REV UU

Highlighting new, critical voices in the literary space

AGAINST APATHY

Autumn 2023

Dear reader,

In 1963, James Baldwin shared in an interview that he was "terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart." Although Baldwin was specifically speaking of the legacy of racial segregation in the United States, his words began circulating again with newfound relevance in October 2023. The world is witnessing a genocide against Palestinian people, and we at RevUU are writing the introduction to the issue you're currently reading. It feels impossible not to comment on this matter.

While we recognize that the colonial occupation of Palestine has been ongoing for 75 years, and the ethnic cleansing and displacement of Palestinians from Israel for many decades, the current genocidal campaign in Gaza is particularly violent. At the time of writing, over 11,000 deaths have been reported across last month. Therefore, we have decided to situate the Autumn Issue of RevUU 2023, a magazine that aims to "highlight new, critical voices," in empathic opposition to apathy. After all, silence and a 'neutral' stance on Israeli settler colonialism results in complicity with the oppressor.

As a publication within Utrecht University, RevUU joins Utrecht in Solidarity with Palestine and Dutch Scholars for Palestine as they challenge the supposed 'neutrality' of academic institutions in the Netherlands.

After more than two weeks of silence, Utrecht University released a statement claiming that they "are a university, not a political institute" and thus will not take sides in a "conflict" (language that forgets power relations need to be (somewhat) equally distributed in order for something to classify as a conflict). Considering that Utrecht University maintains its affiliations with Israeli academic institutions, this neutrality is questionable.

Moreover, Utrecht University is undeniably political. From its colonial legacy - which is brilliantly outlined in the walking tour by Sporen van Slavernij in Utrecht - to unresolved issues of gender, class, race, and (dis)ability that continue to determine who gets to be a student and/or staff member in the university, politics lie at the heart of this particular institution as well as knowledge production and circulation in general. The mere question of what counts as 'research' (and subsequently receives funding) is political.

The university's initial silence and subsequent refusal to condemn colonial occupation is concerning. It reflects the overall apathy that we fear permeates the Netherlands and Europe more generally. Toward the end of October, the Netherlands abstained from the UN non-binding resolution calling for a ceasefire. Abstention is apathy. As a journal that publishes critical thinking, we speak out against apathy when our university and government refuses to do so, and, in a nod to Baldwin, call for a resuscitating of the heart.

Initially, we planned for the theme of this issue to be the (de)construction of "Identity." But as we started witnessing the horrors of this major historical event and, to a certain extent, the glimmer of hope that solidarity brings, we decided to change our theme.

It feels violent to have (any) platform but to ignore the ongoing displacement and genocide of the Palestinian people.

Further, a theme as equivocal and broad as identity runs the risk of being apathetic in itself. Is part of what drives this "conflict" the refusal of people to think critically and to step outside of pre-determined, oppressive identity categories? "Identity" would fail to capture the passion, devotion, and faith in literature's capacity to do *something* to and for the world that are inherent to all the reviews that are part of this issue - and that go beyond simply representing identity. At RevUU, we publish criticism in the first place because we *care*. And all of our reviewers care both capaciously and complexly, which becomes apparent in the meaningful and engaged positions taken up in their work.

We decided to start this issue off with what we call the "RevUU Book Club" section. This section features three different reviews on R.F. Kuang's controversial novel *Yellowface*. While these reviews engage with the same work, they explore different and sometimes even contradictory facets of it. After our Book Club, the other reviews are listed alphabetically by the reviewers' names. These reviews span a wide selection of novels published in the past year. Our publication process demonstrates a politics of care, as each review has received multiple rounds of collective feedback. At RevUU, we have steered our reviews toward publication together, as a community.

We - as editors-in-chief - would like to thank every member of our team for their hard work and valuable contributions. We would also like to thank Mia You for her guidance and support in shaping this edition.

We hope you will gain insights and discover new work while reading our reviews. Most of all, we hope you will *feel* with or because of our work. Let the passion within our reviews coarse through your own body and move it toward action. There is no apathy at RevUU.

On behalf of the RevUU team,

Isabel Oomen & Vlinder Verouden

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REVUU BOOKCLUB

Different voices on R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface*

YELLOWFACE

a Book About Authorship, Cultural Appropriation, and the White Man's Burden

By Iris Bosma

We owe nothing to the dead. Especially when the dead are thieves and liars, too. And fuck it, I'll just say it: taking Athena's manuscript felt like reparations, payback for the things that Athena took from me.

Not often do I feel as uncomfortable reading as I did when I sat down to read *Yellowface*. Not only is the narrator of the novel a thief and a liar, but she also has the audacity to constantly justify her actions to the reader. And with painful accuracy, too. June Hayward is an expert at twisting the truth into her favour. As a reader, you are highly aware of the wrongness of it all, and yet... yet you keep reading. You can't help but feel a certain connection to June Hayward as she exposes her deepest thoughts and fears to you. You hope she gets caught, that she gets what she deserves, and yet... a part of you almost wants her to get away with it.

I know what you're thinking. Thief. Plagiariser. *And*

perhaps, because all bad things must be racially motivated, Racist.
Hear me out.
It's not as awful as it sounds.

Yellowface follows the narrative of June Hayward, a young author whose debut novel flopped. After the death of her friend (and far more successful writer) Athena, June steals Athena's unfinished manuscript called *The Last Front* and publishes a revised version under her own name. What follows is a rollercoaster of events, including but not limited to June coping with criticism, denying various accusations of plagiarism, more plagiarism, and a slow descend into a web of madness and paranoia. Through June's experiences, the novel satirically explores a side of the publishing industry that no one really talks about: one that predetermines which writers get to tell their stories and what writers are turned down on account of the publisher 'already having a writer of colour.' This latter point also results in more enemies for June, like Candice, who originally worked with June's publishing team on *The Last Front*. Due to her bitterness over a white author 'getting to' write a story that 'should' belong to an author of Asian descent, she viciously attacks June over it.

"Who cares about Athena?" Candice barked out a laugh. "Fuck Athena. We all hated that bitch. This is for me."

The writing style that Kuang uses in *Yellowface* is blunt and direct. Perhaps this is intended to help characterise the narrator, June. Kuang seems to have chosen to forgo the almost poetic prose that she employed for *Babel*, or the heaviness that came with the topics which are explored in *The Poppy War*. This newfound bluntness drives home the topics that *Yellowface* tackles. The bluntness of the work suits the fast pace of the novel, and it results in a wildly different reading experience compared to Kuang's previous works. This raises the issue, however, of whether this novel should be compared to Kuang's previous works at all. Not only is it different in style and genre, but the narrative techniques are completely different, too.

For example, June often talks directly to the reader. It almost begs the question whether *Yellowface* is what June imagined her pseudo-autobiography to be like, except that theory wouldn't work because the title is what Candice said she would name her work on June's theft of Athena's manuscript: *Yellowface*. Does that mean that we need to see *Yellowface* not from June's viewpoint, but Candice's? It is often said that June is an unreliable narrator, but what if June is not the narrator at all? What if Candice put those words in her mouth as she fictively wrote *Yellowface*? Or *Yellowface* could be the final work that June starts at the end of the novel, one in which she tries to take back the narrative. It is impossible to know for sure.

This little dilemma goes to show that *Yellowface* can be interpreted in many ways. The ambiguous style of *Yellowface* rightfully sets the reader up with even more questions than the novel about authorship and cultural appropriation would
in the first place.

Ever since The Last Front *came out, I have been victim to people like Candice and Diana and Adele: people who think that, just because they're 'oppressed' and 'marginalised,' they can do or say whatever they want. That the world should put them on a pedestal and shower them with opportunities. That reverse racism is okay. That they can bully, harass, and humiliate people like me, just because I'm white, just because that counts as punching up, because in this day and age, women like me are the last acceptable target. Racism is bad, but you can still send death threats to Karens.*

Because of the bluntness of the prose, sensitive issues such as racism are dealt with from an unusual angle. June sees herself both as a white saviour and as a victim. When she publishes *The Last Front*, she says that she does so out of a sense of obligation. June's approach to her publication of *The Last Front* gives the reader a sense of the white man's burden. June, a white person, is crucial in the process of publishing of Athena's manuscript. Without her, Athena's unfinished work would not be done justice. Either it would not be published at all, or it would be published in a raw, unfinished form. Neither option is acceptable to June.

Interestingly enough, June also positions herself as a victim. She is a victim of vicious people of Asian descent who are out to get her, 'just' because she is white, and telling a story that they deem not hers to tell. This is, of course, a very warped view on the events. It does not take away though, the sense of discomfort that is yet again evoked. How does *Yellowface* deal with this? As readers, we only see one side of the events. And through an unreliable narrator, at that.

For the first time since I submitted the manuscript I feel a deep wash of shame. This isn't my history, my heritage. This isn't my community. I am an outsider, basking in their love under false pretences. It should be Athena sitting here, smiling with these people, signing books and listening to the stories of her elders.

Kuang herself has a clear view on the question of cultural appropriation via authorship: it shouldn't be focused on too much. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she explained that discussing who has the right to tell a certain story is "the wrong question to ask." If we were only allowed to write from our own experiences, very little would be left to write about. What does matter, however, is the way the work in question handles such topics. Remarkably, if one were to look only at *Yellowface*, and not Kuang's other writings or interviews, it would be difficult to come to this conclusion.

In *Yellowface*, June's marketing team seems to want to present June as racially ambiguous, convincing her to publish under the name "Juniper Song." Song is June's middle name but can also pass as an Asian last name. On top of this, June chooses an author picture of herself in which she looks more tanned than she actually is. This results in not only a misleading name, but also a representation of herself that adds to the picture that her marketing team tries to paint. These efforts to present June as racially

ambiguous result in the sense that June and her marketing team are of the opinion that June's writing on Chinese history is potentially problematic. It shows that she seems to know that maybe it isn't her place to tell a story about a heritage that is not hers, even before we observe her actively realising the wrongness of her actions. Once she does realise this, she tries to redeem herself in her own way. However, she never apologises. She never takes anything back.

Does it matter if an author's work does not directly reflect the author's personal views? Perhaps not. However, if *Yellowface* means to address these serious issues, such as racism within the publishing industry and with regard to authorship, and to provide an insightful critique of how these issues have been debated, then it still fails to reflect Kuang's opinion on this particular matter. I think Kuang may have done this purposefully. By not answering the question about authorship inside the novel itself, Kuang allows the reader to come to their own interpretation.

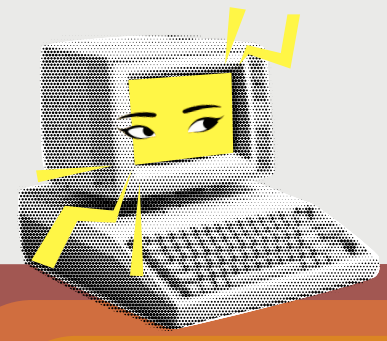
June is not the most sympathetic protagonist, and because of her faults the reader will likely not agree with her view that she does get to write this story. June herself seems unsure of what her own views are. She even admits, during an event with the Chinese American Social Club (quote above) that it should have been Athena sitting there instead of June, sitting amongst "her elders."

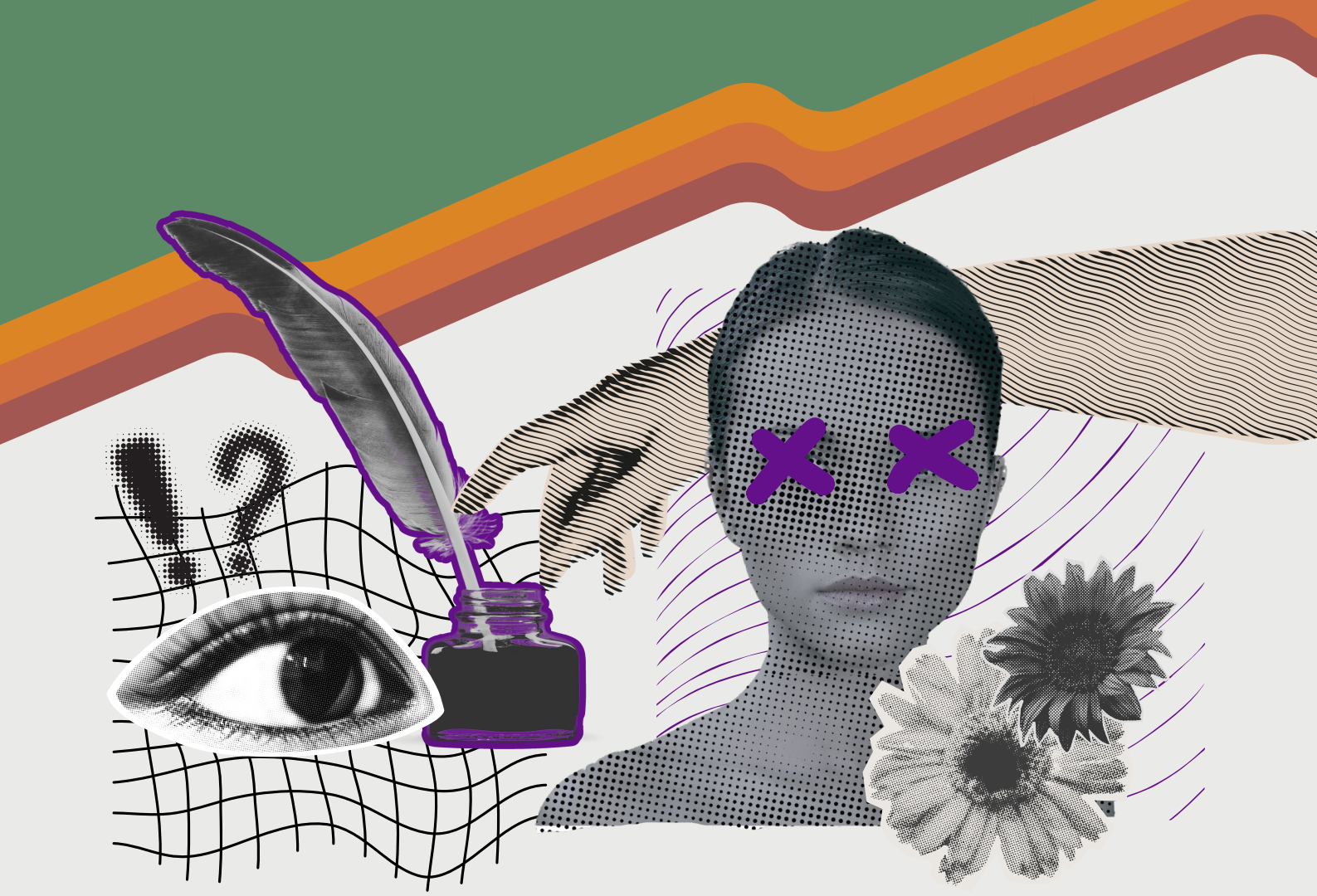
On the whole, Yellowface successfully draws the reader into its story. Through its unreliable narrator we get to see a viewpoint that few would normally dare venture into. It shows an ugly side of people, of friendship, and of the publishing industry. It explores topics such as racism, authorship and victimhood. It shows a white person who is guilty of cultural appropriation, but also Athena, a writer of Asian descent, who is equally guilty of appropriating other people's stories.

Yellowface is not a book for the faint of heart. If you decide to pick it up - which I do recommend - be ready for a roller coaster.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iris Bosma is an enthusiastic writer and aspiring critic of literature. She is currently a student at Utrecht University, following the MA program 'Literature Today'. She has a background in translation, but her passion lies in creating new narratives and creative content. Her first creative work was published by *Things That Talk* for the project *Orange The World*.





ETHNICALLY AMBIGUOUS

Yellowface and the Pitfalls of the Publishing Industry

By Anna Maria Popo

How far would you go to achieve your dream?

How much would you lie in order to publish your book?

These questions are not so different to me anymore after reading *Yellowface*.

Athena Liu has it all: a successful debut novel with one of the 'Big Five' publishers, accelerating sales, multiple book and TV deals, the admiration of thousands of readers, a gorgeous apartment, and a great life. She also has a friend – a not-so-successful writer to say the least – June Hayward. June does not have it all. Instead, she has a debut novel that flopped and could not even get a paperback print, an unfulfilling job, and an overall unsatisfactory life. But she too has a friend whom she can blame it all on:
Athena.

One night, the two friends find themselves in Athena's apartment celebrating her latest deal with Netflix, when she tragically and unexpectedly dies after a pancake-eating contest. June is left behind as a witness; not just as the witness of the accident, but as the only witness of an unpublished, freshly finished manuscript that Athena had never revealed to anyone but her.

June decides to take that manuscript and to take back everything Athena has allegedly stolen from her. Athena's novel is about the history of the Chinese labour and its role in the First World War. And while this would never have been one of June's ideas for a book, she decides to polish the manuscript and make it acceptable for publishing under her name. I found many moments surprised asking myself: How is she going to pull this off? This was only the first one.

June finds herself drawn into this manuscript, as she tells us, putting in countless hours to edit, write, rewrite, and delete parts, in order to make it her own. June now becomes the co-owner of it. After some thought and consideration of Athena's memory, June convinces herself to send the edited manuscript to her publisher. Suddenly, she finds herself at the centre of publishing industry attention, between bidding wars, advance deals, and publicity hype. June publishes the manuscript as her own, titled *The Last Front*, and finds her way out of the margins and in the spotlight as a successful writer.

From the beginning of the novel, June's goal is to convince us, but mostly herself, how unfairly she has been treated as a white writer. And this is where my suspicions on June's untrustworthiness took shape. She habitually attributes Athena's success to her Asian background. There are moments where she recognises Athena's talent for writing, but still to June it is because of Athena's background that her stories have something different to say, something that makes them stand out, something that all publishers are looking for: yes, you guessed it, diversity. June's maniacal obsession with blaming her failures on her friend makes her not just questionable as a person, but unreliable as a narrator. Similarly, June's conviction that reverse racial profiling is one of the main reasons she is failing is frustrating to follow. But on that note, it made me look forward to her downfall.

It is revealed to us that Athena is pigeonholed into writing stories based on trauma and focused entirely on her Asian background, even though she proves multiple times that she is capable of writing a variety of stories. Athena is wanted by the publishing world only as long as she fulfils the role of a 'diverse' writer.

Yellowface unmasks how the publishing industry seems to change the meaning of diversity almost daily. While Athena would likely have been praised for her courage to share traumatic stories of a marginalised culture, June is told to edit the manuscript into something more fitting for a wider audience. June tells us that "the new version [of the manuscript] is universally more relatable, a story that anyone can see

themselves in." But editing the manuscript to claim more relatability and to fit a wider audience overtakes the historical significance of the battle she decides to write her novel on.

The contradictory impulses of the publishing industry, in combination with June's desperation to be recognised, and not to remain in the shadows as a white writer with nothing new to say, makes her constantly justify her actions, in hopes that readers will understand her and support her. And while literature students continue to ponder and debate over the question 'if the author should be separated from their work', the publishing industry squarely depends on the identity of the authors, calculating how they will push their story in the name of 'diversity' (sales).

As a reader, I found myself constantly questioning June's ethics behind her decisions. However, her thriller-esque narration made it impossible for me to predict what will follow next. During certain moments, I would also catch myself hoping for her manuscript to be a huge success. But more often than not, I found myself hoping she gets what she deserves - backlash. The paradoxical but also fascinating element of this novel is the unlikability of the protagonist. Not because of her insecurities - this is probably the only thing that humanises her - but because of her obliviousness in the face of 'what wouldn't I do to be published.' A big part of publishing is marketing and branding, and Kuang makes sure that we get a taste of how this works and how it affects writers.

When June is asked by the marketing team about her background, she becomes defensive, since she believes that everyone should have the ability to write any story they want. Otherwise, it would be censorship. "They can trust the words on the page" she says. However, in less than a page, June's mindset takes a whole different turn. The marketing team is concerned about how she is "positioned" as a writer of a book that talks about Chinese Labour and World War I. And from an indifferent- as June herself is convinced - white woman she becomes "worldly." She is encouraged to use her full first name, which would make the readers interested in her and would "highlight all the different places" she has lived, adding to her profile as a writer. Thus, Juniper is born. It gets better. Juniper is also advised to publish under her middle name, Song, instead of her last name, Hayward. In one page, Kuang, underlines the double-edged knife of 'branding' in the publishing industry, especially as 'ethnically ambiguous.' Juniper's teams both want to make her background transparent to the readers, while on the other hand they commend the ambiguous 'uniqueness' of her name that helps check off 'diversity' on their to-do list.

After this meeting, we have to listen to Juniper telling us - almost confessing to us - that what she did is not a type of "fraud;" she never lied about her name. Only, now it also has become her brand. This will give her the opportunity that the last name Hayward was unable to deliver. That is, until the next obstacle appears for her. When editorial assistant Candice Lee suggests hiring a

sensitivity reader to avoid future scrutiny, Juniper once more jumps to the conclusion that there are people questioning her authenticity for no valid reason.

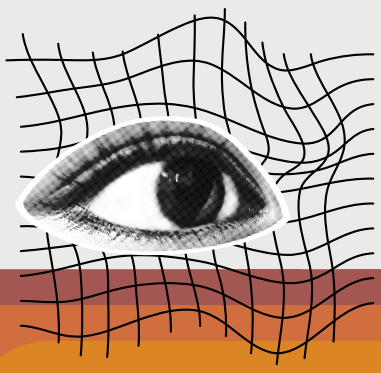
Juniper insists that "[hiring a sensitivity reader] is a nice way to avoid getting dragged on Twitter." The role of sensitivity readers is actually to monitor racism, conscious or unconscious, but still, it does not take long for the editor to remove Candice from the project after Juniper expresses her strong disagreement. Through this example, the author depicts how easy it is to ignore reasonable requests of checking the quality of representation in novels. Candice became one more point to check off their to-do list to make the journey to publishing *The Last Front* as smooth as ever.

After Athena is gone, and then Candice, Juniper now turns blame for her writing career onto the Internet. One cannot forget the importance of social media in the process of publishing a book, and Kuang does not either. "Reputations in publishing are built and destroyed, constantly, online" Juniper declares. From defending the quality of her work, Juniper believes that the comments online, the reviews, the bullying, cancel culture, and hype culture are now the defining elements of the quality of her book. She becomes the self-fulfilled version of a victim to online threats and Twitter leeching. Social media becomes Juniper's new obsession and justification as to why she cannot flourish as a writer, while trying to convince us of her choices and the 'morality' behind them.

Yellowface successfully manages to reveal the problematic aspects behind the publishing industry and how ignorantly it can grapple with diversity. It simultaneously depicts a character who is willingly blind to the immoral nature of her actions, blaming all the misery on being overlooked as a writer because of her background, the overshadowing success of her friend, the different facets of identity politics in publishing that keep her down. Although it is a work of fiction, *Yellowface*, frames the reality of publishing and its pitfalls, while still underlining how we would do anything to be a part of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Maria is a publishing assistant and copywriter with a BA in English Language & Culture from Utrecht University. Her love for books has taken multiple shapes and forms throughout the years – from creative writing and spoken word performances to reading, publishing and promoting books. She is currently an MA student in the 'Literature Today' program at Utrecht University, and her goal is to develop further as a writer and explore her voice as a literary critic.



THE WHIRLWIND OF THE UNLIKABLE FEMALE PROTAGONIST

in R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface*

By Liva Pūka

Part romp antihero thriller, part quick-witted expose, R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* promised me a key to a hidden garden, brimming with the industry's dirty secrets. As I turn the lock, and let my morbid curiosity - tidal in its pull - draw me inside, where on earth will I wind up?

June Hayward and Athena Liu are frenemies. Both are Yale University alumni, both ambitious writers, both relocated to the same city, yet they could not be more different. Where Athena, the Chinese American literary prodigy, reaps the benefits of a successful writing career, June is still a nobody, struggling to get her name out there, bogged down by the publishing industry that has no interest in another white girl's story. But June's luck is about to change. After witnessing Athena

die, strangely enough, by choking on a pancake, June makes a rash decision to steal Athena's unpublished manuscript. As June rises to stardom by publishing Athena's manuscript as her own and posing under an ethnically ambiguous alias, she spins a web of lies that is bound to come back to haunt her.

Yellowface is not the first novel by R. F. Kuang that has come to my notice. With titles such as *The Poppy War* and *Babel* to her name, Kuang has earned praise and recognition on both high-brow and popular literary review platforms. Undoubtedly, Kuang's compelling writing style and thought-provoking themes resonate with a wide audience, but it is also the writer's age that has taken the reading community by storm. Kuang became a published author at the age of 21, and has since released 5 books in the span of 5 years.

Kuang's first venture into literary fiction, *Yellowface*, is her newest and shortest book to date. In a Barnes & Noble interview, Kuang defined her novel as a "ridiculous, absurdist satire" about the publishing industry and a "psychological thriller at heart". As told by Kuang, the pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 prompted a surge of attention to police brutality and racial prejudice. The profound impact of the movement reached various creative industries as well, including the publishing industry, where more and more marginalized voices were brought to the fore. This breakthrough propelled the story of *Yellowface* and its ever-growing necessity to be told at once. She jokingly calls *Yellowface* her "gremlin-mode pandemic novel," as a testament to her frustration, anger, and loneliness.

Yellowface swings into full motion right off the bat. Athena dies, June steals her manuscript - a gut-wrenching retrospective of the role of Chinese laborers in World War One - does further research for it, edits it, and decides to claim all the credit. The novel then gets picked up by a major publishing house. 35 pages in, it quickly becomes clear, if not already given away by the text on the back cover, *Yellowface* is about to open many cans of worms: cultural appropriation, implicit racism, diversity, authorship, and representation in the publishing industry.

The plethora of negative effects of cancel culture and the built-up toxicity of the creative industries are all embodied in the character of June. *Yellowface* sets the record straight: June is not there to please me. And, well, that thrilled me. As far as unlikable, unreliable characters go, June is marvelously written, her convoluted rationale unwavering. Fiction writer Julia Amante observes in her article on unreliable characters: "They seem completely logical and correct in their own mind." This might just be the essence of why unlikable protagonist stories are so vivid. Yellowface is no different; living in June's head possessed me to turn page after page, at the edge of my seat, curious to discover what trouble lurks around the corner.

From very early on, the story hints that June can and will act in ways that are morally questionable at best and flat-out wicked at worst. She is driven by her right to

be admired, read and treated with respect, even though she does not intend to reciprocate it to her peers, the people in her industry, or her readers. June lies to Athena's mother, persuading her not to donate her late daughter's notebooks to an archive, expressing how "donating them would be a violation". After catching a student talk behind June's back, she publicly humiliates her. She causes a ruckus after receiving a one-star rating on Goodreads from Candace, her editorial assistant, basking in her vindication as she thinks: "And though I would never say this out loud about a fellow woman —the industry is tough enough as it is—I hope I got that bitch fired."

Despite her extensive research on Chinese laborers, her perspective on Asian people remains frustratingly narrow, bound by stereotypes. Upon meeting an events coordinator at the Chinese American Social Club, June compares her to "Kim Jong Un's girlboss, propagandist sister". When shown hospitality and invited to a meal of Chinese food, she describes it as "greasy", as she "tr[ies] not to gag". June blackmails, deceives, twists the truth, gets defensive, all just to publicly wash her hands of it on social media. June is a born writer: she writes her own story, building it up as if it's a piece of fiction, shaped out and manipulated to her liking.

Throughout the novel, June's internal monologue recycles her working theory: "Publishing picks a winner—someone attractive enough, someone cool and young and, oh, we're all thinking it, let's just say it, 'diverse' enough—and lavishes all its money and resources on them." Her steadfast righteousness is somewhat fascinating, but more so it puts great emphasis on her victimhood, her inability to change, to break out of her stubbornness, to drop the act. Working my way through the book, I could not shake the feeling that at any moment the lies will catch up with June, that the stakes would become steeper and steeper and at any second, she will have to pay. Yet no matter how many unforeseen obstacles emerge in her way, June manages to worm herself out of everything.

Living through June's story, which got crazier by the page, I circled back to one question: does June have any redeeming qualities? Satirical in nature, June and her world are meant to be exaggerated, her reactions blown out of proportion. Margaret Tally defined an anti-heroine as a "deeply flawed, yet at the same time, sympathetic character." Some might argue that an unlikable character is not defined by their surface-level negative traits, but by those that can be found somewhere in between the lines - where there is an intention, there is a justification. June struggles on the redeeming quality front; my sympathy for June was awoken only when we learn about her sexual assault in college and, perhaps more significantly, Athena publishing a story about it without her consent. Athena exploiting June's suffering appears to be the turning point for June; it ignited her restless anger toward Athena, leading her to perceive Athena as a thief and planting in her the idea of a tit-for-tat mentality.

Yellowface aims to be a social commentary. Witty, sharp, and cutting,

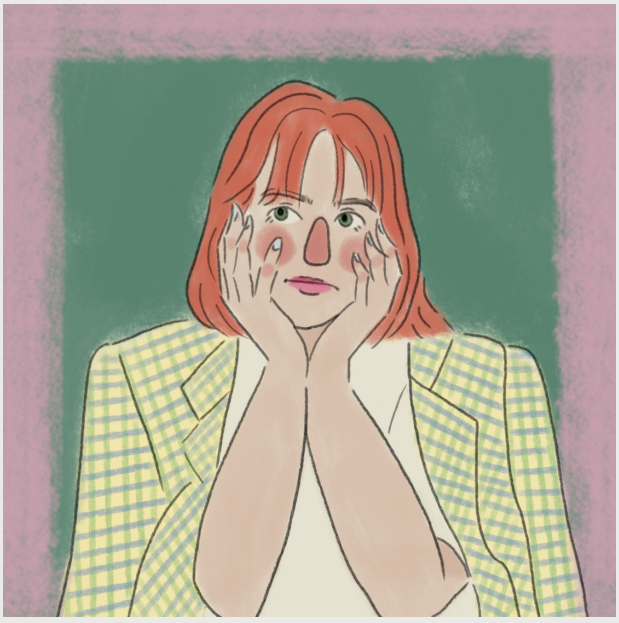
unafraid to poke at fellow writers and readers, unapologetic about its metafictional layers. The synopsis promises us insights into the cut-throat literary field, which has been riveting enough to get picked up by many who are interested in literature and publishing. I was no exception. Nevertheless, the search for its main takeaway left me puzzled. The theatrics of June's personal life outshine the unjust workings of the publishing industry. If anything, the story felt like an in-depth look into June's jealousy and insecurity, triggered time and time again by internet sleuths, doubtful readers, critical peers, and Athena's alleged "ghost" that starts tormenting June on social media. Her outrageous actions become grander than the social commentary the story intends to tell. It seems that the larger questions posed at the beginning become fragmented and diluted, stored away, as June's microaggressions take center stage.

