

APL Volumes

Season 1, Episode 6: THE PALLBEARERS CLUB

*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 Psychological subgenre, and the book *The Pallbearers Club* by Paul Tremblay.

I'm Maddy, the host inside your head for the season, and an Adult Services librarian at APL's Central library. Later this episode I'll be joined by Dale Bridges, a Library Associate in our Circulation department, to mourn *The Pallbearers Club*.

MUSIC

Psychological horror has its roots in the Gothic horror tradition. *Horror Literature Through History* cites "Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1835, as an early example, as it ends with an ambiguous conclusion of whether the titular character has actually witnessed a satanic gathering or if, quote, he simply had a dream or vision that left him forever suspicious of and alienated from his family and fellow villagers.

From there, the theme of terrors of and inside the mind takes root in horror lit. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-tale Heart" in 1843 famously drives its main character to a nervous breakdown out of guilt; "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892 explores the psychological effects of untreated and disbelieved post-partum depression. With "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* in 1898, the Gothic ghost story shifted to focus on the psychological and the internal. In the early twentieth century, however, psychological horror took a backseat to cosmic and paranormal horror, as well as anything that allowed escapism from the very real psychological toll of the World Wars.

Psychological horror returned with a vengeance around in the mid-1900s. 1959 saw the publication of *Psycho* by Robert Bloch and Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in This Castle*, which is considered one of the best psychological horror stories ever. The film adaptations of these stories (1960 and 1963 respectively) also demonstrate the essential role psychological horror has played in film history, and the intertwined history novels and movies of psychological horror have. Stephen King's appearance on the horror scene further solidified psychological horror's presence and appeal through the 1980s, particularly through 1987's *Misery*. Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* in 1988 and its film adaptation in 1991 are together perhaps the most popular and highly awarded piece of psychological horror of the last fifty years. A slew of psychological horror video games in the 1990s, like *Silent Hill* and *Phantasmagoria*, demonstrated a growing interest in games with unreliable narration, sensory confusion, and an atmosphere of doubt about whether what the player is seeing is truly the truth.

Psychological horror has continued to flourish in the new millennium, and has even spawned its own sub-subgenre of social horror relatively recently. Films like *Black Swan* in 2010, *Get Out* in 2017, and *Hereditary* in 2018, and books like *The Cabin at the End of the World* in 2018, *The Changeling* in 2018, and *The Last House on Needless Street* in 2021, with help from the psychological thriller subgenre, have kept the psychological horror subgenre incredibly popular for today's audiences.

The more we discover about the brain, the more we are intrigued by it. How, and why, does it do the things it does? Why can it trick itself? What are its limits? What happens if we let it do what it wants?

The horror in psychological horror is psychological deterioration, which the main character both fears and experiences. Violence is a key element, whether perpetrated against the protagonist or by the protagonist against perceived threats. Common themes often include personal guilt, distrust, mental illness, gaslighting, self-doubt, hallucinations, paranoia, and/or the boundaries of reality and sanity being blurred.

It's also pretty important to note that psychological horror can pull terrors from other subgenres, especially the paranormal subgenre. The psychological terror a protagonist faces can be seen by the protagonist as being a paranormal horror, even if the readers and the other characters know it to be psychological. And even if the horror is paranormal, psychological horror stories focus on the psychological effects of encountering that horror. This is particularly evident in stories involving ghosts or haunted houses (like *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Shining*), where these supernatural horrors manifest infrequently; cause, coincide with, or expedite a psychological break; are doubted throughout; and are perhaps never even confirmed by the story at all. That's where those common themes (gaslighting, hallucinations, distrust) especially come in.

Plot: The plot actually matters a lot in Psychological horror, which always surprises me, since it's a subgenre about characters. Psychological horror often hinges on plot twists, as well as rash and desperate decisions made by the protagonists, to move the plot along.

Pacing: Much like Gothic horror, Psychological horror loves a slow burn. As characters spiral in and out of self-doubt and perceived unreality, Psychological horror will maintain a steady, slow increase towards the final breaking point.

Writing style: The writing style of psychological horror will usually be pretty literary – very descriptive, with long sentences, often following a stream of consciousness, since the reader is usually placed inside someone's head. The writing style can also be denser than that of other horror subgenres, because the story is deliberately trying to confuse the protagonist, as well as the reader – so psychological horror may be a bit of a longer read. Psychological horror is also often written in the first person – if seeing the horror from afar is your preferred method of interacting with it, be sure to check that a psychological horror read won't plunk you down as close to it as you can get.

Setting: The setting in a psychological horror story will most likely be a house, or a hometown, somewhere that the protagonist would normally trust that they know quite well, but whose familiarity will shift and serve to make the protagonist doubt their surroundings and reality.

