

APL Volumes

Season 1, Episode 5: *THE ONLY GOOD INDIANS*

*This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.*

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

MADDY: Hello and welcome to APL Volumes, a new podcast from the Austin Public Library. In this first season, we're exploring the horror genre and its six main subgenres: Cosmic, Gothic, Humor, Paranormal, Psychological, and Visceral.

This episode is all about the Paranormal subgenre, and the novel *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones.

I'm Maddy, your host with a totally normal human head, and an Adult Services librarian at APL's Central library. Later this episode I'll be joined by my APL co-worker Michael Rodriguez, a Library Associate in our Circulation Department, to stomp, kick, and bite, if we have to, our way through this book.

MUSIC

Paranormal horror is pretty intrinsically tied to the entire horror genre. Many of humanity's first horror stories come from folklore and mythology and theology, giving shape to frightening things we did not understand.

When *The Castle of Otranto* published in 1764, it became widely regarded as the first English-language horror novel. And even though some ghostlike visions appear in the text, they aren't the villains or plot points, and so the novel pivots the early days of horror lit, which we know is the realm of the Gothic subgenre, away from the paranormal elements of folk tales.

The realm of monster horror, which is ultimately what like 90 percent of paranormal horror is, really kicks off in 1818 when Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is published and effectively ends the official Gothic lit era. The next year, the short story "The Vampyre" (spelled V-a-m-p-y-r-e) by John Polidori was published – both "The Vampyre" and *Frankenstein* were actually written at the same time, during the same vacation, as part of a contest to write the best horror story. Because, apparently, something about being stuck in a house with Lord Byron for multiple days made people want to write about monsters. Frankenstein pulls on the ultimate myth story – the story of creation – and mixes it with new scientific advancements of the time. Surgery as a unified discipline made great strides at the end of the 1700s, and that is very obviously reflected in Frankenstein.

Monsters are the products of an era's cultural anxieties, and this can be traced through the history of paranormal fiction. After the age of surgery in the early 1800s, the late 1800s see the ripple effect of Darwin's research on human nature – works like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1886 and *The Great God Pan* in 1890 show a sudden fascination with devolution as the flip side of evolution. Combined with social, political, and military upheaval in the early 1900s, these monsters move between human and abhuman or even animal, like werewolves – and Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos is another result, though we know it extends past Paranormal's border of scientific understanding and on to Cosmic's realm of all human understanding.

Paranormal was arguably the first horror represented on the screen, with both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* coming out in 1931. From there, monsters were a familiar presence in pop culture. But they continued to reflect those cultural anxieties: Monsters leaned more towards sci-fi during the age of the atomic bomb (think 1958's *The Blob*, 1954's *Godzilla*, 1956's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Then, around the time teenagers became a demographic that was catered to, the slasher was the monster of choice, preying upon the young and reckless. *The Exorcist*, *It*, and *Peeping Tom* are all classic paranormal horror from the 60s through the 80s. Around the turn of the century, zombies took over. Seen as a metaphor for fears surrounding late capitalism, rising consumerism, and disease-based apocalypses, zombies have stayed particularly popular since the success of *World War Z* by Max Brooks in

2006 and the film adaptation of *I Am Legend* in 2007. Vampires, it has to be said, have never stopped being popular – *Interview with a Vampire* in the 70s, *Twilight* in the aughts... they are truly immortal.

Today, paranormal horror is both expected and accepted. Paranormal fiction is now considered its own genre, populated by books that feature the monsters as the protagonists, the narrators, the love interests, the heroes. For monsters as monsters, though, Paranormal horror is still going strong. The enduring popularity of zombies in particular, but other monsters as well, including new creatures like the Babadook, paranormal horror could maybe even be called the most, quote unquote, mainstream horror subgenre.

Paranormal horror is a bit of a catch-all subgenre. It is often referred to as supernatural horror; it has ties to Cosmic and Gothic horror; and sometimes it is broken down into even smaller subgenres by the types of monsters it depicts (like zombies, vampires, and ghosts). But at the end of the day, Paranormal horror covers everything that cannot be explained by scientific reasoning, and some of its most popular subjects are monsters, possessions, ghosts, demons, and haunted houses. Because of the wide range of subjects, Paranormal horror, perhaps more than any of the other subgenres, lends itself really well to a lot of different formats – everything from short stories to graphic novels to full-length novels. If you are, or you have, a reader who particularly likes graphic novels, this might be a great subgenre to start in.

Plot: The details of the plot can vary pretty wildly across the Paranormal subgenres, but standard elements include a monster and some sort of chase or hunt – our characters are usually fleeing the monster, who is either deliberately or incidentally pursuing them. There also must be a final confrontation with the monster, whether it ends badly or not, whether it includes violence or not – this subgenre requires a head-on showdown between the two sides.

