

Misty comic- a celebration

By Alison Baker

Back in the 1970s, there was a ritual that most of my pre-teen friends and I followed: every Saturday we would take our pocket money (10p in my case), get on our bikes and cycle to the local newsagent. For 10p in the mid 70s you could buy a comic and a packet of crisps or a 5p grab bag of mixed sweets. I would immediately cycle home and lie under my bed with a torch and read my comic, munching my crisps or sweets.

The comic in the basket of my Raleigh Chopper would have been *Bunty*. I wasn't a natural *Misty* reader. *Misty* was for cooler girls than me; girls with Grease t-shirts and Bjorn Borg sweatbands on their wrists. However, we swapped comics and all read each others, so I was aware of *Misty*. And, as I got older, I was able to buy *Misty* annuals from jumble sales. *Misty* ran from 1978 until 1984, when it merged with *Tammy*. It was a British "horror comic aimed initially at young girls" (mistycomic.co.uk), and featured thrilling stories with a supernatural twist about girls. *Misty's* creator was Pat Mills, also creator and first editor of *2000AD*, the groundbreaking British comic which brought the world Judge Dredd. The comic, according to Mills, was named after the Clint Eastwood film *Play Misty For Me* and the name was, I think, perfect. Other mystery comics *Jinty* and *Tammy* sounded very like girls' comics *Judy* and *Bunty*; I never read them and assumed that they contained the same sorts of stories about schoolgirls, gymnasts and ballet dancers, with not a single curse or abandoned orphanage; later, on reading them, I discovered that I was wrong. *Misty* sounded mysterious, glamorous and thrilling, as indeed it was.

I have selected four stories from the 1979 and 1980 annuals to discuss: *The Swarm*, *The School of No Escape* and *Blood Orange* from 1979, and *Home for Tea* from 1980. All four are in comic strip form rather than straight narrative form, and I have selected them firstly because I enjoyed them, and secondly, although probably related, because they seem a good example of the stories in *Misty* comics. The protagonists are all girls, and all seem to be in their early teens; *The School of No Escape* explicitly states that the protagonists are in the fourth form, so are 14 or 15. As Penny Tinkler notes in *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls 1920-1950* a very small minority of girls have ever been boarding schools pupils; yet the protagonist of *The Swarm* also goes to boarding school. Of course, getting rid of the parents is the first rule of adventure-story telling for children, and Enid Blyton's Mallory Towers and St Clare's series were extremely popular in the 70s and 80s, making the setting familiar to readers. Blyton fans reading stories with a school setting

would have the expectation of adventure, perhaps with some girls versus staff conflict and friendship difficulties.

The Swarm

The Swarm tells the story of Tamsin Rogers, whose father is a pest control pilot, working in the Middle East. He unexpectedly comes home to visit Tamsin, taking her to their country cottage for the weekend. He has brought her a strange gift from the Middle East: a huge locust in a jar. He tells Tamsin of their ability to fly thousands of miles and the vastness of the swarm. However when she wakes the following morning, the locust has gone. Throughout the day she sees more and more of them, until father and daughter are driven from their home. They take refuge in a church, but the locusts break through the window. Just as they think all is lost, there is a crack of lightning and a sudden hail storm, and the locusts all die. On leaving the church, Tamsin notices it is dedicated to St Swithun, and that the date is July 15th, St Swithun's day, which means that the rain will continue for 40 days and nights; enough to wash the locusts away. As Nodelman puts it, "normalcy reasserts its primacy" (118).

Adult, sophisticated readers would have predicted the plot of the story from the point of the gift of the locust; but readers of *Misty* were not sophisticated. Girls (and boys) would constantly grow out of reading the comic; I read it from the ages of 9-12. The younger readers would have needed some time to come to terms with what John Clute terms the "lexicon of horror" (pg 269). And besides, the "sighting" that presages the "thickening" of the horror is part of the enjoyment of the reading of horror (pgs 331-332, 337-339). The delicious thrill of anticipation of the Uncanny is unique to the genre. Carroll quotes Freud's essay "The Uncanny," which Freud asserts "occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (174-5). Carroll comments that to experience the uncanny "is to experience something that is known, but something the knowledge of which has been hidden or repressed" (175). In *The Swarm* the uncanny comes from knowing that locusts are destructive, but not expecting destruction from one locust in the English countryside, as well as from the horror that many feel of insects.

The School of No Escape

The School of No Escape is set at St Juniper's boarding school, and is the story of fourth former Dale Ryan and her friends. Fans of girls' boarding school stories, such as Enid

Blyton's Mallory Towers and St Clare's series, and Elinor Brent-Byer's Chalet School, will know that fourth formers are frequently the adventurous but also disruptive girls of the school. Second and third formers are cheeky and naughty, and fifth and sixth formers are studious- they have exams to take. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, in their discussion of fiction for girls, *You're a Brick, Angela!*, outline many stories in early schoolgirl papers (1919 onwards) set in the fourth form of boarding schools.

One morning at assembly, the headmistress appears to forget her train of thought and then, as though sleepwalking, heads to Hangman's Copse and disappears. Almost immediately she is replaced by Miss Voor, a strict teacher who insists on testing the girls with seemingly pointless questions and answers, and observing their sports lessons. Before long, other staff are replaced by teachers identical to Miss Voor. Dale and her friends are suspicious and attempt to find out more, and a mysterious new girl arrives, obviously to spy on Dale. Eventually Dale discovers that Miss Voor and the other new arrivals are aliens intent on colonising Earth. After their defeat, only Dale is left with the memory of the event. This story contains elements of science fiction, such as the presence of aliens and alien technology used for mind control. According to Clute, sleepwalking, as characters do on being possessed, or controlled by aliens, is a sign of "an absence to be filled, they tally some gap between ignorance and outcome, act or implication" (333). As the aliens take control of the staff and girls at St Juniper's, they experience identity loss (315). Only Dale is left to experience, and to remember, the events, leaving her alienated from her friends. Unlike *The Swarm*, *The School of No Escape* has a defined resolution, but not a happy ending.

