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"God would punish them...": Gay masculinity, religiosity, and violence in Genevieve Hudson's *Boys of Alabama: A Novel*

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Abstract:
This article examines how heteropatriarchal hegemonic masculinity and religious prejudice intersect, forming a violent tool that marginalizes queer individuals in Genevieve Hudson's debut novel Boys of Alabama: A Novel (2020), a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Set in Alabama, the novel follows Max, a German immigrant boy negotiating the complexities of masculinity in a Christian society, his queer romance with Pan, and his ultimate subordination to societal power, symbolized by the character of Judge. Using a queer theoretical framework and critical close reading, this qualitative study highlights how the forces of heterosexual masculinity and religious bigotry perpetuate moral policing, effectively erasing queer existence from a heteronormative world.

Introduction

> "Masculine meant strong. Masculine meant straight. If we could only learn the essence of what it meant to be masculine, then we could learn the rest."
>
> — Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased: A Memoir*, 2016

Published in 2020, *Boys of Alabama: A Novel* is a captivating debut by Genevieve Hudson, a winner of the Stonewall Book Award, 2021 and a Lambda Award finalist. The novel immerses readers in the hyper-masculine world of Delliah through the eyes of 16-year-old Max, who embarks on a forbidden queer romance with Pan, a boy shunned by his peers as a "witch" (Hudson, 2020, p. 23). In this poignant coming-of-age story, Hudson explores themes of identity, desire, and the tension between societal expectations of masculinity and personal truth. Set in a small town in Alabama, *Boys of Alabama* unfolds in a world shaped by rigid heteronormative masculinity, religious bigotry, and pervasive homophobia. The narrative captures the intensity of these pressures, with Hudson poignantly reflecting, "You had to test yourself and others by walking to the edge of death. If God kept you safe, it was because you trusted him. It was because you really believed. If he did not keep you safe, it was a sign that you had let the devil in" (ibid., p. 210). Focusing on Max and Pan's queer romance, this study offers a unique and fresh insight into how the intersection of religiosity, homophobia, and queer desire in small-town settings shapes the experiences of young gay men, keeps them under the constant threat of the death penalty, and contributes to the ongoing scholarship on gay masculinity.

Hudson's narrative arc aligns with that of other writers who explore themes of family dynamics, immigration, and cultural dislocation in unfamiliar landscapes, often centring on domestic life and the experience of cultural alienation. However, what distinguishes *Boys of Alabama* is Hudson's distinctive take on this familiar plot device. Rather than focusing solely on physical migration, she delves deeply into the internal journey of a boy steering his queer identity. In a world steeped in narrow-minded religiosity and entrenched homophobia, the novel powerfully examines Max, the protagonist's struggle for self-acceptance and his fight to exist authentically within an oppressive and hostile environment under the "guarded gaze" (ibid., p. 244) of social authority. Through a third-person narrative, Hudson engages readers in the story of Max, a German gay teenager with the magical ability to revive dead animals and plants. Max's arrival in the hyper-

masculine world of Alabama, alongside his parents, marks his return to a place where football serves as an essential tool for shaping a boy's identity in a masculine mould. As the narrative suggests, "football is as much religion as religion is around here" (ibid., p. 27), signifying that such a sport holds the same sacred, almost devotional, significance as religion, shaping the town's identity, values, and social dynamics. Football, like religion, becomes a central ritual that reinforces masculinity, community pride, and tradition in Alabama. Hudson deliberately chooses it as a theme to highlight its significance and how it shapes American masculine identity. According to Cronin and Mayall, football serves as a prime example to examine the global influence of American culture (Cronin and Mayall, 1998). With its disciplined, military-inspired approach on the field and a culture rooted in conflict and male solidarity, football embodies many characteristics that define American identity, both domestically and internationally. These include masculine bravado, war-related metaphors, intense competition for physical dominance, profound emotional and physical resilience, respect for legal structures, and a strong emphasis on the self-made individual (Benavides, 2012). This setting, steeped in rigid gender roles and religious fervour, serves as the backdrop for Max's journey of self-discovery and the challenges he faces in reconciling his queer identity with the dictatorial masculine culture surrounding him.

