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ÉDITORIAL

La connaissance a cessé, depuis des lustres, d'être la chasse gardée d'une élite insulaire. Universalisée et vulgarisée, elle est, à ce jour, un ensemble de données marquées du paraphe de l'intersubjectivité. Produit d'interaction et de complémentarité, un tel patrimoine se révèle l'ouvrage de chercheurs constituant un édifice, dont chaque apport disciplinaire n'est qu'une pièce de la grande mosaïque.

Mais, une science synergique, parce que relevant du suprahumain, paraît aujourd'hui gagnée par l'audace de franchir le Rubicon de la modification du génome humain. Cela, d'autant plus que semble, à présent, à portée de main la perspective de rompre avec le signe indien des maladies héréditaires.

Si la gageure ne va pas sans procès, quelle pourrait être la contribution des sciences humaines aux joutes induites du rêve d'un saut dans l'inconnu de la posthumanité ? Les problématiques générées peuvent-elles jamais s'épuiser dans le rayon d'un seul champ disciplinaire ? Comment faire l'économie d'une réflexion transversale, face à la complexité et à l'imbrication des incidences d'une entrée en posthumanité ?

La Revue Rétjè – dont la dénomination ramène à la notion de « sagesse » en abidji, une langue du sud-est ivoirien, relevant de celles dites nigéro-congolaises – a choisi de valoriser l'interdisciplinarité dans l'abord des questions de notre temps.

Nous formulons le vœu que chacune des contributions de la présente revue incite la conscience des lecteurs à penser le monde de manière ouverte, plurivoque et dialectique. C'est à ce prix que dogmatismes, fanatismes et autres écueils infantiles de la pensée se dissiperont, faisant place à la fécondité, source perpétuelle de renaissance !

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THE POETICS OF LOSS AND LONELINESS IN KAI HARRIS'S *WHAT THE FIREFLIES KNEW*

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Abstract

*This paper analyses loss and loneliness in children's literature, focusing on Harris's *What the Fireflies Knew*. Modern society is rife with violence, ignorance, and misunderstandings, which is often showcased in adult literature and media. However, children's literature mostly seeks to shield young readers from the harsh realities of life, instead offering overly romanticized narratives that fail to prepare them for real-world challenges. Harris's novel departs from this trend by presenting a ten-year-old black protagonist navigating a world marked by family breakdown, loneliness, and loss. Through a close analysis of Harris's literary techniques and thematic choices, this study analyzes how the novel realistically portrays the emotional struggles of its young protagonist, KB, as she copes with isolation and the loss of her family structure. Based on elements of narratology and literary stylistics, the paper examines Harris's construction of an emotionally resonant narrative that captures the complexity of the experiences of black girls in America. By highlighting the rarity of realistic youth literature that addresses the unsparing truths of children's lives, the authors argue for a more honest portrayal of childhood's tribulations in literature, suggesting that such works can provide crucial insight and preparedness for young readers facing the realities of a world fraught with violence and solitude.*

Key words: *loss, loneliness, African American, children, What the Fireflies Knew*

Résumé

*Cet article analyse la perte et la solitude dans la littérature pour enfants, en se concentrant sur le livre de Harris *What the Fireflies Knew*. La société moderne est pleine de violence, d'ignorance et de malentendus, ce qui se retrouve souvent dans les littératures et les médias pour adultes. Cependant, la littérature pour enfants cherche surtout à protéger les jeunes lecteurs des dures réalités de la vie, au lieu d'offrir des récits trop romantiques qui ne parviennent pas à les préparer aux défis du monde réel. Le roman de Harris s'écarte de cette tendance en présentant un protagoniste noir de dix ans qui navigue dans un monde marqué par la rupture familiale, la solitude et la perte. Par une analyse approfondie des techniques littéraires et des choix thématiques de Harris, cette étude analyse comment le roman retrace de façon réaliste les luttes émotionnelles de son jeune protagoniste, KB, alors qu'elle fait face à l'isolement et à la perte de sa structure familiale. Basé sur des éléments de narratologie et de stylistique littéraire, l'article examine la construction par Harris d'un récit émotionnellement résonant qui capture la complexité des expériences des filles noires en Amérique. En soulignant la rareté de la littérature jeunesse réaliste qui aborde les vérités sans ménagement de la vie des enfants, les auteurs plaident pour une représentation plus honnête des tribulations de l'enfance dans la littérature, suggérant que de telles œuvres peuvent fournir une vision et une préparation cruciales pour les jeunes lecteurs face aux réalités d'un monde semé de violence et de solitude.*

Mots clés : *perte, solitude, afro-américain, enfants, ce que les lucioles savaient*

