Breaking the Curse: Retelling a Folk Fairy Tale to Explore Trauma and Healing in Novels for Young People

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[The creative section of this thesis on pages 6 - 290 has been removed from this digital version at the author's request]

No new datasets were created during the study.

Following initial supervisory ethical discussion, full ethical approval from the Bath Spa University Ethics Panel was not required. The research has been conducted in line with requirements in place at the time of this decision. Should you have any concerns regarding ethical matters relating to this study, please contact the Research Support Office at Bath Spa University (researchsupportoffice@bathspa.ac.uk).

Abstract

This practice-based research asks how the folk fairy tale might be used to explore themes of trauma and healing in writing for young people. My novel, *The Wasting Curse*, is a young adult retelling of the folk fairy tale 'Kate Crackernuts.' By finding gaps in the original tale, I use my retelling to introduce and explore interrelation and intergenerational trauma. I aim to assist young readers in understanding their own struggles, and to that end I also narratively explore the complexities of healing and hope.

This thesis also includes a piece of contextual research. Its four sections mirror the key elements of my novel: the folk fairy tale, trauma, dissociation, and healing. I examine these topics in light of both scientific studies and recent examples drawn from young adult reworkings of old folk or fairy tales. Existing young adult literature often dramatizes trauma without accounting for its weight or outcomes, which I have tried to address in my own writing. My methodology draws heavily on autoethnography, with influences from my personal history as a young person who experienced trauma and found release in folk fairy tales.

'Chapter One: Uncover' introduces the concept of the folk fairy tale and the trauma that already exists in the stories we tell. 'Chapter Two: Name' narrows the types of trauma focused on in this research. 'Chapter Three: Inhabit' highlights dissociation and the ways it can be used and misused in stories, with a particular focus on the importance of traumatized characters finding safety in their own bodies. Finally, 'Chapter Four: Mend' covers the tricky subject of healing. This chapter questions the trope of 'happily ever after,' and discusses the importance of an ending that is both realistic and hopeful.

My research is founded on the principle that fictional representations of trauma and healing can have a powerful impact on young readers. I offer this thesis in the hope that the methods I have developed will be useful to other writers and scholars.

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Introduction

This practice-based research exists in two parts: the creative manuscript, *The Wasting Curse*, and a contextual commentary. Since both novel and analysis serve as pieces of the same work, neither should be read without the other. Any knowledge gleaned from my research has directly influenced the novel through plot, characters, emotions, descriptions, and themes. Conversely, my work in the world of fiction has fed back into my understanding of the broader research topics. Both research and creative writing are twined together.

My thesis asked: How can the folk fairy tale be used to explore themes of trauma and healing in writing for young people? The research aimed to contribute new knowledge in the field of writing. *The Wasting Curse* explores the subject through a creative lens, whereas the contextual paper uses autoethnographic methodology. My personal experience is placed within the scope of neuroscience, psychology, and the young adult publishing industry.

My interest in this topic arose from my own experience as a young person who endured trauma and found solace in folk fairy tales. My aim in my creative work is to assist young readers in understanding their own struggles, and to that end I narratively examine the complexities of healing and hope. For my contextual work, my aim is to provide writers with tools to develop their own stories with a conscious knowledge of trauma and an awareness of the consequences of traumatic events.

In the following pages, I will examine my process of writing to show moments of decision-making and influence between my research and my novel. I focus particularly on the folk fairy tale retelling and its unique use as a vehicle for writing about difficult themes. In the representation of trauma, my investigation centers around interrelational and intergenerational trauma. I believe my main

contribution to new knowledge is the suggested methods writers can use to seamlessly and unpatronizingly incorporate scientific truths about trauma and healing into fiction for young people.

My project has three purposes. The first is personal. I entered this research wanting to understand my life experiences and the influence my trauma had on me as a writer and a person. At the start of my studies, I had already attended years of talk therapy and felt I had a good foundation of healing to build on. My move to the United Kingdom from the United States in February of 2020, and my time as an immunocompromised woman during the COVID-19 pandemic, challenged my perception of my progress and pushed me to dig deeper into still-broken places.

The second purpose stems from artistic curiosity. I wanted to find out if—and how—a writer could authentically portray trauma and healing in fiction. In particular, it was important to me to gain and represent a scientifically-informed understanding of these topics. I wanted to combine this knowledge with the conventions of writing for young people to make a story that was both an enjoyable read and an accurate representation of these topics. The focus here was on my young readers and the best way to equip them with a story both genuine and, ideally, helpful.

I imagine the reader of *The Wasting Curse* as a young person aged thirteen and up. I have written this novel with an awareness that my reader may have already experienced significant trauma in their life, but also that they may be just beginning to brush shoulders with the traumatic aspects of the world. This time of transition can be confusing and difficult, and I hope that my story will make it a little gentler.

The third purpose comes from artistic practice. I wanted to find methods that other writers could use to gain a foundation of knowledge in trauma studies and

ways that writers can blend truth with fiction. In my extensive reading through the fantasy and folk fairy tale retelling sections of the young adult genre, I discovered numerous examples of authors who seemed to have good intentions but did not have an accurate understanding of trauma, its after-effects, or the impact its portrayal might have on their readers. I hope that this research can be used by other authors as a springboard for their own inquiries.

This contextual essay is divided into four main chapters. 'Chapter One: Uncover' introduces the concept of the folk fairy tale and the trauma that already exists in the stories we tell. I argue that these difficult themes can be easier to access in the context of familiar narratives, which makes the retelling a particularly useful structure in writing for young people.

'Chapter Two: Name' narrows the types of trauma focused on in this research to intergenerational and interrelational. The physical effects of trauma are discussed, as well as its links to chronic illness. The Adverse Childhood Experience studies are highlighted. The stylistic choices in my creative writing are scrutinized, with attention to tense and narrative perspective.

'Chapter Three: Inhabit' highlights dissociation and the ways it can be used and misused in stories, with a particular focus on the importance of traumatized characters finding safety in their own bodies. Current practice in young adult fiction is examined.

Finally, 'Chapter Four: Mend' covers the complex subject of healing. This chapter questions the trope of 'happily ever after.' The power of relationships as studied in the field of psychology and as represented in *The Wasting Curse* is analyzed. Finally, this chapter discusses the importance of creating an ending that is both realistic and hopeful.

My research had limitations due to the necessity of constraining the scope and the content of my study. These topics would benefit from further study. A greater focus on feminist themes in the context of trauma in young adult fiction would be of particular interest, especially the way empowerment can be used to portray healing. The number of folk fairy tale collections is extensive, and studies could be done on one particular title and its retellings in young adult fiction (for instance, 'Beauty and the Beast') to see how the original and retellings deal with trauma and healing. *The Wasting Curse* itself contains numerous intriguing themes that might have been explored in more depth but fell outside the scope of this research. For instance, the concerns that arise when writing a "sick" character who temporarily inhabits a "well" body. While considerations about disability representation were important to the writing of the novel, they were not ultimately relevant to this research project beyond their direct links to trauma and healing.

I have also limited the scope to insights that were personally significant to me. As the nature of trauma and the delicate path toward healing are intensely personal experiences, it is unlikely another writer would have found themselves at the collision of research and creativity in the same way I did. Another writer might have placed more emphasis on the use of the objective correlative to represent trauma through setting, or perhaps they might have examined more closely the conflicts of blended families. Because this piece of contextualizing research is autoethnographic, my analysis is not intended to be comprehensive.

My research is founded on the principle that fictional representations of trauma and healing can have a powerful impact on young readers. It certainly had such an impact on me, both as a reader and a writer. Before I had the tools I needed to make sense of the traumatic experiences in my real life, I found I could safely

interact with them in fictional worlds. I hope that my creative work will find its young audience. I hope it will provide space and structure for the curious and the wounded alike. And I hope my thesis will benefit writers and scholars as they develop, write, and share their tales.

Like all stories, there are hundreds of places where I might begin. But I will settle on this: in a time of nightmares, I found a book.

Chapter One: Uncover

Once upon a time there was a king and a queen, as in many lands have been.[1]

I am fifteen, walking the aisles of the local library and trying not to think about my nightmares. Images return in fragments. A locked brass doorknob. My shoulder crashing into wood panels. Screams. And I'm beginning to wonder: Are these dreams, or memories?

But I push those thoughts away as I browse. I've never been to this part of the library—didn't realize there was an entire section devoted to fairy tales. A light pink spine stands out to me: *The Welsh Fairy Book* by William Jenkyn. I don't know what "Welsh" is, but I pluck the book from the shelf, take it home, and read it cover to cover repeatedly.

Eventually, around the age of eighteen, I buy my own copy and circle the titles of best-loved stories.

At this point, I do not see the pattern in my favorites.

Time taught me that my dreams were true.

The tale can be told in six deceptively short sentences: When I was four years old, my best friend locked me in a room. He molested me. He did it on three different days. The third day, I threw myself against the door. I screamed until my mom heard. I told her everything.

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[1] Lang, Andrew. "The Story of Kate Crackernuts." *Longman's Magazine,* vol. XIII; no. LXXVIII, April 1889, p. 661.

My parents thought that I would forget—that it was kinder to let me forget—so we didn't talk about what happened. But my body remembered. And my wounds revealed themselves in the stories I craved.

Fifteen- and eighteen-year-old me, bent over *The Welsh Fairy Book*, didn't understand my trauma. But today I see familiar pain in the stories teen-me marked as her favorites. Each of the circled titles centers on a theme that reflects my trauma: justice (as in *Bala Lake*), displacement (as in *Magic Music*), or love gone wrong (as in *The Bride from the Red Lake*). Even without understanding my memories, I sought comfort in stories that reflected my own betrayal, disassociation, and lack of closure. These folk fairy tales did what folk fairy tales do best: gave examples of a way forward, and provided hope.

The Folk Fairy Tale

A *fairy tale* is defined as 'narratives of magic and fantasy, which are understood to be fictional' (Zipes 167). A *folktale*, sometimes subclassed under fairy tales, might be defined as a story of cultural significance meant to convey societal truths, morals, lessons, or entertainment (Leduc 18). The *folk fairy tale*, then, is a combination of the two. It is a fictional story with narratives of magic and fantasy constructed to convey cultural lessons. Like the folktale, folk fairy tales display a sense of right and wrong, crime and justice, cause and effect. Like the fairy tale, a magical entity often influences the story direction. Wit is rewarded, wickedness is punished, and the tales leave the reader to decide "whether and how to apply" the lessons based on "what the story reveals about life and human nature" (Bettelheim 45). In particular, folk fairy tales "illustrate inner conflict" and give "the promise of a happy ending" but do not dictate a certain course of action (26).

Bettelheim's "promise of a happy ending" echoes the familiar phrase 'happily ever after,' a cliché often attached to the fairy tale (26). There is an important distinction between these two approaches to tales' conclusions. A *promise* is not the same as an *achieved* happy ending. A *promise* murmurs of hope—something to come that has not yet been reached. The phrase 'they lived happily ever after,' in contrast, is a statement of fact. Happiness has been reached and will continue. Bettelheim's promise is an ending with some flexibility, some ambiguity, because it has not yet been fulfilled. But even with this less didactic version of 'happily ever after', is a happy ending normal in the traditional folk fairy tales?

The answer seems to be no, 'happily ever after' and even a "promise of a happy ending" does not appear to be obligatory in folk fairy tales. I returned to *The Welsh Fairy Book* to check the types of endings included in this collection. I have defined a "happy ending" as good rewarded and bad punished. In my count, *The Welsh Fairy Book*'s collection contains 34 "happy" endings (41%), with 22 "sad" endings (where good goes unrewarded or bad is rewarded (26%)). Additionally, there are 18 "neutral" endings (where the characters end in basically the same position they started (22%)) and 9 "bittersweet" endings (where whatever is happy about the ending comes at a great cost (11%)).

With 69% of endings something other than purely happy, the folk fairy tales in *The Welsh Fairy Book* do not fully conform to Bettelheim's "promise of a happy ending" (26). This is important for writers who wish to retell folk fairy tales with an eye on the representation of trauma: they do not have to end happily ever after. This will be discussed in greater length in 'Chapter Four: Mend'.

Bettelheim's claim that these stories reveal "human nature" does seem to hold true. The Oxford English Dictionary defines human nature as: "The inherent

character or nature of human beings; the sum of traits, characteristics, and predispositions attributed to or associated with human beings" ("Human nature, *N*"). Human nature might encompass themes like greed, bravery, laziness, kindness, and more, which are explored in *The Welsh Fairy Book* and other folk fairy tale collections. The act of revealing human nature, with or without the happy ending, is a vital ingredient to my examination of folk fairy tales. After all, human nature encompasses many traits, characteristics, and predispositions that could lead to traumatic experiences.

Trauma in Folk Fairy Tales

Trauma is nothing new in the world of folk fairy tales. A quick look at a few popular stories reveals themes of adult abuse or neglect of children (*Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Snow White*), voices stolen or silenced (*The Goose Girl*, *Six Swan Brothers*, *The Little Mermaid*), and captivity or isolation (*Rapunzel*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *East of the Moon and West of the Sun*). Sometimes justice is served—even brutally, as in Andrew Lang's 1889 version of *The Goose Girl*, where the antagonist is put naked in a barrel lined with sharp nails and rolled until she dies. Other times, the abuse seems to be accepted or even condoned. In Giambattista Basile's 1634 version of *Sleeping Beauty*, a married king "gather[s] the first fruits of love" from the unconscious Talia. While he "for a time thought no more about this incident," she wakes nine months later to discover she's birthed twins. When the king eventually returns and tells her what happened, the consequence of the rape is only "[the king and Talia's] friendship was knitted with tighter bonds." Though the types of trauma in our stories might be similar across traditions, the way it is portrayed "change[s] and bend[s] both with and in response to culture" (Leduc 94). This is where the storyteller enters. A writer

who retells a tale must decide what aspects of trauma to explore, expound on, or remove from the story. They must also carefully consider the consequences.

The tale I chose as the focus of this research's work was 'Kate Crackernuts'. This tale was originally collected by a Kirkwall lawyer named Duncan J. Robertson from an unnamed woman who lived in the Orkney Islands on the island of Rousay (Muir). Due to references in the text to a forest (not found on the Orkney Islands), folklorist Tom Muir believes the woman may have been a "traveler" who had emigrated from the Highlands. Though there is not an exact date recorded, we know from *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society: Vol II* (Session 1923-1924) that Robertson was gathering tales in the area leading up to 1895. It is presumed that Robertson gave the story to Andrew Lang, who then published it in *Longman's Magazine* in April 1889. Later, 'Kate Crackernuts' was taken by Joseph Jacobs and published in *English Fairy Tales* (1898). My retelling is drawn mostly from the Lang and Jacobs versions, though I was influenced by Katharine M. Briggs' 1980 novelization (discussed in more detail later) and Margaret Mayo's 1993 retelling. (See an annotated copy of 'Kate Crackernuts' in Appendix A.)

