Rev UU

AUTUMN 2022

Highlighting new, critical voices in the literary space

SURFACING AND RESURFACING

REVIEWS | FEATURES | CREATIVE CRITICISM

Colophon

Introduction

What is silence? Something of the sky in us.
There will be evidence, there will be evidence.
Let them speak of air and its necessities. Whatever
they will open, will open.

Ilya Kaminsky, *Deaf Republic*, "Such Is The Story Made of Stubbornness and a Little Air"

The difference between new and anew is not always obvious. For how do we distinguish the new voice from the old or the returning voice? Is there such a thing as a "new" voice, or is it merely an old voice transformed? In this issue of *RevUU*, the first of its third volume, we evoke a sense of *surfacing and resurfacing* of both the familiar and unfamiliar. The pieces published here work with this theme to reshape and create new and existing narratives.

As inferred in the title of our journal, *RevUU* provides a platform for reviewing literature internal and external to the literary canon. These reviews act as a means to give voice to new and evocative perspectives on both emerging and established texts. Together with our team of innovative writers, we traverse time and space.

With **Anna Mangnus**' review of *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* we begin our journey by travelling back to 1870 to see the Mayan population of Yucatán rise up against the European-descended ruling class, taking critical aim at modern-day colonial heritage. In the present day, **Dick Hogeweij** introduces us to Dutch author Raoul de Jong and traces his journey across ethnical and sexual borders. Here, he uncovers great strength in revisioning one's colonial history. In her piece, which recently won second place in the Utrecht University "One Book One Campus" Creative Contest, **Neelam Reddy** explores her identity as a brown woman as mirrored in *Girl, Woman, Other*. She elucidates how novels have the power to draw things to the surface that we already felt were true but lacked the words to express them. **Natalie van den Berg** transports us to Ireland with her reading of Small Things Like These. She endeavors to show us how latent personal histories inform our readings, while simultaneously we learn how events of the past can gain renewed relevance.

In her reading of the same novel, **Susi Westerveld** is drawn to its somewhat controversial cover, as her review pieces together what has been cut out of history by the silencing glare of the Catholic Church. **Maria Teresa Cattani** critically examines the circumstances of the Southwark Archdiocese intervention into Simon James Greens' visit to the London John Fisher School over the LGBTQI+ content of his novel. In a similar fashion, Poet Laureate Ruth Lasters saw her poem *Losgeld* (Ransom) rejected by the Antwerp City Council. The poem critiques the stigmatizing character of the school system in Flanders, **Laurine Tavernier** notes, but the conservative opposition decried how it was more of a political political manifesto than it was a tool of unification. Resistant readers abound, as **José Dorenbos** expects to find validation of her social-media distaste in *No One Is Talking About This*, but instead ends up interrogating her antagonistic relationship with social media and considers what we can learn from our submersion and resurfacing of the platform. **Aristi Makrygiannaki** uses dialogue to move past her own reluctance towards the sci-fi genre during her reading of *Klara and the Sun*. She illustrates that curiosity and openness may let an unexpected literary work seep through a reluctant surface. Rather than talk, **Fleur Pieren** listens. Enamored by Douglas Stuart and his *Young Mungo*, she weaves a literary event and reading experience together into a syntactic melding, showcasing how an author can take hold of us, their voice forever embedded in our hearts. Writing home, **Leanne Talavera** takes what she reads and hears in Asian-American poetry to foster a dialogue with her mother. She finds with these poets an expression of her own experiences of migration that echo and engage with her mother's journey as a migrant in this poignant letter, wherein relatively or historically unheard voices are now being heard and finding resonance. **Josephine Monnickendam** traces her own reading history through effectual encounters with novels centered on women in Greek mythology, illustrating that these perspectives are finally getting the time and respect they deserve, no longer serving as props in the stories of men.

Indeed, if Greek mythological retellings have only just now started to experiment with female-centred narratives, **Ryan Dougherty** looks at a novel that has no reservations about its centrality of the female experience, in his review of *Oh William!* He highlights the subdued tale of a story so seemingly mundane it goes unseen, and makes a strong case for why we shouldn't turn a blind eye to this intimate story. Similarly, working with the notion of being blind, **Moe Yonezawa** pokes fun at the popular trope of labelling certain men as "written by women," who might not actually be deserving of that title. She interrogates the blind admiration of a person who very clearly displays a concerning number of red flags. In **Zoë Abrahams** feature she explores themes of womanhood, loneliness and alienation in Japanese women's writing. In her reading of *Diary of a Void*, she examines the confining pressures of Japan's patriarchal gender norms and brings her reading home by connecting the intimate act of reading to her own experiences of womanhood. **Kenau Bester** brings us to South Africa as she reads the Booker Prize winning novel The Promise. She questions whether or not this is "a story we've heard before" and emphasizes the importance of systematically marginalized voices being represented in literature. Finally, **Jared Meijer** reads Ill Feelings and finds a missing brother in the crevices of the text. He stages a series of interruptions to find out what it means to be a life-long witness to chronic illness.

It would be remiss for us not to thank the many hardworking individuals that made this issue possible for publication. We thank not only the writers of these reviews but the Design team, the Editorial team, the PR team, Managing Director and of course Mia You, the UU faculty advisor of this publication, for her unwavering and steadfast guidance in the making of this issue of *RevUU*.

And finally, to our readers, we hope that you find your own latent narrative drift to the surface and perhaps begin to write your own story. Thank you for creating, together with us, an innovative space for emerging voices.

On behalf of the *RevUU* team,
Jared Meijer and Kenau Bester
Chief Editors

Contents

Contents

Dear Ma, How Can Poetry Speak to the Migrant Experience?

Leanne Talavera

I've come to realize, Ma, that arrivals and departures are very chaotic in their order. The frenzied organization of one's life under a 30kg suitcase limit. The back-and-forth between a pen, and a passenger form, and a passport. The panicked movement of feet that shuffle from check-in counters to immigration officers to boarding gates.

It was all bureaucratic anarchy.

I've always wondered, Ma, if you ever felt the same—as a young woman who first entered the ordered chaos of a migrant's life; leaving behind lolo and lola, your ates and kuyas, never really knowing when you would get the chance to see them again. Yet in the times I remember asking you about your early days of moving abroad, it was as if language had failed to do it justice. Much like the migrant herself, your answers felt neither here nor there. They came through you in chunks of English that were hard for the ear to digest. But now as a migrant myself, I understand why such experiences broke down your words. For how can one speak of a past, with a tongue that did not live through it? How could concrete, static speech capture the essence of a woman in constant motion and continuous cultural flux?

And inevitably, Ma, language failed me too, as a daughter of a migrant who soon had to contend with her inherited impermanence, and her own undefined spaces. Clipped blocks of language and expression never quite described who I was—or at the very least, the fragments of who I thought I was, yet to be adequately pieced together.

I remember, Ma, the time I realized there was beauty in incompleteness. That was the time I was in university, encountering poetry more often than I ever did before. Of course, I've always crossed paths with the Wordsworths, the Elliots, and the Dickensons. But in university I soon discovered Asian-American poets: the Ocean Vuongs, the Patrick Rosals, the Aimee Nezhukumatathils, and the Franny Chois.

Ma, I will be the first to admit that when I first discovered my affinity for American poetry, it seemed ironic, in an equally comical and anti-nationalistic way.

I was a Filipina, who seemed to find solace in the artistic words of the colonial tongue.

But what I nevertheless loved about the Vuongs, the Rosals, the Nezhukumatathils, and the Chois I met in studying poetry was that they often did not *feel* like they were very American to begin with. These voices who I found new comfort in were all Asian-American poets, and what I'd come to see in them was the liminality I struggled to express. They didn't know, Ma, who they were, or where they belonged, or what to call themselves; and there was beauty in their language of enjambment and fragmentation. Their poetic forms became the language I learnt to describe myself with—a task that both our languages fell short of doing for so long.

Ma, when you returned to the Philippines for the first time since working abroad, how did that feel? If you were anything like me—stepping off a plane after 4 years of university, moving across continents—then it probably felt like you were more so passing through rather than coming back. For the first time in a long time I had no definitive plans of leaving the Philippines, and the stasis was as unfamiliar to me as the country itself was, beyond the airport walls. I recalled Sara Ahmed's words as I crossed the threshold to the arrival gate:

> *the experience of leaving home in migration is hence always about the failure of memory to make sense of the place one comes to inhabit, a failure that is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body that feels out of place. The process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way by that which appears as familiar*

In other words, if all I remembered was movement, how could I find belonging in stagnation? What kind of memories was I "supposed" to have, Ma, to not feel so out of place? These were questions I asked myself intermittently. And for quite some time I didn't know how to approach them, until I revisited the comforting resonances of Asian-American poetry—this time in the form of Jennifer Huang's (coincidentally titled) *Return Flight*.

It was first interesting to note, Ma, that contrary to its title, each section of this tripartite collection begins with a "Departure". In her first "Departure" in particular—a poem that seems to begin *in media res* of a flight—Huang's language oscillates between present and past tense, switching between a subject who is leaving and one who is being left. Her line "I am learning to fly before I speak", is juxtaposed against its succeeding past tense of "Learned to fly before I speak". "Before I could speak, I was left behind" she continues. "What I couldn't express, was left behind. / I leave behind the things that don't belong / To me". It is almost as if, Ma, a migrant body is a dichotomous thing: we are simultaneously leaving something and being left behind.

Huang's explorations of what it means to leave and be left takes various forms in her subsequent "Departures" and other poems. But what became especially striking to me, was how prevalent memory is in all of them. Memories, of a Taiwanese immigrant family across generations. Memories, of a Taiwanese history and homeland Huang wasn't born into and didn't grow up in. Memories, of a childhood and coming-of-age so distinctly marked by Taiwanese traditions, yet so difficult to comprehend in their relationship to Taiwanese identity. And much like myself, Ma, there are moments in which Huang questions her own familiarity with Taiwan as a place, treading a thin line between experiencing and interrogating her memories of it.

In "Layover", for example, an encounter with a 7-Eleven clerk is recalled where the speaker is told "Taiwan is written *all over your face*"; like a map, the speaker soon notes, "I apparently can't hide". When the speaker arrives back at her house and eats a snack, a more distant memory suddenly resurfaces and manifests right across the page: of eating "tsua-bing / and ai-yu / to cool the / climate— / everywhere, / bodies / sweating / into one". "Layover" ends with the speaker questioning herself, "Do I do, to Taiwan, / as the man does to me". It leaves one asking if an identity can be determined—and to some extent, categorized—by such minutiae memories. Do you think, Ma, such memories grant one access to a rooted identity?

I'll be honest. There isn't really anything I took away from the collection that I would confidently categorize as definitive, or as an answer to my existential predicaments, Ma. But towards the end of *Return Flight*, Huang inserts "Drift". What begins with a confessed desire to write a poem about intergenerational patriarchal violence and "ancestors changing their last name to / *Guang*", ends instead with the poem choosing to become one of everyday memories. Of "dad's beet face when he has exactly one drink", or of "mom wafting prayers as / she stirs ribs and radishes and cauliflower in a pot for hours". Memory turns into ritual with traces of tradition, "of crusting salmon with miso and / putting it in the convection oven"; and manifests itself in "objects passed / down: Beanie Baby, moonstones, tarot deck, calendula oil, coffee grinder, / cactus". A connection with Taiwan and Taiwanese identity throughout the poem isn't necessarily established with a grand familial claim to place and belonging. Instead, the poem chooses to explore Taiwanese connections through the little memories that flit by and reemerge in the little details of our lives.

Perhaps, Ma, that is what memory and belonging should ultimately boil down to. Perhaps it is only a matter of choice.

Ma, do you remember when lola died? It was 15 minutes until the start of my morning class in Berlin, when you and Dad called to tell me the news. Of course, I cried. It was hard to do so in a restroom with passing university students. But that day I learnt something life-changing about what it means to be a migrant, and a migrant faced with the death of a loved one: you crave some form of tangibility in your mourning, and the guilt you live with due to your physical absence is as painful as the death you need to process. Josiane Le Gall and Lilyane Rachédi in their study of transnational bereavement write that "the death of a loved one in the country of origin augments the sense of loss and absence associated with the act of migration… it symbolizes all the losses related to migration and reminds them of the impossibility of getting back the time spent away from their homeland". Indeed, Ma, even two years after lola's death, I am left wondering if the guilt I feel for my absence is the price I pay for my decision to live elsewhere.

