

# RevUU

*Magazine*

A JOURNAL TO  
HIGHLIGHT NEW,  
CRITICAL VOICES IN  
THE LITERARY SPACE



SPRING EDITION 2021 - THE TASTEMAKERS OF THE FUTURE

**Launch event's guest  
Emma van Meyeren  
Author of**

**OOK IK BEN  
STUKGEWAAID**



# Table of Contents

Introduction by [Mikolaj Bać](#) and [Ella van Driel](#) 2

Code of Conduct 3

## Reviews

This Mournable Body by Tsitsi Dangarembga: An intense imagination of the self in the other by [Kris van der Voorn](#) 4-5

"You just want our blood on this floor": Review of Namina Forna's The Gilded Ones by [Alyssa Vreeken](#) 6-8

Finding Wit in Worry: A review of Jenny Offill's Weather by [Annick Smithers](#) 9-10

## Reviews

Vorm en inhoud in een relationeel samenspel: Medicalisering van verliefdheid en de kracht van verhalen in Hanna Bervoet's Efter door [Lydia Fris](#) 11-12

Op zoek naar vervangende tekens voor rouw: Een recensie van Emma van Meyeren's Ook ik ben stukgewaaid: Essays over rouw door [Jane Singer](#) 13-15

## Creative

Write Thy Self by [Leda Serikoglu](#) 16-18

## Essays

Wreck or be Wrecked: Capitalism and the Ubiquitous Appeal of Millennial Fiction by [Iulia Ivana](#) 19-22

We Are Far From Polished, Far From Pristine: The impossibility of finding a perfect translator by [Kayleigh Herber](#) 23-27

The Giddy Relief of Reading Rebecca by [Mery Swiatkowska](#) 28-31

Storytelling and Solitude: Covid-19 Pandemic Edition by [Ella van Driel](#) 32-35

Mothers Are People Too, and They Deserve a Lollipop by [Annika van Leeuwen](#) 36-39

G is for Grief by [Jane Singer](#) 40-42

Lover's Confession by [Mikolaj Bac](#) 43-46

Life and Other Stories by [Lea Dokter](#) 47-49

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# An Introduction

Dear Reader,

We are excited to announce the second issue of RevUU: A journal to highlight new, critical voices in the literary space! RevUU is being continued as a passion project to host new voices by students from Literature Today, a Masters Study at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. In view of this Spring Issue we have updated our logo and freshened up the website to reflect on the season and add a new reading experience to all of you. The new issue will be released on May 7th, on the same day as our launch event!

Like in our last issue, RevUU still aims to be a diverse and inclusive platform where graduate students and aspiring writers can comfortably find their own voice while also being supported by other students and faculty. Moreover, we have opened up to writers from outside of the university by having an open paper call and have been able to gain more perspectives from outside of our Literature Today students, some quite internationally as well. Adding to that, we wanted to platform some of our own Dutch writers as well. That's why we've decided to provide you with a bilingual experience which aims to enrich our inclusive message. Our theme this issue as well is very fitting to this message: The Tastemakers of The Future, to highlight some new voices in writing that will undoubtedly have an effect on the development of the literary landscape.

We have a wide variety of topics for this issue. For example, **Annika van Leeuwen** has written about the dehumanisation of Motherhood in literature, and how for example *The New Wilderness* bridges the gap between motherhood and personhood. **Iulia Ivana** looks critically at capitalism and millennial fiction in her article "Wreck or be Wrecked". Our international submission by **Mery Świątkowska's** highlights the reading experience she had when reading *Rebecca* in a playful manner that resembles a stream of consciousness. The discussion about translation in view of the recent Gorman and Rijneveld debate is looked at in Kayleigh Herber's article from a

translator's perspective. **Mikołaj Bać** shares a personal account of the impact books and love have had on his life from an early age in his personal essay. Solitude and how it influences humanity and literature in light of the 2020 pandemic is explored by **Ella van Driel**. In "G is for Grief" **Jane Singer** shares emotional stories about her life and how *H is for Hawk* helped her with processing her grief. Similarly there is also **Lea Dokter's** "Stories of my Life" which focuses on the power of stories in relation to her family and, as the title says, her life.

**Leda Serikoglu's** inventive and visual poem will be among our new creative writing submissions. And we hope to be able to show you a piece written by **Mia You** as well!

Furthermore, we will be hosting several reviews in this issue. **Kris van der Voorn's** review on Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*, describes the experience of reading the novel and the importance of identity. **Annick Smithers'** review of *Weather* explores the escapism of the novel and its playful writing style. **Alyssa Vreeken's** review on *The Gilded Ones* discusses the representation within the novel and looks forward to the potential the rest of the trilogy might bring. For our Dutch language articles we have **Lydia Fris'** review of *Efter* that looks at the importance of interpersonal relations, and **Jane Singer's** review of the novel of our event's guest Emma van Meyeren, **Ook Ik Ben Stukgewaaid**.

Additionally, we would like to thank Mia You, Jane Singer and Paul Bijl for their enthusiastic support and for making it possible to work on this second issue together.

All of these topics and articles can be found in our second Issue which we can't wait to share with you. We hope you'll be inspired by what we have prepared for you and can't wait for your participation in the launch event which will take place on the 7th of May (email us at [revuumagazine@gmail.com](mailto:revuumagazine@gmail.com) or contact us on our social media for more information on the event).

We sincerely hope you enjoy the first Spring Issue!  
On behalf of our RevUU Board,

**Mikołaj Bać and Ella van Driel**, Chief editors



# Code of Conduct

26-4-2021

This is an important one for us, engaged as we are with the literary field and its place in our society. This is the first code of conduct for RevUU, and we hope it will help us to become increasingly egalitarian and inclusive in future issues.

RevUU wants to be a literary platform for everyone. This means we want to be as diverse and inclusive as possible. The following code of conduct has been formulated to visualize the inclusivity we want to display.

## Inclusive language

RevUU wants to make sure that our articles do not convey any language that could be prejudiced. This is why the following language will not be used anymore:

- specific postcolonial terms: we will only use 'enslaved people', and we will make sure that 'exoticizing' of people does not happen in our articles. For an overview of inclusive language also check <https://www.oneworld.nl/lezen/politiek/met-deze-taal-stoppen-we/>;
- We will try and be as gender inclusive as possible. This means that we will use gender neutral language whenever the gender is unknown.

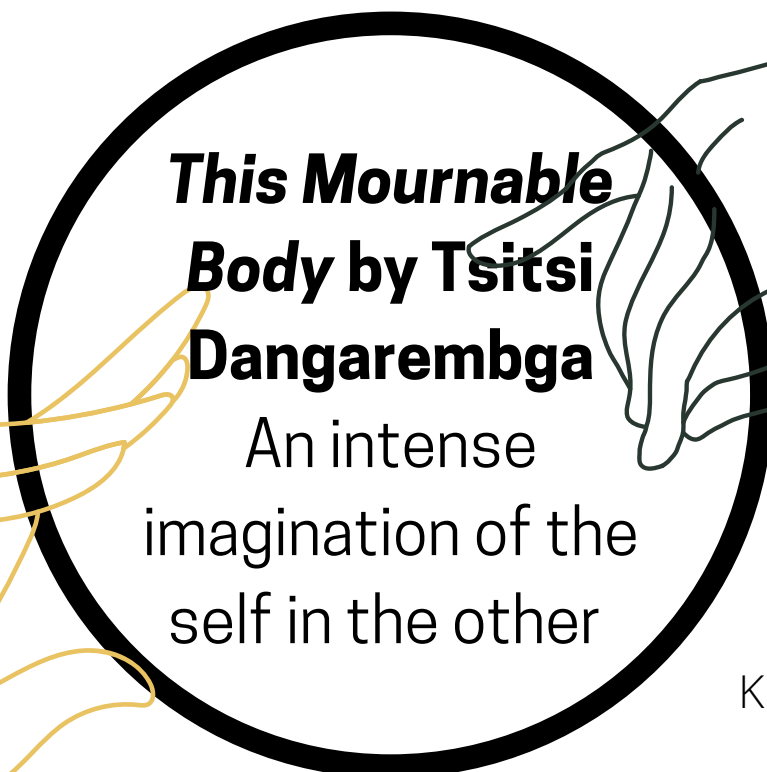
## Diversity in reviews

RevUU tries to represent a transcultural view on literature. This means we will try to make sure every issue showcases a diverse team of voices and authors discussed.

## Checking our privilege

RevUU is a part of the MA Literature Today of the Utrecht University. We understand that this is a place where the privileged and white voice still takes center stage, and that RevUU operates in this climate. We are aware of this and aim for change: we will do our best to voice more than just the dominant perspective.

We are aware that we can make mistakes. We want to learn from these as much as possible, and we strive to make this world as inclusive as possible. Our mission is to have the literary field represent this, starting with ourselves. As this is the first time we have composed a document like this, we want to emphasize that we do not have the monopoly on wisdom regarding equality. If you feel like things are missing or you want to see things changed, please send us a message at [revuumagazine@gmail.com](mailto:revuumagazine@gmail.com) and we will take your comments into consideration!



***This Mournable  
Body by Tsitsi  
Dangarembga***  
An intense  
imagination of the  
self in the other

Kris van der Voorn

**Imagine that you** choose to read a story featured on the Booker Prize Shortlist. You decide to read Mengiste, or perhaps Cook. As you search for the right title however, you read about Tsitsi Dangarembga's imprisonment due to a protest that calls on reform in Zimbabwe. You read that *This Mournable Body* calls out this regime. Imagine that you pick up that book instead, a book written in the second person calling out to 'you'. Imagine that.

As you read, you cannot put it down anymore. You find yourself immersed in the story, a dubious identification with a beautifully reincarnated character in Dangarembga's sequel on post-independent Zimbabwe. Here is a world so different to yours, and yet you find yourself strongly identifying with the character's experiences in a post-colonial capitalistic and sexist world. You remind yourself that you scorned Atwood's sequel being chosen two years ago, because it did not fit into a Booker prize based on one particular book. Then you remind yourself of the larger issues surrounding Atwood's win alongside a

black woman that year. Of the invisibility of black women in general. Of the problematic systematic racism in that book. You realise Dangarembga addresses all this through the main character Tambudzai. And so, you read on.

In *This Mournable Body*, Tambudzai reappears as the adult version of the Tambu you might have become

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***"This Mournable Body gives you the feeling of sitting on the edge of a very uncomfortable seat after a long day of hiking"***

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acquainted with in Dangarembga's earlier classic *Nervous Conditions*. This time, Tambudzai's story begins with her eviction from the hostel she was living in due to her "old" age. Throughout the novel you learn that Tambudzai, an educated woman from a small village, ended up in this situation when she gave up a successful job in the city as a result of racist and sexist obstacles at the

workplace. The author guides you into the world of a black woman who is invited into Western education, only to realise that in this process of becoming, Tambudzai loses all connection to her African roots. It is these same problems that Tambudzai faces in trying to make something of herself after her resignation. Her days are riddled with shame and insecurity. You read it in the guilt she feels towards her family as she is unable to provide for them in the ways she wants to after leaving them for the big city. It haunts her during her months spent in a psychiatric ward following a mental breakdown. She spends those months unable to talk to anyone but the hyena in her head, a symbol for the idea of balance and acceptance. It is only when Tambudzai recognizes her need to connect to her roots and family, that she overcomes these feelings. Throughout the novel Dangarembga breaks down the protagonist's self, formed by an education that made her believe she was worth less than her white peers and at the same time made her feel culpable for it. She then builds it back up to a new firm belief in the self and her black

sisterhood that establishes her past experiences and traumatic connection to the Zimbabwe war.

*This Mournable Body* gives you the feeling of sitting on the edge of a very uncomfortable seat after a long day of hiking. You do not want to get up and walk anymore, but you realise that neither option is going to make you feel better.

This feeling of discomfort arises mostly from how the book addresses its main character, Tambudzai, whose adolescence was shown in the earlier novel and whose coming of age now occupies your mind. Where this earlier story was told through her own first-person address, it is now the reader's turn to be involved in the story. By addressing Tambudzai in de second person, Dangarembga creates an experience whereby every sentence feels like it starts with "imagine yourself." Imagine yourself in Zimbabwe after the war in

Tambudzai's skin and life. Imagine yourself living through these experiences. In doing this, Dangarembga brings you into the story like never before. She makes you, the reader, feel complicit, bringing a new level of understanding and deepening of character development never seen before. Just like that, you have become one with the

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"She makes you, the reader, feel complicit, bringing a new level of understanding and deepening of character development never seen before"

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circumstances of the novel. And at the same time, of course, especially in light of your own identity and the history of the Booker Prize, you begin to question yourself. Am I allowed to read this story? Am I allowed to identify with a character whose struggles and deep insecurities

result from neo-colonialist problems and racist segregation? There are moments when you want to denounce Tambudzai for her ideas and actions. The very beginning of the book is the shocking condemnation of a woman whose skirt slips up in public. She is attacked by the crowd for revealing her legs, with even Tambudzai herself picking up a stone to throw. But Dangarembga's second person address draws you in. It is not Tambudzai, but you, who holds the stone. "It is in your hand. Your arm rises in slow motion" (24). This biblical reference makes you question who you are to criticize something that happens outside of your scope of reference; outside of your understanding. And bit by bit, you begin to understand the relevance of reading this story, your discomfort, and the arduous acceptance of your identification with the main character. Because you now realize: this has been your assignment all along.

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**Kris van der Voorn** is head of design at RevUU. They are a non-binary writer and spoken word performer, currently pursuing the Literature Today Master's at Utrecht University. They specialize in queer and politically engaged literature. Their goal is to make RevUU as diverse and inclusive as possible. Aside from their studies, Kris works at Savannah Bay, one of Utrecht's finest bookshops. They are also a content creator for the online platform VOOS.





**“You just want our blood on this floor”**

Review of Namina Forna’s ***The Gilded Ones***

Alyssa Vreeken

cover art: Johnny Tarajosu

**Namina Forna’s literary debut** hit the shelves in February. With my thesis handed in and birthday around the corner, it seemed like perfect timing – except that my favourite bookstore was closed due to Covid, and also wasn’t receiving recent publications for their click and collect due to Brexit. In other words, this book needed to perform well online, which is where I encountered and bought it. It is unsurprising, however, that the online marketing was going well. *The Gilded Ones*, the first book in the Deathless trilogy, received an impressive six-figure publication deal mere days after Forna submitted her final draft. Plus, it was revealed soon after that the book also received a film deal, with Forna set to write the script herself.

This might make it sound like getting her story from manuscript to bestseller has been a straightforward process, but there is more to it. Forna started writing *The Gilded Ones* in her second year at the USC School of Cinematic Arts in 2012, but at the time her work was met with

questions such as if it was necessary for her main character to be a person of colour. Forna struggled with her identity as an immigrant woman living in America: “In Sierra Leone, it was clear cut. I was a woman, and therefore inferior... But America, I had found, was just as brutal, albeit better at masking the signs of patriarchy.”

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***“The Gilded Ones, the first book in the Deathless trilogy, received an impressive six-figure publication deal mere days after Forna submitted her final draft”***

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Fast forward to 2017. Forna noticed significant promotion for cultural productions featuring people of colour in leading rolls: “[m]ovies like *Black Panther* and books like Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* have ushered in a renaissance of Black art and culture.” After meeting with

an agent, Forna decided to start anew, rewriting *The Gilded Ones* from scratch within two months; this new version immediately received significant attention in the publishing industry and beyond.

The story is set in Otera, a fictional world inspired by West African culture and folklore, with “ultra-patriarchal” values at the core of society: women wear masks that cover the top half of their faces, they are not allowed to leave their houses without a male escort, and aren’t allowed to run, drink, join the army, or even receive education. But most importantly, all girls are expected to prove their purity at the age of sixteen.