A writer considering working on a retelling might look for two primary components in the original tale: iconic story elements and gaps in the story. An iconic story element might involve an important item (a glass shoe left behind in *Cinderella*, a magical mirror in *Snow White*) or moment in the plot (Beauty must leave the Beast before she can return and break his curse, one brother will not be fully transformed at the end of *The Wild Swans*)—or both. This is a touchstone to a story, an aspect that makes it recognizable as a retelling even if it's made a little unfamiliar by the new teller. In Marissa Meyer's bestselling *Cinder* (2012), a retelling of *Cinderella*, Cinder is a cyborg with a mechanical foot instead of a glass

shoe but she still loses it during the climax. A reader familiar with the original story will instantly recognize the foot as a stand-in for the shoe. These iconic story elements help orient the reader in the retelling of a familiar story.

Gaps in the story are other avenues for creatively playing with a retelling. A folk fairy tale tends to be no longer than a short story, which restricts the amount of exposition that can be included. This often leads to parts of the story being summarized, simplified, or entirely left blank. A gap might arise in the motivation (e.g. Why does Cinderella stay to work as a servant for her stepmother after her father dies?) or backstory (e.g. Who was Cinderella's birth mother?) or details (e.g. What did Cinderella and the prince talk about at the ball?). A folk fairy tale is able to glaze over these aspects, relying on brevity or metaphor to make meaning without spending extra text on elaboration. In a folk fairy tale, the teller can say simply "there was once upon a time an old fox with nine tails" (Grimm 152). And this is true without any reinforcement, any additional logic, because we are not given any.

Fairy tales also rely on the use of metaphor or "the language of symbols representing unconscious content" (36). For instance, animals in fairy tales might represent humanity's "instinctual drives" or "the untamed id" (76). These metaphors work in part because the fairy tale is "the result of common conscious and unconscious content having been shaped by the conscious mind" (36). The distilling of "universal human problems, and […] desirable solutions" of a fairy tale is even more seen with the folk fairy tale, as these older tales have been told millions of times between adults and children (36; 150). The universality of themes and images means that a folk fairy tale appeals to the reader without the need to explain every point of the story. But in a longer form of storytelling—like the novel—most readers

require more development. This is where gaps—the parts that beg further exploration—make a story ripe for retelling.

'Kate Crackernuts' came with both iconic story elements and a plethora of gaps to develop. The original story serves as an excellent example of both the familiar and the fascinating in folk fairy tales. The story contains tropes common to fairy tales, such as stepparents and stepsisters, curses, and journeys into a fairy world. However, these staples of a fairy tale are twisted in interesting ways. The stepsisters love each other, instead of being in conflict, and it is Kate who ultimately saves the prince, instead of vice versa. The bones of the story already contained detailed aspects of trauma, like the transformation of one sister's head into a sheep's head. But other details—like the reason behind the prince's curse—are left delightfully vague. With such good bones and intriguing gaps, 'Kate Crackernuts' immediately struck me as the perfect fodder for a retelling.

The length of a novel also allows for developing out themes or actions that only receive the briefest mention in a folk fairy tale. In *The Wasting Curse*, the deeper exploration of the queen's character (Kit's mother) provides one example of a retelling's strengths. Joseph Jacobs' describes the queen's motivation in one sentence: "The queen was jealous of the king's dochter being bonnier than her own, and cast about to spoil her beauty" (Lang 'Kate Crackernuts' 661). This motivation might seem shallow or uninteresting to young audiences today. *The Wasting Curse*'s queen, like the earlier versions of her character, uses a spell to punish her stepdaughter. But in the novel, her reasons are much more complex, and even sympathetic.

> "What have you done?" I demand. My words are strange and soft in Catharine's mouth. They do not sound as angry as I feel.

> "I've saved you." Mother reaches for me. Catharine moves back, behind me. I shield her. "I promised I would protect you, and see? You're out of that wasting body. You're engaged to a prince. You're free" (94).

Kit's mother conducts the curse not just to spoil her stepdaughter's beauty, but to free her birth child from illness and abuse. The imprint of the original 'Kate Crackernuts' remains, but the length of a novel gives my retelling space to complicate and expand the story beat.

One of the most obvious cases of trauma in the original 'Kate Crackernuts' is the violence committed against the bonnie sister when her face is exchanged with a sheep's. A fascinating detail in the original is that this spell of harm cannot take effect until the bonnie sister is in a state of fasting (Lang 'Kate Crackernuts' 661). Food must be withheld in order for her to be vulnerable to the curse. Today, emotional and physical neglect is included in measurements of childhood adversity (as in the Adverse Childhood Experience quiz, discussed later). The folk fairy tale seems to inherently know that neglect leads to physical consequences, even if those consequences arrive through magical means.

Catharine's face being exchanged with a sheep's was an ideal template for a traumatic event. However, I felt that exact type of spell would be difficult to include in my novel. A sheep's head might inadvertently make the situation uncanny in an unhelpful way. There is a certain humor to the mental image of a person with a sheep's head that belies the trauma the person has undergone. Though fantasy as a genre accommodates the strange and unnatural, I felt asking a teen reader to seriously carry this mental image might distract from the important emotional toll of Catharine's transformation. Initially, I thought to simply alter the nature of what was

done to Catharine's face: instead of being changed to a sheep's, she would be badly burned.

Other literature in the young adult age range challenged my impulse. In Katherine Brigg's novelization of *Kate Crackernuts* (1980), the bonnie sister has a sheep's face only in her own mind. Those that love her still see her the same. I found this intriguing, but a bit of a cop-out from fully committing to the trauma one way or another. Still, Brigg's princess is distressed by her loss of identity. She fears she will no longer be recognized as herself. I found the identity aspect compelling, and a powerful inspiration to reach beyond simply burning Catharine's face.

At the same time, I was also reading Intisar Khanani's retelling of 'The Goose Girl', *Thorn* (2020). Khanani's protagonist, a victim of abuse, switches bodies with an "unharmed" person. After her transformation, protagonist Alyrra thinks, "I have lost my body, lost the story of my life written upon it… I have before me a new life" (Khanani 73). The narrative questions that arose were fascinating. Whose body carries the harm? And is the switch a curse, or a gift?

Through these two books, I came to realize that part of the trauma experienced by Catharine is a total loss of identity. She does not just become ugly—she literally loses her face, her voice, her name. I began to ponder ways to replicate that loss (and avoid the sheep's head). I also needed to position my protagonist Kit more centrally in the story's conflict, as the original story treats Catharine as a protagonist through the first half and Kit as a protagonist in the second. The decision to have Kit's mother switch the girls' bodies followed directly out of this line of thinking. The original queen's motivation fit well with Kit's mother's emerging goal to remove her abused daughter from a dangerous situation and give her an

opportunity to flourish. But this twist on the original also created an intriguing dilemma for my two sisters.

Briefly, it is worth discussing the choice to have two primary characters named Kit and Catharine. The princesses' names differ in various versions of 'Kate Crackernuts'. In Andrew Lang's 1889 version, the girls are introduced as: "The king had a dochter, Kate, and the queen had one" (661). After this line, it is the queen's daughter who is always referred to as "Kate," while the king's daughter is not named again. This seems to have caused some confusion in the reprints, with future versions calling the girls everything from Kate and Kate to Katherine and Princess Velvet-Cheek (Mayo 44; 'Scottish Folk Tales' 186).

In modern publishing, it is generally frowned upon to have main characters with names that are at all similar sounding. But I was influenced by my first encounter with 'Kate Crackernuts,' a version written by Margaret Mayo with 'Bonny Kate' and 'plain Kate' (44). It charmed me that two young women, destined to be close sisters, would share a name. I was also intrigued by the idea of two Kates coming from very different life experiences to create their own little family. Their shared name has been incorporated into *The Wasting Curse*, with Speir referencing their shared name as a component of his spell (76). For the sake of making the manuscript easier to read, I attempted to create further distinction between the names by using Catharine (a longer name with a 'C') and Kit (short with a 'K') so that a reader's eye will quickly identify the character based on the shape of her name. In the manuscript, Kit is only referred to by her full name three times: once by Byrne, once by Speir and her mother, once by Wesley (60, 76, 132). This should minimize any confusion for audio listeners.

Returning to the Familiar in Traumatic Times

My twist to ‘Kate Crackernuts’ is an example of how a retelling can take what is familiar (the original story beat of the curse) and create something new. For me, and many others, folk fairy tale retellings function as a new story in a familiar frame. The familiarity—knowing the bones of the story with those iconic story elements—provides a foundation the reader recognizes. Thus the reading experience of a retelling comes with the “blend of familiarity and escape[, the] promise of an eventual happy ending and a world that might get better” (Leduc 141). This familiarity brought over from the original tale can be a valuable asset when an entirely new story feels too overwhelming to the reader.

When I first began counseling for my own trauma, I found I could not bear to read. I told my counselor that I was troubled by this, as I loved books usually, but I felt violated by how a story could “hijack my emotions.” Instead, I turned to tales that were familiar to me, where I could comfortably predict what would happen. Retellings were the perfect reading material for me at this time.

The blend of familiar and new is an aspect of care for traumatized people. Dr. Bruce Perry found the three most effective aspects to healing work in therapy were “predictability, controllability, and moderation” (Perry 312-313). This can be translated into the realm of writing fiction. In story, conflicts and stakes must hold a reader’s attention. They provide the tension. Genre provides the predictability. A reader uses genre to find the sort of stories they want to read: a romantic-comedy with a cheery ending, a mystery with a satisfying revelation, and so on.

Folk fairy tales exist in their own subgenre of fantasy, with inherent reader expectations. A retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* likely has a cursed spindle or one of *Hansel and Gretel* comes with a journey through the wilderness. These touchpoints

of familiarity—broadly created by genre but more specific in retellings—create safety in their predictability. That safety can then allow writers for young people to approach difficult topics, like trauma and healing.

One of my absolute favorite books as a young teen was Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* (1997), a retelling of *Cinderella* that explores one young woman's inability to withhold consent. It is obvious in retrospect why this story would speak to me, but as a thirteen-year-old—or even a sixteen-year-old—I would have baulked at the idea of reading something that dealt with the same topic in an unpredictable contemporary setting. It was the story in wrapped in fantasy and in the structure of a familiar fairy tale that allowed me to become immersed.

Because retellings exist in an emotionally safe space (a new story in a familiar foundation), they create an opportunity to explore traumatic themes with teens. The distance and magic of a folk fairy tale retelling makes it easier to "look at [our] powerful feelings from a safe distance" (Sunderland 14). I believe this is one reason they endure in popularity, especially in children's literature from picture books to young adult novels. In 2021 alone, six versions of "The Brothers Who Were Turned into Birds" (Aarne-Thompson type 451) were published across middle grade and young adult—four of them specific retellings of *The Wild Swans*, and many on bestseller lists.[2]

Conclusion

Turning to story in times of trauma has been part of the recovery process throughout human history. In the late 1700s, books were even proposed to cure certain illnesses

[2] *Six Crimson Cranes* by Elizabeth Lim, *The Seventh Raven* by David Elliott, *The Wild Swans* by Jackie Morris, *A Rush of Wings* by Laura E. Weymouth, *Court of Swans* by Melanie Dickerson, *Savage Her Reply* by Deirdre Sullivan.

(Pulimeno et al. 17). Practices such as bibliotherapy and narrative therapy have developed from these roots and are still used by patients today (17). Retellings of folk fairy tales can provide a predictable foundation, a type of safety, alongside new twists. With the security retellings provide, young readers may be better positioned to enter a story about trauma.

Chapter Two: Name

The queen knew… that the lassie had had something to eat, so watched the next morning and sent her away fasting.[3]

I am seventeen, two days from moving off my molester's street, when sharp pain jerks me out of sleep. My thumb is so swollen, it will not bend. The skin burns hot and red. My parents make an appointment with my family doctor, and the night before I dream that Ringwraiths are chasing me down dark pathways. I wake—and they are in my room. I wake again—and my mom is there, softly stroking my arm. It's time to leave.

A few hours later, ten glass vials clink as the nurse prepares to draw my blood. I don't watch. Dad gently rubs my shoulder and Mom holds my good hand.

The results send me to a specialist in another state, the only pediatric rheumatologist left after a hurricane devastated the area. In the waiting room, I flip through college brochures and read *The Return of the King*. When at last I am examined, the male doctor prods pressure points on my arms and back for fifteen minutes, until tears spring to my eyes, and declares that I have fibromyalgia. A female resident points out my bloodwork indicates rheumatoid arthritis. He waves her off. My mom and I drive hours back to our house and wait for me to turn eighteen, so I can see the adult specialist.

My nights are uneasy. Sometimes thunderstorms roll in, violent and wild. Sometimes the inky dark lurks, watchful and alive. I throw on all my lights, wrap myself in a blanket, and sit on my bed.

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[3] Lang, Andrew. "The Story of Kate Crackernuts." *Longman's Magazine,* vol. XIII; no. LXXVIII, April 1889, p. 661.

And I long to be an adult, where all the answers seem to be.

The correct diagnosis is rheumatoid arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis falls under the vast umbrella of "autoimmune diseases," illnesses that are caused when the autoimmune system attacks its own healthy cells (Orbai para. 3). Over eighty distinct autoimmune diseases are known presently, and they include everything from celiac to Type 1 diabetes, both of which came for me later. While my family had no history of rheumatoid arthritis, it had a vast history of autoimmune disease. And, as discussed below, my family had a fair dose of childhood trauma throughout the generations to act as a catalyst (Wolynn 17; Nakazawa 24-25).

Defining Trauma in *The Wasting Curse*

In my creative work *The Wasting Curse*, I made a decision to explore the physical ramifications of trauma. I focused on two specific types of relational trauma: intergenerational and interrelational.

In his book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Dr. Bessel van der Kolk specifies that trauma has the potential to change the brain, the body, and even our ability to feel alive (2-3). While trauma can occur during mass events like an earthquake or terrorist attack, Dr. Perry reflects that "the most traumatic aspects of all disasters involve the shattering of human connections" (259). Recent studies even indicate that trauma within a household has a bigger impact on survivors' health than trauma at a community level (Harris 148-149). This means that a well-supported child can withstand extreme environmental circumstances but, conversely, a child without a safe household will suffer even when living an otherwise "normal" life (149). Human connection—*especially* within the home—is one of the most

important factors in preventing long-lasting consequences after a traumatic event, while also being a vital tool for helping a survivor recover, and a solid measurement for how the healing process is progressing (der Kolk 210, 352; Harris 114; Perry 85). This will be reflected on in more detail in the chapter 'Mend'.

