

Mirror, Mirror, Who's the Greatest Power of Them All?:

Patriarchal Trauma and Fantasy in Jessica Townsend's

Nevermoor Series

Emily Fuller

Abstract

In the broader field of trauma theory, trauma is often characterised as an event that is physical, violent, and sporadic. However, feminist trauma theorists have argued that there are other forms of trauma inflicted by ideological systems such as patriarchy, resulting in less transparent versions of the traumatic. Fantasy literature, particularly children's fantasy, has a potential to construct new visions of society that transcend these patriarchal systems for their young female heroines, and to reveal the functions of patriarchal trauma. By applying feminist trauma theory to children's fantasy literature, this article exposes the subtler and more nuanced ways in which trauma operates, extending beyond understandings of physical and overt violence. The article offers a close reading of Jessica Townsend's *Nevermoor* books (2017-2020)—a seminal Australian series that has risen to acclaim for its inclusivity, unconventional representations of gender, and creative world-building since its debut. I argue that Townsend repurposes the tropes of the fantasy genre in the *Nevermoor* series to hold a mirror to the harmful effects of patriarchy and the gendered violence it perpetuates. As a result, it rejects the common characterisation of trauma as overtly physical, violent, and sporadic. Rather, the series suggests that the representation of trauma in children's literature, especially middle-grade fiction, is also gendered, and the direct consequence of patriarchy.

Keywords: children's literature, fantasy, feminist trauma, Jessica Townsend, Australian literature

In its broader theoretical field, trauma has been largely identified as events or experiences that are physical, violent, and sporadic (McCann and Pearlman 1990). However, feminist trauma theorists, such as Laura Brown (2004), Jennifer Griffiths (2018), and Maria Root (1996),

argue there are other forms of trauma inflicted by ideological systems such as patriarchy, resulting in less transparent versions of the traumatic. These theoretical approaches can be applied to fantasy literature to examine how it often reflects the ideological systems of white, heteronormative patriarchy. These structures of power perpetuate a kind of trauma that is often invisible and nuanced, yet manifests in highly oppressive ways, thus working to impose rigid gendered ideology in fantasy texts. Children's fantasy fiction has the imaginative scope to either engage with or subvert forms of patriarchal ideology (Phillips 2023). Through representations of the fantastic, the genre can create new visions of society where women in particular are free from patriarchal trauma or are able to actively resist it. However, many of these fantasy texts fail to do so, often largely due to the mass commercialisation of the genre in a capitalist patriarchy (Bould and Miéville 2002). Examining Jessica Townsend's *Nevermoor* series (2017-2020), this article rejects the common characterisation of trauma as overtly physical, violent, and sporadic. Rather, it suggests that the representation of trauma in children's literature is also gendered and a direct consequence of patriarchy.

The *Nevermoor* series is a significant contribution to the genre of children's fantasy as well as the Australian publishing industry. It has been celebrated for its inclusivity, unconventional representations of gender, and creative world-building. The first instalment, *Nevermoor: The Trials of Morrigan Crow* (2017), won the 2018 Australian Book of the Year, as well as being shortlisted for the 2019 NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature (Perkins 2019). It has also achieved international acclaim, winning the Waterstones Children's Book Prize for Younger Fiction in 2018, while film rights for the first novel were sold to 20th Century Fox. I argue that what makes Townsend's *Nevermoor* series compelling, and so widely read across various age groups, is

that it repurposes fantasy to hold a mirror to the harmful effects of patriarchy and the gendered trauma it perpetuates.

The series—*Nevermoor* (2017), *Wundersmith* (2018), and *Hollowpox* (2020)—follows a young girl called Morrigan Crow, who is born on an unlucky day and is resolved to a cursed fate that will see her die on Eventide night. On the night of her imminent death, she meets a curious man named Jupiter North, who whisks her away to a magical realm known as Nevermoor—a city full of fantastical creatures such as Magnificats and Vampiric Dwarves, and where citizens travel across the city using their magical brollies. As Morrigan’s life suddenly turns from bleak to vibrant, she undergoes a series of challenges to find both her purpose and her magical abilities in a new home. Life in Nevermoor is initially framed to suggest that magic plays a significant role in transcending patriarchy as a site of trauma, as Morrigan escapes her gendered trauma as the ‘cursed girl’ in Jackalfax. However, it becomes apparent that the oppressive structures of patriarchy remain central to Nevermoorian society. This is particularly relevant to how ‘othering’ is weaponised against those who threaten the dominance of patriarchy, such as Morrigan and other non-human species. In the world of Nevermoor, trauma is enacted through what Maria Root calls ‘insidious trauma’ (1996), where the traumagenic effects of oppression are experienced by those living within patriarchy. Whilst not always physical or violent, insidious trauma affects or threatens the wellbeing of those suffering under systemic oppression, as seen by Morrigan and other fantastical creatures. Townsend’s world-building is also a primary example of Lennard’s concept of the ‘Medusa Effect’ (2013, p. 81), where the fantastical provides a representation of trauma that mirrors ‘real world’ trauma events. Acting as the ‘polished shield’ (Lennard 2013, p. 81), the society of Nevermoor and the magic that dictates it reflects the dominant ideology of a

heteronormative patriarchy. While Townsend represents Nevermoorian society with many of the gendered, racist, and classist ideals of Western capitalist patriarchy, she employs themes of magic, intersectional friendship, and justice as an opportunity for the reader to challenge these norms and structures, rather than be complicit with such ideology.

