Confronting and Assuaging Pandemic Anxieties Through Horror Media in Christina Henry's *The Girl in Red*

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people read fiction as a leisure activity. Surveys from Canada, China, India, and the US suggest that a considerable number of readers even increased the number of books they read compared with before the coronavirus outbreak (Parikh et al. 2020, 2). While some readers preferred "delightful, lighthearted, and frothy feel-good good books" (Nicolaou 2020), others confronted their fears by resorting to novels whose plots feature fictional pandemics, such as Emily St. John Mandel's postapocalyptic tale *Station Eleven* (2014) and Stephen King's horror novel *The Stand* (1978). In line with scholars who have linked consuming media associated with the horror genre to a greater degree of resilience when it comes to coping with the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (Scrivner et al. 2021, 5–6), this chapter argues that reading horror fiction holds a particular appeal during uncertain times–a potential that is also self-referentially addressed in horror texts, as my analysis will show. Building on the work of Xavier Aldana Reyes, who considers horror fiction "a form of cathartic entertainment" that "channels social fears" and shows "how we should respond to and manage them" (2016, 10–12), I analyze Christina Henry's 2019 novel *The Girl in Red* to illustrate how readers might find solace and inspiration through consuming horror fiction during moments of crisis. I argue that *The Girl in Red* presents its readers with two different ways of coping with existential crises: while it starts with an individualistic approach exemplified through its employment of the common horror film trope of the Final Girl, the novel moves toward a more community-centered approach in its second half. Reading the novel after the 2020 outbreak invites readers to see parallels between the novel's pandemic and COVID-19, providing them with a specific narrative framework within which to position their own experiences. This contribution accordingly focuses on how the novel imagines responses to a pandemic and its aftermath. Through selected close readings of *The Girl in Red*, I show how the novel first celebrates the empowering qualities that the Final Girl trope offers for protagonist Red before exposing the limitations of

such individualism and discarding it in favor of a community-centered approach. Although her consumption of horror media increases the resilience of Henry's protagonist, this chapter cautions against jumping to conclusions about transferring this insight to the readers of *The Girl in Red*, as my cursory glance at some reviews will demonstrate.

Henry's *The Girl in Red* is a loose re-telling of the fairytale of Red Riding Hood. After a pandemic has devastated the United States and caused the deaths of her parents and her brother, the protagonist Red (short for Cordelia)–a queer woman of color in her early twenties with a prosthetic leg–is fighting her way through a postapocalyptic landscape in an attempt to reach her grandmother's home.[1] The novel was published before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but its representation of the diegetic 'Crisis' seems to anticipate eerily the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Red desperately tries to convince her parents to take the threat seriously, people fight over scarce resources, and racist (and misogynist) violence erupts. In the novel, Red's passion for horror films and books helps her make sense of what is happening and prepare for her journey, akin to Coltan Scrivner and his co-authors' insight that "experience with particular kinds of fiction, namely, horror and pandemic fiction, would be associated with better preparedness for and psychological resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic" (2021, 5). Through its self-referential style, *The Girl in Red* plays with this idea by representing its protagonist as an avid consumer of horror media whose knowledge of the genre improves her survival skills when confronted with the Crisis, on the one hand, and by pointing out the limitations of using a horror-informed framework as a basis for action, on the other.

Combining an analytical framework informed by cognitive narratology with horror studies, this chapter uses Henry's *The Girl in Red* as a starting point for further reflections on the potential of consuming horror media as a coping mechanism during stressful situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Since cognitive narratology has become an umbrella term for diverse types of "research on the mind-narrative nexus" (Herman 2013), I will first clarify which particular concepts I am using here, before turning to horror as an affectively defined genre.

As "readers' accumulated memories have a substantial impact on their narrative experiences" (Gerrig and Mumper 2017, 239), large-scale crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic influence the reception of certain narratives. Richard Gerrig and Micah

1 In this chapter, I use the term 'postapocalyptic' as a pragmatic shorthand to describe a place where public order has collapsed. In particular in the US context, "Black and Indigenous Studies posit the notion that colonization and imperialism constitute an unrecognized apocalypse through genocide, slavery, and the compulsory displacement of an indigenous population" (Montgomery 2021, 7). In *The Girl in Red*, the postapocalyptic setting is marked by an escalation of racist and misogynist violence.

