

*Angel Time in the Undiscovered Country: The Cultural and Philosophical Context of Contemporary Afterlife Fiction for Young Adults*

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**Abstract**

In recent years, fiction specifically set in or about the afterlife has become a popular, critically acclaimed sub-genre within contemporary speculative fiction for young adults, especially but not only in English-language publishing. These narratives, where the main characters die at the beginning of the story and find themselves in a world beyond death, have evolved within a rich cultural context, including inspirations from folklore, philosophy, mythology, religion, adult literature both classic and contemporary, and contemporary screen-based narratives.

Young adult afterlife fiction depicts 'the undiscovered country', as Shakespeare's Hamlet called it, as a transitional, liminal world. These are not the 'absolute' territories of heaven, or hell, but afterworlds resembling Purgatory and Hades, or similar in-between territories found in traditional beliefs and cultures around the world. Little is fixed, with the instability of territory reflecting the instability of characters' cultural and personal identities in the world of the dead. And a high degree of individuation is also present, amongst which is that in most of these novels God is absent, which may reflect the beliefs of contemporary young adults. Yet while young adult afterlife novels avoid overt religious messages, they do not shy away from challenging explorations of life and death.

In this paper, the author, an established novelist for young adults, as well as a PHD student in Creative Practice whose doctoral work includes the first substantial analysis of young adult afterlife fiction, profiles the intriguing cultural and philosophical questions raised by this fascinating literary sub-genre.

Keywords: literature, afterlife concepts, young adult fiction, Purgatory, cultural diversity

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, fiction specifically set in or about the afterlife has become a popular, critically acclaimed sub-genre within contemporary fiction for young adults, especially but not only in English-language publishing. In afterlife fiction, the dead are not a danger to the living world, unlike in related sub-genres such as ghost, vampire or zombie fiction; the afterlife is the major, not a minor, theme; characters are either dead or in a state between life and death, such as a coma; narratives begin with death, not end in it; and character development is centred around the struggle to reconcile pre-death identities with afterlife transformations in an alien world, the world beyond death. These narratives have evolved within a rich cultural context, including inspirations from folklore, anthropology, philosophy, mythology, religion, adult literature both classic and contemporary, and contemporary screen-based narratives.

An important thing to note about young adult afterlife fiction is its emphasis on liminality, including in narrative aspects such as setting, character and inspiration. The concept of liminality, first used to denote the in-between state of participants in traditional rites of passage and initiations, proposes, as anthropologist Victor Turner noted, that the person undergoing the subject of passage ritual is, 'in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, invisible' (Turner, 1967). What is meant is that, in this period, they have no social or even personal status. Nothing about them is fixed and they are prone to transformation of an unpredictable kind. As another, more recent writer, Dag Øistein Endsjø, described it, it's not just aspects such as gender, age and hierarchy that may be reversed or negated in the liminal state, but even more basic opposites such as human versus god, human versus animal, and the living versus the dead. He goes on to equate the liminal state of rites of passage with the journeys into the afterworld of Ancient Greek mythical heroes such as Herakles and Odysseus, who venture into the liminal territory of Hades with a specific purpose (Endsjø, 2000).

This concept of liminality, which crosses and recrosses so many boundaries, can usefully be extended to illuminate young adult afterlife fiction, where characters are not only structurally but also physically invisible, at least in terms of the living. And in this paper, based on some of the research for the PHD in Creative Practice which I am currently undertaking, I explore how liminality as expressed in both traditional and contemporary philosophical and cultural questions and explorations, has shaped and informed several contemporary novels within this most intriguing and unusual branch of young adult fiction. The fiction surveyed is, variously, from the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and France.

## **Souls in Purgatory**

In Rome, not far from the Tiber, there is a modest church which has acquired a certain reputation amongst an eclectic global public, attracting not only the devout but also collectors of the curious and amateurs of the Gothic and macabre, for housed within its walls is a tiny museum unique in concept and theme. The *Museo delle anime del Purgatorio*, or Museum of the Souls of Purgatory, contains, within its one glass case, a display of items supposedly marked by the actual handprints of the dead reaching across to the living from Purgatory, in a collection assembled from locations all over

Europe by a priest in the late nineteenth century. Books, clothes, letters, the top of a small wooden table: each item features finger- and hand-prints burnt into it. Each object has a narrative of provenance attached to it: stories which despite their pious repetitiveness are expressive of the fear and hope represented by Purgatory, that ambiguous threshold place which is neither Heaven nor Hell, and where the dead still have a form of agency.