Conventional idea of masculinity, religiosity, and gay subordination

Recent research in masculinity studies has challenged the notion of masculinity as an inherent or natural trait, often seen as "just human nature" (Kimmel, 2004). Scholars now recognize masculinity as "socially constructed, produced, and reproduced" (Connell and James, 2005). Connell further asserts that both femininity and masculinity are "gendered projects", arguing that these concepts are not fixed or natural, but rather ongoing processes shaped by social, cultural, and historical influences. People actively engage in creating and performing their gender identities through behaviours, choices, and roles, making them dynamic rather than static categories (Connell, 1995). Gilbert and Gilbert elaborate: "Becoming a man involves shaping oneself according to, and being shaped by, the available models of masculinity in each society. It also entails negotiating the various discourses of femininity..." (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). This highlights masculinity as not just an individual identity, but also as something shaped by societal expectations and interactions with gender norms for both men and women.

Within the hierarchies of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity serves as an analytical framework for understanding how different forms of masculinity are ranked and evaluated. Connell and Messerschmidt assert that "hegemonic masculinity is distinguished from other masculinities, particularly subordinated masculinities" (Connell and James, 2005). Subordinated masculinities are influenced by several "social factors, including class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, and age" (MacKinnon, 2003). Connell's concept of subordinated masculinity refers to forms of masculinity that are marginalized or devalued in comparison to the dominant, hegemonic ideals. Non-heterosexual or gay men, for instance, are often categorized within subordinated masculinities (Connell, 1995). Kimmel moreover explains that hegemonic masculinity sets a "standard in psychological evaluations, sociological research, self-help, and advice literature, teaching young men to become 'real men'" (2004). These ideals pressure young men to conform to rigid, often harmful, gender norms, shaping their identities and behaviours in a way that aligns with societal expectations of masculinity.

In the realm of the macho ideal, heterosexual masculinity is conventionally associated with hegemonic masculinity (Herek, 1986). As a result, the hegemonic ideal creates a tension for subordinated masculinities, which are often in conflict with the dominant norms, leading them to "live in a state of some tension with hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995). Men who adhere to the ideals of heterosexual masculinity are prized with "certified mental health, respectability, social and physical mobility, and material benefits" (Rubin, 2013). While heterosexual desire is seen as a mark of "plus ability", homosexual activity is termed as "minus ability" (Roberts and Elliot, 2020). Men who violate this script of masculinity – defined by traits like "heterosexuality, independence, rationality, and a competitive spirit" (Howson, 2006) – often undergo social exclusion, stigmatization, and punishment (Bird, 1996). This reflects the societal belief that masculinity is inherently associated with heterosexuality and sexual conquest of women. Eventually, gay men, in particular, are often seen as "not fully men" and are derogatorily labelled as "wimps", "Mama's boys", or "sissies" (Kimmel, 2004).

There is substantial historical evidence showing that patriarchy-driven, heterosexual masculine societies often use religious beliefs and symbols not only to legitimize social inequality but also to reinforce deep-seated homophobia (Roggemans et al., 2015). The stronger the religious devotion, the more pronounced the negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Fulton et al., 1999; Whitley, 2009). Many religions often describe homosexual behaviours as "unnatural", "ungodly",