Admittedly, unlike other existential moments in my life, my first instinct after lola's passing wasn't to look towards poetry. Surprising, seeing as I found so much comfort in Asian-American poetic voices. But when I recently chanced upon Victoria Chang's *The Trees Witness Everything*, I couldn't help but think about my own relationship to loss, and if it was possible to even have one as a migrant. In *The Trees Witness Everything*, nature, life, and death are explored through poems mostly written in short Japanese forms, collectively called wakas, and titled in correspondence to poetic works by W.S. Merwin. In the multiple ways Chang's poems interact with one another and build from each other, one is granted access to a myriad of ways life and loss can be perceived and processed. There are especially poems in her work, Ma, that grapple with the experience of transnational grieving.

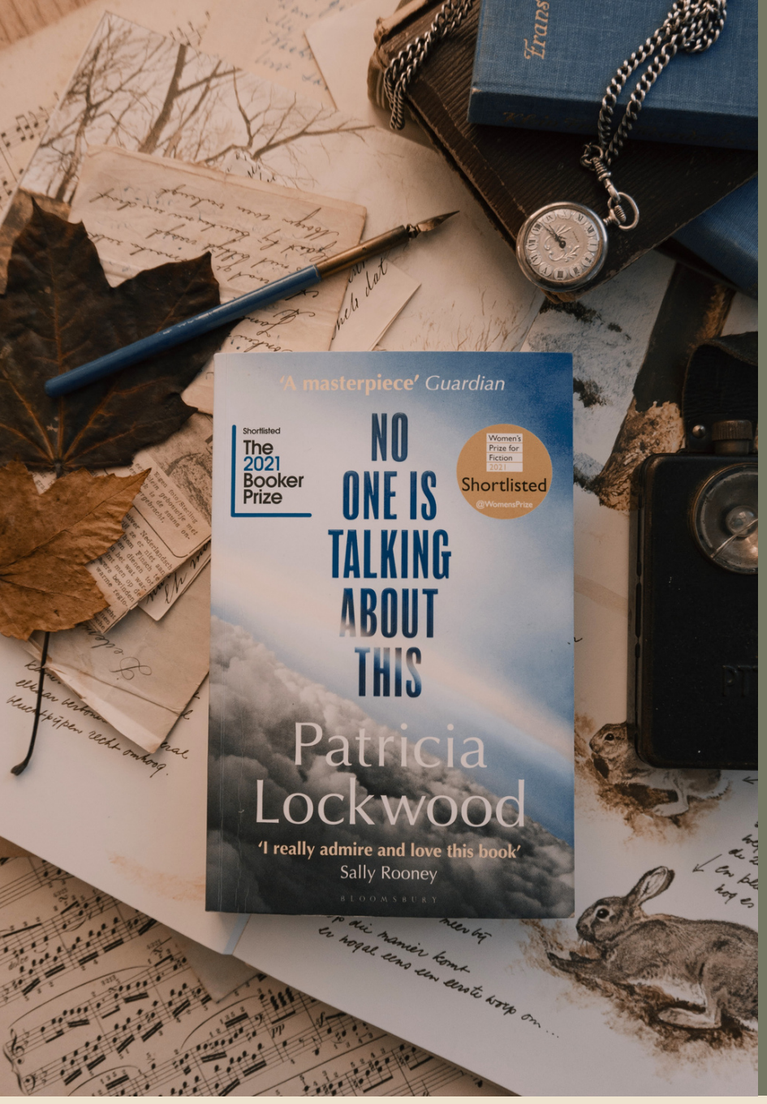
In "Rain Light", for instance, Chang poses the direct question of what to do in the face of losing a loved one, in this case a mother. The mother figure is metamorphized through light, and the speaker claims that while they do possess "rented light"—an allusion to a mother preserved in memory that lives after death—"all that's left is a search-/ light shining in the / wrong country". In the end, Ma, the speaker, not too unlike myself, is left looking for their departed loved one from a physical distance far-removed. And while poems like "Rain Light" touch upon grief across a geographical divide, poems such as "Migration" allude to thenotion of return due to a familial death. "How quickly blood moves" notes the speaker, "When someone dies, it settles, / fills in spaces perfectly, / as if always there". There's this desire to displace your material absence in times of loss. To try to return and fill the voids in the places you left behind. Chang had put into a poetic voice the complexities of my grief as a diasporic body, and she did so by stripping her words bare and allowing them to stand for themselves.

But Ma, as preoccupied with death as I've been, reading *The Trees Witness Everything* reminded me that death cannot exist without life, and throughout the book Chang directly paints the two cycling from one to the other in perpetuity, much like the cycles of the natural world. Chang chooses to end *The Trees Witness Everything* with "Love Letters", a longer poem consisting of multiple tercets that, above all else, brim with the emotion of hope in its many different facets. "Let me tell you a story / about hope", the last stanza goes, "it always starts / and ends with birds". Birds, I can't help but think, who move from place to place, who are never truly static where they are. When lola died, Ma, all I could think of was how much being a migrant meant losing. But maybe Chang is making a point here.

Maybe the stories of migrants are just as much about hope as they are about loss.

About the Author

Leanne Talavera is an MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University. She loves history and literature, and is particularly interested in reading historical and postcolonial fictions. As a creative writer, she mainly likes to explore themes of identity, womanhood, and migration.



Only Two Questions at Three in the Morning

A Review of *No One is Talking About This*

José Dorenbos

Last summer I bought Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* on a whim, while wandering through a bookstore on one of the hottest days of the year. I was wearing a dress and a Formula 1 Mercedes team cap, and the discordancy made me feel powerful.

I was overtaken by a strange sort of pleasure as I held this book, a feeling comparable to the one that arises whenever I get to blame social media for any harmful contemporary social phenomenon. I stay away from social media and figured the book, framed as a 'social media novel,' would constitute one of those voices saturating my offline echo chamber, confirming that, yes, social media *is* bad for you, your biological clock, sense of self, attention span and social toolbox.

Walking home, coffee in hand and quite pleased with myself, I nourished the hope that the book would provide me with another title to mention whenever someone asks me for my Instagram handle and I get so say, smugly as ever, that I don't have one.

What I found instead was a novel that seemed prepared and eager to turn my biases around on me, inviting me to consider why I was laughing along with jokes that I knew must have found their source on a social media platform and that I, for that reason, could only half-understand. Why had I hated social media so much, again? Where exactly is the site of convergence between online hivemind and offline existence? And how far removed am I from there, anyway?

Context Collapse

Lockwood is a North American author mostly known for her 2017 debut poetry collection *Priestdaddy* and her comedic Twitter presence. The latter of these makes *No One is Talking About This* a work of autofiction, recounting the story of an American social media user enjoying fame for her online posts. The character-slash-narrator travels the world to meet fans and, while keeping up her online presence, gets more and more enmeshed in the omnipresent online environment aptly named the Portal. The Portal is a hivemind of voices with which the main character interacts, and it soon takes precedence over the real-life company of her loved ones. The embeddedness sometimes takes an extreme when the narrator seems to get physically stuck in a scrolling spree and has to be nudged out by her husband showing her pictures of chicken dishes roasted to a perfect golden brown.

The main conflict of the story is that between the submersive online environment and the shock reminder of biological existence, the fleshy nitty gritty. The birth of a niece with an exceptionally rare genetic disease – ensuring a life cut short much too soon – forces the narrator out of digital complacency. Navigating the constant urge to joke about how big the baby's head is, the narrator's experience of witnessing the growth of the infant and helping to care for it reminds her of the strange fullness of sensory, bodily existence.

While at face value the book might seem to juxtapose in a strict binary the online world (bad) with the world out-there (good), Lockwood actually subverts this idea by radically overlapping the two through language and analogy. She challenges a notion of these worlds as two sites demarcated by a portal, one tangible and one virtual. The story doesn't end with the narrator swearing off the online, or denouncing it in any way, but rather finding a balance and attending to the moments where the light diffracts and you suddenly see both.

Where is the Online?

The Portal presents a circulationist fever dream in the vein of Hito Steyerl, where dissemination of content takes precedence over content disseminated. It is gloriously empty

and also everywhere. The main character knows just how to manipulate this state of things, enjoying fame for her posts such as one wondering, simply, “Can dogs be twins?”

The book is particularly interested in how hyper-specificity bends itself into emptiness, and how emptiness in turn enables a certain universality. The Google searches punctuating the narrative provide a great example of this, as the narrator recounts one night of “idly typing in searches: why am I tired all the time, why can I no longer memorize a seven minute monologue, why is my tongue less pink than it was when I was a child,” only to conclude, in between brackets, as if the thought is silent or unconscious or perhaps not entirely hers: “(There were only two questions at three in the morning, and they were *Am I dying* and *Does anybody really love me*.)” Ultra-specificity puts signification on the act of searching itself, rather than the question asked. What matters here is not the relative pinkness of the tongue but the evocation of a set of existential questions taking the form of varyingly trivial insecurities haunting a sleepless narrator at three in the morning.

Lockwood more generally does an excellent job of demonstrating how the two worlds, the in- and outside of the Portal, overlap and co-constitute each other, and manages to do so in a humorous way. Analogy provides the key to doing so. In one telling instance, she highlights how the United States conservative rhetoric of “Don’t Tread On Me” has been reframed on social media to NO STEP ON SNEK, and in doing so shows both to be equally poignant in their assertion of self-determination but also their silliness:

> *What a cute little pair of panties," her mother said as she emerged from the laundry room, holding up a pair of her brother's military silkies, which were the bright trumpeting yellow of the DON'T TREAD ON ME flag and embroidered with the words NO STEP ON SNEK.*

Another example:

> *Context collapse! That sounded pretty bad, didn’t it? And also like that thing that was happening to the honeybees?” It’s difficult to decide which is my favorite example: “Something in the back of her head hurt. It was her new class consciousness.*

Lockwood pays specific attention to those moments when the overlap is jarring and uncomfortable, and you cannot help but let out an edged laugh like a punctuation mark. (A recurring motif concerns characters shouting “Ahahaha!” rather than laughing, as it is “the new and funnier way to augh”). But when it works, you suddenly find yourself enriched with a new term for a thing in tangible reality, and with that a new way of approaching, responding to, and living with it. Language actively constructs, after all, and any project of rephrasing is simultaneously one of remaking your surroundings. The idea of the online stretching out to reach across the divide also finds expression in the notion of a tangible hivemind. The image of a stream-of-consciousness is a recurring one, figured not as contained neatly within an individual, but rather like a current or a moving crowd, acting upon any participant. The narrator finds herself in one such tangible hivemind again near the end of the story, in a place perhaps more timeless than Twitter: a crowded, noisy nightclub. This place “was one crush. One body,” the narrator observes. Tellingly, this night ends with her having her phone stolen in the throng and the music. She exits the Portal and loses the means of accessing seemingly without issue or involvement of roast chicken pictures. Lockwood thus concludes that it is not the immersion in the Portal that is the problem, but rather its exclusivity at the expense of other immersions.

Context Reassembly

Seen in line with *No One is Talking About This*, it is clear that Lockwood is a sharp writer who is never normative about how one must deal with traumatic, disruptive events, but still continuously looks for the restorative capability of a well-placed, well-thought joke.

Lockwood’s book is not just funny; it is ridiculous in all the best ways, absurd and endearing. It also manages to be self-aware at the same time, and maintain a critical eye to both the Portal on the one hand, and easy dismissals of social media on the other. This is the exact approach that allowed Lockwood to infuse her famous poem “Rape Joke” with the perfect charge of anger and empowering humor, causing it to go viral and speaking closely to survivors of sexual violence almost immediately after it was published in 2013. Seen in line with *No One is Talking About This*, it is clear that Lockwood is a sharp writer who is never normative about how one must deal with traumatic, disruptive events, but still continuously looks for the restorative capability of a well-placed, well-thought joke.