In Catholic doctrine a person's ultimate fate after death is still undetermined if they are thought to be in Purgatory. This belief, which is ancient but first formally proclaimed as doctrine in 1438, holds that through serious ordeals of suffering, as well as the prayers of living relatives, departed souls can embark on a quest to redeem their sins and reach Heaven at last. In the Middle Ages, this was also supplemented by the now-extinct practice of indulgences, where a person could buy themselves years off an assumed purgatorial sentence. The existence of Purgatory was denied by Protestant reformers, but it continues as a current doctrine of the Catholic Church. However, as an actual place, it does not figure much in contemporary Catholic belief. Paradoxically, it is that changing cultural context which may have served to make the Museum more appealing to non-traditional visitors. With its apparently unfashionable insistence on the material proof of Purgatory, represented by those uncanny scorch marks, this little museum, which is neither condoned nor condemned by the Catholic Church, but rather operates under a discreet veil of non-committal silence, exists in a liminal space and time that places it between the still-potent world of the past and that of the still-evolving present where religiously unorthodox spiritualism is a growing trend.

The grey territory of Purgatory, positioned between the white of Heaven and the black of Hell, can be portrayed in many different shades of ambiguity. Its equivalents in non-Christian cultures offer similar ambiguity and flexibility. For instance, in the Buddhist Bardo, a similarly liminal space, souls also have the opportunity to continue to shape their own destiny through transformation, but are also subject to many dangers. And in the Chinese version, families can also help to buy their dead relatives' passage from the in-between territories towards the Courts of Judgement and final bliss in the heavenly realms. These territories are strikingly evoked in Yangsze Choo's powerful novel, *The Ghost Bride* (2013), which takes up the notion of afterlife marriages—marriages between a living person and a dead one—which emerged within traditional Chinese culture in the past, as described by scholar Ping Yao.

Within an evolving, eclectic contemporary cultural context of imaginative explorations of afterlife, whether book or screen-based, creators may reinvent such powerful concepts in ways which blend the traditional and the innovative without encroaching on contested sacred space. In her seminal work on adult afterlife fiction, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, Alice Bennett identifies this concept of Purgatory as both place and time as having a strong influence on adult afterlife fiction. It is also a potent inspiration for young adult afterlife fiction. This is not because of a religious predisposition. It is for a narrative purpose. As Bennett points out, the liminal nature of purgatorial places has long been recognised as best fitting the purpose of afterlife narratives, because, as Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt puts it, 'In Purgatory the dead continue to exist in time.' (Greenblatt, 2001, p.37)

That time is not mortal time but neither is it eternity: suspended between the two, it can usefully be described as the time of the 'aevum' or the world of the angels, a notion first devised by 13th-century theologian and philosopher St Thomas Aquinas. It is not where God exists, or where mortals live; but rather the space and time occupied by the in-between, angels, fairies, spirits of various kinds, mythological figures and ghosts. Applied as a literary term in Frank Kermode's influential book on apocalyptic fiction, *The Sense of an Ending*, (1967) 'angel time' also becomes a striking metaphor for how time passes in fiction. This concept of 'angel time' is highly relevant to afterlife narratives. For unlike the alien but fixed eternal points of Heaven and Hell, and also unlike the too-familiar terrains of mortal Earth, this ambiguous, in-between world, half-familiar, half-not, where time passes differently and where space may mutate and transform, allows for narrative risks and fantastical invention. This was already recognised by literalist Puritans in Shakespeare's time, who, as Greenblatt reports, were against the theological concept of Purgatory because they distrusted its appeal to the fantastical narrative imagination. Ironically, it is precisely that aspect of Purgatory, rather than its theology, which has made it so appealing as an inspiration to contemporary authors of afterlife fiction, whether book or screen based. This liminal setting makes a great locus for adventure, journeys and the quest. But it is more than that. Since Dante at least, writers have used the concept of Purgatory as a creative metaphor for the human condition.

