

# Travel as Hell: Exploring the *Katabatic* Structure of Travel Fiction

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## Introduction

Literature contributes to and influences our imaginings of travel, both in a positive and negative sense. Many novels depict travel in terms of ‘hell,’ depicting journeys that are exhausting, dangerous, and nightmarish. This narrative can be explored using the concept of the *katabasis*. Drawn from Ancient Greek mythology, it literally means ‘the descent,’ and more generally a journey to hell and back.<sup>1</sup> The underworld is a ‘realm of death,’ where sacrifices are often demanded and the ‘other’ is encountered.<sup>2</sup> Where the traveller returns, they are usually irrevocably changed by the experience. Erling Holtmark observes that the central motif of these sojourns is *identity*: “The journey is in some central, irreducible way a journey of self-discovery, a quest for a lost self.”<sup>3</sup> Through suffering, the traveller learns what they are capable of and understands themselves more deeply. The reader also absorbs the lesson that while travel is not necessarily straight-forward or enjoyable, the difficult passages and twists are intrinsically rewarding and enlightening. The mythic concept of the *katabasis* has been applied more broadly to cover fictional journeys drawn from many cultures and across different forms of media, including books and film.<sup>4</sup> It also appears to apply across genres,

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Dowden, ‘The Myth That Saves: Mysteries and Mysteriosophies,’ in *A Companion to Greek Mythology*, eds Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 283-300; Tim Whitmarsh, ‘The Writes of Passage: Cultural Initiation in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*,’ in *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Miles (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 16-40.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Falconer, *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children’s Fiction and its Adult Readership* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Erling B. Holtmark, ‘The *Katabasis* Theme in Modern Cinema,’ in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin. M. Winkler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> James J. Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell: Mythic Paradigms in *The Searchers*,’ *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1999), pp. 2-17; Falconer, *The Crossover Novel*; Holtmark, ‘The *Katabasis* Theme in Modern Cinema’; Evans Lansing Smith, *Rape and Revelation: The Descent to the Underworld in Modernism* (Lanham and London: University Press of America, 1990); Eric Rawson, ‘To Hell with Ya: *Katabasis* in Hard-

including the Western,<sup>5</sup> science-fiction,<sup>6</sup> and crime fiction.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that the *katabatic* structure provides these fictional or cinematic journeys with resonance and power, and makes them compelling for an audience.

We also contend that this narrative shapes the way that the *process of travel* is perceived, whether by potential or armchair travellers. In this way, it both mediates expectations and frames the travel experience.<sup>8</sup> It might affect the way we travel, as well as contributing to cultural myths about tourism. In this way, it can be likened to the “circles of representation” that may occur when visual images in brochures and photographs are in turn reproduced by tourists, in a process of “cultural production and reproduction.”<sup>9</sup> The *katabatic* narrative gives travel an edge and the traveller a sense of risk and danger – or at least the potential for these. In this way, it is a powerful influence on travel imaginings and should be subjected to analysis in order to understand more fully the way that travel and the travel experience are comprehended and appreciated as social phenomena. This is the focus of the present article; an examination of how the unconscious exposure to the *katabatic* narrative moulds and helps to construct our understanding of travel, in particular its ‘dark’ side.

We subject three texts to a literary analysis using the *katabasis* as a theoretical framework: the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman,<sup>10</sup> *The Searchers* by Alan Le May,<sup>11</sup> and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson.<sup>12</sup> These texts cover three popular genres (children’s, adventure, and crime fiction) and span over half a century. Each has been filmed; tributes to the emotional pull of the stories, the result of using a *katabatic* structure to drive the narrative. Each is chosen as an exemplar of their genre, while recognising that there were many other examples that could have been selected

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Boiled Detective Fiction,’ *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2009), pp. 291-303; Bent Sørensen, ‘Katabasis in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,’ *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 60 (2005), pp. 16-25.

<sup>5</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell’; Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema’; Sørensen, ‘Katabasis in Cormac McCarthy.’

<sup>6</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.’

<sup>7</sup> Rawson, ‘To Hell with Ya.’

<sup>8</sup> Tamara Young, ‘Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia: Guidebooks as Mediators in Backpacker Travel,’ *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 155-164.

<sup>9</sup> Olivia Jenkins, ‘Photography and Travel Brochures,’ *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2003), p. 324.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (London: Scholastic, 2007 [1995]); Philip Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* (London: Scholastic, 2007 [1997]); Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2007 [2000]).

<sup>11</sup> Alan Le May, *The Searchers* (New York: Harpers, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> Stieg Larsson, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (London: Quercus, 2009 [2005]).

and analysed. All contain a journey of some sort; which manifests itself in a 'hellish' predicament or destination.

