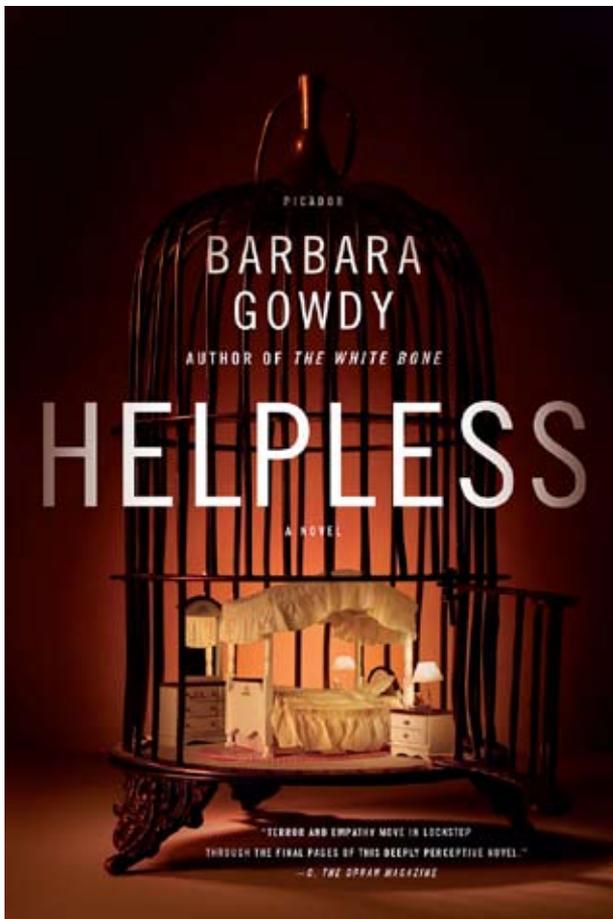


REVIEW ESSAY

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The Monster At The End of The Book: A Review of Barbara Gowdy's *Helpless*

(New York: Picador, 2007)



Helpless is about a man named Ron who falls in love with, and then kidnaps, a six-year-old girl named Rachel. The author, Barbara Gowdy, very quickly clues her readers in to Ron's paedophilic thoughts and feelings in what amounts to progressively louder whispers of our domestic bugbear equivalent to the foreign suicide bomber. But Ron maintains a tenuous control. His self-restraint, even when he has Rachel completely within his grasp, Gowdy says she finds "heroic".¹ His struggle to stay on the side of good and right, to control his urges, to put Rachel's welfare above his lust and his compulsion to fetishise her, is what this novel is about. He never acts on his feelings – he maintains control insofar as he never molests or rapes the girl – and whether or not this is strictly realistic, it leaves the open-minded reader in a difficult ethical position.

Gowdy revels in leaving her readers in difficult ethical positions.

Throughout her career, Barbara Gowdy has consistently chosen to write about characters who live outside of constructed social norms, and to write about these characters with a sense of defiant irony that can hardly be called subtle. She is a provocateur, a muckraker of the human condition. Her willingness to be graphic, to expose the reader in a profound sense, and to offend in order to edify, make Gowdy an unsung hero of transgressive literature, a genre generally considered the province of male authors like

William Burroughs, Irvine Welsh, and Chuck Palahniuk.

In the lead-in to a 1998 *Artforum International* interview, Carol Anshaw observes that Gowdy “consciously shapes the language in her fiction so as not to intrude on the thoughts which she communicates”.² Her prose is spare and precise; she creates the illusion that she is allowing the story to tell itself, except perhaps in the moments when she seems to smirk or wink from the margins.