Introduction

Violence, ignorance, and misunderstandings constitute some of the main ingredients in the workings of modern society. This also seems reflected in contemporary adult literature, media, and arts. Isolation serves as a punitive measure imposed on individuals who engage in delinquent behavior, reflecting societal attempts to address and correct misconduct. Voluntary social isolation frequently reveals underlying trauma or displays deficiencies within societal structures, attitudes, and behaviors, leading individuals to withdraw from social interactions. In a world with all kinds of atrocities, and with adults as main actors, looked at from a child's perspective, a significant amount of literary and research works are framed to focus on issues created by adult violence, ignorance, and dysfunctions in social coexistence. However, literature intended for children, apart from the dumbed-down fairy tales and other sugary drivels of the same consistency that young readers are fed with, tends to push into the margins the devastating struggles in childhood. In an attempt to preserve innocence in children, most narratives and works of literature choose to spare them a look into the seamier side of life, the most sordid deeds of violence that they sometimes endure. All the rage in the canon of children's literature, and entertainment at large, consists in turning out overly romantic plots in which conflicts are managed and solved unrealistically, to the detriment of the truth about children's circumstances. Although literature does not have the pretension to replace informative journalism or educators, in reality, the severe lack of youth literature dealing with violence seconding other sources causes most children to make their brutal encounter with violence and solitude unprepared for; they are simply knocked down into the tribulations of life in society.

This paper, attempting a poetics of loss and loneliness in the wounded protagonist and characters of Kai Harris's *What the Fireflies Knew* [referred to as *Fireflies* for the sake of brevity and ease of reading], speaks for the rarity of realistic literary works for and about childhood that confront childhood's often-unsuspected tribulations. In her novel, Kai Harris throws a ten-year black protagonist onto the thorny path of her already very imperfect world: a broken family torn asunder by uncommunication, loss, and isolation, within a country fraught with staggering race-based economic discrepancies, the apology of individuality, and violence. Our study analyzes Harris's representation of feelings of loss and loneliness, articulated through literary techniques and themes, and the construction of the lives of the various characters grappling with these hardships in an utterly incommunicative and sometimes hostile environment. The theoretical framework, made up of elements of narratology and literary stylistics, has guided our examination of how Kai Harris's novel crafts an emotionally resonant and formally innovative poetics of loneliness and isolation. The analysis follows the young autodiegetic narrator KB's fight to piece back together the scattered patches of her life and make them work again.

1. The Loss of Innocence: The Brutal Fall into the World of Adults

The Cambridge Dictionary defines loss as "the fact of no longer having something or having less of something" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). As for loneliness, it stands for "an unpleasant emotional response to perceived isolation, a subjective feeling of disconnection from others" (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010: 219). The essence of loneliness and loss is compounded in a famous quote usually attributed to F. Scott Fitzgerald: "The loneliest moment in someone's life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly" (Fitzgerald, as cited in Bian, n.d : 620-631). Fitzgerald's putative reflection on loss and loneliness describes with acute precision the torment that KB, the young character of Harris's *The Fireflies*, faces.

Although the novel opens with the protagonist's recollection of her trip away from her forfeited home, a big jump into the unknown, this recollection is not the beginning of KB's tribulations. The disruption in the little girl's life, as she reminisces in the first post-exposition analepses, is announced by KB overhearing her parents' nightly disputes, her father slipping out at night, and his occasional abnormal behavior, together with some other incidents like her father selling the TV set that his wife scraped her sparse savings to purchase for the family. While KB possesses a keen sense of curiosity and thus can collect clues, the complexities of these clues require more maturity than she then had to interpret and fully understand. She is unable to grasp all the nuances of the situation even when those hinting signs pile up until her father's dead body is discovered on the stairs. Her nightmarish recollections always zero in on the corpse of a man lost to crack and disorientation. It vaguely dawns on her, however, in her ten-year-old mind, that the plague of drug abuse is what shatters her family and the whole of her quiet and peaceful world with it. And it really *is*.

KB epitomizes the early and brutal loss of childhood innocence that millions of African American children experience. On the issue, White and Persson (2022) report disproportionate rates of black children removal from their families and exacerbated poor quality experiences with foster care: "Today, they write, a shocking 1 out of every 41 Black children in the US will have their legal relationship with their parent or parents terminated (compared to 1 out of every 100 children in the US)." Some of the reasons why black children are separated from their parents are poverty, neglect, and child abuse. In Harris's novel, the young girl is forced to grow too fast after the event of her father's death and her mother's subsequent misunderstood abandonment.