### **The Descent into Hell**

The classical *katabasis* generally involves six steps:

1. A journey is taken to the realm of the dead.
2. The journey is necessary to recover someone or something, which Eric Rawson dubs "the elusive object of the *katabasis*."<sup>13</sup>
3. The entrance is over a river or through a cave and requires a guide or companion, who may need to be paid or tricked into helping.
4. The realm of the dead is more than dangerous. It is foreboding, nightmarish, and haunted.
5. One of the group must die as a sacrificial victim.
6. The journey changes the hero. He or she is reborn or gains some other benefit.<sup>14</sup>

The quintessential *katabatic* tale is the story of Orpheus in the underworld. He ventures there to save the beautiful Eurydice, who died on their wedding day. The gods relent at his distress and allow him to rescue his wife on the condition that he does so without looking back at her. The temptation is of course too great, and his failure to comply with the condition results in Eurydice remaining out of reach until the lovers are reunited in death.<sup>15</sup> Another myth involves Persephone, the beautiful daughter of the harvest goddess Demeter, who is abducted by Hades, king of the underworld. She is finally released for six months of the year, marking the beginning of spring, with her return to the underworld equated with the start of winter, and Demeter's mourning for the loss of her daughter. Thus the seasons are explained.<sup>16</sup> The underpinnings of these stories are the journey to hell and back, and the changes that this has wrought on the traveller. They are transformed through their experiences. Orpheus is confronted by his human frailty, while Persephone becomes a deity of the underworld.

Subconsciously, exposure to the ubiquitous *katabatic* structure throughout our lives preconditions us to view travel as testing and taxing, yet ultimately enlightening and rewarding. This is far removed from the traditional image of travel as fun, escapist, and a vehicle for relaxation and unwinding from the stress of life. And yet it gets to the nub of the real travel experience for most individuals, which is often replete with unforeseen dramas, delays, and

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<sup>13</sup> Rawson, 'To Hell with Ya,' p. 296.

<sup>14</sup> Clauss, 'Descent into Hell'; Holtsmark, 'The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.'

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Folio Society, 2005 [1955]).

<sup>16</sup> Clauss, 'Descent into Hell.'

the shock of the new, no matter how prepared the traveller might be. The recurring incidence of the *katabasis* in books and films reinforces the idea that the seductiveness of travel is in part due to its seamy or shadowy side; the underworld that we feel exists behind the facade of sun, surf and sex.

These are not narratives that are reserved for adult audiences and material. Our first text, a trilogy, is ostensibly young adults', even children's fare, although it could be argued to constitute a "crossover novel,"<sup>17</sup> with its appeal spanning the generations. The subject-matter of *His Dark Materials* is often weighty; if one looks behind the fantasy of encountering talking polar bears, angels, and witches, the book deals with questions of an afterlife, the role of organised religion in society,<sup>18</sup> the moral imperative of making sacrifices for the good of others, and deciding who has the right to make judgements as to what constitutes a social 'good.' The descent to hell is not merely literal, and results in cataclysmic consequences for all involved.

### ***His Dark Materials* Trilogy (Philip Pullman, 1995-2000)**

In the first book, *Northern Lights*, we are introduced to Lyra, a young girl living as a ward of an Oxford college, but this is not the Oxford University of our world. This is an Oxford within an alternate or parallel world, one of millions of universes which co-exist, and can be traversed through various entry points or portals, only known to a select few. Technology has developed almost in a nineteenth century 'steampunk' sensibility, with airships for transport, as in Michael Moorcock's *The Nomad of Time* trilogy.<sup>19</sup> The biggest difference with this world, however, is that human souls are visibly manifested as an accompanying animal, known as a *daemon*, which becomes a constant companion and friend. The daemons of children can change form at will, but become fixed at puberty in the form of an animal that best symbolises the dominant facets of one's personality, whether it be bravery, intelligence, or cruelty.

Lyra has been brought up thinking she is an orphan. Her parents, however, are estranged; Lord Asriel, her father, pretends to be her uncle and visits her regularly, while Mrs Coulter, her mother, comes to take Lyra away under the pretence of needing an assistant for her work. The college Master agrees, in part because of the danger he foresees for Lyra. Young children have

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<sup>17</sup> Falconer, *The Crossover Novel*.

<sup>18</sup> Jessica Garrahy, 'His Controversial Materials: Philip Pullman and Religious Narrative Identity,' *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2. (2009), pp. 105-122.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Moorcock, *The Warlord of the Air* (London: Panther, 1984 [1971]); Michael Moorcock, *The Land Leviathan* (London: Panther, 1984 [1974]); Michael Moorcock, *The Steel Tsar* (London: Panther, 1984 [1981]).

been disappearing, including Lyra's best friend, the kitchen boy Roger. Lyra travels by zeppelin to London with Mrs Coulter, her first journey among many. At first, the luxurious lifestyle is seductive, with beautiful clothes, and Lyra forgets about her former life and concerns about her friend. She eventually learns the truth: the children are being taken by a shadowy religious organisation known as the Magisterium to an island in the Arctic, and her mother is one of the ringleaders. They are trying to close openings that they have discovered to other worlds, and maintain their own world order, where organised religion prevails. Moreover, experiments are being conducted on this island on children, removing their daemons to make these children more passive and controllable.

