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“Oh, my friend, those weren’t angels”: Trauma, Recovery and Folklore in *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* and *Spectred Isle* by KJ Charles

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Abstract: Trauma and recovery have been explored more and more frequently in popular literary genres. Despite the positive and uplifting disposition of the romance genre, romance novels do not shy away from depictions of even the most gruesome traumatic experiences. The romance genre’s requirement of an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending and the structure of a romance novel make the genre a suitable medium for the exploration of trauma and recovery. In the subgenre of paranormal romance, i.e. non-mimetic fiction, the presence of supernatural elements allows for a specific portrayal of trauma inflicted by and healing induced by the supernatural. The supernatural and the human is put in juxtaposition, exposing communities’ and individuals’ role in trauma and recovery. I use this lens for close reading of two m/m paranormal romance novels by KJ Charles, *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* (2015) and *Spectred Isle* (2017). First, I discuss the presence of trauma and recovery in the romance genre and specifically in the subgenre of paranormal romance. In the following analysis, I focus on three themes through which trauma and recovery are explored in Charles’s novels: trauma related to WWI, traumatic and healing initiation into the supernatural and the role of found family in recovery.

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As Robert Eaglestone says in his chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, "some critics have argued or even assumed that trauma can only be represented in complex, challenging and, even perhaps, modernist or postmodernist forms" (290). Although the popular romance genre is often perceived as insignificant in literary terms, various kinds of individual and social trauma and their aftermath are often explored in detail in romance novels. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the positive and uplifting disposition of the genre, romance novels do not shy away from depictions of even the most gruesome traumatic experiences, including child abuse, sexual abuse, injuries, natural disasters, war- and slavery-related trauma, and trauma related to continuous oppression of marginalized groups, either recounted in a protagonist's backstory or happening directly in the story. However, it is exactly the romance genre's requirement of "an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (as defined by Romance Writers of America) and the structure of a romance novel that make the genre a suitable medium and a safe space for the exploration of trauma and recovery. After all, "there are many different ways of being challenged by a literary text other than by, say, lexical or syntactic obscurity" (Eaglestone 291). While I do not claim in any way that romance novels cannot challenge their readers in terms of their lexical and syntactic opacity or complexity of narrative organisation, the prominence of an emotional over literary impact is unquestionable. The representation of trauma is one of the ways in which this emotional impact is present in romance.

Trauma has become "a universally recognized diagnostic category, but it has also emerged as a category of social discourse that has a strongly moral significance" (Davis and Meretoja 3). I understand the concept of trauma as "a delayed response to an overwhelming event that cannot be processed at the time of its occurrence but manifests itself through intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or nightmares" with the specification that "trauma is a psychophysical experience, even when the traumatic event causes no direct bodily harm" (Davis and Meretoja 4; Rothschild 5). I prefer this definition for its stress on the belatedness of the traumatic response and for its use of the subjective expression *overwhelming event* instead of *tragic* or *disastrous event*, which allows for an individual response to the event in question without judgement on its appropriateness.

In this paper, I explore how trauma and recovery are employed in two m/m paranormal romance novels by KJ Charles. Formerly an editor for Mills & Boon, KJ Charles is a prolific British author who writes mainly historical romance with or without paranormal elements. The pairings in most of her novels are m/m but her backlist also contains f/f, f/m, or nonbinary/m couples.[1] Her novels have been both self-published and traditionally published with Samhain Publishing, Loveswept, and Sourcebooks. The two novels I analyse here, *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* (2015, further abbreviated to *The Secret Casebook*) and *Spectred Isle* (2017), were published at the beginning of the wave of m/m paranormal romance novels with a similarly strong focus on the folklore of British Isles[2]—a wave that at the time of writing this article (2024) has not yet ebbed.

