



Gone, But Not Forgotten

Exploring the Prevalence of the Absent or Dead Mother Trope in Urban Fantasy

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Fantasy

By Karen Eastland

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Master of Letters: Dissertation

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Gone, But Not Forgotten

Exploring the prevalence of the absent or dead mother trope in
Urban Fantasy

by Karen Eastland

*Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

The Book of Matthew is an Urban Fantasy story that subverts the absent or dead mother trope popular in the genre. The protagonist, an immortal being longing for death, is forced to live through the same events over hundreds of lifetimes. The protagonist's view of the world is framed through the bay windows of his lounge room, until he is lured from the comfort of his house by a small boy's grief. In the accompanying exegesis I explore the absent or dead mother trope through a content analysis of a representative sample of texts from the Urban Fantasy genre, so as to respond to the research question: *How prevalent is the absent or dead mother trope in the Urban Fantasy genre?*

I explore how the absent or dead mother trope has been viewed historically and apply this in an effort to explain the prevalence of the trope in the Urban Fantasy genre. In addition I briefly discuss the influence the research had on the artefact creation process.

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The Book of Matthew

Preface

‘Life’s a shit storm, no-one gets out of alive,’ I thought. ‘Some just know the loop-holes and work the system.’

‘Nah, work the balance sheet more like,’ I corrected myself as I watched Death take Matthew’s spirit away.

It’d been an odd last night. I didn’t come for Matthew, but there he was, and so was I. Stranger still, Death spoke to me, ‘It’s a slippery slope Indicus-Resquire. A slippery slope.’

Had no idea what he meant, but we extradimensional entities never talk to one another. No time. Though now I’m left wondering...

‘Oh well. Another time,’ I thought.

If not for Sin-eaters, you lot would evaporate up your arses in a stinky brown sludge and live the same shit over and over again, life after life. The worst of you would go from inflicting pain on others, to having it inflicted on them. That’s why the loop-holes highly sought after. It’s coveted like an ancient treasure.

The prayer to call us isn’t widely known, but somehow the darkest souls always learn it. There’s nothing I haven’t experienced. Religious leaders are the worst. They’re self-righteous cretins. They know how to call Sin-eaters but make it a sin for almost everyone else. I know because not only do they call us, the debauchery they collect as payment for passing on the prayer to their benefactors sickens me.

I mean, what the fuck guys? It's not supposed to work like that!

In their deepest despair, on the verge of death, those without hope attempt the call. We answer and accept the sweet flavour of their sins as nourishment. It's a fucked-up system we've got ourselves in. That first taste hooks us and the only way out is to start again through death.

Death. How ironic. What we Sin-eaters wouldn't do to be granted the gift of death. To die we'd have to become mortal again, and none of us know how to achieve that transformation.

The portal to my realm began to open and I watched it swirl to life in the darkness, illuminating graffiti displaying a devastated future. Despair lit up the alley once again depicting the desperate cry of a youth already dispirited by life. I could feel the heat radiating from the bricks. It was a warmth rising from the ephemeral screams etched through pain, in paint, on the red brick wall.

'My rest will be short,' I thought, and took a step towards my portal when something new caught my eye.

'What's that?' I whispered into the portal's light.

On the edge of the chaos, almost overwhelmed by the surrounding despair, were impressions of optimism woven like lace through a satin bodice to reveal a belief in the magic of the worlds.

'Some still have hope,' I thought.

Smiling, I stepped beyond the mortal world to rest in the peace of my *Void, Sweet Void*. Death's words though, they lingered.

Chapter 1

I'd lost count how many times I'd been ripped from my Void to repeat this fucking nightmare since that first trip.

I'd stepped into my sweet little Void—briefly felt its comfort—then something unfamiliar began to tear at my centre. Suddenly I was ripped from my peace into a strange portal. I'd been around a long time and never experienced a pull like it before. As I spun in its confines, I watched the universes intertwine around the funnelled edge. It warped like a mirror at a fun fair and only my distorted faces reflected back.

'Fuck you,' I screamed as I neared the end of my journey.

The portal spat me out and I hit up against a newly built red brick wall. I turned on my arse and leant against it. I sat in that fucking alley just as I'd now done hundreds of times before. Still none the wiser.

'Since Death spoke to me,' I thought. 'Not a word. Why?'

Each time I hear Death's footfall, I know my time to move on has arrived. He waits in the shadows while I relieve a being of their sins. By the time I'm full, I can't do anything except open the *Sanctom Aevitria Indacu* (The transonic force). Each time I came back I braced myself, but my arse met that fresh hot layer of sticky black tar every time. My taste buds and nostrils retracted, and my eyes stung just before its sweet pungent odour hit.

The alley was dark even in daylight. Even in a state of complete

disrepair, it still acted as a portal highway. Interdimensionals passed through to other portals at the crossroads. Nothing good ever comes from them and was relieved I always landed just off centre. There's no telling where I'd end up if I hit the centre of the crossroads. The force, with which I'm ejected from that portal, I could end up anywhere. The crossroads had an alley, other than the one I always landed in, a set of steep stone steps—leading to an over polluted river—and a foul little whore house known as the *Dead End*. It looked out of place in the shadows of two new buildings. Any normal person would get a chill just looking at this shit on a map.

I staggered to my feet and left the confines of that ominous crossroads. I presumed I was back again, same time, same place, so made my way towards fresh air and the taste of sweet sin. I made it to what looked like a main road. I'd never walked it before so scanned the area for something familiar. On the other side of the street a road crew swept fresh, hot bitumen over the roads surface. An old Ford came barrelling around the corner behind me and I jump aside just in time.

'Outer the way fuckin' idiot,' the driver screamed as I watched his taillights disappear into the distance.

I was about to head towards the road crew but saw a tobacconist about 50 yards down the road and knew a good cigarette always hit the spot. I reached the shop without incident, bought a pack of smokes and tobacco for my pipe.

I lit a cigarette, drew back the bitter sweet tobacco smoke and casually strolled for a while. Still unsure where I was, a sudden warm breeze blew into a willy willy. A piece of newspaper caught in its funnel just like that portal always caught me. I watched the paper float through the air. The willy willy blew out as it wrapped around one of my boots. I sat on a half brick fence and unwrapped the piece of newspaper.

Reachville News, June 4th, 1943

Again? Why?

‘What’s so fucking special about bloody Reachville?’ I said and noticed a wide eyed old drunk hiding behind an old blue industrial waste bin, its rusted corner appeared to be sieving the life of its leaking contents.

It doesn’t matter what I do, nothing ever changes, and I knew this time would end like all the others, back in that stinking fucking alley. The familiar mix of stale beer, cheap wine, greasy fast food, urine, sex and vomit, attacked all my senses.

‘Fuck it,’ I muttered and stood. This one job had been repeating for what felt like a thousand years.

‘Why?’ I asked the old drunk. ‘I do everything right. I follow the list. I take the sins. I go home and instead of having a nice rest I end up back in that stinking fucking alley again... and I don’t care how clean it is now!’

He looked back at me—I was ranting—and appeared about to say something but thought better of it. He staggered off down the alley on his way to at best a rat-infested boarding room that passed as his home.

‘I don’t understand,’ I hissed through frustration.

I tucked the crumpled sheet of newspaper into a pocket in my long pig, leather coat, and began a brisk walk—I could’ve thought it and arrived in an instant but was annoyed and figured a walk would do me some good. I arrived just in time to once again witness the moment Matthew’s abusive, alcoholic father slammed the front door to their house and climb into his only love. His brown 1942 *Ford Super Deluxe*. I stood outside nine Roselee Street and watched him speed away, just like he had hundreds of times before.

‘5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and... BOOM!’ I whispered, smiling as Mark the wanker went up in flames. I have to say, it felt just as it did every other time, good.

‘Uh oh, cue Matthew.’

It’s the pain he feels in that moment which gets me every time. It marks the end of his childhood and the beginning of his torture. It’s when he became captive to his mother’s guilt and his brother’s fears. It’s also when the pressure started for him to look after everyone else. He took over Mark’s role as family provider and protector even though his father never did a particularly good job of either.

* * *

I presumed number nine was still mine, but to be sure I knocked before walking in.

‘Yep! Mine,’ I said into the dusty half-light as I pushed the door open

wider.

After settling in I opened the curtains and windows. The sweet taste of sin was always thick in the neighbourhood that afternoon. Sitting on one of the old floral sofas, I lit another cigarette and watched as neighbours began to appear. I'd tasted their iniquity's before they came into view. They circled like vultures feeding on the family's grief.

'It's up to you to keep the family safe now,' I heard one ignorant old twit say.

'Oh, yes, you're tha man of the house now,' another nosey neighbourly busy body told the traumatised ten-year-old Matthew as she shoved a warm pot of stew into his trembling hands. 'Gotta care for ya ma an baby brother now.'

Her condolences obviously functioning as a means to access the gory gossip from those first to arrive and, 'Therefore know everything.'

I leant forward in my seat as the dumpy girl with the lazy eye tentatively knocked on the front door.

'Ah yes, the homely girl next door— Is this why I'm back?' I wondered.

I finished my smoke and stretched. Something in the back of my mind niggled at me and I kept coming back to that thought. Is she the change that's needed? It's the thing I'd failed to change in Matthew's life every other time. I searched my pockets for notes or instructions to tell me different, but there were none. I'd heard no prayers from a needy sinner so decided to observe the creatures in their natural habitats.

While looking out my windows I noticed the lawn needed work. Normally I wouldn't bother, the universes take care of everything, and usually I'd have my orders, get the job done and move on, but it's been a long time since I'd been able to do that. It was a small cottage, you know the type: white picket fence and pink roses along its edging? Yeah, I reckon an old woman must've owned it before I arrived.

'So... Matthew?' I said to the empty room. My left hand lifted, and I scratched an itch in my ear with its index finger. 'Am I here to help him escape the clutches of the girl next door? Now there's an idea. No orders, I'm back at the same place—'

A knock at the door interrupted me. I'd almost forgot about the visitor that called now, only remembering as I went to get up. I decided to ignore Mrs Bentley's welcoming platitudes for her new neighbour. I wasn't in the mood for her game of one hundred questions and with everyone at Mathew's house, she'd have me all to herself.

'Cup of black tea,' I said, and it appeared in my hand. I took a sip and almost spat it out. 'Sweet,' I added and tasted it again. 'Better.'

I still had my powers—that's a plus—and Matthew was always the same age.

I sat on the lounge again and stared out the room's bay windows, with their clear view of the crime scene across the street. My senses are acute, especially my senses of smell and hearing, so I heard every word those idiots visiting that little blue house and its tear weary occupants said. I

watched busy body after busy body lay the weight of his father's death on Matthew's young shoulders. At one point I almost walked across the street to give some of them their last rites. It had become too much to bear.

One after another a hideous conga line trod the pavement to Matthew's front door. Secretly they envied Mrs Bartholomew. For her however, even though the beatings had stopped, she had no job and with two young boys it wouldn't take much for things to go bad. I was so close to the situation, images were flashing through my head, and there was a sea of sin in every cloth covered dish.

'Don't you worry about anything,' I heard one particularly foul woman caw to another, 'Matthew can wash it and bring it back tomorrow.'

There must've been twenty dishes paraded through that front door. The neighbourhood gossip machine was in good working order and I think I'll take a certain delight inserting myself into his life again. It always fascinates me how beings view grief as a one-day affair, where they get all gussied up and put their best face on. It's like going to church, though with death, they get to do the preaching.

'You nosey, two faced prissy women could drop round during the week,' I said into the empty spaces of my small house and got an inkling I was experiencing a strange emotion, but was caught up with the whole bloody scene, so didn't give it another thought. 'Maybe do the dishes yourself you old cows, help care for the distraught family instead of grazing off

their grief.'

They all knew what Mark was, but they couldn't let that come out, it might sully the neighbourhoods good standing.

'Yeah! Right! Good standing,' I scoffed.

No-one would care. Just about every street this side of Reachville was a crime scene.

'Gods, I hate this realm,' I said. 'Just tell me what to do to make this end.'

I waited for a sign but got nothing.

Chapter 2

Several weeks passed and I spent my time watching the activity from my front windows. Every afternoon Matthew would round the corner and squeeze himself into the centre of a small bush edging a neighbour's front yard. It was like his very own pocket realm. It hid him from the prying eyes and ears of busy bodies, gossips and his mother.

I still had no contact, no orders or prayers—I was surviving off rats rather than rites—so decided it was time to situate myself into the young boy's life. I dressed in polished black shoes, grey pants, a white shirt, a grey cardigan and checked my hair in the hallway mirror.

'I don't know why you bother you old charmer you,' I muttered. 'All you see is your dark gaping chasm reflecting back.'

I walked out into my overgrown garden. I didn't want to scare the boy, so casually strolled to my front gate.

'Excuse me,' I called to let him know I lived close and wasn't some stranger creeping the neighbourhood.

'Can I help you mister?' he asked with a small voice from his seat in the bush but didn't get up.

'I'm your neighbour Fred, Fred Nettles,' I said with a cheery smile, 'and was wondering if I could help you?'

'Help me?' the boy asked looking up from his bush.

I ambled across the street and added a slight skip to my step as I

approached.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Help you.’

Matthew appeared to be silent, but his young mind was reeling through all the things he might need help with.

‘Here,’ I said and offered my hand. ‘Let me help you.’

He hesitated and I wasn’t sure if he’d take it. I was about to put my hand in my pocket when he reached up from his realm and took hold. I pulled him from the bush, and we stood on the sidewalk for a few more silent moments. The only sounds, a distant crow, and far and away voices promising a meal in the making.

‘There,’ I said, ‘that’s better. Now I can see you.’

‘I’m sorry mister,’ Matthew said, ‘but what did you mean you could help?’

‘As you can see,’ I said slowly moving my arm in a smooth sweeping motion, and with nothing more than an open palm, I directed his gaze to follow mine, ‘I’ve been gone a while and need a hand with some gardening. I’ll pay a shiny new penny if you’d help me after school?’

‘Every day?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I chuckled. ‘A shiny new penny every day.’

He was being held captive by a tangled web of conscripted duty woven through his young mind. I knew he wanted the job, money and time away from that house. I also knew it was his brother Adam—as it always was—affecting his decision.

‘I saw your brother yesterday,’ I said, ‘playing with a Dinky Toy, a fireman’s truck I believe?’

I let out a low unassuming chuckle and it caught Matthew’s attention. He was like a wounded animal and I didn’t want to scare him off.

‘Yeah, he likes fire trucks. Says he’s gonna be a fireman, but think he just says that cause me dad...’

His small voice trailed off and he raised his skinny arm and pointed down the street to the tree where his father went up in flames. It was good to see the tree was none the worse for wear.

‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ I said in the same slow ceremonial voice used by others in this realm.

‘Thank you,’ he said and looked up with an odd expression. ‘I miss my dad, even though he...’

Matthew looked at his feet and fidgeted uneasily. It was my turn to feel a little awkward as we shared another few quiet moments on the sidewalk.

‘Well, it sounds like Adam has his future all figured out for himself,’ I said to break the silence. ‘But what about you? What do you want to be?’

‘I don’t wannabe nothing,’ he said with the hint of a tear. ‘I’m the man of the house now. I just gotta look after Adam and me ma, and that’s it.’

I forgot myself for a minute, certain I’d choked on another emotion. Collecting my thoughts before continuing, I kept it to short questions and answers. I needed to ease my way into his life, though it always felt like a lot of work just to get him out of that house.

Eventually he said, 'I have to go mister. Adam will be home and me ma gets upset if he's too loud.'

'All right, but what about the job?' I asked and the flick of his eyes made me realise I was losing him. 'What if Adam helped? Four hands are better than two... or so I've been told.'

His face lit up and I knew he was thinking how could he turn it down?

'Matthew? Matthew?' his mother began to screech down the street and I watched his body tense and his face change. I knew he wanted to climb back into his realm and hide once more.

'Matoo, Matoo,' Adam called.

Distress had snaked its way into Matthew's world. I could taste his energies pulse in confusion. I was playing a role I knew so well, but Matthew was human. The lines, the action, played out a little differently each time I returned. I put it down to boredom, stress and a burning desire for rest, but maybe there was more at play. Something I didn't know about?

'I'll have to ask me ma,' he finally said, bringing me out of my reverie.

'Can I let you know tomorrow?'

'Course you can,' I said. 'You'd best go. Adam sounds like he needs you.'

'Thanks mister,' he called over his shoulder as he ran home.

* * *

The next day, around four o'clock, Matthew knocked on my front door

with Adam at his side. Behind them their mother, dressed in her night gown and robe, watched intently from across the street. I cheerily waved, and it seemed to be enough validation of my credential—every time—because she always went back into her house without another look.