Lyra runs away, and joins an expedition to rescue the children. This is the call to action which is argued to denote the start of the *katabasis*.<sup>20</sup> She makes the first of several journeys over water, another classical step of the *katabasis*. The first is by canal boat, and then by ship across the icy seas to the frozen North. Lyra quickly begins to realise that this is not a children's game, like the mock battles she played with the gypsy-like gyptians back in Oxford, but instead a life and death struggle. She is frightened and would like to abdicate her responsibilities: "I wish it was someone else instead of me, I do honestly!" In overcoming her fears, Lyra takes her first moves towards adulthood and her destiny as a modern 'Eve' who will seek knowledge and the truth above obedience. Her journey is thus a *rite of passage*, from the tomboy we meet in Oxford, to the heroine who displays courage and loyalty to an old friend. It reinforces the idea of travel as a mechanism for transitioning from youth to adulthood.<sup>21</sup>

As in all quests, the hero must overcome trials and put matters right, particularly those in which they have played a part, however unwittingly.<sup>22</sup> To her horror, Lyra has been instrumental in Roger's death. She is the one who takes him to Lord Asriel. Asriel then uses the boy and the power unleashed by removing his daemon to open up the passage-way to another world. Lyra's betrayal, while unintended, has dreadful consequences ("It was my fault he was dead"). This becomes the catalyst for seeking Roger's resurrection from the

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1949]); Rawson, 'To Hell with Ya.'

<sup>21</sup> Amie Matthews, 'Living Paradoxically: Understanding the Discourse of Authentic Freedom as it Emerges in the Travel Space,' *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), pp. 165-174; Pamela J. Riley, 'Road Culture of International Long-Term Budget Travellers,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1988), pp. 313-328; Naomi Rosh White and Peter B. White, 'Travel as Transition: Identity and Place,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2004), pp. 200-218.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

dead (“I got [sic] to go down into the land of the dead and find him”). This is her great quest, which will lead her to the gates of hell. In saving Roger’s ghost, she will defeat the Magisterium and restore the balance between the different worlds.

In the second book, *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra meets Will, a boy from our world. He shares her journey and burdens, becoming a confidante in the tradition of the *katabasis* and eventually her great love. He is a Perseus to her Andromeda, saving her from her mother’s clutches through ingenuity and clear thinking, akin to the outwitting of Medusa. Later on, he accompanies her in her journey through hell, armed only with a magic knife that can cut a portal into other worlds. To reach the world of the dead, the children must travel over water, across a lake shrouded in mist. Like the Greek myth of the underworld and the River Styx,<sup>23</sup> there is a ferryman (“aged beyond age ... his bony hands crooked permanently around the oar-handles”). Lyra wants to “find a way out across the water where the dead people go,” but is told that she must be accompanied by her “death,” which waits for all of us until the appointed time. She tells her death that her quest is hers and hers alone, and that she does not wish to die to complete it: “It’s too important to wait till I die in the natural way, it’s got to be done now.”

Her sacrifice involves leaving her daemon behind, which for Lyra is like rending her soul in two: “And then for the first time Lyra truly realised what she was doing. This was the real consequence. She stood aghast, trembling...” The ferryman tells her that no-one returns from this trip “this way.” He cannot be bought or tricked, along the lines of the traditional *katabasis*. This betrayal of her daemon was foretold by the Master of Jordan College in Oxford; this is another nod to Greek mythology and the prophetic power of the sibylline oracle.<sup>24</sup> The experience of entering the world of the dead involves both physical and mental anguish. In the case of the latter, “something secret and private was being dragged into the open where it had no wish to be.” It felt like the greatest treachery towards a loved one: “There was nothing worse to feel.” Nevertheless, the children endure the pain for a greater purpose, and travel on. Even in the midst of hell, their natural curiosity, like that of any traveller, is aroused: “to see what would happen and where they would land.” They also take comfort in each other, having a fellow companion to share the odyssey. This creates an attachment between them, like any travellers who mutually

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<sup>23</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema’; Alice Mills, ‘Forms of Death in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea*, and Garth Nix’s *Old Kingdom Novels*,’ *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 92-104.

<sup>24</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.’

undergo a difficult or bewildering experience, which is reminiscent of Turner's *communitas*.<sup>25</sup>

A number of caves also feature in this second book, with one used by Lord Asriel to hide his arsenal of weaponry and hardware that he will use to defeat the Magisterium. The language used to describe this subterranean hiding-place, with its "river of sulphurous molten metal" and "cloud of evil smoke," is redolent of the underworld. The second is the "system of caves" they enter with the ghosts, in an attempt to lead them to freedom. This is described as "dark, with an enfolding blackness that pressed on Lyra's eyes so heavily that she almost felt the weight of the thousands of tons of rock above them." The children risk falling into an abyss, "a vast black emptiness, like a shaft into the deepest darkness." This is the stuff of nightmares: "The darkness was so profound that it seemed to pull the eyesight down into it, and a ghastly dizziness swam over their minds when they looked." They encounter the lurid horror of the harpies – terrifyingly repulsive creatures from Greek mythology,<sup>26</sup> working to diminish hope and leave the dead with a sense of despair – who symbolise the grotesquery inherent in the realm of death, a distortion of the real world.<sup>27</sup>

Lyra feels defenceless – "there won't be any help where we'd have to go" – but she takes on a number of magical guides who assist her in her quest to save Roger. The first is her death, who calls himself her "guide," but warns: "I can show you the way in, but as for getting out again, you'll have to manage by yourself." She also has Will and two miniature spies for Lord Asriel, who take on Lyra's quest as their own ("against every instinct, we'll go with you"). They light the way for the band of ghosts through the darkness, both through the glow of their dragonfly mounts and the moral luminosity that they exhibit. Even the harpies are won over by the truth that the children speak – of a world of beauty, as well as wickedness. They realise that there is more than the world in which they dwell, a world of fear and gloom. A bargain is struck. They are given the right to hear the truth about the world from each ghost, "the story of their lives," as recompense for guiding them out of the world of the dead. This is the payment that the guide demands in the *katabatic* narrative. It honours the assistance of the guide, and their sacred knowledge. When Lyra falls into the

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<sup>25</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

<sup>26</sup> Mills, 'Forms of Death.'

