

# MEMORIES OF CHILD ABUSE IN JIM GRIMSLEY'S DAN CRELL TRILOGY\*

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## ABSTRACT

The essay explores the theme of child abuse in Jim Grimsley's early fiction, namely in the three novels sometimes known as the Dan Crell trilogy: *Winter Birds*, *My Drowning*, and *Comfort & Joy*. Four forms of abuse can be identified in the trilogy: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and abuse by neglect. Important themes of the novels include the role of memory in coping with the trauma of child abuse later in adulthood as well as the influence of past abuse on family dynamics. In the individual novels, the author uses various narrative situations and techniques in order to explore the way memory works.

## KEYWORDS

Jim Grimsley; child abuse; memory; twentieth-century American literature; southern literature; gay literature; narrative technique

When Jim Grimsley received the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction for his *Winter Birds* (1994) in 1995, it certainly meant great satisfaction for him: the novel had been rejected by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill in 1985 as too dark, and the publisher took it up again only after it appeared in German, with Dutch and French translations under way. Since then, Grimsley has secured for himself a firm place among contemporary southern writers. In 1999 Lisa Howorth acknowledged Grimsley as an author who was “on the cutting edge of contemporary Southern fiction, where he [had] carved out a place for himself as literary chronicler of the Southern gay experience.”<sup>1</sup> Grimsley did enter the realm of gay literature with his second novel, *Dream Boy* (1995), but he is not only a chronicler of the southern gay experience but even more a chronicler of the experience of the low-class white families in the South, as three of his first four novels focus on two generations of a poor family in North Carolina. *Winter Birds* centers on the eight-year-old Danny Crell who becomes the target of severe violence from his father on a Thanksgiving Day. *My Drowning* (1997) traces the childhood experience of Danny's mother, Ellen, and the last novel of the trilogy, *Comfort & Joy* (1999), portrays Danny as an adult who lives in Atlanta but revisits his mother at Christmas with his gay partner, Ford

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1. Lisa Howorth, “Jim Grimsley: Tales of Southern Courage,” *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 1999: 39.

McKinney. Since the end of the 1990s Grimsley has moved away from North Carolina rural settings as well as from his focus on poor families: *Boulevard* (2002) traces the life of a young gay man who works in an adult bookstore in New Orleans, and *Forgiveness* (2007) explores the violent reaction of a well-to-do manager after he loses his job because of the economic crisis.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is primarily his first four novels that established Grimsley as a southern writer. The three Dan Crell novels are interconnected not only by shared characters and events, but especially by characters' memories and intertextual references, which allows readers to treat them as a sequence of novels based on one fictional world.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the trilogy is very close to a memoir, and the author comments at large on the autobiographical nature of his fiction in the many interviews he has given as well as in an eight-page essay "True Fiction" (1994), which was published by Algonquin as part of the promotional kit for *Winter Birds*. In this essay, Grimsley points out several significant characteristics he shares with Dan(ny) Crell,<sup>4</sup> his literary alter ego, when he comments:

In the facts of his life, Danny was as much like me as I could make him. Danny has hemophilia, like me. Danny has a sharp tongue, like me. Danny has a family full of smart alecks, like me. Danny's father drank too much and drank badly, like mine; Danny's mother is strong like mine; Danny will grow up to be queer like I did.<sup>5</sup>

In the essay, he goes on to describe various experiences in his childhood and his family that bear a striking resemblance to the fictional world of the Dan Crell novels and narrates an episode from his childhood on which *Winter Birds* was based. By doing so, he addresses the problems of memory, which later became a major theme in all three novels:

I have said this is a true story because I remember the night, twenty-odd years ago, when these events took place. But while I have been trying to construct sentences to describe this incident, I have come face-to-face with the problems of memory and material that have colored all the writing I have tried to do. I have vivid memories of my family, of the way we lived, and my writing feels very powerful when I am working out of this material.

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2. Grimsley is also a respected playwright and author of genre fiction. A selection of his plays was published as *Mr. Universe and Other Plays* (1998), and his fantasy novels include *Kirith Kirin* (2000), *The Ordinary* (2005), and *The Last Green Tree* (2006).