Pacing: The pacing of a paranormal story is usually pretty quick, because of that chase element, and the plot and pacing are the most important elements of this subgenre, after the monster itself. Even if the monster doesn't even appear until halfway through, and/or the story starts out deceptively slow, the reader is going to be pulled along just by the factor of knowing something is coming and that the book is going to be even faster paced when it arrives.

Writing Style: The writing style can also vary a lot, but you will rarely see a self-aware writing style in a paranormal book – that usually tips them over into the Humor subgenre. It kind of kills (pun intended) the building tension if the writing style is elbowing the reader in the side the whole time, like watch this, are you ready, are you ready.

Mood/atmosphere: Creepy and tightly wound, transforming into a powder keg of terror and adrenaline when the chase and/or final confrontation hits its peak. Early tension is usually built through glimpses of the monster that can't be proven or replicated, and that tension can become nearly unbearable until the monster is fully revealed and your heart kicks into overdrive.

Setting: The setting will be a place where monsters could exist... so everywhere. But it often revolves around a home – a haunted house, or likely a main character's home, somewhere they should be safe from monsters. Some monsters demand a particular setting (like Bigfoot), and sometimes a monster is placed in a setting outside of what they might usually seek to hide in in order to have a story at all (like the Creature from the Black Lagoon wandering into an urbanized town).

Characters: The monsters aren't the only reason paranormal horror is so popular. Paranormal horror usually makes you care about the characters – while not every Paranormal story is character-driven, you want them to succeed against the monster, because you're made to root for them in all their normal, relatable humanness. Their nuance as humans, as well as possible mistreatment of the monster at their hands or the hands of others, can also sway readers to root for the monsters. Cheering for the home team used to be the default, but more and more, modern paranormal horror is blurring those lines.

Stephen Graham Jones is an incredibly prolific author, with over twenty-five books, plus graphic novels, plus comic books, plus over 350 short stories published, including, of course, *The Only Good Indians*, but also the novels *Ledfeather*, *Mongrels*, *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, the comic *Earthdivers*, the graphic novel *Memorial Ride*, and many, many others. I can't even list all the awards he's won without falling victim to a tongue twister big enough to carry me away to Oz, but it's over a dozen.

Jones is a member of the Blackfeet Tribe, completed his PhD from FSU in a stunning two years, and currently teaches as a professor of English at University of Colorado-Boulder.

He writes across the speculative fiction umbrella, from autobiographical novels to science fiction to experimental fiction to horror fiction and more, and his work is often on the literary and post-ironic side, which responds to postmodern fiction's, quote, "cynicism, detachment, and alienation" by, quote again, "more patently embracing morality, sincerity, and an 'ethos of belief'." Jones has also drawn influence from Gerald Vizenor and other writers of the Native American Renaissance, which is a term that encompasses the rapid increase in and widespread readership for works of fiction and poetry written by Native American authors beginning in the 1960s and following on the heels of the 1968 publication of and 1969 Pulitzer Prize award for N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. John Gamber makes a case that the common themes among the works of these authors include a plot that is tied to a protagonist's return to the reservation, a setting of a sacred landscape, and a central theme following the protagonist's dilemma between two worlds. While Jones is writing from a new era of Native American lit, these themes and the Renaissance's literary writing style can both be found threaded through his writing in creative ways.

Native American folklore is often whitewashed and flattened in horror for Western audiences, by Western authors – the trope of, quote unquote, the "ancient Indian burial ground" was particularly prevalent, especially in the 70s and the 80s, in *The Amityville Horror*, *Pet Sematary* and, yes, *The Shining*, and even into the early aughts with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The folkloric monster of the Wendigo has also been turned into a monster of the week, showing up in shows like *Supernatural*. These off-key cautionary tales, which have colonialism as a villain from the past easily exorcised, turn sacred and important cultural traditions into cursed ones.

*The Only Good Indians*, written by a Blackfeet author about Blackfeet and Crow characters, does not take the "past is in the past" view. No, the past lives, and fights, and hunts you down until you reckon with it. This novel takes the burial ground trope and uses it as the site of the elk massacre, which has to be acknowledged, respected, and remembered in order for the future (literally) to come out of it. This theme continues through the novel, which is full of sharp commentary on social and cultural issues, both historical and contemporary. Not least of which is the title, which comes from the racist proverb "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," a quote often attributed to General Philip Sheridan, but which can also be traced to an 1886 speech given by none other than Theodore Roosevelt.

*The Only Good Indians* opens with Ricky's narrative, just a short time after Ricky, Lewis, Gabe, and Cass kill an entire elk herd at Duck Lake. Ricky left the reservation, joined an oil crew, and is out drinking at a bar. In the parking lot, an elk charges at him, damaging the surrounding cars. The bar patrons blame him and give chase. Ricky nearly escapes but finds himself surrounded by a herd of elk; the newspaper presumes he was beaten to death by the bar patrons when he is found dead.