<sup>27</sup> Rawson, 'To Hell with Ya.'

abyss, one of the harpies swoops down to save her. The advice and assistance of the guide is instrumental to the success of the journey.<sup>28</sup>

The dead, or those who are willing to follow Lyra, are led to the surface and then into another world. It is the “greatest blow” that can be struck against “The Authority,” the name given to the deity, and thus resembles the rebellion in the Garden of Eden, with Lyra the second ‘Eve.’ Even the realisation that the ghosts will become mere particles, part of the “air and the wind and the trees and the earth,” is comforting; becoming a form of higher life in nature, rather than perpetually wandering the underworld.<sup>29</sup> The cutting of a hole between worlds to allow the ghosts to escape is reminiscent of a ritual rebirth.<sup>30</sup> They move from a world that is silent and dark, much like the womb, to a world of chaos and confusion:

The first thing they sensed was *noise*. The light that struck in was dazzling and they had to cover their eyes, ghosts and living alike, so they could see nothing for several seconds; but the pounding, explosions, the rattle of gunfire, the shouts and screams were all instantly clear and horribly frightening.

The return home for Lyra involves a sacrifice that cannot be overcome or outsmarted. She cheated death but cannot avoid the inexorable laws of nature. It demands that she live in a different world to Will in order to keep her daemon alive and to stop the exodus of dust, a synonym for human consciousness. In so doing, she learns more about herself and the bittersweet nature of love:

She had never dreamed of what it would feel like to love someone so much; of all the things that had astonished her in her adventures, that was what astonished her the most. She thought the tenderness it left in her heart was like a bruise that would never go away, but she would cherish it forever.

Lyra is not the only one who will lose something in this story. Her mother leaps to her death to annihilate the evil angel Metatron, engaged in a life-and-death struggle with Lyra’s father, but in so doing, destroys them all. It is her final sacrifice to save Lyra and the world in which she will grow up, a world that will be free of tyranny and open to embrace the truth.

### ***The Searchers* (Alan Le May, 1954)**

Adventure fiction commonly involves the Rite of Passage of a young hero. There is typically a bittersweet loss of innocence as the hero’s travels result in their growing up and taking on adult responsibilities. In *Treasure Island*

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<sup>28</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell.’

<sup>29</sup> Mills, ‘Forms of Death.’

<sup>30</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell.’



(1883),<sup>31</sup> Jim Hawkins sets out on an adventure to find buried treasure on an uncharted island. His youthful enthusiasm for the charismatic Long John Silver is quickly tempered as he learns lessons about trust, betrayal, and doing one's duty. In *The Three Musketeers* (1844),<sup>32</sup> the exuberant D'Artagnan heads to Paris to join the Musketeers and make his fortune. While he succeeds, there is also tragedy as Milady murders Constance to spite him. In many adventure stories, this rite of passage is shaped as a *katabasis*; the hero journeys through a wasteland, encounters danger and darkness, and is profoundly changed. The wasteland is often constructed as an arid and hostile desert, as for example in *King Solomon's Mines* (1885),<sup>33</sup> *The Four Feathers* (1902),<sup>34</sup> and *Beau Geste* (1924).<sup>35</sup> In this section, we consider the example of *The Searchers* (1954), an 'adult' Western adventure, set on the frontier of the American south-west.

Up to World War Two, Western adventure stories were simple moral stories. Good battled evil. Good eventually won out. This was exemplified in the prolific output of Zane Grey, and of the fictional heroes Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger, and the Cisco Kid. After World War Two, however, all that changed. In the post-war boom, America rapidly became more urban and sophisticated. While the new media of television was dominated by Western series, the old fashioned Western movies rapidly lost their box office appeal and the fiction of heroic Western adventures seemed corny and out-dated. These changes resulted in the 'Adult Western.' Movies explored themes that could not possibly be shown on television. Westerns of the 1950s thus had a much harder edge; heroes were now flawed and morally ambiguous, sharing similar qualities with the villains. Rather than simple wanderlust, their journey through the West was either a symptom of their inability to settle down or they were on the run from the law. In popular culture and tourist attractions, the outlaw became the appealing "anti-hero."<sup>36</sup> Feeding these adult films were a new generation of adult novels.<sup>37</sup> Le May's novel was also distinct, in that

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<sup>31</sup> Robert L. Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (London: Penguin, 2010 [1883]).

<sup>32</sup> Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers* (London: Wordsworth, 2001 [1844]).

<sup>33</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991 [1885]).

<sup>34</sup> A. E. W. Mason, *The Four Feathers* (London: Nelson, 1989 [1902]).

<sup>35</sup> P. C. Wren, *Beau Geste* (London: John Murray, 1924).