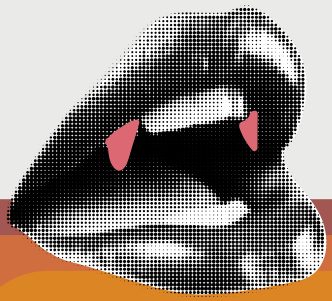
Interestingly enough, the rivalry between these two ambitious writers proves to be way more multi-faceted than I initially expected. With nuance, Kuang situates Athena and June on opposite sides of the spectrum in more ways than one. Alongside race, June and Athena have class differences. While Athena "went from Yale to a fully funded master's degree to hundreds of thousands of dollars in her bank account", June grappled with her fate as a struggling artist. *Yellowface* has all the components to make room for a well-observed and clever segue into socio-economic intersectionality, and the financial privilege that gives many up-and-comers a leg up the publishing industry. In spite of that, *Yellowface* still zeroes in June as a white woman scorned, with a mind and behavior skewed by prejudice, insecurity, and envy.

Yellowface's relevance to today's issues has worked out in Kuang's favor, since it doesn't cease to spark debate among its readers. What is clear is that reading *Yellowface* has kindled enough ambivalence and intrigue in me to know my journey with Kuang has only just started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liva Puka is a junior content writer and copywriter, currently enrolled in the MA 'Literature Today' program at Utrecht University. With a passion for cultural development, anthropology, and ecocriticism, she strives to develop meaningful connections with her audience. Outside professional and academic ventures, Liva finds great joy in birdwatching, which has opened her eyes to the many wonders of the world surrounding us.





BORDERLAND WOMEN: NOSOTRAS LAS OTRAS

A Review of Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny's *Trash*

By Aleida Argueta

'The trash isn't what all of us throw away, it's those people with no soul or heart or decency or any damn thing at all'. Who are the people who live on our waste? Who are those who, in order to survive, have to rescue what others consider rubbish? These questions are explored by Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny through her novel *Trash* (2023) translated to English this year.

I first heard about this Mexican writer through her work in the formation and advocacy of new voices in literature, rather than through her literary work. In the current times, it is worth asking ourselves what spaces we can look for as women and as dissidents, thinking through our challenges to create and find community with others who are also passionate about literature. Aguilar-Zéleny is part of this ongoing search: She directs of the creative projects of Casa Octavia in El Paso, Texas, a writer's residency for women and members of the

LGBTIA+ community.

Something about her as a literary figure has always intrigued me. Perhaps this has to do with her border and genre-crossing writing career, having published short stories such as *Nenitas, cuentos* (2013) and *Señorita Ansiedad y Otras Manías, cuentos* (2014), as well as novels such as "Coming Out", (2015, Epic Press), *Todo Eso Es Yo* (2016), *The Everything I Have Lost* (2020), and *El libro de Aisha* (2021, Random House Mexico). Aguilar-Zéleny writes with versatility in both Spanish and English. And her constant topics are the search for identity, human relationships, migration, gender, and violence.

Something that I think also intrigued me was that she is a *norteña* writer. I could sense that we came from similar places, not only because we are both women and writers, but also because of the inevitable influence that being from the border has in the life of any individual. I grew up in a place marked by migration and cultural exchange, but also by militarization because of the drug war. It is beautiful and horrible at the same time. Sometimes we must face how our surroundings decline, how in a place that once seemed better there are now only remains, leftovers and waste.

Trash (2023) was translated to English this year by Deep Vellum. Translation - in this case in the charge of JD Pluecker - always presupposes various challenges. My first encounter with the novel was through the original Spanish version published in 2018; I noted that it features an oral and forceful narrative, a sort of homage to the phonetics of language, the portrait of a culture conveyed in the selection of vocabulary and the construction of solid, three-dimensional characters. How to do justice to a novel that can be heard while it is being read?

One thing is clear, this work reaffirms that translation must necessarily be a creative process. The freedom and creative license of the translator allows one to make choices that will help convey the essence of the novel to the reader. I was curious to see how Pluecker would be able to transmit the orality of the novel to Anglophone audiences. And he was right in his decision: to opt for a multilingual approach where English and Spanish are mixed to provide the sonorous experience that the original language offers in this novel.

The novel tells the separate stories of three women: the leader of a community residing in the municipal dump of Ciudad Juárez, a researcher interested in studying the community, and a transgender woman who runs a sex workers' house. The stories of each of these characters are interwoven, showing marginality in contrast to privilege, migration, and cross-culturalism. The setting, and therefore stories, are just as Gloría Anzaldúa explains: "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country, a border culture."

The novel creates a portrait of the borderlands through its characters: Firstly,

Alicia, a young woman who, after being abandoned by her mother - who worked cleaning houses in El Paso and who always made comparisons between life in Mexico and in the United States:

She worked cleaning houses on the other side, over there, with gringos or for Mexicans who lived like gringos, I'm not sure. I just know she crossed the bridge downtown every day to get to gringolandia. It's shit going back and forth, but the shit pays well, she'd tell anyone she ran into.

The author makes us ponder how difficult life can be when for some, childhood is a mere luxury and innocence an old habit. We enjoyed our youth depending on the extent of our privilege. I think about it in this way: Alicia was never going to receive an Easy-Bake Oven on Christmas; from her sad role she would find its cardboard box in the dump and exchange it for a few pesos. What are the myriad ways that our bodies can be discarded, transgressed, and used? Alicia has been abused and neglected. But there are two things that make Alicia survive: anger and the community of the Ciudad Juarez garbage dump. This is how she can cope with the vulnerability that comes with her youth and social class.

Secondly, there is the character of Griselda, a well-educated woman who migrated because of a family tragedy to Texas. There she lives with her aunt, who raised Griselda and her sister as her as her daughters and made it possible for each of them to get ahead. Griselda questions what happens to those who cannot get out of the context that pressures them and what happens to those who live off scraps because there is nothing else. As a character who moves between borders, she allows us to see how two cultures combine to create their own identity and sense of belonging:

Sometimes I ask myself who we would have become if our parents hadn't died. If we'd stayed in Juárez. No doubt, we wouldn't be who we are now. I imagine a normal life, the two of us growing up in the furniture store, working for our dad. (...) One of us pregnant at seventeen, the other teaching literacy classes or catechism in some neighborhood on the edge of town. Both of us with an uncertain future, like la tía now.

Thirdly, there is Reyna, who lives a completely different life from before her transition to womanhood. She decides to migrate from Ecatepec to follow the "American Dream". She lives and works in the United States, but following after her dissatisfaction with that she decides to make a drastic change in her life. She becomes the woman in charge of a house of prostitutes as she sees herself as their mother. Reyna feels that her retirement is approaching, and it is her wish to return to her hometown. Through this character, we see the embodiment of important themes such as migration, gender, sexuality, violence, corruption, and the desire to return to one's origins.

The narrative shows the role that the territorial aspect plays in the imaginary. Likewise, the border as the setting of a literary

work allows us to visualize the cultural hybridization produced by the proximity between territories. As García Canclini proposes, such hybridization is a characteristic of many contemporary societies because of the mixture and fusion of diverse cultural elements. Aguilar Zéleny uses the role of language as a canvas to show that we are here (Mexico) but from time to time, there is something that shows how close we are to there (United States).

Where I'm from, we call those towns and cities far from the country's capital "no man's land". It is a joke, but also a reality. It reflects the lack of structure, absence of institutions, no laws, or rules, just people living within their community and moving on. Walking through a border town can both amuse you and make your skin crawl. People just dance and pistea to have fun and to forget. Let the sounds of gunshots in the background be covered by the music of Los Tigres del Norte or Ramón Ayala, or perhaps Peso Pluma to be more fashionable. Nemesio García Naranjo said it well: "so far from God and so close to the United States."

In this story the characters do not coexist in the narrative in a traditional way, but in each individual story we can see sketches and hints of the other. As readers we can fill in blanks that the characters can't because they don't have the picture that we as readers do. And despite a reality as frightening as Reyna describes:

this city is going to fuckin hell. Cause I'm saying, even though we're okay here in this neighborhood, the city is going to fuckin hell, and fast. All you gotta do is walk the streets and you'll see a ton of crosses everywhere or posters with faces of the girls who disappeared. Just go downtown and look at the buildings, pockmarks from bullets on the walls, cracked windows or full-on covered with bars, or empty on the inside.

The knowledge we have as readers permits us to see those spaces for hope, compassion, and care. Seeing how a place is taken away by *la chingada*, seeing all that is left after the disaster leads us to create safe spaces, even if they are only symbolic. The metaphor of trash is not an ending; the trash in this story connects our stories. It reminds us of the utter baseness of the world, but also of the will to hold on to life.

Each of the stories of these characters reveal the diverse forms of *otherness*. In a short story by Dahlia de la Cerda, Mexico is described as a country that devours women. And the portrayal is true, in these characters and in the circumstances that surround them: the patriarchy that murders or disappears them, the poverty and lack of opportunities that consumes them, the organized crime that conditions the way they live their lives. But why, despite the misfortunes, do we think it is worth staying there? And that is something that Aguilar-Zéleny also shows: it is us in connection with other women who can create safe spaces. Sorority. That is why it makes sense that three stories become one – because we take care of each other. This is how *nosotras* stop being *las otras*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aleida Argueta Castañeda is a Mexican essayist and cultural promoter. She has published in literary journals such as *Armas y Letras* and *Humanitas*, and participated in literary festivals: FIL de Monterrey and UANLeer. She also co-directs the cultural project Morras Leyendo Morras, which focuses on promoting literature written by women and creating safe spaces for creative writing. She is currently following the MA program 'Literature Today' at Universiteit Utrecht and holds a scholarship from SACPC-FINBA and CONAHCYT.

"ARE WE GONNA FUCK?"

The Relatability of a Novel

By Viola Becagli

When I started rereading *The Rachel Incident*, I decided I would underline every quote that I found relatable to myself and my life. When I finished the book, it was hard to find a page where I didn't underline at least a couple sentences. I was Rachel and Rachel was me.

My first copy of the book was a Kindle version. I was attracted to it because, in Vogue's column *The Best - and Most Anticipated - Book of 2023 (So Far)*, it was compared to Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*. So I thought "This is my book" following my recent obsession with the novels by the young Irish author. I say obsession not because I deeply liked the books, I didn't even finish reading *Normal People*, but because I feel that her stories have something to do with me, it feels personal despite my irritation towards the characters of the narration. So what I was expecting from this book was for it to help me understand what makes books like

Rooney's feel so personal. But during my first reading, my hopes of liking this book started to fade. The novel didn't bring me the emotions that I was expecting to feel; the characters were grey like the screen of my Kindle, and I was getting bored and sleepy. I was disappointed.

I decided to do my second reading with the paper version. When I went to the bookstore, I saw the cover for the first time. It was full of colors, depicting a faceless young woman looking away from me. It radiated possibility, hope, fun. The person who said "don't judge a book by its cover" was clearly someone who had seen very boring covers.

The second reading revealed itself to be totally different, maybe because the book was physically there in my hands or because I knew what the other reviewers' opinion was, but I laughed, I cringed, the characters were alive. I understood that what made this type of novel feel so personal was the life they were depicting and not any type of life but what we, I mean people in their twenties, are living through.

I felt very lucky because it doesn't always happen that you read the right book at the right time, which is the opposite experience of what happened with Sally Rooney's books, or maybe it's just not my taste. That's when I started to think on how much I wanted to write this review in a way that makes people realize the importance of reading this book, especially in your twenties.

The author of the book, Caroline O'Donoghue, is a young Irish writer, and she is the host of a podcast called *Emotional Garbage* where she revaluates the importance that chick-lit books have for a young audience.

The story, narrated in retrospect by a now-34-year-old Rachel, brings us to Cork in the early 2010s where a 20-year-old Rachel is trying to survive between a not-very-exciting college life and a part-time job at a highly frequented bookstore. In this setting she meets James, a closeted-gay man with whom Rachel immediately starts a deep friendship. Their relationship will eventually become complicated with several dramatic events, ranging from James's secret relationship with Dr. Byrne, Rachel's college professor, to Rachel's accidental pregnancy and subsequent abortion attempt. All of this narrated by a married, happy, and pregnant Rachel.

The whole narration is in first person, but it jumps from centering on one Rachel to the other, expressing the emotions and impressions of young Rachel in contrast with the more objective and mature eye of the present one.

Despite the overall appreciation of the book on Goodreads and in the literary section of the New York Times and the Irish Times, the general opinion about the protagonist was that she is inevitably an unlikable character. Maybe they read the wrong book at the wrong time. Rachel is too instinctive, too emotional, too self-conscious and she makes too many bad decisions - so much so that you just wish, as a Goodreads

commentor writes “she'd LEARN a couple of life lessons and just grow up”.

But I believe that this is exactly this book’s and Rachel’s appeal. As Claire Messud argued in a *Publisher’s Weekly* interview, stating that “If you're reading to find friends, you’re in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities. The relevant question is not 'Is this a potential friend for me?' but 'Is this character alive?'”.

To me Rachel is alive. She makes mistakes and bad life choices and sometimes she is forced to face sudden adult problems that she tries to solve at the best of her abilities. And she is also surrounded by characters that, like her, try to survive and enjoy themselves in the life that they have. In the episode of *Emotional Garbage* dedicated to *The Rachel Incident*, Caroline O’Donoghue talks about Carey, Rachel’s ‘boyfriend’. At first and second sight he is considered a hopeless ‘fuckboy’. He disappears for days and does not answer her texts. But in the end, he turns out to be human. He takes care of his dying mother and rebuilds himself, becoming a better person in the process. This novel is not only a coming-of-age story for Rachel but also for all the characters in the book.

I must admit that Rachel’s insecurities and overthinking are actually my favorite thing about the book. O’Donoghue gives voice to all the little thoughts in your mind that make you feel self-conscious and uncomfortable and turns them into something ordinary and relatable. It gives a shout-out to all the girls that had a height complex growing up, being taller than most boys and envious of the petite girls that didn’t make boys say things like: “Wouldn’t want Rachel on the wrong side of me in a fight!”

Present-day Rachel makes you understand that all of this is okay, that it is fine to be a tall girl and not be able to impersonate the “Bookshop Girl”, “caught in a beam of sunlight looking elegant and melancholy, possibly writing a poem at the same time,” an impossibility for Rachel because “it’s strictly for short women.” She tells us that it is normal to have bad sex while, still, you “couldn’t have been more obsessed with having it.” And it’s also normal to have the most random and embarrassing thoughts like “Are we gonna fuck?” or “I hope he doesn’t want to have sex; I’m still on my period.” when you are somehow alone with any type of man. And that doesn’t mean that you’re dirty or a pervert, it just means that you’re human, maybe horny, but in the end who isn’t.

Rachel’s overthinking and need for validation, especially male validation influences all her relationships within the story. All of these are, to my surprise, only relationships with men except for Deenie Harrington, who is the only other woman to have some kind of plot relevance. The answer to why Rachel doesn’t have any other interaction with women is because she finds it difficult to identify herself as a woman except for her capacity to have sex with men. She feels inferior to women, so she relies on her body and eroticism in order to have some kind of validation of her femininity.

Rachel counts heavily on the opinion that men have of her and sees them as some kind of guide through her chaotic life. She is convinced that men are simply better than her at living life. Starting with James, her closeted best friend, whom she describes to us as "extremely advanced. A person who had interrogated all sides of his soul. He was too emotionally intelligent to get stuck into the doldrums of what music or behavior seemed gay or straight. [...] He was the future of people." Young Rachel accepts his justification of not being out of the closet as something prizeworthy, but the present-day Rachel interjects, "He was actually terrified," giving an example of the older protagonist rational voice.

In regard to the relationship with Dr. Byrne, I would classify it as a more father-daughter relationship. Although Rachel has erotic feelings for him in the beginning, her approach changes after he starts a relationship with James. But she still very much values his academic opinion on aspects of her life. The first time that he comes to her and James' house she thinks "What was even more embarrassing was the thought of him looking at my bookshelves. [...] What conclusions was he drawing about me down there?" Her self-consciousness comes to the surface, she wants to know what he thinks about her books, therefore, about her, even though he came to the house to have sex with James, so probably the books probably were the last thing on his mind.

Dr. Byrne's character is the one that I found closest to Sally Rooney's depiction of men, similar to Nick Conway in *Conversations with Friends*. Dr. Byrne also has a relationship outside of his marriage. Although I found both of them as equally pathetic in their obvious insecurities, I can empathize with Dr. Byrne a bit more, because he is a closeted bisexual. He is hiding. While Nick Conway's betrayal comes from an unhappy marriage and probably the temptation of a younger woman, Dr. Byrne's situation is different. He is in an unhappy marriage, worsened by the impossibility of having a child, but he is also imprisoned by the social rules of his community and his country that limit him in his expression of love.

This is, I believe, is O'Donoghue purpose. She wants to make us empathize with the characters, especially the male ones. She talks about this in her podcast and confirms that she purposefully created all these male figures orbiting around a single female in order to show that men are not to hate based on the fact that they also commit human mistakes. They are not the only cause of Rachel's sadness, anger, solitude, but if they are, they try to gain her trust back doing what is possible. For Dr. Byrne it is to find her an internship, for Carey it's to evolve into a better person, the person that Rachel deserves.

The story is historically framed by the crumbling of the literary scene, in particular how Kindle is worryingly gaining more momentum than paper books (I felt kind of guilty of having an e-book version of the book when I read that). This is a point to which I related on a personal level, not as a twenty-something year old, but because

it depicts how difficult it is to envision a future with a degree in the humanities and to get internships and jobs in the publishing world. The half hope of pursuing a study-related career but also having a deep understanding of the current work condition in that sector.

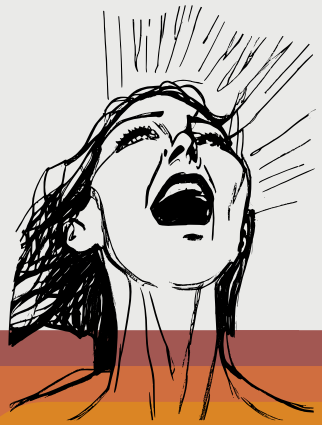
We can refer to the not-really-well-paid internship that Rachel does with Deenie Harrington, the first real woman-to-woman relationship that she has, stained by Rachel's feeling of guilt knowing that Deenie's husband is cheating on her. Nonetheless, their friendship is as truthful as it can be; both characters are searching for a fellow traveler to go through their pain. In Rachel, this pain is caused by her on-again-off-again relationship, while in Deenie it comes from the impossibility of having a child.

Even if they eventually separate, I believe that Deenie is one of the best influences for Rachel during that period. She gives her a future to look up to, a publishing job, and even though Rachel will not follow that path eventually, Deenie opens for her an option that she didn't know existed or was afraid of trying, working in publishing.

This is an open-ended book with an open character. Rachel gives us permission to slip into her shoes and clothes and allows us to live her experience like it is ours. She is the faceless girl on the cover and allowing us to put our face on hers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola Becagli is an MA student at Utrecht University, currently following the program 'Literature Today'. She completed her BA in Rome studying Spanish & English language, and literature and translation, focusing her studies on the changes following the transposition from novel to movie.



HIPPIES AND BILLIONAIRES

Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood*

By Tom van Bunnik

Eleanor Catton knows that ecological despair is not the most appealing subject for a novel. Amidst members of the activist gardening group Birnam Wood – the focus of Catton's new novel of the same name – contemplating the various forms the climate apocalypse might take, one character interjects "We'll all be so fucking dead. We'll be on fire".

After all, despair can quickly devolve into cynicism – "This conversation is bumming me out… Can we do drugs now please?" – and who wants to read a cynical novel when so much of it exists in our day-to-day lives? And what if that book caricaturizes the very few people who resist cynicism, those few ardent believers in the power of grassroots movements to halt our apocalyptic environmental trajectory?

Catton's third novel, *Birnam Wood*, does all this and yet, it is an affirmation of the enduring value of

such literature.

Catton made her literary debut in 2008 with *The Rehearsal*, which explores the lives of students at an all-girls' school and their involvement in a scandalous affair between a music teacher and a student. *The Rehearsal* was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and won the Betty Trask Award in the UK. Even greater acclaim was awarded to Catton for her second novel, *The Luminaries*, which won her the Booker Prize in 2013, making her the youngest author to win at 28.

The Luminaries is a historical novel set in nineteenth-century New Zealand, Catton's native country. The story revolves around Walter Moody, who is looking to make his fortune during the gold rush of 1866. Moody becomes entangled in a mysterious web of events involving a group of twelve local men. As he tries to solve a series of interconnected mysteries, the novel delves into themes of fate, astrology, and the consequences of greed.

Like *The Luminaires*, *Birnam Wood* is set in New Zealand and much like its predecessor, is concerned with greed. In *Birnam Wood*, this greed is articulated within the context of contemporary exploitation of the environment. All of this is personified by Robert Lemoine, the book's caricature James Bond villain. Catton creates in him the quintessential modern billionaire – a self-aggrandizing psychopath. Lemoine is a billionaire and nothing else.

At least, that is how Lemoine wants the world to see him. "Being a cliché can be rather useful," Lemoine asserts, and he carefully constructs a public persona by outwardly "dialing up the billionaire psychology". "Lemoine loved to present as an enigma," Catton reveals, to which only he holds the key. This key, in keeping with the Bondian archetype, is a troubled past and a desire to take revenge on those who wronged him, which for Lemoine is a rather large group: "his parents, his grandparents, the army, the government, the CIA". His capital, then, is proportionate to the size of his vengefulness.

Lemoine's wealth, as well as "his mystique, his opacity, his protean curiosity and impenetrable charm – these were not intrinsic aspects of his character, but cultivated acts of vengeance against everyone who had deceived him". "He had risen to power to spite them," and, he admits, "it was all so easy. [...] it's all just luck and loopholes and being in the right place at the right time". "That's why we're all building barricades," Lemoine continues, "It's in case the rest of you ever figure out how incredibly easy it was for us to get to where we are". This is the frightening truth, Catton suggests; being a billionaire is not the product of hard work or genius but of luck and exploitation. One need only look at Elon Musk to confirm that there is some truth to this.

Although Lemoine's outward persona as a billionaire is a carefully constructed front, the hidden truth of his character – wronged and vengeful – is a cultural given: billionaires are bad. This makes Lemoine a caricature twice over, both in the caricature he

constructs of himself and the caricature of the evil billionaire hiding beneath it.

Catton's caricaturizing extends to all characters, even the well-intentioned if at times hapless group of climate activists of Birnam Wood, a guerilla gardening collective involved in illegally cultivating crops "along verges and fence lines, beside motorway offramps, inside demolition sites and in junkyards filled with abandoned cars," to create sustainable food-sources and subvert public opinion on land ownership.

Mira Bunting, the founder of Birnam Wood – the group's name alludes to Shakespeare: "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him" – fervently believes in the group's mission to generate "radical, widespread and lasting social change," through its gardening practices. Mira is a charismatic and deeply principled leftist radical, but can, to the frustration of those around her, act as though "the rules that bound the little people were just too tiresome and too ordinary to apply to her". The allusion to Macbeth is fitting; similar to Lemoine's self-aggrandizement, Mira too is caught up in her outsized ambitions and ideals, but for only one of them, that flaw will prove to be tragic.

"There was a kind of safety in abstraction," Catton suggests, and Mira embodies that sentiment; she is a caricature of the leftist ideologue caught up her own "roving speculative energy," and blind to "those aspects of mundane existence that could not be posited or wished away". Nevertheless, her fervor is infectious and her convictions are woozily inspiring.

For caricatures can do two things: they either reduce a character to its flaws or they endear and charm. Catton manages to capture both, in Lemoine's vengefulness and Mira's ideological fervor, respectively.

When a landslide closes the Korowai Pass on New Zealand's South Island and the small town of Thorndike is cut off from civilization, leaving a sizeable farm abandoned, Mira is alert to the opportunity that the farm presents to Birnam Wood. She takes a trip to Thorndike to scout the location. Once there, she finds acres of land ready to be cultivated, if it wasn't for an unnerving encounter with its new owner: Robert Lemoine. Lemoine, in line with his public appearance as a paranoid billionaire, alleges to have bought the farm in order to construct a bunker to keep safe should a global apocalypse arrive.

Mira is frightened by Lemoine, not just by his demeanor but also by his effect on her. For despite their insurmountable differences – Lemoine is filthy rich, Mira a leftist radical – she is attracted to the billionaire. Even more surprisingly, Lemoine offers the farm and a sizeable cash-infusion to Birnam Wood. Lemoine's motive remains unclear; perhaps his humanity is seeping through his carefully constructed front, or Mira presents just another puppet for Lemoine to play with. Either way, an apprehensive

relationship begins to unfold between them, charged with the tension that their remote positionalities produce.

This leaves Mira with the dilemma to what degree she can, in good conscience, collaborate with the 'enemy'- "Like all self-mythologizing rebels, Mira preferred enemies to rivals, and often turned her rivals into enemies, the better to disdain them as secret agents of the status quo" - in order to advance Birnam Wood's goals. Nevertheless, Mira is anything but immune to the attractions of power and blinded by her dreams for Birnam Wood, she decides to accept Lemoine's offer.

Mira is an endearing caricature of the well-intentioned but hapless leftist radical; her ideals are so firm and her personality so moralistic that it clouds her better judgement. Still, Catton is clearly empathetic to Mira, and this empathy is infectious - despite the moral ambiguity of her relationship to Lemoine, one cannot help but root for her.

But Mira's personal dilemma over her partnership with Lemoine is only part of the problem. In line with Birnam Wood's 'Principles of Unity', the group is devoutly democratic. This sets up what is the novel's most accomplished scene; in a soup-kitchen, the members of Birnam Wood meet to discuss the possibility of accepting Lemoine's offer.

"What are they talking about?" Shelley, Mira's best friend, asks another member of the group. "Capitalism, I think?" he responds. "Didn't we already solve that one?" Shelley asks.

The discussion Shelley is witness to is dominated by Tony Gallo. Tony is Mira's ex-lover; a disillusioned academic with a master's in "critiquing the anti-humanism of post-structuralist political thought," who left unexpectedly for Mexico only to be accused by the academic community at large over his essay on language barriers and class difference for "reinforcing harmful stereotypes, of sentimentalizing violence, and of being yet another entitled white man". Feeling wronged and misunderstood, Tony returns unexpectedly to New-Zealand to attend Birnam Wood's meeting, having decided to leave academia for a career in journalism.

Before the meeting has even started, Tony becomes increasingly passionate in a jeremiad on consumerism, market-thinking, individualism, polyamory ("polyamory is so fucking capitalistic"), intersectionality and neoliberalism - in short, he is outraged by every inch of liberal thinking, arguing that all of it is "still inside the paradigm" which they so desperately want to subvert. The reaction by the group is riddled with humor - "Like, is anyone filming this?" - making for a comedic theatre that is probably recognizable to anyone ever involved in self-defeating fights amongst leftist radicals.

When the meeting turns to Lemoine's offer, Tony is quick to respond: "He's literally the opposite of everything we stand for... It's blood money". Public opinion amongst the group has shifted away from working in Tony's favor, however - "You come back

after how many years, you completely dominate the conversation, you're rude and dismissive, you're eating food that *we* grew and *we* cooked for you" – and so when the group moves to vote, the majority is in favor of working with the billionaire, even if only to spite Tony.

As it turns out, rather expectedly, Lemoine's wish to use the farm as a doomsteading project is merely a scheme. His supposed interest in the Korowai farm lies actually in the protected nature reserve that neighbors it. Here, Lemoine intends to illegally mine rare-earth minerals to acquire a staggering fortune, at the cost of causing widespread ecological destruction.

At this point, what has thus far been a comedic drama develops into a thriller with a decidedly ecological twist. The dramatic irony is that none of Birnam Wood's members are aware of Lemoine's insidious plans. That is, except for the group's outcast, Tony: "Whatever was going on in Korowai was going on in secret and he, Tony Gallo, *Anthony* Gallo, was going to be the one to flush it out".

As an aspiring journalist, Lemoine's secretive exploitation of the Korowai land offers a promising opportunity to Tony: "*This* was his story". Tony is an unlikely hero; feeling misunderstood and underappreciated, he is guided as much by his 'Berniebro' ideology as his desire for personal glory. Although Catton caricaturizes Tony's vanity – "I am going to be so fucking famous" – one cannot help but share in his excitement: "He was part of the story, he was the story. He saw himself on stage, on a podium, collecting an award".

While secretly documenting Lemoine's activities in Korowai, Tony finds himself in a David-and-Goliath story against a power that far exceeds his ability – Lemoine has advanced drone technology as well as a private army at his disposal – but that makes Tony all the more likeable and the story all the more suspenseful. Will one unlikely hero be able to subvert an evil billionaire's exploitation of the environment?

Birnam Wood, as a result, offers more than caricatures of the all too familiar performers in our present ecological drama. It stages a conflict between good and evil and looks the painful truth squarely in the eyes: in our current environmental predicament, the evil far outweighs the good, both in capital and in power.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Tony declares during his tirade at Birnam Wood's meeting. "As long as we keep thinking like this, we're stuck with cynicism. There's nothing else. We'll never be able to agree or work towards a common goal, and that means the whole project of genuine left-wing politics is fucked."

Still, Birnam Wood is not a cynical novel. Exactly in Catton's unflinching attention to the cynical truth, she captures a sense far more powerful than dread: as long as characters like Mira and Tony believe in their trans-formative potential despite all evidence to the contrary, there is hope.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom van Bunnik is an RMA student in Comparative Literary Studies with a background in English and German literature. His personal and academic interests lie in memory studies, life writing and environmental humanities, with a particular focus on poetry as a way to open up our way of being in the world through literature. He is well-trained in theory and has a deep desire to open up academia to broader audiences.

BIG SWISS BY JEN BEAGIN

and How We Can Let Ourselves Be Understood

By Mara Facon

When I was around eight years old, my parents started sending me to therapy. I was bewildered by the fact that they would even consider it necessary, because I didn't think I was 'crazy'. Nonetheless I obediently went to a child psychologist for a few sessions, and we talked about why my swimming lessons made me feel like crying.

I didn't really see the point of this exercise, so I only returned to therapy in my adult life. By this point, a lot of my peers were not only discussing therapy but also considering it for themselves. Coming of age meant we had to grapple with changes to both our bodies and minds, under constant threat of buckling beneath the weight of problems outside of our control. Living through the Covid-19 pandemic shifted our perception of mental health issues once more, because in isolation, so many more of us were affected by them. I remember whispering to my therapist over Zoom, fearing that

my family could overhear our conversations when they passed my room.

When the restrictions were lifted, it felt as though our collective awareness had altered. The stigma seemed to have decreased. At the same time the normalization of discussions of mental health also led to the topic being glamourized in recent times. On the internet, an image of a mentally unwell girl à la Angelina Jolie in *Girl, Interrupted* has begun circulating and gaining popularity. These girls smoke copious amounts of cigarettes, read Russian novels, listen to Lana del Rey. Put simply, they embody a new kind of cool.

