HIGHLIGHTING NEW, CRITICAL VOICES IN THE LITERARY SPACE.

Spring 2022

Connections in Literature

"RECOGNIZABLE ELEMENTS LIKE THE DARK TONE OF THE SERIES, UGLY MONSTERS, SOME FORM OF MAGIC AND A LOT OF HOT ACTORS MAKE THE SERIES FEEL LIKE THE NEXT *THE WITCHER*"
ILSE BARKMEIJER

More on page 14

"THE ONLY COMPANY WE LIKE IS OUR OWN, BECAUSE ONLY ALONE CAN WE REALIZE OUR AMBITION. THAT IS A PLANETARY SLOGAN HERE."
YARA CLOUDT

More on page 26

"THE CORE OF THE STORY IS THE RIVA FAMILY, AND EACH INDIVIDUAL PLOTLINE ADDS A SMALL PUZZLE PIECE TO THE OVERALL ENIGMA OF THEIR LIVES."
SHAILA KUMARADAS

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Introduction

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive. **James Baldwin**

Dear Reader,

It seems so obvious today that everything and everyone is connected, doesn't it? After all, one of the things we learn from impactful situations such as the pandemic, wars, and global warming is how closely tied our lives are. We are ecologically, politically, technologically, and personally entangled in this world. While living in global chaos shows us how our actions can have an impact, it may sometimes leave us in a desperate place where we feel lonely, helpless, and disconnected. However, facing this gloomy world can also encourage us to explore new possibilities, new forms of interactions, and new chances to evolve out of our echo chambers and grow together. Thus, with curiosity and compassion toward different perspectives, *RevUU* aims to create a platform for diverse voices and various forms of criticism. As literary critics, we are interested in what role literature has in global entanglement. How does it bind us together, help us understand each other, and share our desires and fears?

In this issue, we are once again proud to bring to you the various voices of aspiring writers and read what connection in literature looks like through their unique eyes. Maia Baum insightfully draws a connection between *In: A Graphic Novel* by Will McPhail and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* by Sally Rooney, taking the reader through a day without internet amongst housemates. Isabel Cramer investigates the paradoxes of disconnection in AI in her review of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. Acacia Caven offers an analysis of the *Under Milk Wood* National Theatre play, based on Dylan Thomas' 1954 Play for voices, performed in times of isolation, and streamed online where the public could reunite virtually. Reflecting on Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*, Naomi Tidball explores the power of food and music on mourning. And in a comparative analysis of two poems by Mark Doty and Leontia Flynn, Evelien Vermeulen examines how collective memory finds its form in poetry after the impactful events of the AIDS pandemic and the national crisis in Belfast. All these and more are waiting for you, reader, in our newest issue.

Moreover, we would like to offer our special attention to the authors of creative pieces for enriching our critical thinking by exploring the boundaries of literary criticism. Finally, we would like to thank our authors, team, and Mia You for the energy and time they have invested in producing the latest issue of *RevUU*. We sincerely hope you enjoy it!

On behalf of the *RevUU* team,

Amanda Castro Thijssen and Elif Kayahan
Chief Editors

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A Day Without Internet

Reflections on Will McPhail's *In: A Graphic Novel*

By Maia Baum

Polwin asked her if she spoke English, and she said no, so then he looked at me with his panicked eyes, and I ended up spending fifteen minutes on the phone talking to this woman in Dutch, translating what was wrong with the internet and trying to understand how to fix it, Ellie told me.

So, did they fix it? I asked.

No. They have to break down a wall because something went wrong with the cables.

Break down the wall? Oh my god. Which wall?

Ellie hesitated before answering, then laughed.

I'm pretty sure it's Polwin's room, sorry, that's where the internet cables are.

About a year ago, Polwin told me about the internet's undersea cables. Was I asleep the day that this was explained in school? Maybe. Regardless, as a twenty-three-year-old, it was embarrassing to admit I didn't actually know how the internet worked. With his ADHD-induced enthusiasm for all things surrounding technology, and my ADHD-induced lack of focus for all things surrounding technology, it was difficult to fully grasp this crash course in internet cables (the term 'glass fibre optic cable' was used frequently).

The one thing I did understand, however, was that there were two distinct results from this serious case of broken internet in the apartment. One, in the hours of the day in which we didn't have to work or study, we'd have to find other ways to entertain ourselves, such as talking to each other. Two, in the hours of the day in which we did have to work or study, we'd spend our time in various hipster cafés around the corner, in our gentrified neighbourhood, sipping oat milk cappuccinos, procrastinating on our work, and having awkward interactions with the waiters.

This is how I found myself at one of the many cafés in the neighbourhood, sat down, ordered an oat milk cappuccino, and opened my book. "Here in the present day, I need a good bar to be sad in" (9), I read, in Will McPhail's *In: A Graphic Novel*, and thought about my own position in this coffee shop. I pondered the notion of being alone in a crowded place, such as the café I was finding myself in, and realised I felt both lonely and calm. McPhail's single panel centred around him walking into the "Your Friends Have Kids Bar: Weaponised Self-Awareness and Cocktails" (9) and I quietly laughed to myself, knowing this book would be filled with more self-deprecating, witty remarks about himself, and indirectly, about myself.

As McPhail's protagonist, Nick, comes across a different bar to be sad in, the panel shows "graham's bar" (11) in a font that feels completely out of place from the regular cartoon style text blocks I'd encountered in *In* so far, with Nick's thoughts reading, "I need a... Holy shit is that Helvetica?" (McPhail 11). I get out my phone and snap a quick picture of the page and send it to Polwin, knowing he'll appreciate any reference to typography in mainstream media or cul-

ture, being a self-proclaimed typography connoisseur. In this bar, Nick meets his very own Manic Pixie Dream Girl, named Wren, slowly offsetting the decline in my enthusiasm for this book.

In follows Nick, a young illustrator, who feels disconnected from other people. His days are filled with meaningless conversations, and his interactions with others are all built on performativity, rather than what he experiences as true, human connection. But then, he meets Wren (whose sole purpose appears to be carrying Nick's character arc), and his entire life changes. We've all heard that one before, haven't we? I sigh, and keep reading, looking for more redeeming qualities to emerge from McPhail's work.

As Nick wanders in and out of coffee shops, in search of some deeper meaning to life, or perhaps just to pass the time, McPhail manages to successfully deliver "A Small Sampling of Cafés." This, again, reflects his talent for using his self-awareness for the greater good of laughter. Looking at the name of the café that I'm sitting at, "Coffee Room" seems exceptionally plain and unoriginal, compared to McPhail's selection of coffee shops, such as "Gentrificchiato" (34), "Exhausted Corduroy Coffee"(47), and "Soft Boy Beanery"(56). Characterisation of said cafés include but are not limited to endless varieties of milks, Timothée Chalamet lookalike managers, Wi-Fi passwords such as "EdisonBulbFilament" (McPhail 34) or "DialogueIsNotForExposition2007" (McPhail 36), and, of course, all will empty your bank account. After a quick Google search, I find out the jury is still out on whether McPhail's "millennial joshing" (Smart) is reflective of his "acerbic and clever cartooning" (Quaintance), or whether "the story loses focus with observational bits about pretentious coffee shops and corporate jargon" (Kirkus) – although personally, I find his jokes pretty funny. My thoughts are interrupted by Ellie walking into Coffee Room, ordering an oat milk cappuccino, and sitting down opposite me. She gets out her book and starts reading *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. I guess you could say Sally Rooney's new novel is also a book about human connection.

My mind drifts back to McPhail's love story between Nick and Wren, as I reach the scene in which their first date, and subsequent one-night stand, takes place. The page displays two square panels with Nick and Wren awkwardly standing next to each other, seemingly taking a deep breath in anticipation of what is about to happen, with a third, larger, rectangular panel underneath, reading "Showtime" (McPhail 48). What follows is an incredible sequence set on a theatre stage with a table and two chairs, with the curtains slowly raising, making way for their date (McPhail 49). Their performance, illustrated in a twelve-panel, gutterless sequence is by far the highlight of McPhail's work. Nick and Wren have a few drinks, pay the bill, romantically walk outside (jumping off a street lantern – perhaps hinting to a *Singin' in the Rain* scene), take an Uber home, sit awkwardly on the sofa in the living room, take their clothes off (while Nick puts on a ridiculously large condom), and finally, have sex, until the stage goes dark, signalling the end of the dancelike showcase. Finally, the light goes on again, and they bow to the audience, upon which the curtain falls, and the scene has ended (McPhail 50). This scene perfectly illustrates Nick's sense of performativity, as he is unable to fully connect with Wren. I think about the almost cinematic quality of McPhail's sequence, as he plays with the size of panels, the lack of gutters, the framing, the lighting, and the focus on image rather than text, and I am reminded of why I love comics so much. Meanwhile, I glance over, and my eyes fall on the page Ellie is reading, "He put a finger inside her then and she exhaled. Good girl, he murmured" (Rooney 153). I laugh to myself, thinking about the sheer contrast between McPhail's and Rooney's version of a sex scene.

I turn my attention back towards the graphic novel, and notice the change in McPhail's drawing style, "[breaking] from black-and-white to explore Nick's inner life, rendering vast glaciers, strange beasts and deserted cityscapes in rich, surreal colour sequences" (Smart). The shift from his standard black-and-white images to these vivid colour images signify a breakthrough moment for Nick. Throughout *In*, Nick tries to have real, meaningful encounters with a range of people he comes across in his daily life – from hilariously awkward moments with Steve, the plumber, to realising his own mother is in fact also a

person in her own right, namely, Hannah. While Nick is far from being perfect, as soon as he opens up (encouraged by Wren), his efforts are received with a warm welcome, that feels almost too easy. These moments of Nick fully being *in* the present are reflected in colour. While the colour sequences are undeniably beautiful with their filmic style, the narrative feels like it's happening too fast. After a lifetime of disconnection, is meeting a smart, pretty girl really all it takes to suddenly feel connected to everyone and everything in your life?

As the book becomes darker, touching on themes of illness, death, and grief, McPhail's use of silence is emphasised in its contrast between loud and quiet scenes. As Smart writes, "Many of his most moving panels are silent, holding the reader in the moment as emotions unravel." For pages on end, McPhail tells a story without any words, and as I reach these scenes, I notice myself holding my breath, in anticipation of what's to come. Smith also writes, *In* is "slowly paced, visually minimalistic, thoughtful and quietly sad," pointing exactly to this disparity between painfully impactful images and the complete and utter silence that screams off the pages. As I near the end of the book, however, I can't help but feel unsatisfied with the ending. "There is not enough depth to his characters to truly engage us. The story does turn heartbreaking but, ultimately, leaves us feeling that the narrative arc is thin" (Jacobs). There is so much more to explore still, while McPhail ends his book with a silence that could've been (or should've been) filled with so much more.

Wow, I suddenly hear Ellie saying. She lets out a sigh and flicks back through the pages, after having just finished *Beautiful World, Where Are You*.

Can I show you something? She asks me. I nod, as she passes me her book. I look at the page that's open and read: "So of course in the midst of everything, the state of the world being what it is, humanity on the cusp of extinction, here I am writing another email about sex and friendship. What else is there to live for?" (Rooney 138). I take a second to fully take it in. I wondered if I had been too critical of McPhail, protesting his creation of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, the unrealistic ease in Nick's character arc, and the mismatch of the black-and-white visuals with the colourful sequences. Sally Rooney was right. Sex, friendship, love, relationships – isn't that what we all care about in the end? What we all live for? We're all always searching for that connection, whether it's with our friends, partners, families, plumbers, or the waiters in the cafés that we spend our days in.

While *In* isn't a perfect literary work, McPhail's woke, millennial, hipstery reflections on society are hilarious, and as his debut, he does an excellent job of exploring a "painfully human narrative" (Kejera), in all its flaws and shortcomings. The story is moving and gripping, and highlights McPhail's exploration and challenge of how much can be said visually, rather than verbally. Ultimately, this really is a book about human connection. I look at my watch and see that it's almost five-thirty, which means Polwin will be coming home from work soon. Ellie and I gather our things and make our way back to the apartment, preparing ourselves to spend the rest of the evening without internet, simply talking to each other about sex and friendship, and just for a little while, living completely *in* the moment.

Maia Baum completed her BA at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, with a research focus on visual metaphor in comics, while she worked as Managing Editor for *Expanded Field*, a journal for creative writing and image/text experimentation. She is currently in the MA programme Literature Today at Utrecht University.

It Is Either This or That

Rachel Cusk's *Second Place*

By Laurynas Petrauskas

The term "second place" presupposes a multitude of places, the amount of them being any whole number. Second place implies that somewhere out there exists a first place. Second place evokes inevitable comparisons and juxtapositions. Second place is either a win or a loss; after all, the first place is always already the best option. Think of any invention, of the Mars Race (or the Space Race in the 20th century), and of the ways in which symbolic immortality and commemoration is given to the first. Think of almost any sport. Think of such notions as "the First Lady". In another way, think of the Booker Prize longlist as being the second place and, consequently, the shortlist as the first. Competition rules the world. Comparisons and juxtapositions aid it.

Rachel Cusk's most recent book, *Second Place*, was "only" longlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize, but it is my bet that Cusk is not disappointed. To her, one can assume, the notion of second place does not mean something necessarily negative, something that supposes a sense of inferiority *per se*. Cusk's "second place", deem it a physical or mental place, indicates that any second place can indeed be as equally comfortable as the first, whether initial or better, place.

Cusk is a British-Canadian author and a frequent nominee for various literary prizes, often praised for her unconventional way of writing. Her previous novels, the *Outline* trilogy in particular, offer a transgression, "a new breakthrough in the novel form, or at least an imaginative contemporary reckoning", according to Andrew Schenker's review for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. Schenker also claims that Rachel Cusk is "one of the last great novelists of contemporary life." Bold, but not wrong. The contemporary world is a monument to polarity, and Cusk's *Second Place* seems to align with it as it attempts to juxtapose almost everything: urban with rural, art with reality, men with women, feminism with misogyny, extreme opinions with indifference, and so on.

> *Through M's reflection on her relationship with the past we get to know that she is afraid of criticism. She is afraid of being at the centre of attention and would rather enjoy the feeling of invisibility.*

Second Place is a monologue-like, first-person narrated novel in which M tells her story to Jeffers, an unknown character for the reader. M begins her story by sharing a memory from the time in Paris when she "met the devil . . . and about how after that meeting the evil that usually lies undisturbed beneath the surface of things rose up and disgorged itself over every part" (1) of her life. While wandering the streets of Paris after a night out with a male writer, M encounters a sign, an image of one of the paintings that are exhibited in a gallery nearby and are produced by L - later introduced as an obnoxious artist and snob

who is not even slightly bothered by his own overt misogyny. To her, L's works appear immensely relatable and signify a very much needed sense of freedom at the time, as she has just divorced her husband and lost custody of her daughter.

While reflecting on L's painting, the narrator writes: "But my point is that there's something that paintings and other created objects can do to give you some relief. They give you a location, a place to be" (13). This insight of M quite literally brings us to "a place to be". Around fifteen years later, M is seemingly joyful – she is married to Tony, a composed man who "doesn't comment and . . . doesn't criticise and this puts him in an ocean of silence compared to most people" (22). Together they live in a so-called "second place," on a remote marsh where M invites different artists to their guest house in order for them to pursue their artistry and, presumably, get inspired by nature. After many months of correspondence, M manages to invite L to the second place, and so the frustration begins.

