

Raising Stony Mayhall

By Daryl Gregory

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From award-winning author Daryl Gregory, whom *Library Journal* called "[a] bright new voice of the twenty-first century," comes a new breed of zombie novel—a surprisingly funny, vividly frightening, and ultimately deeply moving story of self-discovery and family love.

In 1968, after the first zombie outbreak, Wanda Mayhall and her three young daughters discover the body of a teenage mother during a snowstorm. Wrapped in the woman's arms is a baby, stone-cold, not breathing, and without a pulse. But then his eyes open and look up at Wanda—and he begins to move.

The family hides the child—whom they name Stony—rather than turn him over to authorities that would destroy him. Against all scientific reason, the undead boy begins to grow. For years his adoptive mother and sisters manage to keep his existence a secret—until one terrifying night when Stony is forced to run and he learns that he is not the only living dead boy left in the world.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review
"*Raising Stony Mayhall*, like all of Daryl Gregory's stories and novels I've read, is so good that I grieved when I got to the last page, because I wanted it to just go on and on."—Chris Roberson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *iZombie*

"A brilliant contribution to the literature of the fantastic. Heartfelt, fascinating, suspenseful, and terrifying, this book involves the reader as only the very best stories can: by entering our dreams—and nightmares."—Jack Skillingstead, author of *Harbinger*

Praise for Daryl Gregory

"Compelling and creepy . . . evokes the best of Stephen King."—*Kirkus Reviews*, on *The Devil's Alphabet*

"A wickedly clever entertainment."—*San Francisco Chronicle*, on *Pandemonium*

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About the Author
Daryl Gregory was the 2009 winner of IAFA William L. Crawford Fantasy Award for his first novel "Pandemonium". His second novel, "The Devil's Alphabet", was nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award and was named one of the best books of 2009 by "Publishers Weekly". His short fiction has appeared in "The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Asimov s Science Fiction Magazine, " and" The Year s Best SF. "He has also written comics for BOOM! Studios and IDW.

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Chapter one

1968

Easterly, Iowa

t was a wonder she saw the dead girl at all. The first winter storm of the season had rolled in well ahead of the forecast, and Wanda Mayhall drove hunched over the wheel, squinting through a shrinking ellipse of clear windshield at a road being erased by drifts, and singing in a high, strong voice. The wind buffeted the Ford Falcon station wagon and threw snow across her headlights, making a screen of white static. She sang "I Will Meet You in the Morning," a belter of a hymn that would keep her three girls from worrying.

And there, at the edge of the road, a dark lump on the white snow.

She thought it was a downed cow, or maybe a dog. Then, a moment after her headlights had swept past, she thought she'd seen a glimmer of yellow. Something about that wink of color made her think, Rubber rain boots.

She pressed on the brake as hard as she dared. Still the car slewed, and the two girls in the backseat

squawked excitedly. Alice, her oldest at thirteen, braced herself against the dash and yelled, "Mom!" Ever since her father died, Alice had bestowed upon herself all the privileges of an adult, including the permanent right to ride shotgun and criticize her mother's driving.

Wanda put the car in reverse and slowly backed up, her eyes watching the rearview mirror for headlights barreling out of the snow, until she reached the spot where she thought she'd seen the dark blot. She left the car running and the lights on. "Don't get out of the car," she told the girls.

She walked around to the rear of the station wagon. The wind whipped at her skirt, and icy snow bit her ankles through her nylons. Typical Iowa snowstorm, raking the empty fields at fifty miles per hour. A few feet from the taillights the dark closed in; she could barely distinguish gray field from pitch-black sky. She should have taken the flashlight from the glove compartment.

Then she saw the lump, perhaps ten feet from the road. She stepped off the shoulder and instantly plunged into snow up to her shins.

It was a girl, not more than seventeen or eighteen. She lay on her side, half buried in the snow, her arms curled in front of her. She wore an imitation rabbit fur coat, a dark skirt, black tights, and yes, yellow rubber boots. Wanda pulled off one glove and crouched in the snow beside her. She pushed the girl's long brown hair from her face and touched a hand to her neck. Her skin was the same temperature as the snow.

A light illuminated them. "Is she dead?" Alice said. She held the big silver flashlight. Of course she'd remembered it; Alice was as levelheaded as her father had been.

"I told you to stay in the car," Wanda said.

"Chelsea's watching Junie. Who is she?"

Wanda didn't recognize her. Maybe she was a runaway, trying to make it to Des Moines. But how did she get way out here, sixty miles from the city? And what killed her-exposure? A hit-and-run driver?

