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JOSEPH BRUCHAC’S “DARK” NOVELS: CONFRONTING THE TERROR OF ADOLESCENCE

MICHELLE PAGNI STEWART

Adolescence is a strange time: adolescents’ bodies are changing in ways over which they often have no control; their hormones often direct their actions without their understanding why; the relatively safe, comfortable world they have known thus far suddenly seems to be full of temptations and dangers they are both frightened by and drawn to. Abenaki Joseph Bruchac, a children’s author best known for historical fiction novels such as *Hidden Roots*, *The Winter People* and the recent *March Toward Thunder*, provides an outlet for the conflicting, alluring emotions of adolescents in his novels *The Dark Pond* (2004) and *Whisper in the Dark* (2005), novels that wed frightening situations within the novels with the terrifying angst of adolescence. Yet Bruchac also acts as a trickster in writing these novels that seem, on the surface, to have more in common with Edgar Allan Poe than with Sherman Alexie, with Anne Rice than with Louise Erdrich, with Stephen King than with Thomas King. Adding to the genre of horror fiction so popular with adolescents, he creates stories for an audience that is more likely to seek entertainment than edification within the text, the kind of audience who reads purely for pleasure without consideration of other “lessons” to be found in literature, such as learning about other historical periods or people from cultures that differ from their own. *The Dark Pond* and *Whisper in the Dark* on one level do seek to entertain, to thrill and frighten young readers as they share in the experiences of Armie and Maddy, but the novels also introduce young readers to characters and cultures with which they may be unfamiliar. In so doing, they make a connection between the horror story and adolescence, despite one’s cultural background.
In these two novels, Bruchac incorporates notions of the uncanny: he deconstructs the familiar genre of the horror story to make it unfamiliar by incorporating American Indian mythology, and he deconstructs the less familiar American Indian coming-of-age story to make it the more familiar narrative of an outsider to the group, one who also is enthralled with the fearful. In these “dark” novels (so-called because of the titles as well as the content), Bruchac uses the popular genre of horror fiction to explore themes of adolescence as well as significant American Indian themes. Through the familiar genre of the horror story, he subtly introduces adolescent readers to American Indian literature, culture, and history, taking them from the known (horror story) to the unknown (American Indian story), benefiting both in the process. Bruchac’s novels thus work as a means to “reinvent” American Indians and to subvert the stereotypes, using his storytelling Abenaki roots to provide an outlet and insight into the adolescent mind.1

The Adolescent as Uncanny

As Nicholas Royle explains in *The Uncanny*, we associate the uncanny with things that are ghostly, strange, mysterious, weird, and supernatural, but the uncanny is more complex than that. For most people, the notion of the uncanny begins with Freud’s famous essay in which he explains, “The subject of the ‘uncanny’…is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general” (217). Postmodern discussions of the uncanny often associate it with notions of deconstruction since one can readily see how the uncanny deconstructs, making signifiers and signifieds difficult to pin down, which is, in part, what keeps the reader uncertain and uneasy, all the while marking a return of the familiar in the love/hate relationship we find in being frightened, thrust out of our comfort zones and into the midst of the unfamiliar.

That the protagonists of Bruchac’s novels are adolescents seems particularly apropos of the uncanny, for what can be described as familiar yet unfamiliar better than adolescence? It is a time when one’s body, something one has “lived” intimately with for at least a decade, becomes something foreign, when the adolescent himself or herself may be seen as a stranger by friends and family, even as they know the adolescent is still the same person. In fact, several critics offer theories about adolescence and adolescent literature that provide an important groundwork for synthesizing adolescence and the uncanny. For one thing, adolescence signifies the uncanny in the way that both are different yet strangely the same since they revolve around issues of power and identity/subjectivity. Roberta Trites connects these concepts when she argues that power is “a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject,” much as the terror of the horror genre does, so that adolescents, ultimately, “are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces...
that surround them” (7). Readers confront this power struggle in horror fiction since they find themselves having to face the unknown, something that may terrify them or keep them from acting, but the novels’ resolutions typically depend on the characters confronting and defeating or eliminating those very forces that terrify them. As such, the characters’ actions provide a mirror for adolescents to confront those very forces of maturation that they fear.