Lewis's narrative is next, and picks up ten years later, with Lewis married to a white woman named Peta. They live a couple hours outside of the reservation, Lewis works as a postal employee, they have a dog named Harley. One day, Lewis is trying to fix an overhead light and while looking down through the fan, see the image of the cow elk he killed. From there, Lewis experiences a handful of traumatic, paranoia-inducing events: Harley is found hanging from his chain and later found stomped to death; Lewis sees the spirit of an elk-headed woman, and reveals and

reveals the story of the hunt and of the pregnant cow elk who refused to die. Believing that elk is now haunting him and possessing Shaney, if not Peta, Lewis spirals and kills Shaney. Peta dies in a household accident immediately after, and Lewis sees something moving in her stomach and cuts it open to find a newborn elk calf. Taking it, he flees back to the reservation, but is shot by vigilantes before he can arrive.

Then, Elk Head Woman, transforming from newborn calf to teenage girl, hitches a ride into the reservation. She goes to spy on Denorah, Gabe's daughter; meanwhile, Gabe and Cass prepare for that night's sweat lodge, simultaneously in honor of Lewis, Denorah's upcoming basketball game, and Nathan Yellow Tail's introduction to cultural traditions. The Elk Head Woman watches everyone arrive at the sweat lodge, having already killed Cass's dogs. Yep, all the dogs die in this one, folks. From there, the night devolves into violence, much of it not even at the direct hands of Elk-Head Woman. I won't spoil all of it, but basically everyone ends up dead or presumed dead – Gabe is saved for last, taking his own life to protect Denorah's.

The next morning, Denorah arrives at the lodge to find Elk Head Woman disguised as Shaney. Shaney challenges her to a game of 21, and then, revealing her true form, begins the chase. Denorah runs for nearly a full day, steadily chased by the Elk Head Woman. She unwittingly leads them both back to the site of the hunting massacre 10 years ago, and Elk Head Woman goes to where her calf was buried and digs it up. Danny Pease, the game warden, arrives and fires warning shots, but Denorah stands between him and the two elk. Elk Head Woman transforms fully into an elk and she and her calf walk into the wilderness. Denorah's legend begins.

*The Only Good Indians* is a powerful, insightful, terrifying story about revenge, survival, trauma, and otherness. It pays homage to many stories and tropes in classic and modern horror, and has genrebled into the Psychological and Visceral subgenres. The best way to describe the feeling of reading it, as the Grimdragon book reviewer put it, is as if Stephen Graham Jones has "one hand grabbing you by the throat, while the other crushes your heart in his fist."

Plot: The way *The Only Good Indians* structures its plot is so clever. We essentially watch the plot repeat three times (we meet a character, get invested, learn more about the hunt ten years ago, the Elk Head Woman shows up, she kills the character), and by the third time begins, we know what's coming and all we can do is watch how the details change and hope that this time might be different. The plot changes after the Elk Head Woman has fulfilled her primary goal, and only then do we get the final, true chase and confrontation of the paranormal plot structure.

Pacing: Like many Paranormal stories, the pacing goes hand in hand with the plot for this novel. As the plot circles, the pacing maintains an even keel for the first two parts, building out characters, their present lives, and their backstories through flashbacks to avoid becoming too tightly wound too quickly.

The pacing in *The House that Ran Red*, Lewis's part, lulls us into a deceptive peace, until Lewis himself can no longer stand the waiting and wondering. Then, when we switch to the second-person narrative of the Elk Head Woman, seeing this plot be, well, plotted through her eyes, the pace takes off again, but is tempered by Cass's and Gabe's daily life. The pace is only allowed to really gallop with the final chase, as it and the plot speed ahead with nothing holding them back any longer.

Writing Style: The writing style is both conversational and literary, and perhaps best described as lyrical—it is full of humanness and everyday humor and personal thoughts and sometimes those thoughts mirror things you've thought or are thinking right alongside the characters. Then there will be a turn of phrase or a description that will take your breath away – even if it is inside that same relatable train of thought. And it works! The conversational tone ratchets up the tension, because you are getting the thoughts in real time as the characters experience the horror; and the literary style then sneaks in and describes the horror in a way that is so unique and vivid, it feels like a punch to the gut.

Mood/atmosphere: The main atmosphere is one of tense, unstoppable, impending doom, dotted with bursts of terror when the Elk Head Woman's effects are felt or seen. And yet, side by side with this doom and terror, is a hammerspace of normality, an atmosphere of the daily human grind, gritty, heavy, putting one foot ahead of the other to survive, to hope, to make a life worth living. The atmospheres layer together into a general feeling of intensity, of life on the brink, one step away from something.

Setting: Most of the book is set near Browning, Montana, on the Blackfeet reservation. The book starts with the narrative that is farthest away – Ricky's, in Williston, North Dakota, just after the Duck Lake hunting massacre - then the next farthest – Lewis's, in Great Falls, Montana, ten years later. Lewis is headed back to the reservation when he is killed, and the Elk Head Woman is driven the rest of the way. We circle in from the outskirts, to the school, to Gabe's father's house on the elders' street, to Cass's camper up in the mountains – the closest any of them are to Duck Lake, which is the story's final destination.