The girl's arms were wrapped around her stomach. Wanda had a bad thought. She put her hand on the girl's shoulder and tried to push her onto her back, but only moved her a few inches; a drift had formed against her, holding her in place. Wanda pulled on the girl's arm-it felt heavy, but not stiff-and moved it down to her side. Then she tugged up the hem of the jacket.

The infant was wrapped in what looked like bath towels. Only its tiny gray face was visible, its eyes closed, its lips blue. Wanda made a low, sad sound. She worked her hands beneath the child, her hand cradling its neck, and brought it to her chest. It was cold, cold as its mother.

Alice moved closer to her, and Wanda put up a hand-the girl didn't need to see this. The dead girl's pale shirt and dark skirt were stiff with frozen blood. Her black tights, she realized, were crusted with it.

Alice stepped forward anyway, frowning. She didn't scream, didn't panic. She looked at the girl, then the baby in her mother's arms, and said, "We have to get them to the hospital."

"Oh, honey," Wanda said. She'd witnessed a few kinda-sorta miracles in her years as an RN, but there was no hospital on earth that could help this baby now. She held it to her and got to her feet. Then she carried it back to the station wagon. Alice said, "Shouldn't we bring the girl?"

"We'll come back for her," Wanda said. The mother she could leave, but she couldn't imagine abandoning an infant, even a dead one.

When they reached the car she made Alice get in first, then put the baby in her arms, as gently as if it were a living child. The younger girls leaned over the seat back, amazed. "You found a baby?" Chelsea said. She was seven years old, Junie only three and a half.

Alice said, "It's not-"

"Sit in your seats, all of you," Wanda said, cutting her off. The last thing she needed was three hysterical girls. She wouldn't allow herself to cry, either.

She eased the station wagon into the lane. In all the time they'd been pulled over not a car had passed them in either direction. The closest telephone was their own, a couple of miles away. She'd have to call the police, or maybe the fire department and tell them where to find the girl.

Then Alice shouted and Wanda nearly slammed on the brakes. "Alice, you can't-"

"Mom!"

The baby's eyes were open.

After a moment Wanda said, "That happens sometimes." She used her nurse voice. Maybe Alice would believe her if she used the nurse voice.

"It's moving," Alice said.

One of the towels had come open, exposing a little gray hand. Wanda looked at the road, back to the child. Its tiny fingers flexed.

Wanda felt a stab of panic. Suddenly she had a dying newborn to save. She couldn't floor it; the Falcon would never stay on the road. "Hold him up to the heater," she said. "Her. It."

The ten minutes to the farm seemed to take forever. The baby's arms shifted feebly under its wrap, and its lips moved silently. Alice talked to it the way she talked to Junie after a bad dream: Don't you worry, little one. Don't you cry.

Wanda drove up the lane and didn't bother to put the car in the garage. She killed the engine and took the baby from Alice. "Help the girls out," she said.

"Chelsea, carry Junie in," Alice said, and followed her mother into the house. With one hand Wanda plugged the kitchen drain and turned on the warm water. The baby looked into her face. Its eyes were the color of clouds before a heavy rain.

"We have to treat it for hypothermia," Alice said.

Wanda had long ago ceased to be surprised by the things Alice knew. "That's right. Now go get me some towels."

Wanda unwrapped the child. Ah, a boy then. He was blue-gray from top to bottom, with a black umbilical cord a couple of inches long, and a tiny gray penis. Dark hair with a bit of curl to it. She stirred the water in the sink, decided it would do, then lowered him into it.

Chelsea dragged over a kitchen chair so she could see. Junie climbed up with her and wrapped her arms around her sister's waist. "We should name him," Chelsea said.

"He's not ours to name," Wanda said.

The boy seemed to like the water. He kicked his legs, waved his arms. He still hadn't made a sound. Then she realized that his chest wasn't moving. No: hadn't moved. The boy wasn't breathing. Junie reached out to touch him. "Get down, girls," Wanda said. "Down!"

She'd never been this scared caring for a patient. She decided she had to treat his hypothermia and breathing at once, so she cradled him in the water with one hand and pinched shut his little nostrils with the other. Then she bent her lips to his. Gentle, she thought. New lungs were fragile.

She puffed a bit of air into his mouth. His chest rose a fraction, dropped-and stayed down. She breathed into him again, and again. After a minute she put her fingers to his neck. No pulse.

He gazed up at her with those cloud-colored eyes, perfectly calm. His hand came up, seemed to reach for her face. And in that moment she made her decision. If it was a decision. If she had any choice at all.

"Mom?" Alice said. "Is he okay? You want me to call the hospital?"

"No. No hospital." Alice started to argue, and Wanda said, "They're snowed in. Nobody could get here anyway. Please, put the girls to bed."