3. On the other hand, *Dream Boy*, through which Grimsley entered the realm of southern gay literature, is not part of the trilogy, and yet it develops the theme of child abuse further to the point of the death of the protagonist; in addition to that, as Grimsley admitted in an interview, the novel is originally based on an episode cut out of *Winter Birds*. See Richard Canning, "Jim Grimsley," interview with Jim Grimsley, in *Hear Us Out: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 120. The theme of the abused child in *Dream Boy* in the context of gay and lesbian literature is explored by Monica Michlin in her essay "The Abused Child as Subversive Theme in LGBT Fiction," in *Dissidences et Identités Plurielles*, ed. Jean-Paul Rocchi (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2008), 265–85.

4. In accordance with Grimsley, I use "Danny" to refer to the character in *Winter Birds* and "Dan" to refer to the character in *Comfort & Joy*.

5. Jim Grimsley, "True Fiction," Advertising Folder (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1994), 6.

But these memories are often very unpleasant and lead to stories that are cathartic to read, but hard to sell to publishers.<sup>6</sup>

The very existence of the essay “True Fictions,” which Algonquin used to promote the book, demonstrates that after a decade of rejection by American publishers, Grimsley was actually able to join the mainstream of southern autobiographical writing. But the autobiographical nature of Grimsley’s fiction has its limits: the trilogy is presented as fiction inspired by people and events from the author’s family rather than a non-fiction record of his childhood. Grimsley emphasizes it repeatedly in his non-fiction as well as his interviews: “What I have written is autobiographical but is not an autobiography”<sup>7</sup> or “Even in *Winter Birds* it’s all fiction, even though it’s based on fact.”<sup>8</sup> To support these seemingly oxymoronic statements, he maintains that unlike the protagonists of his novels he has never been sexually abused by his father, which is a key motif in *Winter Birds*, and half-jokingly remarks that he is obviously not a nineteen-year-old girl who grew up in the 1940s.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of the question of Grimsley’s veracity and the autobiographical status of his fiction, it serves as a perfect example of what the British scholar Julia Swindells calls “the necessary connection between autobiography and the social world.”<sup>10</sup> Grimsley has always emphasized that the setting has had a formative role on him, and this pertains not only to the geographical setting in North Carolina but even more so to his social position. Because of his low-class origin, Grimsley clearly states that he cannot understand the upper class world described by other gay writers, such as Edmund White,<sup>11</sup> but in *Comfort & Joy* he contrasts two characters on the opposite end of the social ladder. Grimsley’s early fiction is distinctly southern, which he considered helpful because southern literature gets talked about,<sup>12</sup> yet, as he remarks, it took him three books to appear, as a southerner, on the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*, while the “gay thing was not a problem.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, at first sight his fiction contains all the elements Fred Hobson considers “central in the most notable southern fiction of the first three-quarters of [the twentieth] century,” i.e., “place, family, community, religion, and the past.”<sup>14</sup>

The fictional world of the trilogy spans from the late 1930s to the 1990s and focuses on two generations of a family: in *My Drowning* Ellen revisits the places of her childhood and tries to cope with memories of her childhood experience.

6. Grimsley, “True Fiction,” 4.

7. Grimsley, “True Fiction,” 8.

8. Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 123.

9. See Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 122.

10. Julia Swindells, introduction to *The Uses of Autobiography*, ed. Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 2.

11. See Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 127.

12. See Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 121.

13. Canning, “Jim Grimsley,” 136.

14. Fred C. Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 8.

In *Winter Birds* the focus is on her son Danny, who, as an eight-year-old boy, experiences a violent night from his father. In *Comfort & Joy*, Dan is a grown-up man who forms a gay couple with Ford McKinney, a young pediatrician at the hospital where he works as an administrator.

While the three novels in the Dan Crell trilogy cannot be called autobiographies, they do share their basic preoccupations. In his treatise on autobiographies, the American critic Paul John Eakin builds on the psychologist Ulric Neisser's identification of "five modes of self-experience"<sup>15</sup> and finds "the primary subject of autobiographical discourse" in one of them, in "Neisser's extended self, the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing continuously across time."<sup>16</sup> The working of memory and coping with one's past is indeed the most important theme of the Dan Crell novels.

