# The postmortal rape survivor and the paradox of female agency across different media: Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* and its 2009 film adaptation

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**Abstract:**
Alice's Sebold's 2002 bestseller, *The Lovely Bones*, challenges the silencing process surrounding the crime of rape by paradoxically establishing a postmortal rape survivor as its narrator. The paper traces how the narrator's voice and agency are negotiated and supported, and how and where the 2009 film adaptation diverges from the novel's feminist agenda. While both film and novel seek to condemn violence against women, the film sets out to do it by casting female characters in the role of helpless victims, whereas the original medium establishes them as canny survivors.

1 In a *New York Times* article from 1989, entitled "Hers: Speaking of the Unspeakable", the at the time unknown writer Alice Sebold argues: "the wall of silence and assumptions that surround the crime are one of the most painful results of rape". Thirteen years later, her first novel,[1] *The Lovely Bones*, topped the bestseller list, and directly challenged this silencing process.[2] What sets *The Lovely Bones* apart from other fiction and non-fiction about sexual crimes against women is the unusual narrative setting employed by Sebold: Susie Salmon, aged 14, brutally raped and murdered on December 6th, 1973 in a cornfield near her home, relates the events leading up to and following her murder at the hands of a neighbour in suburban Pennsylvania from her own personal heaven.[3]

2 The novel seeks to redefine Susie as a 'survivor' rather than a 'victim', in line with antirape discourse about the use of the term 'survivor' "to emphasize women's agency in response to their victimization and to address the complexity of the women's *post*-rape experience" (Projansky 9). This is achieved by means of a postmortal[4] narrative style,

[1] While *The Lovely Bones* was Sebold's first novel, her first book was her 1999 memoir *Lucky*, in which she details her own rape as an 18 year-old college freshman at Syracuse University and the trial that followed. Sebold firmly rejects the notion of *The Lovely Bones* being a fictionalised therapy to come to terms with her own rape: "First of all, therapy is for therapy. Leave it there. Second, because you're a rape victim, everyone wants to turn everything you do into something 'therapeutic' - oh, I understand, going to the bathroom must be so therapeutic for you! After I'd started *The Lovely Bones*, I decided to break off and write *Lucky*, to make sure that Susie wasn't saying everything that I wanted to say about violent crime and rape" (Viner 2002).

[2] *The Guardian*'s literary critic Ali Smith suggests that the huge commercial success of the book in the United States is due to the traumatic events of 9/11, providing the "reassurance and satisfaction of being able to hear the voice of the gone and to piece together the future after cataclysm".

[3] Heaven in *The Lovely Bones* is a construct without a deity, but with several levels. To move from the first level, called the 'inbetween' in the film, to the second level of heaven, the characters have to come to terms with their death and work through their unresolved issues. Both book and film chronicle Susie's transcension from life to the first level and from the first to the second.

[4] The term postmortal was first connected with *The Lovely Bones* in Tallent's 2005 article, wherein Tallent notices a rise of postmortal narrators in general. Whitney, writing in 2010, uses posthumous.

wherein a fully silenced character regains her voice and thus paradoxically, despite having been killed, turns into a survivor. Uneasily perched between the living whom she observes and the dead to whom she belongs, Susie epitomises what for Caruth lies at the core of all trauma stories, namely "the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). Analysing the novel from a postfeminist perspective, Whitney argues that "the act of naming oneself a survivor symbolically places the subject's trauma in the past and denies the event the ability to define her" (355).[5] Thus Susie is allowed to define her trauma rather than being defined by it. She remains a person with desires and hopes, wishes and feelings, and power and agency in her own right (cf. Heinze 289).[6] Her ghostly but strangely uplifting narration and her few but significant interactions with the world of the living provide her with precisely the sort of freedom her rapist, Mr. Harvey, sought to take from her. Meanwhile, Whitney astutely observes, her family on Earth is not granted any psychological reprieve (cf. 355). It seems that Susie's safety from the overwhelming impact of trauma comes at the price of her family. By creating a detached serenity in Susie's narrative, the novel relocates Susie's trauma and victimhood and places it in her parents and sister instead.