Blood Orange

Blood Orange, from the 1979 *Misty* annual, is uncharacteristic of *Misty* stories. Set at the turn of the century in Covent Garden, it is the story of Amy White who is helping her fruitier father. He has received an order for several crates of special blood oranges for a Mr R. A. Claud, but Amy has accidentally sold a crate to another customer. They make it up with a crate from a different batch, and Amy helps Mr Claud take them to his spooky house just outside London. Amy carries the crate to the cellar, and tries to peel one of the oranges. However, it is not orange juice, but blood that comes out of the orange. Upstairs, Mr Claud picks an orange from the replacement crate, and nearly chokes on the juice. He follows Amy to the cellar where his widow's peak, pallor, opera cloak and evening dress are revealed. There is a chase, where Amy trips over a coffin, whose occupant's name is on the lid- COUNT DRACULA. She struggles and attempts to escape, and as Dracula closes in she is

shaken awake by her father- it was just a dream. In the street scene outside the shop, a man wearing a sandwich board advertising a play of Dracula passes.

I cannot recall reading another story in *Misty* where the resolution is that the events were just a dream. Of course, this is the resolution of many stories in the Fantastic tradition (such as *Alice in Wonderland* and Lovecraft's *The Dream Quest of the Unknown Kadath*) which, as Clute notes, is closely tied to Horror. In the final frame, where Amy's father suggests she goes home, taking some blood oranges with her; Amy answers: "Oranges? Oh, no I couldn't. That sandwich man again? Th-that must have been what gave me that horrible nightmare!" (56; spelling and punctuation as in the original). The use of "again" leaves the story open ended, uniquely so in the stories discussed; the other stories have a resolution, if not a happy ending. It leaves the reader with questions: who is the sandwich man? Is he following Amy? Are her dreams controlled in some way? It is interesting to note that the sandwich man is not pictured earlier in the comic. The resolved endings in other stories do not invite extra-textual readings.

Home for Tea

The final story I will discuss, and the only one from the 1980 annual, is *Home for Tea*. Addie and Lyn Price head off for a day of caving. Although experienced cavers, they step through an arch and fall into a cavern. Addie notes that her watch has stopped, but also that she feels drawn to an underground lake. They climb back through the arch and along the tunnel, but find a rock fall blocking their way. On exiting the cave they find the world destroyed. Hiding from feral dogs, they discover their mother's gravestone, stating that she had died in 2020, "reunited with her beloved daughters, Addie and Lyn, mysteriously lost while caving, August, 1978" (6). They are accosted by a man in a protective suit who tells them that they shouldn't be outside without theirs, even in 2058, years after a global war. They run back into the cave, finding a fantastical city, comforting themselves that they still have each other.

In the paper "Recognising Genre," Farah Mendlesohn characterises fantasy, horror and romance as genres of morality and sentiment. This does not necessarily mean that the endings are moral or sentimental, but that the reader can expect that the narrative will uphold the way that the world *should* work, and that the stories evoke a visceral response. The horror in this tale comes from the upending of the reader's expectation- the girls do not return home and can never return home. Their mother's death is not overturned or proven to be an accident- but there is some reassurance for the reader that at least the sisters are not parted.

As Clute states, the moment of Aftermath is when there is “an awareness that the story is done.” An immutable change has happened; the world is no longer “storyable” (279); although we may want to know how the sisters prosper in this new world, the moment of horror has passed.

Mendlesohn discusses the nature of the Portal in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. In fantasy, travel from one world to another, fantastic, realm leads the reader to expect certain outcomes: to meet occupants of the fantastic realm, to explore it, and (usually) to return enriched, either literally or metaphorically. Portals do not operate this way in horror. There is no escape to a secondary world, and as Clute outlines there is usually unpleasantness ahead, rather than excitement and enrichment—Clute uses the term *cloaca* instead of portal—the term for the posterior orifice in some animals (288). However, the journey through a portal, or cloaca, to unpleasantness can be extremely enjoyable for the consumer of horror. As Cawelti says, “the very intensity of the emotion of horror may be one reason for its success as escapism, for the more intense our response to a work is, the more it takes us out of ourselves” (47).

Misty's popularity waned in the 1980s. Pop and fashion magazines such as *Smash Hits* and *Jackie* were being read by my friends and I from our early teens. Many reasons for the demise of *Misty* have been suggested. Pat Mills suggests the lack of serials in the comic, which reduced the number of repeat customers. Another factor is the rise of other media for children; rising ownership of televisions, with children's programming including cartoons. A third may be the perception that persists in some quarters in Britain of comics being ephemeral and therefore lacking merit, despite, as Cadogan and Craig demonstrate, girls' comics writers also wrote mainstream children's books; as Moores comments, “children are seen as passive victims of influences around them- absorbing what they see and hear without the capacity for active discrimination” (55). My early research on children and fantasy fiction indicates that, on the contrary, children are able to articulate their critical opinions on media consumption and their understanding of genre very clearly.

The loss of *Misty* is particularly significant because there is now nowhere to read the stories, except in “Best Of” collections, or, for collectors, in annuals. It is my hope that story comics such as *The Phoenix* and graphic novels for children such as *Cleopatra in Space* and BBC's *Doctor Who* comics will encourage current copyright owners Egmont to re-issue *Misty* for another generation of girls and boys to discover the spine-tingling pleasure of being scared by a comic.

References

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