Through a close reading of Townsend's series, I therefore examine the heteronormative constructions of both daughterhood and fatherhood, and how they hinder the development of nurturing father-daughter relationships. I also explore how patriarchy imposes gendered and racial ideas of the 'other' upon women and minorities who threaten the power dynamics of patriarchy. Townsend's *Nevermoor* series holds a mirror to patriarchy to therefore both replicate and critique it. Through both Morrigan and Jupiter's constructions as supernatural beings, Townsend attempts to use magic to create new visions of femininity and masculinity that do not prescribe to patriarchal ideologies. However, Townsend's use of certain fantasy tropes incidentally replicate patriarchy, rather than exposing the sexism and racism that evokes patriarchal trauma. In the supposed 'Free State' (Townsend 2017, p. 80) of Nevermoor, women and Wunimals are rejected by their community, for example, because they fall outside of white patriarchy. Morrigan's identity as an 'unruly woman' (Tolentino 2019, p. 245) remains fixed in both magical and non-magical worlds; she is repeatedly punished for this, as she embodies a vision of girlhood that fails to meet accepted standards.

Ultimately, this article raises the crucial question of the role of children's fantasy in challenging dominant ideologies and institutions: how can such texts harness the imaginative potential of fantasy to transcend or dismantle these representations of patriarchal trauma in authentic and innovative ways? A feminist approach to analysing representations of trauma is critical, as it reveals how ideological systems inflict women with less transparent versions of

the traumatic. However, I argue that there is a difference between a simple replication of these sites of trauma and mirroring with the aim to *interrogate*, with Townsend's fantasy world straddling both approaches despite its critical attempts at resistance. Indeed, there is a gap in scholarship that acknowledges how systems of oppression are omnipresent in the young female experience, and therefore require further examination, especially in relation to children's and young adult fiction.

Feminist Trauma Theory

Feminist trauma theory is based on examining and articulating the events which occur in often liminal or hidden/unseen spaces. Trauma theorist Laura Brown, for example, describes how 'the private, secret, insidious traumata to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated' (1991, p. 122). General frameworks of psychological trauma theory are limiting in recognising instances of patriarchal trauma and privilege explicit acts, usually of physical violence, that are 'sudden, unexpected and non-normative' (McCann and Pearlman 1990, p. 10). Using such a theoretical framework is potentially misleading, as the overuse of the term 'trauma' in the modern lexicon suggests the opposite: that it is not a rare or non-normative occurrence for women living under patriarchy. Judith Herman iterates this rejection of the non-normativity of trauma, contending in *Trauma and Recovery* that traumatic events 'are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations of life' (2015, p. 35). Marianne Hirsch goes so far as to suggest that trauma is not just common in its relation to the individual, but can also be a form of generational inheritance, via the memories of stories, images and behaviours shared

between family members. Hirsch defines this idea as ‘postmemory’, which ‘reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture...[it] is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a *structure* of inter-and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience’ (2008, p. 106).

A feminist approach to trauma studies is crucial in refocusing trauma as an ongoing lived experience, as opposed to random or sporadic events. Ann Cvetkovich regards feminist trauma theory as a concept which acknowledges ‘experiences of socially situated political violence...[that] forges overt connections between politics and emotion’ and therefore ‘opens up space for accounts of pain as psychic, not just physical’ (2003, pp. 2-3). Theorists such as Herman and Cvetkovich have thus refined and broadened the scope of trauma theory with ‘approaches for understanding and conveying experiences of sexual and racial abuse, domestic violence, and other forms of suffering experienced by girls...that did not fit the frame of trauma theory’ (Kennedy and Whitlock 2011, p. 251). Feminist trauma theory thereby expands the traditional parameters for assessing traumatic experience, challenging previous notions that it is both uncommon and limited to overt violence—which is why I employ it as my main theoretical framework in examining representations of gendered trauma in children’s fantasy fiction.

Trauma and Fantasy

Cathy Caruth’s study of trauma reveals its critical links to literary representation, asserting that trauma fractures language and consciousness. As a result, the language of trauma is symbolic because it ‘defies, even as it claims, our understanding’ (Caruth 1996, p. 5). She

therefore posits that the representation of ‘unclaimed’ experiences of trauma are accessible through imaginative narratives, possibly even more so through middle-grade fantasy texts such as *Nevermoor*. Certainly, children’s fiction provides compelling narrative opportunities to examine representations of gendered trauma as the genre is often understood in pedagogical terms, and is thus celebrated for its ability to reveal social and cultural realities. In particular, BookTok—the corner of TikTok that is used to circulate book recommendations—as an emergent media form in recent years has further popularised a number of pedagogical fictions by promoting them among readers of children’s literature. Indeed, the success of such a platform for the literary and publishing industry reveals the influential power of children’s fiction. Kathleen Glasgow’s young adult novels such as *Girl in Pieces* (2016), *How to Make Friends in the Dark* (2019) and *You’d Be Home Now* (2021), are only one example of many that have found a seminal place on BookTok for their representations of young women dealing with mental health and grief, as well as the symptomatic consequences of such experiences such as self-harm, suicide, and addiction. Indeed, ‘the elastic category of YA literature suggests a readership with multiple, interrelated, and sometimes conflictual views about youth, through which different realities and fantasies are negotiated’ (Gilmore and Marshall 2013, p. 22). Both middle-grade and YA fiction can therefore reveal what already exists regarding systemic trauma and oppression, but also has the potential to create something new in how these realities might be challenged or even overcome—especially through the world-building possibilities of fantasy.

