

Monsters Without Motives: Lost Girls and Boys in *Children of the Night*

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Greenberg, Martin H., ed. *Children of the Night: Stories of Ghosts, Vampires, Werewolves, and "Lost Children."* Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 1999. 224 p.

In light of the horrifying events of the last few years, horror fiction just ain't what it used to be. How can we expect ghosts and goblins and ghouls set on revenge to compete with child serial killers, school shootings, and gang violence? The answer is simple—we can't. That's why the short story anthology *Children of the Night: Stories of Ghosts, Vampires, Werewolves, and "Lost Children"* is so disturbing. The anthology deals not only with children set on revenge, it deals with children wreaking havoc for their own diabolical end. The bottom line is that there's really no need for a motive anymore.

Children of the Night contains eleven different stories and eleven different motives (or the lack thereof) by eleven short story writers, ranging from Sheridan LeFanu to Suzy McKee Charnas. Some stories seem to follow the Fairy Tale structure, complete with shock and moral. Al Sarrantonio's "Wish" urges children to "be careful what you wish for because you just might get it", when a young girl wishes for "Christmas forever!" Although it is April, young Daisy wishes hard for Christmas eternal and gets her wish, hearing a sinister voice whispering acquiescence. Hiding in the basement with her brother, she attempts to "un-wish" Christmas, begging for April and bumping into seasonal boxes, watching "unborn watermelons scattered dryly everywhere". Nothing will ever be born again, it seems, as Daisy finds herself frozen in a snow globe of merry gentlemen and good cheer—and, of course, the sinister voice that granted Daisy's wish in the first place.

Suzy McKee Charnas' "Boobs" takes an entirely different route. Eighth grader Kelsey develops earlier than her classmates, and is the subject of much teasing. One particularly nasty boy gives her the nickname "Boobs." Not only must Kelsey deal with a newly blossomed chest, far beyond the restraints of the training bras of her classmates, but she has also begun menstruating. She escapes school every day with flushed cheeks and ringing ears and once, a broken nose from Billy, her main tormentor. Imagine her surprise when one night during her period, a night accompanied by a full moon, she transforms into a wolf. Exhilarated by her newfound freedom, she prowls her neighborhood late at night, feasting on dogs. Unfortunately for Kelsey, she wakes up her own awkward teenaged self again, and must deal with Billy come light of day.

The stories of revenge in this collection are the easiest to believe because they involve monsters with motives. Charnas' spunky Kelsey refuses to suffer Billy's sexual harassment anymore and takes matters into her own hands. She seems a spokeswoman

for all young girls suffering with public displays of puberty. We can visualize this former tomboy holding up her fists and daring Billy to "say that again." What she doesn't realize is that the boys have started developing as well, and she can no longer hold her own simply because she has powers of metamorphosis. The fascination Charnas' story holds is the fact that Kelsey is repulsed by her young budding body but absolutely thrilled by her wolfish frame. She admires herself in the mirror, calling herself gorgeous and noting the neatly tucked teats on her belly, rather than her huge, awkward breasts. She recognizes animalistic power and makes it her own. The reader finds herself cheering young Kelsey on, silently of course, because she must remain horrified when Kelsey takes matters into her own hands.

Coming of age also means coming to power, or, more distinctly, coming into one's own power, in "The Magic-Stealer," a neat little bit of folklore from Josepha Sherman, which showcases the importance of accepting the wisdom and power of elders. Nitika is Skanea's apprentice, next in line to be the Power-Speaker of the People. She doubts not only herself but also her ability to act as the next Power-Speaker of her tribe, merely because of her age. It isn't until she takes confidence in her own agency that she becomes a complete person.

Larry Segriff's "Specters in the Moonlight" attempts to tackle child abuse and ghosts all in the same few pages, but ultimately falls short of having a protagonist with a motive. We are left to wonder why the hero would even bother. There is no reason beyond simple human compassion that he wishes to help the young spirit, trapped forever in an afterlife of incestual rape. But then again, perhaps simple human compassion is the hardest motive to believe.

What the majority of the anthology lacks in style and skill, it makes up for in enthusiasm and a knack for storytelling. Perhaps Martin H. Greenberg had this in mind when he ended his collection with an excerpt from Orson Scott Card's 1992 novel *Lost Boys*. In this story the reader is presented with double motive: that of the characters and that of the author. Card ends his sad tale of missing children with a justification of his text. He explains his motive for writing in an epilogue, one reminiscent of Mary Shelley's prologue to *Frankenstein*. Here Card answers the unasked questions of "is this a true story?" and "since it's not, how dare you assume to know how the parents of missing children feel?" While Card explains his love and feelings for his own "missing child," a young son suffering from cerebral palsy, he needn't have taken the time.

No matter how real these stories may seem, they are still fiction. We read them to be entertained and to hear a story. If the author chances upon convincing us, then his/her job is done, and very well completed. Having been faced with the horrors and atrocities of the outside world, with the lack of understanding, with the lack of answers to the "why did he do it?" and the "why didn't you know she was so disturbed?" questions that follow on the heels of the slaughters in our schools, we don't really need justification at the end of fictional texts.

Sometimes the movies are right. Monsters just don't need motives any more. That's what makes them monsters. As the popular horror movie *Scream III* reminds us, this is the 01's, and random violence for cruelty's sake is sometimes the name of the game.