3 This is where the 2009 film adaptation, directed by Peter Jackson, differs. Even though "most of the key events of the novel are transposed to the film and it ends on the same note, with Susie's blessing from heaven" (McFarlane 47), the main character – like most female characters in the film adaptation – is equipped with less agency and complexity than in the book. Jackson's Susie is not located beyond the trauma, but in the middle of it, effectively rendering her "the wound that speaks" (Caruth 8). As trauma embodied, she addresses the audience

> in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

4 While Susie in the novel is an omniscient narrator who knows exactly what happened in the underground lair Mr. Harvey specifically built to capture her, the character in the film does not. The reduction of Susie's narrative omniscience in the film serves not only to create

[5] Whitney goes on to say that "*The Lovely Bones* would seem to present a dilemma for postfeminist analysis as the victimization of the deceased narrator cannot be denied or easily translated into survivorship" (355). While the translation is not easily done, the interpretation of Susie's interferences in earthly events will show it is nevertheless accomplished.

[6] Heinze also raises another interesting point concerning the reliability of the narrative. He argues that had Susie lived and told her tale, her trauma would have made her an unreliable narrator. By narrating from the great beyond, her detachedness once more makes her reliable (cf. 289).

suspense, but has the added effect of keeping Susie childlike, and thus establishes her as the 'perfect' victim in all her innocence and helplessness. In order to get closer to omniscience, she needs to regain her memories and spend time in the intermediary stage of afterlife.[7] This is hindered by Susie's attempted avoidance of said memories; she prefers to focus on watching her family or enjoying the questionable perks of heaven with another dead girl she meets there. When Susie finally does confront her memories (symbolically located in a dark Gothic house in her otherwise colourful heaven), she learns two important things. For one, that she is one of many victims of Mr. Harvey's, a fact which supports Sebold's view that "rape is not a craze but a constant" (1989). The other element she uncovers is that her rapist and murderer keeps her remains in an old safe in his cellar. He often sits in a lawn chair in front it, playing with a charm from a bracelet of hers and fetishizing the dead girl, subjecting her to his gaze even after her death. Only in the climax of the film is the safe eventually disposed of in a sinkhole, a final burial for the final minutes. This is clearly designed to give Susie as well as the audience a sense of closure. By contrast, in the novel the same scene takes place much earlier (in chapter four), and Susie's closure is not tied to the disposal of her bodily remains. The symbolic burial is not constructed as the key that leads her from her own heaven into the wider one she wishes to be received into.

5 The novel describes a maturation and recovery process, which differs from the film's trauma-driven narrative. The book carefully sets up a contrast between the living and the dead Susie, the latter of which, even though she does not age, matures considerably to the point where she (re-) discovers and (re-)claims her own sexuality. What the filmic version yearns for is a chaste kiss from the boy she liked while she was alive, Ray Singh, insinuating that a teenaged girl cannot be a victim of sexual violence, if she simultaneously harbours sexual desires of her own. In the book, Susie has been kissed while still alive, and in the eight years after her death, begins to yearn for more. In one of the book's most controversial passages,[8] called "a finale of magical realism" by Whitney (361), her spirit inhabits the body of a psychic girl, Ruth Connors, and while in that body, consummates her old relationship with Ray "so that she may experience life on Earth as an adult" (ibid). Susie's previous sexual experience was at the hands of her rapist Mr. Harvey, resulting in Susie telling the

[7] The exuberant visual design of the afterlife has been met with much criticism given the serious subject matter. For examples of this criticism, see Ebert, Harris, and Brooks.

