



Chalk

Paul Cornell

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" This is what horror ought to be: primal, personal, and powerful." — Seanan McGuire

Paul Cornell plumbs the depths of magic and despair in *Chalk*, a brutal exploration of bullying in Margaret Thatcher's England.

Andrew Waggoner has always hung around with his fellow losers at school, desperately hoping each day that the school bullies — led by Drake — will pass him by in search of other prey. But one day they force him into the woods, and the bullying escalates into something more; something unforgivable; something unthinkable.

Broken, both physically and emotionally, something dies in Waggoner, and something else is born in its place.

In the hills of the West Country a chalk horse stands vigil over a site of ancient power, and there Waggoner finds in himself a reflection of rage and vengeance, a power and persona to topple those who would bring him low.

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Chalk Details

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Author : Paul Cornell

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From Reader Review Chalk for online ebook

David Harris says

I'm grateful to the publisher for an advance e-copy of this book via NetGalley.

This was one of those rare books that stopped me in my tracks. At times not an easy read, I felt it spoke to me, making the story involving, in places painful, but above all, personal.

I should explain that at school in the late 70s/ early 80s I was bullied quite a bit (not as badly as Andrew in this book though!) I was a bit swotty and not a mixer, so within a few pages, I identified strongly with Andrew Waggoner.

He's an ordinary boy for the time: into Doctor Who, not sporty, a bit shy, trying to avoid the school bullies, with mixed success.

Then one evening - something happens. I was frankly gobsmacked by the place that Cornell goes to at this point. I won't give away what happens but it's no exaggeration to say everything changes for Andrew. The book really begins to fly at this point and describes what happens to him over the next year.

It's a taut, claustrophobic story that drops hints of a haunted landscape, of reservoirs of power and above all, explores a deep, pent-up urge for revenge, denied over centuries until fertilised by blood, rage and fear. Andrew seems to have become the vessel for that revenge - which also promises to pay his enemies back for what they did. The chosen tool is a second Andrew - always referred to simply as "Waggoner" - a creature who, or which, has an epiphany at the old hillfort and sets in motion a plan...

We're never quite sure - nor, I think, meant to be - whether Waggoner is "real" (and some kind of supernatural presence) or a projection of Andrew's rage. Waggoner firmly denies that he comes from Andrew's mind, yet others perceive them as one. Waggoner seems though to have motivations and a confidence that are very distinct from Andrew's. Indeed, they struggle and disagree, and this tension animates much of the story as, in that year, friendships are made and broken, pretended to and refused: as Andrew, very tentatively, becomes close to a girl (Waggoner warns him off): but above all, as the chalk patterns of vengeance spiral round and begin to grip the school.

I loved - if you can use the word for such a dark book - the way Cornell blends the different realities in this story. There is the world of the almost-adults in the school. Awful acts of bullying take place only a hairsbreadth away from adults who surely must know about them, surely ought to intervene, but don't - the curious world of the adults, with their own problems, of money, ageing and memories - seems quite separate place, even if it occupies the same space. The two run in parallel, rarely intersecting - so for example Andrew can't report what happened to him, the "obvious" way out of his nightmare. I wonder whether the need, the desire, to read (and to write) fantasy taps into this double universe? We all know in our bones that there isn't one world but many, and exploring that through fantasy is less painful than facing it directly? It's as if everyone has fallen into another kingdom with different rules. In a sense that seems no more unlikely than an ancient tribe living behind a thin veil in a real hillfort... or a twin created for a dark and secret purpose. I could relate to this.

But it's not just Cornell's themes that resonated with me in this book. More than in anything else by him that I've read, he describes the world as I saw it at that same time.

The white line (you'll know it when you get to it!).

The whole, arcane, teenage world of things that you aren't allowed to like and things that you must -

Andrew anxiously runs through the current pop hits, desperate not to betray himself by liking, even by knowing about, the wrong things. Or, forced to pass an initiation test, he fails on banal questions about football managers.

