

*This essay examines Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn*, exploring how each story shows grief and generational trauma through different narrative styles and settings.*

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Jacob and Bree Navigate Grief and Loss in YA Literature

As humans, we frequently encounter grief and loss for the first time while we are in adolescence. Young adult fiction offers a safe space to explore these experiences through the lens of a character who may be going through the same things. *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs and *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn both explore the theme of grief and loss in powerful and meaningful ways, doing so through different narrative styles and in different settings. Within both novels, themes of profound grief and loss, which are popular in young adult literature as they resonate deeply with one of the hardest core experiences of adolescence, are highlighted through the storytelling. Throughout each story, Riggs and Deonn employ imagery and symbolism to illustrate how grief affects each protagonist and how loss can be passed down through generations, carrying with it a legacy of responsibility and trauma.

Loss comes into play immediately once each novel starts. From Riggs, the story opens with 16-year-old Jacob Portman, who rushes home to find his grandfather dying under violent circumstances and whispering cryptic words before Jacob sees something horrifying in the woods that is only visible to him (Riggs). Likewise, Deonn introduces Bree Mathews at 16 years old, reeling from the recent sudden death of her mother, who was killed in a violent car crash after Bree and her got into a massive argument over her choices for school (Deonn). We begin

each journey by watching Bree and Jacob suffer an intense loss at the most quintessential age of growing up. This trauma follows them through their stories and forces each of them to confront their family's past, their unresolved trauma, and their own emerging and inherited powers.

Each author portrays the journey of Jacob and Bree as they navigate the loss of a close relative, utilizing specific imagery and symbolism to show the unique experiences of each protagonist. A great example of this imagery highlights the emotional suppression they each go through. From Jacob's story, Riggs portrays him as experiencing emotional numbness and detachment after his grandfather's death. We see this best in his exploration of the ruined orphanage itself, "What stood before me now was no refuge from monsters, but a monster itself, staring down from its perch on the hill with vacant hunger." giving the reader a powerful reminder of the monster he saw that killed his grandfather (Riggs). We see this again when the house is being examined as "Each room was a disaster more incredible than the last... Creeping mold had turned window-adjacent walls black and furry... throttled with vines that had descended from the roof... my boots leaving fresh tracks in layers of dust... a pair of rooms missing entire walls, into which a little forest of underbrush and stunted trees had grown." are all symbolic of grief, dissolving memories, and a forgotten past (Riggs).

By contrast, Bree describes experiencing a "fog" in her mind when she is trying to remember specific details about her mother's death (Deonn). One cause is this emotional wall in her mind, which she erects to block out painful memories as a way of coping. This "fog" she experiences is also due to the magical amnesia that creates fragmented and obscured recollections of the night, leaving Bree feeling like she is searching for her memories through a thick, cloying fog (Deonn). In addition, Bree gives herself two titles, "Before Bree" and "After Bree," which describe who she is both before and after the death of her mother. Bree sees herself

as split in two, and this distinction she makes represents the emotional rupture between the “before” and “after” feeling that is created when we experience trauma. She even discusses “Before Bree” as someone separate from herself, and when dwelling on how alone she is, she tells herself, “Maybe that's how it should be, one less memory of 'Before Bree' to live up to.” (Deonn). While they employ different symbolisms, each author effectively uses environmental imagery to highlight the disorientation of the emotional and psychological blocks that their respective protagonists experience through their grief. This shared environmental imagery is easy for the majority of audiences to understand and connect with, which has definitely added to the popularity of each book.