The Secret Casebook is set in several decades at the turn of the 20th century, *Spectred Isle* a generation later in the interwar period. The novels are loosely connected through recurring characters but can be read as stand-alones. There was supposed to be at least one more novel following *Spectred Isle,* but it has been put indefinitely on hold. *The Secret Casebook* is a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, a series of interconnected short stories (cases) narrated in the first person by "Watson" Robert Caldwell. The individual stories can stand alone, as each case is wrapped up, but together they narrate the love story of the main couple

over decades. The book opens with a note to Robert's editor, in which Robert hands over the cases for publication after his death. *Spectred Isle* is written in an alternating dual third-person point of view and follows the traditional novel form. The novels' universe is steeped in British folklore, the veil between worlds is thin, and ghosts and other entities from myths and legends are real, even though they are mostly kept secret from the general public. Although the novels are set in the same supernatural universe, each focuses on a different aspect of it: *The Secret Casebook* is focused mostly (but not solely) on hauntings and *Spectred Isle* is more concerned with other supernatural folkloric entities. Both novels also differ from the traditional paranormal romance which "usually makes the vampire or other paranormal entity the hero or heroine" (Jass 213). All the main characters are human, although they do possess some kind of supernatural ability by the end of the novel, thus the novels only partially have "what has become a common trait in most examples of the genre as it is known today: the 'otherness' of one or both of the protagonists" (Ramos-García 141).

Psychological and physical trauma and recovery caused to individuals and communities by both natural and supernatural means are the focus of the novels. I argue that the juxtaposition of the supernatural and the human, inherent to the paranormal genre, is purposefully put to the forefront in these two novels in order to show—and allow fresh perception of—how institutions, communities and individuals cause or influence trauma and recovery.

Literature on Trauma in Popular Romance

Literary trauma studies are a young but quickly developing field of study that is already in its second wave, moving from a psychoanalytic poststructural approach that treated trauma as "unspeakable void" to a semiotic approach that focuses more "on the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experience" (Balaev 1, 3). Although the majority of scholarship is focused on reflection of trauma in literary fiction, works on trauma in popular romance have emerged as well. *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (2013) edited by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega explores trauma as is expressed in romance, although they treat romance in a broader sense as a mode, not genre, and only a few of the studies included (such as "Romance, Trauma and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love" by Lynne Pearce) focus on analysis of popular romance fiction or adjacent fiction with a romance-focused plot.

In analyses of popular romance novels, trauma is explored predominantly in two areas: rape in older romance novels, and war-related PTSD. See for example the article "'Do you think I haven't paid for what I did?': Rape in the Mills & Boon Romantic Novels of Penny Jordan" (2023) by Valerie Grace Derbyshire that explores, among others, rape trauma syndrome and witnesses' trauma. Jayashree Kamblé in "Patriotism, Passion, and PTSD: The Critique of War in Popular Romance Fiction" (in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, 2012) analyses the tension between patriotism and the happy ending required for traumatized warriors in US romances, arguing that "the warrior romance reconstructs the social unconscious that is in fact a critique of American patriotic aggression" (Chapter 11). Veronica Kitchen in "Veterans and Military Masculinity in Popular Romance Fiction" (2018) explores the portrayal of soldiers' grief and PTSD in contemporary romance

novels from the point of view of international security studies. Stacy E. Holden and Charity Tabol in "In Sickness and In Health: Representations of PTSD in Post-9/11 Romance Novels" (2015) analyse the depiction of PTSD in contemporary novels and argue that they advance "misinformation about combat-related PTSD," thus provide "a false hope that those suffering from combat trauma can be rehabilitated quickly by means of both public concern and monogamous love."

Trauma and Recovery in the Romance Genre and Paranormal Romance Subgenre

There are several reasons why the romance genre is so well suited for the exploration of trauma and recovery. First, to reach its Happily Ever After (further abbreviated as HEA) or Happy for Now (HFN), the story needs a conflict and obstacles for the central couple to overcome or come to terms with, which trauma and recovery can provide. Second, the structure of a romance novel allows for an in-depth and unhurried exploration of the protagonists' feelings, thoughts, and development. Both the traumatic experience and the recovery process can thus be observed firsthand, as "the reader is close to the protagonist and shares most of [their] perceptions and ponderings" (Ganteau 139). Third, the protagonist's journey towards recovery presents an emotionally satisfying arc that can be synchronised with the overall emotional arc of the romance novel, culminating in the HEA. Although the romances frequently include narratives of—often miraculous—cures[3] of disability and trauma that determine the HEA, it is important to note that, given the average timeframe covered by a romance novel, the HEA in this case does not have to mean a complete recovery on the part of the protagonist. It can, instead, include acceptance of the protagonist's traumatic experience and of its persisting psychological and physical symptoms by their love interest(s) and/or by a wider social circle of friends and/or family. The guaranteed HEA also provides a safe emotional space for the reader, regardless of how the protagonist's trauma plotline is ended.