<sup>36</sup> Fiona Wheeler, Jennifer Laing, Lionel Frost, Keir Reeves, and Warwick Frost, 'Outlaw Nations: Tourism, the Frontier and National Identities,' in *Tourism and National Identities: An International Perspective*, eds Elspeth Frew and Leanne White (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 151-163.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (New York and London: Taurus, 1997); R. Philip Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004).

rather than being a fictional fantasy, it drew heavily on historical accounts of attempts to rescue captives, including those by George Custer and Kit Carson.<sup>38</sup>

*The Searchers* begins with the Comanches raiding the Edwards family homestead. Everyone is killed, except 11-year-old Debbie, who is carried off. Amos (her uncle) and Marty (her 18-year-old adopted brother) set out to rescue her. With the family destroyed, these two marginal members set out to recreate the family by regaining Debbie and bringing her home. Their obsessive quest will take five years.

Alan Le May was a Hollywood scriptwriter and it was not surprising that his novel was quickly made into a film by John Ford. *The Searchers* (1955) is widely regarded as a classic, one of the best Western films ever made and probably one of the greatest American films in any genre, largely because of its difficult and dark themes.<sup>39</sup> Changing parts of the story, Ford provides a much more detailed and nuanced backstory for Amos (renamed Ethan, and played by John Wayne), and a much more romanticised portrayal of frontier community life, a hallmark of many of his Westerns. It is these key differences which have led to Le May's book being dismissed as a "crude novel,"<sup>40</sup> and the film lauded as greatly superior.<sup>41</sup> We do not agree with that judgement. Our view is that while there are differences, the film and book are equally impressive and complement each other.

Marty and Amos wander through the frontier in Texas, New Mexico, and Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). While bound together by their quest, Marty and Amos are not close. Amos refuses to recognise Marty as kin to either himself or Debbie, constantly emphasising that he is a stray orphan. Both, of course, are now without family and the search for Debbie is also a search for a new start. Marty quickly realises that Amos is obsessed with killing and mutilating Indians. He worries that Amos will blindly attack the Comanches (who will react by killing their White prisoners), or even kill Debbie himself. They follow many leads, but they prove to be dead ends. The

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<sup>38</sup> George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains* (London: The Folio Society, 1963 [1874]); Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West* (New York: Anchor, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Roger Ebert, *The Great Movies II* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005); Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: BFI, 2004); Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> Martin M. Winkler, 'Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*,' in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 118-147.

longer the search continues, the more 'lost' Amos and Marty are. Their mission is all-consuming, driving them on even though they have little to go on. Both suffer from nightmares and Amos is gradually going blind.

Their journey is constructed as a *katabasis*. To regain Debbie, they must cross into a hellish wilderness. Constantly wary of being ambushed, they are also beset by the elements, including severe blizzards. The Indian side of the frontier is certainly depicted as the realm of death. They are constantly coming across sites of massacres and attacks. Amos is happy to sacrifice Marty as a decoy when they encounter trouble. The frontier is also a forsaken zone, for during the period of the search for Debbie, the US had pulled back its troops. The area of conflict is expanding as the Comanches get bolder. Amos and Marty are conscious that they are racing against time, that a 'Day of Reckoning' is coming (a strong parallel with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*<sup>42</sup>). The fighting between Comanches and Whites is becoming more widespread and constant and Amos and Marty know that, soon, the US will change its policy and send in troops, which will probably lead to the Comanches killing all their captives.

To journey through this realm, Amos and Marty must become like the Indians, learning and respecting their ways. Marty learns Comanche, though mysteriously the hateful Amos is already fluent. Caught in a blizzard, Amos even sings a Comanche death song. Every year or so, they briefly return back over the settled frontier. Initially they are supported by the other settlers, but every year the welcome is less friendly. Some blame their search for triggering retaliatory raids by the Comanches, others see them now as nothing more than the hated Comancheros, white renegades who trade and consort with the Indians.

Increasingly alienated from White society, how will they ever be able to return and settle down? Waiting for them on the settled side of the frontier is Laurie. She dreams of marrying Marty and rebuilding the Edwards place. In direct contrast to the Ford film, however, her love gradually sours over time. Sick of waiting and fearful of becoming an 'old maid' she gives up on the search ever being successful and marries another suitor. This is a bitter part of the journey for Marty, who had always selfishly assumed that she would wait, and he is shocked to find out that Laurie is no Penelope to his Odysseus.

To find Debbie, they have to deal with a range of untrustworthy guides. Their co-operation is gained through the offering of a large reward, though this brings additional problems. The trader Futterman may know something, but he

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<sup>42</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollins, 2001 [1954]); J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (London: HarperCollins, 2001 [1954]); J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: HarperCollins, 2001 [1955]).

tries to ambush and kill them to gain the reward. A Mexican rancher Jaime Rosas takes them deep into New Mexico to meet a Commanche chief who has taken a young captive White as his wife. They believe he is willing to trade her, but when they meet they realise the girl is not Debbie. Disillusioned, they finally decide to quit and return home. It has been five years. On their return, news comes from the deranged Lije Powers that Debbie is with a chief called Scar. Should they trust this news? They choose to begin the search again.

While their quest has a definite objective, their journey meanders through the south-west. They follow many spurious leads, really taking them in circles. At the end they find that the Commanches had easily avoided them, and even controlled their route. Their search ends only when the over-confident Scar chooses to reveal himself. They enter Scar's village and realise that they have been there many times before as traders. For all their searching, the Commanches have successfully hidden Scar and Debbie from them. They talk with Scar, who hates whites as they have killed all his sons. They meet Debbie, now 16-years-old. She tells them that Scar is her father, and that he rescued her from some other Indians and has raised her as a Commanche. She cannot remember being white. When Amos tells her that Scar killed her real father and mother, she refuses to believe them.

