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Grieving in Glitter: Polyphonic Trauma and Queer Healing in Steven Rowley's *The Guncle*

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Abstract

In The Guncle (2021), Steven Rowley transforms grief into something akin to a collective chorus. Loss is shared, refracted, sometimes colliding and yet harmonising. Rowley gives shape to a "polyphonic" narrative, where multiple voices coexist without being reduced to a single meaning, using conversations that are silly, tender, or painfully awkward. This approach aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony (Bakhtin 6). This paper explores Bakhtin's theory alongside Dominick LaCapra's trauma studies, Sara Ahmed's emotional politics, and Judith Butler's work on performativity to examine The Guncle's staging of grief as a dialogue rather than a single lament. Humour in the "Guncle Rules" turns out to be a defence and a teaching tool. This illustrates a queer grieving process that is non-linear and non-uniform, yet deeply relational, where glitter and sorrow can awkwardly coexist.

Keywords: polyphony, trauma theory, queer healing, Steven Rowley, the Guncle, grief, queer identity, chosen family, Bakhtin

Introduction

The Guncle, a 2021 novel written by Steven Rowley, has received critical praise due to its distinctive, heartbreaking emotional maturity and shimmering humour as it explores the realms of grief and family. It is a story that is not only warm but also thought-provoking, in a way that encourages people to contemplate the complexity of human lives. The story highlights the perception of characters who stumble upon serious personal losses, and at the same time, explores the depth of relationships within their families and understanding who they are. From the moment Patrick picks up Maisie and Grant at the airport, grief is noisy. Full of jokes, arguments, "Guncle Rules," pop culture references, and even Broadway quotes shouted across the pool. Rowley does not make this noise a distraction from loss; instead, it becomes the medium through which loss is processed. Mikhail Bakhtin, writing about Dostoevsky, argued that a truly polyphonic novel does not just present different characters; it gives them distinct consciousnesses that are not subordinated to the author's single "truth" (Bakhtin 6–7). Patrick's camp-laced, sarcastic humour is rounded out by Maisie's precocious, literal thinking and Grant's blunt, childish questions. The silent presence of Patrick's long-dead partner Joe and the children's deceased mother Sara, sprinkles the narrative with the memory of their grief-laden presence. These disparate voices do not blend into a singular lyrical

moral. Instead, they collide, misinterpret, err, and sometimes even laugh inappropriately while silence envelops them. Grief is about contesting conflict, how the stories around the deceased are woven and who among the living gets to shape those recollections. As LaCapra reminds us, trauma is not simply an event; it is a wound in narrative itself, an ongoing difficulty in telling the story (LaCapra 41). By refusing to give us a single, smoothed-over grief arc, Rowley preserves the sharpness of memory.

Steven Rowley is a popular contemporary American author best known for his bestselling novels that address issues of love, loss, and resilience with wit and humour. Some of his famous works are *Lily and the Octopus, The Editor*, and *The Guncle*. Rowley's books have received a lot of accolades, with *The Guncle* being one of them. It has been an NPR Book of 2021 and a Goodreads Choice nominee. He snagged a prestigious American humour prize, the 'Thurber Prize'. He creates characters and stories that people can easily relate to and understand, a talent that places him among the greats of modern fiction. He lives with his boyfriend and their dog in Los Angeles. In *The Guncle*, the author's background has influenced him, especially his experience as a 'real-life guncle' to his niece and nephew. It has given him a credible basis for the characters and their relationships. His work, especially *The Guncle*, is not just a story. It is a case of "queer activism." By displaying positive and queer stories, he intentionally pushes against the message that queer lives are "largely about lives lived in the shadows or lives cut short or lonely existences" (Steven Rowley). This makes him an author whose voice is active in the cultural conversation. In this sense, the author works as an interlocutor, inserting his ideological position right within the various discourses both in his text and in society at large. This engagement amplifies the novel's contribution to the collective healing and validation of the LGBTQ+ community, demonstrating how literature can be a powerful force for social change and acceptance.

Patrick O'Hara, a recluse residing in Palm Springs, is a semi-retired sitcom actor who remains unfazed by receiving a call from his brother, Greg. Sara, Greg's wife, has passed away due to a long illness, and Greg is entering rehab for painkiller addiction. Quite abruptly, Patrick is thrust into the middle of a child's solitary scream for attention and is roped into the reluctant role of a parent to Maisie and Grant, who remain detached from Connecticut to his meticulously curated, sun-drenched desert home. From the outset, this plot is not so much about physical guardianship as it is about the emotional choreography required for the coordination of three people, each at a different stage of grief, who coexist in the same space. Patrick, who is still grieving the death of his partner Joe and has not dated in years, is out of practice with human closeness. Maisie, the sharp-tongued and protective elder, navigates her mother's absence in combination with her child self and an adolescent guardian, boldly oscillating between confrontation and hyper-vigilance over her younger brother. Grant is quieter, a keen observer who is equally watchful and a stabiliser, but through routine and reassurance. Over the summer, the three of them share and navigate the ordinary and extraordinary milestones: tearful conversations about death, overstuffed family trips to Disneyland, and poolside afternoons. By the novel's end, their time together has not erased their grief, nor does Rowley suggest it should. But it has turned it into something more shareable, the constellation of stories and inside jokes that keep the dead present without immobilising the living.