‘Boys,’ I said, ‘let’s start out the back shall we.’

After my chat with Matthew the previous afternoon, I followed the angry voices and waited for the inevitable beating, shooting, or strangling to feed my gnawing chasm, but it never came. On my journey back, I came upon a not so terrible miscreant with a knife in his chest. As I drew his sinful energies into myself, a shop window—with several snack food ideas for children—caught my eye.

‘Sometimes their likes change, sometimes not,’ I thought. So, after a couple of probing questions about their favourite foods, I sent the boys to the back yard, then went into the kitchen. Opening the door of a top cupboard revealed three magnificent celestial bodies, sprays of light surrounded them from times long ago into times yet to come. They held the secrets to universes all.

‘May I have?’ I ask and the universes provided. They foresee my desires and always get it right... except my tea for some reason.

‘I’ve put together some snacks,’ I said as I walked out with a tray of cake, biscuits and two cups of milk. The boys eagerly sat on a garden bench near an old metal table. It was just the right height to lay the tray down. We sat, ate and talked terms.

‘I was thinking one hour every day after school with help in the garden,’ I said as Adam stuffed cake into his mouth, ‘and Saturday mornings is pay day. I’ll pay you both a sixpence for the weeks work. How does that sound?’

‘A sixpence?’ Matthew asked, and his eyes bulged. ‘I’m gonna save up for a bicycle.’

‘That you could,’ I said with a smile. ‘What about you Adam? What’ll you save up for?’

‘I wantz a bank, soez I canz robz it likes it robz my daddy an’ daddy can come home.’

I looked up to see Matthew staring at me. I hoped I didn’t look impressed. Adam’s life always seemed to revolve around gaol.

‘You’re gonna be a real scallywag when you grow up. Aren’t you?’ I said reaching out, ruffling Adam’s hair and muttered, ‘And spend a long time in gaol.’

‘Yup,’ Adam said and pulled a fire truck from one pocket and a police car from another.

While Matthew and I walked around the garden, Adam rammed those cars together like he already knew his future and was just waiting to grow into it. He also had cake all over his hands, face and shirt. There were even some crumbs in his tangled mess of tawny brown hair.

‘Children,’ I thought with a shudder.

Matthew was never a child in my eyes, for me he was always an old man

in an alley, dying alone in his own filth. It's something I've been trying to change for a hundred lifetimes. I just need to get it right.

'We'll start tomorrow then,' I said as I walked the boys back to their front gate.

'Tomorrow,' Matthew said and held out his hand. We shook on it, and from that day on the boys visited daily.

* * *

Everything went well for a while. Adam started school, Matthew got that bicycle and rode it until it wore out. Then their mother got sick, and I forgot about the fucking homely girl next door with her mousey brown shoulder length hair, coke-bottle glasses, and that fucking lazy eye. Even fashion was a foreign concept to her, but Matthew married her, as he did in every life.

Their mother died in a home for the aging. An angel of death pushed her down the stairs was how I tasted it. Adam stayed true to form and stole an armoured car this time. Drove it into the local bank killing the bank manager, and that fucking girl took everything from Matthew as she always did.

As lifetimes went on, hundreds more of them, I knew where I needed to be, and when to help Matthew pass without sin, but the last time he recognised me.

'Fred?'

'Yes Matthew. I'm here,' I said, pulling him into my embrace and

cradled him in my arms. 'I'll look after you my friend. Sleep now.'

I held his nose, pulled back his head, leant forward and pressed my lips to his. It didn't take long for the exsanguination—of his sinful energies—to begin. I took every horror, every pain he'd endured from his soul, everything I found hiding in his haze. As he drew his last breath, I left only those memories of joy he'd forgotten, but his darkness was deep, lifelong and it took a lot of my energy to heal his spirit.

Finally, Death stepped from the shadows and he said it again, 'It's a slippery slope Indicus-Resquire,' then he took Matthew's renewed, carefree spirit back to the source, the Well of Life.

'What do you mean?' I'd asked but Death had disappeared. It was the last—and only—time he spoke.

I was tired that fateful night in Reachville, drained and needed to eject the collection of sinful energies before they began to leak.

'Not my favourite part of the job,' I thought.

I lay Matthew on the ground and walked into the deep darkness of one of the alley's.

'Open!' I commanded.

A small piercing light appeared in the crumbling wall at the alleys end. As it grew, the wall became caught up in its force. Slithers of sin had begun to drip from the corners of my dry withered mouth. 'A few centuries in my Void would rehydrate me. Here's to hoping.'

A black hole began to form in the wall to the transonic force. I could only

watch my black cracked lips stretch out before me like old overused rubber bands. They looked as if they were dancing in the air. I knew there was an order to the chaos and my body was the only thing stopping me from being pulled into the force. I weighed myself down by planting my feet up against the remaining wall.

My lips danced themselves into a fine funnel, then disappeared into the small black hole. After a moment, something akin to a three-thousand-watt industrial sized vacuum cleaner, took hold of my lips and my face slammed up against the wall. The force captured the sins before they could escape. I became weaker by the second but knew I needed to find the strength to stay, or it all would've been for nothing. I was hanging off the wall by my lips and until the force closed, I could do nothing. Once the sins released, a low whirring sound began, and the vortex grew. In the moments prior to the process, the sound becomes louder and the hold on my lips tightens.

'Here we go.'

I felt a familiar shudder. It was as if there was someone on the other side with a power hammer and had begun to chisel the sins from my lips. There's no warning when it's over either.

'Fuck!' I said as I was flung backwards as the transonic force released me. As I got my wind back, I noticed several steel bins were lined up along one wall like witnesses to the same crime who saw nothing.

I supposed the process was ritualistic: I imbibed sins, Death waits in the

shadows until I've taken all I can, then leads a new spirit away. I then eject the energies into the transonic force, but the high? The high from those sweet sins stay with me until my next hit. Sometimes I seek it out, most times it comes to me.

It wasn't hard to find sinful beings begging for it in Reachville. It had a reputation as a Sin-eater's last stop when they wanted to finish work—early—would be fine, 'But for fuck sake make it end!'

'See ya in a minute,' I said to Reachville once it was all over and walked into my realm. I desperately needed to forget everything, but knew it was a fool's errand. The only time I felt at rest anymore was when I was with Matthew.

* * *

'Hey,' I said to that same dark alley on the same sunny Wednesday morning in Reachville... I stood at the crossroad, again! 'What's going on? And WHY?' I fumed.

'Because—' an echo of distorted voices whispered inside my head. It was a familiar chorus, one I knew to be the Grandmasters. They'd only whispered to me once before, a few millennium's ago, but that was to call me to ascend to the rank of Sin-eater at the moment as my mortal death.

'So, tell me,' I said in frustration. 'Why am I here... again? Why this time? This being?'

The silence of the alley was all that met me, but somewhere I sensed the

Whisperers—the Grandmasters surrounded themselves with—were preparing... but for what? I had no idea.

I turned and left the alley, certain there'd be no response any time soon. That's the problem working with extradimensional beings, they can be so rude. They don't understand linear time causes most of the problems. They can stop mid-sentence, be distracted by a fleeting thought or internal discussion, and it can take anywhere from a few seconds to a century before they continue. On this occasion it was only a short break. I was some way from the *Dead End* when they spoke.

'Because,' they said and I jumped as if someone had grabbed me from behind, 'you cared enough to save this being from his sins. We desire to know why.'

'Huh! Me too...'

That was it. I knew they had nothing more to say and didn't think I'd get another chance.

'And I'm redecorating!'

Chapter 3

I began the slow walk back to the horrid little floral house situated in a cul-de-sac of little old ladies' houses. They all looked the same and in need of a good gardener. The noise of the city rose and fell with every choice I made along the way. The closer I neared my infernal rest, the noise of the city quieted to a low hum, and the screams and yells took over.

I took a different route than usual, thinking, 'this is the time I'll alter future events, Matthew's and mine.' With my footsteps I created a new path and hoped it would be enough to break the cycle. The sidewalk was cracked, with some edges raised from the earth below to trick me.

'Huh!' I said as a particularly ingenious cement paver hid its deformity until I brought my foot forward. 'Thought you had me didn't ya? Well, not this Sin-eater and not today!'

Yes! I felt like I was going crazy.

The path was one with no end in sight and I wasn't the only one caught up in this cycle. Death was playing out the same role in that alley, just as Matthew and I were. I know enough to be wary of Death's short fuse if he thinks he's been played. I've got to sort this before he goes on a, 'I'm stuck in this realm,' rampage. I looked up as I reached the crossroads. I'd never looked at the street names before, just mine, but I was at the corner of Roselee, Mayflower, Ivy and Orchid streets.

‘All old lady names. I knew it!’

Before I walked up to my house, I leant against a dusty white painted brick fence on the opposite corner.

‘This time I’m watchin’ that wanker run the stop sign, get taken out by the L. P. Gas truck,’ I thought. ‘Get myself a front row seat and watch the abusive drunk and his Ford Super Deluxe transform into a flaming mess.’ I’d seen the wreckage before. Everything gets wrapped around the large Oak tree not far from where I was resting, with the GT sandwiched between the truck and tree.

‘Maybe this’ll change something?’ I thought, sat on the fence and lit a cigarette.

I could see the gas truck coming—it was doing the speed limit—then heard the Ford roar to life. I looked up the slight incline of my street and listened to Mark work those gears. As he neared the intersection, I saw he was steering with his knees, had a bottle of whiskey in one hand, a cigarette in his mouth, and was flicking a lighter in the other hand. From where I stood it looked as if he was having a problem getting it to ignite.

‘Don’t you worry about that lighter Mark,’ I said. ‘That cigarette will get lit any minute now.’

I could’ve stopped it all by hailing down the gas truck, but I heard the stories about the abuse in Matthew’s house at the hands of that pool of gasoline just waiting for a spark, and anyway, I reckon the wanker deserved it.

I'd seen his aftermath many, many times carved out on his widowed wife's face, neck, arms and legs after the last time he ever touched her. I also suspected the bastard didn't limit his fury to his wife, but I'm never here until divine intervention plays its hand.

I watched as the Ford Deluxe and truck neared the crossroads. The driver of the truck always survives, but with the burns to his body, he's never quite the same again.

'Another victim of that bastard,' I muttered under my breath. 'Oh! Here we go. It's gonna happen right in front of me.'

I knew if I helped the truck driver from his vehicle, he might be saved from a life of pain, and I needed to change events. The right one would set Matthew's life on a different course. I just didn't know what the right event was.

'It couldn't hurt,' I thought, 'and it'd look bad if I didn't help. I have to live here too.'

I saw the moment they met, heard the scraping of metal against metal, the breaking of glass and a small explosion as the vehicles wrapped around the tree. Once I saw Mark was packed right in there like sardines in oil, I could taste the fear and sin oozing from his death throws. He was screaming. It was pleasing. I ran to the scene before it exploded and reached into the cab trying to save the driver. The taste of burning flesh assaulted my senses.

'Give me your hand,' I yelled above the roar of the flames flowing into

the cab from the rear of Mark's car. As the burning driver took my hand, I could hear Matthew's father pleading.

'Oh, this just got better.'

'Hey? Someone get me outer 'ere. Get me outer 'ere too,' he called and our eyes locked. I showed him the empty, drew his gaze into my chasm. I was surprised but satisfied, I'd always presumed he was dead on impact. I made sure he was aware of everything in that moment.

I pulled the driver from the cab, dragged him up behind the thick concrete fence. I'd taken my jacket off and was patting him down when the gas ignited. Metal, glass, flesh, brain, shit and gore carried on a bow wave of energy and came to rest all over the cross roads.

'With this much blood and gore, anyone seeking a deal with the ancients would get a direct line,' I thought while shielding the driver from the debris.

'You'll be right mate,' I reassured him.

I looked up to see excited housewives all standing around in small groups watching on.

'Some one run for an ambulance,' I yelled as I lay the plump middle-aged driver, Byron, on the ground wrapped in my coat.

The whole experience felt surreal. I'd never shown someone the empty, or my chasm before, without taking their sins.

'And he had no other sin-eater there,' I thought with a smile.

In that loop, I was not only the neighbourhood hero, but was able to get

more time to help Matthew's direction in life. Everything after the accident though, was the same as every other time. I tried to give the right nudge here and there to make a significant change to Matthew's future, but it always ended the same.

Adam's future always altered, but he just finds new ways to go to gaol. The last time he became a fireman and drove over a parked police car with two officers in it.

* * *

Another few generations have passed and I'm still looking for the reason why I'm stuck in this fucking loop. I've even tried to alter events by not taking Matthew's sins, by doing the job I'd been called to do in the first place. Relieving a piece of shit—dying in a slum at the base of a work house full of drugged up young boys—of his sin.

'Sometimes I hate my job,' I thought once my lips were drawn into the transonic force of the temporal dimension.

So many times, I've thought this is it but here I am, still trying to figure out Matthew. I'd finally worked out how to save him from the girl next door, from the weight of the world resting on his young shoulders, and a feeling of piece when his mother passed. I even worked out how to keep him from blaming himself for Adam's crimes. I don't know if it's genetic, but Mathew still ended up an alcoholic working weekend jobs to pay for his addiction.

I was sitting in my newly designed man cave—there was no floral shit

left in my house—when I caught a flavour on a solitary breeze. I made my way to the bay window and saw a taxi come to a stop across the street. The forty-five-year-old Matthew got out, put his hand into the taxi and out stepped a young lady.

‘It’s about time,’ I thought. ‘Good for you. Things are changing, I’ll sleep well tonight.’

I saw the same woman arrive a few nights every week for a while, then one night as she arrived, she had a different flavour about her.

‘What’s that?’ I wondered. ‘It tastes like... Matthew?’

I lay on my bed that night thinking, ‘There’s something different this time.’

* * *

‘Indicus-Resquire?’ I heard someone calling my true name. It roused me from my sleep, then heard it again. ‘Indicus-Resquire?’

I rose immediately and found Matthew at my door.

‘Matthew?’ I asked. ‘Why are you calling Indicus-Resquire?’

‘Um, because it’s your name,’ he said and pushed past me into my house.

‘I know it’s my name, but, how do you?’

‘You told me—’

‘I told him?’ I thought. ‘Have I skipped a generation?’

‘In a dream, you told me in my dreams,’ Matthew said. ‘Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to say—’

‘What did you come to say?’

‘I’m gonna have a baby,’ he said, and he was ecstatic.

‘Maybe this time,’ I thought. ‘But my name?’

‘I’m very pleased for you,’ I said, then asked, ‘what else did I tell you?’

‘You told me your name was really Indicus-Resquire, not Fred Nettle’s, that you’re a Sin-eater and we’d lived near each other for thousands of years. Anyway, I was wondering if you’d be my best man?’

‘What the fucks goin’ on?’ I thought. My mind was reeling.

‘Indicus?’ Matthew called. My eyes refocused and saw he’d taken hold of my chin and was making me look at him. Laughing, he said, ‘You told me you’d be surprised but I don’t care. Be my best man?’

‘Um. Okay,’ I said and pulled myself together. I knew we’d talk about it later. ‘When’s the wedding?’

‘Half an hour—’

‘But it’s the middle of the night.’

‘No, it’s noon,’ he said with a smile. ‘Just grab your jacket, I’m goin’ like this.’

My eyes focused, he was right, broad daylight was blazing in through my front windows. Matthew was wearing an old pair of his father’s black pants. They were two sizes too big and I could smell mothballs. His shirt was white and covered with paint and oil stains.

‘You’re not going like that,’ I said, ‘Go have a shower.’

‘But it’s at the church. I’ll be late—’

‘I’m a Sin-eater remember? We’ll make it in plenty of time.’

Matthew followed me to the bathroom. His flavour was like sucking down a strawberry milkshake with extra ice-cream. While he showered, I opened a cupboard and pulled out a clean white shirt, black pants, jacket and shoes, all made to fit of course.

‘Here,’ I said when the water stopped. ‘Put these on.’

‘Wow! Thank you.’

Matthew stepped out of the bathroom looking like new.

‘See,’ I said as I opened a rift, ‘plenty of time.’

We stepped through and arrived in a dark leaf littered alley not far from the church. It was a small affair. Matthew was better dressed than his intended. Her name was Shelly and she was a pretty young woman. She had a lovely smile and certain style about her. I was uncomfortable participating in silly meaningless rituals but was willing to try anything if it meant I didn’t have to come back again.

* * *

Matthew and Shelly Bartholomew lived across the road from me. I got to have a talk with Matthew about his dream and he was spot on, especially with my name. No-one should ever know a Sin-eaters name, it can only lead to his undoing. Also, I never believed I told him any of it, in dream or in waking, but it did have the smell of the Grandmasters all over it.