Given that she is brought to live with her grandfather whom she had seen only once in her life before and who will not spit two words in a whole day, with her now estranged elder sister Nia, nobody to talk to

and nobody to care for her, the tweenager sees her carefree childhood disrupted. What worsens KB's predicament is that she does not know why she falls into this plight, why her mother left, where the latter went, how long she will stay away, why her sister once her confident now refuses to talk to her, and when the ordeal will end, let alone if it will at all. KB sees that everyone around her is in the know but refuses to give her explanations. The circumstances of a human waking up and finding themselves removed from their city, their family, their friends, their routine, not knowing where they are, how long they will stay in that new place, and why they are brought there, is one of the worst experiences one can ever imagine. That is what happens to KB. She loses all her bearings. Disorientation, the loss of the landmarks of the grounds one is walking, opens an unsuspected reservoir of unbearable suffering.

Detailed nuances of the little girl's loss and emotional journey are captured in the narrative's diegesis through the first-person perspective, as KB grapples with her father's death and family secrets. In *The Fireflies*, readers are presented with the intimate portrayal of KB's emotional journey in a unique way, with an empathy effect that might not have been attained if the author had summoned a narrative mood other than what Genette (1983, p.173) terms "immediate speech," whereby the character "gets rid" of the narrator and takes the command of his/her story. In the bursts of KB's internal monologues, Harris's style creates an intimate connection between her protagonist and the reader by allowing the latter to experience KB's limited tweenager's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings directly, fostering empathy. The reader commiserates with the struggles, the losses, and despair of that child in the tight grip of psychological despair. So strong is the empathy that the reader may feel that KB needs their own protection. The immediacy of the autodiegetic focalization, heightened by the psychological effect of the simultaneous narration woven with the present simple tense, makes her experiences feel raw, urgent, and personal, as it conveys her confusion and the unmediated kaleidoscope of her feelings in real-time. *The Fireflies's* perspective also emphasizes the infantile biases and misunderstandings of its protagonist, adding depth to her character development throughout the novel. The various narrative techniques woven to make up the verisimilitude of KB's fictional world, the African American vernacular, storytelling tradition, symbolism and imagery, character's slow maturation, closely parallel the picture we make of the diegesis Hurston uses in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which, besides, is explicitly summoned by KB herself.

As it happens, the combination of the first-person narration, the present tense, the distinct grammar, tone, and narrating style of the African American vernacular, added to the portrayal of the black female maturation ordeals, makes a strong intertextual connection between the two narratives. Genette credits Proust with introducing new complexities into narrative features; Proust's use of the first-person perspective,

he writes, innovates in the intricacies of character's memory in an unparalleled way (Genette, 1983: 33-85; 161-262). The depth in the characterization, what Genette acknowledges as a Proustian invention, is the depth Harris truly experiments with in crafting the little black girl's voice in *The Fireflies* narrative. Still, one might fail to grasp the full range of the poetic devices which *The Fireflies* summons to create the heightened tension perceptible in KB's character if one overlooks the coffin-like sensation that the house of KB's grandfather, setting to the novel's plot, exudes.

Only a silent narrow street winds its way toward the worn out, forlorn family home. The house itself, steeped in memories and whispers of the past, stands as a solitary estate amidst those flat, sprawling green fields we usually see at unkempt graveyards. The novel confines its little protagonist to a stifling setting that leaves the child with a loose connection with two estranged family members whose thoughts and feelings *The Fireflies'* internal focalization does not allow the reader to have access to either. Two ethereal simulacra of childhood playmates gravitate in the edges of the picture, serving as vessels for Harris to castigate racism. To these, the narrative adds a remote, once-met acquaintance who sexually assaults the pre-teen protagonist, a mother she calls only twice during her whole stay when her grandfather allows, and the sparse memories of a dead father which KB fights to wrench away from oblivion. That frozen island, the superlative of spatial immobility, is the setting where the drama of KB's life unfolds. The complete absence of people she can connect with and the very narrow range of evoked characters, isolating her, enhance the intense and undiluted focus on the protagonist's intimate engagements, allowing a minute exploration of her desolate inner landscape. In narratives, suffocating loneliness is the typical effect that confined settings with single or too few characters project. However, KB's case is honed to the very extreme, almost too overly hinting at an entombed living person. Metaphorically, the little girl is sepulchered at the graveyard.

Also, it may be surmised that the narrative is brought to life so vividly because Harris draws the novel's literary devices from the childhood memories of her stays with her own grandfather in Lansing, away from her home city, Detroit. The author confesses that KB's idea comes from a class assignment on personal events that could be vividly depicted (Galbreath, 2024). Therefore, KB stands for the fictionalized Harris's *double de papier* into which the author pours her feelings and sensations as a black girl, for want of autobiographically putting in the whole of her childhood. KB's terrible ordeals, like Harris's life chronicle, especially the sudden encounter with racism, family insecurity and poverty, and parent's addiction, could thus be generalized to the real itinerary of millions of black girls in the USA.

