

Lyn Fairchild Hawks
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David Gill
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A.S. King™ : A Surrealist Sauce for America's Misery Meal

How do you write about a traumatic, complex topic of white privilege? As I grapple with that question, I see Amy King's answer in her young adult novel *Dig*, which is to bring the secret sauce of surrealism. It's my lame pun in honor of CanIHelpYou?, her character who works the Arby's Drive-Thru Window. I might describe King's cuisine as Guy Fieri's "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives" meets *The Barefoot Contessa*--brash, loud, high-speed face-stuffing scenes layered over complex ingredients and intentional, graceful assembly. King never breaks stride to explain her jarring, surrealist approach as she delivers a rapidfire series of traumatized characters waking up to or perpetuating their complicity in systemic racism. Here's her recipe: if you give the reader just enough disorientation through point of view switches, jump cuts, and new characters; deliver just enough strange endowed objects; and take us far enough into characters' scarred histories, then you as writer might be able to capture the horror, unpredictability, and shock of life under white supremacy. Most importantly, though, remember to always stay plugged into the marvelous, or else why ask teens to read at all?

King may find her writing merely "weird" and "different" (Demmings) but let's present her mind to the average American who prefers "Dancing with the Stars," Big Macs, and Myrtle Beach. In that world, contemporary YA doesn't stretch beyond what Sarah Dessen dishes out--no offense to YA romance. In those books, people die but they don't speak beyond the

grave. People disappear but they don't "flicker" across time zones (King 21). People don't deal with suppressed trauma by carrying shovels everywhere. As VCFA student Tiffany Demmings explains in her critical thesis, "That's Absurd--Of Course There Are Rules! An Interview with A.S. King on Surrealism in Young Adult Literature," what King does parallels the twentieth century artistic movement that resisted rationalism and let the unconscious drive creation. As King tells Demmings, "I think in very choppy cuts—think about film like a cut to the next scene. A real choppy cut gives a feel of surrealism" (qtd in Demmings, 9). Her purpose? "I guess what makes a surrealist book is somehow being able to knit together trauma inside and outside the book...For me it's like capturing shock" (qtd in Demmings, 16).

With *Dig's* several points of view in rapid succession that make us reel, we have to trust early on that this barrage of folks will all connect at some point. First through omniscient point of view we meet two grandparents, Marla and Gottfried. *Why two OK Boomers, we ask, and a godlike narrator? I thought this was YA.* For readers used to first- and third-person points of view, disorientation is nigh. This bird's eye view knows that Marla Hemmings hides her Easter eggs while "Four feet behind her, Gottfried is hacking at a patch of onion grass with a trowel" (vi). The hiding and hacking, later to become emblematic actions but meaningless now, are swiftly forgotten as we jump right into Gottfried's memory of driving at 17 and accidentally killing two robins busy mating in the road. As we try to process this upsetting image, we're right back in Marla's highly-irritable head: "He only ever needed to go to work and mow the lawn. She raised five children and did all the work that came with it and she isn't losing *her* mind" (King 1). Suddenly, we cut back to "The car was going too fast to stop. The robins were jumping

up and then landing for another session...” and we realize, wait, we’re inside Gottfried’s traumatized memory. Huh?

Something wicked this way comes, we can feel it, but we have no idea what. We won’t know till the novel’s end that two of their grandchildren have been sexually assaulted, and that had these two grandparents been more compassionate with their children, things might have been different. The robins, an image of both death and sex, are an endowed object telling Gottfried he should have done what later The Freak, the ghost of his raped granddaughter, yells from her grave: “Mate with purpose” (King 387). Gottfried killed those robins just as he was about to marry Marla, whom he doesn’t seem to love, as evidenced in their minimal communication and his mention of her “meanness” (King 250), never mind lines such as “Gottfried Thinks Marla Is the Grim Reaper” (King iv). What if he had not married her? This we will ask too. What if he hadn’t built a loveless empire upon potatoes and real estate, generational wealth based on white privilege? “Such success in real estate” is how Marla describes the Hemmings’ empire (King 186), which if one studies the history of American real estate, is full of deed restrictions, racial covenants, and redlining (Trapasso). The robins are the first reminder to do the opposite of white supremacists and systemic racism: instead, “Pay attention to love” (King 387).