While Grimsley chose a different narrative situation for each novel in the trilogy, in all the novels he makes use of the possibilities the individual ways of narrating offer to the authors. The most interesting case is the use of the second-person narrative in *Winter Birds*. Yet Grimsley is aware that some works, such as Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), only use *you* instead of *I*,<sup>17</sup> while in *Winter Birds* the *you* being addressed by the narrator is Danny, the eight-year-old boy, and the narrator is the adult Danny.<sup>18</sup> Danny (called Danny the Lesser in some scenes in the novel) is the narratee to whom the narrator (Danny the Elder) explains the meaning of events going around him. The narrator thus talks to his imaginary self of many years ago. Grimsley comments on his choice of narrative situation in the following manner:

It allows me to cheat really: to know all kinds of things that the boy doesn't know, that I can claim to have found out later from the mother, or that can be inferred to have been known later through memory or through visualizing the scene from that later point. It was a very freeing way to write.<sup>19</sup>

What seems to be a story of what an eight-year-old boy is experiencing is in fact a story of what an adult man is remembering. The other two novels are more conventional in this respect: *My Drowning* is a first-person narrative with Ellen as the narrator, and memories of her childhood are brought to her through a series of flashbacks (narrated mostly in the past tense), interlaced with comments from the adult Ellen (usually in the present tense). *Comfort & Joy* is narrated from an omniscient point of view; memories are mainly brought back to Dan when he revisits his family and the places of his childhood.

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15. Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), xii.

16. Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 3.

17. See Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 127.

18. See Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 125.

19. Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 125.

What strikes readers as a fundamental feature of the fictional world of the Dan Crell trilogy is the ubiquitous presence of children suffering; all of its forms can be gathered under the umbrella term *child abuse*. While child abuse is commonly associated with sexual abuse, it is only one of its forms. The German psychiatrist Günther Deegener defines three other forms in addition to sexual abuse: physical abuse (violent actions resulting in injuries to children who are beaten, whipped, burned with hot water, etc.), neglect (considerable impact or damage to a child's development as a result of a lack of care, clothing, feeding, medical care, supervision, or protection from danger), and emotional abuse (outright rejection, intimidation, terrorization, or isolation of a child; verbal abuse on a daily basis, locking a child in a dark room, etc.). Additionally, sexual abuse does not have to include rape or direct body contact but can be "[a]ny action that is inflicted upon or must be tolerated by a child against their own will or any action about which the child cannot make a decision due to their physical, emotional, mental, or verbal inferiority. The offenders use their position of power and authority to satisfy their own needs at the expense of these children who thus suffer discrimination as sexual objects."<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, examples of all the types abound in the Dan Crell novels.

The most severe forms of abuse can be found in *My Drowning*. The structure of the novel is episodic, and its chapters focus on various events in Ellen's childhood. Ellen's father was a tenant farmer and the poverty forced the family to move around from one house to another. Ellen's mother gave birth to eleven children, one of whom was stillborn and another died shortly after being born. The children were hungry all the time, living for periods of time on biscuits and sweetened coffee; only rarely, when there was money, did they have fatback. The constant hunger amounts to abuse by neglect, but the children also suffered from a marked lack of emotional support from their parents. Ellen remembers: "Daddy had never touched me that I could recall, to hold me, only to hurt me."<sup>21</sup> This emotional starvation went hand in hand with physical abuse, which came not only from the father but also from the mother who beat her children repeatedly and even slammed Ellen's head against a plaster wall when she complained.

The primary target of sexual abuse in *My Drowning* was Ellen's eldest sister Nora. The fact that Nora had been abused sexually by her own father was revealed when he asked about her boyfriend: "You let him rub your pussy? . . . So if I check it, I'll find out it's just like I left it" (*MD*, 228). Ellen suffered from paternal sexual abuse as well, but in her case it was less conspicuous. Once her father picked her up from a friend whom she was visiting and

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20. See Günther Deegener, "Child Abuse," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 1672.