Mumper provide an analytical framework for exploring text-reader interactions. Their concept of 'construction' "refers to the activation of information from the text as well as from readers' related knowledge" (2017, 240). While the type of 'related knowledge' (i.e., familiarity with genre conventions or expertise in the topic of the text) that each reader possesses differs greatly from individual to individual, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased availability of publicly accessible information on topics such as the transmission of airborne diseases. Additionally, the pandemic also made specific social experiences such as feelings of isolation or worry about infecting loved ones with a serious disease available to wider sections of the population. Readers' related knowledge also has an impact on their sense of immersion–Gerrig and Mumper use the term 'transportation' to conceptualize the extent of a reader's immersion in a narrative, which depends on familiarity with characters or situations, perceived similarity to oneself, and suspense, among others (2017, 251–53). The aspect that is particularly relevant to my following analysis is familiarity. Building on my earlier elaboration on how the COVID-19 pandemic expanded each reader's related knowledge, it also increased familiarity with some of the (less extreme) pandemic-related situations depicted in *The Girl in Red*, such as empty supermarket shelves due to panic-buying or wearing PPE to protect oneself from airborne pathogens. *The Girl in Red*'s horror fan protagonist is an interesting case in this context, as her familiarity with conventions of the horror genre is both emotionally comforting for her and beneficial in a very practical sense that connects Gerrig and Mumper's more general research in cognitive narratology to studies that focus on the horror genre exclusively.

Horror, as a genre that "is affectively defined" (Clasen 2017, 12)–specifically by creating feelings of fright, disgust, and/or distress and accompanying bodily sensations such as an accelerated heart rate, sweating, and/or shortness of breath in the audience–seems to be particularly well-suited to explore how fiction can work to confront and assuage readers' anxieties. While horror fiction enables readers "to find pleasure in make-believe that allows them to experience negative emotions at high levels of intensity within a safe context" (Clasen 2017, 5), even among horror fans, there are differences concerning how horror media are consumed (Scrivner et al. 2023, 88). Scrivner and his colleagues differentiate between three distinct types of horror fans: thrill-seeking 'Adrenaline Junkies,' who experience the fearful affects evoked by horror media as enjoyable, fear-minimizing 'White Knucklers,' who do not enjoy the immediate sensations but perceive engaging with such content matter as a chance for personal growth, and 'Dark Copers,' who unite aspects of both previous types, using horror media as a tool for both immediate "excitement and existential coping" (2023, 94). Thus, what sets horror apart from other genres is this specific set of recipients' interactions with it as a genre. These interactions encompass both cognitive and emotional facets (Cheyne 2019, 28–29).

The novel's protagonist, Red, falls into the category of what Scrivner and his colleagues classify as a Dark Coper, as she derives pleasure from consuming horror media while simultaneously regarding them as a means to coping with her fears and as facilitating self-improvement. Red's way of interacting with horror media ties in with Ria Cheyne's observation that the horror genre "aims to produce a range of discomforting affects, the experience of which is paradoxically pleasurable" (2019, 29). Among the range of tropes that horror media use to create these paradoxically pleasurable sensations, the concept of the Final Girl is particularly relevant for this chapter. Coined by Carol J. Clover in 1987, the Final Girl describes "one female character [in slasher films] who, while being chased, wounded and cornered by the killer, is forced to endure the trauma of encountering the mutilated bodies of her friends long enough to either be rescued or slaughter the killer herself" (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020, 1). The Final Girl's typical character traits are "smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance [that] set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (Clover [1992] 2015, 40). Clover locates the potential for male viewer identification in the Final Girl's presumed boyishness ([1992] 2015, ch. 1). In the decades since the publication of Clover's text, the concept of the Final Girl has proved fertile for (particularly feminist) scholarly discussions of the horror genre, and over the years the trope has transformed into a polyvalent cross-media phenomenon (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020, 2–3). My following analysis of *The Girl in Red* will bring the Final Girl into dialogue with the cognitive approaches outlined above to illuminate the potential functions of reading horror novels in pandemic times.