Right from the moment L arrives, one is immediately struck with Cusk's ability to represent (and produce) discomfort. The awkward scene of L's arrival, and his unexpected accompaniment by his younger female friend Brett, exposes M's inner turmoil and offers us one of the first juxtapositions. After having been picked up from the harbour and commuting to the second place, Brett comments on M's hair and says the following: "I can colour your hair for you to hide the grey, you know. I know how to do it so that no one would ever guess . . . it's really quite dry" (55-56). One will agree that it is somewhat odd to offer this kind of unsolicited opinion and a wish to help as one of the first instances for a conversation. However, Cusk's deliberate juxtaposition of this young and confident lady with M and her insecurities allows us a glimpse of M's state of mind. M writes to Jeffers:

> I have mentioned, Jeffers, my relationship to commentary and criticism and the feeling of invisibility I very often had, now that I lived a life in which I was rarely commented on. I suppose I might have developed an oversensitivity or allergy to commentary as a result – whatever the reason, I could barely stop myself from screaming and lashing out at the feeling of this woman's fingers in my hair! (56)

What does this suggest? Through M's reflection on her relationship with the past we get to know that she is afraid of criticism. She is afraid of being at the centre of attention and would rather enjoy the feeling of invisibility. One is able to assume that the second place, being either physical or mental, paved her way to the current state of life where she is barely commented on and is therefore happy. It also suggests that the second place altogether with the company of Tony fulfils her strong desire to be in the periphery, yet L and Brett's arrival makes M realise that this periphery is not intact anymore. In the case of Brett, it is her confidence that evokes M's lack of it.

It is also through M's juxtaposition with L that Cusk manages to open up another dimension in the novel. In the beginning of the book, M tells Jeffers that she met the devil in Paris. Halfway through the narrative that devil appears to be her guest. It is no surprise that while reading M's interactions with L, one could sense that L's persona is somewhat reminiscent of Professor Wolland's - a spiteful and malevolent creature in Michail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Although he does not own a cat like Wolland does, in one of the scenes he behaves as if he was one himself. We read about L's sudden wild and even devilish behaviour through M's focalisation, when by the end of their conversation L "suddenly spring[s] to his feet and to my very great surprise leap[s] onto the tabletop like a cat!" (120).

Like L's sudden leap, *Second Place* as a whole is an extremely provocative piece of writing. It invites its readers to argue and reflect. It captivates. One will not be able to skim through the novel, as almost every single conversation that L contributes to leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. In the beginning of the scene described above, M brings a parcel which has just arrived for L and sits down for a chat. During the conversation, she senses "that he could burst out at any minute in some violent physical act – a feeling of impulses under continual restraint" (105). Through her reflections we get to know that L also makes her feel

inferior. She says: “Yes, he was an attractive man, though somehow illegible to me: he emanated a kind of physical neutrality that I took personally and interpreted as a sign that he did not consider me to be truly a woman” (106). This quote sheds light on two intertwined aspects. The first one feeds into the notion of M’s insecurity, which stands as one of the most prominent themes in the novel. The other one deals with L’s explicit misogyny and sexism. Unfortunately, his toxic masculinity operates on various levels.

One could argue that M interprets L’s behaviour in such a way that it makes her feel inferior. But as we follow the narrative, we get to know that in fact she is not wrong. That is, at some point L is not bothered to ask her: “Why do you play at being a woman?” (118). Such a remark, I am certain, will throw anyone off. When M responds to him that she is not sure how to be a woman, as no one has ever taught her how to be one, he says: “It isn’t a question of showing . . . It’s a question of being permitted.” (118). Permitted? By whom? By a white cis male full of hatred towards women? This is audacity that makes one irritated – and it is the writer’s skill to provoke.

But it does not end there. When asked who pays for the house, M answers: “The house and the land belong to Tony. I have some money of my own,” to which L mockingly responds that he can’t imagine her “little books make all that much” (119). These words come from a male artist on the brink of total bankruptcy. Having been on top of the arts scene, L allows himself to criticise M’s books in a mocking manner. One could argue that he is in the position to do so as he has been part of the cultural elite but let me disappoint you here: He is merely an obnoxious misogynist, and the example above portrays that quite well.

The beautifully composed *Second Place* is much more than juxtapositions and misogyny. *Second Place* is indeed a better place. By the end of the novel, M receives a letter from L, in which he writes: “I miss your place” (207). Perhaps these are the only words of L’s that I can agree with. After reading this novel, I miss M’s place, and you will too.

Laurynas Petrauskas is a student of the MA Literature Today programme at Utrecht University and an intern at The Lithuanian Publishers Association. His most recent professional achievement was taking part in organising the International Vilnius Book Fair 2022.

How to Perfect the Art of Exile

A Critical Review of Alienation in Antanas Škėma's *White Shroud*

By Elžbieta Janušauskaitė

In *Perfection of Exile*, renowned literary critic Rimvydas Šilbajoris defined the attempt to comprehend the meaning of exile as the struggle to articulate what humanity had lost in the Second World War (92). Tracing the evolution of Lithuanian literary tradition, he concluded that the events of the early 20th century produced a critical juncture, so that perceptions of exile in literature significantly diverged. Whilst the traditional vision of exile as the loss of one's homeland endured, younger writers experienced exile as a manifestation of alienation. To established Lithuanian writers before the war, "reality seemed solid enough to be regarded as something given, as a reliable framework" (Šilbajoris 136). Yet, for the young modernists, meaning had been shattered beyond recognition and exile had become a universal human condition. Edward Said shared this vision of the modern creator. In his memoir *Out of Place*, he argued that only writers who had themselves faced exile, could look upon the world and see it as it truly was (Said 269).

The perfection of exile was then, a renewed sense of liberty and creative catharsis for those writers who had survived the war. Young Lithuanian authors, who would have otherwise been bound by the requirements of native literary tradition or Soviet ideological constraints, became open to new poetic reflection. Amongst them was the émigré playwright Antanas Škėma, whose provocative text *White Shroud*, not only revolutionized Lithuanian narrative, but envisioned exile in a new and radical way. Exile is a way of dwelling in space with a constant awareness that one is not at home, remarks Said in his seminal text *Reflections on Exile* (139). On one hand, exile is an orientation to a distant place, where one feels divorced from their new environment. On the other hand, exile is an orientation to time, whereby an individual life is plotted around the pivotal act of departure. "Exile is a condition of terminal loss", claims Said (137). Loss that in the case of *White Shroud*, manifests itself in alienation from both time and place, from oneself and the world.

White Shroud, which was first entitled *The Elevator,* takes place over a single day and follows the tedial existence of its protagonist Antanas Garšva, who like the novel's author, works as an elevator operator in a large New York hotel. Garšva is a middle-aged poet, hopelessly in love with a married woman named Elena and ultimately lost in a city that harbors millions of others. As a consequence of being beaten and tortured by Soviet agents whilst fleeing his homeland, he suffers from repeated attacks of amnesia and neurasthenia, which all too often make him depressed and schizophrenic. The novel's composition, just like Garšva's mind, is fundamentally fragmented. His own consciousness mirrors the flow of the elevator, as he moves up and down the levels of the hotel. At ground level lies the reality of New York, surmising his affair with Elena and conversations he holds with the various passengers of the elevator. On the first floor are his memories of Lithuania. Often traumatic, they reveal pieces of his relationship with his abusive father, his failed attempts at love as a teenager and the origins of his mental instability.

Lastly, the final level of his consciousness, which quickly gains dominance over the others as the novel progresses, gives readers a glimpse into Garšva's inner reality. Snippets of forgotten poems are heard on this last floor and his memories are often transformed into strange fantasies as he converses with the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka and is even put on trial by the angels of God.

It is this experimentation with structure and language, and the fragmentation of time and reality, that express how exile functions as alienation. Garšva, as a struggling immigrant, feels like one of many intellectuals who are carelessly exploited as unskilled laborers in a teeming metropolis. "Up and down, up and down. The new Gods have relocated Sisyphus here", Garšva observes with reference to the ceaseless and meaningless movements of his elevator (Škėma 33). Referencing the work of French absurdist Albert Camus, Škėma positions his protagonist as the modern Sisyphus who "no longer needs sinewy muscles" (33) to be allotted the same perilous fate of futile labor. The allegorical nature of Garšva's alienation depicts the capitalist process by which he, as an individual, is dehumanized and stripped of the agency to create. "I am number 87", Garšva repeats to himself, "I am the neophyte of loneliness and the epigon of Christ" (Škėma 44). Reduced to a digit, Garšva struggles with his new status as a convert to the radical individuality capitalism purports. An individuality that detaches him from both his homeland and his community and that he equates to a Christ like agony. Through his inner monologues, Garšva is revealed to be a deeply sentimental and creative person. Yet, in the capitalist metropolis of New York, he is but a cog – remade and changed to adapt to a new environment. And this, unlike his literal exile from his homeland, is the ultimate exile – a process of forced removal from one's very own identity.

Garšva defines himself as "a Lithuanian *kaukas* in a Strauss operetta" (Škėma 13). The usage of the Lithuanian term *kaukas* is particularly interesting, because it depicts not only the exilic condition Garšva experiences in his life in New York, but the extent of his alienation from the rest of the world. In Lithuanian pagan mythology, the term *kaukas* alludes to the spirit of a dead unbaptized child. This creature, liminal in its position between birth and death, is symbolic of Garšva's existence as an unfulfilled poet, a Lithuanian intellectual in a foreign and debilitating space – an American elevator – somewhere in between the poles of heaven and earth. In fact, it is this separation between heaven and earth, and particularly Garšva's ability to move between the two areas through the elevator, that informs the ultimate plot of the novel – a torturous and prolonged attempt at a dialogue with a silent God, whose presence reveals itself only in the suffering of man.

Moments before the novel culminates in Garšva's final surrender to insanity, he is heard praying:

> My Brother, my Beloved, hear me. My sin, my madness, my subjectivity, my screaming, my vitality, my joy – *lioj ridij augo*. My Lift, hear me. My Childhood, hear me. My Death, hear me. Speak, Elevator. Because I am dying in a great peace. I am sweltered by this New York desert. My Christ, hear me. My Christ, I pray to You. O *felix culpa quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem*! (Škėma 45)

In his plea to God, Garšva alludes to those same fragments that constitute his travels through his own consciousness. Haunted by his childhood in Lithuania and the terrors that swept Europe before his arrival to the US, he prays to be heard, to be saved. *Felix culpa*, blessed fall. Škėma is here, referring to the theological concept of the Christian fall of man – the paradoxical nature of unfortunate events having fortunate consequences. In a moment of utter clarity, Garšva is prognosing not only his fate, but the future of humanity. *Felix culpa*, the fall to madness is holy, because it makes you ignorantly blissful. In an attempt to escape the horrors of life after the war, Garšva chooses to surrender to his madness in the same way, that according to Škėma, humanity is surrendering to capitalist oblivion. The consequence is literal and symbolic exile, a universal alienation from

the world as it was before the war and the accompanying reality of life.

> *"The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth", wrote Said. He, just as Škėma, understood that in the metaphysical haze left by the war, humanity could no longer sustain a sense of belonging to a world that now felt so alien and uncaring.*

This place of no return, the tedious existence Garšva is forced to lead in the post–war reality, is for him, unsustainable. His fall to madness, however, is not entirely tragic. In his metaphysical death, Garšva becomes the modern Sisyphus – rolling the boulder up the mountain or in his case, traveling up and down the elevator. As Camus argues in his essay The Myth of Sisyphus, the absurd is born out of the confrontation between an individual's longing for reason and the unbearable silence of the world. "We must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 76) and likewise, we must imagine Garšva to be happy too now that he has surrendered to the absurd. It is this surrender that is the ultimate victory, that makes the alienated exile into a happy creature, capable of belonging in an uncaring world.

"The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth", wrote Said (142). He, just as Škėma, understood that in the metaphysical haze left by the war, humanity could no longer sustain a sense of belonging to a world that now felt so alien and uncaring. White Shroud established this alienation to be a natural condition of human life. It argued, similarly to Reflections on Exile, that in the tragedy of the Second World War, humanity had experienced a terminal loss. That the state of man in the world had itself become exilic and would remain so. It was through literature that the modern creator could begin to unravel reality and create meaning. *Felix culpa*, the fall to madness is holy. *Felix culpa*, only in surrender could humanity overcome loss.

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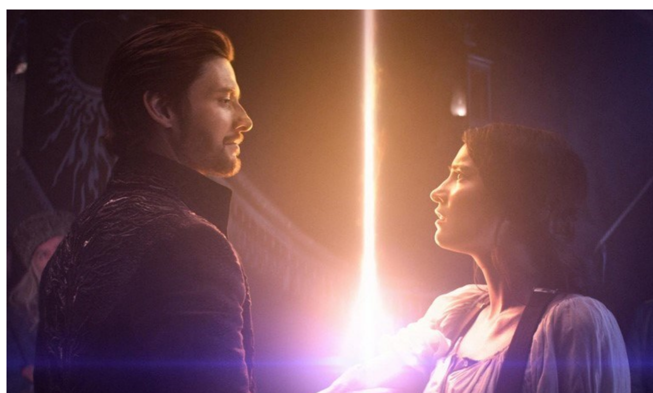
Shadow and Bone

Recapping Netflix's Next Fantasy Hit

By Ilse Barkmeijer

Netflix's Original series based on the popular YA novels by Leigh Bardugo blends sweeping romances, elaborate new worlds, mysterious magic, and more into a bingeworthy escapist show. The show is currently developing a second season.



Ben Barnes and Jessie Mei Li in *Shadow and Bone* (Netflix).

With season two of Netflix's hit *Shadow and Bone* currently in the making it's not unfavourable to take a look at Netflix's first season and the books which inspired the story. A lot of viewers binge-watched Netflix's escapist fantasy series *Shadow and Bone* in a matter of days. It was no surprise that Eric Heisserer's Netflix Original was one of the most watched shows in the United States the weekend it debuted, second only to Disney+'s *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Recognizable elements like the dark tone of the series, ugly monsters, some form of magic and a lot of hot actors make the series feel like the next *The Witcher* (although Shadow *and Bone* is more suitable for a younger audience, hence less gore and more romance). As an adaptation of Leigh Bardugo's popular YA novel series, *Shadow and Bone* succeeds to offer an irresistible blend of romance, action and intrigue, all wrapped up in an aesthetic that is part imperial Russian, part steampunk. In times of a pandemic, which can feel dystopian in and of itself, you can easily lose yourself in this show due to its human heart, fine sense of humour, and lovely characters.

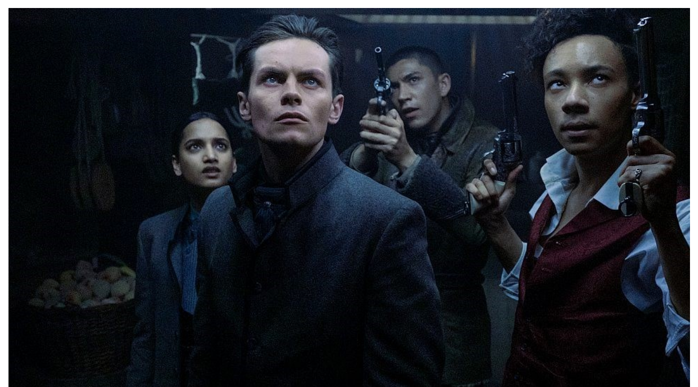
Shadow and Bone is set in the kingdom of Ravka, a country currently at war with its neighbouring countries, Shu Han and Fjerda. Ravka itself is divided into two by a dark void called the Fold, which is populated by shadowy monsters called Volcra. These lethal creatures make passing through the Fold nearly impossible. The kingdom's defence against the Fold, and the army against the enemies from neighbouring countries, are the first and second army. The latter is a population of various users of 'small science' (or a combination of magic and molecular chemistry) called Grisha, the elite. The story centres on a teenage girl called Alina Starkov (played in the TV series by Jessie Mei Li). Like many YA fantasy protagonists, Alina is an orphan and in no way special, mostly according to herself. That is until she is plucked from her life as a first army mapmaker, once she has unleashed the power to manipulate sunlight, she is declared as the "the chosen one". Her new life is filled with magic, training, intrigue, and of course she gets caught up in a love triangle – between her devoted childhood friend Mal (Archie Renaux), and the handsome yet sinister General Kirigan (Ben Barnes).