During this Ritual of Purity, all sixteen-year-old girls have to prove that they bleed red rather than gold. Girls who bleed gold are referred to as *alaki*, meaning unwanted and worthless. They are said to be the descendants of the *Gilded Ones*, who folklore dictates were the four original demons who were

inherently female. Bleeding gold thus marks them as impure and demonic, which is not a good or safe thing to be in a world that is plagued by demonic monsters called deathshrieks. If gold runs through a young girl's veins, they are given the Death Mandate, until death sticks.

Deka's death does not stick. Moments before she is set to take part in the Ritual of Purity, a group of deathshrieks flood into town. Against her better judgment, Deka attempts to protect her father by vehemently urging the deathshrieks to stop. Unfortunately, in doing so, she displays unusual abilities: the deathshrieks obey her command. But this society does not appreciate people who are different. It is clear that anything that is 'irregular' is perceived as dangerous; as a result, Deka is sentenced to death by her community, including her 'loving' father.

From birth, Deka has wished to be pure and unnoticeable, which becomes impossible as soon as she receives the Death Mandate. The town Elders try everything to find her final death: decapitation, bleeding her dry to sell the gold, dismemberment; they even have her father kill her, but nothing works. Nine attempts later, Deka is still blinded by the misogynistic messages of her culture, and still wishes for nothing more than to be forgiven and become pure in the eyes of their God, Oyomo.

I feel for her – which is the point, of course. Deka has tried so hard all her life, and yet she is still deemed not good enough. Not based on her behaviour or actions, but based on something that is out of her control. Despite our differences, this is something I, as well as other readers, can relate to.

Fortunately, Deka's perception of herself and the ultra-patriarchal society of Otera start to slowly change after she is picked up by White Hands, a female emissary of the emperor, who takes her to the capital. Here she and the other enlisted alaki will be trained to fight and kill deathshrieks, alongside all-male soldiers – although alaki aren't considered

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**"Deka's development as a character – as well as that of the secondary characters, alaki and soldiers alike – goes hand in hand with her understanding of the misogynistic society she lives in"**

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women anymore, the emperor uses the soldiers to keep an eye on them.

Deka is continuously confronted with these views, while also being asked to do the very things she was never allowed to do, such as run and fight. She receives training and education, and learns how to make armour out of her own golden blood. Running – something I try my best to avoid at any cost, even when I desperately need to catch a bus or train – all of a sudden seems like such a luxury.

After a couple of months, Deka starts to wonder whether the restrictions she faced as a girl – justified by religious traditions, put on all girls up to sixteen, still enforced on pure women afterwards – were never meant to protect and prepare her for a happy life, but formed a cage to contain her: "[o]ur whole lives, we've been taught to make ourselves smaller, weaker than men. That's what the Infinite Wisdoms teach – that being a girl means perpetual submission."

Deka's development as a character – as well as that of the secondary characters, alaki and soldiers alike – goes hand in hand with her understanding of the misogynistic society she lives in: "[t]ill our empire is free from those monsters ... What was she referring to with those words? Was it the deathshrieks ... or the men who send us out to battle them?" This growing comprehension of her society results in her and her friends finding strength in numbers, rebelling against the system that has thus far not only suppressed them, but made them feel insignificant, unnatural, not worthy of life. The focus is not only on fighting the patriarchal order and their traditions, but on creating an equal society in which men and women can enjoy the same freedoms.

This is an extremely important message, especially in light of the many contemporary discussions and criticisms about feminism. Sure, it is supposed to serve women, but what about intersectionality? What about people who identify as men but are still oppressed due to skin colour, class, or sexuality? This book speaks to these issues in a way that is accessible to young readers, who might – like myself and many others – turn to books to try and make sense of the world around them. The *Gilded Ones* promotes community over division, compassion over animosity, and most importantly, it recognises that patriarchal structures are problematic and oppressive for (almost) everyone.

It is clear that, for Forna, it was important to communicate what she had learned living in Sierra Leone and in America, stating that *The Gilded Ones* is a feminist work: "it is the kind of book I wished I'd had earlier. One that offers a space not only to people who look like me, but to

everyone.”

Learning that Forna is currently also working as a screenwriter in L.A. was unsurprising after having read *The Gilded Ones*. The way in which she plays with descriptions – meaning physical appearances (of human and non-human alike), nature, the towns and cities, objects, and so on – indicates that she has experience with screenwriting: the reader is immediately immersed in the world she has created.

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*"The Gilded Ones* promotes community over division, compassion over animosity, and most importantly, it recognises that patriarchal structures are problematic and oppressive for (almost) everyone"

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Furthermore, Forna does not linger in her writing, does not show the reader everything, and leaves room for imagination. She holds a pace in accordance with Deka's development, providing the reader with summaries akin to cinematic montages. I, for one, cannot wait to see what Forna has in store for us with the remaining two books in the *Deathless* series, as well as the film adaptation. She will surely impress.

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Photo by Alyssa Vreeken

**Alyssa Vreeken** has just concluded her Master's degree in Literature Today, but is still working hard at finishing her Master's degree in Comparative Literary Studies. She specialises in Young Adult literature (how it is read and the affect these narratives (can) have on its target audience), and is particularly interested in Perpetrator Studies, Feminist Theory, and Adaptation Theory (especially in relation to fairy tales and mythology). While reading, writing, and editing at Paratext take up the majority of her time, she also likes to dabble in photography, which is evident by her Bookstagram account: @wandaheartian.





Annick Smithers

# Finding Wit in Worry

## A Review of Jenny Offill's *Weather*

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Jenny Offill expresses a feeling regarding the climate crisis familiar to many of us: why aren't we more concerned about it? This disconnect between knowing what's to come and policies seemingly lacking any sense of urgency is what inspired Offill's latest novel, *Weather* – a must-read for anyone feeling like an earth-threatening crisis can sometimes feel a little overwhelming.

In *Weather*, we follow Lizzie Benson as she goes about her daily life and grapples with the impending climate crisis. Lizzie works as a librarian at a university in New York, where she encounters various people who require assistance at the library's help desk, such as an elderly man who expects Lizzie to solve his problems by giving him the password for his own email. She also imagines someone who "has been working on his dissertation for eleven years" to come home to a note from his wife saying, "Is what you're doing right now making money?" Lizzie herself comes home to a son and husband but, significantly, also feels responsible for her brother and

eventually his new-born.

When Lizzie takes on a job answering emails sent to the podcast of her old grad school professor, Sylvia, the worries of doomsayers slowly start to invade Lizzie's life. The podcast, called *Hell and High Water*, is about climate change, and, unsurprisingly, "everyone who writes her is either crazy or depressed." In addition to dealing with "cranky

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professors" at her job at the library, Lizzie now also has to soothe the existential concerns of doomsday preppers and end-timers. Lizzie's answers to the emails are witty and illustrate her overwhelming feeling of dread when facing the issue of climate change. For example, rather than teaching the younger generation to farm or hunt as the most useful way to prepare for "the coming chaos," she

suggests teaching them "techniques for calming a fearful mind."

This strategy certainly seems the most appropriate way to cope during a time when even some world leaders, most notably the former President of the United States, do not listen to scientists and believe climate change to be a hoax. In the novel, Sylvia provides some much-needed sense on the matter, even though the contents of her well-researched talks are not soothing at all. The knowledge and clarity provided by Sylvia is contrasted with the teaching approach of the school where Lizzie takes her son Eli. Some of the wittiest remarks by Lizzie concern the alienating environment of Eli's elementary school. Lizzie's request to add seedlings in the kindergarten classrooms is denied, as it is "a safety issue." The school's strict regulations give the impression of it being a strange, human factory, where future generations are being taught without even the slightest bit of humanity provided through some plants

While Lizzie's slate of responsibilities



might make anyone want to move to Mars (as she considers for a moment), Offill still manages to bring a lightness to her descriptions of Lizzie's experiences, so it never feels as overwhelming for the reader as it must for Lizzie. Through her thoughts and observations, which are often funny and smart, we only get access to snippets of Lizzie's life; the novel, therefore, does not have a very clear plot. Rather, Offill uses the framework of the novel to meditate on the current state of America, where "Much of the population was in a mild stupor, depressed, congregating in small unstable groups, and prone to rumors of doom."

Similar to Offill's previous novel *The Department of Speculation*, *Weather* is written in a fragmentary style. The novel is written in small sections, each only about seven lines long, highlighting Lizzie's remarks and observations about her life. Offill nevertheless manages to create characters that are interesting and believable, as we get to know them

through Lizzie's poignant perspective. While some fragments do seem to come rather out of the blue, it is precisely this conglomeration of Lizzie's random thoughts that ultimately makes the novel so funny and clever. At times, it is difficult to make sense of Offill's playful style and Lizzie's out-of-context observations, but this randomness and struggle to grasp

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## "Offill uses the framework of the novel to meditate on the current state of America"

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the situation is perfectly reflective of our grapple with the climate crisis. Lizzie's feeling of helplessness about the climate crisis and pessimism about the future is relatable. On the one hand, there is the existential dread and hopelessness that accompanies looking too deep into the matter, a rabbit hole that we see Lizzie falling into multiple times. On the other hand, it is all too easy to remain ignorant on the issue and to cling to a self-

preserving mindset. Lizzie knows that many people "are really sick of being lectured to about the glaciers" and do not want to hear about issues that seemingly have nothing to do with them. All they want to know is "what's going to happen to the American weather?"

*Weather* shows us that it is natural to feel overwhelmed by what we are facing, both in our current, everyday lives and in regard to the long-term challenges for future generations. It is difficult to become involved and not go into doomsday prepper mode, like the people Lizzie consoles for the podcast. At the same time, it is also all too easy to only be concerned about your local weather forecast. *Weather* shows us how a regular person grapples with the facing threat of the climate crisis, all the while trying not to succumb to the dread that comes along with it. And, just in case, it also teaches us how to make a candle from a tin of tuna.



Photo by Annick Smithers

**Annick Smithers** is one of the RevUU's copy editors. She finished her English Language Bachelor's degree last year and is now pursuing the English track of the Literature Today Master's program. She's mostly interested in the role of language and literature in society. Some of her favourite authors are Ali Smith, Angela Carter, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

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# Vorm en inhoud in een relationeel samenspel

Medicalisering van verliefdheid en de kracht van verhalen in Hanna Bervoets' *Efter*

Lydia Fris

**Hanna Bervoets** schrijft dit jaar het Boekenweekgeschenk *Wat wij zagen*, dat deze maand verschijnt. "Hanna is met haar inspirerende oeuvre en scherpe observaties een belangrijke stem in de literatuur en een van de meest toonaangevende vertegenwoordigers van een nieuwe generatie," schreef de directeur van Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek (CPNB). Haar roman *Efter* getuigt hier het best van, en haalde de longlist van de Libris Literatuurprijs en de Gouden Boekenuil en kwam tevens op de shortlist van de BNG Bank Literatuurprijs terecht. De roman verhaalt over negen personages die allemaal op hun eigen manier betrokken zijn bij Love Adiction Disorder (LAD) en *Efter*, het ontwikkelde medicijn tegen het als verslaving bestempelde verliefd zijn. Bervoets' roman trekt je mee in een wereld die we herkennen als de onze, maar die tegelijkertijd is doorgeslagen, zodat de lezer zich na het lezen van de roman even verward als opgelucht voelt. Want het is niet onze wereld waarover we hebben gelezen. Toch?

In *Efter* volgen we achtereenvolgens wat er in de maanden mei, juni, juli, augustus en december gebeurt. Bijna elke maand staan twee andere personages centraal die optreden als focalisators. Zo hebben we te maken met Robert, de vriend van Heleen ende stiefvader van Meija. En Pete, die promotie maakt voor het nieuw op de markt gebrachte medicijn *Efter* en

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**"Dat is waar *Efter* grotendeels over gaat: het verlangen van personages om zich te verbinden aan anderen en het verlangen die relaties zelf te beïnvloeden"**

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tevens de echtgenoot is van Katinka, die in de LAD-kliniek werkt waar cliënten worden opgenomen om van hun verslaving af te komen. Dan is er nog Meija zelf, die onbeantwoorde liefde koestert voor Sjoerd en in de LAD-kliniek opgenomen wordt, waar ook Silver en Fajah als cliënten zitten. Alles draait

om het bestaan van LAD en het medicijn *Efter*, en al snel wordt duidelijk dat er sprake is van belangenverstremgeling hieromtrent, iets dat journaliste Laura ontdekt en waar zij in haar 'realms' op een kritische wijze verslag van doet. Wat echter opvalt, is dat Laura niet het bestaan van een 'Love Adiction Disorder' bekritiseert, maar slechts de dubbele agenda's van de personages.

We worden in de roman geconfronteerd met verschillende focalisators en genres of vertelvormen. Zo komen we in de roman journalistieke stukken en persoonlijke blogs tegen, 'realms', beide geschreven in de ik-vorm, terwijl in de verhalende tekst een verteller het woord neemt. De meerduidige focalisatie en de verschillende genres kunnen worden geanalyseerd als een technische uitwerking van wat in de wetenschappelijke literatuur 'literair relationisme' wordt genoemd. Kort gezegd draait het hierin om de pogingen die

personages doen om elkaar te begrijpen en verbindingen met elkaar aan te gaan. Er wordt een constructie van een personage gemaakt door in te gaan op de relaties die het personage heeft met anderen, omdat het personage mede door al die anderen gevormd wordt. Dat is waar *Efter* grotendeel over gaat: het verlangen van personages om zich te verbinden aan anderen en het verlangen die relaties zelf te beïnvloeden. De verschillende genres en de meerduidige focalisatie in *Efter* laten technisch zien wat het relationisme inhoudt: verschillende perspectieven en verschillende vertelvormen hebben invloed op hoe de personages talig gevormd worden, zoals ook de betrokken personages elkaar binnen het verhaal beïnvloeden en daarmee vormen.

De natuurlijke manier van verbindingen aangaan wordt echter verstoord met de komst van het medicijn *Efter*. *Efter* bemiddelt in de relaties tussen de personages. In deze samenleving wordt verliefdheid tot een beheersbaar en controleerbaar fenomeen gemaakt, iets dat je kunt sturen en beïnvloeden, en niet alleen bij jezelf. Personages kunnen hun verliefdheid kwijtraken en niet verliefde mensen kunnen er bepaalde gevoelens mee stimuleren en dat allemaal door het slikken van de *Efter*-pillen. Wat we zien is het proces van 'reïficatie': tot economisch object maken.

Dit past binnende kaders van het neo-liberalisme, waarin alles onderdeel wordt van een economisch model, zelfs de emotionele sfeer van het leven. In *Efter* wordt verliefdheid een object gemaakt, het wordt gemedicaliseerd. Je kunt het nu regisseren door middel van medicatie. De roman lijkt het medicaliseren in onze eigen maatschappij uit te

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## "Verhalen, waar of niet, drijven de mens in relationele zin"

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vergroten, als een experiment, zoals Bervoets graag experimenteert in haar romans. Wordt er dan kritiek geuit op het medicaliseren van 'gewone' verschijnselen in onze maatschappij, of op wat we tot verslaving rekenen?

