



Autumn 2021

HIGHLIGHTING NEW, CRITICAL VOICES IN THE LITERARY SPACE.

Identity

"IF THE SELF IS WRITTEN AND REWRITTEN BY PREVIOUS TEXTS, HOW IS IT POSSIBLE NOT TO WRITE OTHER PEOPLE'S WORKS?" ELIF KAYAHAN

More on page 10

"SECOND PLACE CREATES ITS OWN DISTINCT SPACE, CAREFULLY TOEING THE LINE BETWEEN FICTION AND BIOGRAPHY, IMAGINATION AND FACT." JAKE REGAN

More on page 25

"HIS NEW APPROACH IS EFFECTIVE. FORMALLY, STYLISTICALLY, AND NARRATIVELY, *THE PROMISE* SINGS, ITS VOICE SOMEHOW CHORAL..." ACACIA CAVEN

More on page 8

Colophon

Chief Editors

Maia Baum

Amanda Castro Thijssen

Managing Editors

Anna Sóley Ásmundsdóttir

Sophie Bierhuizen

Editorial

Suzanne Balm (head)

Sara van der Woude (head)

Angel Apallas

Ilse Barkmeijer

Chantal Groot

Juliette Huisman

Elif Kayahan

Joppe Kips

Shaila Kumaradas

Machteld Laan

Kathelijne Schoonackers

Ris Schortinghuis

Eva Soares

Jake Regan

Paula Werdnik

Design

Acacia Caven (head)

Naomi Tidball (head)

Isabel Cramer

Juliette Huisman

Tara Huisman

Lisa Leenstra

Nina van der Linden

Publicity & Marketing

Judith Revenberg (head)

Evelien Vermeulen (head)

Ipek Ari

Ilse Barkmeijer

Joppe Kips

Angela Kroes

Laurynas Petrauskas

Sanne Tukker

Dear Reader,

We are happy to present the third issue of *RevUU*! Building on the hard work of last year's board, our aim is to continue providing a platform to diverse and critical voices. Recently there has been a growing attention for previously unheard voices. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the work is done: our team believes that there is still plenty of room for change. The creative and critical writing that appears in our articles has the potential to start important conversations, which can help in examining more closely the world around us. With this in mind, we are happy to announce that we have chosen 'Identity' as the main theme of this issue. The complexity and different interpretations of the concept are reflected in the variety of themes discussed in our issue.

While social media has made our understanding of who we are even more complicated, at the same time it has provided a platform for marginalised voices to be heard and for like-minded people to connect. The world of social media is discussed in Paula Werdnik's piece on Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This*. However, after multiple COVID-19 related lockdowns, the importance of real-life connection and affection has been emphasised. This topic is discussed in Ris Schortinghuis' review of Sara Winman's *Still Life*, a book about queer love. The pandemic has also confronted many of us with the challenges of being far away from home, who will be able to identify with the nostalgia discussed in Sanne Tukker's article on *In Moonland*. Written by Miles Allinson, the book talks about important themes like climate change and generational trauma, all set in Melbourne.

The essays in this issue also demonstrate the co-existence of a range of different experiences of identity. Using Virginia Feito's *Mrs. March*, Juliette Huisman analyses the different tropes that are used, and have historically been used, regarding female identity. In a fictional conversation with the author, Elif Kayahan's narrative focuses on sex and plagiarism in Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations*. Angela Kroes reflects on the impact of giving recognition to experiences in her insightful reading of *I Had a Miscarriage*, a memoir by Jessica Zucker, where important themes such as pregnancy loss and infertility are discussed. Race and identity crisis are main themes in Sophie Bierhuizen's review of the thriller *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalia Harris. The 13 other insightful, creative, and critical pieces included in this issue explore many more views, styles, and interpretations.

With the launch of our third issue, we would like to celebrate the hard work of our authors and team, and thank Mia You for her continuous guidance and engagement with *RevUU*.

We hope you enjoy reading the articles as much as we have enjoyed working on them!

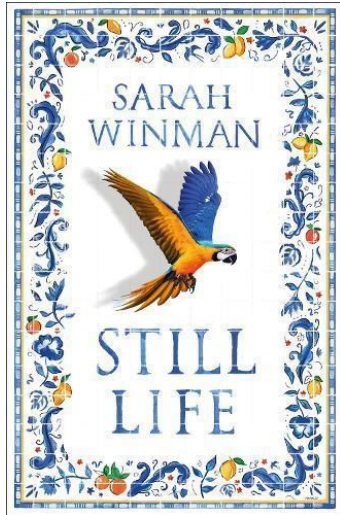
Sincerely,
Maia Baum & Amanda Castro Thijssen
Chief Editors

Contents

Article	Author	Page
A Short History of a Queer Happy Ending: Sarah Winman's Homage to E.M. Forster's <i>Maurice</i>	Ris Schortinghuis	6
Time Heals all Wounds? Damon Galgut's <i>The Promise</i> covers South African History From a New Perspective.	Acacia Caven	9
SEX AND PLAGIARISM: Kathy Acker Walks Into a Bar...	Elif Kayahan	11
Queering Conventional Rom-com Tropes in <i>She Drives Me Crazy</i> by Kelly Quindlen	Machteld Laan	15
<i>I Had a Miscarriage: A Panorama of Perspectives</i>	Angela Kroes	18
<i>Great Circle</i> Makes a Soaring Start but Runs Out of Fuel	Lisa Leenstra	21
Should Have Read the Fine Print: A Review of Zakiya Dalila Harris' Debut Novel <i>The Other Black Girl</i>	Sophie Bierhuizen	23
Some Unorthodox but Nevertheless Pertinent Advice on Why You Should Never Invite an Author to your House: Rachel Cusk's <i>Second Place</i> Reviewed	Jake Regan	26
The Queer Line: Coming of Age on the Subway: A review of Casey McQuiston's <i>One Last Stop</i>	Nina van der Linden	30
The Story of Britain's Last Hanged Prisoner: <i>The Fortune Men</i> Reviewed	Amanda Castro Thijssen	33
<i>In Moonland: The Inevitable Influence of the Past</i>	Sanne Tukker	35
<i>Blue, I love you: Three Letters to the Colour Blue</i>	Anna Sóley Ásmundsdóttir	38
The Rewards of Rereading: A Review of Anuk Arudpragasam's <i>A Passage North</i>	Eva Soares	41
A Painfully Captivating Novel About Death, Grief, and Acceptance: Review of TJ Klune's <i>Under The Whispering Door</i>	Judith Revenberg	43

Contents

Article	Author	Page
Death Among the Tealeaves: TJ Klune's <i>Under the Whispering Door</i>	Tara Huisman	46
In the Tradition of Perceiving Women: A Review of Virginia Feito's <i>Mrs. March</i>	Juliette Huisman	49
Why Patricia Lockwood's <i>No One is Talking About This</i> Is a Must Read	Paula Werdnik	52
About <i>The Last House on Needless Street ... At Least It Isn't Cats</i> (2019)	Chantal Groot	54
A Review of Michaela Coel's <i>Misfits: A Personal Manifesto</i>	Kathelijne Schoomallers	57
Flowers for Robin: A Review of Richard Powers' <i>Bewilderment</i>	Joppe Kipps	60



A Short History of a Queer Happy Ending

Sarah Winman's Homage to E.M. Forster's *Maurice*

By Ris Schortingshuis

Imagine writing a book about the type of love you wish to have in your life. Imagine writing a book that has the happy ending that no one is willing to let you have – a book that is infused with love and joy, but also complex human characters who make mistakes and try to exist in an unjust world. Now, imagine putting this book, and part of yourself with it, away in a drawer, because the government is literally imprisoning people who love like you do, only to see that government stop imprisoning those same people 60 years later when you have just turned 88. You are tired. You have been hiding all your life, disclosing your self only to a few who know what it is to be Other, and you do not want to face the hullabaloo of all the critics poring over your work with new-found gems of information – new keys to unlocking your work. You let it be and, a year after you pass, a friend publishes your story. This is the story of the novel *Maurice* by E.M. Forster, a gay writer who did not live to see his imagined happy ending be accepted by a wider reading public.

To me, this is a sad story. How I wish, I wish, I could hug him and march for him and go all militant suffragette on the government who denied him that happy ending. I knew about Forster's story before reading Sarah Winman's new novel *Still Life*, published by 4th Estate earlier this year, and I cannot express enough how healing this story in Winman's rendering proves to be. Winman's fiction has been called "healing" in the past; the term even sports the front cover of *A Year of Marvellous Ways* through a

blurb by *The Times*: "Magical and healing." That story centres the friendship between an older woman and a young soldier, similarly to *Still Life*.

Though E.M. Forster is a minor character in *Still Life*, thematically his presence is major. Keep him in mind as we go through the story. Winman's novel centres around two British subjects involved in the Second World War in different ways, who briefly meet in war-torn Italy in 1944 and keep circling each other for decades to come. They are Ulysses Temper, a young soldier with a lovely wife at home, and Evelyn Skinner, a sexagenarian art historian who has some form of romantic relationship with the woman with whom she shares a house in Tuscany. Ulysses is the son of a globemaker and aspires to continue with the business when and if he returns from the war. Evelyn is a lover of art and a possible spy. They connect over wine and cigarettes in an abandoned wine cellar where they have come to bring some invaluable art to safety.

The next day, a romantic interest between Ulysses and his commander is explored and, after the city of Florence is freed from occupation, Ulysses saves the life of a suicidal man on a roof in the middle of the town. One man is saved, but – tragically – the commander is killed not long after. Then we return to London and find a tight-knit community of creative people who all love and support each other, but have trouble making successful relationships work. Peg,

Ulysses' wife, is attracted to her husband, but their marriage isn't considered the real deal, since, as Ulysses tells Evelyn, "Thing is, it's always been us when the others have left. Always that spark when the lights have gone out. Is that love?" (16) So Peg falls in love with an American man and becomes pregnant with his child before he leaves her for good. The marriage between Peg and Ulysses breaks up, but they stay connected regardless.

Then, unexpectedly, Ulysses inherits the house of the suicidal man he once saved. He, Peg's child Alys, their older neighbourhood friend Cress, and the parrot from the local pub all travel down to Florence to set up a different type of life. And this is where the warmth and the joy in the novel really start. Winman describes the ease of community when you live with an unjudgmental and open heart; when you radiate love and acceptance, arriving with a make-shift family all willing to support each other through thick and thin, you get a chance to live an absolutely remarkable life in a place far removed from your origins. In Florence, Evelyn comes closer and closer back into Ulysses' orbit. They keep having almost-chance-meetings on her regular returns to Florence, where she once found true love and her general love of art and poetry. This creates the idea of Ulysses and Evelyn being magically connected, soul mates of a different kind. When they finally do meet again through Alys, their community and family seem to fall into place.

What we have thus far is an array of queer characters and allies in this novel, finding out who they love and expanding that love beyond the traditional nuclear family. Ulysses raises a child as his own, even though he is not her father, because her mother cannot be a stable presence in their lives. He also nurses and commemorates his love for his commander in private. Cress finds love in old age, is a (grand)father figure to many characters, and keeps finding new ways to experience the world. He learns the power of poetry, even though he "was a facts man, and facts were stone. Poetry, though, was sand. Ever compared to stars in its granular infinity. Ever shifting." (143). There is love of knowledge in his character similar to the love Evelyn has for art and the city

of Florence. Alys is a child of this combination of abundant love and love of knowledge, going out into the world almost confidently queer when she discovers who she is attracted to. The level of acceptance and community in these characters' lives is what probably every queer person wishes for more than anything.

It is not just free love beyond the confines of comphet idealism that this book celebrates: it is also love of art, poetry, and Florentine architecture. During their first meeting, Evelyn and Ulysses discuss what is central to the appreciation of art. Evelyn starts: "But always the value for me will be response. How it moves one ... it is important, Ulysses." When he asks: "More important than people?" Evelyn answers: "They go together. It's what we've always done. Left a mark on a cave, or on a page. Showing who we are, sharing our view of the world, the life we're made to bear." (25).

This culmination of a love of art and love itself is best described in Evelyn's mentor Constance Lively, an older lesbian poet she met when she was young and in love:

[Constance] suffered a heart attack on the Gotthard Railway on what would have been her final trip to Florence. Crossing the Kerstelenbach Viaduct was often cited as taking one's breath away, and it did exactly that. They found her with a pen in her hand. Final thoughts on love, ultimately: 'I shall remain astonished.' (198-199).

And it is astonishment that follows the events that happen later on, when Florence is flooded with mud and water after heavy rainfall. We follow our community (for that is what they have become in the course of this book) saving themselves, their neighbours, and their livelihoods from the destructive forces that overwhelm the city: a flood of water and mud engulfs Florence. Countless houses and businesses are ruined and destroyed, along with the art and priceless books in museums and libraries. This novel shows itself to be a love letter to a city as well, when we find ourselves caring so much about it when tragedy

hits. And, apparently, there is a worldwide community that already feels the same way: students and art enthusiasts from around the world gather to help clean up the muck and to help repair Florence's artistic gems.

The novel ends with the part that is "all about Evelyn" and we finally witness the budding of her once true love and her encounter with E.M. Forster. We have experienced through Winman's narrative what it means to love openly, what it means to be part of a community, what it means to stand up and come to the rescue of those in need (whether human, animal, or art object). We have experienced loss of love and loved ones, found warmth at the hearths of strangers and instant or life-long friends, and, maybe,

if you're like me, we have been healed by this abundance of support and passion.

And so, here we circle back to E.M. Forster. He is miserable on holiday with his mother in 1901 – 12 years before he wrote *Maurice*, requesting a 'room with a view.' A happy ending may be cheesy to some – even downright uninteresting to others – but still, reading about an openly lesbian woman proclaiming to this young man, after he has expressed his trepidation at not fitting in on his journeys "You'll do here, Mr Forster, ten times over!" (Winman 421) – I feel *that* is pure magic. Fiction is casting a healing spell spanning generations, reaching far beyond what history has allowed us to accept.

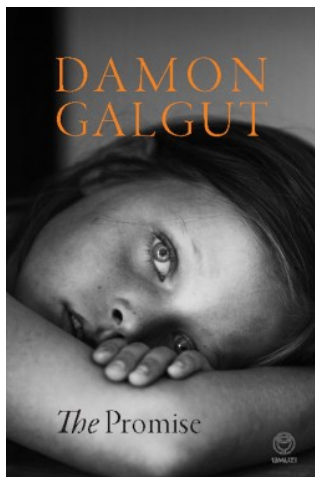
About the Author

Ris Schortinghuis both a student and active worker in the bookish field, continually expanding and sharing their knowledge of queer fiction. They are currently in their second year of the Research Master (RMA) Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University. In addition to being a bookseller at two different bookshops (they were longlisted for Bookseller of the Year 2022), they are a Bookstagrammer, translator of novels and shorter pieces into English for a prominent Dutch publishing house, and on the Hebban Bookseller Panel.

Instagram: @AllaboutThemBrains

Works Cited

- Forster, E.M. *Maurice*. London: Penguin Classics, 2005 [1971].
- Winman, Sarah. *A Year of Marvellous Ways*. London: Tinder Press, 2019 [2015].
- . *Still Life*. London: 4th Estate, 2021.



Time Heals all Wounds?

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* covers South African history from a new perspective.

By Acacia Caven

“A surprising number of writers are very good; few are extraordinary ... Damon Galgut is of this rare company” writes Claire Messud for *Harper's*. Her commendation doesn't fall flat – Galgut's latest novel, *The Promise* (2021), follows on from his earlier successes (*The Good Doctor*, 2003; *The Impostor*, 2008; *In a Strange Room*, 2010) while showing intrinsic growth for the author – returning to his South African roots, but with a refreshing style and voice. Winner of The Booker Prize 2021, the novel follows the lives of the (ironically named) Swart family; descendants of the Voortrekker Afrikaners; ‘farmers’ on the Highveld; through the end of apartheid, the Mandela era, all the way up to 2018. The story of the Swarts is split into four parts, built around four funerals, and stretches forty years through arguably South Africa's most tumultuous period.

The novel opens in 1986 – apartheid is failing, and South Africa is a country at war, but the Swarts, in their entitlement, do not dwell on problems outside their control. The mother, Rachel, has died after a long battle with cancer and the family gathers for her funeral. Amor, 13, is brought home from boarding school, Anton, 19, from his military service and Astrid, 17, still lives at home. The three children, together with their father, Manie, join to contemplate their new reality. Over the next 300 pages, we see through – and into – the minds and lives of these characters as they navigate their dwindling family numbers.

The Swarts seem to drop like flies. Each section – named after the family member that dies with-

in it – covers only a few days, each around 10 years apart: charting deaths, funerals, and the surrounding days. The ‘promise’ of the title, elicited from Manie by their dying mother, was to give Salome, their black housemaid, the rights to the house she lives in in recognition of all she did caring for Rachel in her illness. One by one, the members of the family have the power to fulfil the promise – and it becomes a sort of curse as one by one, they fail to do so. Galgut deliberately restricts us from Salome's perspective throughout the novel, and black perspectives in general, further emphasising the segregation of South Africa, and the dismissive attitude of the Swart's.

Yet, for all the simple tangibility of the plot, Galgut's text is anything but. He plays with narrative form and pacing – his shining trope the stretching and condensing of time. “Outside, it is night. It is night, the same night, but later, the stars have moved on,” the narrator claims, jumping forwards in an instant. It is bewildering to follow, these skips through time, space, mind, and age; the text and narration are constantly in flux, evolving with the characters (or not) and corralling you to keep reading, to see where you are going to go next.

Galgut's developed style is reminiscent of the more classic modernist writer; the influences of authors like Woolf and Faulkner can be seen as we follow a prayer search for its intended, or we're thrown into the mind of a jackal. The way the narrative flits and flies between the characters internal dialogues, omniscient narration, and spectral blend of the two is

a fantastic example of neo-modernism and reads as an almost cinematic experience. While admittedly the disjointed and constantly shifting narrative style is jarring at first, we are soon sucked in. In Galgut's own words:

The narrator ... behave[s] like a camera, moving in close and then suddenly pulling far back, jumping from one character to another in the middle of a scene (or even a sentence), or following some side-line of action that has nothing to do with plot. (Booker Q&A)

His new approach is effective. Formally, stylistically, and narratively, *The Promise* sings, its voice somehow choral. Each (white) character's voice is heard, layered over one another in a way that demonstrates their shared perspectives and therefore positions us as one of them.

At times, Galgut overtly signals his stylistic intentions – “a man who leans out of the scene, bloodshot eyes fixed only on me” claims the narrator, briefly inhabiting Anton and speaking first-person, where a sentence before it was in third. The lack of main character (although Amor begins and ends the story) and the snide narrative asides position the reader as an extension of the Swart family, including all their prejudices: “if Salome's home hasn't been mentioned before it's because you have not asked, you didn't care to know” we read, and are struck with instant guilt – the fourth wall is shattered. Galgut repeatedly draws us into the narrative, before forcibly kicking us out: he explicitly calls out any immersion in the Swart's lives and any lack of judgement or questioning regarding the discriminatory and oppressive, thought processes that permeate the novel.

Galgut is well known for his unapologetic interrogation of post-apartheid South Africa; *The Promise* reads as a complex and fluid metanarrative, filled with allegories and anecdotes, through which we see the political tensions in the country condensed into the lives of one family. The trajectory of the novel balances not only on the explicit promise made by Manie to his dying wife, but intertwines the promises made by a nation to itself, and some of the perspectives that impeded their fulfilment. How can a nation – in which even the promise of a ramshackle house to a woman who's committed her life to one's service goes unfulfilled for 30 years – ever reconcile the wrongdoings and injustices imposed on millions of lives? The saying goes: ‘Time heals all wounds’, but *The Promise* suggests that this may not always be true. Often, it seems to say, the passage of time causes some wounds to worsen until they can never be healed.

It is Galgut's deliberate and delicate navigation between larger societal issues and a microcosmic family saga, interspersed with his iconic dry humour and lack of fear in ‘calling out’ the reader, that positions it as deserving winner of this year's Booker Prize. Galgut has made a beautiful comeback after his seven-year hiatus – *The Promise* brings him alongside other iconic South African authors like Coetzee and Gordimer. His introspective and unflinching depiction of South African history, combined with an experimental, modernist form and style, shows exceptional growth from Galgut. Juggling politics, race, death, religion, and community, *The Promise* is an emotional and effective piece of art; its win builds on the Bookers successes of recent years (*Shuggie Bain*; *Girl, Woman, Other*) and may help to maintain the prize's standing as the best in the industry.

About the Author

Acacia Caven is a current student of the M.A. Literature Today at Utrecht University. Born in Zimbabwe and raised in the UK, Acacia provides a personal, international perspective on literary topics. Her experience as Editor-in-Chief of *Expanded Field* has helped her develop an understanding and critical eye for creative writing in many (experimental) forms. Her recent work centers around contemporary literature and post-colonial voices, both in text and on stage.

Works Cited

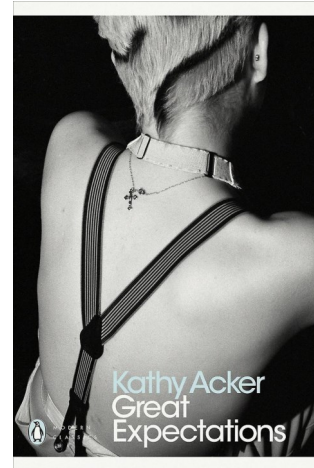
Galgut, Damon. *The Promise*. Chatto & Windus, 2021.

Damon Galgut Q&A. The Booker Prizes. (n.d.). Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://thebookerprizes.com/damon-galgut-qa>.

SEX AND PLAGIARISM

Kathy Acker Walks Into a Bar...

By Elif Kayahan



I.