Alice managed to get the girls into their pajamas, but none of them would stay out of the kitchen. They watched as Wanda worked, and soon she was sweating like a long-

distance runner. After a half hour the baby was no better and no worse for all the forced resuscitation. In fact he seemed to like it. The air she gave him he turned into gurgles and sighs and whines. His first sounds.

"We have to call the police," Alice said.

"We're not going to do that." Wanda lifted the boy out of the water and his arms waved as if he wanted to get back in. "Not yet."

Alice lowered her voice. "You know what he is. One of those things from that night." Alice was old enough to read the paper, to watch the evening news.

"Those were all back east," Wanda said. "And they're all gone now." The president told them the creatures had all been killed-or whatever you called it when you destroyed their bodies. And if the police found out about this boy, they'd destroy him, too.

At some point Junie had climbed up on the chair again. She softly patted his head. "Lit-tle babeee," she sang to him. "Little old babeee."

Then the boy's chest rose, and he let out a long sigh.

"He's learning to talk," Chelsea said.

"He's just making noises," Wanda said. Though how did he learn that? His ribs moved again, and his mouth made a breathy whistle. Wanda put her ear to his chest. She heard nothing but her own pulse in her ears. Maybe he could learn to pump his heart, too.

And then she thought, Oh no, I can't do this. But of course she'd have to.

"Girls, I have something important to say," Wanda said. She lifted Junie onto her hip. "Alice, Chelsea, give me your hands." She made them place their palms atop one another's on the boy's head, a laying on of hands, just like the deacons did for someone who was terribly ill or troubled. Concentrated prayer.

Alice said, "What are you doing, Mom?"

"We have to make a solemn promise," Wanda said. "An oath." She took a breath. "We cannot tell anyone about this boy."

"Why not?" Chelsea asked.

"Nobody," Wanda said. "For a while at least. Can you promise that? Junie?"

"I promise," Junie said. And Chelsea said, "I won't tell a soul."

"This is a mistake," Alice said. "We should call the police." Chelsea yelped indignantly and Alice said, "Fine. I promise."

Wanda leaned down and kissed the boy's forehead. "Our secret," she said.

Her mind raced. She did need to call the police, to tell them about the dead girl. She'd say she thought she'd seen something out there, wasn't sure what. She wouldn't mention the child.

"We should name him Gray," Chelsea said.

"He's not a cat," Alice said. "We shouldn't name him anything."

"We'll call him John," Wanda said, surprising herself again.

"That's it?" Alice said. "John?"

"Brother John," Chelsea said.

The boy looked up at them. Then he blinked. He hadn't blinked before.

"A boy like this," Wanda said, "is going to need a normal name."

That first night, a Saturday, Wanda took the baby to bed with her, but he refused to sleep. He lay there, gurgling to himself, waving his arms and kicking his legs. Wanda eventually slept, for what seemed only

minutes. The boy never settled down, but neither did he cry. Near dawn she picked him up and carried him to the living room, where she rocked him until the girls awoke. Wanda called in sick to the hospital, and sat back, exhausted, as the girls took turns holding him. He stayed up the whole day, never napping, hardly ever shutting his eyes.

Feeding was also a problem. He often smacked his blue lips and worked his toothless mouth, but he turned his face away from water or milk. She was afraid of what he might be hungering for, but that day she taught him to swallow formula, and a few hours after each feeding he'd spit it back out. She doubted he was digesting any food at all.

After supper she hauled the crib from the basement-Junie had only stopped using it a year ago-and set it up next to her bed. The boy refused to sleep in it. She sang to him and rubbed his back, but after a half hour of leaning over the rail she gave up and brought him to bed with her again, where he cooed and squawked and fidgeted until morning.

On Monday she called in sick a second time, and again on Tuesday. She couldn't afford any more absences, but neither could she deposit the boy with the old woman who watched Junie. On Wednesday morning she told Alice, "You now have mono. You'll be out for two weeks. Chelsea will bring home your schoolwork."

"This isn't fair!"

"It's temporary."

Wanda learned to fall asleep to his noises and movement, and grew used to his cool body next to hers. He spent the night experimenting with new sounds. Eventually he discovered a kind of cry that would get their attention, a long, high-pitched wail that would cease the instant Wanda or one of the girls picked him up. No tears-there were never tears-and he never seemed too upset. He simply liked being in their arms.

The morning Alice was supposed to go back to school, Wanda dressed the boy in a special onesy she'd sewn from an old bathrobe. She threaded a leather belt through the back loops and fastened him to the inside of the crib. Alice was appalled. "He's not a dog." Wanda swallowed against the steely taste of guilt and said he'd be fine. She'd run home at lunch to check on him, then as soon as Alice got home from school the girls would let him out, got it?

Users Review

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