Red as a Final Girl

The Girl in Red starts in medias res: "somewhere in an American forest" protagonist Red is approached by a male stranger while preparing a meal over a campfire. Red immediately identifies the man as a threat who considers her an easy target because she is a young woman with a prosthetic leg traveling alone: "No doubt he'd raped and murdered and thieved plenty since the Crisis (she always thought of it that way, with a capital letter) began" (Henry 2019, 9). Since readers share Red's perspective, their first impression of the unnamed male character is shaped by Red's affective response to him. This strategy is typical of the horror genre, as characters "exemplify for us how to react to the monsters" (Carroll [1990] 2003, 17). Red's reaction to the man leads readers to ascribe monstrous qualities to him. In contrast to horror traditions that often feature marginalized people in the role of monsters–particularly those who are (like Red) queer, disabled, people of color, women, or any combination of these traits–the white heterosexual man whom Red encounters conforms to

the monstrous incarnations of "[t]wenty-first century horror [that] is replete with monsters that yearn to shore up inequitable systems of power, often harking back to a sense of order and tradition that is in the process of vanishing" (Keetley 2022, 191). Joshua Gulam connects the emergence of the privileged white male as a monster explicitly to the misogynist election campaign and the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US President when he reads selected horror films as "not only using sadistic male antagonists to represent and critique his [i.e., Trump's] hate-filled politics but also by offering up models for resistance in the form of their heroic female protagonists" (2019, 58). This is also the case in Henry's *The Girl in Red*, as Red spends most of the time hiding from, and occasionally fighting, (mostly white, heterosexual, able-bodied) men. Whereas the traditional horror premise that the greatest threat to the protagonist is an (often supernatural) monstrous menace, the fact that *The Girl in Red* represents "men as a group […] generally [as] predators" (Nilson 2021, 183) aligns the novel with the twenty-first-century "surge of monsters that embody dominant and regressive social structures and ideologies" (Keetley 2022, 192).

Red's assessment of the man's malicious intentions is confirmed when he–after a few racist microaggressions–takes up arms and tries to mug Red. Red manages to subdue him by throwing her boiling soup at his face and attacking him with her handaxe before fleeing the scene. Red's preference for melee weapons as opposed to guns recalls conventions of the slasher film in which "[k]nives and needles, like teeth, beaks, fangs, and claws, are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (Clover [1992] 2015, 32). The fight itself is rather short (in contrast to the usually drawn-out process of the Final Girl defeating the killer in conventional horror films), for "[t]he goal was *not* to have a fancy movie fistfight that looked good from every angle" (Henry 2019, 16). Nevertheless, the description of the bodily effects of Red's attack is fraught with gory details: the man's face is "blistered and bubbled" after having been hit by the hot soup, Red is confronted with "the smell of his burning flesh," and when she smashes her axe into the man's stomach, "the soft organs under his shirt gave way […,] squishing beneath the pressure of the blade, and hot blood spurted over her hands" until she yanks the axe out with "a squelching, sucking sound" (Henry 2019, 17). The fact that Red chooses to target the man's stomach provides an intertextual reference to the fairytale of Red Riding Hood, in which Red Riding Hood (and her grandmother) are saved by the Woodsman slicing open the wolf's belly. In contrast to Red Riding Hood, however, Red does not require a male savior.

In short, Red is a twenty-first-century incarnation of the Final Girl. In fact, this reading is made explicit by the novel when the narrator informs the readers that "Red was going to be the final girl, the sole survivor of a massacre, just like in horror movies. She had to think this way, to make it something outside herself, because if she truly considered the reality of her whole family dying before her eyes and leaving her alone she would curl up in a ball inside her closet and stay there. And that wasn't

her" (Henry 2019, 103–104). Red perceives the designation of the Final Girl as empowering and as a coping mechanism to manage her fears and traumatic experiences, echoing the characteristics of Scrivner et al.'s Dark Coper subtype of horror fans. Clover defines the Final Girl as a female character who "is unattached and lonely but declines male attention. The Final Girl is also watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that her friends ignore, she registers. Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch" ([1992] 2015, 39). In contrast to the overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, and able-bodied final girls of the slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s, Henry's Red is a queer woman of color with a prosthetic leg. The representation of Red's disability in the novel upsets "[d]isability's entrenched associations with both fear and vulnerability," which "have attained a central, though rarely acknowledged, position in the horror tradition" (Cheyne 2019, 29). Ria Cheyne explains how the horror genre tends to represent disabled characters as either monstrous villains or helpless victims (2019, 27–28). Although neither of these issues is exactly the case in the first chapter of Henry's novel (as the readers are privy to Red's thoughts, they know that she is prepared to defend herself), Red's disability still influences the readers' reception and their perception of the character. Whereas readers are arguably expected to sympathize with Red's distress and regard her resistance against the man as justified, anyway (maybe even reveling in the gory details of the rather graphic description of the attack), Red's status as an amputee threatens to turn the novel into a supercrip narrative that "produce[s] stereotypical representations of purportedly extraordinary disabled people" (Schalk 2016, 79).