21. Jim Grimsley, *My Drowning* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1997), 34. Hereafter cited in text as *MD*.

decided to punish her for coming home late. The lascivious grin on his face showed he had found unusual pleasure in the punishment. Ellen reported:

“You’ll have to get a whipping,” he said. He looked at me for a long time, and I felt as if my bare skin were knotting and tightening. He licked out the tip of his tongue onto his lower lip. Then he smiled and lit the cigarette and smoked it. (*MD*, 219–20)

However, it was Uncle Cope, who lived with the family, who abused Ellen most, and on a regular basis, even though she tried to avoid any contact with him. Her mother and eldest sister repeatedly warned her against him: “Mama and Nora had said over and over not to be alone with him, so I never was” (*MD*, 5). Still, her mother’s attempt to save her from abuse by males is accompanied by physical abuse from herself: when Ellen complained that Uncle Cope had peeped at her while she was washing, she slapped her “sharp across the face” and told her “never to mess with that one-leg bastard again” (*MD*, 75).

Ellen wanted to escape from her abusive family; that is why she eloped with Bobjay Crell and married him; their new family is at the center of *Winter Birds*. Yet there is a significant shift. In *My Drowning*, which portrays Ellen’s childhood, all the four forms of abuse are present in abundance and are so accumulated and interconnected that it is sometimes difficult (and artificial) to distinguish between them. While the sources of the sexual abuse were the children’s father and uncle, the physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect came from both Ellen’s parents. On the other hand, in *Winter Birds*, Ellen, herself a victim of childhood abuse, tries to protect her children.

The events of *Winter Birds* took place some time in the 1960s, and the poverty of Ellen’s new family was not so extreme: remembering the omnipresent hunger in her childhood years described in *My Drowning*, now, as a mother, she always had some food for her family. While in *My Drowning* the family had problems getting batteries for a radio, in *Winter Birds* the family even owned a TV set.

However, Bobjay soon became abusive in ways similar to her father’s. This was aggravated even further when he lost his arm in a machinery accident, which pushed the family into deeper poverty; they were constantly moving, usually to a worse place. Moreover, two of the boys, Danny and his younger brother Grove, suffered from hemophilia, which made them extremely sensitive to any physical violence, frequently resulting in bleeding and often requiring medical attention. At one point, while being chased by his angry father, Danny tripped and bit his tongue, which required hospitalization and resulted in a huge medical bill of almost five hundred dollars.

The events of the novel mostly took place on one Thanksgiving Day when Bobjay went amok, started to threaten his family with a knife and even killed the pregnant family dog. He also cut Danny and spilled some hot water on his arm, which can put a hemophiliac into extreme danger. The violent scene culminated in the sexual abuse of both Ellen and Danny. While in *My Drowning* Ellen’s parents engaged in sex as an act of reconciliation after their quarrels, Ellen refused to yield to Bobjay after his bout of anger. Bobjay was

jealous of the love Ellen felt for her children and accused her of incestuous inclinations: "I'm not good enough for you. . . . I'm scum, I'm some kind of bitch you don't want to touch, . . . ain't nothing good enough for you except your children, . . . you love them three times as much as you love me. . . . Oh no, I'm not good enough for you, I'm not your real blood kin. . . . But you only like it with your kin. Well I can get some of that for you right now."<sup>22</sup> After these accusations and threatening Ellen with his knife, Bobjay brought the sleepy Danny to the bedroom and placed him on Ellen's naked body, which was an experience that haunted Danny years afterwards.

However, the Dan Crell novels achieve much more than just a portrait of the various forms of violence inflicted on children and relatives; they also explore the strategies the victims used to cope with abuse while it was happening (or expected to happen soon) and, because of the temporal distance recorded in the novels, they also show the ways in which, later in their lives, they battled the trauma that originated from the abuse.

Both the young Ellen and Danny (as well as all the other child characters, at that) tried to avoid situations that made them vulnerable to abuse, but they also used a different way of coping with the abusive environment: they escaped into the realm of the imagination. When Ellen's younger sister Alma Laura died in infancy, she continued to visit Ellen as a ghost until Ellen eloped with Bobjay. Alma Laura became an imaginary friend who provided virtual support for Ellen. The unfulfilled need for communication was also reflected in how Ellen talks to Corrine, a baby sister of hers, at an age when Corrine could not possibly be an adequate discussion partner. Among other things, she advised Corrine to "close the door when she took a bath" and "to keep a towel close by" (*MD*, 96) so that she could hide if Uncle Cope decided to watch her. Of course, this talking to herself, masked as communication with an uncomprehending baby sister, became, as Corrine started to understand, a way of passing down knowledge of how to protect herself.