Eight months later Shelly had a bouncing 10-pound 8-ounce baby boy, and in that moment, I sensed Matthew’s pride, his love for his wife and child. I’d been invited into Matthew’s life. Treated as part of the family,

and I enjoyed it.

‘What will you call him?’ I asked on my visit.

‘Mark,’ Shelly said with that smile of hers.

Matthew was also smiling, I believe I was the only one who looked stunned while wondering if everyone thought it was a good idea?

‘Oh, and better news,’ Matthew said. ‘Adam gets out tomorrow. I couldn’t be happier. Everything’s falling into place.’

We shared a welcome home party with Adam when Shelly arrived home from the hospital. For a while everything looked just fine. But one afternoon, about nine months after the birth, I heard Shelly yelling, and opened my door to see Adam running from the house.

I never knew what’d happened, but from that day onwards, Matthew and Shelly argued constantly. I tried asking Matthew about it, but he’d become closed lipped. The only noise above their arguments were the cries of baby Mark. Two years later Matthew arrived home to find his wife and son were nowhere to be found. He was in a panic when he came to me.

‘You don’t understand Indicus. I’m worried for Mark. We’ve not been arguing about Adam—I’ve allowed you to think it was—but no! We’ve been arguing because Shelly’s been taking drugs, and the day you saw Adam run from the house—’

‘Yeah?’

‘He wasn’t running from me, he wasn’t running because of anything he’d

done,’ Matthew paused for a moment and took a calming breath. ‘He ran because there was a stranger in the house, Shelly’s drug dealer.’

‘Drugs? Shelly?’ I asked, then wondered why I didn’t sense there was a stranger in Matthew’s house.

‘I should’ve tasted him at the very least, and drugs?’ I thought. ‘Drugs have a specific flavour and someone using them can’t hide it from a Sin-eater.’

‘She’s been on them for a while Indicus, could you help me find Mark, you know, with your magic powers?’

I sat quietly for a moment taking it all in, and for him to ask me to find Mark? That’s something a Sin-eater doesn’t hear every day.

‘When was the last time you were a Sin-eater? You only sin eat for sustenance and have done so for so long—’ I thought.

‘All right. I’ll do it. Take my hand.’

Matthew took my hand and I thought, ‘Shelly,’ but we didn’t go anywhere. ‘Mark,’ but we still didn’t go anywhere. I was stunned. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t think my way to them. It was if a wall had been placed around them.

‘Must be a pretty big fucking wall to keep me out,’ I thought. ‘I wonder if that’s why I didn’t know about the drugs?’

I took a whiff but tasted no drugs in Matthew’s house.

‘What the fuck’s going on?’ I thought.

‘You need to get me something of Mark’s,’ I said. ‘And something

belonging to Shelly, just in case they're not together.'

While Matthew gathered a couple of things, I tried to think my way to Shelly and Mark again. I thought maybe I couldn't travel with Matthew, but the universes couldn't find them. I was worried, that had never happened before. The universes know where everyone is. I should've been able to sniff out a being in another realm, and I could, but not Shelly or Mark.

Matthew and I walked the dark streets of Reachville as we followed Mark's flavour. I don't know if it was me or Matthew who said it first, but we both uttered our disbelief into the night when we ended up at that crossroads, at that alley, at that filthy whore house at the Dead End. It was populated with crack-whores—a more inclusive term for those of any persuasion who traded sexual acts for drugs.

I pushed my way through the crumbling mortar and moulding walls of a house I've hated since I was first called to this realm. As I pushed down whores and kicked open doors, I had a truth smack me in the face like an old friend with a grudge.

'It's a fucking nexus point,' I growled when I saw, acting as upright support beams, three totems carved from the three trees of wisdom, knowledge and life. The house, the alley, the crossroads, those fucking totems, they were all fucking nexus points. In that instance everything became clear.

'I must've arrived in Reachville at a fluctuating moment in time and

become one of the three fucking points of the nexus,' I thought. 'That's why I can't fucking leave.'

I'd heard stories about the Nexus, we all had us Sin-eaters. I heard it was a formless entity, the source of all magic the Grandmasters contained when the worlds began to keep it from corruption. I also heard it had no allegiances to good nor evil.

'Maybe it's changed its mind?' I thought looking at the lowest forms of humanity it had drawn to itself. 'I knew it could be corrupted, but this?'

I roared an otherworldly roar. Felt confident, in control for the first time in centuries.

'Where's the baby?' I asked slow enough for even the dimmest of beings to understand.

'Geeze, slow ya roll man,' some malnourished, weaned off food, sucking down meth being said as he attempted to squeeze past.

'You,' I said picking him up by the throat, 'can slow your roll man. Now tell me where the baby is or you're not gonna see tomorrow.'

'Geeze, that's harsh man—'

'Where's the baby?' I asked for the last time and saw me pop his head off like a tick.

'Next room dude! Geeze! Put me down an' get outta me way.'

I put him down and watched him slither along the wall like the snake he was.

'He's here,' Matthew called from a doorway near the back of the house.

‘Indicus... here.’

I walked into the room and saw three-year-old Mark had been lain on a pile of wet, rotting cardboard and Shelly was lying next to him, dead.

‘Indicus!’

Matthew’s scream was contorted, soul shattering. It cut to my very core. I was enraged but contained my rage while I took control of the situation. Picking Mark up, I put him in Matthew’s arms while I pried the babies blanket from Shelly’s death grip. I wrapped it around the young boy and saw Matthew had fallen to his knees.

‘My Shelly,’ Matthew wailed into the Nexus while cradling his son.

‘She’s dead Matthew,’ I said helping him to his feet.

I wanted to ease his pain, but nothing could.

‘Get Mark out of here,’ I said and opened a rift—without effort—to his house. ‘I’ll see you at home.’

‘Shelly,’ Matthew said. His body heaving with every sob. I waited, watched him run into the rift and made sure it closed.

He’d never admit it, but until Adam got out of gaol, their little family was doing just fine. I allowed the rage to spew forth on the waves of a roar so fierce, even the most powerful of beings would’ve trembled.

Chapter 4

I roared into the night, called for the universes to assist and my will was enacted. The house crumbled around me until all that stood—in a familiar triangle—were the three, ornately carved lengths of petrified wood identifiers of the nexus. Those in the know would find it, but what'd sprouted from that point was deadlier than anything I did that night. A fountain of sin wafted past my angry, hooked on sin, hungry mouth. I took a few deep breaths but didn't use my abilities to ease one sinner into their death.

I heard the sirens, saw the lights of police, fire brigade and ambulance nearing the Dead End, and with a thought, I was back in my house. I was so angry I was shaking, but cleaned up, and tried to calm myself before crossing the road to make sure Matthew and Mark were all right.

'There's only one way a nexus point can break its connection and that is to...' I paused. I didn't want to finish that thought, what with Matthew's dream and all. 'No! I'll think on it after I check him.'

'Matthew must be going out of his mind,' I thought as I whipped up a dinner and a bottle of whiskey to take with me.

When I reached his front door, I noticed it was open a crack. Confused, I found the house was dark and the living room empty, so put the bottle and plate on the table and began to walk the house. It tasted... foul.

Mark's soft coos were coming from his room. I checked on him, and saw

he had a fresh bottle and it appeared to be held to his mouth by an unseen being. I walked to his crib seeking a flavour but found none.

‘Maybe Shelly’s essence?’ I wondered as Mark suckled on its teat. Now and then he’d smile at something over my shoulder. To tell you the truth, the kid was creeping me out.

‘Where’s your dad,’ I asked as I walked back to the dark hallway.

The next room was Adams and there was a definite flavour coming from there.

‘Matthew?’ I asked when I saw a shaded, heaving lump on the floor.

‘Indicus,’ he sobbed.

He’d slumped to the floor beneath the window sill, and on the bed was Adam. A used syringe was hanging from between his great and second toes, on his right foot.

‘He left a note,’ Matthew said and reached out with the crumpled piece of paper in his hand.

His pain was physically hurting me. I don’t think I’d ever felt pain like it before, but it was all-encompassing, and I could sense nothing else.

‘He looks like that broken man I always find in the alley,’ I thought, then read the note.

Matt

I’m so sorry I ruin everything. Don’t blame Shelly she didn’t no. I just wanted to do something for her cause she done so much for

me, so I borrowed sum money and got her tha clothes drier an it wood of been alright but Ben come looking for the money I owed. He shot her up Matt. every day 'til I pay. I tried to stop him, I tried to pay but he kept sayin I owed more. He fucked her up so bad Matt.

His names Ben an he deals from the old transformer on the hill ova the dead end. Everything's my fault. I should have stayed away. Ya gotta go to the old whore-boy house an get Mark. Save Mark Matt.

I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. I love you Matthew. I always have, but its better this way.

Adam.

'I know what transformer he's talking about,' I thought, and that rage began to build inside me again when I found there'd been a predator in Matthew's house. I sniffed the bastard out.

'Oh yeah! I've got your scent all right. I'm comin' for ya Ben,' I whispered into fates winds, then leant down to help Matthew up.

'Come with me,' I said and pushed my arms under his to lift him from the floor. 'I'll find this Ben. I promise you—'

'But, what about, what about my Shelly, Indicus?' He asked and damn it I needed to get out of the house before the cops found me sitting on the sofa with a baby in my arms weeping over a suicide note.

‘I’ll call an ambulance and the cops, but you have Mark. You have to look after that little baby now. When the cops arrive just give them the note and they’ll send someone to help. I’ll come back when it’s all over my friend.’

I sat Matthew on the sofa, made the calls, checked baby Mark once more, and took in the essence—the Nexus had kept hidden from me—that was Ben with every move I made. When I saw red and blue lights come to a stop outside the front windows, I left.

‘I’ll be back when it’s over,’ I said and with a thought I stood at the peak of the sandy cliff hovering over the Nexus.

I tasted the air and found, a little way back from where I stood, an old rank smelling house more disgusting than the Dead End. There was a trail of bodies, in different states of decay, still alive, though barely breathing, leading from my feet to its front door. I followed those bodies to my prey. I’d never flaunted who I was, nor what I could do, but damn it if Matthew didn’t make me want to crush them all.

‘Ben?’ I breathed into the foul night air and as I asked, so I did appear inside the mouldy rot ridden house at the feet of an unsightly being so fucked up on, ‘Special gear, not far tha likes of youze,’ I heard him say.

He was an unpleasant man—to look at and listen to—in his late thirties sitting like a king on an old green velvet sofa. It had large balding patches with pockets of yellow foam protruding through them. A fungus had grown up from the floor around the sofa’s, and Ben’s, legs. A boy,

not much older than Matthew had been when I first met him, was sucking his cock. Occasionally the boy would raise his head and Ben would pop another pill in his mouth, then push him back into his lap.

‘Ben,’ I said, and my voice boomed into every crook and crevice of the old house. I know he heard me, I tasted it as he jumped. I picked the young boy up by the neck and set him down for a nap.

‘Look at me Ben,’ I whispered and reached inside my chasm.

The whisper wove its way through his mind. The very first utterance, I’m told, feels like a thousand fire ants clawing away at the sinner, as if they were trying to burrow their way out through every orifice. A fitting sensation for such a disgusting being.

‘You sit in the filth of your depravity and leech off the lives of those without hope. I’ve dealt with many transgressors minds so putrefied that nothing good, honest or respectable could manoeuvre through the shit they call a brain,’ I paused for a moment, I knew he didn’t understand a word I was saying. I could taste his sins as they began to fall into me and there was no redemption for filth like this in my mind anymore.

‘You are worse than even those,’ I growled, and he looked at me, not into me and I finally had his attention.

‘I know you Ben. Do you want to know how I know you?’

As he looked up, his bottom lip drooped, and he dribbled as if he had no muscles left to keep it shut.

‘Ye... yep. ‘ow does ya know me?’ he asked.

I sensed his fear, and the fear he surrounded himself with. It's what he used on the druggies, whores and the innocent's like Shelly. He was a dung beetle feeding off the faeces of the fears that made up a trail from his feet to the peak of the Nexus. The essence of that parasite wove its way through each body trailed to the tip of the sandy peak. It dripped to the exact spot Shelly had died.

'I know you,' I said again and smiled just enough for my lips to part, to reveal the true me, to keep him offside.

'Ow?' he asked as his eyes focused on my mouth.

'We've got a friend in common, her name was Shelly. You might remember her, she was nothing like these sycophantic addicts you keep on a tight leash. How'd you do it? I want to know.'

'Wha?'

'Straighten your worthless body bag to travel to my friends' home,' I said and realised my whisper had gone up a notch, so used it to my advantage.

'To drug his wife, put his baby in danger and all for what? Filth, for all this fucken filth you tie around your neck to try to hide the true you! You think ya hidden in the shadows don't ya, but you can't hide from me anymore.'

'I dons understan' did ya want some crank, tweak, chalk? Got 'em all, jes name ya poison mate I gotta youngun' o're there who needs ta hit me soes he can gets a hit. Ya know?'

He snorted like a pig as he spoke, and I saw my hand reach out, rip his

face off, hold him by the throat, and listened to his screams as I made him watch me eat it. Shaking my head, I realised it'd been a wish playing out in my mind, and the whiney piece of shit was still asking what my poison was.

'I'll tell ya what my poison is if you tell me all about Shelly,' I said and calmed myself, knowing he was about to die, to find out what he did to her.

'Oh yeah, Shell's was sweet mate,' he said, and I wanted to rip him apart like a planet moving into a black hole. 'To bad bout tha drug fucked bro of 'ers, but rules is rules an ya don pay, ya don getz, ya feel me? Sucked ta be Shells tha's far sure.'

'Sucks to be you—' I said.

'Nah! I's got it good mate. Ya gots tha gear, they gets their gear off. Yeah, an don let tha digs fool ya. I's rollin' in it.'

I'll admit, I've hated taking the sins from some truly worthless beings, but I actually wanted to harm this creature.

'I'd like to take every sin I've ever collected,' I thought. 'Wrap them in a ball and spew them back into the piece of shit sitting back like a king on his decomposing green velvet throne.'

It was something I'd never tried. I'd never even thought about it before.

'I wonder if I'm able to do that?' I pondered that outcome for a few moments. 'What's the worst that could happen—'

'Soes, what'll it be, crank, tweak, chalk or somethin' else? I gots it all,'

Ben continued to say. His mouth was moving, dribbling and all I wanted to do was tear the fucker limb from limb.

‘I’ve something for you,’ I said with a crooked smile having come to an understanding within myself.

‘I’m coming back to this realm again anyway,’ I thought, ‘so may as well try something new.’

‘Oh yeah, what’s ya got for me then? Come on let’s have it,’ he said feeling cock sure of his place in the scheme of things.

‘I need you to stand. Are you able to do that?’

‘Yeah, I can do that,’ he said and as he stood he began to wobble. I grabbed a handful of his unwashed mat of greasy hair and heard the fungus tear from his legs as I raised him off the ground. Even his flavour was putrid, it was hard to maintain control of my actions.

‘Soez, where’s it?’ he asked as he dribbled on my left boot. When I heard it hit, I looked down and saw the moss reaching from the ground wrapping itself around his legs again.

‘Let me see,’ I said and began the preparation to take his sins, so I could regurgitate them. It’s only fair considering.

‘Go on,’ he said.

I pulled him close to my face, he was so drug fucked everyone’s lips probably looked like mine in that moment. I clasp my lips to his, opened my mouth wide and drew his sins into my chasm, then brought to the fore all the sins I’d imbibed during my time in Reachville, and those I’d

arrived with. I wrapped them around the others. When I was ready, I pulled my head back to allow a bit of air to flow through. It carried all the fear, sex and death Ben created around himself. Once every sin had been collected, I vomited them back into the despicable being kicking his legs in mid-air.

I pulled back as my lips retracted, threw him to his sofa, and stepped away. I wasn't sure what was about to happen but was excited. Cracks began to form in his flesh, a bright yellow glow seeped out through every crack along his legs, up his arms and across his face. A black sludge began to flow over his droopy lip and the veins in his eyes raised with the same thick sludge. Just when I thought about stepping out of the room, his eyes exploded. There was a pause, a vacuum of sound, moments before the rest of Ben exploded.

The slimy sack of shit turned into a small pile of black goo that seeped into the cracked concrete floor until only packets of crank, tweak, and chalk remained.

'Well, I wasn't expecting that,' I said and thought myself home.

It was a bit of a bumpy ride, not instantaneous like usual, but after a shower, and clean clothes, I felt my old self again. Except... I felt hungry... no, I had a craving... and not for sin, for food.