A practiced reader quickly sees the care with which Gowdy renders Ron. His social awkwardness, weight problem, drinking problem, and his attraction to machines (collectible vacuum cleaners) make him absurd in very human ways; she might even intend him to be read as autistic. He is tender in his care of Nancy, his girlfriend, and defies stereotyping sufficiently for the reader to allow for his faults, even as they become more apparent and disturbing:

His heart started drumming again. What exactly *had* happened with Rachel? Were his feelings those of a father, a protector, or was he romanticizing his lust? He topped up his glass and tried to think about this honestly. Both feelings were there, he decided, one shielding the other. Like lighting a match and cupping your hand around it against the wind. (p. 21)

Gowdy presents Ron’s appreciation of Rachel’s beauty as unremarkable, even as we come to understand that this appreciation is lust turning to obsession. She *is* a beautiful child, and her mother is increasingly uncomfortable with the attention men pay her. As the novel opens, Celia “...has to finish filling in the modelling-school application if she wants to make the deadline.” A photographer eyes Rachel “as if she were a used car” and tells Celia, “Little girls are a big deal right now” (p. 2). Celia is tempted

by the thousand dollars he promises, but “Nine strikes her as a little young to start trading in on your looks...” (p. 2). Her misgivings, the subtly transmitted impression that she is being asked to sell her daughter, is, by itself, the striking critique of commonplace child eroticism in culture and media that Gowdy intends. In a *Maclean’s Canada* interview in May 2007, Gowdy admits that this social commentary was a big part of the genesis of the novel, which she intended to be about a family dealing with a child’s abduction.³ *Helpless* seems to have grown well beyond the author’s original scope, however; Ron is too central and too compelling to be the antagonist, and it is he who changes most in this novel.

Before he kidnaps Rachel, Ron stalks her. He sees that she lives in a house with a gay man, and that this man is often left alone with her. His reaction is so completely realistic – how many people still equate paedophilia and homosexuality? – that even his ignorance serves to create sympathy for him. He really does seem to believe that she is in danger, and he doesn’t see that his homophobic reaction is really jealousy, or that *he* represents the real danger she is in. As he prepares for the kidnapping by finishing his basement and furnishing a cell with a television and bed and dollhouse, he even involves Nancy in his delusion, subconsciously preying on her history as a sexually abused child and the capacity for denial that seems to be their strongest link to one another. Ron tells Nancy:

“After a while she’ll start to feel safe. She’ll want to stay because for the first time in her life she’ll understand what it is to live in a real home. We’ll be like parents to her. She’ll have both a mother – a good mother – and a father.”

A crack of longing opens in Nancy. “But she’ll tell people.”

“We’ll keep her down in the basement until we’re sure she won’t....” (p. 94)

Throughout the rest of the novel, Celia and her landlord Mika search for Rachel, imagining the worst despite their best efforts, burdened with pain and guilt. This draws surprising parallels between the characters, as Ron struggles to maintain control of his mounting sexual urges, to deny his guilt and maintain his delusion. And this is the novel’s greatest single achievement: the reader can legitimately pull for Ron. We want Ron to succeed, to maintain control, to remain the man he believes himself to be despite mounting evidence, and so it is difficult to deny that he is the protagonist. We sympathise with Rachel’s mother, Celia, and her other loved ones, certainly; but the only one who can effect a positive outcome to a very dark narrative is Ron. And we know that Ron is weak. We know that Ron, like Rachel, is helpless.

A grown man who is “head over heels in love”⁴ with a six-year-old girl is a strange protagonist for a feminist author to adopt, though a passing acquaintance with Gowdy’s other work tends to lessen one’s surprise. Gowdy’s short story “Disneyland” was a staple in contemporary readings classes in creative writing programmes in the United States when it was published in *The Best American Short Stories of 1989* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).⁵ In “Disneyland” a father gives his children (apparently) inadequate gifts for Christmas, watches them cry for a few minutes, and then tells them that they are going to Disneyland for a summer vacation. Instead, the protagonist has her first period while entombed in a home-made bomb shelter with her alcoholic mother and this same maniacal father. The story became part of Gowdy’s novel, *Falling Angels* (Toronto: Somerville House, 1989), in which she visits

the subject of juvenile eroticism when the father makes a pass at his youngest daughter (presumably because she has come to look so much like her mother), though Gowdy’s principal theme is always the way women’s bodies are constructed as dirty, foreign, and deficient. In *Mister Sandman* (South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth Press, 1997), she writes about a married couple who are both secretly and painfully in love with the memories of same-sex sexual partners; they are outed to each other by their mute, albino daughter’s prodigious talent for composing music from recordings of secret conversations. In *The White Bone* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), the protagonist is a young female elephant burdened by her enormous memory. Even in *The Romantic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), which deals with much more conventional characters and conflicts, Gowdy’s sense of realism leans heavily toward the Gothic.

