Little Books, Big Horror: Review of *Night of Mannequins, Taaqtumi,* and *Anoka*

Stephen Graham Jones. *Night of the Mannequins*. Tor, 2020. 128 pages. ISBN: 978-1-250-75207-9.
https://publishing.tor.com/nightofthemannequins-stephengrahamjones/9781250752062/

Neil Christopher, editor. *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories*. Inhabit Media, 2019. 184 pages. ISBN: 978-1-77227-214-7.
https://inhabitmedia.com/2019/08/21/taaqtumi/

Shane Hawk. *Anoka*. Black Hills Press, 2020. 140 pages. ISBN: 9798674225195.
https://www.shanehawk.com/anoka

Not to be overlooked amid Stephen Graham Jones' ongoing winning streak is a little book with the unassumingly *Goosebumps*-flavoured title *Night of the Mannequins*. The first-person narrator and antihero in *Mannequins* is Sawyer, a teen who is caught up the dark and uncertain months between the end of high school and the start of quote-unquote adulthood. The choice of the given name Sawyer is a playful reminder of Jones' unparalleled horror cred. For one, it signals the ways in which *Mannequins* straddles genres and canons by evoking the not-so-disparate worlds of Mark Twain and Tobe Hooper, if not James Wan and Leigh Whannell too. For another, it raises subtle questions about gender and national identity when it's revealed that the other teens call him "Saw" for short, which for all we know could be pronounced as spelled or instead as "Soy."

The premise of *Night of the Mannequins* is deceptively simple; where it manages to subvert our expectations is in the convoluted intricacies of Sawyer's (psycho-)logic as he embraces his role as antihero. Sawyer is obsessed with the possibility of losing his friends—either to the passage of time or, more pressingly, to Manny, the department store mannequin that he and his friends had salvaged from a ditch, played around with for years, and then forgotten about once the joke had worn off. Following a prank gone wrong, Sawyer becomes convinced that Manny, scorned and abandoned by his old friend group, has come alive to seek revenge. When the first member of the group turns up dead in a freak accident, Sawyer's paranoia escalates to the point where he starts to believe that the only way to stop the cycle of violence before it's too late is by beating Manny to the punch—to be clear, this means murdering his own childhood friends.

As preoccupied as it is with nostalgia and melancholy about the end of innocence, *Mannequins* ultimately shares less with King's *The Body* or the aforementioned R.L. Stein series than it does with Jones' own *The Only Good Indians* (2020). In that novel as well as *Mannequins*, Jones mines horror from an unthinkable scenario: the compulsion to kill your loved ones. The mental gymnastics it would require in order to arrive at that point are an endless source of page-turning suspense and black comedy for Jones. But whereas *The Only Good Indians* signalled its ties to coloniality and Indigenous kinship principles right from the title, *Mannequins*, which does not identify its characters as Indigenous or otherwise, takes an approach that is perhaps easier to miss. Chapter 9 of *Mannequins*—which begins with the whopper of an opening line, "Over dinner the night I was to kill Danielle, my dad told a wandering-all-over-story about *his* dad taking him fishing" (73)— is where the book's concern with violated kinship obligations comes into full focus. Jones' conversational, almost stream-of-consciousness prose style is the connective tissue that binds Sawyer with his friends, his family, and even his own neuroses. Consider the fluidity with which he transitions from the dad's innocuous "wandering-all-over-story" to the chilling violence of the central murder plot:

> This time through the story I was just watching how tight that deep-sea fishing line of Grandpa's probably was before it snapped. And how it was probably bright green, and how nobody except me would ever know how that mattered, how that matched up with a certain coil of line in my pocket that I kept having to sneak touches down to, to be sure it hadn't slithered away, to be sure it wasn't going to go killing without me. (74)

Here, not only do we get an implied familial origin for Sawyer's scatterbrained way of relaying an otherwise simple story, but we also get a hefty dose of psychological black comedy when our antihero's thoughts abruptly drift back to the murder weapon hidden in his pocket that, as with Manny the mannequin, he fears will come alive and abandon him.