I checked the front window and saw the crime scene across the road. Certain I'd none of Ben on me, I made my way to Matthew. A female officer was walking around the yard cradling and feeding Mark. They

were just taking Adam out as I arrived.

‘This is a crime scene sir,’ an officer said as he stood in my way.

‘But, I’m like family. Is Matthew all right? What about Shelly and Mark?

I need to know,’ I said using some well-honed skills to get me into anywhere.

‘Is that Indicus?’ I heard Matthew call.

‘Yes, it’s me my friend.’

‘Nice name,’ said the female officer holding Mark and the officer barring the door allowed me through. Matthew was sitting where I’d left him.

‘How are you? Is Mark all right?’

‘I’ve just been waiting for you Indicus.’

‘I’m here now. How can I help?’

‘Shelly,’ Matthew cried, and I looked to see tears falling from his eyes.

‘Shelly’s—’

‘Shelly’s—’ I said and took a deep breath to calm myself as Matthew’s broken spirit overwhelmed me. ‘Don’t you worry yourself, the police can fill me in.’

‘It’s done,’ I whispered as I pulled him close to comfort him.

* * *

Life from that point seemed to flow. Matthew, even I, grieved over the loss of Shelly, but there were no more beings in Matthew’s life to harm him. Once a year we all climbed into his blue Valiant and made the trip to visit the graves of Shelly and Adam Bartholomew.

I helped Matthew for as long as I could, though Mark was a terror. He had some, we call them anger issues—the brats a fuckin’ psychopath—I thought I’d try to fix when I got back. I’d received an urgent call from the Grandmasters assistant, Gothicess, said she ‘Needed to see me.’

I didn’t know what to expect. The Grandmaster surround themselves with all manner of beasts.

‘Could be a Whisperer, might be a gnome,’ I thought. ‘Who could fucking tell—?’

‘Won’t be long Matthew,’ I called as I left. ‘I sure as shit couldn’t!’

I’d just thought it could be a Soul-eater when I stepped through to the Nexus and fuck me if I wasn’t right!

At first glance, it had all the traits of a pretty young woman. She was well dressed, but that fucking flavour assaulted my senses as she neared. She looked at me with her silver slits for eyes and snake like fangs. I’d only ever been this close to one Soul-eater before, *It* was tearing the soul from some poor bastard who’d been sleeping rough. I knew I had to be cautious.

‘I’ve a meeting with you?’

‘One minute please,’ she said with a sweet, officious voice that had a subtle hiss to belie the form she’d taken on.

I stood back. Waited where I felt comfortable. It had one of those next century iPads and was *skyping* with... them? I couldn’t hear conversation what was being said.

‘Right! Here you are,’ It said and passed me an envelope. ‘I have to go, we’re conducting an interview and someone’s comment has caused a bit of a problem. Online etiquette an all that shit.’

‘Wait!’ I said.

‘What is it? Can’t you see I’ve got places to be? And you know what their like, so you get one question. Go!’

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a letter moron. Gods, why do I get all the dumb ones. The interview I’m presiding over is in this dimension’s future, and the outcome depends on what you do with that information. There’s a real shit storm brewing and you’re in the eye of it!’ It said and disappeared.

I pushed the envelope into a zip pocket for safe keeping, shook off Its stench and thought myself home.

Chapter 5

I sat, or rather fell, into the sofa as I read my instructions.

‘I wasn’t expecting that,’ I said with the letter still gripped in my hand.

I sat for a long time and night had fallen when Matthew phoned. He pulled me out of my thoughts when he asked if I was coming to dinner?

‘Dinner would be lovely. I’ll be over in a minute,’ I said and read the letter once more.

Indicus-Resquire,

We watched as you discovered the Nexus, but even we did not see what was to come. We didn’t know why you became caught in an infinite loop until you found it. The Nexus has sought mortal form since it was hidden, but the host body had to be given freely. It can only be corrupted by the heart within the vessel who gives it life, and you have a good heart Indicus, but sadly you’re not the vessel. You’re the liberator. The Nexus resides in the child. It nourished the him and kept him safe for your arrival. But you sealed its desire for form when you used your grace to destroy one of their agents. In doing so, you staked a claim on the nurture of the child. You released your grace into the Never, where it shall be held until the child comes to claim it.

You’ve enough grace for one last gift, use it wisely. We were also

curious about the one known as Matthew and with your connection to his father, the child was destined to be Sin-eater. But the Nexus chose you, hid its true purpose until the child came into being, until it could claim him. You must prepare him for his destiny.

He will be both, Sin-eater and Nexus. He will be like none we've ever seen before.

If the child is not handled carefully, the interview we are currently undertaking 25 years into your future, he will decimate the entire realm.

He is a child of the Nexus, but it was by your grace to his father, he was created. His name is Incantu-Resquire. His father is aware of who, and what, you are. We had to prepare him for when the time came. He will give you custody of the child.

We shall meet one last time Indicus at the place you always find your path leads, though it shall be much sooner than previous encounters.

Grandmasters

Since the Ben situation I'd lost my craving for sin—just as Matthew no longer craved alcohol—don't get me wrong, we still have an after-dinner drink together, but after the Ben situation I craved food.

‘Now I know—cake—why,’ I said stepping out into the cool night air.

With a sponge cake in hand I crossed the road to Matthew’s house. He stood at the door with six-year-old Mark standing by his side waiting for me. I had grown to love Matthew. The sight of him made me smile and the desire to protect him had not waned along with my Sin-eater duties.

‘If I ever had a son,’ I thought, ‘I would’ve wanted one just like him.’

‘Dessert,’ I said with a smile. ‘I hope you have a whiskey, because I could do with one after a day like today.’

‘Course I do old friend,’ Matthew said, and we all sat around the table.

We shared a nice meal, had some laughs and Mark, who’d demanded to sit on my lap, fell asleep.

‘I’ll put him to bed,’ Matthew said. ‘Won’t be a minute then we need to talk.’

‘Right, want another drink?’ I asked as he retreated down the short dark hallway.

‘Yep,’ he called over his shoulder.

I’d never really paid much attention to his house before, it’d always been Matthew. The lounge, dining and kitchen was open plan, but lined with horrible lime green shag pile carpet.

‘To match the walls?’

Off the hallway were three bedrooms a bathroom and toilet. The entire house was dated and I’m certain Shelly would’ve made some stylish changes, but life stopped for Matthew the day she and Adam died. He

never blamed Adam for her death, he never even thought it. I did.

‘Right,’ Matthew said as he walked back into the room. ‘Where’s that drink?’

‘Right here,’ I said.

I didn’t know what he wanted to talk about, but on some level, I suppose I did. The Grandmasters told me, and I found it interesting Matthew had also attracted their attention.

‘So, what do we need to talk about?’

‘This,’ Matthew said, as he pulled a manilla folder out from under the lime green shaggy cushion on his chair.

‘What’s this?’ I asked not wanting to pre-empt anything, then said, ‘and if you say a manilla folder, I might just have to slap you.’

His chuckle was shaky, and a wonky smile followed. Matthew downed his whiskey before he spoke again.

‘It’s adoption papers,’ he said.

He had a serious look in his eyes and a surprised tone to his voice. He looked me in the eye as he slid them across the table.

‘Adoption? But... Why? What’s going on?’ I asked as I opened the folder, and I was certain my eyes must’ve looked like they were about to pop out of my head when I saw the names.

‘What is this Matthew?’

‘I want... No, I need you to adopt me,’ he said.

I wanted to laugh, things were verging on the ridiculous, though I did

think it was for Mark.

‘Oh dear. They said they were going to talk to you,’ Matthew said, and he looked worried.

‘Who?’

I needed him to say their name, so I understood we were on the same page.

‘The Grandmasters of course—’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Now I know we’re both talking about the same thing, why do you want me to adopt you? You’re a grown man?’

‘If you adopt me, you will legally be Mark’s grandfather—’

‘So, if something happened to you—’

‘I’d know Mark would be well cared for,’ Matthew said, ‘and they promised he’d live many thousands of lifetimes. So, you see it’s a selfish request really. I love you as my friend and my father. You made sure I led a good life and with the sale of my house, you and Mark would live at number nine. You’ll train him to be a good and just Sin-eater like you. I only ask you give Mark the Valiant when he is of age—’

‘If you’re not still around that is. Right?’

Matthew was looking down, running his white rubber soled shoes across the shag carpet.

‘Right?’ I asked again, but he didn’t respond, he just watched his shoe run through the carpet.

‘I always hated this carpet. Did you know that?’ he finally asked and

looked at me.

‘No, I didn’t know—’

‘But Shelly, Shelly made everything better,’ he said looking back down.

‘When I brought up about the carpet and getting something new, she said, “It’s like bringing the outdoors inside. It makes me feel like I’m walking in the sunshine while running bare foot through the grass.” She said that because we couldn’t afford to get new carp—’

‘Stop right there,’ I said. ‘Shelly was a good, pure soul Matthew and I don’t believe she’d told a lie in her life. I never felt her sin. I’m not saying she had none, I’m just saying her sins were so minute they barely left a trail.’

‘Thank you for that Indicus.’

‘Now, are you sick?’

‘I am. I’m very sick. I’ve an inoperable brain tumour. They say I’ve a year, maybe two left in me, but I’ll die soon,’ he said, and he didn’t sound angry, or sad. He displayed none of the grief beings feel when they know the timing of their death.

‘All right. I’ll adopt you,’ I said. ‘I couldn’t be more pleased to have had you as my son all these years. It’s what you have always meant to me, even if I couldn’t admit it to myself, and I’ll care for Mark—’

‘Thank you, the house is going on the market—’

‘We... will live in my house across the street,’ I said ‘all of us—’

‘But—’

‘And... at the moment of your death,’ I continued, ‘I will take your sins into myself and send them into the transonic force. We’ll be together, all of us, when the time comes.’

A sudden silence filled the room, our eyes were locked, then I felt Matthew’s hand in mine.

‘Thank you, thank you,’ he said, and tears of relief fell from his eyes as I poured him another whiskey.

‘I have one caveat though.’

‘And what is that father,’ he said with a wet, cheeky smile.

‘You and Mark, you’ll move in with me—’

‘But—’

‘That way I can help care for you both and it’s a pretty cool house,’ I said. ‘You ask for something, you’ve got it. No cooking, no cleaning, and best of all no lime green shag pile carpet.’

We shared a hearty laugh and I admit having to fight back tears of my own. Matthew put the paperwork in the next day and my new son and grandson moved in with me. Matthew’s house sold, and he donated the money to a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre just down the road, nowhere near the Nexus.

It took several months for the adoption to go through, but I wasn’t concerned, whatever Matthew needed he got.

* * *

It was two years almost to the day when he died.

We'd taken a walk to the Nexus, it'd been turned into a park, Shelly Park, the council had dedicated it to Shelly when Matthew made his donation. It was covered in green grass and had a bench seat off to one side overlooking the river. We sat for most of the day. Matthew wanted to be where Shelly had died, he wanted his eight-year-old son to know his mother was loved.

The Nexus cared for Mark while Matthew and I shared his final few moments together. We were at the place where I always found him... dying in his own filth. I wrapped my arms around my son and shared with him the warmth of the love he had brought into my world. I heard Death's footfall and knew it was time.

'We'll miss you Matthew, my friend, my son. I'm going to take all your pain and hurt away now.'

Matthew looked over at Mark. He was talking as if to another person. He smiled and looked up at me.

'I'm ready father.'

I said, 'I love you Matthew,' then pressed my lips to his.

I opened my chasm for the last time and took into me, all of Matthew's sins. As he slumped in my arms, he wasn't the twisted remains of the Matthew I'd found in the alley on that fateful night. He looked just the same, and I watched as Death took his renewed spirit to the Well of Life.

'Mark?' I called.

He knew why we'd gone to the park that day and wasn't surprised to see

his papa had died.

‘Yes grandpa?’ he asked with a smile.

‘Come here son. Help me with your papa, then I need to show you something,’ I said as I wiped the tears from my face.

He ran to me and together we laid Matthew where Shelly had died, then I took Mark into the alley.

‘Open!’ I said.

The transonic force began to open.

‘Do you see that?’

‘What is it grandpa?’

‘It’s a place only you and I can open. It’s the place where the sins of all the worlds, realms and dimensions are sent. Hold my hand, stay close and watch what happens when I send your papa’s sins into the force.’

Mark copied my actions and wedged his feet against the wall. Once the ceremony was over, I told him his true name, Incantu-Resquire.

As the last of Matthew left me, the force took my final breath. I was no longer a Sin-eater, I was carer, grandpa and papa to the Nexus child. Incantu-Resquire was born of my grace the day his mother died. He wasn’t an easy child to care for, and only by my grace could I keep a leash on him as he became a young man.

I didn’t know what a Nexus child was, but Mark was a psychopath, and without me looking over his shoulder, he might stop killing small animals and move on to other beings. I took him to the Nexus each night

and he spoke with something far beyond my understanding, dare I say it, even the understanding of the Grandmasters.

* * *

As Mark grew, he began to visit the Nexus by himself. I worried when he wanted to get his licence and made him go through the proper channels. That was the last day Mark bowed to my will. I refused to give him Matthew's blue Valiant if he didn't. He was an unhappy psychopath until he had those keys in his hands. I'd taken good care of Matthew's car. It was the one thing that never changed through all our lifetimes together. It was immaculate and my memories of Matthew always made me smile.

'He was a good son,' I thought.

I slept with my eyes open for most of Mark's teen, and young adult years. There'd been a spate of murders in surrounding suburbs, and I had a nagging feeling he was behind them, although I didn't want it to be true. When he turned thirty-one, I felt that same tearing at the very centre of me. It was so intense it woke me from a deep sleep.

'Mark!' I called as I sat up in bed panting into the darkness.

I dressed and thought my way to the Nexus. When I arrived, Mark was hovering above the ground in *Shelly Park* at the *Dead End*, in the dead centre. An orange light emanated from beneath the earth and he was bathed in it. His body was stiff, rigid, twisted and he was laughing maniacally.

'Mark?' I called in panic, but it was too late. He looked at me from the

glow, all twisted like he was, then I fell to the ground as he sapped the last of my grace from my body, and I became mortal.

‘Grandpa, you are to be my first,’ he proclaimed.

Still hovering above the ground, he glided to where I’d fallen, and before I knew what was happening, he’d pressed his lips to mine. As Mark took my sins, I saw Death waiting in the dark of the alley, and while Mark absorbed all my grace into himself, the Grandmasters whispered to me one last time.

‘You are, and have always been, the sacrifice the child required to become the living embodiment of the Nexus,’ they said with one voice then it was as if they evaporated into a fine mist.

I saw my old friend Death as he came to collect me.

‘The Nexus needed one such as you,’ he said as he took my hand. ‘A Sin-eater with a soul, a Sin-eater who could feel, a Sin-eater it could manipulate into giving it life. You can rest now Indicus-Resquire, but for me? Your grace has given the Nexus life, its only just begun.’

As Death carried me away, I saw Matthew’s Valiant parked near the bench, then caught sight of the transonic force as it began to open. I saw the moment Mark’s lips were pulled into it as Death led my spirit to the Well of Life at the end of my time.

Exegesis

Introduction

This exegesis looks at the trope of the absent or dead mother as it appears in Urban Fantasy (Feasey 2017, pp. 225-240) and seeks to discover whether the trope is used as extensively in the genre as some claim and, if so, why? While the trope has been researched in relation to a number of literary genres—notably historical literature from the Elizabethan (Åström 2017; Rose 1991) and Victorian (Francus 2012) periods—there is little analysis of its prevalence in Urban Fantasy. To some extent this lack applies to most genres (Åström 2017, p. 4), however the trope's use in Urban Fantasy has been claimed as extensive (Feasey 2017; Wilson-Scott 2018). The preceding artefact, *The Book of Matthew*, was written as a reflexive counterpart to the research performed during the foundation period of this dissertation. Following the completion of the artefact, further research was undertaken to verify those preliminary findings. This paper first reviews the available literature on Urban Fantasy and the absent or dead mother trope, before discussing the research undertaken and its findings and briefly reviewing the influence the research had on the artefact creation process. Following this I reflect on areas identified requiring further analysis to verify the results of this study concerning Urban Fantasy.

