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A Review of *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* (2017), *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (2018) and *In an Absent Dream* (2019)

Reviewed by Alison Baker

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IN A BROKEN DREAM: THE HOME FOR WAYWARD CHILDREN SERIES

Review by Alison Baker

McGuire, Seanan. *Down Among the Sticks and Bones*. Tor, 2017; *Beneath the Sugar Sky*. Tor, 2018; *In an Absent Dream*. Tor, 2019. Novellas.

Seanan McGuire's award-winning novella, *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016) introduced readers to Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children. Part-school, part-therapeutic setting, the home houses and educates young people who have returned from the wonderlands that they travelled to as children. Her subsequent novellas, published after *Every Heart a Doorway*, are companion texts - only *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (2018) can really be considered a sequel, as it follows on from the events of the first novella. Both *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* (2017) and *In an Absent Dream* (2019) tell the stories of the other characters connected to the Home, set within this universe of McGuire's creation.

Down Among the Sticks and Bones tells the story of Jack and Jill, the twins who found a door at the bottom of their grandmother's trunk. The girls are considered accessories to their parents' upper middle-class lifestyle, who want one perfect child, either a sporty, preppy boy, or a delicate, feminine girl; and they impose gender binaries on their twins. This is overturned once the girls reach the Moors; the twins are manipulated into selecting their roles as the daughter of the Master or the apprentice of Dr Bleak. Both are gendered roles: Jill chooses to select the delicate dresses, beauty treatments, and an iron-rich luxurious diet of the vampire-in-training: a role that values femininity only for its corporeal possibilities. The Master expects "... your loyalty, your devotion and your obedience," but does not value her intelligence, her opinions, or her personality (96). Jack, meanwhile, chooses to join the "mad scientist," to wear suits, boots, and gloves (192). She learns from Dr Bleak how to reanimate corpses, how to dissect cadavers, and how to carry out exhumations; she is taught to be logical, rational, and to think scientifically. McGuire demonstrates that Jack and Jill's parents, in their inability to recognise that girls can be both sporty and quiet, or feminine and clever, have not recognised the desire in Jill to be pretty, or in Jack to be challenged intellectually, similarly to how Robin Hobb subverts the heteronormativity of the "binary oppositions between body and mind" within her work (Prater 27). Ultimately this culminates in a series of events, including the death that leads to Jack and Jill being chased out of the Moors, but also represents a profound loss for Jack and Jill's parents, who through their selfish desire to have one perfect child, actually end up childless, and may thus be interpreted as a more contemporary morality tale.

Beneath the Sugar Sky is the sequel to *Every Heart a Doorway*, continuing where this novella left off, shortly after the murders of students and staff at the Wayward Home. It begins

with new student Cora (who has been a mermaid in a world called the Trenches) tentatively joining with Nadya (from a Drowned World, where she lived among turtles) in a pond in the grounds. However, this watery bonding is halted by a naked girl falling from the sky, who claims to be Rini, the daughter of Sumi, the first murder victim in *Every Heart a Doorway*. Thus begins a quest to avenge their friend and fulfil Sumi's prophesised defeat of the Queen of Cakes in the land of Confection, before Rini fades from existence. Just as in the other novellas in the series, McGuire adeptly uses Fantasy to interrogate stereotyping and prejudice: in this text it is what McGuire describes as Cora's fatness, perceived as laziness and greediness, that become the focus. Her size and strength has been invaluable to her as a mermaid; the Queen of Cakes underestimates her:

[Cora] knew what the Queen wasn't seeing... She wasn't seeing the athlete or the scholar or the friend or the hero of the trenches. All she was seeing was fatty fatty fat fat, because that was all they ever saw when they were looking at her that way. That was all that they were looking for (115).

McGuire's approach to inclusive representation, as in *Every Heart a Doorway*, is beautifully rendered in *Beneath a Sugar Sky*. Cora's size makes her insecure and inclined to suspect overtures of friendship as being anything but because of society's preconceptions about her. However, it is to her advantage in Confection; Cora sees that the Queen can be manipulated by flattery, and this enables the Wayward Children to defeat her.

The most recent novella in the Wayward Children sequence is *In an Absent Dream* (2019). It is another prequel, although predating even *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* (2017) with its subject matter, addressing the story of Lundy, the final murder victim in *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016). Katherine Lundy travels to a Goblin Market, a world where she can travel backwards and forwards until she becomes too old. A well-read girl, Lundy knows that she must follow the rules until she is eighteen, and then must choose either the Market or her home.

Unlike the characters within other novellas in the series, Lundy's home-life is devoid of conflict. She is not escaping a family that does not understand her as her father had the same journey to the market that she did. However, his assumption that because they have shared their experiences there, that his daughter will want to make the same choice that he did means that he is unable to help her with her decision, and so she tries to bend the rules rather than break them. Lundy's bargaining to try and get out of needing to conform to the rules ends in her becoming the Lundy that we meet in the first novella: ageing backwards, a middle-aged woman in the body of a little girl. She fails to in her attempt to break from these rules and suffers the consequences, becoming another Wayward child in this suitably allegorical narrative that perhaps demonstrates these sorts of stories do not always have the traditional happy endings synonymous with the genre.

Of all of the novellas, this was the one that engaged me the least; perhaps because I was not strongly drawn to Lundy in the first novella, and therefore her murder felt somewhat inconsequential

without this backstory, and it might be beneficial for new readers to read the novellas in internal chronological order, starting with *In An Absent Dream* before *Every Heart a Doorway*. However, McGuire's lyrical, rhythmical writing contrived to draw me in much as with the rest of the series – and there are other backstories that I would love to read: such as how Eleanor West came to open the home, or related to some of the other students who attend, like Christopher. Since McGuire is committed to an eight book series as announced in early 2019, I hope that these further explore the rich world that she has crafted, within this inimitable style, and that they continue to examine, challenge, and subvert many of the traditional tropes of the genre, with similar effectiveness.

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BIONOTE

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