Theoretical Framework

This reading draws on four main theoretical pillars:

Bakhtin's Polyphony – In *'Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics'*, Bakhtin defines polyphony as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 6). The goal is not consensus, but coexistence. In *The Guncle*, Patrick's voice is world-weary, performative, queer; it never swallows Maisie's logic-driven mourning or Grant's impulsive emotional shifts. Even the 'Guncle Rules', which seem authoritative, get questioned or ignored, creating dialogic friction.

LaCapra's Trauma Studies – In '*Writing History, Writing Trauma*', LaCapra distinguishes between "acting out" (compulsively reliving trauma) and "working through" (finding ways to engage it without being trapped). Patrick's storytelling,

whether about Hollywood, Sara, or his past, shifts between these modes, showing that humour can be both avoidance and engagement.

Ahmed's Emotional Politics – In "The Cultural Politics of Emotion," Ahmed discusses how emotions "stick" to people and objects, shaping social bonds (Ahmed 11). In *The Guncle*, Sara's memory sticks to objects like the kitchen table, a pink flamingo float, and even a batch of pancakes. These things pull different emotional weights for each character, creating tension and misunderstanding.

Butler's Performativity – The concept of performativity proposed by Judith Butler reminds us that we do not have a fixed identity but continuously perform it through the repetition of actions, gestures, and language. In *The Guncle,* Patrick is flamboyant in his fashion choices, pop culture references, and campy one-liners, but these go beyond mere quirks; they are part of how he exists in the world and communicates his queer identity. The grief behind these performances is not well concealed as re-contextualised, allowing him to display nurturing and sensitivity through humour, ritual, and style. Butler says, all performances leave space for difference; the varying personas Patrick adopts in the novel as he shifts and changes in each scene reflect how he reconstructs not only his public identity but also the scope of his grief.

Polyphonic Voices and Queer Grief

In the context of narrative theory, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'polyphony' refers to a textual phenomenon characterised by the presence of "the plurality of independent, non-merged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 6). Unlike in the monologic narrative, where the authorial voice holds a monolithic control and places characters in the role of merely passing through the author's ideologies, the polyphonic novel gives credibility to every other voice. The characters, in this case, turn out as the "subject of their own directly signifying discourse" by addressing each other and the story itself. Truth in such a text emerges at a "point of contact between different consciousnesses", where "event potential is present". In this context, the author is considered "one of the faces of the 'great dialogue' that he created". The hero of a polyphonic novel has "his ideological sincerity" and, in addition, an independent character can be seen as a "creator with his full ideology" (Zhongwen). Bakhtin's notion of 'polyphony' insists that no single voice dominates the novelistic space. In *The Guncle*, Patrick's perspective may frame the narrative, but Maisie and Grant's speech acts, often unfiltered and resistant, carry equal weight in shaping the emotional arc. For example, when Patrick tries to lighten the mood with a Hollywood anecdote, Maisie interrupts: "We don't need you to make everything a joke, Guncle Patrick" (chapter 6). This interruption does not just wound his performance; it asserts a competing truth, that grief sometimes demands seriousness. Rowley's children's characters do not merely stop at Patrick; they are full participants in a multi-voiced negotiation of mourning. The polyphony presented throughout the novel is evident in the displays of direct dialogue, as well as the grief that was not addressed with words, which is not to say they were not expressed at all. At the end, however, Sara, who has been a controlling yet distant influence, has arranged everything, thus giving a strong yet mostly 'muted voice' that heavily influences the turning of events. Her motive is to surpass the pain Patrick experienced in the loss of Joe by gifting him her children, creating a dialogic relationship between the actions she took and the lives that Patrick, Maisie, and Grant lead presently. At no point does this combination of voices belonging to separate stories of grief and survival overwhelm the emotional landscape, as each narrative has its own arc of loss and adaptation. This multi-voiced manner of showing grief complicates the healing process, resisting a monologic closure of the novel and instead letting the "unmerged", "unfinalized" (Bakhtin) voices co-exist, as a measure of the complex, continuing process of healing. This approach would allow a more wholesome and realistic expression of the human experience, in which suffering and resilience of various kinds are given an equivalent narrative weight. Rowley also demonstrates the polyphonic potentials of physical spaces. It has been reconceived as a discursive site where two losses converge. Ahmed tells us that feelings can stick. Patrick's memory of the pool provides a stick. He remembers it as he celebrated a lot with Joe. He now uses it as a shelter to provide

for kids. Instead of tarnishing out this background or replacing it, the territory gains new layers of meaning, which reproduce the simultaneous presence of survival and loss.