While the book is equally funny and poignant throughout, its pacing and formatting raises questions. The short, snappy aragraphs and dispersed page-layout make for a quick and entertaining read but disallow the reader the time and space to reflect on the unfolding narrative and its consequences. This is quite logical too, in the sense that Lockwood’s successful emulation of a Twitter-format has also reproduced in the book an experience of being overwhelmed by a constant flow of content. As a consequence, nothing really sticks unless you eternalize the resonant passages for yourself or, against the grain of the fast pacing, take more time than the book invites you to.

I wonder how the reading experience of this story is influenced by the medium in which it is consumed. The experience of flipping the pages of my tangible paperback copy must feel different to the experience of scrolling or swiping on an e-reader, especially given the content of this story. Alternatively, a more social media-fluent reader might have an entirely different experience of the book's structure.

Perhaps the story requires multiple readings, across multiple platforms, to fully bring across the point it seems to want to make about the confrontation of online and offline worlds. None of this takes away from the fact that Lockwood's project in *No One is Talking About* This is an ambitious and largely successful one, that will have me picking it up and reading the jokes out loud for a while longer.

About the Author

José Dorenbos is a postgraduate student of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University. She is a writer and researcher with experience in the fields of journalism, documentary and academia, with current projects revolving around generational trauma and ecocritical theory and literature.

Women's Bodies and Institutions

Christmas as a Catalyst in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*

Natalie van den Berg

> *This story is dedicated to the women and children who suffered time in Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries.*

With the narration of this line from the dedication in the novella, one of my co-presenters opened our presentation on Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*. She then asked who in the group was familiar with what happened in these mother and baby homes. Only three people put their hand up.

I was delighted when I first saw that this book was on the shortlist for the Man Booker prize earlier this year. Having done various courses on Irish history and literature during my bachelor's degree, I thought having such an important, and unfortunately often overlooked, part of Irish history brought to a wider audience through this nomination would be a good thing. Like my anecdote earlier showed, there are many people completely unaware of what actually happened in these mother and baby homes.

Between the 18th and 20th centuries these homes and laundries housed 'fallen women' under the supervision of the Catholic church. This included women who had become pregnant out of wedlock, but also those who were deemed flirtatious or seductive. Although the front was that they were taking care of and rehabilitating these women, in reality many of them were abused and kept against their will. Another thing that is overlooked is how recently this all has taken place. Una Mullally notes that in 1993 a mass grave with these women's bodies was discovered, bringing the horrible practice to light. Erin Blakemore adds that it was not until 2013 that a formal apology and compensation were given to the survivors by the Irish government. More graves have been found since.

This is one of the reasons why *Small Things Like These* is an important read for anyone this winter.

This novella reveals some of the horrors that took place in these institutions. Keegan's story revolves around Bill Furlong, a merchant and a father of five daughters living an ordinary life in an unassuming town. However, he cannot get rid of a feeling of listlessness. After one day going to the convent to deliver timber, he notices a girl named Sarah who appears to be in a dire condition, but the arrival of the nuns make him turn away and go home. Furlong feels weighed down by guilt about abandoning the girl, and eventually, before Christmas arrives, he returns to the convent and retrieves her in order to help her. He ends up feeling more elated than he has been in a long time and is proud to face any difficulties this decision will bring.

Small Things Like These does so much more than only bring this forgotten history to light. Initially when I picked up Claire Keegan's novella I was so focused on the idea of a story set in Irish history – which is what was primarily advertised for this novel – that I gave the winter-themed cover little thought when I opened the book and started reading. However, I soon got immersed in a Christmassy atmosphere through Keegan's poetic writing style. To my surprise, I ended up finding a Christmas story charged with critical historical and social commentary.

There are a few reasons for the Christmas story-esque feeling I got from the novella, such as the setting of the story and the diction used. The novella reaches the Christmas month quickly: it exchanges the month October for November by the second line, and November for December after two chapters. In the first page alone, Keegan paints a setting with bare trees, smoking chimneys, and children with pulled-up hoods. The diction sets the tone for cold and winter, seen in phrases such as "unhappily endured the weather", "the cold", "rain", and "another raw-cold day." It sets the stage for the Christmas time the rest of the story takes place in.

Christmas seems to be an important element in the story, and it is no surprise that Furlong has an epiphany on Christmas day. Keegan builds up to Furlong's epiphany quite expertly by gradually introducing the reader to his shortcomings and ethical pondering. There are multiple times where Furlong becomes aware of the discrepancies between his thoughts and his actions:

> *People could be good, Furlong reminded himself, as he drove back to town; it was a matter of learning how to manage and balance the give-and-take in a way that let you get on with others as well as your own. But as soon as the thought came to him, he knew the thought itself was privileged and wondered why he hadn't given the sweets and other things he'd been gifted at some of the houses to the less well-off he had met in others. Always, Christmas brought out the best and the worst in people.*

Besides the moral questions Furlong camps with, he also ponders upon the idea of Christmas as a sort of catalyst of human nature, noting that it brings out "the best and the worst in people." Another moment where he knows something is not morally right, but does not take action to change it, is the following:

> *For a good while they waited there in the cold, on the front step. He could have taken her on then, he knew, and considered taking her to the priest's house or on home with him – but she was such a small, shut-down thing, and once more the ordinary part of him simply wanted to be rid of this and get on home.*

Furlong is constantly confronted with his own disregard towards the poor and the situation in the laundry. Keegan's skillful placing of signals about something dark happening at the convent stands in stark contrast with her serene and poetic writing style, creating an eerie presence in the book. There is something going on in this small town. Its inhabitants know it. Furlong knows it. You know it. But all the signs show that everyone is trying to turn a blind eye to whatever is happening. Furlong tries to bring up his suspicions and worries about the convent on numerous occasions, such as to his wife and to the local pub's landlady, Mrs. Kehoe, but both times he gets swept along with their implicit argumentation that he must look after his own. However, he feels torn because of his own upbringing as a child who did not know his father, and feels guilt as he knows such a fate could have been his mother's and his own.

Furlong's continuous restlessness and discontent with his life seem to come to an end after he realizes his responsibility and makes the decision to go back to the convent and take the girl Sarah home with him.

The way in which he finds her parallels the first time he came across her; however, this time he does the opposite, he does not let "the ordinary part of him" make the decision to go home. Although it takes him a while, Furlong eventually proves that Christmas brought the best out of him. Because Furlong's hesitation is present throughout the entire narrative and only comes to an end in the last chapter when he makes the decision to help Sarah, it brings forth the idea that it is never too late to make a decision that will do good in the world.

When we look at *Small Things Like These*, it becomes apparent that women who get pregnant out of wedlock are seen as outcasts in society. They become shunned by their religion, community, and even family. The fate of the women in these laundries, and that of their babies, are in the hands of the institution of the Catholic Church. Since this all happened in Ireland's recent history, it brings up the question about how things are now. Ann Cronin, in an article about the history of reproductive rights in Ireland, notes that "Ireland has a long history of gatekeeping women's reproductive rights," and although she is positive about the changes that have been made since then, she thinks that "there is still some progress to be made." However, the notion of women's reproductive rights reaches farther than Ireland, and the debate around women's bodily autonomy is a global one. With the emergence of increasingly popular misogynistic online personalities, and debates about women's reproductive healthcare and rights in many countries, women's bodies are continuously criticized and politicized. One such example is what happened in the US this year. On June 24th, the Supreme Court of America made the decision to overturn Roe v. Wade. This was a ruling that gave people the right to have an abortion. Following this decision, some states banned abortions, even without exception. Through the overturning of this ruling, women's bodies became again something that is at the mercy of a powerful institution, and not something of their own.

I think the topic of women's bodies and institutions is something we see in *Small Things Like These* as well. When Furlong comes across the girl Sarah, she repeatedly requests that he asks the nuns about her baby. When he gets the opportunity, he fails to do this. Sarah has to rely on others, and in this instance a man, to escape the institutions control over her, her child, and her body. This puts focus on what people outside these situations can do for people in these unfair positions. Furlong does not feel peace until he takes responsibility, until he takes the first step and does something to change the situation. By doing so, Keegan puts out a call to action to bystanders in these situations. People like Furlong, his wife, and other villagers, who so often turned a blind eye to what happens in these convents, have a

responsibility to say something, to do something, to help those in unjust situations. And this is something that can apply to the contemporary situation regarding abortion as well: if people who should have the authority over their own bodies cannot have that, and are not able to change the situation by themselves, it is up to the bystanders to join their cause, so that institutions cannot have, or reclaim, power over people's bodily autonomy.

Thus, the novella brings forgotten aspects of Irish history to light and calls our attention to the fate of these women and children in these laundries. It brings up questions about the power institutions such as the Church hold, and also the responsibility people themselves have when they see malpractices in their surroundings. Despite this being the case, the novella's narrative seems quite separated from its historical information. Disregarding the way the book is advertised, the first time the laundries are mentioned is in the dedication, which is to the women and children who had suffered in these laundries. Nevertheless, the actual story that follows it does not explicitly mention any of this. Let's consider it from the perspective of someone who is unaware of the historical context of its plot. The novella, instead of a commentary on Magdalene laundries, transforms into something that is almost a thriller-mystery: what are the nuns hiding? What is going on at the convent? Due to the open ending and not addressing explicitly what Sarah's experience was in the convent, such a reader would not be aware about the narrative's mirroring of a real historical event until the author's notes on the text after the last chapter. In a way, it seems that this story is sandwiched between a dedication and after-story note of historical context. I think this could have been integrated into the story somehow, to make a more streamlined and united story with both the fictional and historical aspect present in the narrative itself. However, had this acknowledgement not been included at all, the greater cultural implications of this work would have been lost, so the inclusion of them were crucial, even though the way it has been done feels a bit separate from the text itself.

That, however, is the only qualm I have with this novel. I cannot recommend it enough (although I would strongly suggest to read it in the winter months to heighten your immersion into its wintery atmosphere). The juxtaposition between Keegan's serene writing style and the dark undertones of the narrative itself brings a distinctive feeling to the work that makes it both pleasant and intriguing to read for anyone. The narrative brings these untold stories to light, and uses Christmas as a catalyst to show the good and bad in people's decisions. This novella also calls attention to yet another way in which women have been mistreated by institutions. The way *Small Things Like These* foregrounds the main character's guilt and realization of his responsibility, makes its readers think about their own responsibility in these still contemporary issues as well, something that is especially important given the current socio-political debates surrounding women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. Therefore, this book should be on everyone's reading list this coming winter season.

About the Author

Natalie van den Berg is currently enrolled in the MA program Literature Today at Utrecht University, and is a member of the PR team of *RevUU*. She has found a love for poetry and creative writing during her BA English Language and Culture, and is interested in appearances of literature in other media like games and television, of which she is an avid consumer as well. She likes cuddling with her dog while reading whatever new thing she has picked up at one of her local book stores, whether it's an old classic, an enticing comic, or a recently released poetry collection.

Not Excluding People from the Picture

An Exploration of Human Kindness in *Small Things Like These*

Susi Westerveld

The saying *don't judge a book by its cover* doesn't apply to me, for it is precisely the covers of books that draw me to them. This also counts for Claire Keegan's novel *Small Things Like These*, which was shortlisted for the 2022 Man Booker Prize. The picture on the cover of my edition portrays a quaint wintery scene: a distant mountain range is blanketed with a layer of snow and the silhouettes of ice-skating people are depicted on a frozen lake between townhouses. Interestingly, only a small part of the original painting – *The Hunters in the Snow* by the Dutch painter Pieter Breughel the Elder – is displayed. As can be seen in the picture below, the section that has been cut out shows three men returning from a hunt with several dogs in tow.

The men appear downtrodden for their heads are bent low. Even the dogs, with their drooping ears, seem dejected. Before I began my reading, I wondered how the story would connect to the act of cutting out a piece from the larger picture.

Set in the Irish winter of 1985, the first chapter of *Small Things Like These* opens to an impression of the changing seasons in the town of New Ross: "In October there were yellow trees. Then the clocks went back the hour and the long November winds came in and blew, and stripped the trees bare." The winter months are the busiest for Bill Furlong, whose job as the local wood and coal seller has the townspeople lining up outside his door, demanding their share of coal before the holidays begin. His long working days leave him with little room to be with his wife Eileen and their five daughters. Nevertheless, Furlong is grateful that he is able to provide for his family. He frequently reminisces about his past and the kindness that was extended to him and his single mother. Yet, despite his current stability, Furlong finds himself "looking on into the mechanics of the days, and the trouble ahead." His contemplations only increase after he encounters a young woman locked away in the convent's coal house. The town's complicit silence following his discovery reveals that something sinister lurks beneath the mundanities of daily life in New Ross.