The Romance Writers of America define paranormal romance as "Romance novels in which fantasy worlds or paranormal or science fiction elements are an integral part of the plot." In real life, supernatural elements and beliefs are sidelined to the realm of folklore, whereas in paranormal fiction they are incorporated into the narrative as an existing, fully-fledged part of the fictional world. The presence of supernatural elements and the permeability of the barrier between this and other worlds allow for a specific portrayal of trauma the supernatural can inflict and of healing it can induce. The trauma that the supernatural can inflict is not restricted by laws of nature or physics and goes beyond human understanding. Protagonists can experience moments of cosmic horror and endure physical and mental torture the human body and mind would normally not be able to sustain. On the other hand, the supernatural can also heal the protagonists' trauma, injuries, and illnesses, even those that would normally be terminal.

In juxtaposition with the trauma inflicted by human causation, the presence of the supernatural can be used for the *enstrangement* of issues that people no longer properly perceive, by drawing attention to them in a way that is not readily available to mimetic fiction. In *The Secret Casebook* and *Spectred Isle*, the exploration of trauma can be observed

in three specific thematic areas: the war, the initiation into the supernatural, and the found family, i.e., “the supportive family we adopt outside our biological family” (Stitt 183). I will analyse these thematic areas separately because each of them brings forward specific issues.

Trauma Related to WWI

To set a romance novel temporally before, during or after WWI, as Charles did, means making the HEA particularly fragile, both due to the immediate dangers and due to the threat of WWII looming on the horizon. On the other hand, it reflects reality because people find romantic love against all odds even in the direst circumstances. It also provides an opportunity for the presence of a traumatized hero.

Both analysed novels revolve heavily around the first world war: *The Secret Casebook* spans decades and ends during wartime, and *Spectred Isle* takes place in its aftermath. In the novels, the already horrid war has been further complicated and worsened by the existence of the occult, which has been used as a weapon. Most of the characters in the novels are at some point traumatized by being dragged into the war, either conscripted as ordinary soldiers or forced by government officials who want to use their occult abilities.

In *The Secret Casebook*, the found family around the main couple is torn apart by the war. Its members have been either conscripted or forced to flee to prevent being used by the government. The ghost-hunter Simon Feximal and his assistant and lover Robert Caldwell are blackmailed into participating in the war by a government official who uses “a threat of prosecution for sodomy and the attendant humiliation, shame and gaol” against them (Charles, *The Secret* 234). Although they are forced to the front, they refuse “to take an active part in this evil,” so they become conscientious objectors on the front line, “fighting the symptoms because [they] will not be the cause” (235). Being on the battlefield surrounded by so much death traumatizes them both physically and mentally because they have been altered through occult experiments to be perceptive to ghosts: the ghosts communicate their trauma, rage, and sorrow by writing on Simon’s skin, causing him pain, and Robert has had a cartouche implanted in his hand to redirect Simon’s pain on himself and save Simon from dying. They fully expect not to survive the war, but in the fictional editor’s note that closes the novel, it is revealed that they are listed as missing in action with no bodies found and it is strongly hinted that they managed to escape and retire somewhere with no ghosts around where they can recover and live their HEA.