However, though purgatorial places, and to a lesser extent, Hades, in Ancient Greek myth the bleak home of the unworthy dead, are central as inspirations in afterlife fiction, they function not explicitly, but as subtext for setting and mood. Suffering and misery, which are always a feature of religious purgatorial narratives, are certainly present in afterlife fiction, but they are not the main focus. Similarly, though terrifying dangers and creatures exist in these afterworlds and the overcoming of them is part of the proving ground for the characters, they are generally not of the same kind as found in traditional depictions of purgatorial afterworlds. The only piece of contemporary young adult fiction I have read which directly, and deliberately, references an older Western theological view, is Margo Lanagan's short story, *Under Hell, Over Heaven* (2006), an evocation of the 'guide' trope in which four emotionless teenagers take souls to their respective destinations of Heaven and Hell, traversing the inhospitable territory of the 'Outer' as Purgatory is called in this story, while Laura Whitcomb's novel *A Certain Slant of Light* (2005) is centred around a ghost escaping a frightening in-between metaphysical space by taking over living human 'hosts'.

However, some of the novels are not set in a purgatorially-inspired afterworld. These include Karen Healey's *When We Wake* (2013), when the afterlife turns out to actually be a terrifying version of the future; Jane Abbott's *Elegy* (2016) where the living world is really the afterlife for the main characters who are reincarnated Ancient Greek figures; Gabrielle Zevin's *Elsewhere* (2007), where the afterworld is a sunny suburban holding place on the way to rebirth; and Kinga Wyrzykowska's *Memor: le monde d'après* (2015). In this novel, the afterlife is complete, comprising several planets. Not only is there no 'in between' purgatorial place, there are also no extremes, no heaven and no hell. This is also the case in an anomalous precursor to the contemporary novels, Astrid Lindgren's *The Brothers Lionheart* (1973). Nangiyala, the afterworld of Lindgren's novel, is a place of 'camp-fires and sagas', somewhat reminiscent of Narnia, cosily familiar, yet full of possibilities for adventure—with not a trace of Purgatory or Hades in sight.

## **An afterlife without God**

The traditional liminality of purgatorial places is a central inspiration in the settings and atmosphere of the worlds of young adult afterlife fiction. But with one exception, God is either completely absent, or else only glancingly mentioned as being in another, more distant realm of afterlife. It is important to note of course that Purgatory and its equivalents inhabit a much more ambiguous space in traditional religious belief worldwide than that allocated to the diverse manifestations of Heaven and Hell, which are closely tied to the presence of gods and devils. Just as in Ancient Greek myth the gods are absent from Hades, so the Christian Purgatory is notable for the absence or at least the invisibility of God to the souls there, adding to their ordeal. Similarly, in the Daoist/Buddhist afterlife, heavenly beings are absent from the in-between territories where the dead must wander and earn their release before being able to go further. This traditional absence of supreme sacred beings from liminal afterlife territories means that these territories may be less firmly tied to notions of the sacred per se and thus may be seen as more approachable by writers. However, it is still notable that with one exception, Lynnette Lounsbury's *Afterworld* (2014), and unlike in religious and classical narratives, the young adult afterlife fiction examined in this study does not contain overt references to gods or indeed devil figures and their place in the meaning of characters' ordeal. Lounsbury's novel has both God and Devil figures — known as the Awe and Deora respectively — and they both manifest as female, but though they exist and the main character Dom meets each of them, they are not prime actors in the narrative.

This notion of an afterworld without the specific presence of God is intriguing in light of recent research about young people's afterlife beliefs in the West. In a recent study, based on an extensive survey of young people from varied religious and secular backgrounds, Australian sociologist Andrew Singleton reported that more young Australians believe in the afterlife than believe in God; and that only a small minority espouse a religiously orthodox view of it, with most having a personal, self-authenticated vision of the afterlife (Singleton, 2012). A survey Singleton conducted four years later amongst Australian adults over thirty reflected broadly the same trends (Singleton 2016). A similar result was reported by European researchers (Pereira, Faica and de Sa-Saraiva, 2012), while in the US Lynn Schofield Clark observed that American teenagers' spiritual beliefs, except among traditionalists, were eclectic, highly individuated, and often contradictory. And in her recent PHD thesis, Australian literary scholar Dale Kathryn Lowe suggests that it is a growing post-secularist spirituality in the West which drives this interest: a spirituality no longer tethered to orthodox religious belief but which also rejects the completely secular. Though Lowe does not mention any of the novels I have been studying, she looks at the afterlife theme in several contemporary Australian novels which have it as a minor theme, and makes the interesting point that in these novels, there is 'an absence of moral judgement in the traditional religious form of heaven, hell or purgatory' (Lowe, 2016, p.174).