I have had an interest in how the family is depicted in the arts since

reading an article about Walt Disney (Marcus 2014) and the guilt he felt over his part in his mother's death (Barrier 2007, p. 135; Rosenbaum 2012, p. 78). Some articles suggest it was due to his grief that many of Disney's cinematic features began with either the death of the mother, or with a protagonist who had been orphaned (Hamilton 2017). I noticed a trend where the mother of the protagonist was either dead or missing in much of the darker literature I was reading. It seemed to be a technique used to, as Don Hahn described it, provide a quick way 'to have characters grow up' (Radloff 2014). *The Book of Matthew* was deliberately shaped to subvert both the dead mother trope and reader expectations. The protagonist is a deeply flawed individual and the story is full of death, love and loss. Nobody wins, even the protagonist dies. In writing the artefact, I found the connection made between my protagonist's flaws, the death of Matthew's father, and the depiction of the social expectations of others in this environment, assisted in both character development and plot design.

It was during the artefact creation process that the importance of my research into Urban Fantasy became clear as it enabled me to subvert various tropes that dominate it. It is hoped that the results of the content analysis undertaken for this study will be of benefit to authors and researchers into Urban Fantasy. In addition, both the historical background into the absent or dead mother trope, as well as the proposed

reasons for its importance to Urban Fantasy, may provide further background for authors in the field. Finally, the much overlooked impact of publishers, editors, and agents—not to mention readers—only wanting material complying with existing markets and tropes, common to a specific genre, is mentioned (Card 1990; Stein 1995).

This study aims to contribute to knowledge through clarifying the extent and reasons the absent or dead mother trope is used in Urban Fantasy through primary research into the tropes prevalence and evaluating reasons for its use.

Literature Review

This review examines the absent or dead mother trope as it is used in Urban Fantasy. While a trope common to the genre, there are limited studies into its use in that genre (Feasey 2017) with the vast majority focusing on its prevalence in historical literature (Åström 2017; Francus 2012; Rose 1991; Tatum 2005). One of the reasons there has been little research into the trope's use in Urban Fantasy, is that there has not been much research into the subgenre itself (Ekman 2016, p. 452), with much of that research being limited to subjective evaluations of book covers (Ekman 2016, p. 458-459), detailed analysis of a single title (Benczik 2017; Borowska-Szerszun 2019; Elber-Aviram 2012; Kula 2017), or comparative analysis of a small number of texts with another genre (Krul 2016). This review will explore how various researchers in the field define and differentiate Urban Fantasy, from closely related subgenres before examining the reasons the absent or dead mother trope has been used historically.

Urban Fantasy

In the following section the work of major researchers in the field of Urban Fantasy will be briefly outlined, and the different aspects of their research into the field mentioned. I will then highlight the commonalities

between the researchers definition of what Urban Fantasy is, before ending the section with the working definition used in this study. Ekman makes a point of referring to Urban Fantasy as a ‘genre’ (2016, pp. 452-453), as I will for the remainder of this study.

Beagle refers to Urban Fantasy as a ‘distinct marketing category’ (2011, pp. 9-10) that has varied over time with three distinct subgenres, ‘mythic fiction, paranormal romance and noir fantasy’ (2011, p. 10). Urban Fantasy represents different things to different authors (Beagle 2011, p. 11) with a large percentage of readers and authors being female (Feasey 2017, p. 236). The genre is usually ‘action-oriented, [and] often include[s] horrific elements balanced with humor’ (Guran 2011, p. 137). That comedy might be ‘snarky, twinged with morbidity, or downright funny, but the universe [is] overall, dark’ (Guran 2011, p. 138). This use of comedy is a distinguishing element of Urban Fantasy and is often used to offset the darker elements of the genre.

With few scholars contributing to research into Urban Fantasy, Ekman’s work became a primary linking source between the various scholarly sources used in this review. In his exploration of London, as depicted in Urban Fantasy novels, he found that the historicity of the city, basing his argument around four defining eras, provided a sense of place unique to London—which he refers to as ‘a sense of London-ness’ (Ekman 2018,

p. 398)—making it ‘suitable to urban fantasy’ (Ekman 2018 p. 398). Ekman argues that it is this sense of place that is a key element in defining Urban Fantasy. His study also mentions that most Urban Fantasy has a ‘strong female protagonist’ (Ekman 2016, p. 459), a trait other researches discuss, with Ringel attributing the female protagonist to ‘feminist authors’ (cited in Ekman 2016, p. 459). Other key elements of the genre are ‘investigator, detective, monster-hunter or supernatural problem solver’ (Ekman 2016, p. 459) who, according to Young, ‘create meaning from chaos and disorder and participate in making the unknown known’ (2016, p. 142).

In another paper Ekman notes a clear convergence between ‘folktales and modernity’ (2016, p. 453) with the modernising of the folktale being a common underlying element of the Urban Fantasy genre—this is a notable feature in the works of Butcher (2000) and Rowling (1997). Ekman’s research suggests there is agreement between scholars that world setting is central to the story, as noted in Irvine’s reference to the city in his separation of the genre into a primary and secondary strain.

Irvine explains that in the primary strain the story-lines come from a ‘folkloric tradition ... place[d] ... in an urban environment’ (2012, p. 201), while the secondary strain ‘derives from the tradition of exploration of urban existence and uses the devices of the fantastic to continue this

exploration' (2012, p. 201). The first strain is situated in 'a more or less recognizable city' (Irvine 2012, p. 200) and magical or fantasy elements are incorporated into normal life. In the second strain, an imagined city provides the impetus to 'animate the narrative and determin[e] its fantastic nature' (Irvine 2012, p. 201). This second strain grants the author leeway in creating their own rules and as a result can broaden the scope of the genre—for example the work of Miéville (2003).

In their encyclopedia on Fantasy, Clute and Grant refer to Urban Fantasy as a vehicle used to get where the story needs to go, with the city being a 'place ... icon or just geography' (1999, p. 975). They assert the genre's origin, based on 'taproot texts' (Clute & Grant 1999, p. 975) dates back to the seventeenth-century. They agree that the urban landscape is central to the genre and that the city itself might be identified through a characters actions, or seen from the primary town, or suburb, in a distant, yet clear, skyline (Clute & Grant 1999, p. 975). They argue that Urban Fantasy is based on the intersection of a magical or fantasy world with the mundane, but that it is necessary for the city to remain a dominant factor (Clute & Grant 1999, p. 975). They also claim the city is not merely a setting but acts almost as a central character to the story narrative. This is consistent with the position held by Irvine and Ekman. Young, in her exploration of 'whiteness' (2016) in the Fantasy genre, argues that the primary elements of Urban Fantasy revolve around the alienation and

isolation central to conceptualisation of late modernity (2016, p. 141).

Young views that the ‘loss of identity’ (2016, p. 141), felt by many in modern society, is the result of alienation caused by the sense of isolation and separation that the metropolis engenders (2016, p. 141). In addition to this she notes the colour blindness of the genre with there not being many protagonist who are persons of colour (2016, p. 162). Young characterises the elements of the genre similarly to others in the field as being, ‘a city where supernatural events occur ... [and the] redeployment of previous fantastic and folkloric [motifs are used] in unfamiliar contexts’ (2016, p.142). She also agrees with Irvine’s claim that characters tend to be either ‘artists or musicians or scholars’ (Irvine 2012, p. 200), however she adds to this list of occupations that of ‘detective’ (Young 2016, p. 142) as she points out this is a relatively recent development in the genre (2016, p. 162)—again, Butcher (2000) is an example of this. As with others in this field Young agrees there are two main types, or what Irvine terms ‘strains’ (2012, pp. 200-201), of Urban Fantasy (2016, p. 141). Young uses the term ‘Suburban Fantasy’ for the recognisable city of Irvine’s ‘first strain’ (2012, p. 200). She claims the term ‘Suburban’ (2016, pp. 141) is more inclusive than that of Urban. Also by doing this Young includes the secondary notion of the magical undercurrent, found in Ekman’s ‘secondary world’ (2016, p. 456), being included in through the separation of the term into ‘sub-urban’ (2016, pp.

141-142). In following on from this Young also states Suburban Fantasy ‘can be understood as the suppressed history of modernity resurfacing’ (2016, p.142). As previously noted many books in this genre have the secondary world literally underground—an example of this is Gaiman’s use of ‘London Below’ (2003).

Guran claims readers had begun to demand a ‘type of fantasy ... set in an alternate ... [universe] ... with a female protagonist who develops ... attitude ... and supernatural powers’ (2011, p. 137). From the 1990s to the early 2000s, Urban Fantasy was viewed as a subgenre to paranormal romance (Guran 2011, p. 94). As with Young, Guran notes the introduction of the detective or ‘detective-style plot’ (2011, p. 137) into the genre with at least one subplot centred around a romantic relationship (2011, p. 137). As previously noted, she also mentions the use of humour to counterbalance the inherent darkness of this genre (Guran 2011, p. 137). Guran agrees with previously mentioned elements of Urban Fantasy including an urban setting, a protagonist usually on ‘a journey of self-discovery’ (2011, p. 137), and supernatural elements. She also refers to some books moving the romance subplot to a more descriptive erotica, usually told from the female perspective (2011, p. 137), to target an older young adult, largely female demographic—Sands (2019) is an example of this.

The syncretisation of concepts and key components of other genres, such as magic realism (Bowers 2004) and detective noir (Macek 2002, p. 376), can be utilised without impacting on Urban Fantasy's key elements. The fluidity of Urban Fantasy previously mentioned (Beagle 2011, pp. 9-10) allows for the inclusion of these borrowed elements, while retaining the genre's main characteristics: an urban setting and the supernatural (Ekman 2016; Clute & Grant 1999; Young 2016; Guran 2011; Irvine 2012). In this study the working definition of Urban Fantasy will include the city setting, with the option for both a primary location, set in the mundane world, and a secondary location, that may or may not include magical, supernatural or fantastic elements. In this way the so-called 'academy' literature—for example Rowling's (1997) series of books—can be included even though the location of the majority of the story is within the secondary environment. Further to this, and using Beagle's explanation for Urban Fantasy's various subgenres (2011, pp. 9-11), I use a certain fluidity in defining the genre, as I view this will allow the inclusion of texts that might be excluded under a stricter definition. In addition, this broader definition allows authors the ability to manipulate, and reinterpret reality, while still being included in the 'distinct marketing category' (Beagle 2011, pp. 9-10) of Urban Fantasy, without breaking artificially established canons.

The Family in Urban Fantasy

Considering the wide variation in family structure, and the importance of family in most people's lives, it is not surprising that this structural diversity is portrayed in literature. From Shakespeare to Dickens to Rowling, the family has been depicted as anything from a single parent family (*King Lear*), an orphan either trying to survive in a strange city (*Oliver Twist*) or living with an uncaring uncle and aunt (*Harry Potter*). Within contemporary western literature these varying family structures are being depicted as part of a normalisation process (Schirato & Webb 2004, pp. 131-133). No longer is the single parent family viewed with the stigma it once was, now this, and the concept of a broader non-familial family, have developed into literary tropes, the most notable in Urban Fantasy being the 'absent or dead mother' (Åström 2017, p. 4).

The Absent or Dead Mother

The prevalence in Urban Fantasy of protagonists whose mothers are absent or dead has been referred to as an 'Urban Fantasy plague' (Paul 2012, cited in Feasey 2017, p. 234). It is a well-known 'character development' (Feasey 2017, p. 235) technique that builds reader empathy while both providing the impetus for an 'inciting incident' (Milhorn 2006, p. 124) and a reason for the much vaunted protagonist 'character

flaw' (Milhorn 2006, pp. 215-216). There are a variety of explanations for the dead or absent mother trope in literature, with Åström noting these generally fall into 'four categories: the author's own mother, psychoanalysis, society and culture, and narratological constraints' (2017, p. 4).

Author's maternal relationship

The first of Åström's explanations is about authors who express the difficulties of their relationship with their mother through their writings. An example of this is Dickens, who never forgave his mother for wanting to return him to the workhouse he had been forced to work in when he was twelve-years-old, while his father was incarcerated for bad debts (Åström 2017, p. 5; Tatum 2005, p. 244). Dickens not only mercilessly murdered mothers in his literature but also created characters with absent or dead mothers (Tatum 2005, p. 256-257).

Psychoanalysis

Åström's second explanation is through the lens of psychoanalysis, where the mother is absent or killed to assist the child in becoming a self-reliant and strong individual, or so the nurturing mother—symbolic of the matriarchy—can be supplanted by the caring father—symbolic of the

patriarchy (Åström 2017, pp. 6-9). Åström has a second psychoanalytical example with the child's understanding of their mother being explained as split in two parts: 'the good, missing, mother and the wicked, present, stepmother' (2017, p. 6). In this second example, when the child becomes angry with the mother they see it as her being the embodiment of the evil stepmother, which frees the child from feelings of guilt over their anger at their mother (Åström 2017, p. 6). This analysis is then expanded on through exploring how an individual's psyche develops, with particular attention paid to the mother/daughter bond 'which makes it difficult for the daughter to become a separate individual' (Åström 2017, p. 7). Only through the absence or symbolic death of the mother can the child develop into a functional adult (Åström 2017, p. 7). This second psychological explanation is based largely on a feminist reading of the missing or dead mother trope in literature, viewing it as an expression of patriarchal dominance over the matriarchal image of the nurturing mother. Through the symbolic matricide of the mother, the caring father supplants the mother as nurturer, thus reinforcing the dominance of the patriarchy (Åström 2017, pp. 7-9).

Society and culture

The third of Åström's explanations considers a further feminist, psychoanalytic and cultural reading (2017, pp. 9-11). The main cultural

argument explores the changing view of motherhood in the Elizabethan and Victorian periods, with particular focus on the shift in Elizabethan attitudes following the Protestant Reformation. Åström notes that the ‘Protestant valorization of marriage shifted the balance between the extended family and the immediate family, which favoured mothers’ (2017, p. 9), and resulted in them having more control over raising their children (2017, p. 9). This shift led to cultural anxiety concerning the increased power women had gained and may have been a contributing factor to Shakespeare’s inclusion of absent or dead mothers in so many of his plays (Åström 2017, p. 9; Rose 1991). A second cultural example is in relation to women losing their individual identity following marriage, with the prevalence of dead mothers in Victorian Gothic literature being explained as a form of protest against this system (Åström 2017, p. 9).

Narratological constraints

The final explanation for the dead or absent mother in contemporary entertainment is that it is a way of overcoming the time constraints of television and cinema. It acts as a useful narrative device, or as Don Hanh described it, as a ‘story shorthand ... [because] it’s much quicker to have characters grow up when you bump off their parents’ (Radloff 2014). This explanation is extended on with reference to the stabilising

influence an emotionally available mother would provide and the difficulty this creates for plot development (Åström 2017, p. 11). A mother who is there to talk through a situation with their daughter might well forestall the inciting incident that creates the impetus for change used to start many contemporary story-lines (D'Costa 2013; Milhorn 2006, p. 124).

Further to Åström analysis of the trope, Wilson-Scott notes that while the absent or dead mother appears in contemporary literature, and other media, it does not necessarily indicate the absence is indicative of a lack of importance, or worth (2017, p. 2). Rather, her absence can equally point to the importance of the mother to childhood development, particularly when the father is depicted as weak or disinterested (Wilson-Scott 2017, p. 3). This appears most notably through either the protagonist, or other characters, referring to advice given by the mother, or experiences shared with or by the mother, prior to the beginning of her absence or death (Wilson-Scott 2017, pp. 4-5).

Historical Underpinnings

To a large extent the absent or dead mother trope, as it appears in Urban Fantasy, reflects its use in literature from Eighteenth-century England. Francus points out the trope gained traction in that culture due to anxiety

at the absence of literary depictions of the idealised domestic mother (2012, p. 172). She goes on to explain that there are three representations of the mother which dominated the periods literature:

... the absent mother, who is alive but physically separated from her child; the surveilling mother, who cares for her child, who does not know her identity as a mother; and the dead mother, whose history and in some cases whose will shape the destiny of her child. (Francus 2012, p. 172)

These observations appear equally relevant to this examination of the trope in Urban Fantasy, and will form the foundation of the conceptual framework on which further observations will be based.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this section has provided background on both the Urban Fantasy genre and the absent or dead mother trope. In the following section, research undertaken to address a lack of quantitative analysis into the prevalence of the trope in Urban Fantasy will be presented, as well as various possible reasons for the tropes use discussed.