With KB's stay with her grandfather, now bittersweet, now utterly unbearable, she prematurely and brutally transitions into adolescence, where innocence gives way to a more complex understanding of the

world. As it turns out, this premature exposure to life's harsh realities robs KB of the opportunity to enjoy her childhood, a common episode for many children who face adversity at a young age. As she navigates her challenges, her worldview shifts from innocence, childhood wonder, to a more jaded and cynical perspective. KB is exposed to adult realities like grief, loneliness, and financial struggles earlier than she should be. She finally hits the bottom rock in this new dizzy destructing environment with her friend assaulting her. Trying to break free from loneliness, she gets sexually molested by Rondell whom she runs to for shelter and protection. These [de]formative passes in children's lives are the social circumstances that usually disrupt innocence and honesty and propel them onto the dark paths to crime, drug addiction and trafficking, and prostitution. KB explores all the options available to her for making money since she thinks it is only money that can reunite her family. She finally experiments with collecting empty bottles and selling them to get the amount of money needed to get her out of the dark tunnel. Had it occurred to her that she could sell her body for that money, would she not have done it? Who, in those circumstances, would not?

The young girl loses everything she once willed to maintain, even the little perfect things that fate decides to grant her: those little perfect moments of fusional connection that she nurtures with her family. KB is consumed by an agonizing thirst for understanding the tumultuous situation she finds herself in after she is sent to live with her grandfather. Eavesdropping, meeting her cousins, she tries to excavate family secrets and make sense of her father's death, her mother's abandonment, her sister's volatile behavior, and the strained relationship between her mother and grandfather, all while navigating the hazy space between childhood and adolescence. Why did her father change? Why did he die? Why did they lose their house? Why did their mother leave them? Why is her grandfather so aloof and why does he behave so strangely? KB is forced into worry, isolation, and boredom. Her character of abused and lost black girl also exhibits striking parallels with the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove.

Both protagonists are young black girls forced to grapple with adult realities too soon – KB after her father's death, and Pecola, after being raped by her father. They are both consumed by a desperate desire to be seen as beautiful, with KB wishing she were “normal” like the white children living across the street from her grandfather's home, and Pecola praying for blue eyes. Tragically, their innocence is shattered by the trauma they face, driving them to the brink of insanity as they struggle to make sense of their broken worlds and violated bodies. So, equally capital in KB's self-discovery – as well as in Pecola's tragic maturation – is the quizzical first encounter they make with whiteness and racism seen from the simplifying eyes of a ten-year-old's innocence. *The Fireflies'* protagonist tries, in her *Deus profundis*, to cry out for human connection. She initiates a fragile bond with the white children living across from her grandfather's house. Her attempt

is met with the harsh sting of racism. Her friends' mother accuses her of stealing the bicycle she has borrowed from Charlotte. The latter, witnessing KB's accusation of theft, cannot impugn her mother's falsehood. KB's desperation shows in these words in which she tries to take tally of her stay in Lansing: "I thought I had already lost everything, then came here and lost even more" (Harris, 2022 : 227).

KB's imperfect world shatters, driving away in the process her innocence. She has succeeded in understanding and accepting that her family is different from those that she watches on TV and those about whom she reads in novels. Nevertheless, she has never prepared herself to lose everything in a snap. Moreover, nobody wants to tell her the truth. She sinks into abyssal sadness: "I feel tears starting to form, but not cause I'm sad...Why everybody keepin' secrets from me?" (Harris, 2022:75). She pays the price for adult violence, child violence, and parental irresponsibility. It is at the end that KB understands everything. Paradoxically, her so-called child naivety that her family was willing to protect is the trait of character that fixes everything. She guesses it right as she formulates the primary root of the family's downfall. Her mother might not come back because of money as she innocently puts it: "Of course, it's money. Money always keeps us from doin' stuff. Paying for field trips on time. Buying school uniforms that fit. Keeping food in the fridge" (p.28). To those money-related issues that the little girl lists, we readers could add: relieving the two sisters of those worn-out and ill-adjusted outfits that their school and classmates always mock.

