Bookslut

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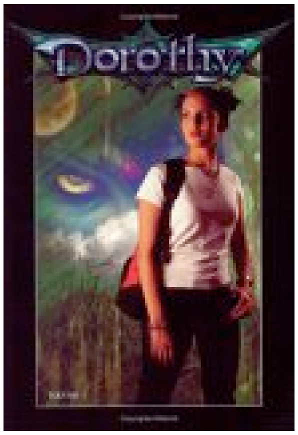
COLLEEN MONDOR

REVISITING THE CLASSICS

The Looking Glass Wars
Frank Beddor

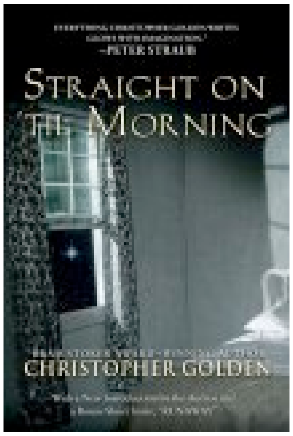


When Frank Beddor's book *The Looking Glass Wars* was released in Britain, *The Independent* ran a headline of "Writer Twists Carroll's Tale in Revenge Attack on Alice." Beddor acknowledged in several interviews that he came up with the much more violent and intense retelling of the classic partly because of his frustration and boredom (even "hatred" as quoted in *The Independent*) of the "terrible girls' book" he read when he was ten. Adult fans of the book immediately leapt to its defense even though Beddor was the first to say that his childish opinion had changed over the years. As he told me in a recent interview, "To clarify, I described *Alice in Wonderland* as 'girly' when I was a brash, swaggering 10-year-old. Since then, my appreciation for Lewis Carroll's wit and imagination has increased immeasurably."

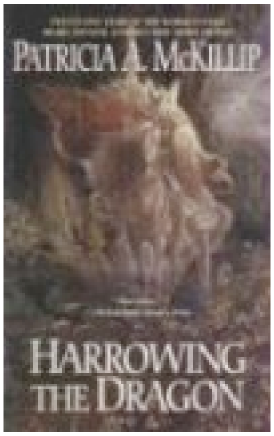
Why then were the Lewis Carroll Society and a number of British children's book authors questioning "the wisdom of reworking the greats of English literature"? Maybe because Beddor's take is so different, and so uncompromising or, as he believes, because "children don't revere the classics the way most adults do." Habitually, adults see large swaths of their childhoods through the lenses of nostalgia. Beddor honestly recalls not thinking *Alice* was a classic when it was forced on him and many other young readers would agree. For authors like Beddor who decide to revisit classic stories with their own tales, there is often an unprecedented backlash from readers and critics. Lately though I have noticed almost a renaissance of this sort of writing. What's different this time is the challenge the authors are giving the originals -- the bold move to make the stories updated, modern and highly readable to contemporary readers. Beddor for example wanted to make *Alice* less of a feminine story, "This is my revenge," he told *The Independent*. "I wanted to rewrite it as a book boys would also enjoy."

The Looking Glass Wars both acknowledges and incorporates the original book as a critical part of its own storyline. Alyss Heart is a princess and heir to the Wonderland throne, but after a bloody coup she is forced to flee her homeland through a portal and ends up in Victorian London. After hard living on the streets followed by a fortunate adoption from the Liddell family, Alyss learns to bury the truth about her early life deeply away, and over time begins to doubt if any of Wonderland was true. One day she tells her story to a family friend, the Reverend Charles Dodgson. He takes that personal history and writes a novel that appalls Alyss and leaves her with no confidant, no one who even pretends to believe her. She breaks from Dodgson completely (a break that is historically accurate) and rushes headlong into a life that does not include her Wonderland story. It is then that Hatter Mattigan, a bodyguard to the Heart family, arrives in London to bring Alyss home.