[8] Cf. Hensher, whose disdain of the passage is particularly strong: "Particularly hard to take is a morbid episode in which Susie falls to Earth and inhabits the body of a living girl, and makes love to the boy she liked best. He recognises her immediately, being Indian and therefore mystic (it is very much that sort of book). The revolted reader finds something familiar in all of this, and for me, that was the moment it all fell into place. What, actually, is one reading here? Ah yes, of course; the Demi Moore spiritualist extravaganza, Ghost."

readers that “in the walls of my sex there was horror and blood” (142). But with Ray, the experience is different: “I held that part of him that Mr. Harvey had forced inside me. Inside my head I said the word *gentle*, and then I said the word *man*” (349) and finally “we made love” (350). By directly contrasting the two sexual experiences, Sebold highlights both the atrocity of the crime and Susie’s recovery process. In her few moments on Earth, Susie deliberately re-claims not only her sexuality, but her sexual agency, and thus leaves her rape trauma behind in order to move on to the second level of heaven. She is thus shedding the constraints of being a victim and fully inhabiting the mode of a survivor. For Susie, ‘life’ does not go on, but the ‘afterlife’ does.

6 One difficulty that the film grapples with is the time span of the events of the book, which cover eight years and thus make Ray 23 and Susie 22 at the time of the body swap. In the film, this is compressed into two to three years. As the actors are not aged up, Susie (played by then 15 year old Saoirse Ronan) still looks like a 14 year old, thus making the full sexual consummation of the relationship a problem. While the book makes a point of Susie slipping into Ruth’s body (thereby looking for all intents and purposes just like the medium, who has been aged normally and is therefore well past any age of consent), the film shows how Ruth faints and upon waking, suddenly looks like Susie. Blonde hair fanned out behind her like a halo, cheeks rosy, Susie is still a girl, more child than woman. Thus, Jackson has to compromise on the nature of Ray’s and Susie’s coming together. For the purpose of the film (cementing Susie as innocence embodied), she needs to remain a child in body *and* spirit, forbidding the path to sexual discovery and absolution that her book counterpart is allowed to claim.

7 Susie’s visualised purity in the film is not only maintained with regards to her self-chosen sexual activity, but also with regards to that enforced on her. In *Writing Rape, Reading Rape*, Milionis posits that “the novel shows what the film does not” (177), as Susie’s rape is never explicitly mentioned in the film, but rather “inferred or accepted […] as if, ‘of course’ a young girl that was murdered was obviously raped as well” (175). The book on the other hand does not shy away from revealing details to condemn the crime. Within the first chapter, Susie shares with the reader how Mr. Harvey attacked her, forcing himself “on top of [her], panting and sweating” (14). When Susie pleads with him, he shoves her knitted hat in her mouth to quiet her. This moment constitutes a first act of silencing (while her murder is the second): trapped in the underground lair, her rapist robs her of both her freedom and her voice. In a swift crescendo of violence, Mr. Harvey proceeds to rip off Susie’s “pants, not having found the invisible zipper my mother had artfully sewn into their side” (15). Susie

narrates that he "began to shove his hands up under my shirt" and "was inside me. He was grunting. [...] I was the mortar, he was the pestle" (15). After the rape, Susie is still trapped under her rapist and confronted with the knowledge of her impending death.

> I knew he was going to kill me. I didn't know I was an animal already dying. […] He leaned to the side and felt, over his head, across the ledge where his razor and shaving cream sat. He brought back a knife. Unsheathed, it smiled at me, curving up into a grin. He took the hat from my mouth. 'Tell me you love me,' he said. Gently, I did. The end came anyway. (16)