In other places he rages about not following sport or music because it's what the other kids are into. In a third rate private school out on the chalk of Wiltshire, deviance is severely punished by the other kids - but a certain sort of boy or girl wants to be deviant.

But what if you could punish them? I recognised this thirst for revenge too - and part of me cheered Waggoner on as he delivers it (in gruesome detail. Really. Gruesome.) Yet my unease also grew. It seems more and more likely there will be collateral damage, that innocents will be drawn in... It's an electrifying read, involving, harrowing and utterly compulsive.

I'd warn the reader that you may find - well I found - bits of this book difficult. There were times I had to put it down and breathe calmly - but I could never put it down for long. It is, simply, the best - and most powerful - thing of Cornell's I've ever read. Buy it, read it.

Anindita, at A Bohemian Mind at Work says

Full review: A Bohemian Mind at Work

Paul Cornell's latest dark fantasy novel focuses its spotlight on a little town where chalk soil is a natural occurrence. Here, the lives of a handful of teenagers raised in Margaret Thatcher's England change forever due to a cruel turn of fate.

As Paul Cornell has described his work during the cover reveal on TOR.com, he doesn't expect us to enjoy Chalk. I assure you, sir, I haven't enjoyed this book. I have cringed, wanted to throw up, tried reading romantic comedy to forget what I have read. Nothing helped. Nothing.

After a week, I am glad I didn't forget. Chalk got to me with its graphic details, lack of emotion from the victim who later becomes the monster he wanted to run from, and an unexpectedly feel-good ending. Especially the ending was something that threw me off the track. Who could imagine a book that begins like that would end like this. Oh, right, you wouldn't know about the this or that.

I don't know how to express my opinion on this one. The writing is brutally honest. I liked the way he built up the intrigue by describing the then class system from the below line:

It's like the British class system is a magnetic field, and moving a conductor through it produces current.

The background of each key character, their families, and their financial and social status is clear and timely provided. The relationship dynamics between parents and children, students and teachers, and classmates, is a major part of the novel.

The atmosphere, the location, and the characters were vivid and appropriate for the storyline. I appreciate (now, after a week) the clarity of narration. I did wish in almost every page after the trigger event that he had toned down a bit, or I had thrown the book away, but I was reading from a Kindle app on my phone. I couldn't stop. After the last page, I realized it was over. The book, and my feeling of nausea. Yes, the author has some dark magic of his own.

Magic reminds me, the Waggoner and the Waggoner strongly felt like a case of split personality, especially when the narrator describes the birth of Waggoner version 2.

He was born outside my window, looking at me. That night on the downs, he was baptized into his own self. This book felt more like a literary fiction than fantasy. I couldn't think about magic for most of the book before Angie, and her music came along. I am not that accustomed to western music, so I found it difficult to understand the significance of each song. I had to use Google, and I am glad I did. Angie's use of music to bring a positive influence in other's lives like 'healing' Drake (the original bully) or rescue Elaine from Waggoner's bullying reminded me of the famous Dumbledore quote, one of my favorites:

"Ah, music"..."A magic beyond all we do here."

As promised in the blurb, the author did not try to justify Waggoner's blood lust in the name of revenge.

I have tried my best to keep this review spoiler free. Hope I didn't give away too much.

Thank you Macmillan-Tor/Forge and NetGalley for providing an ARC in exchange for my honest review.

My recommendation

Honestly, I couldn't make up my mind. My prejudices almost forced me to bury my phone deep down under the storage boxes. I took a week to decide on the rating. Don't judge me if you think otherwise, but I offer this book Four Bohostars.

Tim Hicks says

[Semi-invisible Andrew 2 k

Paul says

Chalk by Paul Cornell is one of those books that causes a struggle within the reader as to if the entertainment value overcomes the brutal and horrific events that are depicted in the story. Chalk is a story of extreme bullying, where the main character is physically altered by the bullies with a knife. The rest of the story becomes a revenge story that is very reminiscent of Carrie by Stephen King but only with a young male in Britain. I want to mention that this takes place in the countryside of Britain during the 1980s because it is a very British story that uses a lot of British slang and terminology. I was definitely out of my depth at times during this story with the language used. I don't feel that this took away from the story but needs to get used to.