Chapter 1 of *The Girl in Red* might be thought to resemble what Sami Schalk has termed 'the glorified supercrip narrative' (2016, 80), in which disabled individuals can reach exceptional achievements that even non-disabled people would have difficulty to attain, resulting in mediating the (false) message that anyone can overcome the limits posed by a disability through hard work while erasing the importance of privilege in this process. This impression might be reinforced by Red's positionality as a woman of color, as Kinitra Brooks explains, using the representation of black women in the horror genre as an example: "The characterization of the black woman as overly strong and superhuman in all aspects is a method of dehumanization" (2018, 26).[2] However, this impression of Red as supernaturally strong is partially reversed at a later stage, when the novel attempts to represent her disability and her matter-of-fact attitude toward it in a more nuanced way: although Red can cover large distances on foot due to previous training, she is not an invincible superwoman, as her prosthesis needs to be removed from her leg at regular intervals to prevent chafing, and it also makes it difficult for her to sneak. Despite its hints

2 It should be noted that Red is not characterized as black, but rather "had that indeterminate mixed-race look that made white people nervous, because they didn't know what box to put her in" (Henry 2019, 11).

at problems such as racist and misogynist violence, Chapter 1 works primarily as a source of entertainment rather than encouraging reflection on serious social issues, thereby appealing mainly to potential readers' longing for escapism and increasing their sense of immersion by incorporating the common generic trope of the Final Girl. Whether read before or after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, readers are invited to take Red's perspective and cheer her on as she defends herself against a racist would-be-rapist, behaving according to horror genre expectations that can be traced to slasher films. While readers' related knowledge makes a difference here, it is their familiarity with horror genre conventions (rather than any life experience) that has the power to increase the pleasure of reading Chapter 1.

The structure of *The Girl in Red* switches between chapters narrating Red's journey through the postapocalyptic US and flashbacks to the time before the events of Chapter 1. On the diegetic level, those flashbacks are framed as intrusive thoughts that haunt Red and that are triggered by what is happening to her during her hike to her grandmother's house. It is mainly in those flashback sequences that the recent pandemic might change how readers perceive certain situations based on their own experiences during COVID-19. While pre-COVID-19 readers might have empathized with Red's parents and her brother Adam, who consider her insistence on stocking up, avoiding crowded places, and wearing surgical masks when leaving the house as excessive, potentially perceiving Red—as one reviewer put it—as "a belligerent, unpleasant little know-it-all" (Mogsy 2019), readers who first encountered the novel after March 2020 will probably feel more sympathy toward Red's desperate (though ultimately futile) attempts to save her family.[3] Thus, COVID-19 endows the reading experience of *The Girl in Red* with a different degree of reciprocity due to the recipients' changed related knowledge and increased familiarity with attempts to prevent infection with an airborne disease. Whereas Chapter 1 of *The Girl in Red* employs the trope of the Final Girl to invite readers to sympathize with the protagonist, from Chapter 2 onward, the focus is less on Red as a potential reader identification figure (though Red's status as the only focalizer in the novel still encourages readers to take over her perspective) and more on her social environment, highlighting how the Crisis has changed the diegetic world. What started with empty supermarket shelves ("the two things Americans liked to stockpile in case of emergency

3 Henry describes herself as "a feminist writer" whose novels often feature female protagonists struggling to survive in a patriarchal society (Lefebvre 2019). These qualities are frequently present in the marketing for her books that targets female readers. Hence, the readers imagined for this paragraph are women considering themselves feminists (in the broadest sense possible). Most of the reviews of *The Girl in Red* I consulted for this chapter confirm this impression, as they were written by women who perceived the novel's representation of a strong female protagonist as positive.

were canned foods and guns" [Henry 2019, 130]) eventually culminated in a complete breakdown of communication technology and looting on a massive scale. In contrast to her family, who seem unfazed by the changes (echoing the horror trope according to which the protagonist's environment misjudges the looming threat), Red immediately expects the worst and starts preparing to leave her home behind, undeterred by her parents' resistance to her plans.