Like Ellen who vivified her long-dead sister, Danny invented an imaginary protector—the River Man, a friendly monster. Danny became a recluse who preferred being alone with the River Man in his thoughts to the company of members of the family. He especially liked to go to a clearing by the river, where he dreamt:

You dream the River Man again: River Man comes out of the water to your honeysuckle mattress on the bank. He is broad as an oak tree and strong as a bear, tall and brown-skinned with shaggy black hair. He lives in the water or in the forest where you have wandered. *He calls you his son*. You know no one else in the world, only him. You have no other home, only his home. You see in his eyes every minute how he cares for you. (*WB*, 10, my italics)

This dreaming is alluded to again in *Comfort & Joy* when Dan revisits the place with Ford McKinney and he remembers: "*And I used to lie in the dead*

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22. Jim Grimsley, *Winter Birds* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1994), 195–96. Hereafter cited in text as *WB*.

*honeysuckle and dream of a cave beneath the river, a man like you in the cave, and one day a lion in a golden field.*"<sup>23</sup> Aloud, he told Ford: "I used to dream about you at the river. . . . You lived under the water, and you took care of me. . . . I didn't know it was you at the time. But it was" (*CJ*, 123). This demonstrates that one's memories are subject to constant reinterpretation. Dreams of a protector and substitute father turn into dreams (or rather, memories of dreams) about Dan's current gay lover; the friendly monster metamorphoses into a man.

The fluid nature of memories was not lost on Ellen either; at the very beginning of *My Drowning* she declared that she had "grown old enough that a memory [became] as real as the real thing" (*MD*, 2). Indeed, challenging the reliability of memory is so important that it is built into the structure of the novel. That is why Grimsley interrupts the childhood experiences, narrated in the past tense, with Ellen's remarks in the present tense, ranging in length from a single sentence to several paragraphs:

*Maybe I am adding to the real memory by looking backward at it from such a distance, but I have the picture of the neighbor woman glaring at Carl Jr., as if she knew he had been flirting with her daughter. I have the picture of Carl Jr. drifting past her, chewing a blade of dry grass. I cannot possibly remember so much. But my skepticism does not dim the picture. (MD, 31, my italics)*

The greatest challenge to the reliability of memories hides behind the title of the novel itself. Ellen's older brother, Otis, once revealed to Ellen that, as her father wanted her born dead, he beat her mother in the belly. "So Mama hated you, he said, and when you were born she took you to the pond, and she tried to drown you, and she would have done it, except Nora saved you. You didn't know that, did you?" (*MD*, 247). This statement might explain the opening scene of the novel, in which Ellen had a vivid reminiscence of her mother entering water while being observed by her children, including herself. Ellen was startled by the similarities between the two versions but was also aware of the contradictions between them. As a newborn child cannot remember such an experience, this memory must have been only a dream based on a story she had heard. Indeed, this would provide a plausible answer to Ellen's sigh, "How can such a vivid memory be so imperfect?" (*MD*, 2).

In spite of the hardships in the past, both Ellen and Dan survived their abusive childhoods, though not without trauma. For example, after years of being sent to the local store to ask for credit, Ellen still felt the need to emphasize that she had escaped the extreme poverty of her youth after all:

Years later I went back to the Jarman's store in the '62 Impala I bought with my own money, earned by working in the elementary school cafeteria. My own children were with me, clean and neatly dressed, and I wore my hair freshly done from the beauty parlor. My dress was sky blue, with a wide white belt, and I wore white shoes, but instead of the white hat, I wore a white rayon scarf tied around my hair. I carried my purse into the store. (*MD*, 50)

23. Jim Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1999), 123. Grimsley's italics. Hereafter cited in text as *CJ*.

