

Critical Reflection on *The Final Blackout*

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Most people would consider it odd that a chemistry major decided to write a collection of short stories centered around a bingo hall. Both of these are because of the fact that I am a chemistry major who appears to have very little to do with creative writing and because a bingo hall is a strange setting that most people wouldn't think to write or even read stories about.

My journey with writing *The Final Blackout* begins over six years ago. During my sophomore year of high school, I took my first job, which happened to be at Troopers Bingo back home in Casper. It definitely wasn't my first choice for my "adult" adventures into the workforce, but my mom had had a student working at the hall during that time and thought that it would be a good starter job with a great boss. This began my journey into the world of bingo, something that I had very little experience with beyond informal games at my elementary school. I have remained there, working off and on for the last six years, almost exclusively in the kitchen. This perspective has clearly come through in my short story collection, but we'll get to that a little later.

When the time came to decide on what I wanted to do for my Honors Capstone, I didn't really consider doing what would be considered traditional research. I had completed my undergraduate research hours for my degree in the spring of 2020 and the spring of 2021. Despite having a great mentor in Dr. Arulsamy and enjoying the compounds we were researching, I had reached the point where I was a little burnt out on writing lab reports. So, instead of signing myself up for a third semester in the chemistry labs, I returned back to my roots. You see, before I was a chemistry major or even a college student, I wrote creatively including for the Wyoming Young Authors contests that are held annually. I won several awards

for that contest in all three categories: nonfiction, poetry, and fiction. I still write creatively on my own time, but the demands of school hasn't left as much for that as I would like. It helped that one of my Honors professors, Nina McConigley, brought up the idea of a creative Honors Capstones when I took one of her classes in the fall of 2020.

Writers of all kinds tend to be inspired by what they are familiar with, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that one of my first ideas ended up being centered around a bingo hall. When I first brought up ideas to Paul Bergstraesser all the way back in September, I had already written the first renditions of five of the stories that are featured in the collection. I had been playing with the idea of writing something based around the bingo hall for a while at that point—after all, I had spent quite a bit of time there by then—but wanted to put a bit of distance between my normal workday and the stories themselves. Paul had suggested a collection that was more nonfiction-based, but after the past couple of years, I honestly wanted something that wasn't entirely in my own reality.

The stories needed something that connected them beyond the fact that they took place in or involved people that were familiar with a bingo hall. Thus, Veronica Reed, the Bingo Bomber, was born. The collection was never meant to focus completely on her. The stories are meant to stand separately with characters who had their own voices, fears, and lives yet make sense as a cohesive group. The original idea opened the collection with the revelation that she was in the middle of carrying out her plans to bomb her seventy-fifth bingo hall, symbolic of the amount of numbers involved in bingo. Uhm, Paul shot that one down pretty quick. He felt that in a story collection that was so based in reality, seventy-five bingo halls in just over twenty years was too much. So we settled on five, five halls that were symbolic of the letters of bingo (Veronica does mention this original plan in one of her letter segments, so it didn't completely die out.).

There are seven stories in the collection, separated yet threaded together by segments of Veronica's letter, and bracketed by Austin Harper's introduction and conclusion. It is implied rather heavily that this collection is Dr. Harper's book about the bomber, the culmination of decades of research. Each of the stories focuses around a different character: Veronica Reed herself; Millicent Jones, an older bingo player; Penny Watson, a high school senior; Dr. Austin Harper, a college professor; Annie Russell, a kitchen worker; Clara Lewis, a floor worker; and James Landwell, a customer who was not in the hall. Of the seven major characters, only two are male, probably because I am more comfortable writing from a female perspective. The two workers who have stories are both in positions I have worked before, but Annie is closer to my own age because I am more familiar with working in a bingo hall kitchen.

While this collection did not end up being autobiographical, each of the characters are based off of coworkers I have had, customers I have served, or even myself. Each character explores a different aspect through their stories. Veronica deals with unhealthy fixation and obsession while Austin is her mirror image, the other side of the coin. He is fixated and obsessed with finding the Bingo Bomber, but unlike the bomber herself, he is able to move on after it is all said and done. Millicent's story centers around addiction and the never-ending chase of jackpots, a trap that I have seen too many customers fall into over the years, though to different extents. Penny deals with the perception of luck. Annie struggles with choices and secrets. Clara's story centers on self-forgiveness and guilt. James deals with moving on and having a future beyond tragedy. Some of these themes cross into other stories, but all of them are heavily based in the choices that the characters themselves make and the choices that other had made that end up having a ripple effect.

Honestly, writing this collection has been both one of the most fulfilling pieces and one of the hardest that I have ever written. The results I believe are a beautiful picture of the struggles of humanity, whether it is understanding a tragedy or examining how our choices end up impacting those around us. So what does this collection contribute to anything? Simply put, it is a glimpse into the resilience of the human spirit. I was asked why I chose such a dark catalytic event such as the bombing of a bingo hall. That answer is simple as well. Only when the darkness falls, when it seems like there is no way to move forward, only then do we see the light that others shine in our lives.

Most of the stories in the collection may start in a dark place, but by the end, whether at the conclusion of the story itself or in Austin's closing remarks, the light is found. Penny has her baby and goes on to work on her law degree despite the challenges. Annie returns to school, gets married, and manages to return to the bingo hall despite all of the memories that could have driven her away. Clara helps to rebuild the hall and takes time to love the children that her dear coworker left behind. James goes to therapy and devotes himself to foster children, children who are often forgotten. Austin manages to move on from the tragedy of losing his grandmother to the Bingo Bomber and put a period on those decades of questions and heartbreak. And honestly, I, along with many others, desperately need to see that light after the difficulties of COVID, the international crises that have occurred, and even just the everyday struggles of living.

This may not be the end of these characters, the end of the stories I have been working on for about ten months now. However, for now, I believe that this collection is a fitting end to my undergraduate program. I owe a huge thank you to Paul for everything he has done over the past two semesters. He is probably the one who knows these characters and their stories, in all versions, nearly as well as I do at this point. And thank you to you, the reader. You make it

possible for capstone projects such as this one to be put out into the world. I wish you all the best, and I hope that these stories have taught you something about yourself or the people around you. After all, writers like to examine the world around them through their pieces, regardless of whether they are fiction or nonfiction. So, thank you for venturing into my world for a bit, and perhaps if you happen to stop in Casper at some point, you will have the chance to see the bingo hall that helped to inspire these stories along with some of the people.