



IT BEGAN WITH CAIN

Why Violence in Literature Cannot and Should Not Be Banned

BY PHIL LAMARCHE

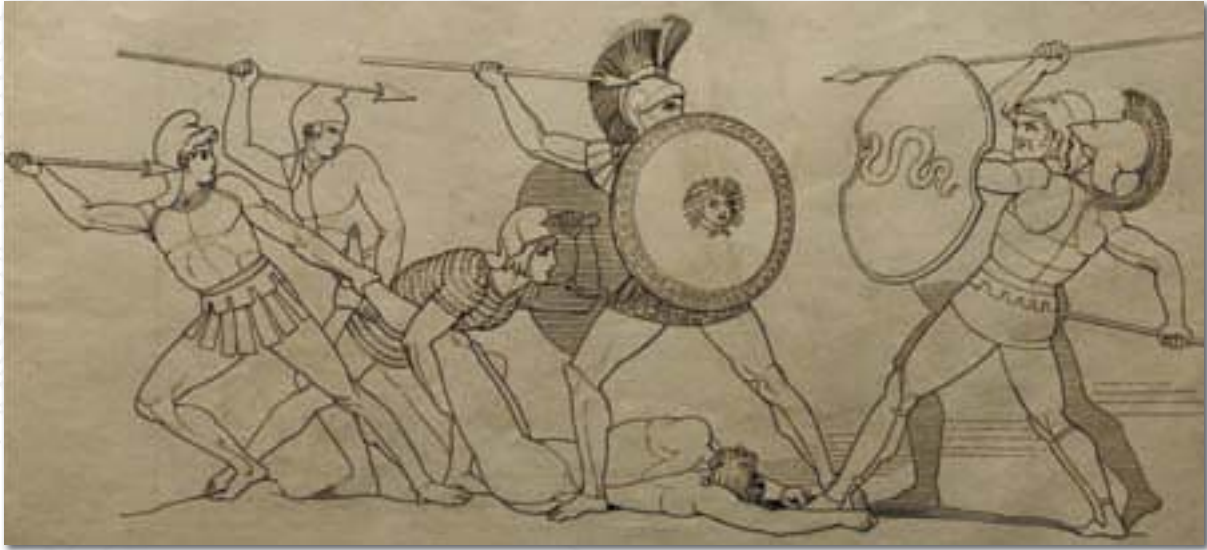
ODYSSEUS, at the end of a twenty-year, pan-Mediterranean tour of lust, narcotic lotus flowers, and fisticuffs, finally gets home to his wife and son, only to strike down the herd of suitors laying siege to his spouse. He eventually goes so far as to lynch the treacherous housemaids and dismember a treasonous beggar—starting with his nose and ears, working on to his hands and feet, finally severing his genitals and feeding them to the dogs.

Beowulf, after tearing Grendel's arm off with his bare hands, tracks down his mother and lops off her head. For good measure, he beheads Grendel (dead from the previously inflicted injury) and collects the noggin of both mother and son to show off to his crew.

Brutus, Cleopatra, Goneril, Juliet, Lady Macbeth, Mark Antony, Cassius, Ophelia, Othello, Portia, Romeo: all dead by suicide alone in the works of William Shakespeare.

These are the characters and works I was raised on—the wholesome, lighthearted public school canon. And when I was asked to write an essay on violence in literature, they were the first to come to mind. Upon revisiting them, I was both struck by the level of violence depicted—I'd forgotten some of the most graphic moments—and I was also somewhat relieved.

While I was working on my first novel, I attended a writing conference in Prague. I was told that I was obsessed with guns and violence, and that I wrote pornographically. When I considered the few, awkward, uncomfortable sexual encounters that took place in my work, I'd laughed, wondering just what kind of pornography the accuser had been watching. But the violence comment had stung a little. I felt lowbrow and crass, as if I was dragging the genre down, and that I should



have been writing about beautiful people with deep yet tidy metaphysical problems. Looking back at the *Odyssey* now feels good, even redemptive—I've yet to sever genitals; it's been tough, but I've refrained from even a single, comic kick between the legs; and I haven't fed any body parts to the dogs. These works remind me that violence is not something peculiar to contemporary literature, nor is it something to be avoided by serious, meaningful work.

Aside from small pockets and brief periods of time, violence seems inseparable from human existence, and if literature is to represent our experience, it cannot be excluded from the medium. Literature, as a whole, if it is to relate to our reality, can no more exist without violence than it can without love, joy, or hope.

Nor can literature exclude acts of violence if it is to be dramatically potent. Drama is produced through emotional contrast. We do not feel the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet's passing if we have not first felt the swell of joy in those first nights they shared. We cannot know the glow of Odysseus' triumphant return if we have not wallowed with him in his aching, tangential journey. We will not truly appreciate peace in a dramatic work if we have not first shuddered at the horror of violence.

The desire to exclude representations of violence often rests upon the idea that violence begets violence—an aged and apt statement—but violence on the page is not violence in the world. Literature is artifice, providing a mediated experience. Reading about a fistfight is obviously not the same as being in a fistfight, and in the experience of reading about a fight, we may be allowed to feel the tragedy of the event without having to fight ourselves. Violence in literature, rather than begetting more violence in the world, may have the opposite effect.