Paul Cornell writes a very brutal and honest story that connects with the reader because it is something so personal happening to the character. I know there are many readers that have been bullied as a child find reading about bullying to be cathartic, like myself, while others really hate reading these type of stories. The revenge aspect has a mystical entity that looks like the main character, Drew Waggoner, and as the story progresses, and Drew gets his revenge, which is actual murder(a definite possible trigger for some people), we find that the entity might have his own desires in mind.

This story is very 80s. Cornell is pulling a lot from his own childhood and pop music is actually a big part of the story. There is a young girl that believes that the pop music is giving her messages and telling her the future. At times I found this aspect of the story to be charming while other times I thought it was focused on too much. Drew is a writer in this story and we get many examples of him using his writing to make sense of his own world. At times, because Drew is a writer, he is definitely an unreliable narrator.

This story was definitely unforgettable. If you like horror and are alright with this murderous revenge type of story, it is for you. If you have strong political views on school shootings and things like that where bullying might have been the cause, this can be disturbing. I was at times very disturbed while other times extremely engrossed in the story. I think that as a horror story, it succeeded in making me uncomfortable. I am still not sold on Paul Cornell's writing style. Cornell writes very sparse sentences that just sometimes don't work for me. Chalk gets a little too busy and muddy towards the end of the story. We don't get a whole lot of explanations about what is going on and the reader must infer a lot. Regardless, this was a decent horror story about bullying that created a response from me.

Dan says

Andrew Waggoner is a normal schoolboy who tries to keep out of the way of the Drake and his fellow school bullies. Then one Halloween they take him to the woods and take the bullying a horrific step forward. Andrew will never be the same again. He seeks revenge, aided by the ancient power of his West Country surroundings.

This book is not for the faint-hearted. Any book which focuses on bullying is unlikely to be a pleasant read but very quickly this gets really horrific. Throughout the book there's very strong language, detailed sexual description and gore.

I got a lot from this book. I totally understood what this book was about and the only thing I've read that was anything like this was parts of my own novel. Cornell though adds a brutality and a darkness that I somehow makes the story gripping and uncomfortable.

I loved the amount of real-world stuff that was put in here. The West Country setting worked really well- I knew virtually every place in the book too and the description fitted them so well. There's a love for 80s Doctor Who with regular mentions of the Peter Davison era and a visit to the Longleat exhibition. Then there's a lot of discussion about pop music, when who was number one in the charts mattered. I enjoyed the references to all sorts of great music (and some less great) and liked the way it was weaved into the plot.

The thing which just knocked this rating down to four stars, and it was very close, is the weird stuff. This is a genre novel, a dark fantasy/horror. That's fine, it's the sort of thing I read all the time. But I just felt here it went too far, on occasion drifting so far into the weird stuff I got lost from the main story. Whilst I got the general idea, there were parts of the weird stuff I didn't quite understand fully which was a shame.

A different kind of book from Paul Cornell but a stunning one.

Alex Sarll says

Paul Cornell's latest novel opens with a horrific scene of bullying gone too far (as if it's not always too far, but you know what I mean - the point when the everyday shittiness descends to a whole other level), which by taking place in a particular spot of Wiltshire countryside enables a subterranean vein of folk horror to erupt into the Byzantine hierarchies and ritual (mis)behaviours of a 1980s English schoolyard. And having negotiated that terrain not so many years later, while dreading double games every bit as much as protagonist

Andrew Waggoner, I can confirm that Cornell has the flavour of it down perfectly. The boundedness of allowed behaviour, the impossibility of knowing the right answer to a cooler kid's question, the cagey conversations where you carefully don't reveal your hand while working out which bands it was OK to like - all painfully familiar. Even the supernatural elements are left carefully subtle, such that it's never 100% clear whether there's anything genuinely occult happening outside the shared follies of certain damaged kids, or whether the sense of the school getting weirder, darker, more savage is just the combination of pupil deaths, mock exams and pubescent group psychology. In particular, there's a scene involving lightning which took me right back to one lunchtime with a dry thunderstorm, when we all spontaneously took up the same wordless chant, and the dinner ladies were getting increasingly unnerved by it but so were we...