Soon enough Alyss is back in the thick of the war for Wonderland where she finds old friends deeply

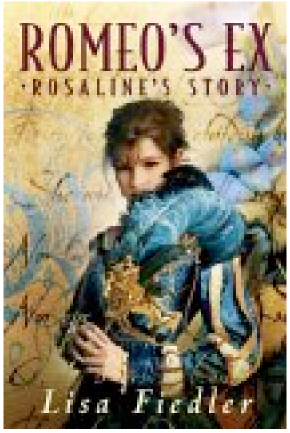


changed by the years of conflict. Ultimately she knows that she must face her aunt, the Red Queen, a deadly vicious murderer who is determined to remove all challenges to her place on the throne. That means Alyss must die, and the war will not end until one of them falls. It is a fight to the death, something that was always funny in Carroll's story, but is deeply serious in Beddor's title. There are no silly calls of "Off with his head!" from this queen's mouth. Now the Cheshire Cat is her psychopathic assassin and Alyss his target. It's bloody, it's violent and all about who will survive. Even though all the familiar players are present, there are no tea parties or croquet games. And to those who wonder why Beddor dared to take on a classic, the author offers this: "I've written my stories for those readers who want something more, something else, a darker Alyss for a darker world. Imagination has been honored. What better gift can I give back to Wonderland?"



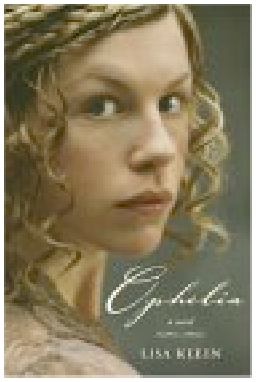
Fans of Frank L. Baum's Oz stories know they are in for something different from the first page of Illusive Arts' comic, *Dorothy* This time Dorothy Gale is angry, rebellious and on her way to Topeka to see Jason who "always gets the best shit" when she drives right into that tornado (in her uncle Henry's hotwired pick-up no less). She is the most misunderstood girl in the Midwest, a girl who recently failed an assignment because she answered the question "Where I've Been and Where I'm Going" honestly -- she wrote "Nowhere." With her red streaked hair and leather pants she doesn't know where she should be but is certain where she doesn't belong. "I'm always being misunderstood," she thinks. "Just like a rock star. Like fucking Nirvana."

She wakes up in an unrecognizable world and soon has run-ins with a mechanical dog, a serpent, a scarecrow survivor of horrific torture and a tin man who was the unwitting part of a deadly love triangle. While Baum's Oz had its frightening moments (those flying monkeys were nothing to be laughed at), the creative team of Mark Masterson and Greg Mannino, who developed the story idea and founded Illusive Arts, have concentrated on a harsh view of a country at war and staggering under the iron grip of a dictator. The Wicked Witch is so very wicked here, she is in fact everything a girl like Dorothy would fear, if she had any idea that such evil could even exist. She rules the country, she decides who lives or dies; she makes you bleed if that is her wish. She makes you bleed and she doesn't even blink when she does it.



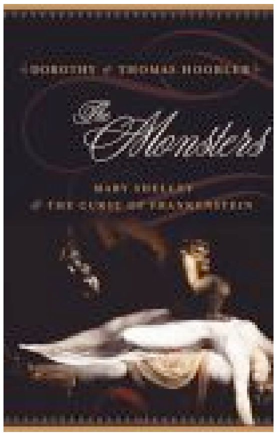
For writer Masterson, *The Wizard of Oz* is a uniquely American fairytale, which made the story an irresistible draw. "If Baum was a genius," he wrote in an e-mail, "he was a genius in this: he gave American children a fantasy version of the world they lived in. Not the historical, feudal past, not the dragons and frost giants of the Old World -- he gave them tin and copper and humbugs. Flim-flam men with power and wizards with guns and walking record players. Creatures never before imagined…and places never visited." None of that would have elevated the story to classic levels had it not been for the lead character however, and the way in which American readers embraced her. "Dorothy," writes Masterson, "is a practical girl who takes things as they come, never getting swept up in the magic, never losing sight of her goal. She's what most kids want to be (or did at one time) -- she's not too smart, but she's level-headed. She helps people who need it, but she's not afraid to tell someone off. She can handle herself, but she's not above accepting assistance. She's the avatar of the United States, a little country, barely more than 100 years old when Baum was writing."

Re-envisioning Dorothy not as Judy Garland's sweet heroine, but as Masterson sees her, as a symbol of bold America, the reader can understand better the transformation Dorothy has undergone in the new CG designed story. With amazing and realistic art that leaps off the page, Masterson's Dorothy makes no allowances for the strangeness of her surroundings and instead plows ahead with the same steadfast determination that made her search for a good time rather than spending another lonely



night on the farm. (Something Baum's heroine understood as well.) She wants to go back home, but she won't be rushed or fooled along the way and she steadfastly refuses to play the victim, even when the going gets very tough. "Dorothy appeals," according to Masterson, "because she's a straightforward American (John Wayne, Bruce Willis, Frances McDormand) and also because she's somehow connected to this otherworld. She's in a strange land, but she's not gonna change because of it. She might change in her own way along with it, but her rebel nature and independent spirit means that's just a coincidence."