Bervoets' roman draait om causaliteit en verhalen. Want niet slechts *Efter* bemiddelt in de relaties tussen de personages, meer nog hebben verhalen de kracht om in de relaties te arbitreran. Relationisme wordt door de verhalen gevoed. Het gaat om de verhalen die de personages vertellen, aan elkaar en aan zichzelf, om te kunnen overleven, want ieder personage beweegt binnen de narratieve kaders die het voor zichzelf anderen heeft uitgezet, hetzij troostrijk, hetzij manipulatief. Het motto van de roman zegt genoeg: 'The world is a story we tell ourselves about the world'. Hoe zit

het met het verhaal dat Bervoets heeft geschreven met *Efter*? Schreef ze een dystopie? In mijn ogen niet. Bervoets heeft een wereld in de nabije toekomst geschetst die we herkennen als de onze, maar waarin één fenomeen een extreme ontwikkeling heeft doorgemaakt. Het draait in haar roman niet om de wereld waarin de personages leven, maar de verhoudingen tussen de personages staan centraal. Niet een kritische stem voert het hoogste woord, maar een nieuwsgierige onderzoeker gaat achter deze roman schuil. Verhalen, waar of niet, drijven de mens in relationele zin.

*Efter* is een waar meesterwerk. Dat Bervoets verliefdheid medicaliseert, getuigt van originaliteit en vindingrijkheid. Het aloude thema van de liefde krijgt een compleet nieuwe betekenis en het aloude thema van verhalen krijgt een nieuwe lading door het relationeel in te vullen. Technisch laat Bervoets uitstekend zien wat er inhoudelijk speelt. *Efter* leest vlot en laat op z'n best zien waar Bervoets toe in staat is. Dit boek is bovendien ondanks zijn leeftijd actueel: de *Efter* producent Fizzler in de roman komt opvallend dichtbij nu coronavaccin producenten als Pfizer de krantenkoppen halen. Met Bervoets' roman sta je midden in de wereld van vandaag. Dit smaakt naar meer. Kom maar op met dat Boekenweekgeschenk!

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Foto door Lydia Fris

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## Op zoek naar vervangende tekens voor rouw:

Een recensie van Emma van Meyerens *Ook ik ben stukgewaaid: Essays over rouw*

door Jane Singer

Design door Kris van der Voorn

**Het boekje is klein**, dun, en voelt licht in mijn hand, terwijl het onderwerp zo zwaar lijkt. *Ook ik ben stukgewaaid: Essays over rouw* is een bundel van drie essays over herinneringen, rituelen en rouwpatronen. Het boek beschrijft zichzelf als "een collectie van notities over aanhoudende rouw". De essays bieden reflecties op de rol van rouw in Van Meyerens leven – zij verloor zelf tien jaar geleden haar moeder op jonge leeftijd. Deze reflecties worden onder andere geleid door theorieën over rouw, boeken van Patti Smith, Marieke Lucas Rijnevelds *De avond is ongemak*, en het werk en de ervaringen van Amerikaanse dichter CA Conrad en Belgisch filmmaker Chantal Akerman. De kracht van de bundel zit hem voor mij dan ook in hoe Van Meyeren omgaat met deze originele leidraden die nieuw perspectief bieden op een onderwerp dat anders een magneet is voor clichés.

### *Samen alleen rouwen*

De titel *Ook ik ben stukgewaaid* – die overigens een citaat is uit Astrid Roemers *NoordzeeBlues* – suggereert dat rouw veel mensen treft. "Er klopt iets niet aan rouw als individuele ervaring", merkt Van Meyeren terecht op (39). Uiteindelijk treft het iedereen. Ik ben ook

stukgewaaid toen mijn vader twee jaar geleden overleed. Toch voel ik mij eenzaam in mijn rouw – *mijn rouw*. Maar waarom is rouw een eenzame ervaring, terwijl iedereen er mee te maken krijgt? Van Meyerens schrijft onder andere over deze "geïndividualiseerde rouw" met behulp van Alessa Ricciardi's *The Ends of Mourning* (33). Volgens Ricciardi is rouw in een Westerse, kapitalistische samenleving een privéaangelegenheid (33).

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**"Ik vraag me af of ook de angst voor de dood of het negatieve en zwaarmoedige stigma rondom de dood een reden is waarom rouw in de marge beland is"**

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Dit is één van de paradoxen van rouw die naar voren komen in de bundel, een paradox die mij bekend voorkomt uit niet alleen mijn eigen beleving, maar ook uit Helen Macdonald's memoire *H Is For Hawk*. Tijdens het lezen van *Ook ik ben stukgewaaid* moest ik vaak denken aan Macdonald. In dit geval aan deze zinnen uit haar memoire: "It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss

isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try" (13). Hartverscheurend verlies is er niet om te delen. Het laat zich niet delen. Dat mag niet. Van wie niet? Van het kapitalisme? Als het aan Van Meyeren ligt wel. We zijn volgzamere consumenten wanneer we ons niet verbonden voelen met elkaar (33).

Ik vraag me af of ook de angst voor de dood of het negatieve en zwaarmoedige stigma rondom de dood een reden is waarom rouw in de marge beland is, in ieder geval in de marge van de Westerse samenleving. Net voordat ik aan de bundel begon was ik *An Idiot Abroad* aan het kijken: een komische reisdocumentaireserie over een klagende Brit, Karl Pilkington, die tegen zijn zin in eropuit gestuurd wordt om nieuwe ervaringen op te doen in verre landen, waar hij alles raar, exotisch en vooral verschrikkelijk vindt. In China gaat Karl lunchen bij een familie waarvan de man buiten bezig is met het maken van een grafkist voor zijn vrouw: een zestiger die er nog gezond uit ziet. "Doesn't this depress you, seeing this every day when you leave your house? [...] I don't want to be reminded that I'm gonna die, not every day", vraagt Karl aan de Chinese vrouw. Maar zij zegt dat ze niet bang is voor de



dood en zich daar geen zorgen om maakt.

### Rituelen

Een ander probleem dat Van Meyeren herkent in haar "wester-seculiere omgeving" is het gebrek aan rouwrituelen (30). Volgens Van Meyeren is dit een enorme tekortkoming, omdat rituelen helpen met het onderhouden van een relatie met een overledene. Rituelen kunnen het verleden verbinden met het heden. Van Meyeren schrijft over de somatische, dat wil zeggen lichamelijke, rituelen van CA Condrad die hen uitvoert naar aanleiding van de zelfmoord van hun vriend Earth en hun daaropvolgende depressie. Deze rituelen lijken compleet willekeurig: "Het eerste ritueel hield in dat hen een rode pruik opzette en een hele dag rood voedsel at. Andere rituelen in reactie op het verlies van Earth worden uitgevoerd door bijvoorbeeld verhalen uit het nieuwe testament te zingen, daarna te schreeuwen, en vervolgens in een blender te stoppen samen met kristalwater" (37). Van Meyeren benadrukt dat zulke rituelen geen oplossing zijn voor rouw – rouw valt immers niet op te lossen op een manier dat het beëindigd wordt – maar dat deze wel kunnen werken, kunnen helpen. Van Meyeren lijkt bij voorkeur rouwen vooral als een fysieke bezigheid te zien.

De nadruk op het fysieke komt ook terug in het belang van objecten in de bundel. Objecten verbinden net als rituelen het verleden met het heden. In het boek worden objecten als de zwarte Renault Mégane van Van Meyeren's moeder of de fromage blanc waar Akermans's moeder van hield, gezien als metaforen die de afwezigheid van iemand communiceren. Op die manier vormen metaforen een taal voor rouw, een taal die we volgens Van Meyeren vooral moeten binnenlaten.



### Alledaagse rouw

Ook het alledaagse van rouw wordt besproken in de bundel. Patti Smith, zo schrijft van Meyeren, beschouwt de dood niet "als een uitzondering op de normale gang van het leven", maar Smith is "constant gericht op de aanwezigheid van afwezigheid" (23). Het belang van het alledaagse in relatie tot rouw komt met name naar voren als het over 'secundair verlies' gaat. "Primair is het verlies van de persoon die overleden is, secundair het verlies van relaties en gewoonten die veranderen door het primaire verlies" (46). Op "het terrein van de rommelige, alledaagse ervaringen" komen primair en secundair verlies samen (47).

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**"Van Meyeren lijkt bij voorkeur rouwen vooral als een fysieke bezigheid te zien."**

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De objecten of metaforen, ook wel motieven genoemd in de bundel, maken ook dat rouw plotseling heel sterk aanwezig kan zijn in het dagelijks leven. Bijvoorbeeld als die zwarte Renault Mégane ineens de hoek omrijdt. Dit plotselinge maakt dat Van Meyeren rouw vooral ziet als een "opdringerige oscillerende beweging" (52). Deze onvoorspelbare kant van rouw doet mij weer denken aan Macdonald, die schrijft dat de archeologie van rouw niet gerangschikt is en dat er verrassende dingen aan het licht kunnen komen, dingen waarvan je misschien dacht dat je ze vergeten was: "The archaeology of grief is not ordered. It is more like earth under a spade, turning up things you had forgotten. Surprising things come to light: not simply memories, but states of mind, emotions, older ways of seeing the world." (199)

*Op zoek naar nieuwe tekens*

Rouw heeft meer erkenning nodig, zo concludeert Van Meyeren, maar ook meer taal, meer dan de woorden die we lezen in overlijdensberichten. Daarom gaat Van Meyeren op zoek naar "vervangende tekens" (56). Zij zoekt naar deze tekens in poëzie, film en proza, maar ook haar bundel behoort nu tot het domein dat zowel erkenning voor rouw opeist, als woorden biedt om het te beschrijven en samen te bespreken.

Marja Pruis schrijft in *De Groene Amsterdammer* dat de bundel haar verraste "vanwege iets principiëels, iets wat ik zelf nooit zo beseft had dat dit ook tot de mogelijkheden behoorde, namelijk dat je degene om wie je rouwt niet loslaat". Dit principe wordt in stand gehouden door woorden als 'rouwproces' en rouwverwerking' die suggereren dat rouw een

einde kent. Je moet slechts het proces doorlopen, het verwerken doen. Alsof je rouwen op een to-do lijst kan zetten en het door kunt strepen als je voor vijf jaar

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**"Alsof je rouwen op een to-do lijst kan zetten en het door kunt strepen als je voor vijf jaar lang elke week even een kaarsje hebt aangestoken en een traan gelaten"**

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lang elke week even een kaarsje hebt aangestoken en een traan gelaten. Dit moet toch wel één van de best verborgen geheimen van onze samenleving zijn; dat rouw geen einde kent en volgens Van Meyeren "misschien zelfs geen begin". Dit is iets wat alleen ervaring of boeken zoals deze je leren.

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LEDA

# WRITE THY SELF

BY LEDA SERIKOGLU

*Being so caught up,  
 So mastered by the blood  
 Of the air. Did she  
 put on his knowledge  
 with his power*

*The broken wall,  
 Burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon  
 dead.*

*Before the indifferent beak could let her  
 d  
 r  
 o  
 p.<sup>1</sup>*

*And she often finds herself seated in a daydream,  
 staring  
 at a reflection that she can imagine  
 but never recognise*

*Where the sea swells and doom binds  
 into nightmares of her own devising,  
 and where she  
 bends into herself  
 and out of her mind*

There  
 is  
 a  
 lighthouse  
 at  
 the  
 end  
 of  
 the  
 horizon,  
 where the first  
 heroine is the last to die.

its at the edge looking at its spines and spires, as the waves come in and wings comply.  
 should have known the wax would be melting, but autonomy demands to take such  
 Yet Heavens abide by divine indiscrimination

[1] Excerpt from W.B. Yeats's poem, "Leda and the Swan."

**HERE LIES THE BRUTAL DICHOTOMY OF THE DEAD.**

**Some are taught the sky is the limit  
Some are warned to mind the ground  
Yet even with the Heavens and Earths colliding...**

She counted reveries which could not be found, but conjured out of twenty-six by two cases the bricks to build her own Babylon.

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*Here we say lies the road ahead  
Here we know lies the road to awe  
Here lies the cradle of the dead  
The place for those never born at all*

*There are whispers in machinations / there are voices in imagination / of Bluebeard's wives and their final designation / built on rows, racks and inhaled sedation / where their deed is dead / conjuring delectable ideations / and always welcomes post-mortem guests / speak once permits the Author /  
**to make your bed.***

\*\*\*

He was drawn by the invitation, one he wished to refuse but never could. He couldn't fathom the indignation; the story had shrouded his creation, as stories often would. On light screens and dark lettering, he was born to be Her guide. Through the ribcage to the heart, he was Death personified.

"And what am I meant to do," he asked as he stepped through such flesh.

She in her impeccably tailored suit replied, "To save me from all the rest." She gave him a Marlene Dietrich smile to make sure he wouldn't dare protest—knowing the action was futile—he was personified as Her Death.

In the second corridor of the first tower was the child caretaker without a choice. She had her duties listed from wall to wall written in her mother's voice.

"Can't you help" the woman asked, but Death gave no response, his silence not indifference, but puzzlement at what they'd found. The girl kept smiling a familiar smile, the girl had no voice—but *she* had not been written, *she* too could not be found; *she* was the castle's body, tied *and* unbound.

In the third corridor of the second tower was the heroine of that ancient tale, whose name bore haunting stories of swans, rivers, and the thresher's flail.

"I have always looked for her in all the margins on the side, conjured yet another shadow, left, on otherworldly embankments, behind."

"Why" he asked in amazement.

"I don't know" she replied, "She became I in some strange replacement, a name shared, a personality divide. There is always a story in the story, the fingers and the worlds apart, the journey is to seek the folly, to end in the place where we all start. I wish to be saved from *their* outcome. Save me for both our sakes. There is only salvation in completion—this is a place for my things half-made."

And so they went on their journey, seeking out the lost one by one. Each uttered few lines of story, each doomed to never be found.

"They" the woman uttered, "were mine when this began. Now they are monsters in the darkness, the plague that hurdles across my land."

In the last corridor of the third tower, was the antagonist of a story when she was ten years old.

"You never finished me" he pleaded, his clothes tattered, his flesh cold. "I beg you to complete me" he said, a line replete in repetition.

"A fragment cannot be given breath." She replied, "A forgotten excerpt is dead by admission."

Death looked on in horror, saying "You too will never be complete, your doom is your story—there are no words left to seed. I cannot save you from the others, I cannot separate you from their fate. You too are a projection, stuck *between* Her fingers *and* Her page."

Terrified in realisation, she turned to face her demise "I am the mistress of this story, do not mistake your power for your pride."

"You mistake my intentions" he kept saying, "you mistake them for sheer contempt, but if I am Death's personification, then I am first companion to the Fingers and the Head.

This mangled nightmare will always begin anew, such is the pains of writing—to always pay Death its owed due. But you—you should have known the end of this story, *Her* phantom on the parapets. You are distanced from love and glory—you are the doomed palimpsest."

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There are whispers in the ether / there are voices in imagination / of putrefied sacks / scattered before curtain call / where meat is met / conceived from the nexus of choices and ideations / and welcomes you into delightful Fall / Then quoth the Author,  
"Nevermore."

\*\*\*

When the last hero is first to die  
there will be a horizon  
at the end of the lighthouse.

Then she sat at the edge of my mattress  
at my cracked and pristine spines—  
they played their reels in greeting,  
indulged our dreaming for some time.  
But "what if" is a potent potion  
when ghosts haunt your waking mind:  
when you know...  
all the paper horses and all their paper men,  
couldn't put Icarus back together again.



Photo by Leda Serikoglu

## Leda Serikoglu

Having completed her Bachelor's degree in English Language and Culture at Utrecht University in 2019, Leda Serikoglu is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Comparative Literary Studies. Her interests include creative writing, speculative fiction—mostly of *the weirder*, the better persuasion, frequently dealing with power narratives—and more recently, meta-fiction and eco-horror. On her time off, she binge watches *Black Sails* and *Hannibal* for the umpteenth time, and chronically overwaters her plants.