Furthermore, Karen Coats provides another important analytic pattern that melds the concepts of the uncanny and adolescence. Coats looks at the paradox of adolescence from a Lacanian and Kristevan perspective, arguing, among other things, that adolescence, “like abjection, breaches and challenges boundaries” (Looking Glasses 142). This notion of abjection, of challenging boundaries, then, is appropos not only of adolescence, as Coats argues, but also of Bruchac’s novels in particular. His synthesis of the horror story, the adolescent novel, and Native American culture seems particularly fitting in light of the historical treatment of Native Americans whereby the government pushed them away to reservations, in part because of the way they breached and challenged Anglo culture, much as adolescents breach and challenge the boundaries of adulthood and childhood that surround them.

Just as critics have aligned notions of adolescence with the uncanny, so, too, have critics recognized the connection between the gothic and adolescence as well as between the gothic and adolescents. In the recently published collection, The Gothic in Children’s Literature: Haunting the Borders, several essays articulate this connection. Anna Jackson, for example, argues that gothic novels align canniness with growing up (163). Coats argues that the gothic is the “ideal mode of expression for the emerging adolescent” (“Between” 84). Roderick McGillis, who associates gothic literature with characters who make unwise choices—thus “explain[ing] why the gothic genre is best suited to children and adolescents” (228)—gives an in-depth correlation between the two:

Adolescents are, perhaps, as intensely haunted or even more haunted than the rest of us. Their bodies as well as their social milieu are in flux, changing as they—both body and social group—morph (or should I say grow?) into maturity. The pressures both within and without on the early adolescent bring trepidation and confusion. The body begins to manifest its thirst for satisfaction in ways that test social decorum, and the social group likewise begins to manifest its thirst for pleasure and control. Peer pressure and biological urgency haunt the growing person, even in the light of common day. (231)

Whereas McGillis argues that the gothic allows for both transgression—something also aligned with adolescence—and regeneration, a similar corollary exists in Bruchac’s “dark” novels in the way that he transgresses genre by writing something other than historical fiction, the genre most typically associated with
American Indians. Bruchac also provides a regeneration of American Indian cultures and identity, reminding young readers that American Indians are alive and well in the 21st century, that their experiences are sometimes removed from the reservation and the mascot issue, and that their conflicts often align with those of adolescents of other cultures.

As is true of adolescent fiction, contemporary American Indian fiction has often been recognized as dealing first and foremost with issues of identity. Louis Owens discusses how difficult and complex it is for American Indian authors to articulate Indian identity and concludes that “The recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes in the face of such obstacles a truly enormous undertaking,…[which] is at the center of American Indian fiction” (4-5). Catherine Rainwater expands on Owens’s discussion of Indian subjectivity in arguing that “contemporary fiction by Native Americans frequently traces crises of self-transformation” (65). Regarding adolescents, a similar argument has been made by Robyn McCallum when she contends that adolescent fiction revolves around a quest for “finding one’s self.” McCallum asserts that the narrative structure relies on the formation of the adolescent’s subjectivity (68), something that is often as difficult to articulate and come to terms with as it is for American Indian subjectivity. In fact, McCallum argues that narrative strategies in adolescent fiction can serve several functions, many of which align with contemporary American Indian authors who write about Native American experiences and characters. For one thing, narratives can result in the displacement of a character, and hence his or her sense of self can be destabilized or called into question. Second, narrative strategies allow adolescents to explore the way that cultural, social or linguistic influences can affect one’s subjectivity. Finally, they allow, through transgressive behavior, an adolescent character to interrogate his/her subject position, particularly in light of the way the dominant culture has confined the ethnic subject position in terms of language, place, and experience (100).

Bruchac’s two novels, then, construct an appropriate allegory of adolescent identity: of a character who is between childhood/adulthood and between the dominant culture/Native culture, who is trying to bridge the two rather than having to choose firmly one side or the other of the maturity/cultural “divide.”