00.20 A.M. on a Thursday night. A bar with dim lighting. Nothing special about the place. Just another bar in a relatively poor neighborhood close to the university. At one table sit three middle-aged women. Their cashmere scarves and pearl earrings give away that they don't quite fit in here. They are here to observe and maybe experiment a little. They whisper rather than talk, and keep glancing at the couple sitting on the bar stools. The boy and the girl must be students at the university. I haven't heard the girl talking a lot. She mostly mumbles, shakes her head and looks around. But the boy has been citing from Ancient Greek poems and explained the lines enough times for me to notice. He has charming looks. Yet she seems to be bored. I think she wants to fuck him more than he realizes.

And then, there is me. Sipping my third drink of the night and reading Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations*. I came here tonight in hopes of getting some inspiration for a new short story but haven't scribbled down a word yet. Instead, I found myself diving into this book my roommate gave me. Struggling with confusion and fascination for more than two hours now, I read: "It's a common belief that something exists when it's part of a narrative. Self-reflective consciousness is narrational" (54). This statement feels like a nice place to breathe a little, to ask the question that has been at the back of my mind the whole night: What the fuck am I reading? What is this book?

II.

Self-reflective consciousness is narrational (54). I look into things or into myself and tell a story of a reality. "I" exists in my narration, dissolves in yours, is reborn now and dies in the next hour. Story changes, reality transforms, identity vaporizes. Narrative is never coherent but always in relation with other stories. Clouds of meaning interfere with each other over an intertextual network. *Great Expectations* destroys Dickens. *Every part changes (the meaning of) every other part so there's no absolute...* (4). Keats' virgins love each other on St. Agnes Eve, or he rapes the virgin on St. Agnes Eve; Cynthia was hysterically jealous, or Propertius was an abuser. *One text must subvert (the meaning of) another text until there's only background music like reggae* (11). *Great Expectations* is a sound, a web, pain, desire, hope, disappointment, passion, rape and fuck. It is Life, while it has nothing to do with the Real. It is what happens behind the book, the paper, the ink when it only exists in between the printed words. *This isn't an expression of a real thing; this is the thing itself... The living thing the real thing is not what people tell you it is: it's what it is* (59). Language cannot express reality, but all we have is language. Reality is absent in language. Barthes announced that the author was dead; the reader mourned and moved on. Descartes' mind dissolved in the unconscious. The scars on the whore's body blinded Oedipus. The sword is prone in this inverted triangle between author, reader, and text. *A narrative is an emotional moving* (54). There are only parts, when combined they leave a moving of emotion. *Interactions became so much more interesting than that which was being portrayed that the concepts of portraiture and therefore of reality were undermined or transferred* (78). Acker's book is not a narrative but a textual environment which involves all my past, all the books we both read, all the people you and I met.

We are *HOLE*s who *DON'T EXIST* (48) when Acker enters me, her father enters O and the women pierce the whore. My narration of self-reflective consciousness is now coming to nothingness.

III.

I put down the pen and watch the snow outside for a while. The waiter brings me two drinks this time. The door opens and you come in as a dog that has been beaten up follows you inside. You smile and sit in front of me. Taking a sip to wet your throat you say:

When I was a child, the only thing I wanted was to be a pirate.

Great! I'm so drunk that a dead author has been resurrected from the grave to tell me her childhood dream of becoming a pirate. Before I have a chance to reply, we hear the boy say something that shakes us to our cores.

BOY: *I understand that you're weak. I want a strong feminist.*

GIRL: *Maybe you should go with someone else. (Hopefully)*

We can't decide whether to laugh or get annoyed. Then you say:

As a result of his own barrenness, he develops a capacity to absorb the fertility of others. The only way you can get the real self is to rip someone off.

Is that what you do? Is this why you take from other texts? Rip them off to create the real self?

I knew this as a child, that, as a girl, I was outside the world. I wasn't. I had no name. For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language. I could neither have nor make meaning in the world. I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others. I have found only the reiterations, the mimesis of patriarchy, or my inability to be.

We are born into this already existing, complicated network of texts. Then we build on them, wreck them, tear them apart, put the most incompatible

pieces together, mix, destroy, appropriate... I like making collages because it makes me feel like a child again. Even as I'm sitting here in this bar, I am stealing words from my fascist high school teacher, my grandmother, a *New York Times* article I read on the subway yesterday, and my thesis advisor's dissertation. If the self is written and rewritten by previous texts, how is it possible not to write other people's works?

I came to plagiarism from exploring identity, and I wanted to see what pure plagiarism would look like. It was the simple fact of copying that fascinated me. I wasn't interested in the "I" of me, but in what the textual "I" looked like. So, I took some biography and made it into an autobiography to see what would happen. I knew I wanted to plagiarize, but I didn't have a clear theoretical justification for what I was doing or why. So, I just started finding these different texts and putting them together.

Were you ever in trouble? You probably don't know this, but there have been many plagiarism scandals in poetry over the last decades, poets apologizing to each other for two or three words of resemblances. Both the moral responsibilities and legal formulations seem to be vague and insufficient to determine how an artist should "acceptably" steal. This literary game we're playing with texts might result in serious accusations. What if I write a work of fiction about a real person, and pretend to speak on their behalf?

My own publisher let me know that they were taking one of my books off the market because they had been informed there was some chance that Harold Robbins might sue me over some material I'd appropriated. Anyway, it was a horrendous experience that completely disrupted my life. I couldn't even answer my phone for three weeks, so I just had to get out of the country for a while. I was also feeling very threatened as a writer. I kept thinking to myself, Look, this is a minor, piddling little incident really - it's about a book I wrote twenty years ago about something Robbins wrote thirty years ago. But what if I was ever seriously attacked?

Then, why does an artist plagiarize, imitate, cut-copy-paste, appropriate? For instance, sometimes I'm too terrified to speak my own words and play with others' instead. Does it make my work any less important?

The truth is I have always used appropriation in my works because I literally can't write any other way. I couldn't find my own voice. So I began to do what I had

to do if I wanted to write, and that was appropriate, imitate, and find whatever ways I could to work with and improvise off of other texts. What it comes down to is that I don't like the idea of originality. The quality of making or creation in me that comes out - whatever it is in me has to do with making - is based on a reactive rather than an active principle. I don't see a blank page when I'm writing. Ever. Or when I do nothing happens. I can't even write people letters. I've never applied for a grant. Blank page is like an invitation to paralysis for me, not to creative activity.

I just realized *Great Expectations* would be perfect for one of my final papers this term, but I feel academia is too limited for whatever this book is. Your narrative or (de)narrative resists being analyzed through an academic autopsy.

I absolutely hate it. I've seen too many English departments destroy people's delight in reading. Take the case of semiotics and postmodernism. When I was first introduced to the work of Foucault and Deleuze, it was very political; it was about what was happening to the economy and about changing the political system. By the time it was taken up by the American academy, the politics had gone to hell. It became an exercise for some professors to make their careers. The culture is there to uphold the postcapitalist society, and the idea that art has nothing to do with politics is a wonderful construction in order to mask the deep political significance that art has.

and improvise off of other texts. What it comes down to is that I don't like the idea of originality. The quality of making or creation in me that comes out - whatever it is in me has to do with making - is based on a reactive rather than an active principle. I don't see a blank page when I'm writing. Ever. Or when I do nothing happens. I can't even write people letters. I've never applied for a grant. Blank page is like an invitation to paralysis for me, not to creative activity.

I just realized *Great Expectations* would be perfect for one of my final papers this term, but I feel academia is too limited for whatever this book is. Your narrative or (de)narrative resists being analyzed through an academic autopsy.

I absolutely hate it. I've seen too many English departments destroy people's delight in reading. Take the case of semiotics and postmodernism. When I was first introduced to the work of Foucault and Deleuze, it was very political; it was about what was happening to the economy and about changing the political system. By the

time it was taken up by the American academy, the politics had gone to hell. It became an exercise for some professors to make their careers. The culture is there to uphold the postcapitalist society, and the idea that art has nothing to do with politics is a wonderful construction in order to mask the deep political significance that art has.

IV.

Since the girl has left the bar crying, and the boy is only drinking and staring at his glass in a defeated gloomy manner, the three women direct their attention to us. Your short hair and piercings and my mini skirt and see-through shirt are more than enough to make us into the whores the honorable wives have come here to see. I pity, if not hate, the way they look at us. You say that there is fascination behind their judgment: "These women tremble in front of whores."

Hmm. I look at the women and then the book and finally at you.

You know, although there are countless sex scenes in this novel, there is almost no eroticism. At least for me.

I can't see how people would get aroused by the sex I'm describing in my books. It's not that I write erotic or pornographic materials (although I have, obviously, within specific sections of my books), but that my general view is erotic or sexual. As a woman but also just as a person looking around at the way things operate, it's hard for me not to be concerned with that; it's almost an obsession. And, then, to be honest, I think my own sexuality probably colors my books very deeply, both in content and in structure.

You abuse the language through disrupted syntax, conflicting and incomplete statements, confusing use of punctuation. You are subverting the meaning and the plot organization with multiple style, forms and allusions. As it is outside and beyond symbolic language, your narrative eludes the phallogocentric structure at the cost of losing its meaning. Or, eluding meaning you create a bodily writing.

We shall define sexuality as that which can't be satisfied and therefore as that which transforms the person. Stylistically: simultaneous contrasts, extravagancies, inco-

herencies, half-formed misshapen thoughts, lousy spelling, what signifies what? What is the secret of this chaos? Since there's no possibility, there's play. Elegance and completely filthy sex fit together. Expectations that aren't satisfied.

Are you talking about sex or your writing?

V.

I want to say "fuck, shit, prick."

FUCK. SHIT. PRICK.

Ha ha.

Cheers!

Oh, for a *Life of Sensations* rather than *Thoughts*!

VI.

I'm going to tell you something. The author of the work you are reading is a scared little shit. She's frightened, forget what her life's like, scared out of her wits, she doesn't believe what she believes so she follows anyone.

...

Wait, who said that? Was it you or me?

...

She's too scared to know what love is she has no idea what money is she runs away from anyone so anything she's writing is un-knowledge.

...

Stop. Who are you talking to?

...

And she says I'm an ass cause I want to please. What I'm going to do? Teach?

Author: You're a dumb cocksucker.

...

Kathy! Stop. Now!

Dear Reader,

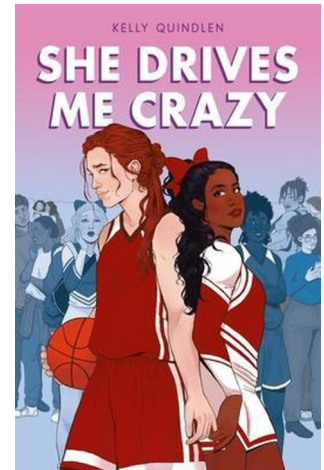
About the Author

Elif Kayahan is a student of the RMA Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University. She completed her B.A. in English Literature at Boğaziçi University and had a double major in Philosophy. Her literary passion lies in the tension between disturbance and fascination that emerges from the narrational games played on language.

Works Cited

- Acker, Kathy. *Great Expectations*. Penguin Classics, 2018.
- . "Seeing Gender." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1995, pp. 78–86.
- Friedman, Ellen G., and Kathy Acker. "A Conversation with Kathy Acker." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1989, n.p.
- McCaffery, Larry, and Kathy Acker. "An Interview with Kathy Acker." *Mississippi Review*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, University of Southern Mississippi, 1991, pp. 83–97.

Queering Conventional Rom-com Tropes in *She Drives Me Crazy* by Kelly Quindlen



By Machteld Laan

What needs to change for a cishet trope to be applied in a book about LGBTQIA+ characters? For example, how do two characters go from *I HATE YOU*, to *I love you*? This is the central question in *She Drives Me Crazy* (2021) by Kelly Quindlen. Quindlen's books are part of a boom in contemporary Young Adult books featuring LGBTQIA+ protagonists, which normalize queer narratives and LGBTQIA+ identities. These recent publications reinvent conventional tropes by presenting previously heteronormative narratives in such a way that queer experiences are foregrounded; thus LGBTQIA+ experiences become recognizable, accessible and, most importantly, enjoyable for an adolescent audience. One of the books that does this impressively this year is *She Drives Me Crazy* by Kelly Quindlen. This author is an active participant in Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and other communities that aim to support queer people. She has previously published two other books: *Her Name in the Sky* (2014) and *Late to the Party* (2020), which, like *She Drives Me Crazy*, all feature sapphic love stories.

Some highlights of recent Young Adult LGBTQIA+ publications that twist previously heteronormative romance tropes are *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019) by Casey McQuiston, *Loveless* (2020) by Alice Oseman, and *May the Best Man Win* (2021) by Z.R. Ellor. In *Red, White & Royal Blue*, the 'female commoner falls in love with the prince' trope is tweaked to be a political drama in which the Prince of England and the son of the (female) President of the United

States navigate a relationship that begins as a public relations hoax and turns into a love story. *Loveless* tells the tale of a girl who comes to realize that although romantic and sexual attraction are not in the cards for her, there is still a love story out there for her in the form of her friendships. *May the Best Man Win* breaks some stereotypes as well, as a sensitive neurodivergent jock and a transmasculine cheerleader are engaged in a battle for the title of Homecoming King. This battle is complicated by the fact that they are exes and didn't process their break-up well. In all these novels traditional heteronormative conventions are adapted to show how stories might turn out very differently when tropes are queered.

She Drives Me Crazy could be described as a delightful mixture of the conventional tropes, such as enemies-to-lovers, fake dating, and the jock-dates-the-cheerleader, tweaked to fit into a queer narrative.

Scottie Zajac and Irene Abraham do not get along with each other at all, especially since Irene had Scottie's car towed for no apparent reason. However, everything changes when Scottie spectacularly loses a basketball game to her ex-girlfriend Tally. After the game, Scottie and Irene get in a fender bender in the school parking lot, and their moms decide that they must carpool to school together until Irene's car is fixed.

Although Scottie hates Irene, she does not

hate the attention she gets from Tally because of her new popular-by-association status. In addition, Scottie's basketball team gets better with Irene and other cheerleaders at the sidelines, which raises Scottie's hope of winning against Tally in their next game against each other. Consequently, to maintain her team's winning streak and to get back at Tally, Scottie proposes that she and Irene start fake dating. This is the start of a bumpy ride: a reluctant friendship, and a rom-com-worthy sapphic love story that is packed with all the good tropes in an original jacket.

Let's begin with the fake dating trope, which is an inherently weird principle. You're basically dating someone, but with the emotional insecurity of knowing that they don't like you too much and that you may or may not be growing to love them—which is usually how it turns out in fiction. *She Drives Me Crazy* is no different. The fake dating trope is often the product of mutual necessity and therefore also a mutually beneficial arrangement. Scottie offers Irene the money for her car insurance deductible in exchange for months of fake dating. All Irene seems to get out of it is the money. Scottie directly says, "I want to pay you to date me" (86), and I have to say, the idea that Scottie is paying Irene to be her girlfriend leaves a weird taste in my mouth, even if the rest of the book—and Scottie and Irene's love story—is really sweet. The evolution of their relationship into romantic territory is, luckily, gradual enough for me to feel like it is just an unfortunate beginning, rather than the initiation of a toxic relationship.

Speaking of toxic relationships, Scottie initially starts fake dating Irene to get back at her ex-girlfriend. Tally's toxic influence on Scottie is referenced throughout the book by Scottie's friends and sisters. It is one of her sisters who tells Scottie that dating Tally had made her "a walking insecurity" (62), but it takes Scottie a while to fully accept that her relationship with Tally wasn't as rose-colored as she remembers it.

Tally acts like a typical jealous girlfriend, only paying attention to Scottie on social media when she is seen with Irene, even though they have broken up. This hints at a love triangle, which is one of the most common tropes in YA fiction in the early 2000s (*Twilight* (2005) by Stephanie Meyer is a prime example of this), but it doesn't turn into a full-blown competition for her heart. Instead, *She Drives Me Crazy* beautifully illustrates how finding a new relationship after a break-up is about mourning and letting go before moving on to a new partner.

She Drives Me Crazy can also be added to the ever-growing list of 'enemies to lovers' stories. This trope is also very old and can be traced back for centuries (Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Preju-*

dice (1813) by Jane Austen, for example). As the trope suggests, the protagonist and their love interest overcome their differences and reevaluate their misconceptions of each other over the course of a book or book series. This ultimately leads them to start a romantic relationship. Quindlen expertly shows how much Scottie and Irene dislike each other in their passive aggressivity after the car crash; for example, Scottie tells Irene that "[h]aving your car towed sucks,' I say with fake sympathy. "Happened to me once. I really feel for you" (23). Their moms are oblivious to this and push the two girls together until Irene's car needs fixing: "Scottie can give Irene a ride!' Mom declares, her eyes bright. 'Please, please, we insist. It's the least we could do.'" (24). It's also the thing Scottie least wants to do.

Through their forced proximity, they cannot help but agree upon a cease-fire; however, it was, interestingly enough, not the initial carpooling that put them on the path towards a romantic relationship. Rather, the trajectory of their relationship changes once they start fake dating: they stop resenting each other when they become friends through the sharing of personal stories and secrets. As someone who identifies with the asexual spectrum, it is refreshing to read a rom-com without the instant love and attraction that pervades YA fiction. It is nice to read about two girls who really get to know each other before starting a romantic relationship, instead of diving headfirst into a teenage-lust-fueled affair.

She Drives Me Crazy also makes the reader reconsider the stereotypical representations of jocks and cheerleaders. Jocks are often the object of (unattainable) desire in contemporary YA fiction, but if anyone were to wonder who the jock was dating, eight out of ten times it would be the cheerleader, and the other times it would be 'the outsider,' in secret, or only after a perilous 250-page ride through high school angst and reconciliation.

When a jock and cheerleader date, they are often portrayed as either the popular 'happily ever after' couple or a pair of toxic bullies. These archetypal characters are strictly gendered—the jock being male and the cheerleader female—which is demonstrated and subverted in the novel *NO! Jocks Don't Date Guys* (2015) by Wade Kelly, in which a jock is expected to date and marry a cheerleader like his brother, father, and grandfather but ends up dating a guy instead.

She Drives Me Crazy also complicates and subverts the stereotypical idea of the jock and the cheerleader: Scottie and Irene both identify as female, and—despite their initial misconceptions—they are actually nice people. Scottie may be a jock by virtue of her being on the varsity Girls Basketball team, but she distinctly lacks the popularity that (male)

jocks—football players in particular—enjoy in common depictions in popular culture. Irene, on the other hand, is widely popular as a cheerleader, but isn't regarded as an athlete at her school. She wants to become Student Athlete of the Year to prove that cheerleading is in fact a sport.

It is refreshing to see a representation of high school athletics that doesn't form a monolith around the 'athletes' (including cheerleaders) and 'non-athletes,' because it was my experience during my year as an exchange student at Ainsworth High School that these groups weren't mutually exclusive. Cheerleaders did usually cheer for the boys' teams, but this was mostly because some of them would be part of the girls' teams. Moreover, the jocks and cheerleaders weren't 'cliqued'; everyone had their own personality and friend groups—which would overlap with the various activities that they were involved in, like plays and clubs. Quindlen's depiction thus shows a more nuanced picture of high school students than most high school narratives.

In this exploration of tropes, I cannot leave out that Quindlen references several classic rom-com movies in *She Drives Me Crazy*, as the intertextuality provides an interesting angle for the way her novel explicitly builds on the classic narratives.

The novel interacts with three classic rom-coms, in particular: *Can't Buy Me Love* (1987), *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and *Say Anything* (1989). Quindlen expertly uses these references to highlight how their tropes still permeate mainstream media, but she also shows how they can be used to bring new narratives into the world.

For example, Irene's response to Scottie asking her to date her for money is, "[i]s this some kind of *Can't Buy Me Love* fantasy?" (86). And when Scottie admits to loving *Say Anything* for its boombox scene with John Cusack, Irene states that it is "empty

and self-indulgent" for its lack of actual communication (168). However, after Scottie performs a dance routine to "I've Had the Time of My Life" from Irene's favorite movie *Dirty Dancing* (1987), Irene holds up a boombox and plays "She Drives Me Crazy". Irene attributes this song-change to the fact that "the other one is so fucking cheesy. 'She Drives Me Crazy' is much more our vibe" (290).

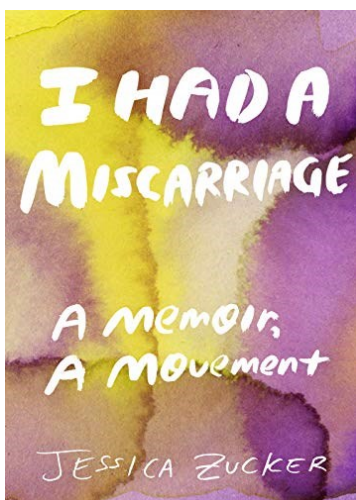
All in all, *She Drives Me Crazy* is a swoon-worthy love story that is built on tropes that have made the romance genre popular throughout the years. The clever ways in which the timeless rom-com tropes are reinvented and queered in the novel will simultaneously surprise the reader and take them into a warm embrace of familiarity.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Can't Buy Me Love*. Directed by Steve Rash, performances by Patrick Dempsey, Amanda Peterson, and Courtney Gains, Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1987.
- Dirty Dancing*. Directed by Emile Ardolino, performances by Patrick Swayze, Jennifer Grey, and Cynthia Rhodes, Vestron Pictures, 1987.
- Ellor, Z.R. *May the Best Man Win*. Roaring Book Press, 2021.
- Fine Young Cannibals. "She Drives Me Crazy." *The Raw and the Crooked*, London Music Stream Ltd., 1988. CD.
- Kelly, Wade. *NO! Jocks Don't Date Guys*. Dreamspinner Press, 2015.
- Meyer, Stephanie. *Twilight*. Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
- McQuiston, Casey. *Red, White & Royal Blue*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2019.
- Oseman, Alice. *Loveless*. HarperCollins Children's Books, 2020.
- Quindlen, Kelly. *Her Name in the Sky*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.
- . *Late to the Party*. Roaring Book Press, 2020.
- . *She Drives Me Crazy*. Roaring Book Press, 2021.
- . "About Me." *Kelly Quindlen*, <https://www.kellyquindlen.com/about-me>. Accessed 15 October 2021.
- Say Anything*. Directed by Cameron Crowe, performances by John Cusack, Lone Skye, and John Mahoney, 20th Century Fox, 1989.