King doesn’t ever directly state, “So these two Boomers represent white privilege,” but instead creates artful and art-full disorientation and dis-ease in a loveless world of white supremacy. Liken it to what surrealist painter Leonora Carrington did when serving her dinner guests hair omelets (Temple). For all of *Dig*, our brains work feverishly to understand why these characters do what they do and why they suffer. Their seemingly random traumas and

cringeworthy revelations are eventually explained. By the end we know that all of Marla's kids despise her; are either dying or destroyed by a cold, materialistic upbringing; and have gone on to traumatize their children. One daughter, mother to granddaughter CanIHelpYou?, is an unapologetic racist who actually keeps an heirloom "slave bell" in the house and has killed off any hope of connecting with her daughter (King 145). Another daughter, Missy, mother to granddaughter Loretta, is so tuned out from partner abuse, poverty, and drugs, that she has no idea her daughter is covered in flea bites or sexually molested (King 108). One son, Harry, is dying of cancer while his son, grandson Malcolm, is plagued by diarrhea after their constant travels between the U.S. and Jamaica (King 70). Meanwhile Gottfried has been a silent witness all these years, the good guy doing nothing (King 250). So the omniscient point of view for the Easter scene, like a robin hopping hyperactively between two very unhappy heads, is a perfect vantage point for this hot mess of dysfunction, this family of white privilege.

Omniscience also works to distance us a bit and represent an all-seeing, reified eye that compares folks, which is key to a hierarchical system where there's always elite, One-percenter levels. It's probably no ironic coincidence that Gottfried's name connotes God and peace; he's the god who refuses to intervene ("Gottfried Family History"). Omniscience also illustrates there are very unpleasant secrets against a jolly backdrop of spring. Like *The Truman Show* or *Pleasantville*, where cheery facades hide disturbing truths, King gives us The Great White Lie, pretenders who are actually very disturbed, ironically on a bright day of spring celebrating resurrection. Note how Gottfried's vantage point with short, declarative sentences troubles us further such that we almost jump when the potato peeler removes "skin," because we've just heard of innocent robins killed in the road (King 2). It's probably no coincidence brown skin is

being peeled away, either. But we're too busy asking, *Why is this dude crying while peeling potatoes? Why are innocent mating robins killed by the nice guy's car?*

Meet white privilege: a Mac truck rolling over innocent people, and random in who it elevates. While that conclusion can't be drawn during *Dig's* very first read, our reader ignorance at this stage also mirrors how for many white people the trauma of systemic racism isn't evident. King knows exactly what she's doing when it comes to the right dose of sauce to serve up when, because by the end of the book, the Easter dinner Marla and Gottfried are preparing will actually be served, and at that very table, grandchild Katie (CanIHelpYou?) shares this observation as she tries to imagine her one Black friend sitting down with them:

"As I finish my plate of food, I try to imagine Ian at this Easter dinner. He'd be so funny and so great and he'd ignore the weird shit everyone is saying and he'd treat it like some kind of anthropology project. That's how he has to get through life here. Because every single person he meets is racist in some way and they have no fucking idea they are." (353)

What's marvelous here is how Katie has broken the chain of white supremacy, not only with this realization but also acknowledging the problem of her placing Ian's photos all over her bedroom mirror as a way to get back at her racist, slave-bell-hoarding mom. "Even in two-dimensional form," she says, "I'm using him" (King 237). She respects Ian's request to part ways. Gen Z for the epiphany win, giving us hope! Like Malcolm, her cousin and a grandchild as well, she is capable of saying she is white: "Forgetting the names of the hired help is very white, Pop" (King 83). As Gen Z does, she sees through the B.S., a white teen humbly able to be part of reparations and acknowledge their part in systemic racism. She's a soulmate to Malcolm, her cousin, who sees through the B.S. of first class amenities on planes and white social rituals that don't like conversations "about the obvious link between slavery, poverty, and mass

incarceration” (King 67). At page 67, Malcolm shows up as the first kid to make the links, and at that point, we can cast it off as characterization of a liberal thinker, and not necessarily The Point of the story. That’s what white people get to do: make systemic racism an afterthought.