But although it could be claimed that the absence of God in fictional afterworlds reflects the transforming spiritual context of contemporary Western culture, it could also simply be explained by a reticence on the part of authors to encroach on sacred ground, as well as a desire not to set up pre-conceptions or assumptions in readers' minds. It may also be part of what Alice Bennett describes as an ongoing dialogue

between an anthropocentric and a theocentric view of the afterlife, which has been going on since ancient times, that is, a conflict between how theologians and mass culture regards it. And certainly the absence of God does not mean an absence of religious subtext. In Laura Whitcomb's *The Fetch* (2009), for instance, the eponymous 'fetch' or escorting guardian, a young ghost named Calder who exists in a space overseen by guardian angels, breaks all the rules by re-entering the earthly world at the time of the Russian Revolution. He does so in an attempt to change history and reunite the lost souls of two imperial Romanov children, Alexei and Anastasia, with the rest of their family in Heaven. Inspired by an inventive interpretation of Christian beliefs, including the Resurrection, the novel also features a glimpse of Heaven in an exploration of love crossing all barriers. However, though the notion of redemption of sins or mistakes through a purgatorial ordeal is certainly an important underlying thread in many of the novels, few of them approach the issue directly, with one exception being Richard Scrimger's *Me and Death* (2010). In Scrimger's narrative, which blends old-fashioned moralism and postmodern irony, Jim, a fourteen year old wannabe gangster, bully, and self-confessed 'piece of crap' is run over by a car and emerges into an afterworld peopled by Mourners, Grave Walkers, and Slayers—but no God figure. Here, he must negotiate many dangers in an attempt to find a path to redemption which will give him a second chance on Earth. In contrast, though there is a strong redemption motif in Neal Shusterman's powerful *Skinjacker* trilogy, it is interpreted in secular, not religious or moralistic terms. Young adult afterlife novels may avoid overt religious or spiritual messages but they do not shy away from confronting explorations of life and death.

### **Altered and diverse**

Liminality, and how this altered, ambiguous in-between state brings about transformation, as well as what that transformation means to a previous sense of psychological integrity and existential identity, is experienced by the characters in a place which could be seen as the ultimate in non-material space. Afterlife landscapes exhibit many strange, treacherous qualities: they are never what they seem, and are inhabited or animated by metaphysical entities, such as demons, angels, gods, or other supernatural beings. They are spaces inspired by mythological and religious imagination, as Alice Bennett points out:

Afterlife fiction makes repeated use of readers' recollection of similar worlds: worlds in which the physical laws of time and space are abandoned, where there is a causal or karmic logic to punishment and reward, where certain specific and familiar architectures and landscapes—rivers, plains, fields, camps, schools, hotels, cities—appear again and again (Bennett, p.177).

What Bennett is articulating here is the way in which these afterworlds may resonate with readers in unexpected ways, from previous reading, from cultural and religious knowledge, and lived experience of real places. Culturally speaking, afterlife landscapes may echo not only traditional images of liminal places found in religious belief, but also from folk culture, specifically those pertaining to fairy belief. As Katherine Langrish points out:

You cannot rescue someone from heaven or hell, but tantalisingly, the dead in fairyland may not be quite gone, only stolen away into some other dimension,

some fairy realm of suspended half-existence, and perhaps they can be brought back (Langrish, 2016).

Furthermore, I would argue that they are also inspired by elements to be found in that liminal territory we all know: the world of dreams. In dreams, time passes differently, identities are confused, things, people and animals shape-shift, landscapes, whether natural or built, rapidly change, events happen without explanation, and the prevailing atmosphere may shift in an instant from cosy to terrifying, sad to grotesque. The worlds conjured in the afterlife fictions examined here share many of these characteristics, with disorientation of both reader and character an intrinsic element, though overlaid with a coherent narrative structure not usually found in dreams.

Just as the settings of afterlife fiction illustrate issues of difference, so do elements of characterisation, the most crucial being cultural diversity. It is striking how cultural diversity, which has sometimes been perceived as absent or minimal in much contemporary English-language young adult fiction, is at the very heart of narrative process in afterlife fiction for young people. Not only is there a multiplicity of cultural influences in themes and settings, but central and secondary characters come from a wide range of ethnic, cultural and historical origins, created by authors who are often themselves of culturally diverse backgrounds. In the afterlife as depicted in young adult afterlife fiction, not only is cultural diversity the inescapable norm, but the fact that no one cultural tradition dominates means that hybridity of a particularly unpredictable nature becomes a highly destabilising element that severely tests and challenges characters, particularly those who have come from culturally stable backgrounds.