and “impure” (Yip, 2005). Traditionalism plays a key role in shaping the relationship between religion and negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Wilkinson, 2004). The rigid division of roles between men and women is a core value in many traditional religious beliefs, and homosexuality is seen as a breach of this fundamental principle (Duck & Hunsberger, 1999). According to this perspective, negative attitudes toward homosexuals arise from the perceived violation of these traditional gender roles (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). This reinforces the idea that religious and cultural norms often intertwine to enforce heteronormativity and stigmatize non-heterosexual identities. Fear of divine punishment, both for individuals and for society, can drive more religious people to encourage anti-homosexual attitudes and support policies that foster intolerance (Wilcox 1996). The negative impact of religion and spirituality on gay individuals has deep historical roots, tracing back to sacred texts in both Christianity and Judaism. The story of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim is often cited as a cautionary tale, with their destruction attributed to the “licentiousness of the lawless” (v. 7) and their “lawless deeds” (v. 8) (2 Peter 2:4-18; Gnuse, 2015). These biblical narratives have long been used to justify religious condemnation of homosexuality, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and promoting societal rejection of queer identities. For both Jews and Christians, “unnatural lust” often referred to sexual acts that did not serve the purpose of procreation, which were commonly interpreted as including homosexual acts. One of the key texts condemning homosexual activity is the *Holiness Code* of Leviticus, where such acts are described as a “transgression of orders” and “sexual immorality”, reinforcing religious prohibitions against same-sex relations. Leviticus 20:13 states: “If a man lies with a male as with a female, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them” (2001). In his thorough analysis of the texts concerning homosexuality in the Hebrew Bible, Robert Gagnon argues that the cultural and intellectual assumption underlying these passages, particularly the Levitical laws, is the belief that all male homosexual activity is inherently sinful and immoral. Gagnon’s interpretation suggests that these texts reflect a long-standing theological perspective that condemns same-sex relations as a violation of divine order (2001). This highlights how religious conviction can often reinforce negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in societies where traditional beliefs are strongly upheld.

Religious bigotry, masculine pressure, and gay marginalization in *Boys of Alabama*

Genevieve Hudson's complex coming-of-age novel *Boys of Alabama* subtly explores the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity through the character of the Judge and the deeply ingrained homophobic attitudes of society. These forces have a devastating impact on Max and his "unnatural" queer relationship with Pan, emphasizing the destructive power of societal expectations and the harsh consequences of deviating from prescribed gender norms. Max, a queer boy from a German family, moves to Alabama – a place governed by heteropatriarchal masculinity and rigid religious doctrines. In this town, football and gun culture are seen as essential rites of passage for boys to become "real men". The town even names "a road after a legendary college football coach" (Hudson, 2020, p. 6) to highlight its devotion to athletic masculinity. Max's father emphasizes, "If you want to understand this place, you need to understand the pride they have for this man" (ibid., p. 7), referring to the revered football coach. Researchers identify that football and gun culture are traditionally associated with the cultivation of masculinity because they are seen as symbolizing conventional ideals of strength, aggression, and dominance – qualities that have historically been linked to being a "real man" (Scaptura and Boyle, 2021). In most cultures, these activities promote physical toughness, competitiveness, and a sense of power, all of which are qualities often emphasized in hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, both football and gun culture can reinforce ideas of control and protection, where boys are socialized to believe that embracing these elements will help them prove their masculinity and transition into adulthood (Harding, 2021). Along with his father's job transfer from Germany to the USA, the move presents an opportunity for Max's parents to try to intervene in what they consider their son's "immoral" (Hudson, 2020, p. 67) relationship with Nils, a boy from the neighbourhood where Max lived in Germany. This is made clear in a conversation between Max's mother and his aunt, in which they discuss his "abnormal" sexuality and their hopes of changing him.

> Aunt: Maybe you're the one who's having trouble.
> Mother: I wish. I mean yes. But it's more than that.
> Aunt: More what?
> Mother: Did I do something wrong? Was I a bad mother? I thought taking him here would be good after all he went through with Nils. I thought it would be, um, an adventure. Something that expanded him. (ibid., p. 165)

This dialogue captures a deeply emotional and complex moment of conflict between personal acceptance and societal expectations. Max's mother's concerns about her son reflect not only

society's negative views on homosexuality but also the fear of how her family will be judged because of his sexual identity. Her worries reveal a sense of guilt and anxiety about being perceived as a "bad mother". Research suggests that being homosexual can have a profound impact not only on the individual, leading to emotional distress and mental health challenges, but also on their family. Families may face negative consequences, such as social isolation, with society often placing blame on the mother, questioning her ability to raise her son as a "proper" man (Finck, 2016). The conversation also highlights the challenges parents face when their child's identity doesn't align with societal norms, underscoring the difficulty many experience in reconciling their love for their child with the pressure to conform to long-held beliefs and social expectations of sexual identity.