About the Author

Machteld Laan is an M.A. Literature Today student at Utrecht University. As a B.A. student in Literary Studies (also at UU) she was educated in stories by and about marginalized people, which focused on the delicate balance between amplifying voices and speaking for them. In previous research, she has explored topics such as sexuality, world literature, and English literatures. She is especially interested in stories that find new ways to explore the topics of sexuality and



I Had a Miscarriage

A Panorama of Perspectives

By Angela Kroes

After finishing Jessica Zucker's debut *I Had a Miscarriage: A Memoir, a Movement* I logged onto Goodreads to see what other readers thought about it. Five-star reviews flooded my screen. Many readers felt validated, understood and moved by Zucker's words. I, too, had been moved. Never having experienced a miscarriage myself, I was glad that those who had had found comfort in the memoir's pages. Reading the book, I became aware of how many lives are touched by pregnancy-related complications and the numerous possible emotional responses that accompany them.

Zucker earned a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, a master's degree in Human Development and a master's degree in Public Health. After studying and training at multiple institutions, she became certified to treat perinatal and postpartum mood and anxiety disorders through Postpartum Support International. She is now a Los Angeles-based psychologist who primarily treats women struggling with pregnancy and pregnancy loss (Zucker, "About"). Her professional experience in the field turned personal in October 2012, when she miscarried after sixteen weeks of pregnancy, in her home, alone.

Her description of the event is vivid; the simple and explicit use of language befitting a surreal situation like a traumatic event taking place inside the home. "My baby slid out," she writes, "I saw her there, dead, dangling from me mere inches from the toilet-bowl water" (Zucker, *Miscarriage* 9). The reader is presented with a stark and striking contrast between Zucker undergoing a placenta removal and the future she had envisioned for her second child: "As the machine roared, I stared at the ceiling and felt everything I had prepared for – the sleepless nights breastfeeding my infant, the anxiety-ridden moments in which I would stare at my sleeping baby's chest rising and falling, the moment my son held his baby sister for

the first time, the extra place setting at the dinner table – tugged from my body" (16). At the end of the chapter I felt it was time to put the book down and sit for a minute.

In October 2014, two years after she miscarried, Zucker sat down to write about her experiences. The resulting essay was published by *The New York Times* for Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day. Zucker included a faceless photograph of herself holding a sign that said #ihadamiscarriage so that everyone who had gone through similar experiences could imagine themselves holding the sign. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, prompting her to start an Instagram page entitled @ihadamiscarriage, where she offers support for everyone who needs it (and with 216,000 followers, there are plenty) in the bite-sized format Instagram allows (19-20).

With *I Had a Miscarriage: A Memoir, a Movement* Jessica Zucker aims to be inclusive and supportive of the countless ways to become (or not become) pregnant, lose a pregnancy, and deal with its emotional aftermath – or the lack thereof. To normalize any and all perspectives and break the "strident trifecta of silence, stigma, and shame" (42) that surrounds it. In order to do so, she alternately offers professional insight and draws on her own lived experiences as well as those of her patients. Since this is a memoir, Zucker mostly refers to 'women' in relation to pregnancy complications as she feels that term represents her own identity and that of the majority of her patients (xi). Nevertheless, her comments on gender and race in the preface are especially timely for today's social climate, and I appreciated them. Miscarriage, Zucker writes, is not exclusive to cisgender women, and WOC may have limited access to maternal health care in time of need (xi-xii). With Zucker's professional insight, it would be interesting to see a future work of hers dedicated entirely to the preg-

nancy related experiences of POC and trans, non-binary and genderqueer people.

The book discusses a variety of topics: feelings of isolation, sex after pregnancy loss, the anxiety that may come with having a baby post-miscarriage, and body image. One of Zucker's patients, Grace, a black woman, has suffered from anorexia and bulimia since her teenage years. Her mother dismissed her problems as a "white girl's disease", and she never got the treatment she needed. As a result, Grace's eating disorders continuously went through a cycle of highs and lows. When she became pregnant her eating patterns changed and she gained weight, further complicating her body image. When she miscarried at 13 weeks, she blamed herself and her eating disorders (102-104). Another patient, Taylor, who identifies as gender non-binary, dreamed of getting pregnant as a means to help them appreciate and connect with the reproductive parts of their body, the body they had felt alienated from most of their life. Taylor didn't get pregnant through artificial insemination, and felt disappointed by their body once more (106-110). Through such examples, Zucker explores not only the complicated relationships people might have with their bodies, but also the sense of losing control over them.

Although the memoir is primarily written for survivors of pregnancy loss, stillbirth and infertility – Zucker directly addresses them in the preface – it makes for a valuable read for outsiders as well. Beside the fact that Zucker opens up a panorama of perspectives, she also offers insight into how to support a loved one who is currently in the throes of a postpartum-but-no-baby transition. Keeping in mind Zucker's encounter with a friend shortly after she miscarried, who complimented her slim figure, saying she looked like she had never even been pregnant at all (76) – yep, you read that right – this can be a resource for all readers. Aside from the practical take-aways, this book is a valuable tool in that it can simply make the reader realize the depth of this societal issue and how little it's talked about. I myself realized that I had never heard or read about someone speaking openly about pregnancy loss, let alone the stigma that can accompany it. Raising awareness among those who haven't experienced a miscarriage themselves seems, to me, a step towards changing the negative narrative that surrounds it.

Throughout the book Zucker links her own and her patients' stories to the larger cultural conversation surrounding miscarriage: the feelings of guilt, well-meant but ill-phrased words of kindness from close relatives, and the unwritten rule to wait and tell others about a pregnancy only after the first trimester. In her discussion she occasionally cites journalistic and academic sources. I appreciate the au-

thoritative weight this adds to the work, especially in her brief reflection on the shift in attitude towards miscarriage over the years (41-44). During the 1800s, having a miscarriage was generally regarded as a blessing; a financial and physical relief from having to carry another child. However, Zucker writes, this changed around the second half of the 20th century, when the US passed *Roe v. Wade* and access to safe and legal abortions were made possible and birth control more available. Then, "the prevailing narrative, especially among white, middle- and upper-class women became that, essentially, all "kept" pregnancies are wanted pregnancies" (43).

Although the memoir is primarily written for survivors of pregnancy loss, stillbirth and infertility – Zucker directly addresses them in the preface – it makes for a valuable read for outsiders as well. Beside the fact that Zucker opens up a panorama of perspectives, she also offers insight into how to support a loved one who is currently in the throes of a postpartum-but-no-baby transition.

Although Zucker's message is clear and poignant, some of her phrases could have done with a Steinbeckian approach. Had Zucker sat down and listened to a recording of herself saying her lines out loud, she would likely have sat down to revise phrases like "please don't erase my pregnancy with a trivial remark about the shape of this body of mine" (77) and the poem in the epilogue (216-217) to make them sound more natural, less stylistically artificial. Zucker's prose is mostly nuanced and well-phrased, but a sentence like this – especially when it's used in a conversational context – is distracting to read. Zucker could have done without that theatrical element since it only takes away from the seriousness and gravity of the topic.

Jessica Zucker's debut has achieved what it set out to do. And, unfortunately, pregnancy loss is no longer the only field she can offer insight on. Last spring, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and has since then undergone a bilateral mastectomy (ihadamiscarriage). On October 14 she published an article on Oprah Daily entitled "Breast Cancer Is Not a

"Battle" to Fight" embedded with the same academic reflection and nuance she offers in her memoir. In doing so, Zucker continues to voice the unspoken side of societal-medical conversations and cultivate understanding for previously unheard stories.

About the Author

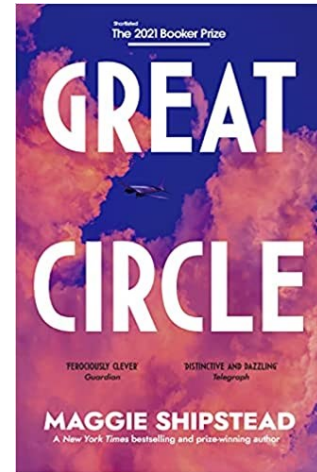
Angela Kroes completed her B.A. in English Language and Culture and is currently enrolled in the M.A. Literature Today program at Utrecht University. In previous research, she has explored the "American Dream" in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. She is part of the PR team for RevUU.

Works Cited

- ihadamiscarriage. Instagram post. *Ihadamiscarriage*. Instagram, 2 Oct. 2021. Web. 15 Oct. 2021.
- Zucker, Jessica. "About." *Dr. Jessica Zucker*. Dr. Jessica Zucker, n.d. Web. 13 Oct. 2021.
- Zucker, Jessica. "Breast Cancer Is Not a "Battle" to Fight." *Oprah Daily*. Oprah Daily LLC, 14 Oct. 2021. Web. 15 Oct. 2021.

Great Circle Makes a Soaring Start but Runs Out of Fuel

By Lisa Leenstra



Someone once told me that books should never be more than 500 pages. No book, they insist, needs nor deserves more than that to tell a great story. *Great Circle* by Maggie Shipstead—shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2021—seemed a strong contender for the prize, but its 600 pages fail to disprove this statement.

Like last year's Booker Prize winner Douglas Stuart, Shipstead had to make drastic cuts in her earlier drafts. In the acknowledgments, Shipstead writes: "Paring down an unwieldy thousand-page manuscript into this slender wisp of a thing was not an easy process." Stuart, having written his winning novel *Shuggie Bain* over the course of 10 years, echoed this sentiment. However, unlike Shipstead, Stuart managed to get his work down to around 450 pages. Those eliminated 150 pages made a world of difference—possibly even the difference between winning and losing.

In *Great Circle*, Shipstead truly embarks on an adventure; the story has a large cast, spans over a century, and leaves little of the world uncovered. The opening of the book illustrates the backstory of Marian and Jamie Graves, twins who as babies survive a shipwreck. During this tragedy, their mom leaves and their dad saves them, which sentences him to jailtime for failing his duties as captain and them to a life with their uncle. Here, the twins are mostly left to themselves as their uncle is too busy with painting, drinking and gambling. This freedom makes that one day, Marian finds herself on top of a mountain when an

airplane flies dangerously close overhead, igniting a lifelong dream of becoming a pilot. We follow Marian as she does anything to achieve this dream; she marries the toxic man who pays for it, leaves for England to fight in World War II, and sets out to fly a great circle around the world but vanishes on the last leg.

Years later, Marian's legacy is to be brought to the big screen and world-famous actress Hadley Baxter is cast to portray her. Hadley lands this role after a big scandal costs her her role in a previous franchise, which her life revolved around. And so alongside Marian's story, *Great Circle* follows Hadley as she readies herself for her potentially career-saving role and deals with the aftermath of her affair(s).

Switching between narrators can be a weakness, because if done wrong it causes confusion in the story or invites a comparison between the characters, thereby heightening the chances of disliking a character. But it is actually one of *Great Circle's* strong points. While mainly following Marian and Hadley's stories, Shipstead often makes small narrative detours, delving into other plot-interwoven stories. None of these shifts feel abrupt and thanks to clear headings and masterful writing style, it is unmistakable who the section revolves around, even if the shifts happen across time.

It is evident that Shipstead has taken the time to research the book's content and context. For example, big events in the history of aviation are tied in with events in Marian's life. Aside from that, the expe-

periences of Marian are familiar in their detail and realism, resembling Amelia Earhart's pioneering aviation career, which culminated in her mysterious mid-flight disappearance in 1937. This detail and realism is a strong aspect of Shipstead's gripping writing; from the first page onwards, it lures the reader into the story and makes it easy to connect with the characters.

Unfortunately, because of *Great Circle's* unwieldy length, this wonderfully obtained attachment to the characters slowly shifts into detachment as the book drags on. The reader receives so much information about each character that the various deaths throughout are no longer heart-wrenching, but almost relieving. This includes Marian, whom we know from early on will not live through her last flight, and as that moment draws near, the reader will experience a great duality between feeling like "it cannot end like that. Not after all this," and "Please, just get it over with."

Also, as easy as it is to follow whom the chapter concerns, making sense of all the (hinted at) connections between characters over time becomes increasingly difficult. Throughout the 600 pages, there are a lot of characters who are shortly (re) introduced to catalyze something further down in the timeline. For instance, almost all the people involved in the production of Hadley's movie have ties to someone in Marian's life, so much so that for some readers the hints to these relationships might be lost. The connection between Adelaide Scott and Sarah Fahey is one of these occurrences. Hadley is introduced to Adelaide on a get-together with the movie's team. Sarah is the first and true love of Marian's twin Jamie. Because of how much has happened—and is happening—and the gaps between

appearances of these characters, it is easy to miss the connection to Adelaide when Sarah Fahey is re-introduced as Sarah Scott after getting married. Nevertheless, the connection is there, for Adelaide is later revealed to be her daughter. While this does not depreciate the novel entirely, it is lamentable because of how easily it could have been avoided and because it takes away from the realism that originates from the well-researched details. There can be some points of overlap between an original story and an adaptation, and personal connections can be the instigation for this. However, it seems improbable that all characters are connected in some way, if not by blood, then by coincidence.

Great Circle is a truly enjoyable novel and I would not hesitate to recommend it to people who do not shy away from big books. However, it also has its shortcomings, ironically due to its length. Maybe if, like Stuart, Shipstead had found a way to trim the story down even further, she could have produced a winner, but as we know by now, *Great Circle* has failed to land the 2021 Booker Prize.

About the Author

Lisa Leenstra a graduate student in English literature, currently enrolled in the Literature Today program at Utrecht University. Her motto is "I like books, not necessarily literature," which illustrates her preference for modern books over classics.

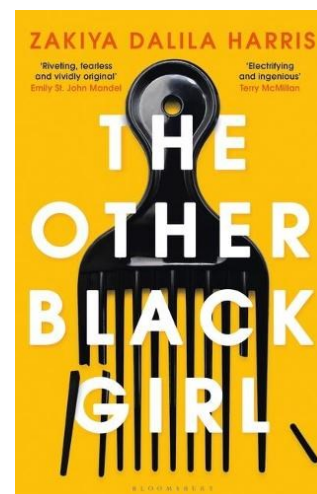
Works Cited

Shipstead, Maggie. *Great Circle*. Doubleday, 2021.

Should Have Read the Fine Print

A review of Zakiya Dalila Harris' debut novel *The Other Black Girl*

By Sophie Bierhuizen



“Don’t touch my hair – don’t touch my crown,” was singer-songwriter Solange’s request in 2016, and she was right to state her boundaries. A woman’s hair encapsulates her personality and is an extension of her being. This is especially the case when it comes to black women, whose hair is often an expression of their heritage, culture, and a source of black pride. Therefore, it might not be surprising that black hair and its care regimen are major themes in Zakiya Dalila Harris’ debut novel *The Other Black Girl*.

The novel kicks off with a thrill-inducing run-away scene of a woman fleeing Manhattan who cannot stop scratching her scalp. Harris’ writing style immediately drew me in, making me wonder, ‘Where is this woman going? What is making her scalp itch? What – or who – is she running from?’ But without providing any answers the story jumps ahead 35 years, to introduce the only non-white editorial assistant at Wagner Books: Nella – a reference to Afro-American author Nella Larsen.

Employed at Wagner for two years and in desperate need of a promotion, Nella comes across as plain-looking, hardworking, and is described as walking on eggshells to sidestep racial issues. However, used to her homogenous workplace and numbed by its ‘office odours’, Nella is stunned to one day smell her favourite hair grease, Brown Buttah. Certain that her white colleagues did not stumble onto the black hair aisle, Nella comes to the only other possible conclusion: there must be another black girl on her floor.

She is proven right when introduced to her new colleague Hazel: darker skinned, impeccably dressed, and charismatic. Although ecstatic that her place of employment is diversifying, Nella quickly realises there is something off with Hazel. While Hazel is on the frontlines of black representation and mentors underprivileged black youths in her free time,

she appears to be too complacent to her white superiors, and too eager to sidestep microaggressions. It does not take long for Nella and Hazel to compete for the position as ‘go-to black girl’, which inevitably raises the question, ‘Why can there be only one?’ Still, slowly, Nella feels her stability at Wagner slipping, and her insecurities are validated when she receives anonymous notes telling her to leave Wagner immediately.

Harris, having worked for the editorial department at the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, has had first-hand experience in the publishing industry. With this expertise, she constructs the publishing industry as the stage of workplace scheming at Wagner Books. Harris cunningly uses every staff meeting to create a bigger divide between Nella and Hazel, making the first an outcast, and the latter the office darling. Distracted by the cut-throat environment, I was delighted to discover that this becomes the backdrop to much bigger themes.

Wagner Books is the place where, 35 years prior, the fictitious novel *Burning Heart* was published – written and edited by Nella’s childhood heroes Diana and Kendra Rae. Their storylines foreshadow the dystopian world in which the novel takes place. Being childhood friends, Diana is quick to call out Kendra Rae’s confrontational side towards their white colleagues, whilst Kendra Rae fights tooth and nail to enable her friend’s – otherwise repressed – career. That is, until Kendra Rae is ostracised by the media and disappears. Their friendship is the root of the mystery surrounding Hazel’s complacent attitude and the notes left on Nella’s desk telling her to leave Wagner.

Harris plays with voices in her novel by writing multiple characters from the first-person perspective. Nella, however, is composed from the third person, separating her storyline from the others. It

appears to be a conscious choice from Harris to have the reader observe Nella from a more distanced perception as her life seemingly falls apart. Interestingly, there is one character that seems to be on her side: Shani, who in a shocking turn of events has similarly been duped by Hazel in the past. This has me wondering, 'Will she be able to protect Nella from her fate?'

Throughout this unfolding thriller, Harris deftly employs humour into tense situations. When Nella receives her first threatening note, it worries her, but she is mostly confused since the note is typed in the least threatening font: Comic Sans. In a similar vein, Shani recalls her interaction with a nightclub bouncer, whom she describes as: "Tall, dark and cute [...] with a smile that suggested he'd much sooner call a woman 'brown sugah' than 'bitch'" (Harris 99). It is this quick humour interwoven in the story that takes your mind off the more troubling "other black girls". This interplay with characters and humour cuts through the tension and mystery whilst simultaneously providing the characters with personality. Nella's best friend, Malaika, is fleshed out with her dialogue and actions which has her personality flowing from the pages. For instance, when Nella considers confronting Hazel, Malaika responds, "Right. So when you say you want to 'talk' to Hazel, do you mean...?" Malaika's outline mimed removing her earrings one by one" (196).

Harris' characters never feel gauche or as a simple trope, rather they are but reminiscent of the various qualities a person can have. She plays with stereotypes and authentic personalities as seen in the real world. This is also evident in her description of Nella. She feels as if she does not belong to either the black or white community due to her prosperous upbringing and her string of white boyfriends. Harris also interjects a diverse range of white characters in her novel, such as C.J., the white working-class mail delivery man, and Nella's app-developing boyfriend Owen, who was raised in a lesbian household.

Harris' world reflects reality without resorting to previously established class systems or often segregated relationships. This vast portrayal of black characters is an important feature of *The Other Black Girl*. As pointed out by Nella herself, black voices in literature are often portrayed as caricatures and not resembling real people. A character named Shartricia, written by a renowned white author in the novel Colin Franklin, illustrates this. Described as a teenage mother with seven children, and suffering from an opioid addiction, Shartricia is the catalyst of Nella's demise at Wagner, when Nella voices her concerns of this token-of-diversity character. Mirroring the effect the novel *Burning Heart* has on its readers, *The Other Black Girl* provides a platform for black narratives

and characters to move away from the stereotypical depiction, and it motivates us to look for more authentic People Of Colour representation in authors and their novels.

The characters of *The Other Black Girl* are interlinked partly by the publishing industry, but more importantly by their hair. Harris describes the expression and embrace of black identity through this. For instance, Hazel is stunned to find out Nella does not have the skills to tie scarves or do flat twists, which are classics in black hairstyles. "How had she made it this far without knowing how to style black hair?" (86). This discovery spurs an inner dialogue in Nella that informs the reader about her history of relaxing her hair, a practice that chemically straightens afro hair, and only recently cut it off to see what her natural curls would look like.

Although new to the natural hair scene, Nella knows the importance of black hair and how it can portray personality. She accepts an invitation to a hair party by Hazel to learn how to tie scarves and snoop on Hazel. The following scene jolted my memory, in which my mother would braid my hair for school, and seeing this echoed in Nella made her feel more real to me:

In almost every other instance, she's hated it: when she was getting cornrows; when she was getting DIY relaxers; when her grandmother insisted on pressing the curlers so close to her forehead that she could feel her skin sizzling, even if "it's not touching!" like Grandma always promised. [...] There'd also been something profound in those moments; it was in the nature of this elongated physical contact that most non-black teenagers didn't have with their mothers, but she did. And it was in the little things such contact taught her about the women in her family. (311-2)

This significance of hair and the familial connection is underlined throughout this story and its characters. Diana, who chooses to wear wigs because she is never confident enough to show her black hair, is described reminiscing on her friendship with Kendra Rae when curling her wig before a big event. Hazel herself is "natural", a term describing a woman with natural afro hair, dreadlocked, and dyed ombre – a feat that labels her with a high level of coolness.