Can we talk about King’s marvelous naming conventions in all their mystery, hilarity, and brilliance? To Demmings’ point of surrealism having “no rules” (1), we’re not entirely sure why Malcolm doesn’t get a special name but others do. Meanwhile we laugh, confused, at the randomness of CanIHelpYou?’s name, until we learn Katie herself is waking up to the system that America serves up: corporate greed fed by minimum-wage labor, addictive and unhealthy foods, and brutal competition à la Hunger Games, designed by white oligarchs with manifest-destiny dreams. Katie serves up the famous potatoes plus a bonus--“all you have to do is order potato cakes and say please” (King 131) in order to get your weed. Again, it’s King’s right dose at the right time, because when Katie pities those customers who abuse her, some white readers may not yet be connecting white entitlement as part of systemic racism, and just think it’s her rant against rude people: “I pity anyone who says *gimme*. The world is going to be a giant disappointment for you. All you’ll ever get is the kindness of the Drive-Thru girl after growling your entitled order into my head” (King 91). What this book is, is a slow burn of truth for white folks to wake up to, to see all the corruption infecting every layer of our skin so privileged. Like Katie, white readers may be waking up white more often, just as she by book’s end says, “I always thought I was so much better than other white people...But I think I might be *them*. Shit” (387).

Two more bits of sauce brilliance via jump cuts when next we meet some very scary dudes in a chapter titled, “Jake & Bill can bring the snake out now”(King 2). Why do these young

men carry a snake around school on a Sunday and give “no fucks” (King 3)? Are they even connected to Marla and Gottfried, whom we just met? By the end we learn these dudes have killed the estranged granddaughter who calls herself The Freak, who seems to have surrealist super powers, only heard and seen by some. Bill, we learn later, belongs to a white supremacist organization that includes police. At this point, though, we feel slightly terrorized by young men wandering school grounds with a snake, especially one who’s seen enough disciplinary action that the omniscient narrator pauses to note, “It was once suggested that the school should rename the in-school suspension room the Jake-Marks-Gives-Zero-Fucks Room” (3). Reading this description, we wonder if these white boys (we can assume because they are always white, school shooters) will return with AK-47s to a school or maybe a Black church.

Once we learn by the end that Bill is responsible for killing The Freak, we move from a place of shock to asking, *Why does a sadistic, sociopathic boy get to rape and murder a girl, and carry a snake around? Why does he get to be part of a white supremacist organization to which the police are tied? Why does he get to roll through stop signs while police wave?* (181). Bill’s power shows he’s a boy given carte blanche, literally and figuratively, to destroy. Dots begin to connect for us, where suddenly there are more racists than we thought, such as nice-guy Mike, next-door neighbor to David, called The Shoveler most of the book and who doesn’t know he’s a grandson of Marla and Gottfried. (The happy grandparents don’t know their own grandkids?! What the--?!) Mike is more of a dad to David than his own, but guess what’s on his “left deltoid”? “100% WHITE POWER” (256). Some nice guys plan on finishing first.

Back to the beginning, where on page 3 we are given an introductory list of characters, including “CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: The Shoveler Mr. _____ son The Shoveler’s Mom

Mike the Neighbor Mrs. Second Grade” (King) and followed by seven more. So early on, we can’t wrap our heads around a cast this big. We even wonder if King herself “gives no fucks” about our comprehension. Bizarre names of who we’ll learn later are the grandkids keep us turning pages, searching for the connection among David, The Shoveler (fatherless with a transient, kleptomaniac mom); the Freak (estranged from her parents, and raped and killed); CanIHelpYou? (drug dealer); Loretta the Flea-Circus Ring Mistress (abused); and First-Class Malcolm (dad dying from cancer). The stories are harrowing enough and the teens’ musings, weirdly intimate enough, that we lean forward. Marvelous humor breaks make the misery meal less miserable, such as when Malcom reviews the history of the flush toilet (King 70). Maybe sometimes the sauce is actually cod liver oil or whatever gross truth the system needs to purge.

When you open *Dig*, you certainly aren’t expecting mentions of diarrhea and toilets any more than you expect to see the race dots connected later between Malcolm’s love for a Jamaican girl who likes him but won’t release her agency to his American whiteness. There’s not a thing in this book that doesn’t involve race, colonization, privilege, or their related traumas. Seemingly innocent potatoes are an endowed object representing the truth that must be dug out. Why The Freak is attending a lecture on potatoes, we do not understand on page 36, but there’s that thin thread connected to Gottfried crying, so we stay to watch. The Freak, who gets to “flicker” across time zones and join some professor’s class, presents to us the wisdom of the endowed object, a symbol of systemic racism and white privilege:

“Who would have thought Northern Europeans would rely so much on a plant so poisonous? Everything about it is toxic except for the tubers themselves. Leaves, stems, roots, seeds, all poison. The secret...is keeping the spuds beneath the soil. Because any part of the plant that sees light can hurt you if you eat it. Even kill you--but only after making you puke your guts out and go crazy...The world we live in--this dominion of Northern Europeans--is the way it is because of *Solanum tuberosum*. If you ask me, it’s ironic that our ancestors were able to

avoid poisoning themselves on the plants, and yet rose to poison the whole world with themselves.” (King 36)