Paul Kivel's analysis of how masculinity develops from an early age provides a valuable basis for understanding the construction of boyhood masculinity and the marginalization of a queer child, like Max, who fails to conform to the prescribed masculine ideals. In his *Act-Like-a-Man Box*, Kivel illustrates how boys are socialized into rigid cultural, social, and religious norms of masculinity from a young age, often being confined within an invisible box of acceptable behaviours through various coercive methods (Kivel, 2010). He states: "The key to staying in the box is control. Boys are taught to control their bodies, control their feelings, control their relationships-to protect themselves from being vulnerable..." (Kivel, 2010). Similarly, Hudson centres her plot around God's Way, a boarding school tightly bound by discipline and religious codes, where Max was admitted, using the teenage boys' perceptions of masculinity as a central device. Hudson wisely chooses this religious name for the school to illuminate how children are indoctrinated with religious views about gender roles, symbolizing the way institutions can shape and enforce rigid, conservative ideologies around gender and sexuality. The narrative suggests, "they chanted God's Way, God's Way" (Hudson, 2020, p. 99) when they were in danger, highlighting the boys invoking God's guidance and protection as they felt threatened. It reflects their reliance on faith as a means of seeking security and reassurance in moments of crisis. This closely knit masculine environment of the boarding school reveals how the boys are left to derive their understanding of manhood, sexuality, and masculinity within a rigid, religiously governed space where there is no tolerance for vulnerability or anything deemed "unmanly". Max feels "different" from his peers at school due to his sexuality, as the other boys talk about girls and engage in "boy stuff" (ibid., p. 32), which is considered a "signifier of virility" (ibid., p. 179). In

contrast, he is drawn to another boy, Pan, rather than a girl. Davis, one of Max's friends, says, "I need a girl with curves" (ibid., p. 162), and he also talks about Renata, a girl he refers to as "his experimenter" (ibid., p. 95). For Davis, "what they did sexually was experimenting, not serious, but practice for the people they would one day marry" (ibid.). He further explains, "What we are doing is playing. Experimenting. Getting good" (ibid.). In popular ideology, early adolescence is often seen as a crucial period for sexual experimentation and socialization, shaping a young adult's sexual development in the future (Sommer 2020). This dynamic shows the gap between Max's experiences and those of his classmates, emphasizing his sense of alienation within a world defined by heteronormative ideals. By breaking away from the conventional path of heterosexuality, Max reflects, "the rest of the world tells you that you are wrong. You are crazy. You are lost. Even when the rest of the world says you are evil" (Hudson, 2020, p. 71). Even "in Germany, his classmates had found him incredibly strange" (ibid., p. 35) because of his non-conformity to the heterosexual masculine script. Hudson constructs a world steeped in toxic masculinity and organized religion, where there is no tolerance for homosexual masculinity. The dominant masculine ideology asserts that men "cannot learn to be a man without learning how to interact with women" (Mosher and Tomkins 1988), suggesting that a man's identity is shaped by his relationships with and treatment of women. This reinforces traditional gender roles, where masculinity is often defined by the ability to assert dominance, control, or earn approval from women, thus maintaining a gendered power structure. It also reflects the concept of procreative masculinity, where a man's value is tied to his involvement in heterosexual relationships, reproduction, and his role as a father, solidifying his place within societal norms (Wang and Keizer 2024). By deviating from these hegemonic heterosexual masculine norms, Hudson highlights the full force of society's negative attitudes toward Max, illustrating the harsh consequences of rejecting these rigid gender expectations. Davis, a leader in the peer group, mocks and laughs at Max, saying, "Don't worry, Germany. We'll get you a girl" (Hudson, 2020, p. 163). Additionally, another boy taunts him, "Y'all cute for faggots" (ibid., p. 203). These words immediately echo Pascoe's analysis of homophobia, where she introduces the concept of "fag discourse", a sexualized insult directed at gay men (Pascoe 2005). This insult not only degrades those it is aimed at but also serves to maintain a social hierarchy that marginalizes non-heteronormative identities, reinforcing homophobia and rigid gender roles.

