

Replanting the Bad Seed

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Pinborough, Sarah. *The Taken*. New York: Leisure Books, 2007. 323 p.

The frightening fairy tales and legends that parents tell their children often serve as tools to scare youngsters into following the rules or avoiding danger. The boogeyman, for example, will capture children who don't go to sleep when they should. The man with a hook will surely find the young lovers parked in the woods after dark. Fortunately for us real humans, these stories are just legends or myths. However, in Sarah Pinborough's *The Taken*, the Catcher Man, an ancient Pagan figure, is indeed real. He is said to steal lost children, yet this is not what causes the horror in the book. The nightmare doesn't truly begin until he brings the lost children back. As the narration indicates, "the dead never really leave us in peace... they feel so close I'm not sure where they end and we begin."

Mary, an aging mother, begins to realize this unmistakable truth. The sins of her past return to haunt her, no longer bound by the restrictions of death, as the cherubic ten-year-old with blonde curls and a devilish grin comes back to see Mary and, with a less-than-innocent giggle, begins to unleash thirty years of pent-up fury. And all inhabitants of the sleepy farming village of Watterrow, a village with a shameful secret, will pay. With a simple phrase, Melanie Parr ignites the guilt and terror that had lain dormant in Mary for three decades. She tells her that "the Catcher Man brought me home."

When Melanie was a child, Watterrow had possessed all of the expected country values and small-town charm readers would expect from an unspoiled rural area. Each generation had grown up together, and parents raised their children together. In such a tightly-knit community, no one is unfamiliar, and nobody is out of place. That changes when a young girl named Melanie moves to town with her divorced mother. They are outsiders—city folk. In short, they just don't belong. Nevertheless, the young mothers of Watterrow want to become acquainted with the Parrs and thus, encourage their children to befriend Melanie. Little do they know the danger that they were unleashing upon their sweet, naïve children.

As a child, Melanie is, in the words of the vicar, an "abomination." She loves to play sadistic mind games, turning the village children against one another and reveling in their guilt and physical pain. Underneath the blonde ringlets, she is an unquestionably malevolent being. Upon discovering the burns and bruises of their children and hearing their stomach-turning secrets, Mary and the other mothers make the impetuous decision to find the young girl and scare her straight. Their plan goes awry and, in the throes of a violent storm, Melanie becomes one of the lost children. She vanishes without a trace for thirty years—until the storm returns to Watterrow.

In Pinborough's fictive world, the Catcher Man gives lost and dying children a choice. They can suffer the pain and terror of death, or join him in the "in between." Melanie was one of many children who followed him into the storm, but, unlike the others, the storm made her powerful. Unfamiliar with complicated human emotions such as revenge, the Catcher Man unwittingly allows a vengeful and powerful Melanie to return to Watterrow. And with her return, strange events begin to occur.

Alex, Mary's niece, is among the first people to see unknown children cropping up throughout the village. They are dressed in clothes of differing eras, totally unsuitable for the weather, and they play in the streets despite the torrential downpour and powerful wind. They stand and stare with unsettling grins upon their faces, seemingly laughing at the townspeople. Almost immediately after these lost children emerge with the storm, brutal deaths become commonplace. The Catcher Man may have brought them back, but it is Melanie who is now leading them—and she has her own agenda. As Melanie tracks down the children who told on her and the mothers who had sought vengeance all those years ago, Alex becomes intricately involved in the search for the truth. Because of her own personal crisis, Alex is the only one who can slip into the "in between." Only she can follow the children into the darkness and bring the nightmare to the end, without becoming a target for Melanie's wrath.

Sarah Pinborough artfully builds the tension as she varies the point of view between multiple characters. Narrators include Alex, Melanie's victims, and even the Catcher Man. This strategy brings all the pieces of the Melanie Parr mystery together, shedding light on what really happened in Watterrow three decades earlier. Tragedy peppers the lives of all involved. No one is safe, including the vicar. Over the course of the storm, a hefty percentage of the village's tiny population is brutally slaughtered by the forty-year-old with a ten-year-old's emotional maturity and sense of justice.