Dr. Perry observes that in "human relationships[,] we can both create and destroy, nurture and terrorize, traumatize and heal each other" (XXVIII). My protagonists (Wesley and Kit) and two secondary characters (Catharine and the Hidden Queen) are the primary recipients of trauma in *The Wasting Curse*. It was important to me to find honest ways to both portray the trauma and offer a road toward healing. After all, 60% of the American population will experience at least one traumatic event before they turn eighteen (Nakazawa 14). My primary readers fall in this demographic of Westerners in the age group of 13-18. Because family has such an impact on trauma (whether in causing it, preventing it, or recovering from it), a writer for this age group should put an emphasis on developing the interplay between their characters' home life and the traumatic events in the story. Family is not just a plot obstacle that must be overcome for young characters to have agency. It is the foundation for the characters' stability and, in a trauma-conscious book, a staple in how a character will respond to and recover (or fail to recover) from trauma.

Chronic Illness and Trauma

In *The Wasting Curse*, Kit's mother tells her, "The women of our family carry a certain… curse, of sorts… When we are hurt, we become ill" (14). Though both Kit and her mother assume this curse must be magic—and, therefore, able to be broken by magic—the Hidden Queen clarifies the true nature of Kit's "wasting" sickness in

the last chapter: “It is more ordinary and terrible than magic… Many circumstances met to create you as you stand before me. Blame and chance, body and attack. I cannot read the threads. There is enough of both” (286).

The curse isn’t magical. But it is real.

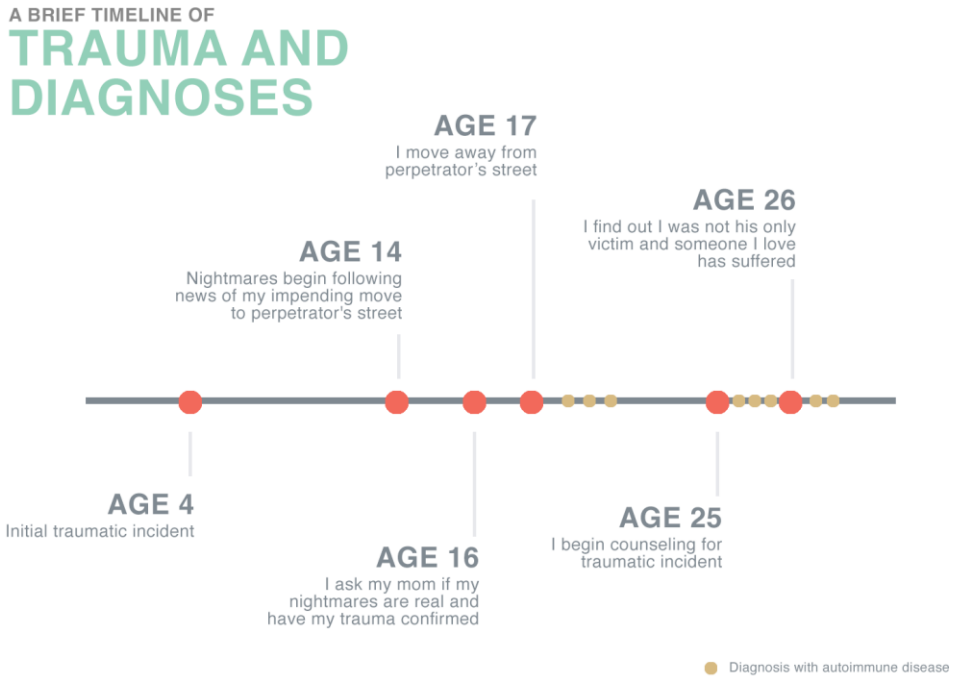
Many studies indicate that trauma in childhood and the teen years may lead to illness later in life. Felitti et al.’s landmark “The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study” (1998) deeply explored the link between childhood trauma and health risk later in life. As a part of the study, Felitti et al. developed the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Quiz (see Appendix B), which measures ten categories of trauma, from emotional abuse to parental separation (Harris 37).

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris summarizes the categories as:

- Emotional abuse (recurrent)
- Physical abuse (recurrent)
- Sexual abuse (contact)
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Substance abuse in the household (e.g., living with an alcoholic or a person with a substance abuse problem)
- Mental illness in the household (e.g., living with someone who suffered from depression or mental illness or had attempted suicide)
- Mother treated violently
- Divorce of parents or separation
- Criminal behavior in the household (e.g., a household member going to prison)

According to the ACE Quiz, Kit would have a score of 4 out of 10 (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, lost parent). Wesley would have a score of 2 out of 10 (lost parent, mentally ill family member). Studies have found a "dose-response relationship between ACEs and poor health outcomes," meaning the higher the exposure to trauma, the greater the impact on health (Harris 38). One of the specific findings was that "for each ACE Score an individual had, the chance of being hospitalized with an autoimmune disease… rose 20 percent" (Nakazawa 14). Kit's score of 4 puts her at a higher risk than those with a score of 0 for a range of outcomes. Among other possibilities, she is: twice as likely to be diagnosed with cancer, three and a half times as likely to develop chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 460% more likely to face depression, twice as likely to have learning or behavioral problems, and 1220% more likely to attempt suicide (der Kolk; Nakazawa 48; Harris 38).

My own score is 3. I had never connected my diagnoses with my trauma until reading *The Body Keeps the Score*. It changed both the way I understand my body and the way I take care of myself now when I need to confront the past. My body seems particularly prone to attacking itself in response to traumatic episodes, whether they are happening in the present or being revisited in the context of counseling or treatment. The findings of Felitti's study correspond eerily with my own experience, shown in the timeline below.



Laying out a timeline of my diagnoses in relation to my trauma was a pivotal moment in my research. The more I learned about the connection between autoimmune disease and trauma, the more I found the connection appealing to explore in *The Wasting Curse*. Trauma can prime the body with the "high autoantibodies [and] low system controls" that lead to autoimmune diseases (Nakazawa 102). These diseases, in turn, can be passed to offspring (Harris 83). As I followed this line of thinking, I asked myself: "Isn't an autoimmune disease a sort of curse?"

In the wake of this moment of clarity, the connections between family, trauma, and disease quickly became a major focus of my creative work. I wondered if I could portray trauma and disability similar to my own in *The Wasting Curse*. This became the backbone for Kit's story.

Intergenerational Trauma and Inheritance

Kit's storyline focuses on my inquiry about trauma and illness, but Wesley's focuses on the intergenerational aspects of trauma that can be inherited. In an honest conversation with his father during the last part of the book, Wesley says, "I am what Mervyn made, what Grandfather made, what *you* made. What [Mother] made" (260).

In the course of my research, I came across studies about epigenetics and inherited trauma. Proponents for this strain of research claim that genes "could retain some memory of their past experiences" and so trauma undergone in past generations could have a literal effect on the expression of DNA (University of Cambridge para. 8; Wolynn 29-30). However, some researchers contest these findings, pointing out that the field is still very new and studies showing intergenerational epigenetics at work in humans (as opposed to mice) are scarce (Holden para. 10).

While research about the gene inheritance of trauma is still hotly contested, a benefit of fiction is that a writer can use science that is still being tested and make it into something of their own. In fact, there is already a literary tradition of using what science is still exploring for thematic effect. In *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell,* the character Stephen (a descendent of slaves) experiences a fleeting memory of his mother when he hears the word "chains": "Suddenly in his fancy he saw a dark place—a terrible place […]. He did not think it could be a memory. Surely he had never been to such a place?" (Clarke 220).

I have attempted to create a similar thematic element with the reoccurring nightmare Wesley experiences prior to his eighteenth birthday. He describes this first as "velvet darkness and the hot bite of iron" and later as:

> A nightmare about heat and hammers. A nightmare that regularly visited when I was a child, until my father gave me draught to help me sleep. When I weaned off, it had stopped. Until today (18; 31).

Wesley then corrects himself, realizing: "But it wasn't a nightmare. It had been a memory. I knew this Hidden One in my blood, even before I knew who or what she was to me" (31). I have used this memory to explore theories of inherited trauma.[4] But the memory serves a second, narrative purpose by showing one of the reasons Wesley steps into the curse: He has been primed with the trauma, experienced from the victim's point of view.

This will be discussed at more length in 'Chapter Three: Inhabit'.

Stylistic Choices Concerning Trauma Representation

Any storyteller is faced with a few basic, but sometimes difficult, decisions about the form their story will take. This includes decisions about narration (first, second, or third person) and tense (present or past (including past perfect and habitual past)). These choices can drastically change the atmosphere, tone, and language of a story. My interest here is in the specific ways that I used narrative point of view and tense to depict trauma and traumatized characters.

I want to begin by explaining my thinking when it came to choosing between the first, second, and third person narrative viewpoints. For the purposes of *The Wasting Curse*, second person was not a viable option. Neither Kit nor Wesley would be addressing a "you" in their storytelling. Therefore, it was a matter of choosing between first and third person, and selecting my narrators.

[4] Specifically, the practices of Family Constellations.

Ultimately, I chose first person to give the readers a way to inhabit the minds of two characters who, for much of the book, are literally not in their own bodies. Kit is in Catharine's body, while Wesley's curse is exacerbated by his struggles with extreme disassociation. By using first person narration for my two protagonists, I could explore their struggles without the narrative complications and potential confusion (such as having Kit narrated as "Kit" but called "Catharine" by others) that might arise from the stylistic framing inherent in third-person.

Once my narrative style had been decided, I had to choose between present or past tense. Beyond simple verb tense, the past or present tense determines the narrative's perspective within the story's timeline. Past-tense implies a narrator who exists in a future time. It changes what is said, and how it is said. A narrator telling a story that has already happened (even if it's only just happened) will tell it with the benefit of already knowing the conclusion. Whatever action is relayed will be relayed through a lens of interpretation, because the narrator is reflecting back on what has taken place.

A writer who is attempting to responsibly portray trauma has an added level of complexity in the use of the past tense. Psychology books like *The Forgetting Machine* (2017) impressed on me the potential complications of framing the story in the past. Memory is faulty even at the best of times, and especially surrounding traumatic events (Quiroga 20:17-24:22). Dr. der Kolk says, "Memory loss has been reported in people who have experienced [trauma], with incidence ranging from 19 percent to 38 percent" (190). The truth itself can shift as time and reflection give a narrator the chance to create structure out of their events—even if it means, often unconsciously, smudging the details. Memory researcher William Hirst has observed, "on average, a 60% decline in memory consistency […] over time" (Gladwell 17:41-

17:39). In an interview with author Malcolm Gladwell, Hirst says, “When you remember something [it’s not like] you’re retrieving it and it remains absolutely stable. […] When you retrieve it, it is opened up to the possibility of change” (Gladwell 20:19-20:35). A first person past-tense narrative that aimed to represent the physical and psychological reality of trauma would likely have to introduce the instability of memory. I felt this would be beyond the scope of *The Wasting Curse* and had the potential to overcomplicate this particular story.

In contrast, the use of present tense allows the narrator to be fully present in a moment. This gives them the freedom to narrate as events occur. Of course, this does not automatically make a narrator reliable (as already shown with Wesley)—even in the present, we can misunderstand or misinterpret what is happening. But it allows the character to be closer to what is occurring, rather than conveying an interpretation of what has already happened, and in turn allows the reader to be closer to the raw immediacy of the action. As this closeness supported my goals of keeping the reader close to an honest portrayal of trauma and healing in *The Wasting Curse*, I chose to use present-tense.

The decision to use two narrative voices (Kit and Wesley) came in part from a practical standpoint, as there would be sections of the novel one character would encounter that the other would not. This aspect of dual narrative—that neither character has exclusive access to the entire story—can give readers more authority over the text as they negotiate the different ways the characters see or understand the world (Gillis 6). In *The Wasting Curse*, we see one example of this through Wesley and Kit’s two different recollections of their formal introduction:

Kit:

> We had been formally introduced at the beginning of the evening, but it had felt more like being introduced to a distracted puppy (45).

Wesley:

> I'm not sure she was ever formally introduced to me, which seems odd. I have a vague feeling that we did meet, surrounded by noise and movement. As the guests were arriving last night, maybe? (60).

From these two points of view, a reader can deduce that Wesley *had* met Kit but was too unfocused to fully absorb the introduction. This additionally foreshadows Wesley's struggles with dissociation and solidifies the narrators' different observation styles. Kit met and judged Wesley's character with keen accuracy. Wesley, however, is an unreliable narrator who cannot recall details about the meeting. It is only when he feels he can be helpful that his attention fixes fully on Kit in the scene where he makes her a brace.

My two narrators provide me with an opportunity to more deeply explore two unique but intersecting types of trauma. Thus, using two narrators in the first person, present tense, gave me the stylistic freedom to further dig into my topic of study.

Conclusion

My creative work *The Wasting Curse* seeks to explore the ramifications of intergenerational and interrelational trauma. These traumas can have serious outcomes for young people. They might even influence the onset of disease, as is the case with Kit, or the inheritance of consequences, as with Wesley. By using two protagonists, I am able to explore different but intersecting modes of trauma. I intend

for *The Wasting Curse* to allow young readers to be immersed in and take ownership of the story.

Accurate representation can be an effective way to assist and empower young people through the stories they consume. Our young readers are not unfamiliar with trauma, but, like me, they may struggle to identify it. A writer can offer a gift in naming and sensitively portraying trauma. A writer can help their young readers *know*.

The next step, then, is what to do with the knowing.

Chapter Three: Inhabit

Kate… took a fine linen cloth and wrapped it round her sister's head and took her by the hand[5].

I am twenty-six, on a date to see *Avengers: Infinity War*. When I go to sit down, I notice my boyfriend has flipped the armrest up between us. I like him and I find it sweet. It's easy to tell he plans to put his arm around me later.

But then, midway through the movie, he does it. My body goes rigid. I can't breathe. Even though I tell myself I'm safe, that I could leave, that it's only a freaking arm around my freaking shoulder, my heart won't stop racing. Sweat drips between my taut shoulder blades.

The movie scene shows a character being tortured. When she screams, I hear my little four-year-old voice in it. I dig my fingernails into my palms, the way I learned to distract myself during medical procedures. I am so far out of my body, the pain barely registers. But it's more real than the weight of his arm around me. I count down the scenes until credits, blinking back tears.

I don't start hyperventilating until I'm back in my car.

When I go home, the half-moons of my fingernails mark my skin for days afterward. Some of them are bloody.

Dissociation and Escape

In *The Wasting Curse,* both Kit and Wesley struggle with dissociation. For victims of trauma, it is common to "chronically feel unsafe" in your own body (der Kolk 113).

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[5] Lang, Andrew. "The Story of Kate Crackernuts." *Longman's Magazine,* vol. XIII; no. LXXVIII, April 1889, p. 661.