On a technical level, the plot determines the setting here, rather than the setting dictating mood or pacing, and so it acts as a support aspect, allowing the dual atmospheres, the plot, and the characters to all have more depth because of it. But the setting is also intrinsically important to the characters and to the Elk Head Woman, as a place of generational history, trauma, and culture.

Characters: The characters across the story are, like many of the aspects, rooted in their humanness and their relationships to one another, and their struggle to honor their traditions and culture while trying to survive in a modern world. In a Reddit AMA, Stephen Graham Jones once said, quote, "Horror needs stabbing dummies, sure, but it also needs the reader to care about those stabbing dummies, and the real violence inherent to horror, it's not always the chainsaws, it's often the objectification and reduction, in that the reader can leave your text thinking people, especially women, are things. and that's actually dangerous and destructive. That puts the blade on the chainsaw."

This idea is intertwined throughout *The Only Good Indians*, particularly with the characters, who we do care about and can't help but care about, even as we know what'll happen to them. Jones flips the second part, so that rather than a result of horror, it is folded in as real-life examples of objectification and reduction. We see the objectification and reduction of the main characters at the hands of others, particularly white characters and the Western world, and we see the objectification and reduction of the female elk to just that – an elk, rather than a mother, a carrier of generational memory and history. And as the elk becomes more and more human, she gains more sympathy while also wielding that reduction to her advantage, in her assumed forms as a woman and a girl – the elk subverts the classic paranormal idea that to lose your humanity is to become a monster – as she becomes more human, she becomes more monstrous – she delights more in violence, in planning it, in enacting it where it will hurt the most.

This story also has a Final Girl! Denorah, cheekily nicknamed Finals Girl at the outset, is the story's actual final girl, but manages to subvert that trope as well, asking for mercy for the elk and her calf at the end of a brutal, terrifying chase.

MUSIC

MADDY: Hi, Mike, welcome.

MIKE: Thank you.

MADDY: So we are going to be talking about Stephen Graham Jones and *The Only Good Indians* in a little bit.

But before we get started I would love to know your favorite piece of horror. It can be a book. It can be a movie.

MIKE: Oh gosh. There's so much to choose from.

MADDY: That's true.

MIKE: I don't know. I've been a big, big horror fan all my life. Actually, now, this is probably the most chill I've been on horror ever. I had a subscription to *Fangoria* when I was like in the fourth grade. I was a big scare fan, big horror fan, big gore fan even back when I was a little kid.

When I was in sixth grade I got sent home because, well, they took away my Trapper Keeper because I had cut it open and stuffed all these pictures of Freddy Kruger inside of them. And one of them was, I don't know if you remember from the original *Nightmare on Elm Street*, there's a scene where Nancy gets a phone call. And she picks it up and he says, "I'm your boyfriend now, Nancy." And a tongue comes out of the receiver to kiss her.

MADDY: Gross!

MIKE: Yeah. The picture I had in my Trapper Keeper was a full page of a\the still of the tongue coming out of the phone and Nancy looking revolted. Yeah, that was my favorite.

I'm a big fan of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, the first couple of *Nightmares*.

MADDY: That kind of gave it away, I think.

MIKE: Yeah. I was terrified the first time I saw it, and after that I was hooked.

MADDY: That's great. So you said you are chiller on horror now, but do you still gravitate more towards slashers and gory or do you go for monsters, slow creep? Or all over the place?

MIKE: I'm kind of all over the place when it comes to horror. I appreciate, I love a good slasher movie. They don't make them like they used to.

But there is always new stuff coming out and small stuff out there to see. If you subscribe to Shudder, you've got everything you want there.

MADDY: Yeah, their backlog is pretty incredible.

MIKE: Yeah, it is. And they never take anything off there, either. Everything is on there for a very long time.

I like it all when it comes to horror except for more like, I don't know, as I've gotten older I find myself more accepting of stuff that I didn't like when I was younger. You know, like real slow-burn atmospheric, more adult type stuff. The human condition of people just being mean to each other and it's terrifying. That sort of thing.

Or just a man and a woman just being mean to each other because they can't get over each other, and then something terrible happens. That's scarifying too.

MADDY: Yeah, for sure.

So, outside of people yelling at each other, do you have a favorite monster of horror? Is a slasher your favorite kind of monster?

MIKE: I like a good vampire. Especially when they are not a classic vampire...

MADDY: Sparkly?

MIKE: When they're not sparkly, when it's not so obviously a metaphor for anything. VD or being slutty, or something like that. That sort of thing. Yeah, if it is just a mean old monster vampire, I like that more.

MADDY: Yeah, I feel like I'm waiting for the vampire renaissance where we kind of get back to just mean vampire.

Well, we don't have a mean vampire in *The Only Good Indians*, but we do have a mean elk head woman. So let's start talking about the book.

