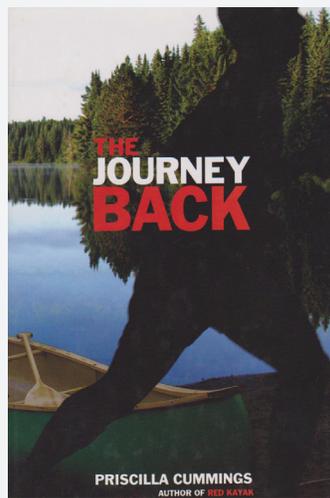


Think Piece
***The Journey Back: Whereupon There Are No
Heroes With Whom to Identify***

Cummings, Priscilla. *The Journey Back*. New York: Dutton, 2013.

Joseph Michael Sommers



Within the parlance of the day, I suppose the proper first thing to do in this essay would be to remind the reader that it *may contain spoilers*. And by “may,” I mean “It will.” And by “It will,” I mean, “It will happen right now.” You were warned.

When the editors asked me to frame a discussion of identity while bracketing that concept within my work on empathic bonding between young adult readers and the protagonists that they read and then marrying that to a particular protagonist, “Digger” Griswald, the deceptively-earnest 14-year-old protagonist of Priscilla Cummings’ *The Journey Back*, well, let’s just say that I may have been a poor choice of a correspondent with Digger’s narrative. Digger is a down-on-his-luck prisoner in a detention center for juveniles. Digger escapes said detention center in a noble, if not overtly-naïve, attempt to save his family who suffers under the domesticated tyranny of an abusive father in an already borderline poverty-stricken circumstance. And, truth be told: he’s pretty clever and mighty successful in his escape on the whole and would be seen to most audiences, I think, as a bit of a hell-bent scamp along the lines of one of Mark Twain’s more famous Hellraisers such as Huckleberry Finn or Tom Sawyer. It should be a no-brainer: gotta love the scrappy underdog fighting to get back to his near-

destitute family to protect them from a dad with substance- and spousal-abuse issues. So, what's the problem, Sommers?

The problem is why Digger's in the detention center in the first place.

The reason why Digger's in the detention center in the first place is that he and his best friend J.T. decided to play a prank on a well-to-do neighbor that went horribly awry when a three-year-old boy was killed.

I warned you that there would be spoilers.

Forgive me if I appear to be sanctimonious; I am anything but. However, in full-disclosure, regardless of my capacities as a scholar of children's and young adult literature, I am first and foremost a husband and a father to a toddler very similar in age to the child who dies in the book.

Likewise, forgive me if I seem dismissive; again, I am anything but. Cummings crafts a narrative here surrounding a young man who does something unforgivable—truly, he doesn't forgive himself, and he rolls the stone of his own shame and misery regarding his crime over and over up the hill of regret throughout the book, and it returns to crush him over and over again. But he keeps trying to push that stone. And, regardless of the number of exculpatory flashbacks and theoretical glances at happiness Digger envisions throughout his escape from Cliffside Youth Detention Center, egress is only afforded to him when he not only owns the indiscretions of his youth but also atones for them as best as he can between two covers. (I won't spoil that for you.)

His identity, so masterfully-constructed by Cummings, is a callous teenage boy harboring irresolvable pain. Michael Griswald (his actual name) was the young man who committed the crime, but Digger is the person who comes out of the horror of murdering a toddler. The actual journey of the book is Digger's reconciliation with himself and not-only a reclamation of Michael, but a transformation of that young man into a better person. And that's as valid a novel of growth and education as any in recent memory.

Problematically, it's tethered to the corpse of a young child.

Empathy is a tricky thing for readers of narrative fiction young and old alike. It's the quality, I like to think, that separates the concept of "hero" and "protagonist"; it's Ernest Hemingway's old construct of following a story surrounding imperfect people where the narrative compels you forward, but you're not necessarily supposed to root for the protagonist as they're not necessarily the paragon of virtue one would deem heroic. Interestingly here, I do think Cummings wants her readers to empathize with Digger. So much of her book is cast in internal dialogue speaking directly to the reader seemingly begging the reader to understand the circumstances that underpin Digger's journey: I have to escape. I have to protect my family. I can't let more people be hurt (like I hurt someone else before). Problematically, in the process of trying to get back to his family, Digger is perfectly willing to hurt others in the process. He will lie. He will steal. He will do thousands of dollars in damage to property. He will do whatever he has to get back to his family.

Digger's construction is interesting to me in so many ways because, in fiction, I adore this sort of doggedness. For anyone familiar with the old television serial and filmic update of *The Fugitive*, the work reads in so many ways like a juvenile-accounting of Richard Kimble. Except, in this case, there is no one-armed man; Digger killed a small boy, even if only by accident. And it gnaws at him, I think, as it gnaws at me. He erred. We all err. He's consumed by his error; he becomes the error until he can rectify it within his own mind and begin a process of healing. But that doesn't bring the young child back from the dead, and I don't think many young readers know *that* empathy.

In many ways, *The Journey Back*, in all of its gaudy clichés and dead-toddler fulcrums is a perfect young adult narrative for post-recession America; it is a survival piece constructed and defined on the mendacious propaganda of a glacial recovery where thousands if not millions are angry at those people who are not even wealthy but merely tenuously stable. My fear here is that readers may empathize with Digger at the wrong points in the narrative – with his anger and his outrage and not with his self-loathing and imposed-damnation. No amount of rescuing strays dogs or reading bedtime stories to fellow abused children can redeem Digger's actions. Those scales will never balance out. This is something that will occur off-camera, if it ever does, after the reader puts this book away.

Digger is no hero, but he is a compelling and conflicted protagonist with a merit and complexity to his construction that should challenge the reader as the best protagonists of prose fiction do. Just don't ask me to empathize with him. That's not going to happen. And, my hopes for the youthful reader of *The Journey Back* is that, whoever that might be, that person looks at Digger and doesn't try to make that one-to-one connection of an empathic bond. Rather, I hope the reader looks at Digger and reads awaiting his transformation into a better Michael, a Michael they will never read, but one they might be able to empathize with.

About the Author

Joseph Michael Sommers is an associate professor of English at Central Michigan University where he teaches courses in children's and young adult literature as well as courses in modern and contemporary Anglophone literature, visual narratives, and popular culture. He is the coauthor of two McFarland books and has published essays on such topics as Judy Blume, Spider-Man, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.