KB looks deadly wounded, certainly, but in her solitude, she stands unwaveringly tall. She finds the necessary resources to breathe life back into her whole family with the certitude and confidence that they can still reunite and regain serenity after the storm. Because it shows KB still believing in man-worked miracles, Kai Harris's story argues that everything is possible with children's unlimited optimism. From the beginning of the novel to its end, her determination to heal her wounded family bonds is remarkable. In the novel's denouement brought about by KB's initiatives, we still find some of the ubiquitous deus ex machina devices, forcefully turned strategies used today in children's literature. Nevertheless, the violent world of KB speaks for realism. The girl fills her spirit with the objective of reuniting her family. For that purpose, she looks for opportunities to earn money anywhere she goes and in everything she does. When her extended family, uncles, cousins, aunts, and grandfather, gather to celebrate the Independence Day, her principal motivation in attending the event is to discover the issue between her grandfather and her mother: "Even though it's nice to be fussed over, I'm impatient to get to my cousins. I tune out the adult voices and think bout how I'm gon' get my new cousins to tell me bout Momma and Granddaddy" (Harris, 2022: 148).

KB discovers that her grandfather has some money, which means that he can help her rebuild her family. She then starts thinking about how to convince the old man in agreeing to help. She discovers then

that there is an unresolved issue between father and daughter. Moreover, she initiates her mediation duties between the two: she understands that her grandfather and herself are somehow enduring the same situation: loneliness. As she always does, the mother tries to keep KB focused on childhood occupations, as if KB's life were not dependent on the whole family's welfare. However, her mother's rebukes in no way deter her from making up her mind: "So, while Momma focuses on gettin' better, I'm gon' focus on fixin' Momma and Granddaddy. Once I do that, he's gon' give her anything she needs to get her girls back" (Harris, 2022:126). From that moment, she identifies herself as being "the one to fix us all" (Harris, 2022:126) and becomes then the firefly that glimmers in the darkness of her scattered family, explaining the title given to the novel. Her growth comes with an interesting reversal of family roles: children serving as mediators between adults. The shifting of family roles frequently unfolds in the wake of trauma.

Basically, the title "what the fireflies knew" conveys a sense of awareness or understanding beyond childhood, beyond KB's age. The firefly, as an insect, contiguous in nature, beauty, metamorphosis, and fragility, to the caterpillar, is the literal metaphor of the fleeting nature of childhood maturation, transformation and rebirth. For KB's age, the fireflies' mesmerizing bioluminescent glow in the dark and ephemeral nature, bear a sense of mystery and wonder in an overarching darkness. For mature people, these flies may metaphorize the fleeting moments of joy and the importance of cherishing memories amidst trauma. These brief glimmers in the dark night that fireflies emit can also symbolize hidden truths, understood wisdom, or the mysteries of existence that elude our grasp. The understanding of this light's fleeting character engages the little girl on the road to healing. The fireflies episode in KB's life comes as a moment of growth, when she can slow down, reflect, and appreciate life despite its challenges. KB's twilight encounter with the fireflies is essential to her coming-of-age trajectory, spotlighting her resilience and the lessons of complexities she learns about love and family throughout the story.

After the fireflies episode, KB has come to understand that within a family, mutual love is enough, sufficient to cope with misunderstanding and incommunication. She now loves her imperfect family and expends a lot of effort and time radiating with love on everything and in every situation. Her change of attitude is the essential catalyst for her family reunion. A natural change in KB's life circumstances is not what gives her hope and steers her upward spiral. It is her change of attitude in the wake of the fireflies spectacle which instigates the change. The desperate character succeeds in filling herself up with patience and determination and, steadily, reunites her family. Surprisingly, she applies a line of conduct that grown-ups know and have taught her but which, because of the often cynical and dismissive adult "crisis mentality", midlife grumpiness, they are unable to put into practice. As a deacon, the little girl's grandfather does know

and teach about faith, hope, and forgiveness. However, all the same, his ego and culpability prevent him from reconnecting with his daughter. KB's father also teaches her that "sometimes, you gotta give up something you want to get something you need" (Harris, 2022 : 241). But he too, certainly fails in identifying life's priorities apart from trivial pursuits. Alterity and sacrifice are what both mean. KB makes these sacrifices. She sacrifices her innocence, energy, strength, time, resentment, ego, anger, and girlhood to understand and fight for peace.

2. Fighting with Loneliness and Abandonment

Johnny Tan contends that we live in an age of information technology but often fail to communicate with one another (Moore). Truthfully, in the age of hyper-connectivity, where technology has woven a tapestry of virtual bonds spanning continents, a pernicious affliction has crept into the hearts of many, particularly in the prosperous nations of the modern world: the malaise of loneliness, a silent epidemic that echoes through the lives of the ostensibly well-connected, underscoring the vital need to nurture genuine human bonds and community in an increasingly isolating era. John Donne is wrong when he says that no man is an island, entire of itself (108): every human, in this sense, *is* an island. When we try to deny our solitude, we are inevitably drawn back to its stark truth. The feeling of aloneness is exacerbated in the characters of *The Fireflies*. Although some are surrounded by their relatives, they still feel all alone as the protagonist testifies to, in her simplified perception: "now, ain't no noise. I'm still not alone, but feels like I am, here with Nia and Granddaddy and wondering if either one of 'em even likes me" (Harris, 2022: 17).