Saul Lazenby, the protagonist of *Spectred Isle*, carries the trauma of disgrace. When stationed in Mesopotamia, he fell in love with a local man, who was in fact an Ottoman agent, using Saul to gain information about the garrison town, which the Ottomans then attacked. Saul was subsequently court-martialled, flogged, and jailed for two years. At the end of this ordeal, he was offered a bullet to kill himself. His family disowned him, his friends deserted him, and he lost all prospects for his career in archaeology. Saul has been unable to forgive himself, although he served his sentence, and is convinced that he does not deserve anything good ever again. He does not even socialize in pubs “because it seemed unjust to impose himself under false pretences” (Charles, *Spectred* 65). His sense of self-worth is diminished, and he lives in a constant state of expecting “terrible things to happen” to the point where “it’s almost a relief when they do” (109).

The other protagonist, Randolph Glyde, is an occultist, the last living member of a powerful family whose ancient duty was to protect England. The family was conscripted into the war and every single one of them except for Randolph died in a horrid way, "their lungs turned to glass," during the Great Summoning, in which the occultists were used to raise the entities from behind the veil between worlds:

> "You mean the Angels of Mons?"
> "Those weren't angels," Randolph said. "Oh, my friend, those weren't angels. That was the first Great Summoning. We started it there, the British. We—arcanists who ought to have known better, under direction of generals who ought to have been shot—we summoned things that should never have been in unimaginable quantities. And we ripped the veil to shreds." (Charles, *Spectred* 114, 95)

Here Charles subverts the famous patriotic Angels of Mons legend. This widely believed legend stems from the paranormal short story "The Bowmen" by Arthur Machen, "in which archers from the 1415 Battle of Agincourt appeared to help the beleaguered British Army in 1914" (Clarke 10). The fictional story was published in September 1914 and quickly began to spread as a real story. Machen himself was appalled but it could not be stopped: "by spring 1915 it was becoming unpatriotic not to believe in the Angels of Mons (219). Charles effectively dismisses this "scenario straight out of late-Victorian England, a mix of parish piety and imperial flag-waving" (230). Changing the supposed angels to monsters summoned by arcanists on the order of military authorities transforms the story into one of governmental and military greed, in line with the loud and clear anti-war message of the novel. By using magic as a weapon capable of causing even more horrid injuries and lasting and possibly irreparable damage to the post-war world, she defamiliarizes the narratives of war and power's greed for more power, towards which it is possible to become numb due to sheer familiarity, thus allowing readers to feel horror and anger afresh.

Randolph emerges from the war lonely, grieving, and guilt-ridden. His guilt and grief cause him to bottle up his feelings and withdraw behind a mask of sarcasm and hardness which begins to crack only when he and Saul are nudged to open up and actually talk to each other about their traumatic experiences while being caught together in a liminal time and space loop in the fens, "neither land nor water, endless and empty and eternal" (Charles, *Spectred* 105). In the absence of professional therapy or pharmaceutical intervention, talking to a person who does not judge or pity and is able to understand the traumatic experience is the next best thing, allowing trauma survivors to ascribe "some form of meaning to their traumatic experience(s). . . . first, privately, through the construction of a coherent, listenable narrative of a traumatic experience, and second, publicly, by sharing that narrative through a testimonial act" (Jensen 73). The supernatural trap that exposes the protagonists to unknown dangers at the same time creates a space in which they can get close, emotionally and physically, as they are safe from the human gaze that could bring them under arrest.

Traumatic and Healing Initiation into the Supernatural

In both novels, the main couple consists of one protagonist who is an expert in the supernatural into which they have been initiated in childhood, and one who is a novice made aware of its existence by a chance encounter and who then has to be initiated into the supernatural world.

Initiations are usually performed through rites of passage. In real life as well as in fiction, regardless of the presence of the supernatural, rites of passage have a strong potential to cause physical and mental trauma to the novices. According to the theory of ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, later broadened by Victor Turner, there are "three phases in a rite of passage: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*" (Turner 56, original italics). During the transitional, so-called liminal phase:

> The bizarre becomes the normal, and through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes, the novices are induced to think (and think hard) about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted. The novices are taught that they did not know what they thought they knew. Beneath the surface structure of custom was a deep structure, whose rules they had to learn, through paradox and shock. (73)

In worlds where the supernatural is real but hidden, the above-mentioned recombinations are literally monstrous and fantastic, the deep structure is at odds with the cultural customs and the novices cannot return to the society as they knew it before. On the other hand, they bring with them a fresh point of view different to those of the experienced and are able to question the necessity of how things are done.