Before we got started we were talking a little bit about our experience reading Stephen Graham Jones. This was my first book of his.

MIKE: Same.

MADDY: What's next for you of his list?

MIKE: I have on my shelf two of his books. One's a comic book called *Memorial Ride*. I just started and it's very entertaining so far. I'll probably finish it today. And I also have a copy of his *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*. That was recommended to me by a friend who works in the horror movie business. He's a composer. And he recommended it to me. It sounds like a slasher, like a straight-up teen slasher movie.

MADDY: And it's a trilogy, I believe. So the second one just came out. And so we'll get that trilogy that we are used to seeing on screen, but it will be a nice thick hardcover.

MIKE: Cool. Looking forward to it.

MADDY: Yeah. I'm really excited. He apparently hasn't done much horror, like his early novels are not in horror. But that's where he's kind of floating towards now. Based on *The Only Good Indians* I can only imagine how great all of his forthcoming books will be about the horror genre.

MIKE: I think he should just stick to horror. He's very good at it.

MADDY: Yes. He seems to be very good at all the things he does.

So, *The Only Good Indians* is a great paranormal-slash-psychological horror story. Did you have a favorite scene or scariest scene?

MIKE: There are several.

MADDY: You can spoil whatever you want to.

MIKE: OK. First off, I don't think it was the scariest scene, but I thought it was probably the best scene, when he .... I don't want to say he kills, but one of the main characters, his fate befalls him in his own living room or in the garage, when his friend comes over, the lady who works with him at the post office.

MADDY: And she gets her head...

MIKE: She gets scalped by a motorcycle, pretty much. And immediately after that his live-in girlfriend comes home and also dies. And he loses his mind pretty much.

That scene is so, I thought it was so well written.

MADDY: That's my favorite as well. Hands down.

MIKE: It creeps by. Everything everybody says is pretty much perfect, how he frames everything. It just falls into place so well. It's like ten pages. But it goes by like that (SNAPS FINGERS), and you are just like, "What happened?"

MADDY: I know. I felt like every breath I was taking while I was reading that scene. Especially at the end where he's carving up his girlfriend Peta's body and pulling her teeth to check if they are ivory. He is dressing her like a deer.

And then the newborn calf coming out of her stomach, like great *Alien* homage, but also just horrifying.

MIKE: I never thought of it that way because I was just, "This is going wild!" It was nuts.

And also like, did you sense that he was trying to kill his friend? I kind of had to go back and read it again, that passage and be like, was he already pushed to the limit by the elk head lady? To do that? Or did it come undone after that happened?

MADDY: I did. I was getting the feeling that he was planning it and then talked himself out of it. And then like, in the moment, was like, "You know, I'm going to do this." And just full mental breakdown.

I was shocked that he went through with it. I couldn't believe it.

MIKE: I kind of think that he did try to talk himself into it and then he was backing out of it. And I think it really was an accident that her hair gets caught.

MADDY: Yeah. It wasn't clear.

MIKE: But he didn't do anything about it.

MADDY: Yes, he didn't help her hair...

MIKE: There was a split second where he could have done something about it. But he just let it happen. And that's where (SNAPS FINGERS) he slips.

MADDY: I agree. The universe decided for him.

MIKE: Yes.

MADDY: And then you have almost the exact same thing happen again where Peta falls off the ladder, and in the first scene where she rushes him and tackles him, now he just watches it happen and doesn't do anything about it. That explicit decision to have no agency is almost as terrifying as everything else that happens.

MIKE: It is. It really is. And surprising

MADDY: Very surprising.

MIKE: You know what I mean? He seems like such a sympathetic guy.

MADDY: Yes, yes.

MIKE: To see him take no action and have no reaction pretty much. Other than to chop her up. It is pretty jarring.

Because you get to know this guy. And he seems to be pretty awesome. He seems like a really great guy. Guilt is a hell of a thing. And that elk head lady is there to let him know.

MADDY: She really enacts vengeance, but sometimes she doesn't even have to get her hands dirty. She will just push a little bit and then all of the humans will kind of fall apart among themselves.

MIKE: So do you think that elk head lady was manifested by all those guys' guilt?

MADDY: Ooh.

MIKE: Because at first I was like, oh, it's just guilt. He's having a hard time dealing with this thing that happened. And it is kind of affecting other parts of his life. And of course it is going to rear its ugly head at one point.

But then the basketball scene.

MADDY: Yes. At the end.

MIKE: Other people start to meet the elk head lady. And there is a basketball game between his daughter and the elk head lady.

MADDY: And she's wearing the skin of someone else, but her bones start to show and creak. Oh, it's so good.

MIKE: That basketball scene, that's my favorite, favorite scene in the book. It is so.... I've been trying to think about it all day. I don't think I've ever read another horror scene written as a sports scene.

MADDY: And it takes itself so seriously. It's not like, you know...

MIKE: Every point means something

MADDY: ..."I played one on one with the devil." It was like, this is life or death. It is the most serious thing that is happening right now. I loved that scene, for sure.