Picking up Jen Beagin's *Big Swiss*, my preconception about the novel was that it would fit into this category of media about sad, unhinged women. The appeal of this was definitely not lost on me. There's something attractive and refreshing about difficult, complex feminine characters who simply don't give a shit. Growing into womanhood can put a lot of weirdness into your head. You're often told to suppress your emotion in favour of being deemed socially acceptable. As artist Audrey Wollen expresses in her Sad Girl Theory, women can "consciously disrupt ... the status quo through enacting their own sorrow".

My worry, however, has been that the rise of the Sad Girl places women into categories that fetishize and dumb down their experiences of pain and trauma. Branding certain behaviours or interests as part of being an unhappy woman is ultimately reductive - not to mention how it all comes back to feeding into consumerism - but it's remarkably pervasive. In my head, a vision of *Big Swiss's* main character as an Ottessa Moshfegh reject had developed before I even got beyond the first few pages. And I was right, to some extent, but also very, very wrong.

Greta lives in a crumbling 300-year-old Dutch house outside of Hudson, NY with her friend Sabine and a sprawling hoard of animals, ranging from Greta's idiosyncratic terrier Piñon to a hive of bees that inhabit their kitchen. Just like her home, Greta has been slowly heading toward physical and psychological disintegration for many years. Her mother committed suicide when she was a child, leaving her aimless and emotionally stunted. At 45 years old, she has never had a stable job in her life and finds it hard to take care of herself adequately. In her current employment, as a transcriptionist for the local sex-therapist Om, she encounters her unsuspecting small-town neighbours at their weakest, their most indulgent and self-pitying. But one of Om's patients, an enigmatic woman from Switzerland, catches Greta's attention.

Big Swiss, as she nicknames her, has experienced a violent assault, having been almost beaten to death by a man who is soon to be released from prison. In spite of this traumatic experience, she doesn't wallow during her sessions; in fact, she displays a detachment that is quite similar to Greta's.

The two eventually run into each other at a dog park, where Greta makes the spur

of the moment decisions to a) lie to Big Swiss, whose real name is Flavia, about her identity, and b) meet her for drinks the next day.

Drinks turn into daily walks with their dogs, then into a full-blown affair, all the while Greta still listens to and transcribes Flavia's therapy sessions. Her game, which hasn't been played masterfully in the first place, eventually unravels completely. Flavia finds out that she's been lied to, their affair is revealed to her husband and finally, Greta is let go from her job under the condition that she visits Om as a patient and transcribes her own sessions. At the novel's end we find Greta in a more hopeful place, healing her broken heart with the help of two mini donkeys that live in the stable outside her home.

Big Swiss's protagonist is eccentric, which is reflected in how she tells the story with all of its dry humour and minute details. Beagin also plays with form, allowing Greta's voice to interrupt the transcripts to comment on what's happening or having her thoughts suddenly take the shape of the transcriptions without her being able to control it. But Greta's grip on the narrative, however dubious it was from the beginning, slips at a certain point. During their affair, she can no longer hold on to her role as an auditory peeping tom, instead regularly spilling her guts to Flavia. Greta sees Flavia as aspirational, first and foremost. She wishes that she could mirror herself in her lover, particularly when it comes to how she deals with her trauma.

Greta appears to know what her problem is from the start: her mother killed herself, she cannot feel emotions properly, and she is suicidal. But this knowledge doesn't actually enable her to act; in fact, she is clearly stuck in her traumatic past, writing urgent notes to her dead mother, and letting life pass by her. Her suffering is distinctly unappealing, far from the coolness of the stylish Sad Girl. This is reflected in her living situation: not only does it rain directly into her room, but Greta and Sabine's home is regularly infested with insects, which are treated not as pests but as roommates. At one point a colony of ants "passes through" her bedroom to which she reacts by simply moving all her belongings into a small chamber until they are gone again.

Greta is completely helpless in these situations, returning to a child-like state unless someone is there to pull her out. Meanwhile, animals like the dogs and donkeys take on the role of typical therapy animals – a comparison Greta would probably scoff at – because they involve her in a process of mutual care and comfort. But deep down it seems as though Greta wishes she could see things like Flavia does: to accept trauma as part of her life and stop "rolling around in [her] own shit".

This approach to trauma seemed cynical to me when I read the novel. I felt called out by the characters' refusal to give in to common approaches to therapy. In fact, I wouldn't simply call it resistance to therapy but to emotion generally. Until the very end, I felt like Big Swiss was meant to turn you off of feeling forever, because you're just throwing yourself a pity party that doesn't end up helping you in any substantial way anyways. It struck me as old-fashioned, more Baby Boomer

than Gen-X in its 'suck-it-up' attitude. The description of Flavia's assault made me (a Gen-Z-er) feel for her quite profoundly, which is something that I wished the novel had done as well.

One of *Big Swiss's* last chapters offered me some much-needed untangling of Greta's past through her therapy session with Om. I finally got a sense of the truth underlying her attitude, as she uncovers the extent to which she was involved in her mother's passing. Their relationship was defined by her mother's bipolar disorder, which led to a lot of pressure on Greta from an early age to suppress her emotion and keep her mother from spiralling. But when her mother "threatened suicide for the nine thousandth time", Greta gave her blessing to go through with it.

Om sees Greta recreating the conditions of her childhood in her relationship with Flavia, essentially morphing into her own mother by desperately hanging onto someone she loves, making her survival depend on the presence of one person in her life. Considering Flavia's attitude towards trauma, Greta might have known she would enable her inaction about her mental state. If things had been left to run their course, Greta might have even come to rely on Flavia to give her a reason to end her life.

By separating the torrid couple at the very end, Beagin offers Greta the chance to change for the better, even though it means risking a lot. Greta has to admit to herself that her trauma isn't somehow too complicated or unique to examine. It could lead her in the right direction. Maybe she can break the cycle created by her upbringing. Maybe she'll escape the Sad Girl fate by allowing herself to be both complex and understood by someone. Maybe we can all stop playing it cool, put our pain on the table and ponder over it like a jigsaw puzzle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mara Facon is a Swiss post-graduate student, living and working in the Netherlands. Their main interest is in queer literature and contemporary poetry. In their thesis for their studies in English and History at the University of Basel, they analysed the poet Sumita Chakraborty's use of animal symbolism and metaphors. They were also active as an art educator at the Kunstmuseum Basel.

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

By Ashley Fields

I have always loved ghost stories – those that keep you up long past the lights were turned off. The ones that leave an unsettling feeling in your spine and gut, that make you question the boundaries of humanity. I have chased those tales from a young age. The first horror movie I watched was *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). I remember sneaking into our family living room, opening the tape box, praying that my parents wouldn't hear the creak of the plastic contraband, and placing that forbidden treasure into the VCR. I stared at the TV wide-eyed and mesmerized, while desperately trying to peak behind the edges of the screen to catch a glimpse of the thing I was meant to be afraid of. See, in those films, you never know what haunts you. You just know that you are being haunted.

Kevin Jared Hosein's *Hungry Ghosts* is of the same vein as the forbidden pleasures of my youth. Love for the unknown, unseeable entity followed me

through to adulthood and to some degree formed my literary consciousness. Hosein weaves together the lives of individuals from different walks of life—a drug dealer, a gambler, a transgender woman, and more. Each character's journey unfolds in a poignant and heart-wrenching narrative, offering a raw and unflinching portrayal of their struggles. One sentence into the novel and I felt that eery familiar sensation make its way down my spine and settle in my belly: "Four boys ventured to the river to perform a blood oath". Oh, Kevin. What have you started?

In the barracks, where entire families share single bedrooms, the Saroop family — consisting of Hans, Shweta, and Krishna— live a life dictated by poverty and faith. When the town madman, Dalton Changoors, disappears one day, leaving his wife alone in the decrepit estate, Hans attempts to change his family's misfortunes by moving on to the property with Marlee Changoor. As the wide cast of characters revealed more of Trinidad to me and the language demanded me to accept Hindi without Googling meanings of phrases I had never heard. I knew what Hosein had done was both uniquely brilliant and yet familiar in a way that I had previously read.

I first read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* a few years back. As a literature student, I had heard of the text, but always felt a bit too intimidated by the lore of the title character to actually start reading it on my own. One day I was finally able to take the leap and ordered the book. Upon unboxing the package, I was faced with the cover image of a mother carrying what appeared to be a lifeless child. It is a confronting and unnatural image. As I entered the world of another of Morrison's classics, the story of Sethe unfolded. Sethe once had a two-year-old daughter whom she was forced to kill to avoid the baby's re-enslavement by their white overseer. The home that Sethe and her increasingly fragmented family live in is haunted first by grief and trauma which is then personified through the appearance of Beloved. As the story continues, Beloved becomes more and more greedy for her mother's and sister's attention. Soon, Sethe must quit her job in order to satisfy Beloved - to no avail.

The colonial ghost is of a different caliber. Hosein was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1986. His debut adult novel, *Hungry Ghosts*, published earlier this year, carries forth the tradition of Black authors utilizing science-fiction to tell the untellable — namely the effects of slavery and colonialism on a society. The imagination of the Black author is pushed past the limits of what is deemed humane in order to tell the story of those treated inhumanely.

Beloved and *Hungry Ghosts* both occupy that space in between life and death. They convincingly flirt with the landscape of the afterlife. Just as in Morrison's work, the families in Hosein's novel are haunted by the ghost of those who were killed as the only means of obtaining freedom. The spaces they inhabit become putrid with roaming grief and a desire for reconciliation. The barracks in *Hungry Ghosts* in which the main family resides are thus described:

These barracks were scattered like half-buried bones across the plain, strewn from their colonial corpse. In their marrow, the ghosts of the indentured. And the offspring of those ghosts.

The title 'Hungry Ghosts' is a translation of the Sanskrit word preta, derived from the word meaning "departed" or "deceased". These supernatural beings co-exist with humans and in Hinduism and possess an insatiable hunger and thirst. Their presence is unrelenting. In this sense, grief could be said to become a tangible character in (post)colonial texts as *Beloved* and *Hungry Ghosts*. As Paul D details in *Beloved*, loneliness has the ability to take human form:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up, holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind-- wrapped tight like skin. Then there is the loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive. On its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place.

Such loneliness prevails in the genre of Back speculative fiction, in which this text can arguably be considered.

The parameters of love are also contended with in both texts, particularly in the case of parent-child relationships. The narrator of *Beloved* describes the caution that Paul D has when speaking about the love that Sethe has for her children:

Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.

Love, here, can be weaponized against the parent. Love in such circumstances is a dangerous risk in the most literal sense.

The aspect that makes good horror is the unrelenting presence of discomfort. Hosein hammers that emotion persistently. There is not a moment when reading where you can let your guard down. I am deeply moved by the notion of a hungry ghost that lingers in the memories of survivors of colonial trauma. All the more interesting is the common themes found in writers who are separated by distance and time, yet who can capture to insatiable desire for peace and recognition that has long been denied.

Though I will never embarrass myself by calling another author a new Morrison, I will go as far to state that novels like Hosein's further the discussion pioneered by Black authors such as Morrison and Octavia Butler. This is a conversation that addresses the inhumane violence and displacement forced onto the Black diaspora - whether that be in the Americas or the Caribbean - through a more distanced medium of speculative fiction.

Hungry Ghosts propels that conversation forward in a region of the

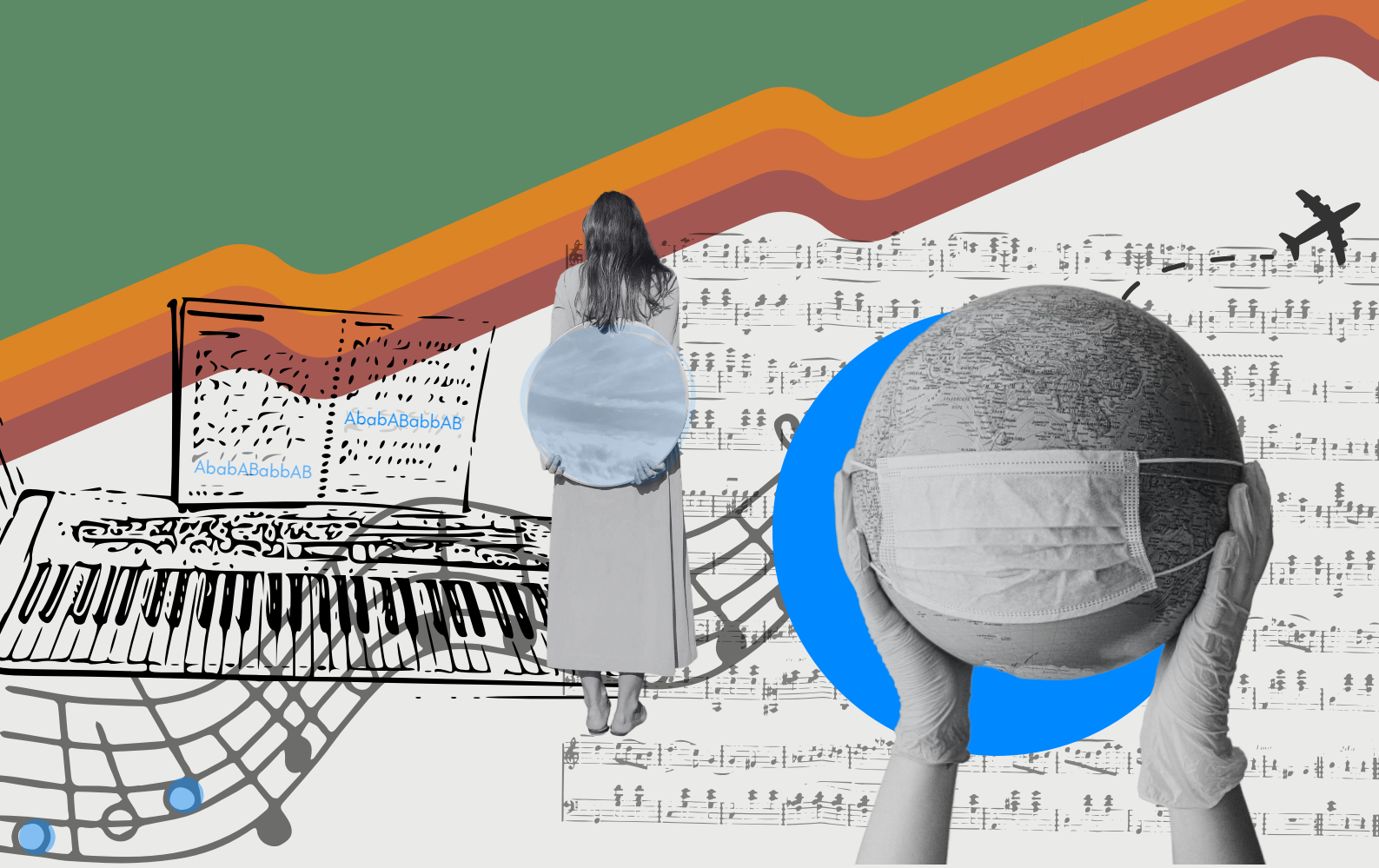
British Commonwealth that has consistently been disenfranchised, overlooked, and subjected to commodification. The text addresses the reverberating consequences of European and American colonialism in the Caribbean which have denied Caribbeans of their basic rights.

Hungry Ghosts is a literary triumph that will linger in the hearts and minds of readers long after the final page is turned, leaving them with a profound appreciation for the complexities of human connection.

Now that I am older and no longer looking behind the TV to see if the monsters are lingering there, I see that the real scary things lurk elsewhere. They are the unacknowledged grief that demands to be felt. The spooky entities are the ghosts that crave to be seen. And our ghosts need to always be hungry if we feed them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Fields is an American expat, living in the Netherlands. She enjoys good food, good books, and a good scare. While continuing her studies at Utrecht University, she works as a freelance copy editor.



LIFE, INTERRUPTED

Deborah Levy's Latest Explores How (Hard It Is) to Reconstruct an Identity

By Lottie Gale

Since the year 2020, we have all been performing. We are walking reconstructions of our pre-pandemic selves. Amid lockdowns, blue masks and sanitising stations, our lives were put on pause. When it was time to press play again, the world had refracted into a spectrum of ends (people died) and beginnings (dolphins swam in the Venice canals). We catch glimpses of *what could have been* in the streetlights that line the path we now take.

Deborah Levy, acclaimed novelist, memoirist and two-time Booker Prize nominee, turned to the world of classical music to explore her notion of identity being "self-composed". Her ninth novel, *August Blue*, is a lyrically conducted dream sequence that attempts to pull together the pieces of a life, interrupted.

Though the "Sars-CoV-2 Rapid Antigen Test" is jarringly name-dropped once or twice, *August Blue*'s

pandemic does not dwell on the intricacies so much as it swells in the background to instil a sense of unease and displacement. Levy has been praised for the way this captures something of "the dazed reawakening of the social self during that time of gradual unmasking". However, the pandemic was not the main interruption in her protagonist's glittering career.

Elsa M. Anderson is an orphan and celebrated concert pianist who recently dyed her hair blue on a whim. Fostered aged 6 by piano maestro Arthur Goldstein, a "short man. With complexes", who plays a dually paternal and pedagogical role for the young child prodigy. This notion of doubles is central to Levy's depiction of unravelling self-image. At the height of Elsa's success, she performs Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No.2* at the Golden Hall in Vienna. Until she doesn't. For two minutes and 12 seconds, Elsa's hands (insured for millions, silkened with orange blossom hand cream) play a composition of their own. The audience is stunned, the conductor enraged, Elsa entranced. She walks off stage shortly after.

We join Elsa a few weeks after her mid-performance breakdown as she drifts between Athens, London, Paris and Sardinia – places emerging from their own disruption as quarantines lift. She recognises her failure, that she "had messed up the Rach", truncating the Russian virtuoso's name to assert her familiarity with his fine work. She is telling us that she is at home with such men, the greats. This is also a revealing performance of belonging: to say Rachmaninov's name in full would be a breathless admission of what she abandoned halfway through.

Confusion about her next steps makes it painful for Elsa to face the music in full. While meandering between private piano lessons, she tries to come to terms with the unexpected notes that spilled out of her fingers in Vienna. Her hands committed an act of disobedience, but Elsa is not sure against whom; the conductor is their ostentatious master, but she herself is their corporeal possessor. She seeks new avenues of self-expression. But is it too late?

A key lesson that Elsa learns from her own identity troubles is not to impart them onto others, perpetuating the cycle. This is most apparent in the didactic traits she inherits from her high-pressured experience as a child prodigy. She narrates a lesson with her favourite pupil:

"When I wanted to correct a mistake, I lifted their wrist off the keys. You are stealing my hand, marcus said ... I made a decision to never do that again."

Elsa sees this kind of interruption as perversion – she intervenes because of her role as teacher, but who knows what the child could have created if not cut off? This mirrors the disruption of Elsa's own career, to the powers that forced her hands off-script, and the powers that ultimately reigned them in after two minutes and twelve seconds. Can impulse be rationalised? Her decision to "never do that again", and her affection for this particular pupil, "I felt at ease in their

company", suggests she is gaining back some freedom. Is this a result of distancing from the version of herself who performs on a stage, being conducted? Levy leverages interruption in the composition of her writing: being thrown off course is sometimes an opportunity.

Don't be mistaken - Levy ensures that Elsa's journey towards "a new composition" is not entirely internalised, this is not a novel about a celebrity's lonesome fall from grace. Elsa has company in the shape of a mysterious doppelgänger that follows her around the world. She is aware of her mirrored self from the opening scene in Greece, when she watches the woman buy the last two mechanical toys at a market stall. Here begins the imagined dialogue between Elsa and her double, in the apt form of a musical refrain:

Maybe you are, she said.
Maybe I am what?
Looking for signs.
What sort of signs?
Reasons to live.

The seemingly telepathic call-and-response between the women is a gift from Levy to her readers: through these refrains we edge closer to understanding the rebirth of identity that is taking place. This is a gift that keeps giving - it is also where Levy's wistful style with its pauses, spurts and stutters, is most rich and illuminating. In a novel preoccupied with displacement and disruption, the use of the doppelgänger serves as a firm focal point for Levy to explore what it looks like to shed, and construct, a version of the self. The alter ego means Elsa is not reforming from scratch - she holds up a time-elapsing looking glass for the trauma of Elsa's childhood and the glimpses of the woman she is yet to become.

Outside of Elsa and her "shadow-self", doubleness begins to dizzy Levy's narrative. Her writing loops around itself and at times gets tangled in its own insistence on musicality - people can be "perfectly composed" and padlock combinations become broken melodies, "Try two-four-eight-six". Her trademark resonance of objects, what Filgate refers to as a "throughline in Levy's work", does not escape this lyricism. Elsa's friend Marie, having just attacked a speeding motorcyclist, hugs Elsa goodbye and walks off "with the bloody ring in her pocket". The scene abruptly shifts to Elsa making tea, alarmed by the heat from "the tiny ring of gas on the hob". In a short paragraph break, a couple of lines, Levy is drawing a 'ring' across time. Small shapes act as beats in the rhythm of Elsa's observations, much like the parallels between the two doppelgängers. Levy plays on images that might otherwise be abstrA-

AbstrA? Ab# ABabABabAB BBBaaa AAABBB

Sorry - images that might otherwise B AbstrAct or arbitrA-

A#

My hands converge to play the black and white keys. How is it that a Dell Inspiron 7500 transforms into a Yamaha U1? I type A for abstract and a low hum rings out. The white, stencilled laptop keys are worn,

but now the ivory chimes in a tuneful melody as I glide my hands across the octaves of the QWERTY pad. With each stroke, the 1082 words of my August Blue review stretch into lines of sheet music. The pixels of small, black letters bleed into the ink of minims, quavers, treble clefs. All of which I play, my fingers moving with deft pace when moments before they faltered on how to start the next sentence. A bum note. CTRL + Shift and it becomes C-sharp. In the distance, I think I hear the rapid clicking of keys – typing, typing – but no, it is my metronome – ticking, ticking.

What possesses these hands which, I'm sure, were growing stiff as they approached that halfway-through-the-wordcount slump? My creation crescendos. I slide my feet forward, angle my toes towards the base of my instrument, then rush down on the smooth pedals. What pedals? My shoes unceremoniously meet the floor beneath my desk, next to the bin (top of the pile: rejected notes on Levy). My piano has an off button, it protrudes amid this interlude. I press it with purpose, maybe if I push it hard enough the polished wood of the piano will reconfigure to the chrome edges of my laptop. I have an essay to finish. It is no use – the black and white keys taunt me. I slam closed the lid of my piano – the glowing screen flickers off.

Time for a break – I walk to the kitchen in search of coffee. Someone is boiling the kettle, the hob ring beneath it glows red. I think of the bloody ring in Marie's pocket. I think of the ring of gas on Elsa's hob. I shake out my fingers, trying to expel the trance they were under, but when I stretch them out the silver bands embellishing each digit twist.

Dizzied vision blurs silver rings, hob rings, coffee stain rings. Levy's doubles have ricocheted their way into my day, and maybe coffee will not shake that, but fresh air should.

Walking down the stairs, I think about how when you love someone, you see them everywhere. Your eyes become dartingly distracted by imagined glimpses of them. I grab my keys, paying no attention *whatsoever* to the silver loop of the keyring, and open the door. Outside, I breathe in the cold air to clear my mind – what Levy would call "an impersonation of self-composure". I decide I will take my bike. My remaining 1000 words will be better after cycling, and anyway my laptop is now a piano.

I think about my birthday last year. A friend bought me a Daunt Books bag. I had never heard of the place, to her surprise. The next day on the Tube I saw one thousand people with Daunt Books bags. It has a name I think, the Frequency Illusion.

My bike waits amongst its two-wheeled friends. The pairs of wheels spin and the silver spines glint. Levy's cycles interrupt my cycle. I consider, was Elsa seeing herself everywhere because she thought of herself, frequently? An obsession over a broken identity allows us to identify how Elsa feels about the adult, and artist, she is becoming. I rub my eyes and suddenly I am standing in a jewellery store. Gone are the bike wheels slotted in racks –

now rings, silver rings,
nestled side-by-side
as far as I can see.
Metamorphosis: Ovid,

Kafka... Levy?

Elsa strives for "a mental impression of harmonic combinations". The thoughts that plague us will not relent until we address their intrusion. I think we should finish what we started more often.

I circle back inside.

Cautiously, I approach the closed machine on my desk. Upon touch, will it spring back into that strange, mutant instrument? I stopped piano lessons aged 12 because the teacher described my pinky fingers as unobliging.

You have an essay to finish; these hands are yours – they will type if you conduct them so. I prise open the lid and the Word document glares back, the screen familiar once again. Lines and bars of music have returned to the breaks and marks of words. And to my surprise, there are 2000 of them. Wordcount reached.
An interruption became inspiration. Levy told me it would.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lottie Gale is an MA 'Literature Today' student at Utrecht University. She is fascinated by the experience of being a reader, particularly considering the power of paratextual elements. Her previous research focuses on this idea, including her most recent discussion on 'Judging a Book by its Cover: Advantageous Eponymy and Active Titles'. As a film enthusiast, she also hopes that Dutch subtitles during cinema trips here will develop her currently extremely poor knowledge of the language.

"EVEN AFTER EVERYTHING"

A Review of Claire Dederer's *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma*

By Camille Guinée

Monsters. As children we lie in bed at night in fear that they should find us. As we grow up, we come to understand that the monsters we've been taught to fear — those furry, snot-nosed, ugly, and malevolently described creatures from our childhood tales —aren't as easily pinpointed, or as different from us, as we once thought.

Far more chillingly, the real monsters of our world look, act, and speak like us. At one point they might have been *just* like us. What's more concerning is that now, all grown up, these real-life monsters are capable of disguising themselves as us, or rather, as more exceptional versions of us. They share our creative talents and boundless potential, at times surpassing our abilities. Capable of crafting beautiful and profoundly compelling creations beyond our wildest imaginations. What separates them from us, however, is their gifts propensity to divert our attention from the truths of

their character.

As adults, no longer shielded by the innocence of childhood, we are expected to know better, to be capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, between a monster and a genius. This becomes especially challenging when we find ourselves inexplicably drawn to the creations of individuals whose actions or beliefs are morally reprehensible. So, how do we navigate the complex terrain of appreciating the work of people who turn out to be monstrous? What do we do when the lines that once seemed so clear, turn out to be blurry?

How are we to stay away from the monsters, so as to not become monsters ourselves?

This is the question which now plagues our era of 'cancel-culture' - an era characterized by moral righteousness and self-congratulation when it comes to finding and distinguishing the monsters from the masses. A debate which, despite its portrayal as a fervent pursuit of justice, often descends into a contest of moral superiority rather than a genuine expression of care.

Claire Dederers newest book, *Monsters*: *A Fan's Dilemma*, is a 13-chapter part-memoir, part-personal essay that tackles this exact dilemma: The actions of "monstrous" artists, whether we can separate their actions from the art they create, if we even should, and beyond that, what happens to us if we don't.

One might ask, who is this author to presume she has the authority to guide us in addressing a matter as profound as this, one which weighs heavily on the thoughts and minds of an entire generation? To answer that question: Claire Dederer is author of the New York Times best seller *Poser* and the acclaimed memoir *Love and Trouble*. She is known for writing on an array of subjects in the form of personal essays and cultural commentary, for which she has been recognized and garnered great attention. Described in The New York Times Book Review as "an excellent writer who spins her prose with the casual grace and easy humor of a seasoned professional".

This seems to be the perfect answer: exemplifying that she is established, that she is trustworthy. The truth of the matter, however, is that Dederer is a white middle-class woman — a feminist, a writer, a mother, someone who used to be a teenage girl, who has been preyed upon by older men, assaulted on the street, grabbed, coerced, and escaped rape. In our day and age she is, unfortunately, "non-special". She, like all of us, only has her personal take. She does not claim to offer any more or any less than this.

With this in mind, why not her?

Where any author might seize the chance to promote their foolproof approach to addressing such a complex subject, providing an unequivocal solution to all their readers' struggles, Dederer has taken a markedly different approach. She steadfastly avoids positioning herself as an impartial observer and rejects the concept of authoritative criticism. Instead, she

openly acknowledges the biases and subjectivities she brings to her exploration of the topic:

The tension between what I've been through as a woman and the fact that I want to experience the freedom and beauty and grandeur and strangeness of great art — this is at the heart of the matter. It's not a philosophical query; it's an emotional one.

The reason why all of Dederer's ideas appear so well-defined and confident is because she wholeheartedly takes ownership of them. She refrains from assuming that her thoughts and feelings will align perfectly with those of her readers; she acknowledges both the diversity of their experiences, and the fact that her own have an effect on the way she tackles this subject. She also recognizes her own monstrousness. Facing the emotional conflict in her struggle to be both a good writer and a devoted mother, while also dealing with a history of functioning alcoholism. She acknowledges that there are parts of her own life resisting harmony.

Eventually, she brings us to the realization that the purpose of this book is not to furnish us with definitive answers or a step-by-step guide on how to navigate the topic. I won't deny that I thought this would be the case, or rather, I hoped for it, so that I would know with certainty what was "right". Alternatively, it offers something far more valuable, presenting us with multiple avenues for introspection. These pathways enable us to delve into our own conflicting emotions—the very emotions that led us to pick up the book in the first place—leading us to a deeper comprehension of why we feel the way we do. As we begin to grapple with the fact that "what Woody Allen did was very wrong" and come to understand that despite this, our "feelings come from someplace more elemental than thought", we slowly begin to uncover the parts of us that may also be, at times, *monstrous*.

This declaration that Dederer is not an objective expert on the matter, is in turn what actually allows us to let down our guard. As soon as I knew all of these thoughts and explorations were a reflection of her own experiences rather than an assumption of mine, it became much easier to digest. Then additionally realizing I resonated with some of her experiences, felt less like Dederer was exposing me or calling me out for my conflicting emotions. Instead, feeling more like a moment of solidarity, of shared understanding that, yes, these issues are very complicated, our emotions are very complicated, I am not alone in this and neither are you.

But how did this all come about?

On 20 November 2017, Dederer published an essay in The Paris Review titled *What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?* In her essay, she grappled with the dilemma of enjoying and appreciating the creative works of artists who committed horrible acts. Reciting and reflecting on her personal engagement with the works of men like Roman Polanski, Woody Allen, V. S. Naipaul, and too many more to

mention. This would become, as Dederer intended it to be, the first chapter of her book *Monsters*.

This topic has hung in the collective air like a heavy mist. Almost every day a new idol is outed for not being what they claimed to be, and their audience is left with the responsibility of deciding what to do with everything they created. I will stop saying 'we' and 'us' in this moment because I stand behind the sentiment expressed by Dederer: we hide behind a collective, for fear of taking ownership and exposing our own complicated feelings. Every time a situation of this nature unfolds, an anxiousness is evoked in me. This person is 'cancelled' but, but the work. What do I do with the work? What do I do with the way it made me feel? With everything it gave me? An inner battle ensues.

Dederer tackles this battle head-on; she passionately articulates and expresses her own thought process in addressing the complicated confrontation between consumer, artist and art. In doing so, she allows me to tackle my own.

One complicated example pointed out by Dederer is that of the Harry Potter series, and more specifically, of its author J.K. Rowling.