The Judge, an evangelical figure and a key player in Alabama's political landscape, leads the religious community. He embodies the ultimate expression of the macho ideal, showing no mercy for those who choose the "path of sin" (Hudson, 2020, p. 183), and he condemns them with a deathly zeal. Representing the entrenched status quo of hegemonic masculinity, the Judge is an unwavering embodiment of the biblical principle: "Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them" (Proverbs 13:24). Through him, the ruthless enforcement of traditional masculine values and religious doctrine is laid bare. Here in Alabama, both animals and queer people are treated as disposable, and the town's harsh moral code echoes the sentiment that "the wages of sin is death" (Hudson, 2020, p. 158). In Kimmel's terms, the Judge is the "man in power, a man with power, and a man of power" (Kimmel, 2004) within the community. This phrase reflects the dominant, hegemonic ideal of masculinity where men are expected to hold positions of authority, control, and influence in their communities. This ideal typically emerges in social structures where power is linked to masculinity, often in relation to leadership, dominance, and physical control. Kimmell points out to highlight how such a model pressures men to conform to rigid, patriarchal expectations of masculinity, often marginalizing other forms of masculinity (Kimmel, 2004). Hudson captures the Judge's embodiment of unchecked authority and the destructive consequences of rigid, power-driven ideologies. When asked about the inspiration behind the character of the Judge, Hudson explains in an interview:

He was modeled after the kind of men I've seen whose...fundamentalism and thirst for power eschews any kind of nuance and becomes dangerous, even deadly... he is willing to put other people's lives at risk in order to maintain his belief system as well as his power...he is ready to use his power to punish those unlike him. (Hudson reviewed by Price, 2020)

In such a close-knit atmosphere of "religious bigotries and hyper masculinities" (Connell, 2000), Max is in a homoerotic relationship with Pan, whom his friends ridicule as the "witch of the town" (Hudson, 2020, p. 127). This queer romance not only violates social, cultural, and political norms but also constitutes a religious violation. Hudson portrays Pan's experience as a teenager through the lens of queer masculinity. Like Max, Pan also negotiates a complex life history – or perhaps even a more difficult one. Pan is an unlikely figure in Delliah, an openly gay teenager of Puerto Rican descent who often wears makeup and feminine clothing. He has "smooth skin" (ibid., p. 24) and a "hairless belly" (ibid., p. 119), traits that are feminine and even unsettling

to macho principles. This highlights Epictetus's view, where he suggests that if a man does not follow conventional masculine ideals, he is marked as unmanly or feminine. He writes:

> Are you a man or a woman? A man. Then adorn yourself as a man, and not as a woman. A woman is by nature smooth-skinned and delicate...she is a prodigy...a man if he is not hairy...he is a prodigy. Where shall we exhibit him...? 'I'll show you a man who would rather be a woman than a man'. (Epictetus, 2014, pp. 145-146)

It seemed people at school mostly ignored Pan's weirdness (Hudson, 2020, p. 47), as the narrator suggests. Before he and Max developed a relationship, Pan had been involved with Lorne, the son of the Judge, which also threatened the masculine structure of the godly society. However, Max and Pan begin a secret relationship within the hyper-masculine realm of *God's Way* and the world shaped by the Judge's brand of Christianity, where "the Judge man called his supporters a Christian army" (ibid., p. 180). For Pan, Alabama appears as an earthly and hedonistic den of temptation and peril. Pan's characteristics, which don't align with his peers' expectations, label him with "unmanliness" (Stoudt, 2006). Hudson portrays an event at the dinner table in Max's home, where Pan is placed in an uncomfortable situation and ignored by Max's father because of his non-masculine appearance and for wearing "his mother's clothes" (Hudson, 2020, p. 119). His father "did not want to sit at the dinner table with Pan in girl clothing", while he was "stroking his khaki beard" (ibid., p. 52). By shedding light on these two contrasts, Hudson creates a world of hegemonic masculinity as presented by Max's father, in contrast to the subordinated masculinity represented by Pan. In an atmosphere of pervasive homophobic attitudes, Max and Pan's love exists under the constant threat of the death penalty. This fear is evident in Max's eyes. Hudson writes, "he wondered what would happen if he leaned in and kissed Pan on the mouth...They would be physically removed from the premises" (ibid., p. 108). Here Hudson vividly captures the tension between Max's feelings and the oppressive environment he inhabits. The thought of kissing Pan evokes a powerful sense of risk, symbolizing the societal and personal dangers that come with expressing queer desire in a repressive, homophobic context. This moment echoes Michel Foucault's ideas in *Discipline and Punish*, where the threat of punishment serves as a tool of social control, shaping behaviour through fear and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). In this case, Max's fear

of being “physically removed” reflects how institutional power enforces conformity, not just through direct punishment but by conditioning individuals to internalize societal norms and regulate their own actions.