Scar has only revealed himself as he is preparing for a decisive battle with the cavalry and Texas Rangers. After an epic battle, Scar is defeated. Amos and Marty ride into the village. Amos rides after a Commanche girl he mistakes for Debbie. She shoots him as he picks her up to take her home. Amos is the sacrificial victim in this *katabasis*. Scarred by his hatred, he could never have returned to settled life. It is Marty who finds Debbie. She tells him that she does remember, and that she remembers it all.

Written in the 1950s, *The Searchers* has obvious Cold War overtones. Debbie's captor convinces her that he has rescued her, that he is now her father, and that her real relatives are liars. She tells Amos and Marty that their quest is wrong, that they are wrong, and that she is happy with her new life. In the vernacular of the fifties, she has been 'brainwashed.' Nor is she alone, as other children are being taken and similarly converted to an 'alien' way of life. Furthermore, the American authorities are powerless. Washington has been convinced by Quaker pacifists that they need to appease the Commanches and not use any force. It is only after five years of frontier warfare that this policy is reversed, and the cavalry can literally ride to the rescue of the settlers.

### ***The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Stieg Larsson, 2005)**

The final text, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, is an international best-seller and part of an emerging genre of crime fiction, labelled Scandinavian noir for

its bleak outlook, mirrored in its minimalist landscapes. Although somewhat lurid and arguably ‘pulp fiction,’ it is important to acknowledge that the *katabatic* underpinnings are as likely to be present in popular texts as in classic literature, and thus the former play a role in our understanding of travel.

Larsson’s *Millennium Trilogy* involves the journeys of two individuals, initially separately and later together: an investigative journalist, Mikael Blomkvist, who runs a magazine, *Millennium*, and a security expert, Lisbeth Salander. Both are lonely and alienated from society, but for different reasons. Blomkvist is divorced, has a long-standing but ultimately doomed love affair (“they had a connection as addictive as heroin”) with a married colleague, Erika Berger, and has just lost a court case for libel in relation to an industrialist whom he accused of fraud. He resigns from his position with the magazine, and feels humiliated in the eyes of those who saw him as a crusader for social justice. He is a lost soul, looking for a way to recapture meaning and purpose. The case he is called upon to solve metaphorically saves his life.

Salander is highly intelligent, but emotionally fragile. Like the actors in an ancient Greek drama, she wears a mask, which keeps her from engaging fully with the outside world. Her ‘look’ is a defence, involving confronting piercings and tattoos, dyed short hair, weird clothing, and ultra thinness: “She looked as though she had just emerged from a week-long orgy with a gang of hard rockers.” She has a job with a security firm and specialises in investigating people’s backgrounds and uncovering secrets, largely through hacking computers. Salander has a guardian appointed to look after her affairs, who rapes her and subjects her to degrading acts to get access to her own money. The scenes with her rapist are brutal and explicitly detailed. The fact that Salander turns the tables on her adversary shows her inner strength, as well as her willingness to return violence (“an eye for an eye”) and extract revenge, beyond what we might consider a normal response. We are never sure what this young woman is capable of, or how she will react to a situation.

The two join forces to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the granddaughter of Henrik Vanger, which took place at a family gathering on a small island in Sweden in the 1960s. The grandfather engages Blomkvist, who sees the exile as a way to escape the unwanted publicity about his libel trial and take his mind off his troubles. It will also provide him a generous salary to cover his debts. The attempted recovery of the missing girl is the first hint of a *katabatic* structure. Blomkvist goes to live on Hedeby Island while he is collecting information, requiring a journey by train and then across water. This acts as a demarcation<sup>43</sup> between his old and new lives. The island is a bleak wintry backwater for a man used to a free urban lifestyle in Stockholm (“It

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<sup>43</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.’

was eerily quiet”) and the bitterly cold weather saps his spirit (“At times he was on the brink of tears and toyed with taking the first train heading south”). His ‘banishment’ to the island is a form of descent.<sup>44</sup> It is ‘alien territory’<sup>45</sup>; initially unfathomable and replete with secrets. Blomkvist also ends up in jail for a few months, the ultimate social fall from grace. The island is largely deserted in the winter months, when the summer visitors have left, and is a kind of hell or realm of the dead, both figuratively and literally, as Blomkvist is later to find out. The bleak landscape matches the desolation that Blomkvist feels, isolated from his real work and his network, however unsatisfactory. He starts an affair with Cecilia Vanger, one of the missing girl’s family members, but one feels that this is purely temporary, an attempt at alleviating his *ennui* and emptiness.

The twist to the tale is that Harriet Vanger has run away and taken on an alias, to escape the clutches of her brother, the seemingly innocuous Martin Vanger. The genial veneer hid the monster within, just as the outward respectability of Hedeby Island masks a dreadful secret. Martin raped his sister and has followed in his father’s footsteps as the perpetrator of a spate of serial murders of women. Uncovering the truth involves painstaking attention to detail, and clever detective work. Maria de Lurdes Sampaio<sup>46</sup> argues that Blomkvist, like the Greek hero Theseus, must journey through a *labyrinth* of falsehoods and cover-ups, before destroying the source of evil. Salander is sometimes his guide, as is his daughter Pernilla, when she discerns the Biblical connection to the murders, but he also works alone, acting on instinct. Salander is more correctly categorised as his companion, the woman who traditionally assists the *katabatic* hero to achieve their goals.<sup>47</sup> He ends up in Martin’s basement, a symbolic cave in the *katabatic* tradition, where he is bound and gagged (“Blomkvist had opened the door to hell”). He confronts evil at its most visceral. We are given a graphic description of this ‘hellhole’; with its chains, restraints, video technology for recording the victims, and a steel cage. Salander rescues him, before chasing Martin’s car on her motorbike until he veers off the road and dies. She is inexorable in her determination to see him pay for his sins. As the *katabatic* narrative demands, one of the group must die.

