

Memento Mori: Pushing Past the “Dead Queer” Stereotype in Fiction about Suicide

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This paper began in its earliest stages as me scratching notes to myself about my process when writing a novel. I was working on my fourth novel – a story that examines the after-effects of the suicide of a queer, 17-year-old high school boy on people around him. I found myself extremely frustrated that although I was tackling my fourth book, this novel was proving no easier to write than my first. Maybe if I could chart or track my writing method, I thought, I could make the process more streamlined, more efficient, or just a lot less painful the next time. However, as my notes about my writing process quickly revealed to me, there was a problem. The novel was not like any of the novels I’d written before because for the first time I was writing from a non-fiction, quasi-autobiographical place that ran completely counter to what I had always believed were my interests as a writer: normally, I prefer to write magic realist, fantasy-based fiction – what some have even labeled “slipstream” fiction.

The motivation to write the novel came when I learned that a 17-year-old boy who was attending the government-funded Catholic high school where my partner was a teacher killed himself after a bout of homophobic bullying. There were queer teachers

and staff in the school who might have been in a position to help him or offer empathy, but they didn't and/or couldn't because of the highly restrictive atmosphere of the Catholic school for queer people, where teachers or staff who are exposed as being non-heterosexual are fired from their jobs and have no legal recourse with which to retaliate.

My partner only knew the young man in passing – she had never taught him – and I didn't know him at all, but his death had a definite impact on our small household. For my partner it was the last straw: she quit her job at the Catholic school and, making a major career change, she decided to apply to graduate school and study the institutionalization of homophobia in Canadian Catholic schools. Although *I* had never met the boy, I was struck with the lingering sadness that I think most people feel when they hear that someone very young has taken her or his own life. I was also disturbed by the injustice of the fact that his death went publicly unacknowledged and his bullies unpunished in any formal way. I felt very keenly that the boy who'd committed suicide was a soldier fallen in battle, but his struggle was not recognized as such, particularly in the context of Alberta (coincidentally the last province in Canada to allow same sex marriage) and his Catholic school where queerness would have been either unrecognized or addressed only as love the sinner, hate the sin. I was struck by the injustice of the fact that even though being LGBTQ is not illegal in Canada, an inordinate number of young people still kill themselves because of it, one Alberta study concluding that homosexually oriented males account for 62.5% of Alberta suicide attempts (Bagley 24). Although the school's refusal to openly acknowledge or publicly mark the boy's death for fear of encouraging copycat behaviour among the other students made sense, I wondered how the problem of the high rate of suicides and suicide attempts among queer youth might

ever be solved if suicide and queerness in general were topics that were never explicitly addressed, especially in a publicly-funded Catholic school setting? How could I write about this and do it justice?

All of these issues were at the forefront for me in the process of starting work on the novel. Because the novel would be so unlike the novels I had written before, the writing came with a number of constraints that I had to impose or were necessarily imposed upon me if the book were to not be part of what I saw as a worrying phenomenon in mainstream North American culture of the “dead queer” genre. By this I mean the fact that non-heterosexual characters are rarely central characters in film or mainstream texts, and when they are, those films or texts that do receive significant attention usually include that disturbingly popular character of the queer man or woman who is doomed and/or dies either directly or indirectly because of his or her sexuality. Primary examples of this are award-winning films such as *Brokeback Mountain*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and *Milk*. In terms of North American literature, Alison Bechdel's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic memoir *Fun Home*, about her closeted gay father's suicide, is another example of the kind of text about queers that is accepted and celebrated by the mainstream. Christopher Isherwood sardonically refers to this almost desirable, romantic aspect of the “dead queer” in his novel *A Single Man* when the main character George imagines the internal monologue of his straight, apparently liberal-minded neighbour. Pretending to be her, George imagines her saying or thinking the following about him and his recently dead partner: “Let us even go so far as to say that [homosexual relationships] can sometimes be almost beautiful – particularly if one of the parties is

already dead, or, better yet, both” (28). This mainstream depiction of dead queers as the only interesting or acceptable queers was very troubling.

It became essential that I write a fiction that, although it addressed queer suicide, could not be as easily read as another example of the “dead queer” genre. I needed to know if there was a formula for this “genre,” and if so how I could avoid it in writing my book about a queer suicide in Alberta. I also needed to challenge myself as a writer, and not inadvertently follow my own formula and reproduce books I had already written. As such, I gave myself a number of constraints on the level of plot, narrative, character, and language:

- 1) I did not want to write a typical “dead queer” story, but I also did not want the alternative of yet another cute coming-out story. This was going to be difficult when writing a book centering on a young, dead, gay man.
- 2) The novel had to take place in Alberta.
- 3) The boy would not appear alive in flashbacks – a common strategy I’d noticed in other fictions about suicide. He could appear, but if he did, it would be in the present, as a corpse.
- 4) No ghosts allowed – every other book I’d written had fantastic or magical elements and I wanted to see if I could do a novel without any fantasy or magic.
- 5) The book had to be queer even on the level of the sentence – my solution to this was to borrow from Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein because of their disregard for conventional grammar and Stein’s use of repetition appealed to me. To do this I would start every sentence in the novel with the word “Because.”