In *The Secret Casebook*, Robert's first initiation is rather unusual. His inherited manor is haunted, and he calls for Simon, a ghost-hunter. Robert's ancestor haunts the manor because he was shot dead in the middle of bedding a man and stayed locked in this trauma. What the ghost needs to rest in peace is to climax and he achieves that by forcing Simon and Robert into intercourse right in front of his portrait. The ghost is able "to direct the actions of the living as it desires" only because in this case "the living share the same desires" (Charles, *The Secret* 11). The ghost, although invisible, participates in the intercourse as well and when he climaxes, his story is concluded and the haunting ends. Although it is an intense and potentially traumatic scene, their consent is ensured throughout, nobody is harmed, and it has a humorous undercurrent in Robert's dry narration.

Simon's initiation is much more traumatic. He and his adoptive sister Theodosia were forcibly initiated into the supernatural as children when they were used for occult experiments by Theodosia's father, Karswell, in order to become his divination tools. The experiments were cruel and painful, and the trauma has made Simon into a reclusive, private man, who is unable to ask for help. When the writing on Simon's skin starts carving its way through his flesh and he is slowly dying in pain, Robert turns to the malicious Karswell for help and has a cartouche implanted in his hand to be able to act as Simon's lightning

conductor and redirect the pain to himself. Robert is thus drawn even deeper into the occult and linked through the trauma of a forced body modification with Simon and Theodosia.

In *Spectred Isle*, Saul is initiated among the Green Men, a diverse group of people of various professions and various supernatural abilities—such as clairvoyance or ability to see and summon ghosts and other entities—who protect England from supernatural threats. The initiation is done through a series of rites of passage that have their roots in folklore. During his first rite of passage—although at that moment it is not perceived as such—he is given water from Camlet Moat's holy well and has his face washed with a handkerchief which is then tied to a tree. The belief of clootie wells is common in the British Isles: "the individual would dip the rag into the well water and wipe the area of affliction prior to hanging the clootie to the tree" (Varner 71). When the cloth rots away, the affliction rots away with it. This rite symbolically starts Saul's recovery from the trauma that stems from his disgrace during the War. However, the scene is not explicitly set up as magic healing. Even Saul himself feels it to be more like a placebo, that nevertheless helps him to look at his situation differently thanks to Randolph's kindness and compassion where the law and society had failed him:

> Saul was a man of science; he would never, even alone, have given in to the urge to make a superstitious gesture. Glyde had dirtied a fine pair of trousers to soak that handkerchief, and done it in such a priestly way that Saul had been left with a feeling of something almost like absolution. It was a comfort, even if an illusory one, to imagine his sin and shame rotting away with the cloth, and Glyde had given him that when other men had spat. (Charles, *Spectred* 47)

As Saul progresses through the initiation, he regains both a community and a sense of purpose. His final rite of passage symbolically frees him from his past. He has to avert a threat to England and restore the balance disturbed by an attempt to desecrate a holy well at Camlet Moat whose protector he became. He achieves this by sacrificing a lead bullet he has been wearing around his neck since his release from jail—a bullet he was offered to kill himself with. For Saul, it has been a symbol of "death and shame and failure, loss and betrayal, unspeakable, unbearable grief which he'd lived in order to carry. . . . It was so heavy he could barely lift it" (Charles, *Spectred* 227). By throwing the bullet into the well, the weight of his trauma is symbolically lifted.

As a young man, Randolph had to suffer through an excruciatingly painful ritual to be able to perform the ancient duty he had inherited: he was suspended from a tree by hooks through his shoulders for nine days and nights, similarly to Odin's self-sacrifice on the Yggdrasill, the World Tree. However, Randolph's sacrifice is not exactly voluntary, but instead is imposed on him by his father and the twenty-two generations of Glydes behind him: "It mattered enough for my father to put the hooks in my shoulders, and for me to let him. It was unthinkable not to" (Charles, *Spectred* 131). The awareness of the ritual's necessity had put a strain on Randolph's relationship with his father. He would have later been forced into a marriage of convenience with his cousin Theresa to produce an heir (had she not died during the war), and had considered himself lucky that Theresa resented the idea of traditional marriage as much as he did: "they'd both be happy with a practical arrangement, pleasure to be taken elsewhere. . . . He'd have grown old with his best friend and considered himself blessed" (55-56). Randolph perceives his inability to carry on with

that duty—a duty that everyone else in the know rightly considers monstrous—as a failure: "I'm sorry that I'm going to fail at everything because I can't—the idea of having a child, of doing that, explaining—I can't" (131).