In Christianity, one of the world’s major monotheistic faiths, research has shown that the stronger individuals adhere to religious teachings and the more strictly they follow the rules of their faith, the more likely they are to harbour homophobic prejudices towards homosexuals (Fulton 1999; Whitley 2009). Hudson portrays one of the central plot points as the prejudiced, homophobic religious community in the American South. Within the theological traditions of Western Christianity, and especially within Roman Catholicism, there is a “fear and loathing” of bodies, particularly of women’s and queer bodies (Hogan, 2015). In this theological framework, the body is an intrinsic part of God’s good creation and the vehicle of God’s redemptive presence in the world. John Paul II, through his exegesis of the Genesis text, insists that Adam and Eve – representing the original man and woman – are images of God as a “unity of two”. He argues that their masculinity and femininity allow them to make a sincere mutual gift of self to one another (John Paul II, 1988, p. 7) (402). Thus, transgression from this “ideal” construct and engaging in a “violating” body (homosexual sex) is condemnable and punishable. After their first sexual intimacy, instead of experiencing enjoyment, Max and Pan are consumed by fear and the threat of punishment. The societal conspiracy of heterosexism forces homosexual men to conceal their identities (Sanna, 2012). Hudson provides a painful description: “Fear lived in the ears. Fear tunneled through the holes in his nose” (2020, p. 83). Max begs Pan not to reveal their secret: “Don’t tell, Max said. Please don’t tell” (83). Because Max fears committing sin through engaging in a homosexual affair: “Fear at the God in the sky who might be there... Fear at the sin inside of him” (ibid., p. 212). Though the two boys wish to have a life together, religious prejudices and masculine pressures force them to conceal their sexual expression through “methods of control” (Foucault, 1980)

The Judge exercises his homophobic masculine power over queer individuals in his community to discipline them. Hudson points out, “The Judge was like a manager that pulled every gaze toward it” (2020, p. 266). There is a story in the community that he once drank poison and lived, so he too possesses a godly “magical” quality about him. In this atmosphere steeped in “the heteronormative bourgeois and masculine social geographies” (Jazeel, 2005), the Judge declares, “God’ll hear you and test you... God would punish them for their wanting” (unnatural desire)

(Hudson, 2020, p. 265). The homophobic attitude becomes even more horrific when the Judge discovers the homosexual relationship of his son, Lorne, whom he refers to as "a sin creature" (ibid., p. 158). First, "the Judge took it as a sign of his moral deterioration and began to distance himself" (ibid., p. 196) from his son. And the final punishment comes when the Judge ties his son to a tree and stabs him in the ribs for the crime of sodomitical desire. Traditional gender beliefs refer to the commonly accepted ideas about how men and women should behave, what roles they should fulfil, and how they should express their gender (Qiu, 2023). These beliefs often come with stereotypes that define what is "appropriate" or "normal" for both masculine and feminine genders. When someone, such as a gay man or a lesbian woman, does not fit into these traditional roles or expectations, they face negative reactions or discrimination, even the death penalty (Deaux & Kite, 1987). Hudson meticulously details the gruesome tableau of violent masculinity, unravelling the brutal power dynamics at play through the death of the Judge's son. The text depicts:

> He tied Lorne to a tree out-side. Tied him with ropes so tight his ankles and wrists bruised and bled. The Judge pierced his ribs with a hot metal cane, too, so his side would drip blood like Jesus. The Judge said it was about repentance and getting Lorne to work for his forgiveness. He needed to touch death in order to find life. He said he read on Lorne's soul his depraved desire. The vision came straight from God. The Judge wiped Lorne's tied-up body with a hot cloth. Got all his blood on this cloth and then burned the cloth in a pile with his clothes and spread the ashes of the bloody rag and soiled clothes across the lake. He said the past was burned up and the future would be clean and pure. (Hudson, 2020, p. 158)