Discussion

The following is in three parts: firstly, I present the primary research I undertook to verify my assertion that the absent or dead mother trope is frequently used in the Urban Fantasy genre, secondly I evaluate and reflect on various reasons why this is the case, before finally briefly discussing some of the techniques I used in the artefact creation process and how I used the research as a foundation for that process. As previously noted, there is little research available on the Urban Fantasy genre, with what exists being largely subjective evaluations of book covers (Ekman 2016), or detailed analysis of a single title (Benczik 2017; Borowska-Szerszun 2019; Elber-Aviram 2012; Kula 2017). Additionally, some researchers, authors, and various other interested parties, have pointed to the widely held belief that Urban Fantasy makes extensive use of the absent or dead mother trope (Feasey 2017, p. 227), yet there is little quantifiable evidence to back that claim (Feasey 2017, p. 229). In this study I aim to provide a tentative first analysis of the trope's prevalence as found in the works of leading authors in the field. I make use of data collected over two periods, separated by three months. I then collated the data and examined it for trends, with the results being displayed in graphical form. I present a preliminary study into the prevalence of the absent or dead mother trope in the genre before suggesting a more detailed study, including interviews with authors in the

genre, to first verify my preliminary finding and secondly understand the reasons the trope has been so extensively adopted.

Part 1: Research

Research Question

I identified two areas lacking in the Urban Fantasy literature in relation to the absent or dead mother trope. While the trope is referred to in a number of reports, I was unable to find evidence to support the claim that it is ubiquitous in the Urban Fantasy genre. In addition, explanations for the trope's prevalence in Urban Fantasy appear absent in research undertaken by the handful of academics specialising in this genre. As a result the initial research question was split into two parts:

1. Is the absent or dead mother trope prevalent in the Urban Fantasy genre?
2. Why is the absent or dead mother trope prevalent in the Urban Fantasy genre?

Separating the research into discrete components enabled both an evaluation of unverified claims relating to the trope as well as an

evaluation of the possible reasons for its use.

Research method and data collection

There were a variety of approaches I used in this dissertation's creation. Natalier notes there is rarely a clearly defined separation between research and theory (2010, p. 50) and this study was no exception, with a 'circular process' (2010, p. 50) between data collection and theory dominating. I performed a content analysis on a series of books identified as popular in the Urban Fantasy genre, with a conceptual analysis undertaken of the complete texts using explicit coding to identify the prevalence of data relevant to the study. This codified data was transferred to a spread sheet for easy evaluation, collation and quantification. The data evaluation process involved examining the prevalence of the concepts under investigation within the various texts. A significant number for recording was designated as any mention of the concept that was not a misleading or a deliberate misdirection within the text (for example, a protagonist claiming to be an orphan in a chapter after receiving assistance from their biological father in a preceding one). Once data collected from a text was completed—that is, sufficient information to indicate a significant response to the evaluation was extracted—the next text was processed.

An initial sample was taken from relevant texts I already owned (Bishop [2013]; Butcher [2000]; Rowling [1997]). This confirmed the possible

relevance of the research in the initial stages and led to my evaluating a further sample of sixteen texts in early 2019 based on the top fifty books from the *Popular Urban Fantasy Books* collection collated by the social networking and cataloguing website Goodreads (2019). In late September 2019 I evaluated a further sample of nineteen texts based on a different list of top fifty Urban Fantasy books (Amazon 2019). Where books from the same series were included in the list only the first text in the series was processed, which is the reason a list of top fifty books was reduced to sixteen in the Goodreads sample, and nineteen in the Amazon (refer Figures 1 and 2). Data collected from the texts included whether the book was part of a series, the protagonist age, gender identity, species, occupation and those texts in which the protagonist was an orphan, came from a paternal one-parent family or had an otherwise absent mother (Appendix D). In the final data set there were thirty-five texts classified as Urban Fantasy with a number of related genres (Academy Reverse Harem Romance, Shifter Romance and Erotic Urban Fantasy) being included in the Amazon best seller list.

Results

The first notable thing about the two data sets was their differences, the most obvious of these being the inclusion of extra genres in the Amazon data set and the lack of cross-over between the main authors on each list

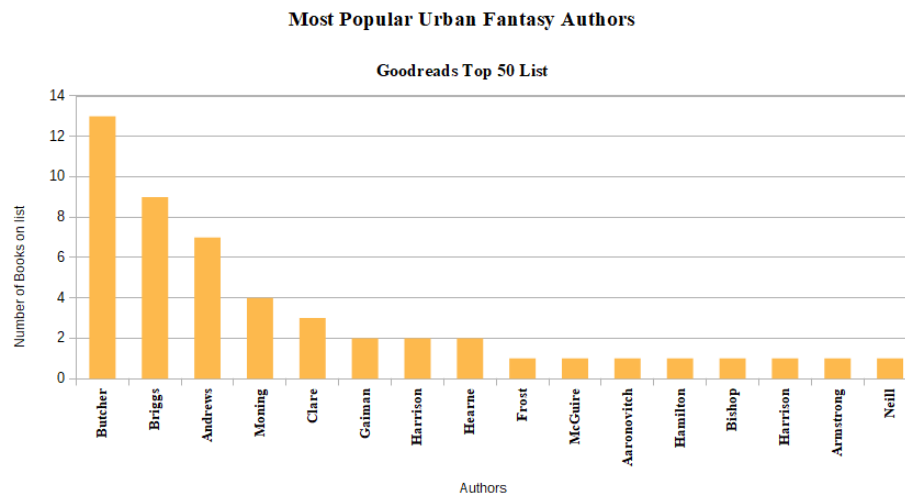


Figure 1: Most Popular Urban Fantasy Authors

Source: Goodreads (2019)

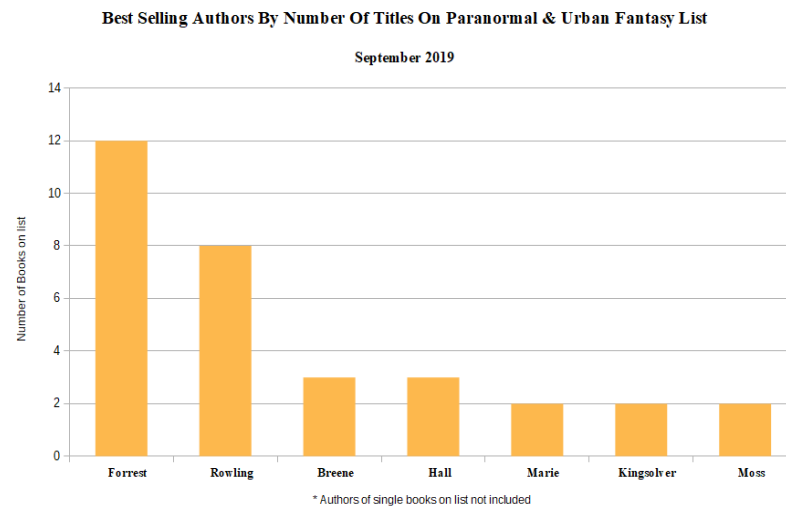


Figure 2: Paranormal & Urban Fantasy Best Selling Authors

Source: Amazon (2019)

—Butcher (thirteen books), Briggs (nine books) and Andrews (seven books) at Goodreads (Figure 1), and Forrest (twelve books) and Rowling (eights books) at Amazon (Figure 2). This was likely due to one being the bestseller list for that week and the other a collated list of the most popular books over an undefined period. Of the thirty-five texts included in this study, only one protagonist came from a nuclear family, Neill's book about a PhD candidate who is transformed into a vampire (2014).

Both the initial and secondary study had a high number of books that utilised the absent or dead mother trope. Of the thirty-five texts, only three included a protagonist with a living mother. Of those three—Aaronovitch (2011), Foxx (2019), and Neill (2009)—only the Neill book had a functional maternal figure with the mother in the Aaronovitch text being largely unmentioned (the father is a functional heroin addict) and in the Foxx text an alcoholic. This leaves only the Neill book with a mother who is both alive and present in the protagonists life. An interesting exception to the easy classification system used in this study was the Moning (2006) text. The book starts with a nuclear family, then the twenty-two-year-old protagonist's sister dies in mysterious circumstances, before the protagonist learns she and her sister were adopted and their adopting parents are hiding something. The Moning (2006) text initially subverts the trope before flipping the protagonist's life in order to utilise it.

Findings

Through an examination of the data sample presented in this study, it is clear that the absent or dead mother trope is used extensively in the Urban Fantasy genre. A larger sample may indicate a variation in these findings however the samples used in this analysis, while not random, were representative of a broad cross-section of the genre. Because of the number of texts in this study that used the trope, it is suggested that the first part of the research question can be answered with a moderate level of confidence in the affirmative:

The absent or dead mother trope is prevalent in the Urban Fantasy genre.

Part 2: Why is the absent/dead mother trope used?

Urban Fantasy researchers claim that the genre is written about the real world with a secondary world acting as an undercurrent. This secondary world includes the magical and fantastic aspects of the genre, while the primary world does not. It is this juxtaposition of familiar and fantastic that is key to understanding how the genre works. What is interesting to note, is that from the research undertaken in this study this does not appear to be the case when it comes to representations of the family, in particular the position of women as a part of both coupled and one parent families in contemporary western society. Figure 3 shows the variation in structure of family's in Australia in 2016, while Figure 4 shows the prevalence of both absent or dead mothers in the Urban Fantasy books examined. It is clearly the case that the family structure predominant in Urban Fantasy, does not reflect the lived experience of many of its largely female authors, or young female readers (Feasey 2017, p. 236). This returns me to the second part of the research question:

Why is the absent or dead mother trope prevalent in the Urban Fantasy genre?

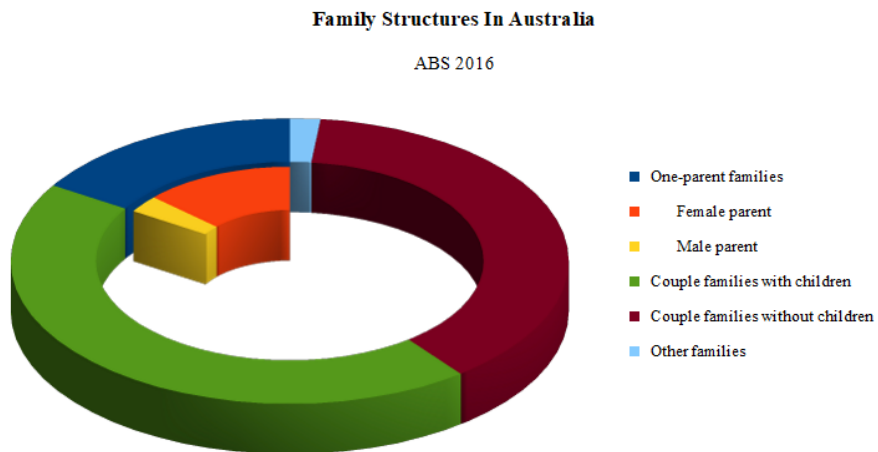


Figure 3: Family structure in Australia in 2016

Source: ABS (2019)

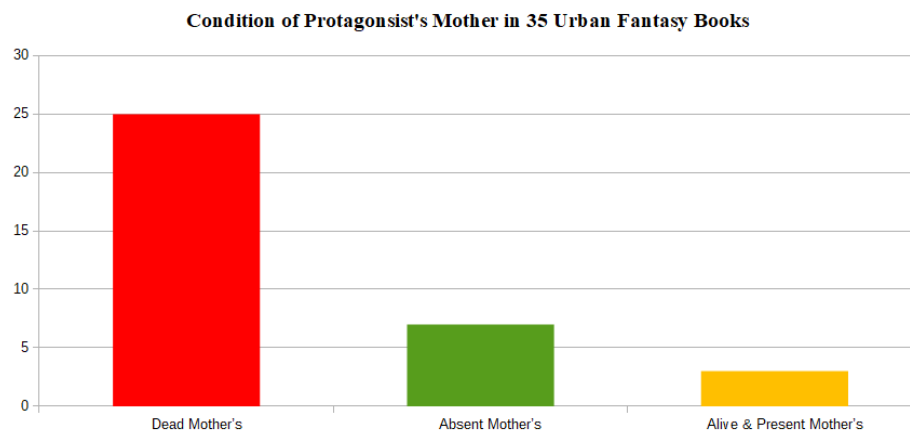


Figure 4: Condition of protagonist's mother in 35 Urban Fantasy books

Source: Primary research

In answering the secondary research question there are a number of factors to take into consideration.

Is the author's gender identity the same as their protagonist?

The books analysed as part of this study were all popular with readers at the time the lists they appeared on were produced—the Amazon best selling list changes weekly. Because of their popularity these texts will be used as a tentative guide to gender as a basis for analysis. All of the books with alternating protagonists were based more in the Paranormal Romance, Shifter/Erotica, or Academy Reverse Harem subgenres, than mainstream Urban Fantasy. All of the solo male authors in the sample created male protagonists while the solo female authors predominantly created female characters (Figure 5). Of the forty authors in the sample eight were male, twenty-eight were female and four female identifying. This reflects Feasey's claim that Urban Fantasy is 'considered [a] female production' (2017, p. 229).

The prevalence of female authors in the genre presents the interesting proposition, that the use of the trope may act as a way of reinforcing Wilson-Scott's hypothesis that rather than the absence depicting the mothers lack of importance, it actually illustrates the importance of the mother (2017, pp. 2-5). If the mother had been there would the horrible

things that inevitably occurred have happened? In addition, this is also indicative of my next reason, in some cases the death of the mother is used to initialise the protagonists ‘journey of self-discovery’ (Guran 2011, p. 137).

Author	Gender	Protagonist	Author	Gender	Protagonist
Aaronovitch	M	M	Hartnady	F	M
Anderle	M	M	Hearne	M	M
Andrews	M & F (Couple)	F	Kingsolver	F	F
Armstrong	F	F	Long	F	M
Ayers	F	F/M	Marie	F	F
Bishop	F	F	May & Savage	F & F (Collab)	M/F
Breene	F	F	Mayer	F	F
Briggs	F	F & M/F	McGuire	F	F
Butcher	M	M	Milan	M	M
Clare	F	F	Moning	F	F
Crawford	M & F (Couple)	F	Moss	F (She)	F
Dawson	F	F	Neill	F	F
Eve	F	F	Raines	F (Her)	M
Forrest	F	F	Rowling	F	M
Fox	F (She)	F	Sands	F	F
Gaiman	M	M&M	Singh	F	F
Hall	F	F	Ward	F	M/F
Hamilton	F	F	Xuemei X	F (She)	F
Harrison	F	F			

Figure 5: Comparison of author and protagonist gender *

Source: Research and viewing author social media, website or bio page

* Claimed gender identity (refer note Appendix E)

Narratological reason

As mentioned by a number of researchers in this field, and so descriptively pointed out by Hahn: 'it's much quicker to have characters grow up when you bump off their parents' (Radloff 2014). This strategy provides a way to overcome the time restrictions inherent in television and cinema, while developing audience empathy for the protagonist and making it possible for the 'inciting incident' (Milhorn 2006, p. 124) of a story to be moved forward in the timeline. By forcing the protagonist into a new situation, almost always the beginning of their 'journey of self-discovery' (Guran 2011, p. 137), the writer is able to trim backstory and quickly move into a try-fail cycle in which the protagonist's ability to exert agency over their world is challenged. In instances where the protagonist's mother was absent, or died prior to the story, the author can use this to encourage reader empathy for the protagonist, or as a contributing reason for the protagonist's 'character flaw' (Milhorn 2006, pp. 215-216). In the few instances where a protagonist's mother is neither dead, nor in some way absent, their influence on the protagonist tends to provide a stabilising influence with the relationship depicted as smothering or, at the very least, inhibiting the protagonist's commencement of their journey of self-discovery, through limiting their agency.

The industry

A final reason, which I have not found mentioned in the literature on either Urban Fantasy, or the absent or dead mother trope, but does exist in relation to the publishing industry, is that of industry and reader requirements (Card 1990; Stein 1995). Form serves a purpose, and the various tropes help situate a reader within the comfortably familiar confines of genre. As Vogler points out, if a writer ‘rejects form... [they] run the risk of reaching a limited audience because most people can’t relate to totally unconventional art’ (Vogler 1999, p. xvii). He goes on to state that ‘[a] certain amount of form is necessary to reach a wide audience’ (Vogler 1999, p. xvii). This is also mentioned by Card in his discussion on writing to the Science Fiction and Fantasy markets (1990). While this may seem a strange reason to justify the ubiquitous nature of the absent or dead mother trope in Urban Fantasy, when viewed from the perspective of an author presenting a manuscript to a prospective publisher, it becomes obvious that the publisher is after a marketable product. They need to sell books. In the past many had an editing staff who utilised a matrix of requirements for manuscripts that was implemented on a genre basis (Coyne 2015). Stein makes mention that the in-house editing staff of many publishing houses have been reduced in number and that agents are now expected to submit manuscripts that are almost ready for publication (1995, p. 297) It is into this world of

overworked and time managed manuscript reviewers that authors submit their work. If an authors manuscript fails to tick too many boxes on the publisher's matrix grid sheet they have a high likelihood of having their work rejected. This is one reason the growing independent self-publishing industry has gained popularity amongst authors.