Mood/atmosphere: Unsettling, tense, nearly dizzying. Think of all the adjectives that could apply to an escalating mental breakdown, and they can be used to describe the mood of a psychological horror story. The atmosphere is always the most important aspect in horror, but in the Psychological subgenre particularly, it is also driving the narrative.

Characters: While horror protagonists are already supposed to inspire concern, the protagonists of psychological horror are really supposed to make you care and fear for them – what is more human than fearing the breakdown of your own mind? When the antagonists are outside of the protag's mind, they are usually human monsters, who will often be people that would normally be trusted by their victims – think family members, neighbors, coworkers. Though, quote unquote, “unaffiliated” serial killers and murderers do make it into the mix.

Paul Tremblay is considered one of the main psychological horror writers of the last twenty years, and his position as a juror for the Shirley Jackson Awards confirms it. He's written seven novels (*A Head Full of Ghosts*, *Disappearance at Devil's Rock*, *The Cabin at the End of the World*, *Survivor Song*, *The Little Sleep*, *No Sleep Till Wonderland*, and *The Pallbearers Club*) and one short story collection titled *Growing Things*.

Tremblay writes across horror subgenres and tropes, but his novels all center psychological horror: his characters are thrown into horrifying new realities and are forced to survive without losing their humanity or their mind. His

books bring in the apocalypse, the paranormal, the cosmic – and make the characters and the reader doubt what is real and what is the real horror.

*The Pallbearers Club* is a book about vampires. Now, Maddy, you might say. Why didn't you read it for the Paranormal subgenre. To which I will say – Have I taught you nothing? Every horror story has elements of another subgenre in it. And as we just learned from Tremblay's brief bio, at the heart of every Tremblay story, despite its setting, its plot, and its monsters, is psychological horror. The vampires are just a red herring.

*The Pallbearers Club* follows Art Barbara as he writes (and we read) his memoir. In high school in the 1980s, Art starts an after-school club for volunteer pallbearers, and there he meets Mercy, a very cool girl who seems ageless, who takes inappropriately timed pictures of the funerals, and who loves punk rock. As their friendship grows, Art becomes increasingly convinced that Mercy is a vampire. After a fateful encounter, the two go their separate ways, and Art's story jumps forward in time, to the points over the years where he re-encounters Mercy and they repeat the process of Art's doubt and subsequent fleeing. Their last encounter sees them becoming roommates, but Art's years-long psychological break finally catches up to him.

Whether or not you think this is actually a piece of horror fiction (and you will hear my and Dale's opinions on that later), *The Pallbearers Club* has a lot of the hallmarks of psychological horror.

Plot: Like many pieces of psychological horror, this is not a plot-driven story – it is more focused on homing in on individual scenes that show Art unraveling.

Pacing: The pacing of this book is quite slow. Art's memoir, since it is still partly in draft form, spans decades. And Mercy's notes in the margins, while a very unique format, also force the reader to slow down and read her commentary. The pace picks up slightly when Art and Mercy have scenes together, before slowing again when they separate. The pace really accelerates in the last chapter.

Writing style: The writing style of *The Pallbearers Club* is very literary – full of descriptive language and detailed accounts of everyday life – think Jonathan Franzen but with vampires. The book is styled as a memoir, so the writing is also a bit self-aware and very self-indulgent. Mercy's annotations are a sharp contrast, made up of short sentences in a very conversational style.

Setting: The first half of the book or so is set in Art's small suburban hometown, which is very Stephen King in its ordinariness and vagueness. The second half bounces around Providence, Rhode Island, which is described in a "this could be any city you've lived in" way, before returning to Art's hometown. The setting aspect is most pointedly felt during scenes that take place in Art's house, when the building he knows so well threatens to betray him – or keep him trapped within in it forever.

Mood/atmosphere: The overall atmosphere of *The Pallbearers Club* is one of entrapment, nostalgia, and melancholy loneliness. Art feels trapped by his own body, trapped by Mercy's sway, trapped by his inability to change outcomes. And this feeds into the mood of loneliness, where we are seeing Art's physical and psychological isolations – even when he is surrounded by friends and bandmates, Mercy's absence lingers. That being said, Art is also prone to explaining the minutiae of certain areas of his life, so sometimes the atmosphere is scattered, like a cloud of smoke being waved away. It never really goes away, but it can take time to build back up after these instances.

Characters: The character aspect is the most fundamental to this story. Art and Mercy's toxic relationship underpins the whole novel, and drives most of the other elements. Art is semi-autobiographical by the author's own admission, and his fears surrounding memory, death, and grief are relatable. And the question of whether or not Mercy is a vampire often takes a backseat to her own quirks, musical taste, and pointed quips. The side characters, especially Art's classmates, the funeral home employees, and Art's later bandmates, are a lot of fun, and serve mostly to illuminate the setting and Art's current lifestyle-slash-frame of mind.

Okay, I think I've held my bias back long enough – let's get to the fun part.

