans who has worked as an epidemiologist while serving in the Navy and knew the kind of diseases they studied there. He learns of an outbreak of a highly virulent virus named Sympatico Syndrome because those infected lose all social inhibitions such as physical distance which enables the virus to spread at a dangerous rate. His decision is to contact his family and his colleague Elly. He convinces his brother of the reality of the danger and that they should go into quarantine on his island property. The text follows the preparation and journeys of Cole and his family, his son Hunter who is away at college and Elly. This will be, he is sure, an extended stay. He therefore gathers together equipment such as battery chargers, camping gear, water purification tablets and food supplies which will not spoil over time. Added to these he buys a shotgun, a hunting rifle and ammunition for he fears that these will be needed to protect them as well as for providing food. These actions are reminiscent of the beginning of the lockdown periods in the UK in early 2020 when stock piling and panic buying were a problem (Coronavirus BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51883440> [accessed 16 April 2021]). In addition to the practicalities McDonald evokes the emotions associated with the immediate physical environment becoming a threat. On her way to the island Elly stays in a hotel where she carefully plans what she will need to take in terms of clothing, how to carry this efficiently and, as it were, how to safely make her escape, for there are the bodies of the dead to contend with and those who were infected and represented danger in their uninhibited state. She must at all times be in a state of high self-awareness:

Breathing through the heavy mask was difficult when she was exerting herself. She leaned against the wall and fought the urge to raise the mask. The moment she thought of lifting it, she was hit with the urge to take a drink of water, but not only did she have to conserve it, but she didn't want to risk lifting the mask even for that brief moment to take a drink.
(McDonald, 2016, p. 133)

It is the detailed examination of the human state under pressure which makes this such a powerful work in the context of contemporary experiences. Elly does find her way to the island, as does Hunter. He has to rely solely on his own initiative as he negotiates the long journey to his family. When it is no longer practicable to use his car he walks, and then finds a horse in an abandoned farm. Technology fails him and he has to resort to old-age modes of

transport which do bring him to the safety of his family. The challenge for this extended family group is now how to deal with the next stage of their ordeal as the series continues.

In conclusion the discussion of these various texts which take pandemics as their subject demonstrates the various genres authors have employed to explore the consequences, practicalities, emotional and social pressures exerted upon the young. The commonalities which come out are an emphasis on determination, personal strength, courage and the discovery that, again in the words of Nichols, that ‘they have an astonishing ability to stand in the ruins of their world and to build it up again from the ashes’.

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