Even Shani is instructed to chop off her hair when moving to Manhattan, to produce a clean slate and claim anonymity. Lastly, Malaika is keen to take good care of her hair since she has experienced hair grease that dried out her ends, making it a rule of thumb to read the fine print of labels before she uses hair

products. As a proprietor of wisdom, she is right since we should all be careful with what we do to our hair, especially when it is discovered that Hazel's hair grease is mind altering.

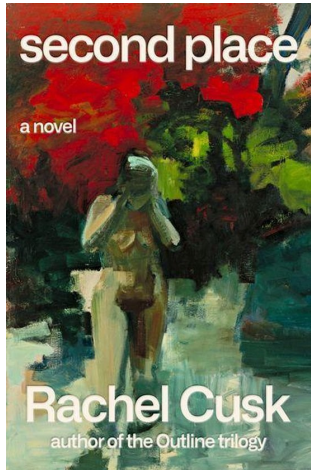
The Other Black Girl is a thrilling novel that stands on its own as an enthralling piece of dystopian fiction, making you re-evaluate society's diversity and numbness to racial issues, and it is truly a grand debut in the world of literature, demonstrating Harris' broad range as a writer. This is a must-read for anyone eager to read more diverse narratives and is keen to feel the hairs on their neck stand up in excitement.

About the Author

Sophie Bierhuizen's interest in multicultural societies stems from her international experiences: being born in Switzerland and raised in the Netherlands. This curiosity developed further when she was living abroad in the UK and Finland. These experiences ignited her attentiveness to diversity and its often-underrepresented portrayal in literature. She is currently studying for her M.A. degree in Literature Today at Utrecht University and is a Managing Editor of *RevUU*.

Works Cited

- Harris, Zakiya Dalila. *The Other Black Girl*. Bloomsbury, 2021, United States.
- Solange. "Don't Touch My Hair." *A Seat at the Table*, Columbia Records, 2016.



Some Unorthodox but Nevertheless Pertinent Advice on Why You Should Never Invite an Author to your House

Rachel Cusk's *Second Place*: Reviewed

By Jake Regan

Second Place centres around a visit to the narrator's house by an eccentric artist and his young companion. The guests proceed to wreak emotional havoc and domestic turmoil upon the long-suffering protagonist and her unwitting family, crossing all sorts of interpersonal boundaries, testing marriages, and essentially making everyone around them miserable for the sake of the "greater good": producing art. While reading this novel, I found myself thinking of other instances, in both history and fiction, of artists – particularly writers – being dreadful houseguests, and I wondered whether this was an acknowledged phenomenon. Do artists make for such difficult company because of or in spite of their creative instinct?

In September 1922, D.H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, arrived in Taos, New Mexico at the behest of Mabel Dodge Luhan, a prominent socialite who had moved to the remote area several years earlier. Luhan, a devotee of Lawrence's writing, wished dearly for a literary representation of Taos by her favourite author (Silverblatt). The Lawrences stayed as guests in Luhan's mansion, "Mabeltown", and spent the next few months exploring, participating in local Hopi ceremonies, and socialising with Mabel and her husband Tony.

Regrettably, the visit was not at all what Luhan had wistfully imagined before her guests had arrived. Her dreams of a D.H. Lawrence novel about Taos were quickly dashed when Frieda, suspicious and jealous of Mabel's affection for her husband, banned Lawrence from working on the project with her (Panovka). Lawrence himself turned out to be a rude and conceited nightmare of a houseguest, frequently ridiculing Mabel for staying in bed too late, instructing her to scrub her floors and bake bread, even going so far as to suggest she dress differently. Tony, a

Native American, found himself under regular and intense scrutiny from Frieda, who was scandalised by his and Mabel's mixed-race relationship (Panovka). Luhan eventually wrote a memoir about the encounter called *Lorenzo in Taos*.

Houseguests make the worst company. It's often impossible to find common ground at first. Something to talk about before the first glass of wine takes effect and a semblance of casual conversation ensues.

Rachel Cusk's *Second Place* is a beautiful, contemplative, pastoral novel in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, or Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond*, whose rural setting informs the self-reflection and existential ponderings of our protagonist – an unnamed middle-aged woman modelled fairly transparently on Mabel Dodge Luhan. In fact, *Second Place* is entirely based upon Luhan's memoir, albeit with some crucial changes of detail. Firstly, it is set in the moors of the English countryside, as opposed to the deserts of New Mexico. The Lawrence character (referred to only as "L") is a painter, not a writer, and has brought with him a younger, unaffiliated guest named Brett, whereas Lawrence had brought his wife.

The dissimilarities end here, however. In the dedication at the back of the book, Cusk writes, "*Second Place* owes a debt to *Lorenzo in Taos*... My version – in which the Lawrence figure is a painter – is intended as a tribute to [Luhan's] spirit." The novel, then, could be read as a re-writing of Luhan's narrative: an attempt, perhaps, to interrogate Lawrence's character, and to expose a tendency in artists to justify their appalling behaviour with good art. Cusk portrays L as an arrogant genius who acts as a constantly disruptive force, upending the delicate harmony forged by

the narrator's family. Our narrator is so enthralled by L's mystique and work that she often overlooks his various transgressions – similar in nature to those of Lawrence towards Luhan – and allows herself to fall under his spell. She is thus stripped of her agency and begins to lose her sense of individuality, noting at one point that “[L]’s refusal to know anything about me had felt like a refusal to grant my existence” (Cusk 119). This sentiment echoes throughout the second half of the novel as Cusk wonderfully demonstrates how L, and by extension every self-aggrandising artist, feeds on the insecurity and subordination of his admirers for personal validation. As the narrator's character diminishes, L's prospers. Lawrence once said that he wished to “destroy” Mabel Luhan (Luhan 215). L says the same thing in *Second Place* (139).

Admittedly, it can be pretty fun for a while.

In March 1857, beloved Danish author Hans Christian Andersen announced that he was coming to visit Charles Dickens in London. After a gruelling *five weeks* of hosting, Dickens lost his patience, writing to another acquaintance that “Hans Andersen slept in this room for five weeks – which seemed to the family AGES!” (Thorpe). Andersen had, variously, asked to be shaved every morning by one of Dickens's sons, thrown a tantrum involving flailing on the lawn when he received a negative book review, and made a fuss any time he felt he was not the centre of attention (Philippas). When he finally left, the two authors promptly lost touch.

But then, inevitably, the conversation takes an uncomfortable turn. Or you start feeling tired and your table-mate shows no signs of hitting the road imminently, despite multiple facial and verbal cues (yawns, nods, polite “hmm”s).

Early in the novel, we are blissfully drawn into an indeterminately old-fashioned, rustic environment, gesturing to a bygone era. It is free of modern technology and interested instead in a slow, meditative pace of life, with a tone that occasionally verges on transcendental in its reverence for mindfulness: “If we treated each moment as though it were a permanent condition, a place where we might find ourselves compelled to remain forever, how differently most of us would choose the things that moment contains!” (176).

Yet ultimately, insofar as the novel is spiritual, it is a Biblical backdrop upon which the action unfolds. The predominant allusion throughout the narrative is to

the Garden of Eden: our narrator and Tony have created a paradise for themselves, only to find their inner and domestic peace shattered by an intruder who appears, at times, to be nothing more than a manifestation of temptation. The reference is made explicit in an episode that depicts L and Brett painting a grotesque scene on the walls of their guesthouse: Adam and Eve tormented by the serpent (161).

You start to question why your life is like this.

In Stephen King's 1987 novel *Misery*, Paul Sheldon, a popular crime author, gets into a car crash and is rescued serendipitously by Annie Wilkes, a fanatic reader of his books. Instead of taking him to the hospital, she brings him to her home, where she traps him and forces him to write a new novel for her. She also chops his foot off with an axe. Of course, it is the host, not the writer, who radically transgresses here, but perhaps this is an indication that discretion is also advised to authors who find themselves considering entering their readers' homes.

The weird thing is, after you say goodbye and find yourself in glorious solitude again, you're immediately struck with a bout of amnesia that makes you forget every single thing you despise about hosting, and you invite another guest over on Thursday.

Cusk's treatment of the plotline as a grand, Miltonian catastrophe, although powerful, is undermined by the book's top-heavy structure. About 80% of the plot happens within the last 20% of the novel, and although plot is by no means the metric by which this book should be judged, as readers we are asked to rapidly readjust our relationship to the text, shifting from slow, pastoral writing, to what feels like a period social drama: more akin to a D.H. Lawrence novel, perhaps, than to Luhan's memoir. This gear shift towards the “third act” is not necessarily a bad thing; after all, some plot development is a welcome surprise following roughly 150 pages of introspective musing in bucolic settings. The problem, as I see it, is that the escalation towards the end of the book tries, in a way, to tell a different story, leaving us with the impression that something unclear has *changed* with-

in this pivotal sequence. We know what has changed in a literal sense: the breakdown of the family structure, L's deteriorating health, and our narrator's mental stability. But we are not given much of an insight into what has brought this shift about, besides L's mere presence. The clearest way I can trace this ill-defined shift is in terms of a scale that leads from *love* to *disgust*. The first half of the book is replete with lyrical descriptions of scenery and people as seen through a lens of love:

The sky was like a blue sail overhead and the waves crashed on the shore below and the water had that coruscation of the surface that is the surest omen of summer. How fortunate we felt to be there together, Tony and I – the debt of our isolation is paid back in an instant by times such as these. (44)

As time passes, however, the descriptive passages become tainted with a dismaying melancholy: "I sat and looked out of the window at the falling water without speaking or moving at all . . . How sad the rain was, falling after all these weeks of warmth and sun." (163); the tone occasionally veers all the way into revulsion: "I didn't quite like being touched by him. It made the question of disgust, which I had tried to stamp down, rise up again, except that this time it felt as though it was I who was disgusted by him" (150). Cusk's writing here is potent in its ability to evoke an increasingly visceral response as the narrative unfolds, reflecting the deterioration of the previously established harmony. However, the stakes are heightened to such an extent towards the climactic sequence that the novel is in danger of going too far and taking the reader entirely out of the otherwise expertly crafted world.

Another thing: we don't hold ourselves to anything near the standards we expect of others when we visit their homes. Why is that?

Darren Aronofsky's 2017 film, *Mother!* makes possibly the most convincing argument against houseguests yet (it is also a fitting companion-piece to *Second Place*). Jennifer Lawrence, playing a thinly veiled met-

aphor for Mother Earth, marries Javier Bardem, a poet/God. They live in bliss for a while, until an unannounced guest appears, soon followed by his wife, their two sons, and very quickly afterwards pretty much all of humanity (it's a Biblical allegory, you see, Aronofsky all but winks at us). Their house gets destroyed, ravaged by plights including a condensed World War and the accidental "sacrifice" of their new-born baby. Although kind of dramatic, the equation of unwanted houseguests with the destruction of the entire planet by humans is not *wholly* unwarranted.

We just live in denial, I guess.

Overall, *Second Place* is a unique departure for Cusk. Retellings of stories are constricted by their source material, especially in the case of nonfiction. Often, the relationship between original text and retelling are tenuous, as with *Ulysses* and *The Odyssey*, or the film *10 Things I Hate About You* and its inspiration, *The Taming of the Shrew*. In other cases, retellings take the tack of merely updating or modernising old stories, such as the bizarre "re-imagining" of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* in 2014 by Val McDermid. Cusk, on the other hand, manages to honour Mabel Luhan's memoir without making any ambitious Tarantino-esque attempts at re-writing history, or using familiar tropes like mythology – Biblical allusions aside – as a crutch to write an original story. Instead, *Second Place* creates its own distinct space, carefully toeing the line between fiction and biography, imagination and fact. It raises questions about artistry, and the abuse of power that accompanies it; domestic environments and the importance of preserving them; and the fragility of familial units. It shows us the ways in which retelling a story is similar to being a houseguest, by taking up residence in a previously inhabited framework, for better or for worse.

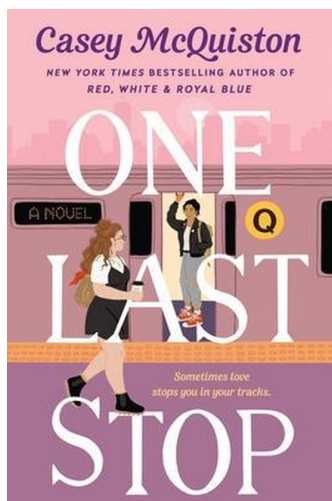
In many ways, authors are the perfect houseguests, provided they stay within the confines of their books. I myself have hosted hundreds of writers on my shelves over the years and have never once had a problem. The moment Johnathan Franzen gets on my nerves, for example, I can happily snap my book shut and wander off to do something else.

About the Author

Jake Regan recently compiled and edited an anthology of Irish short fiction called *The Globe and Scales* for Marrowbone Press, where he also worked as a copyeditor on several forthcoming novels. He has also been published in *This is Not Where I Belong* and *Hunt and Gather*.

Works Cited

- Aronofsky, Darren, director. *Mother!* Paramount, 2017.
- Cusk, Rachel. *Second Place*. Faber & Faber, 2021.
- King, Stephen. *Misery*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2007.
- Luhan, Mabel Dodge. *Lorenzo in Taos*. Martin Secker, 1933.
- Panovka, Rebecca. "The Strange Revival of Mabel Dodge Luhan." *New Yorker*, 2 June 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-strange-revival-of-mabel-dodge-luhan>. Accessed 10 October 2021.
- Philippas, Anne. "Hans Christian Andersen: The Eccentric Guest." *Charles Dickens Museum*, <https://dickensmuseum.com/blogs/charles-dickens-museum/hans-christian-andersen-the-eccentric-guest>. Accessed 12 October 2021.
- Silverblatt, Michael. "Rachel Cusk: Second Place." *Bookworm* from KCRW, 6 May 2021, <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/rachel-cusk-second-place>. Accessed 8 October 2021.
- Thorpe, Vanessa. "How guest Hans Christian Andersen destroyed his friendship with Dickens." *The Guardian*, 10 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/10/charles-dickens-hans-christian-andersen-letters-correspondence-auction>. Accessed 12 October 2021.



The Queer Line: Coming of Age on the Subway

A review of Casey McQuiston's *One Last Stop*

By Nina van der Linden

Over the summer of 2021, I asked Aster, a friend of mine who's an avid reader, for a list of recommendations for queer fiction. It's been a while since I've had time for recreational reading, and my desire for enjoyable stories featuring queer people is universal across all the media I consume. Luckily, most of my friends have a similar interest, so I can always count on them to contribute to my knowledge of queer (pop) culture.

This group of friends was formed on Twitter, where one person asked around if people who were interested in attending a concert by Halsey, a queer artist, wanted to do so together. It evolved into the group of people I now consider my family. The people in this group have changed over time, but its essence remains. Groups of friends like these are not at all uncommon in queer culture. They are often referred to as "found family" or "family of choice," and they are a way for members of the community to form a system of support and love not based on genetic relationality, but on being queer in a specific time and place.

The concept of "found family" is the backbone of Casey McQuiston's sophomore novel *One Last Stop*, which was included on the list I received from Aster. The characters in the novel, much like my friends, are a seemingly random collection of individuals. A transgender psychic named Niko dating an electrical engineer-slash-sculpting artist called Myla, drag queen Isaiah, token straight line cook Jerry, an outcast member of the financial elite named Wesley, and Jane; a butch lesbian who has been stuck on the Q line of the New York City subway since 1977. The one thing all of them have in common is that they meet accidentally. August, the novel's protagonist, who has never been the center of attention in anyone's life, suddenly becomes the tether of Jane's con-

nection to the present.

"The Q train is a time, a place, and a person" is what August says after seeing Jane on the subway the first few times. Jane only appears on the Q line at a set time, the same time she used to take the train in 1977. Later in the novel, we learn that Jane's existence is quite literally dependent on August, as well; the fact that Jane is stuck in a time loop means she loses her memories between the moments they see each other, and August must be the one to remember things for her. The anachronism of Jane's existence is the main plot of *One Last Stop*, and it is reflected in more than just the retellings of important events in queer history. McQuiston wields linguistic temporality to bring the story to life, interchanging between past and present tenses as August, as a third person narrator, retells Jane's stories to the reader. The switching of tenses makes it so that the events described by Jane blur into the present, to the point where the reader is unsure at times whether the "she" in a sentence refers to Jane or to August. While this complicates readings and doesn't always work, it sometimes succeeds brilliantly. When Jane frustratingly tells August about the morning she wakes up and remembers half of her own found family died in a fire, the only thing that makes the reader realize August was not involved in this fire herself is the newspaper clipping at the beginning of the chapter about the UpStairs Lounge arson attack in 1973.

Details like this clipping make the book feel like just as much of a case to be solved as the cold case of August's uncle, which plays a central role in both August's relationship with her mother and, as it turns out later, her relationship with Jane. Information isn't offered on a silver platter, but instead, the reader is coaxed into connecting the dots for themselves, much like August has a habit of doing.

In fact, almost everything in the novel seems to be conveniently connected to each other. The third person narration is one that is frequently used in true crime documentaries, where events are often retold through the victim's perspective. Myla, who is August's roommate, has experience in electrical engineering, which leads to the group discovering that Jane's connection to the Q line is an electrical one, resulting from a power surge when she touched the tracks in 1977. Myla's boyfriend Niko's psychic abilities are mostly used to get August to open up about what she's feeling and to process those feelings, often conveniently right after August runs into an issue regarding her connection with Jane.

Unfortunately, the many intra-textual references and connections get a little too obvious after a while. The most glaring example is that August, who is desperately trying to get away from her mother's obsession with the 38-year-old disappearance of her brother Augie, finds herself right in the middle of the exact same narrative. It already seems too big of a stretch for Jane and Augie to be connected, but when August accidentally solves Augie's cold case while working on a way to get Jane off the Q line, the reader's suspension of disbelief is broken. There can be *too much of a coincidence* even in a novel about being stuck in time. This could have been easily resolved by connecting Jane's transtemporal existence to Augie's missing person's case, for example, if Augie's case could only be solved if Jane and August ran into each other on the subway. However, the novel makes no such attempt, and instead the reader is left to chalk its resolution all up to chance.

Even though the different plots are interwoven somewhat clumsily, what *One Last Stop* does do extremely efficiently is encapsulate the feelings of a young adult trying to break loose from their parents. In the beginning of the story, August considers herself quite independent, crediting her mother's approach to parenting for her supposed independence. Her actions, however, tell a different story. She initially meets Jane when she spills coffee on herself and needs a change of clothes. It is clear through her interactions with Niko that, while August has always been self-reliant, this is mostly because she's learned to sideline her own priorities in favor of helping her mother. August comes to terms with the fact that despite her desire to distance herself from Suzette (not clear this is her mother), she does take after her mother. Her mannerisms and desire to solve Jane's case directly result from being raised by Suzette, as is evident from her attention to detail; a result of going over every single aspect of Augie's case. Her experience in studying the seemingly insignificant aspects of a case is what makes her realize that the postcard Augie sent Jane is dated three years after his disap-

pearance, meaning he didn't die 38 years ago. Inadvertently, August solves the case she's trying so hard to escape.

Another important part in August's journey of self-discovery is the connection to the queer community her found family provides for her. I've read many queer coming-of-age stories, most of which revolve around coming out. *One Last Stop* takes a refreshingly different route by having the coming-of-age story revolve around coming "in"; into the community. It is no accident that August's first queer experiences, like falling in love and having sex with another woman, occur on the Q line of the New York subway. New York has been considered a queer haven since even before the Stonewall Riots; not always safe, but big and busy enough for queer life to thrive in secret. I also don't believe the Q line was arbitrarily selected by McQuiston as the backdrop for this romance; it's a little too on-the-nose for it to be an accident. Currently, the Q line runs alongside Greenwich Village, with a stop only a ten-minute walk from the Stonewall Inn. A detail I appreciate is that the particular stop in question, 8th Street, is offhandedly mentioned in the novel.

A story of a bisexual August from New Orleans meeting Jane, an Asian butch lesbian on the subway would have been a lovely coming-of-age story by itself, but what really drives the coming "in" narrative is the time travel. Because Jane's memories slowly start coming back to her as she spends more time with August, the reader gets a firsthand account of many historical events that occurred before the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. One of the aspects of queer life that can make it feel extremely isolating is that there is almost no guidance from "those who came before". Both lives and knowledge of queer history have been lost or outright destroyed by political motivations. As with any cultural group, history is an important tool for the queer community; it is what shapes the way we conduct ourselves. When that history is lost or obscured, or otherwise remains hidden from future generations, important lessons learned in the past are forgotten.

The open discussion of queer history/present but also of queer *politics* highlights how the movement has become more palpable to the mainstream masses over the past four decades. McQuiston demonstrates that, in some instances, the situation in 2020 might be comparable to the developments of the 1970s; the benefit drag show August and her friends organize to raise money for Billy's Pancake House, a staple safe space for the queer community that has existed for over 40 years but is now at risk of disappearing because of gentrification and a sudden desire to "clean up the neighborhood" – an argument

that has frequently been used to justify the demolishing of dominantly queer and BIPOC neighborhoods.

The contrast between then-and-now is showcased in some of the interactions between August and Jane; when a fight breaks out in the subway, August wonders why Jane doesn't just call the cops, to which Jane replies angrily: "You know I don't fuck with pigs." The use of present tense becomes particularly important here; the narrative distinction between Jane's experiences and August's presence in 2020 is blurred. The first-hand accounts create a pocket of space-time displacement on the Q train, where every time August and Jane discuss Jane's life before she got stuck, it's like the story is transported back to the 1970s, bringing the reader along. In these moments, we collectively exist in two times in the same space; a time where openly being queer leads to being beaten up, arrested, set on fire and killed, and a time where advertisements for roommates can include "must be queer and trans friendly" without a problem. The Q train, then, truly *becomes* a time, a place, and a person. When August gets on the train, the reader *is* Jane in the 1970s.