Photo by Mikolaj Bac

# WRECK OR BE WRECKED: CAPITALISM AND THE UBIQUITOUS APPEAL OF MILLENNIAL FICTION

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By Iulia Ivana

**We are the avocado toast generation**, the internet proclaims. We are spoiled, rootless, and use too much irony as a way of diluting our existential anxiety. Moreover, according to Bret Easton Ellis, the so-called “bad boy” of 1980s American literature, we have not managed to produce a single *great novel*. Conversely, the type of literature created by millennials and Gen-Z writers highlights passively subversive, selfish, self-destructive or sex-obsessed (female) characters that seem to continuously be on the brink of mental breakdown—attributes that stand in stark contrast to the male-dominated, agency-centered novels that often focus on the individual pursuit of one’s desires and needs which characterized the Holden Caulfield-s, Jay Gatsby-s, or Stephen Dedalus-es of the previous centuries.

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**“The media is quick to designate writers of the contemporary moment as either too much, or not enough.”**

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The media is quick to designate writers of the contemporary moment as either too much, or not enough. Articles describing Sally Rooney as “the voice of her generation,” poignantly capturing the “Instagram age,” and working towards the dismantling of societal taboos—through her portrayal of *unlikeable*, deeply flawed characters and their frankness about mental health issues—are abundant, but so are those deeming her books as “simple-minded” and having “no literary ambition.” Nonetheless, the aspects which readers and critics dismiss as being trivial and politically useless in contemporary literature written by women function as spaces for interrogation of our current cultural moment, which continues to prioritize agency and a novelistic demand for a certain kind of resolution. Such characteristics are patently absent in many contemporary millennial and Gen-Z novels, which, in turn, are seen as an expansion of the form: they are generally structured around failure, numbness, and complete detachment from one’s surroundings.

These novels are interested in an experience of numbness that is not primarily pathological, but rather a symptom of life under oppressive systems, propelled by an increased sensitivity to power dynamics. They do not aim to disclose a general condition of contemporary womanhood, but rather to show us what capitalism feels like on an individual scale, where the only option is alternating between self-loathing and doing what you need to survive—to wreck, or be wrecked.

...

“I could never work for a company like that,” somebody tells me in a performatively ethical fashion as I announce my newly acquired internship. “They’re awful and what they’re doing is morally wrong,” this person points out feverishly, with that theatrical affect that only privileged people whose most radical endeavor in life is quitting plastic—once and for all!—are able to pull off.

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**"Contemporary literature differs substantially from the *Great Male Novels* of the previous centuries—and I would thank a capitalized god for that were I not agnostic."**

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Retrospectively, it was precisely this conversation that got me thinking about the dichotomy of choice that burdens the current generation; the crushing awareness that, as Jia Tolentino cleverly points out in her collection of essays, the only options of this era are to either morally compromise yourself in order to be functional, or be destroyed by a system that could

easily do without you. This realization has also led to a change in the way in which the contemporary generation consumes—and produces—culture. From the conspicuous popularity of the Instapoetry phenomenon that is both visually appealing and peculiarly short—and therefore easily accessible to any type of reader—to the growing success of the novel of passivity, featuring protagonists carefully delineated by reservations of judgment and deference to fate, contemporary literature differs substantially from the *Great Male Novels* of the previous centuries—and I would thank a capitalized god for that were I not agnostic.

In Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a nameless protagonist plunges into a year-long pharmaceutically-induced coma to escape her otherwise similarly numb existence. “It was easy to ignore things that didn’t concern me,” Moshfegh’s narrator declares. “Subways workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn’t matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn’t have worried.” What Moshfegh’s narrator does here—as countless other critics have observed—is only a slight exaggeration of what the rest of us do anyway, albeit in a more restrained, cautious manner: drag ourselves to and from work, write to-do lists that we never get to, only to bring some semblance of control, pretend to enjoy our flexible, temporary jobs while trying to numb the oppressive realization that we are living in a perpetual crushing crisis, on a death spiral planet led by a handful of egocentric clowns.

A similar confusating feeling of numbness delineates both of Sally Rooney and Naoise Dolan’s work, whose protagonists have been called toxic, narcissistic, and desperate to undercut themselves before the reader can. Both writers use Marxist erotica and criticize capitalism in a way that propels the plot forward, but their performance of inequality awareness does not engage any agency towards dismantling the system.

In an article for *Los Angeles Times*, Lynn Steger Strong argues that the idea of *agency* has undergone a complete shift in contemporary fiction written by women. As she puts it,

*A writer, a subject — who has power and control, and makes choices — is often writing about a woman reduced to being an object (a body sometimes but mainly in the sense of being acted upon). Someone who, having less power and control than those who’ve occupied so much of the fiction that came before, has a wholly different relationship to action than her predecessors did.*



In the Moshfeghian model, the narrator writes off an entire year of her life to escape the pulsing city and the farcical optimism of the pre-9/11 society, as depicted in the character of Reva, the protagonist's only friend whom she mocks continuously for her obsession with conformity and fitting in. Conversely, Moshfegh's narrator is scornful of anything that requires even minimal effort towards self-betterment, eschewing the modern capitalist notion that the only way to live a decent life is by paving our own way meritocratically.

In Sally Rooney's prose, characters are similarly largely defined by their passivity and numbness to the external world despite their political ambitions, which remain largely theoretical and performative. Both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* portray female protagonists—Frances and Marianne—that are products of their age, growing up with the rise of the internet in a cratering economy. They are both overeducated, underpaid, and drenched in self-loathing; additionally, both dignify their everyday struggles with dark humor and reflections on their own privilege.

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**"Both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* portray female protagonists—Frances and Marianne—that are products of their age, growing up with the rise of the internet in a cratering economy. They are both overeducated, underpaid, and drenched in self-loathing."**

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Despite being "cool-headed" and "observant," as the back cover of *Conversations with Friends* portrays her, Frances navigates her early adulthood through unpaid internships and minimum wage jobs that are impossible to sustain anyone who does not have the privilege of being born into generational wealth. She likes to describe herself as "broke," making sure to use a tone of voice that she calculates to be flippant, but there are countless moments in the novel where she has so little money that she cannot feed herself.

Subscribing to similar millennial tropes of self-hatred and nearly chronic self-scrutinizing obsessions, Marianne, one of the protagonists of *Normal People*, is a formidable character. Her categorical self-assuredness and unequivocal detachment from her social surroundings grant Marianne a unique perspective on the world: during classes, she is not afraid to tell her professors things such as "[d]on't

delude yourself, I have nothing to learn from you." Coming from a particularly wealthy background and a highly abusive family, she calls herself "a fundamentally cold, unfeeling person," who is consequently unfit to be loved.



Photo by Mikolaj Bac

As Lucinda Rosenfeld points out in an article for *The New York Times*, the motives that Rooney ascribes to her female characters range from the ravages of late capitalism (Frances) to familial physical abuse and being a social outcast (Marianne). Nonetheless, much of the critical landscape has simplistically focused on presenting these books as subversive yet perfunctory, depicting a general condition of millennial womanhood that is structured around failure, absences, and lacks. But passivity, after all, can induce boredom and vexation, resulting in unsatisfactory reading experiences due to the lack of answers or solutions to the issues explored in the narrative. This lack of agency and action, coupled with the presumed failure to produce the voice-of-a-generation novel, successors of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Sun Also Rises* and *On The Road*, is precisely what prompts the former *enfant terrible* of 80s literature, Bret Easton Ellis, to publicly bash millennials as "Generation Wuss," attacking what he regards as the narcissism of the young; but, one might wonder, what does the idea that novels by straight white men *about* straight white men speak for entire generations in a one-size-fits-all fashion underline if not utter and absolute narcissism?

In contrast to their media reception, the common aim of millennial and Gen-Z novels is to push against labels and the idea that they have to be representative of an entire generation of people. That being said, any writer is a product of their age, unavoidably shaped by the broader structures and power dynamics that they are part of. As Jia Tolentino points out, a generation does not simply start living a rootless life for reasons of personality: "It's just easier (...) to think millennials float from gig to gig because we're shiftless or spoiled or in love with the 'hustle' than to consider the fact that the labor market (...) is punitively unstable and growing



more so every day." It's easier to blame millennials for refusing to *grow up* and start a family instead of realizing, as Sian Cain argues in an article for *The Guardian*, that the reasons behind filling one's house with plants might simply "fulfill a desire to care for something living in the face of restrictive rental agreements and incomes that suit neither pets or babies."

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**"The fact that contemporary literature written by women acknowledges how one's wants and needs are completely redundant in a world shaped by capitalism is not depressing—but revelatory."**

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The fact that contemporary literature written by women acknowledges how one's wants and needs are completely redundant in a world shaped by capitalism is not depressing—but revelatory. This cognizance is precisely what makes these novels feel true to a certain demographic of people who have failed to see themselves in the canonical male writings of previous centuries, and why the current need for representation is so paramount.

That we are living in a ruthless political and economic system that makes us feel like outsiders even to ourselves is undeniable; and while complete Moshfeghian detachment is not an option for most of us still caught in the rat race for minimal financial stability and social acceptance, plunging ourselves in fiction that reckons with the simultaneity of daily life and global crisis surely has an irrefutable appeal.

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Photo by Iulia Ivana

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# We Are Far From Polished, Far From Pristine: The Impossibility of Finding a

# Perfect Translator

by Kayleigh Herber

*Ultimately, there is a sizeable chance that the “perfect” translator for any given book might not even be within the consciousness of the publisher because of the way the selection process typically takes place.*



**For a period of three days**, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld was the chosen translator for Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb” and its accompanying upcoming poetry collection. But the announcement of this choice made by Dutch publisher Meulenhoff on the 23rd of February 2021 was followed by an outpour of opinions on whether or not Rijneveld, a White author, should have been chosen over a translator with a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour) background. While some may hold the opinion that Rijneveld should have just declined the offer, many for whom translation is their main source of income are not always at liberty to accept or decline assignments merely based on whether they think another translator might be more suitable. The outpour of emotion about who can and should translate a text and why reveals a lot about how our society views translation, a craft often hidden away in fine print and the inside of book covers. The questions

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“What does the hypothetical perfect translator for such a text look like or need to be able to do?”

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ultimately brought to light are, what does the hypothetical perfect translator for such a text look like or need to be able to do? This article will not dwell on whether or not poetry should be translated in the first place, nor will it spend aeons of time discussing whether the translator should be expected to refuse such commissions, as these would not merely be a question of conscience, but also a financial decision. This essay will explore the parties involved in selecting translators, as well as why the perfect translator does not exist.

The response this situation has garnered reveals that the issue here is much more complex than a White author translating a Black woman's poem. It is probably not a secret that a vast majority of Dutch translators working on high-profile assignments are Caucasian – Elbrich Fennema and Luk van Haute translated Haruki Murakami's works, while neither of them are ethnically Japanese. *Children of Blood and Bones* by Tomi Adeyemi was translated by Angelique Verheijen, also not BIPOC. However, neither translation really caused an uproar. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, a book about the immense struggles experienced by pre-abolition American BIPOC was translated by Harm Damsma and Niek Miedema, as was Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. Specific choices made in especially the latter's translation regarding the translation of the N-word were the subject of a heated debate (Nzume), but the translators' ethnicity, though



Photo by Ella van Driel

“The translation of any piece of literature that deals with race should be treated with appropriate sensitivity to those issues, but a good translator of whichever ethnicity should aim to treat the text with the respect its contents deserve.”

mentioned occasionally, was never really the main topic.

“The translation of sensitive issues and concepts always depends on the context of the story and the publication.”

The translation of sensitive issues and concepts always depends on the context of the story and the publication. Translate terms surrounding these issues in a more politically correct way and it could make it seem like the text is softened compared to the original. This is not necessarily the effect to strive for when you want to give the reader a more accurate sense of the ease with which these deeply offensive terms were used during the time a story might be set. Translate it in a way that could be considered more accurate to the context of the story and it could be

quite shocking because it is indeed offensive. Another translator faced with *The Nickel Boys* may have chosen differently, or maybe the editor or the publisher would have the final say on whether or not this text would be published as such.

The debate surrounding “The Hill We Climb” seems to be very much focused on the two individuals, Gorman and Rijnveld, while there are many more parties involved. What people were offended by, or at the very least apprehensive of, was the feeling that a White person would become a mouthpiece for a Black author, or would take some degree of ownership of a text written by a Black author.

The translation of any piece of literature that deals with race should be treated with appropriate sensitivity to those issues, but a good translator of whichever ethnicity should aim to treat the text with the respect its contents deserve.

Yet in the case of “The Hill We Climb” undue attention seemed to be put on Rijnveld and for the most part Rijnveld alone – it was their face that featured on many publications on the topic. However, the systemic issues of representation of minorities in the world of Dutch publishing houses seemed to escape relatively unharmed. The ethnicity of the translators of the aforementioned books did not get the attention Rijnveld received, but that is not the main point. What is more important is that fighting the translator will never be as effective as calling the system behind the case to attention.

#### Who gets to pick the translator?

It is relatively rare for the author to decide who translates their text. Commissioning a translator usually takes place through previously established connections. Generally speaking, a publishing house will acquire the translation rights from the original publisher if they think



there is a market for a translation of a specific text. In many cases there is a pre-established portfolio of translators the publishing house works with on a regular basis, and once a collaboration has proven successful a translator may be offered other assignments by them in the future, sometimes within the same genre or perhaps even from the same author. This can help translators hone their specialisation skills. The database can grow in numerous ways: the publishing house may notice a translator's skill in another publication, or the translator may have applied to be added to the database in a similar way someone would send an open application to a company, to name a few. Contact between a translator and a publishing house or it may be established via internships, acquaintances, colleagues or even translation scholars and teachers who could recommend promising students. Usually, a translator cannot apply for a specific translation project in the same way another person would for a job. Ultimately, there is a sizeable chance that the "perfect" translator for any given book might not even be within the consciousness of the publisher because of the way the selection process typically takes place.

In the current case, Gorman and her team were actually involved in the process, and had expressed their approval of Rijnveld's selection under the condition that three sensitivity readers would be involved in the process. The demand for sensitivity readers was included in the translation contract, and would have been present regardless of who the final translator would end up being. It is unclear whether or not Gorman and her team were presented with other options besides Rijnveld. While the portfolio of authors boasted by many publishers

is starting to feature an increasing number of diverse voices, it is still very much unclear what their portfolios of translators look like. One thing that is clear, however, is that almost all CEOs of major Dutch publishing houses are of Caucasian heritage.

Besides BIPOC translators possibly not being on every publisher's radar, the notable amount of time that has passed also seems to suggest there could be a relative scarcity of BIPOC translators with this specific specialisation. At the time of writing this essay, a month has passed since Rijnveld handed back the commission and the new translator for "The Hill We Climb" has yet to be selected. This speaks volumes about the difficulties of finding an experienced translator which would tick every box for every party involved – the publisher, the author, the readers as well as the translators themselves. Yet, most of all it reveals the result of a very complex net of factors such as longstanding systemic equality issues both in education and publishing. If Meulenhoff made a conscious decision not to work with someone who has translation experience or translation credentials, the more logical choice would indeed be a Dutch spoken word artist with a BIPOC background. Perhaps Meulenhoff thought Rijnveld was simply more marketable, being a recent Booker Prize alumnus.

While progress is definitely being made – the portfolios of authors featured by publishers are growing more and more diverse – to say that there is still a lot of ground to be covered in terms of racial equality in the publishing world would be an understatement. The publication of the Dutch edition would have been an incredible opportunity to mirror the significance of Amanda

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Gorman's performance at Biden's inauguration. Meulenhoff could have used this opportunity to increase BIPOC visibility in Dutch publishing ventures the way Gorman's performance provided BIPOC visibility at a major political event. It is up to publishers to have an intersectional portfolio of translators as well as authors, and to be mindful of its gaps in representation like any other company is, but also to make a conscious effort to broaden cultural participation. However, it is up to society as a whole to make sure that there is diversity to be added to said portfolio.