While the growth in success of self-published authors has mirrored that of the Amazon Kindle, and has been lauded amongst its online acolytes, there is still the requirement for authors who are endeavouring to make a living from writing to bow to the pressure of the genre. The same reasons Vogler states for the importance of genre and form applies. Readers expect certain tropes to be followed in a genre book. The detective solves the crime, the police officer catches the murderer, the damsel in distress gets rescued and everyone lives happily ever after. While there are obviously books that subvert these tropes there are many more that obey them, maybe with a slight embellishment to match the authors style. So, if they want to sell books, a self-published author is bound by the readers expectations of the genre they are writing for (Fox 2016).

This ultimately is the reason I view that the absent or dead mother trope is so entrenched in the Urban Fantasy genre. Everybody expects it and, because everyone expects it, publishers and agents demand it, and authors—whether they like it or not—include it.

Subverting the Genre

A solitary, supernatural practitioner in the art of sin-eating yearns for death, but his journey leads him to much more than he expected. Not a bad idea for a story. While researching the Urban Fantasy genre, I was intrigued to find a reference to something called the absent or dead mother trope, which became the major focus of the research component of this exegesis. Through my research I was able to apply that knowledge to my artefact with the techniques of creative writing I have learnt. Below I mention part of the process I used in writing the artefact with the knowledge I gained from my literature review and content analysis paving a solid foundation.

In *The Book of Matthew*, the role of stepfather is symbolically passed to the protagonist the day he arrives, coincidentally the same day the biological father dies. The mother seals the symbolic transition of the boys to the protagonist in the days following the father death. Marsiglio suggests ‘paternal claiming includes emotional, psychological, practical, and often symbolic aspects’ (2004, p. 23) which were shown in the artefact through the interactions between the boys and the protagonist over a number of temporal iterations.

The portal that rips my protagonist from his sanctity is violent, and with

each transition he is deconstructed, and born anew, in both mind and body. This journey of self-discovery grants the protagonist his desire for death through giving him the unexpected: a family. I spent some time researching mythical and fantastic entities before coming across historical references to the Sin-eater (Hartland 1892). I discovered few authors use the Sin-eater as a protagonist, with those that do keeping the story close to established lore or mythology (Hartland 1892, p. 145). Making my protagonist a Sin-eater freed me from the well trod character types of Urban Fantasy—the vampire, werewolf and shifter—and made subverting specific ideas less problematic, such as the nuclear family (Van Krieken et al. 2006, p. 72) being replaced with the protagonist as the head of a family of convenience in a satellite or detached living arrangement.

In the initial stages of the writing process I made use of Swain's technique for story construction by asking open 'What if?' (1990, p. 185) questions. I adopted Bickham's concept of a 'story question' (1999, pp. 7-10) to keep the artefact on track. Without this clever tool I never would have been able to negotiate the subject, theme and story question cycle through the reflexive writing process I have adopted. In Appendix F are the initial word clouds I created from the first texts I processed for my content analysis. These provided me with the idea for using a recursive temporal process that allowed my immortal entity to go through the

Urban Fantasy journey of self discovery. Once I had my protagonist, I looked at two important aspects of writing: voice and point of view. Burroway says 'be real with your voice and your voice will gain more confidence the more you write' (2011, p. 48). The tone of the artefact revealed itself as noir (Burroway 2011, p. 19). I knew the artefact was dark and although noir was prominent, it was not until I read some of Gaiman's works that I realised it better suited neo-noir (Macek 2002). Neo-noir is generally thought of as a cinematic genre popularised by Gaiman (Conard 2007), and addresses the dark theme of the artefact as voice.

While the voice used in *The Book of Matthew* identifies as neo-noir, the genre is Urban Fantasy. I examined several genres, before writing the artefact, but because of my research into Urban Fantasy I decided its focus on family made it suitable as a vehicle for the story. After completing a draft of the artefact I found chapter one was not working, but struggled with it until I had to face the fact I was 'shovelling shit from a seated position' (King 2010, p. 78). It was then I finally understood what King meant by having to 'murder my darlings' (2010, p.197), as the first chapter was my favourite but once it was cut the story made sense and I was able to make sense of the story.

Summary

Through the research undertaken in this study I sought to answer a simple question: How prevalent is the absent or dead mother trope in Urban Fantasy? In so doing, I first undertook research to verify the assertion that the trope is prevalent in the genre. After describing the methodology and data collection process, I briefly discussed my analysis and the results which led to the confirmation of the initial hypothesis: the trope is prevalent in the genre. Following this, I discussed various reasons that the genre utilised the trope to such a high degree, before finally stating that while there are a number of reasons the absent or dead mother trope is used in literature, there is a possible likelihood that reader expectations, and market forces, are also contributing factors. I then briefly mentioned the writing process I used in the artefact's creation. In the next section I will reflect on the study, and its limitations, before making some suggestions regarding future research that may enable a more accurate response to why authors use the trope so extensively in the Urban Fantasy genre.

Conclusions

In this study I examined the prevalence of the absent or dead mother trope in Urban Fantasy through an analysis of its use in popular contemporary books in the genre. I then explored a number of reasons why an author may choose to utilise it and reflected on the connection between protagonist and author gender, before discussing the relevance of the narratological, psychological and historical reasons Åström (2017) refers to as an explanation. Finally I mentioned the pressure publishers, editors and agents can place on authors to conform to a genre's recognisable tropes as well as a number of reasons an independently publishing author might also use the trope. After all, authors have to make a living and sometimes writing to market can be a lucrative strategy (Fox 2016). In ending the discussion I went back to the beginning and briefly mentioned some of the techniques I have learnt throughout this degree as they were applied to the artefact creation process.

Significance of the Study

While this initial research into the absent or dead mother trope in Urban Fantasy may appear to be of limited significance it is hoped that it provides information useful to authors in the Urban Fantasy genre and

start a conversation that reaches across genre fiction and encourages others to investigate the embedded nature of such tropes. The research methodology was not complicated, however the content analysis was time consuming, requiring the transcription of a number of texts prior to processing. Budgetary constraints were not a factor, outside of hours dedicated to the analysis, as all the texts were acquired cheaply via online marketplaces.

Study limitations and recommendations

The process I adopted for the research component of this study was limited by both budgetary and time constraints. The texts used, while a reasonable sample, were limited in number and as a result a larger sample may produce slight variations from the results presented here. Further, the proposed reasons for the apparent ubiquitous nature of the absent or dead mother trope were inferred from material largely not specific to the genre itself. As a result, a future study into this may benefit from a survey of authors in the field. How willing authors would be to admit that they are doing what their agent, publisher or the market is telling them to do is difficult to judge, but that would likely be the best way to proceed. Finally, of particular relevance to future study is the agency exerted by the absent or dead mother on their offspring through ‘the letters, books, and memories of the absent mother that guide her children’ (Francus

2012, p. 172). These depictions of the dead mother's agency being exerted in the protagonists life, can be seen in action in Urban Fantasy stories by authors from Rowling (1997) to Butcher (2000) and would provide an interesting model for further investigation.

Conclusion

The Book of Matthew was composed using many techniques covered in my Master of Letters course, but with so much information and so many new techniques, I had to choose, so selected a few to show, and utilise the knowledge I gained to write my artefact. I deliberately subverted the Urban Fantasy genre and the tropes associated with it. By using a Sineater for my protagonist, I moved away from the common characters in Urban Fantasy today, such as werewolves and vampires. It soon became apparent that the subversion I used would be the, absent or dead mother trope so prevalent in Urban Fantasy literature. Instead of mercilessly murdering mother's, I polished off the patriarchy. From genre, to market expectations, this exegesis has examined the trope of the absent or dead mother and its prevalence in the genre Urban Fantasy, along with their relationship to The Book of Matthew. A study into the genre and trope revealed both were comfortable bedfellows. The research question: was the absent or dead mother trope prevalent in the Urban Fantasy genre was answered in the positive: The absent or dead mother trope is prevalent in

the Urban Fantasy genre, and my contribution to knowledge is this study, with suggestions for further research in the field.

Appendix A – Goodreads Data

Author	Title	ISBN/ASIN	Series	Location	Protagonist	Gender	Age	Occupation	Family	Species	Note
Aaronovitch	Rivers of London	9780575097568	y	London	Peter Grant	M	25	Police Constable Apprentice Wizard	Disfunctional: Father Heroine Addict	Human	Intersectionality / Brief Runaway
Andrews	Magic Bites	9780441014897	y	Atlanta	Kate Daniels	F	26	Mercenary Magical Ability	Blended upbringing then orphan	Human	Adopted daughter, married with daughter Parents killed in car accident @5yrs
Armstrong	Bitten	1841493503	y	New York	Elena Michaels	F	30's	Journalist	Orphan	Werewolf	
Bishop	Written in Red	9781101615058	y	Fantastic USA	Meg Corbyn	F	24	Sanguine/Blood Prophet	Orphan	Human	
Briggs	Moon Called	9781101208434	y	Tin-Cities Washington State	Mercy Thompson	F	30's	Mechanic	Abandoned and Orphan	Shifter Coyote	
Briggs	Cry Wolf	9780441016150	y	Chicago	Charles Cornick/ Anna Latham	M/F	200's	Enforcer/healer	Unknown / Parents Mates	Werewolf	
Butcher	Storm Front	9780451461971	y	Chicago	Harry Dresden	M	25	Wizard Private Investigator	Parents died raised by Uncle Orphan	Human	
Clare	City of Bones	9781416995753	y	New York City	Clarissa Adele	F	16	Student	Father dead Mother kidnapped during book	Human/ Shadowhunter	
Forrest	Harley Merlin and the Secret Coven	978-1721621576	y	Las Vegas then San Diego	Harley Merlin	F	19	Witch	Orphan	Human	
Gaiman	Neverwhere	9780060557812	n	London	Richard Mayhew	M	20's	Businessman	Orphan		
Gaiman	American Gods	9780380789030	y	Road Trip US	Moon	M	32	Bodyguard	Orphan	Human	Person of Colour Clashed with step- mother Woman of Colour
Hamilton	Guilty Pleasures	9780755355297	y	St. Louis, Missouri	Anita Blake	F	24	Vampire Hunter	Mother died car accident father remarried	Human	
Harrison	Dead witch walking	9780060572969	y	Cincinnati	Rachel Mariana Morgan	F	25	Witch & Bounty Hunter of Sapientials	Father Died working as bounty hunter which broke mother	Witch/Day walking demon	
Hearne	Hounded	9780345522535	y	Tempe Arizona	Atticus O'Sullivan	M	2100	Druid/Magic Store Owner	Orphan Father died 2 thousand years ago	Human	
McGuire	Rosemary and Rue	9781101140109	y	Fantasy & San Francisco	October Toby Daye	F	50's looks like teen	Private Investigator	At 7 was given the Changing Choice & Chose Fae. Broke Mother as forced to leave Father.	Human/Fae	Gets trapped in Fae for 14yrs & husband thinks she's dead
Moning	Dark Fever	9780440240983	y	Ashford, Georgia then Dublin Ireland	MacKayla Mac Lane	F	22	Bartender	Happy Family! Sister Murdered sparks investigation. Finds out she's an orphan who was adopted	Fae	Lack of background & flaw shows in protagonist
Neill	Some Girls Bite	B001TMCFIU	y	Chicago	Caroline Evelyn Merrit	F	27	Phd Student	Nuclear Family affluent upbringing	Human/ Vampire	

Table 1: Top 50 Author List - Urban Fantasy

Source: Goodreads (2019)

Appendix B – Amazon Data

Author	Title	ISBN/AISN	Series	Location	Protagonist	Gender	Age	Occupation	Family	Species	Note
Anderle	Road Trip: BBO Delivered with Attitude	9781642024494	y	Los Angeles	James Brownstone	M	30's??	Bounty Hunter turned restaurant owner	Orphan Now married Adopted daughter and newborn	Human	
Ayers	Wolf Boss	1980894159	y	Helen's Corner Urban Southern USA	Carter Kay & Alec Patterson	F/M	30's??	Baker/Businessman	Deserted	Shifters Werebear/Wer- ewolf	Paranormal Erotic Romance
Breene	Warrior Fae Trapped	B07VZ7C7CX	y	Santa Cruz	Charity	F	20's	Student	Abandoned	Fae	
Crawford	Dark King	9781081555634	y	London	Aenor Dahut	F	176	Shop Owner Princess	Orphan accused of killing parents	Fae	Romance Urban Fantasy
Dawson	Unwanted Supernatural Academy: Year One	B07SD55F5H	y	An Academy (Arkansas?)	Maddie Northsea	F	18	Student / Princess	Orphan	Shifter	Reverse Harem Fantasy
Eve	Bloodwood Academy Shifter: Semester One	109789262X		Nevada/ Bloodwood California	Maddison James	F		Student	N/A	Human	Paranormal Romance
Fox	Bloodwood Academy Shifter: Semester One	B07V74GDDC	y	Nevada/ Bloodwood California	Ivy Potter	F	17	Student	Mother is Alcoholic Single Parent	Shifter / Werewolf	Urban Fantasy with Romance/Erotic
Hall	Trial by Fae	1078456917	y	England	Mari	F	20's	Demon Slayer	Orphan	Human	
Hartnady	Feral Dragon	B07VT98YRT				M		Didn't read	N/A	Dragon Shifter	Paranormal Erotic Romance
Kingsolver	Shadow Hunter	B07PZ47VQV	y	Westport, Washington State	Erin McLane	F	19	Barmaid/Assassin Spy Thief	Sold into slavery/ apprenticeship by parents	Human	
Long	Wolf Bite	B01E6FF7AW	y	Dallas & Willow Bend	Mason Clayborne	M	20's	Lone Wolf (?)	Orphan: Father died in Alpha trial Mother killed herself	Shifter	Pack set Romance used first book for examples
Marie	Taming Demons for Beginners	B07X2WZ819	y		Robin Page	F			Orphan		
May & Savage	Dearly Departed	B07WTRHYZG	y					Didn't read	N/A		Reverse Harem Fantasy
Mayer	Recurve	B00TK441LA	y	Fantasy & Eureka	Larkspur	F	Teens		Orphan 'Bastard child' Mother murdered by fathers wife (queen)	Elemental	
Milan	Towers of Heaven	B07QH93BMR	y	Fantasy	Jason	M	28	Warrior	Orphan	Human	Role Playing Game Lit
Moss	Spark	B07PKV1N84	y		Elliot Sinclair	F	22	Bartender/Student	Father left / mother died	Human/ Magical	Romance/Erotic Urban Fantasy
Raines	Jake		y	Bear Creek	Jake	M	30's	Did not read	N/A	Werebear	Urban Romance Fantasy
Rowling	Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	9780747532743	y	Surrey, London & Hogwarts	Harry Potter	M	11	Student	Orphan	Human	
Sands	Immortal Born	B07H4ZCBQC	y		Allie Chambers	F	30	Works at blood bank Rearing murdered friends vampire baby	Bad family & relationship history	Human	Urban Romance Fantasy
Singh	Archangel's War	B07MMKGS8D	y	N/A	Elena Deveraux	F	Immortal	N/A	N/A	Human turned Angel	Romance Fantasy
Ward	Savior	9780349420455	y	Various including Ithaca, New York, & Sharing Cross, South Carolina	Dr. Sarah Watkins & Murderer	F/M	30's (??) & ??	Biomedical researcher/ Mental disorder	Fiance died/ vampire looking for love & redemption	Human/ vampire	
Xuemei X	Half-Blood Academy 3: Magic Fury	B07TZTHRML	y	Academy	Marigold	F	??	Student	Father interned in Hell, Mother (Lilith) chose isolation	Demigoddess	Academy Reverse Harem Fantasy Romance

Table 2: Paranormal & Urban Fantasy Best Selling Authors

Source: Amazon (2019)

Appendix C – Sin-eaters Prayer

Sin-eaters Prayer

Into the dark reaches of time
I seek intercession of the divine
I cast my shadows of pain and power
As I lay in Death's embrace
My final hour.

Seek I respite and forgiveness of sins
Before new light and new life begins.

Sweet is my flavour
A morsel a treat
Come my saviour
Take my flavour
And eat.

My hope is lost, all are tainted
My need is great, long I've waited
My charity was weak
My desires sated.

Seek I respite and forgiveness of sins
Before new light and new life begins.

I call to the timeless who seek sweet sin
I give of myself, outer and within
I call to the timeless who seek permission
And give of myself, in offering my essence
I call to the timeless who desire a way in
I give of myself and commit unto you, my sin.