Randolph has been traumatized by the ritual physically and mentally: he suffers from chronic weather-sensitive pain in his shoulders, and the unnatural symmetrical scars on both sides of his shoulders that "looked more like reptile skin than human" have been "one of the many reasons Randolph liked to fuck fully clothed, standing up, preferably with men he didn't know" (Charles, *Spectred* 169, 168). Saul is the first man in front of whom Randolph is reluctantly willing to expose the scars and let him touch, observing and touching in turn scars on Saul's back caused by the flogging.

As with the war, employing the supernatural in the portrayal of child abuse of Simon and Randolph brings the issue of abuse and the lasting damage it causes to the forefront of attention. Magic in hands of malevolent individuals can cause untold cruelty but it is shown that even supposedly good people are willing to perpetuate cruelty and abuse in the name of tradition or to protect the status quo instead of finding an alternative solution. The series of events that have drawn the protagonists together let them see their own suffering from a different perspective as cruel and imposed, not normal or deserved. Their various physical and psychological scars are exposed to scrutiny and accepted. Both couples emerge from the chain of events with the newly acquired understanding that they do not have to carry their burdens alone because that is what a community, no matter how small, is for.

Found Family and Recovery

One specific kind of community with the power to facilitate healing, which is often found in romance, especially in novels whose protagonists do not for some reason fit into existing social structures and institutions, is found family. To its members, found family can substitute for missing or estranged family of origin and provide "connection, adoption and kinship" and a safe space to deal with trauma and to be themselves without judgement (Stitt 373). This is especially important for marginalized people because of *minority stress*. The term was coined by Virginia R. Brooks in the book *Minority Stress and Lesbian Women* (1981), and later developed into the minority stress theory. Minority stress is caused by:

> . . . the cultural ascription of inferior status to particular groups. This ascription of defectiveness to various categories of people, particularly categories based on sex, race, and sociosexual preference, often precipitates negative life events for the minority member over which the individual has little control. (Brooks 71)

When it comes to working through trauma, there is an additional layer of difficulty for marginalized people that "stems from the hermeneutical marginalization to which they are subjected because they have been denied equal participation in the collective meaning-making practices of society at large," therefore they cannot articulate "their experiences in meaningful ways to others" (Marquart 169). In queer historical romances set during the times of legal oppression of LGBTQ+ relationships, found family has one more important

function: making the HEA more believable, solid, and sometimes even possible, by building a network of support and resources and thus creating a bubble of society that "reconstituted itself around the new couple" when the "corrupt" society at large cannot be reformed (Regis 38, 14).

Found families in paranormal fiction are even more special. Their members can be united by their supernatural abilities, their need for secrecy or hiding from the public, or rejection of a former way of life. The members of found families in both of Charles's novels are united by their involvement in the occult business, are used to keeping secrets, and have been through rites of passage, such as those mentioned above, thus they have seen how arbitrary the cultural customs and societal conventions can be. After facing occult horrors and entities that other people consider mere folktales, mundane laws lose their significance.

In *The Secret Casebook*, Robert becomes a member of a household shared by Simon and his stepsister Theodosia. Simon and Theodosia are united by their occult knowledge but also by their childhood trauma as already mentioned. When Robert saves Simon by redirecting his pain on himself, he is united in suffering with the rest of his found family. Theodosia is indifferent to the exact nature of Simon and Robert's relationship: "Theodosia might remark it if I laid you over the dining-room table at suppertime. But only to request that we did not spill her soup. She is not concerned with such things. . . . She would like me to be happy, and she finds you amusing" (Charles, *The Secret* 122). The house in Fetter Lane is a safe space for those reclusive characters and their secrets and is suited to their need to withdraw from company—to the point that Robert finds it oppressive at the beginning, resembling "the lair of some excessively industrious Blackbeard" (99). Towards the novel's end, the atmosphere is enlivened because Simon and Robert adopt two orphans, Sam and his sibling Jo, a soothsayer. After the war that has torn apart their found family, only Sam Caldwell stays in Fetter Lane.