My own novel, *American Youth*, started as a series of short stories depicting violent teenage behavior: fistfights, vandalism, self-abuse. From the beginning my intentions were not to encourage, condone, or romanticize such actions, but rather to explore them, take them apart, examine the parts that made the whole. *What makes the violent teenager tick?* Having been a fighter, a vandal, a self-abuser, writing the book was as much a process of self-discovery as sociological study for me.

Delinquent behavior is often blamed on a moral or intellectual inadequacy, attributed to *bad, stupid* kids who lack the proper *character*, but it often has less to do with an individual's cognitive abilities than their current emotional state. It seems to me that violence does indeed stem from ignorance, from a malfunctioning moral compass, but the often overlooked cause is pain—pain that has no process or path that leads to comfort.

American Youth explores this type of pain, dealing with the aftermath of an accidental shooting which claims

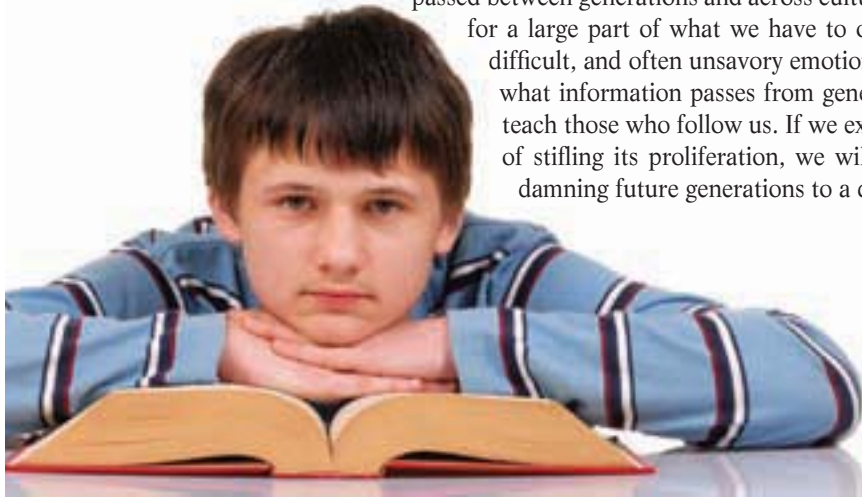
the life of a teenage boy. The protagonist of the novel is involved in the shooting, and with some encouragement, lies about the event to protect himself and his family from the law. With this lie, his path to forgiveness is blocked, and he takes many common, troublesome tangents. Like Odysseus trying to get back to the warmth and love of his home, the boy in *American Youth* struggles on his journey, attempting to find comfort in all the wrong places: sex, drugs, violence, even among the ranks of a fascist, quasi-skinhead youth gang. While I would never claim that the novel is a roadmap for coping with tragedy, it has always been my hope that it would provide a few warning signs for the dead-end roads that present themselves in such situations, and to provide some comfort and camaraderie to someone feeling alone with their pain. On one level, the novel is a letter to my own teenage self. It is a note that says, "I understand, I'm sorry you're feeling the way you are, but what you're doing won't help."

I recently read from *American Youth* and spoke at a high school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It was a good-spirited event, and afterwards, as I was talking with some of the more outgoing students, a quiet, serious young woman approached me with a copy of the book. She handed it over to have it signed and said, "Thank you. It helped." At this point, I'd been on a book tour through the U.S. and several other countries, and I'd long grown cynical of all the complimentary smoke-blowing that goes on around a visiting author. What struck me most about the young woman's comment was its simple earnestness. I felt it. She was gone as quickly as she had come, and again I was swelled with the belief in the power of the literary endeavor, reminded that it is through literature that our collective experience is passed between generations and across cultures. Our textbooks and oral traditions are adequate for a large part of what we have to offer, but our literature carries many of the subtle, difficult, and often unsavory emotional and aesthetic truths. If we limit the spectrum of what information passes from generation to generation, we limit what we are able to teach those who follow us. If we exclude certain subjects such as violence in the hopes of stifling its proliferation, we will instead be creating a disingenuous medium and damning future generations to a dangerous, isolating ignorance. ■

AMERICAN YOUTH : A Novel
by Phil LaMarche

American Youth is a controlled, essential, and powerful tale of a teenager in southern New England who is confronted by a terrible moral dilemma following a firearms accident in his home. This tragedy earns him the admiration of a sinister gang of boys at his school and a girl associated with them. Set in a town riven by social and ideological tensions—an old rural culture in conflict with newcomers—this is a classic portrait of a young man struggling with the idea of identity and responsibility in an America ill at ease with itself.

"Phil LaMarche observes boys undergoing the rites of adolescence the way Rick Bass and Jim Harrison investigate the ravages of time on their fathers — with an unflinching but sympathetic eye, sometimes amused, sometimes ashamed, always astonished."—*San Francisco Chronicle*
Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7740-0, 256pp., \$14.00



About the Writer

PHIL LAMARCHE was a writing fellow in the Syracuse University Graduate Creative Writing Program, and he was awarded the Ivan Klima Fellowship in Fiction in Prague. His work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Ninth Letter*, and the 2005 Robert Olen Butler Prize Story anthology. His story, "In the Tradition of My Family," has been made into a film by orLater Productions, and his first novel, *American Youth*, was published in paperback in January 2008. He teaches creative writing at Syracuse University and lives with his wife in upstate New York.



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