Several chapters of *Small Things Like These* start with vignettes. Here, the narrator momentarily zooms out to provide us with a bird's eye view of, for example, the town's surrounding areas or of the Nativity scene set up in the main square. These descriptive passages serve to set the mood for the rest of the chapter and are filled with symbolism. One vignette in particular shares a notable connection with the painting on the cover. At the start of the fourth chapter, the narrator comments on the large number of crows that have descended on New Ross. The description of the crows is ominous: the birds are "scavenging for what was dead" and plunge towards anything that seems edible. The narrator also explicitly mentions that the birds roost around the convent.

Accordingly, the part of the painting *The Hunters in the Snow* that is displayed on the novel's cover includes a crow hovering above the snow-covered town. By zooming in on this particular part of the painting and by describing the crows near the convent in an eerie manner, Keegan foreshadows the sinister side to this Catholic-run institution. Like the crows that eye prey from above, the convent's watchful eyes are ever present, keeping those who deviate from the Catholic Church's preconceived rules in check.

The narrator informs us that, aside from providing women with a basic education, the convent runs a successful laundry business. However, this is only its outward appearance. For decades the true nature of these Irish laundries, collectively referred to as the Magdalene laundries, was kept silent. Under the supervision of the Catholic Church, the laundries took in thousands of women who had been labeled as 'fallen.' Yet, in practice, these Magdalene laundries were nothing more than prisons for women who had birthed children out of wedlock. The women were incarcerated because they threatened the Catholic Church's moral ideals.

What struck Keegan about this historical scandal is the silence of the public. In an interview with the Man Booker Foundation, she expresses her astonishment about the fact that so many people did nothing to aid the women. It is only in recent years that the Catholic Church and Irish society at large have begun to make amends for this dark page in Ireland's history books. The scandal of the Magdalene laundries reminds me of the picture on the cover of *Small Things Like These*. The exclusion of the hunters from the cover echoes the exclusion of the fallen women from Irish society; the 'failures' were cut out of the picture.

Returning to the novel, the convent and its laundry business are introduced through circulating rumors. While some villagers claim the place is a mother-and-baby home, others say the nuns earn money by selling illegitimate children. By introducing the institution through rumors, Keegan shows us that the citizens of New Ross are indifferent towards what is truly happening inside. Like the villagers, Furlong has heard of the rumors but doesn't let them deter him from delivering coal to the convent. He is, however, taken aback by what he encounters inside: young girls are polishing the floors on their knees, wearing little more than grey shifts.

Keegan uses sensory language to give us a vivid impression of the girls' state. For instance, when they see Furlong, "they looked like they'd been scalded," and their hair was "roughly cut, as though someone blind had taken to it with shears." In addition, he notices the extreme measures the nuns have taken to keep the women inside: the doors have padlocks on them, and the high wall separating the convent from outside "was topped with broken glass." These prison-like qualities are reminiscent of the crows roosting outside – keeping watch over the town and eying prey from above. What's more, Furlong discovers a girl locked away in the convent's outdoor coal house, the excrement on the floor suggesting she's been in there for more than a night. He must decide whether to take the girl with him or return her to the nuns, who are clearly abusing the women under their care.

The narrative of *Small Things Like These* made me think of a story my mother once told me. Around the same time that Furlong encounters the young woman in the coal shed, my grandfather encountered two Vietnamese siblings in a diner in Windsor, Ontario. The boy of nineteen and the girl of nine had fled by boat from Vietnam to Canada. My grandfather observed that the siblings owned little and were not properly dressed for the cold weather outside. In this moment, he could've chosen to walk away; with a big family back at home, he had enough on his hands. Yet, he decided to take the siblings with him.

Similarly, Furlong wonders whether it is wise to take the coal-stained girl with him to his house. Only recently his wife had scolded him for being too soft-hearted, saying that "'[i]f you wanted to get on in life, there's things you have to ignore.'" Nearing the age of forty, Furlong faces an identity crisis. So far, he has kept his past at bay by over-working, but lately he has found himself wondering about the identity of his unknown father. Born to an unwed girl, Furlong suffered the harassment afforded to illegitimate children in Ireland. Nevertheless, compared to others in his situation, Furlong and his sixteen-year-old mother had been lucky. His mother's employer, the wealthy widow Mrs. Wilson, had allowed her to remain working and had provided them with lodgings.

Finding the girl in the coal house confronts him with a life that could've been his mother's. Because of this, his decision to return the girl to the convent may come as a surprise, but I find that it makes him a realistic character. Keegan provides us with a liminal person who is both part and not part of the scandal: Furlong was harassed because of his illegitimacy, but escaped the fate of a laundry child. It is through his liminality that we learn about the social implications of the Magdalene laundries. Growing up in a society that brandishes single mothers as fallen, I find it quite understandable that Furlong hesitates to bring the girl to his home. Helping her might

have unforeseen consequences, ones that would not only affect him, but his family as well. At the time, aside from the public's prejudices against single mothers and their offspring, the Catholic-run laundries were powerful institutions in league with government authorities. Furlong knows very well what it means to be an outcast in society, which has made him even more determined "to keep his head down and stay on the right side of people." Would it, therefore, be wise for him to risk his and his family's wellbeing for a stranger in need?

Nevertheless, in the days following his run-in, Furlong often finds his thoughts straying back to the young woman. During weekly mass, on his trips to customers or even when he's with his family, he repeatedly pictures the girl whom he left sitting alone at an empty table, "breast milk leaking under the little cardigan and staining her blouse." On Christmas Eve his contemplations reach a breaking point and he finds himself walking through the snow to the convent.

Strikingly, Keegan once more incorporates a crow in a scene related to the convent: on his way up, Furlong encounters "a black cat eating from the carcass of a crow." The dead crow foreshadows what Furlong plans on doing. Like the black cat, he intends to go against the convent's authority, hereby 'killing' the predatory gaze that made him conform to the Catholic Church's predetermined rules. Knowing what he knows about the convent's laundry and having received the brunt of people's prejudices, Furlong has come to realize how the kindness of his mother's employer enabled his freedom. He wonders what the point of being alive is if he can't similarly help others in need and sets out to do what he should have done in the first place. Upon arriving at the convent, he finds the same young woman locked up in the coal house. Only this time, he doesn't return her to the nuns.

Even though Keegan doesn't offer us a look at what happens when Furlong brings the girl to his home, with *Small Things Like These* she teaches us the importance of extending kindness to others – what including people in the picture means. Rather than going along with the town's exclusion of the 'fallen' women, Furlong responded to the girl's plea for help. In our current times where exclusion is still common, Keegan provides a hopeful note with a character whose disposition doesn't remain influenced by society's practice of exclusion. Similar to how my grandfather's story functioned as an example to me, *Small Things Like These* shows us how one small act of kindness can make a lifetime of difference in someone else's life. And this is worth going out in the cold for, regardless of the consequences.

About the Author

Susi Westerveld has recently completed her BA in English Language and Culture at Utrecht University, and considers herself a true bibliophile. If she's not playing with her cat or watching Japanese anime, you'll find her curled up in a cozy spot with a cup of tea and a fantasy book. She has found her place at the MA program Literature Today and sees herself working as a professional writer in the future, delving further into the relevance of cultural memory and transculturality.

Can *Noah Can't Even* Even be Talked About?

Maria Teresa Cattani

How does literary freedom function in a school with a specific, defined identity? Are restrictions logically, morally and ethically justifiable? Lately, this discussion has been all over the internet regarding different cases. This article will focus on a case that took place in the UK, exploring the influence of the Catholic Church on the freedom of expression and the search of identities of pupils in secondary school.

On World Book Day (3 March 2022), the governors of the London John Fisher School, a Catholic secondary school, invited author Simon James Green to talk about his novel *Noah Can't Even*, which features a gay character. Green, who is a Young Adult (YA) author and identifies as gay, was planning to talk about "being an awkward teenager, the power of comedy, [his] career, and about an 8 min section of the importance of LGBT rep", as the author states himself on Twitter. After his talk for years 8 and 9 (ages 12-14), there would be time for book signing of *Noah Can't Even*. These plans, however, were cancelled due to an intervention of the Southwark Archdiocese, who stated just four days before the planned event in a first press release that "from time to time materials or events emerge for consideration that fall outside the scope of what is permissible in a Catholic school" and that "the book-signing event scheduled for 7 March 2022 at The John Fisher School is one such event."

Noah Can't Even, published in 2017, centers on the titular Noah's search for identity, particularly in relation to his sexuality, during his time in high school. He describes this, in essence, as pure hell. He tries to achieve social normalcy by pursuing Sophie, but when his best friend Harry kisses him at a party, things change. The themes of the book draw on inclusion in the context of high schools, which was the main reason for the John Fisher School to invite Green. Why, then, did the Southwark Archdiocese intervene in such a drastic way? What have been the reactions of the people involved and of the general public? Does this reflect a larger general movement in terms of recent controversies that concern LGBTQ+ literature?

After the catastrophic event, the kiss between Noah and Harry, their classmates make fun of them using the structure and form of the Lord's Prayer:

"Let us pray."

"Our Father, who art the gay boy? Noah be his name ..."

[...]

"He makes Harry come. He gives him one. On earth as it is in Heaven ..."

[...]

"And lead him straight into temptation. Right into a gay bar. For Noah is a gay boy. Who likes to suck cock. For ever and ever. He's gay."

"OK, sit yourselves down!" said Mr. Baxter, head of year.

The year elevens all shuffled back into their seats. Noah despondently plopped back down, straight on to a banana that the hilarious occupants of the row behind had placed on his seat during the prayer.

"Awww – right up his arse!" said one of the lads. (It wasn't.)

"He loves it!" said another. (He didn't.)

"Oh, Harry! Do it to me!" sighed a girl. (Not a phrase he would ever use. He wasn't a porn star with no class.)

In a second press release on April 28 2022, the Archdiocese quoted this part to show the public why they didn't agree with "the use of this prayer in this way, and for this to be promoted in a Catholic school." It was seen as a source of deep disquiet and as blasphemy. Another passage that has been quoted as problematic is the following:

> *Rumor had it, Connor was seeing a boy in year thirteen – two years his senior! How very edgy. That meant Connor was also probably sexually experienced now, taken under the wing of this sugar daddy in the sixth form, who would have doubtless shown him exactly what to do and when to do it …*

"If the narrative were about a female pupil in Year 11 and a male pupil in Year 13, who was her 'sugar daddy' and had 'doubtless shown [her] exactly what to do and when to do it,' the concern would remain the same", states the Archdiocese. Thus, the Archdiocese argues that the event's cancelation was not based on Noah's or Green's sexual orientation. Especially since the book also uses inappropriate, sexual language towards women which is unacceptable in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Consequently, the Archdiocese stood up for the principles of the Catholic Church, such as the dignity of the school's Christian identity, the sexual integrity of students and the use of the Lord's Prayer in a respectful way. The school's identity is being undermined, jettisoned, by prioritizing a book that goes against their values.

The question that comes up, however, is whether those passages that seem problematic for their offensive and sexual nature are written precisely to cause such discomfort and to make teenagers reflect on unacceptable behavior. They draw upon how – unfortunately realistically – sexuality is being discussed in some secondary schools. The school should offer students freedom and space to contemplate these topics and to agree or deviate from the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

As we have seen, the Archdiocese claimed that the ban doesn't have to do with a LGBTQ+ "problem". They judge more the fact that it is so explicitly sexual in a cruel, animalistic way, which is extremely opposed to sex within the context of marriage. This argument is even more powerful to them since it involves minors within an educational context. Nevertheless, I will expose that the parents in this discussion do see it as a LGBTQ+ problem, since they're arguing, amongst others, that what their kids are being taught about the "LGBT+ side of life, with a huge emphasis on transgenderism, is nothing short of straight from Hell, truly diabolical."