King uses potatoes to make those underground connections constantly, till by the end, all the poisonous roots, shoots, and leaves are plain as day. For white people, this disorienting walk is absolutely essential to understanding what it’s like to *not* be white in America. To be Ian, who can’t even eat Easter dinner somewhere, date a girl, walk down the street, or drive a car, without race being a factor. Though our dots aren’t connecting yet between Malcolm’s digestive system and how all the teens are actually “poisoned” grandchildren, it’s because we are more mesmerized by The Freak who in a chapter titled “NAKED FREAK CAN’T CRY” calls herself a “dirt burrito” which is kind of like a potato (King 36). We don’t know why this naked girl knows everything or why she chills with earthworms (King 36) and learns their secrets, until we understand she finds a way in this surrealist world to speak to the other grandchildren and tell them where she has been killed and buried by Jake and Bill.

In another section starring The Freak, King uses both third person close and also fly-on-the-wall point of view to disorient while echoing her theme. Here we still don’t know The Freak is actually a ghost, which is why she has superpowers to yank a shovel from the hands of two high school bullies. After we see her feeling things --“The Freak feels like she’s failed him as she watches the shovel graze a boy’s cheek--” (King 146), she grabs the shovel and throws the boys across the hall. Then we go to this new passage, new point of view:

“Teachers try to get students into their rooms. Try to get the place to quiet down. None of the students listen. They mill around in circles like they’re in an enormous, angry blender, looking for more ingredients.

‘It’s like a fuckin’ prison riot,’ one teacher says to another.

‘I don’t know how I do this anymore,’ the teacher replies” (King 147).

What is surreal here is that we think we're in The Freak's head but we're no longer sure. Now we're a camera? We're not sure why we get this moment with the teachers until the end, when King has proven that all characters float in this chaotic, unhappy world where boys carry snakes and shovels, where teachers are merely hamstrung referees unless sometimes marvelously angry girls appear like guardian angels. Again, how is this any weirder than real life where troubled white boys wandering into schools and churches with guns? It's an effed-up world, and we all should be shocked, angry, and sad, ready to become angels ourselves.

Time's truly up for the essay, but had I more time, I would tell you about the endowed objects of tunnels (the invisible rules of competition and hierarchy, the narrow, American-Idol-like pipelines to success forced by white supremacy); or snow (the cold and freezing nature of caste systems, and Anglo-Saxon, Puritan parents denying their offspring affection); or shovels (the need to dig to find the true history of the world that only the lynched, raped, and exiled dead from race genocide can tell). Through all these sad, strange endowed objects glows what surrealist and founder of the movement, André Breton, called "the presence of the marvelous," adding, "This passion for eternity...lends an unforgettable intensity to their torments, and to mine" (UbuWeb Papers). The Freak is eternal now that she is dead. She can see all things across time. Like a god, she can witness and intervene in the sad lives of her cousins. The Freak embodies the marvelous when she pleads with her cousins upon her exhumation.

"DIG YOUR WAY OUT!

"The Freak is tired of the Easter egg hunts, the race--the competition. She wins, okay? She's dead, okay?

NOBODY WINS!

CHANGE YOUR MIND!" (384)

If you “mate with purpose” (King 392), if you love others, The Freak (or perhaps a godlike narrator, we’re not sure) says this will happen: the “Tunnel closes” (King 387). We can assume they mean the narrow tunnel of white supremacy only letting a few win--it’s over. At least for this book it is.

What King has delivered is the opposite of a Happy Meal. She’s given us essential food for restoring America’s health. And that is the marvelous--the hope King gives in showing us a New World, one where Gen Z can help us all make it right.

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[Lyn Fairchild Hawks](#) is a North Carolina YA author who writes about gifted, weird, and wise activist youth. Lyn is an MFA graduate of the Vermont College of Fine Art's program in Writing for Children and Young Adults, where she was mentored by A.S. King. A former high school and middle school teacher, she is the author of [Teaching Macbeth: A Differentiated Approach](#), where she argues for *Dig* to be taught alongside the Bard. For more rationale and tips on how to make YA part of your school's literary canon, read her blog post and her thesis at, ["How YA Is Literary: The Search for an Abundant Canon."](#)