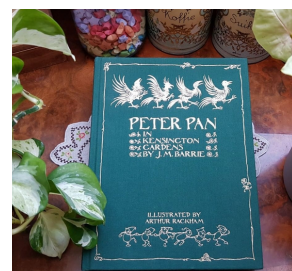


Photo by Ella van Driel



## What are the characteristics a publisher could look for in a translator?

Finding the right translator involves more than just selecting someone who has a good grasp of the language the text is written in. Sufficient mastery of both languages involved in the process may seem like a very straightforward demand, yet in this case it may not have been at the forefront of the publisher's mind. During a televised interview in Dutch talk show *M.*, Rijnveld admitted to not having read the translation of their own book as their English is not great. Despite the fact that they are a skilled author of novels and poetry – another skill a publisher could consider when selecting a translator – should Rijnveld have been offered the job in the first place when we look at their CV, which is full of lauded poetry yet void of published, well-received translations or other translation credentials?

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“Should Rijnveld have been offered the job in the first place when we look at their CV, which is full of lauded poetry yet void of published, well-received translations or other translation credentials?”

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Besides having mastered at least two languages, a translator needs to be aware of the cultural context. A translator may specialize in or prefer

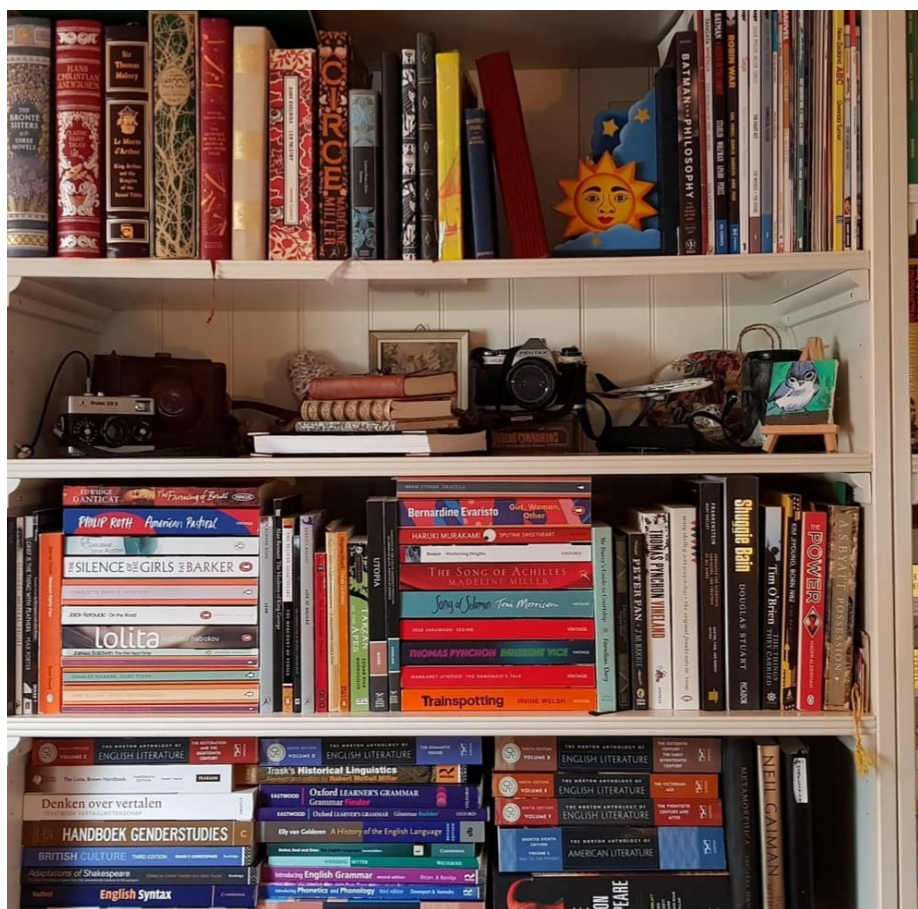


Photo by Ella van Driel

translating British-English literature, American-English or even Canadian-English literature. Though all three involve translating an English text, culturally these are quite different. “The Hill We Climb” is not just a spoken word poem in English, but it is heavily America-centric. This specific text alone already demands an understanding of references to historical events from the American slave trade and to the specific structure Martin Luther King’s poetic “I Have a Dream” speech (Gorman ll. 95-100) as well as the storming of the US Capitol on the of January 2021 (ll. 55-6) . The translator also needs to have an understanding of (Afro-) American pop culture, as it alludes to Lin Manuel Miranda’s rap-musical *Hamilton* on multiple occasions (ll. 64, 43-5), yet recognize that the latter is also a Biblical reference (ll. 43-5). Not every translator of English literature would automatically be qualified to translate

“The Hill We Climb”.

In this case perhaps even more than in some others, the translator also needs an extraordinary sense of sound and structure. “The Hill We Climb” would benefit from having a translator with experience within the area of spoken word poetry, a genre of which the essence is by its very definition harder to capture on paper. It features many instances of homonymy, alliteration, rhyme, and wordplay, and having a translator who knows what to look for and has experience with these concepts in Dutch spoken word poetry would hopefully benefit the end-product.

Reducing the selection of a suitable translator to a simple game of matching a translator to the author they share the most traits with, whether that be socio-cultural status, race or any other trait, is a false framing of issues, as well as

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“Reducing the selection of a suitable translator to a simple game of matching a translator to the author they share the most traits with, whether that be socio-cultural status, race or any other trait, is a false framing of issues, as well as damaging to the practice of literary translation as a whole.”

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damaging to the practice of literary translation as a whole. There are not many Elizabethan playwrights around nowadays that would qualify to translate Shakespeare's texts, and following the logic behind this framing of the problem, none of those would ever be translated. Furthermore, by expecting people only translate what is most familiar to them, we risk losing a world of wealth concealed in books written in languages we do not comprehend.

Each author, translator, and reader – even those who may seem similar on the surface – will bring something uniquely their own to a text. We must be mindful of the necessity of translations and the way they allow people broaden their horizons and experience different cultures despite the initial language barrier. It is not merely a question of who can and may translate certain texts, it is a question of the knock-on effects of systemic equality and visibility

issues. There are some amazing translators who will do a great job, especially if the aforementioned qualifications are taken into account during the selection process. The search for someone who does not exist – the mythical perfect translator – should not become a reason to not translate texts altogether. It would be a tragedy indeed, to see so many voices silenced.

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Photo by Kayleigh Herber

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Photo by Mel Micai

# THE GIDDY RELIEF OF READING REBECCA

by Maria Świąkowska

**It happens sometimes.** In fact, it happens all the time. I'm reading a Classic. A Classic is supposed to pertain to humanity, of which I am a part. Which is to say: I am human. Or so I like to think. And in this reading process I briefly, obliviously, indulge in this fantasy that yes, here is the story about every-man. Here is a story about me. I relish in the observations; I savor the reflections. I'm having a blast. I sit back and relax in my chair.

And then it happens.

Sometimes it's twenty pages in, sometimes it's halfway in. But, unmistakably, it is always there. The 'ouch!' moment is bound to occur at some point, making me feel like I have come to the party uninvited, sneaked in and then – in the middle of everyone having fun – the lights go out and the spotlight is on me and – ouch! – it turns out I am not on the guest list. Not even on the waiting list. Never have been. Like in one of those dreams where your out-of-placeness is the greatest anguish. The "Back-to-school-in-just-my-under-

A conversation between the common reader and her brilliant friend.

**“There is a vulnerability there, intrinsic to every human relationship, whether taking place in real time, on flesh-and-blood basis, or belatedly, between the page and the mind.”**

pants”, or something like that.

You know the drill.

Precisely, that ‘ouch!’ moment comes when the author – or the narrator, but I’ll take the liberty the essayistic form grants me and not dwell on the questions of form boggling the serious minds of academic scholars – embarks on a trip of generic observations, and – it being a classic – chances are they are indeed brilliant, with that sharp insight that only a Great Mind can impart – and if I’m lucky they’re even amusingly ironic, which I enjoy thoroughly. And so I sit back, relaxed, as if having a friendly chat with an older, smarter friend.

And then – let’s take the example of Musil’s iconic novel-slash-essay *The Man Without Qualities* (in Burton Pike’s translation) – I happen upon the following sentence: “A man may love his dog and his wife. A child may love a dog more dearly than a man his wife.” A sentence like this takes me by surprise, spoiling all the fun I’ve been having until now. Because, clearly, in that clever phrase, I am not the man. I am not “a man”. It is much more likely that in this scenario, I am the man’s wife, quite probably less lovable than a child’s (a boy’s?) dog. But, of course, this is not about lovability.

This is just one sentence in just one book, but it points to something very common, so common, in fact, most of us rarely even take notice. But it’s things like that, the little things that put you back in your line. Little signs that read: “Remember how Umberto Eco said that every book has a model reader, one that its author imagined while inking or typing these words your eyes now run over? Well, honey, this was not *you*.” Even if you might at times feel an intense affiliation with, say, Ulrich, his thoughts were meant to inspire and amuse somebody else.

Oh. Right. Ok. So I misunderstood. We’re not laughing together. I haven’t

received the invitation to the party. In fact, it looks as though I have stolen it from somebody else, mistaking it as mine, and sneaked in, unnoticed. And now my out-of-placeness becomes opaque. Poignant, even. Silly me. We are not laughing together. I am being laughed at.

And someone might say: who cares if the invitation wasn’t for you. If you got it, then by all means, girl, hold on to it. As tightly and as thankfully as you can, after all: this is not just any party – it’s the Classic who is the host. Enjoy it since, after all, now you can. The author is dead – literally as well as (as good old Barthes taught us when we were first-year undergrads) figuratively – who cares about who he had in mind writing this or that clever sentence.



Photo by Mel Micai

Well, actually, I do. And please excuse me while I stubbornly refuse to not hold a grudge. And no, it does not mean that I’ll slam the book shut, throw it fiercely to the side, and ostensibly refuse to learn about where the musing and scheming of everyman will take him (spoiler alert:

nowhere nice). But from now on I will not be as comfortable with the book. Something will change. Instead of pulling me in, I now feel as if it pushes me back. I wriggle a bit in my chair and sit upright from this point on. Less comfortable. Like when that one little remark is thrown matter-of-factly into a conversation you’re having with an actual, flesh and blood friend at a party, and you shrug it off with a smile – and yet from here on something changes, the vibe becomes different, and you start to look impatiently at your phone, suddenly eager for an excuse to leave.

Or, as was put more succinctly in the words of a woman much wiser than I am in *The Mother of All Questions*, “a book without women is often said to be about humanity”. Because, of course, the impression I have just described is nothing new. And yet the pang of it is something I feel anew every time. Even now that I have read my fair share of Classics, it always comes as something of a surprise. Maybe I’m naive, or maybe my memory capacity could be compared to that of a goldfish – and yet each time I open a new book, I approach it with an openness, a curiosity and a kind of trust.

A trust that it will welcome me.

Which makes it all the more disappointing when, in the end, once more it *does not*. Admittedly less and less so, after all my instincts are a bit better than those of a goldfish, but still – each time – just a bit.

Which in turn made it all the more exhilarating when I come across the book that does invite me – yes, someone like me – with open arms. And this is precisely how I felt reading Rebecca Solnit’s *The Mother of All Questions*. What a relief it was



to not have to go through those moments of misrecognition. The energy which otherwise I'd have had to spend on ignoring my out-of-placeness I could now give to the pure enjoyment of the skillful phrasing, the brilliant humor, the sharp insight. I could now sit back comfortably throughout the reading, let my hair down, relax my defense muscles, and occasionally even throw my head back in an outburst of genuine laughter.

Here I was, sitting in my armchair, laughing out loud at her magnificent snarkiness. Like in a conversation you are having with a good friend. Because reading a book, and a book of essays in particular, is like having this kind of a conversation. In one of her essays on reading, Siri Hustvedt, another brilliant and wise woman, observed that reading fiction is like giving up the voice of your internal narrator (that little voice in your head live-covering the ordinary events of your life in real time as they unravel) to the narrator in the book. Yes, I would say, but reading non-fiction means not giving yourself over to the text completely; more often it is an experience marked by a more active form of engagement, one in which your inner narrator gives up some of her space, but still interacts with that other guy who steps in.

And if it happens to be a guy who won't even acknowledge her presence, well, that makes things pretty awkward, doesn't it. It's like halfway through the reading you realize you have invited someone to your house who you'd rather not have there. Hopefully things don't go down *Funny Games'* style, but at the very least it will be unpleasant. I realize that I'm talking now about two invitations, the one extended (or not) by the book to its reader, and the one that the reader extends to the book – although she may later regret it. But

the reciprocity of this process is precisely what makes reading such a profound, formative – as well as oftentimes painful and disappointing – experience. There is a vulnerability there, intrinsic to every human relationship, whether taking place in real time, on flesh-and-blood basis, or belatedly, between the page and the mind.

The remaining part of Solnit's quote I mentioned before goes: "... but a book with women in the foreground is a woman's book." A male friend of mine recently asked me, tactfully, a bit hesitantly, if the feminist book club I run is for women only. He assumed that a group reading texts by women must consist exclusively of women. And he was not entirely wrong – guys on our meetings are few and far between. But it's not the question of them not being welcome (oftentimes I actually feel obliged, as I did during that conversation, to emphasize that yes, yes of course they are, very much so) rather, it is a question of a certain suspicion on their part, paired with what I would call a lack of curiosity.

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**"And yet the book was perhaps tenth in a row we went through in a syllabus filled with male-only authors striving to portray the human condition in its glorious, phallic fullness."**

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Men tend to assume that, since women are a minority (which never fails to baffle me since, in fact, the very opposite is true) their experience is somehow marginal, which is to say that the figure of every-man could not do without a penis. And this also applies to the men who consider themselves allies to the feminist cause, who fully support their claims to self-expression and equal rights. That time we discussed Musil's book in an academic setting, the room was

filled with wise and woke young men who never missed an opportunity to denounce "White Heterosexual Maleness". And yet the book was perhaps tenth in a row we went through in a syllabus filled with male-only authors striving to portray the human condition in its glorious, phallic fullness.

And nobody seemed to notice an important lack.

Not even the girls.

Or maybe they just assumed that, well, that's just the way syllabi work. They're meant to be universal, and therefore it follows that the character that more than half of humanity will find it easier to identify with is less likely to appear in the forefront. If you don't like it, you can always supplement your reading experience by joining a feminist book club. And I will be the first to extoll book clubs, feminist ones in particular – like I said, I even run one. But my point is, that these should not be the only safe havens female readers should resort to in search of recognition. Nor should they be thought of as these exclusive sororities where no man shall venture (although, of course, if you and your girlfriends want to start a women-only group, then by all means you should go for it). In fact, I think by now we should be past the point where we have to actively prove to the guys that it's okay for them to read, enjoy and talk about books written by and centered around women.

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**"In fact, I think by now we should be past the point where we have to actively prove to the guys that it's okay for them to read, enjoy and talk about books written by and centered around women."**

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Because, after all, I'm sure they would also find writers like Rebecca Solnit delightful. And they should not stop themselves from experiencing this delight, nor should they rob their inner narrators from an opportunity to have an exchange with a brilliant friend – perhaps snarky at times, pointing out the things they were not

aware of and that make them feel uncomfortable, but isn't that what great friends are for? I realize that these observations are nothing new – but the thing is, they remain observable on a daily basis. I hope one day they will become obsolete, in the meantime, however, I encourage everyone reading this, regardless of

the pronouns they go by, to indulge in the giddy relief of reading Rebecca – or any other writer who makes them feel like not only they are on the party's guest list – but that they have been awaited, impatiently, for a long time.