MUSIC

MADDY: Hi, Dale!

DALE: Hi!

MADDY: Welcome to the podcast and talking about *The Pallbearers Club*. But before we get into it, we're going to back up a little bit and start with, what is your favorite piece of horror?

DALE: Oh, that's a good question. It's strange because mostly I'm a horror movie fan. I don't read too much horror literature.

But my favorite piece, I think, is, Shirley Jackson is just the best. And I don't know why it took me so long to read *We Have Always Lived in This Castle*. But it was only a couple of years ago that I read it. And it is in my top five books of all time, I think now. Just that voice, that literary voice from the beginning. I was just completely hooked. It is definitely right now my favorite piece of horror.

MADDY: That's amazing. I'm going to do a brief tangent already and tell you my preschool was named after the castle. Which is not a great name.

DALE: I so thought you were going to say named after Shirley Jackson, which would have been cool.

MADDY: If only. No, it was called Merricat's Castle, for kids.

DALE: Merricat's Castle for Kids. That sounds so whimsical. Did you know where that came from at the time?

MADDY: Yes. It was a lovely old, big, originally a mansion.

DALE: You went to grade school in a mansion?

MADDY: Well, it was in New York City, so it was easy to turn into blocks of linoleum-tiled floors and classrooms.

DALE: That's still very cool.

MADDY: But it was donated by an old lady who died wealthy and single and asked that it be turned into a public school for kids, but it had to be called the name she gave it, which was Merricat's.

DALE: This sounds like the start of a horror novel. If you pitched that, I think I would watch it.

MADDY: I think I would watch it too. The story of my life. This is why I am like this now.

Yes, Shirley Jackson, queen of psychological horror. I think everyone is still just trying to chase the high of what she did.

DALE: I think she was just weirdly underrated. Even as much as we knew Shirley Jackson. I grew up, the only thing I was ever assigned, and I had an English masters, the only thing I was ever assigned was *The Lottery*, of all Shirley Jackson.

MADDY: Really? That was the first short story I ever read. I was eleven years old.

DALE: Eleven? That was maybe a little bit too early.

MADDY: My dad was like, "I think you'd like this."

DALE: So many children die. No, it was just the one.

MADDY: My dad was like, "This is how the real world is. You have to read this now. This is what middle school is like."

DALE: That is kind of what middle school is like actually.

MADDY: As we learn also in this book. Yeah, I think Shirley Jackson has experienced a lovely, lovely renaissance and appreciation in the last, you know, in pop culture and a wider zeitgeist in the last, you know, ten, fifteen, twenty years.

DALE: So good.

MADDY: Well deserved.

DALE: She's the best.

MADDY: So you really love Shirley Jackson. In terms of horror movies, do you also tend to skew psychological and creepy, or do you go more for like gore and monsters?

DALE: I don't go for gore. I like a good monster. Who doesn't like a good monster? Yeah, I would say psychological or like I have just a weakness for really low-budget, crappily awesome horror movies. The best one is Sam Raimi and *The Evil Dead* and things like that. But *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*? Yes, sign me up, just based on the title alone. I'm down with that.

MADDY: You didn't even have to watch it. Just imagine what it is like.

DALE: No. I imagined, and it was exactly what I imagined, and it was wonderful. I loved it.

MADDY: Well, I'm glad you loved it, because something we did not love is, the smoothest segue of all time, *The Pallbearers Club*, by Paul Tremblay.

So I do have to apologize because this is the only book I did not care for in all the books I had to read for this podcast, that I chose and chose for myself. But we are going to get into it, a piece of psychological fiction, a piece of psychological horror, more or less. We'll talk more about our opinions later.

But one of the most unique parts of this novel, perhaps the unique part of this novel, is the fact that there are notes in the margins from the antagonist, the second main character, Mercy, who our main character, Art, thinks is a vampire.

You're an author. I have in a former life worked in book publishing. So we are both familiar with red-line edits. What did you think of that? Did that activate your trauma response? What did you think of that method of having those little edits in the margins to go along with?

DALE: I mean, it's a tough thing to pull off as a writer and as a format. And I will say I think it worked. At the beginning of reading it, it did take me out of the story a little bit. But I think that is always the case when you are reading something that's formatted a little differently.

And by the time I was through the first couple of chapters, it was fine. So that wasn't necessarily a problem.

I'll give him credit for taking a risk on that and pulling it off, partly because there is not a lot of other things in the novel that I do like. I liked Mercy. The interplay between the two was sort of interesting. I liked how Mercy, because Art, the main character, is pretty insufferable. He just is not fun. He is not good.

MADDY: I'm going to reiterate the no-swearing rule.

But yes, he is, horror is based on description. It has its roots in King's literary style. And a lot of this is a homage to Stephen King. But there is something about the description in this book that just is so over the top and inaccessible.