**Bruchac’s Dark Novels**

In *The Dark Pond*, Bruchac tells the story of Armie Katchadourian, a Shawnee-Armenian adolescent who, while away at boarding school, encounters a strange, dark pond that is also being studied by an Abenaki janitor, Mitch. Armie is an outsider at school, partly because he is Shawnee and Armenian, but also because he has psychic powers that make the other students uncomfortable. Like many an adolescent, he feels as if he does not belong with the others who see him as weird, and he finds it difficult to explain to his counselors what he
is feeling. Son of two high-powered lawyers who feel the boarding school experience will benefit their son more than the public schools in Washington D.C., Armie feels somewhat abandoned by his parents. They are most involved in his life when they can treat him as one of their clients since their careers are based on fighting for indigenous rights: when the Academy wants Armie to cut his long hair, his parents use their law background to confront the Board of Trustees at the school, arguing that Armie’s long hair is part of his Shawnee heritage.

Collapsing Shawnee tradition with an adolescent belief in the sanctity of determining one’s hair length (or color), Bruchac demonstrates how Armie is both like and not like those around him, just as his fears about the creature in the lake are connected to his Shawnee culture as well as to the western European literature Armie reads in school, such as *Grendel* and *Macbeth*. Haunted by the creature in the woods, Armie lets his curiosity get the best of him, and he cannot resist sneaking off to the woods to discover what really is in the pond. Much of the novel revolves around his trips to the woods and his meeting Mitch. The two discover they have a similar interest in the creature, one that drives them to the climactic moment when Armie must save Mitch from the grasp of the pond creature. The novel ends with Armie discovering that his friends think he is strong, not weird, and that his parents have not abandoned him but have come to visit him and meet his friends. His friendship with Mitch will continue, and he feels a greater acceptance from the boys at school. Despite the “happy,” all-is-well ending, though, we are never told what the creature is or if it has been destroyed.

Bruchac’s *Whisper in the Dark* has a very different plot even as it delves into the same genre and revolves around common fears of the unknown. Maddy, who has recently been orphaned due to a car accident, tries to figure out who has been calling her on the telephone, whispering threats. Maddy and her good friend Roger have active imaginations, fueled by their love of creepy stories and Roger’s mother’s professorial lectures on the gothic. One day, after their usual run, Maddy and Roger discover someone has written “I AM HERE” on her back door and injured her dog. This incident begins a series of events that suggests Maddy is being stalked by someone or something that means her harm. She recalls Narragansett stories about the Whisperer, a creature who would call those it had chosen four times, after which they would disappear. This creature was believed to return in human form to seek others. She also remembers stories about Chauquaco Wunnicheke, “Knife Hand,” a cannibal who was buried with the Whisperer in a cave and who, in a whisper, promised to return to take away the children.

As Maddy and Roger continue to try to solve the mystery of who is whispering/stalking Maddy, frightening situations escalate until they worry that the Whisperer has taken her aunt, Lyssa. They head to Aunt Lyssa’s house where they find her dazed and semi-conscious in the cellar. With the help of
Roger, her friend Mr. Patel, and Aunt Lyssa—and the street exploding above them—they are able to defeat the Whisperer in the Dark, an albino named Wilbur Whateley, a former resident of the neighborhood who had killed his parents as a teenager and recently escaped from the mental institution where he had been for thirty years. The novel ends with Maddy deciding to write her own scary stories, with her regaining some of the use of her hand injured in the accident, and with her and Roger kissing, the beginning of a new stage of their relationship.