Once more, into the fray we go.

Do I enjoy the magical wizarding world of Harry Potter? In all honesty, I do, I won't deny that fond memories of my childhood are attached to the discovery of this series. I had a comradery with a community that shared a fondness for magic, and a soft spot for a story in which good triumphed over evil. Nonetheless, do I have a visceral negative reaction to the reality of J.K. Rowling's comments with regards to the trans community? It genuinely disturbs me to even contemplate them. Both sentiments can coexist, as W.H. Auden aptly expresses, and as Derderer references: "the desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews". Dederer adds,

Our emotions, collapsed together with those of the artists we love, leave us vulnerable in ways that are entirely new in the Internet era. No wonder we don't know how to behave in this new landscape, or even how to feel.

How can someone who championed uniqueness, emphasizing inclusion in place of division, in the childhood books of so many, be so openly opposed to an entire real community which stands for a celebration of that above all? This "stain" as Dederer likes to call it, represents a betrayal — a betrayal to a community that, in years past, found solace in her books, felt understood, accepted. They created a relationship (albeit para-social) with someone they thought they knew, someone they believed knew them. What results is a deep cut and a harsh awakening.

And yet "even after everything", as Dederer so simply puts, why do I still have so much love for the story, the plot, the characters, the magic beneath it all? I believe that I know what is right, and I know what is wrong. Why can I not let go? And what do I do with the art?

The impulse to obliterate and

reprimand anything and everything created by Rowling is powerful, overwhelming. But as Dederer is quick to point out, does our decision to enjoy or hate something actually change anything? Is the idea that we might be able to make a difference by creating a bonfire of all the Harry Potter books ridiculous? Will it change any of the damage that has already been done? Will it change the fact that, after knowing all of this, I can't help but cherish the art? Is this simply the "plight of the audience member"?

Perhaps the fact of the matter is not to change this, but to simply recognize that:

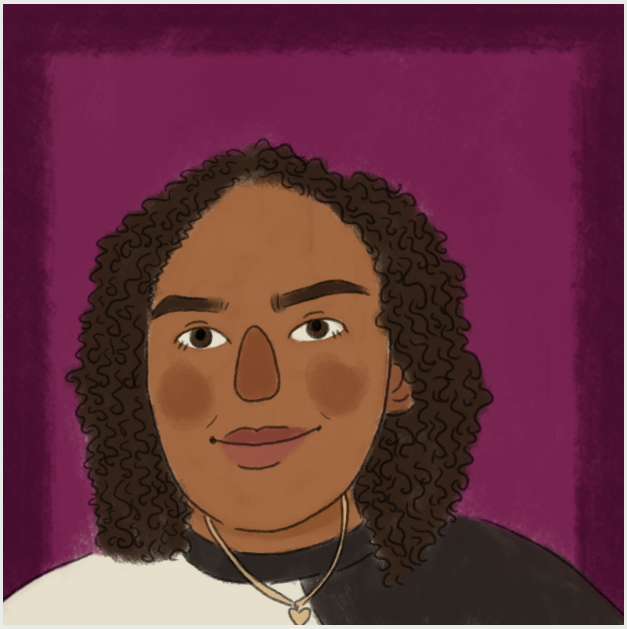
Love is not reliant on judgment, but on a decision to set judgment aside. Love is anarchy. Love is chaos. We don't love the deserving we love flawed and imperfect human beings, in an emotional logic that belongs to an entirely different weather system than the chilly climate of reason.

This "love" is not a cop out to absolve us or the artist of any responsibility for their actions, for the pain they have caused. No. I think the ultimate point is that this has little to do with them and much to do with how we go on in a world where someone like them, someone so *monstrous*, created something so cherished.

In a society captivated by the genius of artists who have committed unthinkable deeds, Dederer invites readers to embark on a journey that challenges preconceived notions, blurs moral boundaries, and reevaluates the intricate relationship between an artist's persona, their body of work, and the position of the consumer, caught in the web between.

Above all, Dederer's exploration unveils profound ambiguities—hidden truths that force us to confront uncomfortable aspects of ourselves and the way we operate. Her exploration of her own confusing, conflicted and complicated thoughts has given us the opportunity to find, to not shy away from, our own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Camille Guinée, currently a student at Utrecht University pursuing the MA 'Literature Today', maintains a profound fascination with how literature mirrors historical context, particularly in reference to postcolonial texts. Furthermore, she is deeply intrigued by how literature has evolved into a platform for exploring contemporary issues that occupy the minds of people today and continues to serve as a medium by which change is inspired. With an inquisitive spirit and a dedication to the written word, she is adamant about making her mark in the literary landscape.

LOVE, THEORETICALLY FLIPS OFF RESPECTABILITY POLITICS

By Lizzy Hinder

Merciless, incisive, and unapologetic; endearing, funny, and fiercely kind. That's the duality of *Love, Theoretically*, Ali Hazelwood's third romance novel, published in June this year. Through the adventures of Elsie Hannaway, adjunct professor of theoretical physics, Hazelwood portrays the United States sharply divided between rich and poor, an academic world riddled with infighting, and a society where traditional social expectations still dominate. Against this depressing backdrop, Hazelwood's cast of main characters appear like lights: twinkling, erratic, full of dreams and the desire to do right. While they don't always succeed, they continuously strive; and the fact that they do so in the everyday dances of the digital age, makes the novel a hope-giving read. More than anything else, *Love, Theoretically* is sincere: in Hazelwood's love of her genre, in the verisimilitude of the setting, in the richness exploration of its characters, and in its politics.

The plot is simple but effective. During the day, Elsie Hannaway grades papers, commutes between universities, and tries to get her students to learn something. In the evenings, she poses as a girlfriend, taking advantage of a lifetime's training in the art of people-pleasing to tailor herself to the requirements of each 'fake-date.' Her day and night jobs collide when she interviews for a faculty position at MIT and runs into Dr Jonathan Smith-Turner – known previously to her as only Jack Smith, the mysteriously hostile brother of her favourite client. Turns out that Smith-Turner is *also* on the faculty of MIT, a famed experimentalist physicist, and part of the selection committee. And – just to make things more interesting – he once pranked the most prestigious journal in theoretical physics. A prank which accomplished three things:

- The near-ruin of Elsie's mentor
- Discrediting theoretical physics as a prestigious academic field
- Inspiring Elsie to hold a life-long grudge.

From this beginning, romantic tensions and misunderstandings ensue, against the scenery of chilly Boston winters and feuding schools of physics.

I can't help but laugh at Elsie Hannaway. Not because her life is funny, but because Hazelwood knows her genre, and the role that comedy plays in the typical modern romance novel. While Elsie's financial situation is precarious, her health complicated by diabetes, and her family life the equivalent of T*he Song That Never Ends*, the way she tackles her problems is somewhere between hilarious and inspiring. One of my favourite lines occurs when her mother calls – just before Elsie presents a research talk – to panic about the impact of her brothers' feuding on the family's plans for Thanksgiving. Instead of telling her mother to get a grip, Elsie makes the following offer: "If by November things aren't better, I'll … look into rope restraints and cheap storage space, I promise. Gotta go, Mom."

We know what has to happen. We know that Elsie needs to learn how to say 'no', how to set boundaries. We know that she can no more keep peace in the family in perpetuity, any more than she can "give everyone the me they wanted, needed, craved." We sense it in her desire to tell her roommate that she prefers *The Twilight Saga* to auteur cinema, and in her fatigue with her mentor's perpetual mangling of her name (Elise, instead of Elsie.) We, the reader, know this from the beginning. We also know – it is a romance novel, after all – that she'll get there in the end. And until she gets there, we're happy to cry and laugh when we see what she tries first.

Hazelwood also makes a subtle but strong political argument through Elsie's experience. It could be summarized as: forget respectability politics. The equation which guides Elsie through her life – 'to get ahead, please people, by conforming to their expectations' – is a personal application of a politics of respectability, where someone from a disrespected context conforms in some way to expectations placed on them. Because these expectations are

usually articulated by people in positions of power and privilege, it is hoped that gates which might otherwise be closed to a person might be opened by the gatekeeper at hand. But in the end, 'getting ahead' might translate into nothing more than being able to live. As is the case in this novel; getting ahead professionally for Elsie also means getting out of a place where she can barely afford the insulin required for her to stay alive.

As both a woman in the male-dominated STEM field and an impecunious adjunct professor, Elsie starts as a believer of this philosophy. It's initially fruitful: she impresses the other professors on the hiring committee with her work and her performance during the interviewing process. However, her success in the latter case is based on her tailoring herself to each professor in one-on-one interactions and in pandering to the prejudices of the (nearly all-male) class of experimentalist graduate students, whom she must teach a trial class regarding the ultimate importance of theoretical physics. I couldn't help but cringe, when Elsie, with deliberate sweetness, informs a supercilious grad student that theoretical physics certainly is arcane, but because the mathematics of it can be useful to experimentalists, theoretical physics still has utility and value. My cringing had nothing to do with my appreciation for theoretical physics; I have no appreciation for theoretical physics, knowing absolutely nothing about it. It had everything to do with the subtle but clear parallel between Elsie's manipulation of the class and her evaluation of herself. For most of her life, Elsie has measured her usefulness to other people and presented herself as someone who can meet the requirements they have; and now, in her late twenties, this has grown from a habit into an internalized view of herself. But even in the novel's rising action, we get a clue about the likely result of this path. During her first meeting with Professor Monica Salt, who recruited her for the interview, Elsie once again assesses someone's requirements of her: "I know the Elsie she wants. A gladiator, a fighter." But - as we painfully discover with her - someone who recruits a gladiator rarely cares about the gladiator's survival.

In the end, Elsie's professional success is achieved, not thanks to anyone on the selection committee, who largely see her in terms of her gender or as a foot-soldier for their academic feuds. It's offered to her by someone who has read her work and finds it both excellent and useful for their research. They offer her a post-doctoral position at MIT, a collaboration with them, funding out of their research grants, a step forward for Elsie's career. A step forward which would also end Elsie's financial insecurity and her precarious access to healthcare. It's a stark contrast to her current employment situation, teaching as an adjunct professor at three different universities. But most vivid of all is the scene where she takes the job; her decision is greeted with incredulity, wonder, and then a gleeful hug from her new colleague. There, too, the contrast is clear: between a hiring committee of established professors who would take her, under the condition that she modify her personality to suit them and serve their agenda, versus another rising star in academia who wants her because of the

quality of her work.

The message to the reader is clear as well: people who see you as inferior, because of who you are, are not going to change their minds if you try to fit yourself into their expectations. The reward for making yourself convenient and useful is being used, often as a tool. Advancement is secured when you find the people who recognize your merit; and while that's an inherently chancy business, it yields much greater reward than 'playing the game'.

Key to Elsie's character development is the romantic relationship between her and Jack. Jack's hostility dissipates, as we and Elsie come to understand him better. Through their relationship, Hazelwood also offers us an intriguing portrait of a progressive masculinity. Jack-Smith Turner is physically imposing: tall, chiselled, with discreet but striking tattoos on muscled arms. Capable of scooping Elsie up in a bridal carry if she passes out from hypoglycaemia. He also has the kind of assertive personality that has no hesitation about using his physical or intellectual advantages. But - before you start edging away! - he has two other notable qualities to his character. First, Jack drinks his 'respect women' juice like it's his favourite beer. Better, Hazelwood shows us this feature of his character, rather than telling it, through his relationship with secondary female characters: one of his graduate students, who trusts Jack implicitly; his grandmother, whom he adores; his best friend, whom we later encounter in the novel. He repeatedly uses his privileged position as a man in STEM to make it a safer and fairer place for women, including for Elsie herself.

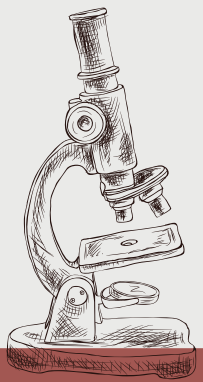
One of the most notable aspects of their relationship is how Jack pushes our heroine: not into having sex, as the male leads of previous romance eras might have done, but into fully inhabiting herself. Jack relentlessly calls Elsie "on her bullshit", as he puts it, because he is genuinely interested in knowing what she thinks, feels, and experiences. While he occasionally veers into the territory of paternalism in how he tries to help Elsie overcome her personal problems - indeed, it catalyses the mandatory third act blow-up - Jack simply isn't interested in dominating his partner. He praises Elsie's brilliance in her work, insists on her setting the physical pace of their relationship and enjoys acceding to her wishes. This last part is best shown in a cozy, sweet scene where he presents her with their entertainment for a movie night: a box set of *The Twilight Saga*.

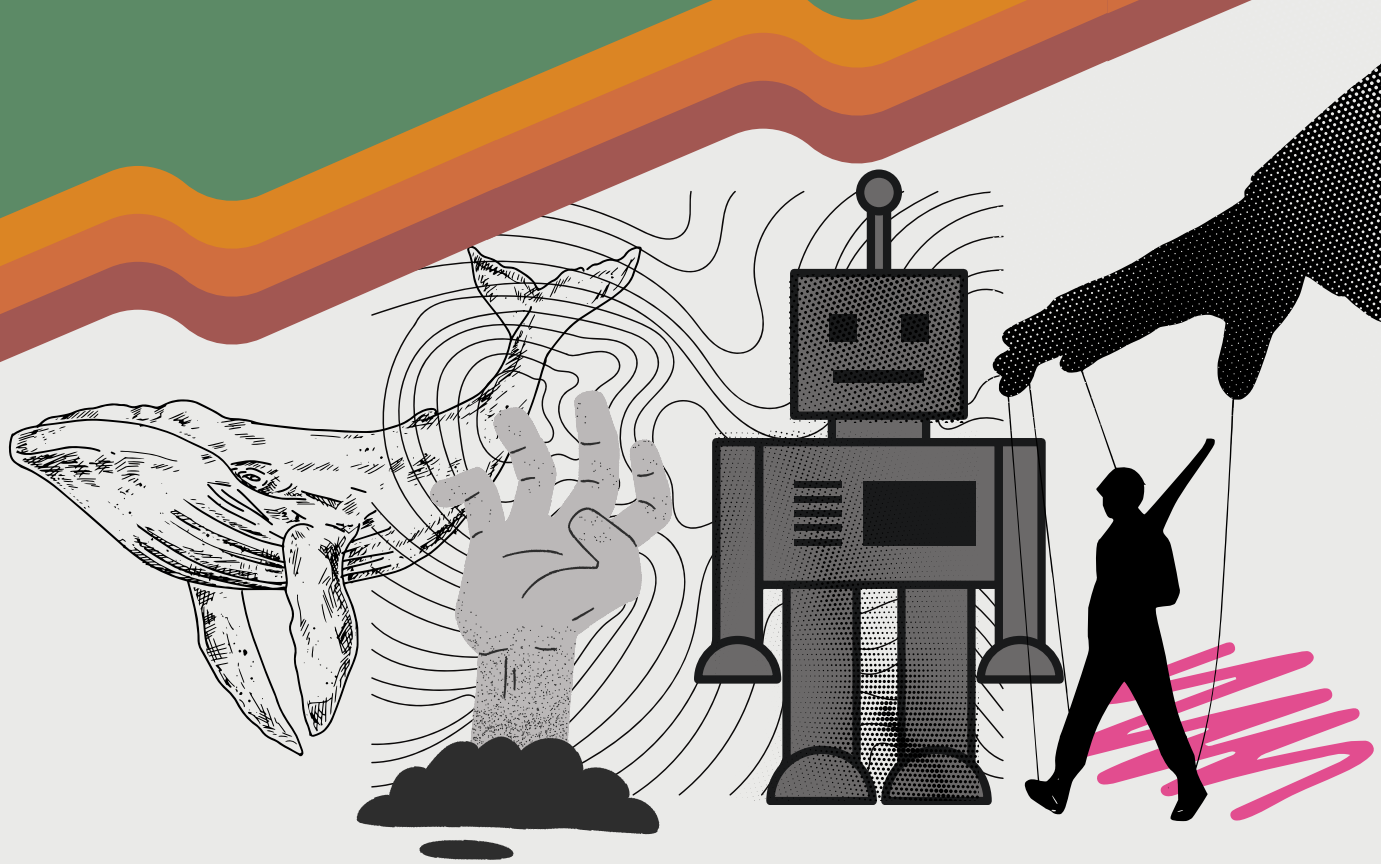
Best of all for the reader of the romance novel, this respect carries over into the bedroom. Jack's relentless campaign to understand Elsie inspires her to equal heights of honesty and determination to get to know him as well; it culminates in a dynamic where both of them are focussed on knowing and loving each other, physically and emotionally. And - Hazelwood doesn't disappoint here either - the sex is spicy, tastefully written, without ever being absurd or unrealistic. In other words, it continues her commitment to honesty, in all things.

To contribute the obligatory pound of flesh: this commitment to honesty does sometimes come at the expense of style. Hazelwood's narrative is smooth, quickly delivered, but Elsie's first-person narration leads to linguistic oddities which are either endearing or awkward, depending on the eye of the reader. Notable examples include Hazelwood referring to Elsie's phone as "the iTwat" – in theory, because its pattern of screen-cracks resembles a vulva – and her sometimes gratuitous use of the colon, and fragmented sentences. But – in all honesty – it still works. The prose might be clunky, but we're in Elsie's shoes, and Elsie will never be mistaken for 'a cool girl.' She is who she is: a nerd, an academic hopeful, a physicist; a stressed-out woman with a chronic health condition, a people-pleaser in recovery, a girl trying to figure out relationships. And we cheer when she finally re-introduces herself, towards the denouement of the novel: "I'm Elsie. I really love cheese, particle physics, and movies with sparkly vampires."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lizzy Hinder is an MA student at Utrecht University, originally from Australia. She likes reading historical novels, social histories, romances, and fantasy. She has been writing fantasy and romance stories since she was a teenager and reading them even longer. When not reading and writing, she can be found making friends with other people's pets.





PINOCCHIO WITH A FRANKENSTEIN COMPLEX

Why *In the Lives of Puppets* Should Be the First TJ Klune Book You Read

By Roos Kreeft

"Is that a whale?" Dad asked, pointing at the screen. "Yes," Vic said. "And it's going to swallow us whole."

Prepare to be transported into TJ Klune's dystopian fairy tale world where robots rule the world. Meet and fall in love with robots Giovanni, Rambo, Nurse Registered Automaton to Care, Heal, Educate, and Drill (Nurse Ratched for short), and Hap in this modern retelling of *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

Like his previous two novels, Klune manages to create a wholesome, exciting, and whimsical story in *In the Lives of Puppets*. It's not hard for the reader to fall in love with his flawed but extremely charming characters. His writing has his readers smiling and laughing along with this loveable bunch throughout the novel. Klune writes amazingly creative and compelling stories. And although he, once again, pulls it off, this time he doesn't manage to excel.

TJ Klune grapples with some of humanity's biggest questions in his latest novel. Such as: What happens when robots become sentient? Is it possible to overcome natural instincts? What is free will and how do we handle it? And maybe most harrowing: will humanity continue to survive, and more importantly, should it? But I'm getting ahead of myself now. Let's wind back a little bit to when all was good in this world. Let's go back to the Forest.

In the Forest, exiled robot Giovanni (General Innovation Operative) has created a home for himself. All that is missing is someone to share it with. As luck would have it, one day, Gio is entrusted with the care of Pinocchio - erm, Victor - a real boy! Victor, following in his adoptive father's footsteps, becomes a creator himself. In a place called the Scrap Yards, he finds the decommissioned robots Nurse Ratched and Rambo and fixes them up. Little Rambo is an overly anxious and extremely gullible robot that absolutely loves to vacuum; he is a Roomba after all. And Nurse Ratched is a vintage (one does not dare call her old) robot with sociopathic tendencies.

I often found myself laughing out loud while reading. Sometimes the book gave off the feel of a parent watching a Disney movie with their child and laughing along with the jokes only the adults will understand. Although the novel's premise might seem light-hearted, Klune handles serious themes (sexuality, anxiety, depression) by wrapping them in fun packaging. He makes light of these heavier subjects with little jokes (although sometimes it feels a bit overdone). When Nurse Ratched, for instance, tries to make Victor feel better about his "intense anxiety disorder" by saying that everyone is unique, Rambo interludes with a squealed "hooray!", exclaiming that they "all have things". These scenes usually occur when the trio visits the Scrap Yards - a dump for decommissioned robots and parts.

At the Scrap Yards, they usually only find parts of robots, or robots that are beyond repair, but one day they come across a dying android. Hap (aptly named Hysterically Angry Puppet) is a severely damaged robot, running out of power. After fixing him up with wooden parts and a new energy source, Hap is ready to join the family (although he's a little less friendly and a little too aggressive). By fixing Hap up, they accidentally send a signal to the bad guys - we never really learn what their evil plans are - which leads to Giovanni's abduction. The androids that show up urge Gio to come with them voluntarily, but when he argues, they wipe his memory and take him against his will. Victor and the others have seen all of this unfold in a hiding space, unable to do anything about it. Our found family must now rescue Gio from being decommissioned, or worse. And thus, the story begins...

Although, at its core, the book is a retelling of *Pinocchio*, it is brimming with references to other literary works. Nurse Ratched, named after the antagonist in Ken Kasey's 1962 novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, definitely shares some of her namesake's maniacal tendencies. Our Nurse Ratched, however, despite all her pretence, is more

magnanimous than she lets on. Victor is both Pinocchio as well as Victor Frankenstein. Klune winks at the 1818 Mary Shelley novel when Hap first wakes up in Victor's laboratory. "'It's alive,' Rambo whispered fervently. 'It's alive.'". There is also a Big Brother-like entity à la George Orwell's *1984*, that in the past purposefully hunted humans down to ensure their extinction and now records and surveils all robots to ensure that none of the robots 'suffer' from free will.

Speaking of free will: Klune nods to Frankenstein again when Hap starts to question what it means to have free will. Nurse Ratched, unable to find an adequate answer for him, says she must have disappointed Asimov. Isaac Asimov is, of course, one of the greatest science fiction writers. He coined the term "Frankenstein Complex" (hats off to Klune for this full circle moment); the fear that robots will develop a will of their own and eventually usurp humanity and even eradicate it. Ironic then, that this is exactly what happens in Klune's novel.

While Nurse Ratched admiringly invokes Asimov, Klune's novel does exactly what Asimov grew tired of. In an introduction to The *Rest of the Robots*, a 1964 collection of eight robotic stories, Asimov tells his readers that "[he] resented the purely Faustian interpretation of science". Asimov then deviates from the norm by creating benevolent robots, set on helping humanity rather than eradicating it. And although Klune's readers fall in love with Gio, Rambo, Nurse Ratched and Hap, they are the exceptions and not the rule. It turns out that robots have evolved into human-like androids: some able to smell, feel, emote, some motivated by monetary gain, others even seek sexual pleasure in the City of Electric Dreams (Klune's take on Las Vegas). Contrastingly, in the first part of the book the reader sees only the kindly androids that surround Victor. I even wrote in my notes that I found it refreshing that the novel wasn't a cautionary dystopian warning against what the future holds. I spoke too soon, as it turned out.

Klune dedicates his novel to humanity; even if it "kinda sucks", he feels the universe will allow it to stick around for a little while longer. In the novel, he briefly touches on why humanity ultimately becomes eradicated. Gio tells Victor a little bit about humans: "Some devoted their lives to lifting each other up. Still others fired guns in deserts and schools, closed borders against those seeking shelter, enacted rules and laws to hurt the most vulnerable."

The robots eventually sought to fix what humanity had broken, Gio tells Victor. Mankind refused to listen, simulations were run, and all tests concluded the same: "for the world to survive, humans could not". Is this not exactly what Asimov dubs the Frankenstein Complex? Klune attempts to not fall into the Frankenstein Complex trap by introducing robots that feel and smell and are able to improve themselves, but in the end, he still tells a story of how robots overthrew humans.

Although it functions as the most obvious reference, I think it's worth looking further

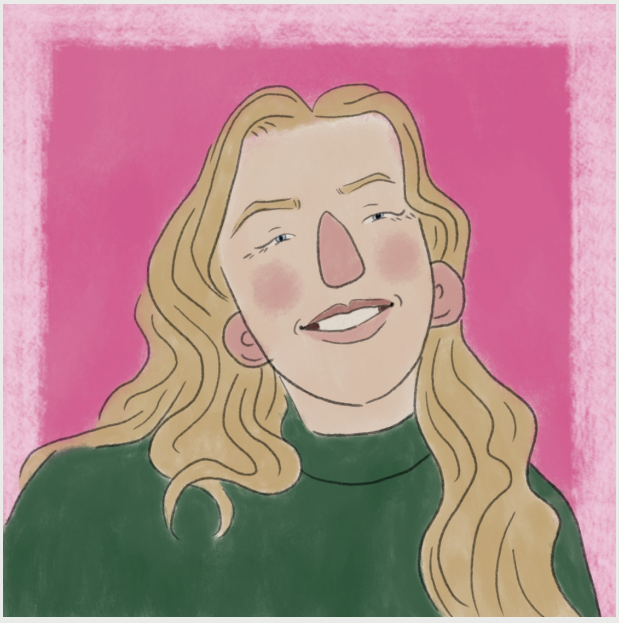
into Klune's debt to C. Collodi's 1881 *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Klune prefaces the different parts in the novel by quotes from both Collodi's novel and the Disney film from the 1940s, and many of the characters from the original novel make an appearance. The Blue Fairy, in this novel an unlikeable god-like robot, can be found in Heaven (our world's Las Vegas Luxor Hotel). The logo for the Authority is a cat and a fox; you will probably remember that in the Disney film, two of the antagonists are a fox called Honest John and a cat named Gideon. The bad guys travel in an aircraft that looks like a whale and, given its name in Collodi's novel, is called – you guessed it! – the Terrible Dogfish. And finally, our friends are abducted by the Coachman. Unlike the original Coachman, who is sadistic to his core, this one makes a full one-eighty and tries to redeem himself. He eventually helps our friends and becomes essential to the ease with which Victor is able to continue his search for Gio. Instead of weeks, it now only takes days to get to where they need to be.

This is, unfortunately, the point where Klune began to lose me a bit. I am a big fan of Klune's previous work and hitherto Klune has not shied away from difficult journeys or endings. Having the characters face difficulties that they are sometimes unable to overcome has added greatly to the plot in *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (2021) and *Under the Whispering Door* (2022). The turnaround of the seemingly evil Coachman was completely jarring, seemingly only to get on with the plot rather than adding anything to it.

The novel does a lot of things almost well. Although the intertextuality of the novel is oftentimes funny, it also sometimes feels misplaced. The novel is a *Pinocchio* retelling but combined with all the references to other creative works, it also feels a little overdone at times. In many interviews Klune has explained that he wishes to intersperse his stories with accurate and positive, yet subtle queer representation. And he does do queer representation deftly (Victor is asexual and gay, the Blue Fairy is non-binary, and in a brothel in the City of Electric Dreams we encounter couplings of all sorts). However, the seventh time someone mentioned that sexuality is a spectrum, I couldn't help but roll my eyes a bit.

Compared to his previous novels where everything felt so perfectly balanced, I was left slightly disappointed. That being said, Klune is still an author unmatched in style and the book is certainly enjoyable – and maybe more so if your expectations aren't tainted by the masterpieces that are *The House in the Cerulean Sea* and *Under the Whispering Door*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Roos Kreeft is a post-graduate student of contemporary literature. During previous studies, she specialized in Anglo-Irish literature and subsequently Irish national identity. In 2021, she was granted the Harting scholarship, an excellence programme which allowed her to study in Ireland for a year. During the pandemic, she was active in the Booktok/Bookstagram scene, reviewing and recommending books to her followers. Now, she aims to shift her focus towards authors of fantasy literature such as Brandon Sanderson and T.J. Klune as well as to less conventional forms of literature.

"LOVER'S NOISE WAS WHAT THEY CALLED THE AWFUL SOUND"

A Review of Savannah Brown's *Closer Baby Closer*

By Fenna Leeuwenburgh

"I am not in love! Hooray!"

"Sudden fall long stop", one of the first poems in Savannah Brown's latest poetry collection, conveys a seemingly cheerful, slightly unsettling message that recurs throughout the rest of the book: to love and be loved is to be vulnerable, and to be vulnerable is both terrific and terrifying. *Closer Baby Closer* incorporates references to the internet, London, space, insects, dreams, birds, and nightmares to describe several stages of a relationship; the book casts an original light on intimacy in the modern age through "a lens that burns as often as it illuminates", as is stated on its back cover.

The collection is divided into three parts, each with a slightly different tone and message, that come together nicely as a cohesive whole. *Closer Baby Closer* is similar to some of Brown's previous work, which includes two novels, *The Truth*

About Keeping Secrets (2019) and *The Things We Don't See* (2021), and two poetry collections, *Graffiti and Other Poems* (2016) and *Sweetdark* (2020). Thematically, *Closer Baby Closer* is the most similar to *Sweetdark*, which is described as "at once philosophical and accessible", with "London (and occasionally the apocalypse) as a backdrop, *Sweetdark* explores... the pursuit of vulnerability, pleasure, chaos, and the dichotomy of a life wholly experienced, full of so much darkness and so much sweetness, sometimes in the same breath." Several of these themes recur in *Closer Baby Closer*, especially the exploration of vulnerability.

The first section of *Closer Baby Closer*, as Brown herself mentioned in an interview in Our Culture Magazine, describes "the joys – if you could call them that – of intimacy... it's not a particularly joyful collection of poems, but in my head I'm like, there's joy in the terror." In poems such as "Sudden fall long stop", "Unmute me unmute me unmute me!" and "Olber's Paradox", Brown describes both the feelings of exhilaration and apprehension that can arise at the start of any new relationship, and she invites the reader to feel them with her. For instance, in "Sudden fall long stop", she describes in great detail the physical act of falling, and uses it as a metaphor for falling in love with someone new. Through the use of this metaphor, she vividly portrays the fears of intimacy and of the future that someone can experience in this situation:

the weightless sensation of falling
you get from the float
of your organs
or at least their strange upward tug,
including the heart,
yes maybe yes especially the heart

In the last line of this passage, the repetition of "yes maybe yes" directly exemplifies this sense of uncertainty that the speaker and the person that they are addressing are feeling, both towards each other and within themselves. The writing also contains a sense of determination, which is in direct conflict with the insecurity, but remains palpable within the sentence; logically speaking, the two emotions should not be able to exist at the same time, but nonetheless, Brown captures the essence of both within a six-word sentence. At the end of the poem, she concludes,

oh no,
it's true. Once you're up there, I mean.
The only way back is down

evoking a sense of surrender to the sensation of falling, despite the looming fear that is present in the poem. Trepidation and excitement continuously exist as one intertwined emotion in many of the first section's poems, which sets the tone for the rest of the collection.