The journey ends with Blomkvist and Salander returning to Stockholm. His reputation has been rehabilitated, as he is eventually able to prove the truth of his indictments against the financier, through the aegis of a book, *The Mafia*

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<sup>44</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell.’

<sup>45</sup> Sørensen, ‘Katabasis in Cormac McCarthy,’ p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Maria de Lurdes Sampaio, ‘Millennium Trilogy: Eye for Eye and the Utopia of Order in Modern Waste Lands,’ *Cross-Cultural Communication*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2011), pp. 73-81.

<sup>47</sup> Holtmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.’

*Banker*, and the subsequent media exposure it attracts. The book is a form of catharsis, which allows him to move on from the events of the past, and “was animated by a fury that no reader could help but notice.” Blomkvist also has the moral satisfaction of knowing that his work has led to the rapprochement of Harriet Vanger with her grandfather, and prevented further evil being committed through the death of Martin Vanger. His work has given him back his self-respect and achieved closure.<sup>48</sup> Blomkvist can therefore be reintegrated into society; another classic element of the *katabasis*.<sup>49</sup> He also becomes closer to his formerly estranged daughter, and develops a close relationship with Salander, which brings comfort to both. It could be argued that Blomkvist is ‘born again’ with a new self-identity.<sup>50</sup> He is the traveller who has endured and triumphed over adversity. While “the katabatic hero often wins a bride following his underworld journey,”<sup>51</sup> Blomkvist has learnt through his trials that he can function alone and does not need a permanent mate to make him happy.

Salander’s life is also changed, but not necessarily for the better. Like Blomkvist, there is a symbolic rebirth. She cleans out her flat, and, in so doing, starts to put into order her previously anarchic existence:

She dragged out a total of six black rubbish bags and twenty paper bags full of newspapers. She felt as if she had decided to start a new life. She thought about buying a new apartment – when she found something suitable – but for now her old place would be more dazzlingly clean than she could ever remember.

There is also a partial reintegration into society<sup>52</sup>; the outsider taking the first steps towards feeling accepted. Salander has formed a bond of trust with Blomkvist, one of the few non-dysfunctional relationships she has enjoyed in her life. He does not judge her, and sees behind the defences she uses to protect herself from others. She realises, however, that he does not share the intensity of her feelings: “It could not possibly work out. What did he need her for? ... When he asked her if anything was wrong, she gave him a neutral, uncomprehending look.” She later visits him to bare her soul, only to find him with his former lover, Erika Berger. Salander is left alone, in the swirling snow. Her other crisis involves the crime she has committed. She has harnessed her hacking talents and ability to disguise herself to transfer approximately 2.5 billion Swedish kroner from the offshore accounts of the corrupt financier to her own. This wealth is likely to be temporary, which

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<sup>48</sup> Rawson, ‘To Hell with Ya.’

<sup>49</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell.’

<sup>50</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell.’

<sup>51</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell,’ p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Clauss, ‘Descent into Hell.’

Holtsmark conceptualises as an “anti-katabasis.”<sup>53</sup> In the next book in the series, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, she is on the run from the police. Her *katabatic* journey has left her defenceless and vulnerable, and in a sense she “has never really escaped from the harrowing journey to hell.”<sup>54</sup>

## Discussion

The use of the *katabasis* occurs across a broad sweep of genres and its mythic dimension is also the source of its universality.<sup>55</sup> As Holtsmark argues: “The appeal of the katabasis type is freed from any kind of anchoring in specific cultural traditions.”<sup>56</sup> This is the background to its power as a narrative device and the potentially broad influence it may have on travel imaginings. Hell may be a physical place, as experienced by the child protagonists in *His Dark Materials*, who venture to the world of the dead to rescue their friend. It may also be emotional or metaphorical, in the case of *The Searchers* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, where the hero and/or heroine experiences a kind of living hell or meets those with hellish intentions or lifestyles. The realm of the dead can be experienced through “the psychological suffering and purification of the protagonist.”<sup>57</sup>

In all three texts, the journeys undertaken are not easy, but they are enriching and purposeful in their hardships. These travellers are not *flâneurs*, strolling about and seeing the sights, nor are they hedonists. The travel experience is portrayed as raw, precarious, and authentically challenging. The traveller is not sheltered within a bubble, nor protected from the visceral qualities of life. They are immersed in what they are doing, and survive through self-reliance, as well as the relationships they develop with their fellow travellers. The latter could be characterised as *communitas*, “an essential and generic human bond” based on shared experience.<sup>58</sup> There is a transcendent quality to these relationships, exemplified by the bond between Lyra and Will in *His Dark Materials*, or Salander and Blomkvist in *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*. In both these cases, the connection between the travellers is so intense and extraordinary that it blossoms into love.