As a genre, fantasy has the capacity to illuminate and arbitrate trauma narratives by creating alternative world orders. Moreover, fantasy literature has the potential to construct new visions of society that transcend patriarchal systems and to reveal the functions of

patriarchal trauma. Richard Matthews defines literary fantasy as ‘a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic—a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live’ (2011, p. 1). However, Joanna Russ challenges Matthews’ idea that fantasy suspends the rational world, arguing that it embeds didactics that rely on experiences already known: ‘Didactic fiction does not always tell people something new; often it tells them what they already know, and the retelling becomes a reverent ritual, very gratifying to all concerned’ (1995, p. 6). Indeed, the genre often fails to fulfil its imaginative potential, as it unconsciously replicates the same patriarchal ideologies that contribute to the subordination of women.

The repurposing of historical structures for the sake of the fantasy genre, for example, is reiterated by Kim Wilkins:

We know that we are modern (and, I would argue, Western) because our society is not irrational, floridly religious, and normatively violent, at least not to the extent that society in the Middle Ages is imagined to be. But the irrational, floridly religious, and normatively violent exercise powers of attraction over us too, and nowhere is that more clear than in fantasy fiction (2019, p. 16).

This sentiment has informed the commercial trajectory of recent YA fantasy, which is largely upheld through seemingly feminist fantasy romances such as Sarah J. Maas’ *Throne of Glass* series (2012-2018) and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series (2015-), and Victoria Aveyard’s *Red Queen* series (2015-2018). Further, Western practices of storytelling and art have a habit of caricaturing history for its violence, cruelty, and repressiveness—particularly of women (Tolmie 2006). This may partly reveal the replication of normative patriarchal structures in fantasy fiction despite its imaginative possibilities—which is evident in Townsend’s

revising of society through *Nevermoor* as her fantastical world replicates the ideologies of patriarchy and white supremacy. In feminist discourse, however, there is the idea that it is impossible to think beyond patriarchy as it is fundamental to how we have constructed the Western world through language, society, art, and law. In considering how this difficulty of thinking beyond patriarchy applies to fantasy, it is important to acknowledge the pseudo-historical argument within the genre that enables the justification of things such as gendered violence. This kind of claim that insists ‘this is what it was like in those times’ creates a certain blindness to fantasy as an imaginative genre. Ironically, such arguments exist alongside an author’s employment of various ‘historical inaccuracies’ such as magic, dragons and other non-human creatures. These pseudo-historical criticisms made by netizens not only continue to emerge on online platforms, but also help to conceal deeper ideologies pertaining to racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. *The Rings of Power* (2022), the most recent adaptation of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* produced by Amazon, saw vast backlash over its casting of Black, Asian, and transgender characters across various races of Middle Earth. Such right-wing viewers promoted this criticism under the guise of it presenting ‘historical inaccuracies’ and was therefore an example of Hollywood and liberal wokeness run amok. As Aja Romano writes on the movement in fantasy adaptations:

Framing the mere existence of nonwhite characters in media as an inherently political stance is itself an ideological agenda. Moreover, it contradicts the long legacy of fantasy adaptations deviating from canonical descriptions of characters, and fans usually not minding—as long as the casting still reinforces a white, male-centric worldview. (2022, n.p)

Indeed, while gatekeeping of normative representations in fantasy persists, particularly in online communities, fantasy texts like Townsend's present narrative opportunities to think beyond the historical and ideological structures of patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism.

Fantasy presents readers with an opportunity to ask how we can imagine ourselves into something new that transcends patriarchy and history. In considering how patriarchy implicates the contemporary female heroine in fantasy, Tolmie notes that there has been a transition from passive replications of patriarchy to active representations of it, with *Nevermoor* falling into the latter:

These female fantasy characters...often do speak up and participate vigorously in overtly anti-patriarchal discourses. The transition is from implicit or submerged critique/destabilization to explicit and obvious critique/destabilization.... This transition does not, however, result in a radical new approach to the delineation of the female hero in contemporary fantasy fiction. The emphasis remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down—triumphing over it, reversing expectations—rather than in cultural revolution or innovation, and oppressive structures continue to provide the basis for representation. (2006, p. 147)

In *Nevermoor*, Morrigan is forced to exist within such structures, as Townsend fails to utilise the tropes of fantasy to create a new vision of society in which these heroines escape gendered trauma and oppression. However, Townsend still uses elements of magic and the fantastic to mirror her reconstruction of patriarchy, forcing readers into a critical position that encourages reflection upon real-world structures. While the text uses the fantastic to offer a repetition of

patriarchy that supports a critical engagement with real-world social, cultural, and political systems, it also fails to offer a vision of something totally new, thus reinforcing the inability to truly escape the parameters of existence as defined by patriarchy.

The children's and YA literary market—at least for Western texts—is largely informed by white feminist rhetoric when challenging patriarchal ideology. Both YA fantasy novels and their requisite adaptations are saturated with heroines such as *Harry Potter*'s Hermione Granger, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Celaena Sardothien in Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass*, as well as both Arya and Sansa Stark in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. As Leah Phillips points out, while these characters are smart and resourceful, they also fulfil the criteria of Western beauty: white, able-bodied, thin, and conventionally attractive. She contends that 'rather than offering any intervention in heroic norms and standards, mainstream YA heroines—who overwhelmingly look and act like Cinderella, even as they kick ass and save the day—perpetuate the system of binary opposition at the very centre of Western thought' (2023, p. 1). *Nevermoor* largely refrains from any discussion of beauty standards pertaining to Morrigan nor is she represented through any romance narrative arcs. The book refuses to validate patriarchal beauty standards as central to constructions of girlhood. However, while Morrigan's character repudiates ideas about romance and sex, she is white and can 'kick ass' because she is able-bodied. As Lissa Paul argues, this reinforces a typical representation of female heroines who perform the standard male hero's journey in drag: 'Active' heroines are now regarded as nothing better than coded men, guys in drag, still privileging masculine fighting and winning over feminine negotiation and co-operation' (2000, p. 340). Tolmie reiterates this sentiment through the examination of medieval romance in fantasy fiction, noting:

In many fantasy novels, much as in many medieval sagas and romances, literary heroines remain at their best when rising above external conditions that are against them in gender-based ways. They dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom, run away from their abusive fathers, escape unwanted marriages, avoid, avert or survive rape, or take up arms. (2006, p. 148)

Indeed, the heroines cited above are all constructed in ways that infer masculinity as supremely powerful and the norm—even Morrigan’s mental and physical fitness reinforces this at times—rather than making any genuine attempt to dismantle and reformulate ideological representations of what ‘power’, namely female power, looks like.

Alternatively, Phillips stresses the importance of mythopoeic YA literature in dismantling the pre-existing mythology that endorses a liminal construction of girlhood in YA fantasy fiction. She argues that mythopoeic YA literature rejects the binary oppositions between identities (i.e. strong/sensitive, brave/fearful, aggressive/gentle) and instead relies on representations of ambiguity and hybridity. Townsend offers a compelling representation of mythopoeic YA literature in her novels despite the clear power structures such as white supremacy and patriarchy depicted in her books. She uses fantasy to create revisions of such power structures, while also employing the genre and its key tropes to create characters that embody fluid and intersectional identities through reconstructions of masculinity and fatherhood, for example. Indeed, while Townsend presents Nevermoorian society with many of the gendered, racist, and classist ideals of Western capitalist patriarchy, she uses themes of magic, friendship, and justice as an opportunity for the reader to challenge these norms and structures, rather than agree with them.

Girlhood and Fatherhood

Nevermoor reveals how patriarchal expectations of daughterhood incite domestic trauma within young women. Virginia Picchiatti insists that ‘if we investigate the theoretical discourses defining daughterhood within its familial context, we find that the daughter appears weak and co-opted into a patriarchal system of gendered roles and relationships’ (2002, p. 34). By emphasising the neglect Morrigan experiences in her childhood, largely at the hands of her father, Townsend highlights how young women are moulded into versions of girlhood that are determined by patriarchal ideals of passivity, obedience, and silence.

By failing to remain a quiet and passive girl who keeps herself out of the public consciousness, Morrigan challenges the patriarchal expectations of daughterhood and girlhood, described by Mary Pipher as the Ophelia Complex (1994). In defining this type of adolescent femininity, Pipher highlights how Shakespeare’s Ophelia is typified as the obedient daughter who chooses to drown herself when she feels she is failing to meet the demands of the two leading men in her life: her father and Hamlet (1994, p. 20). Pipher asserts that this oppressive femininity is perpetuated by patriarchy to construct an ideal image of girlhood and daughterhood as voiceless, vulnerable, and fragile. Through the relationship dynamic between Morrigan and her father Corvus, Townsend highlights how patriarchy abandons young women who fail to correctly fulfil their filial duties. The stilted relationship between Morrigan and her father is established in the first scene of the novel, in which they meet with the town council to discuss Morrigan’s curse: ‘Corvus had developed a subtle twitch in his left eye that only appeared during these mandatory monthly meetings, which signalled to Morrigan that he hated them as much as she did. Coal-black hair and crooked noses aside, it was the only thing father and daughter had in common’ (Townsend 2017, p. 3).

The scene makes explicit how Morrigan does not fit into conceptions of passive girlhood, as she is considered a ‘cursed girl’ who holds unimaginable power. Her status is used to justify her father’s absolution of his duties as a parent. Ultimately, Corvus views Morrigan as a commodity that benefits him; when she lacks such purpose, he terminates his duty of care. This is particularly poignant when he tries to prevent her from gaining access to education because the supposed curse insists her life will be cut short within a year, and thus he sees no commercial value to her. He claims:

Yet paying for an education seems rather pointless when this particular childhood is about to be cut short. Personally, I think we should never have bothered in the first place. I’d be better off sending my hunting dogs to school; they’ve got a longer life expectancy and are much more useful to me. (Townsend 2017, p. 9)

Morrigan is a victim of patriarchy’s investment in the commoditisation of women. Her right to access education is contingent on her perceived economic value, which is determined by Corvus to be less than the worth of a dog. This raises the question of not only the ways women are treated as commodities via the male gaze, but how their liberties and livelihood depend on these very determinations made by the men around them. Certainly, the parental neglect Morrigan experiences in the domestic sphere is one that is distinctly gendered. Patriarchal ideology continues to place gendered limitations and expectations on parental roles, which ensures that men have a space to exert their power and secure their privilege, while women are bound and confined. Tabitha Freeman surmises that

The paternal relationship has remained relatively hidden from the cultural gaze... reflect[ing] a longstanding assumption that childcare is an essentially and

exclusively female activity; a naturalised constant that has provided a vital underpinning of the cultural supremacy of the male (2008, p. 114).