The Judge, as both enforcer and executioner, becomes a mirror to the societal forces that perpetuate cycles of violence and retribution, suggesting that such power, when unchecked, inevitably consumes the one who wields it.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated its clear condemnation of homosexual activity, asserting that when homosexual persons "engage in sexual activity they confirm within themselves a disordered inclination which is essentially self-indulgent" (1986: para. 5). In response to legislative proposals concerning discrimination against homosexual persons, Mario Conti, Archbishop of Glasgow, argued that such actions would harm the body politic and trivialize the respect owed to marriage. To convey the gravity of the murder scene, Hudson uses the imagery of Jesus's crucifixion and bloodshed, drawing a parallel to Lorne's death penalty.

Homophobia and religious orthodoxy emerge as such violent forces that the Judge seeks to erase his own son's identity out of revenge. The negative stereotypes associated with traditional church-driven homophobia are perpetually reinforced. Connell notes: "homophobia is not just an attitude. Straight men's hostility to gay men...sometimes leads to murder" (Connell, 1995).

Religion serves as a platform for society to engage in a debate about the role of gay and lesbian people. In *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II responds to what he perceives as the crisis of truth engulfing the world today. Yet, after condemning his son to death, the Judge's exercise of hegemonic power does not end there; he continues his campaign of masculine control, seeking to further separate and kill Max and Pan while satisfying his unquenchable thirst for homophobic dominance and toxic masculinity. The Judge organizes a hunting camp atop a hill, where the boys are instructed in how to operate guns and kill animals. "It's healthy for teenagers to experiment" (180), he claims. This is the way they are taught the art of masculinity, a process through which "they're building his self-confidence" (Hudson, 2020, p. 180), as the Judge declares.

Despite his mother's unease, Max decides to join the camp. However, the camp's deeply homophobic culture forces him to confront his emerging feelings, leaving him in a constant state of fear, particularly from the Judge. The narrator reflects Max's internal struggle: "He didn't want the Judge to read his thoughts and see Pan in them. He didn't want the Judge peering into the smudged mirror of his mind and thinking: Sin creature" (ibid., p. 179). To the Judge, however, Max's struggle is a test of his faith. As the Judge puts it, "It's good to have him test his morals" (180) by forcing him to drink poison. The Judge explains that this ritual "comes from the Bible. It's a way of testing one's faith in the Lord" (ibid., p. 209). He goes on to justify the cruel test, claiming, "If you have God inside and drink poison, you get stronger and enlightened. If you don't have Him in you, you die" (ibid., pp. 208-9). Organized religious prejudice serves as a violent tool used against non-heterosexual individuals, often condemning them for their sexual behaviour, labelling it as "unnatural", "ungodly", and "impure" (Yip, 2005). This kind of prejudiced thinking has long been used to justify extreme actions or beliefs, with religion being manipulated to validate or legitimize harmful practices. It shows how religious ideas can be distorted to support power structures or to rationalize violence (Helie, 2004). The presence of severe penalties, including the death sentence for those found guilty of homosexual acts in numerous countries, suggests that religious authorities in these regions are particularly inclined to interpret their religious teachings as condemning homosexuality.