But if this is not your kind of story, no worries, there's more. In the island nation of Kerch, a trio of rogues who call themselves the Crows – Kaz (Freddy Carter), Inej (Amita Suman), and Jesper (Kit Young) – take on a job to cross the Fold and kidnap the Sun Summoner (Alina) to earn a small fortune from a Kerch crime boss. Elsewhere, a Grisha named Nina (Danielle Galligan) is kidnapped by a group of Fjerdans, who despise magic, and forms an unexpected bond with one of her captors, Matthias (Calahan Skogman), after they get shipwrecked.

This is all a lot on paper, which makes *Shadow and Bone* feel quite complicated at times. Although the show manages to juggle these numerous tones and plot elements, the somewhat rapid changes can confuse newcomers to the Grishaverse. Especially the Crows plot feels like a divergence from the main storyline, with the Crows mainly functioning as comic relief. It is not until the second half of the show that the two storylines collide at full force, creating the possibility for a grand finale. Still, the show is quite easy to absorb, as you don't need a character key to keep track, unlike, say, *Game of Thrones*.

It helps that *Shadow and Bone* features an appealing cast, composed mainly of newcomers. Li, who has a background in theatre, has the acting chops and charisma to make us root for Alina and her cause. Archie Renaux makes us wish we all had a best friend like Mal, and fantasy veteran Ben Barnes (from *Stardust* to *The Chronicles of Narnia*) makes Kirigan the mysterious general that he is, with many women swooning over the looks of both men. But the ones who are most enjoyable to watch, and seem to have the most fun with their roles are Carter, Suman and Young as the Crows. They get into the most shenanigans, whether Jesper seduces and beds a stablehand to pull off a heist, or Inej struggles with the morally grey areas of assassination. The most impressive performance, in the little screen time they get, is given by Galligan and Skogman. They have the skills to make the characters of the flirtatious Nina and the sulking and serious Matthias unforgettable. Jesper's comfort goat Milo makes the cast even more appealing, as he immediately became a fan favourite.

A big part of what makes the show feel like a fresh wind in fantasy on TV is that the *Shadow and Bone* cast, unlike *Game of Thrones* and *The Witcher*, isn't all-white. Considering the fantasy genre as a whole and where it was, even a few years ago - the fact that an Asian British actress is the main lead of a major fantasy series is significant. Bardugo already tried to diversify her books more when she wrote the *Six of Crows* duology as an elaboration of the Grishaverse, creating characters with different backgrounds, ethnicities, and sexualities. The show goes even further by casting a more diverse range of actors rather than Bardugo's all-white *Shadow and Bone* characters. Racial bias is directly addressed in the show itself as Alina is half-Ravkan and half-Shu, because of which she must deal with her fair share of discrimination from both the powers that be and her fellow Grisha. The show does, however, fail its only openly queer character, Jesper. In the first season, he only has one intimate moment with a man when he has sex with him as part of a manipulative strategy that serves the greater good. After this, Jesper never sees the boy again. Hopefully this insufficient portrayal will be different in future seasons of the show.



Amita Suman, Freddy Carter, Archie Renaux and Kit Young in *Shadow and Bone* (Netflix)

Besides great casting and characters, the show's costume designer Wendy Partridge and her team did mind-boggling work on making the show come alive. Their detailed work is amazingly captured in over-the-shoulder shots and full-length walks. The costumes manage to establish the hierarchies in Ravka, which is shown by colour differences as well as intricately stitched details. The show's set and visual effects are just as suitably lavish. The world comes to life through such lavish use of colour and other visu-

als that you can't help but look at it with awe. Not only do the costumes and the set design look amazing, but the fights and magic wielding are truly and utterly stunning. This visual spectacle creates an alternate reality that any fan would love to live in. And as the magic comes to life on the screen, viewers wish that magic would spring from their hands if they made the same gesture combinations as the characters.

Of course, the world which is brought to life in Netflix's *Shadow and Bone* could not have existed without Bardugo's worldbuilding in her Grishaverse books. Her refreshing approach to create a 'Steampunk tsarist Russia' aesthetic rather than the medieval England setting of a lot of popular fantasy books makes for an interesting story. Ravka thus immediately gives off a unique vibe and hooks readers and viewers into exploring the world that Bardugo has created. Furthermore, the world at war is rich in subtext: race, class, poverty, crime, sexual politics, the relationship between the state and the individual. It would be a shame if the great range of angles provided would be overlooked. Every institution that the young people encounter, be it a gang, a class, or the army, wants something from them in exchange for the meagre protections they offer. Ravka therefore seems to be populated by old people who give orders and kids who do all the work, with no one in between. Because of this, historical Russia, which the world is based on, becomes a surprisingly fertile ground for a mirror of contemporary generational politics.

For the readers of Bardugo's books, the series would be easier to follow, and less overwhelming, than for new fans, as they were already familiar with her world and its rules. For them, Heisserer's changes and the combination of the *Shadow and Bone* trilogy and the *Six of Crows* duology make for an exciting development. Because who wouldn't want all their favourite characters put together in one big story? The changes also raise questions about the future developments in the show and its two storylines, especially because the readers of the books will already know what the next chapter of the story will entail.

Whereas the typical YA fantasy tropes in Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* are at times very repetitive and boring, Heisserer manages to use them to his advantage. He understands very well when viewers love a good trope and uses them, at times, unexpectedly. Magical makeovers? There are several of them. A scene in which two enemies who are clearly into each other are forced to share one bed? Got that too. A villain who was hiding in plain sight, and is, by the way, immortal? He's here for you. This series knows that its audience loves the familiarity of the fantasy-adventure-romance and will gladly deploy these tropes as entertainment value over originality.

Honestly, this doesn't make the show unworthy. Because the audience for YA is primarily young women, shows like *Shadow and Bone* are often labeled as low-brow culture. Is *Shadow and Bone* ever going to be a 'prestigious' series or going to change the way we think about television? Probably not. It is, however, an irresistibly enjoyable piece of entertainment for those who appreciate a bit of magic and political palace intrigue.

Ilse Barkmeijer is a postgraduate student of Dutch and English literature and is currently a MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University. She is an avid reader of everything she can get her hands on, but mainly enjoys reading romance fiction. As editor of *RevUU* she developed her editing skills as well as learning to understand the critical voices of others.

Veronika

Creative Piece

By Kaixuan Yao

I am trying to write differently, now, as I sit by the windows with blinds raised. Views of neoclassicist facades come through, spread in front of me like linen sheets under the sun. I dropped into a long sleep last night, like a dog's muzzle that sniffed so attentively at the soil and ... surrendered. By this point, with this little written, I am already tired. I can barely open my eyes. To be honest, right now my right eye is closed, given the great effort required to keep my eyelids lifted, and my left eye merely peers into its exterior from a minimally maintained gap. Focus, focus, focus... I feel as though I'm running out. There is, in addition, the great fatigue from living, which amuses me as much as it trains me to be amused.

It is only in the case that someone shall invite me to play a role, that I would go on in spite of my exhaustion. Considering my optimism, my sociability, and the optimism and sociability of others, I thought it a good idea, after all, to build a machine. An automaton. Something that operates by itself and provides for all unrehearsed scripts an equilibrium. Like the familiar face of a renowned actress that grounds the frivolity and vicariousness of having played (and continuing to play) an assortment of characters.

This idea came to me yesterday afternoon, when, for a short twenty minutes, the sky was clear. White clouds against the innocent blue, reflected on the windows of the building across the street. There must be wind, for the illustrated shadow work of the sky passed fleetingly into another. Soon it would rain again. I thought about the sky's reflection in the still river, the one I grew up nearby. Before it rained, a dragonfly would fly so close to the surface, only to circle above by dint of the atmospheric pressure, and therefore initiate no contact. But an equilibrium had then been set in place. Those were the first memories of how I learned to fly. I spread my wings, as delicate as dandelions, and intuited the mechanism of intuition that Life demanded of me. Now, I sit here alone in a foreign room, staring at the windows across the street. The building's stately edifice solidifies on my retina, along with the nonchalant evolution of the sky's projected image. I have come to terms with the course of things: my optimism, my sociability, and those of others.

And that was the moment I finally saw them, standing behind the window.

The reason their existence had up until this point remained unnoticed was as inexplicable as their breathless existence itself. They seemed like a sculpture one might find in a deserted once-noble garden in the countryside, now restored and open to public visit, since the regional governmental capacity had recovered—it is hard to imagine how such change had occurred. Overnight, constitutional malfunction turned into ahistorical hope. But maybe it was a blessing. And we learned that the hard way later, as hope quickly spiraled into political paranoia and we were forced to escape. On my way, I remembered that sculpture again—with its silent statement. The one that few paid attention to but that had been observing us in silence all this time. I felt a profound

sorrow. Is it still there, in a moment of chaos, conducting its silent observation? The garden will soon be overgrown. Here by the window, I see it again, in the blind stare with which the person returns my attention. In their blind stare, there are, paradoxically, possibilities for life.

Have I started to write differently? Now that their stare has fixed me in my position. I'm afraid so. And God, I am afraid. For it is not a position of optimism, sociability, nor hope. All this time I had already imagined the greatest enemy to be the ones who would force me out. They will force me out and I will continue to live. Living is flying, hovering. Living is existence in space and time, and existence is a dance. But that blind stare fixes me in my position. I am becoming transparent, breathless, immobile, blind ...? I have no thought.

From the minimally maintained gap, my mind peers into a vast snowy land. In this great nothingness I could not breathe, I could not. And in my hypoxia the first life is born, the first thought that ever comes along in this spotless world covered in snow: What is it that you do when you drown?

*

What is it that you do when you drown? Asks the dragonfly. What is it that you do? I ask in the hollowing coldness that was once air. In my hypoxia, views of neoclassicist facades come through, spread in front of me like linen sheets under the sun. The last thing that I remember is drowning. In my sleep, I dreamt of being a dragonfly, hovering over a still river. I am not used to flying, so I drowned into reality. And since I am still drowning, I express defiance to this reality, this Life, by acting.

I assume many roles. The first role I took on was a dog. Still a child, I laid low, knees on the ground, folding my torso by my waist, and nearing my face to the soil. It was at that moment that I realized there is absolutely nothing more about living than the fresh smell of grass, mixed with the scent of resin from broken branches, the fruitiness of our dark earth and the faint lingering of feces. And so, I knew that Robi, our family dog, had a good life, though we had lost him forever. I tried to fall into the sweet earth the way Robi did, and immediately I understood that he never gave in. One day, he awoke, and that's that.

They say that a thespian never really grows out of their first role. There is some truth in this statement. A part of me has remained close to the ground, forever crawling, and searching for the rawness of living. In this sense, Robi never did die.

For the past few days, the radio has been broadcasting an ongoing war elsewhere. I listened as I indulged in the safety of my home. I did not intend to think too much about it. I meant the uncanniness of history.

There was a less peaceful time in this country. People disappeared under daylight, one after another, until their last walking traces in the streets were buried by the snow, which was ceaseless. I kept the windows open and inhaled the wintry air deep into my lungs. In this great nothingness I tried to breathe. And quickly I noticed that by concentrating on my breath, I could conjure up the smell of my beloved ones that had passed away. Smoky and sweet, the cigar, the perfume... And then I heard the music, the banter. I started to speak in their voices —it was hardly noticeable to my interlocutors, but I was becoming them. And in this sense, they were never gone.

An hour has passed by the time I return from my thought. It is suddenly sunny. The windows of the building across the street are screening our sky's moving image. I sit there for a while longer and discover in the image a vague human contour. I am trying to understand who that is, or whether that is my own reflection?

Soon it is going to rain. I fall back into sleep.

Kai Yao graduated from the Comparative Literary Studies research master program at Utrecht University in 2020. She will begin her PhD studies in Chinese Literature, Culture and Media at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in Autumn 2022. Currently, she resides in Prague, Czechia.

Fake Friends in *Klara and the Sun*

How Kazuo Ishiguro's lifeless robots can give us a new perspective on life

By Isabel Cramer

Welcome to a future, perhaps even parallel, Earth. Highly sophisticated artificial intelligence is a part of everyday life in Kazuo Ishiguro's compelling *Klara and the Sun*. Ishiguro asks all the big questions in his latest novel: What does it mean to be human? Can science transcend death? Is parenthood truly selfless? The list seems endless for this philosophy-filled novel. *Klara and the Sun* manages to bring existential and ethical questions to the table page after page.

The novel launches into action in an Artificial Friend (abbreviated to AF) store, presumably in the United States. Several series of automatons are sold as playmates for children and teenagers — among the store's wares we find "Girl AF" Klara. We are introduced to Klara as the narrator of the story, and as we spend more time with her, it quickly becomes apparent that she is not human, but rather an artificial, robotic being that closely resembles a human both in physique and (supposedly) psyche.

We gradually begin to discover and navigate the shop (and subsequently the wider world) through Klara's eyes. Previously being positioned mid-store alongside her friend Rosa, the pair is moved to the shop window to represent the store — as well as to increase their chances of being bought. Here, we start to understand the near-religious importance of the Sun (always capitalized, like "God") to Klara. It is mentioned that Klara's series of AFs is solar-powered: rather than human nourishment, it is the Sun that feeds her, and it is the Sun that enables her to see. To Klara, it seems, being able to see is paramount in life. She is praised for being incredibly observant, and curiously soaks in all that she sees from her position in the shop window.

Klara's time in the shop window ingeniously reflects how a child first encounters all sorts of inexplicable events. As Klara sees the outside world and its people for the first time, we are introduced to the AFs' relative naivety, and their abstract way of understanding humankind. Central to Klara's robotic innocence stands an unfaltering loyalty to 14-year-old human Josie, who Klara first meets during her time in the shop window, and who eventually buys Klara to come home with her.

Ishiguro, against the conventions of traditional sci-fi literature, includes scenes wherein very little action happens. He is known to apply this style to not only Klara and the Sun, but also in his previous novels *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *The Buried Giant* (2015). Nevertheless, Ishiguro fills his scenes with compelling sentences resembling an intricate artwork — precise, intriguing and masterfully constructed. Hence, this style works harmoniously within *Klara and the Sun*.

Rather than sudden plot twists and revelations, Ishiguro prefers writing long, winding plots — by the end of the novel it is obvious how the narrative will unfold and eventually end, even if at one point the story seemed to go entirely in another direction. This is very much in line with Ishiguro's style and his employment of rather passive scenes in his novels. In *Klara and the Sun*, the most important revelations

(such as why Josie is sick, what the “portrait” entails, and what is going to happen to Klara) are subtly teased in front of our very eyes.

