

## "Suffused with a feeling of loss": The Language of Memory and Desire in Lois Lowry's *Son*

*Son*, the novel that concludes Lois Lowry's the Giver Quartet, tells the story of Claire, a birthmother "suffused with a desperate feeling of loss" for the child who has been "carved out of her" (11). Throughout the novel, Claire's desire is expressed through a language of memory and loss, a language that persists even as her body is transformed in each of the novel's three books. My essay interrogates the nature of Claire's memory, and the relationship between her wounded body and the desire that drives her. In doing so, I have three goals: to demonstrate the still problematic place of maternal narrative in young people's writing, as is strikingly evident in Book Three of the novel; to show how Claire's story of maternal desire contests "the memories of the whole world" (*The Giver* 77) that the Giver transmits to Jonas, and to call for a greater precision in discussing the language of memory in young people's writing.

For much of the novel, Claire's memories are not traumatic as much as they are painful. The distinction Lowry draws between these two kinds of memory is evident throughout her work. It is also supported by memory scholars who refer to "difficult" or "painful" memory rather than traumatic memory because they do not want to "draw upon some kind of 'deficit' model that conceptualizes painful pasts as necessarily resulting in psychological disturbance" (Brown and Reavey 169). These scholars are more interested in how "ordinary people who have undergone extraordinary events . . . have developed . . . ways of living with the past" (169). Surely this exemplifies the story of Claire who unlike the other protagonists of the Giver Quartet possesses no exceptional gift. What she has instead is a painful memory and desire inseparable from her wounded body.

In its extended narrative attention to a birthmother's perspective, *Son* clearly differs from the daughter's perspective that is evident in Lowry's early novel *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye* and much young adult fiction. *Son* also directs attention to the selectivity of collective memory through "the story of Water Claire" (132) that is created in Book Two. The maternal desire that is missing in the villagers' collective memory is also missing in *The Giver*. Focusing on the language that the Giver uses, the process of transmission, and the gendered nature of the memories that he transmits to Jonas, I propose that the concept of memory in *The Giver* has more in common with what Jeffrey K. Olick calls collected memory—an individualist approach to collective memory—than with the collectivist understanding of such memory. But whatever we call it, *Son* contests the Giver's view that that "Memories are forever" (144). Reminding us what is missing in that memory, *Son* speaks to the role of writers in imagining a collective memory that includes space for a birthmother's story.

## Works Cited

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