In the complexity of this case, it is important to understand the different parties that take a stance in this debate. First, the pupils' parents play an important role on both sides. It was the parents who raised their concerns to the Education Commission of the Archdiocese. Moreover, it was the parents parents who created the petition "English Catholic School MUST Cancel Scandalous LGBTQ+ History Month Book Signing Event", to cancel the signing event. On the petition website, people that supported the ban made several remarks such as:

> *Valiant MacCruiskeen: "There is a specter haunting Purely-the specter of homosexuality. A homosexual author of teenage fiction visiting a Catholic School is 100% as much of an issue as the ongoing war in Ukraine […]. Putin, as I'm sure you are aware, would not stand for what this school has done."*
>
> *Bernie: "These boys, some or even many, who are maybe at a confused stage in their life, could be swung over to think they are gay and get into a very sordid lifestyle."*
>
> *Laura: "By encouraging this book signing, and advertising books for them to buy about the gay lifestyle,he is risking setting the boys in those year groups on the entirely wrong road – away from their Catholic Faith.*

What is striking in these comments is the comparison being made between the acts of violence in the war in Ukraine and the visit of Green at the John Fisher School. The comparison is completely illogical and incoherent. It must be said that these reactions on the petition website might not give the most nuance, nor always depict the views shared by most of the parents. They are rather extreme.

Another questionable phrase is that of "lifestyle". Not only did the signees of the petition against Greens' visit suggest that being gay is a lifestyle choice, but also the schools' chaplain insinuates a similar message: "No one is denying the existence of those who have differing views and beliefs to ourselves, the event is about promoting the literature of a lifestyle choice that is contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ, and therefore has no place in a catholic school." How is it possible to think of one's sexuality inherently as a choice of lifestyle? From the Churches' perspective, the gay "lifestyle" that is being disapproved of, is not about being attracted to people from the same sex. It's about acting upon it. The difference being between one's identity and their actions, or one's choice on how to express their sexuality. In the case of *Noah Can't Even*, this expression is considered to be against human nature, almost animalistic. However,

it is essential to underline that being attracted to a person of the same sex is often not a choice in itself.

The group of governors and the school head that invited Green in the first place also played an important role in this controversy. In reaction to the intervention and letters by the Archdiocese, they refused to cancel the event. The Archdiocese stated that: "the headteacher and some Governors decided to disobey the clear instruction from the diocese, and this will have serious consequences." The serious consequences consisted in the removal of several governors on the leadership team, which then led to strikes by staff members of the John Fisher School to raise attention for the controversy, petitioning for the reinstallation of the governors. Instead, emergency governors were installed by the Archdiocese. These strikes had big consequences: some staff were dismissed, the school closed for a week because of understaffing, and the controversy caught the attention of the public.

Furthermore, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) carried out an investigation on the John Fisher School. The study showed that, although the pupils described the school as one where 'everyone just fits in' irrespective of faith, background, or sexuality, some leaders, staff, and pupils have been left feeling angry, confused, and frustrated. Others are worried about the impression these events might give of the school's ethos. The school's chaplain shares this concern and says that the international reputation of the school is at stake. However, this worry is based on a different kind of ethos, namely one that cares more about appearances than students themselves.

As a consequence of the publicity, a lot of people reacted on Twitter, and other social media platforms. Green himself dedicated a whole thread on Twitter to explain what happened to him in which his pain, disgust, and anger are evident. He starts an important conversation on the importance and influence of literature in spreading awareness of inclusion problems at secondary schools: "You can't be made gay by reading about gay characters in books. If you're LGBT, you're LGBT. I want LGBT kids to find comfort and understanding in my books, and non-LGBT kids to understand other lives, empathise, see we're really not so different."

Various Christians declared their unhappiness about the fact that the event was cancelled and their disagreement with the decision of the Archdiocese. One of them says: "As a gay Catholic, I find banning Green from giving a school talk incredibly sad. Hearing from a successful gay man would have done a lot to help me in the isolation and otherness I felt at school. Shame on you. Not in my name."

Another stance was taken by the academic and rabbi, Jonathan Romain, who questioned the effectiveness and the consequences of the ban: "When the Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark bans a gay author visiting a school during World Book Day and sacking the governors who had invited him, is that an example of inclusivity or segregation, widening children's horizons or limiting them?"

The last intervention in this discussion that should be pointed out is the one from education journalist Warwick Mansall: "This ongoing story shows how it is not only academies which can have a problem with overly-centralised control of governance. (This is a voluntary-aided RC school)." Here a bigger governmental issue is brought to attention: how is it possible that the Archdiocese has so much power over Catholic schools? Is this centralized control of governance a healthy system for a secondary school? Where should staff draw the line in letting their school be governed by the Archdiocese?

Curiously, outside the UK this controversy hasn't received much attention, even though it's not only in the UK that one can encounter such situations. Another example of a similar controversy is the court case on *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe in Virginia last summer. And, in the context of the contents of the school curriculum, one could also think about the ban on *Maus* in a school in Tennessee earlier this year. Should we worry about the freedom of speech at schools, especially regarding LGBTQ+ literature? Shouldn't pupils be allowed to look in the mirror and see all kinds of possibilities? That mirror is needed to create a space for meaningful discussion, creating conversations.

About the Author

Maria Teresa Cattani is this year's managing editor of *RevUU* and she loves studying and reading texts of all kinds and forms. She is particularly passionate about Hispanic literature and teaching her pupils the French language and culture. Previously, she investigated forgotten writings of women in exile during the post Spanish civil-war era. She is currently a student in the MA Literature Today program, figuring out what the future holds for her.

Color Me Brown

What *Girl, Woman, Other* Taught Me about My Brownness

Neelam Reddy

Color

Four.

I was four years old when I learned the color brown.

I was living in St. Albert—a shit town nestled in the armpit of Alberta, Canada. I had just moved there from California and while my parents tried to reacquaint themselves with the country (that's where they met and fell in love before heading south), I was sent to the local day care to acquaint myself with my new Canadian peers. This was nearly twenty years ago, and like almost all childhood memories, I CANNOT recount every minute detail in high definition. I read somewhere that those "core memories"—the ones where you can recall the colors and scents and the chronological order of events in great detail—only really take form after the age of five. But this is different. I may not have the colors and scents and order, but I do know the words that were said, that perpetually remain alive and well in the recesses of my mind. And that is perhaps more real, more certain than any other "core memory" that formed subsequently. When I see it in my head, it's like watching it unfold on an old television —the images are grainy (I cannot make out the faces) nor can I tell how many people or things are in this scene (It's all distorted). But I don't concentrate on the image itself— it's the sounds coming from the television, the words that are being said, that matter the most here.

*You can't play with us because you are **BROWN**, and you are a **GIRL***

That's what the kids at day-care said. I wanted to play basketball with them, and they said no because there were two things wrong with me: I was brown (I still am) and I was a girl (I still am), ergo a **brown girl**.

There is a lot to unpack here. We can say this behavior comes from the home—kids don't just say things like that unprompted. And while there's truth to that, that's not the message I'm trying to get across. This was the first instance that I could pinpoint, in my twenty-three years of life, in which my identifying markers (color and gender) were used to create a single definition of me—**brown girl**.

And it is because of this definition of my identity that I did not belong, could not belong, in the same group as those four-year-old white kids. You see this is where I finally saw color for the first time, and it was my own. This is the first time I can say I learned that color and gender (in my case) are inextricable—I cannot separate my "brownness" from my "girlness". I am not brown, nor am I a girl—I am a **brown girl**. The intricacies of this identity are numerous and vast and multi-faceted. Now, what I am saying here is some critical fuckery that no four-year-old would sit and analyze (I certainly did not at the time). This is the stuff tweed-wearing, elbow rubbing scholars would mull over in the corner of their windowless offices and come back to me with some verbose psychoanalytic response to this incident. As an adult, I have no doubt that this incident played an integral role in my bildungsroman—like scholars, I can also now reflect on this incident with much more critical consideration.

But, when you are four you don't think about those things, obviously. You look at your hands, your arms, your face, and see that the color of your skin is several shades too dark and that the absence of an appendage between your legs leaves a space—an emptiness. You see all these things (or lack of things) and from the perspective of a four-year-old, being a **brown girl** meant that I could not play basketball.

And that hurt.

I really wanted to play.

When I first read *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo, I saw aspects of myself on those pages. Not verbatim, mind you, the novel contained several narratives I could never personally relate to—but it did tell me something about brownness, my brownness.

12 women. 12 lives. 12 stories.

I think that sums up Evaristo's story, a story of twelves.
Twelve women with lives that are their own to tell.
Twelve lives that are interlaced by shared experiences, but independent in their own right.

Twelve stories that speak for themselves rather than spoken for—uninterrupted voices dictate the pages.

In the span of 452 pages, Evaristo weaves all these narratives —individual and unique on their own—to form the overlooked multi-colored fabric of Britain's society—the stories of **brown girls**.

Within these pages, I learned something about brownness—not only the degree of melanin that permeates my skin, but also the social construct it imposes upon me in the world that we live in.

Like Evaristo's characters, I too, am very aware of my brownness. We learn of our color young. We learn that certain colors suit certain roles, certain places in this world. Like, in the story of Amma, she captures our plight as **brown girls** with the word "disillusioned".

That's a good word.

We are disillusioned every time we get typecast in the life roles that **brown girls** are supposed to play. Sure, Amma's situation is different than mine—she's an actress who's pigeonholed on stage to roles as a slave, servant, prostitute, nanny— even criminal. All limiting and degrading.

I'm pigeonholed too, just with other (arguably better) expectations such as daughter, wife, and stay-at-home mom (college educated, of course). There's nothing wrong with those life roles—but that's it for me. Anything outside of that scope is hard for the world to comprehend, and therefore hard for it to support. Color and gender are one in the same as a **brown girl**. The color I am says more about who I am supposed to be than who I actually am. It's drenched in history and tradition and a lifetime of preconceptions.

I see my color before I see me.

And the world sees me the same way too.

A single story is dangerous business.
Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives fair warning to this phenomenon. A story, funneling a single perspective, is a dangerous one. And it is our (**brown girls'**) duty to combat single faceted narratives with authenticity—a genuine attempt to relay another perspective and voice.

That's what *Girl, Woman, Other* made me think of—authentic voices.
Evaristo tells each woman's story unhindered by abandoning traditional conventions and adopting a more liberated form of expression. Sentences do not end, nor do they begin with capital assertion. Like a river, words ebb and flow against the current of narrative. It's free and unending—how a **brown girls'** story ought to be.

Shade

Fifteen.

I was fifteen when I learned that there are many shades of brown.
And I was the wrong shade.

You're too dark for me—too brown.
He told me this on the dance floor at our high school Model UN banquet. I was hoping he'd dance with me, but instead I got a rude awakening.
The operative word here wasn't *dark* or *brown* even, it was *too*.
I was too much of the thing that defined me.
Ironic, isn't it?
So much for supporting international relations.
On the ride home, I watched the moonlight reflect off my darkness. I rubbed my arm (maybe I can get some of this brown off). Maybe I can be a few shades lighter at least.
So that someday someone will see me as desirable.
As something beautiful.

I've read stories of women with alabaster skin.
I've seen advertisements about fair and lovely Indian girls. I read and see everything that is not about me. And it is all about being brown or browner or brownest.
And no **brown girl** wants to be the brownest.

Tone

Eighteen.

I was eighteen when my skin tone became desirable—something to touch, to marvel at, to be curious about.
But what I thought was fascination turned out to be fetishization.
I wish I knew better then.

The first sign was his touch—not the fact that he touched me, but how. It was our first meeting in public (safety 101). We had settled into a café table alongside the window, and he rested his hand on my thigh. We talked, and he moved his hand up and down the length of my thigh. He told me he liked my **brown girl** complexion. What was *too dark*, was now *interesting* —especially since I was the first **brown girl** he was ever with (a point he was sure to make). A touch turned to heavy petting and indiscreet kisses along the nape of my neck and lips. The entire time (for three hours?) he kept his hands on me. I thought I wanted more.
Looking back, I'm embarrassed that I let it happen in front of all those people.

What a spectacle.
What a shame.
What a **brown girl**.

I invited him back to my place.
Seemed fine, really.
Until it wasn't.
Thrussst—say that you're a dirty girl.
(Strange, but not unheard of)
Thrussst—say you're a dirty brown slut
(Huh? What did you say?)
Thrussst—say that you're a whore
(What!?)
I felt my lips move, but I didn't speak. I'm glad I didn't. I was stunned, to the point of silence. Then, like a wave of unmitigated emotion, I said
No.