Ishiguro is a master of withholding information from his readers. The lack of information seems not so much a deliberate choice, but rather a natural process based on the nature of Ishiguro’s narrator. Klara knows as little of this great new world as the reader, and experiences everything she encounters as new and self-evident. In Ishiguro’s skilful hands, this self-evidence becomes a device with which the reader is compelled to read on. What is an “AF”? What do the Mother’s strange requests in the store entail? When will Josie’s illness be explained? *Klara and the Sun* keeps you on your toes.

This withholding of information is both a source of great pleasure and immense frustration. Ishiguro has his readers practically malnourished. Because Ishiguro tells us so little about his world — and seems rather uninterested in traditional worldbuilding — the reader is only fed minimal portions of information and hints about the strangeness of this parallel, future Earth.

Klara and the Sun draws from the depths of the Uncanny Valley, and what it means to be neither artificial nor human. The term Uncanny Valley, coined by Tokyo Institute of Technology professor Masahiro Mori in 1970, attempts to describe the observation of discomfort in people upon encountering uncannily human robots. Our feelings shift towards unease and strangeness when a robot crosses the “uncanny” threshold.

Ishiguro’s incorporation of the concept of the Uncanny Valley complexifies our understanding of Klara’s sentience. Is Klara truly sentient, or is AF programming sophisticated to such an extent that selflessness and perceived emotions are merely part of computer-generated coding rather than a “soul”? The novel’s events are portrayed in a uniquely abstract manner by virtue of its robotic perspective. AFs view the world as a conglomeration of “boxes”. The descriptions of the visual world through Klara’s eyes give an abstract, nearly kaleidoscopic feel, reminding the reader that they are in fact seeing this strange world through the eyes of a robot.

Klara is not so much uncanny in physique, but rather in psyche. The human characters in *Klara and the Sun* can easily recognize an AF upon sight, meaning that there is some significant physical difference between humans and AFs. The uncanniness is rather found in the inner workings of Klara. The human characters in the novel are, on this level, affected by Klara’s uncanniness. From our human perspective it is clear that Klara’s life as an AF was limited to her being a robot. She enjoyed a certain degree of freedom — but only as much as her masters allowed. In some parts of the novel, she seems to be more like a pet, a decorative appliance or security device rather than a friend. She had the benefits of having a place to stay and loving company — but merely because she was an expensive purchase, a sophisticated plaything for teenage Josie. Klara was ultimately waiting to be discarded, even if the narrative points toward her potentially having to “continue” Josie’s being. “Are you a guest at all? Or do I treat you like a vacuum cleaner?” (Part Three), she is asked upon entering a home. Are you sentient, or not quite?

Similarly, a woman outside the theatre accuses Klara of needlessly taking up a seat: “First they take the jobs. Now they take the seats at the theatre?” (Part Four). Here we find an allusion to mechanisation as well as the fact that artificial creatures are becoming more integrated in society and being treated as human beings. So the question remains to what extent AFs are humans, or perhaps even replace humans.

The novel dives even further into this question of whether Klara is a sentient creature or rather an appliance. The Mother asks Klara to “continue” Josie — not in her own mechanical body, but in a new one which is modelled perfectly after Josie by scientist Capaldi. The uncanny quality of Klara is that she is capable of, or at least attempts to, discover and learn every part of Josie’s behaviour, mind, and heart. If Josie comes to die, Klara’s artificial mind is to be transferred to Josie’s artificial clone. Would this perhaps mean that Klara is at least sentient *enough* to continue and mimic a human girl?

As the novel progresses, we learn that children are being “lifted”. This is supposedly a risky form of

genetic editing which drastically improves the academic performance of children — which is supposedly the reason for Josie's illness. These modern practices are nearly parallel to tinkering with mechanical creatures (such as AFs) in order to improve their functioning. Here we return to the Uncanny Valley — because Ishiguro blurs the lines between man and machine by showcasing that humans and Artificial creatures are treated, or rather objectified, similarly in striking ways that have to do with performance rather than sentience.

Klara and the Sun is philosophical to the bone. Ishiguro, as in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Sleeping Giant*, once more addresses ethical issues from the top shelf. *Klara and the Sun* juggles the interplay of the temporariness of all things, including life itself. Ishiguro presents us with existential juxtapositions, where abandonment and loyalty, ungratefulness and forgiveness, dedication and expectation are starkly pitted against each other.

Klara's unfaltering loyalty and selflessness may or may not have been part of her programming. Artificial Friends are, obviously, programmed to fulfil their function as "Friends". Programming is made to strive for perfection, and hence the "Friend"-aspects of an Artificial Friend will likely be enhanced and presented in their most idealised form. Unlike humans, Artificial Friends such as Klara have no personal agenda that could put the feelings of others in jeopardy. However, we once again tread upon the issue of Klara's sentience — would Klara's unfaltering loyalty be a testament to her being passionately human, or rather to her being an artificially programmed creature? Questions revolving around Klara's religious stance toward the Sun arise in a similar context.

"I have my memories to go through and place in the right order," (Part Six) Klara says in the final passage of the novel. She seems nostalgic and ruminates on the wonders of her past while bathing in the Sun's nourishment. The loneliness, isolation and finiteness of the ending scene were nearly unbearable, even if Klara seemed completely at peace with her final destiny. To me, she was human — human *enough*. This final scene is perhaps one of the moments where Klara is at her most human, and most artificial all at once. Ishiguro succeeds once more in bringing existential and ethical problems to the table in the one-of-a-kind surreal style we all know from him.

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Food for Thought, Identity, and Culture

A feature on Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*

By Naomi Tidball

In the last few years, there has been a surge of musicians sharing their personal stories, framed, of course, as heroic journeys in the documentary form. For instance, the new Britney Spears documentary was released, or rock documentaries like, *It Might Get Loud* (Guggenheim, 2008). But musicians setting their stories to paper are fewer and far between, so it came as a complete surprise to discover a memoir written by Michelle Zauner, lead singer of one of my favourite bands, Japanese Breakfast. Despite the Indie-rock band's name, the Oregon/Pennsylvania lead singer, Michelle Zauner, is a biracial Korean American.

In August 2018, in *The New Yorker's* section "Personal History", Zauner published an emotional piece titled "Crying in H Mart". In 2021, Zauner's reflective story on being biracial and dealing with heartbreak over the loss of her mother (due to cancer) had expanded into a book-length memoir under the same title.

As the term 'expanded memoir' evidently suggests, Zauner's book begins with the piece previously written for *The New Yorker*. Following this, Zauner delves even deeper; she invites us into various life experiences up until the death of her mother. What I discern from Zauner's biography is an overarching theme on the struggles and the empowerment of being biracial. However, if her book had a distinct thesis, it could be contextualised as the following: Food serves as a powerful tool in making meaningful connections to our heritage and identity.

Zauner offers two definitive themes regarding identity and food. On the one hand, she reflects on the positive connections to family and culture, when she encounters eating specific Korean dishes. Zauner reflects:

> The first dish to arrive was sannakji—live long-armed octopus. A plate full of gray-and-white tentacles wriggled before me, freshly severed from their head, every suction cup still pulsing. [my mother] looked at me and smiled, seeing my mouth agape. "Try it," she said [...] Eager to please her and impress my aunts, I balanced the liveliest leg I could find between my chopsticks, dipped it into the sauce as my mother had, and slipped it into my mouth. It was briny, tart, and sweet with just a hint of spice from the sauce [...] I gnashed the tentacle between my teeth as many times as I could before swallowing, afraid it would suction itself into my tonsils on the way down. "Good job baby!" "Aigo yeppeu!" my aunts exclaimed. "That's our pretty girl!" My family lauded my bravery, I radiated with pride. (22-23)

On the other hand, food and the act of eating are heart-wrenchingly reiterated in moments where Zauner recollects herself and her mother in conflict. Specifically, clashes occur within Zauner's honest excerpts on eating and participating in North American

culture/viewpoints to fit in with a predominantly white suburb in Oregon. In turn, a later chapter shows the pivotal moment where she attempts to re-establish her Korean roots. However, the sadness of this moment is that her motives for re-establishing her connection to Korea come with the discovery that her mother's test results show an invasive tumor in her stomach. As Zauner expresses on learning to cook Korean food:

> I wonder if I should explain how important it was to me. That cooking my mother's food had come to represent an absolute role reversal, a role I was meant to fill. That food was an unspoken language between us, that it had come to symbolise our return to each other, our bonding, our common ground. (98)

Ergo, Zauner's re-discovery of her Korean heritage occurs amid her mother's taxing illness, and the ever-growing fear of loss. Although repetitive in moments, Zauner's use of narrative is situated around food eloquently illustrates the often-difficult moments in maintaining a biracial identity – specifically, the pressures of living with two different cultural expectations. As Zauner expresses in her opening chapter, "Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?" (5) This particular sentiment occupies much of her memoir: the feeling that losing individuals (family) from one part of her culture leads to emotional insecurities about her racial identity. Thus, the imbrication of food, cultural heritage, and trauma paint a seamless triptych.

Another worthy mention is Zauner's reflections on parental upbringing. She outlines her struggles on balancing expectations from two opposite cultures, and the connections she makes with her parents. Through blatant honesty, we become aware of a sort of resentment Zauner feels towards her father. Initially, she paints a picture of her father as this favourable figure, one who provides for the family. As she reveals, "[as] a kid I was enthralled with the stories of his past, his machismo and grit" (74). However, in later chapters, Zauner punches back at her father's distant attitudes, reckless behaviour, and marital indiscretions with the following statement:

> I should be feeling sympathy or empathy, camaraderie, or compassion, but I only feel resentment [...] He was my father, and I wanted him to soberly reassure me, not try to goad me into navigating this disheartening path alone. (89)

Again, Zauner seems to reflect in her later entries a resentment towards her father, and a sense of coolness or indifference: a painted figure of a father, and her North American culture that remains distant or unwanted.

In stark contrast, her descriptive retelling of her relationship with her mother is moving and often overwhelming. At the start of Zauner's memoir, she reflects on the tensions between her mother and the volatile fights that ensue due to Zauner's attempts to assimilate with her North American peers. In doing so, Zauner highlights the cold and hostile environment, tensions, and the air full of passive-aggressive encounters, leading to an explosive battle. For instance, Zauner recaptures the following:

> In one fell swoop, my mother gripped me by the hip and spun me around to strike my backside with her palm. It was not the first time my mother had hit me, and the strike hardly hurt, aside from the embarrassment of feeling much too old for this practice [...] 'Why are you doing this to us? After everything we have given you, how can you treat us this way?' [her mother] yelled [...] 'I had an abortion after you because you were such a terrible child!' There it was. Almost comical how could have withheld a secret so impressive my entire life, only to hurl it at such a moment. I knew there was no way I was truly to blame for the abortion. That she had said it just to hurt me as I hurt her in so many monstrous configurations. (64-66)

Masterfully, there is a purpose to this build-up. She later discloses and reconciles with the recognition that similarities between her and her mother are

based on culture and innate or mutual feelings. Where Zauner writes:

> It made me feel close to her, an admission of awkwardness from someone I'd always perceived as the paragon of poise and authority [...] She was not always grace personified, that she once possessed the very same tomboyish defiance and restlessness with formality for which she'd often scolded me, and that her time away from Seoul had maybe exacerbated the estrangement she felt from certain traditions, traditions I had never learned. (113)

These moments of comparing, contrasting, and further reflecting on the parental relations during the growing pains of adolescence, hosts a decisive and perspicuous move in relaying her vision of being biracial.

I guess the takeaway from this is that being biracial is something that I am proud of. However, the experience is often emotionally exhausting. I often find myself in a liminal state of being.

This leads me to my second point. Such a personal topic in someone's life requires the use of compelling and relatable imagery and language. Crying in H Mart resonates with me profoundly. Aside from the surface similarities of being half-Asian and growing up in the Pacific Northwest (I am not half-white/half-Korean, but I am half-white/half-Japanese), Zauner's words resonate with my understanding of being half-Asian. Coming from a biracial background (half-Japanese and half-Canadian), I, in some way, connect or relate to the experiences discussed in Zauner's passages on growing up in a culturally divided household. In particular, I identified with Zauner's accurate retelling of her struggles to fit into the standards of beauty imposed by her Korean mother and her North American environment. By comparison, my experience with the cultural divisions on tattooing resonates profoundly. In Japan, tattooing is recognised as a Yakuza branding. Whereas, in North America, tattooing is far more accepted as a form of expression, and of beauty.

Recently, I started to reflect on the growing pains or the inevitable difficulties of being biracial—and specifically half-Asian. On countless occasions, I felt displaced, only feeling welcomed in a superficial or touristic form. This leads me to think about Zauner's reflection on her Asian identity and space. In several moments, Zauner discusses her displacement when it comes to her appearance. Through bold imagery, she conveys the experiences of her identity and space with comments such as:

> Such was puberty, one big masochistic joke set in the halfway house of middle school, where kids endure the three most confusing years of their lives [...] a girl from class confronted me in the bathroom with what would become a familiar line of questioning [...] "Well, what are you then?" [...] There was something in my face that other people deciphered as a thing displaced from its origin, like I was some kind of alien or exotic fruit. (95)

These moments truly touched me. For a long time, the only positive affirmation of my identity were comments on my "exotic" looks, with such comments as "half-Asians are so beautiful, like unicorns." To this day, I still encounter the ever-so tiring questions of "where are you from? Because you don't look fully white," or "what kind of Asian are you?"

I guess the takeaway from this is that being biracial is something that I am proud of. However, the experience is often emotionally exhausting. I often find myself in a liminal state of being. What I discern, and what Zauner points to is a conflict of ambiguity; where I often float between two cultures, trying to reason with the idea of belonging. It's important to stress, that it is not just my white/Canadian side which makes me feel displaced, but also my Asian side. Similarly, Zauner states a similar experience on studying at a Korean school in America:

> I didn't have any Korean friends outside of Hangul Hakkyo [...] Most of the kids were full Korean, and I struggled to relate to the obedience that seemed to possess them, inculcated by the united force of two immigrant parents. (81)

When I think about the retelling of a musician's life, often, there is a consistent focus on the artist's connection to music. In the case of Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, I notice a retelling of her musical journey that is gradual. Instead, Zauner conveys her insecurities of success in the music industry, and once again, her challenges with the cultural pressure enforced by her mother's expectations. For this reason, two moments significantly stand out for me. The first being her lengthy excerpt between, and again, the tensions of cultural expectations; her mother stringent in her attitudes towards getting a post-secondary degree, and music being merely a hobby than a profession. The second example is when Zauner discovers New York City's indie-rock bank, The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and specifically lead singer Karen O (Karen Lee Orzolek). Zauner confesses: "My first thought being how do I get to do that, and my second, if there's already one Asian girl doing this, then there's no longer space for me" (55). This particular remark both reiterates the theme of identity and of occupying space. It also rings a valid or one poignant truth about the internal struggles of being biracial. Many times, in my youth, I had to endure the pressure of standing out, comparing myself with my other half-Asian friends in areas of sports, academics, and simply existing. Obviously, times are progressively shifting, and the space is more open to diversity. Still, however, that sense of establishing yourself and the fear of rejection lingers.

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Utopia of Isolation

Creative Piece

By Yara Cloudt

I'm stuck in my den for the next couple of days.

And weeks.

And years, probably.

Decades, perhaps, if all goes well.