This book is self-contained, but coming right after the Shadow Police and Lychford books I was going to say Cornell is a very dark novelist these days. However, looking back, my first encounter with his work had the Fifth Doctor crucified on the brainstem of the Time Lord's internal world for no greater crime than a perceived lack of commitment to the fight; I suspect *Happy Endings* and Cornell's affable manner in person have skewed my memory of what, overall, has always been quite a tortured oeuvre. And he's said *Chalk* is "the heart of all my work". I wouldn't like to speculate as to exactly how autobiographical it is, but certainly the scenes of bullies in the woods recall at least in outline a formative incident in his own life which he recounted in *Behind the Sofa*. The point is, this is clearly a very personal story, and perhaps because Cornell's a christian, also ultimately a story of forgiveness. Now, of course I'm not entirely against forgiveness; on the macro level, Northern Ireland is a better result than Bosnia, and on the personal level, holding transgressions against basically decent people is a colossal waste of time, potential, and emotional energy. But when it comes to shits like the bullies here, I really don't see any virtue in forgiving them, and I remain slightly unconvinced by the extent to which Cornell has to stack the deck against Waggoner getting his own back by making his vengeful self both supernaturally dangerous and socially unpleasant. It's not untrue, it's not even quite clumsily didactic, but I did still feel slightly preached at, and unconvinced that the ending had the requisite emotional heft (though obviously part of that may constitute deliberate abnegation). Though in fairness, he's certainly not banging on about Jesus here either; the bulwark against the dark forces is a far more reliable faith, namely pop music. Though I pity anyone attempting this particular sort of phonomancy now the charts have been Sheeraned, I can confirm that hearing too many Number Ones in uninterrupted succession is a profoundly numinous experience.

Todd Bristow says

This one was a pleasant surprise. Just when I thought I know where it was going, BAM! It wasn't what I thought at all. It's fantastic when you finds a book that turns your expectations on their ear. It hit a lot of my sweet spots:

1. It's British. Very British.
2. The horror is unabashedly so.
3. It's set in a school in the 80s and the music plays an important role.
4. The history and lore of the setting is used to great effect.

Highly recommended.

Booniss says

Andrew Waggoner is an unremarkable schoolboy, just trying to get by without drawing attention of the school bullies. He is however, tragically and horrifyingly, unsuccessful. Something terrible happens to Waggoner and it awakens a power which promises to seek revenge on his behalf and heal him of his wounds. Another Waggoner, visible only to Andrew, starts to wreak havoc at the school.

This will not be an easy read, but it is an incredibly powerful story about coming of age in the 80s, when assault was written off as boisterous horseplay and what was at Number One meant something. Through our unreliable narrator we explore how far we will go for revenge, and what that will mean. The ancient power of the land collides with the modern magic of pop to produce a dark story of childhood nightmares which captures the chalky hormone saturated atmosphere of school so perfectly you'll end up dreaming you're late for an exam.

Jordon Greene says

It's a great read. I'm not usually one for paranormal stories, but this one blends it in so fluidly, almost under the radar, to the point that it actually felt natural. Andrews's story of revenge is cold and calculating at times, brutal at others. If you enjoy the more graphic depictions you should enjoy this. It's not extreme, but enough. I thoroughly enjoyed Paul Cornell's Chalk.

Jane says

Incredibly moving. Visceral shocking.

Relatable.

The Grim Reader (Beavisthebookhead.com) says

There are quite a few things that become apparent whilst reading 'Chalk' by Paul Cornell. The first is that Cornell is a big fan of popular tv show Doctor Who (edit: I recently found out he is one of the writers for Doctor Who! Who knew?! Not me), brought about by the many references to the popular programme. Second is that he is a fan of 80s pop culture and thirdly is that Cornell can write a very powerful and moving story.