The film keeps these gruesome details not only from the audience, but also from Susie herself. Instead, we see Susie escaping from the underground lair in the cornfield, running past Ruth Connors whom she accidentally touches and into her own house, where she sees her family but remains unseen by them. Walking through the house, still unaware of her own death, she opens the door to the bathroom, only to find Mr. Harvey, soaking in the tub, a wet towel over his face. Blood and dirt on the floor, as well as a bloody shaving knife by the sink, hint at the crime she thought she had escaped. Milionis argues that "close ups of Mr. Harvey's breath, so alive, sucking the facecloth over his face in and out with each breath he takes, [are] so grotesque and overwhelming for everyone watching that Susie's silent scream may provide a catharsis for the viewers, too" (175). In contradistinction to Milionis, I argue that Susie's scream is not silent at all, but shrill, enduring, and otherworldly. It is a marker of her torturous understanding of her own death, even more piercing and poignant since everything in between her flight scene and the bathroom scene is left to the imagination of the viewer. Milionis suggests that this is rooted in the filmmaker's fear or repelling the audience (cf. 175) by showing the sexual abuse of a teenager. In fact, Susie walks through the whole film without so much as a scratch on her face. Furthermore, one of the most gruesome details of the book, namely what exactly Harvey does to his victim's remains, is edited out of the screenplay. The film shows Mr. Harvey dragging a heavy and wet cloth sack through his cellar and shoving it into the safe, and while the audience can infer that sack and safe hold Susie's remains, not so much as a finger is shown. Instead, her sister later finds a lock of her sister's hair taped into a notebook hidden under the floorboards of Mr. Harvey's bedroom.

8 By contrast, the novel provides a detailed description of what precisely happened to Susie. Having been cut to pieces by Mr. Harvey, the only part of her body ever to be recovered is Susie's elbow – so much more gruesome and less innocent than a lock of hair.[9] In the novel, Susie thus suffers a double fragmentation through the ripping apart of body and

[9] Grotesquely, the body part is recovered by a neighbour's dog and brought "home with a telling corn husk attached to it" (11), thus alerting the police to the crime scene.

soul in death, as well as through the killer's mutilation of her body. When the book shows Mr. Harvey in the tub, commentary dips into his thoughts as easily as if they were her own:

> As he scoured his body in the hot water of his suburban bathroom – one with the identical layout to the one Lindsey, Buckley, and I shared – his movements were slow, not anxious. He kept the lights out in the bathroom and felt the warm water wash me away and *I felt his thoughts of me then* [emphasis added]. My muffled scream in his ear. My delicious death moan. The glorious white flesh that had never seen the sun, like an infant's, and then split, so perfectly, with the blade of his knife. He shivered under the heat, a prickling pleasure creating goose bumps up and down his legs. (56)

What remains unclear is whether Susie was still alive at the time of her dismemberment, but even so, the different and differing levels of detailed information about the crime available both to the central character and to the audience of the novel are as significant as the film's effort to keep Susie visually as whole and untouched as possible. In the adaptation, her body and soul are presented as purified, the nastiness and the horror of her experiences as well as any desires that seem to contradict her angelic image are edited out to make for a more smoother and more palatable narrative. This however traps the film version of Susie in a limiting over-virginisation, reducing the scope and damaging the power of her postmortal experiences and thus defeating the anti-silence and pro-agency stance Sebold set out to foreground in the first place. Sebold has said that "when people discover you're a rape victim, they decide that's all you are" (in Viner 2002). This is precisely what happens to Susie in the filmic adaptation process.

9 Another element lost in the translation from page to screen is Susie's possible involvement in Mr. Harvey's demise. Her revenge on her rapist and murderer is subtly hinted at in the novel (cf. Whitney 356f.). Early on, she expresses her most ardent wish: "I could not have what I wanted most. Mr. Harvey dead and me living" (21). Susie is to remain dead, and not even her temporary body swap with Ruth can reduce the finality of this fact. Mr. Harvey's death, however, located near the end of the novel, coincides with Susie's advancement to the second level of heaven: "Now I am in the place I call this wide wide heaven because it includes all my simplest desires but also the most humble and grand" (369). One of her most grand desires then is the death of her murderer, who is killed by a falling icicle. The cause of death is the key clue in linking it back to Susie: earlier in the novel, she muses over the perfect way to commit a murder, nonchalantly mentioning that "'How to Commit the Perfect Murder' was an old game in heaven" and that she "always chose the icicle: the weapon melts away" (142). The placement of Mr. Harvey's demise *after* Susie's ascension to wider heaven (and the granting of wishes it entails) taken together with

this not-so-harmless game strongly hint at Susie's involvement. Significantly, however, her wish is only granted when she has already moved on: it cannot be its precondition.