He stopped (I'll give him that). He didn't insist (thank God).
He was disappointed that I didn't live up to my promise of a fun night.
To me, that was far from my definition of a fun night.
When it was over, I didn't kick him out. I don't know why. For whatever reason (maybe guilt?), I let him stay the night. He even held me, resting his hand on the small of my back as we slept—well, while he slept—I didn't get any sleep that night.

Evaristo tells the story the way it is—there's no sugar coating it. That's the way it should be, to be honest. When we cut away at the truth in the effort to provide an "aesthetically" pleasing, more digestible one we do a disservice to others. We don't even give them a single story; we give them a perforated one. This is where *Girl, Woman, Other* taught me that a **brown girl's** brownness is inherently uncomfortable.

Through her twelve characters, Evaristo confronts her readers with vivid, unapologetic descriptions of her characters' pain (both mental and physical).
I CANNOT even begin to imagine the horrors that Carole or Bummi or LaTisha endured. And I am grateful I never (hopefully) will.

Evaristo compromises comfort for fact. For the rape and sexual assault of some of her characters, there's no ambiguity on what cruel acts were forced upon their bodies. She tells each detail, each touch, each penetration, each cry, each pain—unrestrained.
It's daunting, yes, to read something so raw and uninhibited but in that moment, you appreciate its intention, its purpose in the novel.

Hue

Twenty-three.

I turned twenty-three today while writing this piece and this is what I know so far:

I am a **brown girl**. Am I okay with it? Have I fully and truly accepted the definition of my identity as such? Honestly—no. I am human after all and while I have come to appreciate the person, I am in the skin that I wear. It would be remissive of me to say that I have completely evolved to complete acceptance of myself. It's a nice notion to think that over the course of twenty years I would have irrevocably changed to be a person that would whole-heartedly love herself, the hue of her skin. The road to self-acceptance is a long one and I'm afraid I can't give you a satisfactory ending.

Evaristo does the same too. Her novel gives a sense of unfinishedness. There's a lot of unknown variables regarding her characters. Some get closure—a full story from birth to end. Others leave you wondering what's to come next for them. Stories without closure are great—it leaves you desiring something more. And that feeling, that deep desire that burns in the pit of your stomach, is what makes a story that much better.

Stories are inextricably interlocked to create a community of familiarity—it's not sameness that draws me into Evaristo's novel, it's finding the similarities within the differences of her character's stories. Indeed, it's a novel—a book bound by pages and printed with ink. But it is also something tangible, something that I or any other woman like myself can recognize as something true and raw and honest.

It's a story.
Of girls like me.
Girls that are full of **colors** and **shades** and **tones** and **hues**.
Brown girls.

About the Author

Neelam Reddy is an MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University and the department head of PR/Marketing at *RevUU*. Having completed her Bachelor of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta, Neelam has moved to the Netherlands to pursue a career in the writing/publishing sector. In addition to her love for traveling and teaching, Neelam is an avid writer. Neelam's fondness for creative writing can be witnessed in her frequent participation in writing contests. She enjoys writing historical fiction and personal narratives.

The Real Love Story in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*

Anna Mangnus

Silvia Moreno-Garcia's newest novel *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is a beautifully atmospheric novel that follows the coming of age of Carlota Moreau, though the driving force of the novel is Carlota's effort to keep Yaxaktun – the hacienda where she lives – from being taken from her or wholly destroyed. It is a story of sheltered childhood, questioning one's assumptions and trusting one's gut, subtly weaving in themes of feminism and anti-colonialism. The story peppers in elements of romance and heartbreak, but the real love story is between a growing woman and the place she calls home.

The Daughter of Doctor Moreau is an innovative retelling of H. G. Wells' 1896 classic *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. It retains the core idea of a doctor creating human-animal hybrids to push the boundaries of science and medicine, but changes the setting from an unnamed island in the Pacific Ocean to the Yucatán peninsula during the 1870s Mexican Caste War. Additionally, its narrator is no longer a shipwrecked Brit. *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* instead switches between the perspectives of Montgomery Laughton – Yaxaktun's caretaker and a name borrowed from Wells' novel – and Carlota, the titular daughter of Doctor Moreau. These changes allow Moreno-Garcia to convey an intimate familiarity with the setting of the story from the start, an intimacy that gives the novel much of its power. This is especially true when Carlota's intimacy with and love for the hacienda is what forces her to stand up against all she has ever known to protect it, leading her on a journey of self-discovery and coming into power.

The Characters

Both Montgomery and Carlota are sympathetic protagonists, though it is always obvious that Carlota is the star of the show. Moreno-Garcia presents Carlota as a sweet, dutiful girl who slowly realizes that her father's experiments aren't as ethical as they may seem. She slowly becomes more aware of the politics surrounding these experiments as she meets with patrons Eduardo and Isidro Lizalde and begins to question the Lizaldes' intentions with the hybrids. This move towards a more critical attitude is gradual and filled with resistance as Carlota tries to hold on to the life she has always known, which includes obedience towards her father.

It is a great strength of this novel that it does not rush Carlota's character development in any way. Her feelings and growth always feel grounded in the development of the story's events. Her process towards breaking out of a mold created by the sheltered environment she grew up in runs the danger of feeling forced, but this is never the case in Moreno-Garcia's novel. Carlota is shown more of the world (or rather, different ideas about the world, as she never leaves the hacienda) by Eduardo Lizalde as he courts her. He makes her more excited about the idea of a world beyond the hacienda where she might be allowed to be more expressive, and introduces her to the idea of questioning a parent's authority.

However, I cannot claim that *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is a big hitter when it comes to plot. This is partially made up for by the characters, but none of them quite have the depth to fully replace this. While I was sympathetic towards the characters, I never *cared* deeply for them. Because the lack of plot puts the burden of engagement largely on the characters, I would consider this a flaw of the book. *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is beautiful, but it can be difficult to fully engage with it.

The Plot

As mentioned, *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is not a book that heavily focuses on its plot. Things obviously still happen in the book, but they mostly function to push the characters' development. Much more emphasis is laid on the charact-

ers and – possibly even more importantly – the setting. Some reviewers (Boyd, BonesBooksBuffy) have complained about the main plot twist being too predictable. This is a fair complaint, but personally, it did not bother me too much as I saw this 'twist' as more of a culmination of a character arc. Additionally, at least one reviewer (BookshelfFantasies) was disappointed at the relatively small role the hybrids played in the story, as they thought they were "the most interesting part of the story". I would disagree with the latter, though it is true that from the synopsis it seemed like the hybrids would play a much larger part in the story than they did. Nevertheless, I do not feel that this is necessarily a flaw of the book. The dehumanization of the hybrids and the lack of attention that is paid to them is one of the ways in which Moreno-Garcia alludes to the poor treatment of the oppressed people in Mexico. The European descendant ruling class treated the native Mayan population as inhuman (this was also the cause of the Caste War rebellion) and as nothing more than a source of labor, similarly to the hybrids in this book. Because of this, it makes some amount of sense that they occupy more of a background role.

The Pacing

Moreno-Garcia successfully transports us into the Mexican jungle, illustrating a lush and beautiful world that one can only be in awe of. The actual story takes a while to take off and even when it does – around the halfway mark – it remains very slow. This makes it more difficult to get immersed in the story, but the slow pace is not all bad. Moreno-Garcia is masterful at setting a creeping pace that always has you feeling like something is building ominously in the background. This adds another dimension to the rich setting and lyrical writing of the book, and it was definitely one of the things that kept me reading.

One of my main problems with Moreno-Garcia's atmospheric writing style is something that is rather close to what I consider one of its main strengths. I previously mentioned that Moreno-Garcia's writing constantly feels like it is building towards something.

The problem with this is that it never fully follows through with this feeling. This building of tension inevitably falls flat without a satisfying climax. This is a feeling I got when reading Moreno-Garcia's hit novel *Mexican Gothic* and once again with this book. There is a kind of 'final battle' at the climax of the book, but for me it did not resolve all of the subtle tensions to my satisfaction. The final chapter's denouement softens this a little in the sense that its open ending and the bittersweet hope it leaves behind does more justice to the overall feeling of the book. Writing a satisfying ending to a novel predicated on atmosphere over action must be extremely difficult, and I could not imagine how Moreno-Garcia could do it better. Still, as a reader and not a writer, I was left wanting more.

Feminist and Anti-Colonial Themes

As several reviewers (Memmot, Serrano, Boyd) have noted, the amended setting has a striking effect on the political messages of the book. Moreno-Garcia sets her novel in the 1870s Yucatán peninsula during its Caste War, in which the Maya population was rising up against the European (and European-descended) ruling class. The story criticizes how the European-descended ruling class treats the land and its people with a combination of ownership and disdain, and questions the legitimacy of this rule. The book shows how the Lizaldes, the embodiment of this ruling class, are ill-suited for life in the jungles of Yucatán, and have no real reason to be allowed to have any kind of authority there. They are shown sweating in their city clothes and getting lost at every turn. This is juxtaposed to the Mayan rebels who know the territory like the back of their hand and the inhabitants of Yaxaktun who flourish in their environment. This criticism of the ruling-class and their unfounded legitimacy, while siding (either tentatively or strongly, depending on the character focalizing) with the Mayan rebels in the Caste War, show the book's anti-colonial themes. She shows Ramona, the maid, cautiously giving supplies to the Mayan rebels and Cachito, a hybrid Carlota sees as her little brother, idolizes the leader of the rebels as a hero. While the narrative shows this idolization as a youthful simplification of the political dynamics at play, it does not contradict that the rebel leader Cumux is whose side we are on. Similarly, the giving of supplies to the rebels is ultimately seen as a just act.

The feminist themes in this book are even more overt. Carlota grows up and claims power for herself alongside a realization of the stifling expectations that are put upon women. This is present in her changing relationship with her father, but perhaps more obvious in altercations with the Lizaldes. One of the turning points in the story is when Eduardo Lizalde tells Carlota that she would be allowed to live with him in Mérida and have a comfortable life there as

his mistress, indicating that this is the most favorable outcome for her. This is when Carlota realizes how few options she really has within Mexican society as a woman of her position. It is also when she truly makes the choice to break away from this 'civil' society. Her options are either to conform to the idea society has of her and live a safe life as Eduardo's docile mistress away from Yaxaktun, or she can shun that very society and choose the much more dangerous option to reject Eduardo and fight (with the hybrids and the rebels) to become the mistress of Yaxaktun. She chooses the latter.

These themes might not be called subtle – they are naturally crafted with a strong sense of modern morals and '21st century sensibilities' (Abel) – but when reading they never seem exaggerated. There is a fine balance to keep here that many historical fiction books skew by having their heroines speak and act according to modern day feminist beliefs – I fear I have to sympathize with Booker Prize winner Hillary Mantel's sentiment that we shouldn't "falsely empower female characters in history" as it tends to feel fake - but Moreno-Garcia does a good job at keeping this balance. As said before, all of Carlota's character development seems realistically in line with the developments of the story, and her growing 'feminist' beliefs and actions follow the same trend.

