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## ON 'CONTAINING MULTITUDES': EMBODYING GRIEF IN TAMSYN MUIR'S *HARROW THE NINTH*

Review by Kimberlee Anne Bartle

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Muir, Tamsyn. *Harrow the Ninth*. Tor, 2020. Book. The Locked Tomb Series 2.

As the sequel to Tamsyn Muir's first gory, hilarious, genre-blending necromancy novel *Gideon the Ninth* (2019), we see Muir's tale naturally shift towards its 'new' namesake in *Harrow the Ninth* (2020), as she tackles the challenges of Lyctor-dom. While *Harrow* delights in witty conversation, flighty alliances, planet-killing, awful cooking, and ample backstabbing (literally and figuratively), it is perhaps most notable for what it *lacks*; namely, despite Gideon's ultimate sacrifice at the end of book one, there is a bewildering absence of the feisty, sunglass-clad cavalier within book two. From having Harrow's cavalier's name line scribbled out in the text's Dramatis Personae to odd, flashback-style interactions with deceased characters in an alternate "Canaan House," there is an overwhelming sensation of confusion and distorted reality that permeates the novel. With frequent thematic discussions of 'fate' and being structurally broken up into five acts, featuring a prologue, parados, and epilogue, the novel also recalls the Greek Tragedy form, which affords the text a literary foundation to grapple with themes of haunting and loss. Paired not only with the text's incongruous timelines, extreme time lapses, and shifts between second-, third-, and even first-person narration but also with Harrow's self-professed insanity, her noted status as an incomplete Lyctor, and her seemingly inescapable impending death, the reader is often forced into the role of detective, attempting to navigate the various complexities of the plot. Ultimately, *Harrow* exists at the intersection of intergalactic epic and reality-blurring liminal; of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Mystery, and Horror, offering an intimate and complex perspective on the pressures of ascension and power, as well as literally embodying grief.

As a new Lyctor – an immortal necromancer servant to the Emperor and Necrolord Prime, John – Harrow spends the majority of book two coming to terms with her altered status, powers, and precarity. However, despite her new station, Harrow's magical and social ascension is stunted, making her like a dog "with three legs missing" in a den of (Lyctoral) wolves (170). Harrow's failed progress leaves her subject to frequent assassination attempts by the other, more ancient Lyctors and to occasional acts of seduction by fellow 'infant' Lyctor lanthe. These tenuous-at-best relationships leave Harrow isolated, highlighting the absence of her prior companion, defender, and Cavalier, Gideon. As the novel frames itself within the impending threat of a vengeful Resurrection Beast, the seemingly inescapable bodily possession by the relentless, anonymous "Sleeper," and the Emperor's impending assassination, *Harrow* is paced with a sense of anticipation and doom akin to the Y2K New Year's Eve countdown.

The text repeatedly explores the boundaries of reality, perception, and selfhood as Harrow's new powers develop. From early on in the text, the narration focuses on being very much 'within' the body; frequent sensory descriptions of breathing, touching, seeing, hearing, and, of course, a lively smattering of necromantic violence and gore abound. However, Harrow's hyper-awareness of sensory inputs, granted via the partially successful Lyctoral process, does not lend her an air of demigod superiority or perceptual confidence. Rather, she feels "assaulted by... sensory data" (34), overwhelmed by external stimuli, and unable to respond appropriately to her immediate reality in the Mithraeum. Harrow often finds herself aware of things having moved without her knowledge, even 'waking up' to find herself performing deeds outside of her own apparent awareness, and is sometimes triggered into lapses of consciousness, leaving her feeling strangely disconnected from her own body and agency. Thus, guided only by the ghostly presence of figure known only as "the Body," dreamlike interactions with various late members of book one's Canaan House, and a smattering of odd letters written by a "previous Harrow," both she and the reader find themselves plagued "by doubt in the face of fact. The uncertainty of the insane" (349). Harrow's paradoxical inhabitation of her 'self' not only affords others the opportunity to (in)validate her 'reality' but ushers in the possibility that she "might also be *haunted*" (254, original emphasis). Certainly, plagued by the fact that she bears the spiritual signatures of 200 children and, thus, literally "contain[s] multitudes" (132, 72) – a literalisation of the same line from Walt Whitman's 1892 poem, "Song of Myself" – Harrow ashamedly reconciles herself to being "the product of [her] parents' genocide" (157).

Muir's multifaceted exploration of Harrow's actions and thoughts offers a sympathetic and nuanced exploration of loss and survivor guilt. In attempting to reconcile her heritage and new powers, Harrow is repeatedly vexed by the true price of power, making her feel "beyond pity" and utterly alone (461). In the case of her inherited power, Harrow wrestles with its origins in her premeditated, magical, and genocidal conception. Meanwhile, the power she is meant to wield comes with the forced demolition and absorption of a sacrificed sword hand, or by ingesting a Cavalier for 'full' Lyctoral ascension (401). Her guilt concerning these past sacrifices and fear of history repeating itself causes Harrow to literally wall off her mind, making herself a sort of mental "mausoleum" by rewriting the past and refusing her future (460). While Harrow is literally 'haunted' by the spirits of the deceased, she is, moreover, figuratively 'haunted' by the guilt of survivorship. Thus, as Ortus suggests, Harrow was, perhaps, "never *mad*" but, rather, overburdened with grief, saying, "the mind can only take so much pressure before it forms indentations" (415, original emphasis).

In playing with malleable conceptions of memory, perception, sanity, and reality, Muir's novel not only offers a nuanced exploration of responses to trauma but also highlights potential sites of empowerment and agency. Shifts in narration style and time play into Harrow's 'wielding of multitudes' and the desire to reject the trauma surrounding her reality, alongside the construction and manifestation of that same reality. From Harrow's own (re)creation of the alternate Canaan House to the epic poem-directed battle against the Hazmat suit-wearing Sleeper (Chapter 49) – who, of course, was also "hijack[ing] the play" of Harrow's direction and, thus, wielding the narrative power

of reality construction (384) – these varying, almost absurd levels of authorial power and ‘reality’ not only showcase Muir’s incredible ability to weave complicated and hilarious threads together (“Why am I talking in meter?” 443), but also show Harrow the means to her empowerment. Rather than living apart from her “own master plan” (65), Harrow has the cognitive strength to (re)direct her reality and tackle the challenges of the future.

While *Harrow the Ninth* does not offer a straightforward narrative, Muir’s exceptional ability to interweave different ‘realities’, characters, and inter-/hyper-textuality in a way that is both sincere and hilarious affords readers the opportunity to explore complex conceptions of power and embodiments of grief. Like *Gideon*, *Harrow the Ninth* ultimately offers a unique narrative that defies strict conceptions of genres, wielding the fantastic, the violent, and the surreal with unparalleled ease. For those interested in exploring trauma, mental illness, queer relationships and representation, embodiment, agency, magics of life and death, hauntology, fate, and Science Fantasy with all its diverse affordances (and, of course, epic sword fights, creepy tombs, petty banter, and gore galore), *Harrow the Ninth* is a veritable cornucopia of necromantic delight.

#### BIONOTE

**Kimberlee Bartle** has most recently completed her second Master’s degree from the University of Cambridge, UK, in Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature, where she graduated with distinction and won the Best Dissertation Award. She currently lives in Ireland with her partner and is learning a great deal about cows (and the joys of rural internet). She is most interested in both the use of the Fantastic to navigate trauma and the specific, critical affordances of necromancy in contemporary Young Adult literature in order to explore issues of identity and (re)imagined futures.