But Mercy's notes do kind of bring us back into the fold a little bit. I started to find myself, a part of my brain as I was reading, and I would notice that she hadn't commented in a while. And I would be like, "I wonder what Mercy, I wonder why the author decided not to include a note here from Mercy." Or kind of miss her little snark every once in a while.

DALE: I agree. That's a valid criticism of that, too, because there were like, when it behooves the story, then Mercy kind of shows up. But there are other times when, like, Mercy would have commented on that. Right? You know what I mean? She would not let him get away with that without a comment.

So yeah, there are, I mean, I guess it was necessary for the story, but that does come into play sometimes as well.

MADDY: Yeah, and then of course at the end of each chapter we have her breakdown of the chapter. So sometimes she'll wait to dissect it then. But it is noticeable when she is silent. I don't know if I even meant it as a criticism, but it definitely took me out of the story to wonder why she isn't commenting this. And then just realizing we were waiting until the end of the chapter so she could get it all out at once.

I'm not sure how I felt about the redlining ultimately. I liked it on the dedication page, where she was like, "Who are these people? They don't exist."

And so I liked the interplay in the front matter and the back matter where it truly actually didn't matter. Heh. Heh. Didn't even do that on purpose.

Yeah, I don't know. I wasn't expecting it when I even opened the book from the copy.

DALE: Yeah, me neither. I had very little as far as expectations.

MADDY: Yeah, because you also had never read a Tremblay book. This was my first as well.

DALE: Correct. Same. So I went into it, and I didn't do any background research beforehand. So I went into it really cold. And just the idea that it was marketed as a horror book and you are doing a horror podcast, so...

MADDY: I was like, of course.

DALE: And the title is macabre to a certain degree. So I went into it with that. But yeah, I didn't know anything about it.

So he's attempting to do a spoof of a particular type of voice with Art, the main narrator.

MADDY: Certainly. He's insufferable on purpose, absolutely.

DALE: But I think you are supposed to be somewhat captivated by his way of...

MADDY: You want to feel bad that he's being drained dry by a vampire. And I don't.

DALE: No. If anything, I was like, "Faster!"

MADDY: Why is it taking until 2014? Let's speed this up a little bit.

DALE: Let's get to the end. Maybe he's more interesting as a vampire.

MADDY: Even those last pages where, spoiler alert, we do find out that Mercy is a vampire, or at least she is telling us that she is. Where she is talking about how beautiful his heart is and how sweet it is to eat. And I was like, "Really? Doesn't seem like it would have been that sweet."

DALE: Right. Like that was another thing. If you were a sort of like ageless vampire, and I don't know how long she was but apparently since the 1800s, right? Isn't that where the story comes back to, when he writes the report? So if you've been around that long, are you really going to hang out with somebody as insufferable as this guy? He is so boring. You are not going to spend your time with him.

MADDY: She's like, and this is so gross to say, she's like tenderizing him. She is like marinating his heart in punk rock to make it taste better? I guess?

DALE: Yeah.

MADDY: So even though we do find out on the last page that she has been siphoning it and in that previous chapter we find out that he has been siphoning from Eddie possibly, which is still kind of up for debate, I guess.

But did you, up until that point it isn't really clear whether there are any vampires and who is telling the truth. So up until like three quarters of the way through the book, who did you believe? Did you believe Mercy's notes or did you believe Art with his memoir?

DALE: So the Easter eggs, the little hints that they give along the way are so mundane.

MADDY: I agree.

DALE: They are just not that big. The weird thing is when he makes the jump into believing she's a vampire, I was like, "When did that start? How did you suddenly go from not believing to believing this friend of yours is..." Because that's a huge jump, to like, "I listen to punk rock and I bought a leather jacket and now I believe in vampires." That was a big transition. And I didn't really get how he got there. Especially since the things that he fixates on are not very big things. So I did not really, he just seemed kind of whiny to me more than anything.

MADDY: Yeah, and a lot of that stuff that Mercy kind of tries to blame it on later, like overmedicating, improperly medicating, insomnia, things like that, they don't apply early on. So he doesn't have this foundation to blame it on.

But he's also a kid. If I was seventeen and I was, "Oh my god, your jacket's alive? What?" I'd just be like, "Oh, no, that's because I watched *The Shining* last night." Or whatever.

And they are huge horror fans. They talk about being horror movie fans. And yet that never is a real throughline in their characters. It's all very music based. Which is great, and obviously defines both of them and their relationship to one another. But every once in a while they will be, like, "We put on this B horror movie." But no one ever makes the connections between like him possibly thinking this because of all of the content he's consuming.

It was very, the leaps he makes, was not the psychological thrill ride I was hoping for.

DALE: Yeah. Right. Like you were sort of on the edge and is this real or is this not? I mean, a lot of it was like, I just don't care, necessarily. You want the vampires to get there so the action can start. You know? Something can start happening.

