

“The water hears and understands. The ice does not forgive”: Death and Rebirth in Dirty Water in the *Six of Crows* Duology

In Leigh Bardugo’s *Six of Crows* duology, water is a powerful force of death, rebirth, and revelation. The six main adolescent characters have arrived in the crime-ridden Barrel of the port city Ketterdam after experiences with water have irrevocably separated them from the families or communities of their childhoods. These traumatic experiences include using a brother’s body as a raft to swim from a corpse barge to the harbor, transportation in a slave ship, death of a parent due to a poisoned well, a shipwreck, and escaping filicide in a canal. The adolescent characters are incapable of returning to states of innocence or ignorance after their baptisms in unclean waters; they see themselves as contaminated remnants arisen from the deaths of their childhood selves.

An aphorism in the text intones, “The water hears and understands. The ice does not forgive.” As members of a gang called the Dregs, the adolescent characters’ proximity to death marks them as abject, and their participation in the violence of their surroundings makes them actively monstrous. Their presence in Ketterdam is tolerated insofar as it is profitable, but the adults of their capitalistic culture by no means “forgive” the adolescents’ abject state. The adolescents themselves debate whether forgiveness is possible, desirable, or deserved. Imagery of drowning and submersion depicts them as marooned in violent liminality, seemingly incapable of accessing either the past or the future.

Yet death-infested water is also a conduit of subjective discovery and self-creation. Examples include the once-enslaved Inej vowing to return to the sea to attack slavers, and the Grisha (matter-manipulator) Nina gaining the power to manipulate death, which she perceives as a freezing river. To ensure their survival, these adolescents must embrace their identities as “canal rats,” creatures whose immersion in death makes them hard to kill. Suppression of trauma arrests development, but integrating their abjection into their burgeoning identities allows the characters to form a community of monsters and navigate towards futures of their own choosing. They must be willing to hear and understand themselves with the cold clarity of water and ice, precisely because no one else will.