KB grapples with crude loneliness. She has nobody to discuss or share things with. How can a normal and healthy child live in a world where she has nobody and is left all alone? The principal cause of KB's feeling of loneliness is her abandonment. She finds herself adrift in a sea of solitude, farther and farther away from a world that once brimmed with the familial warmth of her father, her mother, and her sister. The secure foundations of her childhood are shaken, leaving her grasping for stability in an unfamiliar void. She then whispers messages into the wind to her deceased father, echoing the bitter-sweet updates the little girl of "I Miss You, Daddy" slow song moans, with time passing, to her own late father. KB says: "I pretend the words are smoke, watch as they spiral up past the stars to catch a kiss from Daddy" (Harris, 2022 : 48-9). The most disconcerting thing is that the familiar figure of her sister Nia, whom she once knew, even if that sister still shares the same spaces, has faded, reshaped by the new world around her, into someone almost unrecognizable. Worries and fear start governing the young girl's everyday life: worries about why all that happens, about the possible responsibility she may bear for the miserable situation she now finds herself in;

fear that maybe things will remain as they are: that maybe she has lost everything and nothing is going to be better.

Loneliness and abandonment can have profound effects on children's emotional and psychological well-being. When children feel abandoned, whether due to physical absence or emotional neglect from caregivers, they may face feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and difficulty forming trusting relationships. In a way, abandonment can create a sense of loneliness, even in the presence of others, as they may struggle to connect with peers or adults meaningfully. Actually, KB and Nia need help, but Nia's activation of denial and repression defense mechanismsⁱ has led her to remain oblivious of KB's struggles. This psychological state reflects in the abandoned fourteen-year-old girl an unconscious effort to shield herself from uncomfortable realities, resulting in a lack of awareness regarding the challenges confronting people around her. She erects a protective barrier, preventing the acknowledgement of distressing emotions and experiences, and this hinders her interpersonal understanding and empathy. The girls' grandfather, although withdrawn and grieving himself, eventually notices, but only after getting rid of his own emotional issues: he leaves a place for hope to fill him; he lets go of his grief against himself and his fears. He understands his granddaughters. His understanding makes him decide to tell KB the truth, not to prevent her from playing with the white children, and to open up and embrace her presence. This decision is one of the factors that heal KB. But before that, she tries to get her relatives' attention by fighting with Nia and even running away. However, neither of them, Granddaddy or Nia, understands her. Eventually she gets raped and betrayed by her summer friends. Although sad, those atrocities – even Nia's hard time with her summer friends too – fix those two sisters' relationship. They reconnect, working together to restore the unity of their broken and almost vanished family. After all, do we not say that every cloud has a silver lining²

The novel, focalized from KB's perspective, makes it easy for the reader to grasp and empathize with her loneliness, but a little harder to perceive the depth of the loneliness that all the other characters face. KB's maturation retrospectively sheds light into her father's challenges. He first appears as irresponsible and idle. A closer look makes the reader realize that he is destroyed by his desperate fight against the lack of job opportunities and the frustrations of being fed by his wife. Above all, he too, unappreciated and humbled, has fallen into the grip of aloneness. He embodies solitude through his struggles with addiction and eventual death, which finally impacts the family dynamics. He is aware of the sufferings he is putting his family through and does not yield to his addiction without regret because he loves his wife and daughters. He shows his love for his family despite his addiction through moments of vulnerability and beautiful connection. His love is recalled in the sweet memories that KB fondly reminisces and that Nia desperately tries to forget.

The character of KB's father illustrates that even flawed individuals, "crack heads" as society labels them, can have genuine care for their families. Nonetheless, he is aware that the struggles of the so-called "dirty druggie[s]" (Harris 2022: 239) are neither evident nor sympathized with since addiction is readily condemned and addicted people anathemized without remission. His addiction is what plunges his family in turmoil, leaving KB, Nia and Jacquee devastated. Poverty, despair, and shame are some reasons that push him into desperation. He never lands a steady job. Finally, he destroys and loses his life and that of his family in the process. He feels increasingly isolated, and with his family's contemptuous gaze [only KB does not understand this], shame makes him spend more and more time alone lying on the stairs. He remains, all along, insignificant and silent. He even goes unnamed throughout the novel, known just as father. He is the only KB family member who goes without a name. After his death, recalling the burden and social disgrace he once was for her mother, KB sanctimoniously says this: "Come to think of it, Daddy was probably Momma's Tea Cake – a reference to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, cause he ended up being bad for Momma in the end" (Harris 2022: 53-4).

