

From Mr. Hands to Mr. Molester

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Braunbeck, Gary A. *Prodigal Blues*. Baltimore: Cemetery Dance Publications, 2006. 304 p.

Those of you who are Braunbeck fans more than likely remember the brilliant short story “Mr. Hands,” in which the mother of a kidnapped molested/murdered child invokes a demonic presence in order to get vengeance on child molesters. As with all horror, in “Mr. Hands” the most well-intended plans take a turn for the darker, and the result is the supernatural version of vigilante justice, where even innocents can be killed if they happen to get in the way.

While Braunbeck’s newest novel-length tale, *Prodigal Blues*, revisits the same theme—child molestation—as his short story, it has more in common with two of his previous novels, *In Silent Graves* (originally titled *The Indifference of Heaven*, 2000) and *Keepers* (2005), than it does with “Mr. Hands.” In those two novels, a narrator is “drafted” as the central sympathetic consciousness through which a tale featuring gore, horrifying imagery, and gothic sensibilities is filtered. *In Silent Graves* reads a bit like a fairy tale read by an adult to a child to ease him or her into a peaceful sleep. It incorporates a physically deformed Pied Piper of Hamelin as one of its main characters, as well as various walking dead bodies, to relate a story about redemption through sadness, grief, and love. The main character, newscaster Richard Londrigan, becomes an unwilling participant in a game that tests reality and leads to his shedding his vanity, his ambitious nature, and his indifference to the suffering of humanity. *Keepers* begins with a horrific scene of a strange man in a bowler hat being killed in traffic almost immediately, followed by a man being torn limb from limb by Doberman pinchers, but then flashes back to Gil Stewart’s (the main character) childhood, in order to tell of his quest to discover a secret self of which he is entirely unaware. Stewart unwittingly finds himself the center of attention for a group of men called The Keepers, and a creature that is a ghoulish combination of just about every animal known to man. He must force himself to remember his painful past to realize why the Keepers are after him, and why a mangy mutt has chosen the present night, of all nights, to come to his home to die.

Prodigal Blues presents readers with the third such unwilling participant in a Braunbeck novel, Mark Sieber. Sieber is a janitor at OSU (which is apparently close to Cedar Hill, Ohio, the author’s fictional town which serves as a setting for some two dozen short stories) who begins the novel with a fistfight because a student makes a joke about pedophilia. This incident leads Sieber, the tale’s narrator, to tell the story of how he came

to be so sensitive to the issue. Although his story starts with a run-of-the-mill road trip from Cedar Hill to Topeka, it soon becomes nightmarish when he finds himself stranded near a truck stop in Jefferson City, Missouri. It is at this venue that he meets the same child seen on all the “Have You Seen Me?” posters in the area, when he returns to his table after looking at the posters (earlier he saw the girl in a VW minivan). He suspects that this unlikely event, finding a missing child in the exact location from which she vanished a year earlier, has been orchestrated when the child apologizes to him for his finding her. Soon, Sieber finds out exactly what was in store for him when he is kidnapped by the group of people with whom the girl was traveling.

The surprise comes when Sieber meets his kidnapers, who turn out to be a group of four teenagers, aged nine through twenty-one. Each of the four is badly burned and scarred, to the point where each is forced to wear stage makeup, while some have prosthetic noses; one even has had his legs sawed off. It turns out that the four have escaped from a man they know only as Grendel, an internet pornographer who specializes in supplying children for rape, humiliation, and torture. Sieber, similar to previous Braunbeck narrators, finds himself being dragged into an underground world by pitiable humans who need help in order to reclaim their lives and their dignity. He is at first reluctant, that is until the oldest of the four, Christopher, forces him at gunpoint to watch a video of what happened to a young, mentally retarded teen named Connie, who was at one time Grendel’s “favorite” (I beg the reader’s indulgence for this long quoted passage, but it is central to understanding Braunbeck’s themes and what I see as his authorial intention):

Even though I’d never seen her before, it was obvious from the characteristics of her face that this was Connie. She was carrying a stuffed doll that I recognized; Blossom, of *The Powerpuff Girls* fame. The man whispered something in her ear, and Connie, smiling, took off the robe and climbed naked onto the table, dropping Blossom to the floor as she did so. The man signaled Christopher to close the door, and then, for the first time, stood still long enough for me to get a good, clear look at his face.

I had seen Grendel before. Several times. You’ve seen him too, remember? He’s the guy who bags your groceries at the store on Friday night; the man who checks your gas meter every other month; the fellow who manages the graveyard shift at that Steak ‘n’ Shake twenty minutes from your apartment.... Remember him now?

Grendel checked the positioning of the lights, all the while whispering things to Connie that I was glad I could not hear.... Grendel signaled Christopher to assist him with strapping down Connie’s arms and legs. Once that was done, Grendel took off his hospital gown and massaged his penis into a stiff erection, which he then covered with

lubricant from a tube Christopher handed to him. Once he was satisfactorily slick, Grendel turned and climbed up onto the table, positioning himself between Connie's legs. I watched Blossom then. She was smiling....