At first glance, the second section of *Closer Baby Closer* may seem shorter than the other two because it only consists of three poems, but this is deceptive. This part contains the most experimental and some of the most interesting work in the entire collection. In it, the narrator's perspective on love and relationships drastically changes,

as Brown herself has noted: "The middle section is like: 'This is the worst that's ever happened to anyone. This curse of existence that I have to give any part of myself away to anyone, ever, is absolutely dreadful.'"

A particularly intriguing poem in the second section is called Nightmare stations", which Brown based on a speculative horror novel that she wrote herself and that served as the catalyst for this poetry collection: "It was about a couple who undergoes experimental relationship therapy that's meant to make them feel like they're in the same body... I sort of ended up breaking it down and repurposing it for a lot of the middle section of *Closer Baby Closer*." This poem, which is the longest in the entire collection, is written in a different typeface and format than any of the other poems; it mimics a sort of 'code-language', which gives the reader the ominous sense that Brown's voice has been pushed to the background and that a new, erratic, and mechanical narrator has taken its place.

This section distinguishes itself from the other two, not just because of its sudden thematic pivot away from intimacy and towards horror, but also by not feeling distinctly and exclusively human in its narration, without losing any of the honesty that Brown so skillfully incorporates in her work. For example, in the following passage, she brilliantly mixes the robotic tone that makes the poem unique with the more vulnerable lyrical voice that has become so familiar to the reader in the earlier poems of the collection:

> oh my shared humanity # I knew from
> the second it hit
> water # that the flayed red astronaut
> the size of a fist
> was ours >>>>
> I'll admit that I'm horrified # of my own
> biology
*** Its limits Its failures*
> What it craves # A chain link # organ

> Little vessel circled like a ship
> made of flesh # going nowhere >>>>>>

In this passage, the speaker addresses their state of being, the fears that they have concerning themselves, the other person whom they call "my shared humanity", and their own body. The feelings and worries that the poem addresses are distinctly, unmistakably human, but the format and font that the poem is set in make the reader question whether the narrator is even human to begin with.

The third and final section of the collection, as Brown explains, is "a lot lighter... It was the joys of intimacy, the terrors of intimacy, and then the last part was like, 'I'm just gonna go out on the town.'" After the emotional and experimental crescendo in *Closer Baby Closer* that "Nightmare stations" provides, the third section returns to its original narrative style and format, beautifully wrapping up the collection. Brown continuously reflects on her own identity, girlhood and the social expectations and assumptions put on girls and women, such as in "My god, girlhood ripened", "Call and response", "Shared

consciousness of the party girl" and in "THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE WORLD!!!!!".

In the latter, Brown blends witty imagery and a sardonic sense of humour to undermine the image of the 'perfect' woman from a patriarchal standpoint, or in Brown's description, "Our glittery idiot savior / The exquisite god we despise" (59). In the poem, she describes this stereotypical image of a woman in detail:

She is wearing low-cut
paradoxes and thinks about her boyfriend for a minimum
of nine hours a day [...]
She is vividly sexy and precious and dying
like the coral reef as photographed for Playboy
She is moving to a city near you
She is online now and ready to chat
We know
Where she lives

Additionally, in this section of the collection, Brown comments on the consequences of wealth inequality and capitalism, such as in "Jeff Bezos' sexts", a gripping, satirical poem which she wrote exclusively using words from texts Jeff Bezos sent to his now-fiancé, Lauren Sanchez, and in "Every time we go for a walk we're like wow look at that house", where she writes that "Around us the times are inflating" and that "[m]y friends rent the rooms of people who hate them. I want my piece. I want something unlosable. I know you're worried. My friends are making money for people who hate them." The final section of the book covers a range of different topics, bringing the collection to a close both in terms of content and tone.

Overall, Brown's *Closer Baby Closer* is an enchanting collection of poems that, while it addresses themes that are fairly common in her earlier work, is innovative in its approach and execution. Brown employs a writing style that is highly self-aware, occasionally verging on self-deprecation; her poems are vulnerable and honest, and they flow very naturally, even in the more experimental "Nightmare stations". The poetry collection takes you along through the potential joys and terrors of intimacy – "lover's noise" may be an "awful sound", but throughout *Closer Baby Closer*, it echoes through the pages and haunts you, making sure you won't forget how terrifying and beautiful love can be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fenna Leeuwenburgh, a 23-year-old graduate student in the MA program 'Literature Today' at Utrecht University, has a passion for English literature that they bring to their current role as a teaching assistant. Their interests extend to several literary genres, including fantasy, poetry, queer literature, and science fiction. Prior to their current academic pursuits, Fenna served as the Head of Photography for Phoenix Magazine for two years, which allowed them to cultivate their artistic eye and attention to detail.

A FABRICATED IDENTITY AND EVOKING EMOTION, CAN IT WORK?

A Review of Emma Cline's *The Guest*

By Bob Lensink

When I was a teen, I stumbled upon a pornographic video at the age of thirteen or fourteen. As a young boy in puberty, my primary reaction was one of lust, attributed to my hormones, but also wonder. I thought that it was something very pure, seeing this kind of expression on the screen in front of me. Quite naively, I figured that this type of act would be driven by love, that it was a pure act of love, because why would it be as pleasurable otherwise? Yet when I told my parents about me watching this video, they sat me down and had a long talk about sex, porn, and love. The main conclusion was that porn is fake. Not fake in the physical sense - I mean you can see the bodies moving in the videos - but fake in the sense of love. Porn is not a good representation of real love, my parents told me, and therefore I should not try to look at those kinds of videos in that way. It should be nothing more than an outlet for my hormonal needs, no matter how enticing it is to see it as anything else.

This idea of real or fake became less and less relevant as I became older. As I learned about the world, about life, love, and relationships, I took the lesson my parents taught me to heart: pornography was not genuine, just false intimacy and misleading love. There was one thing that I was curious about for a long time, however. I always wondered how porn stars themselves experienced performing porn, and if they agreed with my parents' idea of porn being unrealistic. Despite my curiosity, though, I did not actually attempt to research that which I found curious. Pornography served my needs just fine as it was, without wondering about the emotional state of the people performing in those videos. Yet my questions on this subject are, at least partly, answered in *The Guest*, written by Emma Cline.

The novel made me wonder about the same question I had asked myself when I watched pornography: can you feel emotion for a character with a fabricated identity?

Cline takes my curiosity, and makes it the world of the main character to a certain extent. My questions about the authenticity of pornography are merely a small part of Cline's narrative. They are more like a minor detail in the grand scheme of things. It did, however, make me interested enough in Cline's story to read through her novel in the hopes of finding some answers, or maybe more questions that I have never even considered, and maybe answers to these questions, or maybe a mix of all of these things.

The Guest is a fictional work about Alex, a young woman who survives off of the backs of rich men that do not mind paying her expenses in exchange for sexual favours. She has survived living and working in New York City for a couple of years, but her time there is running out. She has not paid rent for a couple of months, her roommates hate her, and her previous sugar daddies have blocked or ignore her.

Alex has found a solution to these problems, however, when she encounters Simon. He whisks her away from the city to Long Island for a summer at his beach house. All she has to do to survive is to stay in Simon's house and act like a piece of arm candy for him to show off when he goes to a dinner party. Besides that, she has his entire house and the clothes that he bought her at her disposal. Alex seems to have life figured out.

All of this comes crashing down when Alex falls out of Simon's favour. While drunk at a party, Alex meets the husband of the organiser of the party, Victor. Alex recognises that Victor is similar to her. He used to be like her, before he "fully committed, made a life out of this, or at the least, decided to call what he had a life." Victor is what Alex wants to be, a person who does not have to do anything except staying loyal to the person that provides for them. It is with this good company (while being drunk!) where Alex makes a fatal mistake. She shows genuine interest in a person other than Simon. She fails to do the one job that she has: not showing any kind of real interest in anyone besides Simon. And Simon, he finds out.

The morning after, Alex is forced to leave Simon's beach

house and go back to the city. However, Alex knows that she cannot do that. She has nothing left in the city, and more importantly, an ex of hers is looking for her because she stole his money. The ex, Dom, is constantly calling and texting Alex, threatening her and demanding that she pays him back the money.

Her salvation is Labour Day, which is in a week's time. Simon throws a big party then, which Alex reckons is her only chance to beg for Simon's forgiveness. With his forgiveness, her livelihood is safe; without it she is doomed. Thus Alex's perfect life turns into a desperate race against time, as she has to survive on Long Island for a week without any help from Simon and his many acquaintances.

All alone, Alex must use all her manipulation skills to survive and leech off of the different rich people she encounters, such as charming a moody seventeen-year-old boy to do whatever she wants, or pretending to be a babysitter for a child and deceiving their housemaid. After a rollercoaster of thievery, destruction, and tons of painkillers, she reaches Simon's party at the end of the week. Yet the author is cruel enough to end the book on a cliff-hanger, with Alex's fate left undetermined.

What makes *The Guest* so interesting to read is the way the book handles time. Before Alex is kicked out by Simon, time can be either very long or very short: Alex's years in the city are described in a span of a few chapters, whereas an afternoon on the beach is contained in only a few pages. Once it becomes clear that Alex has to survive a week, however, time seems to slow down ridiculously. The amount of pages once describing a few years now cover a couple of hours, or a day at most. This impacts Alex's mental state heavily as well, as she needs to be at Simon's party at the end of the week; otherwise her life is over. After all, if Simon does not notice and accept her at the party, she has nowhere else to go. New York is hostile, Long Island is foreign, and her ex Dom is on the hunt, unrelenting in his pursuit for his money. Without Simon, she is stranded between two worlds, where her constructed and fake identity denies her access to either one. The text thus constantly reminds the reader of how many days are left until the party, as a reflection of how Alex feels little remorse in light of the chaos that her presence causes.

Most reviews of *The Guest* mention how the novel is a so-called "beach-read", referencing both the fact that the book was first published in the weeks before summer, but also that the novel starts at a beach, which, apparently, makes it perfect to read on the beach.

I do not agree with this description, as I find it shallow. In fact, I think that this book feels more like winter than summer: cold, dark and partly devoid of life, which are the same words that I would use to describe Alex. She is a person with little personality or identity – Alex does not mind changing her entire appearance, as long as it pleases her sugar daddy. This made me feel conflicted about Alex's fate. On the one hand, she is a

type of person most people have mixed feelings about: a woman entirely dependent on a man's money, with no critical capacity or desire to be independent. On the other hand, however, there is a feeling of pity as you read how Alex is scrambling for any kind of support after she is kicked out from Simon's mansion. After all, she has a psychotic ex-boyfriend looking for her, and no one in New York wants to be associated with her. Simon is her last chance at staying alive.

Cline is adept in transforming Alex's lies and manipulations into a more balanced emotional experience, where Alex's struggle to survive becomes more sad than anything else. I want to hate Alex, but I cannot seem to do it. Alex tries so hard to reunite with Simon, throwing all her connections and relationships away to reach her goal, even if Simon does not love her. "Simon." Alex laments, "Simon had not loved her. […] But it was close enough. And close enough was fine." Alex is so desperate and dependent on Simon that even him not loving her, but sort of loving her is enough. As long as Simon takes care of her, Alex does not care how he feels about her. That evokes a sense of pity in me so strongly that I can only feel bad for Alex.

Still, the ambiguous ending makes me wonder how seemingly effortless I have been dragged into Alex's manipulations – as if I am one of the people she has lied to. Maybe the novel is a lie in its entirety, who knows? Even if Alex is not lying, maybe the narrator or the writer is. That said, Cline states in an interview in The Guardian in 2020 that she "[is] trying to replicate something of [her character's] inner lives", which does not help with this question. If *The Guest* represents Alex's inner life, then it is still unclear whether Alex lies to herself or not. But can the reader even know? Or more importantly, does it matter?

What I have seen, however, is a glimpse of how people who fake their life or their job feel when they do it. Even if it is incredibly hard to deal with the current situation, they just keep on going, keep on surviving. Because that is what they know. Maybe I should keep on going too. Shows what I know. Maybe those porn stars are sort of similar to Alex: they both fake their identities, putting on masks in order to survive. Yet porn stars can take them off: can Alex do that too?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Lensink is an MA 'Literature Today' student at Utrecht University, interested in cultural/literary responses to societal and/or political events, primarily in Great Britain. He has a background in British literature and culture and writes reviews in a formal but accessible style. His BA thesis focused on the Great Irish Famine and its representation in older and contemporary literature.

ECHOES OF CHINESE WOMEN IN THE TEAHOUSE

A Dialogue about *The Sojourn Teashop*

By Keyu Li

(This conversation is with a former international student from Wuhan University who studied comparative literature and now works at a publishing house in Hong Kong. Since she prefers not to disclose her name, she will be referred to as "A" in this article. During our conversation, we discussed a Chinese author, Jia Pingwa. His notable masterpiece, *Ruined city*, was written in 1993 and played a crucial role in establishing his position in the Chinese literary scene. However, our primary focus was on his latest work, *The Sojourn Teashop*)

Li: Have you read Jia Pingwa's work The Sojourn Teashop, which was translated into English this year?

A: To be honest, I do not know much about it, and the sales of the translated version of the book do not seem to be very good, but I have a bit of an impression of the author, Jia Pingwa. His masterpiece, *Ruined City*, I remember, was

banned from being distributed in China because of his bold portrayal of sexuality, power, and morality, which was extremely controversial in China.
Li: Indeed, but that has not stopped Ruined City from becoming a classic of contemporary Chinese literature. Jia Pingwa's works are written in a delicate style, and his exploration of human nature delves into astonishing depths.

Jia Pingwa's latest novel, *The Sojourn Teashop*, follows *Ruined City* and once again focuses on the urban life. However, in this new work, his narrative lens shifts from the perspective of men to that of urban women. In this work, Jia Pingwa delicately depicts the destinies of more than a dozen urban women, whose stories unfold in a teashop called 'Sojourn'. These urban women are torn between tradition and modernity, bondage and freedom, and their stories involve a variety of themes such as lesbianism, women's liberation, spiritual betrayal, professional growth, independence and dependence, from which they map out the pressures and challenges faced by contemporary women.

A: You mentioned that the book features a dozen women. Can you briefly tell their stories?
Li: It is really a long story. The story is narrated by Eva, a Russian woman who met Hai Ruo when she was studying in Xijing. Hairuo is a strong and independent woman. After her divorce, she started her high-end teahouse. Hai Ruo has a group of sisters who often support each other in business and spirit, so they use the teahouse as a place of emotional connection. Hai Ruo gives each sister a jade pendant to wear, so they became known as the 'Twelve Jades of Xijing,' with Hai Ruo as their leader. Of all the sisters, Hai Ruo is the closest to Lu Yike, the owner of an advertising agency, and they have been looking for a platelet donor for another friend of theirs, Xia Zihua.

Xia Zihua, once a glamorous model, finds herself entangled in a complicated affair with a wealthy, married businessman. Despite bearing him a child, marriage eludes her. This heartbreak and her battle against leukemia cast a shadow over her once radiant life. In these challenging times, Hai Ruo coordinates a support network to ensure Xia Zihua is never alone. Among this network is Xi Lishui, who runs a car specialty store; Yu Benwen, the owner of a bustling hotpot restaurant; Xiang Qiyu from a rehabilitation hospital; Si Yinan, owner of the mahogany furniture store; and Xu Qi, a talented actor from a local theater...

A: Wait, I find these relationships and storylines are a little confusing and trivial, especially the names of these people, which I find really hard to remember.
Li: You are right. I believe the translation of names is one of the challenges for Chinese literary works to gain recognition overseas. The names in *The Sojourn Teashop* carry significant wordplay and puns. These names serve not merely as identifiers for the characters but also represent their unique identities, personalities, statuses, and destinies. To capture the story's essence accurately, a trans-lator must have a deep understanding of the connotations

behind these names. In fact, the translator actually noticed this problem when translating, as she writes in her 'Translator's Note':

The name 海若 literally means "ocean-like", which encapsulates the depth of the female characters, echoing the author's praise in the Afterword of the real life teashop owner and her friends.

But unfortunately, the translator did not apply this awareness to her translation practice. She only introduces the meaning of one character's name and neglectes to explain the names of other characters.

A: Yeah, this is also inevitable. The translation of names in Chinese literary works faces the choice of transliteration (using sound) and translation (using meaning), and the cultural and historical significance behind the names must be comprehensively considered. This reminds me of one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and its clever use of name symbolism. (In this classic work, the authors, Cao Xueqin and later Gao E, masterfully employed names to not only signify character traits but also to reflect the cultural, societal, and historical backdrop of the story).

So, do you think there are any compelling aspects of *The Sojourn Teashop* in terms of its narrative devices?

Li: In fact, The Sojourn Teashop draws inspiration from the writing style of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, creating an intertextual relationship with it. The former blends the surrealism of Western novels with the mythical nature of classical Chinese novels, merging them seamlessly and subtly.

Under the influence of Freud, surrealism claims to liberate the richness of the unconscious by prioritizing the 'dreamlike' and temporarily relinquishing conscious control. Jia Pingwa's understanding and mastery of surrealist techniques are precise. The novel uses Eva's dream of returning to Xijing City as a means to vividly depict the various events that occur in the city.By mixing dream with reality, the story gives a clear surrealistic feel.

Furthermore, the surreal narrative framework can also better accommodate mysterious plots. For instance, in the entire novel, a character named Feng Ying plays a significant role in driving the plot. She delivers messages to Zhang Huai, urging him to prompt Yiguang to repay her debts, and she also has various connections with the Twelve Jades of Xijing'. However, it's only at the end of the novel that we discover she tragically died in a plane crash right from the beginning of the story.

"Have we been seeing Feng Ying's ghost all along?" This question is raised by a character in the novel, and it mirrors my own curiosity. When I read this, I couldn't help but recall an earlier part of the novel where it was mentioned that Lu Yike encountered her reincarnated father twice. At first, I thought it might be that she was so heartbroken by her father's death that she had

hallucinations, but now I understand that Jia Pingwa uses these characters to disrupt the linear flow of time, creating a surreal narrative environment. Just like Lu Yike's name implies that everything is both real and unreal. (Lu Yike, homophonous with "露亦可", is derived from the *Diamond Sutra*'s "如梦幻泡影，如露亦如电", which translates to: "All composed things are like a dream, a phantom, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning". That is how to meditate on them, that is how to observe them...)

In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Pao Yu's journey in the Phantom Realm of the Great Void echoes Eva's dream of traveling to Xijing, forming a distinct intertextual bridge between the two narratives. While Pao Yu's dream foreshadows the destinies of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling, Eva's reveals the lives and fates of the 'Twelve Jades of Xijing'. This narrative method not only deepens the thinking about the dilemma encountered by modern women, but also skillfully combines the charm of Western surrealism and Chinese classical novels.

A: Speaking of the lives and fates of the 'Twelve Jades of Xijing', what became of their endings?

Li: Actually, when I saw the name of this novel, I could guess that its ending is tragic. Both the original Chinese title "暂坐" (sitting temporary) and the more specific English translation *The Sojourn Teashop* are commonly used to refer to a short, temporary stay or rest. I think this term highlights the shortness of time and explores struggles faced by Chinese women, as well as their status in society, in which they are often only allowed a 'temporary' presence and a 'fleeting ' voice. The novel begins with the prosperity of the teahouse, which represents the strength and unity of women, but by the end of the novel, with the destruction of the teahouse, the women of Twelve Jades of Xijing' are overwhelmed by various challenges: Xia Zihua is defeated by fate and ends her life; Hai Ruo, the owner of the teahouse, is arrested by the police; Ying Lihou becomes embroiled in a serious debt dispute after being betrayed by her favorite sister Yan Nianchu; Lu Yike runs away to Malaysia in order to escape the harsh reality of life in Xijing...

A: Are you suggesting that in The Sojourn Teashop, Jia Pingwa is hinting at negative endings for all women? I believe this reflects how he overlooks women's plight, showing his deep-rooted sense of patriarchy. What do you think?

Li: I agree with you. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir observes: "Everything that men have written about women should be viewed with suspicion, because they are both judge and party." Although Jia Pingwa has repeatedly emphasized that he respects women, readers can always find patriarchal ideas in his works. In the novel, there are few but highly significant male characters, and one of them is Yi Guang (whose name means 'like light'). His introduction in the story is akin to his name, as he carries his own aura of radiance. He is the 'signature' of Xi Jing City;even a piece of his calligraphy can fetch a high price of 100,000 yuan with ease. He maintains varying degrees of ambiguous relation-ships with this group of women. He always

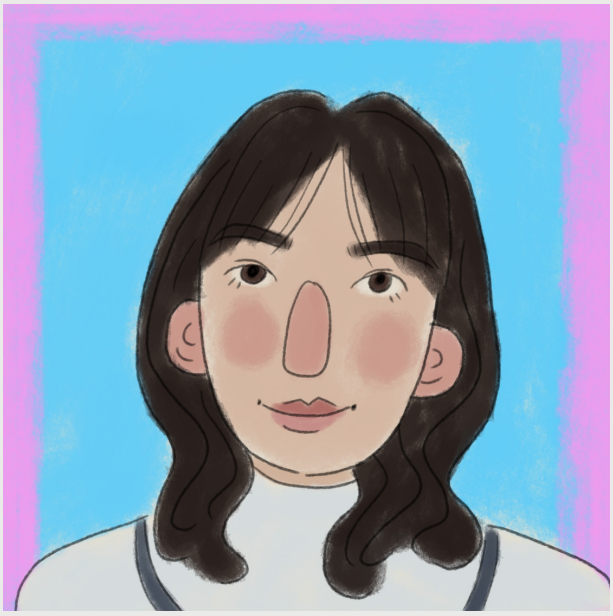
appears alongside these women at crucial moments and assists them in making important decisions. These women also regard Yi Guang as their spiritual advisor. Moreover, when Yi Guang speaks, Jia Pingwa clearly adopts a similar male standpoint, saying, “Loving women makes a man noble!” This statement implies that the love for women is merely a means to elevate further the status of men, revealing a kind of ironic self-importance.

In *The Sojourn Teashop*, Jia Pingwa ultimately portrays all these urban women involved in public life as distorted figures who submit to men and materialism, where all emotions become sacrifices to interests, power, and male dominance. To this day, the unconscious practice of portraying women, revealing their fate and evaluating their behaviour from a male standpoint is widespread, especially in China. The patriarchal consciousness expressed by writers in their works will subtly affect readers, solidify the idea that women are the ‘second sex’, and increase the difficulty of women's liberation.

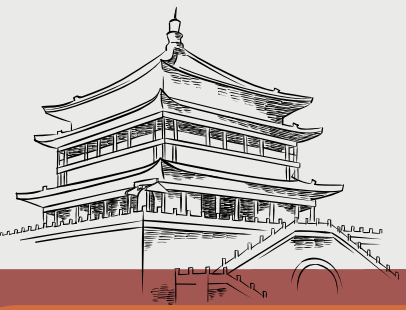
No work is perfect, but nevertheless, these shortcomings also serve as a form of reflection, which precisely shows certain aspects of the current Chinese society. I understand that reading such a book might be challenging, but would you be willing to give it a try after our conversation?

A: I've noticed that many works of Chinese literature often go unnoticed by the general public. In a world dominated by English, Chinese literature indeed faces significant challenges. However, this also makes us appreciate its differences and uniqueness even more. Just as the title of this novel, *The Sojourn Teashop*, suggests, perhaps we should pour ourselves a cup of tea, sit down quietly, and truly experience and embrace the intercultural impact the novel can bring, along with the beauty and
insights it offers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Keyu Li is currently pursuing a MA degree in 'Literature Today' at Utrecht University. In her undergraduate studies, she specialized in Chinese language and literature, with published articles in journals and books like *Chinese Literary Artist* and *Wuhan Language and Culture Research*. She has a strong interest in ecofeminism and presented and discussed her paper on Yangtze River literature and feminism at the inaugural Yangtze Culture Academic Conference hosted by the Wuhan Academy of Social Sciences.



THREE MOTHERS AND A HAUNTED HOUSE

Review of *Banyan Moon* by Thao Thai

By Ronan Maat

A house bears witness to memories beyond those that line its walls. In *Banyan Moon* by American author Thao Thai, three generations of women reside in Banyan House – a house containing secrets sealed or spilled, and the love and grief that strengthen and sever the ties keeping the family together.

After Minh, Ann's grandmother, passes away in the house, Ann and her mother Huong must come to terms with the devastation left in her wake. Then two other revelations hit Ann in quick, brutal succession. Firstly, she is pregnant. Secondly, the father of her child – Noah, a man whose world of wealth and privilege feels false and unwelcome to her – has been having an affair.

The walls of Banyan House watch as Ann and Huong try and fail to reconnect after these events bring Ann back home, with their past grievances causing their words to be suffused with

bitterness and sharpness at every other attempt. Their house feels like a living being with its history coming alive in each chapter. Its gothic exterior underscores its haunting feeling, and the damage and mess, demanding but never receiving attention, holds a mirror up to the secrets and words withheld between its residents, past and present.

And in the Banyan House, we have formed our own ouroboros, snakes swallowing each other until we forget which body is ours, which soul belongs here, and which is meant to have departed.

The novel uses three perspectives – those of Ann, Huong, and Minh – in such a way that we are privy to the secrets the others are not (yet). Thai divides the story according to chapters told from the first-person perspective of the character in question, effectively creating a sense of intimacy between readers and the characters; it is as though these women are letting us in on their secrets.

It is not unheard of for authors to neglect creating a believable context for characters' reticence, instead manufacturing secrets merely in order to build up suspense. But Thai expertly weaves the secrets into these characters' lives in a way that makes sense for both their personalities and their individual situations. Whether a character chooses to divulge these truths is a choice made with their messy and complex humanity in mind.

Many of these secrets have seemingly died with Minh. Yet, through a unique and eerie use of the first-person perspective, Minh continues to live on in the pages and the walls of Banyan House. Much of the current timeline is told by her, watching over Huong and Ann in whatever spectral or spiritual form she has now taken, existing as a kind of disembodied voice hovering over the remaining characters. She is able to feel and respond to the conversations she witnesses, and she is burdened with the words she is no longer able to impart to the living, as well as the love that she died with for her daughter and granddaughter.

It is in this way that the grief in this novel does not feel one-sided; the grief emerges from the separation on both sides. It is also not limited to the loss of life; characters regularly mourn relationships that have changed or fractured, as well as an envisioned future that never came to be. Huong often ruminates on the loss of her daughter's affection, as well as the jealousy of her daughter's attachment to Minh.

Misunderstandings and withheld truths lie in the way of Huong's relationship with her daughter, and although not all of them are resolved, we do see a satisfying conclusion to their arc. Much as many relationships between a mother and her daughter can be messy, difficult, and tumultuous, Huong and Ann's relationship is often precarious and uncertain. Giving us insight into both their perspectives and both the hurt and love that motivate them, we occupy the same position as Minh – watching them, yet unable to prevent the train from inevitably careening off the

tracks.

Thai reflects on these themes in a way that sits heavy in our chests. We follow the characters' emotional processing and interpersonal relationships through a candid and detailed narrative, one that is emotionally affecting and hard hitting. Through all the complexities of their decisions and sacrifices, our empathy is naturally evoked.

We follow these three generations in their respective settings as Thai takes us across the world. Some of what we follow takes place in Vietnam many years ago, as Minh recounts the joys and sorrows of her early life, and the people she has met, loved, and lost over her formative years. Thai paints an evocative image of Minh's early years. We get the sense that these are things Minh would have liked to recount to Ann, and yet as the reader we are privy to these events, some of which Minh has taken to the grave.

Her journey takes her to the U.S., and the dual setting allows the text to dive into themes of immigration and belonging, seamlessly weaving into Thai's exploration of what it means to belong in a familial context. In a story where the concepts of family and motherhood are central, Thai asks what a house or a home can signify, and how the structure and the people in it can become so fused

Ann often associates the idea of returning to her childhood home with regression or the perpetuation of a cycle, and moving out and into the world with achieving distance from her identity, as a personal achievement.

Although she initially finds reasons to prove this attitude, the eventual forgiveness and empathy she extends to the women who came before her recontextualise the presence of this home and what it means to her.

Ultimately, *Banyan Moon* is a story about all the messy and very human complexities of motherhood, and the love that survives beyond resentment and anger.

'Gratitude and resentment are two things I feel most when I think of your grandmother,' she says.
'What about love?'
She's surprised. 'Of course love. Always love.'

While cathartic is a word that could be used to describe the emotions that run high in all the grief, fear, and anger that leap off the novel's pages, hope is the emotion that settles in you when you turn the final page. Though uncertainties abound, and problems are far from fully resolved, you are left with the sense that you, just like Minh, can finally rest easy, and that time will take its due course for the surviving characters.

For mothers and daughters, *Banyan Moon* won't offer reprieve from their own potential anxieties and heartache, but it can offer a deep sense of catharsis, reflection, and – of course – hope. For everyone else, it will take them through a journey that leaves them with the profound sense of having lived three

generations worth of memories. As a deeply moving narrative with a

simple yet eloquent and evocative style, Thai reminds us what it means to love and heal, no matter how deep the fractures and tears may seem.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ronan J. Maat is an MA student in literature. With a firm belief that stories help to broaden our understanding of and compassion toward our fellow humans, he is always on the lookout for new and inspiring works and voices.

WHO IS PAUL MURRAY? A TEENAGE GIRL?

A Review of *The Bee Sting*

By Laura Mäenpää

Perhaps you've been stung by a bee before. Unless you're allergic, it was probably a mildly uncomfortable experience which passed quickly and left no mark. In the case of Paul Murray's *Bee Sting* however, you probably felt more like you were allergic. And also like you were the bee.

Paul Murray is the author of *Skippy Dies*, a book that was longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2010. He is Irish, male, and middle aged (this will be relevant later). His fourth novel, *The Bee Sting*, released in 2023, is both chaotic and cathartic. At around 650 pages it will take you a while to get through, but it is not on the 2023 Booker Prize shortlist for nothing. The book is about the Barnes family, who are going through a crisis. The financial crash has swept over Ireland and the family garage business is suffering. This leads to other problems within the family to escalate as well: secrets are becoming too hard to hold onto as the

family's lifestyle is crumbling. Cassie, the 18-year-old daughter, is having a hard time focusing on school. Her younger brother PJ is losing friends and scared his family is falling apart. The mother, Imelda, is struggling with the lack of spending money and her relationship with her husband and the kids' father, Dickie. He is taking a big hit as the breadwinner and owner of the garage, which causes his mental health to decline and even radicalisation of sorts.

I will demonstrate below how Murray uses different forms for each family member's chapters, like no punctuation for Imelda and text messages embedded into the text.

After Cassie kicks off the book, the first thing you will wonder is who Paul Murray is. A teenage girl? Who else could understand the storms that pass through Cassie's head as her future is decided. Her best friend Elaine is best and the worst, impossible to let go but also something I could only describe as toxic. Cassie is in the awkward middle-phase between childhood and adulthood, realizing that she and her dad do not bond over doing her homework together anymore, and that suddenly everything her Mam says is rage-inducing. On top of that her brother keeps whining and won't leave her alone. For a moment her life is exactly like *Derry Girls* when a cool red-haired literature teacher shows up and tells her that she has a talent. Then Elaine, who put the enemy in frenemy, steps in.