MIKE: It's incredible. And how spare the setting is, as well. They are not even on a real basketball court. They are playing in somebody's dirt driveway, with a terrible goal. It's buckets tied to a pole, something like that. It's incredible.

MADDY: And no one to watch them. It's just them. Dead silence in the mountains.

MIKE: It's just them! You can hear the wind blowing.

MADDY: So atmospheric.

MIKE: So atmospheric.

MADDY: Surrounded by dead dogs. Just playing for her life.

And then the chase. You get this amazing set-up and you are like, my breath was catching when you are getting closer to twenty -ne and twenty-one and she's like hitting seventeen and eighteen and she's starting to beat the Elk Head Woman. And finally the Elk Head Woman is like, "I'm not going to lose. The chase is on."

And just the rules of the game change, but in those moments, especially when her back starts to rip open and you see like the elk form come through, oh man.

MIKE: That's so good.

MADDY: It was so good.

MIKE: It was a great book. I hate saying it, but with a book this good you don't want anyone else's fingerprints all over it. But I can't wait for this movie.

MADDY: I know!

MIKE: I know somebody's going to option this movie. Somebody's gonna make it.

MADDY: So outside of, obviously you have to include the basketball scene. I've thought about what this would look like on the screen as well. So outside of the basketball scene, outside of the Shaney hair and the motorcycle, Peta immediately dying, cutting the newborn calf out of her stomach, were there any other scenes that you would love to see represented on the screen that were particularly evocative to you?

MIKE: The first ten pages. Ricky's demise.

MADDY: With the giant elk crushing the cars?

MIKE: Yeah. That would be awesome to watch.

MADDY: That would be so cool.

MIKE: Just the frustration. I felt very frustrated. You need to get out of there and let this elk do its thing before everybody thinks you do it. In the movie version I'm sure everybody will be just "Aagh! Get out of there! They are going to come after you!"

And they do. And he gets his.

Yeah, I'd like to see that. It would be amazing.

MADDY: I agree. The image of the elk drunkenly stumbling. And you are just like, "Oh, it's a giant elk. How wild that it is in a car park." And then later you realize that it's the Elk Head Woman assuming shape for the first time and then she slowly becomes more and more human. She didn't know what she was doing. She was just so intent on revenge.

It's the shortest part of the book and it still gives me total chills.

MIKE: It's a great way to kick off a book. It totally gets you into it.

MADDY: And then the immediate shift to Lewis' part. And he's like, "I'm just going to go home from the post office and my normal job and nothing is going to happen for fifty pages" and you are just waiting and waiting. The ratcheting up of tension. I would love to see that on screen because it is so palpable already in the book.

MIKE: Although I can see how in the movie version they might not include the other two guys.

MADDY: Oh really?

MIKE: Yeah, because they are in the book a lot, but they are not as much involved in everything. They get theirs too, but you could easily leave them out of the screenplay. You could just have it be Ricky and Lewis at the slaughter.

MADDY: Yeah. And then you could have a very small part that is just the sweat lodge massacre.

MIKE: Oh, I forgot about that already!

MADDY: Because you are switching perspective from the Elk Head Woman, her journey through the town, and then like Cass and Gabe have different things going on in their own lives.

But yeah, the sweat lodge massacre, which is the name of the part, where all the dogs die and then everyone else dies and the car crashing Jo. That might have hurt the most, I think.

MIKE: That didn't need to happen.

MADDY: That's kind of the point, right?

MIKE: Yeah. None of it needed to happen.

MADDY: Senseless violence.

MIKE: You know what else I liked about the book? It is, but at the same time it doesn't beat you over the head with the morality of the whole story.

MADDY: You draw your own conclusions.

MIKE: You draw your own conclusions. If you are just there for the gore and for the scary parts, it's great for that. And if you can get something else out of it, that's great too.

But I do like how it doesn't beat you over the head with it. Nature and that sort of thing.

MADDY: It's very much this happened, and you have to deal with it in the context of what modern life looks like. We have jobs and motorcycles. How do we balance back and forth?

I loved it.

MIKE: I loved too.

MADDY: This is easily one of my favorite horror books, but probably the best book I read in the last year.

MIKE: Me too, maybe. Very close, if not.

MADDY: The Elk Head Woman herself, how did you feel about her as like a traditional horror monster?

MIKE: A lot of Native American folklore is pretty scary. And it is pretty filled with cautionary allegories and things like that. I could see the Elk Head Woman coming back for another couple of movies. She is going to be urban legend after this. You know what I mean? When it gets made into a movie. Don't go hunting. Elk head lady is going to come and get you.

MADDY: Only take what you need. Use every part. Yeah.

MIKE: Oh, and you know what I was thinking about? I was thinking about this earlier. I wonder if the Elk Head Woman appeared to everyone who dared to eat the flesh.