10 While the revenge narrative of Susie's possible part in Harvey's death is not mentioned or hinted at in the film (presumably because it would not fit into the angelic mould Susie is cast in), she does manage to make contact with her father while he is in Harvey's presence.[10] Jack Salmon helps the killer to build a bridal tent in his backyard. The men talk, tension mounts, and while the omniscient but far from omnipotent Susie in the book fruitlessly wishes she could make a wilted flower[11] bloom, as a sign to let her father know the other man killed his daughter, the Susie in the film is successful. This act of magic alerts Jack to Mr. Harvey's guilt and prompts a violent outburst, thus channelling her rage into a vessel (i.e. her father) that is not limited to the notions of innocence, purity, and helplessness. Mr. Harvey is forced to flee inside his house while Jack bangs on the door until the wood splinters. The blooming flower is the catalyst that leads to her father going after Mr. Harvey, and while no such incentive is given in the book, where Jack's ventures after Mr. Harvey based on his own suspicions instead of heavenly signals, the stories progress in the same vein. Following Mr. Harvey into the cornfield, the scene of the murder, Jack Salmon hopes to enact his revenge. But he is not successful and is instead beaten up by a teenaged boy who has used the cornfield as a secret and inappropriate rendezvous place. In conjunction with the film's hesitance to show Susie's victimised body, the attack on her father assumes new meaning. The camera, as well as Susie's gaze, is firmly fastened on Jack while he is almost beaten to death with his own baseball bat. The male body can be shown to suffer violence, implying an audience's acceptance thereof, whereas the sexualised violence against the girl must be hidden from view. This filmic strategy further casts Susie in a victim rather than survivor mould and adds to the silencing of rape victims, while simultaneously and conventionally casting a parental figure in the role of avenger. In her reading of the novel, Whitney argues that "lacerating rage is not present in *The Lovely Bones*; it has been replaced by melancholy" (354). Based on the evidence outlined above, namely Susie's involvement in Mr. Harvey's demise and Jack's experience in the cornfield, I come to a different conclusion. In film and novel rage is channelled differently. The film version needs a raging paternal

[10] There are other instances in the book when Susie manages to communicate with her family or make her presence known. At one point, her father smashes the ships in bottles he built with his daughter and Susie casts her face "in every piece of glass, in every shard and sliver" (52). Following Susie's transcension into wider heaven, she makes her little brother's garden bloom (368), thus mirroring and resolving her impotency in the novel's geranium scene.

[11] The flower is metaphor for deceased girl: around her father (and her family at large), she was vibrant, alive, in bloom, whereas around Mr. Harvey, she is wilted and dead.

avenger, while the novel primarily negotiates rage in its female heroine. The melancholy however is firmly and singularly located in her mother in both novel and film.

11 Unlike her husband, Susie's mother Abigail does not respond with rage, violence or the all-consuming wish of seeing her daughter's murderer brought to justice. Instead, she retreats into herself, and is continuously haunted by what happened to her family. Whether it is her husband's growing obsession with Mr. Harvey, or Susie's omnipresent school picture used for both search and commemoration, the truth of her daughter's death is one she cannot escape.[12] Bliss, who reads Abigail through the lens of Caruth's work on trauma, argues that

> the novel explores Susie's mother's struggle with her maternal role. Her daughter's violent death results in Abigail examining and questioning not the, perhaps, expected topic of her failure to protect her daughter, but rather the unresolved conflict that results from Abigail admitting that she has never fully embraced motherhood. Abigail's individuality and sense of selfhood has all but disappeared beneath the persona of Mother and Susie's death is the unlikely catalyst for the reemergence of Abigail's sense of self. (861)