One of the final pieces of the twisted puzzle that Jones lays out for us in *Mannequins*, lastly, is the ubiquity of superhero narratives in contemporary media. Both the aborted prank that triggers the novel's events and Sawyer's eventual killing spree center on a superhero movie—the third and final installment in a trilogy that Sawyer and the gang have been following throughout their adolescent years. Jones is tactful enough not to name the franchise in question or to belabour the underlying point about how the genre's current fixation on flawed, violent protagonists might feed into Sawyer's delusions about heroism and sacrifice. Rather, it is the matter-of-fact tone of Sawyer's

narration that teases out these delusions, such as when he rationalizes that "All I'd been doing ever since Shanna [died], it was saving lives left and right. Yeah, the superhero movie was on DVD in my bag, but I was also *in* a superhero movie, *as* that superhero. Not the one everyone wants, no, but real life isn't always like the movies" (110). Jones' verbal irony in moments like these is devastating, as is the cosmic irony he invokes with the realization that the novel's events are triggered by a single unpaid movie ticket. In the grander scheme of the Hollywood production-distribution system, as Jones seems to suggest, it all centers on the insistence that audiences *pay* to see these movies in the cinemas. For the teens in *Night of the Mannequins*, the price of the ticket is literally their lives. Truly scary stuff!

Speaking of scary stuff: *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories,* compiled by settler educator and Inhabit Media co-founder Neil Christopher, is a collection of short stories by authors spanning the Dene, Inuit, and Cree peoples of the north. Canada, whether as a political or geographic framework, is tellingly absent from the anthology, which instead centers the ancestral narratives and the everyday terrors of those who have traditionally made their home in the unforgiving Arctic. In addition to the nine collected stories, *Taaqtumi* also includes a brief pronunciation guide and glossary of the Inuktitut and Northern Athabaskan terms used throughout the body of the anthology. Back matter aside, Christopher does not include any prefatory material in *Taaqtumi*. While the stories are rich enough to speak for themselves, the lack of a critical introduction or accompanying essay is unfortunate, not just because Indigenous horror is an increasingly vital topic of critical discussion and teaching, but because the specificity of Arctic horror certainly deserves more generous contextualization for those of us on the outside.

Arguably the centerpiece of *Taaqtumi* is "Lounge," a speculative fiction novella by the prolific Cree-Inuit-Scottish-Mohawk team of Rachel and Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley. "Lounge" is close kin with Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018), another hallucinogenic and often elliptical tale of life beyond humanity. The protagonist, Talli, is an Italian-Inuit particle physicist who arrives in the Arctic territory of Avvajja to study a series of cosmic anomalies—namely, that the Earth's continental plates all seem to be converging on this one northern location. She is disturbed to find that the other members of her research team are skeptical of, if not completely uninterested in, the strange phenomena in Avvajja. Hoping to break the ice (pun intended), Talli, along with her mushroom-shaped cybernetic companion Drashtr, organizes a virtual reality "lounge" party that quickly goes awry when the energy emanating from the land begins to manipulate the team members' senses and emotions. As she struggles to make sense

of the otherworldly imagery that seems to absorb and pacify her teammates, Talli is forced to reconcile her family's tragic history with the supernatural forces that are pulling her deep into the mystery of Avvajja.

"Lounge" is more than just a slow descent into sci-fi weirdness. For one, its story structure is cyclical, beginning with a flash-forward to its denouement before tracking the hours that lead up to the titular virtual reality party. In this sense, "Lounge" is less a slow burn than it is a trial-by-fire for the reader who, not unlike Talli herself, must gradually learn the story's technical and emotional vocabularies as the narrative progresses. For another, the story thus raises illuminating questions about the ways in which human and beyond-human forms of consciousness might (fail to) interact. Talli and her team's lack of communication contrasts with Drashtr's unique ability to "debate" with, and thereby assimilate to, Avvajja's foreign environment. The novella also plays on the fetishistic imperialist vision of the Arctic as a final threshold of discovery; ironically, it does so by affirming that the Arctic and its ancestral custodians are, in fact, located at the center of the universe. Talli often repeats a joke told by her late Uncle Charlie which claims that the Arctic is "a place where people go to *become*" (103). From a colonial-extractivist perspective, this sense of becoming is rooted in a belief that exceptionalism and meritocracy will elevate humanity—rather, certain privileged pockets of humanity—beyond its "savage" origins. By this logic, to conquer the harshest environment on the planet is to rise above all else on said planet. As Talli ultimately discovers, though, even the process of becoming itself is cyclical and contingent. After all, "to become" only works as a transitive verb or as a link between objects—one has to become *something*. In Avvajja, you simply become what you always already were.