One Last Stop definitely takes a difficult path. It is a history lesson and coming-of-age story hidden inside the package of a queer romance novel. While the romance between August and Jane is ultimately the biggest aspect of the story, especially in the discourse around the book, the other aspects of the book are, in my opinion, more valuable and more important. The different stories are interwoven in a way that sometimes betrays McQuiston's relative inexperience as a writer, but the clumsiness fits the narrative of August's own clumsiness and inexperience with queer issues and history. The cleverest aspect of this book is by far its marketing; the demand for queer romance is higher than ever, and it's often difficult for young people to learn about queer history

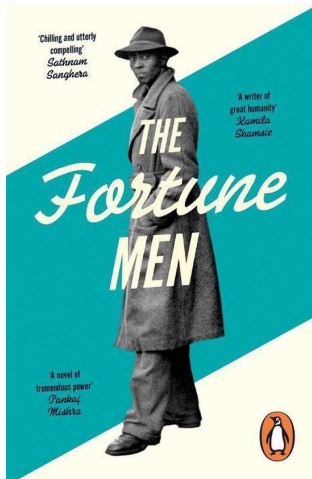
in an accessible way. By emphasizing the romance aspect, McQuiston is able to sneak in a history lesson to those who really need it. They do this not by lecturing about past events in hindsight, but through an imaginative narrative, compelling characters and by using linguistic structure and temporality to transport the reader into the past. The story of Jane and August's romance is set in the 1970s, but it takes place in our present. It reminds the queer reader of the fact that thousands of queer people have come before them, presently exist alongside them, that thousands will come after them, and that they are never truly alone.

About the Author

Nina van der Linden has a background in gender and media studies with a specific focus on the interdisciplinary field of representation, having written their B.A. thesis on queer representation in *Orange Is The New Black*. Additionally, they have been a part of the queer community for over ten years now and have extensively engaged with queer culture and history throughout. Nina designed *RevUU's* logo for the Autumn 2021 issue.

Works Cited

McQuiston, Casey. *One Last Stop*. St Martin's Press, 2021.



The Story of Britain's Last Hanged Prisoner

The Fortune Men Reviewed

By Amanda Castro Thijssen

In Western Cemetery, Cardiff, a tombstone with the particular epitaph 'Killed by Injustice' can be found. This is where Mahmood Mattan was reinterred in 1996, after being hanged in prison in 1952. Mahmood was a Somali merchant and sailor who settled in Cardiff after falling in love with a Welsh woman. At the age of twenty-nine, he was falsely accused of murdering Lily Volpert. Lily had owned a shop until one night, shortly after closing time, her throat had been slit and a hundred pounds had been stolen from the safe. The police interrogated those in the surroundings and visited different boarding houses, including the one Mahmood was staying in. Mahmood gave a statement showing his innocence and nothing suspicious was found in the room. Nevertheless, he was arrested a few days after. Six months later, Mahmood would be the last person to be hanged in a British prison and almost seventy years later *The Fortune Men*, a novel about the last months of his life, would appear.

The book, published in 2021 and written by Somali-British author Nadifa Mohamed, fictionalises Mahmood's story and paints the portrait of a man who, despite the circumstances, showed hope until the very end. Mohamed came across Mahmood's case in 2004 and began writing *The Fortune Men* in 2015 because of her personal connections with the story. Her father had also been a Somali sailor and had, in fact, known Mahmood, as they were of the same age and had both settled in Cardiff around the same time. Moreover, Mohamed's uncle had been murdered in front of his shop in a similar way to Lily, whose name is changed to Violet in the narrative as requested by her family. Having written about Somali experiences and injustices against Somalis in the United Kingdom before, both in the form of novels and essays, Mohamed has now become the first Somali-British author to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

The novel is written in a detailed but simple style, immersing the reader in the multicultural society of Tiger Bay, now known as Cardiff Bay. Until the scene of the trial, the reader follows both the lives of Mahmood and Diana, Violet's sister. Diana is in mourning and looking forward to the moment the trial ends, so she can let go of what she calls the "public business of grief" as people are endlessly visiting her and reminding her of her sister's death. Indeed, after the trial scene, written in the curious form of a Q&A, the reader never hears about her again. The lives of both families are, nevertheless, forever connected, as Mahmood realises the thread of his life was cut the moment Violet was murdered. The author acknowledges their ties by dedicating her work to both Lily and Mahmood, who share an unjust death.

In the story, Mahmood is a thief who has no shame in admitting his crimes. Nevertheless, as an innocent in this case, he grows tired of the corruption and prejudices in British institutions. He is aware of the fact that he is constantly being treated differently because of his skin colour and does not hesitate to speak out about it to those in his surroundings, who, as the novel progresses, become almost exclusively white. The narration and epilogue reveal how the police wilfully ignored statements that exculpated Mahmood and even bribed witnesses to adapt their stories and frame him as guilty. Mahmood's lawyer never shows sympathy for his client, and even calls him a savage during the trial. These instances of discrimination are based on authentic events and show, as mentioned by the author in an interview with *The Times*, that "[e]ven if he [Mahmood] was not the actual killer, he was the kind of man who they imagined might harm them, and for that, he was found guilty and sentenced to death."

Despite the constant accusations, Mahmood never loses hope. He believes in the importance of sharing his truth and asks both the police and the guards at prison to write down his version of the events, so he can die knowing he has done everything in his power to prove his innocence. He constantly prays and promises his children that he will be back home soon. Mahmood's trust in righteousness leads him to establish what he believes to be an almost friendly relationship with the guards stationed by his cell. His overall optimism makes the last scenes in the book even more harrowing. On his eldest son's birthday, the guards move the wardrobe in Mahmood's cell, revealing an adjacent room with a noose hanging from the ceiling and an ugly truth: Mahmood was doomed to be hanged from the moment he entered prison. The execution scene is hard to read, as Mahmood's calm nature is transformed into complete panic and utter disappointment as he approaches the rope. The countdown and the praying reinforce the sense of urgency and the inevitability of the act.

Mahmood is executed without a chance of saying goodbye to his family. Following the last chapter, a scanned news report can be found, in which Mahmood's wife is described crying outside of the prison. At the end of the news report, it is Lily's name that appears, instead of Violet's. This is a moment of realisation for the reader who does not know about the authentic story behind the book. The epilogue recounts the real-life efforts of Mahmood's family to clear his name, finally leading to his case becoming the first rectified miscarriage of justice by the British Supreme Court in 1998. However, that same year five other black and mixed-race men were wrongly accused in the case of the Cardiff Five, showing how Mahmood's arrest was not unique, but rather part of a system of internalised prejudices.

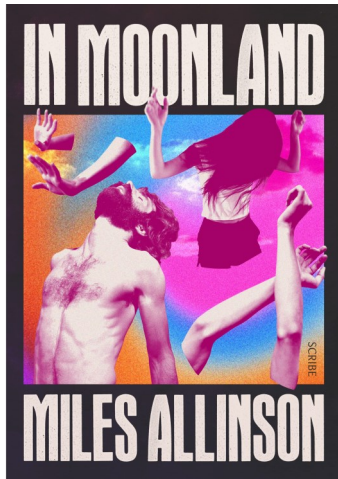
The Fortune Men is powerful in its representation of racism and its capacity to create empathy with the innocent Mahmood. Nevertheless, it comes as a surprise that it has reached the shortlist for this year's Booker Prize. The novel, with its straightforwardness and simple prose, does not seem especially suited for multiple re-readings. The possibility of seeing Mahmood walking out of jail and the question of who murdered Violet are what keep the book interesting, at least for the reader that ignores the real-life story behind it. It is, without doubt, the social relevance of the plot that has allowed it to be nominated. Even though *The Fortune Men* is a historical novel, the institutional racism in it resonates with murders such as those of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor in the United States. Many have now turned to analyse institutional racism in their own countries, as Mohamed does in her book. By nominating it, the Booker Prize has taken a political stand, acknowledging the truth about discrimination in the United Kingdom. Moreover, as a literary prize, it has once again shown the everlasting power of fiction as a way to reflect on our current society.

About the Author

Amanda Castro Thijssen is a postgraduate student of literature at Utrecht University, specialising in comparative Anglophone literature, and has just finished an internship at publishing house Luitingh-Sijthoff. Moreover, she has worked as an editor for *Frame: Journal of Literary Studies*, collaborating in issues about feminist bodies, activism, and law, and has written as a columnist for feminist organisation *Women's March Nederland*. She is a Chief Editor of *RevUU*.

Works Cited

- Mohamed, Nadifa. *The Fortune Men*. Viking, 2021.
- . "Nadifa Mohamed Tells the Real-Life Story That Inspired her Booker-Shortlisted Novel *The Fortune Men*." *The Times*, 3 Oct. 2021, [thetimes.co.uk/article/nadifa-mohamed-tells-the-real-life-story-that-inspired-her-booker-shortlisted-novel-the-fortune-of-men-cfzhg6qc8](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nadifa-mohamed-tells-the-real-life-story-that-inspired-her-booker-shortlisted-novel-the-fortune-of-men-cfzhg6qc8). Accessed 22 Oct. 2021.
- Mohamed, Safia. "'Killed by injustice': The Hanging of a British Somali." *BBC News*, 28 Jan. 2019, [bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/hanging_of_british_somali_mahmood_mattan](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/hanging_of_british_somali_mahmood_mattan). Accessed 22 Oct. 2021.



In Moonland: The Inevitable Influence of the Past

By Sanne Tucker

****This review contains spoilers for Miles Allinson's *In Moonland*.****

At times nothing can be more tempting than living in the past. Memories can have such a magnetic pull that it can feel impossible to steer away from them. I too am familiar with yearning for a past that is unattainable. Just before the start of the pandemic I had come home from living in Australia for a while. Melbourne, to be exact. Just as I was planning to go back and began saving money, the pandemic hit. While it was in full swing it forced me to reconsider why I wanted to go back in the first place and whether, perhaps, it was better to enjoy the untouched memories.

Melbourne is a city of contrasts, at least to me. It is a city of extreme freedom, happiness and love as well as a city of limitations, darkness and drug abuse. People who were struggling to overcome their anxieties and demons seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. Nonetheless, stumbling upon Miles Allinson's second novel *In Moonland*, which is set partly in Melbourne, I found myself longing for the city again. Through the book I found a safe way back into my memories, through the eyes of characters that have lived in the city much longer than me, and who are deeply flawed in a way that I had become so familiar with. Upon reading the book, it became clear to me that not only does it manage to pull on my heartstrings, the publication of *In Moonland* could not have been more perfectly timed with its commentary on generational trauma and the way we treat the world.

In Moonland revolves around three main characters who are all related. The first character introduced is Joe. Joe lives in modern-day Melbourne and narrates the beginning of the book. Later, the story is told from the perspective of his father, Vincent, who left Melbourne during the 1970s to join the ashram of

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in India. The story concludes through the perspective of Sylvie, who is Joe's daughter and lives in a postapocalyptic near-future in which Australia has been devastated by natural disasters.

As the book began with descriptions of Joe and his life in Melbourne, I was thrown back into my memories of the city. Descriptions such as "empty suburbs, [...] the same blazing 7-Elevens, the same ugly new apartment blocks" are all too familiar and highlight the dullness of the city's architecture and its grey atmosphere. It reminded me of the one thing that most people I had encountered there had in common: they wanted to get away from Melbourne. Some wanted to escape to Europe, others to Japan, and others simply to New Zealand, but most wanted to just leave.

Vincent, Joe and Sylvie feel the need to escape as well, although with different degrees of urgency throughout the book. For the three of them, the need to get away arises largely from their lack of connectedness to their current time and place. To exemplify, Vincent is struggling greatly with the meaning of life and is trying to find something to hold on to. When he applies to get into the ashram he writes: "what is the meaning of life? [...] Does God exist? ~~Why does it feel like my soul is entwined in shit?~~" and "[w]ho will show me how to love and live?"

Although not literally stated by either Joe or Sylvie, similar questions can be found in their narratives as well. The feeling of impending doom appears to be a form of generational trauma that the three suffer from in their own way. It's a feeling that I, as many others, have become too familiar with during 2020 and 2021. This makes the characters and their anxious thoughts fit seamlessly in our peri-pandemic, and (hopefully) near post-pandemic era.

At some point a character states that the “*past holds endlessly more than the future and for that reason, doing anything to jeopardise the past is really just a disaster waiting to happen.*” Although quite bleak and exemplary of the character’s lack of hope for the future, there is wisdom in this saying. It reminds me of my fear of meddling with my own memories. At times, the past can feel like a safe haven, free of threatening viruses and anxiety- it can be tempting to try and relive it. However, what has been will never come back and I need to learn to accept that, just like Allinson’s characters need to learn to accept their familial past in order to move forward.

With globalisation and capitalism unmoved on their pedestals, even when they were contributing factors to the pandemic we’re currently living through, questions of how we treat the planet and our own lives ought to be raised.

Although Allinson has his characters dig into the past, his aim is never to show that one will find answers there or that the past was better than the future. The past, according to Allinson, is simply the past. It is not better. It is not worse. It just is. The only thing that the characters in *In Moonland* find, is that they carry the past and their generational trauma with them. As Joe is trying to relive his father’s life by traveling to places that his father has been to, he does not find what his father found all those years before and that is precisely the point. You cannot relive the past, no matter how hard you try. It can help make sense of where you are right now, but it will not give you any answers. It merely functions as a compass, and as a way of thinking through the present.

This takes me to a more implicit subject that the book deals with, namely the way we treat the planet. As we find in the last part of the book, Sylvie is driving through a Mad Max-esque environment on her way to her estranged father. As she is driving through this dystopian, rural, Australian landscape, the state of the country is described as: “[d]ull heat. The loneliness of wind across sandy fields. No birds, just flecks of black plastic, and higher up [...] the sturdier bodies of tiny drones.” Sylvie’s environment feels like the amalgamation, the concretisation of the impending doom that her father and her grandfather have felt all those years.

The people have not cared for the planet, and still do not care for the planet and now they must live on a planet that is trying its very best to be as hostile as possible. Nonetheless, humans remain on Earth like a pest that cannot be eradicated.

The characters in the book constantly question the ordinariness of civilisation as they know it, and this can be considered a critique of the way in which the world currently functions. With globalisation and capitalism unmoved on their pedestals, even when they were contributing factors to the pandemic we’re currently living through, questions of how we treat the planet and our own lives ought to be raised. Allinson’s characters raise such questions. When Vincent is in the ashram, he notices how sharply that life contrasts with his life in Melbourne. That disconnect leads him to question what life actually means and which form of civilisation is the real one, the correct one. “*Maybe Australia was the aberration. Maybe this was the real world.*” Vincent is open to ways of living that are not conventional, something we should be more open to in order to turn the tides in the destructive ways we are currently living on the planet. Considering most people’s desire to return to their pre-pandemic lives, certain questions must be asked. Wasn’t that way of living that got us in trouble in the first place? Should we not consider a way in which we live more in harmony with our planet? Taking Vincent’s train of thought, but slightly altering it: maybe the Anthropocene is the aberration. Maybe we should move away from an era in which human activity is what influences the climate and the environment the most, and reconsider what we find normal.

As Sylvie is making her way through the post-apocalyptic landscape, it should come as no surprise that she is rather cynical towards the future. This kind of cynicism is not unfamiliar to me when it comes to Melbournians/Australians in general and I have never found it surprising. Australia is a country in which bushfires are a yearly problem and the country has only just lived through the so-called Black Summer of 2019-2020, during which 18.6 million hectares of land were destroyed by fire. Pessimism due to anxiety about one’s safety with regards to the climate in Australia is thus not surprising. It is the standard.

It can be questioned whether the impending doom that both Vincent and Joe were feeling was some form of gut feeling about the future, which has materialized during Sylvie’s lifetime. Sylvie often thinks about death without appearing to consider taking her own life as a real option. It emphasises a numbness with regards to the current state of the world as well as her own life. Her inability to enjoy life and find meaning in it appears to be generational, and considering the state of the world, perhaps not even unwarranted.

As the book concludes, Sylvie confides in Joe that she is pregnant. The book thus concludes on the appearance of a new life. It left me distraught. Will this new life have to endure the same generational traumas as those who came before? Will another generation be doomed to the same fears and anxieties? Or will this be a generation of change? A generation that looks at the past with consideration? Will it look at the past as a guide on how not to do things?

This new life at the end of *In Moonland* leaves me with a similar feeling I had leaving Melbourne. It could be freedom, it could be love, but it could also be anxiety and fear. The only way to find out is to move into the unknown future which is inevitably influenced by the past.

About the Author

Sanne Tukker is a graduate student in Media Studies at Utrecht University. As well as studying at Utrecht University, she has studied in Melbourne where she successfully finished a minor in Gender Studies. Her most recent publication is an essay on the representation of Black dancers, which can be found in the academic magazine *BLIK*.

Works Cited

Allinson, Miles. *In Moonland*. Scribe Publications, 2021.



Blue, I love you

Three Letters To the Colour Blue

By Anna Sóley Ásmundsdóttir

I
u
Bluuuuuuue u
u ue
ue
uuuuue
Songs are like tattoos
(Mitchell)

Thoughts flow through my mind one after another, and sometimes a few at a time, both intertwined and independent. They form a musical cacophony that one would think impossible, except if one complements the other. A melody complements a lyric, but only one of them carries a semantic meaning. I walk from the record shop to the train holding an old record that I'm all too familiar with, *Blue*, the title song stuck in my head. I think of the song as a chapter in a book, a poem that stands on its own but also forms a wider net in context with the other songs. The vocalisation of "blue" is so much more complicated than the visual representation of the four letter-word *blue*.

I turn the corner to my street feeling cold, open the front door half-relieved, half dreading the tingling when the hands get warmer. Why dress for weather when you can dress for mood? A seasonal blue mood. What is it about the colour blue? The pen tattoos the paper with blue ink, a few words on the note that goes with your gift. I think it's dishonest to write the word *blue* without somehow capturing the waves of Joni Mitchell's voice. It would perhaps be eas-

ier on note paper, but then again the dots that symbol pitches never include the phonetics of the words. They are kept separate, the notes on the note-lines and the words below.

I leave the LP in front of your door after knocking a couple of times. In some ways I'm relieved but also a little blue, already feeling as if I lost the momentum that could bring us closer together. At the same time I'm enjoying the distance to dream. Perhaps feeling a little blue thinking of the time when I first discovered the album but had no one to talk to about it. A friendship distanced by time.

I pick up my phone and see a text from you and a photo of the bookstore where you got me a copy of Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. There is a passage that connects blue to distance, when it becomes the colour of distance:

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue. The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance. This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue. (Solnit 29)

The idea of this scattered light and the blue of distance is somehow tattooed in my brain since I read it first, like a song that is stuck. The book is about different ways of how to get lost and how to find something new in getting lost. The beauty of blue, the blue of distance is a way of seeing beauty in something that got lost.

II

Blue, songs are like tattoos
You know I've been to the sea before
Crown and anchor me
Or let me sail away
Blue, here is a song for you
Ink of a pin
Underneath the skin
An empty space to fill in
Well there're so many sinking now
You've got to keep thinking
You can make it thru these waves
Acid, booze, and ass
Needles, guns, and grass
Lots of laughs, lots of laughs
Well everybody's saying
that hell's the hippest way to go
Well I don't think so
But I'm gonna take a look around it though
Blue, I love you.
(Mitchell)

I look out the window and see a blue sky and see a blue sky, a sea of blue sky. Somehow one is less aware how fast the train moves when looking at a blue sky. But as the gaze fixes on something else one comes back to the senses, although one could also look at it as one was lost in thought. The body keeps walking, but the mind is absent. I follow the mind, and when I finally wake up I don't know where I am. Pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming. Sleepwalking through life unattached to a body. I don't know how often you have grabbed my hand avoiding an accident. Sometimes leaving a blue mark behind, a little reminder that we are supposed to feel, use our senses to keep us safe, not only the intellect.

Why has our intellect somehow become detached from our bodies, our mind an invisible world-

out of body experience, and our senses incomprehensible with a longing for understanding atmospheric qualities of, for example, the colour blue? Blue has a touch that seems to mirror the distances and look inwards. I feel like there is an inward forming of an ocean in my solar plexus, love and longing and a knuckle punching my stomach that forms a melancholy blue void within my body. It doesn't fit into my body but I can still abstractly feel it. Perhaps there are few imaginations that fit into a body. Besides, most of us live partly in an online parallel universe, a sea of information anchored by algorithms.

The confessional aspect of "Blue" and the album *Blue* makes it very naked, somehow touched by the atmospheric qualities of the colour. In the song it seems as if Blue were a person and a void at the same time, as if she were addressing her creations, work of art through another work of art. *Blue, I love you*. Like a letter to someone called Blue, a song inspired by Blue, belonging to Blue but from Joni. A borrowed tune to give to someone. Are songs tattoos that sit in your mind that you try to paint away? Or are they tattoos that become attached to you later as you write them to become a reality or to accept a reality painted by a memory?

I step out of the train and walk towards a bookstore in the city centre. The smell of new books. I look through the shelves and see a copy of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. I pick it up and read the beginning to be reminded of a memory when I gave you a copy because you also love the colour blue.

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a colour. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse), it became somehow personal.*
2. And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns. (Nelson 1)

"Perhaps my problem is that I don't want to get out from under its spells, but I have to say you have been on my mind more than usual these past few days and that is my confession," you said, laughing with a smile in your eyes, happily finding an understanding friend in a lyrical essay made up of 240 bluets. Or that's how

I remember it through the scattered light of a foggy memory.