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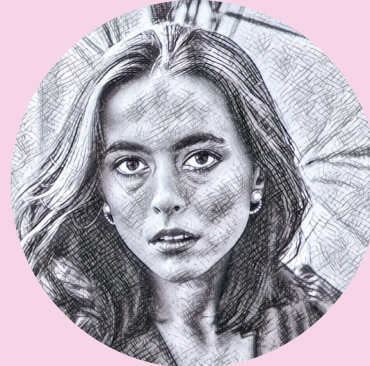


Photo by Maria Świąkowska

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Photo by Mikolaj Bac

# STORYTELLING AND SOLITUDE: COVID-19 PANDEMIC EDITION

*We need isolation to create art, but we need connection with art to truly understand our own isolation.*



Photos by Mel Mical

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By Ella van Driel

**Especially in 2020**, isolation plays on all of our minds. The global pandemic has created a reality for most of us where we have to isolate ourselves within the confines of our own homes. We have to stay away from others like the plague, though it seems as if we've not learned our lesson from said plague at the same time.

It is surreal.

During self-isolation, during all of the stress that came with feeling as though reality itself was slowly fragmenting, naturally I turned to one of my old favourite distractions: novels. I picked up *The Mercies* before Covid-19 reached Europe properly. I hadn't had time to read it yet; it had been on my bookshelf for a few months. Now there seemed to be all the time in the world. I started reading it when every-

thing went from bad to worse, to try and escape for a little bit. It was oddly comforting to read about the trauma these women endured on the isolated island of Vardø. Despite how painful it was to read their perspective of feeling lost and alone, I had a realisation. The realisation that many of my favourite novels were centred around the isolation of the self in its many varieties. But what does this preference say about me? What does it say about humanity that these stories are so universal?

When I started reading for myself as a child, really got lost in the many fantastic stories available to me, I finally felt truly connected to the people around me. *The Mercies* seemed to exemplify that sentiment. Our heroines Maren and Ursa find each other against all odds. Distantly infatuated at first - unsure of the unknown - up until



the point where they can't help but drown in the other's warmth. My reading journey was of a similar kind, a curiosity that I could not quell despite my initial hesitance.

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"Isolation can be found in humanity's stories since we first started to record them."

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Isolation can be found in humanity's stories since we first started to record them. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Bible*; the topic has clearly been on our minds well before we could write about it. The topic that subverts all genres, that connects all of us. A fear for most, a comfort for many simultaneously. But what is the purpose of reading Victor Frankenstein growing obsessed during his isolation at university? Of reading about Jane Eyre's social isolation? About Prospero and Miranda on their island, Odysseus and his journey home after the Trojan War?

The island, as well, has been a focal thematic point in literature. The thought of being free of society and getting to live in solitude on an uninhabited, isolated piece of land surrounded by water is one of delight - or so a few Dutch children's songs describe. In Greek mythology, for example, the island has been a place of desolation or banishment. Vardø too, where *The Mercies* takes place, is an island isolated in Norway. On Vardø, they are not truly alone of course, as outsiders can still come visit, but nonetheless the isolation challenges their humanity and sanity.

As someone who watches crime documentaries on the daily, I am aware of the damage isolation can do mentally.

There is a reason why solitary confinement is considered a method of inhumane torture by the UN. Psychological studies and analyses on prolonged isolation can seem horrendous and seem as if they fit better within a horror movie than our reality (BBC). Before the pandemic it was even a trend online to try isolation for as long as the volunteers could handle it to see how people actually reacted to it for entertainment. But if isolation is something to be feared, why are we so fascinated by it?

As I was reading these novels during quarantine - looking to lose myself in the stories of others - I realised something. I had a need to deal with these troubling times through the emotions and troubles of fictional others; catharsis was what I craved.

Aristotle's catharsis theory - to release one's emotions through art - is a literary device that I believe to be one of the most important aspects of any work and for every reader. Again, I had this sudden realisation that seemed so obvious. I had been self-isolating at home, trying my best to 'flatten the curve' by doing this small thing that seemed so easy: staying exactly where I was. Most people in self-isolation have still been able to talk to their loved ones regularly with the help of technology and social media. It is not comparable to in-person contact, however, and it is hard to process how quickly life has changed for us all. I truly needed catharsis in order to give myself time to process it all, and I found it in Maren and Ursa's narratives initially as I started reading my way through my unread books, waiting to be picked up. I could understand these characters, I could relate, and in return I could process what I was feeling. The power of fiction to me is not only

what it does culturally, but what it does socially and mentally on an individual level.

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"The power of fiction to me is not only what it does culturally, but what it does socially and mentally on an individual level."

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I think of ancient theories like Aristotle's, and marvel at how people still feel similar emotions despite such wild time differences. Humanity has changed so much yet so little that we can still understand these people from so long ago. We believe that we are entirely different from the generations before us, but through the lens of fiction it shows time and time again that we are still quite similar.

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"We believe that we are entirely different from the generations before us, but through the lens of fiction it shows time and time again that we are still quite similar."

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It is the principle of why we still perform Shakespeare's plays 400 hundred years later, why we read accounts of the same people each generation anew; why we can. Even if a tale has been turned over a thousand times, even if it has become hard to read because of language change or the language being dead, we somehow are still able to feel what they felt. Is that not why we read? Why we crave to hear, read, and see stories?



why we read? Why we crave to hear, read, and see stories?

Occasionally I revisit my childhood companions and thank them, thank them for making me feel less alone and help me process the world around me. I wonder if Charlotte, Anne and Emily Brontë felt less alone by writing, by sharing their literary company with women isolated from excitement and society as they were. Do we then read and write to feel less alone? To feel less abandoned when we are unwillingly isolated because of unforeseen circumstances?

More recently Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart* has become one of my favourites. Not only Murakami's lyricism, but Sumire's and Miu's solitude in society, their relation to others, was what stood out to me. They are only physically on an island later in the narrative, but both live on their own figurative island in society, removed from others by either trauma or the feeling of being displaced. Miu's trauma earlier in life, that even turned her hair white if we are to believe her, is exemplified by her looking in on her abuse from far away disconnected from herself and the city around her. It is a perfect example that shows how isolation can have physical and psychological components that interact with each other. Social isolation, the feeling of otherness, or trauma can create this feeling.

I can't help but feel about *The Mercies* similarly to *Sputnik Sweetheart*. Maren and Ursa can be seen as Norwegian equivalents to Miu and Sumire, despite the differences in time period. Likewise, *The Mercies*, too, has a double layer of isolation. The men that die in the Vardø storm, and the havoc and loss

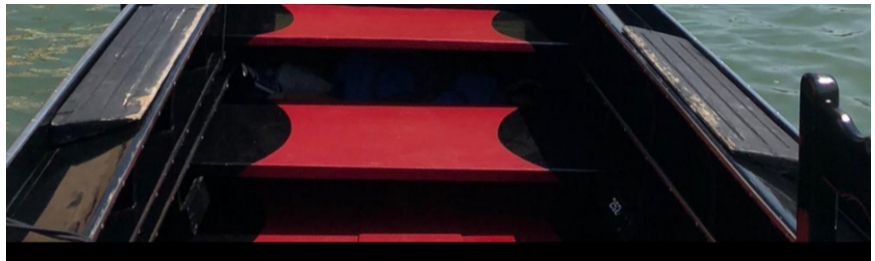
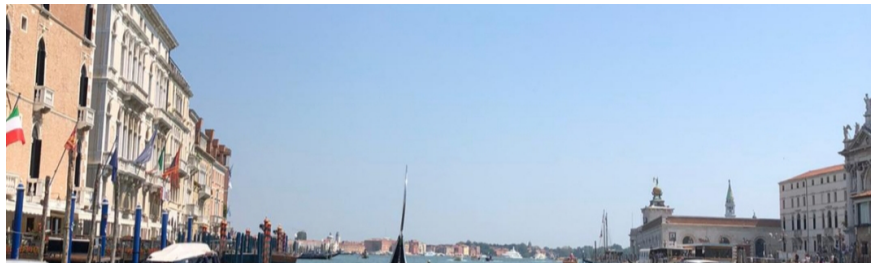


Photo by Mel Micai

that follows, is for Maren both a social and physical isolation. All the women are too shocked to console each other much. They are only able to do so superficially because they are all traumatised by witnessing the event that killed all their sons, fathers, brothers and husbands. That this storm took place on an island on top of that makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time. The sea killed their loves, but they are surrounded by the danger all around. They are isolated by its force.

Female isolation seems most prevalent in my mind. The women in Vardø, Shakespeare's Miranda, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Madeline Miller's Hecate; there are so many examples. While I feel cathartic reading these narratives, reading this as a woman makes it so there is little true escapism in it for me. I can't truly forget about the

world, the people, the culture, that creates the narrative. I can't forget the history, nor do I want to. I know that the power that books have is unimaginable when I can still hear Humbert whispering in my ear that it wasn't truly his fault years after I dared to open *Lolita*. Greek tragedies sing in my blood as I understand their pain, still can understand, after all this time. But the realisation that isolation was the reality for many women, and sometimes still is, is something that haunts my dreams at night.

Again, I think of the Brontë sisters, and I think of how they were expected to stay home. Sure, in the company of their family, but nonetheless as bound to their homes as we are now during the pandemic, though for entirely different reasons. Was it not Virginia Woolf who said that women, and writers in general,

need a room of one's own to write? If isolation is needed for us to create art, what is its actual purpose? We need isolation to create art, but we need connection with art to truly understand our own isolation.

I cannot help but connect philosophy to fiction, cannot even deign to ignore its importance to the world. How many times has a book helped me cry? Helped me understand myself better than before because I understood the protagonist? Helped me feel a purpose in life?

That is exactly the point, I have to tell myself. There's a reason why we need art for catharsis, why we need to read fictional pain in order to forget about our own pain for a bit. We need it to be able to work through our desires and fears in art, in a fixed setting. Afterwards we can thank the work of art for what it has helped us realise about ourselves or the world around us. I am confronting a possible past self when I look at Maren, or at Ursa, or at some of the other women in *The Mercies*. Who would I be? Or would I be someone else, someone invisible to the narrator? Or will I stay the silent spectator, only there to witness the atrocities committed in

the name of a God that at that moment in time promoted hatred instead of love?

Despite the pandemic looming over every action I take in these times, I am comforted by the notion that I am neither the first nor the only one who has experienced this. We have had deadly viruses before. We have been isolated before. We have felt lonely before. Has the world actually changed as much as we think it has? Or am I simply facing similar isolation as the women generations before me have experienced, but just with a different colour sticker slapped onto this specific brand of isolation?

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"The true power of literature in the context of our efforts to keep each other healthy is not just that it's a pretty or fun thing to read, but that it can help us process what is happening around us."

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The true power of literature in the context of our efforts to keep each other healthy is not just that it's a pretty or fun thing to read, but that it can help us process what is happening around us. The internet

exposes us to so many atrocities every day, it becomes hard to process. That orange man was not helping in the slightest either.

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"When the world seems like a bad science fiction novel, what else is there to do but dive back into tragedies set in the past, present, or future and realise that we are lucky to still be online and talk to our loved ones as easily as we can now."

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When the world seems like a bad science fiction novel, what else is there to do but dive back into tragedies set in the past, present, or future and realise that we are lucky to still be online and talk to our loved ones as easily as we can now. We are not alone, never have been alone, and never will be in this world.

Nevertheless, I don't regret reading it. Any of it.

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Photo by Ella van Driel

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# MOTHERS ARE PEOPLE TOO, AND THEY DESERVE A LOLLIPOP

BY ANNIKA VAN LEEUWEN

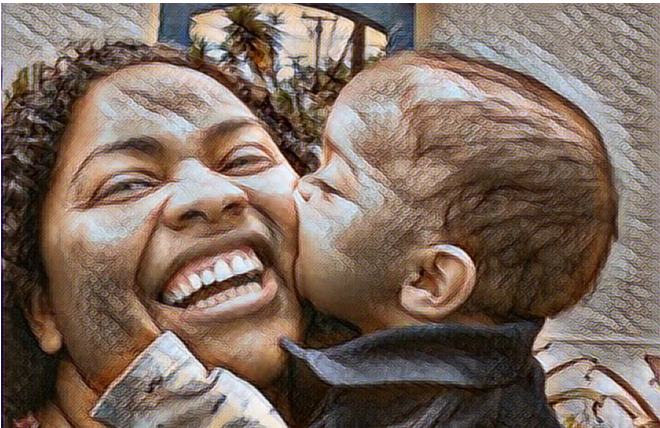


Photo by Mel Micai

**New authors are often bombarded** with advice about plot structure and character building. An often repeated piece of advice about characters is that you need to think about what your characters want and what they need - and the discrepancy between these two. This, the helpful experienced author says, is how you build an interesting character. This advice illustrates that motivation is a big part of realistic, human characters. Yet, the motivations that authors think of are not always as three-dimensional as real-life ones. For female characters, who are often defined in relation to

others, the reasons for acting in certain ways tend to be centred on their love for other (male) characters. Especially when these characters are mothers, they are not always afforded personhood by their authors, instead being defined by the love they have for their children. Two prime examples of this occur in the 'A Song of Ice and Fire' series and its TV adaptation 'Game of Thrones'. Cersei Lannister's actions are motivated by her love for her children, which is consistently said to be her only good quality, and Catelyn Stark's whole character arc revolves around helping her husband and children.

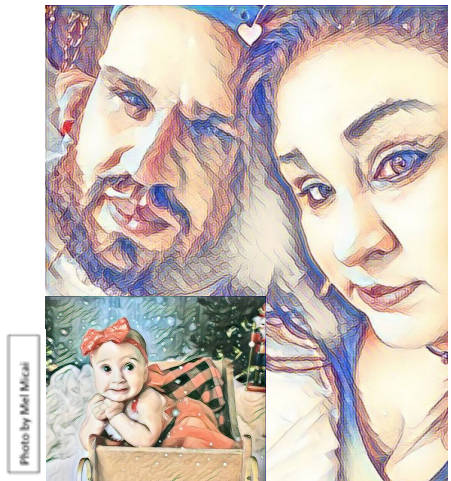


Photo by Mel Micai

In 'The New Wilderness' by Diane Cook, the attempt to bridge the gap between mother- and personhood results in beautifully human and complex characters. The novel takes place in an unspecified future, in which pollution and overpopulation have resulted in an unliveable City. The story opens with Bea, her husband Glen, and her daughter Agnes living in the Wilderness together with ten other people who needed to escape the City. The Wilderness is a huge expanse of wild land, mountains, rivers, forests, and the Community that lives there has to adhere to a strict set of rules. Most importantly: leave no trace.

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**"My mother did not live like a prehistoric nomad for four years to save my life, but she did change her whole life to accommodate my brothers and me."**

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So far, this description may not suggest a particularly character-driven story, but the reason for Bea and her family to have set out on this adventurous new life is because Agnes - eight years old at the start of the novel - would not be able to live in the City any longer, due to the polluted air. Bea herself, however, was doing pretty well in the City, and had made a huge leap in her career before they left. This is not just an interesting fictional dilemma; for my mother and many women of her generation, this was a reality. When children were born, they were expected to stop working. Of course, my mother did not live like a prehistoric nomad for four years to save my life, but she did change her whole life to accommodate my brothers and me - and this was the expected way to go about this in her environment. Just as I took for granted that my mother was there to take care of me any time I got home, or was sick, Agnes in 'The New Wilderness' takes for granted that her mother lives in the Wilderness for her. When reading the novel, this

parallel stayed in the back of my mind, this uncurious assumption that my mother would just sacrifice her own career, her own happiness for me. And with that, I suppose, the blame that a younger me may have put on her for not doing so, as Agnes does later.