Balancing Love and Criticism

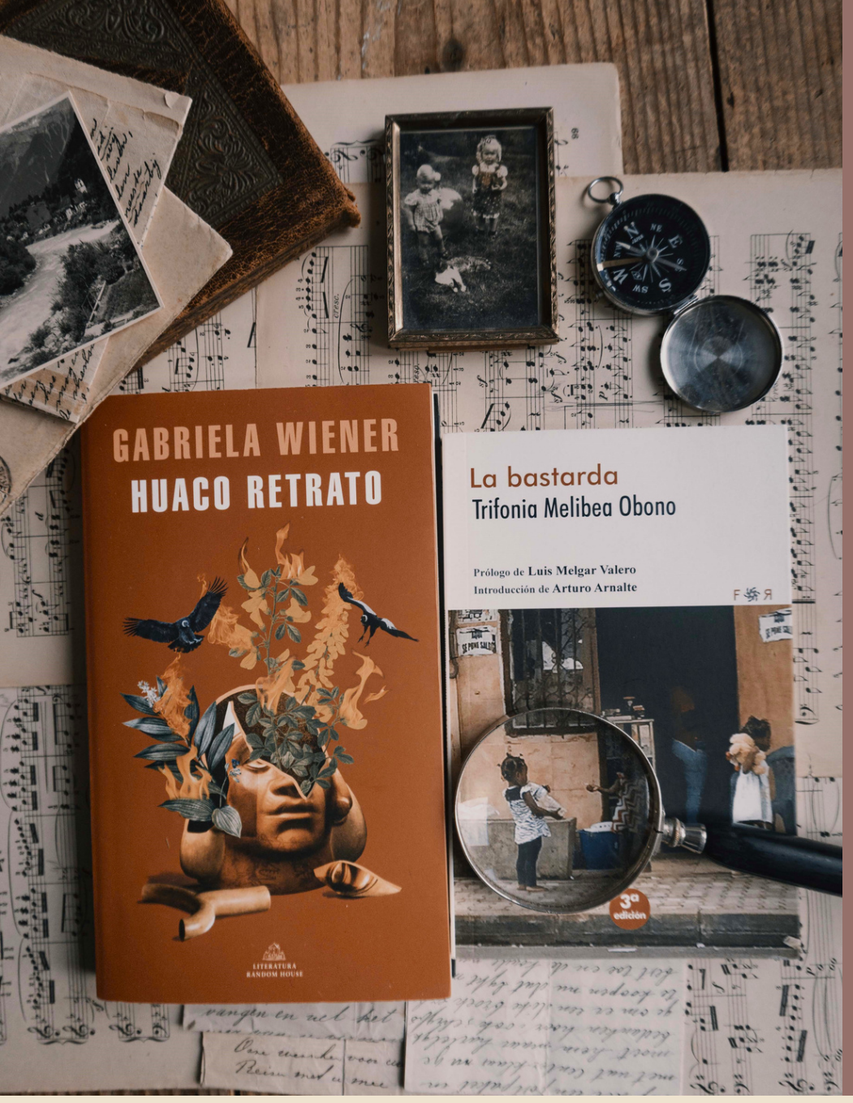
What struck me most about *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*, and indeed the thing that has stayed with me now months after I read the book, is how Moreno-Garcia balances this criticism of historical Mexico with an obvious overwhelming love for the country and the setting she describes. The lush descriptions of the nature, the cultural artifacts, the food, and the rituals surrounding this are so carefully cultivated to exude a feeling of love that is hard to ignore. Personally, I am not the most visual reader, but Moreno-Garcia truly managed to make me feel like I could see, feel, and experience all the things she was describing.

This vividness and the strength of this love for Mexico is obviously focalized through the narrator. Carlota's love for Yaxaktun is the primary romance of this story. Though Carlota has to contend with (different kinds of) love for Eduardo and Montgomery and her father, her strongest attachment is for her home.

Something that makes this story great is its capacity to express such a strong love while still being critical of its object. Carlota's adoration of her surroundings does not take away from her realization of the injustices that transpire there – both because of the Lizaldes' rule and her father's unethical treatment of the hybrids. If anything, it strengthens it. Carlota's connection to Yaxaktun is what creates the stakes in the novel, what drives Carlota to fight against the institutional sexism and class inequalities mentioned before. These tensions are what make the story feel alive. The intricate balance of Moreno-Garcia's love for (historical) Mexico and her criticism of its misogyny and colonialism helps set the bittersweet tone that is proving to be the trademark of her writing and, in my opinion, its greatest strength.

About the Author

Anna Mangnus is studying in the MA Literature Today after completing their BA in Liberal Arts and Sciences at Tilburg University. They are interested in queer voices and unconventional storytelling. So far, their main experience with criticism has been loudly commenting on whatever trashy movies and tv shows they watch on the couch with their best friends, and rambling to whoever will hear it about the weird stories they love. This is their first publication.



I Am Everything

Literature Crossing Ethnical and Sexual Borders

Dick Hogeweij

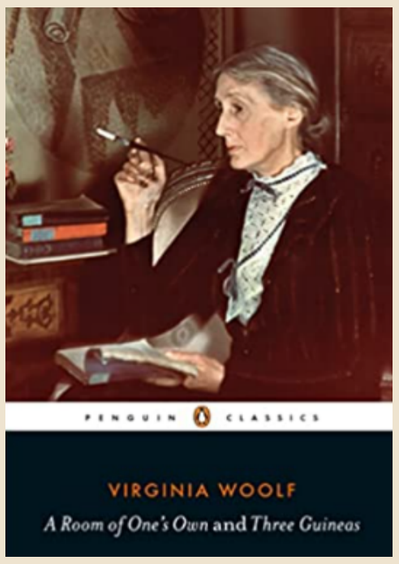
I am half Surinamese and half Groninger, my ancestors came from China and France, I love men, I am brown and have blue eyes, a Dutch mother and a Surinamese father.

This is the way Raoul de Jong introduces himself in a recent interview with Dutch newspaper *Trouw* (translation mine). This feeling of "being everything at once" is the theme of the Dutch *Boekenweek* (Book Week), to take place in Spring 2023. The theme addresses a trend in the contemporary literary field, namely that of authors writing about their experience with complex ethnicity and sexual orientation. De Jong is one of the two featured authors of this national event, having been invited to write the *Boekenweek* essay for the occasion. This essay will be handed out to everyone who buys a book during this week.

I am everything sounds nice: swimming in an endless ocean of opportunities, being a little of everything. However, such an ocean could also be overwhelming, since it implies being nothing complete, or in the opposite extreme: *I am nothing*. Much of the literary work of writers such as De Jong can be seen as a struggle against this negative feeling, a struggle to build a safe house in which one can fully live her/his/their complex identity. Even better, this fully accepted identity *is* this safe house.

This struggle for a safe house rings a bell: it reminds me of a completely different yet related story from nearly a century ago, the essay *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. Of course, Virginia Woolf was white and belonged to the privileged British upper class. Nevertheless, as a woman, she had to fight prejudice and defended the thesis that every woman needed a room of her own to be able to develop her creative talents.

I read Woolf's essay as a plea for the free development of women's own identity – urgent for Woolf herself as a bisexual, intellectual and free-thinking woman – and the title of the essay as a metaphor for this identity.



Although separated by nearly a century, Woolf's struggle against the prejudice of the inferiority of women very much resembles the struggle of the protagonists of the novels I want to bring under your attention under the umbrella of the Book Week theme "I am everything".

As these authors are in search of their identity, this literature is often self-reflexive, and frequently takes the form of autofiction. Belonging to a minority along two different axes (ethnicity and sexuality) makes defining and upholding your identity a difficult task. As De Jong comments in the interview, "You need all the pieces of reality to be a full, whole, round human being".

A related theme that we encounter is dealing with one's own history: if you want to fully understand and accept your identity in the present, you also have to come to terms with your (colonialized) past.

Maybe not surprisingly, much of this literature is by non-male writers, since they are a minority (not numerically, but in the sense of power) and must fight for their position even along a third axis. This trend is not only prevalent in Dutch and Anglophone literature, but also in the literary landscape on a global scale.

Here I will take the occasion to draw the reader's attention to a few recent books of auto-fiction from various regions around the world, in which the struggle for defining one's own identity is thematized.

The first novel is *Huaco Retrato* (*Huaco Retreat*) by Peruvian author Gabriela Wiener. Her background is complicated, with an Austrian Jewish great-great-grandfather named Charles Wiener ("Wiener" meaning "from Vienna"), and with both Spanish and Quichua (Inca) ancestors. She herself is bisexual, living a polyamorous life in Madrid with a Peruvian man and a Spanish woman.

In her autofictional novel she is trying to get a grip on her complex ethnical and sexual identity.

Her ancestor Charles Wiener was a famous archaeologist who excavated in Peru in the service of the French government. He discovered and stole many indigenous treasures and sent them to Europe. Among them were many *huaco retreats*, portraits of men on pottery, which had a ritual meaning among the Incas. Charles had the typical colonial superior arrogance, taking Quichua women at will for his sexual pleasure and leaving them behind without any remorse or conscience. Gabriela faces this colonial legacy, which puts her, albeit against her will, on the side of the colonial powers.

On the other hand, she has, due to her Quichua ancestors, a dark, mestizo complexion, causing her to be treated as a *sudaca* (derogatory expression for South American people in Spain). In one scene, hilarious for the reader but humiliating for Gabriela, her mother-in-law mistakes her for the new housemaid. This puts her on the side of the colonized.

Apart from dealing with her position between colonizer and colonized, she has to cope with her complex sexual orientation. To complicate things further, she does not shy away from short love affairs outside her triangle of love in Madrid.

All in all, *Huaco Retrato* is a rich, layered novel worth reading. reading. Unfortunately no English version is available yet, but I plead for an imminent translation.

The next novel is *La Bastarda*, the 2016 coming-of-age story of Trifonia Melibea Obono from Equatorial Guinea. This small West African country is a former Spanish colony, and the novel was written in Spanish; however, an English translation is also available under the same title.

Obono lives and works alternately in Equatorial Guinea and in Spain. Nowhere is she fully at home: she is considered Spanish when at home in Equatorial Guinea, while being considered a *negra* while living in Spain. Being bisexual, she is outspoken about LGBTQ+ human rights issues in Equatorial Guinea and uses her literary work as activism. She has broken the taboo of discussing homosexuality in Equatorial Guinea.

La Bastarda tells the story of Okomo, born a "bastard" and an orphan after her mother dies in childbirth and who lives in a traditional village in Equatorial Guinea that is about a day's walk from the capital Gabon. As a bastard, she is in a subaltern social position. When she discovers the pleasures of lesbian love, she is forced to confront the attitudes of the culture the culture of her Fang tribe about fixed gender roles, like the requirement for women to have sex with men for the purpose of reproduction.

When her family discovers her lesbian love affair and she refuses to conform to the cultural norm, she is expelled from the tribe. She eventually retreats to a sanctuary of freedom in the forest, where other exiles live. She breaks free from the conventional norms of her tribe, since she cannot fit the mold. She is more than the mold. She is everything.

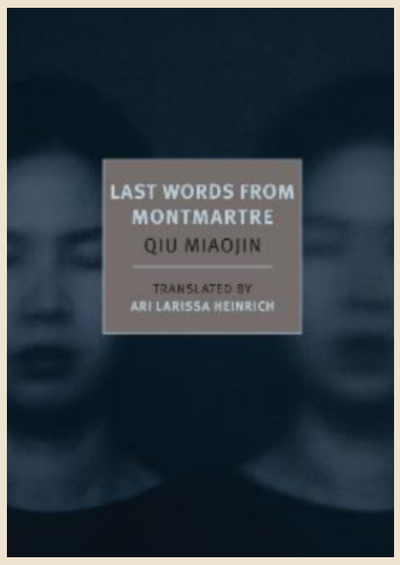
La Bastarda was the first novel by a woman from Equatorial Guinea to be translated into English. Due to its lesbian protagonist, the book is currently banned in Equatorial Guinea.

Of course, such novels were written in the past as well. In fact, what I have been calling a trend could actually be seen, with our new perspective, as a tradition. Therefore I want to extend the theme of the Book Week to authors of one generation earlier, and draw to your attention two books from the 1990s that did not receive the attention that they deserved in Europe.

The first 1990s novel I want to mention is *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* (*The Forbidden Stories of Marta Veneranda*) by Sonia Rivera-Valdés. Although it was written more than 20 years ago, it fits the present theme perfectly. Rivera-Valdés is a lesbian author of Cuban origin, who emigrated to the US after the Cuban revolution.

Marta Veneranda, a Latina woman living in New York, finds that she inspires confession in people; when people come to her, they feel the need to reveal their most embarrassing and shameful stories. The ten short stories of *The Forbidden Stories of Marta Veneranda* focus on female homosexuality and the cultural hybridity of Latina women in the US. The protagonists are not only confronted with a cultural shock, nor is their only problem to reposition themselves as Latina women in the new society, but they experience another very complex process of female sexual transition. For this reason, *The Forbidden Stories of Marta Veneranda* is an excellent synthesis of many migratory tensions - the search for a cultural, social and sexual identity.

The next novel, also from the 1990s, comes from a completely different part of the world, from Taiwanese author Qiu Miaojin. Her most popular novel, *Notes of a Crocodile* (1994), is set in the lesbian scene of Taipei. After she wrote this novel, she moved to France, where she wrote *Last Words from Montmartre*.