In Lounsbury's *Afterworld*, for instance, it is in fact the non-acceptance of diversity, the assumption of cultural knowledge, which leads to problems for new arrivals. There is an episode early on in the novel which underlines this. The main character Dom and another new arrival to the afterworld, a religious minister in his early thirties named Robert, are being given information about the new reality in which they find themselves. Robert reacts with bewildered horror, protesting that the afterlife can't be what it is, culturally and religiously diverse, and he is told by their guide:

‘You have known exactly what you believe and what you have been taught, and you are right that what you believe in life creates what happens to you after your death. But you have not understood that you are not the only one on Earth’ (Lounsbury, p.65).

‘You are not the only one on earth’. That simple yet potent phrase encapsulates exactly what is behind the cultural diversity—and destabilisation-- that is so integral to afterlife fiction for young people. Death cuts these characters from all they took for granted, including their personal and cultural identities: and even if they come back from the afterlife, they will be changed forever as all their assumptions and expectations have been challenged.

### **Lazarus walking: the return of the dead on screen**

The rise of contemporary young adult afterlife fiction has occurred against a context of great creative interest in the afterlife theme in screen-based narratives, especially

TV series. There has also been the occasional feature film made around the theme, such as *Flatliners* (US, 1990; remake released 2017) in which a group of five medical students attempt to investigate the afterlife by inducing near-death experiences; the 1999 American film *Purgatory*, an unusual if uneven blend of the traditional Western and afterlife narrative; and the Japanese film *Yomigaeri* (2002) in which an investigator looks into the sudden re-appearance of people long dead. The most recent of these is *The Discovery* (US, 2017) which revolves around the idea of a scientist discovering proof of the afterlife: a discovery which leads both to mass suicides and a growing cult.

However, it is in TV series that the most complete and complex screen-based explorations of the afterlife theme have occurred. The earliest and most prominent of these was the pop culture phenomenon, *Lost*, which premiered in 2004 and ended in 2010, but more recent ones have included *Les Revenants* (France 2012; *The Returned* in English, also remade in the US in 2015), *The Living and The Dead* (UK, 2016), *Resurrection* (US, 2014), *Glitch* (Australia, 2015) and *The OA* (US, 2016). In most, aside from *Lost*, the return from the dead is a central focus, with the living world impacted by the sudden eruption of the afterlife into this one. The ‘returned’ in these narratives are not ghosts, vampires or zombies; after years dead, they have suddenly and inexplicably found themselves back in the world of the living. They are physically normal, and at the same physical age as they were when they died.

What could be called the Lazarus trope, after the episode in the Gospel of John where Jesus brings the four-day-dead Lazarus of Bethany back to life, depicts an archetypally liminal figure, who could be said to inhabit an ambiguous space between life and death. The Lazarus trope has been a minor theme in literature in the past, including works by Alfred Tennyson, Luigi Pirandello, Robert Browning and Graham Greene. Much earlier, the ‘revenant’, or ‘returned one’, as opposed to the ghost, had appeared in stories and anecdotes in the Middle Ages, especially in Northern and Eastern Europe, as described by Nancy Mandeville Caciola in her paper, *Revenants, Resurrection and Burnt Sacrifice* (2014), where she profiles the eleventh-century Saxon bishop and author, Thietmar of Merseburg, who recounted several of these stories in his major work, *Chronicon*. Caciola powerfully depicts the contradictions inherent in Thietmar attempting to bring these ambiguous stories of revenants within a conventional Christian interpretation of Christ’s resurrection, pointing out that these stories occurred in the context of his society, ‘a pluralistic, frontier context that intermingled different cultural traditions, ethnicities, and religions’ where tales of the returned dead carried a freight of animistic fear as much as pious Christian hope. These stories, she observes, are ‘rife with internal contradictions that hold a mirror up to the tensions, the cultural pluralism, and the ongoing transformations of his time and place’ (Caciola 2014, p. 311).

Although the revenant or Lazarus trope’s reinvention as a growing trend in screen narrative is largely disconnected from a religious meaning (though it is not entirely absent), the television series which use it certainly could be said to echo Caciola’s observations in a contemporary sense. They often continue some of the motifs found in earlier works, such as the disorientation of the Lazarus figures returned to life, the major ramifications for their families and communities, and the dichotomy of fear and hope presented by these ‘returned’. *Glitch*, *The Returned*, *Resurrection*, and to some extent *The OA* are all set around the idea of the returned becoming ‘inconvenient’—

alien even sometimes to their own families, disturbing patterns of life and exposing old secrets while *The Living and the Dead* explores not only the borders of life and death, but also notions of time and the multiverse. Meanwhile *Lost*, with its characters stranded on a mysterious island, clearly alludes to a purgatorial in-between place, where old sins may be redeemed and second chances given. *Lost*'s producer Damon Lindelof made this explicit in an interview reproduced in Greg Garrett's *Entertaining Judgement: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination* (2015). Lindelof observed that the setting of Dante's *Divine Comedy* was a major influence in the creation of the show's own world, saying that 'this idea of purgatory was very much in the DNA of the show from the word Go' (Garrett, 2015, p.157).