Trauma heightens our stress response. Cortisol is the inflammatory hormone released under stressful circumstances, and elevated levels can lead to serious health consequences (Nakazawa 30; Newberg and Waldman 173). In cases of extreme or repeated trauma our bodies can become stuck in a cycle of high cortisol and toxic stress (Harris 47; 52; 54-55). As discussed in 'Chapter Two: Name,' this stress can be held in the body and manifested in the form of autoimmune or other health problems. Hyperarousal and hypoarousal are two of the most common ways someone might respond to a distressing event (Beutler et al.).

Hyperarousal manifests as "an active stress response to a perceived threat characterized by hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, irritability, disturbed sleeping patterns, and the inability to concentrate" (Beutler et al.). In contrast, hypoarousal is "associated with a muted psychophysiological response," also known as dissociation (Beutler et al.). Dissociation will be the primary focus of this study.

Dissociation can be further understood as a process of removing yourself from the present. Though milder forms of dissociation are harmless and even useful—such as daydreaming—it can become detrimental in its extremes (Winfrey and Perry 171). On a physical level, when a person dissociates the brain "prepares the body for injury" by slowing the heart rate and releasing endogenous opioids to minimize pain (Perry 50). These heroine-like substances kill "pain and produce a calming sense of distance from one's troubles" (203). One extreme form of dissociation is a complete bodily shutdown through fainting (Winfrey and Perry 118).

Dissociation can also manifest in a more general sense of "feeling lost, overwhelmed, abandoned, and disconnected from the world" (der Kolk 114). We see this in Kit's dance with the king: "My muscles move to the song, taking me toward

him, lifting my arm and turning me" (40). Passive phrasing (the muscles are doing the action, not the character) will frequently draw criticism in a writing workshop. But here, the passive phrasing is intentional to show Kit's state of dissociation.

Wesley's form of dissociation is more pronounced, with attached memory loss. This is notable in his inability to remember more than fractured moments of his time in the Hidden Lands. He reflects, "It's like trying to recall a dream that's already forgotten. Snatches of feeling—dread, fear—and the vaguest of sensations" (149). Dissociation makes it difficult for the brain to record memories in a clear, sequential way (der Kolk 216). Instead, moments are split and isolated to make a traumatic event more bearable. Because the brain processes these memories as fragments, they cannot be assimilated into the past. They remain charged with feeling, and the body responds as if the trauma is happening currently. This can cause problems in personal and professional functioning (216). This is true of Wesley's experience. His inability to remain present in the Hidden Lands causes him bodily harm and puts other characters—Jay, Abram, and Kit—at risk.

But memories can be integrated. Minds that hold fragmented memories can learn to keep the past from straying into the present (der Kolk 217). When Kit becomes conscious of the witnesses around her and King Byrne, she anchors herself in the now with her concentrated breathing: "I inhale, slow and deep. *One, two, three, four…* and exhale. I can afford to stay sharp this time" (41). Another method she uses (and teaches to Wesley) is tapping, which will be discussed below.

Character Backstory and the Pre-Disposition to Dissociate

I knew from the beginning of my draft that Wesley had something in his past that influenced his motivation to accept the curse on behalf of his family. But I did not

fully understand Wesley until I began Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy for my own problematic responses to distress.

My example at the beginning of this chapter happened after approximately three years of talk therapy. Nonetheless, as the incident at the cinema shows, I still experienced extreme anxiety and dissociation in otherwise benign social interactions. These symptoms continued into my studies for this project. I decided to try a different approach to my trauma through EMDR treatment. EMDR replicates the deepest stages of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep while a patient remains conscious, which allows the patient to process a difficult memory without the painful, sometimes immobilizing feelings that come with it (Nakazawa 198-199). Essentially, EMDR can be used to assimilate fragmented memories and put them firmly in the past (der Kolk 310).

My treatment led directly to certain scenes involving Wesley, as his backstory developed alongside my sessions and research. One example of this is the scene where Wesley and his father talk before Wesley's final journey to the Hidden Lands. Ever since he learned of Wesley's choice, King Hugh has questioned Wesley's decision to take the curse. In this scene, Wesley confesses:

> Maybe I didn't do any of this out of noble intentions. I only chose the hardest path because I felt I—needed to. That I deserved it. Not because it was the right thing for the family but because it was the cruelest thing for me. […] I inherited all the empathy and guilt that you postponed (261).

This came close to the real motivation behind Wesley's actions, but still left some gaps in *how* he came to have this understanding of himself.

Wesley's extreme dissociation during his Hidden Lands visits opens questions about what might pre-dispose someone to this particular response to

trauma. Though Wesley's experience in the Hidden Lands is itself not inherently traumatic (he is at a party), the hijacking of his body by the spell could be enough for his mind to fragment in order to protect him. The dissociative behavior of the prince exists in the original 'Kate Crackernuts,' with several reinterpretations of the story clarifying that when the prince rises from his bed he moves as if in a daze or dreaming (Ray 47; Lurie 68; Briggs 181). Even in the earliest recorded version of 'Kate Crackernuts,' he fails to notice Kate is in his room, following him, or even on the horse behind him (Lang 'Kate Crackernuts' 662). His inattention implies some level of dissociation. This behavior could be attributed to his state of enchantment, but I wanted to instead seek a more psychological explanation. This is reflected in a conversation between Wesley and the Hidden Queen:

> "Control." She taps her forefingers between my eyebrows. "Even now, that is all your mind craves."
>
> My thoughts veer toward blur, and I struggle to remain, to feel my bare feet on the cool ground.
>
> "What are you doing to me?" I manage to croak.
>
> "Me?" She smiles. "I summoned you here. But your mind seeks to take back your body. After all, isn't removing yourself a type of control? I am not responsible for this—you are" (205).

When I began to consider Wesley's dissociation might be more psychological than magical, it opened new possibilities for trauma in his backstory.

Early in my research, I came across sources that indicated a break between the mother-child bond could increase the child's likelihood of being affected by dissociation (Muller). This seemed to me a clear way to follow Wesley's symptom (dissociation) back to his trauma (a break with his mother). Wesley's character

development was further influenced by a case study in Perry's *The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog* (2017). In this scenario, two brothers were born to a mother who was not equipped to care for infants. One brother, receiving the care he needed from extended family, grew up well-adjusted and developmentally "normal" (118-119). The other, raised away from the support system his mother needed to be an adequate caregiver, experienced severe neglect and extreme developmental problems (120-121). Since Wesley experiences dissociation but Abram does not, it seemed clear that something in Wesley's early years might have been very different from Abram's. This is indicated in the text in a conversation between Wesley and his father:

> "Did Mother ever hold me?" I ask.
>
> Father looks startled. "You know she was ill. She could hardly rise from her bed some days."
>
> "But it was different with Abram. Wasn't it?" (260).

As I continued to write the scene, I used one of the techniques I had learned in EMDR to explore Wesley's childhood on the page. One practice in EMDR is to follow a feeling (often a physical sensation) back to the earliest memory of the feeling. In the scene, this is written as, "Something tugs in [Wesley's] chest, the deep hollow between [his] ribs. A loneliness that doesn't begin here" (260). He follows the memory back to a moment in his childhood when his mother drew away from him. In an EMDR session, this would be called a "target memory"—a memory that is stuck, unprocessed, and still causing distress or negative identity associations (Menon and Jayan 1-2). I am intentionally using this method from EMDR to show Wesley engaging with his difficult past. Though he lacks the guide and equipment needed for an actual session of EMDR, by using some foundational elements of the

practice I am able to position him so that he can name and seek resolution for his trauma.

The implication is that Wesley experienced inconsistent care from his mother due to her own mental health problems, a documented indicator for dissociation in children and adults (Chu and Deprince 3; Hulette et al. 224). By the time Abram was born, their mother was receiving the support she needed to care for another child—but by that point, Wesley would have been two years old and already suffering from a disrupted attachment. Other family dynamics—such as Abram's role as his mother's favorite and Wesley's role as Abram's protector—would have influenced Wesley's choice of taking the curse, and later his predisposition to dissociate during it. Because Wesley's mother died later in Wesley's childhood, he never received an opportunity to repair his broken bond, which would cement his tendency toward dissociation until he can learn better coping mechanisms.

Tapping as a Method of Embodiment

While wider applications of healing practices will be expanded on in 'Chapter 4: Mend,' it is important to briefly speak here about the use of tapping by both Kit and Wesley. Rather than discarding the dissociation when it was no longer useful to the plot, I wanted to give my protagonists a practical, proven coping mechanism for their traumas. As I considered my options, I remembered a demonstration of Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) workshopped during an advocacy class on assisting survivors of human trafficking. I began to research more details with an eye to implementing this coping method in my writing.

EFT tapping has been shown to have a powerful effect on neutralizing PTSD symptoms in more than one hundred clinical studies (Church et al. 1). A patient taps

two fingertips against eight acupressure points on the body—the side of the hand, "eyebrow, side of the eye, under the eye, under the nose, chin, beginning of the collarbone, [and] under the arm"—in a rotating pattern (Healthline). In professional treatment, this rotation is paired with affirming spoken language meant to address a traumatic event, such as "I deeply and completely accept myself" (Church et al. 5). Tapping can have a physical effect on the patient, including reduced inflammation, reduction in cortisol, and regeneration of white matter in the brain (5). Though EFT tapping is more effective under the administration of a professional, it can be utilized by a patient on their own (Legg). Few studies exist on the use of tapping on individuals suffering from developmental trauma, but it is supposed that the "nonverbal somatic procedures" would be useful in cases where trauma occurred at a pre-verbal stage (Church et al. 10).

I introduced tapping in the novel with Kit, who found this way to self-soothe prior to the start of the story.

> Phantom sounds aren't unusual in this old castle, but my body doesn't care for logic just now. I release the door and tap my fingertips against my collarbone. Somehow, the solidness of the beat makes my faltering heart steady (8).

Kit's ability to work out a healthy coping mechanism on her own was also influenced by my work in EMDR. During one session, a memory surfaced from a time shortly after my assault. In this memory, I had horrible insomnia but was too ashamed to go to my parents for help. Instead, I curled up on the floor outside their door. I spent hours tracing patterns in the carpet and concentrating only on the feel of the bristles against my palm. As I processed this with my therapist, I realized that at the age of

five or six I had been teaching myself mindfulness. Even without training, we find ways to achieve the comfort we need. Some ways are healthier than others.

After that night at the movie, I developed a habit of pinching my nails into the palms of my hands in an attempt to stay grounded and be distracted at once during stressful situations. This is a common tick in novels for young people. For me, it led to bloody hands. I realized this was a type of self-harm and recalled the tapping demonstration in my advocacy class. The practitioner had shown that even tapping a single pressure point (rather than rotating through all eight) had beneficial effects. Instead of pinching with my fingernails, I began to tap the “karate point” (the side of my hand) to achieve the same soothing effects without harming myself. This particular pressure point is useful because it can be a subtle tick in public. Years later, during EMDR, tapping my collarbone was encouraged as I processed memories. I found this to be even more effective than the side of my hand at centering me in my body.

Like me, Kit has learned to tap when she becomes overwhelmed as a way to combat her dissociation. She then teaches Wesley how to tap.

> “What if you just stop?” she says, tapping the side of my hand again. “Just stop dancing. Can you?”
>
> “I'm not sure...” I try to still my feet, but the music grows louder in my head and the beat pounds against the back of my eyes. I wince, stumbling my way back into the dance and nearly stepping on Kit in the process. She moves swiftly out of the way, and manages to follow me. My vision goes murky and my head feels heavy. “I—I don't think so.”

> Kit lifts her hand and hesitates, fingers curling with uncertainty. But then she touches her fingertips to the fabric of my shirt over my collarbone. She taps, firmly. “Maybe this will help?”
>
> The tapping centers me in this moment, pulling my attention to the present. I'm aware of my heart's erratic beating, beginning to steady now to match Kit's rhythm. Her skin is soft and, as my eyes focus again, I realize we've come closer. She smells of wild and heather and earth. Her eyes are wide and silver and she's tilted her head back to study me. A small, concerned crease between her brows smooths. Her lips are full, and the sound of her voice—so soft I might not have heard it if I were not so near—reminds me of the low sigh of waves in a cove.
>
> It takes a moment for her words to register in my mind: “You've stopped” (210-211).

Wesley goes on to use tapping to remain conscious when he is in the binds of his enchantment. In this way, *The Wasting Curse* portrays both a realistic trauma response and a scientifically-based method of coping.

Positioning the Character in the Climax

One major plot point in *The Wasting Curse* required particular care: When would Kit and Catharine switch back to their original bodies? In my early plans to rework the story of ‘Kate Crackernuts,’ I intended to have Kit and Catharine’s curse break during or even after the climax. This is a fairly common method in curse-breaking narratives: the young adult novels *Thorn* by Intisar Khanani (2020)*, Echo North* by Joanna Ruth Meyer (2018), *Six Crimson Cranes* by Elizabeth Lim (2021), *Wintersong* by S. Jae Jones (2017)*,* and *Hunted* by Meagan Spooner (2017) all have

a curse break as part as their thematic climax or dénouement. These five books also made intriguing use of dissociation in the climactic action of their stories.

Dissociation is a frequent tool used by authors in the Young Adult genre. Sometimes it is used as a method to make a protagonist less clever in order to heighten tension, and often it can be observed in the climax.

In *Wintersong*, the climactic tension requires the protagonist escape the Goblin King's underground realm through a maze of tunnels and challenges. She encounters a vision that she knows isn't real: "*It's not Josef. It's not the Goblin King. It is a trick,* I chanted to myself" (Jae-Jones, 293). She approaches anyway—"almost against my will, my feet followed the sounds"—too disconnected from reality and her body to avoid the trap it sets (293). This makes her escape more challenging and eventful, but the benefits of the added tension are perhaps undone by reader frustration with a supposedly clever character acting in a distinctly unclever way.

Contrast this with Elizabeth Lim's *Six Crimson Cranes*: during the climax, the protagonist is in a similar circumstance. She has a limited amount of time to escape a magical realm. She, too, encounters a vision of home to tempt her to stay: "Demons lurked, haunting me with old memories" (Lim, 426). However, because the author has not used the magical setting to influence the character's ability to remain embodied, she reacts with decisive knowledge and moves past the trap: "*They must think you're an idiot to fall for those tricks*, [my companion] said. I agreed and ignored them all" (426). Not only does this remove the hazy excuse of a character being easily tricked into a dream, it empowers the protagonist at the moment of her triumph. She is in her body and she is an active participant in her climax.

Hunted also uses dissociation during the climax to create a sense of the magical. The protagonist enters the scene in a magic-drugged fog: "Dimly the sound

[of ice cracking] made her think of a half-lost memory… She [tried] to sort out memory from dreams, reality from story" (Spooner, 342-347). This impacts her ability to use memory to overcome the challenges of the climax. Because she is not embodied, it takes her three attempts to become enough in her body to solve the challenge of her final confrontation with the antagonist. First, after touching a feather, her memory is stirred: "'Eoven,' she said, struggling to remember. 'I am here for Eoven'" (347). Second, it is the antagonist's use of her name: "But her name, the word *beauty*, it rang in her thoughts and her eyes flew open… She remembered" (347-348). Finally, she seeks to reconnect with her body: "[She] forced her hands to tighten, intending to drive her own fingernails into her palms to jolt herself from the […] spell. Instead she found one of her hands was full, and when she looked down she remembered she was still holding her father's bow" (348). While this protagonist does end up embodied before she claims her climactic action, the dissociation used to get her there places her in a passive stance.

