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In Defence of Happy Endings

Thursday, December 12, 2019

By: Mary Borsellino

Mary Borsellino has published work with a variety of micropress publishers in Australia and internationally. Her first foray into professional fiction writing was self-publishing a lurid YA novel at eighteen to supplement her babysitting income, and it kind of became a habit after that. Her website is <http://maryborsellino.com>



Mary Borsellino was a 2017 Writeability Fellow, and one of our inaugural Publishability Fellows in 2018

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Early in my young adult fantasy novel *Spare*, a character is upset when a ballet has a tragic conclusion. Her friends aren't especially understanding:

Lena chuckled. "Really, it's embarrassing that you haven't outgrown your need for happy endings."

"It's more accurate if at least one of them dies," Silvie pointed out gently. "At their age, it would be unreasonable otherwise."

These two ideas — that happy endings are somehow less mature, less profound, than unhappy ones, and that the demands of authenticity preclude hope — are ideas I've had drummed into me my whole life, especially when it comes to fiction about marginalised groups such as queer people and those with disabilities.

An example: when I was in my late teens, I adored LiveJournal. I remember a line from *Heathers* that everyone there loved to quote: a father, speaking at his child's funeral, declares "I love my dead gay son!"

The antihero of the movie immediately undercuts the declaration by asking wryly how the father would feel if his son was limp-wristed with a pulse.

We announced "I love my dead gay son!" so often because so many of the fictional characters we obsessed over fit the bill: beloved, gay, dead, but it was the follow-up line from the film that stuck in my head.

EM Forster, writing of the barriers preventing the publication of his novel *Maurice*, remarked that if it had "ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well."

The idea that queer narratives were only palatable if they were tragedies bothered me like a bad tooth. I was already sick of dead gay sons.

Now my own child is the same age that I was in those days of LiveJournal. Eris loves art and music and animals, is nonbinary and witty and beautiful and kind, and decorates their mobility aids with stickers in the same way rock stars decorate their guitars.

We try to become the parents that would have saved us when we were children. We try to write the books we needed to read when we were young. As a queer, disabled parent with a queer, disabled child, the kind of parent I try to be and the kind of book I've tried to write dovetail nicely for me.

Spare is about Silvie, a gay teenage witch who loses her magic, along with hearing in one ear and much of her balance. Though her disabilities are based on my own, she was written very much with Eris in mind: that which is vital and alive and threatened, the vulnerable future which must fight the decaying past.

Silvie is up against the rotted, toxic things in our culture that those in power seek to preserve; the deadly devouring greed that threatens to destroy everything else. In *Spare*, these things are represented by zombies.

There's a lot of stuff in *Spare* that was shaped by the many hours of anime Eris and I have watched over the years, and not subtly either: one friend who read the manuscript draft began to spam me with gifs of James from Pokemon, and artwork by Eris of this same character [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BzZmXFoAY7L/> (<https://web.archive.org/web/20210321084820/https://www.instagram.com/p/BzZmXFoAY7L/>)] shows that the allegation is at least somewhat fair.

But anime has shaped *Spare* in ways much deeper than hair colours, as well, because the whole time I was writing it I kept thinking about a short video I'd seen online [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngZOK3lWKRC> (<https://web.archive.org/web/20210321084820/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngZOK3lWKRC>)]. Acclaimed director Hayao Miyazaki watches a computer-animated clip of a figure crawling across the floor using its head as an extra limb.

The creator of the clip explains that because they haven't programmed the figure to feel pain, it doesn't know that it should protect its head as it moves. He suggests that the movement is creepy enough that it could be used to animate zombies.

Miyazaki, however, is utterly disgusted, seeing it as a mockery of disability.

"Whoever creates this stuff has no idea what pain is," he says. "I strongly feel that this is an insult to life itself."

More than once, I lay awake at night and worried over his words. Was it possible for me to write a novel intrinsically about disability that was also about zombies, or would it be an insult to those I sought to represent?

28 Days Later, one of the many, many zombie stories I've seen in my time, borrows its beginning from the much more interesting (and zombie-free) novel *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham. Both stories begin the same way: a man wakes up in hospital and discovers that something catastrophic has happened. In *Days*, the catastrophe is zombies, but in *Triffids*, it's that most of the population has become blind overnight.

Early on, having left the hospital, narrator Bill encounters another person confidently navigating the street — a man using a white cane and wearing dark glasses. He asks Bill what's going on, what's happened to everyone else:

When I had finished he said nothing for almost a minute, then he gave a short, bitter laugh.

"There's one thing," he said. "They'll be needing all their damned patronage for themselves now."

When I first read *Triffids* as a child, this two-line moment was a revelation — permission to be bitter and sarcastic about the way the world treated people with disabilities, instead of grateful and relentlessly optimistic. One of my goals with *Spare* was to create a whole novel about characters whose feelings about disability didn't fit the pleasant, polite, inspirational narrative.

Silvie handed one of the mugs of tea to Azura. "Sorry, do you mind moving over to the other chair?" she asked, ducking her head a little. "I'm deaf in one of my ears, so I have to sit on the side where I can hear you." She curled her shoulders forward a little as well, an automatic tic whenever she needed to ask someone for something.

It was a habit she'd had ever since her early teens, when her first growth spurt had hit and she'd suddenly found herself taller than most of the other sentries. Ducking her head, slouching herself shorter, staying near the back. Keeping small to avoid unnecessary attention, especially in moments when she needed to speak up.

Now that she was damaged, no amount of postural self-defence was enough to save her from being the centre of attention. Her walking stick might as well have been a pennant or a flag held over her head, drawing everyone's eyes to her as soon as she entered a room, and if that wasn't bad enough there were a thousand tiny things she needed help with now, things like asking Azura to shift to the other chair so they'd both be able to hear each other.

Silvie, self-sufficient since she'd been old enough to understand that she had a self at all, prickled with humiliation.

I suppose the obvious question is, why did I write a book full of so many things I was terrified of getting wrong? Why write a zombie story when it ran the risk of being an insult? Why write characters who feel ambivalent and angry and sad about their disabilities and traumas, when I risk reinforcing negative stereotypes by doing so?

The most honest answer I can offer is that I wanted to be, well, honest. I wanted to prove that happy endings can be just as complex and contradictory and considered as unhappy ones, and that being as truthful and authentic as I could be in how I shaped this fiction was, ultimately, the path to the truest hope I could imbue it with.

Perhaps ultimately, I wrote a zombie story because that was the threat that my characters had to overcome: those dead gay sons of the past needed to be put to rest, so that the living could inherit what comes next.

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