
*Most people go through life dreading that they are going to have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.*

Diane Arbus

Think back to your first trip with Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, or how it felt to enter the *Matrix* after Neo takes the red pill. *Five Wounds: An Illuminated Novel* takes you down a similarly twisting path and leaves you pondering the journey well afterwards. Pooling influences trans-national, trans-cultural, trans-temporal and trans-art form, authors Jonathan Walker and Dan Hallett spin the story of ‘five wounded orphans [who] must face their traumatic origins’ (blurb). These tales are told through the fascinating combination of Walker’s proclamatory prose, Hallett’s Goya and comic-book influenced illustrations, a Bible-like layout and handwritten notations.

Described as ‘cruel and arbitrary’ (blurb) by the authors, the world of *Five Wounds* looks and feels at once early renaissance, modern and apocalyptic. Sixteenth-century Venice is an influence, hinted in the water surrounding the city, the grand architecture of government buildings and aristocratic housing and the grimy cobblestone surrounds of the lower classes. Hallett’s illustrations come to the fore here, deftly evoking the settings for the trials and tribulations of the five main characters.

Connections between these five unfurl throughout. We first meet Cur, ‘the rabid leader of a sect of dogs, desperate to escape his inheritance’ (blurb). Cur’s history is brutal and beautifully told, drawing on the novel’s influences of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Uncanny X-Men. An unwilling Frankenstein of human and canine drives, Cur cuts a tragic and likeable figure.

As Cur undertakes his role of government thug, his path crosses Crow’s. Crow’s plan to cure his own leprosy by distilling the essence of death includes larger ambition, ‘that the transformations of his own body might become an occult model for the body politic, which he intended to remake in his own image’ (36). Crow’s voracious and often ugly plans drag in Magpie, a photographer and thief who thinks of ‘the act of stealing as something that might also be finely crafted and precise, a cut like the intervention of a surgeon on an insensible patient’ (69). Magpie’s observations and interactions are a rich source of information about the characters and their interrelations.

The story of one of Magpie’s links to Gabriella, ‘a crippled angel, haunted by her inability to interpret prophecies’ (blurb), is both enlightening and painful. At first it seems that the Gabriella character will clarify some of the more cryptic parts of *Five Wounds* and help draw threads together, but Gabriella’s diminished predictive powers complicate in interesting ways. The angel turns to various references to help interpret the interrupted messages she receives, leading to many of the novel’s passages on biblical meanings, heraldry, decipherment, transcription, symbols, codes, dreams and languages.
These topics are further developed when Gabriella meets Cuckoo, ‘a gambler with a wax face determined to find a fixed identity before his luck runs out’ (blurb). Cuckoo’s search for self is woven carefully into the web of stories that bind the five characters. The points of contact in this web range from comic to shocking, from hideous to loving.

In the whirlwind that is Five Wounds there are many persistent themes. One is blood. It is blood and blood lust that bind Cur to his canine family and blood, blood borne infection and bloodstream that are so important to Crow’s work. Related themes are alchemy and the preservation of life through photography, which could be seen to be part of a larger project to get to the truth, or to the essence of things. The ‘art’ and strategy of crime and of politics recur, as do overarching utopian ideals, comments on karma and the balance of life.

As the quote that opens Five Wounds (and this review) suggests, a major thread and connection between the main characters is the oddity and trauma that each carries. As each character develops, we find out more about how they bear, use or suffer their difference, and how they recognise the burden of freakishness in each other:

3 ‘There’s something else I have to tell you,’ he added, growing reckless. ‘This isn’t my face.’
4 ‘That doesn’t matter either,’ Gabriella said. ‘I used to have wings.’
5 Cuckoo could not quite see how this was equivalent, but he recognised a symbolic moment when he saw one. (107)

Another similarity between the main characters is their orphanhood, and each describes and is affected by this in their own ways. Author Jonathan Walker explains this further layer to Five Wounds and gives the reader another direction in which to travel:

Five Wounds includes several hidden quotations from an unpublished autobiographical essay I wrote on the deaths of my parents ‘it is no accident that everyone in the novel is an orphan), but which I chopped up and reinterpreted by sticking these quotations in a radically different fictional context. This essay is called The Art of Grief (named after the late-medieval genre of The Art of Dying) … the whole point is that the novel transforms the quotations from The Art of Grief, so that they are almost unrecognizable … I should stress that you don’t need to know any of this to enjoy the book.¹

A final and intriguing element of Five Wounds is its design and layout. The layout of the text in columns and numbered chapters and verses is influenced by the Bible. Related to this are the handwritten notes scribbled over various passages and pictures in the book. These appear at first to be part of the illustrations and the layout and notes go hand in hand. Walker explains that the Bible-like layout gives the


impression that the tale of *Five Wounds* is ‘definitive … sacred,’\(^2\) while the handwriting over this text contradicts the fixedness of the story and gives the impression that changes could be still to come. The choices made by the unseen editor also seem to give the writing directness, cutting out superfluous language and perhaps promoting the succinct to avoid what could become chaotic.

*Five Wounds* is the kind of book you become immersed in, partly because it’s an entertaining read with many suspenseful moments, and partly because following the many twists, turns, clues and threads require dedicated attention. Like any well-layered story, *Five Wounds* will have you wondering exactly what the mystery is long before you even start trying to solve it. It is a thought-provoking and beautifully presented work.

**Aliese Millington**

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\(^2\) Walker in [Burman]