Both novels, then, begin with a sense of displacement for each protagonist, something McCallum argues is necessary for characters who undergo some sort of quest for identity (69-80), as both Armie and Maddy do. But by the end of each novel, these characters have acquired a sense of agency, in part founded on the traditions of their American Indian cultures and beliefs. The ends of both novels thus depict a *bildungsroman*: both Armie and Maddy are more comfortable with themselves, including their limitations or alienation from the social spaces around them, and both have found a way to incorporate the stories of their Native cultures with the realities of their experiences. In his essay, “Storytelling and the Sacred: on the Uses of Native American Stories,” Bruchac explains how American Indian storytellers know that stories do not exist “in isolation from the life of [the] people” so they try to incorporate “origins and cultural contexts of the tales they use” (65). In fact, Bruchac’s specific choice to deal with water monsters, which Armie helps Mitch defeat from on top of the mountain, and with the whisperer in the dark, which Maddy confronts in her aunt’s basement, coincides with the psychic catharsis and rebirth that Irene Moser locates in underground physical spaces, water sources, and high (mountainous) spaces (292). In this way, too, we see each character struggling with the catharsis and rebirth so often necessary for an adolescent grappling with issues of identity and culture.

As American Indian stories, Bruchac’s two novels serve as examples of mediation, as defined by James Ruppert, who argues that contemporary Native American writers are creating dynamic texts, encoding them with mediation: “an artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological frameworks of Native American and western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other” (3). Ruppert sees mediational texts as encouraging readers to reconsider the way they come to understand the text and its meaning, reeducating readers so they can understand two codes, two traditions of discourse. Bruchac’s novels use the two codes—American Indian and horror story—beneficially: while both novels may “dismantle European American stereotypes, create cultural criticism of the dominant society, and make manifest crimes of past,…their mediational goals direct them more toward Native concerns such as nurturing survival, continuance, and continual reemergence of cultural identity” (3-4). Bruchac combines the rich cultural traditions of both American Indian literature and the horror story,
utilizing young readers’ interests and “mak[ing] significant incursions into dominant discourse” (Rainwater 5), while also educating them in the process. Bruchac braids together the horror story of a creature in the pond with the story of Armie’s coming to terms with his subjectivity as a Shawnee as well as his connection with Mitch and Mitch’s quest; he intertwines the horror story of a whispering stalker with the story of Maddy’s accepting the loss of her parents, the loss of the use of her hand, and her step into the more grown-up world of male-female relationships. Bruchac’s “dark” novels are successful examples of mediation, which, as Rainwater argues, allows readers from the dominant culture to gain access to meaning in American Indian texts as well as to learn American Indian strategies for producing meaning since western narrative structures and mythologies do not always apply to American Indian texts (Rainwater x).

Rather than provide young readers with just another tale of terror, Bruchac educates his adolescent readers about American Indian spirituality and beliefs, making these dark novels all the more illuminating. Whereas Bruchac seeks, in his many historical novels, to revise the record of the past, in his dark novels, he revises adolescents’ understanding of other cultures and of their own fear of and fascination with the unknown.

The Familiar/Unfamiliar

At first, The Dark Pond seems to be simply the story of a frightening and possibly dangerous unknown creature, yet throughout the novel Bruchac commingles the familiar with the unfamiliar. For example, Bruchac’s opening suggests the familiar of the horror story: “It’s out there. I can’t see the dark pond from the window of my dorm room. Its waters are too far back in the woods, four ridges away along the trails that no one else is stupid enough to follow. But all I have to do to see that place in my mind is close my eyes—just as I used to when my mother told me those old Shawnee tales of hidden monsters” (n.p.). Simultaneously, he introduces the unfamiliar: Shawnee stories of water monsters. The story proper also suggests the unfamiliar in Armie’s explanation that he feels things others do not and that he has a psychic kinship with animals so others see him as weird, calling him Spooky Armie. The first chapter opens with Armie explaining why he feels like an outcast from the others at school: “Ever since I was really little (which was a looong while ago) I’ve been teased because I was weird. It wasn’t just because I looked different, with my thick black hair and my brown skin. It was also because I said things that other kids thought were strange” (1-2). Animals are not afraid of him, which he also sees as a hindrance to being accepted by others.