Going even further, Whitney proposes that Abigail sees Susie's death as "divine retribution for her undesired maternity" (360), a reading which can be linked back again to Caruth, who proposes that those suffering from trauma "carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (*Trauma* 5). Abigail searches for a way out of her own history, which to her mind casts her as the giver and taker of her daughter's life. Whitney comments on "Abigail's untapped intellectual potential", arguing that it connects to "larger issues of secondwave feminism" (360). Having desired an academic career, she instead lives a suburban life as a housewife and mother of three children. The punishment for resenting this life is, to her mind, her daughter's death. Trying to escape this overwhelming guilt, she temporarily finds distraction in the arms of the detective who is in charge of her daughter's case.

12 The level of desperation that clings to Abigail keeps her from ever appearing callous, but when the affair does not help to escape that which she wishes to repress, Abigail chooses a direct, not a metaphorical flight: she leaves her husband and her two living children and makes for California, thus literally leaving the site of the trauma. Her eventual return is propelled by Jack's suffering a heart attack. Bliss argues that this return signifies that "Abigail is finally able to acknowledge that she never wanted to be a mother and implicitly rejects the maternal role: she returns for her husband, not for her children" (879). However,

[12] For an excellent analysis of the use of photographs in *The Lovely Bones*, see Bliss' *Share Moments, Share Life: the Domestic Photograph as a Symbol of Disruption and Trauma in The Lovely Bones*. Bliss argues that the school photograph "has a dual purpose: it functions as her memorial and it also substitutes for her absent body" (875).

Bliss further argues that "by the novel's conclusion, Abigail has reassumed the maternal role" (863), but Abigail's son refuses her, and her living daughter does not trust her. I would argue that the avenue open to her, first by her own choice, now by that of her children, is assuming a marital, not a maternal role. Buckley in particular, three years old when Susie died and four when his mother left, has grown into a teenager without her, relying on his sister, his father, and other family members. But the key point is that Abigail's affair and departure (as well as her return) mark her agency: even though she is bound by social rules, Abigail knows how to break them before they break her.

13 The film portrays her character differently. Rachel Weisz plays Abigail as the novel's beautiful and somewhat distant woman, but the affair is deleted from the film version and her time in California is reduced considerably. Her growing estrangement from her family is not connected to her quest of re-defining (or perhaps finally defining) her identity as a woman outside the maternal role. A brief montage in the beginning of the film shows the stacks of books on her bedside table change from Camus, Woolf and Hesse to editions of *Working with Nature* and *Baby and Child Care*. It is a blink and you will miss it moment, whereas the novel continually reinforces the point of Abigail's unfilled intellectual desire. Her tenuous grasp on her family and self find no representation on the screen, as McFarlane's criticism of the adaptation makes clear:

> When Abigail leaves home and fetches up in a Californian vineyard, there is no adequate sense of what has provoked this departure. Sebold led into this via a clear distinction between how she and Jack have coped with the rupture of their family life, and there is vestigial but palpable sexual attraction between Abigail and the investigating cop, Len Fenerman (Michael Imperioli). The film doesn't make nearly potent enough her sense of how Susie's death has affected her. (49)

But what so ultimately traumatises Abigail is not her daughter's death, but her fear of having contributed to it by un-desiring motherhood. Just as Susie's sexual re-discovery from the novel is lost in the editing room, so are Abigail's feminist desires and the way she feels she is being punished for them.