This one decision greatly affects Bea's life, and throughout the novel the reader sees her struggle to be her own person apart from being a mother. The breaking point in this story is when Bea learns that her own mother has died in the City while she was travelling a great distance with the Community between two posts. She reads the letter containing the news while surrounded by the Community, with her daughter at her feet. She is crying when she

heard a whimper and looked down. Agnes had tears in her eyes, but her whimper had been purposeful, performed. She was imitating her mother. Trying to access the feelings she saw there. 'Nana is dead,' she announced to Bea, quivering her lip dramatically. And this enraged Bea, as though Agnes were trying to take ownership of this pain, of this relationship. This important relationship that Bea had abandoned in order to care for her own daughter. (132, emphasis mine)

Here, Bea's battle of being a mother and her own person reaches a new level. Were she just an unlikable or evil woman, she may have become violent, or shouted at this child that was stealing her emotions. She would have gotten up, told Agnes to stop, and said something that she might later regret. A likable character, on the other hand, would have comforted her daughter, or perhaps hugged her. I can see the scene playing out in my head: a grieving mother/daughter pressing her own child against her to perhaps remind her that at least she still has her. The husband joining in their embrace. A family, even through the grief. Perhaps a sunset.

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**"The New Wilderness does not romanticize, it brings out humanity in all its roughness."**

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But 'The New Wilderness' does not romanticize, it brings out humanity in all its roughness. And so Bea does not take Agnes in her arms, but instead she leans "toward Agnes's face, with cold emphasis, she pointed to her own thumping chest and repeated, 'My mother is dead. Mine'" (133, emphasis in original). Immediately after this, she gets up, and leaves the Wilderness to go back to the city, abandoning her daughter and husband. She claims her personhood, in effect showing that the grief is hers.

Bea's claim on her own emotions is an important one, and it speaks to something that I feel we tend to forget about mothers: they are people. I have long disliked the fact that we tend to define women by their relation to others/men, and specifically that there is a value judgment attached to this process. What comes to mind here is the discussion about men respecting women. An often-heard argument is "would you treat your mother like that/would you want your daughter to be treated like that?" The issue with this argument is that it should not matter. It should not matter whether someone is your daughter or mother or wife, you should respect them for being a person. This claim to personhood is what Bea struggles with, and what eventually breaks her.

Here, the novel gives Bea a break. We do not find out much about the year she spends in the City, because we follow Agnes as she attempts to deal with her abandonment. Part four of the book, which starts after Bea runs away, is called "The Ballad of Agnes", where the first part was called "The Ballad of Beatrice". This part opens with Agnes waking up next to a prairie dog "with a question on its face", her own answer to this question being "I'm Agnes. And yes, I belong here" (139). This is in stark contrast to her mother, whose narrative showed that she does not belong in the Wilderness. Without Bea around, Agnes gets the opportunity to be a person, a leader, instead of a daughter. At the same time, presumably, Bea gets the opportunity to be a person as well, away from her daughter, undefined by her.



Photo by Mel Mical

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**"Lollipops are metaphorically connected to this belonging vs. not belonging, as well as to the sacrificial element of motherhood."**

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Lollipops are metaphorically connected to this belonging vs. not belonging, as well as to the sacrificial element of motherhood. They first appear in part one of the novel, when Bea speaks with Ranger Bob. The rangers are the police in the Wilderness, and they keep track of where the community is and what happens with it; Ranger Bob is an old friend of Bea's, who she's known for as long as she has lived in the Wilderness. After Bea finishes reporting on the gains and losses, Bob gives her a "vibrant green lollipop. 'Give this to your darling girl,' he said. 'I know how much she loves them'" (39). He gives Bea one for herself as well. A page later, "Bea returned to her cave and chomped through both lollipops. The last thing Agnes needed was to remember what sugar was" (40).

Bea almost defensively frames her action as one meant to protect Agnes. Later, however, we find out that Ranger Bob has given her quite a few green

lollipops before, and that Agnes never received one. Another relevant tidbit of information here is that green lollipops were Bea's favourites. Bea's decision to "chomp" through both of the lollipops and not share them, either with Agnes or with her husband Glen, is likely motivated by her love for lollipops instead of her love for Agnes. When these bits of information were revealed, Bea's personhood and self-prioritisation (which you could also call selfishness, but I'm not sure if I want to) made me feel a certain second-hand shame, like she shouldn't have eaten the lollipops. As if she had the obligation of sharing something she loved, something she did not have access to most of the time and did not know when or whether she would be able to have again. As if it was not enough that she had turned her life completely upside down for her daughter's health, no, she should have given her one of the lollipops as well.

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**"Mothers are hardly ever allowed to just be people."**

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Mothers are hardly ever allowed to just be people. We see it all around us, such as when Chrissy Teigen was harshly berated online for going out to a restaurant 'only' two weeks after giving birth (while her husband John Legend was not expected to

remain at home with his new-born), or when the women in the British Royal family are expected to stand on the balcony and wave, holding their babies only mere hours after having given birth. In literature, too, mothers are hardly ever depicted as real people whose motivations and feelings matter, but rather as nagging or overbearing caregivers, depending on the perspective of the child. However, it does appear small steps are being made towards allowing mothers to be more than just their role: for example, the first chapters of Ali Smith's 'Summer' stick to the perspective of the annoyed child, whereas later parts of the book provide mother Grace with her own story. Bernardine Evaristo's 'Girl, Woman, Other' features full chapters from the perspective of different mothers, yet still shows (most of) these mothers as family-focused and child-oriented; it is hopeful, though, that a mother-character like Amma, who is clearly living a full and fulfilling life, is put at the centre of that story. With 'Summer' 's Grace, 'Girl, Woman, Other' 's Amma, and 'The New Wilderness' ' Bea, it seems mothers in recent literature are getting the chance to exist as people. 'The New Wilderness' has flaws. It is not a perfect book, or even a perfect representation of motherhood. However, the book at the very least allows Bea to be a full-fledged person; sometimes a mother also needs a lollipop.

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Photo by Annika van Leeuwen

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# G is for Grief

by Jane Singer

*"The archaeology of grief is not ordered. It is more like earth under a spade, turning up things you had forgotten."*

—Helen Macdonald

**They said two years**, and so it was planned. My father's death and my own grief started two and a half years before his heart stopped beating. He died by euthanasia, choosing death after being slowly broken down by the cancer and its treatment. I knew the date and the time he would die days before it happened.

I read 'H is for Hawk' about two months after my father passed away. The book was comforting, not because of the occasional mentions of the familiar headaches and tiredness that come with mourning, but due to the recognition of the excruciating struggle that comes with the death of someone you love; one that everyone faces, sooner or later.

Macdonald provides an extraordinary account of how everyone mourns in a different way. It is a very personal story of her dealing with the death of her father. Soon after he passes away, she can't escape the feeling that she should buy a goshawk, and so she does. Her interest in falconry then turns into an obsession with the training of the hawk.

The book and especially the title taught me that the process of recovery after you lose someone significant is like learning how to talk again.

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**"The book and especially the title taught me that the process of recovery after you lose someone significant is like learning how to talk again."**

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Photo by Mel Micai

Grief is complex, but Macdonald accurately describes instances of grief in an accessible manner. She spells out grief for people who can't find the words, in a way that has not been done before. She provides a language for grief; a language that I used to put my own grief into words.

Below is a fragmented account of my experience with mourning, guided by Macdonald's words.

**L is for laughter.** Laughter because of memories, or because of the hideous flowers your aunt sends. In the period after someone

significant dies, it feels like ridiculousness is everywhere, which results in many smiles and laughter. During my father's funeral procession I sat behind the steering wheel of his cream-white Singer roadster from the 50's. My father was crazy about cars, especially old ones. To find an old-timer from a brand with the exact same name as our family name was the last push for him to finally let himself buy one.

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**"In the period after someone significant dies, it feels like ridiculousness is everywhere, which results in many smiles and laughter. "**

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That day I was following the hearse with my mother next to me in the passenger seat. Behind the hideous, colossal vehicle and our adorable little roadster were about ten other Singer old-timers. Thank God my father wasn't able to observe that his last ride was in such an appalling car, for he would have never gotten in.

The thing with funeral processions is that they don't go very fast, but a car from the 50's needs to warm up its engine before it runs smoothly. So after a few minutes of pulling up and slowing down again, the engine failed. The cars following us, all driven by middle-aged male mechanics, had to stop. Before them they saw two women looking like they were at a loss, facing each other as their roadster slowly rolled on for a few more meters and finally stalled. The gap between us and the hearse was growing bigger and bigger. Just like Macdonald, unable to cope with some situations, my mother and I laughed, for there was nothing else we could do, and there was "no way of incorporating these signs of life into the fact of death."

**P is for parents.** In 'H is for Hawk', Macdonald mistakenly mentions going to her "parents" house for a weekend: "My parents' house. I suppose it was my mother's house now." Parents become mother. They become she. Their becomes her. No more his. No more he. No more him.

**H is for hands.** "Hands are for other humans to hold." Macdonald realises that to flee to the wild to heal her broken heart was a big mistake, that she needs others to help her through her mourning. Being a bit of a loner myself, this reminds me of the effort it took me, and still takes (some of my friends still don't know), to tell people my father passed away. I long to shut down, to not tell anyone. The pity and sympathy of others only make it harder, perhaps because it makes it more real. I still fight against this urge to bury the grief deep inside me.

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**"R is for recruiting, for I recruited the hands that held me and hold me still. "**

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**R is for recruiting,** for I recruited the hands that held me and hold me still, like Macdonald recruited a man she briefly dated to "serve" her loss. I knew mourning was approaching, so I could decide whom I wanted to help me through it. Slowly the relationship with one of my friends made no more sense. She was a bit like a social butterfly, always fun to be with, but also super busy. When you would finally plan to do something with her, which was quite a task, chances were she'd cancel. One time I confronted her with this, resulting in her feeling pressured and offended, needing an apology from me in order to patch things up again. But when you enter a period in which you need friends, instead of just want

friends, these shallow friendships are not worth your limited energy anymore. And so she left me, like the man Macdonald looked to for support left her, unwilling to aid my approaching loss.

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**"One of the first times I cried after he died was while peeling onions, although it felt more like the onion was peeling me. "**

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**M is for messy.** In her book, Macdonald casually sits on her sofa watching television when suddenly she notices tears running from her eyes and dropping into her tea mug. This reminds me of how messy grief can be. I am what you can call an opportunistic crier. After my father died I didn't cry very often. One of the first times I cried after he died was while peeling onions, although it felt more like the onion was peeling me. The more I peeled, the more I felt like I was peeling away my own thick skin. When it came to chopping them, my eyes were already wet. My sight became blurry, but I just cut through. The tears came and I went with them. I liberated my sorrow.

This week, the tears also came. I went to get a Hepatitis B shot. The nurse sat me down in a white, sterile room, the only colour coming from a poster on the wall with an animated world map on it, clearly placed there to distract children. I sat down on the bench, holding it with two sweaty hands. I've always been afraid of needles; even thinking about it now turns my stomach. However, it was not panic I was trying to control, it was misery. I told her needles always stress me out. She told me to look at the poster. I tried to sit still as the tension was building up inside of me, and as I was looking at that stupid



poster I could only think about my father. When the needle pierced through my skin it hit a nerve. I still sat like a statue after the needle had left my body.

"Breathe," the nurse ordered.

I drew a deep breath. I sobbed. While trying to catch my breath, she looked at me with sorry eyes and asked if I liked chocolate. Surprised at the offer, and already feeling like a child, I nodded yes and optimistically expected her to open a drawer full of little chocolates in colourful shiny wrappers. Maybe she has dark chocolate. Oh, how I love dark chocolate. I was already beginning to feel a little bit better. In a second she would present me a chocolate in a golden wrapper shining like the sun, and everything would be okay again. "There's a coffee machine outside that offers hot chocolate. You can sit in the hall and take a minute to collect yourself," she said as she opened the door for me to leave.

**D is for "don't forget"**, because that is what you want to do. When Macdonald leans towards forgetting "darkness", "death" and "all things that had been before", she reminds herself that she "must fight, always, against forgetting". I too desperately wanted to forget my father's death, but I cannot forget it without forgetting him. So I won't forget his

laugh, his love, his positivity, and our rides together in the roadster. When we took it to south England, rolled off the boat in Dover, its headlights like two big wide eyes, having no idea of where to go. Mum was more of a planner than we were. We drove on over the cliffs, let the coast guide us. The road before us was as grey as the sky. The wind, the tires on the road, and the occasional passing car were our only music. The wooden dashboard only held a glove compartment with some liquorice, and, behind the steering wheel, a spastic speedometer that looked more like the pendulum of a clock. I knew you could fix it. Hell, you could fix anything, built an entire new engine for this car from scratch. It just didn't matter. Speed didn't matter. Don't forget that speed doesn't matter.

**G is for gap.** In one passage Macdonald perfectly describes the shape of grief:

There is a time in life when you expect the world to be always full of new things. And then comes a day when you realise that is not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were there and are no longer. And you realise, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where the memories are.

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**"It's easier to walk past them, jump over these holes, but, for the sake of remembering, we should look into them."**

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In order to not forget my father, I have to visit these holes, even though their depth can be intimidating. When I visit my mother's house the holes are more prominent. The sight of the empty couch, the empty bed, the roadster, all cause a stinging pain in my heart. It's easier to walk past them, jump over these holes, but, for the sake of remembering, we should look into them.

**L is for love.** At the end of the book Macdonald realises that "all the grief had turned into something different. It was simply love." This reads like light at the end of the tunnel. I am not there yet, and right now I don't know if I will be, or if I want to be, for the grief also reminds me of my father. It feels like it intensifies my love for him, and I don't know if I am willing to give this up (yet). For now I am somewhere between grief and love.

**Reference:**

Macdonald, Helen. *H is for Hawk*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2014.



Photo by Jane Singer

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# LOVER'S CONFESSION

by Mikołaj Bać

"All that we are is the result  
of what we have thought."

Buddha

**Why do people still need** personal essays in the era of exhibitionism, performed by celebrities on a regular basis? Perhaps even the quote above is taken from a lame motivational site called *Great Focus Quotes*. I don't know. Does it really matter, though? People have read, people still read, and people will read. In the same manner as I did. The point of this lover's confession is to show you that books have always been present in my life, and they introduced me to the world in which I live right now. They've created it, and from time to time they have also made me suffer. But what kind of real love doesn't make you suffer at one point or another? I aim at helping someone to gain a better understanding of themselves. If I happen to succeed, then I would feel like I have achieved what I wanted.

I don't have lots of stories to tell. But I'll tell you this one.

Books. They were everywhere.



Photo by Mikołaj Bać

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## "Books. They were everywhere."

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To begin, I would love to talk to you about my parents. They grew up in smaller towns. Even for Polish standards, these two places weren't the best ones to live in. My father had seven other siblings and he was the one most interested in reading books. Oh, and my mother. She also read a lot. Mainly Agatha Christie. *Appointment with Death*. They made them dream. They made them live. Eventually books brought them together.