"Guncle Rules" as Dialogic Trauma Tools

Trauma theory explores how profoundly disruptive experiences affect individuals and societies by shaping personal narratives and memories. The theory highlights that trauma disrupts a person's sense of 'self' and changes their story identity because it often leads to broken storytelling. Early trauma approaches existed in Freudian theory and suggested trauma as "an unrepresentable event that breaks the psyche". However, contemporary approaches examine "everyday and ongoing trauma" within marginalised communities, and this includes more voices. *The Guncle* holds a strong case study for 'polyphonic trauma' because multiple characters experience and process trauma distinctly, and their experiences exist together. Patrick's grief for Joe holds a central traumatic event, and it leaves him reclusive. The memories of Joe's final days and the exclusion by Joe's family create a profound impact that affects him deeply. His memories exist to the point where a minor event like Grant's injury triggers re-traumatisation and forces him to remember. This example demonstrates how trauma exerts a harmful effect on consciousness and memory, which blocks past incorporation. Trauma comes into play for Patrick, Maisie, and Grant as they have just faced the acute trauma of losing their mother, Sara, as their familial dynamic is an immediate transfer of guardianship with Patrick due to their father's addiction. They exhibit their trauma in different ways. Maisie becomes the little mother, and Grant relates to death and trauma on an elevated level based on what is happening to him and his family. Thus, their conflict is evident as they are frustrated with their situation. They are communicating how they feel, but they are limited by "the limitations that come with trying to articulate agonising experiences" (LaCapra). So, 'Guncle rules' become the idealised application for overcoming such trauma, yet in the eyes of Patrick, they transform into 'what he needs' the children to incorporate to ease their trauma. For example, he transforms this into making the children write letters to Sara instead of talking to her now that she is dead (and he believes she is still listening). The "Guncle Rules" are more than just comic relief; they serve as conversational bridges. Each rule creates a discursive space where Patrick can subtly introduce life lessons disguised as camp wit. Guncle Rule No. 6 "Never let your guard down" (Rowley 59) functions both as Patrick's creed and as an ironic commentary on his difficulty in fully opening himself to the kids. LaCapra's idea of "working through" trauma involves integrating past loss into a narrative that allows for forward movement. The trauma intersects here in a polyphonic nature, yet is not exclusive to just one person's trauma. For example, although Sara is not overly involved in the plot while dead and previously sick, she endures trauma on her deathbed, and the guilt of leaving her children and friend transforms her need to care for them into everyone's separate traumas. Trauma exists not just as an experience but in a 'polyphonic' realm of existence. It is a trauma-filled symphony as "the experience of individuals and cultural groups" shows a deeper connection. Patrick's rules, precisely because they are quotable and repeatable, become mnemonic devices, shared language that the trio can carry beyond the summer. In a scene, Grant repeats a Guncle Rule to Patrick, reversing the roles of teacher and learner, "People should just do what they want" (Rowley 98). This circularity of instruction reflects Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which voices influence and reshape one another without merging.

Queer and Healing Narratives

The Guncle is an important addition to queer healing narratives based on Patrick O'Hara's experience of 'self-discovery' and the construction of a 'chosen' family. Patrick's experience of being gay plays an integral role in an examination of his identity and how he understands his past trauma. His statement, "What do you think gay people do? Have you consistently done that for generations? We adopt a safe version of ourselves for the public, for protection, and then, as adults, we excavate our true selves from the parts we have invented to protect us. It is the most important work of queer lives" (Rowley 201), references a principle of queer theory, lifelong self-excavation, or authenticity, while living in a world that is often hostile to lives that are not normative. The act of

uncovering a 'true self' that one has been concealing for years is regarded as an important form of healing and resistance (Greenwood). The novel adds another layer of queer healing through the formation of a chosen family. Patrick, Maisie, and Grant, created after a tragic event, may understand family in this circumstance with these very real figures and experiences, and their "team" (Rowley 227) exists simply outside of the biological definition of family. More than a year after Joe's death and at a time when he had been "adrift in black space like an untethered astronaut"(Rowley 227), following Joe's death and Joe's family masking Patrick's legal right to mourn him, the "team" provided Patrick with a month of belonging. Patrick could not be eternally lonely, and the presence of his neighbours in a throuple from his building provided a 'reliable system of support' that further reinforces the community as crucial for queer well-being. This selected study analyses the development of the chosen family as an extension of an already existing discourse on the family of choice, and the aspect of community plays a pivotal role in the recovery of queer health. The reimagining of family is both therapeutic and healing because it substitutes for support and validation, which are often taken away from families characterised by tradition.