As Bruchac tells the story of Armie, he invites readers into Armie’s world, sharing Shawnee history (and a touch of Armenian history since his dad is Armenian). Armie explains Shawnee connections to nature and frequently remembers the stories of his mother and ancestors as he encounters the strange
pond, all the while demonstrating the paradox of nature, which makes it a fitting choice for a frightening tale: “[N]ature isn’t some cute sweet little bunny. It’ll swallow you up if you don’t watch yourself. It’s not that it isn’t beautiful or sacred. It is. More than you know...[Y]ou just have to respect the natural world and remember that you’re part of it” (14-15). From folk tales to *The Blair Witch Project*, the woods recall the unknown, and Bruchac plays with this familiar fear as Armie becomes simultaneously more fascinated with and more fearful of the dark pond and what is inside it.

Bruchac’s *Whisper in the Dark* goes even further in exploring the bridging of familiar/unfamiliar. Bruchac creates in Maddy a typical adolescent: she is afraid of the dark and of the mysterious voice that whispers to her on the phone and at her house; she likes terror-inspiring stories and movies even as they frighten her; and she is experiencing her first adolescent crush. Yet just as with *The Dark Pond*, Maddy also belongs to the “unfamiliar.” She is a Narragansett, so she is both an “Other” to the dominant culture and a member of an American Indian culture less well-known to the dominant culture. She frequently discusses Narragansett legends, particularly those dealing with monsters, demonstrating that her fear has seeds in the Narragansett stories she has grown up hearing from her mother, father, and grandmother. Although the Narragansett stories of the Whisperer in the Dark will likely be unfamiliar to most adolescent readers, Bruchac creates in Maddy someone who may find connection with other lovers of horror since she is fan of Edgar Allan Poe, Anne Rice, and H.P. Lovecraft, as is her friend Roger, whose mother is a professor specializing in gothic literature. These facts allow Maddy to discuss horror fiction with the astuteness and sophistication of someone beyond her years.

Bruchac superbly mediates the familiar and unfamiliar in both novels, simultaneously creating characters who have beliefs and experiences in common with typical adolescents of today while also introducing young readers to American Indian history, beliefs, and people. Debbie Reese laments the fact that many young people today see Native Americans as relegated to the past, that if Native Americans are still around today, they must not be “real” because they enjoy the conveniences of modern life and do not live in teepees (636-38; see also Molin 3-43 and Smith “Native” and “Justice”). While Bruchac has written a number of novels dealing with the history of various Native American people and cultures, in his “dark” adolescent novels, he writes contemporary fiction, creating characters whose stories are not set in a specific year and, even if the settings are themselves specific, the stories could very easily take place elsewhere. Bruchac himself has remarked, “The myth of the ‘Vanishing Red Man’ is more alive in the minds of most Americans than the vital continent-wide growing population of Native Americans” (“Storytelling” 65). Thus, Bruchac deconstructs the dichotomies Native/Other and past/present to demonstrate that these characters are both similar to and different from their
Native ancestors as well as non-Western adolescent readers. Armie, who uses e-mail but frequently references the stories of his grandmother, who starts a fire with a lighter (65) even though he knows the “old way” to make a fire, who makes references to Star Trek as well as Tarahumara Indians, is clearly a blending of contemporary and Native culture, a cultural “mixed blood” in a different sense of the word.

Maddy uses the internet, cell phone, Velcro, and a PlayStation, immediately dispelling the myth of the vanishing Indian of the Plains, reminding adolescent readers that they cannot easily relegate Native Americans to the past or to a Hollywood stereotype:

It isn’t easy at times being Indian. I know I’m half white, but it doesn’t make the Indian part of me any less. Plus I look Indian. My skin is dark, my eyes are slanted, and my hair is thick and black. My dad used to say that all I had to do was put on a buckskin dress to look just like a Narragansett girl from the seventeenth century.