Ritual elements of the *katabasis* can be understood within the framework of the modern travel experience. They suggest that travel involves

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<sup>53</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.’

<sup>54</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema,’ p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

<sup>56</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema,’ p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> Sørensen, ‘Katabasis in Cormac McCarthy,’ p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p. 250.



both an inner and outer journey, with the traveller forced to turn inward to cope with circumstances, as well as seeking the assistance of others, including the guide. These journeys offer opportunities for self-actualisation, what Dean MacCannell calls the search for “an Absolute Other,”<sup>59</sup> in that the individual discovers more about themselves and what they are capable of. While Christoph Hennig labels this merely a “modern myth” of travel,<sup>60</sup> it has been found to be both an important motivation and outcome of travel in a number of different contexts, including adventure travel, volunteer tourism, and religious tourism.<sup>61</sup>

The *katabatic* structure also helps to explain why difficult or dangerous travel can paradoxically be so pleasurable; why we endlessly discuss with our friends and neighbours the intricate and often highly personal details of holiday illnesses, missed connections, rude hosts, and substandard accommodation. Deep down, as we witness in the books we read and the films we watch, we realise that these experiences are *good for us*: “the pattern speaks to something deeply human.”<sup>62</sup> Travel teaches us self-reliance and a greater understanding of the world around us, as well as of ourselves and our capabilities and weaknesses. We must sometimes sacrifice something in the process, even if it is only our pride or sense of superiority. The importance of a guide or insider knowledge is emphasised in these narratives, which suggests that we need to reach out to others, which is part of the socialisation of travel. There is also the need for endurance, to realise that challenges are part and parcel of the travel ritual, but not the whole story. The benefits realised through travel are multifarious, and the traveller may be irrevocably changed.

While some of these elements might be disputed in their general application to all tourists (Edward Bruner, for example, argues that few travel experiences are truly transformational<sup>63</sup>), this is the promise that books deliver through the mechanism of the *katabatic* narrative. In this way, we are

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<sup>59</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Christoph Hennig, ‘Tourism: Enacting Modern Myths,’ in *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World*, ed. Graham Dann (Wallingford: CABI, 2002), pp. 169-187.

<sup>61</sup> Jorge Gutic, Eliza Caie, and Andy Clegg, ‘In Search of Heterotopia? Motivations of Visitors to an English Cathedral,’ *International Journal of Tourism Research*, vol. 12, no. 6 (2010), pp. 750-760; Jennifer H. Laing and Geoffrey I. Crouch, ‘Frontier Tourism: Retracing Mythic Journeys,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2011), pp. 1516-1534; Pekka Mustonen, ‘Volunteer Tourism: Postmodern Pilgrimage?,’ *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2006), pp. 160-177.

<sup>62</sup> Holtsmark, ‘The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema,’ p. 49.

<sup>63</sup> Edward M. Bruner, ‘Transformation of Self in Tourism,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1991), pp. 238-250.

preconditioned to seeing the process and experience of travel as potentially problematic and risky, but also hugely satisfying and meaningful. The return home is an important part of the journey, and may lead the traveller to seek another quest, armed with the knowledge that they have overcome obstacles and thrived on exposure to the unknown.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we analysed three books using the Greek *katabasis* as a theoretical framework or lens, to assist in understanding more deeply how travel is portrayed and represented in literature, and how this colours or frames<sup>64</sup> readers' perceptions of the travel experience. These narratives suggest that travel can often be purposeful, and involve struggles or challenges, which must be overcome. The guide or companion is often integral to the success of the journey. The return home is a time of reflection, when the traveller realises what they have gained (or lost) and how they have been changed or transformed by what they have seen or done.

These themes are presented to us as children and through our adult lives, when we read these books, and absorb them unwittingly and perhaps subconsciously. They implant in us a certain way of understanding travel and perhaps create the stirrings of a desire to travel. The *katabasis* also gives these narratives an emotional intensity that makes them cinematically powerful story arcs.<sup>65</sup> It is no coincidence that these three books have been adapted into generally highly successful films, some with multiple versions over the years.

The power of books and their link with travel is an important social and cultural phenomenon, which warrants further research, building on prior studies in the context of guidebooks,<sup>66</sup> and travel brochures and photographs.<sup>67</sup> The concept of the *katabasis* can be used to analyse other genres of fiction, and may provide a useful tool for understanding the essence of these stories. They might also help to explain why we gravitate towards certain stories and their enduring popularity across the generations. In a tourism context, it can be argued that all books involve some kind of journey or "movement,"<sup>68</sup> and thus these mythic elements tell us something about the complexity of travel, and how we feel about it and approach it, both as children and as adults. The

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<sup>64</sup> Young, 'Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia.'

<sup>65</sup> Clauss, 'Descent into Hell'; Holtsmark, 'The Katabasis Theme in Modern Cinema.'

<sup>66</sup> Young, 'Framing Experiences of Aboriginal Australia.'

<sup>67</sup> Jenkins, 'Photography and Travel Brochures.'

<sup>68</sup> Dan Vogel, 'A Lexicon Rhetoricae for "Journey" Literature,' *College English*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1974), pp. 185-189.

*katabatic* narrative might also be a useful lens for exploring a swathe of tourist behaviour, including travel motivations and the way we experience travel.