PJ is Cassie's 12-year-old brother. He is scared that his parents don't like each other anymore. He needs to solve all the family's problems by himself, because burdening them with anything more could be dangerous for their troubled relationship. His sister will not listen, and why is she studying after the tests anyway? At least he has Ethan to text with.
HEY!!1 IF U COM TO DUBLIN WE CULD GO SEE BLACK DAWN 2GETHER!!!!! :)

Imelda also known as Mam is so beautiful you would not even believe Even her dad would not touch her Even if her brothers had to take her punishments too But it is the most important thing There is not much else outside of keeping up appearances Just being a mother is so difficult especially when the money is so tight Why not just ask the grandfather Maurice for more? He has always loved her too Her beauty but not on her wedding day that's when she was hidden

Dickie is also all about appearance. Until he is not. He was so close to having his own life, but of course it was not possible after the accident. Or rather accidents? Who knows where it even began. He was always meant to take over the garage, that much he knows. Taking over his dead brother's girlfriend too, it is the right thing to do. Even if it means suffocating himself in this small town. He will find solace in the woods with the boy, it is good for their relationship.

The Bee Sting is a ball of yarn that seems to consist of many different colors and entanglements, but chapter by chapter it comes undone. By the end all the family's history, present and even the future to some extent are laid before the reader's

eyes. Still, there is a veil over the future. It is so dark that the release that the book has been building up for all 600 pages might not be as bright as one would have hoped for. "It is for love. You are doing this for love," are the last words of the novel, not focalized through anyone in particular unlike everything else. From the reader's perspective the last two sentences do not add anything new, nor do they resolve what happened in the last scene. Murray might suffer from a problem that haunts many authors, that they do not know how to end a story. What is left unsaid by the author will be filled in by the reader and for a book with this volume, an open end comes across as a little unimaginative.

But I do not want to be too harsh. *The Bee Sting* has so many redeeming qualities, that the ending is still somehow cathartic. The impending doom that has shadowed the family from before it even was a family keeps shadowing the end too. The end is not really an end, because there can't be one. Murphy's law turns into Murray's law as he makes sure to put the characters through it all. Just when you think that surely it can't get any worse, it does. This is where the comedy is found, lurking around the edges of the tragedy: if all secrets were revealed, there would be so much less drama. But they are doing it, keeping their secrets, out of love. The absurd realism of the situation really makes *The Bee Sting* sting. If you have ever spent time studying psychology, you know the character's dynamic sadly makes sense. If you have ever spent time in a dysfunctional family, you know it makes total sense. And I would argue that we all have.

The Bee Sting is dramatic fiction. More specifically, it is Irish dramatic fiction, with elements of superstition and the supernatural embedded into it. As Justine Jordan wrote in her review for The Guardian: "*The Bee Sting* draws on Irish folklore about a traveler taken in by fairy folk to their great hall of riches under the hill, only to wake many years later in a cold, unfamiliar world where everything they knew and loved has passed away". The family's homeplace is indeed called "Goldenhill" and up until the events of the book, they have been successful and quite satisfied.

Other reviews, professional and non-professional, have pointed out that her chapters lack punctuation because she is uneducated. In this case her superstition could also be explained away simply by her lack of education, but I would like to propose a different interpretation. Often women in Irish texts are interpreted to be images of Ireland, as the damsel in distress imprisoned in a colonial tower. This could also apply to Imelda and how her own and then Dickie's father control her life, emotionally and financially. However, she has a safe haven in Rose, a witchy psychic, who gives her chapters a new depth. Rose lives in a cottage removed from the rest of the village. She can see the future and tries to save Imelda from it. Other people, especially the men in Imelda's life do not trust or care for Rose much and in the end, it is also up to the reader to decide whether Rose's abilities are real or a bunch of lucky coincidences. Of course, to many believing in psychics or the superstitious is

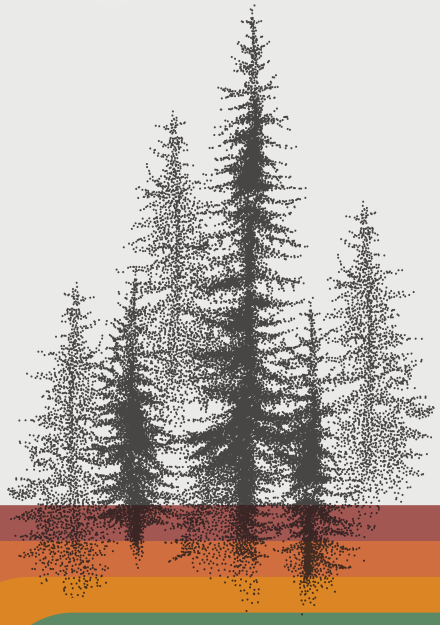
something only an uneducated person like Imelda could fall for, but the truth is that Rose is never wrong. Even if many modern Irishmen do not identify as superstitious, the legacy of the folklore and traditions are still present. Imelda is the embodiment of these persistent remains of the faery folk, with her golden hair, otherworldly beauty, and superstition. At the same time, she is the post-financial crash Ireland. A little chaotic, confusing, and hung up on money but still by no means unlovable or lost.

As for the form of Imelda's chapters, in my opinion they lack punctuation because she is either in an active state of emotional turbulence or thinking back to a memory. How many could say that their thoughts are clear and organized when they constantly feel like they are reaching their breaking point? How many could say the same about their memories from 20 years ago? Memories tend to be fuzzy and unclear around the edges, and so are her sentences, especially when it involves dialogue: "Mammy said she was vain Keep looking in that mirror and the Devil will appear That was what she said".

Now to make a roundtrip to the beginning of this review, I want to address my experience as the reader and why I think reading *The Bee Sting* is akin to being a bee who is allergic to bee stings that then gets stung. As someone who carries an EpiPen with me because of severe allergies, I know what it is like. Not being able to breathe properly, not having any feeling in your legs. I've also been stung by a bee. I saw how he lost his stinger and flew off into a corner to curl up into his death. It was brutal, and it seemed so pointless to me. I was not going to harm the bee that stung me. But he did not know that. Out of love for his colony he stung me, just like the characters in *The Bee Sting* keep hurting and pushing each other to the breaking point when they meant to protect each other. They do not see each other's secrets or lives but we as the readers do. We are the bee because we can relate to them, see why they do what they do, but we might also find ourselves highly allergic to what we learn about the Barnes family. That is how strong *The Bee Sting* can be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura is a student of the MA program 'Literature Today' at Utrecht University, and her background is in literary studies. Her literary passions include formally experimental texts, modern fiction, and feminist and queer stories with a specific focus on intersectionality.



WHEN MATERIALIZING FEELINGS COMPLICATE THE TRUTH

A Literary Review of *Prophet*

By TJ Manders

If great art does anything, it is capturing complex contemporary zeitgeists in accessible representations. The new noir, science-fiction mystery novel, *Prophet* by Helen Macdonald and Sin Blaché, is a perfect example of a work establishing such a thing. What do a mug, an American diner, flowers and two boxes of Scrabble have in common? They appeared out of thin air on an American basis overseas, and while real, they are not true... Do you comprehend such distinction?

Whether its conspiracy Red-Pill thinkers believing in the Illuminati or feminist scholars critiquing Western epistemologies, questions surrounding truth have never been so present - or perhaps not since the secular turn of the enlightenment. Living in a post-truth, post-Trump era, where alternative facts slither through our highly mediated communication, Baudrillard wasn't far off expecting that the explosion of information would lead to an implosion

of meaning. Things don't have to be true anymore to be real. Deep fakes, fake news, complicated information reduced to fit a three second attention span. Algorithmic bubbles help us to avoid what we a priori disagree with. So, what is truth then in our current simulacra's sprouting from emotions? Now, obviously, *Prophet* is unable to give any real answers to such philosophical problems. But the author's do offer an immaculate story about truth, trust and meaning.

The novel starts with the convicted drug addicted Sunil Rao, who finds himself instead of his cell, in a cheap Holiday Inn. The former military asset is once again called upon when random objects start to appear out of thin air. Quickly we learn that a certain substance called Prophet is materializing people's nostalgia into real life objects - or copies - and once reunited with their makers puts them in ghastly coma's. Why the army wants to work with someone as rude, extravagant and undisciplined like Rao, who's former employs called him "fucked," is due to his gift; Rao knows the truth. He's a living polygraphy, being able to tell of any given statement whether it's true or false. However, the real but untruthful, objects remain even a mystery to him. As does the agent he is paired with, Lieutenant Colonel Adam Rubenstein.

If not being able to truth-tell statements about Adam gives Rao enough reasons to be bothered with him, Adam is also his anti-matter. A private, poker-faced military protégé who folds his clothes every night and which duty is his whole identity. A character being able to always know the truth, sounds contradicting to the genre, yet it's precisely the reasons for "not being able to know" that propels the story forward. Similarly, it raises questions about trust. If Adam is the only person in the world Rao cannot truth-test, can he trust him? Does he even have a choice? As they slowly unravel the secrets behind the origins of the substance, the men also start to gradually decipher the enigmas of each other's hearts.

The antagonistic partnership between the men appears to contradict the dual authorship of Macdonald and Blaché. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, they talk about their peculiar digital collaboration. The authors became friends through Twitter in 2009, but only met in real life once the book was almost finished. Stuck at home during covid, Macdonald, a historian of science, naturalist and known for her award-winning novel H is for Hawk, asked her twitter-friend Blaché to co-write a new novella as they both were fascinated by the concept of nostalgia. With pieces of prose and hour-long chats on narrative and tropes, both authors took inspiration from fan-fiction and seemingly so, Prophet is in form and production an ohmage to such digital subcultures. Despite Web 2.0's influence on the book, *Prophet* seems to have stronger appeal to the cinematic. In *The Guardian* the authors themselves say they pitched it as a combination of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*. Similarly, a review by Scotsman says it reminds more of television than literature, and *Washington Post* reviewer Sophia Nguyen says that it "reads like a Christopher Nolan movie."

With its slow burning

sci-fi plot and a real-world resonance, involving spatial temporal altering technologies made by shadow companies, *Prophet* felt indeed to have a Nolanian thematic. As *Prophet's* 450 pages are cut up in five parts, and seventy-seven chapters, likewise it seems similar to what David Bordwell defines as Nolan's aesthetics; the use of fast paste, cross-cutting scenes while still adhering to an embedded story. While the five parts are differentiated on the location of where the story takes place, the chapters seem to not follow any clear line. Some chapters are only two pages long, others much longer. And the focus of the third-person perspective changes swiftly within those chapters between Adam and Rao.

Additionally, in the first two parts two other story lines are involved; one of a little boy growing up under his father's Iron-fist and one marked "Before" relating to Adam's and Rao's previous mission in Central Asia. As these two timelines tie themselves to the present story and come to an end in part two, from there the plot is interrupted sporadically by chapters exploring phone calls between the supposed antagonists. While I admire a creative form that reflects its thematic, the different timelines and especially the motives behind them make *Prophet* sometimes hard to follow.

I can phantom a justification behind the exposition of the young boy and the ***Before,*** the former giving insight in the origins of Adam's stoicism, and the latter exposing what seems to be the source of different quarrels between them. Nevertheless, the phone calls carry rather meek importance to the story, except introducing some people who will be important for the enactment of the finale but play no major role in it themselves. It seemed to be a cheap tool to inject suspension. Similarly, the quick shifts in the subjective experiences of Adam and Rao within each chapter, at times, worked disengaging. Comprehending both character's deep and ambivalent feelings is a lot to bear for one mind. Without even mentioning Rao's reflections on his time Afghanistan, I would say the story knows many spatial temporalities within the reading experience that can be hard to keep up with.

This inception I similarly encounter within the dialogues. The conversations between Rao and Adam are well written table tennis-like conversations. For every remark, there is a smashing return. A highly entertaining chess game in which they try outsmarting the other, or simply provoke. Nevertheless, intwined with such conversations, the subjective annotations plunge the reader in a rather difficult labyrinth. While trying to find rapprochement, both men keep their cards close to their chest and often attend to the other from their own assumptions. This creates a push and pull between quick-witted, snappy dialogues and nervous, but heartfelt conversations. Written with an emphasis on details - a stylistic choice often seen in fan-fiction - in combination with deep personal reflections, make these conversations at times fleeting. Occasionally arguments appear to be repetitive, other times you are overthrown with details and feelings. However, skipping sentences or reading too quickly, *Prophet* is not made

for. Sentences like "He doesn't know what he wanted, he knows exactly what he wanted," or "The unnatural heaviness behind his eyes that doesn't feel right, feel so right" can easily be misunderstood or, more seriously, misinterpreted. Significant plot points construed within single remarks by the characters, I sometimes (almost) missed. Like when Adam coincides within himself that he is in fact in love with Rao – aha, so he is gay! – or when Rao casually foretells his own death early in the book – hello, spoiler much!

Perhaps, the novel's form itself represents the inherent struggle of Rao and Adam to communicate with one another. I wish to say that the hearth of the book lies in the relationship between the two men, but the constant navigation of their ambivalent feelings, hostile attitudes and psychoanalytical renderings of each other made it feel like I was running through a maze, instead of enjoying its enigmatism. Their circling around the truth of liking each other made me stop turning my head. For instance, when Roa realizes more seriously he treated Adam poorly: "Rao sees it happens this time … The lightning flash of misery at the endearment. He's done real damage there, hasn't he? He had no idea." While reading this, I huffed, wondering why he couldn't have figured that out 200 pages earlier?

Whether the two end up together, I will not spoil. But on the negotiation of homosexuality within the story, the authors have surprised me. *Prophet* navigates nicely around the pitfalls of generic gay storytelling. Neither does it fall into the despair and trauma of being gay, nor does it suppress a subjective sexuality all together. Sure, I personally hoped for at least one steamy scene, but it is a sensible choice of the authors to include none. Yes, both characters care greatly for each other and are gay, yet that didn't give them any instantaneous reason to hit homerun. That would rather nullify the characters. Because Rao might be an out and proud gay man – giving blowjobs to strangers in bathroom stools – Adam's sexuality is rather absent. Which is not another story about shame perse – his father did try to send him to a conversion camp – but because Adam barely seems to care that he is gay. Instead, his feelings for Rao are overshadowed by his strong psychological dissonance from emotions (and sex), Rao's unpredictability – or unlikability – and the inherent difficulty of the collegial relationship. When Rao does find out Adam has been gay all along, this even lessened the potentiality of them reconciling as lovers.

Without losing sight of the enfolding mystery, *Prophet's* complexity does harvest in the opportunity for an in-depth and lived account of homosexuality. Producing a story with queer characters that not revolves around (figuring out one's) sexuality, while still doing it justice and not make it simply "consumerable," like *Love, Simon*. It neutralizes, instead of trying to normalize or naturalize queerness. Being able then to recommend a book to a friend without having to state it's actually a "gay book" is a refreshing occurrence. Offering a representation that perhaps can bridge people's algorithmic bubble. Something we desperately need

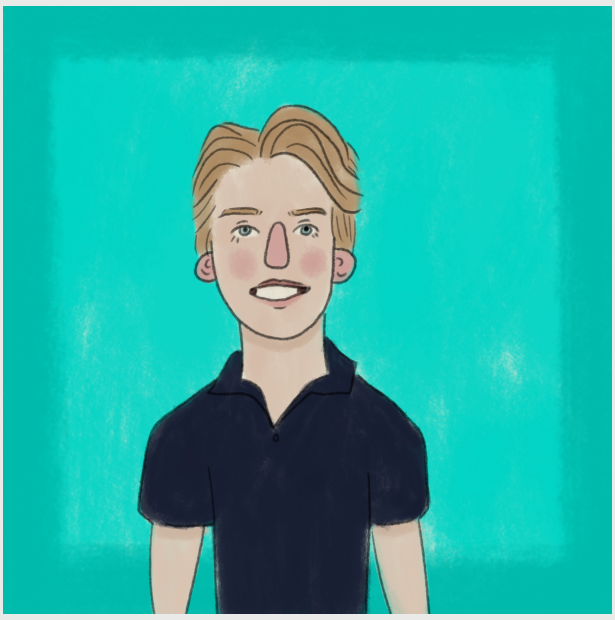
with the current rise of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric.

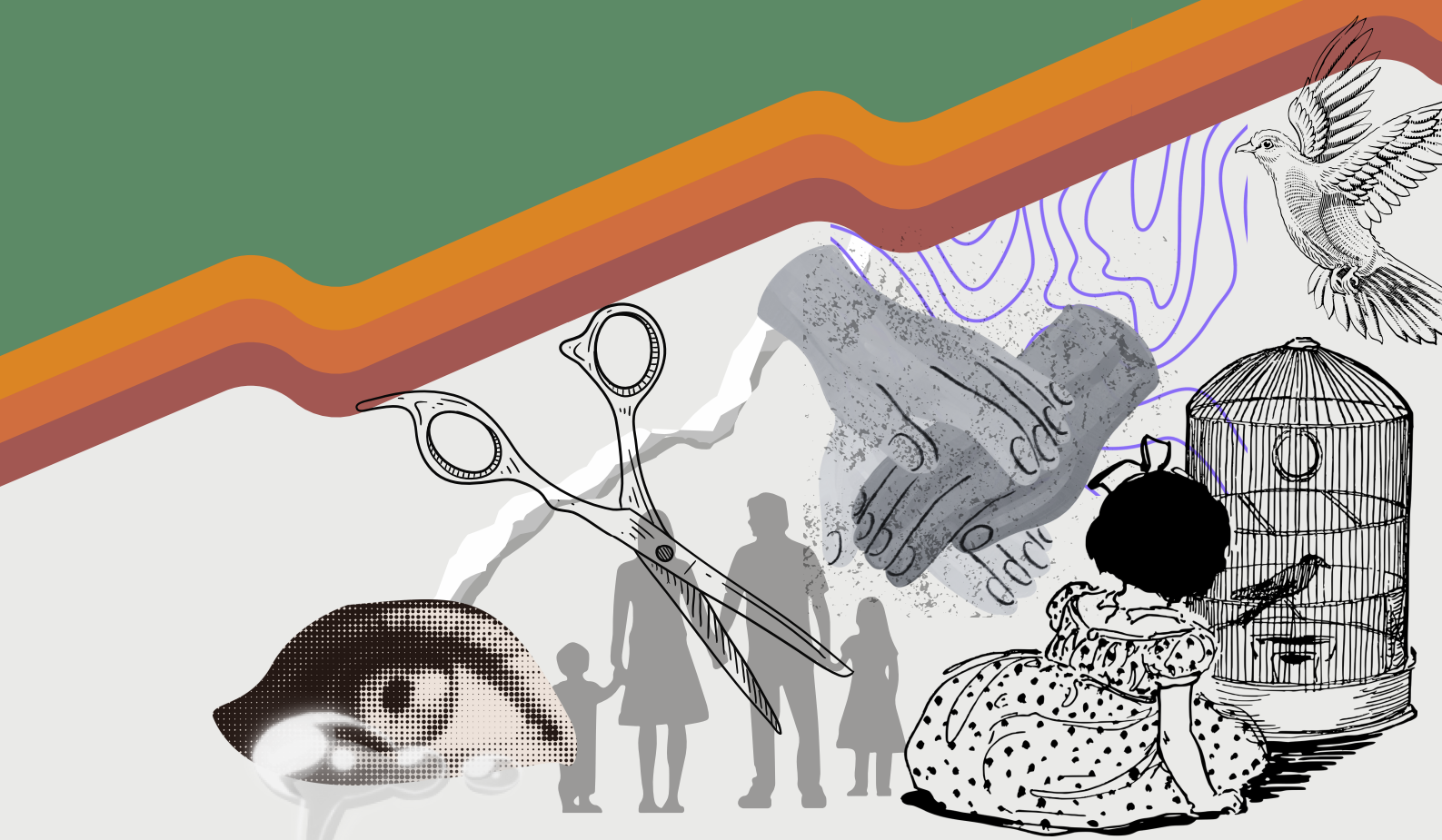
Macdonald and Blaché have written an exciting novel that is hard to put away. Not only because of its plot, but also due to its thematical contents. The novel plays into many current epistemological questions and keeps you wondering till the end. Roa and Adam live and breathe from the page, and their personalities really bloom within the challenges they face, whether it's being stuck together in a room or military escapades. At the end of the book, you feel you can truly interpret the meaning behind the slight differences between a thousand different smiles, frowns and glances. Constructing a story that perfectly adheres to its mystery science-fiction genre but with a wink to fan-fiction and a refreshing queer twist.

However, *Prophet* is not an easy read and can be quite lengthy. Its complexity in form and its heavy interchangeability between dialogues and repetitive, ambivalent feelings, make me wonder if the book tries to do too much in too many pages. A few cuts would do much for the dispersion of the tension within its narrative structure. Perchance, I might even go so far in saying that a re-materialization of Prophet in cinematic form could do it even more justice. With its Nolanian aesthetics, I agree, that *Prophet* has all the allure for the big screen. Though, till that happens, Prophet makes up for an innovative, nostalgic read that you simply won't forget.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thijs Jerôme, or TJ, is a Dutch 'Gender Studies' graduate focusing on the nexus of sex, sexuality and philosophies of entanglement. As a dedicated sex positivist, he gives workshops about consent, volunteers at an LGBTQ organization and writes psycho-analytical essays for his blog about his sex life and sexual cultures. TJ takes no stories about love for granted. Writing fiction himself, he tries to relate academic theories to our real-life fantasies and desires.





A STORY OF TRAUMA, HOPE(LESNESS) AND MAGICAL PLACES

Isabel Allende's *The Wind Knows My Name*

By Isabel Oomen

Although I was named after Isabel Allende, and grew up loving to read, I somehow had never gotten around to actually diving into one of her novels. This first dive did not disappoint. Allende has written a hauntingly tragic story, yet she managed to instil it with hope and kindness.

The story spans multiple continents and generations. It centres around three characters who have all lived through atrocities at a young age: Nazi violence in Austria, the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador and Trump's 'zero tolerance' policy at the US border with Mexico. We follow Samual Adler, Leticia Cordero and Anita Díaz as they survive these horrible events and try to move on. Along the way, we meet other key characters, such as social worker Selena Durán and lawyer Frank Angileri, who shed light on what it is like to work to improve the conditions of children such as Anita - seven years old, separated from

her mother and left alone in an orphanage. Allende weaves their lives together to convey her message: this is what we have been and are – still– doing to each other, and this is how it affects the lives of children.

The way in which Allende draws parallels between what has happened, in Nazi Austria and El Mozote, and what is still happening, at the US- Mexico border, is admirable. In an interview with Alicia Menendez the author states that when she first learned of the travesties at the border, her mind immediately went to a play she had seen decades ago about the 'Kindertransport.' This transport was a last, desperate attempt of Austrian Jewish families to get their children to safety. 10,000 children were put on a transport to England, where families had agreed to take them in. This was not entirely as successful as hoped, which Allende shows the reader through Samual, who ends up in an orphanage and suffers from pneumonia before finding a family that treats him well. Allende saw the parallel, history repeating itself. However, she also acknowledges that these are not the only instances of forced family separations:

Think of slavery, when they could just take a child from its mother and sell it to someone else, or indigenous children that were separated from their family and placed in horrible Christian boarding schools, or the Irish mothers who had their children taken away and put up for adoption just because they were not married.

Deeply rooted in this novel is a call to action, an attempt to open our eyes to this ongoing tragedy. Does it work? Well, Allende got me to put down her book and googling what I could do to help (there are various charities you can donate to, one of which was founded by Allende herself – to which I donated). The part where she reveals that families who try to cross the border illegally are put into so-called 'ice boxes' and are left there for three days particularly affected me. Imagine your seven-year-old self, left in a freezing room with your mother or father, and then imagine what it would feel like if armed men came in and took your parent away without telling you anything.

Overall, Allende did an irritatingly excellent job of conveying a feeling of hopelessness. The passages about the Nazi violence and the El Mozote massacre elicit similar sentiments, but since these are events that have already happened, the hopelessness of those past events bring the horrors of what is still happening today even sharper into focus.

The use of multiple points of view gives us, the readers, a deeper insight into the various different characters' backgrounds. Allende likes to share their histories of immigration – particularly how Selena Durán and Frank Angileri ancestors came to the USA. It seems fitting considering the subject of the novel and enriches the overarching plot, which slowly brings these first, second or third generation immigrants together in search of Anita's mother.

The only thing the novel lacks is showing. Much of

Allende's novel is very descriptive, which is not a problem in and of itself, but it does result in it reading more like a piece arguing against certain politics than the characters' own authentic story. For example, the first few pages of the novel introduce us to Samual Adlers' parents and their struggles living under Nazi rule. But instead of leaving clues for readers to pick up, Allende gives us a full account of the Adlers' characters, thoughts and concerns: "His worries had begun a few years prior and only worsened as Nazi power was consolidated." Consequently, it sometimes feels like Allende is using her characters to push an agenda instead of sincerely telling their stories and leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions.

It can be argued that knowing the details of the Adlers' lives and the Nazi presence adds to the sense of impending doom. Still, the not knowing and the putting together of the pieces that comes with showing would have given this narrative an edge. It would have added a certain level of emotion - both good and bad - that would have made the book, the characters and their stories come even more alive.

Beyond that, the novel is captivating. The chapters in which Anita talks about her guardian angel and a place called Azabahar are particularly engaging. According to the seven-year-old, Azabahar "is a star where the people and the animals all live happily, and it's even better than heaven, because you don't have to die to go there." It is a magical place that Anita visits with her younger sister Claudia (who has passed on) and there, they are reunited with their mother, grandmother and other people that are important to Anita. Most importantly, there are no mean or bad guys there, and "no one is ever afraid". Anita's guardian angel, as she tells her sister "won't go away forever, Claudia, don't be silly. Guardian angels have to stay with their kid."

At first glance, it seems Allende's way of illustrating how Anita was trying to cope with her trauma. Yet, Allende is known for incorporating magical realism into her novels... so what else could Allende have meant to tell us by creating Anita's fantasy realm? Something Anita tells her little sister struck me. "No, we're not lost. The wind knows my name. And yours too." She is reassuring herself and her sister - using the title of the novel - that they will never be alone. Then, at the very end of the novel, Samual says, after he joined Anita in Azabahar: "It's the mysterious realm of imagination, a place you can only see with the heart."

The guardian angel who will never leave her, the place where she can visit her loved ones whenever she likes... It seems Allende is trying to tell us that you should never experience grief alone. Anita stays connected with the world around her, even after her trauma, whereas Samual withdraws from it and into himself: "From a young age, he had been plunged into a harsh reality and never thought to create a better, imaginary world."

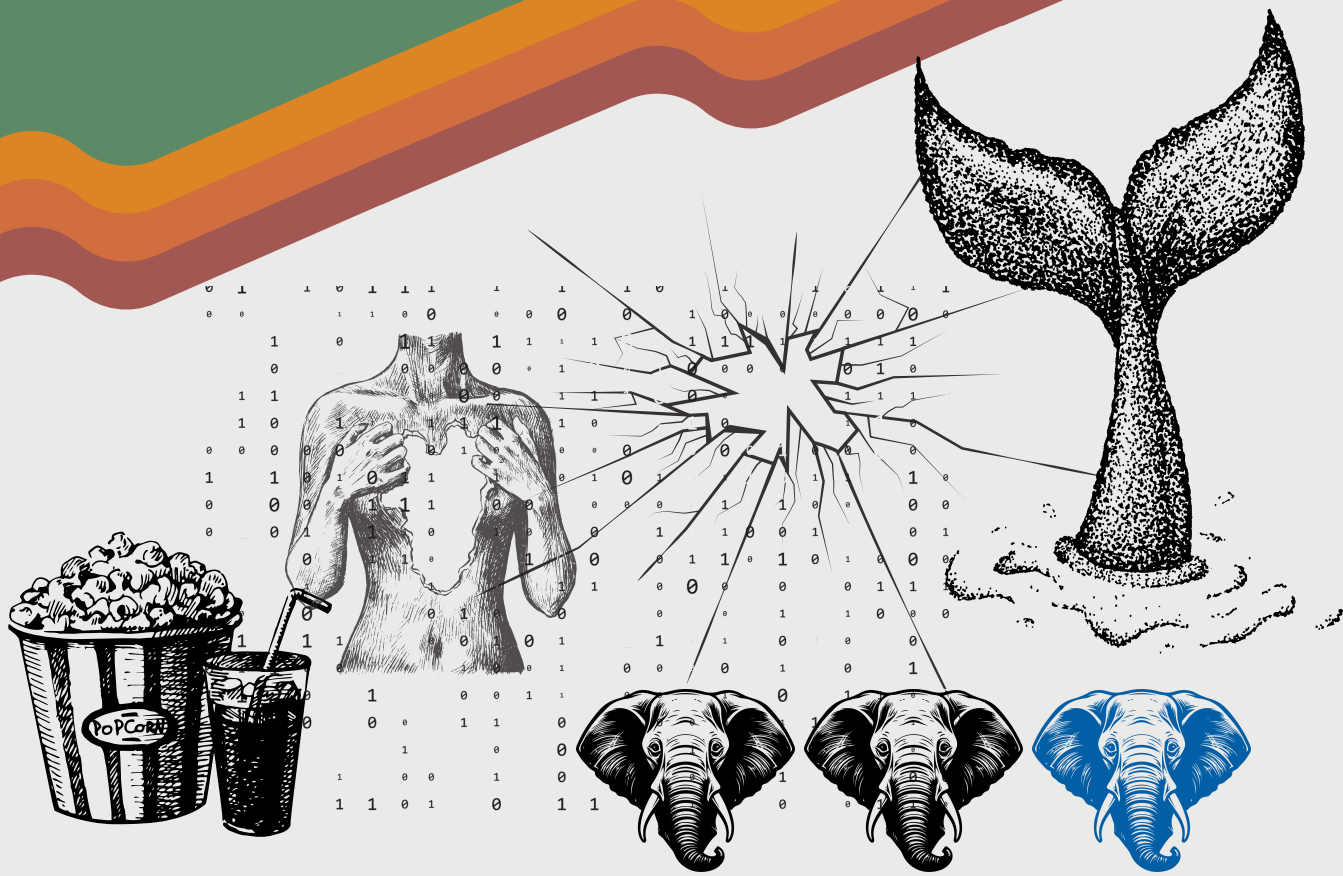
Azabahar and the personal angel ensure that Anita never feels truly alone, and it helps her to keep functioning through this difficult period. The last line would then indicate

that Samual - with Anita's help - has finally realised this as well. This makes for a wonderful full-circle parallel in the novel. It also left me feeling a longing - the good kind - for a magical place like Abazahar.