I used Gowdy’s only book of short stories, *We So Seldom Look on Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), in a first-year rhetoric course for business students at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. The students got that Gowdy wants us to understand that the female necrophile who narrates the title story is both a hyperbolic representation of male sexuality and a challenge to phallogocentric culture; that the two-headed man’s obsession with normalcy ironically renders him monstrous; and that “Body and Soul” was *meant* to be uncomfortable for its readers in pointing to our constructions of social and physical difference. While many were excited by the outrageous subjects and situations Gowdy works with in these stories, many just couldn’t come to the point where they thought reading – or writing – incendiary and often graphic material of this nature was time well spent.

The following semester, I taught a research writing course to many of the same students based on disability studies scholarship. The class explored the ways the legal system and mass media construct physical perfection, physical fitness, physical and mental norms, and disability and deformity – themes and subjects at the centre of most of Gowdy’s work. Some of the most vocal students teased me for subjecting them to *We So Seldom Look on Love*, and the author became a point of comparison for unpopular assignments in the class: “At least it wasn’t Barbara Gowdy.” When I said I was reading her latest book, and that Gowdy was trying to create sympathy for a paedophilic protagonist, one young woman affected an expression of disgust and said, “Of course she is.” Another student, a fan of Gowdy’s work because elements of it reminded him of his beloved *Fight Club*,⁶ articulated the reaction I believe Gowdy depends on: “I don’t want to understand [paedophiles]; they should just be killed.” This student had used an essay titled “Victims and Victors: Representation of Physical Disability on the Silver Screen” in his research, though he echoed a stereotype of disabled people the authors articulate – the disabled are “better off dead”.⁷ His hostility and revulsion supersede any rational argument about whether or not a problematic sexuality (and, by extension, mental condition) makes a person somehow *not* a person: paedophilia negates the paedophile’s right to life, and all of his human rights, in the minds of many people. Another stereotype of paedophiles is the belief that they get their just rewards when they are raped and brutalised in prison, ignoring any question of whether or not justice can be achieved through rape and brutality.

This common hostility seems to surface in Kenneth Whyte’s interview of the author for *Maclean’s Canada*. The interview certainly demonstrates a gulf between the experiences

of Gowdy and Whyte, as Gowdy repeatedly shocks him with harsh realities of girlhood:

Whyte: There’s no doubt kids are more overtly sexualised today, but on the other hand there is a lot more social concern about men acting on sexual interest in young girls today than ever before. We’re firmly against it, there’s almost a hysteria about it.

Gowdy: Yes, we believe it’s almost the worst feeling you can have, as a man – sexual interest in a child, girl or boy. It didn’t used to be the case. I mean, when I was a girl in the ‘50s there were what we called funny men or gropers – the milkman was one, there was a guy down the street who in exchange for a candy would grope you. And we took advantage of that because we wanted the candy. And we knew these men were creepy, icky, and lost in a way, but we weren’t frightened by them.⁸

Gowdy also mentions that more tolerant attitudes towards “sexual interference with children”⁹ less serious than rape might keep more children alive, a chilling point nevertheless worthy of scrutiny.