Then I came. I don't know whether I was brought by some kind of mysterious stork or, as in *The World According to Garp*, I was mysteriously brought to life by someone's empathy. I don't know, I've never asked. All I know is that I wasn't really planned, like the inspiration which comes to a writer as he starts to compose and which turns his life upside down. Amélie Nothomb even described all the books that she wrote were a result of a pregnancy. *Pregnancy nothombiste* as she referred to it in French. I guess I was the same kind of inspiration. My parents had just come back to Poland from the States, wanting to give me the best possible future which meant not being an American. In hindsight I really appreciate that.

*Books. They are everywhere.*

Maybe Poland in the early 2000s wasn't the perfect place to grow up but it created this odd subspecies of a thing who I happen to be right now. I remember this time. I was constantly bullied for not being masculine enough, – but one book was always close to me. Which one, you may ask. It was *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne. It resided in my backpack, in my pocket, in the bathroom. Being beaten for longer hair and reading too much in a martial arts camp and quickly escaping the place thanks to my parents' quick intervention. They grew up in places with books themselves. Books made them dream. They made me dream.

And also: Trying to write my first story. First novel. *Emerald Isles Ally*. For those of you who have played Heroes III, I'm sure that you already have a smile on your face. Even though I'd written this piece in Polish, the title was exactly this English one. I didn't even know back then what it meant. I only knew that I wanted to write. But I wrote one page and abandoned it. Something about mythical guns and creatures in a blue loose-leaf binder, lost during one of the moves from house to house. One day I would really like to read what a ten-year-old could have possibly imagined on those isles.

Why am I talking about books? Well, they just got stuck in my mind, connected to important events in my life. But if you want to talk about other things, then alright, I also love music. I remember being completely heart-broken and riding my bike, listening to Biffy Clyro. I remember my first kiss to Green Day's *21st Century Breakdown*. You know, music has always been around me. It appears in my memories, but it does not create it. It never really changed my personality. That's why I'm here writing about literature.

As a young boy I wasn't considered normal by the standards of my friends. When I was 8 my grandfather told me that to become a real man you have to read *The Deluge* by Henryk Sienkiewicz. For those of you who have no clue who the hell this guy was and what the heck this book is about, I will provide you with an explanation. This is one of the novels which is one of the most important Polish reads. Nearly 800 pages, it used to be read in high schools, but is now overlooked. And I nearly finished the book. I stopped about 750 pages in, saying that there is no more war but just this stupid love between the two main characters. I never came back to the novel and started to read *Garfield* comics again.

When we drove somewhere during the summer holidays, all the other kids were playing football or playing in the sea. I was lying on the beach,



reading. Well, I also played with them sometimes. But I just needed to read as much as I needed to breathe. What was I reading? I guess it was *The Master and Margarita*. Then everyone was just laughing at me for having dreams about my head falling off from my corpse.

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**"But I just needed to read as much as I needed to breathe. "**

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*(You've just reached the middle of the text. From now on it's only gonna be easier).*

You should know, I don't really cry much. Since the more conscious age of 13 (I'm now twenty-something), I've cried five times. Ten years, only five times "when the wet covered my eyelids" – as we say it in Polish (or at least as I do). I don't think you'd be surprised that one of those times was because of a book. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell made me suffer. It turned my world of idealism upside down. I would love to say that I haven't been the same since, but that sounds like a horrible cliché. Oops, already said it.

*Books. They will be everywhere.*

Perhaps I even had a room of my own. I was living in different times. I wasn't even a girl, though I was considered one eventually. I was definitely too sensitive. Even now when I watch certain films, I have to pause them because I relate to the hero too much. Well, with books it has happened too. At first, I read only fantasy because it was kind of easier to dissociate myself from the main hero. But then I discovered other types of literature. Ones that were more sophisticated. I even won a Polish literature competition later on. And you know what? It never bored me.

I had this gift that I wanted to share. So, what I did was I bought my sister some books. It was

my mission to make her culturally knowledgeable! To change her social views. To make her just as enlightened as I was. For that reason, I gave a thirteen-year old a book by Virginia Woolf in an attempt to make her a feminist. She never read it. And then I gave her other books which she also didn't read. But my cultural revolution wasn't over yet as I wanted to make her win the Polish literature competition just like me. But she wasn't interested at all.



Photo by Mikolaj Bac

And then I went to university. And they asked me a question: *Qu'est-ce que tu fais ici?* And I didn't know what I was doing there. But in the Renaissance classes with De Montaigne sitting by my side I just knew the answer. *J'essaie*. Everything happens for a reason. Even though I wanted to quit those studies after every exam session, it seems like this passion for literature and the French language which, like every new language that you learn, broadens your horizons. Gave me an opportunity to study somewhere else - in a place that is even flatter than my used bike tires, also known as The Netherlands.

In the meantime, a weird thing happened, and I was just as stuck as a lot of other people. In a place where I didn't want to be. Maybe it's not that common that you just run away to your childhood home during an event that only happens once in a period of 100 years and some not-even-living molecule shuts the door behind you to your normal life. I remember standing at the bathroom window, thinking about how time

flies by so quickly. The nostalgia was taking over so much that while I was standing there, I wanted to become *Karlsson-on-the-Roof* from Astrid Lindgren's books that I discovered in the exact same house many years before.

The first analysis? *Box Hill* with a subtitle Story of Low Self-Esteem. Some place in Surrey which I had never heard of before, reminded me of my weird childhood dream of getting kidnapped by pirates just like I didn't have my own will at all. I also thought about becoming a guy without any aspirations sitting down on a bench with his friends, smoking a cigarette, enjoying a beer without any concerns about the sense of life. Now I know how wrong I was. Just trying with all my strength to avoid any social problems or more difficult questions that literature proposed. Maybe those thoughts are also the reason why I'm at the place where I am right now.

And here I am, feeling *The Discomfort of Evening* while being surrounded by the flashing lights of my computer and the blocks of houses nearby. I don't really know whether everything

that I've lived through and what I'm living right now is real. Maybe it's just an imagination of some fucked-up author, who wanted to create his alter ego to tell you a story about the childhood of some lost soul. I don't really know.

Books...

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"And where does that lead?"

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"And where does that lead?" you may ask, frustrated that you've just wasted your time reading through some unknown guy's story. And I would tell you that you are right. I just wanted to show you that I don't even know where I would be without books. I don't even know if I would really exist.

As I opened myself up to you so intimately, what do you think about taking a deep breath, taking a look inside yourself and just wonder: How did books change your life? Would that be too much to ask after such a detailed lover's confession?

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Photo by Izabela Makocka

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Lea Dokter

**For as long as I can remember**, stories have been a foundational part of my life. I have started to think of them as a breadcrumb trail weaving through my own story, beginning with my mother, and later helping me find my way back to my father. They helped me navigate the twisted undergrowth of childhood and the confusing labyrinth of adolescence. Stories are the glue that give my life some semblance of shape and coherence, counteracting the fracturing power of trauma.

My earliest memories of them are of those told by my mother, invented on the spot as she sat on the edge of my bed; her stories almost always took place in forests, revolving around the adventures of anthropomorphic animals. Although the general fallibility of memory makes me question the accuracy of this recollection, I vaguely recall a story about a squirrel's birthday party.

My mother had always been a writer, dabbling in poetry and journalism in adolescence, then writing articles for the

neighbourhood magazine as a creative outlet next to the demands of motherhood and work later on. As most writers are, she was also an avid reader, and I treasure the battered copy of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* I found among her possessions years after her passing.

It was a surprising find, tucked away among her scrapbooks, articles, photo albums, and other miscellaneous

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"My earliest memories of them are of those told by my mother, invented on the spot as she sat on the edge of my bed"

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possessions my father could not bear to look at, nor get rid of. The dusty box had been tucked away in the attic, waiting to be discovered when my father, too, passed away. How strange to find that this novel, which I had fallen in love with several years before, was one my mother had not only read, but presumably

treasured as well - the sole surviving material evidence of my mother's taste in literature.

Her body succumbed to the cancer that was corrupting it from the inside when I was seven years old. Never again would I get to witness her impromptu storytelling; I found solace in the books she had bought me instead. I vividly remember the colourfully illustrated pages of *Rupsje Nooitgenoeg* and *De Mooiste Vis van de Zee*, which transported me to different worlds in which, for a moment, the grief could be forgotten.





I had always been a bit of an outsider. Home had been my safe space, but now that my mother was nothing more than a collection of stories and a decaying heap of flesh in a box underground, it felt as if our house, too, was blanketed by six feet of damp, suffocating earth. I fled into fiction. The books absorbed me, to such an extent that I completely lost touch with whatever was going on outside the place the pages transported me to. Children can be immensely cruel; if I'd had a rough day at school I would flee into a different universe where the fictional characters almost felt like friends.

Books were an escape, a place to go when the present was less than ideal. Simultaneously, the grim tropes of fairy tales manifested themselves in our home, which turned hostile when my father decided to move my new stepmother and her two children in. I was never forced to clean the fireplace, but it was clear from the very start that my stepmother had marked my younger brother and me as obligatory annoyances on her path to happiness. Fiction gave me hope that my life, too, could unexpectedly change for the better. Like millions of young Harry Potter fans around the world, I stayed up the night of my eleventh birthday in the vain hope an owl would come crashing through my window, for it would deliver me from this bland and painful muggle existence, marked by neglect.

Aside from providing an escape, books also provided a means for identification. Needless to say, the wicked stepmother trope was a welcome affirmation of my feelings. Much like Cinderella's, mine had made it abundantly clear that her offspring would always come before me and my brother. Seeing my situation reflected in stories made me feel like I was not alone. Over time, as I started to consume more complex narratives,

circumstantial identification evolved into an almost interpersonal connection: I felt understood by characters who had similar experiences to mine, more specific than broad biographical details, who felt and thought similar things, and who saw the world in the same way I did. They suffered the things no one talked about, the things I kept to myself - melancholy, loneliness, automutilation. Somehow, the stories I read made my experiences feel valid.

Unlike most fathers in tales involving evil stepmothers, mine was still alive, although metaphorically speaking he may as well have been dead at times. Trauma is difficult to comprehend as a child, especially the trauma of others. How to interpret a parent pulling back

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"the grim tropes of fairy tales manifested themselves in our home, which turned hostile when my father decided to move my new stepmother and her two children in"

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into themselves, locking the vulnerable parts away in a high tower with no golden locks to climb upon? How to interpret it as anything but rejection?

My father wasn't much of a reader, with one notable exception: anything written by Stephen King. At age twelve, I snuck his copy of *Desperation* up to my room, and devoured it. It was terrifying in the best way, and over the next few weeks I steadily made my way through *Carrie*, *De Marathon*, and *Misery*. Though not the most observant parent, my father could not help but notice, and although he questioned the suitability of these books for a girl my age, he also realised we had passed the point of no return.

The evil stepmom moved out, taking the entire contents of the bookcase with her. Instead of starting another argument, my father purchased a cheap second-hand collection of Stephen King novels online. Most of them were Dutch translations, as my father had assumed, but to his surprise some English copies were also included. I was intrigued.

English had always been one of my favourite subjects in school, and growing up in the age of the internet certainly helped me gain some proficiency. I decided that I would give reading in English a shot; after all, how could I claim to love the way Stephen King wrote if all I ever read were translations?

Although painstakingly slow at first, I was soon reading everything in English, aside from books originally published in Dutch. When the time came to decide which degree I wanted to pursue, there was only one option I could associate with some form of happiness: English literature. The best thing my ex-stepmother has ever done for me, it turns out, was taking my father's books.

The pursuit of literature solidified into an actual, physical escape from our dysfunctional household. The apartment I moved into was set to be demolished in a year or so, and therefore very cheap; I had a garden and lots of space, but everything was damp, and there was no heating. I felt at home for the first time in twelve years.

University was not exactly Hogwarts, but it read like a fiction I had never fully believed would become my reality. Friendships seemed to form effortlessly, books providing fertile ground for conversation. We were reading constantly, my literary horizons expanding at an astounding speed. Many of the authors I now consider to be among my favourites - Atwood,

Welsh, Duffy, Plath - got introduced to me by professors I soon desired to equal some day.

However, these five years were not a simple upward trajectory to a happy ending. Traumatic pasts tend to disfigure present realities; whilst condemning my father's drinking and my brother's cocaine habit - causation or correlation? - I feel the lineage press urgently on my shoulders as I open my first bottle of wine at 1.37 PM on a Tuesday.

Years spent consuming dystopian narratives did not pay off in terms of preparing me for the real thing. Global society seems to be disintegrating at an increasingly rapid speed as I'm pursuing a Master's degree in comparative literary studies. Books have transformed into objects of study, layered works of art, which I frequently delve into - not to escape, but to analyze. Analyze and admire.

Books are no longer just stories to me, but carefully constructed commentaries, reflections, explorations. They still have the power to transport me to different worlds, but this acts less like a temporary escape and more like a broadening of perspective. Identification is no longer the main attraction, but some works have a way of grabbing you when you least expect it.

For a course on African Literature, we're reading *Soul Tourists*, focalized through a perspective far removed from my own. The novel opens by detailing the circumstances of the protagonist's father, who casually slips into messy alcoholism and self-neglect after his wife passes away. The teacher asks how everyone is enjoying the novel, prompting a classmate to state that so far, the novel hasn't gripped him yet. What a luxury. Descriptions of piss-soaked carpets, the result of alcohol abuse and depression, call to mind the diarrheacaked bedframe I wiped clean after my father's suicide. The dried vomit, months old, on the laminate.

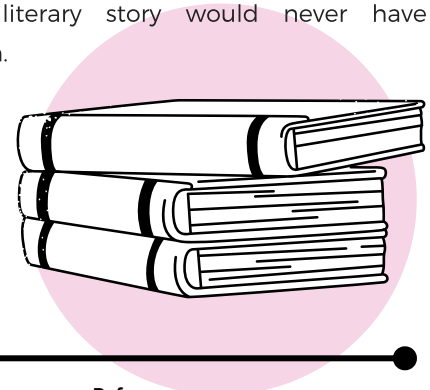
The horror narratives my father and I shared a passion for paled in comparison. Ironically, we had very little in common other than clinical depression and a love for these dark novels. I plucked the English ones from the shelf, then stumbled across old children's books and my mother's copy of *Brave New World* in the attic's cobwebbed recesses. They currently reside next to each other on my own bookshelves, an odd but meaningful little genre of their own.

I tend to remember my mother in the bright colour scheme of the children's books she collected for me, my image of her a pastiche of pictures, stories, artefacts, and unreliable memories. I often wonder if we would have gotten along at this age -

I feel, or rather want to believe, we would have been friends. At least we could have discussed Huxley together.

Would she agree with me that the most intriguing part of the novel is the beginning? Did she read *1984* as well, and if so, how did that compare for her? Which aspect of the dystopias did she find most unsettling and why? Would she please tell me another story?

For as long as I can remember, stories have been a foundational part of my life. They began with my mother, and reconnected me to my father; they have comforted, familiarized, touched, provoked, broken, repaired. The breadcrumb trail has become a yellow brick road, a solid foundation bright with the promise of home; I have dedicated myself to stories, intending to spend the rest of my days reading them, researching them, talking about them. Who knows, perhaps I'll end up writing them. If I do, I hope my parents would have liked them. After all, without my mother's stories, my father's novels, my own literary story would never have begun.



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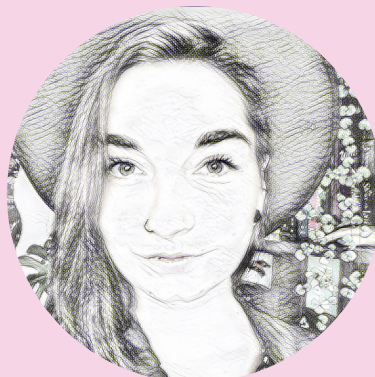


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