As a first-time reader of Allende, I'm now convinced her other novels are worth reading as well. Allende's novel is meant to make readers reflect on the current horrors going on in the world, and it did exactly that. Readers' hearts go out to Allende's well-written characters, and she does an excellent job of making you hope that Anita finds her mother again. If one can only see this place through the heart, it will look different to each of us. What does your Abazahar look like?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabel Oomen has a background in 'English Language and Culture', with specialties in historic English texts and intertextuality, and is also a licensed English teacher. In addition, she has her own translation bureau called Giraffe Translations and does freelance translations (Dutch - English) for publishing house Aspekt.



WHALE AND THE CRIME OF ISOLATION

By Laid Papinova

Whale, by Cheon Meyong-Kwan, is a novel which, at its heart, tells the story of a girl who once saw a strange, impossibly large fish swimming in the ocean:

In front of her was an unbelievable sight- an enormous fish, several times larger than the house she had grown up in. It crested in the middle of the ocean and spouted a jet of water out of its back... Overwhelmed by the appearance of this unbelievably large creature, Geumbok began to tremble, unable to close her mouth. The fish slapped the surface with its huge tail before vanishing into the water. All of this happened in the blink of an eye. Geumbok stood there for a long time, mouth agape. Was she dreaming? Geumbok asked a fisherman, who had been watching the fish nearby, what that was.
He looked at her oddly. "You must not be from around here. That was a whale...

I start my review with the quote above to

articulate the following point, namely, that magical occurrences are an everyday reality for people living in previously isolated, rapidly changing societies. Conversely, to see something you previously thought impossible, to broaden your horizons through a sublime encounter with the outside world, is a state of mind that is increasingly impossible to achieve for us moderns, raised with the internet and often living in multicultural, metropolitan environments. Perhaps this is the reason why one is instantly fascinated by Geumbok, who is awed by a whale much in the same way a reader, in the opening sentence of Gabriel Garcia Marques' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is fascinated by something as simple as ice.

However, the novel also cleverly enforced my already existing belief that this phenomenon, although beautiful, is ultimately tragic. Geumbok's fascination with this magical new world is quickly shaped by an unfeeling, capitalist mold. Her dreams, too, are colonized. Indeed I recall with some bitterness the passage where she first enters a cinema:

People said incomprehensible things to each other on a big screen. They grew bigger and smaller at will, rode through a desert on horses, shot their guns, and a man and a woman kissed in the back of a wagon. This movie had come from a faraway country, Miguk- or Beautiful Country- America. Geumbok couldn't tear her eyes away from the screen because of the vivid, shocking scenes and the majestic sounds pouring over her.

A considerable time after this experience, Geumbok opens a cinema in the shape of the whale which she later saw being slaughtered. Unsurprisingly, this business imitating the shape of a living being proves to be quite lucrative, as Geumbok's countrymen too are fascinated by American movies:

The movies they saw were usually from a country called America, and they found the movie stars and their lives depicted onscreen to be so impressive that not only did they start mimicking their behaviour, some even moved to America. A single proposition took root in people's minds... The proposition that determined every aspect of people's lives was this: Everything that is American is beautiful.

Again, I emphasize my bitterness, because my home country of Albania was also once obsessed with these awe-inspiring movies from beyond the sea. Instead of Westerns, the sword and sandal genre, probably due to its underlying collectivist message, was allowed by the communist regime of Enver Hoxha at that time. I recall my father telling me stories of how the cinemas of Tirana once bustled with people trying to watch for the third or fourth time in a row movies such as Spartacus or Hercules. Actors such as Steve Reeves and Kirk Douglass were idolised much in the same way John Wayne and Clint Eastwood were idolised by the Korean people in the novel. Clearly, both Albanians and Koreans were fascinated not by the movies themselves, but by the Western utopia which these movies represented. Indeed, my father often described in vivid detail the hopes, dreams and ambitions of the

Albanian people during the fall of the Eastern Block: Everyone was a future billionaire. Everyone was the protagonist of their own movie. Everyone thought happiness lay just beyond the sea or that this sea of freedom and abundance would finally come to them.

In just a few years, however, these hopes and aspirations quickly gave way to the brutal reality of unregulated capitalism. After the communist regime finally collapsed in the year 1990, many Albanians, unfamiliar with the new economic system, quickly invested in state-sponsored pyramid schemes. A portion of the population lost everything they had, and the anti-government protests which ensued culminated in the anarchy and violence of 1997. Therefore I, who was born and raised in a modern, safe, stable, and increasingly dynamic Albania, can only regard with disbelief and fascination the daring, reckless ambitions which my father described to me, and which are exemplified in the novel by characters such as Geumbok. This was the same state of mind which brought suffering to two countries so far apart both geographically and culturally.

At this point, I must step back from parallelisms with my own country and focus on the ways in which *Whale* analyses the historical particularities of South Korea. More precisely, the novel shows a South Korea still affected by broken dreams. Geumbok's life, for example, is plagued by a grief exemplified in the slaughtering of the whale. The juxtaposition between a beautiful ideal and an ugly reality, or between a hope inexorably linked to life and the inevitability of death, pushes her to a state of denial, compulsively pursuing grand entrepreneurial projects. It is telling how Geumbok responds to the death of another majestic animal, namely Jumbo the elephant. Jumbo's body is taxidermized, partly to help the twins who took care of him cope with his passing, but most importantly, so that Jumbo can continue to fulfil his role in advertising Geumbok's cafe. Thus, one of the novel's most important messages is made clear: Unrestrained capitalism creates cold, dead copies out of broken dreams.

Under this revelation, the novel's portrait of Geumbok as a powerful businesswoman with considerable political influence is also telling. This character is undoubtedly meant to represent a part of those people who served as the architects of the modern South Korean nation. This is despite her being politically uneducated, not even knowing what communism is: "Geumbok yawned, bored... tell me what this communism is about". Therefore, Myeong-Kwan's satirical wit is at its peak in the following passage: "...Geumbok became a firm believer in the need to eradicate communists and took on the role of Chair of the Women's Subcommittee of the Pyeongdae Anti-Communist Alliance, which was just one of dozens of roles she was asked to serve by various political, economic, environmental, religious, academic, sports, and local organisations...".

And who is this powerful architect of the future? A woman whose grief has alienated her from her only child, Chunhui. Clearly Chunhui is destined to work as a brickmaker in her mother's factory, not

only because of the former's obvious talent, but also because Geumbok is too careless to think about another future for her daughter. This relationship between the two characters, or lack thereof, serves as a critique of modern South Korea. Indeed, the novel implies that behind this country's unprecedented economic success, lies a society which prioritizes productivity over happiness and personal expression, and whose primary aim is to create workers for increasingly powerful corporations, referred to as chaebols by the Korean people. Myeong-Kwan even makes an explicit, albeit humorous reference to this problem: "'Overthrow the *chaebol* dictatorship and form a workers' paradise'". Thus, it is not a coincidence that Chunhui, as a representative of the younger generation, is mute, or that it was her destiny to burn to the ground the façade created by her mother.

Whale is not, however, simply a critique of capitalism and modern South Korea. Despite the problems which inevitably come with modernity, the novel also shows how this new world provides more freedom and better opportunities for people previously oppressed by patriarchal norms. For instance, Geumbok's entrepreneurial spirit challenges the traditional conceptions of a woman's role in society: "Nevertheless, people were impressed by her unwomanly capacity to boldly pursue new opportunities (Myeong-Kwan, 169). Moreover, unrestrained by the traditional duties imposed upon her sex, Geumbok freely expresses her gender identity, as she, or rather, he, chooses to spend the remainder of his life as a man. The novel also shows how the adherence to a strictly patriarchal and supremacist conception of masculinity brings only suffering not only to women but also to men. Indeed Geokjeong (Geumbok's husband), no longer able to fulfill his masculine duty as a provider, transforms from a kindhearted person into a jealous abuser. Another example comes from the man with the scar, who destroyed his life and mutilated himself to prove his manhood to a woman.

Lastly, I must mention the novel's style. Although *Whale* employs numerous magical realist elements (Chunhui's ability to communicate with Jumbo and the one-eyed lady's ability to communicate with bees being the most obvious examples) it owes more to Charles Dickens than to the Latin American Boom. The eccentric characters, the numerous, interconnected plots, and the focus on those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, are all signs of this Dickensian influence. Myeong-Kwan has not, however, created a simple pastiche. The grotesque sense of humor prevalent in *Whale* goes to lengths unthinkable for a Victorian novel. Naked bodies, as well as sexual acts, are described in excruciating detail, perhaps to the discomfort of some readers. The novel also does not shy away from depicting the most vile aspects of human behavior, such as rape and murder. Nevertheless, a signature warmth prevails on almost every page. Despite their faults, I could not help but feel a certain degree of sympathy for each character and their struggles. For as long as they are alive, hope is certainly not dead.

In conclusion, *Whale* depicts the paradoxes facing a society learning to adapt to unprecedented change. I was

especially moved by the novel's exploration of the trauma which this change ultimately entails. This trauma affects not only the generation that directly experienced it but also the generation that comes after it. Indeed I feel very grateful for the life I have, knowing that my own parents were raised in a dictatorship not too dissimilar to the North Korea of today. Therefore I applaud this novel for exposing a crime often overlooked: Isolation.

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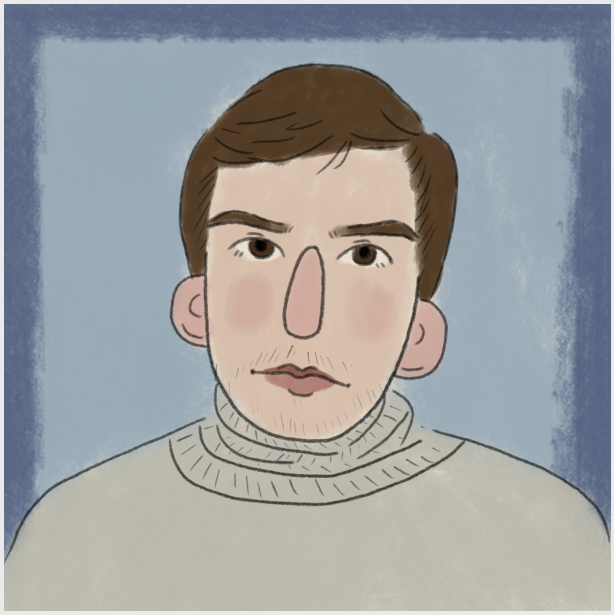
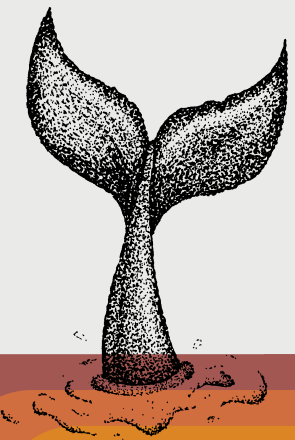




THE EPIC OF THE MIDDLE-AGED MOTHER

By Mads Poulsen

Imagine, if you will, that you pick up a book with the express understanding that it is about a woman, but when you open to its first pages you are met with a decidedly masculine voice telling you about the role of women in stories and society. You might double-check the cover only to confirm that you are, indeed, reading the correct book. You continue reading as confusion and trepidation slowly set in; the scribe tells you that women's stories are expected to come to an end, if they are told at all, with the arrival of a man to grant her happiness or motherhood before she is consigned to fade into obscurity.

Now imagine that this masculine voice surprises you once again by telling you that the tale you are about to read is anything but a half-faded echo of yet another forgotten woman, but rather the story of a woman made legend, and instead of letting his own biases cloud and reshape the story, he will let the woman tell her

story on her own.

Such is the beginning of Shannon Chakraborty's *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*. Set around the twelfth-century Indian Ocean, the novel follows the story of Amina al-Sirafi, a pirate turned parent who is living out her retirement in reluctant peace on the coast of Yemen with her mother and daughter.

Her peace is soon interrupted, however, by the arrival of a woman named Salima, who petitions Amina to set back out to sea on one last quest to help find her missing granddaughter. Amina refuses until she discovers that Salima is the mother of one of her late crewmates with whom Amina has a complicated past, making the missing girl her crewmate's daughter. Tempted by the promise of vast riches that would ensure a better life for her daughter and a mixture of responsibility and guilt towards her former crewmate, she decides to leave her own family behind for one last job involving sea monsters, foreign sorcerers, and a grand adventure.

Chakraborty is a white Muslim convert who originally intended to be a historian before shifting her focus to writing. Her knowledge and passion for history bleeds into the pages of the novel, as she very ambitiously states in the author's note that she wanted to write a work that was "completely historically accurate except for the plot." In an interview with the *Reading and Writing Podcast*, Chakraborty stated that the novel was originally pitched as Sinbad the Sailor meets *Ocean's Eleven*. This idea eventually led to *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, a historical fantasy novel deeply rooted in West Asian history.

With this meticulously researched historical backdrop, the story centers around motherhood and how to counterbalance the responsibilities of being a mother with more individual ambitions. In a Reddit AMA from September 21, 2023, Chakraborty writes, "I wanted something that reflected how desperately we could love our kids, but still want more for US." This is palpable in the pages of the book. One of the central struggles that Amina faces throughout her journey is whether she is choosing to leave for the right reasons. There is a continuous inner struggle between whether she is doing it for the money, and by extension, her family's well-being, or if she is driven primarily by a lust for adventure like the ones she had in her heyday.

Throughout her journey Amina is faced with the reality that if she messes up, she may not return to her family at all. Contending with this while repeatedly asking herself whether she is acting for the right reasons brings the challenging ambivalences of womanhood into the forefront of the story. Her own family implores her to stay and focus on raising her own daughter instead of chasing after somebody else's. Salima, on the other hand, appeals to her maternal sensibilities and her responsibility to her former crew. These conflicting requests show that Amina is, first and foremost, a mother, but perhaps she could be much more.

In the story, there is a recurring theme of people, primarily men, who believe her less capable due to her gender, and she has to prove herself more than once despite her storied past. The reluctance to look to Amina as a leader is best expressed in the prologue: "[T]o be a woman is to have your story misremembered. Discarded. *Twisted*." Amina is seen to be incapable of accomplishing everything that she has because she is a woman. She must either have had outside help, or assistance from the supernatural. This sentiment rings both true and false, the truth of which I will get to presently.

For now, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which this is negated. The world Chakraborty has created is filled with capable women. There is Amina herself, of course, but there are also other women such as Amina's comrade, Dalila. Amina's crew is inhabited by a diverse cast of characters, but these two women often end up drawing the focus.

During an interview with the *UpperPen Podcast*, Chakraborty stated, "I knew I wanted to have a mixed gender crew, but I very much wanted the most dangerous characters in that crew to be the two female characters." The 'danger' of these women primarily shines through, not in their physical prowess, as may often be associated with strength, but rather in their leadership skills and craftiness.

Amina proves her leadership skills multiple times to win the trust of her crew, and Dalila, referred to as the mistress of poisons, uses her alchemical and apothecarial skills to strike fear into anyone who crosses her path. In addition to these two women, there is also Dunya, the girl that Amina and her crew have been tasked with finding. She is an accomplished scholar, despite being a child of only 16, and is able to use her knowledge of history and the occult to carve her own way in the world.

Amina and her crew show that true strength does not come from brawn: it does not come from physical, gendered attributes, but rather from something else. Amina's motivations largely center around her parental feelings towards her daughter and wanting a better life for her. She ultimately realizes that a marriage between her motivations can coexist simultaneously and arrives at a poignant conclusion: "[P]art of me hopes anyway that in seeing me do this, Marjana [Amina's daughter] knows more is possible. I would not want her to believe that because she was born a girl, she cannot dream." Placing a middle-aged mother into the role of an action hero grants this conclusion a greater sense of verisimilitude and proves that women do not have to be a footnote in someone else's story.

Throughout the novel Amina displays a disdain for the supernatural. Unsurprisingly, given her history with it. Marjana is the result of a supernatural union between Amina and her demon ex-husband Raksh. Amina, a recent Muslim convert when she first meets Raksh, believes her soul to be damned due to her relationship with him, even if she initially knew no better. After sinking Raksh to the bottom of the ocean, Amina has taken it upon herself to raise her daughter in the image of a

human, despite her half-demon heritage. This leads to her living a life of constant wariness, sheltering her daughter from the world to the point of detriment.

When the supernatural enters back into Amina's life, she does not take it well. She is haunted by the consequences of her actions and wants nothing to do with it. Up to this point Amina has relied on her own sense of strength to get by in the world. When her agency is taken away, and the supernatural is thrust upon her once again it feels like a violation. Against her own wishes she is transformed into something that is more than human, an enhanced version of herself.

My initial reaction upon reading this was outrage. How can Chakraborty take a woman whose strength stems from her cunning rather than her physical might and reduce her to little more than a super-soldier? The scales fell from my eyes, however, when I realized the parallel between her previous supernatural encounter and this one. The supernatural robs her of aspects of herself that are vital to her identity; first it was her soul, now it's her humanity.

To counteract the devastating reality of what is taken from her, both instances also see her gain something in return through her own force of will. Marjana is everything to Amina and, despite believing her soul to be lost, her dedication to raising her daughter untainted by the supernatural shows her maternal strength. She tries to be the best mother she can possibly be; supernatural circumstances be damned.

When Amina is then transformed, she becomes the antithesis of everything she believes to be right. That she is able to take this tragedy and turn it into a strength is another way in which her tenacity shines through. She clings to the vestiges of her humanity even if she is not human anymore. Paradoxically, this perseverance makes her more human than anything.

Still, I find it a shame that this has to come off the back of the supernatural. The book opens with the scribe making mockery of people who perceive Amina to have had supernatural assistance through her adventures: "she *must* be a sorceress, because no female could sail a ship so deftly without the use of forbidden magics." The combination of the rejection and acceptance of the supernatural makes for a mixed drink that leaves a somewhat bitter taste in my mouth. I cannot help but wonder why it is necessary for the focus of Amina's strength to shift into something unattainable. Although it is a clear sign of strength that she is able to transform her negative experiences of violation into something positive, the meaning starts to go out the window due to the way it is framed.

At its core, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* is a story about a mother: a mother who chooses to play the hand she has been dealt for the sake of showing her daughter that women should dream and strive for something more. Grounded in a strong female narrative voice, the novel questions whether women can be the protagonists of their own epics or if the responsibilities of

being a woman exclude them from that.

The relationships between the characters, often punctuated by humor, give the story a charm that few fantasy novels can acclaim. The book comes to a close, and as it does, you once again behold the cover as you might have done when you first started reading, the confusion and trepidation you experienced all but gone on the wind. Instead, it is replaced with an understanding. An understanding that this is a novel written by a woman, for women. *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* is far from flawless, but Chakraborty has crafted a narrative that shows a different side of the action hero – a side that works *because* Amina is a woman, not *in spite of*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mads Poulsen is an MA student of 'Literature Today' at Utrecht University with a background in 'English Language and Culture'. His area of expertise is adaptation studies with particular focus on gender and race. For his BA thesis, he wrote about the narratological effects of altering the gender and race of certain characters in the Netflix adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*.

DYKETTE IS THE WORD

Queer complexity and identity

By Genta Tanjung

I was fifteen years old when I realized I liked girls, something that a decade later I still know to be true. So no, it was not a phase, Dad. I recall the moment the realization became real for me, and it was mostly scary. Being queer was a concept that at the time was foreign to me. I thought, sure, that's other people, but not me. Had I known that it was only the beginning of my journey in finding my identity, things might have been better or easier.

Still, looking back, I would not change a thing. I needed to go through years of many sleepless nights questioning myself, my attraction. Even when I thought I was finally at peace with this, there came a new question: But who am I really? Which label would I use? What category am I in the community? I spent a large portion of my young adult life identifying myself as anything other than 'lesbian'. I would say I'm queer, I'm gay, at one point I thought I

was bisexual. There is nothing wrong with any of those labels, but I have never really felt like I could relate to them. This is a common theme amongst queer women growing up - a refusal of the existence of themselves and their identity under the pretence of normality.

It wasn't until I read the 1980 essay by Adrienne Rich titled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" that I found the right words that could help me to navigate the ups and downs of what it means to be a lesbian:

Even before I wholly knew I was a lesbian, it was the lesbian in me who pursued that elusive configuration. And I believe it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks literature that will express that energy and strength.

What Rich wrote here really speaks to me, it made me no longer have desire to be invisible, and I want to make space for myself in society.

Naturally when I found out about *Dykette* by Jenny Fran Davis, a novel that features lesbian leads, I wanted to read it immediately. *Dykette* is so unapologetically queer. Davis manages to capture the complexity of queerness through the characters that represent every sexual identity under the sun. It was a journey to go through this novel, I can't imagine giving this book to a heterosexual person and trying to make them understand it. Notably, other women-loving-women books tend to shy away from explicitly calling a character 'lesbian', but Davis is not afraid of this at all. Davis is successful in her blunt portrayal of queerness in all its glory: the good, the bad, and the ugly. But I think the complexity of queer identity goes beyond what Davis is trying to achieve with this book.

Sasha and Jesse are a twenty-somethings dysfunctional couple trying to make a living in fast-paced New York. Sasha thrives with everything 'normal:' she wants to settle, she wants to get married, she wants children, she wants that white picket fence life, and she wants to be the ultimate femme wife to her butch boyfriend (Sasha refers to Jesse as both her boyfriend and girlfriend). Jesse, on the other hand, just wants to be young, fun and enjoy everything they have now. When their older, wealthier, more settled friends Jules (a local celebrity host) and her girlfriend Miranda (a therapist) invite them on a ten-day getaway, they jump at the opportunity. The trip only gets more exciting as they are joined by a third couple, Jesse's best friend Lou and their Instagram-famous girlfriend Darcy. What can go wrong when three pairs of lesbians spend their vacation together under one roof for almost two weeks?

Things take a turn as they grow more intimate within one another, with secrets and confessions being thrown out left and right. All the characters get entangled with each other, within and outside of the relationship that they brought to the trip. Sasha has a crush on Jules but tries to hide it out of respect for Miranda, even though she thinks Jules might feel the same way. Sasha

despises Darcy long before the trip. She has suspicions that there's something going on between her girlfriend and Darcy based on Jesse's fascination with her nemesis. Sasha looks down on how attention-seeking and clout-chasing Darcy is, but secretly envies her it-girl persona. Jules and Miranda are practically married and are even discussing having children, but Miranda says she does not want to be an old mother, already being in her late 30s. When Jesse and Darcy collaborate on an artsy but sensual livestream performance, Sasha can no longer contain her jealousy that eventually sends her into a spiral of rage. Long story short, things get very chaotic.

The novel is sectioned into three parts, titled "Minx," "Princess," and "Bimbo." The overall story centers around Sasha, and the section titles reflect the various types that Sasha aspires to be. Although most of the novel takes place between the end of December and early January, a few scenes are a set in the past, to show how the characters started their relationship, before they become who they are now.

Here comes the part when things get even more complicated; Each character represents a lesbian identity outside of the usual norm of a pretty girl who likes girls. Jules and Miranda are the traditional older lesbian couple, Sasha is a full-blown femme, Jessie is a dyke who uses she/her and he/him pronouns interchangeably, Lou is a masculine non-binary person who underwent top surgery, and Darcy is another femme.

Everyone here is clearly *performing* gender, performing their identities, and are very committed to the bit. In fact, they seem so committed that it almost becomes heteronormative. Sasha is a clear portrayal of this, she is very much obsessed with being a baby angel face femme bimbo to the point that she solely bases her identity around her butch girlfriend. It is like her whole being only exists because she is validated by her masculine butch counterpart.

Even though I find myself relating to some layers of Sasha, as we are both femme lesbians, I still find it unsettling how she views herself. Her ultimate goal is to be a homemaker, she thinks that her purpose would be complete when she finally becomes The Wife. There is a part in the story where Sasha has a conversation with her ex about gender roles, they argue about the roles that they're supposed to take as the man and the woman in the relationship even though it's a lesbian relationship. Thus, she makes it clear what kind of roles that she actually wants out of the relationship:

Sasha did not want strict gender roles so that she would have to climb out of bed and fetch a bowl from the kitchen. She wanted strict gender roles so that the ex would protect her, provide for her, and wear men's clothing.

Being domesticated and wanting to be a housewife are almost always what Sasha talks about, as if her whole personality is trying to prove her femmeness and to confirm her femininity in every way possible. I can only imagine how demanding it is to

have to be constantly performing this identity and expecting to be praised all the time for simply just showing femininity. Davis explains that this antic is called 'dykette': "seen-by-butch", "seen-as-femme" and "containing both the butch's gaze and the femme's stare". This term explains a lot about the binary roles in the novel, on how there are only distinct identities between the feminine side and the masculine side.

I am very aware that just because a book is inherently queer, it does not need to be ground-breaking or constantly offering something new. It can be nice just to read a clichéd romance between two women. But sometimes this story feels like an empty vessel: full of nuances and theatrics but failing to deliver what it is supposed to give. I do not think I can quite tell whether Davis is actually hitting the right mark with this portrayal, as she describes in her interview with Vanity Fair:

There's the question of, is the book serious? Are the characters serious? Does Sasha really think "faking it" is easy and fun? Is she just trying to be funny? Then there's the bigger question of: Is it a serious work of literature? Is it a serious work of fiction? What I hope is that the book is taken seriously, or semi seriously, in its celebration of joy and humor and gossip.

I think I can see what Davis is trying to do by creating these characters and underscoring the identities they represent; her depiction of queer life is candid and raw, which is not something that we read every day, since there is not that much space for queer, especially lesbian, fiction. But still: now I am trying to find out if it does more harm than good. I find it stereotypical that the portrayal of the characters centers around the question of what femininity and what masculinity is. Isn't the point of being in a lesbian relationship the capacity to exist outside an assumed and dictated agenda?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Genta Tanjung is a graduate student at Utrecht University studying 'English & Comparative Literature' for which she was granted a fully funded scholarship from the Indonesian Government. She worked as an English teacher after finishing her BA in 'English Literature'. Her specialization is contemporary queer fiction. Outside her academic ventures, she enjoys analyzing horror media adaptations.

MISS MAJOR SPEAKS AND WE LISTEN

Lessons from a Black Transgender Elder

By Vlinder Verouden

Trans women Of Color are not expected to live beyond 35. At the intersection of racism, transphobia and misogyny, these women experience disproportionate rates of fatal violence. Few trans women Of Color survive mass incarceration, the (ongoing) HIV/AIDS crisis, and transfemicide to become an elder in and for the trans community, guiding us, specifically our siblings Of Color, in a time when we do not have many transcestors to turn to. When I stumbled upon the memoir of Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, an American pioneer for trans liberation, who looks back on her remarkable life in her late seventies, I felt a shimmer moving through my body. I had encountered something special. Indeed, the memoir turned out to be a critical source of trans wisdom and a unique piece of life writing.

Miss Major Speaks: Conversations with a Black Trans Revolutionary, published by Verso –

the self-proclaimed "largest independent radical publishing house in the English-speaking world" – traces the life of Miss Major and records the lessons she has learned along the way. Born in the 1940s, Miss Major is an activist, community organizer and former sex worker who not only participated in the Stonewall Rebellion but also lived through incarceration, admission to a psychiatric hospital and the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Somewhat deviating from the genre conventions of memoir, Miss Major's life is presented in the form of a conversation between the trans activist and her former assistant, the writer Toshio Meronek. Thus, as the title of the memoir already suggests, Miss Major speaks rather than writes. The dynamic between the two, specifically the way in which Meronek turns Miss Major's speech into script, is reminiscent of how philosophy is traditionally recorded through students. In that sense, Miss Major might actually be a trans Socrates or Wittgenstein, whose spoken wisdom is preserved in written form for future generations.

Indeed, it would not be amiss to classify *Miss Major Speaks* as a philosophy, providing insight through experience and age that elucidates not only what it means to persevere as a Black trans woman in the United States but also what it means to build community and move fiercely toward trans liberation. The act of sharing is important to Miss Major. As she argues toward the end of the memoir, elders should teach "younger people to pick up the fight. When you are constantly under attack, especially if you're in this community," she explains, "you can't just retire and walk off into the sunset. You've got to stay and teach young people to fight."

In the introduction, parts of which feel like an unnecessary summary of the text to come, Meronek shares that a conversation has always been Miss Major's preferred form of address, since it "has the potential to cement connections more than a monologue". Considering that Miss Major's activism has always centered connections and communities, the memoir's conversational form is fitting. It also heightens the intimacy between Miss Major and the reader, who feels more like a listener, gathering at the trans elder's feet to listen to her stories.

And these stories are vibrant. Meronek has done a great job capturing Miss Major as she is. Absorbed in their conversation, I did not merely read Miss Major's words, I could hear her speak. She was in the room with me. While I am familiar with Miss Major's voice, having come across videos of her circulating online, I am certain readers who have not heard her speak before clearly feel her presence accompanying them as they move through the memoir. The phrasing, the wit, the honesty, the warmth permeating the text is distinctly Miss Major. After a while, you, too, begin to relocate the T to the front of the acronym TLGB, and recognize the significance a change in vowel makes (girls and gurls).

At times, the conversation is messily presented on the page, questions and answers haphazardly stitched together, compiled under the title of a chapter that does not

always correspond to its content. Perhaps its slight chaos is the charm of the memoir, as it represents how spoken conversations move from one thought to another without always making complete sense. It certainly does not take away from the strength Miss Major possesses as a storyteller.

Although she has been through enough suffering and injustice for multiple lifetimes, the memoir never turns bleak. Miss Major's voice brings a warmth and a brightness with it that reminds the reader to hold on to moments of light, no matter how weakly they flicker, even when someone finds themselves in "the deepest, darkest fuckin' hole." Before writing the book, she tells Meronek that she does not want it to be harsh: "I want it warm and embracing, like a big hug."

This does not mean, however, that Miss Major glosses over the systemic inequity she observes affecting trans people, Black people, homeless people, poor people. She will tell it like it is. After all, she named her community center for trans people living in the South of the United States "TILIFI": "Telling It Like It Fuckin' Is." This is a sentiment that travels throughout the memoir. For example, the first part of the book is titled "Stonewall Never Happened", a bold statement that blossoms into a critical reflection on the rebellion, particularly the ways in which it has been and continues to be commemorated. For the queer community, specifically in the United States, Stonewall has long been seen as the catalyst for queer and trans liberation, a celebratory landmark in queer history. As such, Miss Major's bold statement will definitely cause some commotion.

Stonewall is by far the main event people ask Miss Major to bring back from the dead. After all, she is one of the few people involved in the Rebellion still alive today, on top of being the most visible. As Meronek writes in the introduction, "in the years leading up to the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion … I must have booked her for more than a hundred events and press interviews." After a while, Meronek started to decline all invitations to discuss Stonewall, since Miss Major has shared her reflections on numerous occasions. It might have made the memoir more powerful, then, if Stonewall appeared only as a single, fleeting sentence, refuting its significance for queer liberation since, according to Miss Major, it did nothing for trans women in general and for those Of Color in specific.

Yet it makes sense for the memoir to discuss Stonewall in quite some detail, and to do so at the very start. First of all, it is what people are interested in and might even buy the memoir for, as they either recognize Miss Major's name or read on the blurb that she is a Rebellion veteran. More importantly, however, the memoir shows the cracks in the reification of Stonewall as a landmark in queer history, and brings forth Miss Major's account of the rebellion, which differs from the one circulating in the popular imagination.