I live on Titan, Jupiter's moon, in a world that you Earthlings might call a Dystopia, but I prefer the term Utopia. It is the nature of my species to be quite withdrawn. Most of us don't like to be loud, we don't like bragging, and we definitely don't like good company. The only company we like is our own, because only alone can we realize our ambition. That is a planetary slogan here. The government made it up to help explain to us why we are so introverted by nature. We, all of us on this planet, prefer to live in isolation. That is the way of our world. Living in social environments, like humans do on Earth, causes nothing but distractions. Having fellow Creatures around you means you have to take everybody else's feelings into account. We don't like to do that. It costs too much effort and more often than not the most rational option will be ignored, because now, suddenly, feelings outweigh what is logically the best choice. Social relationships create disagreements, and disagreements cause distractions, and feelings get hurt and that too provides a distraction when really we should all be focused on our tasks in servitude of the government of the planet. Our ambition to serve our government as well as we can is top priority here.

I'm aware things are very different on Earth. I read lots and lots about it. Humans are overly stuffed with emotions; you love entangling yourselves in complicated relationships to other fellow humans, you often ignore the logical options for the sake of consideration, and you rebel against your governments instead of simply listening to them. What a strange world!

We are very different. We don't go outside like you do. We work from home. We do everything logically and efficiently. Not a single drop of our energy is wasted on silly friendships that won't stand the test of time anyway. The government has designed our planet this way, and so it will be for as long as our species have the pleasure of living on. And we *will* live on for a long time because none of this endangers our reproductive process, it only ensures our survival. Reproduction of the species is digitized here. There is no need for sexual intercourse, as living beings have on Earth, which directly eliminates transmission of certain diseases and the possibility of rape and sexual assault, which I have read about a lot in Earth books and find particularly gruesome. Our reproduction is done by a computer programme. Every six months, all of us donate a small container with reproductive cells to the Institution of Life and with those cells, they create new life. This programme is very efficient. It can't decide the characteristic features of the Creature it births, but it can make sure every single Creature is born healthy and has no complications, and it can abort birthing an unborn creature if they show signs of health complications. This way we can make sure everybody lives a long life without creating an overpopulated planet. We

can regulate exactly how many new Creatures we want to be born to make sure the whole society stays balanced, and the newly born Creatures are then raised and nursed in a special center. I don't know exactly how that happens, I can't remember, for they give every Creature a selective memory wipe every so often to prevent us from developing any form of psychological problems, and no one really has access to those centers. Except for specific government officials, of course, and the Creatures specialized in reproduction who work for the Institution of Life. All I know is we don't have parents like you do on Earth. That I can remember.

You might wonder, then, if we ever get lonely, considering you are from Earth, and Earth is full of human beings, and human beings are, according to our books, social creatures. My answer to that would be that, yes, I suppose, we Creatures can get somewhat lonely...

But don't let this mislead you, because loneliness is a wonderful thing!

We are encouraged by the government to appreciate creativity and art because it makes us feel less alone! If we should ever reach a point of despair at having not seen another Creature's face in too long, there are plenty of stories out there for us to immerse ourselves in! Those who feel alone need not look further than the pages of a book, where one shall find uncountable stories of comfort, imaginary worlds, and make-believe friends and lovers!

This is another one of the government's pick-up lines. I quite like it. It captures the heart of our planet. When we get lonely, we have books. When we get bored, we have books. When we have, despite all our knowledge of and programming against its dangers, an urgent need to feel a connection with a fellow Creature, we have stories and fantasy and literature. Our society has successfully eliminated the continuous and torturous ties with fellow Creatures that, in the end, only drain us and come between us and our duties. We don't have friends, nor do we have lovers. We simply don't feel the need to seek each other out anymore because make-believe characters in books and fantastical stories are so much better anyway. There is no conflict here, because real Creatures can't have conflict with imaginary characters, which means we have no wars either.

According to myth, there used to be war on our planet, lots of it, just like on Earth. There is a myth going around that there is an Opposition still, and that they live above the ice, on the surface of Titan, while we live below it. The myth goes that the Opposition was inspired by Earth books about a revolution, and that they want to "free" us, whatever that means. We are safe from harm inside our dens. The government has ensured we can all live long, healthy, and prosperous lives. What more freedom could we need! It's only a myth of course. I don't think there really is an Opposition. Creatures must be insane to want to start a conflict!

We are encouraged by the government to appreciate creativity and art because it makes us feel less alone! If we should ever reach a point of despair at having not seen another Creature's face in too long, there are plenty of stories out there for us to immerse ourselves in! Those who feel alone need not look further than the pages of a book, where one shall find uncountable stories of comfort, imaginary worlds, and make-believe friends and lovers!

We have peace now. Distance ensures peace, as the government wisely taught us. You humans could learn from us how to be peaceful. And in return you could teach us creativity. We are Creatures, but not a creative species. But humans are. We love your stories– they are what we live for here. The imaginary worlds we get to escape into are the reason we keep going. It makes the whole system work, otherwise we might actually get as lonely as you do.

Our planet's most loved slogan is this: travel

anywhere from your couch. A good book is all you need to cross the universe and feel connected, after all.

My personal favorites are the somewhat more complicated ones, although they shouldn't be so complicated that it takes me too long to read, because then I can't finish them in time. I don't want to become too distracted and not fulfill my duty to the government. That is, of course, a danger when my mind is preoccupied with wishing to know how the story ends.

To be very honest, I also very much enjoy those books that detail the journey of two lovers. "Romances," I believe you call them. Sometimes I wonder what it must be like to have a lover. The only Creatures that do have lovers on our planet are the ones who do the hardest work. If you have reached significant achievements, and have earned a higher pay, and you have shown the government that you are a good Creature who is committed to the system and who can fulfill their duty, even if you have some distractions around, then you get a special pass. Something like a medal. If you have that, you can enter secluded halls. I don't know what is inside those halls, I have never been into one (I never really leave my den anymore!), but other Creatures say it is where you meet your One True Match. Your One True Match is kind of similar to what you humans call a soulmate, although it seems that humans always doubt whether soulmates are real, whereas here, a One True Match is official, and when you are assigned your One True Match, you know it can't possibly be wrong because it was based on all the data the government has collected about you since you were formed. All your actions, thoughts, experiences, and emotions are collected and stored digitally, and based on those things, a computer calculates your One True Match. Through this process, they can also decide whether or not you are suitable to have a lover. If you are too emotional, you can never receive your One True Match, because the government knows that such powerful emotions will cause disruptions. They will distract you from your duties. A lover is only in the cards for you, to use human idioms, if you have proven complete allegiance to the government first.

If you can keep a secret, I shall tell you one, Earthling. I suppose if anyone is to understand, it is a human being. I will never say this out loud, because it's a risky business to enter and a very hard thing to achieve, but I wish to receive a medal too. Oh, I do! Once, I went onto an online forum on my personal computer. I looked up if there are other Creatures who feel the same way, if more of us wish they could have a medal and receive our One True Match. There was one chat I found... Creatures were very emotional... They were quoting Romance books from Earth, only I can't remember... I only looked at it for a short moment, then I closed the page. It scared me. I never went back. Sometimes, still, I think about it, and I am convinced all of us secretly wish we had a medal, but that can't be right. The system works perfectly, for all Creatures. I don't question the system. I just... Wonder, sometimes.

I don't get as lonely as the humans in the books do, but it haunts me a little, the thought of what it feels like to simply be touched by another Creature. What must it be like to share your life with someone? To not avoid being too close to another Creature's body? Physical touch must be such a wonderful thing.

Since we work from home here, on this planet, nobody really leaves their den. Everything is done digitally and from a safe distance. We have delivery hoovers that zoom through every neighborhood once every two days and bring you the supplies you need for daily life, such as food, drinks, soap, and other hygiene products. All of this is done without physical interaction. The government has decided it is safest that way, because there are all kinds of viruses in this galaxy, and we wish to avoid contamination as much as possible. We try to keep our planet as clean as we can. This is another reason we all work from home, or avoid any form of contact with fellow creatures; if there is no contact between carriers of a disease, then the disease can't ever spread. So hoover deliveries are done through the air: the deliverer halts their hoover vehicle above our dens, and drops our supplies down a pipeline that immediately cleans and disinfects everything that

comes through it, after which the package of supplies is, in a regulated manner, allowed to slide down the rest of the pipe into our living space.

It's funny for me when I read human books. Your planet does everything so inefficiently. All of you have to leave your houses, as you call them, and go to a mall or supermarket, which can sometimes be a solid twenty-minute drive away, which is all a huge loss of time. On top of it, these supermarkets are filled with fellow humans, and therefore filled with disease, and you all repeatedly contaminate each other, which leads to sickness and absence from work, which of course then disrupts your duties to the state. Earth is such a strange and funny planet!

But then again, you are able to talk to one another. You guys can form real connections... I haven't talked to a fellow Creature in so long I have forgotten what the sound of my voice is like. I read about those lovers in your romance books, and I do long for something like that. A connection so deep you can call each other's names backwards and know the other will understand anyway. A casualness in your unity to such an extent that you can put your hand in the other human's hand and not fear you are endangering your health or your duties. How incredible that must be... To love, to touch, to not be alone...

What a thought!

But like I said, we don't have that here. We Creatures don't connect with fellow Creatures, we only connect with imaginary and idealized characters, and it's better this way. The only company we like is our own, because only alone can we fulfill our duties. Work from home, travel anywhere from your couch. A good book is all you need to cross the universe and feel connected. That is our way. So if all goes well, I will not leave my den in the coming decade. No distractions, no disease, no commotions. I can focus all my ambition on my duties to the government.

Our Utopia costs a lot to maintain and is much too precious to live in. But it is a Utopia, and may Titan bless the government for creating it!

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Clashes and Connections of the City

A Review of Fiona Mozley's *Hot Stew*

By Sara van der Woude

Fiona Mozley's second novel, *Hot Stew* (2021), opens with a snail escaping its unlucky fate as escargot-to-be, subsequently tracing an almost mythical origin story of Soho, London. We hear the trampling of the deer that used to be hunted on the former moor, the stapling of bricks as the terrain is consolidated into a residential area, the dropping of bombs that would forever change the face of the city, and the bustle of what would become one of London's most important entertainment districts. Eventually, the snail leads us to the roof of a Soho building, where sex workers Precious and Tabitha have set up a garden on top of the brothel where they work. However, the serenity of the garden is deceptive: the two women may soon be evicted from their building. In the following chapters, Mozley explores this central conflict by introducing us to an ensemble of six interconnected characters, each of whose chapters tell their personal part of a larger social narrative. In the social hierarchy of the ever-transforming urban area, they each occupy their own place, often leading to starkly conflicting interests.

How different from, and yet how similar Mozley's latest novel is to her Booker-shortlisted debut *Elmet* (2017). Whereas the current novel tells a distinctly urban story, the York-raised author's first novel centred on the darkness and violence of the Yorkshire countryside. Its name, 'Elmet', refers to an ancient Celtic kingdom, connecting the story to rural legendry. While thus opting for a drastically different setting and scale with *Hot Stew* — Soho covers a mere square mile — it is clear that Mozley's writing is imbued with the idea of geography and the environment as shaping forces for her characters and the relations between them.

Like *Elmet*'s key conflict between a family and a wealthy group of landowners who threaten to disturb their peaceful rural life, *Hot Stew* follows the clash between the sex workers and real estate owner Agatha Howard, who intends to evict them to advance the process of gentrification in the area. In both novels this contestation over landownership and the permission to live and belong in a place engender strong resistance from those in danger of expulsion.

Although *Elmet* had more clearly defined ties to myth and legend, *Hot Stew* also reads like a folk tale, with apparently fairytale-esque character sketches and relations that seem to delineate archetypal roles of victim, perpetrator and saviour. Like two damsels in distress, Precious and Tabitha wait at the top of the tower marked for demolition, with Agatha as the comically typical capitalist antagonist (with her lavish lifestyle, she is vaguely reminiscent of Cruella de Vil). Wealthy Cambridge graduate Bastian fulfils the classic role of a prince stifled by his family's expectations, desperate for an escape; and Robert lives a secluded life hiding his past as a hangman for Agatha's late gang-leading father.

Although Mozley maintains a strict black-and-white division between good and evil, we gradually discover that these characters may be more complex than we anticipated. Precious and Tabitha are por-

trayed in an empowered and humane way and won't go down without a fight; cold and rigid Agatha is tormented by her alienation from her mother; and ultimately, we may be surprised by who turns out to be a hero in this tale.

The novel's most curiously mythical characters are a man and woman nicknamed after celebrity magician couple Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee, who live in an underground commune of addicts led by a man they reverently call 'The Archbishop'. They are clouded in mystery: we know and discover very little detail about them throughout the novel, and their story is primarily told through a distant description of their actions. As Paul and the Archbishop are squabbling about the ownership of a crown they'd found, Debbie escapes through Soho's underground tunnels and undergoes a complete metamorphosis in a luxurious abandoned spa. After getting clean there, she is able to re-join society as Cheryl Lavery, her real name.

Debbie's magical transformation is indicative of Mozley's argument about wealth, success, and inheritance in her novel. Oftentimes her characters' place in society is a matter of luck: just as homeless Debbie one day happens to stumble upon the perfect environment to set her life straight, Agatha and Bastian were 'accidentally' born into families that provided the right circumstances for them to live wealthy and successful lives, and that will allow them to play key roles in society through law and finance.

At times, Mozley's characters display self-awareness of this privilege. As Bastian reflects on the state of his relationship with his ambitious yet distant girlfriend, he says, as though there is an inevitability to his life: "They are from similarly wealthy backgrounds; they are likely to have similarly successful careers" (Mozley 80). Each of Mozley's characters knows their place in the city's social stratification and is aware of the sacrifices they must make to stay on top or move up, even if that means accepting jobs that make them question their own morality.

Mozley skilfully shows that the accumulation of wealth may not only require selling your own soul, but that it usually occurs at the expense of others, as shown by the corrupt and manipulative legalistic means that Agatha and her lawyers employ. Like punishers for Agatha's sins, her estranged half-sisters (Agatha must consider them her 'evil' stepsisters) come knocking at her door demanding their share of their father's criminally acquired inheritance, suggesting that anything not earned legitimately may just as easily be taken away. In the meantime, Paul and the Archbishop have beaten each other's skulls in over the question of whose head may wear the crown, a poignant parallel cautionary tale of what might ensue with the introduction of such power differences in a community.

The starkest contrast in terms of morality and power occurs between the characters of Precious and Tabitha in opposition to Agatha Howard. From her descriptions of these characters, Mozley's writing about women is clearly entrenched in contemporary feminist debates, condemning so-called girlboss feminism and applauding the emancipation of sex workers. While some may praise Agatha's fulfilment of a traditionally masculine position as a corporate leader, Mozley shows that by entering this system Agatha becomes corrupted and even directly harms other women by threatening their livelihoods. While at first sight Agatha may be classified under the buzz label 'strong female character', she has no intention of further promoting female empowerment. Agatha only uses feminist talking points to push her own agenda: "From my perspective, as a woman concerned about the safety of other women, I wonder about trafficking. Sex trafficking." (Mozley 112). She has no interest in the safety of sex workers, and is in fact actively hindering those who are working safely.

Yet in her addressing of the dark sides of corporate feminist tendencies, Mozley seems to rely on stereotypes once more and accidentally reverts into the trap of misogyny. Mozley's treatment of Agatha shows that criticising certain strands of feminism must be done with exceptional care, to avoid scoring an own goal. For obvious reasons, Agatha is clearly the antagonist in this novel, yet her identity as an ambitious woman who must necessarily be cold and conniving itches. As a character Agatha is completely despicable, but did she also have to be placed in that tiring category of cruel, frigid, successful women?