Observing the defeatist attitude of KB's father evokes Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. In the dramatic relations between humans and God [standing for Grace in the frame of *The Fireflies*], God extends His strained body, hand, and finger to reach out to Man and save him. Man's bent finger and reclined attitude are usually interpreted as a lack of will to connect with the divine. But we usually fail to ask if Man has the inner strength to stretch his whole body and finger toward God. Does KB's father have the strength to yearn for Grace and make a decision to put an end to his addiction? His addiction is what eats away at Jacquee, even long before his tragic end.

KB's mother, Jacquee, contends with profound loneliness before the death of her husband from drug overdose, and a lot more in its wake. Jacquee's heart bears the weight of a thousand unspoken sorrows, each choice echoing the haunting silence of her estrangement from her father, and then from her husband, a wound that festers with the passage of time. The depth of her devastation in the wake of her husband's death is understood when one recalls that she chooses to marry her husband in defiance of her father's will and remains estranged from him for more than ten years. The drift between Jacquee and the widower becomes palpable when she expresses her desire to become a TV presenter, a choice that starkly contrasts the man's expectations and values. Her marriage in the aftermath of their misunderstanding is a pivotal moment which deepens the rift in their relationship, marking both with unspoken disappointment and profound sense of loss on both sides.

On top of that emotional toll of familial disconnection, Jacquee's husband later mocks her ambition to pursue her studies when she informs him that she intends to go back to university. On the whole, she feels her ambitions and true self obscured and mocked by the preconceptions of others. She was once held in the bonds of paternal authority and is now bending under the weight of maternal responsibility. These circumstances prevent her from blossoming into her true self. Her husband's death for drug abuse and the loss of her home are the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Jacquee had always exhibited a remarkable fortitude articulated in an unquestionable refusal to complain. Her various smiles in face of life vicissitudes make of Jacquee a legendary figure that her younger daughter reveres. So deeply does KB idolize her mother's stoicism that she has already started imitating her:

Momma always smiles, even in the bad times. Her smile is like a gigantic, dripping ice cream cone, after I stuff my belly full with dinner. Even with a stomachache, I want that smile. I need that smile more than about anything in the world, I think. Momma has different smiles for different things. This smile, when the car hisses and puffs and then stops, is squeezed tight across her face like the drawn-on smile of a plastic doll. (Harris, 2022 :7-8)

Experience shows that these people who show too much strength of character, going through the worst hardships without a word of complaint, usually fall in the grips of profound depression when they finally do break down because tension builds up so high in their hearts without any release. KB notices this in her mother too:

I get that Momma is sad, but her sad is so big that it takes away from other people. Sometimes it feels like Momma's grief for Daddy keeps me from having my own grief for Daddy. I bet it's hard to lose a husband, but it's hard to lose a daddy, too. I guess she don't get that, though, cause her daddy been right here this whole time, and she barely even sees him. (Harris 2022:34).

Even when she is cornered and has to leave her two daughters in her father's care before she goes to the health facility for her treatment, Jacquee brings them with utmost reluctance and offers the old man a hug that the latter awkwardly dodges. She remains alone, estranged from her father who is also slowly sinking into the abyss of loneliness.

As a matter of fact, KB's grandfather seems to be plunged in an absolute physical and psychological solitude. Loneliness in older adults is a pervasive issue that significantly impacts their physical and mental health. As he ages, he faces various challenges, on top of all, the loss of the loved ones, decreased mobility, and reduced social networks. Although he loves his daughter and grandchildren, he feels awkward around them. His attitude shows that without the meaningful interactions of people that matter to him, he has resigned himself to solitude, simply awaiting death to strike. KB underlines his strange silence on the first

days she spends with him, broken only by rebukes: “‘Kenyatta,” he grumbles. It’s the only word he says to me that day’ (Harris 2022 :13).

Throughout the novel, the word “alone” appears 29 times, quietly underlying the deep resonance of sorrow in KB’s story. As for the word “quiet,” it is repeated sixty-six times, added to the many occurrences of the derived adverb “quietly”. “Quiet” and “quietly” mainly refer to the old man’s attitude or the atmosphere in his house. Also, words like “silence”, “silent”, and “silently” occur twenty-seven times, to the same effect. The narrative signals that the old man’s first wife left him and that his second wife died leaving Jacquee who has now severed ties with him. None of his elder sons or their children graces him with a single visit the whole time Nia and KB stay with him. He has only one friend who occasionally calls on him for Bible studies and engages him on fishing trips once in a blue moon. When the protagonist goes over her first impression that she is not welcome in her grandfather’s house, she realizes that her grandfather’s extended periods spent without meaningful social connections have made him construct a mask of indifference and gruffness. He is afraid of showing his desperation and extreme vulnerability. It is his feeling of pride or shame in admitting his struggle against solitude that first makes KB compare him to the grumpy character Marilla Cuthbert of *Ann of the Green Gables*. She will slowly crack his shell however, and make him come around, opening a window for more sunshine to flow into their respective lives.