Hudson depicts a harrowing scene in which the Judge forces Max to submerge his head in the waters of a "sacred" (2020, p. 216) lake, compelling him to drink the water as a means of cleansing his sin, because the Judge believes the boy "needs to be monitored" (ibid., p. 207) in order to fix his perceived "abnormality". The novel describes the moment with these words: "Max filled his mouth with water and let it flow from his nose and let urine go from his penis as he floated. He was done with healing. Finished. He was someone who had to be saved just like anyone else" (ibid., p. 269). However, the boy manages to escape death. Upon his return from the camp, his mother, deeply concerned, asks, "You okay? Did something happen at camp?" (ibid.). He replies, "I'm fine. He tried to smile" (ibid., p. 270). But internally, he is consumed by fear; self-doubt engulfs him, leaving him uncertain whether his sin has been erased: "He feared that the lake had not drowned out his sin, but that his sin was now sealed inside him" (ibid.). In LGBTQ+ narratives, individuals who deviate from heterosexual masculine ideals often face threats to their safety, even the death penalty. The camp designed to "heal" (ibid., p. 233) Max, organized by the Judge, symbolizes society's preference for disciplinary methods to "correct" (ibid., p. 38) the "abnormality" of sexual minorities (Foucault, 1977) through a "judgmental gaze" (Hudson, 2020, p. 217). Hudson employs a clever narrative trick to deepen the complexity of his plot and illustrate the force of hegemonic power. Though Pan is in a relationship with Max, he still harbours feelings for Lorne, his first boyfriend and the Judge's son, whom the latter himself kills for a homosexual act. Pan asks Max to use his magical powers, which allow him to bring dead animals back to life, to revive Lorne. However, after the camp, Max loses his power and is unable to restore life to Lorne. Filled with disappointment and sadness, Pan leaves Max forever. The boy attempts to reach out to him, but to no avail: "Max called Pan's phone, and every night, the phone rang and rang. No one answered" (ibid., p. 277). The Judge succeeds in his plan, exerting his hegemonic power over powerless queer individuals by separating the two boys. Toxic masculinity triumphs over subordinated masculinity in this godly Alabama, where "God would punish them" (ibid., p. 265) for their "unnatural" sexuality. What Kinsman identifies rings true here: "gay men marginalized and pushed aside and have often felt like outsiders", a result of institutionalized heterosexual masculine discourse (Kinsman, 2004).

Hudson portrays a world steeped in homophobic toxicity, where there is no room for those who deviate from the norm. Max, who dreams of a beautiful life with Pan, envisions a future full of possibility: "Max wanted to stay...in America. Max pictured Pan at college somewhere in New

England" (2020, p. 273). But he is destined for tragedy, and despite his magical healing power, which allows him to bring dead animals back to life, he is powerless to change his own fate, unable to transform the homophobic gaze of society. Hudson deliberately chooses to give Max magical powers to emphasize that, unlike other challenges, the entrenched layers of homophobia and religious orthodoxy cannot be easily overcome, even with the help of magical power. Now, Max feels he must act like a heterosexual "real man" to conform to societal expectations of procreative masculinity – someone who "could meet a woman, fall in love, get married, have a child" (ibid., p. 273). Max is a lonely character, with his wounds constantly reopened. The intertwining of religious orthodoxy and toxic masculinity isolates him from the mainstream society of Alabama, where there is little room for the acceptance of gay men.

Conclusion

Hudson's novel pulses with violence, masculinity, tension, and queerness. It masterfully explores the complexities of queer coming-of-age, delving into themes of teenage love, the desire for hegemonic masculine power, tragic fate, and the painful process of growing up. Following the success of her debut story collection *Pretend We Live Here*, which made a significant impact in 2018 with its electric prose and compelling characters, this novel builds on the talents Hudson skilfully demonstrated throughout her work. Setting Max in the Deep South of America, Hudson places him in the midst of a conflict between the world of toxic masculinity and vulnerability. Emrys Donaldson in *Cincinnati Review* notes, "*Boys of Alabama* is a love letter to the complexity of queer Southern masculinities, in all their lushness and violence, their lust and danger" (Donaldson, 2021). Through vivid imagery – such as comic books featuring muscled men, songs sung by schoolboys about girls in short skirts, billboards advertising muscular men and hard-jawed men smoking cigarettes, and the character's name, "The Judge" – Hudson constructs a world dominated by a heteropatriarchal masculine ideal, where there is no room for "different" sexualities. Trapped in a cycle of religiosity and homophobia, Max finds himself cast out of society, facing what he perceives as "the end of everything" (Hudson, 2020, p. 281). Through the lens of a specific novel, this research remains highly relevant today, shedding light on the ongoing challenges faced by queer individuals, especially in conservative, religiously influenced environments. As contemporary societies continue to wrestle with toxic masculinity, homophobia,

and rigid gender norms, *Boys of Alabama* provides a powerful lens to examine the persistent struggles of queer youth facing these societal pressures.

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