This use of magic to erase or fog memory is a common form of dissociation in fantasy novels, and can be seen even more starkly in Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* (2009) where, like *Hunted*, the protagonist enters the climax in a magic-fog. This time, the protagonist takes her climactic action "not because she knew [the antagonist] must die. Not because she remembered the truth of [her lover's secret]. But because she remembered [he had a secret]… which would hurt him in some horrible way she felt deeply but didn't remember" (416-417). In the instance of *Graceling,* the protagonist is not embodied when she acts. She becomes a vehicle of the plot, doing what she does because the plot requires it while almost entirely dissociated from the motivation behind her actions.

Compare with Joanna Ruth Meyer's *Echo North*. In this climax, the opposite is true. The protagonist realizes that she has been disconnected from a vital memory for the entire book, and in a powerful scene she is fully integrated with a part of herself she never knew she was missing. She says, "I remember, I remember what I shouldn't be able to: I have lived my life twice over" (Meyer, 558). She enters the final action more fully herself than perhaps in the entire book and is entirely present for her climactic decisions.

As in examples above, authors sometimes use dissociation to create extra obstacles between a character and their objective. This is seen in *Thorn*, a retelling of *The Goose Girl*. The protagonist has been in the body of her maid for the majority of the book. But during the climax, the protagonist is further separated from her physical form by being transformed into the antagonist's likeness for the final confrontation. She assumes this likeness solely for the reason of testing her romantic interest's goodness. This dissociative action removes the protagonist very far from her true form and shifts the focus of the climax from her character arc to the prince's, because the question of the climax becomes: Will he attack her because she looks like his family's enemy? It is a puzzling narrative decision in an otherwise excellent book.

Thorn, with its body switch curse, is the closest to my retelling. But though *Thorn*'s prince breaks his family's curse in the climax, the protagonist's curse does not break until afterward (when she is restored to her true body). She becomes yet another protagonist who is not fully herself in the climactic part of her own story.

There is a crucial psychological aspect the authors are not considering: healing—or becoming your truest, best self—can be made more difficult when you are not in your own body. Dr. Van der Kolk points this out in *The Body Keeps the*

Score (emphasis his): “In order to find our voice, we have to be *in* our body—able to breathe fully and able to access our inner sensations” (331). A protagonist not fully in their body is not in a position to access their true voice. Without self-awareness, an extra block is added in their journey to healing. Even in healing practices that face inward—such as guided imagery, hypnosis, and meditation—one primary desired outcome is to rewire the *physical* brain of the patient (Nakazawa 192). A body that has experienced trauma “often has been storing up physical and muscular tension” from a lifetime of fight, flight, or freeze (177). If a person is to recover from that trauma, they must do so with some involvement of their own body and consciousness. It is only by creating a stronger connection with their body that a patient can tangibly “wake up to joy” (196). This is an especially important concern during a novel’s climax.

Author Doug TenNapel summarizes a typical positive story’s structure succinctly as: first act (protagonist’s flawed current situation), second act (the protagonist becomes who they are meant to be), and third act (confirmation of change) (35:21 - 47:08). These acts are demonstrated in *The Wasting Curse* in the table below.

	First Act	**Second Act**	**Third Act**
Kit	Kit is trying to find control and safety. She is alone in her secrets.	Kit begins to trust the people she has around her. She learns to have compassion on her body and her past.	Kit breaks her curse, accepting her own body, and continues her journey to healing with the support of her relationships.
Wesley	Wesley takes on a curse, believing the choice to be noble,	Wesley discovers that his motivations have been more	Wesley is able to help the victim because he allows

	and cuts himself off from those who would help him bear it.	selfish than he thought. He decides to put aside punishing himself and instead do the one thing he can to help the victim.	his loved ones to aid him.

Importantly, the third act *confirms* a change that has already taken place. Kit breaks her curse because she has *already* forgiven her body and its role in her past. Wesley earns his freedom because he *already* put aside his harmful motivations in order to help someone else. Author-blogger K. M. Weiland puts it, “The climax is where your character proves that he really is a changed person” (para. 2). This interpretation of narrative structure mirrors the psychological underpinnings of placing a person in a strong position for healing. The character entering the climax has already undergone a significant change and now is proving to the reader that they are a new person. In the same way, a recovering individual might already have hit a milestone in their journey before they showcase their new strengths and coping techniques. The character and the individual both are solidly placed in their developing identity. They enter the biggest moment of conflict ready to use all they have learned.

The importance of inhabiting one’s body as a part of healing, and the narrative structure of providing evidence of change before proving it, altered my thoughts around *The Wasting Curse*’s climax. I became aware that Kit would have to be restored to her true self before she could face her final challenge. By breaking the curse before the climax, I would put her in a position that would best showcase her ability to overcome her trauma. The manner in which I chose to switch Catharine and Kit’s bodies will be discussed more thoroughly in ‘Chapter Four: Mend.’

Conclusion

Trauma can often trigger dissociation. A mindful representation of both trauma and its effects provides young readers with a fictional example of how these difficulties are experienced and, perhaps, overcome. The trick is to keep a focus on story *and* psychological reality. By using my research in psychology, I was able to develop a scientifically-informed representation of trauma and dissociation in my creative work. Kit and Wesley both suffer forms of dissociation because of their traumas, and they are both positioned at the end of the second act to take the next step toward healing. Once a protagonist is equipped with the tools they need to enter the final act of their story, we can turn our attention to healing itself—and how (or whether) it is possible.

Chapter Four: Mend

When the folk came in next morning[,] they found Kate and the young prince cracking nuts together.[6]

I am thirty-one years old, fresh from a full set of ten EMDR sessions, and on a first date that isn't going well. Much has happened to make our hour-long walk feel endless. My app-acquaintance has made sex jokes about canal boats. He's taken every opportunity to touch my hair. As we return to town, he asks me to remove my glasses and then tells me my "eyes are better without them." Anxiety builds like a geyser inside me. My mind has the telltale wobble of a PTSD episode.

He and I stop to wait for a crossing signal. That's when he puts his hand on the small of my back.

My body goes rigid. I almost choke on my breath. The streetlight changes. He lets his hand fall away. My brain wants to crack. I walk forward, angry. Am I going to have to pay for another EMDR appointment because of this idiot?

But movement clears my head and I realize: I already have the tools I need. I recall the phrases the therapist and I used in the healing process: *I can trust myself. I can leave or stay when I want to*.

I want to leave, *now*. I will not let myself freeze this time.

I make an excuse to go. When he tries to walk me home, I firmly refuse his offer. When he tries to kiss me goodbye, I turn it into a side-hug.

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[6] Lang, Andrew. "The Story of Kate Crackernuts." *Longman's Magazine,* vol. XIII; no. LXXVIII, April 1889, p. 662.

A subtle exhilaration buzzes through me when I leave. I have put work into healing, and while I am not (and perhaps never will be) fully healed—this time, I do not break. I adapt, and I continue.

Representing Healing in Fiction

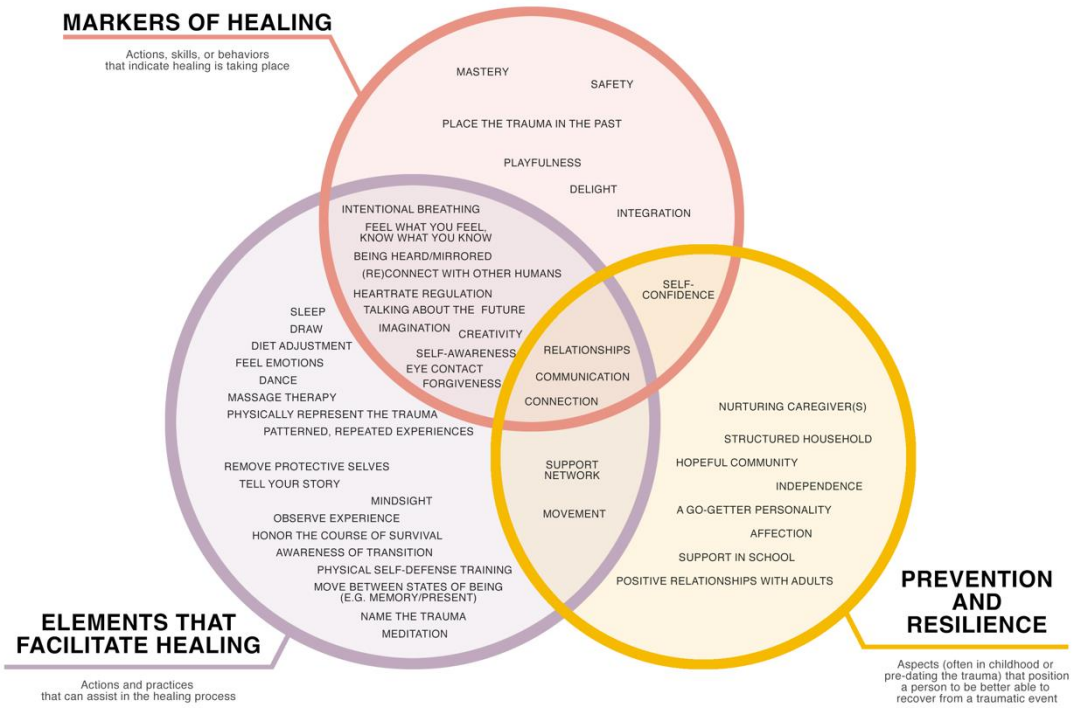
The journey from trauma toward healing can be difficult to portray in fiction, particularly fiction for young people. We (especially as adults) often wish to show teens and children a world where good ends perfectly and bad meets justice (Margot 47). But in real life, recovery from trauma is not linear and rarely has an ending. Even as a child, I found a strong representation of this in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Return of the King*. After Frodo has come home from his quest, he still suffers from the wound he received on Weathertop. When Sam discovers his master in unbearable pain near the end of the book, Frodo tells him, "I am wounded… wounded; it will never really heal" (Tolkien 1279). And, indeed, it does not. Frodo has to leave Middle Earth to find respite.

This example of a hero who never fully recovers from his wounds had an enormous impact on me. As I acquired my own scars and learned that no amount of counseling or treatment would ever fully erase them, I took comfort in the honesty of Frodo's ending. Healing can begin on the page, but we may never be fully restored by the close of the book. A writer can pay homage to this truth while also positioning their character in a place where they can adapt without breaking. Healing may never be complete, but the process can gleam with hope.

A character who is recovering from trauma may begin to exhibit actions, skills, and behaviors that show a healthier balance among their mind, body, and spirit (Pulimeno et al. 14). Most of these markers demonstrate a movement from a mental

space of survival, where energy is fixed on the present, to a mental space of ease, where the brain is more able to fully function (der Kolk 58). Playfulness, creativity, and imagination are some of the hallmarks of this stage of recovery (der Kolk 205, 350; Perry 167). These markers are not signs that all effects of a trauma have been overcome or no longer influence the character. However, they can be good indications that the character is on a trajectory toward healing.

In my research, I wanted to understand more about these specifics of healing. Could such a broad topic be made more concrete? I used my reading to note elements that mitigated trauma or assisted in the recovery from trauma. I found that these could generally be placed into three categories, as displayed in my original Venn diagram below (see Appendix C for a reference list). This diagram had an enormous impact on my creative writing.



By representing three branches of healing in this way, I gained insights that had a significant bearing on *The Wasting Curse*. Even during the revision process, I turned to this graph to explore where I might strengthen my narrative or where I might have missed a valuable asset. A detailed discussion of my process is below.

Prevention and Resilience

Resilience begins in early development and is significantly impacted by the child's environment (Perry 38). Resilience can act as a buffer against the adverse effects of trauma, equipping a character with the resources they need to react and adapt (Baron-Cohen 51; Nakazawa 65). An author who wishes to give their characters tools to recover from trauma might start by examining the character's early childhood.

Kit's childhood with her birth father, mother, and grandmother built in her a foundation of resilience. In the clinically studied Resilience Questionnaire (Appendix D), Kit would score 11 out of 14 at the beginning of *The Wasting Curse*, and 14 out of 14 by the end (Nakazawa 154-156). She is continuing to develop her resilience over the course of the story—a good indicator that she is recovering from her trauma.

Though Wesley's estrangement from his mother sets him apart from Kit, he received support in his education and flourished in his well-structured household. He also grew up in a hopeful, hearty community and was confident in his own abilities from a young age. In the Resilience Questionnaire, Wesley would score 10 out of 14 at the beginning of *The Wasting Curse*, and 13 out of 14 by the end (Nakazawa 154-156). He, too, is adding to his resources as he grows.

Elements that Facilitate Healing

As a character moves toward healing, certain actions and behaviors can strengthen their recovery. These might be mental or emotional exercises, such as feeling emotions or practicing mindfulness (der Kolk 240; Newberg 14). They might also be physical actions, such as creating art or getting better sleep (Nakazawa 160; Harris 114). An author should check whether any of these elements are present on the page during the course of the story.

In *The Wasting Curse*, Kit uses many elements to self-soothe and improve her wellbeing. One notable example is her ability to make eye contact. The beginning of the book intentionally avoids any description of eyes while the reader is in Kit's point of view. Many victims of abuse find eye contact too exposing, too vulnerable, and therefore avoid it (der Kolk 102). Kit voices this in the third chapter: "It feels as if he's staring at me, but I cannot lift my eyes to check" (39). This gradually changes as Kit feels safer with the people close to her, and so the narration includes more descriptions of eyes and expression later in the book.

Kit's healing journey is also indicated by her growing ability to feel (and allow herself to feel) her emotions, her use of intentional breathing, and her growing closeness with Catharine and Wesley (and his family).

Wesley's trauma of isolation and dissociation requires a similar but unique recovery. He has to learn to reconnect with others (especially his own family) and gain self-awareness, not only of the dissociative parts of himself but also of his own motivation and feelings. This can be observed in Wesley's shift from forced cheerfulness and avoidance in the beginning of the book to honesty with both himself and his family by the end.

Markers of Healing

Kit's ability to feel safe in her own body is a powerful sign that she has begun to heal from the traumas she has endured. Her ease in her body comes with increased self-confidence. It is only when she has returned to her body that she is able to express her affection for Wesley. The deepening of her relationships, both with Catharine and Wesley, act as an enormous indicator that she is in a better place than she began.