MADDY: Yeah. It is a really big risk, I think, to invoke vampires in a psychological horror story, where you don't even realize. Like, the vampires make their first appearance to us, and not just through Art's memory, in the present tense, about twenty pages from the end. And that makes sense as a psychological horror, right, where you are wondering, hypothetically, as a good reader, which we are not, if they are real or if they are not.

Did you find this scary?

DALE: No! Almost the opposite of scary. I feel like it was really, I mean, I didn't know anything about Paul Tremblay until you said that he was well known.

MADDY: Yes, he is well established from the nineties.

DALE: I think it would have been better if they did not market this as a horror novel.

MADDY: I agree. Literary psychological suspense, maybe. But even then...

DALE: Yeah, like a Gen X novel. I was thinking of the movie *Reality Bites*. Yeah, it's a little like that with the really super whiney characters. I'm Gen X and I can say, I get that. We were a whiny generation. And all the sort of pop culture references and how their entire relationship is built around that.

Some of that could be interesting in a sort of Chuck Klosterman type of way. But as a horror novel it just lands with a big old oof.

MADDY: Almost like a heart coming out of your chest, flopping onto the ground.

Yeah, the landing is uneven at best, I would say. And I do talk about this a little bit earlier, but I'm just going to say it here because neither of us are Tremblay, we are both noobs, essentially. He is well known for pulling in tropes of other subgenres of horror, mainly paranormal, and making them psychological, where you are not really sure what is supernatural and what is not.

And that is kind of how he's made this legacy for himself, but I think some of the, like you were saying with Easter eggs, some of the treatises on memory, memory as a physical object, memory as the thing that people help with, memory as something that can be looked at in an infinite number of ways, was more profound to me, and I use the term profound very loosely, than any part of the horror.

Because it isn't. It's scary to confront your own mortality, but even that kind of falls to the wayside. You'll notice that every once in a while Art will think about it while he's having panic attacks during the pallbearers club. But it's kind of like shuffled off. Which is too bad.

DALE: I agree. I think that those parts of the book are the things that work the best. He's got, there are some aspects that are a little bit humorous. I think that sort of light humor and that light touch is working OK and well for him. I especially like when Mercy kind of comes in and pokes light fun at his sort of overwrought nature.

MADDY: Woe is me.

DALE: Yeah. And those are the things that seem to be working best. And then when it tries to go more into the horror or suspense or like ooh, do you believe this type of thing, it was always so low key.

MADDY: Yeah. And Art is able to escape the situation. The furniture floating was, I think, perhaps the best visual in the novel, in the scene, and yet he is able to escape and run and then doesn't see Mercy for another however many years. Wait! I want to go back to that! Let's talk about the dressers floating!

DALE: Yeah, it seems like the author is running from the most interesting parts or scenes in the book, too. Why did we then, we started to get into something. Maybe the author is doing that on purpose, taking us away from something.

MADDY: It does feel very human.

DALE: That's why I think the novel works better as more of a fictional literary thing than a genre thing. I think if I went into this reading it more of like, "This is a literary novel that has some horror elements into it that's kind of like fun and will tease you and leave you guessing." I think I would have enjoyed it more than the way it was marketed as.

MADDY: I agree.

I'm going to shift gears. You enjoy music, right? We all live in Austin.



DALE: I do, yes. You are required to once you move to the city.

MADDY: Yes. You must get a little badge that says, "I like music."

DALE: It says South by Southwest on it.

MADDY: This book, the foundation truly is music rather than vampires. And honestly even relates, I would say, is on even footing with the idea of memory and this fiction versus memoir, music kind of underpins everything. How did you feel about the portrayal of music? Of the idea of the bands, the nightlife, what it feels like. Do you think Tremblay really captured what it really feels like to listen to a band for the first time in your friend's car? To understand a genre of music on a molecular level?

DALE: I thought there was some authenticity to that as far as being first introduced. That is one of the things that works the best in that early relationship between the two of them, where she's the older, cooler friend, and he's kind of like this teenage loser who hasn't really found his identity yet. And she guides him into... she's like, "Is that seriously what you are listening to?" And sort of guides him into a more interesting phase of his life, where he starts developing a taste and aesthetic and stuff.

So I remember that period and having some friends in that vein. And that felt authentic to me.

The music aspect I liked. But the punk scene, they just mentioned *Husker Du* like every page. That's the only band I even remember them talking about. Bob Mould and *Husker Du*.

MADDY: I know. I think he wears one *Ramones* shirt, but other than that...

DALE: Yeah, it's like she's into all these punk albums, and then they just play the same *Husker Du* album over and over. Not that...

MADDY: We've all done it.

DALE: Yeah. I'm not a *Husker Du*...

MADDY: Fan? Listener?