But I live in these times, times when people find Indians interesting but sort of quaint. Modern-day people claim to be rational—even though they believe in urban legends and their kids all read the Harry Potter books and dream about being wizards. So if you start talking Indian stuff as if you really believe it, they may just look at you as if they pity you for believing crap like that. And if you talk about the past, a lot of people say you should just forget it. Live in the present day. Whatever happened, happened. This is the twenty-first century. Forget about it. But Indians don’t forget. I might listen to Eminem on my Walkman and play video games and send e-mail, but that doesn’t make me a different person. It doesn’t change the beat of my heart. We Indians know what century we are living in, but we also remember how we got here. And we remember the stories created along the way. (79-80)

Bruchac, through Maddy, gives a powerful retort to those who see American Indians as relegated to the past or to the Plains. He utilizes the familiar genres of the horror story and the adolescent novel as a means of representing the unfamiliar of American Indian identity politics. Jackson argues that the “uncanny is overcome through a new self-possession that is represented as a release from a more limited sense of identity” (169), as the emphasis shifts from other people’s expectations of the adolescent’s identity, particularly as it has been limited or misrecognized by those others (170). For Maddy, this seems to be the case, and her recognition of who she is, of her Narragansett identity as well as her emerging adolescent identity, allows her to respond to the unfamiliar.

Metafiction/Playing with the Dark

One way that Bruchac demonstrates his own tricksterish underpinnings is his use, in both novels, of metafictional references to horror fiction, particularly movies and books with which adolescents are likely to be familiar. Such a
strategy reinforces the way these stories become familiar horror stories tinged with a Native American element. *The Dark Pond* is sparser in its metafictional references. At one point, for example, Armie says he has stumbled into a Stephen King novel as he dreams of the pond (32-33). Dreams take on a liminal status in Bruchac’s dark novels, for dreams—or to be more exact, nightmares—are a standard motif in horror fiction, often because they are linked to our hidden subconscious fears. For Native Americans, though, dreams are even more significant as they reveal a truth about real life situations, not just something unconscious. So for Armie, as a Shawnee, his dreams about the pond—all dark, negative, and frightening—elicit more fear than might be the case for a non-Native.

*Whisper in the Dark*, because of Maddy’s and Roger’s fascination with horror films and gothic fiction, is intensely metafictional. Maddy constantly likens her situation to the plight of a “victim” in a horror film, such as when she, Roger, and Mr. Patel enter her house looking for her Aunt Lyssa:

> Remember what I said about the way Roger and I criticize the way people act in certain movies? You know, those scenes they seem to have in every single scary film. Like the one where the kids go right in through that open door, when you just know a monster is waiting for them. You know, just so the werewolf or vampire or brain-sucking mutant from outer space can pick them off at its leisure one by one. And everybody goes:
> “Yeah.”
> “Great idea.”
> “Cool.”
> “Let’s all wander off and get massacred.” (136)

Maddy questions the mindless actions of people in horror films even as she herself makes the same mistake—heading into her house without waiting for the police to arrive. According to Julie Cross, Maddy’s monologue is an example of gothic humor, in which parody of the genre itself is often a useful function, making readers aware of “deliberately constructed literary devices” (71). Numerous passages such as this one highlight the way that Bruchac plays with the genre even as he writes it, “counting coup” on Hollywood, as Rainwater defines the concept. She argues that just as some Indian tribes would “count coup” when they could get near enough to an enemy to touch him or take his belongings, so, too, do contemporary American Indian authors “count coup” by appropriating western, postmodern forms of discourse. By mocking Hollywood—known for inculcating the stereotyped Indian into the American social consciousness, Bruchac “counts coup” on the ever-popular horror film, “appropriating the semiotic ‘property’ of the Other, but also reinventing it by making it serve ‘Indian’ ends within the mainstream culture” (33-34). Thus, Bruchac succeeds in making the novel both part of and outside of the dominant discourse.
In *Our Stories Remember*, Bruchac explains that in Native cultures, stories are never “just a story”: they are not just about entertainment but are “a powerful tool for teaching” (35). This explains why Bruchac highlights the storytelling aspect of each novel. Royle explains that “the uncanny seems to be bound up with a compulsion to tell, a compulsive storytelling” (12), and it is intimately entwined in language (2), both commonly found in Native American literature because of its origins in the spoken word. *The Dark Pond* very early on demonstrates the Native American circular way of telling a story. After beginning his story and telling us a bit about his life and how others view him, Armie says, “I have to go back and explain something” (9), reminding us that we are being told a story, even as we read it. In *Whisper in the Dark*, Bruchac ends the novel by telling us that Maddy has been writing the story of what happened, a way to get “power over [what happened]” (173), which is one of many functions of storytelling. Both novels, then, rely on conversive structures, defined by Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez as those structures that are founded on both conversation and conversion, drawing the reader into the story at the same time the reader becomes transformed by his or her participation in the story (1-10).