Her preference for horror novels and films explains why Red reacts differently to the Crisis. Much to the dismay of her mother, who works as an English professor and warns Red that "genre fiction would rot her brain" (Henry 2019, 40), Red is an avid consumer of horror fiction. For her, this habit does not only serve to entertain but is also framed as preparation for potential future catastrophes. Thus, Red exemplifies the "feeling that horror helps them cope with existential problems" that Scrivner et al. consider typical of the horror fan subtype of Dark Copers (2022, 93). Consequently, *The Girl in Red* is riddled with references to horror media and emphasizes their instructive qualities: in contrast to characters in old monster movies, who flee from the creatures "with literally every single thing they own[] on a little cart" (Henry 2019, 45), Red travels light and only packs items that are essential for her survival. Even before the Crisis has turned into a catastrophe of epic proportions, Red carries her emergency backpack with her everywhere she goes, because, unlike horror movie protagonists, she wants to avoid getting caught in a situation where "the thing a character needed the most was left behind" (Henry 2019, 48). When encountering soldiers, Red immediately thinks of the threatening presence of military personnel in *28 Days Later* (2000), and her conversation with one of the soldiers mirrors the dialogue between Clarice Starling and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), most notably through the repeated use of the phrase "quid pro quo" (Henry 2019, 235). *The Girl in Red*'s employment of references to well-known horror films to evoke emotional reactions aligns the novel with what Steve Jones has conceptualized as "metamodern slasher films" that invite the audience to indulge in "genuine emotional responses" (2024, 31). Just like "metamodern slasher films [that] are characterised by optimism, sincerity and outward-facing inclusivity" (Jones 2024, 36), Henry's novel takes the subjective emotional responses of Red seriously. Simultaneously, the novel engages with—and, one might argue, to a certain extent innovates—certain generic conventions of slasher horror by casting an amputee woman of color as its Final Girl

One example of intertextual play in the novel occurs when Red deduces what she terms "the Apocalypse Rules" (Henry 2019, 63) from her reading material (which is also a popular motif in self-referential horror films), the "golden rule" being "Not Separating" (Henry 2019, 228). Abiding by those self-imposed rules, Red convinces her family to stay together and travel to her grandmother's house on foot through the forest to avoid other people, roadblocks, and traffic jams. As Red's family makes their way to the small town nearby to stock up on supplies and camping gear,

Red distributes surgical masks and vinyl gloves "to her family members with the solemnity of a priest handing out the host" (Henry 2019, 64). Although Red's brother Adam is skeptical at first ("You really think this flimsy thing is going to help?" [Henry 2019, 64]), everyone eventually puts on the mask and gloves–such scenes might remind readers of insecurities concerning the efficacy of masks in the early days of COVID-19. Readers familiar with the transmission of airborne diseases are also more likely to share Red's panic when her mother takes off her mask after a pile of burned corpses has induced nausea in her: "And with every rise and fall of her mother's chest, Red could practically see the plague that had killed so many people rushing into her mother's mouth and nose, cheering with delight at having found a new victim" (Henry 2019, 72). While Red's mother contracts the disease, she does not die because of it: shortly afterward, the family home is attacked by racist neighbors and Red's parents sacrifice themselves (by engaging in a shootout) to allow their children to escape. Although it is clear from the beginning that Adam has also passed away, the actual circumstances of his death are only revealed toward the end of the book.