Set at a private school during the 1980s, Paul Cornell's 'Chalk' is the story of Andrew Waggoner and the ordeal he endures at the hands of the school bullies. I know, it isn't the most original of ideas, but, hang in there because this is a great novel. Whilst being quite a shortish tale, 'Chalk' is a gripping, uneasy reading experience, one that features many scenes of strong violence. The violence in the book is often very graphic, though it is testament to the quality of the writing when you know something bad is going to happen and yet it still doesn't quite prepare you for the graphic nature of what actually occurs.

Waggoner is just an average kid. He minds his own business but gets singled out by Drake and his friends. What Drake and the others do to Waggoner goes beyond name calling and pushing in the playground. It's a horrific occurrence that stays with you for a long time afterwards. The story then follows Waggoner as he takes his vengeance upon those that wronged him.

‘Chalk’ isn’t just a cheap psychological revenge thriller. History plays a strong part in Waggoner’s awakening and elements of the supernatural are woven through the narrative very well. ‘Chalk’ is a journey through the psychological disintegration of a child’s fragile mind. The school attitudes are quite indicative of the time in that a simple pat on the head and saying everything will be okay is the norm. Waggoner’s relationship with his parents are distant and increase the pressure on his already fragile mind. There are plenty of 80s references throughout the book. From tv show like Top Of The Pops to Rentaghost, to pop culture icons like Bowie, Culture Club and Spandau Ballet, ‘Chalk’ really succeeds in taking you back to time when attitudes to what is deemed acceptable and what is not were very different.

The violence in ‘Chalk’ is purposeful and unflinching. It is gruesome reading at times but necessary and in keeping with the time. Being a short novel the pacing is quick but not at the expense of getting to know the characters. As a child brought up during Thatcher’s rule in the 1980s I can identify with a lot of this book. It is one that really resonated with me for a number of personal reasons, too, and I’d highly recommend it. A note on the ending of this book which I thought was superb. It took me a little by surprise and I thought it came together really well, leaving me with conflicting emotions and a desire to read more from this talented writer.

Alice says

So um. This was messed up Like, The Wasp Factory level disturbing. These two books share a lot of similarities- mainly all the emotionally detached murder, isolation and themes of genital mutilation. o.0 Yeah.

Please excuse me while I go read a My Little Pony book or something. My brain feels traumatised.

Nikki says

Received to review via Netgalley; publication date 21st March 2017

I don’t quite know how to rate this, because it’s not much my thing. It’s a bit too close to horror, it’s so grim, and the teenage boy fixation with sex was, well, rather beyond my experience or anything I’m interested in. Bullying I know well, and Cornell captures it wonderfully — but I can’t say beautifully, because who could call that beautiful? The magic is weird and wondrous and I do enjoy the way it’s tied in with history and the landscape.

I was less interested or convinced by Angie’s pop music magic; it felt very thin indeed, almost just a way to give her more of a role in the story without it feeling organic. But the main character’s ambivalence to her, the people around him, the great big revenge that’s happened because he wanted it — that feels real.

I can’t say I enjoyed this, and I can’t say I’d read it again, but nor would I urge someone not to read it. It’s

definitely powerful, and I had to read to the end, even though I found aspects of it distasteful (I suspect I was intended to).

Originally reviewed for my blog.

David says

Has anyone written a PHD thesis on the importance of bullying as a subject in horror fiction? I have a theory (it's only a theory) that all horror writers and readers were bullied, and that the horror genre itself is a form of revenge.

Anyway, Chalk is a novel that has bullying at its heart. The plot is structured by revenge. An injury is done, a crime committed against the innocent narrator, and the people who did this are picked off one by one. It got me thinking, why is revenge so powerful and compelling and common as a plot driver? I'd always thought it was because it gives us permission to enjoy our latent sadism without too many moral qualms, but in this novel a character suggests that revenge actually gives meaning to the original injury. This was interesting to me because it made me think of revenge as a creative act. Certainly the way that the bullies are picked off one by one is very inventive.