The Illusive Arts version of Dorothy's story appeals to readers because it does hold true to Baum's vision -- Dorothy is still the same girl (as Masterson's words attest), she's just not a girl in 1900 or 1939; she's definitely 21st century. But her story is no longer the simple tale of finding some friends along the yellow brick road on the way to the Emerald City either. Now it is about monsters and politics and freedom. Baum's America was not grappling with such issues however, and Masterson reaches within the original story to find the true essence of Oz, not just the fun adventures. "Oz is the fever dream of America," he writes. "Oz is the hope of what we could become. Oz is feminist, surprising, technical, magical, royalist, democratic, contradictory, vast, limited, safe, vulnerable, covered in poppies, riddled with enemies, full of laughter, never ending." Oz is America, obviously, and Dorothy's story is our own, now updated for a whole new audience and a whole new American vision. (Which, appropriately enough, is pretty dark and forbidding.)



When asked about other childhood classics, Masterson pointed out that while he was not familiar with much beyond the Disney version of Peter Pan he was struck by the statue of Peter Pan in Hyde Park, London. As he puts it, it is a "Square G Statue of Pan with little nymphs crawling all over his base and his raw pubescent sexuality just explodes out of the metal. The thought of a young girl encountering that sort of love god, and his enticement to go live on an island forever, emulating savages and encountering pirates… well, that's colonialism, isn't it? The romance at least." To him, Wendy should be treated in "the manner of Tom Stoppard's Indian Ink. British girl intrigued by the exotic. Wants to taste life before it passes her by."

Clearly Masterson is on the same creative wavelength as author Christopher Golden, whose coming-of-age classic, *Straight On 'Til Morning* was reissued by Roc this year. On the surface, Golden's story is about a group of young teenage friends just coming to grips with their sexual longing and needs. The book starts out with a lot of fun summer moments, some making out, strip poker and many discussions about who is doing what with who. Kevin Murphy has a girlfriend but she is not the one -- that would be his old friend and romantic interest, Nikki. But Nikki is older and becomes obsessed with Pete Starling. It should just be a story about bad teenage romance until Kevin goes looking for Nikki one night.

Reeling, he lay back again, eyes closed in denial. When he opened them again, there were shadows on the moon. Five of them. Five figures flying across the moon.

One of them was Nikki.

In his new introduction to the novel, Golden admits that *Morning* reads almost like two books. "There are two journeys within these pages, one very personal and one surreal and wild, as the title should indicate. Don't say you weren't warned." The first part is all about Kevin Murphy, his brother and their friends and the difficulties that arise in their lives with the arrival of Pete Starling. After Pete and his friends disappear with Nikki though, the book transforms from a traditional story of teenage drama to a fantasy of epic proportions. In that respect it follows J.M. Barrie's original design: first the Darling children are home in London and then in one night their lives are changed forever through the interference of Peter Pan. Golden's book is darker than others that revisited the Neverland arena however -- far darker than the latest sanctioned sequel for sure. In his Neverland sex is a critical component of the story. There is no sweet maternal figure in Golden's retelling, rather a burning need for reproduction that overwhelms everything else -- that is the essence of Neverland's sorrows.

Publishers Weekly called the book "A bizarre combination of *The Wonder Years* TV series and *The Lost Boys* film" and they were right on the mark. Golden, who has no recollection of when he first read *Peter Pan* or in what form, saw his story as a dark coming-of-age tale above all others. Barrie might have thought it would be a wonderful adventure for the Darling children but even he had to acknowledge that most of the boys he wrote the story for died terribly young, in war, in accidents, in great sadness to all who ever loved them. It never should have been a sweet fairy story and Golden returns it to the roots Barrie strived for. He returns Pan to the creature that lives in the Hyde Park statue and Nikki is his Wendy who goes looking for grand adventure and finds far more than she ever dreamed.

It's not a happily ever after story, Christopher Golden reminds us, and when we are honest with ourselves, we know it never was.

