

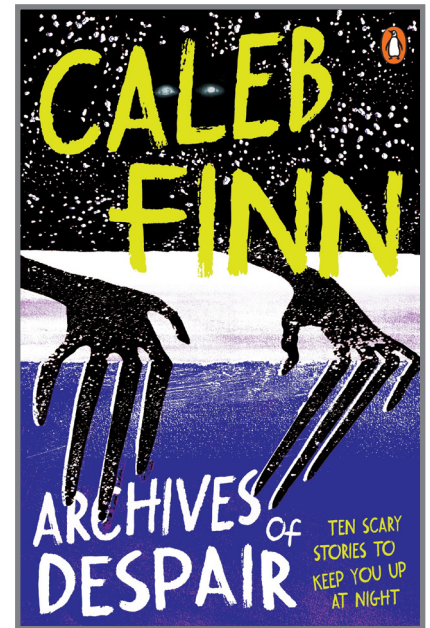
Archives of Despair

AUTHOR

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ILLUSTRATOR

ADAM PARATA



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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary
(Violence)

SYNOPSIS

You have been given access to secret files buried deep within the archives. Disturbing stories never meant for the light of day.

Stories of evil grandparents and unsettling homework.

A string of deaths, seemingly unrelated.

Walls squirm, as if alive.

A cursed wish comes true.

Ordinary people behave oddly, even family and your closest friends . . .

These stories share a common fate. All the children are met with tragedy.

Coincidence?

Or could these nightmares be connected by something more sinister than you dare to imagine?

A dark and chilling mystery awaits.

Find the answers, before he finds you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caleb Finn is Australia's most-followed male content creator, with over 17 million fans worldwide. Known for his cinematic short horror films, Caleb is inspired by film, digital culture, body horror and liminal spaces. His fascination with creepypastas, urban legends found in the corners of the online world, motivated him to write his own collection of scary short stories. He documents his parenthood journey on his TikTok channel to millions of followers.

Caleb lives in Melbourne with his partner and young child. *Archives of Despair* is his debut novel.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

New Zealand born, Melbourne based artist Adam Parata is known for his atmospheric and thought-provoking work. Drawing inspiration primarily from life and the complexity of the human experience, Adam's handling of visual

storytelling can be described as a dance of both literal and abstract forms to communicate simple and complex messages. This sensitive approach to handling form, detail, light and texture is where the magic lives, and it's through these focused sensibilities that Adam is able to create drama, story and atmosphere in his masterful work.

Adam finds working with darker themes to be most thought-provoking, and what interests him the most about illustration is its ability to tell stories, share and communicate at scale.

Growing up studying the masters, watching films, playing sport, obsessing over video games and building huts in the countryside of New Zealand has no doubt informed Adam's work. But it's this merging of a curious country boy feeding on the offerings of a modern city that continues to grow the fruits of Adam's labour.

THEMES

- Trauma
- Morals and ethics
- Death, mortality and existentialism
- Body horror
- Liminal spaces
- Storytelling, truth and uncertainty

STUDY NOTES

BEFORE READING

- Look at the book's cover. Identify visual techniques used in the design that help you form ideas or assumptions about what the story will be about.
- What genre do you think the story is? Which elements of the cover gave you hints about the genre (for instance, colours, fonts chosen, imagery)?
- What do the title and image tell you about 'despair'?
- Predict what you think may happen in the story.
- The blurb on the back cover is brief and mysterious, and written in the second person. Why do you think the publishers and author chose to give minimal information about the characters and story in the blurb?

AFTER READING

WRITING STYLE

Voice

I turned around and looked down the hallway, catching a small glimpse of The Cleaner before he disappeared around the corner.

'Hey!' I cried out. 'Where's Dad?! What did you do to him?'

I launched into a sprint to catch up with The Cleaner. I was the fastest girl in my grade. If there's one thing I could count on, it was my speed.

I grabbed the corner and pushed my weight off the opposite wall, nearly losing my grip against the wet paint slipping through my fingers.

'Don't walk away from —'

In the above example, how effective is the speech in pacing the story? Describe a scene (it can be inspired by *Archives of Despair*, or one you've made up) and write one version with no speech and plenty of description of the action; and another version with less detail and some speech. Is the second version briefer, and more economic? Which do you enjoy reading the most?

Form

- What do you think of the emails that are threaded throughout the book? Do you think it is effective in adding intrigue and propelling the narrative? Why?
- One of the stories also uses a diary format ('Happy Birthday'.) How does this format impact the unfolding action? How would your reading of, and enjoyment of, the story change if the story was written in standard first person past tense prose?
- The term epistolary novel refers to a book written as a series of letters; or one where the narrative is dispersed with additional content in the form of diary entries, newspaper articles, transcripts, emails. These can be fictionalised as part of the narrative or real-life resources. *Archives of Despair* is a collection of ten short stories, and interspersed with these stories are emails addressed to the reader, so it could be described as an epistolary novel. Use the epistolary structure in your own creative writing. Choose two fictional characters and write down their correspondence, or add extra content (like newspaper articles, radio transcripts, blog posts, diary entries) to your narrative.

Illustrations

- Do the illustrations add to your experience reading the stories? Why or why not?
- What do you think of the illustrator's scene choices to match the story? Do they add mystery, intrigue and horror to the experience of reading the story? Do they 'spoil' the narrative in any way?
- Would the images be more or less impactful if they were in colour? Why?
- Choose one of the short stories and create your own illustration. Have you chosen a similar scene to the illustrator, or something completely different? Why?

THEMES AND CHARACTERISATION**The Bowler Hat Man**

- What was your take on the Bowler Hat character? How does the description of his looks, his smell and his clothing impact this impression? Does his old-fashioned outfit, for example, make him more scary, or less?
- Write your own scary short story with the Bowler Hat Man involved. He can be a background character or a more prominent one. Check through the stories (especially 'Lovely Day' and 'The Extra') to fact-check you have his characteristics consistent.

Trauma

- The author describes trauma as 'the driving force and main theme [he] focused on when making The Bowler Hat Man. All of the events occurred through his unhealthy channels of relieving the trauma from losing his family, as well as projecting his jealousy onto others.' After learning of The Bowler Hat Man's past in the short story 'The Extra', did you feel differently about his actions?
- There is a content warning at the beginning of *Archives of Despair* highlighting some of the themes of the book, as well as a page with helpline phone numbers listed. The author says his hope is 'for these stories is to encourage younger readers to face their fears and persevere through confronting situations.' Discuss.

Morality and Ethics

- How large an impact should someone's mental health history and personal circumstances have on our understanding of criminal behaviour? Research real-life examples of crimes perpetrated by people with traumatic backgrounds and discuss the judicial case, media coverage and long-term impacts for all people involved.

Horror and gothic literature

- Research the basic tenets of the horror genre and make a list. See if you can identify these tropes in other books/movies/TV shows you've come across. What scared you most?
- Identify similar tropes present within *Archives of Despair*. For instance, some of these might include:
 - nightmares
 - an abandoned or decrepit house
 - bodily possession
 - a local legend
 - the supernatural
 - inanimate objects coming to life

- sinister sounds
- hyperreal or artificial environments
- a curse that comes true.

Make a list of how the author uses these tropes, but also how he subverts them.