MADDY: I was also thinking that! I read somewhere in a review that Gabe says that he fed, I think it was Gabe, he fed the last couple of parts of the elk to his dogs. And the dogs, she tramples them. So I think that's a great question.

MIKE: A really ugly scene.

MADDY: Extremely ugly. Both scenes where dogs die, the description of what they look like afterwards, is horrifying.

I was thinking about that too. I would love to see little pieces of everybody.

MIKE: And also like, but a lot of people didn't eat the meat when he distributed it because it had that creepy stamp on it.

MADDY: The racoon paw. So maybe not.

MIKE: Maybe that saved a lot of people.

MADDY: Maybe.

MIKE: Or sealed his fate, as it were, because he used everything he got from it.

MADDY: We'll never know.

So we talked about what the movie would look like. You are a huge fan of graphic novels. What do you think if this was turned into a graphic novel, what would you like to see as the illustration style? This is a book that is full of characters and dialogue and internal scenes as well. Is there something that jumps out at you?

MIKE: I think it being in monochrome would help it a lot. Maybe just black and white, or million shades of gray. That's what I think the landscape would look like during all the important parts of the story.

MADDY: It's bleak and late November.

MIKE: It's bleak. It's cold. It's right after Thanksgiving. The rez that they live on sounds pretty desolate.

MADDY: Up in Montana. Yeah.

MIKE: So I think very spare illustrations would go a long way.

But also at the same time color inserts when the Elk Head Woman comes out. Yeah, that would be good. When the blood happens.

MADDY: Which is often. Yeah, that would be extremely striking. And very in tone with the book, I think. Especially in Lewis's chapter or section where you had these long stretches of, "What's coming? Is it in his head?" His mental breakdown. I think the lack of color for such a long time, only to get hit with those horrifying...

MIKE: Did you have to think about it as much? I super thought about how much was in his head and how much was actually happening, was physical.

MADDY: Absolutely.

MIKE: I don't want to say it took me several chapters, but I think it did. I had to go back and reread a couple of times.

MADDY: It's hard to tell if, because he's the only one who can "see it" but how real is she actually?

MIKE: Yeah.

MADDY: I chose this for the paranormal subgenre, but I think it works just as well for the psychological subgenre because it is about her appearance's effect on him. Lewis in particular. And then she's much more supernatural in the other parts. For a while I was wondering if it was just in his head.

MIKE: Have you ever hunted?

MADDY: I have not. Have you?

MIKE: No. I have never, other than like small birds with a BB gun. Which I got over when I was fifteen or so.

I grew up in a really, really small town, it's a ranching community. When I was in seventh grade we had to learn how to dress a deer.

MADDY: Oh, wow.

MIKE: At school.

MADDY: At school?!

MIKE: Yes.

MADDY: Oh my gosh. I'm from the East Coast, so this is very new to me.

MIKE: Yeah, I know. And I had just gotten there, started going to school there the year prior. I was used to going to school, because my dad was in the Air Force so we moved around a lot. And I was going to school in cities.

And then all of a sudden we move to this super rural place.

MADDY: And you have to dress a deer.

MIKE: Yeah, I had to sit there and watch my seventh-grade Life Sciences teacher dress a deer. Some of us had to help him.

MADDY: Oh no, frogs were as gnarly as I got.

MIKE: Yeah, after that I was like, "I'm not doing any of that anymore." And they were like, "All right, you can just sit out or whatever." I was like, "Yeah, I don't want to do that."

Later on in high school I had to do even more gory stuff, because it is a ranching community and everyone was in FFA. You had to take at least one class. I had to learn, I had to be there for castrating pigs and stuff like that. I showed a goat at a livestock show once. And I was really sad when I had to sell him. That was sad.

MADDY: Aww.

MIKE: But I'm kind of familiar with that sort of thing so where everybody, you know, you use what you take. You have to make sure it gets used properly or it's just going to go bad.

I thought about that a lot when I was reading the book because, well, especially the deer-dressing part.

MADDY: Human dressing. Yeah.

I can only imagine what that extra layer of knowledge brings because I don't have that, but it is certainly, he described it well enough that I could imagine it. I know that I miss that piece.

MIKE: He's a good writer.

MADDY: He is a phenomenal, the scenes he creates, the vivid imagery is just, it's a lot.

MIKE: That's a great word for this book, is vivid. Cold and vivid.

MADDY: Cold. Vivid. Harsh.

MIKE: Pretty harsh.

MADDY: Yeah. And yet somehow hopeful... at the end. At the very end. That's such an interesting, I hadn't even thought about that. Vivid. I had nightmares the night, so I read this all in one sitting.

MIKE: Really?

MADDY: On my couch. Yeah. I just had the afternoon and I just got totally sucked in. And I had nightmares that night of running through the woods and finding animals and all this stuff. I can't remember the last time I had such a vivid dream of any kind. And I think that just speaks to how...

MIKE: I mean, he pretty much spells it out for you. No problem for your brain.