Wesley begins with a false cheerfulness that belies his sometimes-suicidal feelings, but by the end of the story he is able to experience sincere delight. His honest communication, both within himself and to others, shows that he is overcoming his past of neglect and blame. Like Kit, Wesley's biggest marker of healing is the relationships he has gained and mended by the final scene of the book.

Content Concerns for Young Readers

Between drafts of *The Wasting Curse*, I became aware that I had missed a potentially pivotal moment: Kit never actually says what happened to her. Not to Catharine, or Wesley, or even in her own head. I debated whether this would be necessary for the purposes of my story in light of my young audience.[7] I turned to similar books in my genre for ideas and came across *Stitching Snow* (2014) by R.C. Lewis. In this futuristic retelling of *Snow White*, the character Essie (Snow White) has suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her father, and her background of trauma both informs and equips her for the stakes of the story. I felt that the difficult topic was handled delicately for the age group until the climax, where Essie's father attempts to assault her on the page.

[7] I am conscious of the discussions around attaching trigger or content warnings to books. However, as this is a decision beyond the writing process and into the publication and marketing part of book creation, I prefer to focus in this contextual research on decisions made within the story rather than the presentation of the material.

> I pushed him away and hit him, bringing shock to his eyes—I'd never dared strike him before. The shock quickly shifted to anger. He came back more forcefully, too quickly. He was so much larger than anyone I'd ever fought. […] He caught my arms, resisting my efforts to twist away (Lewis 293).

This scene took me back to myself, age 13, reading Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* at the insistence of my older sister. I reached a scene where a father rapes his daughter, written as a dream but very much on the page. At that point in my life, my own memories were more feeling than reality. I was physically sick as I struggled to explain to my sister why I didn't want to finish the book. Whatever my decision would be about revealing Kit's trauma, I did not want this experience for my readers.

I needed a way to portray Kit's trauma with all the seriousness of what happened to her. But equally important, I needed to avoid over-exposing and traumatizing (or retraumatizing) young readers. My readership will likely contain young people who have not encountered these topics at all before, and therefore will need a gentle introduction to the dark themes. It will also contain young people who have lived these experiences, and therefore need sensitive portrayal of these painfully familiar topics. For this reason, Kit's abuse remains mostly off-page. The reader is kept very close to the consequences of her experience without having explicit access to the experience itself. The one exception to this is when we see King Byrne cornering Catharine while she is in Kit's body.

> My stepfather has cornered Catharine near the curtained window, and he is closing the distance between them. He is so intent, he has not heard me. Catharine stares with wide eyes. The moment before he's close enough to block me from her view, her gaze darts to me in the doorway. Horror and fear and confusion are written across her face—across my face—and I am

> suddenly looking at myself. The first time. I am fourteen, and I am alone, and I am trapped. Then he steps forward again, and I can't see her—I can't see myself—beyond his broad back.
>
> He bends to kiss her neck.
>
> Fury and revulsion rise in me so violently that the wand almost snaps in my hand. I cannot spare Catharine the knowing—but I will spare her the touch.
>
> I hit my wrist with the wand. My body lurches forward, and I squeeze my eyes shut against an unbridled nausea. My soul seems to tumble free of my skin, and for a moment I fall and fall and fall. Then, with a painful *snap*, I am in a body again. Just in time to feel a kiss land on my neck (252-253).

My intent was to use the brevity of the moment to minimize the potential traumatizing aspects of the scene. It is immediately followed by one of the strongest bonding points between the two sisters.

> Catharine turns to me, her eyes shining with tears. She starts to speak, then closes her mouth. I meet her gaze, and watch her expression crumple as she reads the truth in my face.
>
> "Yes." The word is so soft, I almost don't hear myself speak. "He hurt me."
>
> With a whimper, she begins to pull away, to bow her head.
>
> Before she can, I wrap my arms around her and hug her as tightly as I can. Her arms close just as fiercely across my back, and suddenly I am the one crying. I am raw and exposed and finally, *finally*, someone else knows—someone else is with me in my loneliest, ugliest moment. […] My mother

only saw the shame of me—Catharine stands in the shame with me and holds me, turns the shame from darkness to a bittersweet, searing love (254-255).

Byrne's assault is not included on-page to shock the reader or force them to suffer with the victim, but to display the healing agency of this relationship between sisters. The scene allows the knowing and naming of the abuse so it can climax with full acceptance and empowering love.

Still, I was conscious that earlier in the book Kit wonders: "Would [Wesley] ever think any part of me is radiant, if he knew?" (241). The first draft of *The Wasting Curse* left this partially unanswered, because Wesley had not directly proved the doubt wrong by the end of the manuscript.

The solution came in the form of compromise. The first part was to lean heavier on Kit's relationship with Catharine and the revelation that takes place when they are restored to their own bodies. Throughout the novel, Kit's growing closeness and vulnerability with Catharine enables her to become closer to Wesley, and vice versa. This will be discussed in more detail below. By adding a line where Kit verbally acknowledges what Catharine struggles to ask ("Yes."), Kit speaks her wound without having to be explicit for Catharine or the audience. Catharine's unhindered, absolute acceptance creates a model for what Kit might receive from Wesley. In the final chapter, I added an interaction between Kit and Wesley where they edge close to the unspoken truth about Byrne.

Wesley says, […] "He almost hit you, Kit."

"Oh," I blurt, "that was nothing. […] He's done worse."

[…]

> "All right," [Wesley] says. He moves his hand next to mine, so that just our fingertips touch. "We will face the worst of it, then, together. Whenever you are ready."
>
> I raise my gaze to his, surprised to find my vision blurred. His eyes are gentle.
>
> "Whatever has happened," he says, "I am with you" (288).

Wesley's final line is a direct echo of another moment between Catharine and Kit earlier in the book. Just prior to the girls' transformation, Catharine says: "Whatever comes, […] I am with you" (78). Because Catharine has already modeled acceptance, it is therefore reasonable for the reader and Kit to anticipate how Wesley might respond once Kit is ready to tell him everything. In this way, I have blended some important elements that facilitate healing while making room for my characters' and readers' stages of development.

The Important Role of Relationships in Healing

At the heart of both Kit and Wesley's trauma is a break in important relationships: Kit's abuse at the hands of her stepfather and the isolation that follows from the secret, and Wesley's mother's neglect and father's pressure to perform. These both represent the two most common types of relational trauma: actions against a person or neglect of a person (McAllister-MacGregor). Human relationships "create and destroy, nurture and terrorize, traumatize and heal" (Perry XXVIII). Relationships can be sources of pain, but they also act as agents of healing (Murthy 51). Kit and Wesley experience this. Some of their relationships cause pain, such as Kit's complex feelings about her mother and Wesley's about his father. Other relationships

bring restoration, such as Kit's mutual support with Catharine and Wesley's with Abram.

As shown in the Venn diagram above, at the center of all phases of healing lies relationship, connection, and communication. These three combined might be condensed to just connection: our ability to belong (Murthy XVIII). Connection represents a particularly important area of focus for writers. *The Wasting Curse* features several pivotal connections. Most notably, Kit's connection with Catharine and Wesley, and Wesley's connection with his father, Abram, and Kit.

Throughout the novel, Catharine and Wesley show love to Kit even when Kit is unable to love herself. This connection leads to improvements for Kit on a psychological, emotional, and physical level. Social relationships (or lack thereof) can have a physical influence on the body. Kit has been lonely in her secret abuse for years, and studies show that loneliness leads to increased inflammation and worsening chronic illness (Murthy 39). When their bodies are initially switched, Catharine does not carry the lonely secret about Kit's abuse. This means that Catharine in Kit's body is better able to regulate her body's response to stressers. While inhabiting Kit's body, Catharine's care quite literally begins to mitigate some of the harm done. Kit notices when she returns to her own body, "My joints are less swollen than I remember, and though making a fist is not easy, it is *easier*. I wonder if, just as Byrne's attacks woke a curse in me, Catharine's kindness has awoken something else" (267).

Likewise, Wesley is shown greater love from his family and from Kit than he is able to extend to himself. It is through receiving love from other characters that both Kit and Wesley are able to find compassion for themselves. G. K. Chesterton wrote (emphasis his), "There is the great lesson of 'Beauty and the Beast;' that a

thing must be loved *before* it is lovable" (88-89). This sentiment—captured in the original fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast' and beautifully articulated by Chesterton—is echoed in the fields of neurology and psychology. Dr. Perry summarizes it as, "The capacity to love cannot be built in isolation" (262). In *The Wasting Curse*, Kit's relationship with Catharine and Wesley's relationship with Abram and his father have a vital role in their journeys toward healing.

One important aspect is that Kit's relationship with Catharine helps heal her network of relationships with others, specifically with Wesley. Kit must be joined in her most vulnerable place (by Catharine) before she can bear the thought of Wesley loving her. It is only in light Catharine's support after their body switch that Kit begins to think she can be worthy of a romantic relationship, despite what has been done to her. The sisters' relationship therefore becomes the foundation for Kit's actions in both the climax and denouncement.

Another example of the healing potential of relationships in *The Wasting Curse* can be found in the interactions between Kit and the Hidden Queen. Midway through the book, Kit and the queen identify with each other in their mutual pain and isolation:

> [The Hidden Queen] holds herself upright with a rigidity I recognize. The sheer will of presentation in the throes of invisible pain. It is in the stiffness of her fingers, still lifted in some sort of signal. It is in the angle of her head, exactly straight rather than relaxed into an slant one way or the other. It is in her eyes, that hold mine in a question.
>
> I am back at the ball, Byrne reaching for me. I am staring at the crowd. I am asking them, *Can you see me? Am I real?* (172)

In the last chapters of the book, when Wesley and Abram begin to remove the queen's shoes, Kit is able to use her connection with the Hidden Queen. When the Hidden Folk back away from their queen, Kit comes forward and takes the queen's hand, standing with her through an ordeal of immense pain before healing can take place. The presence of another person during a painful and frightening experience is, itself, a strong indicator of a better outcome. United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy observed this in his extensive clinical work, where relationships were a healing influence in the hospital room and a vital component of addiction recovery (Murthy 51, 22-23). Other studies, like Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad's in 2009 and 2014, have found that people in strong social relationships are less likely to die prematurely than those who are alone (13). By standing with the queen, Kit is helping heal the wound of isolation in the same way Wesley, Abram, and Hugh are helping prepare the queen's physical body for healing by removing the iron shoes.

Romantic Relationship and the Unfinished Core

Many different kinds of relationships are important in 'Kate Crackernuts' and *The Wasting Curse*, but the romantic relationship between Kit and the prince deserves special attention. Love stories dominate the young adult bestseller lists, from Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) to Mackenzi Lee's *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue* (2017) to Lexi Ryan's *These Hollow Vows* (2022). As I considered the way a romantic relationship could be used to explore the effects of and recovery from trauma, I was inspired by Mark Wolynn, who has observed that "people often unconsciously choose a mate who will trigger their wounds… The chosen partner reflects what sits unclaimed and unfinished at the core of the other" (186). In creative writing, Will Storr calls this unfinished core the "sacred flaw"—"the broken

part of us that we've made sacred" (222). He notes that "in romantic… movies, the two protagonists often inhabit two opposing flaws. When they finally come together, they're healed" (221). I felt Kit and Wesley's relationship would be an interesting opportunity to explore the way romantic relationships can strengthen each party by challenging the wounds born of their trauma. I also wanted to uncover how Kit and Wesley could support each other through the emotional and physical difficulties in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

In *The Wasting Curse*, Kit and Wesley's relationship is built to reflect their individual unfinished cores. Kit has been traumatized by violation (both physical and emotional), as well as the isolation of her secret. From the first time she sees Wesley at his window, she recognizes that his wound (the unfinished core) is pulling him toward isolation, too. She empathizes with his pain before he himself is fully conscious of it, saying, "While he stays, I stay. It's strange, but somehow I feel I must—I feel he should not be alone. Even if he does not know I'm here" (10). Later in the scene, the parallels between Wesley and Kit are more closely identified when she thinks, "There is a blackness in me that needs to be carved by freezing winds, that needs to lean into the gale of sunrise, the way the prince did this morning" (16). Her experience of trauma allows her to recognize his before he himself is fully aware he has any.

Wesley's trauma, in the form of neglect and pressure, is subtler than Kit's. However, he likewise identifies with Kit when he sees her alone in the ballroom and recognizes her physical pain. He reflects on this moment later when he thinks, "When I came across her yesterday, standing alone and colorless with anxiety, […] I had only wanted to find a way to help" (51). Even though he is still recovering from being cursed in the garden, he is drawn to her loneliness and her pain. His unfinished

core comes from not being seen or allowing himself to be seen in distress, so he consciously observes her struggle and desires to ease it. His awareness also clues him into the true nature of Byrne and Kit's relationship. He connects her reaction to its source when he notes, "She has gone colorless, the way I found her last night. […] Suddenly, I'm not sure that the injury was a mistake" (61). Wesley's experience of trauma, combined with his friendliness and resources of resilience, make him aware and eager to help when he is not yet ready to receive help himself. In the course of the story, both he and Kit address and, in some ways, fulfill what is broken in each them up to the concluding scene.

The conclusion of the book had its own challenge. As a retelling of 'Kate Crackernuts,' an important consideration was how the traditional story's ending would adapt to Kit's trauma. One of my favorite elements in 'Kate Crackernuts' is the way Kit's (or "Kate's") requests for rewards increase in value each night that she watches the prince. The first night, she agrees to the king's payment of "a peck of silver;" the second night, she negotiates for "a peck of gold;" and the third night, she consents to help "only if she should marry the sick prince" (Jacobs *English Fairy Tales* 231-233). This reversal of the prince proposing trope comes as a delightful surprise. It also shows "Kate" as a young woman who knows her own mind (and heart) and isn't afraid to lay claim to what she wants.

However, *The Wasting Curse* has introduced a trauma that could well come into conflict with this original ending. It would not be unreasonable for a girl leaving an abusive situation to hesitate before entering a romantic relationship. I sought to compromise between the ultimate ending I would desire for Kit and the reality of her on-going healing process.

As I thought about Kit's conclusion, I played with an exercise from Dan Allender's *To Be Told*: imagine a story where the ending is the opposite—the farthest thing—from the trauma (46). Allender is proposing the exercise in an autobiographical sense, but I found it useful to apply to my characters. If Kit's story begins in betrayal, violation, and isolation, then an ending displaying the farthest fate from that trauma would have trust, autonomy, and relationship.

