

A Venture into the Night

Some Notes on Violent Fiction

Elizabeth Crook



“**W**hat’s with the violence?” a friend emailed recently when he was reading galleys of my new novel, [Monday, Monday](#). “I thought you said you were going to write something light this time. Something funny. I’m on page nineteen and your people are already lying around in pools of blood. This is not a funny book, Elizabeth.”

I wish I knew “what’s with the violence.” It creeps in and takes over. In my four books, I’ve drowned characters, scalped them, shot arrows through the bodies of small children, and strangled beloved dogs. I’ve thrust swords through innocent women and shot men as they cried for mercy. I’ve imposed death by consumption, induced suicide on a snowy mountain night, and trapped a fireman between the tender and the firebox of a train I wrecked in 1891 in a flooded New Mexico culvert.

Only once have I had second thoughts: having decreed a brutal death at the battle of San Jacinto for a female character I’d grown to love, I balked, and finally, gutlessly, called on a fellow writer to kindly dispatch her for me.

I should make this point: the deaths were true to their times. In my second book they included the slaughter of prisoners at Presidio La Bahía in the Texas Revolution of 1836; in my third, the massacre of immigrants by Mormons at Mountain Meadows in Utah in 1857. And now in my fourth, Charles Whitman has opened fire from the Tower at the University of Texas, a horrendous event ushering in the age of horrific school shootings.

But why these topics? Why so much blood? It was true that I'd started to write a comedic novel about a mother and two daughters after a few reader reviews left me with the impression that maybe my books were too gruesome. The reader who described my second novel as "a novel filled with dread, ghastly events, and remorse" had driven the point home. I decided not to do it again this time.

But then the comedic story refused to happen. I pecked away at the keys, unable to become excited about the mother or her daughters. Their tale seemed soft and irrelevant because there was nothing important at stake for them. It actually bored me, and I wasn't sure what to do with it.

And then an issue of Texas Monthly Magazine, with a dark cover image of the Tower at the University of Texas and the title UT's Darkest Day: Charles Whitman, 40 Years Later, arrived in my mailbox, and my heart started to pound. It was a chilling account of Charles Whitman's 1966 massacre, told by people who were there. The next thing I knew, the story I was writing had shifted backwards forty years and the mother had developed a past as one of Whitman's first targets. And nothing was at all funny anymore. One of the two daughters was the product of a tender but illicit love affair and had to be given away at birth. The second never knew about her long-lost sister until one day she starts asking questions, and all the lives of all the characters are turned upside down.

And who was that, in my book, suddenly dangling on a frayed rope halfway to the bottom of a deep cave called Devil's Sinkhole?

In real life I'm a sensible, nonviolent person, descended from a long line of well-behaved Brits—schoolmasters, journal keepers, poetry quoters, and preachers—mostly do-gooders who came to Texas in search of health and humble prosperity. In all my life I've never so much as slapped anyone. I step over roaches and rescue spiders. I close my eyes and plug my ears during bloody scenes in movies. But then I go home and commit even worse depredations on the page.

Could it be that stories themselves—the ones I grew up hearing—are at the root of the impulse? My grandmother used to recount what our family called “Mama Two’s horribler stories.” If you told her a horrible story, she would tell you a “horribler” one. Her social work in towns near the Mexican border brought her into contact with plenty: There was the story of the dead baby stored on a kitchen shelf in a jar of formaldehyde so it wouldn’t become a spirit child—a duende. There was the story of the girl who drowned herself because of painful boils in her ears.

The books my mother read to me and to my brother and sister were also filled with disaster and heartbreak. The simple turn of a page could put us face to face with confounding misery or cruelty. There were the Dickens novels, populated with suffering children. There was The Little Match Girl who was beaten by her father and who froze to death selling matches. There was the tortured death of Aslan on the Stone Table in Narnia, the shooting of Old Yeller, and the terrible tales of the Brothers Grimm. In poems, there was the rabbit caught in the snare, “Crying on the frightened air,” and the child unable to find him and set him free. The message was painfully clear: terrible things could happen. And what would we do if they happened to us? What would we feel? These were the things worth puzzling over.

At the start of Monday, Monday, Shelly Maddox is walking across the sunny campus of the University of Texas on a hot August day in 1966 when Charles Whitman places her in his crosshairs. As the author, I have no great interest in Charles Whitman—an unhinged boy who has lost control. But I cannot take my eyes off Shelly because Shelly does not see what’s coming, and because I could be in her place any day, on any campus. Any of us could. Her actions, or reactions, or non actions, are what I’m waiting to see. I’m not writing a violent scene to try to make sense of the bloodshed or put it to rest in my mind—those options are out of the question. I’m writing to figure out who I am, by guessing what sort of person I might, in her circumstance, be.

There is a poem by Walter de la Mare titled “Some One” that my mother used to read to us from the book *More Silver Pennies*. She read it so many times I can recite it from memory.

Some one came knocking
At my wee, small door;
Some one came knocking,
I'm sure—sure—sure;
I listened, I opened,
I looked to left and right,
But nought there was a-stirring
In the still dark night;
Only the busy beetle
Tap-tapping on the wall,
Only from the forest
The screech-owl's call,
Only the cricket whistling
While the dewdrops fall,
So I know not who came knocking,
At all, at all, at all.

My mother read the poem to us in almost a whisper, implying a great mystery about who was knocking. We wondered if he was still out there. And we suspected—at least I did—that he was not a benign presence. If he had knocked and come in and had dinner with us, we wouldn't have thought about the poem much after it was over. We wouldn't have wondered who the stranger was, and what he might be capable of doing to us.

In defense of my novel filled with “dread, ghastly events, and remorse,” I'd like to add that other readers judged the violence less harshly, saying the book was “grittily realistic” and “truthfully brutal.” One went so far as to say it had “funny scenes and extremely amusing dialogue,” before adding “mixed in with the tragedy.”

I think that's also the case with *Monday, Monday*. The book doesn't ask anyone to look through the eyes of a frightening stranger like Whitman, lurking out in the dark. The reader can remain with those of us inside the house, where there is warmth and laughter, deep, committed love, and a great deal of kindness, even if there is also heartache. The people inside the house are decent, reasonable people—courageous enough, if slightly alarmed

by the knocking. We have no idea who's out there. We keep a sense of humor and stay in the light of the fire. We tell stories that might—or might not—come true, in which there are strangers knocking. And we listen for more knocking. Now and then we venture into the night. Because what comfort could we take in a cozy fire, if not for the dark outside?

Elizabeth Crook is the author of Monday, Monday and three previous novels. She has written for magazines and periodicals, including Texas Monthly Magazine and the Southwestern Historical Quarterly.

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