DALE: No, I'm fine with *Husker Du*. I'm not a *Husker Don't*. I'm not one of those. It was fine. But they could have, if they are going to go into that arena, there are certainly some more underground bands that they could have...

MADDY: Well, I think when you start with bullying your protagonist by saying he looks like he's a fan of *Duran Duran*, there is only so much farther you can go. In his wheelhouse.

DALE: I liked the pop culture references. It's of my generation so that may be a little bit more fun for me. I liked the call back to the more anachronistic, like cassette tapes and that. That was sort of fun to go into.

MADDY: Yeah. The Walkman. Gotta always have that Walkman. Yeah, I think as someone who is a generation or two later, it was really interesting for me to dig into that scene and experience it through these eyes, through Art's eyes, and really look at it. I mean, Providence, Rhode Island. Who knew?

But also I loved how Mercy, this hundred-plus-year-old vampire by the end, found that punk was her identity. That she identified with it so much, too. So in addition to being totally submersed and feeling like there is a great, I'm sure someone has put a Spotify play list together of everything that is listed in this book, I found it was really fun to be like there are people who never leave the music they first heard when they were young behind. Nor should they!

That is truly an identifier for a lot of people and their personalities and their lives. But I loved that something about this one era, this one couple of years in the mid to late eighties made a vampire stick with it for thirty more years.

DALE: That is one of the drawbacks of the format of the book too, is that I would love to find out how Mercy got into punk music, right?

How she became this immortal wandering the earth and then she finds punk. But we can't know any of this because we can't be revealed. So we can't really know much more about Mercy. But Mercy is the more interesting character.

MADDY: Relegated to the margins.

DALE: Did you buy him being in a punk band? The description of him playing?

MADDY: No.

DALE: Me either.

MADDY: That was the first time in the book where I was, and Mercy said something about "There's no way you could have been in that many bands over that amount of time." The way he described it. I love all these fun band names, but there was something about it, where I was like, we are missing too much of his life from the nineties and the early 2000s to believe this kind of transformation.

DALE: Right. Because he becomes this sort of like that guy in the city who's been...

MADDY: Right. He's at the end of every bar.

DALE: He's the godfather of all the punk things. I still don't, I buy him as the punk listener, the kid who gets into punk and he's like, "Now it's going to be my identity."

MADDY: I'm raging against the machine, Mom.

DALE: But I don't buy him being the cool, "Now I'm the guy on stage sneering at the Man," type.

MADDY: Yeah. I'm curious too because there isn't really a man for him to sneer against. I almost wish that the doctors in his life, who we get – Dr. Seward comes up a lot in the beginning who is helping him with his surgery. Great *Dracula* reference. And even Mercy mentions that a couple of times. But because of the punk lifestyle and the musician lifestyle, he is no longer really seeing doctors and they kind of fade out. But I was, that would be a great to bring that back around. There is someone he's actively rebelling against.

I mean, Mercy. He's actively rebelling against her hold over him. Whether or not it's real.

DALE: Yeah. He seems to be pretty fixated. But she leaves for years at a time.

MADDY: Well, he doesn't see her. She sees him.

DALE: But they don't really have any contact. But he's still so...

Yeah, like they had, I don't think that they needed to have a romantic relationship in order for him to like... But it did seem like, I'm like, why are you still always thinking about...? I guess that could be the whatever psychological vampire hold or whatever that we have, that she has. But it just seemed strange.

MADDY: Yeah. We all have things that we remember from childhood and cringe years but something about it...

I also would have preferred if the Pallbearers Club had been what had a hold on him. And it does towards the end. He goes back and is working and drives the hearse. She's a product of the Pallbearers Club.

And he names his one-man band The Pallbearers Club.

DALE: That's another thing. It seems like it was an interesting idea, but it seems unformed, the Pallbearers Club in general.

MADDY: Yeah. I think from the copy I had expected it to stretch the length of the book.

DALE: Yeah. And to be more central to it. But they had what, one or two things and then they were out?

MADDY: Yeah, I think a third, halfway through the book they were like, "This was our last Pallbearers Club." And I was like, "But there's a hundred pages left!"

DALE: Yeah. It just served as the vehicle for him meeting Mercy, it seemed like, and after that he just abandoned the whole idea of it together.

MADDY: When I heard about this book, back when it published, I believe May of 2022, the only thing that had really been released was the copy. And I was like, "Oh, *Pallbearers Club*. Weird stuff is going to happen in this graveyard and there are vampire morticians. And it's going to be so cool."

And that's kind of like the first inkling we get, when he's wondering if the woman in the casket is undead because they can't feel her weight. And she is a recurring feature later, but I wish there was more talked about in like in terms of setting at the morgue or the funeral home. The general setting is so rife with horror and terror about memory and death and grieving and who will carry on your legacy? And this Pallbearers Club is being like, "We're the only people here."

I just wish that that had been the whole book.