I had high hopes for this book. From the outside it gave every indication that it would very much tickle my fancy. It had all the ingredients to be my perfect cup of tea; 80's pop music, 80's nostalgia generally, adolescent bullying, the supernatural; and all served up with a nice dark, miserablist tone. It sounded almost like it could be a Joel Lane novel.

And, mostly, it delivered. I really really enjoyed this book. I've never heard of Paul Cornell before. Apparently he writes for the Dr Who series. (It took me a while to get into his writing style which isn't strange or unusual, but some sentences bothered me. Like this one where he's talking about a huge chalk drawing of a horse on a hill; "That's why this horse, uniquely, is designed for perspective, for a modern audience who are used to the illusion of that." Wouldn't that be better as, "...that illusion." at the end? I feel petty, and a bit mad, for bringing that up because I ran that sentence by a couple of friends and they both said it was fine. But there were other sentences that seemed clunky with slightly odd word arrangements. However the whole thing is a first person narrative and maybe it's got a slight West Country twang. And, it has to be said, there is plenty of beautiful writing in here too.)

I'm not going to talk about the plot because I don't want to spoil it, but Cornell does this amazing thing where...oh god is this a spoiler? Hmm, I don't think so, I think this is okay;

So, after his traumatic event, the main character's personality splits in two, or is duplicated with a supernatural doppelganger, who is at one and the same time a protector and a persecutor. The reason I was very excited about this was because it reminded me of an excellent book by a Jungian analyst called Donald Kalsched, *The Inner World of Trauma*, where he discusses this as a common symptom of trauma victims, a self-defense mechanism that protects, but can also appear to persecute and bully the self if it feels under threat. Of course, Cornell never really leaves any ambiguity as to whether this doppelganger is an interior, psychological event or an outside entity. He's pretty clear that we are dealing with external supernatural forces. Although, as I said, it's a first person narrative, and maybe if I went back and read it again, the narrator might be unreliable enough to allow some ambiguity...

Now I think of it, the Dr Who influence can be felt in the way that the story builds to a big dramatic climax, a clash of two different realities. But I like the way that, on the other side of that big event, the story

suddenly drops back into the grimy, beaten-down, painful quietudian. And that's where it ends. One of the striking things about the book is the wounded, numb, damaged, disillusioned tone of the narrator. And this quality or lack in the narrator may account for the general lack of human connection between any of the characters. One of the results of this for me, is that it's hard to connect as a reader to any of the characters.

I think this could have been remedied if we'd got a glimpse of Andrew's connection with his own gang of geeks before the trauma that changed him. Because Andrew, the narrator, doesn't seem connected to anyone at any point.

But, I'm guessing Cornell made a decision to give Andrew a slightly cold, free-floating quality to emphasise his damaged state.

One of the things I appreciated was the use of appalling 80's pop, especially in conjunction with crazy, supernatural events. For example, how did he manage to soundtrack a near-apocalyptic conjunction of two competing dimensions with Renee and Renato's Save Your Love, without the whole thing collapsing into hilarity? He managed it brilliantly.

It's a great book. I loved it! I hope he does more like this in the future. Meanwhile, I'm going to check out some of his other stuff.

Vignesh Kumar says

Gah. What did I read??!

I was really anticipated to read this as the blurb sounded promising. Revenge? Fantasy against Bullying? Join Me. That's why I took this book and read. But it's not good. I did NOT like it.

The writing was very weird and blunt but sometimes it was good. Only sometimes. Andrew Waggoner after getting bullied by Drake and his lot so brutally both physically and mentally, turned up to an ancient site of power where another being is born who is unnatural and paranormal. What happens next forms the plot. The book was set in late 80s and was full of references of the pop artists of that time. It was hard to get into it.

On the whole, I wasted my time reading it.
