

In “My Childhood is Ruined! Harper Lee and Racial Innocence,” Katherine Henninger reads Lee’s multigenerational novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* as simultaneously raising awareness of racial injustice and allaying a need for immediate social change through “sympathetic identification with the child” and its “promise of futurity.” In its belated sequel, an adult Scout must “confront that the whiteness her father so shockingly represents is part of her...has made her who she is.” The child in the (adult) Southern Gothic functions as both a repository of inherited pain (including the history of chattel slavery that Faulkner called “America’s original sin”) and a haunting evocation of the continuation of those injuries. From *The Sound and the Fury*’s Quentin Compson to *Beloved*’s Denver Garner, child characters represent abiding personal and collective trauma. Yet contemporary southern gothic literature aimed at young readers often presents young (white) protagonists who uncover familial or geographical connections to a slavery past through plot devices that create racial, generational, perspectival, and temporal distance from that past. Using Megan Boler’s concept of a “passive empathy” that distances the reading self from the portrayed other and absolves the reader of social responsibility, this paper reads four gothic novels aimed at young audiences that each present a discovered connection to the history of American chattel slavery: R.A. Nelson’s *Days of Little Texas*, Lesley Blume’s *Tennyson*, Jane Nickerson’s *The Mirk and the Midnight Hour*, and Avi’s *Something Upstairs*. Each of these novels differently negotiates absolution for characters (and readers), often leveraging empathy as an alternative to justice, and portraying a past laid to rest despite social ills that continue to haunt us.