Much more multifaceted and unexpected are Agatha's counterparts, Precious and Tabitha. They are not defined by their occupation: they have sex to secure their livelihoods, but they are also curious about the world, with their conversations ranging from Elizabethan England to ownership over one's own image in an online world. Central to Precious' and Tabitha's portrayal as sex workers is empowerment. This is evident from Precious' explanation of her early relationship to sex: "Sometimes the sex was wonderful. Sometimes the sex was disappointing. But she always felt in control" (Mozley 66). The women work in a brothel, not controlled by pimps, where they are well-protected by guards. And from their humorous jabs at each other it is clear that these are women who are not to be pitied, as they are exactly where they want to be. Mozley particularly excels at portraying the love between Precious and Tabitha, showing what can be gained from mutual support between women.

Mozley's clean, straightforward prose rapidly moves the story towards the inevitable clash between the different but interconnected worlds of her characters. The characters are painted with short, straight brushstrokes that effectively sketch out the different perspectives the reader is asked to engage with. Although the moral fault lines in the novel are evident, Mozley's language notably does not judge her characters. While Mozley tells us how her characters think and feel, we are not told directly how we are supposed to feel about them. Instead, it is primarily through the characters' dialogue, which is filled with subtle humour and irony that is apparently lost on its speakers, that the reader is guided towards a judgment of their worldviews and motivations. It seems that Mozley wants to let each of her characters speak for themselves and make their case, and by showing their true colours they will inevitably lead us to form our moral judgment.

With the novel's engagement with the issues of social class, feminism, empowerment, and morality necessarily comes the question of whether Mozley might be trying to do too much with *Hot Stew*. Mozley is clearly aware of the prominent debates of contemporary society, and has the intellectual and lyrical ability to thoughtfully engage with them in a manner that is filled with sympathy for her characters that exist on society's fringes. Furthermore, as an author trying to portray twenty-first century Soho, she cannot ignore the varied lives of its inhabitants and the forces that may threaten them. Yet with the six perspectives we are introduced to throughout the novel, even a skilled author like Mozley may struggle to fully excavate and develop each of their struggles. The story of struggling queer actor Lorenzo, for example, could have provided a stronger exploration of masculinity, but although he is granted his own chapters, his role remains mostly that of an extra who casually connects other characters through dinner dates and the like. It seems that Mozley's 'stew' might thus have benefited from having fewer ingredients to truly do justice to each of them.

Ultimately, *Hot Stew* is a clever social novel that makes Mozley's Soho feel like its own rich world. The many issues it raises intersect like streets on a map, showing that although each of the characters is vastly different, their lives are necessarily connected through geographical proximity. The novel's obvious engagement with modern societal debates perhaps does not make exceptionally innovative points, but the figures with which Mozley personifies them, particularly Precious and Tabitha, are bound to evoke our empathy, and stay with us. They add a love and sympathy so strong that they are able to shine right through the darkness and grime of Soho.

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Dylan Thomas' Classic 'Play for Voices' has a New Sheen

Under Milk Wood Review

By Acacia Caven

Karl Johnson and Michael Sheen in *Under Milk Wood*

The National Theatre's most recent adaptation of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood* blends old with new in an emotional navigation through the town of Llareggub (try it backwards) and its inhabitants. Repackaged by Siân Owen, Thomas' (arguably over-adapted) 1954 text is given new life through the addition of a framing story that situates the action in a small care home, somewhere in Wales. Directed by the award-winning Lyndsey Turner, a text originally written for radio is infused with new depth and emotion as we watch a struggling alcoholic writer – played by Michael Sheen – attempt to trigger his demented father's memories.

Drawing out the humour from the mad-cap, rambling lyricism of Thomas' original one act 'play for voices', Sheen is electric. His presence is intense and bewildering – he bursts onto the in-the-round stage, centres himself, and remains there for the rest of the performance. Displaying no direct influence from the actors that read the iconic poetry before him, Sheen plays Owain Jenkins as angry, heartbroken and wild with excitement – all at the same time. He conjures various characters, lives and memories for his father, also Mr Jenkins (Karl Johnson), in a desperate attempt to make him remember himself. This new reworking does more for Thomas' words than many before – excluding, perhaps, Keith Allen's 2015 film adaptation – in regard to making it accessible to a modern audience. One example is the choice to give the omniscient narrative presence, 'First voice,' a tangible identity and purpose through Sheen. In this way, the added framing narrative contextualises the play, allowing differences across time and space to add to, rather than detract from, the overall message. While the lifestyle of Llareggub and the words of Dylan Thomas may be considered markers of Welsh culture, many elements are perhaps less relatable in the modern day. However, in this performance, even Thomas' (already beloved) poetry seems rejuvenated, and is given immediacy and freshness by Sheen, who conjures the words as if he were Thomas himself.

It is a mesmerising return to live performances for the National. Staged in the Olivier – which has been reconfigured since its closure in 2020 – to a socially distanced skeleton audience (only 500 in a 1,129 -capacity theatre), the casting choices are especially poignant in the wake of the pandemic. After a year of loss, and the inequal impact of the pandemic on care homes in the UK, Turner brings together an aging, yet undeniably spritely, 14-person ensemble company including Karl Johnson, Siân Phillips and Alan David. When entering the auditorium, one sees a stage full of furniture, covered in white sheets. A reminder of

how long the theatre has sat unused. The effects of the last two years are not ignored in the production, rather, they are carefully acknowledged. The play builds on feelings of melancholy and nostalgia, balanced by Thomas' dry wit and bizarre humour – for example, the delightful interactions between Mr and Mrs Pugh (played by Alan David and Cleo Sylvestre, respectively) – but, even further, the in-the-round staging displays the two-meter distancing between players (all except the father-son duo) without centralising it. The realities of the pandemic are unavoidable in live performance, yet the production is so engrossing, so fluid, that even such restrictions seem intentional and add depth.

Emphasised by Owen's framing script, the play highlights themes from Thomas' original work; age, death, memory and alcoholism are central. With their wavering Welsh accents and shuffling steps, juxtaposed against equally sharp movements when needed, the elderly players evoke pathos from the audience, and the slow pace matches the dream-state that we seem to be inhabiting. The stilted (in)action of the script – its changing scenes and drifting, shifting focus – which designates *Under Milk Wood* as a text to be heard, rather than seen, is still noticeable. Often, it feels tedious, and the audience yearns for some deeper emotional connection, some more information, on any of the inhabitants of Llareggub. Yet, these instincts are mediated by the framing script. We are accompanied on our journey by Sheen and Johnson, and their emotional connection, their character arcs and actions, give Thomas' words an emotional tangibility that has arguably been lacking in previous live renditions. The lines between 'reality' and 'memory' blur, not just for Old Mr Jenkins, but also for the audience, and the characters – who occasionally forget to switch their slippers for heels, their hairnets for hats.

The intentionality of such actions is emphasised by the minimalism of the stage itself. When in the care home, there is a semblance of normality: well-lit, waiting room aesthetics, filled with Zimmer frames and knitting needles, but once we enter Llareggub the set is stripped bare – lit only by a single red light that brightens and dims depending on the tone and size of the scene and its players. Part of the beauty is that, aside from costumes, the thread of the care home is carried through the play by the opening scene props being repurposed throughout the show; "Nogood Boyo goes out in // the dinghy Zanzibar" exclaims Sheen, and we see Nogood Boyo paddle past in a laundry bin with 'Zanzibar' written on a piece of paper stuck to the side (*Under Milk Wood* 1.2). The lines between reality and fantasy, intention and chance, are constantly in flux as they blur and bend to fit Thomas' – no Turner's – no Sheen's, narrative.

Overall, the company has pulled off an incredibly complex performance. The costume changes, repeated exits and entrances, multiple characters per performer, and constant rotation of props – in combination with Thomas' tongue-twisting poetry – make its successes even more powerful. Admittedly, it is a little jarring at first, the switch from Siân Owen's contemporary, 'realistic', language of the care home to a script that is written to be read off a page, not learnt by rote. Especially a script so detailed and full of rich imagery and poetic license as *Under Milk Wood*. However, Sheen carries all the gravitas of a ringmaster, and we are soon drawn in and guided through the complexities of both language and multiplicity through his centring presence. The relationship between Old Mr Jenkins (Johnson) and his son (Sheen) is really the defining emotional thread of the play. Love, forgiveness, humanity: all correlate through and under their relationship arc and the framing narrative that consecrates it.

"It all gets jumbled – stuff from now and things from then, things from before," says Kezrena James as Kelly when Owain Jenkins first realises his father doesn't recognise him (Thomas and Owen 1.1). That concept is drawn through and unifies the two realities that we simultaneously inhabit – certain elements of the relationships within the care home that are established in the opening scene are carried through, and thread together the different vignettes and characters we encounter. Although, at times, it feels as though they themselves don't understand what they're doing, any confusion is facilitated by their positioning as patients of care. The performance is reminiscent of Suzanne Osten's 2006 film, *Well-*

kåmm to Verona, with its intangibility, ethereal lighting, multiple, changing uses for both people and props, and dreamlike (sometimes nightmare-like) presentation; all contextualising this as the elder Jenkins' reality, therefore, a reality filtered by dementia. In this sense, even the extensive running time seems intentional – just under two hours, the play begins to drag in the last thirty minutes. The original 'loose ends' from the beginning of the performance (so to speak) are tied up in a delightfully nightmarish kiss scene, where Johnson faces his character's tormentors from childhood and seems to be about to break down, before Sheen retakes the tiller and rescues him from drowning in memory. To continue seems pointless in a way.

But Turner does fantastically present the lives that we watch unfold as a community that is salty, sultry, and swashbuckling – in memory – and we feel a tenderness for the characters that is encouraged by Thomas' language. For all their predispositions towards being caricatures, being performed by older thespians gives them a nostalgic tendency, and we recognise something of ourselves, of the human condition, in them and their roles. Any restlessness in the audience is quelled when we see "blind Captain Cat" (Anthony O'Donnell) meet his one true sea love, Rosie Probert, in his dreams. Here, the core messages of love, forgiveness and memory are reminded to the viewers. These notions circulate and solidify around Old Mr Jenkins. Temporality ceases to exist – at one point Karl Johnson seems to be simultaneously Mr Jenkins in the present, Mr Jenkins in the past, and his father in the past. We are reminded of the opening scene, the nightmare scene: Johnson alone on a darkened stage with swirling lights and disembodied voices around him. This, Turner tells us, is his (Mr Jenkins') reality. When he is the Reverend Eli Jenkins, he is lucid and concise, but when he is himself, Dickie Jenkins (by extension, Old Mr Jenkins), everything is seemingly chaos. Time has no purpose – just like for Lord Cut-glass in his kitchen of clocks – lives overlap and run into one another; we are all connected.

In this, as in much else of the play, Sheen is the crowning glory. At one point concurrently Cherry Owens, Owain Jenkins, (Dylan Thomas) and Reverend Eli Jenkins' father too, he and Turner take what was originally a humorous thread in the play – the alcoholism and debauchery that Thomas so enjoyed belittling – and present it as a, if not *the*, problem. Sheen's characters intersect through time and space in the dream state he has created for his father, and we see that alcohol problems are central to their estrangements and failures. "Poor Dad, to die of drink and agriculture" (*Under Milk Wood* 1.2), says Johnson pointedly, before leaving Sheen alone on a darkened stage, with only the raucous sounds of a ghostly bar to accompany him. It is, of course, a nod to the life of Thomas himself, and a little on the nose perhaps – but not badly done, if only because it uses the words of Thomas himself.

And it is undeniable that it is Thomas' words, the text behind the performance, that makes this play a success. In every rendition of *Under Milk Wood* – be it film, radio, text, or play, it is the language that makes it so enthralling. That too, the National has pushed further in this performance. One must appreciate the restraint demonstrated when it comes to additional diegetic sound; some Bach for Organ Morgan, some sound effects of birds and bells to establish the spring season, some overlayed voices to really enhance the ghostly element of certain scenes. And, with 13 of the 14-strong-ensemble being Welsh, every word feels authentic. There is no stumbling over alliteration, no awkwardness around the onomatopoeia. Thomas' poetry sings out in every line – and if the audience is not awed by that, the memory it takes to learn such lines is awe-inspiring enough.

Overall, what the National seems to be going for in this play is honest, simple, acting, with a beautiful script and a powerful, poignant cast. There is a simplicity to the production that allows the focus to remain on the text, its delivery, and the messages it contains. Exploring memory, community and interconnected lives, The National Theatre's first play since theatres were allowed to reopen pays homage to Britain's elderly and gives new life to an iconic text.

Under Milk Wood

Performed at: The Olivier, National Theatre

Capacity: 1,129 socially distanced to 500

Opened: June 23, 2021, Running to July 24.

Running time: 1 HOUR, 50 MIN.

Production: A National Theatre presentation of a play in one act by Dylan Thomas, additional material by Siân Owen.

Crew: Directed by Lyndsey Turner; Sets and costumes, Merle Hensel; Lighting, Tim Lutkin; Sound, Donato Wharton; Movement, Imogen Knight; Production Stage Manager, Shane Thom.

Cast: Michael Sheen, Karl Johnson, Susan Brown, Ifan Huw Dafydd, Gillian Elisa, Michael Elwyn, Kezrena James, Andrew Macbean, Lee Mengo, Gaynor Morgan Rees, Anthony O'Donnell, Siân Phillips, Cleo Sylvestre.

Music By: Edward Rhys-Harry.

Acacia Caven is a current student of the MA Literature Today at Utrecht University. Born in Zimbabwe and raised in the UK, Acacia provides a personal, international perspective on literary topics. Her experience as Editor-in-Chief of *Expanded Field* has helped her develop an understanding and critical eye for creative writing in many forms, developed further in her position as an Assistant Literary Agent for African authors. Her recent work centers around African magical realism and post-colonial voices.

Butterflies

Creative Piece

By Sven Verouden

It smells like gasoline in the mall. I'm sitting in a tightly packed coffee chain, reading the book I'm currently devouring, ignoring the scent of possible danger. I'm thinking that my last day in the city might very well be my last day in my body too. There's a certain poetry in being splattered all over the shiny floor, which has memorized my footsteps after all these years.

I close my book because I am not enjoying it as much as I should, the pretty words lingering in the air rather than finding a home in my mind. There's too much noise. I've never been able to switch off sounds like a nightlamp before bed. Why are people always so loud? I'm hearing too many voices, when there's just one I want to hear right now, and that voice belongs to Deborah Levy.

Apparently, she is quite the writer. I had not heard of her, but the royal blue caught my attention and sank its teeth into my bank account. It's a memoir – the first of three, actually. A trilogy of autobiography. I knew it was good when I opened my laptop and started writing too. I want writing to inspire me, to unleash the butterflies in my stomach that turn to ink when they escape my fingertips, to warm up my body by several degrees like the afternoon sun through a dusty window. Most of all, I want writing to remind me that I am alive.

In the past months, there have been few of these reminders. Two, to be exact. The first happened in a rectangular room at a round table where I shared a poem that had come to me the night before. While I was reading the words out loud, my heart was beating and my blood was pumping and my lips were moving and my soul was dancing. I was holding invisible hands with the poets in the room, closing the circle of salt we had spilt. I felt powerful and vulnerable at the same time. It was glorious.

In that moment, I forgot to feel alone. I knew the loneliness might twist tightly around my body once I had taken off my shoes and locked the door behind me later that afternoon, but right then and there, at the round table in the rectangular room, performing my own writing, I remembered how to feel warm again. Sometimes it's not enough to read and write and watch.