III

Blue, here is a shell for you
Inside you'll hear a sigh
A foggy lullaby
There is your song from me.
(Mitchell)

I'm back at my flat by early nightfall, sitting in a chair contemplating whether my childhood memories are true or, by remembering a memory over and over again, they have become foggy and delusional. In *Bluets*, number 111, the "I" talks about dreaming of a blue restaurant after working the whole day in an orange restaurant and references Goethe: "Every decided colour does a certain violence to the eye, and forces the organ to opposition" (Nelson 43). If our senses are so unreliable and words so loaded, just like the word *blue*, how can we ever be honest?

Aftershocks, a memoir by Nadia Owusu, uses a metaphor to describe trauma through a language used to describe earthquakes, aftershocks are smaller earthquakes that follow the main one. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson introduce a theory of conceptual metaphors and that we use metaphors to explain concepts in everyday language: "Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence, we have found that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson 4). They give an example of this through various conceptual metaphors including TIME IS MONEY, that explains how we measure the concept time in terms of how we measure money, you waste, spend, gain time (7-9). Similarly, we also make sense of concepts through orientation: "These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment" (14). When we are depressed we feel

down, but we also speak of being blue. Mitchell's vocalisation of *blue* leads down in pitch. Which is actually another metaphor, pitches are sound waves that move through air or water and the frequency of the wave is what controls the pitch.

The main character in *Aftershocks* finds a blue rocking chair on the street:

The first time I rocked in the blue chair, it felt familiar. It felt like the kind of peace you find when floating in shallow water. It felt almost like sitting on my father's lap. It comforted me like all the rocking chairs that had come before it. I rocked and rocked for hours. As I rocked, everything else seemed farther away, almost inaccessible: my desert room, my roommate playing video games on the other side of the door, the street below. Nowhere except the blue chair mattered. I wanted to rock forever. (Owusu 65)

She spends a week rocking in this chair, depressed, going through memories. On day five she turns to her late father's music, jazz. "In the dark of my room, Coltrane's cacophonous soul spoke to mine. I wept. I wept myself dry, and when I could weep no more, I felt something like a happy rage" (Owusu 341). A foggy lullaby that lets the ocean of tears out.

I hear a knock on my door. When I open, I see you smiling, thanking me for the LP and shyly giving me a hug. I invite you inside and show you a song that I'm working on. We have this thing that we like to quote song lines whenever we can, so after playing a part of the tune, I look up with a coy smile and say: "There is your song from me".

About the Author

Anna Sóley Ásmundsdóttir is a Managing Editor of *RevUU* and a student of the M.A. Literature Today program at Utrecht University. Her former research focused on the relationship between poetry, song lyrics and music. A solo album with recordings of original compositions and lyrics will be released in August next year.

Instagram: @annasoleyasmundsdottir

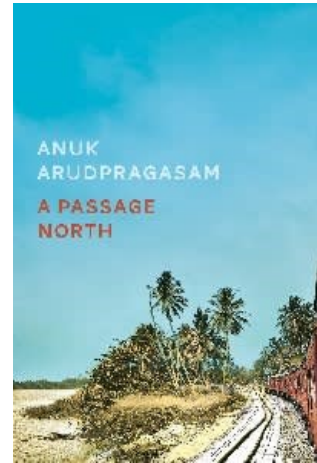
Works Cited

- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. 1980. The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Mitchell, Joni. LP cover. *Blue*. Reprise, 1971.
- Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. 2009. Jonathan Cape, 2017.
- Owusu, Nadia. *Aftershocks*. Simon & Schuster, 2021. EPUB.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. 2005. Canongate, 2017.

The Rewards of Rereading

A Review of Anuk Arudpragasam's *A Passage North*

By Eva Soares



Since the Booker Prize announcement on the third of November, we know who has won this year's prize, namely Damon Galgut with *The Promise*. I also know who should have won the 2021 Booker prize. The criteria for choosing a winner are sparse and vague. Officially, the only criterion is for a novel to be considered the best in the judges' opinion. You might be wondering, and rightfully so, how I could be so certain when it all depends on the subjective opinions of an alternating panel of judges. My claim is based on, what the current and former Booker judges consider, the strongest aspect of a book: its ability to be reread. According to Charlotte Higgins' article "Inside the Booker Prize", what the judges look for is "a book that basically rewards rereading" and can be "appreciated from different viewpoints by different judges". In other words, a book that will continue delivering some form of discovery and pleasure with each rereading is a winning book. Keeping this in mind, I argue that Anuk Arudpragasam's novel *A Passage North* should have been the Booker Prize winner.

Krishan is a young Sri Lankan man living with his mother, grandmother Appama, and her caregiver Rani in a post-civil war Sri Lanka. After a tragic call from Rani's daughter, he is obliged to travel across Sri Lanka by train to Attend Rani's funeral. His mental preparation and voyage across his home country prompts his mind to explore personal memories, philosophical thoughts, questions of life and reflect on the world around him. *A Passage North* is equally a physical and mental voyage as the reader follows Krishan's musings and life story. With today's consumption practices where the longest booklist is revered rather than the time spent on a single book, it would have been easy for me to simply read the novel and move on to another. Yet, after a single reading of *A Passage North* much of its content was left unrevealed. Rereading is almost necessary to en-

joy the full range of themes, tropes, and symbols it presents. The novel's richness and diversity is what allows for multiple readings, always offering the reader a deeper understanding and appreciation of it. In a single train ride from South to North of Sri Lanka, Arudpragasam touches upon love, death, getting old, trauma, religion, the psyche, journeys, and travel. These topics interact with each other, creating additional subjects and fueling nuanced discussions. The relationship between Appama and Rani, "that rapidly aging woman who was fighting to remain in the world and that invisibly wounded stranger who didn't seem to care about whether she stayed or left" shows how love and friendship can heal someone physically and mentally (Arudpragasam 172). Rani is given a purpose and an uninhibited companion through Appama. While Appama sees Rani as her accomplice in obtaining information about the goings on of the family, something she can no longer do on her own as her age increasingly isolates her to her room.

A Passage North also depicts the link between trauma and migration. Upon seeing advertisements discouraging Sri Lankans to emigrate, Krishan, wonders "how was it possible to convince such people not to risk their lives going elsewhere, not to attempt migrating to countries that seemed, in their minds, far removed from these sites of trauma" (Arudpragasam 190). Having worked for an NGO in the North shortly after the war, Krishan knows that the reason most people leave is to run away from the places that have caused pain, death, and terror in their lives. He emphasizes the necessity to migrate in order to escape trauma, creating physical distance from a mental wound. In this way, the novel's themes mix with each other, revealing connections which could not be made so easily. With each new reading comes a reward in noticing these connections and relating to them.

To add to the novel's already rich narrative, Arudpragasam frames its reading with the recurring trope of the gaze. Throughout the novel, the gaze and the eyes play a symbolic role in grasping concepts of death, trauma and beauty. Krishan is faced with the power a gaze can have on individuals. He participates in and is an observer of many stare downs, where "a kind of tension [builds] up from each person's sense that the other person could see inside them" (Arudpragasam 121). Gazing at someone is a transgression of that person's intimacy, thus it holds power. In the novel, eyes become a symbol for that gaze and its potential effects. The war prisoner, Kuttimani, is aware of the symbolic power eyes hold. He asks that, after his execution, his eyes should be given to a blind child "so that they too might look into the horizon" (Arudpragasam 198). Thus, eyes represent a powerful sense of freedom, the ability to look out at a distance.

... Gazing at someone is a transgression of that person's intimacy, thus it holds power. In the novel, eyes become a symbol for that gaze and its potential effects ...

This powerful symbol was not lost on Kuttimani's killers either, since they destroyed his eyes in revenge. Krishan also wonders about the deterioration of the eyes as people encounter scenes of beauty and violence throughout their lives. He reflects that "perhaps it was not just images of beauty that clouded one's vision over time but images of violence too, ... both of which marked and branded us, limiting how far we were subsequently able to

see" (Arudpragasam 261). The freeing power of the gaze is, in time, clouded by the subsequent images life brings along. In this way, Arudpragasam ties together the various themes the novel discusses with the effect of the gaze. Trauma and beauty are held on the same standard as images which affect people to the same extent. The fact that with old age eyesight deteriorates is linked back to these images and the journey of life. I could go on listing and exploring each intersection of themes and the gaze for an entire thesis, yet I would have only touched upon its surface.

A Passage North has come to mean, for me, a bottomless well from which I can draw new philosophical views of life's struggles and rewards. Not only does this novel withstand rereading, it provides a form of guidance. Following Krishan's musings on his life and that of his relatives, the reader is taken through a form of therapy coming out of each reading with more tools to deal with and appreciate our own lives. This is a novel which aims to heal and guide us, especially after the difficult period the world has been through, and which would surely have been a worthy Booker Prize winner.

About the Author

Eva Soares is a graduate of Utrecht University's B.A. Literary Studies, and she is now completing an M.A. degree in Literature Today. Having an international background – French, American and Portuguese roots – her main interest is literature dealing with culture and multilingualism.

Website: <https://evasoares.journoportfolio.com/>

Works Cited

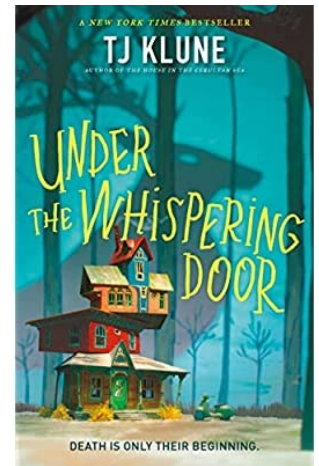
Arudpragasam, Anuk. *A Passage North*. Granta Books, 2021.

Higgins, Charlotte. "Inside the Booker Prize". *The Guardian*, 5 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/05/arguments-anticipation-and-carefully-encouraged-scandals-the-making-of-the-booker-prize>. Accessed 16 October 2021.

A Painfully Captivating Novel About Death, Grief, and Acceptance

A Review of TJ Klune's *Under The Whispering Door*

By Judith Revenberg



** Contains mentions of death, mental health, and suicide (and spoilers) **

Earlier this year, I was introduced to an author whom I now call one of my favourites: TJ Klune. The book that won me over was *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (2020), a novel filled with gentle dialogue and endearing characters about learning to accept others and simultaneously yourself. Consequently, it was a no-brainer that when Klune's most recent novel *Under the Whispering Door* was released in September 2021, I had to get my hands on it as soon as possible.

It is not necessarily a ground-breaking novel. There have been many books about life after death, morality, and acceptance, and I am sure there will be many more. Klune even seems to build upon the formula of his previous novel when it comes to the basic structure of the plot. Still, he has a talent for storytelling, and before I knew it, Klune's characters once again found their way into my heart.

Under the Whispering Door follows Wallace Price, an attorney, who is cruel, unlikable, unrelatable, and, consequently, an interesting choice for the main character. After all, it is common for an author to include character traits a reader can resonate with, can look at and say, 'I do that too!' But Wallace is not written to be likeable – at least not at the start of the novel. Instead, he acts thoughtlessly, indifferent to others' feelings. This is evident from the first lines, which read, "Patricia was crying. Wallace hated it

when people cried" (Klune 7). They are followed by him firing Patricia, after which Wallace is quickly established as "cold and calculating" (12) by his employees.

It takes dying for Wallace finally to recognise his flaws. As a ghost, he attends his funeral, to which only four people show up. When his ex-wife gives a gruelling eulogy about what a terrible person he was – "he was obstinate, foolhardy, and cared only for himself" (33) – Wallace agrees to accompany Mei, his personal reaper, to start the next chapter in his existence. She brings him to Charon's Crossing Tea Shop, where he meets Hugo, the so-called ferryman. The teashop is referred to as a way station throughout the novel, stating that it is "a stop along the path we're all travelling on" (331). Hugo, as a 'ferryman', is there to help those who passed cross to the other side, accompanied by Mei and the ghosts of Hugo's grandfather, Nelson, and dog, Apollo. What unfurls is a story about grief, personal growth, and unexpected love, with a third act that will have you in tears.

Since *The House in the Cerulean Sea* was a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* bestseller and received various awards, many readers might inevitably recognise links between the two novels. Upon Wallace's arrival at the teashop, he notices a picture of "an island in a cerulean sea, the trees so thick, he couldn't see the ground" (67). This feels like a deliberate nod towards *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, even though that story takes place in a different reality. The picture is not the only connec-

tion. *Under the Whispering Door* is also built on a found-family trope with a gentle queer romance subplot between Wallace and Hugo. The novels are centred around personal growth, although Linus from *The House in the Cerulean Sea* recognises he worked for a flawed system, while Wallace realises *he* was the core issue. Throughout the book, Wallace acknowledges he was an objectively bad person while alive and uses death to improve his behaviour.

Grief, Wallace knew, had the power to consume, to eat away until there was nothing left but hollowed-out bones. Oh, the shape of the person remained as it was, even if the cheeks turned sallow, and dark circles formed under the eyes. Hollowed out and left raw, they were still recognizably human. It came in stages, some smaller than others, but undeniable.
(405)

Both Linus and Wallace are shown the error of their ways and become better for it, and are accepted by their newly found family. In *Under the Whispering Door*, Wallace is told by Nelson, “We don’t need you because that implies you had to fix something in us. We were never broken. We want you, Wallace. Every piece. Every part. Because we’re family. Can you see the difference?” (473).

However, while *The House in the Cerulean Sea* was about acceptance and sticking up for yourself and felt aimed towards a younger audience, this novel explores far heavier themes, including grief, suicide, and mental health. When it comes to grief, Klune draws from personal experience. The dedication of the novel states, “For Eric. I hope you woke up in a strange place” (5). This is in reference to his late fiancé, Eric Arvin, who was hospitalised in 2013 for a benign tumour on his brainstem. He became dependent on a ventilator and died in 2016 of pneumonia. In a blog post about Arvin’s passing, in which Klune explains he suffered from severe depression during the period before his fiancé’s death, he writes, “Everything I knew crumbled around me. And oh, did I sink into the darkness of it all” (Klune).

In the acknowledgements of *Under the Whispering Door*, Klune states that the novel is “a deeply personal story for me; therefore it was very hard to write. It took a lot out of me to finish, as it forced me to explore my own grief over someone I loved very much” (Klune 544). His willingness to use his grief and channel it into the story is evident, and his descriptions regarding the subject are painfully beautiful.

Klune’s writing style borders on poetic. There is an ease to how he strings metaphors together to visualise Wallace’s emotions. Especially in the third act, during which Wallace is forced to say his good-byes and pass on, Klune brought me to tears more than once. The ability to make the reader care enough about characters to transfer fictional feelings from page to reality is evidence of truly skilled writing, a talent Klune continues to display.

Despite the romance subplot, the novel does not romanticise grieving in and of itself. Instead, it touches upon various facets of death and loss and does not shy away from displaying grief’s toll on the people left behind. This is not just with regard to Wallace’s death. We are also introduced to a mother who lost her child and cannot get over her grief, a man who was murdered and cannot accept he is dead, and someone who was so lost after the death of a loved one, he took his own life.

Klune’s characters suffer, but rather than ignoring what that does to a person, he tackles the subject of mental health head-on. Hugo suffers from anxiety and depression, caused by both the death of his parents at a young age and the deaths he deals with daily. It causes him to have panic attacks, as described in the following scene:

It took a long time, but Wallace didn’t push. He wouldn’t. Not when Hugo was like this. It wouldn’t help. So he sat there, head bowed, tapping his finger on the boards beneath him, a tiny sound to let Hugo know he was there. [... Wallace must have tapped his finger a hundred times before Hugo spoke. “I’m fine,” he said, voice hoarse.

“Okay,” Wallace said easily. “But it’s all right if you’re not, too.” He hesitated.

“Panic attacks are no joke.” (362)

Instead of glossing over mental health concerns for the sake of furthering the plot, Klune makes conversations like these an integral part of his novels. This shows that dealing with trauma, depression, and anxiety is an ever-continuing process, which cannot be resolved in the manner of a few pages, and is not inferior to physical conditions.

Wallace decides to remain a ghost at the tea-shop for the time being. He falls in love with Hugo, starts to care deeply about Mei and Nelson, and becomes an integral part of their unconventional family. Consequently, it comes as a shock when, in the last third of the book, a deity referred to as ‘The Manager’ appears. He mirrors the person Wallace used to be – a cold-hearted, calculating being who only cares whether his system works fluently. The Manager forces Wallace to cross to the other side and gives him one week to get his affairs in order, saying, “There is no loophole, no last-minute bit of evidence you can fling upon the courtroom in a display of your legal prowess. [...] don’t make the mistake of thinking I’ll look the other way for you. This was always temporary” (401).

So starts the third act of the novel. Wallace works towards accepting his faith, making sure there are no loose ends, and eventually finds peace with the idea that he has to move on. Because of this, when the Manager, who was quite clear about the lack of loopholes, suddenly decides to make an ex-

ception and brings Wallace back to life to work as a reaper, alongside Hugo and Mei, I stumbled.

On one hand, I do enjoy happy endings, to see everything fall into place regardless of the hardships the characters went through, and, sure, it is nice that Wallace gets a second chance at life after all. But Klune spends a lot of time and pages helping the reader accept Wallace’s (the story’s) seemingly inevitable destination, and the sudden twist felt like it undid part of the emotional journey. Yes, the expected course would have been painful to read, but it would have been more in line with the message that while life does not always turn out the way we want it, it is up to us to make it work.

Regardless, Klune conveys a topic as heavy as death in a captivating, moving, and heart-breaking manner but still leaves us hopeful. As he confronts us with the inevitability of death and grief, he shows there is a way through the pain with moving dialogue and descriptions: “Wallace whispered, ‘It’s easy to let yourself spiral and fall.’ ‘It is,’ Nelson agreed. ‘But it’s what you do to pull yourself out of it that matters most.’” (295). *Under the Whispering Door* is a reminder that even when we have spiralled into our emotions and grief to a point beyond recognition, into a husk of who we used to be, we are not beyond saving.

About the Author

Judith Revenberg is a graduate student in literature at Utrecht University. She is an avid reader of Young- and New Adult fiction and has researched characterisation and protective mimicry presented in YA novels. Judith has written book reviews for bol.com’s *Lees Magazine* and, as head of PR for RevUU, is always on top of the developments in the literary field.

Works Cited

- Klune, TJ “The Failings of a Human Being.” *A Fistful of Awesome*, 27Apr.2020, <http://www.TJklunebooks.com/newblog/2020/4/27/the-moralistic-failings-of-a-human-being>. Accessed on 14-10-2021.
- . *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, Tom Doherty Associates, 2020.
- . *Under the Whispering Door*, Tom Doherty Associates, 2021.

Death Among the Tealeaves

TJ Klune's *Under the Whispering Door*

By Tara Huisman

****Warning: The following review contains spoilers.****

Under the Whispering Door is a book about death, but it's not a book about dying. TJ Klune's latest book tells the story of Wallace Price: a cold and uncaring lawyer, who only in death realises that he hasn't truly lived. What follows is a tale of grief, love, and learning to deal with the messiness and mysteriousness of living. And all this takes place in a cosy tea shop in the woods, that functions as a waystation for the recently deceased. Charon's Crossing Tea and Treats is a soft and warm space filled with mismatched furniture, vined plants, and a powerful scent of spices. Wallace's arrival at Charon's Crossing happens with the same grace as sticking your ice-cold hands into a warm bath: painful, and accompanied by a strong reflex to remove yourself from the situation. But Wallace is granted no such luxury.

By the end of *Under the Whispering Door*, Wallace works out that "[life]'s about the people, and what we're willing to do for one another" (318). And the people are precisely what brings life to the novel. There's Mei, a new and energetic Reaper who guides the deceased to the tea shop and comforts them ("Death isn't a final ending, Wallace. It's an ending, sure, but only to prepare you for a new beginning" (120)). There's Nelson, the old grandfather who died many years ago but stays around anyway ("We think we have time for such things, but there's never enough for all we should have said") (232). And last but definitely not least, Hugo. Hugo is not just the ferryman who helps the deceased cross, he is the

heart and soul of the novel. Empathetic to a fault, imperfect, but most of all: kind. Human. ("I took the job because I wanted to. How could I not? Helping people when they need it most, when they think all is lost? Of course I'd agree to it (235).") And as Wallace slowly falls in love with him, he learns that same kindness.

For those familiar with Klune's other work, such a strong cast of characters should come as no surprise. His previous book, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (2020), was praised for both its endearing characters and its charm, two traits that I can confidently say have returned in *Under the Whispering Door*. The book features well-rounded characters and takes time to explore their various histories and motivations. Another recurring theme in Klune's work, is that his books often feature gay, bisexual, and asexual characters (*How to be a Normal Person*, *The Extraordinaries*, *Murmuration*). *Under the Whispering Door* is no exception. The novel features multiple LGBTQIA+ characters, but it's not a story about *being* LGBTQIA+. It is a story where the characters can just exist as themselves, where they just *happen to be* LGBTQIA+. This is an important distinction. It allows them to just exist without having to make a statement about their sexuality. It is a story in which being LGBTQIA+ is already normalised.

Not only does Klune's work feature strong characters, Klune writes with an easy flow that makes *Under the Whispering Door* impossible to put down. I sat down with a hot cup of tea to read this book and



found myself still in the same spot hours later, my tea long having gone cold. And like Hugo, I take my tea very seriously. Take the first chapter for example, Wallace's introduction, where he is shown to be cold and uncaring by firing an employee over a single mistake—even though she had worked for him years. His employee tells him about all the hardships she's facing in life, while Wallace only attempts to steer back the conversation to his intention to fire her. The woman has no idea what he has planned, and for a while Wallace's interjections *could* be mistaken for niceties. Wallace and his employee are having two entirely different conversations, and it is only through the insight we are given into Wallace's thoughts that we understand what's about to happen. This type of clever writing and anticipation for the inevitable continue throughout the novel, which made me keep turning pages – straight until the last one.