The absence of Morrigan's mother underscores such observations about the gendered nature of parental responsibilities (Freeman 2008, p. 113). Townsend's representation of the single father exposes stereotypical notions of men as ill-equipped to be nurturing and patient in fatherhood, as patriarchy normalises constructions of emotionless masculinity while upholding maternal visions of womanhood and femininity. Within these delineations, Corvus refuses to take on his responsibilities in caring for Morrigan and is not held accountable by those around him for his lack of paternalism: 'It shouldn't have been a surprise that Corvus was so resigned to her fate, but Morrigan suddenly realised that to him, she might as well already be dead. Perhaps in his heart, she had been dead for years' (Townsend 2017, p. 58). This reveals how the refusal of fatherhood by men is profoundly unlike the vilification of women who resist motherhood, as seen in literary representations such as Phillip Pullman's Mrs Coulter in *His Dark Materials* and J.K. Rowling's Professor Umbridge in the *Harry Potter* series. However, patriarchy's expectations of fatherhood present potentially damaging consequences not just for women and their children, but for men too. Whilst patriarchy does not force Corvus to actively participate physically or emotionally as a father, patriarchal ideology would, arguably, fail to support him to even if he desired it. Freeman, for example, considers that 'although fatherhood has traditionally formed the bastion of patriarchal privilege, this ideological system has rested upon the tacit negation and devaluation of the potential depth and complexity of men's parental relationships' (p. 113). These limiting notions of fatherhood and filial duty encourage models of femininity and masculinity that fail

to foster representations of healthy and nurturing relationships between fathers and daughters, and more generally, men and women.

Magic and Patriarchy

Magic plays a significant role in addressing patriarchal constructs of fatherhood. As described, Morrigan is whisked away to the magical realm of Nevermoor to live with her new parental guardian, Jupiter North. As a Nevermoorian and a magical being, Jupiter represents a polarising image of fatherhood and masculinity that defies normative representations of maleness, albeit in complex ways. This is distinctly evident when Morrigan first meets Jupiter:

All six-plus feet of him were decked out in a long blue coat over a slim suit with mother-of-pearl buttons—stylish but slightly askew.... He stood with his feet wide apart and hands stuffed into trouser pockets, leaning casually against the doorframe as if he spent half his life standing in that spot and couldn't think of a place he felt more at home. As if he himself owned Crow Manor and the Crows were merely his dinner guests. (Townsend 2017, pp. 52-53)

This image is typically identified with maleness and dominance, where Jupiter's body language reflects and asserts a natural sense of ease and control. Here, however, magic allows Morrigan to transcend the familial trauma from her father's neglect and instead find a sense of love, care, and security from Jupiter as he confidently assumes the primary father figure role. By the end of *Wundersmith* and after a long period of adjusting to life with Jupiter, Morrigan finally allows herself to place trust in the security he provides. This is evident when Jupiter

rushes to aid her after she tries to save the lives of her friends who have been kidnapped and trafficked for their powers:

She'd also remember what came next. The clatter of footsteps on cobblestones, and the feel of strong hands closing fast over her ears, blocking out all the sound. Looking up to see a pair of wide, wild blue eyes in a forest of ginger hair. The bittersweet feeling of crashing back to earth, knowing she would land somewhere safe. (Townsend 2018, p. 380)

Patriarchy regulates identities of daughterhood and fatherhood in distinctly gendered ways, inhibiting the development of healthy and nurturing father-daughter relationships. However, through the characterisation of Jupiter as a father-figure, Townsend demonstrates how magic and fantasy can be used to eclipse systems of patriarchy and ultimately the systemic trauma women experience as they are bound in expectations of ideal daughterhood. The ethereal self-expression of Jupiter reveals a manifestation of masculinity and fatherhood that appears almost other-worldly amongst the saturation of cold, rigid expressions of masculinity, like Corvus, that are the product of patriarchy.

The fantastical and fanciful imagery employed in constructing Jupiter's masculinity provides a refreshing juxtaposition to the patriarchal stereotypes of fatherhood as detached, unattainable figures, particularly in daughters' lives. Corvus, Morrigan's father, is the chancellor of Great Wolfacre, with a 'clear, authoritative voice honed by years of demanding order in the Chancery' (Townsend 2017, p. viii). He is described as 'very busy and very important, and usually still working even on the rare occasions he was home for dinner' (p. 15). In contrast, Jupiter is an adored member of the Wondrous Society and owner of the famous Hotel Deucalion, the most decadent hotel in Nevermoor. His vivacious and warm

energy makes people turn ‘to him like sunflowers to the sun’ (p. 93). Hilariously, his hair is repeatedly described as one of his best assets: ‘His mane of bright copper waves could probably have won awards’ (p. 54). Jupiter also uses his magic as a seer to protect Morrigan, as he has a ‘knack for seeing things...that have happened, things that are happening right now. Feelings. Danger’ (p. 136). He has foresight of how certain events will affect her in the future and will do whatever he can to prevent her from harm or threat. Not only does this trope of magic reflect typically feminine ideas of intuition and insight, but it also highlights the potential for fantasy to construct new visions of fatherhood and gender norms, specifically through the development of Morrigan and Jupiter’s unconventional relationship.