MADDY: He just wrote my dream for me. He's screenwriting my dreams now.

Yeah, I think the fact that it could carry over so vividly and I could remember that so well the next day, it's just in my brain forever.

MIKE: Yeah, it's been almost two months since I read the book. I finished reading it right before Halloween. I can still remember so much of it. Quite vividly.

MADDY: Yes. Oh my gosh.

Well, let's move along to books that may be, or movies that may be as vivid as this one. Do you have any? Again, you are a very big fan of graphic novels. Do you have any recommendations for what people who liked *The Only Good Indians* might also like?

MIKE: There is a series out right now that I've been getting into. It's called *The Silver Coin*. It's a horror anthology. It's basically a silver coin gets passed along and it brings terror, that sort of thing. It's really good. I'm really liking that one.

Another one is called *Ice Cream Man*.

MADDY: That sounds deceptively horrifying. Or deceptively not horrifying.

MIKE: Awesome. It's great. It looks like the side of an ice cream truck but it's all about terrible things. Like a new trade paperback just came out about it. But the last one, there was a story about, do you remember the German pilot who flew that plane right into the side of a mountain with all those people on it? About five or six years ago?

MADDY: Oh, yeah.

MIKE: There's a story in the last one that came out that pretty much mirrors that story. And it is terrifying. It's awful.

I think the seventh trade paperback just came out, and there's six prior, and they are all great. And they've all got this thin connecting... I don't want to say storyline, but just like a sinew of gristle that connects all of them together, the whole way through. Every chapter, you are just like "oh, I forgot about that. Man... Oh, this is so awful."

But you keep reading it because it is awesome.

MADDY: Yeah, those are the best kinds of stories.

Well, that sounds awesome. I'm going to put those on my to-read list.

I'm just going to quickly read off some books.

I think the closest I've felt to this kind of like, my gorge rising in my throat was *Hex*, by Thomas Olde Heuvelt. It's so freaky. It's about a modern-day town that is essentially upstate New York and kind of barred in, like no one can leave. Because they have a cursed witch whose mouth has been sewn shut who walks the streets. So they are not allowed to have social media or phones with cameras on them and the government essentially has them contained. And what happens when teenagers film her and put it on the internet.

MIKE: Ooh, that sounds amazing.

MADDY: It's so good. It's a thick book.

MIKE: Is it Y?

MADDY: No, it's adult. It's translated, I believe, and the author has a more recent book called *Echo*, which is similarly creepy but less paranormal. But *Hex* just has that creeping, like this does, where you know something is going to happen. You can see the witch. Everyone can see her. She's just like walks around and follows the same route every day. But what happens when you break her rules and where does she show up then?

MIKE: Just having your mouth sewn shut sounds terrifying enough to me.

MADDY: I know. And the cover has the word HEX and it's sewn across so it's already just creepy from the very front.

The *Other Terrors* anthology, edited by Vince Liaguno and Rena Mason.

*White Horse* by Erika T. Wurth.

*Road Of Bones* by Christopher Golden.

*The Devil in Silver* by Victor LaValle, whom we read for cosmic horror, if you remember.

*The Queen of the Cicadas* by V. Castro.

*When the Reckoning Comes* by LaTanya McQueen.

The last two in particular are about horrors that had happened in a particular place and people have tried to move on, as it were, and someone or something refuses to let it go and kind of bringing back the hell.

MIKE: I like those sorts of stories.

MADDY: Yeah, I do too. I'm really excited to read the last two.

So check all of those out. We'll put them in the show notes as well. You can check them out from the library.

Mike, thank you for coming on.

MIKE: My pleasure.

MADDY: And we'll see you guys next time.

MUSIC

Thank you for listening to this very paranormal episode of APL Volumes.

You can find a list of all the media we discussed in the show notes, and copies of them are available to borrow through the Austin Public Library. If you want even more recommendations check out our personal pick service and get a personalized list from our expert librarians.

Thanks to my guest Mike Rodriguez. If you see him out on the floor here at the Central Library, ask him about his seventh-grade biology class.

APL Volumes is recorded and produced in the Library's Innovation Lab, a part of the APL Innovate Digital Makerspace. The Austin Public Library is currently putting together a very cool digital makerspace, which will offer not only recording equipment and hardware, but all kinds of audiovisual software for 3D modeling, graphic design, animation and much more. We are really excited to bring it to the public, so keep an eye out for it in the future.

Many thanks to the APL Innovate team for their guidance and input on this podcast.

A big thank you to Peter Hofstad, APL senior publication specialist, for helming the marketing and editing of Volumes, to Michael Wheat, one of APL's graphic designers, for our fantastic logo, and to Stephen Plail, my adult service coworker and a member of the APL Innovate team, for our theme song and for being the recording wizard.

This podcast is all library, all the time. Our next episode will be on the psychological subgenre. We're reading *The Pallbearers Club* by Paul Tremblay.

Thanks for listening and for supporting your local public library.

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END TRANSCRIPT