Not only the writing style kept me engaged while reading, but also the comfort of 'being' at Charon's Crossing. Of course, initially Wallace wouldn't agree with me. He's so out of place there that he isn't even allowed the usual armour of his expensive suits. Instead, he's forced to spend his time in a T-shirt, sweatpants, and flipflops. One piece of Charon's Crossing homely décor is a sign that reads:

The first time you share tea, you are a stranger.

The second time you share tea, you are an honoured guest.

The third time you share tea, you become family. (44)

The first cup of tea surprises Wallace; it tastes like the warmth of a fond childhood memory. Although he is openly welcomed, Wallace is still a stranger in the boisterous tea shop, spending his days hiding in the kitchen. And we, the readers, are also strangers to the teashop, having barely spent a few pages there. Slowly, hiding in the kitchen turns into late-night talks with Hugo on the porch, hidden behind the tea bushes underneath a sting of fairy lights. His second cup is shared with Hugo, hunched over a steaming bitter brew that leaves a soft aftertaste, lingering like honey. Even Wallace notices that irony. And the last

cup of tea, a cup that "smells like home," (325) is shared between Hugo, Nelson, Mei, and Wallace. Family. And through the passage of warm scone-scented days and quiet evenings by the fireplace, we, the readers, become part of that too.

The story is driven by the introduction and variety of new characters, and it is through them that Wallace's growth becomes apparent. Wallace – who comes to Charon's Crossing angrily calling his death an "awful inconvenience," (49) and spewing threats of formal complaints and managerial interference – learns to employ his newfound empathetic skills to advise and calm down a new and furious deceased guest of the tea shop. It is only when Wallace pulls a prank on a disliked customer that he truly laughs for the first time. Yet Wallace's character growth becomes most apparent when you compare him to the Manager—the being who oversees the entire process of life and death. The Manager is introduced as a headstrong, order-focussed being who indifferently eliminates anything that upsets that order. It's an indifference that makes him feared, that creates a looming sense of dread of what might happen to you if you upset his order. It is the same sense of dread Wallace's employees felt. In the end, Wallace's life-experience helps him understand the Manager better than the others ever did. Not only does he need his newfound empathy, insight, and kindness, he also profits from his past. He sees through the Manager's bureaucracy, offers a new plan to help manage the afterlife, and is brought back to life as a result.

That ending brings about mixed feelings in me. On one hand, his resurrection means that Wallace and Hugo can have their happy ending. And we need more queer romances that end happy. We have had to deal with too many tragic queer tropes, like 'bury your gays', or being satisfied with some background character that's supposed to count as queer representation. Coming from this history, having some positive stories can help us create a more hopeful outlook for the future. Yet it feels as if the happy romance goes against the overall theme of *Under the Whispering Door*. The book is cleverly interwoven with humour, but it also features a sometimes overwhelming sense of grief. The novel shows grief as

both a catalyst and a transformation, a sense of grief for a life we *could've* lived; the realisation that we had so many more possibilities ahead of us than we ever thought, only to realise in the same breath that death has taken them all away (“Wallace suddenly found himself wishing for many impossible things” (228)).

This heart-breaking reality hangs between Wallace and Hugo as they fall in love and realise that they'll never have a life together. Over the course of the book, they try to accept and move on from this grief too. And just as Wallace is ready and lets go... he's resurrected. No more moving on to the next stage of the journey, no more grief. He had accepted his end, said his goodbyes, and now, that acceptance isn't needed anymore. In that sense, the plotline of grieving and moving on was accomplished but also undermined. Although it might not be the ending that I had expected while reading the book, I feel that

it's the happy ending we deserve. Klune leaves us with the promise of their future together, and the sense that things will be alright from here on.

Under the Whispering Door takes us on a beautiful yet heavy journey. The book is filled with insightful questions and comments about existence, which caused me to keep my notebook within reach the entire time. How could I read a line like “Wasn't that the great answer to the mystery of life? To make the most of what you have while you have it, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly” (310), and not write it down? Yet out of all the lines I penned down, Wallace's (after)life and journey are best captured in a quote of three simple words: “He learned kindness” (303). The book might have centred around Wallace's journey, but it also leaves us readers with an important question: “What will you do with the time you have left?” (276). Wallace an-

About the Author

Tara Huisman is a graduate student of Media Studies where she focuses on film and game research. In her research, she often looks at the way storytelling contributes to social activism. She works for the journal *Junctions*, where she has just taken on the role of Managing Editor. She is part of the LGBTQ community.

Works Cited

- Klune, TJ. *How to be a Normal Person*. Dreamspinner Press, 2015.
- . *Murmuration*. Dreamspinner Press, 2016.
- . *The Extraordinaries*. Tor Books, 2020.
- . *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. Tor Books, 2020.
- . *Under the Whispering Door*. Tor Books, 2021.

In the Tradition of Perceiving Women

A Review of Virginia Feito's *Mrs. March*

By Juliette Huisman



It can easily be assumed that, whilst reading our fair share of novels, most of us have been able to recognise ourselves in one or two characters that we have come across. Whether we recognise certain mannerisms, laugh along with a character that has the same sense of humour as us, or whether it is something that we just cannot quite put our finger on but identify with nonetheless.

For Mrs. March, the eponymous protagonist of Virginia Feito's accomplished debut novel, this feeling of recognition hits a little too close to home. Upon visiting her favourite patisserie in preparation for the party she is throwing for her husband, she is congratulated on his accomplishment of publishing a novel and asked whether this is "the first time he's based a character on you?" (Feito 4) Mrs. March had not really read the full novel herself, unlike how she had eagerly read her husband's previous manuscripts, for the sole reason that she was "too repulsed by the main character" (8). In shock, and with mouth agape, Mrs. March starts to wonder whether she indeed unwittingly had been the muse for her husband's latest main character: "a whore" (5).

After collecting herself, for appearance's sake, Mrs. March rushes home to confirm – or, she hopes, to deny – the similarities between her and the character, Johanna, that she describes as a "weak, plain, detestable, pathetic, unloved, unlovable wretch" (16). Mrs. March concludes that the prostitute's physical description could indeed match her own, while remarking that it was so unremarkable that it could as

well be coincidence. However, she is not willing to admit that there are any similarities between her and the repulsive character. It is not until she reads the words "to my wife, a constant source of inspiration" (16) in the acknowledgements that her tears of fear come pouring out.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Mrs. March continuously observes people – her husband and the guests at the book party, whose foreboding laughs make her want to poison them – to see whether it is indeed her that they imagine when they read her husband's work. This eventually drives Mrs. March to insanity, questioning who it is she portrays, who it is people perceive her as, and, most dauntingly, who she actually is.

While these questions regarding female identity are central in *Mrs. March*, they are certainly not new questions. They fall into a longer literary tradition, harking back to the works of Daphne du Maurier, Louisa May Alcott, and Virginia Woolf.

The first and most direct literary reference to this tradition in *Mrs. March* can be found lying on Mrs. March's nightstand, where Du Maurier's early 20th century novel *Rebecca* is put out as if to be read. In this gothic novel, the eerily similarly unnamed Mrs. De Winter's married life is, like that of Mrs. March, determined by the haunting ideas of what it is to be a perfect woman and wife. While in *Rebecca* Mrs. De Winter is directly confronted by the ideals of womanhood in the image of her name's predecessor, the late Mrs. Rebecca de Winter, *Mrs. March* brilliantly illus-

trates that these ideals are also imposed by society and, most devastatingly, ourselves.

The mere fact that the narrator of Feito's novel only and endlessly refers to herself by her married name – even when referring to moments in the past, before Mrs. March became a Mrs. March – showcases how women are defined, and tend to define themselves, by their husband through titles such as “Mrs.” The name of March itself is also not without any possible significance. Feito's Mrs. March is not the first literary woman to be known by this name, with the title already belonging to the mother in Louisa May Alcott's widely read novel *Little Women*. Alcott's Mrs. March is portrayed as the perfect mother, woman and wife through her care, patience and selflessness. She is very much a woman in the traditional sense, stating on the topic of marriage at one point in the novel that “to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (151). This association places any other Mrs. March in the same realm of woman in the reader's mind, thus creating expectations through tradition and its accompanying boundaries that define what kind of woman she is thus supposed, – or, perhaps, expected – to be.

The importance of this name is already plastered on the cover of every copy of the novel, with Mrs. March being both a character and the title given to the novel. The title *Mrs. March* reminds us of another woman in literature known as “Mrs.”: Clarissa Dalloway, the eponymous central character in Virginia Woolf's widely acclaimed novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. *Mrs. March* refers in multiple ways – albeit in more subtle ways than to *Rebecca* – back to *Mrs. Dalloway*, both in story and the themes that are echoed throughout. Both novels start off on a morning in the 20th century, following a married woman as she makes her way into the city to pick up the last things she needs for a party planned for that evening. The party underlines, in both novels, the importance of the social roles of women, specifically married women in the upper classes of society. This emphasis on the awareness of societal roles is reflected in how women behave and in how they are conscious of how they are perceived. Both women are very much aware of this and su-

press what is inside, what they feel and are. Mrs. Dalloway expresses that “it rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster” (10), and suppresses that what she deems not lady-like. Mrs. March expresses a similar fear of people peering behind the façade, unwilling that “the whole world would know [and that] they would see inside her, wickedest of violations” (16).

In *Mrs. March* this fear is internalized in such a way that it results in severe hallucinations and paranoia. At the start of the novel Mrs. March is already very much aware of how she is perceived – covering up her hands with gloves as to cover her raggedy hands, covering up every trace of not being well put together as expected of women – and this only increases as she finds out about her literary alter-ego Johanna. The fish on her plate even starts blinking as it stares at her, the paintings behind her morph to take a look at her as she turns her back, and she starts to see herself, not only in the mirror or her husband's character, but staring back at her in the streets of Manhattan.

Mrs. March provides the reader with an insight to, and awareness of, how we are seen, how we want to be perceived, and how we allow these views to form us as women specifically. By way of getting into the increasingly fastidious mind of Mrs. March, the disturbing unease of certain views and their effects become foregrounded by the slowly disintegrating account of reality that Mrs. March gives us. From her gloves at the start of the novel, which she keeps putting back on for appearance's sake, to the eventual unnerving feeling that even the dead are watching her, all of Mrs. March actions and thoughts are shown to be grounded in how she believes others perceive her.

Even though the story of Mrs. March is set in the previous century, and despite the fact that possible references to other literary works can date back to the end of the 19th century, such views of women – and of what women should be – are still prevalent today. The idea of the domestic angel may seem so archaic to us, a relic of a long time ago, but these traditions still seep into our perceptions today, be it willingly or not. The fact that we are still able to rec-

ognise ourselves in characters created decennia ago shows that humans, even after countless evolutions, are still more unchanging that we would like to believe.

Mrs. March tells of a continuous fight between what we show ourselves to be and what we are made out to be. Who we actually are is often lost in the middle of this muddled mess this fight leaves in our minds. Feito has succeeded in writing a novelistic ac-

count of a severely muddled mind, using both style and story to convey the decay of this female trope, while reinvigorating the literary tradition shaped by various female authors before her.

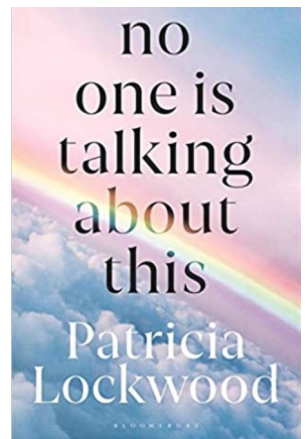
About the Author

Juliette Huisman is currently a graduate student at Utrecht University, after having finished two two B.A. degrees in four years' time. Her research focuses on psychological and historical aspects present in literary works and how they affect plot, characters and our perception of both as a result. In her spare time she likes to explore these themes herself in her own writing.

Works Cited

- Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. 1868-1869. Puffin Books, 2014.
- Feito, Virginia. *Mrs. March*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2021.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. 1925. Penguin Group, 2012.

Why Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* Is a Must Read



By Paula Werdnik

She opened the portal. 'Are we all just going to keep doing this till we die?' people were asking each other, as other days they asked each other, 'Are we in hell?'

Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* is unique, unconventional, witty, and cynical; it captures the zeitgeist of our time.

The novel reads like a collage of thoughts. A Dadaist bricolage of quotes, queries, and questions about universal themes. Lockwood's novel explores themes such as the evasive meaning of life, the mundaneness of the everyday, the coping with loss and grief, and the questions we ask ourselves about our society and norms. More specifically, this novel delves into the questions we ask ourselves about the changing nature of life in the digital age: our overconsumption of information, our obsession with technology and self-branding on social media, and our attempts to connect, while being more isolated than ever.

These themes feel especially topical since the corona crisis turned much of our daily lives into a digital simulacrum. Zoom meetings, Skype calls with families, and drinks with friends over Whatsapp video call. The digital world began to replace the "real" world; at times it still feels that way, now more than ever. Our laptops, phones, tablets and TVs have become the ways we connect to the world, and each other. As the protagonist screams, "*My whole life is in there!*" we feel a sense of grim relatability.

The collage-like quality of the novel is reflected in the use of interesting typography; it is peppered with text messages, captions of social media posts, and italicized private inner thoughts. Straying from a conventional linear plot structure, the novel progresses in a fragmented but captivating way. This fragmentation of the structure and content seems to

reflect the mind of the protagonist, as well as the society the protagonist lives in. Lockwood's novel is self-reflexive; she writes, "Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made...or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote" (74). The novel itself seems to mimic the format of social media posts and text messages, the sections divided into short paragraphs and short chapters; some are just a fleeting thought.

The reader learns that the protagonist is a "portal" (a term used in the novel to refer to the internet or a type of social media) influencer. She flies to conventions, gives speeches, and hosts interviews about the portal. Indeed, at the start of the novel, it seems her whole life revolves around the portal. Absurdly, the reader later finds out that all her fame on the portal was the aftermath of a single post she created, "Can a dog be twins?"

Throughout the novel, however, the protagonist grows out of this identity. She is pulled out of her irony, her cynicism, and her obsession with the portal when her sister's baby, a baby who is diagnosed with an illness called Proteus syndrome, is born. Proteus syndrome causes some parts of the baby to grow faster than others, and it is clear the baby will not have long to live. After the birth, the protagonist spends most of her time with her family, she falls in love with the baby, and realises that there is beauty and meaning to life. She realises that she has been wasting her time on the portal. She spends less and less time on the portal, and by being connected to real life, and being affected by the hope and the tragedy that the baby represents, she is confronted with real, deep and overwhelming feelings of love, grief, regret and hope.

The protagonist is, ultimately, relatable. She refers to memes, to topical societal issues, to

thoughts we seem to collectively share through our “communal mind” (Lockwood, 225) she calls it. The novel reflects a specific “American-ness”, yet the themes are universal.

For example, it points out our global obsession with trendiness, our attempts to be new and funny, our disconnectedness from reality, and the addictive nature of the Internet. The novel points out the escapism we seek by constant stimulation, and the dangers of this.

Yet, the novel also highlights the beauty of technology, of the immortality of the portal and how even the dead could live on in pictures via “memories” stored on phones and the portal, “the place where images dwelled and dwelled” (Lockwood, 222). After the baby dies, the family is still able to cherish photos and videos of her, and share these via messaging apps. In a sense, thanks to technology, the baby is able to live on in the digital world. It reflects a thought that we have all

had at one moment or another during the corona crisis lockdown, “thank God, can you believe, that we had the technology” (Lockwood, 222).

This novel is important as it holds a message of hope. The protagonist finds greater meaning and hope in life after meeting her sister’s baby, a baby that had too little time on this earth. In the ‘Acknowledgements’ of the novel, the author raises awareness about this important issue, Proteus Syndrome, and shares links to help with donations.

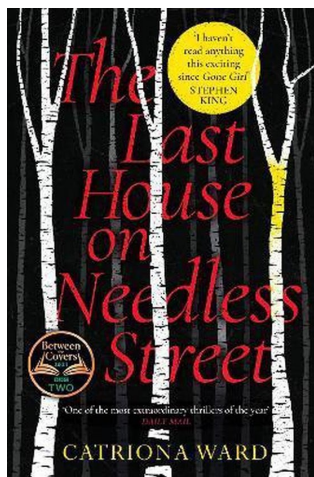
Only at the end did I understand the title, “No One is Talking About This”; no one is talking about the tragedy of Proteus Syndrome. I didn’t know about the illness either before reading the novel. The novel spreads awareness about the importance of living life to the fullest, of being conscious consumers of technology, and also about an issue very close to the author’s heart – Proteus Syndrome. Love it or hate it, one thing is clear - this novel is something we should all be talking about.

About the Author

Paula Werdnik is a postgraduate student in literature at Utrecht University. She has completed a B.A. degree in Arts & Culture Studies at Radboud University, with a minor in Literature in Society. She has written for *NUKS* magazine and *Raffia Gender & Diversity* magazine.

Works Cited

Lockwood, Patricia. *No One Is Talking About This*. Riverhead Books, 2021.



About *The Last House on Needless Street* ...

At Least It Isn't Cats (2019)

By Chantal Groot

Read it! It's got a rave review quote from the King, apps [Name Withheld], who has known me since the late 1990s, those dying halcyon days of the EXTREME youth generation, when we devoured anything and everything dark and violent because Fuck Society™. Stephen King was/is the King of Horror, Master of Psychological Thriller, inspirer of decent-to-great film adaptations and mediocre-to-godawful miniseries. [Name Withheld] mistakes my lack of instantaneous response for apathy (unaware that I am illegally texting while cycling) and goes for broke: It's a murder mystery narrated by a cat.

Well now ... Sold. Bought. Being the well-integrated heathen I am, I keep on pedalling with sub-stellar situational awareness as I add Catriona Ward's *The Last House on Needless Street* to my (404 Not Found) shopping basket. The cat bathing in the streetlight on the hardcover—very Grizabella-esque—tempts me. The €26,99 price tag is repulsive, like a peanut butter pickle. At €15,89-plus-shipping, the cat-less paperback is more palatable, like strawberry sandwiches.

A talking cat! I had missed the unapologetic supernatural mystery novels of my childhood. From R.L. Stein's *Goosebumps* to King's own extensive universes (MCU who?), I like a dash of the uncanny in everything I read. Finally, an excuse to throw a good old crime airport novel into the institutional literary works! These past 15 years of on-again/off-again/no-on-again/naw-am-broke-back-to-work-again English literary studies have gotten me down, and abandoned me on, the canonized path of Literature™. Apart from one hearty course on detective fiction in my second year at university that was right up the nostalgia alley—Thank you, Professor Pascoe!—my academic blinkers, and limited free time, refused to let me veer away from the titles approved by the syl-

labi. Essays must be weighty in their writing. Word-count, marginally met. To the student essayist, literary works are more easily dissected, intersected, and vivisected—Pynchon, stop avoiding me, I said I was sorry—when they have enough meat on them to feed (into) the *cause célèbre du jour*, because contemporary social relevancy is a guaranteed grade booster. You can make a meal out of anything, granted, but certain literary genres are considered lesser cuts of leaner meats that, traditionally, shouldn't dress a respectable academic's table set.

As previously established, I'm not respectable. And this is not an academic paper *per se*. There isn't even a minimum wordcount. Just a 2K maximum. Just a quote-creative-critical essay-unquote, which I have decided to interpret as an experimental personal essay to best explain why, while I initially appreciated Ward's novel, I was ultimately let down by it. This won't be an eloquent piece of scholarship. It may just end up on the back pages of some student magazine, tailing its betters like a sickly new-born wildebeest trying not to be abandoned by the intellectual herd. This is not a let-me-titillate-your-interest review. This is a chugging train of thought, creatively featured (and vice versa), and although it takes a while to get to the point, there are no intermediate stops between here and my biggest issue with *The Last House on Needless Street*.

It's not just about the cat.

It's about what that cat could have been.

It's about potential.

It's about the town loner, Ted, and his pet cat, Olivia,

and their strange coexistence alongside Ted's daughter, Lauren, in the last and creepiest house on Needless Street. A little girl was kidnapped, presumed murdered, in the area years ago. Ted was suspected, never arrested. The little girl's big sister, Dee, moves into the second-to-last house on Needless Street to spy on Ted, convinced of his guilt. Ted says he's innocent, but what's he doing in the forest where gods dwell? Why does he keep finding a child's white flipflop about his house? There's also the Chihuahua Lady down the road who goes missing; a tired detective on the case since forever; Ted's bug-eyed therapist; and the spectre of Ted's mother everywhere. There's something going on in the attic and/or basement, and a strange voice on the tape recorder. Speaking of voices, Olivia the cat narrates every so many chapters and occasionally consults the Bible. Well, she's not really a cat. Or, rather, not a real cat, depending on who is talking. Nor does she talk. Actually, she does, but not ... Why does the rug keep changing colour? What's going on in this ~~book~~ house book?!