Whyte continually asserts that Ron *is* a paedophile, while Gowdy makes the distinction that Ron has “paedophilic thoughts” that he has not acted upon – thoughts which, she says, plague many men who are “heroic” in their choice not to act upon them. Whyte counters with the fact that Ron has done nothing “except kidnapping a little girl because he’s attracted to her...,” and Gowdy has a difficult time backpedalling. Then, Whyte goes on to ask Gowdy, essentially, if paedophiles should be considered human beings – after asking her why she would write about a paedophile at all. The more he objects to Gowdy’s very project, the more *Helpless* seems an important novel. Gowdy wants to appreciate human struggle in all its forms, but *Helpless* may do more than that. Gowdy sees what Ron feels as love, however repulsive his love may seem to

the reader, or the interviewer.¹⁰ Gowdy never lets the reader forget that Ron is dangerous, but dares one to consider Ron human. The question then becomes, should we consider people like Ron mentally ill? Should we construct his sexuality as psychological damage? Can we, after seeing other human beings categorised as monsters for whatever differences they demonstrate from the socially constructed sexual norm, conveniently call him a monster and be done with it? And, if so, can we also maintain our delusion that what Ron feels is so bad and wrong as to nullify his human rights, but that there is nothing wrong with the commonplace juvenile eroticism used in advertising, fashion, and popular film?¹¹

What we lack, practically, is treatment for people like Ron, or even an awareness of his paedophilic feelings as a psychological disorder. Historically, much more effort has been directed towards the punishment of the offender than to the rehabilitation of the victim, with the result that many victims – both male and female – grow up to become predators, or to (at least) exhibit these predatory feelings which they cannot express, even to a therapist, for fear of being branded and institutionalised as a threat to others. At the end of the novel, after returning Rachel to her front yard, Ron drives away supposing he will kill himself. Here, consciously or unconsciously, Gowdy draws upon that pervasive stereotype shared by both paedophiles and disabled people, and anyone else who exists outside of mental and physical norms.¹²

In this way *Helpless* is very much like Theodore Weesner's novel *The True Detective* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), based upon a tragic real-life kidnapping in New Hampshire.¹³ Weesner's paedophile is a socially isolated young man with no self esteem, himself a victim of sexual and emotional abuse, who tries through half the novel to find an

acceptable sexuality to express. He fails, kidnaps and rapes a boy who is fatally injured when he tries to escape, and commits suicide before the eyes of a compassionate policeman who mourns the loss of both boys.

The True Detective is more strictly speaking realistic, and harsher in its realism, than Gowdy's narrative; the kidnapped boy in *The True Detective* is raped and then killed by a paedophile driven to desperation by the expression of what he, like Ron, sees as love. The end of *Helpless* is a relief, a happy ending when we know no such ending is likely or even possible in the real world. As Whyte asserts, Gowdy *can* write about anything she wishes. Any interpretation of her forced, classically comedic ending is inextricably bound up with the reader's view as to whether a person can be something other than what he chooses.

Both authors present us with paedophiles who possess consciences. Weesner's kidnapper is compelling because the author shows us a young man who does not seem to have any way of stopping himself from committing a series of actions that are morally repulsive, even to him. But Ron does everything he can to control his urges – he drinks, he averts his gaze, he immerses himself in a fantasy that he is Rachel's protector. The fact that he maintains control may be the most shocking element of this terrifying book.

- 1 Kenneth Whyte, "Interview with Barbara Gowdy," *Maclean's Canada*, 5 March 2007, http://www.macleans.ca/homepage/magazine/article.jsp?content=20070305_103076_103076 (accessed 9 July 2008).
- 2 Carol Anshaw, "Odd lot" (Interview with author Barbara Gowdy), *Artforum*, June 1998, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3202/is_199806?tag=artBody;col1 (accessed 9 July 2008).
- 3 Whyte, "Interview with Barbara Gowdy."

- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *Best American Short Stories 1989*, ed. Margaret Atwood (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
- 6 Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: WW Norton, 1996).
- 7 Rhonda S Black and Lori Pretes, "Victims and Victors: Representation of Physical Disability on the Silver Screen," *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 32 (2007), 66-83.
- 8 Whyte, "Interview with Barbara Gowdy."
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Black and Pretes, "Victims and Victors."
- 13 Theodore Weesner, *The True Detective* (New York: Summit Books, 1987).

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