Otherness and White Supremacy

Throughout the series, Townsend illustrates how othering via white supremacy is weaponised as a ‘tool of patriarchy’ (Griffiths 2018, p. 181) to perpetrate systemic abuse and trauma. Certainly, Morrigan herself is othered through her categorisation as the ‘unruly woman’, as conceptualised by Jia Tolentino: ‘So many things are deemed unruly in women that a woman can seem unruly for simply existing without shame in her body—just for following her desires, no matter whether those desires are liberatory or compromising, or, more likely, a combination of the two’ (2019, p. 245). In the first book, Morrigan is introduced as a ‘cursed child’—an abnormality who is linked to particular kinds of power that make them threatening to the rest of society, and who is therefore doomed to a fate of premature death: ‘There it was. The truth she kept squashed down, something she could ignore but never forget. The truth that she and every cursed child knew deep in their bones, had tattooed on their hearts: I’m going to die on Eventide night’ (Townsend 2017, pp. 9-10). The nature of her supposed curse presents

an ambiguity that confounds the patriarchal world in which she lives and makes those around her frightened of her otherness. This is evident when her father announces her death to the rest of the Jackalfax community, assuring that her death had ‘also taken with it the danger, doubt and despair that plagued her short life.... The town of Jackalfax—indeed, the entire state of Great Wolfacre—is safe again’ (Townsend 2017, p. viii). Morrigan’s otherness symbolises the apprehension towards women who are powerful in ways that patriarchy have not afforded them or have attempted to restrain.

Morrigan also embodies the characterisation of the unruly woman to which those around her respond with shame and blame. Townsend challenges and satirises a patriarchal culture of victim-blaming as she focalises the absurdity of the events for which Morrigan is blamed:

‘We’ll start with the incidents requiring compensation: the Jackalfax Town Council has requested seven hundred kred for damage to a gazebo during a hailstorm.’

‘I thought we agree that extreme weather events could no longer be reliably attributed to my daughter,’ said Corvus. ‘After that forest fire in Urf turned out to be arson. Remember?’

‘Yes, Chancellor. However, there’s a witness who has indicated that Morrigan is at fault in this case.’

‘Who?’ Corvus demanded.

‘A man who works at the post office overheard Miss Crow remarking to her grandmother on the fine weather Jackalfax had been enjoying.’ The caseworker looked at her notes. ‘The hail began four hours later.’ (Townsend 2017, pp. 4-5)

The scapegoating Morrigan must bear replicates the patriarchal model of victim-blaming that has systemically inflicted women across most history and culture, especially in a post-#MeToo world. Jessica Taylor recalls these misogynistic patterns of female traumatisation where ‘women were burned and drowned for being “witches”. Women and girls were subject to religious rituals. Later on, they were sectioned, medicated, tortured, abused, injured, and subjected to medical and psychiatric experiments’ (2020, p. 22). Just as women have been historically blamed for any disruption or threat to the equilibrium of patriarchy, Morrigan is blamed for threatening the power-balance of her own patriarchal system as she is unable to conform to the rules because of the unpredictable nature of her curse. Literary works such as *Nevermoor* ‘attest to the frequency of trauma and its importance in a multicontextual social issue, as it is a consequence of political ideologies’ (Vickroy 2002, p. 2) that are interested in punishing unruly women living under patriarchy.

In her fantastical world-building, Townsend utilises magic in an attempt to create a world absent of patriarchal oppression and suffering; however, her fictional society still positions Morrigan within the binary of the good-bad woman, or the Madonna-Whore, which is imposed upon young women by patriarchy to regulate their girlhood. This is reflective of Russ’ idea of fantasy, where ‘the frame of fantasy indicates the relation between fantasy and actuality: actuality is the frame, fantasy exists inside the frame. We begin in actuality and move into fantasy; the segment or segments of “realism” exist in the story as a standard by which to measure the fantasy’ (1995, p. 21). *Nevermoor* appears to present an alternative,

magical space in which patriarchy is challenged, where both men and women feature prominently in public life and in prestigious societies such as the Wondrous Society. However, it replicates much of the stereotyping and othering that occurs in Jackalfax. The world of Nevermoor is recognised as ‘the Free State’ (Townsend 2017, p. 80), which suggests that this magical realm transcends all political and social institution, particularly patriarchy. Nevermoor is initially described as a non-normative utopia of creativity and diversity, which Morrigan is completely awestruck by as she had previously been conditioned to accept the monotony and rigidity of a patriarchal society like Jackalfax:

Morrigan breathed in deeply as they entered the city. Having never been outside the town of Jackalfax, she was unprepared for what lay beyond the gates. In Jackalfax, everything had been neat and orderly and ... *normal*. Homes sat side by side in uniform rows – identical brick houses on straight, clean streets, one after the other... If one were looking at Jackalfax from above, one might guess the entire town was designed by a sole miserable architect who hated her life.

Nevermoor was no Jackalfax. (pp. 77-8)

Nonetheless, the reader still encounters patriarchal ideology and othering, demonstrating the difficulty of escape even within the realms of fantasy. Miéville asserts that the commercial value of fantasy is rooted in the fetishisation that modernity projects in relating reality to fantasy, which encourages fantasy texts to resort to replicating systems and ideology of conservative realities: ‘Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality— constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true*—mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity’ (2002, p. 42). Hence, Morrigan’s sense of ‘otherness’ can potentially operate ‘as both a resistance to representations of “sexualised”

femininity...and as a regulatory of girlhood femininity through producing the good girl/bad girl binary' (Vares and Jackson 2015, p. 559).