I did not feel that Kit needed to perfectly embody this change, as the end of the book is not the end of her life. Presumably, she will still have plenty of time to grow and heal. But by setting a target for the ultimate place I would like to see her, I was able to make her proposal to Wesley a sign of her recovery. Her proposal is an action that encompasses trust, autonomy, and relationship. The proposal displays trust because she is being honestly vulnerable about her desire in the belief that it will be respectfully received. It showcases autonomy because she is naming and claiming that desire. Finally, it defines a new relationship because she is moving their friendship into something more intimate and permanent. In this way, Kit's proposal indicates aspects of her healing rather than being an action forced by the original story's structure. To accommodate the sense that Kit is *getting* better but is not yet perfectly healed, I also chose to soften the original story's terms (to marry the sick prince) with a few caveats:

> "I mean," [Kit blurts], [her] face hot, "I would ask that you don't engage him to Catharine, and perhaps you'll allow us to court, and maybe in a few years we—I mean, it would be up to him and we'd have to see how it goes—but—I suppose I'm asking for the chance to try" (291).

The proposal given by Kate in 'Kate Crackernuts' is factual, brief, and confidently given. In *The Wasting Curse*, Kit's request aligns closer with her character and

journey. This compromise gives homage to the original story while allowing Kit the space she needs to continue her process of healing beyond the page.

Toxic Relationships and Disempowering Independence

There is one notable relationship that does not continue beyond the ending of *The Wasting Curse*: Kit's relationship with her abuser, King Byrne. When King Byrne is taken by the Hidden Folk, Kit does not protest. Not all relationships are positive, or worth keeping, and part of Kit's recovery is shedding relationships that harm her.

Another toxic relationship Kit has shed by the close of the novel is the relationship with her mother. Near the beginning of the book, she feels conflicted as the peacekeeper between her mother and Catharine. Her dynamic with her mother makes her the one soothing—rather than being soothed—in their troubled mixed family. This only further isolates Kit from a guardian who ideally would be able to buffer the effects of Byrne's abuse. Instead, her mother is also acting as a force for isolation by attempting to divide Kit from her primary companion, Catharine. Kit's mother responds to the traumatic situation by withdrawing and lashing out; Kit needs rather to be pursued and accepted. Kit definitively turns her back on her mother's way of responding to trauma when she says, "I can carry this. And when I can't carry it—I have friends who will help. And I'm not too stubborn to ask" (251). The future of Kit and her mother's relationship is left ambiguous by the close of the novel, but this declaration and Kit's immediate choice to defy her mother and save Catharine both indicate that Kit has drawn a boundary between herself and her mother. Though Kit loses two relationships, the net gain is still positive—and the relationships she cultivates are deeper by the end of the novel than they were at the beginning.

Though it is beyond the scopes of this paper, it should be mentioned that there is much discourse about the appropriateness of romantic relationships in young adult fiction. Writers and readers alike debate whether love stories—especially ones that end in marriage or the equivalent, and particularly in instances with a female protagonist—are helpful for this age range. This has led to a rise in literature, particularly in the feminist tradition, where a female protagonist foregoes romance, sometimes in favor of swearing off all relationships (particularly with men) or swearing vengeance (such as in Elana K. Arnold's *Damsel* (2018) and Louise O'Neill's *The Surface Breaks* (2018)). A journey portrayed as healthy that leaves a character isolated (from romance *or* platonic relationships) by her empowered independence seems to be acting counter to current psychological studies. This would be a fascinating topic for further research, particularly with an eye on the interaction between trauma, relationship, and empowerment.

In fiction, as in real life, relationships act as a cornerstone to wellbeing: they bolster protection from the lasting effects of trauma, are an invaluable tool for restoration, and serve as an indicator of whether someone is recovering (Perry 85, 328; van der Kolk 210, 352; Harris 105, 114; Nakazawa 155). A writer interested in representing healing might ask: Is the quality or number of my character's relationships greater at the end of the book than the beginning?

Hope Fully Ever After

The folk fairy tale is perhaps best known by its characteristic ending: happily ever after. While the cliché may not be true in every—or even in the majority—of folk fairy tales, it can be frequently found in the stories we choose to retell most often. 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Cinderella' both meet the criteria of happily ever after,

and both dominate the market of young adult retellings. Between 2012-2022, retellings published in the 12+ age range include over 30 versions of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ and over 40 of ‘Cinderella’ (see Appendix E for full list). The success of these books suggests happily-ever-after is a type of ending that appeals to young readers.

However, some books for young people challenge the idea of happily-ever-after. *Just Ella* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (1999) confronts the shallowness of an instalove relationship between Ella and the prince, and concludes with Ella independently working in refugee camps. *Rebel Rose* by Emma Theriault (2020) delves into the political complications of the beast’s restored kingdom as it sits at the edge of the French Revolution while also exploring Belle’s journey to fall in love again with her now-human Beast. Despite these outliers that push back on the expected ending, the essential hallmarks of the fairy tale remain the same in most retellings: the couple falls in love, defeats evil, and lives on together. By the closing page, improvements have been made in both the protagonist’s relationships and circumstances (physical and, by virtual of fewer stressors, psychological). But can a story that intentionally addresses heavy topics end in ‘happily ever after’?

Placing themes like trauma and chronic illness in story is, itself, a kind of fantasy. In the structure of most tales, there is inherent order: a story rises, falls, triumphs, and ends. But neither trauma nor chronic illness follow such a neat pattern. The scaffolding of a retelling, as discussed in ‘Chapter One: Uncover,’ uses familiarity to provide the reader with comforting boundaries. However, these boundaries, present in all fiction, limit the story’s ability to represent lifelong struggles. A story ends. The repercussions of trauma and illness, by contrast, never finish. As discussed in ‘Chapter Two: Name,’ these struggles can reach even beyond the individual’s life into the generations after them.

Given the gravity of trauma, it would be disingenuous to expect a story to end with a purely happy ending. In *The Wasting Curse*, happily-ever-after might have looked like illnesses cured, wounds wholly healed, wrongs forgiven. Not only would this type of ending ring untrue in the universe of the story, but it also has the potential to harm readers who are struggling with their own circumstances. A perfectly happy ending seems to say: These characters are fine, so if *you* are not strong enough to overcome and end your struggle, you must be (and will remain) broken beyond repair. An overtly optimistic ending might also set up a young reader for unrealistic expectations for healing in the real world, even if the writer is using relationships and therapy for their characters to get them to their happily-ever-after. A prescriptive happy ending does not leave room for reader experience and often results in a shallow, overly simplistic conclusion.

If we wish to move away from a perfectly happy ending, a tragic ending would be the natural opposite of happily-ever-after. Some writers may feel that a tragedy might be closer to the reality of trauma and illness. But writing for young people comes with additional responsibility due to its very nature: The readers are more inexperienced and vulnerable than their adult counterparts. A young reader may not have encountered content like this before. Furthermore, a young reader does not necessarily have the resources available to an adult with which to navigate a despairing conclusion. As I approached the ending of *The Wasting Curse,* I asked myself: If my story is a young reader's introduction to these topics, have I given them the resources they need to manage the knowledge with hope? If my story *isn't* my young reader's introduction to these topics, have I given them resources that can help them manage their lived experiences?

Numerous studies have proven the effect of narrative on readers, and especially young ones. Whether it is to inspire healthier lifestyles or to combat school bullying, these studies indicate that inhabiting a character (as discussed in 'Chapter Three: Inhabit') can lead to real-life changes (van Laer et al. 25; Pulimeno et al. 8; Rozalski et al. 33-34; Vélez and Prieto 613-614). Tools like bibliotherapy—a treatment using written material to help with mental health problems—have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression in young adults (Yuan et al. 353, 359). When readers are connected to a story, they aren't just encountering words on a page—they are neurologically living the character's experiences (Berns et al.). It is therefore important that writers for young people remember that their narrative choices are not merely influential within the fictional universe of the story, but have the potential to impact the world beyond it. This is not just a statement to stroke an author's ego: it is clinically proven. The way we tell our stories has the potential to create positive changes in brains and behavior: making people kinder, altering beliefs, and increasing empathy (Boult; Kaufman and Libby; Hammond). Authors for young people should approach their writing conscious of this responsibility. The conclusion of a story can act as the thesis of the author's message, which is one of the reasons why the last third of the novel is particularly important.

So while perfectly happy might be a trite and untrue ending, tragic despair might not be appropriate for all young audiences. The compromise would be something between the two. I think of this as the bittersweet joy that characterizes the strongest endings in young adult fiction. These endings stay far from perfect, but they brim with hope.

Dan Allender has said, "Hope is a memory of the future" ("Session Three"). I think of hope as the act of combining imagination with memory to project a different

possibility, a new reality. In *The Wasting Curse*, Kit describes this as: “I weave a new future in my mind, the threads made from the moments I’ve collected today—Catharine’s tight embrace, Wesley’s earnest gaze. In this future, I am not alone” (267). The gift of hope in a story for young people is that a reader might take what they find in the pages and apply it to their own circumstances.

I have tried to create the bittersweet balance of a hopeful ending in *The Wasting Curse.* I wanted to be honest with my young readers that some questions about trauma have complex answers—if they have answers at all. This is exemplified in the exchange between the Hidden Queen and Kit in the final chapter:

> The Hidden Queen’s voice softens, more like Catharine when she’s uncertain than the unshakable wisdom of a grandmother. “Is there something to be said that you are here—you, *yourself*, wholly as you are?”
>
> We both look down at her feet, still inflamed and streaked with blood. We are both ourselves, wholly, in a way we would never have been without our pasts. Is there something redemptive in that—something that makes who we are worth what we’ve suffered?
>
> “I don’t know,” I whisper.
>
> The Hidden Queen smiles and closes her hands over mine. Quietly, she says, “Neither do I” (286).

This rather melancholy reflection on the enduring complexities of trauma is further developed as Kit faces her feelings for Wesley a little later in the scene:

> The wounded part of me wants to curl up, hide from him, flee from the uncertainty of this. I would be safer alone.
>
> But I am not my wounds. Taking a deep breath, I make myself look him in the face. His mouth quirks in an uncertain smile, but his eyes shine

> with sincere care. And a new feeling burns through my fear and my ghosts. It steals my breath, painful but good. Hope. (290)

The message then becomes: Trauma does not destine you for tragedy, and healing isn't a list you can check off on the last page. The mixture of both together make for an authentic blend of realism and care.

Conclusion

In his book *The Brain's Way of Healing*, Norman Doidge points out that "the word *heal* comes from the Old English *haelan* and means not simply 'to cure' but 'to make whole'" (xviii). The sense of wholeness at the end of a story can be deeply cathartic, even if it is wholeness without complete happiness. A writer intentionally wielding the representation of trauma and healing can give this gift to a young person in the form of a book.

Maybe the book will rest, unassuming, on a library shelf for a teenager to find. She is fifteen, fleeing nightmares. She plucks this volume from the others. And fairies and curses and clever heroines and brave heroes take her breaking hands with a promise: On the far side of the dark, there is light.

Conclusion

Over the course of this research, I have documented my journey in exploring trauma through the use of folk fairy tales. I narrowed the scope of this undertaking by focusing on interrelational and intergenerational trauma. My approach included extensive research in the fields of psychology, neurology, and neurobiology. However, my personal experiences remained central to what was fundamentally autoethnographic research. I drew on both my history as a young person who found release from her trauma in folk fairy tales, and as an adult actively seeking healing through counseling and EMDR. I have demonstrated the concrete ways that my study of these fields and the examination of my own journey helped me to represent trauma in my creative work, *The Wasting Curse,* from character development to stylistic choices to plot decisions. Finally, I discussed the challenges that arise when writing a conclusion to a story about trauma, especially for an audience of young people, and the important role hope and healing can play in fiction.

A persistent desire to understand, truly and unflinchingly, pushed me through my project. I needed to gain insight into my own personal story and the ways my trauma and my love of folk fairy tales have shaped me as an author and a person. At the same time, I wanted to produce an ethically responsible and narratively engaging novel for young people. To achieve this, I dug into the connections between childhood and adversity, trauma and illness, safety and embodiment. I wrestled with how my characters and I might find healing, and the ways our endings might equip my readers. To do all of these things meant treating my young readers with care and honesty and developing a means for telling stories with authentic, unpatronizing hope.

The need to control the scope of this research meant that there were areas I was not able to explore. In addition, the emotional and physical toll of this topic necessitated safeguarding steps that restricted the amount of trauma content that I could safely consume. Though I went into the material with eager curiosity, there is still much in this field of study that I have only just begun to understand. Future research in this area would benefit from a partnership between a professionally trained trauma specialist and an author of works for young people. While the scope of this research was limited to interrelational and intergenerational trauma, many other types of trauma could be explored more generally (such as the impacts of natural disasters, abandonment, or addiction) or specifically (such as religious, medical, or racial trauma). Given that feminist themes are a popular topic in young adult fiction, studies that specifically examine gendered trauma and the use of empowerment as a device for healing would be of particular interest to this demographic.

I hope the creative techniques and contextual analysis in this thesis will aid other writers for young people. Folk fairy tale retellings can act as a valuable tool for writers who wish to help their readers more readily encounter difficult topics. These tales' familiar structure and tropes blend the known—the comforting—with new themes or topics a writer might want to tease out. This makes the retelling a useful conduit for stories that explore trauma. If a writer aspires to portray trauma, I believe they need a deep knowledge of the subject and its physical, emotional, and mental effects. Moreover, the consequences of trauma, such as dissociation, should be depicted with intentionality and understanding. This particular care should extend throughout the entire narrative, from plot points to character development.

In my experience, healing is the most challenging element in depicting the trajectory of trauma. No person's healing looks quite the same as another's, in terms of timeline or method. Those who suffer trauma are unlikely to experience a neat and final conclusion to their journey. But in a story, structural norms push for healing to come at the end, signaling a tidy and happy resolution in which trauma is unequivocally defeated. In light of this tension between narrative and generic demands and the more complex emotional realities, I needed to carefully consider where I wanted to leave my young readers when they closed my book. I have posited that a hopeful ending compromises between optimism and tragedy.

Given the central place that autoethnography has taken in this research, I want to conclude this thesis by reflecting on my personal circumstances between the start and end of this practice-based PhD. I opened each of my contextual chapters with a short, personal story, and it seems fitting to end in the same way.

Over the last two and a half years of research, my own life has mirrored my work. I began this PhD in March 2020, after an international move from the United States to the United Kingdom. My last suitcase was unpacked just days before the first COVID-19 lockdown. The nature of my research and the isolation of my condition as an immunocompromised person opened up my past in ways I did not expect. I believe the vividness of this difficult time added urgency to my writing. It reinforced the importance of understanding myself and the world around me. But it was also, at times, an incredibly lonely work.

Lonely seems a simple word. To me, it is a crack through my chest. It is eight months not touching a single person. Not one gentle arm nudge. Not even a

handshake. Like Kit, I wandered the streets wondering: *Am I real? Does anyone see me?*

I did not want to be alone anymore. But for much of my life, any attempt at a romantic relationship had been filled with the sort of terror described on that date at the movies. It took the black hole of loneliness to force me to face my pain. I finally sought further healing through EMDR treatment, though I entered those sessions unsure if a person like me could ever have a life that looked anything like the stories I read and write.