6) I would focus on the “disenfranchised mourner”: Commonly in texts about suicide or trauma, the story centres on the person who has died and his or her immediate circle of friends and family as in texts such as Anne Enright’s novel *The Gathering*, Salvatore Antonio’s play *In Gabriel’s Kitchen* and Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Joyce Carol Oates’s novel *The Falls*, which begins with a gay man committing suicide, presented a model that was closest to what I was looking for in that the majority of that novel revolves around characters who never knew the main “dead queer” character, but they are still affected by his death. Set in the 1950s, this novel opens with a man named Gilbert Erskine throwing himself into Niagara Falls while on his honeymoon because he realizes that he can never love his wife because he is in love with another man. Once Gilbert commits suicide, he never appears again as a character, except in his new wife/widow’s seven-day vigil on the shores of the river, and her few brief memories of their disastrous wedding night. The rest of *The Falls* concentrates on the wife’s second marriage and her children. In a sense, Gilbert haunts the novel, but only as an uncomfortable and inconvenient, fleeting memory for Gilbert’s widow. Although *The Falls* matched what I wanted to do in terms of structure, it was difficult not to read Gilbert’s suicide in *The Falls* as a blatantly obvious plot device – in an interview with Joyce Carol Oates at the end of Harper Perennial edition of *The Falls*, an unnamed interviewer asks Oates how Gilbert’s closeted nature might “enhance the reading of the story” (8). Oates replies, “Many suicides, especially in the past, have surely been a consequence of sexual anxiety” (9). Given that Gilbert’s sexuality never resurfaces in the novel and that there are no other queer characters in the novel, a cynical reader might see his homosexuality as just a convenient excuse for his suicide and way to set the rest of the plot in motion. Although character-

and structure-wise *The Falls* is highly unusual, Oates disappointingly seems to rely on the stereotype of the “dead queer” to jump-start the story. I absolutely could not have the boy’s suicide in my novel appear simply as a plot device.

Although I did not appreciate the way Oates seems to be using her queer character’s suicide as a plot device, her novel’s branching out into the lives of characters who have no direct relationship with Gilbert Erskine, but who nonetheless are affected by his suicide, was a provocative one. Noticing the depth of my partner’s grief when the boy in her school died, I realized that there was little fiction available that examined the outer circles of people affected by suicide, the ripple effects of the suicide, what Kenneth J. Doka refers to as the “disenfranchised mourners.” Doka defines disenfranchised grief in the following way: “There are circumstances . . . in which a person experiences a sense of loss but does not have a socially recognized right, role, or capacity to grieve. The person suffers a loss but has little or no opportunity to mourn publicly” (3). By concentrating on a selection of disenfranchised mourners as the main characters of my novel, perhaps I could avoid the “formula” of narratives about suicide and make something new. Ha! Easier said than done.

I immediately encountered problems. By deciding that the boy and his family would not be the centre of the book, a writer friend of mine pointed out to me that I was saddled with an unwieldy narrative structure from the very beginning: seven unconnected, distinct characters and their separate stories – connecting them to each other was going to be very difficult. In addition to this, every sentence was going to start with the word “Because” but I had to somehow prevent the language from being too repetitive; I had a gay main character, and it was supposed to be a book that centered on

his suicide but was not going to be about a “dead queer.” Essentially I’d let the novel jump into its own Niagara Falls before I’d even begun.

I recalled from writing a previous novel that the writing method that had proven the most useful to me as a writer in the past draws from a technique I’d heard Michael Ondaatje uses – and maybe it’s not even true. “They” say that how Ondaatje writes a novel is that he begins by writing disconnected, non-sequential, unrelated scenes, images and snippets of dialogue – what basically sounds to me like eating dessert first – and then after he’s written all the scenes, he bridges them together, and voila! A novel.

I decided to ignore my apparent and various writing problems, temporarily threw my noble writerly intentions out the door, and concentrated instead on writing scenes, images, lines, that gave me pleasure and resonated for me: I knew, for example, that I would have as a character a girl who liked unicorns; I knew there would be a significant scene of a bickering, married couple breaking up – with the husband moving out and the wife helping him pack a box of dishes; I knew there would be a drag queen who dresses up as Lt. Uhura from *Star Trek* as part of her lounge act; I knew a closeted guidance counselor would work in the school; I knew it would take place during the seven days of the week following the suicide.

So I started writing the “Michael Ondaatje way,” and immediately realized I was writing to formula. Not a formula established by Ondaatje or anyone else, but my *own* formula.