DALE: Yeah. I agree. Same. I found the title intriguing. And the idea of this weird kid forming an extracurricular activity that involves carrying corpses.

MADDY: A weird girl taking pictures of corpses.

DALE: This is all kind of weird. And then something that hadn't occurred to me before, but something that I think the novel lacks is atmosphere. Which is very, why...

DALE AND MADDY: That's horror!

DALE: Exactly. Especially psychological horror. That is mostly what it is, is setting an atmosphere to something. And he never really sets it. The Pallbearers Club is a cool idea and it sort of, there's even some interesting characters involved in it. The mortician seemed like an interesting character.

MADDY: Yeah, Mr. Stevens.

DALE: But they are all suddenly gone and it goes to Mercy.

MADDY: Yeah. I agree. I think that's a great point about atmosphere, and I'm going to steal it.

I think between that and pacing are the two main things that a horror novel has to have. So we lack atmosphere. In a psychological horror you are supposed to, despite it taking place in someone's brain, and the thoughts and psychological, we get too much of Art. There's no mystery about what is going on in his brain. He's always in pain, which is very sad.

But so much of it can be written away by stuff that we already know. So the siphoning that vampires are doing doesn't even matter much, because it is all based on stuff that was already happening. And I think really the pacing, regardless of how a horror novel or movie chooses to pace itself, it's always going to build towards the end.

Did you think it built at all?

DALE: No!

MADDY: Leading question.

DALE: It was not a build. It was a slog.

After I stopped sort of paying attention to it as a horror novel, I kind of was able to enjoy it just as a, that idea of a Gen X novel, and enjoyed some of the ideas and symbolism and the deconstruction of that generation that was happening in the novel.

And that was kind of fun. And by the time I started just enjoying the novel on that level, when they returned to the vampire stuff, I was like, now I'm not even interested anymore.

MADDY: It felt very, it wasn't even third act speeding up. It was like, we get to the last chapter where he is in Eddy's house, and I was like, "Wait! Wait! We are suddenly moving way too fast."

DALE: Yeah. Slow. Slow. Slow. Creeping along. And then...

MADDY: He's sitting on Eddy's chest and he's killing him. And I was like, "Wait, wait, no!" And it was over two pages later.

DALE: Yeah. Also the other thing that really annoyed me in the novel is the lack of development of the parents. Because his mom, the death of his mom, is this huge event that is supposed to be this big turning point where he starts wondering if he himself has killed his own mother. All the psychological things of that.

And I'm like, "That would be interesting if we knew who your mother was at all. But we have no clue. You introduced her as a suburban housewife."

MADDY: Who used to play basketball.

DALE: And that was her entire character. So I have no investment in her death.

MADDY: I agree. And it's so sad. It should be this really poignant moment. And Mercy certainly treats it as a poignant moment. But there is that lack of depth and connection for the reader. What other response was he going to have but him thinking that this kind of vampire, whether himself or someone else, was killing his mother?

It didn't really have that kind of payoff or, not even a twist but sudden uptick of "Oh, he's really starting to leave his own mind behind."

DALE: Yeah, that would have been more interesting if they had at least done that. Of course once again it would have helped if the mother's character was developed.

MADDY: Yes, exactly. That's the main problem.

But also his parents get divorced and he's like, "I didn't see that coming." Because it is a "memoir," we don't either. But still maybe the reader should have seen a little bit? At least some foreshadowing?

DALE: Yeah, they interacted a couple of times. You could have seen that. I don't know what the purpose of the divorce is, except for maybe he just wanted the mom by herself so that he could siphon off. I don't know.

And then the dad is just gone. I don't know.

MADDY: It's so bizarre.

DALE: Strange choices that don't pay off, like you said.

MADDY: And I think part of it is in some of the press release interviews that he did around the launch of the publication of this book, it is semiautobiographical. Not the vampires. But the scoliosis. The brace. The surgery. I imagine some of the family things. Definitely the eighties rock scene, punk rock scene.

But it falls into so many categories, as we've said, where it is literary, it's autobiographical, which is usually literary anyway. And it would have been a lot more interesting as a semiautobiographical treatise on grief and blame and survivor's guilt.

DALE: Those were the more interesting parts to me. I agree. I think that if that was more of like a semiautobiographical story about him and him dealing with this sort of unusual, difficult childhood that he has and the world that he had to escape into to get through that. That would have been a more interesting story. Yeah. I agree.

I wonder if that sort of hampered his ability too. Because writing autobiographical stuff can make it difficult for you to be objective about what you are writing and the story that you are telling. So I wonder if that hampered his ability to sort of see the story for what it was.

MADDY: Yeah. Amp up the horror.

Well, in case we haven't totally ruined your perspective on this novel, whether you have read it or not, but if you have liked it, we do have some readalikes for you.

Do you want to start, Dale?