In *Spectred Isle*, that same house becomes a home for another found family, created by Sam, who "opened the house to the rest of their group because . . . he found its emptiness unbearable" (Charles, *Spectred* 49). Aside from the involvement in the occult, members of this found family are also united by their hatred of the government that destroyed and traumatized them and their nearest and dearest. Sam offered rooms to Barney and Isaacs, two former soldiers and the only people who survived a military occult experiment intended to create "a battalion of abominations" (222). In their case, having a safe space means that they need to be locked up if they suffer from a fit because they are dangerous to their surroundings during those, but the fact that this is accepted and accommodated allows them to feel as normal as possible.

At the end of the novel, Saul is offered lodgings by Sam, a safe space for him and his relationship with Randolph: "nobody will give a damn if Randolph's here for breakfast, or indeed if you're not. What I mean is, feel free to conduct your personal business as you choose. . . . But amongst us, it's Liberty Hall" (Charles, *Spectred* 230). Although it is still difficult for his *too good to be true* traumatic response, he is now able to accept that he does not have to pay rent and that he will receive a monthly stipend from Randolph as the other Green Men do. What is the most important factor in his continuing recovery is that he is fully accepted to his new found family and his disgrace does not matter at all:

> And there they were, four chaps at home in their shared lodgings, passing a few idle hours in companionable quiet. Saul was disgraced, Barney and Max

> were apparently monsters, God knew what Sam might be; and it seemed that none of those things mattered. . . . He had no idea what fresh horrors his bizarre new life might hold, but whatever the price would be, he'd pay it. For acceptance and perhaps even friendship; for a place to fill and a job to do. (231-232)

The HEA for Saul does not lie only in the love confession and the promise of a future life with Randolph, but also in the acquisition of a safe space—in the material form of a closely guarded home as well as the immaterial form of a found family—for his recovery.

Conclusion

To conclude, Charles's use of supernatural folkloric elements and beliefs as an existing part within the novels' fictional world purposefully draws attention both to the positive and negative role of institutions, communities and individuals in trauma infliction and subsequent recovery. Through the exploration of trauma and recovery as related to the war, the initiation to the supernatural and the found family, it has been shown that what causes the most trauma in these novels is not the supernatural itself, but the supernatural in human hands. The actions of malicious or greedy and power-hungry individuals and the government are made even more extreme and monstrous with the possibility to use the supernatural for their gain. However, the supernatural can cause damage even in the hands of supposedly good people if they choose to use it for abuse in the name of tradition. The existence of the supernatural also highlights the bigotry and narrow-mindedness of society and the arbitrariness of societal norms. Against that, as an antidote, stand romantic love and devotion, and found family, which provides a safe space for recovery from trauma and substitutes for the missing family of origin and other social institutions that are either defunct or hostile towards its members. In Charles's novels, the capacity for understanding and acceptance of the found family members is increased by their involvement in the occult.

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[1] These acronyms denote the main characters' gender: m/m means two men, f/f two women, m/f is a man and a woman, and nonbinary/m means a nonbinary person with a man.

[2] This wave includes (and is limited only by my knowledge to) *Seven Summer Nights* (Harper Fox, 2016), *Salt Magic, Skin Magic* (Lee Welch, 2018), *The Greenhollow* duology (Emily Tesh, 2019-20), *The Faerie Hounds of York* (Arden Powell, 2020), *Oak King, Holly King* (Sebastian Nothwell, 2022), and the *Last Binding* trilogy (Freya Marske, 2021-23).

[3] For a nuanced analysis of cure narratives in romance, see Cheyne 135-160.

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