I realized that the bickering husband and wife was a unit I had used in every single book I’d written so far, so my adaptation of the Michael Ondaatje way was just the lazy, predictable, Suzette Mayr way. I realized that writing about this breaking up

heterosexual couple in a story about a queer youth who killed himself was perhaps counterintuitive. So I started again, and on a whim changed the pronouns in the bickering husband and wife scene from “he” and “she” to “he” and “he,” and the “he” and “he” would be two male characters selected from the seven fictional disenfranchised mourners: the couple bickering over the box of dishes would be the Catholic school principal Max and the school’s guidance counselor Walter. Suddenly, I was able to generate 100 pages of story.

I gave the 100 pages to two readers with very different aesthetics, one a poet, one a prose writer, and they both hated that initial draft. They hated that every sentence in the 100 pages started with the word “Because” and found the repetition tedious; they both said that all the characters were interchangeable and that I clearly didn’t know how to manage them. They asked, why is there a girl obsessed with unicorns in this book, and both observed that she didn’t fit in at all. Even though the book was loosely structured around the seven characters and seven days, structurally it was still an amorphous blob.

I went back to the Michael Ondaatje method and cherry-picked some more, but this time as a researcher.

I watched several episodes of the original *Star Trek*, concentrating particularly on the character Lt. Uhura; I researched the effects of homophobia on sexual minorities in Alberta; I researched drag queens, having an illuminating email exchange with Canadian Literature scholar Belén Martín Lucas about drag queens, and reading various theorists; on the advice of another friend of mine I researched unicorns and cut and pasted pictures of unicorns from the internet into an electronic unicorn scrapbook; I interviewed many

people in the teaching profession. I heard Rufus Wainwright sing his new song, “Do I Disappoint You,” on the radio.

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I know nothing about music, but I was so moved by this song and Rufus Wainwright’s beautiful voice and his Canadianness and unabashed gayness, that I bought the CD immediately and played the song over and over again – and realized that I’d finally found my structure and I’d figured out how to end the book.

After listening repeatedly to the song is “Do I Disappoint You,” I decided that it was obviously a love song about a torturous love affair sung by a man to a man that starts on a drum climax, hits bigger and bigger climaxes and then ends on a few cute notes played on a flute – I was moved by the excessiveness and decadence of the orchestration, the over-the-top lyrics, the references to Hell, the repetition and upping the orchestral ante that comes with every repetition. I approached the song as a text I could transcreate, and basically choreographed my novel manuscript to the song. The “Because” sections would operate as the book’s repeating chorus.

After giving in to the operatic excessiveness the book had been missing all along and settling on a loose, repetitive “song” structure, and after watching many episodes of *Star Trek*, I realized that the giant collection of characters I had assembled didn’t have a lot in common, but they did have the dead boy in common. By having him in common, they were in fact their own little solar system, and perhaps he was the sun in the middle of it. Maybe – because the boy had died – their solar system was circling around a dead star, a supernova that was burning everything up in its path as it expanded and exploded. It incinerates everything around it, or perhaps burns away the impurities and leaves

behind only the essential and authentic. What if the text spanned a week, and then Monday – the day the boy killed himself – just started repeating over and over and over (like a song’s chorus) for all the living characters, so that they’d be stuck in an eternal rotation around this dead sun? These seemingly disconnected characters would all be connected in the way planets are connected with each other in a solar system.

The Michael Ondaatje way: I expanded my initial draft to 200 pages.

At the same time, thematically a number of elements in the manuscript started matching up with my research on unicorns once I started uncovering the truth about unicorns: I found out that during a period in the middle ages, unicorns were often incorporated in Catholic iconography because of their association with virgins, that there were actually virgin cults around unicorns, and a strong association was made between the capturing of a unicorn and the passion of the Christ with the unicorn as a stand-in for Christ. Unicorns belong to the age of chivalry, the characters on *Star Trek* often trade heavily on this notion of or discourse around chivalry and codes of honour. I learned that there is a unicorn constellation called Monoceros which is positioned close to Orion, and maybe my solar system centered around an exploding sun was actually also a constellation.

I had a marvelous coincidence of themes blooming out of all this material. A constellation structure permitted me the freedom as a writer to find multiple meanings in the same cluster of characters. The title of the book would be *Monoceros*.

The Suzette Mayr way – my manuscript was now 300 pages long.

Monoceros will be published very soon, and looking over the final drafts I see that many of my initial constraints have fallen away, and that as a writer I *do* in fact have

my own formula that I am apparently very reluctant to deviate from. Have I learned anything about how to make the novel writing process any easier for myself next time? Probably not. Have I managed to avoid adding another text to the “dead queer” genre? Perhaps, but perhaps not. Ultimately, what I hope to have accomplished is showing readers and writers another way of looking at how to write fiction about suicide, and hopefully to have contributed to the necessary public dialogue around queer suicide and visibility, particularly in Alberta and in Canadian Catholic schools. I can hope for nothing less.

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