

“Down beneath the water, I felt her”: Haunting Girlhood in Sarah Jude’s *The May Queen Murders*

“I don’t want you and Heather down by that water,” Ivy’s mother tells her in Sarah Jude’s *The May Queen Murders*; “too much blood in it” (Jude 35). Amid the recent torrent of young adult novels pivoting narratively on the disappearance of a girl – dead or missing; ambiguously absent; gone -- *The May Queen Murders* picks up the symbolics of water and drowning to explore girlhood as a site of simultaneous violence, vulnerability, and threat. The “gone girls” of YA suggest that girlhood is being defined in this cultural moment by a tendency towards displacement, dissociation, and disappearance. In their absence, “gone girls” continue to bear an uncanny presence; the fluid instability of these girl bodies induces a shoring up of borders, boundaries, and identities, in unspoken response to the structural critique that is their haunting (cf. Avery Gordon).

This fluid instability is made textual in Jude’s novel through the watery disappearances of cousins Heather and Ivy. Two girls enter the water and one comes out, both inherently changed in ways which come to bear on the community around them. At stake in these disappearances, as Claudia Castañeda argues, is the “making” of the child, the futures she embodies, and the threat inherent in her “capacity to become” something *else*, something unmanageable, unsustainable, and unknowable (Castañeda 1). When Heather disappears from the May Day festivities, two transformative moments become paired in the text: from girlhood to womanhood around the figure of the May Queen (“she’s gotta be gentle, virtuous, and love the land and folks here” (32)) and from girlhood to *something else* around the depths of the river. Submerged beyond the anxious adult gaze, Heather slips from the future imperative of girlhood and the gendered course of life that it entails, opening up the possibility of *something else*. As *The May Queen Murders*’ investment in growth, changeability, and heterosexual futures reveals, the narrative horror of a missing girl is not merely what may be happening to her, but what she might become, and what she might do, freed from the social constraints that work to make girls into women.