In the same ontological register, Uncle Charlie's backstory is also where "Lounge" takes some of its most provocative turns. Just as the characters in Lai's *The Tiger Flu* grapple with the dubious promise of life beyond the human body when a tech company offers to upload its users' consciousnesses to a planet-sized hive, the world that the Qitsualik-Tinsleys create in "Lounge" is one where individuals with terminal illnesses can pre-emptively "sell" their deaths to the research industry in exchange for cash and a digital copy of their medical records to be inherited by their next of kin. For Talli, her uncle Charlie's legacy is therefore complicated. Not only do the proceeds from the "sale" of his dying days help to fund Talli's education and research, but his death file—which may or may not hold secrets to their family history and to the cosmic anomalies in Avvajja—sits on her computer desktop like an archive that she dares not

touch. Talli's alternating hesitation toward and obsession with both the land of Avvajja and her Uncle Charlie provide the emotional backbone of "Lounge."

While "Lounge" takes up more pages and lofty concepts, the surrounding tales in *Taaqtumi* are no less compelling. Aviaq Johnston, author of the wonderful *Those Who Run with the Sky* (2017) series of young adult novels, delivers arguably the best old-fashioned chills in the entire volume with the cliff-hanger ending of the opening story, "Iqsinaqtutalik Piqtuq: The Haunted Blizzard." Gayle Kabloona's "Utiqtuq" is a post-apocalyptic Inuit zombie story (did you know, by the way, that there's a word for "zombie" in Inuktitut?) that, like all great survival-horror narratives, dwells on the impossible life-or-death decisions that the living must make, including whether or not and how to abandon those we love. Jay Bulckaert's "The Wildest Game," if I may name just one more favourite of mine, is a first-person confessional that fleshes out (again: pun intended) Jim Siedow the Cook's notorious line from the original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*: "I just can't take no pleasure in killing. There's just some things you gotta' do. Don't mean you have to like it."

In contrast with *Taaqtumi*¸ Cheyenne-Arapaho writer Shane Hawk's inaugural collection of short stories, *Anoka*, is packed with supplementary material. In his introduction to the volume, Hawk explores the personal and political significance of his creative choices, including the (mostly nominal) decision to base the stories in the real-life community of Anoka, Minnesota, which advertises itself as the "Halloween Capital of the World." The name "Anoka" derives from the Dakota word "anokatanhan," which Hawk translates as "on both sides of the river" by way of an explicit reference to his own mixed settler-Indigenous parentage. Even more illuminating are Hawk's "Story Notes," which he of course recommends reading only *after* one is finished with the stories themselves. There, the author briefly sketches out his inspirations and motivations for writing each of the stories, pointing out specific intertextual allusions or talking shop about the precision craft of flash fiction. These endnotes are arguably unnecessary (at least in a world where we've effectively "killed the Author"), yet I am thankful that they're included if only so that we can measure Hawk's initial expectations for each story against their final products. Hawk's "Story Notes" are an intriguing peek behind the curtain of the author-reader divide, offering unique levels of insight into the creative process of an emerging master of the short story. I would love to see more authors take up this practice, regardless of whether they're career veterans or first-timers.

It is worth mentioning too how Hawk's own Black Hills Press has brought *Anoka* to life as a pocket-sized print edition. Tiny as it is, *Anoka* is presented gorgeously—a perfect little book, whether your intention is to carry it around, to assign it to students, or just to display it. Seweryn Jasińsky's black-and-white cover design is a striking marriage of Saul Bass's poppy all-caps lettering and Stephen Gammell's notorious illustrations from the *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* series. The back cover blurb, attributed to "My skeptical, yet supportive grandma," tells us everything we need to know about the book: homespun, crafted with love, and loath to take itself too seriously.