The Sin-eaters prayer, for the common folk, is a variation of the theme using the final two stanzas, but the timeless don't want to make it too easy for sinners. Sweet relief from sin, for the clergy and who they make trade with, the whole prayer is required. One word out of place and Sin-eaters don't show!

Appendix D – Full Data Sheet

Author	Title	ISBN/ASIN	Series	Location	Protagonist	Gender	Age	Occupation	Family	Species	Note
Aaronovitch	Rivers of London	9780575097568	y	London	Peter Grant	M	25	Police Constable Apprentice Wizard	Disfunctional: Father Heroine Addict	Human	Intersectionality / Brief Runaway
Aderle	Road Trip: BBQ Delivered with Attitude	9781642024494	y	Los Angeles	James Brownstone	M	30's??	Bounty Hunter turned restaurant owner	Orphan Now married Adopted daughter and newborn	Human	
Andrews	Magic Bites	9780441014897	y	Atlanta	Kate Daniels	F	26	Mercenary Magical Ability	Blended upbringing then orphan	Human	Adopted daughter, married with daughter
Armstrong	Bitten	1841493503	y	New York	Elena Michaels	F	30's	Journalist	Orphan	Werewolf	Parents killed in car accident @5yrs
Ayers	Wolf Boss	1980894159	y	Helen's Corner Urban Southern USA	Carter Ray & Alec Patterson	F/M	30's??	Baker/Businessman	Deserted	Shifters Werebear/Wer- ewolf	Paranormal Erotic Romance
Bishop	Written in Red	9781101615058	y	Fantastic USA	Meg Corbyn	F	24	Cassandra Sangue/Blood Prophet	Orphan	Human	
Breene	Warrior Fae Trapped	B07VZ7C7CX	y	Santa Cruz	Charity	F	20's	Student	Abandoned	Fae	
Briggs	Moon Called	9781101208434	y	Tri-Cities Washington State	Mercy Thompson	F	30's	Mechanic	Abandoned and Orphan	Shifter Coyote	
Briggs	Cry Wolf	9780441016150	y	Chicago	Charles Comick/ Anna Latham	M/F	200's	Enforcer/healer	Unknown / Parents Mates	Werewolf	
Butcher	Storm Front	9780451461971	y	Chicago	Harry Dresden	M	25	Wizard Private Investigator	Parents died raised by Uncle Orphan	Human	
Clare	City of Bones	9781416995753	y	New York City	Clarissa Adele "Clary" Fray	F	16	Student	Father dead Mother kidnapped during book	Human/ Shadowhunter	
Crawford	Dark King	9781081555634	y	London	Aenor Dahut	F	176	Shop Owner Princess	Orphan accused of killing parents	Fae	Romance Urban Fantasy
Dawson	Unwanted	B07SD55F5H	y	An Academy (Arkansas?)	Maddie Northsea	F	18	Student / Princess	Orphan	Shifter	Reverse Harem Fantasy
Eve	Supernatural Academy: Year One	109789262X			Maddison James	F		Student	N/A	Human	Paranormal Romance
Forrest	Harley Merlin and the Secret Coven	978-1721621576	y	Las Vegas then San Diego	Harley Merlin	F	19	Witch	Orphan	Human	
Foxx	Bloodwood Academy Shifter: Semester One	B07V74GDDC	y	Nevada/ Bloodwood California	Ivy Potter	F	17	Student	Mother is Alcoholic Single Parent	Shifter/ Werewolf	Urban Fantasy with Romance/Erotic
Gaiman	Neverwhere	9780060557812	n	London	Richard Mayhew	M	20's	Businessman	Orphan		
Gaiman	American Gods	9780380789030	y	Road Trip US	Shadow Moon	M	32	Bodyguard	Orphan	Human	Person of Colour

Table 3: Full Data Survey Sheet Used In Study (page 1)

Author	Title	ISBN/ASIN	Series	Location	Protagonist	Gender	Age	Occupation	Family	Species	Note
Hall	Trial by Fire	1078456917	y	England	Mari	F	20's	Demon Slayer	Orphan	Human	
Hamilton	Guilty Pleasures	9780755355297	y	St. Louis, Missouri	Anita Blake	F	24	Vampire Hunter	Mother died car accident father remarried	Human	Clashed with step-mother Woman of Colour
Harrison	Dead witch walking	9780060572969	y	Cincinnati	Rachel Mariana Morgan	F	25	Witch & Bounty Hunter of Supernaturals	Father Died working as bounty hunter which broke mother	Witch/Day walking demon	
Hartnady	Feral Dragon	B07VT98YRT				M		Didn't read	N/A	Dragon Shifter	Paranormal Erotic Romance
Hearne	Hounded	9780345522535	y	Tempe Arizona	Atticus O'Sullivan	M	2100	Druid/Magic Store Owner	Orphan Father died 2 thousand years ago	Human	
Kingsolver	Shadow Hunter	B07PZ47VQV	y	Westport, Washington State	Erin McLane	F	19	Barmaid/Assassin Spy Thief	Sold into slavery/ apprenticeship by parents	Human	
Long	Wolf Bite	B01E6FF7AW	y	Dallas & Willow Bend	Mason Clayborne	M	20's	Lone Wolf (?)	Orphan: Father died in Alpha trial Mother killed herself	Shifter	Pack set Romance used first book for examples
Marie	Taming Demons for Beginners	B07X2WZ819	y		Robin Page	F			Orphan		
May & Savage	Dearty Departed	B07WTRHZYG	y					Didn't read	N/A		Reverse Harem Fantasy
Mayer	Recurve	B00TKK41LA	y	Fantasy & Eureka	Larkspur	F	Teens		Orphan/Bastard child' Mother murdered by fathers wife (queen)	Elemental	
McGuire	Rosemary and Rue	9781101140109	y	Fantasy & San Francisco	October Toby' Daye	F	50's looks like teen	Private Investigator	At 7 was given the Changeling Choice & Chose Fae. Broke Mother as forced to leave Father.	Human/Fae	Gets trapped in Fae for 14yrs & husband thinks she's dead
Milan	Towers of Heaven	B07QH93BMR	y	Fantasy	Jason	M	28	Warrior	Orphan	Human	Role Playing Game Lit
Moning	Dark Fever	9780440240983	y	Ashford, Georgia then Dublin Ireland	MacKayla 'Mac' Lane	F	22	Bartender	Happy Family' Sister Murdered sparks investigation. Finds out she's an orphan who was adopted	Fae	Lack of background & flaw shows in protagonist
Moss	Spark	B07PKV1N84	y		Elliot Sinclair	F	22	Bartender/Student	Father left / mother died	Human/Magical	Romance/Erotic Urban Fantasy
Neill	Some Girls Bite	B001TMCF1U	y	Chicago	Caroline Evelyn Meritt	F	27	Phd Student	Nuclear Family affluent upbringing	Human/Vampire	
Raines	Jake		y	Bear Creek	Jake	M	30's	Did not read	N/A	Werebear	Urban Romance Fantasy
Rowling	Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	9780747532743	y	Surry, London & Hogwarts	Harry Potter	M	11	Student	Orphan	Human	
Sands	Immortal Born	B07H4ZCBQC	y		Allie Chambers	F	30	Works at blood bank Rearing murdered friends vampire baby	Bad family & relationship history	Human	Urban Romance Fantasy
Singh	Archangel's War	B07MMKGSD8	y	N/A	Elena Deveraux	F	Immortal	N/A	N/A	Human turned Angel	Romance Fantasy
Ward	Savior	9780349420455	y	Various including Ithaca, New York, & Sharing Cross, South Carolina	Dr. Sarah Watkins & Murderer	F/M	30's (?) & ??	Biomedical researcher/ Mental disorder	Fiancee died/ vampire looking for love & redemption	Human/vampire	
Xuemei X.	Half-Blood Academy 3: Magic Fury	B07TZTHRML	y	Academy	Marigold	F	??	Student	Father interned in Hell, Mother (Lilith) chose isolation	Demigoddess	Academy Reverse Harem Fantasy Romance

Table 4: Full Data Survey Sheet Used In Study (page 2)

Appendix E – Author Gender

Author	Gender	Author	Gender
Aaronovitch	M	Hartnady	F
Anderle	M	Hearne	M
Andrews	M & F (Couple)	Kingsolver	F
Armstrong	F	Long	F
Ayers	F	Marie	F
Bishop	F	May & Savage	F & F (Collab)
Breene	F	Mayer	F
Briggs	F	McGuire	F
Butcher	M	Milan	M
Clare	F	Moning	F
Crawford	M & F (Couple)	Moss	F (She)
Dawson	F	Neill	F
Eve	F	Raines	F (Her)
Forrest	F	Rowling	F
Foxx	F (She)	Sands	F
Gaiman	M	Singh	F
Hall	F	Ward	F
Hamilton	F	Xuemei X	F (She)
Harrison	F		

Table 5: Gender Identity Of Authors In Study *

Source: Amazon/Goodreads Author Page's; Author Website's (2019)

* Some authors of erotic shifter or reverse harem urban fantasy do not participate in live interviews or provide photographs indicating their gender (this appears to be usual for male authors writing for the largely female audience [Feasey 2017, p. 236] of these genres). Additionally, the co-authoring couples in the study used a female or a non-gendered *nom de plume*.

Appendix F – Word Clouds



Figure 6: Initial Word Cloud Derived From Butcher (2000)

Sources: Butcher (2000); Google Word–Word Cloud Add-on (2019)



Figure 7: Word Cloud Derived From Butcher (2000)

Sources: Butcher (2000); Word Art (2019)



Figure 8: Word Cloud Derived From Butcher (2000)

Sources: Butcher (2000); Word Art (2019)

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Åström Explores the dead or absent mother trope, identifying the trope as a recurring theme. The trope is common place in western culture and is recognised as a transhistorical phenomenon. A common understanding between texts is if the mother is not killed it 'could' hinder the narrative. Although not an isolated phenomenon, it has been a recurring feature throughout the centuries, to which the literature of the times, which verifies the trope as a phenomenon.

Beagle, PS 2011, 'Introduction', in PS Beagle & JR Lansdale (eds), *The Urban Fantasy anthology*, Tachyon Publications, San Francisco, CA, pp. 9–12.

Beagle refers to Urban Fantasy as a distinct marketing category which has varied over time, and has three distinct subgenres: mythic fiction, paranormal romance, and noir fantasy.

Burcher, C, Hollands, N, Smith, A, Trott, B & Zellers, J 2009, 'Core collections in genre studies: fantasy fiction 101', *Reference & User*

Services Quarterly, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 226-231.

Burcher discusses Paranormal/Urban/Contemporary/Fantasy, and the conventions the genre is centred on. Burcher also provides some elements and tropes which Urban Fantasy authors use today.

Clute, J & Grant, J (eds) 1999, *The encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Orbit, London.

For Clute and Grant, a city is a place and Urban Fantasy is a mode with the city as icon or geography. They note that Urban Fantasy texts where fantasy and the mundane worlds interweave, intersect.

Ekman, S 2016, 'Urban Fantasy: a literature of the unseen', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 451-469.

For Ekman Urban Fantasy reveals a prevalence of strong female protagonists, and his research into the genre revealed, a general acceptance by others in the field, that setting is paramount, but must be, or appear to be, recognisable elements of an urban setting.

Feasey, R 2017, 'Television and the absent mother: why girls and young women struggle to find the maternal role', in B Åström (ed), *The absent*

mother in the cultural imagination: missing, presumed dead, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland.

Feasey follows the feminist media theorists who routinely comment on the 'symbolic Annihilation' of women in the media since the term was first coined, and how women are still condemned, trivialised in a diverse range of popular media texts, noting it is mothers who are most frequently omitted. Feasey identifies mothers are generally unavailable, missing, or dead. She also examines the reason young adults are drawn to Urban Fantasy, with the idea of the possibility of becoming some supernatural being, because it detracts from the life stages young adults pass through in a few short years. The sad truth is the missing mother trope is so intertwined with fiction stories, the question to be asked is, how could, or should that trope be altered?

Francus, M 2013, *Monstrous motherhood: eighteenth-century culture and the ideology of domesticity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

The notion of the absent or dead mother has ties to historical literature from the Elizabethan and Victorian periods, and there is little analysis of its prevalence in Urban Fantasy. Francus also pointed out how the trope gained traction in that culture due to an anxiety about the absence of

literary depictions of the idealised domestic mother.

Guran, P 2011, 'An introduction: funny thing happened on the way to urban fantasy', in JR Lansdale & PS Beagle (eds), *The Urban Fantasy anthology*, Tachyon Publications, San Francisco, CA, pp. 137–145.

Guran touches on a largely prevalent aspect of readers and authors being primarily female. She recognises Urban Fantasy as usually 'action-oriented, [and] often with horrific elements balanced with humour. That humour could be 'snarky, twinged with morbidity, or downright funny', though the universe is overall, dark.

Ireland, KR 1978, 'Urban perspectives: fantasy and reality in Hoffmann and Dickens', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 133-156.

Ireland defines the features Urban Fantasy and the way they distort the imagination, and the phenomena of the grotesque. His paper refers to the grotesqueness of realism in an urban setting.

Irvine, AC 2012, 'Urban Fantasy', in E James & F Mendlesohn (eds), *The Cambridge companion to fantasy literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 200–213.

Irvine views the urban background must have a purpose, to one which is also a character in the story. Character and urban space must complement each other; therefore, both must have characteristics common to each other, the urban landscape according to the human experience. Irvine also discusses the history of the genre, Urban Fantasy, and provides a clear outline of elements, tropes and worlds used to create a [un]familiar space for the supernatural to create a tale and transform a reader out of their normal lives to experience something new and different.

Krul, R 2016, 'Young adult appeal and thematic similarity in urban fantasy', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 142-158.

Krul researches the mythological aspects of Urban Fantasy and discusses how the theme and identity of historical folklore can make old tales appealing in young adult literature, the importance of setting, and provides the elements and tropes Urban Fantasy authors use today.

Maczynska, M 2010, 'This monstrous city: urban visionary satire in the fiction of Martin Amis, Will Self, China Miéville, and Maggie Gee', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 58-86.

Maczynska's paper examines the social construction of urban space and

its role in fiction in the creation of alternative aspects and distortions of city scapes.

Radloff, J 2014, *Why most Disney heroines don't have mothers and so many more secrets from the Disney archives*, viewed 28 April 2019, <https://www.glamour.com/story/disney-secrets-beauty-and-the-beast>

Disney films are about coming of age. They are the day in the life of a protagonist when they have to accept responsibility for their journey. For Hahn, the death of the mother is shorthand, saying it is quicker to for a protagonist to grow up when their parents have been bumped off. It is a story shorthand.

Rose, MB 1991, 'Where are the mothers in Shakespeare? Options for gender representation in the English Renaissance', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 291-314.

For Rose, cultural anxiety about increased power women had gained, may have been a contributing factor for Shakespeare to include of absent or dead mothers in so many of his plays.

Saffel, J 2008, 'World-building in Urban Fantasy', *Texas Tech University*, Texas.

Saffel examines Urban Fantasy as elements of the real world and local urban environments, even if those worlds are situated in a Urban Fantasy created city or town like Gaiman's London Below.

Saricks, JG 2009, *The readers' advisory guide to genre fiction*, American Library Association, Chicago.

Saricks emphasise the darker side to Urban Fantasy and how it focuses on societal issues, power, and the urban blight, and examines hopeless individuals in relation to the genre.

Tatum, KE 2005, 'Something covered with an old blanket': Nancy and other dead mothers in Oliver Twist', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 239-260.

Tatum agrees with the absent or dead mother trope, and its prevalence in historical literature, and refers to the example of Dickens, who never forgave his mother for wanting to return him to the workhouse he had been forced to work in when he was twelve-years-old. Dickens mercilessly murdered mothers in his literature but also creating characters with absent or dead mothers.

Wilson-Scott, J 2018, 'Both absent and omnipresent: the dead mother in

Fleabag', *Feminist Media Studies*, pp. 1-11.

Wilson-Scott also explores the dead or absent mother trope as a possible empowerment to project a protagonist into, or along, the journey. She suggests the trope appears in contemporary literature while in other types of media it does not. Although not necessarily an indication of the absence being a commonality, the mother's absence can point to the importance of the mother to childhood development.

Young, H 2016, *Race and popular fantasy literature: habits of whiteness*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York; London.

Young's research into Urban Fantasy focuses more on identity than setting, but like Ekman's *Unseen*, she highlights the urban spaces and how people, and place, can lose their identity as the world modernises. She also conveys there is a hint of selective memory concerning our historical pasts. Young views Urban Fantasy as a tool to focus on unseen things, whether they are people, places, or supernatural monsters.