The second reminder hits me while I'm sitting in the busy coffee chain, which smells like gasoline and tastes like caramel. My legs are folded like an accordion underneath the small table, my bag clamped between my ankles because it's a Sunday afternoon. The coffee is too sweet and the chair is slightly uncomfortable and the couple next to me is glaring intensely and the stream of people with shopping bags and thundering stories is passing me by and by and by and

Why can it never be quiet in the city? I wish I could be the kind of person who brings a book to a café and orders a chai latte and takes tiny sips and slowly turns page after page, utterly undisturbed by the world around them. I've tried, many times. Armored with a pair of heels on my feet and a pair of sunglasses on my nose, I close the tinkling doors and set up my desk of Literary Leisure in the most beauti-

ful corner that is not yet occupied.

Only to be reminded that the truths I dream up are more beautiful than the truths I live out. It usually takes about five minutes for my bubble to burst and for my feet to touch the ground again. Whether the music is playing too loudly, or the people around me are talking too intensely, or the place is too hot, too small, too expensive, too ugly, I finish my coffee, close my book, and leave.

Each time I close the door behind me, the sad smell of defeat makes me long for the garden I grew up in. I want to smell jasmine instead, the pretty white flowers that grew above my head in fragrant vines late in summer, when I used to read never-ending piles of books with my father's mother sitting next to me, who would flip through her magazines or her thick novels she picked up from the library. We kept each other company on the wooden bench that was almost comfortable, sipping tea in perfect silence until my father came home. Now she's gone and I only have a balcony to read on. Perhaps I should grow jasmine.

I am only growing annoyed now. It's getting harder to ignore the alarmingly sweet scent of benzene, to ward off the buzzing voices of strangers around me. I should not be surprised. Did I really think I could peacefully read my way through the hour I had to kill?

I check the time. 27 minutes before Van-Thi arrives, before the two of us celebrate my last day in Utrecht. I thought I would be sad. I'm not. When I took the bus this morning, the city no longer felt like home. Perhaps home is where your reading chair is waiting for you to melt into the fabric, where your laptop is waiting for you to fill a blank page with poetry, where most of all you can be utterly undisturbed.

Sven Verouden (22) is currently finishing a research master in Comparative Literature at Utrecht University. While mainly invested in transgender studies and creative writing, Sven also enjoys thrift stores, period dramas and sharing too many pictures on Instagram.

Malibu Rising

A Steady Cocktail of Booze, Surfing, and Family Tragedy

By Shaila Kumaradas

Slip off your shoes and dip your toes in the water. Can you feel the faint ocean breeze and the droplets splashing against your cheeks as the sound of four surfboards hitting the water echoes in the distance? If you can, you've found the home of the Riva siblings. I hope you enjoy your stay.

It is easy to explain the appeal of *Malibu Rising*. It has a beachy, dreamlike cover perfectly suited to those late summer nights when you crave a novel somewhere between the lines of "Young Adult" and "Adult" fiction. The stamp across the front, "Bestselling Author of *Daisy Jones and the Six*" carries the promise of entrancing characters and language that reshapes your thoughts. Or even simply the name, Taylor Jenkins Reid, is one that is swiftly becoming a staple on the shelves of contemporary fiction and thus a necessity for any book lover to have read. Not to mention the praise and the glowing reviews surrounding the writer and the title.

But what really stuck out to me above all else was the blurb and the critics' promise of a character-driven story: its web of complex parental relationships, and of lost family. Did it live up to this promise? Yes, for the most part. Was I disappointed by its execution? Perhaps.

Reid, as she displays in *Daisy Jones and the Six*, knows how to give characters a strong voice – to the extent that at some point, without realising it, you've stopped seeing them as characters. Rather, they are people that you meet on a page, that just happen to be crafted by ink.

On the surface, *Malibu Rising* delivers what it promises. The core of the story is the Riva family, and each individual plotline adds a small puzzle piece to the overall enigma of their lives. Mick and June Riva, the young, struggling parents of the four protagonists, are presented in flashbacks over the course of many years, ranging from 1956 to 1981. We are also offered glimpses straying far further back than this timeframe, with snippets of June and Mick's younger years, including their childhood dreams.

As teenagers, Mick and June play out a budding love story that is not particularly convincing (nor is it meant to be). Reid shows us a prequel to their doomed love and the slow, aching deterioration that follows. We are led to hope for an amicable separation before their lives implode, but that is not how these stories go, especially not in the worlds that Reid creates. Mick, the increasingly famous rockstar (and father when he is reminded of it), has one affair after the next and is barely able to keep track of them himself. He and June divorce twice, the second separation permanent and the cause of June's downward spiral. In his absence, June's only moments of intimacy are with the bottles she downs; she never gives a thought to any man except her divorced husband.

In the present day, the perspective shifts between each of their four children. Nina: tall, responsible, and blessed with a supermodel-like appearance, is the anchor holding her family and the narrative afloat. Jay is a professional surfer: lanky and handsome. Hud is short, stocky, and both the inverse of

and a mirror to his brother Jay. And Kit is the youngest, outspoken but struggling in Nina's shadow. Reid provides a strong setup, creating characters who are not easily forgotten. But for a character-driven plot, only Nina seems to truly carry the story.

Nina, the eldest Riva child who eventually acts *in loco parentis* for her three siblings, helps others before helping herself, which has led to her never "hav[ing] lived a single day for [her]self," as her best friend Tarine tells her (232). Nina's more emotionally charged scenes make up for the superficial moments in which various rock stars' and celebrities' lives are briefly explored, moments which rather than giving a meaningful insight into their lives often seem quite vacuous. The party described in the second half of the novel feels somewhat disconnected from the significance of the Riva family dynamic. The most impactful scenes in the novel revolve around Nina's joys and suffering. We feel a sense of dread creeping in through the windowpanes as young Nina stops resisting her father's efforts to reconcile with her after his first affair:

> She smiled just the tiniest bit in her lavender dress, so he lifted her up into his arms and ran with her through the parking lot.
>
> "Nina, my Nina! Cuter than a ballerina!" he sang to her, and when he put her down, she was laughing. (109)

She forgives him in her youth, not yet having learned that he hasn't changed and never will. And it is these moments of hope, right before they are lost, that strike a chord in the reader. Beside this, the confrontation between the brothers Jay and Hud seems somewhat superficial; their fight over Hud's involvement with Jay's ex-girlfriend doesn't carry the same weight as Nina's struggles. Jay and Hud possess little personality besides their fiery confrontation, which predictably ends in them reconciling as they are bonded in brotherhood.

Kit's character is allowed slightly more depth, as the narrative conveys her rethinking her sexuality and moving out of her comfort zone. The novel hints at her interests and passions such as surfing, yet these aren't explored in depth beyond a few lines. Other avenues of Kit's character development are left unfortunately unexplored. She leaves no lasting impression when compared to Nina, inadvertently leading the reader to the exact conclusion that Kit seeks to break away from: Kit lives in Nina's shadow, both throughout the book and in the reader's mind.

The part of the story that moved (and frustrated) me the most were the flashback scenes to Mick and June Riva's tumultuous beginnings and marriage, and the start of their family. The instant infatuation, while being an overly familiar literary trope, works in the sense that we see why Mick and June sought each other out. They were two young adults breaking free from their past lives and primed to fall in love.

Mick and June are given abundant chapters in which their relationship flourishes and then swiftly disintegrates. Their relationship is the tragedy and defining factor of June's life. She is gentle and caring, a kind mother to her children until she eventually falls victim to alcoholism. She is a sympathetic character in her simple wish for a loving husband. But this wish that she so dearly clings to is the only one which seems to matter to her. She has no aspirations outside of her relationship with Mick and it is disheartening to see her yearning for his return, particularly after their second divorce, after his child support ends and he is nowhere to be found.

In her portrayal of June, Reid paints the tragedy of alcoholism and its crippling effects on a family. At first, June is a functional alcoholic, one who "still kept her charm and wits about her [and] got the kids to school on time" (132). But soon, her addiction becomes apparent to all of her children as she becomes increasingly unstable. The problem that arises here does not lie in the depiction of June's alcoholism; rather, it lies in its cause. June's life revolves around her husband. Her alcoholism is a direct result of the pain Mick has caused her. And ultimately, she dies in the bathtub of the home he bought her. Her children keep swimming, keep surfing, but she drowns – never truly recovering from her husband's betrayal.

But a woman is more than her husband, and I wonder, why couldn't June have been *more* than Mick? His first affair was shocking to the Riva family,

the greatest betrayal of all. But what about the second, the third, or the tenth betrayal? His disloyalty wasn't a phase. If anything, in the case of Mick Riva, disloyalty is his most prominent character trait. He is, in many ways, a cardboard cut-out of the charming, adulterous, neglectful husband. For the reader, his act gets old quite quickly. Yet it continues for the remainder of the novel.

"Family histories repeat" Reid reminds us, as Mick mirrors his own father's actions (191). He knows that he will never change, even for his children – *especially* not for his children. He is sorry, but in the end, he simply does not care enough. The Riva children, in unexpected ways, echo their parents' actions. Hud accidentally impregnates his secret girlfriend, Ashley, just like Mick did to Hud's biological mother, Carol. Nina reconciles with her husband Brandon after he has left her for another woman, just as June once did. Hud and Nina each break the pattern of their parents, however, with Hud vowing to always stand by his child and Nina breaking things off with Brandon for good. You cannot help but root for the Riva children, as they lose their way and then find their footing once again.

The recycling of the stories throughout the Riva generations both strengthens the narrative by showing the cyclical nature of family history and hinders it from offering something new in the latter part of the story. But what sustains the novel throughout is the way Reid builds the characters' world. Reid knows how to sculpt a scene, as she has proven to readers in her previous novels. *Malibu Rising* is no different. *Malibu Rising* is a strikingly vivid narrative, destined to one day capture the screen of cinema. Reid's world unfolds in your mind like a pop-up book or a Hollywood scene, so visual that I could describe to you the sight of the Riva cottage tucked away by the water, or the industrial lines of Nina and Brandon's house which never crossed the threshold into a home. The world she creates sits freshly in the reader's mind; the descriptions are poignant without ever being overdone. Pieces of Malibu from all generations are woven through the text: "Back then, Malibu was a rural fishing town with only one traffic signal. It was quiet, crawling inland by way of narrow winding roads through the mountains. But the town was coming into its adolescence..." (31).

The setting greatly shapes the novel and the characterisation of each Riva. For Jay, Hud and Kit, home lies in the cottage by the water. It resides in their shared love of surfing and their connection to the ever-present ocean, one of the most powerful bonds depicted in *Malibu Rising*. For Nina, the idea of home is much more ambiguous. Her world is stretched between the cottage, which her father bought, her mother's restaurant, *Riva's Seafood*, and the house Brandon bought her. But her heart takes her elsewhere, to the beaches of Portugal. The unfamiliarity of this new place is a welcome highlight of the narrative – I only wish there could have been more startling turns away from the cycle of events repeated and recycled across each generation of Rivas.

Shaila Kumaradas is currently doing the MA Literature Today at Utrecht University. She is currently an intern at Amsterdam-based publisher Versal and is writing her thesis about marginalisation in Malaysia during WWII. Shaila is looking forward to finishing her master's degree in January and pursuing a career in writing and editing.

Memory in the Poetry of Leontia Flynn and Mark Doty

By Evelien Vermeulen

Mark Doty's poem "Lost in the Stars" provides an elegiac retelling of a musical evening in 1992, at the height of the AIDS crisis. In it, the speaker reflects on the idea of memory, and what it means to remember loved ones who have passed. Leontia Flynn's 'Letter to Friends' explores different ways to remember the past, before turning to ponder the future. Both poems seem to focus on shared experiences, on shared memories that shape communities, whether it be gay men during the AIDS crisis (Doty), or Belfast right after the Troubles (Flynn). This essay explores the theme of memory in these poems, and how this theme is emphasized through the form of each poem.

> *While it is not explicitly mentioned, the time in which Doty wrote this places it directly in the context of the AIDS crisis of the late twentieth century*

I will first study Mark Doty's poem "Lost in the Stars". This poem describes a nightclub singer who reflects on life and the people in it. Doty's poetry makes extensive use of enjambment, with lines rarely ending in a full stop. Instead, sentences are cut up, creating the sense of one long, running thought that continues throughout each poem. Especially interesting to consider here are the stanza breaks. Doty's sentences do not end where stanzas do, the thought instead runs over to the next stanza. This creates a meandering effect, as sentiments are stretched across the space of the poem. This flow is interrupted, however, by the white space between stanzas. The physical emptiness of the space abruptly cuts the movement of the poem. In Doty's "Lost in the Stars", this results in a sense of stammering. It feels, and sounds, as if the poet is trying to find the right word to continue on, as though caught up in emotion. Consider the white space between the fifth and sixth stanza:

> Davíd, who'd said our town
>
> averaged that year a funeral a week,
>
>
> did a performance piece
>
> about the unreliability of language.
> (Doty, *Source* 11)

The emotional reality of the last line of the fifth stanza seems to leave the poet at a loss for words, and forces him to take a break before continuing. Doty himself reflects on the absence of words in the face of grief, arguing that "elegy needs to fumble its way toward what sense it can make" (Doty, "Can Poetry"). The stanza breaks in "Lost in the Stars" parallel this sentiment, as they leave the poet struggling to express himself, while he tries to remember his lost friends. While it is not explicitly mentioned, the time in which Doty wrote this places it directly in the context of the AIDS crisis of the late twentieth century, adding an intense layer of interpretation: the "lost" friends here are presumably those lost to the AIDS

pandemic. The sixth stanza further presents one of the few occasions in which a stanza break does end a sentence: "It was 1992 / and we were powerless." (Doty, *Source* 11). Here, the full stop at the end of the line places emphasis on the word "powerless", which alerts the reader to the severity of the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, the use of "we" conveys the community that the poet is a part of, creating a feeling of universal struggle, as opposed to a personal struggle. According to Doty, the AIDS crisis placed an emphasis on bodies as "a location of instability", and of "so much danger and uncertainty" (Hennessey 83). Doty emulates this focus on the precarious male body in "Lost in the Stars", by describing the physical effect of the illness on the body. He mentions patients who were "not well enough / to come", and patients "who'd been helped to their metal chairs, / canes leaning against them" (Doty, *Source* 12). Another point of focus on the body is the figure of the drag queen, who in her dark attire provides a stark physical contrast between her and the audience, who are dressed in more casual clothes:

> black glittery leotard, eyelashes
>
> spiking from kohl-rimmed, huge
>
>
> black eyes, bouffant hard
>
> and black, high thick heels
>
> (Doty, *Source* 11)

The poet's listing of the drag queen's physical attire results in the feeling of a sense of excess: the glitter, the kohl liner, the excessive hairspray. It is evident that the drag queen is very much over the top compared to the rest of the crowd. The drag queen fits in with the idea of Camp, as described by Susan Sontag (1961). Sontag notes that Camp "is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (275). The excess of the drag queen makes her an otherworldly figure compared to the other bodies in the room. However, the poet describes that even the drag queen is subject to fragility: "the limits of flesh / resisted her ambitions" (Doty, *Source* 12).