All of these series, popular both with adults and young adults, are distinguished by multi-stranded narratives, thought-provoking ideas, complex plots, unexpected twists, sharply realised characters and closely-depicted settings, against an unsettling background of certainties upended forever: descriptions which can be equally applied to young adult afterlife fiction. There are differences of course between these screen narratives and the novels: in the TV series, aside from *Lost*, there are no adventures in the world beyond death, unlike in the young adult novels. Instead the Lazarus-themed series focus on an eruption of afterlife into the living world, brought about by some disturbance in time or space. And whilst none of the novels examined in this study feature an overt Lazarus theme like the screen narratives, several are centred around what might be called quasi-Lazarus figures: characters who fall into near-death in order to journey into the afterlife for one reason or the other: this includes *Afterworld*, *Memor*, and *The Ghost Bride*. Meanwhile, *A Certain Slant of Light* also features a return from the dead, when two ghosts take over living bodies.

### **Conclusion: creating *The Ghost Squad***

Finally, I would like to briefly touch upon my own young adult afterlife novel, *The Ghost Squad*, which is the creative product of my PHD, as opposed to the analytical product represented by my exegesis. *The Ghost Squad* fits broadly into the sub-genre of afterlife fiction, including an emphasis on liminality, whilst departing in several significant ways. A hybrid narrative blending the accessible texture of quasi-mimetic realism with the disorienting atmosphere of speculative fiction, it seeks to achieve further generic hybridity by mixing tropes from detective fiction and from ghost stories. Most importantly, in *The Ghost Squad*, unlike in all the other novels, the main characters are neither dead nor in a death-like coma, but firmly positioned in the living, waking and (almost) normal world. The adventures of the main characters, Polly and Swan, are not centred around a journey into the territories of the afterlife per se; rather, and perhaps even more disturbingly, it is the afterlife which has intruded into this life, through the government's secret experimental research centres, known as the Post-Life Entity Index Facilities, or PLEIF for short, which categorise people according to their afterlife markers. In metaphorical terms, however, Polly and Swan, cut off from their known worlds, have to enter an afterlife every bit as destabilisingly liminal as those depicted in other such novels. Having to leave all assumptions behind, they must learn to navigate a treacherous world where nothing is as it seems and everything can change in an instant. For Kel, meanwhile, the enigmatic child escapee from a pleif who is protected by Polly and Swan, the afterlife is a constantly hovering nightmare of inexplicable memory flashes, while rumours of sinister experiments on people who carry the 'rem' marker (the re-embodied, or

reincarnated) and ‘dems’ (the disembodied, or ghosts) add to the oppressive atmosphere of a world where the afterlife is no longer just beyond the threshold of death, but present in the fabric of life itself. Other points of difference developed later, as the novel was progressing, against a background of immersion in afterlife narratives. The Lazarus motif, which does not appear in the majority of the novels, but is a central theme in most of the screen narratives, provides for a crucial twist in the denouement of *The Ghost Squad*, and a pointer to an even greater future shift in the evolution of that fictional world. This was a narrative choice inspired both by the screen narratives and *Tai Whetuki/House of Death Redux*, an extraordinary video art installation by contemporary New Zealand artist Lisa Reihana, which I viewed in Auckland, New Zealand in 2016. And it was in part the almost complete absence of overt religious reference in most of the young adult afterlife novels I’d read which challenged me to approach this differently in *The Ghost Squad*, though it is still far from being a major narrative concern. But just as the other novelists’ narrative choices rested on the exigencies of their individual fictional worlds, where religious exploration might have seemed superfluous, my creative decisions were driven principally by the nature of my novel’s fictional world: a world that unlike the afterlife doesn’t seem so different to ours, yet which in reality is being radically transformed by the ramifications of what has been discovered. There are no definitive answers, only more questions: but without any reference to the religious impact of such a shattering revelation on human culture and society, the world of *The Ghost Squad* would have been incomplete.

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