



PROJECT MUSE®

The Hardest Question: What was Good?: Reflections on Alison McGhee's *The Opposite of Fate*

Kathi Appelt

South Central Review, Volume 38, Numbers 2-3, Summer/Fall 2021, pp. 9-11 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2021.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/836357>

The Hardest Question: What was Good?: Reflections on Alison McGhee's *The Opposite of Fate*

Kathi Appelt, Vermont College of Fine Arts

THERE ARE THREE QUESTIONS at the heart of Alison McGhee's novel, *The Opposite of Fate* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020): What was hard? What was impossible? What was good? It turns out that the last question is the most difficult to answer, especially for the protagonist Mallie, the victim of a horrendous crime.

As the story opens, we know straightaway that Mallie, a twenty-one-year-old massage therapist, has been robbed, raped, viciously beaten, and left for dead on a street corner in Utica, NY. For sixteen months, she lay in a coma—the result of serious brain trauma, followed by an undiagnosable brain infection. To complicate matters, it's soon discovered that she is pregnant with her rapist's baby.

It takes only a moment for Mallie—or Mallie's body—to become the center of a raging battle. Mallie's cadre of closest acquaintances, including the man and woman who raised her after her father's death, her boyfriend Zach, and her brother Charlie, all believe that Mallie would choose to terminate her pregnancy.

On the other side, her mother, buoyed by her charismatic church community, insists that Mallie give birth. A custody battle over Mallie ensues, and the mother—of course—wins. She is also given custody of the baby, a boy, who is delivered by Caesarean section.

When Mallie, against all odds, wakes up, she has no idea that any of this has happened. She has no memory of the assault, the protests that were staged on the steps of the hospital, or of the birth. She is only aware of the “dark birds” that seem to circle at the edge of her vision.

The hardest, most impossible question becomes: what was good?

And then, in a twist in the plot, before Mallie fully regains consciousness, her mother dies of cancer, leaving the whereabouts of the baby unknown, his fate sealed by the courts. As well, Mallie's long-time boyfriend, Zach, has disappeared, deepening her sense of loss.

The first time I read this story, it was in manuscript form. Alison and I have been friends since the icy-cold January night in 2003, when we encountered each other in Noble Hall at Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier. We were the newest members of the faculty in the low-

residency MFA program there, and we've been each other's friends and readers for all these years. In fact, we co-authored a novel called *Maybe a Fox* (Atheneum, 2016).

So, considering our personal connection, is it cheating to claim this book as my favorite?

After years and years and oh, so many years, of speaking with school-children, possibly the most often-asked question I receive is, "what is your favorite book?" (I'm not convinced that kids really want to know. I mostly think it's a question they can ask without confessing that they haven't actually read any of my books). But that aside, I have always told them that *Black Beauty*, by Anna Sewell, makes my heart sing. And it does. Really. I have loved it for such a long time.

First published by Jarrold and Sons London in 1877, its original title was "Black Beauty: His Grooms and Companions. The Autobiography of a Horse. Translated from the Equine." I mean, who can't appreciate a book translated from the Equine? To me, it's the equivalent of the stone tablets that Moses translated from the God.

And I will add that *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, published by Alfred Knopf in 1987, over a hundred years later, is the most important book I've ever read. It changed me in ways that seemed to deconstruct my actual cellular makeup, and then somehow stitch it back together, albeit in a different form.

But *The Opposite of Fate*, regardless of my kinship with Alison, speaks to me about the ways we fall into moral quandaries, the ways we're compelled to act in the presence of powerful forces, and how none of this can ever amount to a clear winner or loser. It's obvious that each party in Mallie's life made choices. Except Mallie, that is. She alone had no choice at all. No say whatsoever.

For the better half of a century, we've been grappling with the issue of abortion, and from what I can tell, middle ground is non-existent, which is what makes it such a difficult argument. There's nothing for either side to offer to the other, no common meeting ground. To her credit, Alison's narrator doesn't make a judgement call, which would only turn this story into a morality play. There's none of that. No cheap shots.

Instead, she gives us a community, one that makes mistakes, but also holds on, and along the way, we're indulged by the poetic skills of an author at her masterful best. In what could have been a pedantic, issue-oriented grind, we are given beauty in its place, and for that the characters are allowed to show us their inherent humanness.

By the end of this beautiful story, we can say that maybe, just maybe, the middle ground turns out to look something like love, even though it's

clear that there will be no happy-ever-after. No, this is love with all its shadows, including in the role of Darkness—the name that Mallie has given to her unknown assailant. Throughout the book, he stands always on the sidelines as Mallie makes her anguished way past and through him, toward reclaiming her Self and her life.

Hard, impossible questions are asked here, with no clear-cut answers.

The end, in fact, feels like the beginning, and that is where the big hope lies—that Mallie especially, can find her own new story. We trust that she will, but we also know that, at last, who she takes with her will be her choice.

I will continue to tell kiddos that *Black Beauty* is it for me. And I hope a couple will pick it up and give it a read. Likewise, I will always be a champion for *Beloved*. I think it's the anthem for our beleaguered nation.

But, in this moment of my own life, (and in the storm that continues to swirl around a woman's most inherent rights), my friend Alison McGhee gives us a portrait of humanity that only claims that we are all imperfect, all recreating the stories of us, all trying to make something good out of living in this world.