These references to fragile bodies, specifically fragile male bodies, emphasize the feeling of collectiveness. These bodies are all affected by the same horrible disease, and those not physically ill are indirectly affected through their relationships with those who are. As Judith Butler argues, the fact that these bodies are all fragile, implies that the body is "constitutively social and interdependent" (31), thus creating a sense of community. This is the key to memory for Doty, who expresses that poetry, for him, involves a shift from personal emotions to shared ones (Doty, "Can Poetry"). In "Lost in the Stars", this shift occurs multiple times, for example in the instance above, though it is perhaps most obvious from the central question in the poem. The poet asks himself "How will I remember them?", but later reflects on a shared memory: "How will we remember you?" (Doty, *Source* 13-14). An answer, perhaps, to this question, presents itself in the final section of the poem. Its form is vastly different from the rest of the poem, as it is prose rather than poetry, and is printed in italics. Thus, the form is a radical departure from that of the section before it, but its content does suggest a continuation. It is described that a saucepan, a physical object, provides the speaker with a memory of Billy, who is confirmed to have died. It is not confirmed, however, that physical remembrance is the only form of memory, as the speaker reveals that Peter, another friend of Billy's, holds on to the exasperation he often felt around Billy, thus suggesting that memory also exists in the emotional.

Leontia Flynn's 'Letter to Friends' is an epistolary poem, as is evident from its title. The letter in question is seemingly addressed to the poet's friends. However, the intended audience for this poem is perhaps more ambiguous than it might seem: a specific addressee is never explicitly named. The only idea of an addressee that the reader receives is Flynn's constant use of "we", confirming a relationship between herself and some other person, or multiple persons, who remain unnamed throughout the poem. Rather than confirming the identity of this "we", Flynn seems to play with this personal pronoun, so that it can be applied to a larger community. Consider, for example, the ninth stanza of the poem. The poet has been summing up different physical embodiments of her

memories, and here she paints her audience a picture: "Here we are grinning up the Empire State" (Flynn 37). While it is possible that this is a picture of the poet and a friend on the Empire State Building, it is interesting to consider the possibility of the "we" in this instance being the poet amidst the dense crowd of tourists, which reflects the fact that people share experiences, sometimes without even knowing it. Flynn's use of "we" therefore elicits a wider meaning of the word. This wider meaning is further explored in parts two and three of the poem, as Flynn moves from her personal world of pictures and old train tickets as physical memories, to the broader, more emotional memories that Belfast holds. Here, the word "we" is replaced with Belfast. Like Doty, Flynn's perspective shifts from personal to collective memory: "Belfast, long the blight / and blot on lives has now brought to an end / or several ends, it's grim traumatic fight" (Flynn 41). As Neal Alexander states, "many recent Northern Irish poems treat the idea of an achieved peace with marked irony and skepticism. They typically employ complex or distorted temporalities, bringing past, present and future into new relations with one another" (60). This presentation of "distorted temporalities" is exactly what happens in 'Letter to Friends', as the lines between the individual and the collective are blurred.

> *Both poems seem to focus on shared experiences, on shared memories that shape communities, whether it be gay men during the AIDS crisis (Doty), or Belfast right after the Troubles (Flynn). This essay explores the theme of memory in these poems, and how this theme is emphasized through the form of each poem.*

Flynn further creates ambiguity about the addressee of her poem through her use of language. Throughout the poem, she plays with the syntax and rhythm of speech. This is perhaps most evident in the second part of the poem, in the following lines: "(I love the way our students talk today), / but we were going to need, like, some employment" (Flynn 39). Here, the poet emulates the way her students speak. This creates a chatty tone, as if the poet is conversing with the reader, which engages the audience, further blurring the line between the addressee and the reader.

Flynn emphasizes the importance of material memories, especially in the first part of the poem. Her descriptions of "artefacts that now seem relics from some ancient bureau" (Flynn 36) express how physical objects can make a person relive certain memories. From these first few stanzas, the poet's longing for the past becomes evident. For example, the mention of old tickets for "flights not booked online / but in an *actual travel agent*" seems to reflect that the poet misses the times in which flights could only be booked through a travel agent (Flynn 36). Later, the poet reflects on the need to hold on to the past: "my corny slob's / memory-hoard lets me now retrace a day / ten years ago" (Flynn 37). Interestingly, Flynn does tend to end her stanzas on a full stop, as opposed to Doty. Rather than one flowing thought, her stanzas feel more finite, creating a more static feeling to the poem. This makes the poem seem more restricted than the ones by Doty. However, there are a few instances in which the end of the stanza cuts off a sentence and continues it in the next, thus creating a similar flow to Doty's poem, for example in: "crouched in the sweaty damp / of that old bedsit, why *stuff mattered* – for // this box of doodles, bills, old cards and prints" (Flynn 38). Here, the enjambment places emphasis on "why *stuff mattered*", reflecting the importance that Flynn finds in memorabilia. Flynn does, however, find other ways to connect her stanzas. Whereas Doty's poem is in free verse, and barely makes use of rhyme, Flynn's 'Letter to Friends' is quite explicit in its rhyme scheme. Each stanza has ten lines, with an ABABCDECDE rhyme scheme that stays consistent throughout the entirety of the poem. Due to the enjambment, however, it is quite difficult to make out the rhyme scheme upon the first reading. It thus seems that Flynn uses a rhyme scheme not to attract attention to her poem's form, but to the particular words that she rhymes. In the first stanza of the first section, she strikingly rhymes "friend" with "end". The line between these two words implies the passing of

time, in “when the last millennium rolled over”. The emphasis on time connects the two rhymes: it implies that friendships end over time. The mention of “the distance of the screen” encapsulates the growing distance between old friends as friendships fall apart. This is even explained in the stanza when it is stated that: “Things carried on”, signifying that no matter what happens, time goes on. The rhyme scheme becomes pivotal to the idea of remembrance, as the poet struggles to remember details of the past: “What happened in between, / those and these days?” Similar to the poetry of Doty, Flynn places focus on a shared memory here, evident from the use of “we” in “Were we, perhaps, surprised / -and are we still?” (Flynn 35). This particular stanza is a great example of Flynn’s use of rhyme to display memories.

Both of these two poems contain specifics in form and content that allow for a comparison between them regarding how they each deal with memory. Be it in a catastrophic pandemic or in a national conflict, both poems show that events such as these bring people together and allow for the existence of a collective memory. If anything, both poems are fascinating reflections on the past, and shall undoubtedly be the subject of many more studies as they themselves, over time, slowly become memories.

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WHAT IS EVEN REAL ANYMORE?

No One Is Talking about This by Patricia Lockwood

By Angelos Apallas

“More and more I begin to feel that the whole world is conscious” (Lockwood 207). These are some of the concluding words of Patricia Lockwood’s debut novel *No One Is Talking about This*, an abysmal trip into the cyber-world, documenting the foundation of being as it surfaces through lifelike glimpses of social media posts. Searching for meaning in a newfound digital reality, a female protagonist is found trapped in the stream of her own consciousness, striving to stitch the pieces of her own narrative together until one natural phenomenon shatters the digital shackles and grounds her back to reality.

The craftsmanship behind two of Lockwood’s poetry collections and the memoir “Priest Daddy” is employed in her newest book, a deconstructed narrative consisting of many unintelligible voices – puppets governed by higher technological powers. “Your work can flow into the shape that people make for you,” she told Slate in an interview in 2020, “or you can try to break that shape.”

The narrative of *No One Is Talking about This* unwinds by foregrounding a married woman in her late 30s who has gained a sense of importance due to random posts on social media. The story resembles Patricia Lockwood’s life, as she has been an active user of Twitter since 2011, producing social commentary or random, raunchy jokes that often go viral. Lockwood employs Twitter as a critical tool to conceive the “portal”, a multi-dimensional reality the reader might find themselves trapped inside, grasping for another post, another exit to breathe. This medium of communication—which is supposed to bring people closer—is constructed like a maze, a trial of the cyberworld to determine who will come out sane and who will remain entangled in its vast pathways. “That's what's so attractive about the internet,” Lockwood said in an interview with the Guardian, “you can exist there as a spirit in the void.”

Even the narrator seems perplexed at times, bowing down from their omniscience and handing over the reins to the new omnipotent interface. Part One of the novel roots the narrative and prepares the readers with intermixed narrators in a way that resembles the multiphase of voices on a social media platform, like a charming spell enchanting the readers to doze off and keep scrolling over the pages, looking for fulfillment. It’s a testament to the power of the author that she has managed to construct a narrative so diligent and seductive, the pages appearing like social media posts, always there to lure you inside. Since social media have become a tool in the hands of software developers, writers can now be perceived as puppeteers using stories as their arsenal to excavate or modify reality. Similarly, “novelists, in the portal, began to rise on a tide of peculiar energy. This was their moment. They were going to say goodbye to all of that!” (167).

The narrative led me to think of the 2020 Netflix documentary “The Social Dilemma”, which analyzes the increased gravity of social media over the last decade. It also explains how a precisely constructed algorithm is utilized to captivate users' attention by

triggering the dopamine production of neural pathways in our brain. Astonishing! A platform claiming to be free markets its interface so that the user is exposed to a slew of advertisements before they have access to the rest of the content. This can include specially designed posts, images and memes you didn't know you wanted to see, funny cat videos popping up just as you were about to get on with your life, or stimuli meticulously selected based on personal data analysis to keep you instigated, to keep you consuming. "If you're not paying for the product, you are the product" is mentioned throughout the documentary, a quote that renders the viewer powerless over their subconscious, yet avaricious over the use of social media platforms.

But what does this have to do with *No One Is Talking about This*? As aforementioned, the abuse of technology and social media are two of the novel's main themes, adding a dystopian aspect to its layers, even though in reality this is a scenario that could unravel over the following decades. But that is where Lockwood has managed to exploit an algorithm that has turned all of us into modern technological slaves and apply that to her novel. Every page is like an explosion of dopamine in the neural pathways of the reader; you can't stop flipping through the pages as you are devoured by a will to be exposed to another stimulus, to discover one more truth, to please your caffeine-induced, can't-go-to-sleep-without-playing-a-sitcom-in-the-background, existential angst.

The way Lockwood's novel mirrors a social media platform is thus one of the reasons why Lockwood's novel is so successfully written; you are unconsciously browsing through the pages just as you would unconsciously browse through posts. That is also why I think she drops some whimsical hints in the book, addressing the reader directly without compromising the stealthiness of her deviously constructed narrator, as if she's using them to deceptively taunt the reader further into their reading frenzy. "Keep reading a little longer" the narrator urges, "not totally against your will" (198).

Progressing towards Part Two of the book, the palpable question rising is that of how much power technology has over people and whether it has turned into an omnipotent being that has forced itself on humans.

> There was a robot in her sister's house that listened to them 24/7, filing their conversations away carefully in case they all murdered each other at some point. Those headlong months of words would be locked in a vault for eternity, sobbing on and on, 'what will we do,' 'what are we to do', underpinned everywhere with the baby's breathing and the blips of her machines, occasionally brightened by her sister throwing out little interrogations of the quotidian like, 'Alexa, how tall is Kevin Hart?' (173)

Technology has surpassed its basic function: it no longer simply provides assistance as it now methodically documents the degeneration of the human species; technology is the new master. Lockwood's characters feel lost and oblivious due to the reversal of the power dynamics between humanity and technology in the digital era; they are victims of their own progress. Technology is monitoring the evolution of human behavior instead of people monitoring the advent of technology.

The shift between humankind worshipping technology and blaming its existence for their own doom is relentless. On the one hand, characters – the social media sensation protagonist being one of them – are so immersed in this new reality that "it spoke of something deep in human beings, [of] how hard she had to pinch herself when she started to think of it all as a metaphor" (158), whereas at times of uncertainty they also express their gratitude towards it, stating "God, can you believe, that we had the technology?" (202).

The chilling ambivalence towards technology is on its own burdensome to deal with, but it also disorients the characters' navigation among real-life experiences.

> The fizzing black void that she saw – was it anything like the portal? Possibly. Both were dimensions where only one thing happened: you revised your understand-

ing of reality, all the while floating in a sea
of your own tears and piss (75).

What this quote expresses is what I was simultaneously troubled by while pacing through the book, pinpointing the concept of identity. We do not get characters with names, we just get their strife, their connections, their sublime struggles to alternate among realities and come to peace with that unsettling shift. I reckon one may not persevere through that perpetual alternation without their identity fading a tiny bit each time: "I've been this way so long, I don't know how to be anymore" (122).

Lockwood also omitted any names because she is not necessarily interested in who these characters are, but what they represent. Their voices and their experiences are sometimes tangled together exactly because of that omission, offering us an extra layer of graphic language to view the story from. Plus, this makes everything all the more universal. This isn't something just these fictional characters suffer from — you and I could be next.

The dark veil overshadowing the characters' lives is starting to be lifted during Part Two of the novel – though still not completely effaced. It is already mentioned several times in Part One that the protagonist's sister is pregnant, a detail surging in her stream of consciousness just like any other piece of information found in the portal. Little sparks of light blossom in the narrative, until the chaotic dormancy is disrupted, and things take a sharp turn. Her sister's baby is diagnosed with Proteus syndrome, a rare genetic condition that entails an overgrowth of skin, bones, and other tissues, meaning that it won't survive for long after it is born.

The vastness of posts, voices, and experiences finally interfuse into a single dimension; the birth of the baby is a glimpse of light that pulls everyone back to reality. Regardless of the grim atmosphere and the ominous circumstances foreshadowing the baby's death, it is actually the second part of the book that manages to reach sublimity.

But how is it that the idea of death sparks a ray of hope and warmth in the novel? It's simply because it reminds everyone that they have to live. It reminds everyone of the time they have wasted trifling over nonsense, over matters they never really had any control over. But most importantly because it is a natural phenomenon; it brings everyone back to reality; it untangles them from the initial anarchy of digital dissociation.

Time moves differently now; it is fast and violent. Yet in all its violence, it has grounded characters into appreciating its hypostasis. As the protagonist says in a moment of frenzy, "A minute means something to her, more than it means to us. We don't know how long she has – I can give them to her, I can give her my minutes." Then, almost angrily, "What was I doing with them before?" (171). The baby's imminent death inspires the woman's meditation of remorse. She has remorse for the moments she has lost, for the moments she didn't seize, for the moments she thought she was alive. In all its velocity, time offers the woman moments of stillness; that is how she reaches clarity.

"She wanted to stop people on the street and say, 'Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!'" (145). What is striking about this is locating the source of the protagonist's exasperation. She seems frustrated that people are ignorant of such genetic disorders that afflict pregnant women and their newborns. But what if that's just a glimpse of truth masking the foundation of her deepest qualms? As a linguistic item, "no one" both transcends as well as entails the "I." What she's more upset and remorseful about is that she herself was ignorant of such a phenomenon, that she did not use her platform to be vocal about it. She is guilty, just like everyone else.

Furthermore, the revelation of the baby's illness makes everyone aware of what it means to be alive. It reminds everyone of the identities they had before the portal, the significance of their forsaken individuality. "She only knows what it is to be herself" they keep repeating to each other in awe and admiration, as if the idea of idiosyncrasy is long lost in the portal (155). "The rest was about them and what they thought a brain and body ought to be able to do" (156). Shattering how an addiction can make you lose control over your own body, your own senses,

the way you assess and filter the world. The baby's confidence in the naturality of its own existence blesses the characters with the meditation of relying solely on one's own identity and being able to view the world through that lens; removing the self from the contamination of the social spectrum, from the labels attached to us by society, by social media platforms that drain us of our individuality.

What I can confidently say is that this book clenched me, haunted me, and turned me into a powerless observer of a grim, yet sublime story. I am particularly fascinated by books that knock me off my high horse of human vanity and remind me how feeble and vulnerable my nature is. When I read the book, it "did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did" (206); it was a dark but expiatory voyage into the unconscious, desperate in its own attempt to find meaning, hold onto it, make it make sense. But life doesn't always make sense, and Lockwood doesn't let you forget that.

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