Red actively suppresses her memories of him, indicated by the sentence "don't think about Adam," which is repeated several times, thereby creating curiosity in the readers' minds and implying his death to be particularly gruesome. Adam's death is marked as traumatic for Red, but due to genre conventions, readers' expectations concerning Adam's death gravitate toward entertainment rather than deep emotional investment, as "[h]orror is a genre that invites its reader […] into a disturbingly pleasurable relationship with trauma, offering up trauma as a compelling spectacle to be consumed and even enjoyed" (Hurley 2021, 3). This impression is confirmed when Red eventually reveals how Adam died: Red finds her brother in front of a locked door in a warehouse as he is bleeding to death through wounds on his lower body that were caused by a creature, which bit off his legs. After a short moment of Red being overwhelmed by her emotions, she immediately gets a hold of herself and leaves her brother's body behind to search for his bundle of supplies. Thus, the novel does not use Adam's death to bring more emotional complexity to Red's character but rather as another step toward revealing who/what the main threat (apart from racist, misogynist men) in the novel is: a monstrous creature that has escaped from a laboratory situated within the military-industrial complex. The characterization of Red remains superficial, and her pragmatism and resilience once again evoke associations with the Final Girl. Red's struggle to come to terms with her brother's death hints at the limits of horror media to facilitate constructive coping strategies. Although "[a]necdotal evidence suggests that some individuals may find solace from their anxiety and depression through using horror entertainment" (Scrivner et al. 2022, 94), *The Girl in Red* suggests that while horror fiction might be helpful for certain people in certain situations, it is not a panacea. Returning to the overarching question of whether engaging with horror

media might help consumers cope with existential crises such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, my analysis of *The Girl in Red* cannot yet provide a conclusive answer: while certain types of horror fans such the so-called Dark Copers, represented by Red, might benefit from reading/watching/playing horror media, there are cases in which such an approach remains insufficient. However, consuming horror is not the only solution to coping with crises that *The Girl in Red* proposes.

Losing and Finding Familial Bonds

The Girl in Red is mainly set in a forest. The woods figure prominently in the horror genre, most often as an "archetypal site of dread" (Parker 2020, 1). Readers who are familiar with the genre thus expect "ominous depictions of the forest as a site of trial, trepidation, and terror" (Parker 2020, 2). What readers get in *The Girl in Red*, however, is more akin to representations of "nature as refuge" that are prevalent in US American dystopian young adult fiction and that "suggest that a female protagonist's awakening is catalyzed by her experiences within nature and that these experiences shape nature into a place ideal for claiming her agency" (McDonough and Wagner 2014, 157–58). Apart from her aforementioned encounter at the beginning of the book that ends with Red killing a racist misogynist, the forest in *The Girl in Red* is strangely depopulated, with the protagonist barely encountering any humans or animals. Much to the disappointment of many readers, the novel does not feature any literal wolves. While the man who threatens Red at the beginning of the book is likened to an animal by Red, she does not compare him to a wolf but refers to him metaphorically as a "coyote" (Henry 2019, 19). This might be due to the novel's attempt to not specify a geographical setting, as coyotes are far more widespread in the US than wolves.

The greatest threat to Red in the forest is not the natural world or even other humans, but her sense of isolation. On the one hand, the Sylvan territory is difficult to navigate for Red because of her prosthetic leg. In case of a serious injury, a lack of medical infrastructure would most likely result in her death. On the other hand, the combined force of the traumatic loss of her family and the social isolation in the forest take a psychological toll on Red. As the novel progresses, her interior monologue becomes increasingly frantic: "Red tried not to talk to herself because it reminded her too much that she was alone but sometimes words just fell out of her mouth, like they were trying to remind her that she could still speak" (Henry 2019, 27). Due to widely enforced social distancing measures, many who read the novel after March 2020 can reasonably be assumed to have become familiar with occasional feelings of isolation, thus increasing the relatability of Red's emotional turmoil and contributing to a stronger sense of immersion. *The Girl in Red* emphasizes the emotional stress

that Red's loneliness causes her, which cannot even be alleviated by reading the horror novel she brought along with her, hinting once again at the limits of consuming horror media as a coping strategy.