While Morrigan is no longer ostracised as the 'cursed girl' in *Jackalfax*, she occupies the role of 'other' when she is revealed as Wundersmith—an all-powerful entity that citizens of Nevermoor call 'the Butcher of Nevermoor...that wicked devil with blackened mouth and empty eyes' (p. 266). The othering Morrigan experiences as a Wundersmith causes her to struggle between two opposing facets of her identity: the strong girl with unwavering morals, and the dangerous Wundersmith. This is highlighted when fellow Wundersmith and the series' villain, Ezra Squall, questions her on what it means to be a Wundersmith. He says: 'Is that what you believe a Wundersmith is? An instrument of death? I suppose you're half right. Destruction and creation. Death and life. All tools within your grasp, once you know how to use them' (p. 429). Paradoxically, here Morrigan's 'otherness' mirrors her life in *Jackalfax*, which suggests that even though fantasy has the opportunity and freedom to imagine new radical worlds, it often falls into the familiar trappings of patriarchal ideology, particularly regarding girlhood. Whilst Townsend employs magic to dismantle systems of patriarchy in creating a world free of systemic trauma for young women like Morrigan, expressions of girlhood considered disruptive remain oppressed.

In Townsend's third instalment, *Hollowpox*, the notion of othering reveals how patriarchy and racism intersect to ratify white supremacy. Feminist and lawyer Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' to highlight the different ways in which black women experience injustice in the context of patriarchal violence and trauma: 'As feminists, we recognise how racism has been – and is still – gendered. Patriarchy continues to be foundational to racial terrorism...both in specious claims that justify the torture of Black men

in defense of white womanhood, and in its treatment of Black women and girls' (2015, np). It is important to note how Townsend positions readers in examining representations of race and racism. Indeed, just because an author depicts images of race and racism in a fantasy setting, it does not necessarily follow that readers are encouraged to agree with such depictions. Rather, Townsend uses a fantasy setting to reveal the harmful consequences of racism and white supremacy, thus encouraging readers to take a critical stance. The premise of *Hollowpox* parallels the same racist ideologies that are harnessed by patriarchy to further oppress people of colour, or in the case of the *Nevermoor* world, a species known as Wunimals—'sentient, self-aware creatures who were capable of human language and fully assimilated to human society' (Townsend 2020, pp. 62-3). They differ greatly from standard unimals found in *Nevermoor*, who are 'normal creatures who went about their normal creature business in their normal creature societies' (p. 63). It is inferred that it is a privilege to be recognised as a Wunimal as opposed to an unimal, as Wunimals 'wore specially tailored clothes, or at least accessorised with a jaunty hat or a monocle or something, to signal their sentient Wunimal status and to avoid the embarrassing assumptions of strangers' (p. 63).

The distinction between Wunimal and unimal becomes less clear when *Nevermoor* experiences the spread of an infectious illness that transforms Wunimals from sentient, articulate, and peaceful creatures into vicious and temperamental unimals. Consequently, Wunimals are degraded and alienated in ways that parallel how white patriarchal systems denigrate people of colour, particularly women of colour. This is seen when Morrigan and her friends throw a party at the Hotel Deucalion where both humans and Wunimals are invited, much to the disgrace of those people who see Wunimals as inferior to them:

‘Utterly disgraceful.’ The woman wrinkled her nose as she watched the elegant dogwun and her pursuing photographer disappear into the crowd. ... ‘The Deucalion really is going to the dogs, if *that’s* the sort of riff-raff they’re letting in.’

The man nodded in agreement. ‘Hmm. Someone should call the pound and have that pooch taken away.’ The pair of them shared a smug little giggle (p. 266-7).

This othering, both for people of colour living in a white-supremacist patriarchy and for Wunimals living in Nevermoor, is an act of depersonalised racism. Both the hypervisibility and invisibility of the Wunimals speaks to the contradictory positioning of black bodies within white supremacy. As Audre Lorde contends, ‘black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalisation of racism’ (2017, p. 3). Moreover, the mobilisation of racism and othering within patriarchy is instigated by the practice of fearmongering, or what modern culture has come to know as fake news, where ‘journalism that should not be taken seriously as it [is] false, fabricated or little better than fiction’ (McNair 2018, p. 17). Morrigan is introduced to this idea when she finds a poster that has been distributed through the city by a political party known as the Concerned Citizens of Nevermoor:

The symptoms listed on the poster were the same as on the Wondrous Society’s posters, but not really. They’d been edited, abbreviated, shortened to make them even more ridiculously broad...It was the last bit of the poster that really spooked her.

Watch Your Neighbours. Don't Hesitate. Act On Your Suspicions. It was like these 'Concerned Citizens' were just trying to turn everyone against Wunimals. (Townsend 2020, pp. 251-2)

As in real-world white patriarchal structures, such misinformation breeds fear and hysteria, which Robin DiAngelo contends is a symptom of 'White Fragility', which functions to reinstate white racial equilibrium by restoring 'our racial comfort, and maintain[ing] our dominance within the racial hierarchy' (2018, p. 2). She defines it as a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, which triggers a sense of defensiveness through 'emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal' (p. 2). Such hysteria and fearmongering fosters an environment of hatred, violence, and oppression against the Wunimals, just as it does against people of colour in white patriarchy. Wunimals are pushed out of public spaces and locked up in cages like animals, while outbursts of violent racism ensue: 'The protest had become a mob—an actual, proper *mob*. The kind that Morrigan had only ever read about in storybooks about long-lost villages with a witch living in the woods' (p. 314). These systemic abuses 'call for collective action in relation to political struggle for agency and full citizenship and to see offenses or trauma as a symptom and tool of patriarchy' (Griffiths 2018, p. 181). Townsend thus demonstrates how patriarchy is not only a perpetrator of gendered violence and trauma against women, but also actively contributes to the systemic traumatising of other minorities through the racist ideologies of white supremacy.