The genres of mystery, horror, thriller and crime are so entwined it is impossible to pry them apart without leaving tell-tale signs of the others' influences. Horror is to mystery as fear is to the unknown. Crime fiction engages mystery to thrill. In the down-to-earth stories, the mystery of the crime has a worldly resolution. No one ever questioned why Scooby-Doo was the only talking dog in the show's universe, yet it was apparently too out-there for the monster of the week to be anything more than a hoax in (wo)man form. The whodidit in a whodunit is an unknown but ultimately, assuredly, a naturally occurring species. Typically, human. Occasionally a Parisian "Ourang-Outan" or a phosphorous hound. The mystery, the supernatural, is played up, but the payoff is satisfying in its commonsensical conclusion. *Of course*, it wasn't an ancient family curse, my dear Watson: it was [SPOILER]! But wasn't it gripping to follow along as the exact details of how, when and why were revealed? And satisfying to see the pieces fall into their logical place, the delight of reconsidering the relevance of throwaway objects and observations that came and went unnoticed your first time round? Readers want the author to be clever, to fool them up until the big reveal. Some are truly intelligent enough to predict the outcome. For the rest of us, we eagerly anticipate how all these seemingly loose threads will be neatly tied and delivered in a climactic bow of well-crafted intent and execution. *That* is what mystery novels are all about!

At the other end of the topical trope spectrum, however, we have ...

It wAs All jUsT a dReAm~~~☹

The betrayal. The literary copout. The clashing colours. You hate to see it.

I will not insult Ward's name and character by teasing whether *Last House* turns out to be nothing more than a dream sequence. It doesn't. Technically. There are real world consequences. There is a murder. Several, in fact. There are bodies and dead loved ones uncovered. There is a killer, maybe two. Shoot, why not, who knows, maybe none ... ?

In Ward and [Name Withheld]'s defences, I was the one who assumed that a narrating cat was, unquestionably, a talking cat. In my defence, about two-thirds of a way through the story, Olivia does begin talking with Lauren. Both cases collapse in the end, however, when it is revealed that Olivia isn't talking to a person in Lauren. Nor is she a cat, physically. There is a strong argument to be made that she's real enough to Ted and, more importantly, to the reader. She remains my favourite character. Her narration is a steady stream of inconsistent red herrings that keep the plot intriguing, even as that little pit of wary suspicion begins to ferment in your guts. You see where this is going but hold out hope that a clever twist is coming soon, because, *surely*, it's not one of those again ... ?

"Haven't ready anything this exciting since *Gone Girl*!" says Stephen King, says the cover.

As an old school King fan, I should have clocked from the beginning why the acclaimed Master of *Psychological Thriller* praised it. King used this trope (cliché?) in *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden* back in 1990. He wasn't the first, nor the last. Bloch did it in print in *Psycho* (1959); Hitchcock on film (1960). Ellis did it in *American Psycho* (1991, filmed 2000). Palahniuk in *Fight Club* (1996, filmed 1999). Harris in *Red Dragon* (1981, filmed 1986 and 2002). Lehane, *Shutter Island* (2003, filmed 2010). Hell, Shyamalan went all-out in his 2016 cinematic comeback *Split*. Even Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* combined 19th century medicine and mystery to explain the character dissonance still commonly call multiple personalities disorder (MPD) though the correct medical term is dissociative identity disorder (DID).

Y'all, I'm tired.

Also, [SPOILER]. Again.

No, it wasn't all just a dream. It's just in Ted's head. Twist!(?)

Ted has DID. Olivia the cat is one of his alters. Lauren the daughter is another alt. Olivia can talk to Lauren because Lauren lives inside her (or vice versa). Same being, just on different levels, bound to Ted's tortured psyche fuelled by repressed childhood traumas.

The dead little girl is real, at least. That's her flipflop under the fridge. Whodunit?

This is not a rant about the vilification of mental health—unintentional or not—in pop culture and fiction. This isn't even an essay about it. Just a paragraph, and a mediated one at that. I will point out that the afterword on page 325 of my cat-less paperback edition details Ward's extensive research on DID during her writing process, consulting with professionals and patients alike. There is even a bibliography for those who wish to educate themselves further on the subject. The novel does not demonize Ted for his condition. Instead, it offers a *fictionalized* experience of how one *might* develop DID and draws attention to how societal prejudices *unfairly* malign sufferers. A murder mystery with a (non)talking (not)cat does not presume its place alongside the ICD-10s and DSM-5s of psychiatric taxonomy. To the stay-in-your-lane'ers—I see you lurking—I readily acknowledge that, not having DID, I cannot give account for *Last House's* accuracy in its depiction. As someone with Asperger's, though, I know how polarizing a response any work of fiction which delves into mental health can evoke. More importantly, I know that, among the Twitterverse outrage that insist the non-Aspie's get nothing right about us, there are always meeker voices that go, "But ... this does reflect my personal experience with AS." They shouldn't be made to feel invalidated if they recognize themselves, for once, in media.

But all that is an ethical impasse for someone else's 2K word essay.

My biggest issue with Ward deploying the old psychological unreliability trick is that, despite King's claim of the novel "[keeping] its mind-blowing secrets to the very end", you can see at least one coming way too early. There are too many observational discrepancies between narrators sharing the same spaces. Too many lapses in consciousness brought mimetically to the reader's attention, but not to that of the characters. The problem with the popularity of psychological thrillers is that we as readers know all the signs, regardless of whether they're medically accurate. As much as I wanted Olivia (and her loquaciousness) to be real, the writing was on the wall within the first few chapters. For a mystery setup, it can only lead to an anti-climax.

... Still, I liked it. Not loved it, but liked it. Even loaned my cheap copy to mum. This article's title is misleading in its backhandedness. *Last House's* saving grace is that Ward appreciates and respects the devil she's put in the details. If it's not Ted, then who did it? Why did Olivia and Lauren assume these specific forms? What's on those old tapes, other than Ted's pickle and strawberry recipes? I won't spoil the book's other revelations, but one in particular did draw a tickled "Oh shit!" out of me. I had been too preoccupied anticipating the non-surprising reveal of Ted's mental health to notice the less glaring gaps; the ones Ward *had* minded. Having spent 1932 of my 2K max wordcount humming the obvious—which, coming to think of it, may have been deliberate on Ward's part from the beginning—I can only end this with a begrudging "Touché, Cat!"

... But, seriously though, if you're interested in murder mysteries with feline protagonists, I cannot recommend the Rita Mae Brown & Sneaky Pie Brown series enough

About the Author

Chantal Groot has a background in English literature (BA, and currently MA) and creative writing. She believes that regardless of form, writing is itself an art and is best expressed as imaginatively as possible. As such, she does not subscribe to any reviewing formalism and prefer instead to combine the criticality of literary evaluation with the creativity of an aspiring writer, with an added touch of personal anecdotes for good measure.

Works Cited

Ward, Catriona. *The Last House on Needless Street*. London, Viper, 2021.

A Review of Michaela Coel's *Misfits: A Personal Manifesto*

By Kathelijne Schoomallers



Michaela Coel's star has been rising ever since she arrived on the television scene in 2015 with *Chewing Gum*, a show she wrote and starred in. After this, she landed roles in *Black Earth Rising* and *Been So Long*, before writing and starring in the impactful *I May Destroy You* in 2020. In between winning BAFTA's and an Emmy for *Chewing Gum* and *I May Destroy You* something important of a different order happened to her. She was invited to give the 43rd MacTaggart Lecture at the 2018 Edinburgh TV Festival, before 4000 industry professionals. While Coel delivered the lecture with calm and poise, the content was called "ground breaking", "business shaking", and a "hand grenade" by the media (Wright, Sejean). *Misfits: A Personal Manifesto* is the remediation of her lecture on paper, to which Coel's reflection on its writing process and what it revealed to her is added. As she addresses her personal experiences as a beginning writer and actress in the often overwhelming TV industry, it is a shocking and eye opening book, but nonetheless filled with uplifting confidence, hope and honesty.

The book opens with Coel rather flippantly describing her hatred of moths and her habit of killing them. Whenever she encounters one, she sprays it with moth-killer until it falls dead to the floor. Coel writes: "Moths disturb me, my peace and my flow, with their incessant fluttering. Their erratic, unpredictable movements get me the hell anxious – I hate them" (3). There is something a little off about opening a book centered around a lecture on empathy

and care for those around you with a scene of the destruction of an animal, but it soon turns out that moths have come to carry a special meaning for Coel. When she is asked to give the prestigious MacTaggart Lecture she wonders what she will talk about to industry insiders, what her place in that industry is, whether she is an insider too, or still 'outside'. Puzzled by a strange dream she has during the writing of the lecture, featuring her sitting on a bench outside a house, Uber drivers and a moth, she asks her friends what it could mean. According to her friends the house is the industry, and the Uber drivers are the producers. Another friend suggests that the moth represents her spirit, "that doesn't want to be part of any of this" (14). The idea moves her to tears, and so a love story of sorts begins. The notes of the book reveal that she has consulted a moth expert and for four pages Coel tells us what she now knows about moths and what they symbolise in different cultures. The death's-head hawkmoth is singled out as her favorite. We learn that this moth can produce sound: a tiny squeak, and this squeak is the moth's only defense mechanism when it enters beehives. It is easy to picture Coel as the death's-head hawkmoth entering the 4000 strong TV industry beehive on the day of the lecture and the lecture as her squeak in defense of "misfits". She wears a death's-head hawkmoth necklace underneath her dress, a gift to herself.

Coel's initial revulsion towards moths, that slowly turns into investigation and acceptance, is symbolic of her personal growth over the time that

Misfits: A Personal Manifesto spans. It is the book's most important theme and biggest strength: trying to understand unpleasantness, pain and injustice instead of outright rejecting it. Throughout the pages, Coel illuminates the many difficult and confusing situations she has encountered during her life as a Black woman in a white society, specifically during her career in television. After laying out painful or infuriating moments before the reader, she moves closer, asks questions and investigates others' and her own part in it. During the first season of *Chewing Gum* Coel discovered that all the Black actors on set shared one trailer while the only White actress had a trailer to herself. Coel remembers showing her anger and disappointment to the producer of the show and demanding change, but also asking everyone involved, including the Black actors, how this situation had come about. The Black actors were afraid of losing their jobs if they spoke up for themselves, while the producer insisted she wasn't racist or thoughtless when she put them in that trailer. "But if you aren't racist or thoughtless about race, what other thing can you be?" Coel asks her MacTaggart audience and leaves them, and the readers of her book, to mull that over. (66)

Coel commits to transparency and deep self-reflection while preparing for her lecture. She stays at a friend's Somerset house to work on it and notices how its tone keeps morphing while she writes and endlessly edits it. She begins to understand that she is dissociated from her own pain. If she wants to invite her listeners along with her in her experiences she first needs to be able to sit with the pain she is about to share with them. She likens this process to her relationship with moths: "Considering my initial revulsion, the mysteries of the moth slowly lure me in, eventually offering me reassurance" (20). How well she eventually succeeds at inhabiting her pain becomes clear when she recalls practising her lecture and having to repeat her sentences until she can get through them without crying.

While the MacTaggart Lecture makes up the book's body and is the part that packs the punches, it is the origin story of the lecture that offers beautiful and clear language full of symbolism, metaphors, inquisitiveness and vulnerability. It invites you along with Coel while she tries to figure it all out right in front of you. She is honest and realistic about "never really finish[ing] the lecture - does anything ever finish?" (20). It is almost as if

that ongoing and never finished process of pursuing transparency worked on her even years after she completed her task of delivering the lecture, and the book's introduction is the result. It adds even more personal context, another layer to the words of the lecture itself.

While the MacTaggart Lecture makes up the book's body and is the part that packs the punches, it is the origin story of the lecture that offers beautiful and clear language full of symbolism, metaphors, inquisitiveness and vulnerability. It invites you along with Coel while she tries to figure it all out right in front of you.

The blurb on *Misfits: A Personal Manifesto* calls it a timely and necessary book. It happens that another prize-winning, London youth theatre alum also had her manifesto published in October: *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* by Bernardine Evaristo. In the promotion for her new book Evaristo is called a trailblazer. Both Coel and Evaristo's manifestos come in the wake of winning important prizes for their work and each being the first Black woman to do so in their respective fields. These are no doubt impactful moments in their lives, and also illuminate the need for trailblazers and manifestos. Coel explains: "This isn't about me. Luckily, I've learnt. This is for the new writers coming after me, so the process of learning isn't harder than it should be. Why not be transparent [...]? As they enlighten you, with TV stories you can't film or write without them, enlighten them [...]" (77). She is speaking here of "misfits", the ones who look at life differently, or who life looks at differently. "The UK's Black, Asian, and ginger communities, for example" (54). Later on she equals a lack of misfits producing television to a lack of varied perspectives and argues that this can have catastrophic consequences for the acceptance and safety of misfits. In a time where misfits make for popular and lucrative TV productions she asks, "[w]hy are we platforming misfits, heralding them as newly rich successes, whilst they balance on creaking ladders with little chance of social mobility? I can't help usher them into this house if there are doors within it they can't open. It feels complicated. What I can do is be transparent about my experiences, because transparency helps" (88).

This need to be transparent about experiences in the TV industry is something Susan Wokoma, who played Michaela Coel's character's sister in *Chewing Gum*, also feels. She recently highlighted and reposted Instagram stories of Black actors who revealed the careless treatment they face in show business, and the disturbing and dangerous things they are asked - and feel compelled - to do in order to carve out a place for themselves. Wokoma related her own experiences: she was for example once asked to ride a scooter against traffic for a scene. She also recalled being invited to audition for roles and having to go through time-consuming script reads and rehearsals to finally audition through Zoom or self-tape, only to never hear back again. Trade union Equity's Code of Best Practice for Self-Tape and Zoom Auditions for Scripted Drama came into effect earlier this year and for weeks was posted in Wokoma's Instagram bio, as a resource for other actors. Similarly, John Boyega announced on his Instagram in October that he partnered with Converse and is launching the Create Next Film Project, "to help nurture a new generation of rising Black filmmakers - each will receive mentoring as well as support & funding over the next 6- months to tell the stories they've always dreamed of". Like Coel, these are young Black actors and writers from London who feel the need and urgency to make the industry easier and safer for the ones who come after them, to spare others their own struggle.

In the aptly titled "Aftermoth", Coel reflects

About the Author

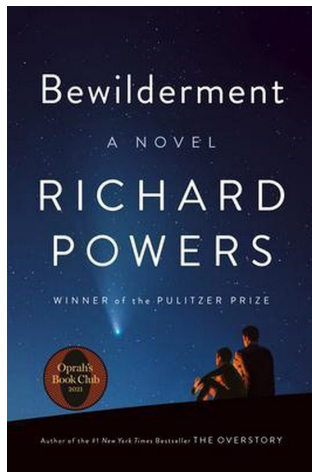
Kathelijne Schoonackers is an M.A. Literature Today student at Utrecht University and a member of the editorial team of *RevUU*.

on the lessons she has learned from writing her lecture. She notes how rare it is to be able to speak for an hour without the threat of challenge or retort, something she also touches upon in the lecture itself: "[i]s it important that voices used to interruption get the experience of writing something without interference at least once?" (55). Yet she encourages the reader to speak, even when interruption or challenge looms or is inevitable. "Speaking can be a terrifying action. Our words - even spoken from a position that is so powerless that all that's produced is a moth-like squeak - can be loud enough to wake the house [...]" (99). Fittingly, in the last lines of the book, we learn that the idea of moth-killer spray is now utterly unbearable to Coel.

This is a small and short book, a little over a hundred pages, but every page contains clear and moving language, every page makes an important point. It is, indeed, a word grenade to shake up your bookshelf and return to whenever you need to be reminded of the power of vulnerability and transparency.

Works Cited

- Boyega, John. "The next thing isn't out there." Instagram, 15 Oct. 2021, [instagram.com/johnboyega/](https://www.instagram.com/johnboyega/)
- Coel, Michaela, creator. *Chewing Gum*. Retort, 6 Oct. 2015.
- Coel, Michaela. *Misfits: A Personal Manifesto*. London, Ebury Press, 2021.
- Coel, Michaela, creator. *I May Destroy You*. FALKNA Productions, 7 June 2020.
- Evaristo, Bernardine. *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*. London, Penguin Books, 2021.
- Sejean, Nathalie. "Michaela Coel Knocks You Down With Her James Mactaggart Lecture." *Mentorless*. Mentorless, 7 Sep. 2020, mentorless.com/2020/09/07/michaela-coel-knocks-you-down-with-her-james-mactaggart-lecture/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2021.
- Wokoma, Susan. Instagram, [instagram.com/susiewoosie12/](https://www.instagram.com/susiewoosie12/).
- Wright, Catherine. "The Speech Michaela Coel Made That Was a 'Hand Grenade' to British Television." *Showbiz Cheatsheet*. Show Biz Cheat Sheet, 28 Sept. 2020. Web. 3 Nov. 2021.



Flowers for Robin

A Review of Richard Powers' *Bewilderment*

By Joppe Kips

After his previous novel *The Overstory* received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2019, I found myself wondering where Richard Powers might take us next. Having themed his novels around subjects such as brain disorders, the First World War, the Holocaust, and eco-activism, it was safe to say that the subject of his next work could be anything.

Yet his new novel, *Bewilderment*, remains focused upon the same question that *The Overstory* poses: What the hell is wrong with humanity? It is a question you find yourself asking more than once while reading Powers' thirteenth novel, which turns away from the wider, interconnected plot towards a more emotionally focused look at astrobiologist Theo Byrne and his neurodivergent, nine-year old son Robin.

Powers places us deep within the wilderness, as Theo has taken Robin out of class for a week of camping, after trouble arose between his son and his classmates. Here, in the Smoky Mountains, we are introduced to father and son, and their great affection for all that is living. Especially young Robin is thrilled to be out in nature, relishing each and every animal fact and insisting on sleeping under the stars. Powers' own recent relocation to the Smokies is apparent in this first part of the novel, his descriptions captivantly realistic. As Theo and Robin 'visit' the planets made-up by Theo you cannot but fall in love with Robin's raw enthusiasm as the two of them ponder upon the age-old question: Is there life out there, somewhere?

However, they cannot stay in the mountains forever. Upon returning home *Bewilderment* follows Theo and Robin through the rollercoaster of everyday life as a father struggling through parenthood, and an emotionally challenged environmentalist boy in a world dead set on destroying its environment. After another incident, in which Robin smashes a classmate's face in with a thermos, and unwilling to put his son on psychoactive drugs, Theo turns to his late wife Aly's ex-boyfriend, Dr. Currier, for help.

Currier, who has been working on an experiment that is applicable as behavioural treatment through neurological feedback, agrees to help Theo by putting Robin in one of DecNef's trials. In the treatment, participants are trained to match their emotional state to that of earlier participants, which should lead to more emotional control. For Robin, it works wonderfully. Less agitated and better able to shrug off his classmates' teasing, he becomes even more environmentally interested than he already was, selling drawings of endangered animals and – being inspired by famous child activist Inga Alder, who in turn is based upon Greta Thunberg – protesting at the Capitol. Robin's development can be compared to that of Charlie Gordon in Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*, a novel named early on in *Bewilderment*. Like Robin, Charlie undergoes treatment – in his case surgery – to enhance his overall intelligence. What Charlie gains in intelligence, Robin gains in emotional control. The parallel, while interesting, is a bit too much 'in your face' and weakens the overall

reading experience, as those familiar with Keyes' novel can already predict where Powers' *Bewilderment* might end on.

Robin's participation/progress in the trial, although doing wonders for his emotional control, is accompanied by depression, caused by the ever-increasing news of nature's decline and humanity's willful ignorance of this decline, which hurts Robin greatly. Currier's solution? To emotionally train him on the brain-scan of his deceased mother which he happens to have kept all this time, made while she was thinking upon the emotion 'ecstasy'. I am no scientist, but upon reading this I was pretty sure that Currier might be breaking a couple of ethical principles in the process. Learning in the same chapter that Aly, who up to that point had been described only positively, had cheated on Theo with Currier at some point during their marriage, did not make me like Currier more either. However, DecNef's treatment worked again! The novel seems to take a turn for the better, and Theo and Robin finally seem relatively at peace. This, of course, cannot last.

It's broken by Currier, when he asks whether his team can use a video of Robin, which'll be completely anonymized, in order to make a case as to why DecNef should keep its governmental funding. Theo, after checking with Robin, reluctantly agrees. The video goes viral and is eventually traced back to Robin, after which the media will not leave them alone.

From this point on, *Bewilderment* spirals out of control. The video, and Robin's subsequent media-attention, aggravates governmental parties running for the elections, and Currier's experiment is pulled 'on hold'. Without treatment, Robin quickly slides back into old patterns of screaming fits and erratic

behaviour. At the same time, Theo's work is at risk as the government threatens to put a stop to both the Earthlike Planet Seeker and NextGen Space Telescope projects, powerful telescopes through which extraterrestrial life might be found. Powers' multiple storylines turn themselves against Theo until he is almost ready to break. Almost.

Finally, Theo decides. Robin and he will take a break and go back to the Smoky Mountains. When they return, he will take Robin to the doctor to start on a drug treatment.

Those who have read *Flowers for Algernon* hope that Powers chooses to end his parallel here, with Robin having lost his emotional control and being his original self again. However, Powers is relentless in showing that the parallel was not between Robin and Charlie, but between Robin and Algernon, the little mouse whose deterioration is even worse than Charlie's.

Bewilderment's tragic ending, though heartbreaking, completes Powers' powerful message to his readers. Earth is dying, and if we continue like this, we'll end up dying alongside it. Although some choices Powers made were unnecessary in that they did not add to the story nor character development, such as Aly's being pregnant when she died and her having cheated on Theo, the novel skillfully makes its readers aware that, in our willful ignorance, we are killing the only planet we have. Overall, *Bewilderment* makes for a more than interesting read, and the depiction of the love of a father struggling through parenthood for his wonderful, different son is nothing short of incredible.

About the Author

Joppe Kips is a post-graduate student of English literature, currently enrolled at Utrecht University, and part of both the editorial and PR teams of RevUU.

Works Cited

- Powers, Richard. *Bewilderment*. London: Hutchinson Heinemann, 2021. Print.
- Keyes, Daniel. *Flowers for Algernon*. Eugene: Harvest Books, 2005. Print.