Her need to reconfirm her new economic status (having her own money, carrying a purse), as well as her clean and neatly dressed children, demonstrate that she still bears, and will always bear, the burden of her abusive childhood full of violence and poverty. The same theme is explored in *Comfort & Joy*, a novel originally meant as a gay romance which Grimsley wrote when he could not publish *Winter Birds* in the United States.<sup>24</sup> It is a gay romance but, besides that, also a study of the consequences later in life of child abuse.

Dan Crell is now an adult man in his early thirties who tries to build a working relationship with Ford McKinney, a scion of an old Savannah family. Both men bring the burden of their past into the relationship. Ford's family pushes their son to marry and take his expected place in the Savannah social hierarchy, while Dan, in addition to his memories of disrupted childhood, is HIV-positive from taking untested hemophilia medication at the beginning of the epidemic. When Dan visits his mother with Ford one Christmas, the full extent of his childhood traumas resurfaces.

At that time Bobjay is already dead and Ellen has remarried and lives with her second husband in their own graveyard, which is the source of their income. Dan and Ford fly over from Atlanta and they rent a car. On their journey to visit Ellen, Dan decides to make a detour to the Circle House, that is, the house that provided the setting of *Winter Birds*. Dan is overwhelmed with emotions, and even Ford is startled when he sees the place.

Yet, it is probably Ellen who is most strongly affected when she learns that Dan took Ford to the place, as she realizes the traumas of Dan's childhood that the visit to the place must have rekindled. She trusts Ford and, aware of the hardships of Dan's upbringing, asks him openly, "Are you and Danny having a hard time?" (*CJ*, 163). Indeed, Ford was confused by Dan's emotional reaction that was brought out by the visit to the house: "There's some way he's afraid of me that I don't understand. Like in that house, the one he took me to see. When I found him in that bedroom, crying. And he wouldn't say why, and I was scared to ask" (*CJ*, 164). But even Ellen remains obscure at this point: "A bad thing happened to Danny in that room. . . . Maybe he'll tell you about it one of these days" (*CJ*, 164). While she does reveal that Dan may have been harmed in his childhood, the real nature of the events described in *Winter Birds*, including the sexual abuse by his father, remains hidden from Ford.

The extent of Dan's childhood trauma is also revealed in a dialogue with his sister Amy, when both of them remark they would like to forget about the place. To her "I wish you could forget about that place," Danny simply replies, "I wish I could too" (*CJ*, 153). But this is impossible and Danny later admits: "If I could forget my family, I would have done it a long time ago" (*CJ*, 274). But, the family cannot be forgotten, and Dan has been struggling with his childhood trauma for more than twenty years.

The fact that the trauma has a lasting effect on Dan is also obvious from Ford's remark to Dan: "There's two of you sometimes" (*CJ*, 213). This admits

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24. See Canning, "Jim Grimsley," 117

that, indeed, there may be Danny the Elder and Danny the Lesser, which can shed light on the narrative situation of *Winter Birds*, where Dan/Danny the Elder still tries to cope with his past by explaining its meaning to his imaginary younger self, Danny the Lesser.

Child abuse in all its forms is a defining phenomenon in the fictional world portrayed in the Dan Crell trilogy, which may serve as an encyclopedia of child abuse in its complexity at all levels. Moreover, it demonstrates how it is reproduced in the next generation, even though the proportion of the four forms of abuse changes. The novels reveal the main strategy the children used to cope with abuse at the time it took place: they escaped into the world of the imagination, inventing imaginary friends, either as communication partners or protectors: Ellen talked to her long-dead sister till her late teens, before she escaped from the family, and Danny invented the River Man, a substitute father who took care of him until the imaginary monster took a real shape in his gay lover.

The most important theme of the novels, the role of (unreliable) memory in children's coping with abuse in childhood and the consequent traumas in adulthood, is explored in all three novels via various narrative techniques. First, various narrative situations are used to explore the role of memories and the effect of time on them, and the theme of memory and time is expressed in the non-linear structure of the novels. Second, the temporal distance makes the witnessing of children's suffering more bearable because the reader is regularly reminded that the child has survived the ongoing abuse. Last but not least, the exploration of the lasting effects of the trauma makes it clear that the character's recovery from abuse is far from complete and is virtually impossible.

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