Red's isolation ends when she accidentally encounters Sam and Riley, two children of primary school age. Red's meeting with the siblings increases the pastoral appeal of the forest setting: when Red manages to make Riley laugh, the sound of his laughter "didn't belong in that terrible world. It cut through the oppressive air of the forest and hung there like a magic spell" (Henry 2019, 179). The children embody futurity, reminding Red that despite the vast destruction, there are future generations who will (have to learn how to) build a life among the ruins. Red feels responsible for the siblings and chooses to adopt them in an act of cross-generational solidarity. Red's new-found family is then taken in by elderly Korean American DJ Park, who hides the group in his home to protect them from violent militiamen. Through this turn of events, *The Girl in Red* emphasizes the importance of social contacts and familial bonds for people's wellbeing while simultaneously disentangling family formation from biologized kinship. Although Red's alliance with DJ Park is only temporary, the safe space of Park's home is the key to Red's working-through the loss of her brother, as Red eventually reveals how Adam died in a conversation with DJ Park. Thus, in the end, *The Girl in Red* turns its back on glorifying the sense of self-sufficiency inspired by the Final Girl trope and instead celebrates social connections as an essential support system during difficult times. This message has also resonated with readers such as Lilly-Ann Newman, who closes her book review in March 2020 with the statement that "Red […] lost everything, trekking across a treacherous country alone, but with the support of two tiny hitchhikers she reaffirms her faith in humanity. I can only hope that we can do the same" (2020).

Endings and (No) Closure

The Girl in Red ends with Red encountering and defeating the (literal) "flesh-eating monster" that mortally wounded her brother–a "giant black slug[… with a] head made of teeth. So many teeth–shaped like a great white shark's serrated triangles and stacked like a whirling buzzsaw in concentric circles" (Henry 2019, 350). The monster's shape recalls threatening features of several classic horror monsters with its sharp teeth, slimy exterior, and slithering motions. Saving both herself and her new family member Sam from the creature by attacking it with her axe and presumably killing it, Red overcomes her survivor's guilt: "Red had thought she had known everything at the start. She had thought that knowledge, that preparation would keep her and her family safe. It hadn't. No amount of caution or knowledge or perfectly packed supplies could eliminate the danger. That danger had taken her family from her. Red could never really be at peace with that, but she finally accepted

that it wasn't her fault" (Henry 2019, 359). Red's acceptance of her agency's limits is represented as a form of personal growth (and arguably the only dimension of Red's character that develops in the entire novel). Interestingly, Red depersonalizes the death of her parents and her brother: although there are clear culprits in both cases (racist Anglo-American men and a lab-grown creature, respectively), she subsumes both under the vague moniker of "danger." This leaves more room for the readers to imagine themselves in Red's place and to fill the term 'danger' with their fears, anxieties, and/or other personal issues.

Finally, Red–together with Sam and Riley–arrives at her grandmother's house, which, from the outside, seems to be both unharmed and inhabited, as the smell of fresh bread wafting from the chimney indicates. The italics that are used for Red's intrusive thoughts proclaim: "Grandma's house. I'm home, finally home, and there are no wolves in these woods" (Henry 2019, 363). However, the book ends with Red knocking on her grandmother's door–thus, leaving open who (or what) awaits her in the house. The intertextual connection with the fairytale of Red Riding Hood challenges the optimistic tone of the open ending, as the original Red Riding Hood is greeted by a disguised wolf instead of her actual grandmother. This remaining sense of unease is also typical for the horror genre, as Ria Cheney explains: "horror's disturbing affects endure, echoing beyond the conclusion of the narrative" (2019, 51). Maria Nilson observes a similar trend among recent feminist retellings of fairy tales: "Not only have the fairy tale characters evolved and the setting of the stories become more elaborate, the stories in themselves have changed from one-dimensional tales with a clear beginning, middle, and end into multilayered stories that are often contradictory, ambivalent, and have open endings" (2021, 185). Nilson regards Henry's novel as "a text that provides very little hope and seems to say that the unjust society portrayed cannot be changed" (2021, 183). However, I would argue that while the novel certainly privileges individual solutions over structural change, it also celebrates its protagonist's resilience in the face of difficult circumstances. Despite the violent confrontations she faces along the way, Red is still able to build mutually supportive relationships with both Mr. Park and the children Sam and Riley, who help her to overcome her survivor's guilt, and eventually, she reaches her destination.