As Nia herself is also grappling with her own emotional isolation after her father’s death and her mother’s disappearance, she starts drifting apart from her once-close relationship with KB, crossing the threshold of adolescence and suddenly wanting nothing to do with her. KB notices that Nia remains distant, retreats inward, keeping family secrets along with the rest of their family. It takes KB some time to understand that her sister’s aloofness is the true expression of her own distress:

Nia changed, then Daddy died. And I can’t tell if she’s happy or sad with him gone... For a while, I was nothin’ but angry at Nia. But the more I thought bout that sad look on her face when she was alone in the room, the more I began to wonder if Nia was struggling, too, just like me (Harris, 2022 :77).

Nia almost always locks herself away between the headphones of her Walkman blazing loud music in her ears, and gets dizzy running out with friends, with a genuine new interest for boys while she shuts her sister out of her world. KB cannot understand her flight from reality and interprets it as an additional abandonment. “Daddy’s gone, Momma’s gone. Nia’s still here, but she might as well be gone, too” (Harris, 2022: 27). She always gets cross with KB each time the latter lovingly evokes the memories of their father. Nia seems to find refuge in her hatred and rejection of familial love; sometimes trauma and despair activate in people paradoxical attitudes. She has been so disappointed that she runs away from any glimmer of hope.

It is in the explanation she offers KB in the denouement of the novel that finally makes the latter fully understand her struggle: “you always wanna talk about the past, and I just wanna forget it... I mean, ain’t it hard for you to remember all that stuff? Even remembering good stuff about Daddy makes me feel like I’m ripping in half” (242). Nia’s avoidance is not an expression of dislike. *Au contraire!* She carefully avoids to unearth her father’s memories fearing the sorrow they would awaken. Nia had such privileged relations to her father that they sparked little KB’s jealousy. Nia was once closer to her father than KB was. We can thus imagine how lonely she now feels. KB’s realization of her relatives’ solitude brings her out of her own.

In her poem “Loneliness,” R. Erway describes in verses the titular feeling as the presence of absence. The poet depicts loneliness as a silent partner following her everywhere, from childhood (elementary school) to adulthood (college), pushing her to make friend only with its jealous self. The sad tone of the poet’s last verses paints the pain which little KB left alone with grumpy Nia and her Silent-Bob grandfather, feels, like all of us one day or another:

I think he (loneliness) wants me as a friend, because
No matter what colors prism in my eyes
Or where my feet choose to stay,
He’s still beside me.
“At least you’re not alone.”
“No,” I say.
But he is silent.
And so am I. (Erway, 2018: 22-29).

Conclusion

Kai Harris’s *What the Fireflies Knew* is a novel that dives into Black girlhood and perfectly exposes the seamier sides of black girls’ experience which are not often portrayed in mainstream fairy tales and TV shows or in the canon of children’s books. The paper highlights through KB’s narrative the unsuspected torments black children confront. Its poetics of loss and loneliness is profoundly rooted in black tradition while it comes up with a realistic painting of black children’s tribulations. It puts light on the unperceived issues of loneliness and abandonment that a child can go through, helping to understand the immense devastations that neglect and incommunication can have on children and on adults alike. The way is then totally paved for abandonment and loneliness. Nothing pains more than being invisible and untouchable to people that are however around. *The Fireflies* shows that children can be traumatized by loss and loneliness and absence and that they can be subjected to violence too. Literature’s first objective is not to supplant educators or journalists, nor to mirror reality. But it does serve as a major vehicle for education and insight, shaping our understanding and perception of the world in rich and imaginative ways. It should not impose harmful boundaries to children’s imagination that take them too far away from reality. Literature should refrain from

exclusively embracing inappropriately kiddified representations of childhood. In this vein, *The Fireflies* underlines that realistically explaining life situations to children is better than trying to conceal things from them. Children do not need to be spared but to be informed and prepared for life struggles. Holding away information and secluding them from the difficulties inherent in childhood can result into the same devastating incidents that KB falls prey to. In times of difficulty, through accompaniment, they can learn and grow and gradually understand what adulthood and life have in store. Misconceptions about children's physical, intellectual and social wellbeing by adults can have on children far more devastating impacts.

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¹ Repression involves pushing painful or unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or memories out of conscious awareness, and denial involves refusing to acknowledge or accept reality, particularly when it is unpleasant or distressing.