Riggs and Deonn are also able to utilize the role of time and stasis to highlight grief in each story. In *Legendborn*, Bree’s grief is tied to her growth and healing. Her Root magic enables her to revisit memories and understand the past, rather than trying to escape it. As time moves forward, she uncovers and develops more of her powers, allowing her to process her trauma (Deonn). In this way, we can see how “emotions and other forms of human affect have a history,” and in order to fully heal, we must understand what it is we went through (Mullaney). By contrast, Miss Peregrine’s loop literally traps the peculiar children in a single day that repeats for eternity (Riggs). This makes the loop a symbolic representation of one’s refusal to face change and confront the pain of grief. While *Legendborn* uses time and memory to process grief and heal trauma, Miss Peregrine’s time loop can be seen as a metaphor for emotional stagnation, or the fear of change and letting go of the past. These contrasting ideas about time connect well with audiences experiencing grief and help add to the popularity of each novel.

Loss for Jacob and Bree is also the way they begin to connect with their past and, ultimately, their inherited legacies. Bree taps into Root Magic and is able to relive her ancestors’

memories by connecting to them through nature and magic. Her ancestors are able to take hold of her and literally pull her through the memories they want her to see, “But before I can say another word, Louisa wraps her hands around my elbow and the world disappears again.” (Deonn). This connection symbolizes the way grief connects across generations and the way trauma is frequently passed down through family lines. Jacob instead is able to find his grandfather’s photos and the stories he told to help him uncover his grandfather’s strange past and his own legacy (Riggs). The photographs Jacob finds serve as a preservation of the past and his grief, as it is a reminder of what was lost, with Jacob saying, “I slipped the photo into my pocket like a keepsake.” (Riggs). Both of these protagonists are able to connect with their past through their loss and these symbolic methods, Bree through her magical abilities, and Jacob through the photographs.

The themes of grief and loss are deeply intertwined with identity and belonging, and are commercially successful in literature because they tap into universal human experiences. Everyone experiences loss, questions identity, and desires belonging at some point, and most especially during adolescence and young adulthood. These themes evoke deep emotional responses, creating a lasting impact that, in turn, fosters reader loyalty. When characters experience grief and identity crises, it forces them to grow, change, and search for meaning while also creating high-stakes conflicts within a story. Readers are naturally drawn to characters who are able to change and find their strength, understanding, or purpose through their struggles and pain. Often, readers can see parts of themselves in characters who deal with grief or seek belonging. People crave stories that explore and reflect the real-world struggles they face, grief and identity themes are timeless, aligning with past and current conversations around healing, loss, and belonging.

We can see different historical influences upon Riggs and Deonn when looking at each of these novels. One I consider most evident throughout *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* is the vintage photography referenced throughout the story that reminds us the story partially happens during WWII. Riggs built the story around real photographs he found and collected from the early to mid-20th century, something he discusses after the novel in the back of his book, and he uses the war as a backdrop for the children's escape at the end (Riggs). These photographs capture oddities and unusual visuals that reflect the eerie, strange tone of early photographic culture worldwide, and also reinforce the WWII setting of the book.

Likewise, *Legendborn* directly engages with the history of slavery, racism, and generational trauma in the American South. The setting itself is at UNC Chapel Hill, a real campus with deep-rooted racial histories, including ties to Confederate memorials and institutional racism. These memorials and ties to the confederacy are present for Bree in the story, but also found among many college campuses in the south, and "contributed to a hostile living environment" for many African American students (Skipper). In addition, institutionalized racism is prevalent within many colleges in the south, and their campus student groups are similarly segregated, another historical element found in *Legendborn*. Just like in their real-life southern counterparts, "remnants of old-fashioned racism, never really left" and are still trying to be worked out of the system today (Walker-DeVose).

Ultimately, both *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and *Legendborn* are excellent examples demonstrating that grief is not a passive experience, but a transformative one, particularly for young people navigating the complexities of adolescence. Through rich imagery and layered symbolism, Riggs and Deonn portray grief differently yet beautifully, as something that reshapes identity and drives characters to uncover hidden truths that connect them to a larger

legacy. Both protagonists emerge stronger and more self-aware by the end. Both novels reflect why themes of grief and loss remain so powerful and relatable in young adult literature, thereby adding to the popularity of these novels. They mirror the emotional intensity of growing up and the strength that can arise from confronting the most difficult experiences and emotions.

Works Cited:

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