Although *The Girl in Red* imagines (or at least hints at) a livable future for its disabled protagonist, the novel's vision remains another example of what Alison Kafer calls a future in which "disability appears […] as the site for personal triumph and overcoming" (2013, 22), rather than as a herald for large-scale structural change and generally more accessible futures. This privileging of individual solutions, which Nilson considers a common trait of twenty-first-century feminist retellings of fairy tales (2021, 174), limits the novel's potential when it comes to addressing challenges (like a pandemic) that affect society as a whole. While one would not generally ex-

pect a horror novel to engage in extensive social criticism,[4] *The Girl in Red*'s feminist agenda (most notably articulated through its references to the ubiquity of misogynist violence both before and during the Crisis and its casting of white male heterosexual would-be-rapists in the role of monsters) might raise expectations that the novel goes beyond simple entertainment.

A look at amateur readers' reviews shows how those expectations differ and are influenced by extratextual factors that include not just changes in readers' related knowledge through global crises such as the advent of COVID-19 or which horror fan subtype they might be classified as but also elements such as the publisher's marketing strategies for the novel.[5] Even though my assessment of these amateur reviews that were published after March 2020 is far from systematic, it still shows a great variety of responses. Whereas many reviewers do not mention the COVID-19 pandemic at all, those who do relate the plot of the novel to the pandemic perceive it as spoiling what would otherwise have been an escapist pleasure (e.g., Kloss 2022; Lemon 2022; Wolter 2022). Although some reviewers feel that the parallels between the diegetic Crisis and COVID-19 make it easier for them to empathize with the protagonist (e.g., Newman 2020; Leitzinger 2022; Wirtz 2022), many others perceive those parallels as deterring and uncomfortable enough to warrant a warning (e.g., Gross 2022; Lübbert 2022). In contrast to protagonist Red, who finds solace in horror media and is emboldened by what she learns from them, reviews fluctuate between those disturbed by the novel's representation of a deadly pandemic and those enjoying the book without mentioning COVID-19.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how *The Girl in Red* represents both horror fiction and social connections as helpful when it comes to coping with existential crises. By engaging with horror media intertextually, the novel, on the one hand, positions itself within the generic framework of horror and, on the other hand, appeals to horror fans and invites them to identify with the protagonist and spot the numerous intertextual references. *The Girl in Red* plays with genre conventions by rewriting traditional notions

4 While horror media have arguably always engaged in some form of social criticism (see, for example, Angela Smith's *Hideous Progeny* [2011] for entanglements between early to mid-twentieth century horror films and eugenic movements), those political implications remained marginalized in scholarly discourse (and public awareness) until the 1980s (Wisker 2005, 232).

5 The German translation of *The Girl in Red* appeared in 2022. According to senior editor Beatrice Lampe (2022), the promotional campaign for the book did not mention the role that the fictional pandemic plays for the plot on purpose. Lampe further informed me that the novel met the German publisher's sale expectations.

of monstrosity and by renovating the Final Girl trope. By casting a disabled queer woman of color in the role of the Final Girl, *The Girl in Red* asserts itself as part of the twenty-first-century socially progressive horror trend that also includes movies like Mike Flanagan's *Hush* (2016), which features a physically disabled female protagonist, and Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019), whose plot focuses on an African American woman. The novel's association of Red's monstrous antagonists with misogynist, racist men and the military-industrial complex forms the core of its feminist agenda and responds to the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president and the ensuing conservative backlash against progress toward equal rights for people of color, queer people, and women. However, due to its characterization of protagonist Red as strong, intelligent, and self-sufficient, *The Girl in Red* does not explicitly address how pandemics affect marginalized populations more severely than privileged people, turning the novel into escapist entertainment rather than a serious contemplation of social issues. The novel's message of horror media as helpful tools to cope with existential crises might resonate with horror fans of the Dark Coper subtype, whereas its celebration of cross-generational solidarity and familial bonds might reach a wider audience.

While the novel was generally well-received pre-COVID-19, those who read the novel after March 2020 tended to perceive the parallels between the diegetic Crisis and COVID-19 as uncanny. In contrast to protagonist Red, who feels empowered to stand up for herself and take her survival into her own hands through her voluntary exposure to horror media, this is not necessarily the case for those recipients, some of whom feel cheated out of their desired escapism due to similarities between the fictional pandemic and COVID-19. The study of pandemic reading practices remains a field with many open questions, including which kinds of readers turn to which literary genres and what motivates them to do so. The case study in this chapter is merely a first step in the direction of learning more about the role of reading in confronting and assuaging pandemic anxieties.

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