DALE: Yeah. I have a really good one that I think pairs well with this novel. It's called *A Good and Happy Child*. A few years ago my wife introduced it to me. No real spoilers, but the basis of the novel is that there is a guy and he's having his first child, or just had his first child. But he's really freaked out. He doesn't want to hold the child. He doesn't want to touch the child. And this has something to do with some trauma that happened in his own childhood. And his wife convinces him to go talk to a therapist about it.

So the conversations, the story is being told to the therapist that you are getting. And the story, once again this is not spoilers, this is stuff that comes out early on in the novel, is that he had a creepy invisible friend when he was a child that kept telling him to do worse and worse things, that got creepier and creepier. And the idea is, is the friend invisible? Or is this a demon type thing? Or is this just a voice in his head that was telling him to do things?

MADDY: That sounds really good.

DALE: It is really good. And it is similar to this in that there is something you don't know until the end. But the payoff is definitely much better.

MADDY: It's *A Good and Happy Child*, by Justin Evans.

DALE: That's the one.

MADDY: OK. I'm going to list a few as well. Do you have more? Because we can go back and forth if you like.

DALE: Yeah, let's go back and forth.

MADDY: I am going to say *We Sold Our Souls*, by Grady Hendrix. Grady Hendrix we have talked about on the humor episode of this podcast. He tends to lean more into that wry, pop culture, pretty funny. But *We Sold Our Souls* is about a punk rock band that sells their souls for stardom.

It is hailed as his darkest novel yet. So it definitely gets more into the psychological horror rather than funny paranormal. OK, you go.

DALE: Well, something a little bit off the beaten path so far as other horror pop culture, going along with the time period of this novel, there is a great podcast that is called *Satanic Panic*. Anyone who lived in the eighties remembers this time period and your mother showing you newspaper clippings of cows that have been sacrificed to Satan and stuff. And this weird phenomena that didn't actually happen that swept through the nation in the eighties. And they go into it in this podcast, and it's great.

MADDY: That sounds amazing.

Also in the eighties: *Wolf in White Van*, by John Darnielle, which is about someone who I believe is housebound or bedbound, who is playing mail-order RPGs, role playing games. But who is he playing with?

I'm going to list a couple of more for *Pallbearers Club*, and then we can save some for psychological horror. Does that sound good to you?

DALE: Sounds good.

MADDY: *Fever Dream*, by Samanta Schweblin.

*Jawbone* by Mónica Ojeda.

*Such A Pretty Smile* by Kristi DeMeester.

*Ramifications* by Daniel Saldaña Paris.

So if you liked *The Pallbearers Club*, or you think you would like that kind of style but maybe something with a little more payoff, check out the ones we just listed.

But if you are a fan of psychological horror in general, we do have some recommendations for that as well, where we can kind of move away from *The Pallbearers Club* and just talk.

DALE: *The Bad Seed*, both the book and the movie, about a cute little blond-haired child (WHISPERS) that is not good. This little sociopathic child. It's great.

MADDY: That sounds terrifying.

I'm going to say, Catriona Ward is a relatively new author, but her book, *The Last House on Needless Street*, which came out a couple of years ago, is extremely good literary psychological fiction. And her 2022 horror, called *Sundial*.

DALE: *Bunny*? Have you?

MADDY: I haven't. It's on my list.

DALE: It's so good. It's a great story about a creative writing program and the horror. It just takes so many turns that you cannot predict. I think the author's name is Mona Awad. She's great. That's her first book. A first book should not be that good. Very jealous.

MADDY: So unfair.

*The Hole*, by Hye-young Pyun. I haven't read it yet, but it looks so good.

And then *Bad Fruit*, by Ella King. It's a mother daughter relationship. Psychological generational trauma.

DALE: Just one more. This is a nonfiction. *The Devil in Massachusetts*. It's about the Salem witch trials and how that's started. But it is told as if it is a novel. It's nonfiction, well researched, but told in a very, a real page turner.

MADDY: Wow, that sounds great. Coming out of left field with that nonfiction!

I'll do one more. *Comfort Me with Apples*, by Cathrynne M. Valente, which is a quick 117 pages. But really holds you through to the end.

Well, I think that is going to be about it for us. Dale, thank you again for coming on and giving us your honest opinion.

DALE: Thanks for having me, that was fun.

MUSIC

Thank you for listening to this very psychological episode of APL Volumes, Season One.

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 Dale Bridges. If you see him out on the floor here at the Central Library, ask him how he really felt about *The Pallbearers Club*.

APL Volumes is recorded and produced in the Library's Innovation Lab, a part of the APL Innovate Digital Maker Space. The Austin Public Library is currently putting together a very cool digital maker space, 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 Visceral subgenre. We're reading *Tender Is the Flesh* by Augustina Bazterrica.

Thanks for listening and for supporting your local public library.

MUSIC