Beyond these fairly recent fairytales, there are older stories that writers have not been able to resist putting their own mark on from their very first reading. William Shakespeare knew how to write ripping good tales that still enjoy near universal appeal today. There are endless ways to revisit, rewrite and adapt Shakespeare's plays and although most of these modernizations are dreadful (I have a lot of trouble seeing Hamlet as a woman), it doesn't stop authors from trying. Fantasy writer Patricia McKillip takes a stab at *Romeo and Juliet* in her latest short story collection, *Harrowing the Dragon* and uses a common conceit to breath new life into the classic.

By presenting "Star-Crossed" from the perspective of the play's "First Watch" McKillip gives an outsider's view of the ultimate family drama. Her story is that of a man in love with a married woman and burdened with the monumental task of sorting out just what went on at Juliet's tomb ("trying to make sense out of a brawl among the dead"). His is a common man's opinion of the Montague/Capulet feud as he slowly unravels the mystery surrounding Juliet's love and marriage. In the process the story becomes more a meditation on love and collective guilt then it does the feud itself. McKillip stays faithful to Shakespeare's story, giving reader's a fresh perspective but still a familiar tale.

Authors Lisa Klein and Lisa Fiedler went a little further afield with their versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. In each case they sought to bring the female characters a bit more to the forefront and give them better opportunities to shine then found in Shakespeare's work. In fact, Fielder's novel, *Romeo's Ex* focuses on a very minor character, Rosaline, Juliet's cousin and the girl Romeo claims to love early on. In Rosaline she found a way to making the play more accessible to modern readers. "I had my hook," she wrote me recently. "A whole new voice, a character who would see the story as I saw it."

In this respect the author was taking an approach similar to McKillip's, except Fielder was determined to do more than just explore the story further -- she wanted to explore the characters as well. "After all," she writes, "Shakespeare's boys -- Hamlet and Romeo -- already had a rock star thing going on, at least for me. In any century they're the kind of guys girls crush on. Guys who don't call when they say they will. Great kissers. Cute, cute, cute. Heart breakers. You know. I thought they deserved girls with some moxie, girls who'd make them work a little harder."

Rosaline is no pushover, something Fiedler makes clear from the very beginning. She's cautious and careful and also a bit of a cynic on the one hand, but willing to take the occasional chance for the sheer pleasure of shaking her life up. The difference between Rosaline and Juliet is that her risks are of a simpler nature -- jumping a wall, stealing a flower. She doesn't take chances with her heart which is why she is less than impressed with Romeo's overblown promises. Fiedler's Rosaline is a down-to-earth kind of girl, the kind many modern teens immediately identify with. She is a perfect foil for Romeo and stands out head and shoulders above poor doomed Juliet.

"It's not that I thought Shakespeare 'neglected' his female characters," writes Fiedler. "In fact, I always thought he made them rather magnificent, dazzling, notwithstanding their historical circumstances. I believe Shakespeare was actually rooting for both Ophelia and Juliet; I think he liked them, and would have wanted them to fare better if their situations had allowed. They were outnumbered, out-gendered, overpowered. He had to write them as he did because from where he stood, these girls didn't have a lot of options."

For Fiedler the idea of creating options for Shakespeare's female characters prompted her, in the case of Romeo, to make Rosaline a healer who is eager to break from the Capulet feud. She also becomes a careful observer of her young cousin's romance and delivers the kind of comments and questions that many modern readers of the play (who can not understand a thirteen-year old falling so deeply and quickly into love) might have. "One of Rosaline's complaints… is the fact that Romeo and Juliet are simply too young," Fiedler writes. "Yes, their age is a major issue, but the bigger issue for me is the fact that they are strangers! They meet at a party and hook-up, and somehow they've come to be regarded as the greatest lovers of all time. Wow. If that were the case, half the girls I went to high school with would be considered romantic heroines."

In the end Fiedler manages to reveal how easily the Verona tragedy could have been averted, and how quickly we all embrace the idea of young love regardless of the vapor-thin manner in which it has been developed. The biggest revelation in *Romeo's Ex* though is neither one of the book's "stars" but rather the delightfully pragmatic Rosaline. She is, first and foremost, a girl who will survive and thrive solely because she insists on finding a way in which to make her life happen in the manner she chooses -- an admirable quality for any young woman to exemplify. It is something she has very much in common in fact with Klein's Ophelia.