Anoka's status as an attractive-looking book is fitting, because many of the stories contained therein deal specifically with the inherent spookiness of collecting rare books of obscure provenance. There is a mysterious leather-bound volume called simply "the Book" that features in the opening story, "Soilborne," in which two prospective parents try (and fail) to conjure up a child straight from the earth. Creepier still is the book in "Wounded," which seems to delight in subjecting its current owner to all manners of supernatural and psychological horror. When our Lakota protagonist Philip Wounded first discovers the book stashed among the liquor bottles under his late grandfather's workbench, it is coated with ice and grime "as if it had been sitting in the freezer next to his venison all winter" (7). Its pages are cluttered with Spanish text and English marginalia (the latter centering on a repeated imperative to "KILL, KILL, KILL"). When Philip brings the book to a Spanish-speaking friend for translation, it mockingly transforms itself into a copy of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, complete with the iconic blue-sky dust jacket of the first edition. It bleeds and oozes pus-filled worms when Philip tries to destroy it. Worst of all—and here is where the psychological terror comes into play—it plagues Philip's dreams with intrusive, suicidal thoughts. These thoughts, which stem from an adolescent drinking binge during which he neglected to watch over his younger sister on the day she was kidnapped and murdered, are some of the most brutal and disturbing content that Hawk commits to the page. Coupled with the book's dedication "to all missing indigenous girls and women," it's clear in moments like these that the subject matter hits close to home for the author, in one sense or another.

So too are the joys, expectations, and terrors of kinship central to the stories in *Anoka*. In "Imitate," a middle-aged father with a history of substance abuse and an unfaithful marriage discovers one day that his child, Tate, has been replaced by a doppelganger with charcoal eyes. The imitation child has cravings uncharacteristic of a ten-year-old: he demands coffee, peanut butter without bread, and plenty of broccoli. In the scenes where Tate is the object of dinner-table fights between father and mother over what

the child should and should not be eating, I was reminded of my own childhood experience as a picky eater and how those running arguments fundamentally shaped my relationship to food. As the conflict in "Imitate" escalates to violence, meanwhile, its mysteries only deepen. The story resists any straightforward allegorical reading (is the doppelganger a manifestation of infidelity, of guilt, of addiction, of abuse?) by foregrounding the kinship violation of a father killing his son. The doppelganger stresses this visceral sense of transgression with its final line, "Killed the real son?" (45).

Lastly, I should point out that Richard Van Camp and Shane Hawk each take the step of including genderqueer characters, in the stories "Wheetago War II: The Summoners" from *Taaqtumi* and "Transfigured" from *Anoka*. Neither writer is overzealous or self-congratulatory on this topic, which is worth commending. Van Camp's character Dove is known as much for their heroic deeds as for the uniqueness of their genderfluidity. We even get a sympathetic take on the elder narrator's clumsy efforts to treat Dove with courtesy and respect, as evident in the lines "No, I do not know what Dove is, but I am here to nominate them for the Mark of the Butterfly. You bet your ass, I am. Dove goddamned saved me. I pray he and she wakes up soon" (31). It's a lot of characterization packed into a few simple pronouns. Hawk, who explains in his "Story Notes" that "the modern werewolf is a perfect allusion to some people in the queer community" (78), identifies the unnamed lycanthropic narrator of "Transfigured" as genderfluid too. While I find that the narrator's joking identification with *Silence of the Lambs*' Buffalo Bill errs on the insensitive side, I can't help but appreciate Hawk's ability to convey sincere gender euphoria when the narrator thinks to herself, after being called "Sweetest woman I ever seen" by a flirtatious stranger, "*Woman*. There was the word again, floating in and out of my brain" (64). It's a great little flourish in a book full of great little flourishes.

Looking at *Night of the Mannequins, Taaqtumi,* and *Anoka* as an ensemble, I'm reminded of Lillian Gish's fourth wall-breaking line in another famous "Night of the…" story, *The Night of the Hunter*: "It's a hard world for little things." Like the young characters in the stories themselves, these books are easy to underestimate on the basis of their size and recency. As Jones, Hawk, and the authors collected in *Taaqtumi* each illustrate, though, it's the little things that stand to teach us the most about power and resilience where we least expect them.

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