Signs indicate, in a new chapter so normal it is miraculous: yes, I can. I still struggle with my memories sometimes, but I now have the resources I need to test my comfort zone and reach for the future I want. In my concluding year of research, I had my first kiss. And my past didn't steal my present.

Trauma doesn't disappear, but we adapt. Chronic illness doesn't vanish, but we continue. The repercussions of these adverse events might not be fully healed in this life. The magic of writing is that I get to choose where the story ends.

And I choose hope.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Annotated Copy of 'Kate Crackernuts'

The base text used here is from Joseph Jacob's edition, originally published by David Nutt in 1898 and reprinted by Dover in 1967.

Once upon a time there was a king and a queen,[8] as in many lands have been. The king had a daughter, Anne,[9] and the queen had one named Kate, but Anne was far bonnier than the queen's daughter, though they loved[10] one another like real sisters. The queen was jealous of the king's daughter being bonnier than her own,[11] and cast about to spoil her beauty. So she took counsel of the henwife,[12] who told her to send the lassie to her next morning fasting.[13]

So next morning early, the queen said to Anne, "Go, my dear, to the henwife in the glen, and ask her for some eggs." So Anne set out, but as she passed through the kitchen she saw a crust, and she took and munched it as she went along.

When she came to the henwife's she asked for eggs, as she had been told to do; the henwife said to her, "Lift the lid off that pot there and see." The lassie did so, but nothing happened. "Go home to your minnie and tell her to keep her larder door better locked,"[14] said the henwife. So she went home to the queen and told her what

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8. Tom Muir expands this to explain the king loved his first wife, but she died tragically. Katherine Briggs's novelization also expands the backstory in this way.
9. The daughters' names vary in different versions of the tale. In Andrew Lang's version, the girls are introduced as: "The king had a dochter, Kate, and the queen had one." After this like, it is the queen's daughter who is always referred to as "Kate," while the king's daughter is not named again. This seems to have caused some confusion in the reprints.
Both daughters are called Kate by Margaret Mayo, or Katherine and Kate by Briggs. Others call the king's daughter is Anne (Joseph Jacobs, Muir, Alison Lurie). In Lomond Books' edition, the king's daughter is called Princess Velvet-Cheek and the queen's daughter is Katherine.
10. Jacobs relays the story primarily in past-tense, but the Lang version is in present-tense.
11. Some editions clarify that the queen is jealous of her stepdaughter's beauty because she wants her own daughter to marry well (Lomond Books).
12. Muir, Mayo, Lurie, Lamond Books, and Briggs specify that the henwife is also a witch.
13. Mayo clarifies this is not a bite to eat or a drop to drink. Lurie relays the command as the stepdaughter must not eat anything.
14. Lang: "To keep her press door better steekit." Lamond Books: "To keep the press door better snibbit."

the henwife had said. The queen knew from this that the lassie had had something to eat, so watched the next morning and sent her away fasting; but the princess saw some country-folk picking peas by the roadside, and being very kind she spoke to them and took a handful of the peas, which she ate by the way.

When she came to the henwife's, she said, "Lift the lid off the pot and you'll see." So Anne lifted the lid but nothing happened. Then the henwife was rare angry and said to Anne, "Tell your minnie the pot won't boil if the fire's away."[15] So Anne went home and told the queen.

The third day the queen goes along with the girl herself to the henwife. Now, this time, when Anne lifted the lid off the pot, off falls her own pretty head, and on jumps a sheep's head[16].

So the queen was now quite satisfied, and went back home.

Her own daughter, Kate,[17] however, took a fine linen cloth[18] and wrapped it round her sister's head and took her by the hand and they both went out to seek their fortune. They went on, and they went on, and they went on, till they came to a castle. Kate knocked at the door and asked for a night's lodging for herself and a sick sister. They went in and found it was a king's castle, who had two sons, and one of them was sickening away to death[19] and no one could find out what ailed him.[20] And the

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15. Mayo: "If she wants something done, she must come herself!" Some editions (Lamond Books and Lurie) do not include dialogue from this encounter, and simply say that the interaction went the same way as the previous day.
16. In Lamond Books' version, Princess Velvet-Cheek picks up her own head and puts it in an egg basket.
17. Some editions (Lamond Books and Laurie) include a story beat where Kate sees her stepsister coming home and/or confronts her mother the queen over the transformation. In Lamond Books, Kate observes that neither she nor her sister is safe if her mother was willing to go to such lengths.
18. Lamond Books: "A fine shawl."
19. Muir, Briggs, and Mayo have Kate discover this information while she's working as a maid in the house. In Lang's version, Kate is given housing on the condition that she watches the prince. In Lamond Books, Kate is asked specifically to help the ailing prince because she has experience with her sick sister.
20. In Lamond Books version, "a strange disease, which seemed to have touched his brain . . . Someone had always to be with him to watch that he did himself no harm."

curious thing was that whoever watched him at night was never seen any more.[21] So the king had offered a peck of silver to anyone who would stop up with him. Now Katie was a very brave girl, so she offered to sit up with him.[22]

Till midnight all goes well. As twelve o clock rings, however, the sick prince rises, dresses himself, and slips downstairs. Kate followed, but he didn't seem to notice her[23]. The prince went to the stable, saddled his horse, called his hound, jumped into the saddle, and Kate leapt lightly up behind him. Away rode the prince and Kate through the greenwood, Kate, as they pass, plucking nuts from the tree[24]s and filling her apron with them. They rode on and on till they came to a green hill. The prince here drew bridle and spoke, "Open, open, green hill, and let the young prince in with his horse and his hound," and Kate added, "and his lady him behind."

Immediately the green hill opened and they passed in. The prince entered a magnificent hall, brightly lighted up, and many beautiful fairies surrounded the prince and led him off to the dance. Meanwhile, Kate, without being noticed, hid herself behind the door[25]. There she sees the prince dancing, and dancing, and dancing, till he could dance no longer and fell upon a couch. Then the fairies would fan him till he could rise again and go on dancing.

At last the cock crew, and the prince made all haste to get on horseback; Kate jumped up behind, and home they rode. When the morning sun rose they came in and found Kate sitting down by the fire and cracking her nuts. Kate said the prince had a good night; but she would not sit up another night unless she was to get a peck

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21. Detail excluded from Lang's version.
22. In Lurie's version, Kate has hidden herself in the room so that the prince does not know she is there.
23. Lurie: "He walked as if in a dream." Mayo: "In a daze." Briggs: "There was a glazed and flightless look in [his eyes]."
24. Some versions (Lamond Books) do not clarify that she picks nuts as they ride.
25. In Mayo's version, Kate realizes she is in the hall of the fairy folk and if they catch her spying they will never let her go.

of gold[26]. The second night passed as the first had done. The prince got up at midnight and rode away to the green hill and the fairy ball, and Kate went with him, gathering nuts as they rode through the forest. This time she did not watch the prince, for she knew he would dance and dance, and dance. But she sees a fairy baby playing with a wand, and overhears one of the fairies say[27]: "Three strokes of that wand would make Kate's sick sister as bonnie as ever she was." So Kate rolled nuts to the fairy baby, and rolled nuts till the baby toddled after the nuts and let fall the wand, and Kate took it up and put it in her apron. And at cockcrow they rode home as before, and the moment Kate got home to her room she rushed and touched Anne three times with the wand, and the nasty sheep's head fell off and she was her own pretty self again. The third night Kate consented to watch, only if she should marry the sick prince[28]. All went on as on the first two nights. This time the fairy baby was playing with a birdie[29]; Kate heard one of the fairies say: "Three bites of that birdie would make the sick prince as well as ever he was." Kate rolled all the nuts she had to the fairy baby till the birdie was dropped, and Kate put it in her apron.

At cockcrow they set off again, but instead of cracking her nuts as she used to do, this time Kate plucked the feathers off and cooked the birdie. Soon there arose a very savoury smell. "Oh!" said the sick prince, "I wish I had a bite of that birdie," so Kate gave him a bite of the birdie, and he rose up on his elbow. By-and-by he cried out again: "Oh, if I had another bite of that birdie!" so Kate gave him another bite, and he sat up on his bed. Then he said again: "Oh! if I only had a third bite of that birdie!" So Kate gave him a third bite, and he rose quite well, dressed himself, and

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26. In Lamond Books, the king offers her a bag of gold Bonnet-pieces.
27. In Lang and the Lamond Books' versions, this happens on the first night she's there.
28. Mayo has Kate ask for this after the prince has been healed. Lamond Books has the king order the marriage after the prince has been healed.
29. In Lamond Books, this happens on the second visit.

sat down by the fire, and when the folk came in next morning they found Kate and the young prince cracking nuts together. Meanwhile his brother had seen Annie and had fallen in love with her, as everybody did who saw her sweet pretty face. So the sick son married the well sister, and the well son married the sick sister, and they all lived happy and died happy, and never drank out of a dry cappy[30].

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30. Lurie: "They lived happily together ever after." Lamond Books: "And, unless they be dead since then, the young couples are living yet."

APPENDIX B: Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey

Prior to your eighteenth birthday:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often… Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often… Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever… Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
4. Did you often or very often feel that … No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
5. Did you often or very often feel that … You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
7. Was your mother or stepmother:
   Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __
8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
   Yes No

If Yes, enter 1 __

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?

   Yes No

   If Yes, enter 1 __

10. Did a household member go to prison?
    Yes No

    If Yes, enter 1 __

Now add up your "Yes" answers: _ (this is your ACE Score)

REFERENCE:

Nakazawa, Donna Jackson. *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal.* Atria Books, 2016.

APPENDIX C: References for 'Healing in Three Parts' Venn Diagram

Markers of Healing

- Playfulness (van der Kolk 205)
- Place the trauma in the past (van der Kolk 231)
- Safety, mastery, delight (van der Kolk 308)
- Integration (Silberg XVI)

Markers of Healing + Elements that Facilitate Healing:

- Creativity (van der Kolk 205)
- Imagination (van der Kolk 350, 259, 305; Perry 167)
- Self-Awareness (van der Kolk 208, 247, 254)
- (Re)connecting with humans (Van der Kolk 210)
- Eye contact (van der Kolk 336)
- Intentional breathing (van der Kolk 270)
- Feel what you feel, know what you know (van der Kolk 305, 335, 344)
- Being heard/mirrored (van der Kolk 301, 352)
- Heart rate regulation (van der Kolk 267)
- Forgiveness (Nakazawa 174)
- Talking about the future (Silberg 31)

Markers of Healing + Prevention and Resilience:

- Self-confidence (Van der Kolk 205)

Markers of Healing + Elements that Facilitate Healing + Prevention and Resilience:

- Relationships (van der Kolk 210, 352; Harris 114; Perry 85)
- Communication (van der Kolk 235)
- Connection (van der Kolk 308)

Elements that Facilitate Healing:

- Sleep (Harris 114)
- Draw (Nakazawa 160; Perry 73)
- Diet adjustment (Nakazawa 181, Harris 114)
- Feel emotions (van der Kolk 240, 266, 273)
- Movement:
    - Physical self-defense training (van der Kolk 218)
    - Dance (van der Kolk 333)
    - Exercise (Harris 114)
- Massage therapy (Perry 169)
- Physically represent the trauma (van der Kolk 300)
- Patterned, repetitive experiences (Perry 152)
- Remove protective selves (van der Kolk 295)
- Tell your story (Nakazawa 88)
- Mindsight (Nakazawa 170)
- Observe experience (van der Kolk 253)
- Honor the course of survival (van der Kolk 213)
- Awareness of transition experience (van der Kolk 274; 25)
- Move between states of being (e.g. memory/present) (van der Kolk 245)

- Name the trauma (van der Kolk 232)
- Mindfulness (Harris 114; Newberg and Waldman 14)

Elements that Facilitate Healing + Prevention and Resilience:

- Support Network (van der Kolk 210)
- Movement (van der Kolk 169)

Prevention and Resilience:

- Nurturing caregiver(s) (Nakazawa 129, 154; Silberg 20)
- Structured household (Nakazawa 156)
- Hopeful Community (Nakazawa 155)
- Independence (Nakazawa 156)
- A go-getter personality (Nakazawa 156)
- Affection (Nakazawa 154-155)
- Positive relationships with adults (Nakazawa 155, Harris 105; Perry 328; Baron-Cohen 51)
- Support in School (Nakazawa 155)

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APPENDIX D: Resilience Questionnaire

Please circle the most accurate answer under each statement:

1. I believe that my mother loved me when I was little.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

2. I believe that my father loved me when I was little.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

3. When I was little, other people helped my mother and father take care of me and they seemed to love me.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

4. I've heard that when I was an infant someone in my family enjoyed playing with me, and I enjoyed it, too.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

5. When I was a child, there were relatives in my family who made me feel better if I was sad or worried.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

6. When I was a child, neighbors or my friends' parents seemed to like me

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

7. When I was a child, teachers, coaches, youth leaders, or ministers were there to help me.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

8. Someone in my family cared about how I was doing in school.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

9. My family, neighbors, and friends talked often about making our lives better.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

10. We had rules in our house and were expected to keep them.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

11. When I felt really bad, I could almost always find someone I trusted to talk to.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

12. When I was a youth, people noticed that I was capable and could get things done.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

13. I was independent and a go-getter.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

14. I believed that life is what you make it.

Definitely true	Probably true	Not sure	Probably not true	Definitely not true

How many of these fourteen protective factors did I have as a child and youth? (How many of the fourteen were circled “Definitely True” or “Probably True”?)

_____

Of these circled, how many are still true for me? _____

REFERENCE:

Nakazawa, Donna Jackson. *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal.* Atria Books, 2016.

APPENDIX E: Young Adult Retellings of 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Cinderella' (2012-2022)

'Beauty and the Beast'

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Cross, Sarah. *Kill Me Softly*. New York: Egmont, 2012.

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Harmon, Amy. *Making Faces*. Spencer Hill Press, 2017.

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Jay, Stacey. *Of Beast and Beauty.* Delacorte Press, 2013.

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Mannering, G. R. *Roses*. Sky Pony Press, 2013.

Marriott, Zoë. *Barefoot on the Wind*. Walker Books, 2016.

Mass, Wendy. *Beauty and the Beast*. Scholastic Inc., 2012.

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Meyer, Joanna Ruth. *Echo North*. Page Street Kids, 2019.

Michaels, Alicia. *Bellamy and The Brute.* Clean Teen Publishing, 2017.

Novik, Naomi. *Uprooted*. Del Rey, 2015.

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Poston, Ashley. *Bookish and the Beast*. Quirk Books, 2020.

Prendergast, G. S. *Zero Repeat Forever*.Simon & Schuster, 2017.

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Whitten, Hannah. *For the Wolf.* Orbit, 2021.

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‘Cinderella’

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Buck, Alicia. *Out of the Ashes*. Sweetwater Books, 2015.

Cass, Kiera. *The Selection*. HarperTeen, 2012.

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