

“The Tug of the River”: Possibilities and Hazards of the Posthuman in Garth Nix’s *Sabriel*

Cary Wolfe argues that humans can expand their power by extending their consciousness into physical parts of the world, thus transgressing divisions between human consciousness and physical objects. While Wolfe’s argument is grounded in the language of the cyborg, I extend his argument to human unity with forces in the natural world. Garth Nix’s *Sabriel*’s eponymous protagonist begins the novel as a 17-year-old schoolgirl, but she extends her consciousness into the physical world through the use of seven bells, a sword, and a bound creature taking the form of a cat, all of which have their own personalities, while maturing into the identity of the Abhorsen, the keeper of the border between life and death. These extensions of consciousness expand Sabriel’s power so that she can walk freely between life and death, a river with a current that pulls away at consciousness, imposing its own will to twist, warp, and mutate resistant souls. *Sabriel* thus presents both possibility and hazard in posthuman extensions of consciousness -- possibility in the positive extensions of the Abhorsen’s bells, sword, and cat; hazard in the negative extension of the malignant river into human consciousness.

The Abhorsen’s tools, the bells, sword, cat-creature, all have their own magical personalities and attempt to act on their own against Sabriel. As she develops over the novel, her consciousness expands in relation to the bells, sword, and cat, allowing her greater powers against the effects of the river of death. Beginning at Sabriel’s stillbirth when she is carried briefly into death the river pulls at and influences her consciousness. The physical manifestations of this influence promise to become more pronounced as the river affects her more -- the novel provides plenty of instances of humans who, having succumbed to the influence of the river, have mutated almost beyond recognition, notably the primary antagonist Kerrigor.

Sabriel gains power over her world by extending her consciousness into physical objects, a posthuman transformation. This form of posthumanity comes with both possibilities for adolescent power and the hazard of corruption of identity.