In using first person focalizers in both novels, Bruchac also makes a number of addresses to the reader in the form of “you.” Whereas the gothic, according to Elizabeth MacAndrew, typically uses indirect, mediated narration (10), Bruchac utilizes, in the tradition of Poe, the first person, allowing readers to experience the frightening incidents as the protagonists do. However, Bruchac also takes this a step further into the American Indian tradition with numerous passages that involve the audience in the story, as Maddy does in the following passage: “Even though I’m not as tragically out of balance as Mr. Mindlow thinks, I suppose he is sort of right. You can always walk out of a movie or turn off a TV, even in the middle of the most awful events. You know that, after the filming is over, all the people who get ‘killed’ are really still alive, and the monsters are fake” (17). When Poe’s narrators address a “you,” most readers feel that the narrator is speaking to someone specifically—in “The Cask of Amontillado” perhaps a priest or a family member Montresor is telling how ingenious he was fifty years ago. When Bruchac’s narrators use “you,” it is more informal (even using the adolescent “tic” “you know” as in the example earlier) and more generic, addressed not to a specific person but to the audience. He constructs a “present, listening audience (as opposed to the absent, solitary reader)” (Rainwater 7), making the written text an oral performance. In this way, then, Bruchac also links his horror stories to the less familiar (to a Western audience) type of storytelling, one that, as Leslie Marmon Silko explains in the video *Running On the Edge of the Rainbow*, attempts to draw in the audience members so that they become a part of the story. Bruchac puts the reader in the intimate position of experiencing along with the narrator, something that heightens the fear and keeps the reader uncertain, uneasy, all
the while marking a return to the familiar in the love/hate relationship we find in being frightened.

The endings of Bruchac’s novels also meld horror fiction, American Indian stories, and adolescent literature. In *The Dark Pond*, the story ends without a clear resolution to what is actually in the pond, although “answers” with respect to Armie’s identity have been addressed, which bring to light Native American literary, cultural, and historical ideas. While the identity of the Whisperer in the Dark has a more human explanation, Bruchac does perhaps a better job in this novel of making the unknown known and the known unknown. Although given a real explanation—that the Whisperer is escaped mental patient Wilbur Whately—Maddy tells us that her grandmother’s response might not be what some would expect: “‘Chauquaco Wunnicheke,’ she said, nodding her head. ‘Knife Hand. Those dang diggers let his spirit out’” (172), suggesting that the Whisperer is not Whately after all but the mythical being called Knife Hand. Maddy’s grandmother sees the Whisperer, then, as something between the human and the spiritual, more in keeping with her Narragansett beliefs. This ending is reminiscent of the ending of Silko’s short story “Yellow Woman,” in which the narrator explains that her grandfather, who liked Yellow Woman stories best of all, would have especially liked to hear the story of her being “kidnapped” by Silva, another being who, according to the narrator, is both human and non-human (62).

In *Whisper in the Dark*, Bruchac uncovers part of the mystery of the novel, but he leaves the truth unknown, as we cannot be sure that the whisperer has been caught or silenced—especially if we believe, as the grandmother does, in the mythic presence of the whisperer. In fact, this lack of a concrete, known answer fits one of Rainwater’s observations about storytellers in general: he or she need not bring closure to the tale since listening to a story is more important than giving a definitive meaning through the narrative (7). In both novels, the endings ring true from an American Indian literary perspective. They also fit with the standard ending of a horror story in which the terrorizing element has been destroyed (at least until the sequel comes out). Finally, they also coincide with an adolescent literature coming-of-age story in which a novel’s conclusion is not the end of the character’s story since conflicts of maturation will continue to arise as adulthood confronts and challenges adolescents.