Conclusion

Through the childhood neglect Morrigan experiences, Townsend emphasises how young women are coerced into silence and obedience as a result of heteronormative patriarchal constructions of girlhood and daughterhood, such as Pipher's 'Ophelia Complex' (1994). Being flattened into an identity as the 'cursed girl' in her patriarchal community, Morrigan experiences misogyny through victim-blaming. Although she escapes this oppressive identity of girlhood by being placed in a world supposedly free of patriarchal authority in Nevermoor, she still experiences misogyny that propels her into a similar position as 'other'. In her new identity as a Wundersmith, Morrigan's oppression takes on a more nuanced form as she is placed within the binary of good and bad—a binary that is typically used in flattening and distorting female identity by patriarchal dogma.

In the magical realm of Nevermoor, the practice of othering is also racialised, as it is extended to not just unruly women who threaten the stability of patriarchy, but other minorities too, such as nonhuman species. Townsend's *Nevermoor* series is candid in its exploration of patriarchal ideology and how it becomes enmeshed with racism and sexism. The role of magic and fantasy is adopted to emulate patriarchal structures and to reveal the ways women and other minorities are implicated with 'insidious trauma' living under patriarchy. Ultimately, Townsend uses the fantasy genre to not escape realities of trauma, but to hold a mirror to it in a way that forces readers to see it for what it is.

References

- Bould M and Miéville C (2002) 'Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy', *Historical Materialism*, 10(4):39-316.
- Brown L (1991) 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', *American Imago*, 48(1):119-133.

- (2004) 'Feminist Paradigms of Trauma Treatment', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 41(4):464-471, doi:10.1037/0033-3204.41.4.464.
- Caruth C (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, John Hopkins University Press.
- Crenshaw K (8 July 2015) 'The Charleston Imperative: Why Feminism and Antiracism Must Be Linked', *The Huffington Post*.
- Cvetkovich A (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Culture*, Duke University Press.
- DiAngelo R (2018) *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, Beacon Press.
- Freeman T (2008) 'Psychoanalytic Concepts of Fatherhood: Patriarchal Paradoxes and the Presence of an Absent Authority', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 9(2):113-139, doi: 10.1080/15240650801935156.
- Gilmore L and Marshall E (2013) 'Trauma and Young Adult Literature: Representing Adolescence and Knowledge in David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir*', *Prose Studies*, 35(1):16-38, doi: 10.1080/01440357.2013.781345.
- Griffiths J (2018) 'Feminist Interventions in Trauma Studies', in Kurtz R (ed) *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge University Press.
- Herman J (2015) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 2nd edn, Basic Books.
- Hirsch M (2008) 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29(1):103-128, doi: 10.1215/03335372-2007-019.
- Kennedy R and Whitlock G (2011) 'Witnessing, Trauma and Social Suffering: Feminist Perspectives', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 69(26):251-255, doi: 0.1080/08164649.2011.606602.
- Lennard J (2013) *Tolkien's Triumph: The Strange History of 'The Lord of the Rings'*, Amazon Digital Services, Inc.
- Lorde A (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, Silver Press.
- Matthews R (2011) *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*, 2nd edn, Routledge.
- McCann L and Pearlman LA (1990) *Psychological Trauma and the Adult Survivor: Theory, Therapy, and Transformation*, Psychology Press, London.
- McNair B (2018) *Fake News: Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism*, Routledge, London.
- Paul L (2000) 'The Naked Truth about Being Literate', *Language Arts*, 77(4):335-342.
- Perkins C (2019) 'Excellence in Literature and History', *SL Magazine*, 12(4):52-55.
- Phillips L (2023) *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Framing Myths of Adolescent Girlhood*, Bloomsbury.

- Picchiotti V (2002) *Relational Spaces: Daughterhood, Motherhood, and Sisterhood in Dacia Maraini's Writings and Films*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Pipher M (2003) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Random House.
- Romano A (17 September 2022) 'The Racist Backlash to The Little Mermaid and Lord of The Rings is Exhausting and Extremely Predictable', *Vox*.
- Root MP (1996) 'Women of Color and Traumatic Stress in "Domestic Captivity": Gender and Race as Disempowering Statuses', in Marsella AJ, Friedman MJ, Gerrity ET, and Scurfield RM (eds) *Ethnocultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues, Research, and Clinical Applications*, American Psychological Association.
- Russ J (1995) *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Indiana University Press.
- Taylor J (2020) *Why Women Are Blamed For Everything: Exposing the Culture of Victim Blaming*, Little Brown.
- Tolentino J (2019) *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, 4th Estate Books.
- Tolmie J (2006) 'Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(2): 145-158, doi: 10.1080/09589230600720042.
- Townsend J (2017) *Nevermoor: The Trials of Morrigan Crow*, Hachette.
- (2018) *Wundersmith: The Calling of Morrigan Crow*, Orion Children's Books.
- (2020) *Hollowpox: The Hunt for Morrigan Crow*, Orion Children's Books.
- Vares T and Jackson S (2015) 'Reading Celebrities/Narrating Selves: 'Tween' Girls, Miley Cyrus and the Good/Bad Girl Binary', *Celebrity Studies*, 6(4):553-567, doi: 10.1080/19392397.2015.1021822.
- Vickroy L (2002) *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, University of Virginia Press.

Biographical Note

Emily Fuller (Deakin University) is currently undertaking her PhD research concerning representations of the body in Swedish fiction and teaches in the discipline of literary studies at Deakin University. Working as an independent bookseller and children's book specialist for the past ten years, she has maintained a strong interest in finding ways for child and adult readers to engage with children's fiction on a deeper level through representation. Her research interests include gender and critical race theory in YA fiction, fantasy, and contemporary fiction.