Humour as Memory Work

In *The Guncle*, humour plays a vital role in Patrick coping with his losses, initially as a defence against unresolved grief, and then as a tool for fellowship. Patrick's "waggish set of 'Guncle rules'" (Greenwood) and his overall humour were presented as just how he deals with the world around him. Patrick's humour is a barrier between himself and the raw nature of his partner Joe's death, and the loneliness that follows him. He never wanted other people to see the sadness. He was just terrified that people would stop laughing after they knew how twisted he looked on the inside. However, as Patrick appropriately accepts the roles of Maisie and Grant, he transforms humour - shifting from a defence mechanism into an educational device and an intangible way of building connection. The "Guncle Rules" become more than clever sayings, but rather very distilled pieces of wisdom, such as " Live your life full out every day, each day is a gift. Every day is a gift. The reason we die is to teach us how to live' (Rowley 100). These rules help the children articulate their grief and help them understand the world in a way that they can digest, in part because of Patrick's trademark charm in delivering them. Patrick uses humour to decline difficult conversations and pepper them with 'love and comedy', allowing the children to process their experiences and loss in ways that made them feel less ominous and less of a huge burden. This highlights how humour can use its chasms in emotional boundaries to be therapeutic when used appropriately. Humour does not serve as an accidental safeguard or defensive measure but as a tactical tool that allows Patrick to shrink grief and, at the same time, safeguard it.

The Authenticity Glitter

The 'glitter' in the title not only alludes to the exaggerated character of Patrick and the humorous moments but also to the genuine expression of his gay preferences, which becomes central to his recovery and his capacity to bond with the children. Being queer also intrinsically defines who Patrick is, and inextricably interacts with his positive and negative experiences of discovering himself and losing something. His dialogues with Grant, especially the analogy of favouring pizza to describe sexual attraction, make the idea of queer identity normal, unknowingly but elegantly (Rowley 187). This interaction is quite heavyweight with the deconstruction of heteronormative assumptions. Patrick poignantly expresses the critical role of the most vital endeavour, queer lives, as we consider the possibility of excavating true selves out of the masks the world wants us to wear to protect us (Rowley 201). This self-discovery is put forward as an act of surviving and finding strength amid a world that tries to marginalise queer identities or even wipe them out (Greenwood). The 'glitter' is also representative of the wild, unorthodox lifestyle that Patrick gives to his family, which is provocative to the norm. He demands that Boys can do girl things and Girls can do boy things. And that is not even a Guncle Rule; there should not even be boy things and girl things in the first place. Few rules are necessary to be happy in the world because the thriving motto of the

society was, "People should just do what they want" (Rowley 98), and it creates an inclusive and accepting space for Maisie and Grant. Children can grieve and develop as real people in this kind of environment where the freedom of expression is encouraged and the acceptance of strict gender roles is refused. The 'larger than life' persona initially proved an obstacle to Patrick; however, it quickly turned into the strength and comfort he needed upon being able to identify and accept who he truly is, including all his flair, which is crucial in both healing the community and himself in some ways (Greenwood). This true expression of the self not only implies the personal success of an individual but also the potential ability to bring positive change in familial and societal situations.

Conclusion

The Guncle is about how to exist with grief so that it does not crystallise and transform into something that becomes still and lonely. The funny thing, and quite honestly, courageous, is that Rowley does not offer a single way to grieve. Rather, he allows the voices to collide with one another. The cheesy humour of Patrick does not cancel the frankness of Maisie or the low-key watchfulness of Grant. Bakhtin would likely refer to this as the 'fruitful chaos of polyphony': none of the voices is allowed to become the moral voice, because true sorrow is never clean enough to be described by one perspective alone. Such moments, which could have been used as light comic relief, include Guncle Rules. But in context, we are more like the repeated lines in a tune, i.e. you know the tune, but depending on who is listening, it varies as to what day it is or exactly how badly the kids need a diversion. One can only have so much glitter and sarcasm to lug around. Rowley does not make any pretence that humour can mend grief. At times, Patrick's humour does not work; at times, the children do not cooperate. And such opposition is substantial. It is at the time of fighting back that grief is not only experienced, but is treated as a relationship, dirty, dynamic, and collaborative. The thing is, maybe the lesson here, or whatever there is to be learned, is that it is not about moving on but about keeping ourselves in tune to keep up the song in a choir where nobody ever quite makes the same sound even twice.

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