**Conclusion**

In his autobiography, *Bowman’s Store: A Journey to Myself*, Bruchac explains how his family and his Abenaki roots shaped his own adolescence, even though he did not know, until he was an adult, that he was Abenaki. As he reflects on his youth and adulthood, he explains that truth is not a linear idea, that “Our memories, our dreams, and what truth we do know, may better be seen as a great circle. That great circle, like the beautiful spiraling web of the orb-spider, is filled with lines of connection which move between circles within circles”
This same circling of connections that he perceives connecting the present, the past, and the future can be seen in the way he has synthesized stories of adolescence, horror, and American Indian identity in these two “dark” novels. Rather than write a story whose sole purpose is spine-tingling terror, rather than suggest a straight-line coming-of-age story, Bruchac finds commonality in the angst of adolescence and horror as he shows that one’s maturity comes through beginning to understand one’s identity, which is connected to the past, to the present, and to others, both those an adolescent has much in common with and those he or she does not. Bruchac explains that his great grandparents “had to let experience be the final teacher [for his grandfather and his siblings], because they couldn’t always be there” (24), suggesting a similar framework for adolescent literature. Adolescents in literature are frequently orphaned—either metaphorically as Armie is or literally as Maddy is—as a way of demonstrating the extent to which adolescence requires young people to begin to act on their own beliefs and accept the consequences of those beliefs. So, too, does Bruchac encourage adolescent readers to “learn better by doing than by being told” (Bowman’s 24). By the novels’ conclusions, both Armie and Maddy have a stronger sense of who they are and of the extent to which they themselves are responsible for confronting those forces that frighten them, just as young people, learning to negotiate the world and their emotions, should confront the forces of adolescence that frighten them.

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1 Rainwater argues that American Indians have long been “consign[ed] to silence and stereotypical representation” (ix). This is particularly true within children’s and adolescent literature. For discussions of stereotypes specific to children’s and adolescent literature, see Hirschfelder, Molin, Reese, Seale and Slapin, Stott, and Thompson.

2 Representing the views of many, Cynthia Leitich Smith complains that “Native people in books for young readers appear almost exclusively in historic contexts. Though historic books are welcome, their numbers have been so proportionally high that many children believe Native Americans went the way of the tyrannosaur or that we all live as we did 500 years ago” (“Social” 8). In fact, Smith identifies contemporary fiction as the “most underrepresented type of Indian-themed book” (“Native” n.p.). See also Molin and Reese.

3 In Rainwater’s terminology the texts would be “cross-coded,” that is, “encoded with more than one interpretive frame of reference” (34).

4 Steponaitis, Reily, and Garber explain that a common Shawnee myth, one that explains the origins of witchcraft, involves a cultural hero who calls the horned water serpent to the edge of the water where the monster is killed and its body broken up for use as a medicine. Erdoes and Ortiz discuss the type of stories depicting monster slayers, in which the hero must defeat the monster, often because of his connection to the natural world, 179-80. In the description of the hero, who grows up quickly and is a match for a monster, even at a young age, the connections to Armie can be found.
These two stories are specific to the tribes and therefore the places identified in each novel, which in a sense means they are not interchangeable in location. However, the conflicts could, in fact, occur in other places, possibly even with members of other Native cultures who have similar water monster or whisperer in the dark stories.

I am associating Bruchac with the Native American trickster in that he is writing in the liminal spaces, emphasizing both the American Indian and the gothic traditions, and he is clearly having fun with the horror genre in his metafictional references to horror stories and films. Yet, just as a trickster often serves to push the boundaries of social conventions in order to help the audience learn a lesson, so, too, does Bruchac push the boundaries of the genres to demonstrate that what we often see as different or other may be more familiar than we thought.

WORKS CITED