14 A more successful feminist presence can be found in Ruth, the girl who allows Susie to use her body. A social outsider at school, "Ruth is a black-clad, angsty-poetry-writing lesbian feminist cliché. More importantly, she has a political function in the novel. Her willingness to bear the burden of rage and retribution fulfills the reader's desire for justice while leaving Susie forever childlike, innocent, and untainted by anger" (359). Whitney makes an excellent point of highlighting the feminist undertones of Ruth's character, but I would nevertheless argue that Ruth is not the vessel for Susie's anger. As outlined previously,

it is her father who goes after Mr. Harvey. Likewise, it is her sister who confronts the police over their ineptitude and passivity and breaks into Mr. Harvey's house to collect the necessary evidence to connect him to the crime. Instead, what the character of Ruth offers is another means of communication for the deceased. It is Susie's touch that endows Ruth with her special powers, but Susie did not specifically select her because of a previous connection:

> I could not help but graze her. Once released from life, having lost it in such violence, I couldn't calculate my steps. In violence, it is the getting away that you focus on. When you begin to go over the edge, life receding from you as a boat inevitably receding from the shore, you hold on to death tightly, like a rope that will transport you, and you swing out on it, hoping only to land far away from where you are. (41)

Susie's accidental touch allows Ruth to see spirits and retrace their steps. She begins to write down their stories, their fates, and thus – very much like Susie's postmortal narrative itself – gives the silenced a voice. She becomes the chronicler of their violent endings.

15 Ruth's second involvement in lending a voice to the silenced (i.e. giving her body to Susie) is often seen critically by reviewers. Tallent writes

> The particular body borrowed by Susie in order to experience the loss of virginity has been carefully constructed as lesbian. [...] Why detail Ruth's emergent – yet so far unconsummated – sexuality only to have her abandon her body so that her friend can use it? Is a lesbian body, by virtue of not "belonging" to any male, more available for appropriation? A lesbian's virginity less important to her than a straight girl's to her? At the very least, this lesbian character loses the experience of devirginization, as Susie did; we're supposed to accept that in the case of Ruth, this is all right, because she's cheerfully volunteered to have her body occupied by another. (8)

Like Tallent, Whitney argues that "her actions make the lesbian Ruth into a "straightened" sacred feminine vessel" (361). For one, I would argue that Ruth fancying her female teachers and drawing female nudes in art class does not necessarily make her lesbian. Ruth is an advocate for women, the wounded especially, but as far as her sexuality is concerned, textual evidence suggests that she has been constructed more ambivalently. The only person Ruth is romantically involved with is Ray, with whom she bonds over their shared loss of Susie and their outsider position at school. Eventually, Ruth suggests that Ray could kiss her:

> 'I thought you liked girls,' Ray said. 'I'll make you a deal,' Ruth said. 'You can pretend I'm Susie and I will too.' 'You are so entirely screwed up,' Ray said, smiling. 'Are you saying that you don't want to?' Ruth teased. (227)

Later, Ruth admits to Ray that the experiment has taken an unexpected turn: when kissing him, she has begun to "feel something" (230). Ruth defies labels, and instead allows herself to feel, be it for the dead girl or for the boy they both like. This of course does not take away from Tallent's point about Ruth giving up her virginity so that Susie can experience it

instead. However, a more complicated picture appears when one considers that the boy Ruth and Susie share this experience with is one that Ruth herself has been sexually linked to and whom she considers a friend. Furthermore, it is Ruth who instigates the body swap in the novel, showing her willingness to grant Susie this last wish. As Susie puts it, Ruth is "a smart girl breaking all the rules" (341). It is Ruth's agency and Ruth who is in control of the events. In contrast, the film constructs different power relations: Ruth is passive, her body indeed taken over by Susie, who appears out of nowhere. Susie's spirit merges with Ruth's body while Ruth witnesses Mr. Harvey dispose of the safe with Susie's remains in the sinkhole. This is of course highly problematic because if Ruth did not vacate her body herself, what happens to her is – strictly speaking – a rape in and of itself, so the scene negates the very point it was trying to resolve.