What stands out most in Meronek and Miss Major's conversation on Stonewall is the

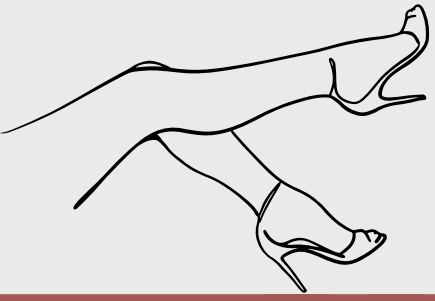
emphasis on Miss Major not being "a single event." In other words, her wisdom

and influence extend far beyond the Stonewall Rebellion. Rather than conceiving of Miss Major as a single event and only thinking of her as a veteran of the Rebellion, the memoir redirects people's attention to the comprehensiveness and complexity of Miss Major as a lifetime, as a force. With Stonewall out of the way, the rest of the memoir discusses how Frank 'Big Black' Smith, a crucial figure for the Black Panthers and the Attica prison uprising, mentored Miss Major in prison and showed her how radical inclusivity is integral to political action ("it has to include us all, or it's not going to work"); how Black and Of Color sex workers came to bear more knowledge on the HIV/AIDS crisis than public health organizations and would eventually train doctors; how simply looking out for each other is the way to survival; how joining forces is ultimately the way to liberation.

What these shimmers of wisdom show is that so much knowledge and theory emerge from the streets. Most of the brilliant insights Miss Major passes on to the reader come from experience, from being a former sex worker, from having been incarcerated, from organizing a community center from the ground up. I recognize some of these insights from my training in gender studies, insights that now circulate in academia but arguably have been circulating on the streets and in practice much longer. Moreover, they are accessible to a much wider audience through this memoir. The length, humor (I keep thinking how Miss Major's vanity plate application for TRNSGDR is still pending) and language of *Miss Major Speaks* should attract a wide range of readers, opening the eyes of cisgender readers and providing a guiding light for transgender readers, specifically those Of Color. "Our stories are not all the same," Miss Major shares on the final page, "but the destination is."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Under a new moon, Vlinder Verouden captures shimmers of beauty in words and images. A poet, spoken word artist, trans theorist, former editor-in-chief of *FRAME: Journal of Literary Studies* and a voracious poster on Instagram, Vlinder sets out to catch these shimmers before they escape into moonlight.



LOVE, LONGING, AND LONELINESS

A Review of *Y/N* by Esther Yi

By Merit Wissink

When was your First Time? For me, it was when I was still in primary school and heard the song "What Makes You Beautiful" on the radio, the first single by what would later become the most famous boy band of the early 2010s: One Direction. From that moment on, I was a *Directioner* (a die-hard One Direction fan). Everything in my life revolved around one thing and one thing only: this band. I had posters, wristbands, necklaces, t-shirts, I bought all their albums, saw their films, and went to their concerts. Whenever the phrase 'one direction' showed up in schoolbooks and assignments, I would underline it and draw hearts around it. I stayed up until deep in the night to watch their live streams and videoclips. They gave my life a sense purpose, and they made me happy.

When I first read about *Y/N* by Esther Yi, the premise immediately intrigued me. Girl falls in love with K-

pop star and travels the world in a quest to find him. As I've shamelessly divulged, this love and devotion for a popstar is something I could relate to. So, I picked it up, ready to be sucked into a wonderful and surreal story about fan culture.

Y/N follows an unnamed Korean American narrator living in Berlin. She works an unfulfilling job as a copywriter for a company selling canned artichoke hearts and has a boyfriend whom she introduces to everyone as her adoptive brother (ew!). She lives with her roommate, Vavra, a superfan of the popular K-pop group referred to as the "pack of boys". The narrator, on the other hand, is anything but. She does not want anything to do with these Korean superstars. Everything changes, however, when Vavra drags her along to a concert. She is mesmerized by the looks and movements of the youngest member, Moon, and becomes obsessed with him in an experience that is described as her "First Time".

At the same time, her relationship with her boyfriend, Masterson, is failing. He cannot commit to falling in love with the narrator and instead describes her as "the person [he is] currently considering being in love with." Moon, however, is always there for the narrator. At the (misunderstood) advice of a therapist, she leaves for Seoul in search of Moon. What follows is a story of delusion, identity, and loneliness in the modern age.

Through *Y/N*, Yi explores the wild world of fan culture and the extremes of idolization in a way that feels timely and relevant. As Masterson cleverly observes, boy bands such as the "pack of boys" now function as gods. "We no longer go to church once a week," he says. Instead, "we attend a stadium concert once a year." Yi, moreover, uses *Y/N* to explore the realm of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships, where one party is interested in the other and the other is not aware of the person's existence, are prominent in an age of fan culture's accelerating online presence. The narrator's imaginary relationship with Moon seems to give her more satisfaction than the real-life relationship she has with Masterson. "He feeds my imagination more than you do," she says to Masterson, who replies, "Of course he does, … Because he exists in your imagination."

The ways in which the characters talk is dream-like, and the novel gets progressively more surreal as it continues. Yi's prose is highly literary, dripping in adjectives and synonyms, which, although impressive, often borders on pretentious. Whilst reading, one gets the impression that Yi robbed a thesaurus of its entire vocabulary to write this novel. The words and sentence structures can be unnecessarily complicated, which sometimes makes it difficult to get into the narrative. An example of this absurd style can be seen here, in a scene after the narrator sees Moon for the first time:

For a single moment in time, I would be all that he saw. I knew I'd be condemned for imposing on him my individual humanity, divorced from the crowd, but I didn't care, I was a person, I knew this if nothing else, that I was a person, however hapless,

however void.

Similarly, the following passage, where she describes how she wants to be noticed by Moon, exemplifies Yi's beautiful yet bizarre language:

I couldn't follow along, as my arms were crossed in order to thwart any flare-ups of agency that might disturb my state of perfect passivity, which I needed to maintain so that Moon could act upon me as much as possible.

Well, *my* agency wants to flare up in a cringe. I can see that this use of language is deliberate, as it adds to the surrealism at play in the novel. However, it is overdone, especially considering the fact that all characters, however major or minor, use language in the exact same manner. We never get to know any of the character's personalities, as they all sound the same. They all speak Yi's language.

The poetic, dreamy prose is regularly interchanged with the narrator's own fanfiction, a type of fiction, written by fans (often amateur writers), based on popular characters or on real-life figures. The title "Y/N" refers to "your/name", a narrative device used in a particular type of fanfiction which allows readers to insert their own name into the story. While innovative, Yi's addition of fanfiction is also immediately where some of my problems with the novel arise. The fanfiction follows Y/N and her relationship with Moon, and while it is not strictly autobiographical, the storylines between the narrator's life and her character's often strike an uncanny resemblance. The character our narrator creates seems to be an exact copy of herself, sharing all her physical and personality traits. Moreover, the narrator's writing style is identical to Yi's, making them hard to distinguish. I found myself wondering whether I had missed the switch from fanfiction to 'real life' several times.

Moreover, one of the fans the narrator meets appropriately notes that, "[i]n order to accommodate the biography of every reader that might chance upon the story, the writer creates a character void of personality." Ironically, the Y/N character that the narrator creates in the novel is very particular and has lots of imperfections and quirks that make her hard to relate to or see yourself in. This makes it seem as though the title of the novel, as well as element of fanfiction, were only employed to lure in a specific reading public: that of so-called fangirls, the die-hard (often female) fans that are known to go to great lengths to engage with their idol.

You see, Yi comes from a background in academic and non-fiction essay writing. Y/N is in that sense her first exploration into the world of fiction writing. In an interview with the podcast "Reading the Room", she notes that she is not a K-pop fan herself. Her obsession is with literature and great writers.

Yi seems to be wanting bridge the two worlds, to create a middle ground between the higher culture of literary fiction and the lower culture of fandom. Although she does take the initial steps to explore the (so far)

unexplored literary world of celebrity fandom, I get the feeling that she tries too hard to make fan culture literary and, consequently, seems to forget the yearning and the passion that lie at the heart of the story. The yearning and the passion that made me consume everything One Direction created.

In that same interview with "Reading the Room", Yi notes that *Y/N* is essentially just a simple story of girl meets boy and falls in love. However, by changing the context to one of fan culture and idolization, Yi is able to give it a contemporary, critical, twist.

Y/N provides a modern exploration into the themes of loneliness and identity. The narrator struggles with intense feelings of solitude. She has trouble finding human connection and purposefully distances herself from any form of community. In contrast to other fans of Moon, she does not experience any sexual feelings towards Moon, nor does she really want to meet him. Rather: "[She] want[s] to have known him for years and years." Other fans, she perceives as being stalkers or just utterly disturbing - she meets one fan who wants to domesticate Moon like a dog. At the same time, her identity as a Korean American woman living in Germany, and subsequently South Korea, makes for a complicated relationship with her identity. This becomes especially apparent when she moves to Seoul, and everyone calls her out for her American pronunciation of the Korean language. She does not seem to fit into any society. Instead, she finds comfort and company in her idea of Moon. *Y/N* thus reads as an inquiry into fandom as a way to fill the void, as a cure for loneliness. Moon, or rather her idea of Moon, gives her the company she longs for, and that she struggled to find with her (ex-)boyfriend and friends. Through fanfiction, the narrator is able to inhabit an imaginary character, an ideal character that she longs to be.

Looking at it this way, *Y/N* is essentially a novel about longing - about longing for love, longing for companionship, longing for a superstar, longing for the unattainable, and about longing to be someone you are not. But most of all about how, perhaps, the best fantasies are those which are never realised. Longing might be the goal all along.

Nonetheless, one cannot refrain from interpreting the novel as a *cautionary* tale about idolization and the development of parasocial relationships, as well. When our narrator eventually meets Moon, her dream crumbles as she understands that Moon cannot be who she wants him to be. In response to Moon not reciprocating her affection, she realizes:

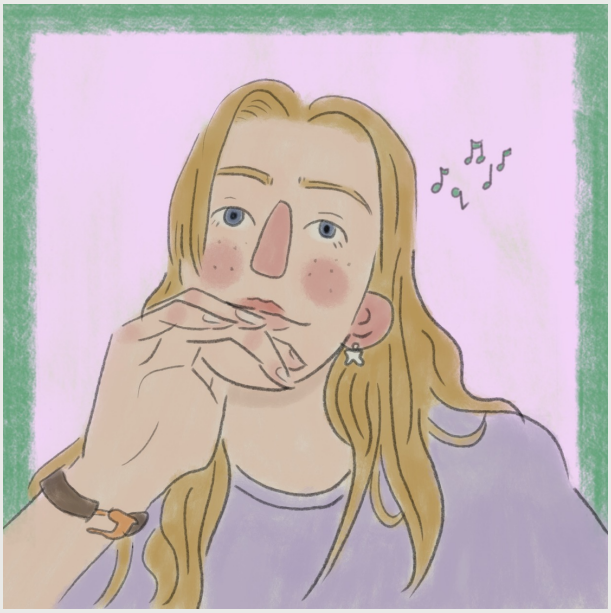
I might as well have been speaking with a well-meaning relative. Here Moon was, setting before me ideas of indisputable rationality, like utensils arranged in order, polished and practical, when he was supposed to be coaxing my imagination into its deepest contortions.

Overall, Esther Yi presents us with a unique and interesting debut. She makes an attempt, though half-hearted, to explore the (so far) mostly unexplored literary world of celebrity fascination and obsession. In the

end, my problem with Yi's novel is that I do not think it went far enough. Yi had the potential, and even set up the story initially, to really explore the longing and the yearning that comes with idolization, the longing and the yearning that I know and have experienced, but her desire to intellectualize fandom made it ultimately fall flat. I found myself wishing for more: more delusion, more obsession, and more passion. For an even deeper exploration into fan culture and society's obsession with celebrities. I wanted to be able to see my own obsessive tendencies in the character, to see a similar sense of yearning reflected in the narrator.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Merit Wissink is currently enrolled in the MA program 'Literature Today' at Utrecht University. She completed her BA studies at Groningen University with a degree in 'European Languages and Cultures', specializing in Swedish language and literature. In her free time, she likes to listen to and obsess over music, film, and all things pop culture and art related. Her research interests include gender and sexuality in literature and (pop) culture.



THE LAMENT OF LILITH

Exploring Legends, Lore, and Literature

By Kerry Young

When I say monstrous woman, what comes to mind? Is it Medusa, a shape-shifting embodiment of danger and death? Or perhaps the chillingly mundane, such as a serial killer? Women have been cast as monsters in a multitude of forms throughout history and literature, challenging us to explore the countless ways in which 'monstrosity' can be depicted and redefined.

Sarah Clegg's debut non-fiction work, *Women's Lore 4,000 Years of Sirens, Serpents, and Succubi*, traces the origin of the "monstrous woman" trope. The woman as "other" has been used throughout literature and Western culture to lend credence to the dominant social structures that benefit from women conforming to a narrow set of social roles. Notably, Clegg traces the lineage of Lamashtu, an ancient Mesopotamian goddess, who shares uncanny similarities to our modern demons, Lilith, Lamia, and even mermaids. With a healthy dose

of humor, Clegg explains how these ancient stories have morphed over the millennia from stories told by women for women to cope with the profound fear and horror of childbirth and infant mortality, to stories told by men for men to address concerns about sexual transgressions and morality.

Clegg, who has a PhD in the ancient history of Mesopotamia from Cambridge University, and reads Sumerian, Akkadian, Arabic, Greek, and Latin, states:

Legends of all these creatures were bound up in each other, were part of a single tradition that has spanned almost the entirety of human history. The purpose of this book is to trace this tradition, to understand how it was passed down through the centuries, how it changed, and why it was so prolific and so widespread.

Unsurprisingly, the breadth of her book is breath-taking, but coming in at just 252 pages, there is also a lot of material that is glossed over. Of course, it is impossible to go into detail about every example throughout history of the 'Monster Outside', a term coined by Gilbert and Gubar in their groundbreaking book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. This term, 'Monster Outside', refers to a character archetype that refuses to conform to the gendered roles traditionally assigned to them, and therefore are seen as monstrous.

It is positively monstrous that within critical discourse there exists such a huge gap in scholarly study into the 'Monster Outside'.

Adapted by generations of male storytellers as an archetypal foil to the innocent beauty, the 'Monster Outside' has taught generations of young women that acting with agency is monstrous. Despite the inherent richness of the original stories, there has been limited scholarship dedicated to them. I could ascribe this lack of serious investigation to many reasons: the passing on of these stories being confined primarily to oral tradition, or of being recorded in mediums such as textiles, pottery, and other stereotypically 'female' pursuits, which were seen as a hobby rather than a source of knowledge. Chiefly, though, it is the dismissal of women, and their stories, that has led to this defect.

The monsters that women created to help deal with the pervasive dangers of childbirth, were stripped; of their talons, their monstrosity, and remade into a different image. This new creature was one that women were told to be frightened of, despite having an outward appearance that looked like a reflection they might see in a mirror. The reason? Because these new "monsters" could be their mothers, aunts, sisters, or even themselves. But these new monsters no longer spoke about women's fears, they had been coopted to represent a new set of fears – as Clegg writes, "These monsters were used to define womanhood in the negative, and to brand as demonic any woman who behaved in a manner deemed insufficiently feminine."

Clegg examines the slow transformation of these monsters, from both a linguistics standpoint and from the art/artifacts that

remain. Clegg articulates it as such:

Having condemned as sorcerers women who tried to protect themselves and their children against our demons, having ridiculed those who believed in them as foolish old women, a new pattern is starting here, one that we'll see repeated again and again through the Middle Ages to the modern day: men had worked out a way to turn the legends of Lilith to their own needs, to use them to reflect their own fears – principally, their fears of women.

Horror stories have been a useful gauge of the collective human psyche throughout the years. Victorian stories such as Dracula and Frankenstein discuss the loss of humanity, as experienced by the Industrial Revolution, while our modern horror stories trend towards outer space and our fear of being colonized. Likewise, the grotesqueries that modern men have created are not, as one might assume, horribly disfigured hybrids, but rather, alluring temptresses, the "femme fatale", or as I might cynically say, women themselves.

Clegg addresses this idea of woman as monstrous early in the text – through an unusual manner. In an unassuming footnote on page 5, the reader gets their first taste of Clegg's dry wit, when discussing the creation of the murderous mermaids to address male fears of seductive women. She notes: "Seductive behaviour, of course, could cover anything from turning up naked and actively trying to persuade a man to have sex, to existing while a man was nearby." Clegg's creative use of footnotes is one of the truly distinctive and delightful stylistic choices about this book. Once considered an esoteric and pedantic tool, used only by the dustiest historians to express their intellectual superiority, the footnote has taken pride of place in this book. Through them, Clegg offers both witty insights and humorous asides. Indeed, much like David Foster Wallace's inclusion of an entire chapter of his novel *Infinite Jest* within a footnote, Clegg often uses her footnotes to give the cultural information needed to understand her jokes and jibes – especially since these jokes usually reference a culture that existed thousands of years ago.

It was difficult, at times, to comprehend the motivations of these people who lived in a world so fundamentally different from my own. However, Clegg took that into account and went to great lengths to paint a picture with her words and include an image for good measure. In one short passage, Clegg explains that the purpose of incantation bowls was deeply personal:

The fear of Lilith's seduction, for Ephra's wife, was her fear of losing her husband's affection (or never gaining it in the first place), and her hope that this was caused by a supernatural temptress who could be banished by a clay bowl. Her quiet desperation, preserved where she buried it 1500 years ago, is a small, heartbreaking window into a world where women were entirely dependent on their husband's affection. To lose it was a terrifying, life-destroying prospect, and something over which they might have very little

control.

She then includes an image of one of these incantation bowls for us to see the perfectly preserved wishes of women painstakingly painted onto a small clay bowl. It was surprisingly poignant to see the hopes and dreams of a woman carried forward through time, making Clegg's concluding comment in the footnotes: "In a crowded field, this man's bowl is an absolute embarrassment…", particularly satirical, while also helping me to understand the stakes.

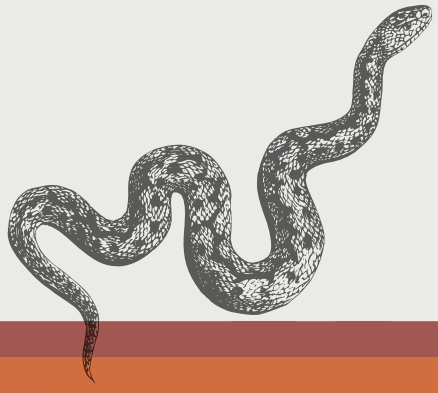
In Jonathan Russell Clark's essay *On the Fine Art of Footnotes*, he mentions that authors like Wallace, Klosterman and Nabokov all used footnotes as "a chance for meta-commentary. They can – with doleful hindsight like Klosterman's or circuitous neurosis like Wallace's – both compose a piece and comment on it, but because they aren't commenting within the narrative itself, and because the technique they use comes from authoritative academics, the footnotes grant these tangential asides a kind of authority not offered by, say, a parenthetical."

However, Clegg's footnotes are not just humorous additions to the text, but also important to the overall tone and structure of the book. Take, for example, her footnote on page 76, that starts halfway down the page and continues to take up the remainder of the bottom half of the next page as well. Instead of the pedantic, dry tone that most non-fiction scholars seem to feel is their honor-bound duty upon receiving their degree, Clegg uses a conspiratorial, inclusive tone, inviting the reader to join in on her mirth or scorn. Perhaps my favorite footnote occurs on page 142, referencing a Medieval cardinal Peter Damian, whom she finds particularly repulsive – "He's credited with inventing the siesta, and it's telling that even this cannot outweigh his negative qualities" Clegg jokes. Which I think speaks to Clark's point that "Footnotes, in other words, no longer merely support a story; now, they can *be* the story."

Overall, I found this book a thought-provoking journey through the western world's conception of femininity and what it means to be "monstrous". I relish the opportunity to share a conspiratorial wink with Melusine the next time I see a Starbucks, or bite back a chuckle as I see more of these monstrous women invading our culture and reclaiming their place in our collective imagination.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerry Young's natural habitat is a world of words, where she delves into the realms of monsters and mythology through her writing and voracious reading. Her deep passion for folklore is rivaled only by her aversion to the truly eerie. Armed with a BA in 'English Literature' from Florida State University, Kerry is currently pursuing an MA at Utrecht University. Prior to wielding her proverbial pen as a critic, she dedicated herself to the art of education, helping students refine their writing skills.



FLOATING UPWARDS AND FINDING A WAY OUT OF THE WOODS

How Han Kang's *Greek Lessons* Illuminates Language

By Anke van Zijverden

δύσβατός γέ τις ὁ τόπος
φαίνεται καὶ ἐπίσκιος.
ἔστι γοῦν σκοτεινὸς καὶ
δυσδιερεύνητος.

This place is a place
where it is difficult to take a step in any given direction.
All around has grown dark,
It is a place where it is difficult to find anything.

It's pouring rain outside. My friends and I just managed to get to the bookstore in time to avoid getting absolutely soaked. Together we browse the variety of books in London's Foyles, surrounded by conversations in a multitude of languages. Inspired by this collage of cultures, I find the table with Fiction in Translation and am immediately drawn to a small novel with a white

cover and Korean writing on the side:

그때 우리는 바다 아래의 숲에 나란히 누워 있었어요

The contrast between the familiar English phrases on the cover and the unfamiliar characters on the side inspires me to pick it up. It's Han Kang's newly translated *Greek Lessons*. Briefly scanning the contents of the novel, it becomes apparent to me that language, communication and connection are at its heart. As a literature student, this pulls me in, but I'm already planning on buying four other books, which I'm holding in my other hand.

Perceiving my doubts, my friend nods encouragingly at me from across the table, encompassing exactly the type of non-verbal support that I expect from her.

It's a Han Kang novel, it's a signed copy

it seems intriguing, you should buy it

Greek Lessons is a relatively short novel that revolves around two nameless characters, a woman and a man, who both have a charged relationship with language and slowly form a connection to each other by employing other means of communication.

The woman has lost the ability to speak, in that she has been gradually exorcising language from her body. As a response to trauma – losing custody of her eight-year-old son and the recent loss of her mother – she reverts to silence. A distance is established between her and language, which is reflected in Han's visceral writing style and the third-person perspective that she employs for the woman's narrative: "she … seems to have become a shadow … an outside observer of a life contained in an enormous water tank. She can hear and read every single word, but her lips won't crack open to emit sound."

This passage underscores the woman's desperate need to regain language in order to be readmitted to society, where the primary media for 'true' communication seem to be speech and writing. Indeed, language pervades every aspect of her life since she is a literature teacher at university, who has previously worked as an editor and has published three volumes of her own poetry. The woman's anxiety regarding language eerily permeates the novel and makes its readers question the importance of language in their own life.

In the character of the woman, Han poignantly explores the tension between the woman's need to regain language and her inability to reclaim it since she cannot reconcile with the world as she is experiencing it. This leads to feelings of alienation and isolation. She attempts to regain language by learning Ancient Greek, which appeals to her since it is completely unlike her native Korean. It is of the past, and it is a supremely "self-sufficient language" with "a complicated grammatical system that [feels] like a safe, quiet room."

Intricately interwoven

with her narrative is that of her Greek teacher. His strenuous relationship with language stems from the pain he experiences as a result of being torn between two languages and cultures (i.e., German and (South) Korean). Similarly to the woman, he has found comfort in Ancient Greek, as its grammatical structure of the middle voice enables a single word in this language to contain a multitude of meanings. His access to a multiplicity of languages and sensitivity towards communication are cleverly presented as a counterpart to the woman's limitations.

This opposition recurs in the first-person perspective Han uses for the man's narrative, which also reflects the claustrophobic feelings that the man experiences in his increasingly darkening world.

The man is gradually losing his sight throughout the novel, which means that he is slowly moving inwards, focusing solely on his own thoughts and imagination. This complicates his ability to communicate, and it consequently creates similar feelings of alienation and isolation as the woman experiences. At the beginning of the novel, the man offers a violent description of this increasing darkness as a "knife" that is drawn between himself and the world. Both the man and the woman have to find new forms of communication to navigate contemporary society and to find connections to other people.

As Han emphasizes in an interview for the Pen World Voices Literary Festival, with *Greek Lessons* she wanted to explore the complexity of language. Especially, since language can be rather constrictive, it is "slippery … and you always fail if you want to be really accurate … your arrows are always failing the target." In *Greek Lessons*, she masterfully represents a multitude of languages and non-verbal communication in her poetic writing style. She employs language as a tool in itself to explore its seemingly infinite abilities as well as its limitations. Throughout the narrative, she juxtaposes the man's language with the woman's silence through white spaces. Additionally, she creates shorter sentences, sometimes consisting of only one word, to mimic speech, and she evokes poetic rhyme, metaphors and symbolism. The eventual connection that is established between the characters is expressed in tactile communication, where the woman writes short messages on the palm of the man's hand in Korean. This is cleverly visualized in italics that are shaped in the form of a hand.

Breathing in, she uses the tip of her trembling index finger to write distinctly on his palm.

First
to the
hospital

The opposition she creates between the third-person narrative for the woman and the first-person perspective for the man reflects their connection to language, where the woman is distanced from language and where only language will remain for the man when the darkness ultimately consumes him. When their narratives connect in the final

chapters, Han symbolizes the darkness they find themselves in, in order to craft a visual representation of their connection: "We were lying side by side in the woods under the sea then. / In a place that had neither light nor sound." The poetic atmosphere that Han invokes with this vivid description beautifully portrays the lyrical English translation of the Korean text on the side of the novel.

Finally, the woman utters sound and regains a first-person perspective in the final chapter. In an interview with The New Yorker, Han expresses that language is something that can deliver emotions but is simultaneously capable of inflicting pain. In her creation of the linguistically intricate form and narrative of *Greek Lessons*, Han further interrogates this paradox.

In *Greek Lessons*, Han devotes attention to similar themes as in her International Booker Prize-winning *The Vegetarian*. *Greek Lessons* was published first in South Korea, yet its translation was published seven years after *The Vegetarian*. Even though *Greek Lessons* is advertised as the 'follow-up' to *The Vegetarian*, it ultimately anticipates the shocking character development of *The Vegetarian*'s protagonist. With *Greek Lessons*' experimental form, Han examines the depiction of a shift in the female character's consciousness and her willingness to remain a functioning member of contemporary society. This is further developed in Yeong-hye's character in *The Vegetarian*, where she truly obscures the boundaries of what it means to be alive.

It is intriguing to see that *Greek Lessons*, a text that centers around language, is the only novel by Han Kang that has been translated by two translators: Deborah Smith and Emily Yae Won. In 2016, the translation of *The Vegetarian* generated some controversy after the Korean American translation professor Charse Yun claimed that the translation heavily embellished the original Korean text. Han was more involved in the translation process of *Greek Lessons*, but she remained acutely aware of the difficulties, even impossibilities, that arise in a literary translation. In a report on a Korean-English literary translation workshop organized by the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT) Han attended in 2015, she concludes that a translation should be considered in the context of its source text yet should be understood on its own terms.

For *Greek Lessons*, the translation adds an extra dimension to the central questions of the novel: What are the limitations of language? And how can humans transcend society's reliance on the spoken and written word? Smith and Won chose to maintain certain Korean elements in the novel, hereby beautifully reflecting the layering of languages that is offered in the original text with the characters' native Korean at the heart of the narrative. The symbolism that connects the man and the woman, where they find themselves surrounded by darkness in the woods and under the sea respectively, are reflected in hangul (the Korean

alphabet). This is cleverly maintained in one of the first passages that discusses the woman's silence:

After starting primary school, she began jotting down vocabulary in the back of her diary. With neither purpose nor context, merely a list of words that had made a deep impression on her; among them, the one she valued the most was 숲. On the page, this single-syllable word resembled an old pagoda: ㅍ, the foundation, ㅜ, the main body, ㅅ, the upper section. She liked the feeling when she pronounced it: ㅅ - ㅜ - ㅍ, s-u-p, the sensation of first pursing her lips, and then slowly, carefully releasing the air. And then of the lips closing. A word completed through silence. Entranced by this word in which pronunciation, meaning and form were all wrapped around in stillness, she wrote: 숲. 숲. Woods.

The traumatic darkness symbolized by natural elements (whether in the woods or under the sea) experienced by both characters is tightly woven into the story and ultimately entangled in its lyrical ending. At the beginning of the novel, the woman asserts that her dislike of "taking up space" is reflected in her inability to utter words. Han inverts this narrative and purposefully uses language to shine a light on the woman's narrative. And now, considering the abundance of language that can be found all around us, the novel makes the reader reconsider communication and its inevitable and inherent imperfections.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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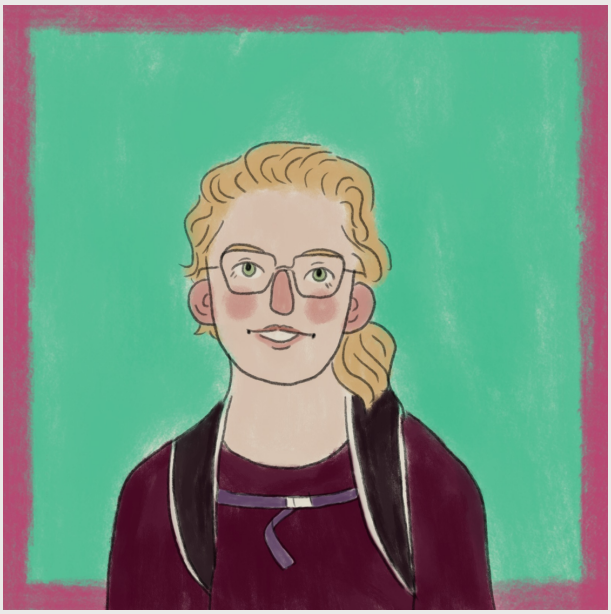

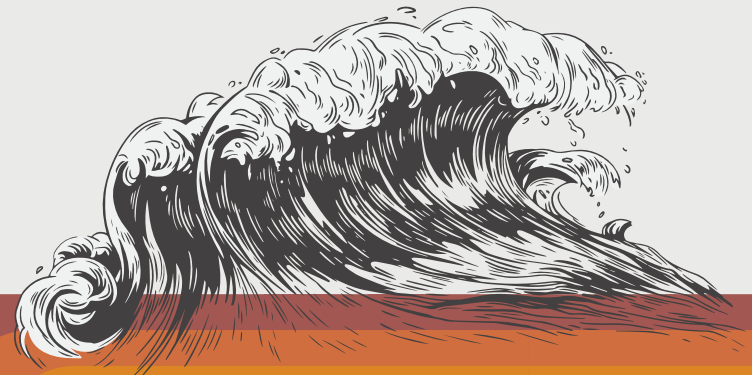

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