I stared at Blossom as the leg of the table behind her shook and shuddered from the constantly-shifting weight above it; it would jerk slightly forward, then right itself before jerking forward again, a steady rhythm for a while, then getting faster, and sweet, sweet Blossom, she just sat there smiling at me, shaking from the vibrations....

Then one of Christopher's shoes passed by and kicked Blossom away. I was so startled that I blinked and looked up at the table where Grendel, covered in gore, was on his knees ejaculating into the open stomach cavity of something that looked like it might have once been a human being but was now only a steaming heap of bones and liquids and blood and—

—I lurched forward, shoving everything out of my way as I tried to get to the bathroom.... (104-108)

I consider this passage to be the most important in the novel. First, it seems to come out of right field, blindsiding the reader in its frankness and graphic quality. Before this scene, the novel is informed by Braunbeck's typically reserved, understated prose, which can best be described as impressionistic (think connecting a lot of blurry semantic dots in order to decipher a big picture). This is the first instance of truly visceral violence and graphic gore, a trait which defines much of the book afterwards. But what impresses me about this passage is that the reader, who until this time has been viewing child molestation in an almost intellectual way, through the consciousness of Sieber, is suddenly forced into the shoes of the child. The narrator's action of focusing on the doll during the sexual molestation is similar to what is often reported of children—the attempt to get “outside the body” and find what psychologists call “a happy place.” One can only marvel at the brilliance of forcing the reader to witness sex with an under-aged, mentally retarded child in this fashion. The sickening rocking back and forth of the table is more real than would have been a graphic depiction of penetration, perhaps because the latter is simply too terrible to conceive of and would be too nauseating to read about. The sudden jerking of the reader's focal point to the molester's masturbating over the gutted body, as unreal or surreal as it seems, comes as a complete shock. Whether or not this particular act of brutality strikes the reader as being less “real” because of the visceral quality of the prose at this point is unimportant, since the purpose of the author seems to be to discomfort.

Of particular importance in this quoted passage is also another of Braunbeck's characteristic techniques—that experience, perhaps even life itself, always has a mythical

(or a better word might be archetypal) quality. Even the casual reader will pick up on the author's hypothesis here that killers, even the most egregious child molesters, look like you and me. As I've often commented when hearing reports from the neighbors and friends of "normal guys" who turn out to be serial killers: if they did not act like normal people, they would not have had the opportunity to kill more than once or twice before being caught. In fact, one of the best dialogues between Sieber and Christopher occurs when the latter is explaining exactly how to remain inconspicuous when engaged in criminal activity, something he learned from Grendel. But back to my original point about archetypes. Braunbeck fans recognize here and throughout *Prodigal Blues* his recurring technique of moving from the human tale of specific incidences occurring to specific individuals to a more universal, pseudo mythological saga starring creatures such as fallen angels (*In Silent Graves*) or shapeshifting demons (*Keepers*). And in such cases what he seems to produce is more akin to the societal myth of origin than it is to the typical novel. In *Prodigal Blues*, for example, the only identifiable individuated, absolutely human character is Sieber. Grendel is represented as the uber-molester, capable of unrealistic atrocities that ring true more in spirit than in deed. The four children who kidnap Sieber all use stage makeup to cover their scars and dismemberments, and as Sieber comments the first time he sees them, have no discernible characteristics whatsoever. They are simply a black teen in a white T-shirt, a small boy in a wheelchair, a teenaged girl with long black hair that hangs in her face, and an older boy whose face looks like a mannequin's. To the uninitiated Braunbeck reader, the children might be dismissed as being a bad attempt at representing the terrible atrocities that molested children undergo, for after all, their injuries would hardly be survivable; however, I see Braunbeck more as a writer who should be understood *in toto*, with all of his fictions in mind while reading one particular work. It seems clear to me that outside of Sieber, each of the other characters is meant to be seen as *people*, rather than as a *person*. This makes the story more effective, especially since the prose itself—word choice, imagery, poetic language—convey the necessary emotive quality of the tale. So when Christopher forces Sieber to watch the video of Connie's murder, he is forcing him to watch the image of every molester who ever lived ending the life of every child who ever died at the hand of a pedophile, and when he (Christopher) explains the reasons behind his complicity in the making of the video, he is informing Sieber (and the reader) exactly how it comes to be that all kidnapped children can be controlled by all kidnapers. One could say that *Prodigal Blues*, like the earlier novels, takes on a historical context, which is perhaps why the molester takes on the moniker Grendel—the first monster.

I can say without reservation that Braunbeck fans will enjoy this novel as much as they did *In Silent Graves*. It is as powerful, without being overly experimental (as was *Keepers*). Ultimately, each person who comes to this novel will have to decide for him or herself whether the graphic quality of certain scenes works, and whether the sense of universality achieved by creating characters as archetypes is more effective than a personal story, such as Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002). Certainly, both types of writing have their strengths. However, dear reader, I ask you, which style has survived thousands of years, and in almost every culture, passed down from generation to generation?