16 While Ruth is one of the few living people Susie is able to directly interact with, her heaven is by no means devoid of companions. The novel populates heaven, both the intermediary and the final stage, with a multitude of people, among them Frannie, her "intake counsellor" (20), whom Bliss interprets (connecting her to Abigail) as performing "a heavenly maternal role" (863). Frannie helps Susie to settle in, and provides both advice and comfort in this new world. In a way, Frannie assumes the function of a rape crisis centre. Projansky outlines the work of rape crisis centres as "helping women understand common post-rape experiences, such as a constant feeling of being dirty and wanting to shower, uncomfortableness with sex or even physical touch, a sense of being responsible for the attack, or guilt over accusing a loved one" (9). Susie shares Frannie with Holly, another deceased girl who inhabits her heaven. The film does not feature Frannie at all and instead establishes Holly in the advisory role, while simultaneously recasting her as another victim of Mr. Harvey's. The screenplay thus creates a 'Mr. Harvey victim heaven' only, a sort of exclusive and horrifying girls club. By comparison, the heaven(s) in the book offer the comfort of other people, be it old neighbours, deceased family members or supportive strangers such as Frannie and Holly. Sebold's heaven is used to work away from limiting Susie to being a rape victim, while Jackson's version – by installing Holly as another of Mr. Harvey's victims and as Susie's only companion – defines her as such. This effectively makes the film version of heaven a restrictive, even claustrophobic place.

17 Just as the filmic presentation of Susie's heaven is restricted, so is its central character. This restriction is at the core of the film's and novel's difference. As Brooks aptly sums up, "gone is the dismembered body part that alerts the family to Susie's fate. Gone is her anguished mother's adulterous affair with the detective who leads the case. Gone is all

mention of what really transpired in that lonely 1970s cornfield". Gone, in short, are the gritty aspects of the recovery process. The film adaptation needs a prettier heaven, a safer environment, an ultimately more black and white take on the story to highlight the abhorrence of the crime.

18 Continuously cast as the perfect 'victim', Susie becomes passive and is transformed from agent to object, as the film places her (after)life in the hands of men. She cannot take revenge herself; she needs her father to do it for her. Similarly, she cannot transcend to heaven until Mr. Harvey lets go of her remains. Completely dependent on the actions of male agents, Susie is trapped until the very end. The more complex usages of Susie's postmortal agency such as her desire to sleep with Ray or her possible involvement in Mr. Harvey's death fall victim in the cutting room: they are signifiers of an older, more mature, more influential Susie, who is outgrowing her victimhood in ways not suitable for a 'perfect victim'. Only when it comes to the body swap is her agency in the film re-established, albeit at the price of another female character's freedom, namely Ruth's. Turned from active medium to overwhelmed vessel, Ruth becomes an object and is as such as silenced as Susie is by her murder. In the same vein, the film never dares to picture Abigail's abandonment of the parental role. The novel's threefold presentation of female self-determination (Susie's revenge, Ruth's vacation of her body, and Abigail's flight to California) is too daring for a film that seeks to show the helplessness of a victimised girl and establishes her as an object of pity, which leads to the crux of the matter.

19 While Sebold has "in her employment of a posthumous voice […] created a unique form of literary survivorship for the heroine" (Whitney 355), one that "restores some dignity and agency to those silenced by violence" (356), the film falls short of this goal with regards to the agency. Seeking to restore Susie's dignity, shielding and protecting her and the audience from the details of her end, her agency is limited to the point where little is left. As Caruth argues, "the story of a trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life" Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). In the film adaptation of *The Lovely Bones*, the trauma's "endless impact" on the (after)life is maintained and "the story of a trauma" takes the place of what is, in the novel, essentially a story of recovery. Jackson provides a PG-13 rated condensing of the source material, that, rather than showing a complex, multi-faceted survivor watching her family come to terms with the trauma of her loss, focuses on the central character's continuing traumatic victimisation. This rewrites the story as one wherein entrapment of innocence is the dominant theme and the

myth of the 'perfect victim' finds perpetuation, thus keeping the "wall of silence" surrounding the crime of rape, albeit not that of murder, firmly in place.

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