In *Ophelia* Klein found a way to challenge the impression of Hamlet's girlfriend that Shakespeare crafted when he was writing as a "man of his time" but modern academics took far too seriously. "[I]t annoyed me to hear other critics and teachers lionizing Hamlet as a hero who can do no wrong, and taking his [Shakespeare's] estimation of Ophelia as weak and unfaithful at face value," writes Klein. "And I found that students in this day and age simply can't relate to a spineless Ophelia."

Just as McKillip and Fiedler did so well, Klein also worked her version of Ophelia into the existing text, not significantly altering the existing play but adding to it in the moments when Ophelia is "not on stage" and thus could have thoughts of her own. "It was a challenge to keep the framework of Hamlet intact while creating, in essence, a separate stage for Ophelia and giving her a deeper relationship to Hamlet, a greater intimacy with Gertrude and a key involvement in the murder investigation at Elsinore. But it was also fun to invent a past for her, and a future beyond the events of Hamlet."

Much more so then authors tackling Alice, Dorothy, and Peter Pan, Klein and Fiedler had entire stories to create around dialogue-rich plays. They also chose to set their novels (and McKillip with her short story) firmly in the existing work, and not based on it or updating it. What happens to Romeo, Juliet and Hamlet directly affects the plots of Klein and Fiedler's novels and they do not ignore -- for the most part -- who lives, dies and kills. What Klein chose to do was find an utterly believable way for Ophelia to survive the Elsinore tragedy (interestingly enough it hinges on Ophelia being a healer, like Rosaline) and then extend the story behind the play's final scene. Ophelia leaves Denmark with fully one-third of the story remaining. This allows Klein to move her protagonist completely into the spotlight and far beyond a secondary assignment.

More so than the other authors revisiting classic storylines, Klein takes her character into a whole new place. Ophelia finds a life in a French convent ("get thee to a nunnery" indeed) and develops new passions and friendships. The author takes the continuing theme of madness from the play and transfers it to a religious fervor experience by one of the convent's other residents, creating new ways to explore and enrich Ophelia's life. Overall a second story develops that overwhelms the first, making *Ophelia* a novel not at all about Hamlet, but one that merely includes him, in much the same way the play merely included Ophelia.

"I hope readers will think I have succeeded in moving Ophelia out of Hamlet's shadow… Regardless, the novel was tremendously fun to write and very liberating. Shakespeare's works belong to everyone; he's not an untouchable cultural icon. He borrowed from other writers and altered his sources, so why shouldn't we do the same to him? I like to think," adds Klein, "that Shakespeare would approve of my Ophelia and perhaps say, 'Would that I had thought of this myself.'" As it happens, Klein is planning to revisit MacBeth in the future.

In all of these recent titles it was the novels themselves that spurred modern authors to revisit the original stories. For Veronica Bennett and Thomas and Dorothy Hoobler, however it was the story of an author and the creation of a novel that prompted their books. In both cases it was the lingering literary mystery surrounding the inspiration for Mary Shelley's monster that made them take long thoughtful looks at her life. Bennett accomplished her tale through a young adult novel, while the Hooblers took a most unorthodox approach by writing a fully fleshed out biography of one historic, and perhaps enchanted, evening.

According to the catalog copy it was a portrait in the National Portrait Gallery in London that prompted Bennett to dig deeper into Shelley's life for *Angelmonster*. "The look in her eyes fascinated me," she said, "and it came to me that history and biography could reveal facts and speculate on her feelings, but that only a novel could bend history to the power of the imagination and explore what might have been behind those eyes. As I began to research Mary's story, I was struck by all that happened to her at such a young age -- and in a period of history when we are led to suppose that young women were prevented from doing anything."

From this initial curiosity, Bennett crafted a gripping novel about Shelley and her passionate but doomed love for the poet Percy Shelley. It was her husband's career and life that dominated everything Mary did. She left her family for him when he was a married man and she was only sixteen. She allowed his wanderings across Europe to dictate where and how they would live even after her children grew ill and died, one by one by one. Bennett knows all these facts but she writes Shelley's life story as a great sweeping novel -- it seems impossible to be true anyway and lends itself beautifully to he fictional treatment. All the drama of the Shelley romance is here and Bennett creates a sympathetic and determined vision in Mary Shelley. She was far more than the creator of Frankenstein and was more fascinating than her own fiction, something most readers would find hard to believe possible. In this case, Bennett has resurrected a literary figure and placed her in a highly readable and engaging story. Mary Shelley is now the star, as she rightfully should have been all along.

For the Hooblers, their interest in Shelley was sparked by some casual research during which they learned that on the infamous night where Lord Byron challenged his small group of friends to write a ghost story (the assignment eventually became *Frankenstein*), his personal physician John Polidori was inspired to write what is acknowledged as the original vampire story. This coincidence struck them as irresistible and the further their research took them the more intrigued they became by the very unorthodox lifestyles of the group with Byron that evening. Ultimately the authors chose to write a biography of that evening, including overviews of the life stories of all those present (Percy & Mary Shelley, Bryon, Polidori and Shelley's stepsister, Claire Clarmont who had a child with Bryon and probably an affair with Percy). A few critics have stated that everything in *The Monsters: Mary Shelley & The Curse of Frankenstein* can be found elsewhere, but whether or not that is true, it is the manner in which the Hooblers put their book together that makes it so wonderfully unique. They have written a biography of a literary event; of one evening and everyone who took part in it. They went back to their subjects' childhoods and followed them through Byron's challenge and on to their deaths. Along the way they found that Percy Shelley, Bryon and Polidori all died young and Clairmont and Mary suffered horrific personal losses. Honestly for such a creative and, as they referred to them recently, "daring [and] unconventional" group it is staggering how sad and hard their lives turned out. For the Hooblers it was all too much to resist and in the process of writing their book they came to their own conclusions about just where the idea for *Frankenstein* was truly born. As they explained to me:

"[W]e decided to write about the events leading up to Bryon's challenge, and that was when we saw that Mary's inspiration for her book must have come from her father and Percy. She was, in effect, criticizing them, especially her father, for the way she was brought up. It was Mary who was the monster, in real life. Or so it seemed to us."

This revised look at the life of a famous writer is wonderfully compelling reading. While scholars might have already known the bits and pieces of information that the Hooblers have so elegantly folded together in this single book, *Monsters* was not written for them. It is a book the authors intended for "anyone who enjoys reading about people who lived life to the fullest, and paid a high price for it." In that respect it is an extremely modern story, even though it takes place in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Mary Shelley was really a 21st century woman as evidenced by her very scientific novel. In fact, it was by looking at Mary through contemporary eyes that the Hooblers were able to uncover a surprise or two about her that has probably eluded most fans of her work.

“Mary really set aside her own work after Percy’s death and devoted herself to putting his poems into shape for publication as well as creating the myth of the saintly, ethereal Percy the poet that persists to this day,” they emailed me recently. “It was only by studying what Percy’s closest friends wrote about him, as well as examining the evidence that is in Mary’s diary and letters that the true Percy emerges. The myth is Mary’s creation.”

Of course the Hooblers ended up facing the same sort of challenges that Frank Beddor dealt with in *The Looking Glass Wars* when their book appeared with its harsher view of Percy Shelley. “Some reviewers,” they write, “who still carry a torch for Percy, were angry at our interpretation. One went so far as to quote a long poem by Percy in his review -- as if the reviewer felt Percy should still take first place, even in a book that is about Marcy and her creative life.” That’s a position Beddor would recognize all too easily, and one that all writers who challenge classic tales (and classic writers) must contend with. But without these kinds of authors, without the sort of boldness that makes a revisit of the past not only reasonable but exciting, readers would find themselves stuck with the classic and only the classic. This does not mean that the original is not the best, or even that there needs to be a competition between the two, but there should always be plenty of room for reinterpretation and the just plain fun of reading about tough ass versions of Alice and Dorothy, a sexy and frightening Peter and finally seeing Hamlet and Romeo as secondary to the women they romanced. And as for Mary Shelley – well, the work of both Veronica Bennett and the Hooblers has proven to be a revelation for this former Brit Lit student. I never knew who she was, while managing somehow to study her novel endlessly. How did I miss her when presented so often with her husband and her monster? How did so many of us miss what she had to say?

It is a mystery to me how could anyone possibly be angry or insulted that that any of these new books were written. Love them or not (and I know some of you are still proudly brandishing the originals like shields), you have to respect this willingness to take a creative chance. These are writers who all went swimming in the deep end and that’s something far too many of us never dare to even attempt. Give them respect for that, then go read their books and find out what you’ve been missing while trapped in the past.