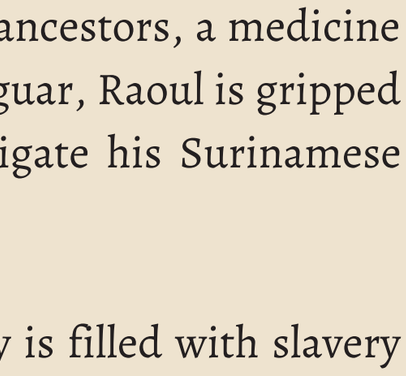


Last Words from Montmartre tells, in the form of a series of letters written by an unnamed narrator, the saga of a passionate love affair between two young women – their sexual awakening, their gradual breakup, and the devastating aftermath of their broken love. Qiu's genre-bending novel is at once a psychological thriller and a sublime romance.

The letters are alternately set in Paris, Taipei, and Tokyo. They provide disconcerting insights into what it means to live between cultures, languages and genders – until the genderless character Zoë appears as the ultimate incarnation of the "I am everything" theme; she causes a radical transformation of the narrator's spiritual and physical identity.

Earlier I wrote about how authors might use literature as part of their struggle to build a safe house. Unfortunately, Qiu lost her struggle. She committed suicide at the age of twenty-six soon after finishing *Last Words* or 'last testament' (an alternative translation of the title).

Finally, I want to return to the author I started with, Raoul de Jong, and consider Jaguarman, in which he dives into the history of his Surinamese ancestors.



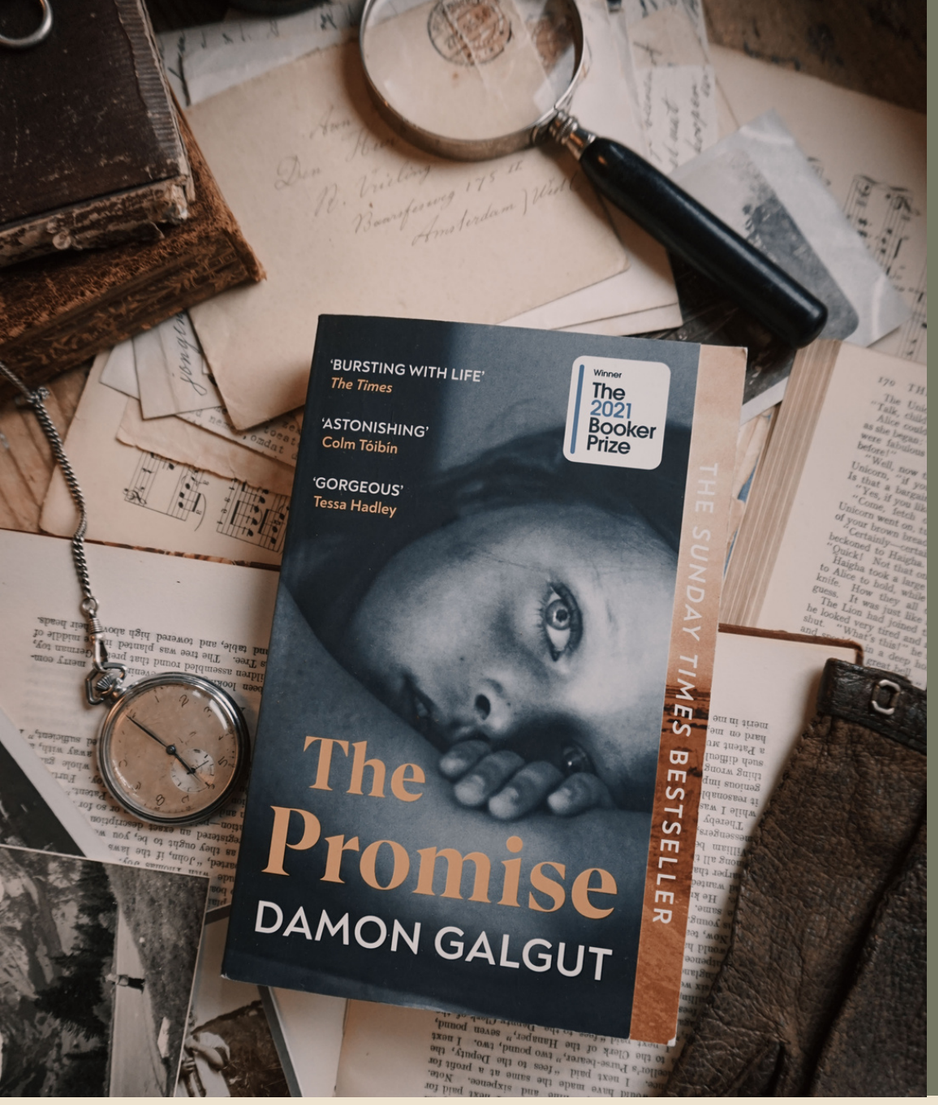
De Jong grew up without his Surinamese father, and when he meets him for the first time at the age of twenty-eight, he discovers that he is very much like him. They speak alike, move alike, and both believe in miracles. When Raoul's father tells him that one of his ancestors, a medicine man, could transform himself into a jaguar, Raoul is gripped by this mystery and decides to investigate his Surinamese roots.

The history of the former Dutch colony is filled with slavery and oppression, but those who search carefully might also find a great deal of hope and vitality. De Jong is living proof: his ancestors somehow managed to survive, and during this personal quest he acquaints himself with Surinamese writers, thinkers, and resistance heroes. He discovers that the power of the jaguar was essential for the country; in indigenous cosmology, the animal is considered a precious, ancient energy that transforms, heals and protects all living creatures in the forest. Thus he comes to understand how much everyone can learn from it.

The 2023 Dutch Book Week takes place from the 11th until the 19th of March 2023. If you happen to be in the Netherlands during that period: pop into a library or bookshop, obtain De Jong's essay, and see what is happening.

About the Author

Dick Hogeweij is an MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University and a member of the editorial team of *RevUU*. During his BA Spanish Language and Culture he specialized in postcolonial theory and transculturality, in particular regarding Latin America. In literature, one of his main interests is to examine how cross-cultural exchanges enrich the literary scene.



A Story We've Heard Before

A Review of Damon Galgut's Booker Prize-Winning *The Promise*

Kenau Bester

The candles were lit. The table laid. I can still recall the smell of the tablecloth, the smell of ordained fabric only taken from the cupboard once a year. I recall the dissonant scratching of the record's needle as it dipped in and out the grooves of the Christmas hymns. I recall the unrelenting scratching of the starched dress my mother had forced me into that morning to attend an unfathomably long church service. I recall saying grace and the coarse callouses on my grandmother's hands from years of domestic servitude and the absence of callouses on my own. I recall the relief of finally being permitted to eat the food that had been enticing me for the three days leading up to this occasion. I recall asking my grandmother: "Ouma (grandma), why isn't Nellie sitting with us? Is she not also hungry?" "My kind" (my child) she responded, "she does not eat with us because she prefers it that way."

Like any four-year-old caught in the "why" phase of childhood, I was easily appeased and did not think to question this further. It had been a mere six years before that when Nelson Mandela had delivered his inaugural speech becoming the first black president of South Africa and marking the end of apartheid. It was in this moment that I was dubbed a child of the "born free generation," a term that now has become widely contested. As a child I was largely unaware of the political underpinnings that had led us to this juncture and did not think to further question why my grandmother's housekeeper did not eat Christmas dinner with us, a meal she had helped prepare. What I further did not know at the time was something that Damon Galgut articulates so well in his Booker Prize-winning novel The Promise: "There [was] nothing remarkable about [my] family… [we were] just an ordinary bunch of white South Africans…"

I have taken some obvious poetic licence in the appropriation of this quote, but it rings true. Just like the Swart family, I too come from a long line of white Afrikaners, and although the new generations are largely city dwellers, we too once occupied farmlands throughout South Africa. And yet, as I crawled to the end of The Promise, I could not shake the prevailing thought, so what?

Yes, Galgut successfully and bluntly portrays the post-apartheid psyche of the white Afrikaner. Yes, Galgut had accurately painted a bleak reality of South African society after the death of the "rainbow nation" euphoria. Yes, each character could be read as an allegory of a greater narrative, but I could not shirk the feeling that this was simply nothing new. To this you may respond that for non-South Africans this does indeed provide a new and interesting perspective, to which my rebuff would be, "But is this perspective still relevant?"

When I first heard that Damon Galgut's novel was nominated for the Booker Prize, I thought, okay, a white South African, that's interesting. Surely this novel must be bringing a new perspective to the ongoing socio-political pandemonium that is current-day South Africa. What I found instead was a story that I couldn't help but feel I'd read before. This is not to say that I agree with the commonly shared sentiment among white South Africans that "apartheid is over" and therefore 'people' should move on. This is not a particularly well-veiled nod towards any black South African who dares to mention the prevailing systematic inequality and racism that is experienced on a daily basis. So no, I do not mean to say that novels about apartheid are no longer relevant, the Truth and Reconcilliation Committee barely scratched the surface of attempting to heal decades of generational trauma. These are stories that want to be told, that **need** to be told.

It was in this vein that I picked up The Promise. The Swarts are an 'ordinary' white South African family unable to cope with the transition into democracy. As a family of five, they live on a small farm outside of Pretoria with their domestic worker Salome and her son Lukas. When the mother of the family, Rachel, lies dying on her deathbed, she pleads with her husband to give their house to Salome who had so devotedly cared for her throughout her illness. It is a promise that hangs like a duplicitous shadow over their lives as each family member fails to fulfil her dying wish.

Perhaps the most masterful aspect of Galgut's novel is how he plays with post-modernist aspects of form. He employs a type of free-floating narrator, which like the shadow of the promise infiltrates each character's consciousness and lays bare their interiority. An example of this can be found relatively early on in the novel where the now deceased Rachel finds herself a ghost:

> *She touches down where her spirit was once thick, but she's no longer solid, a watercolour woman…Eventually she fetches up somewhere she certainly hasn't been before, except there she already is, lying naked on a flanged metal table, the splitting image of herself, but grey and cold, like somebody dead.*

From here the narrator delves into the mind of the elderly female volunteer who has been preparing the body for burial, then drifts off into the room next door where Manie, Rachel's sister is meeting with Rabbi Katz who is responsible for conducting the ceremony the next day. Next, we find ourselves in the mind of Anton, Rachel's son who while conscripted in the South African defence Force kills an innocent black woman and must now reconcile 'duty' with conscience.

The novel is sectioned into four parts, each section centered around the funeral of a family member. The motif of 'four' is carried throughout the novel; four family members, four decades, four deaths, four funerals, four presidents. This was a deliberate choice on Galgut's part as he told *The Guardian*,

> *The dramatist in me saw the potential in staging a family history in four acts, each one centred on a burial. And if each act took place in a different decade, with a different president in power, I saw a way to show the nation behind the family, and give a taste of the time.*

Although the passing of time can become quite bewildering with the disembodied narration, Galgut does execute the passage of time in a persuasive manner. As Maya Jasanoff, a chair of the judges of the Booker Prize denotes, "It combines an extraordinary story, rich themes and the history of the last 40 years of South Africa in an incredibly well-wrought package."

Thus, I do agree with the unequivocal consensus that Galgut has delivered a novel with a unique and effective narrative form. It is, in my view, an objectively fine piece of writing and I would certainly not dissuade others from reading it. My real objection lies in the content of the novel, that it mirrors already established and, in my opinion, tired tropes within post-apartheid writing. I didn't need to look far to support this supposition, three authors which immediately come to mind are JM. Coetzee with his novel *Disgrace*, 1999, Mark Behr with his novel *The Smell of Apples*, 1995, and *My Traitor's Heart* by Rian Malan, 1990. To further this point, I would like to draw your attention to this excerpt on *Disgrace* from the Penguin Random House website: "Disgrace was lauded primarily as a searing examination of racial tension and the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, a contemporary classic of postcolonial literature."

Remove the word *Disgrace* and you could be speaking about any four of these novels. What Coetzee's *Disgrace* shares with *The Promise* is their mutual nomination and subsequent win of the Booker Prize. While Mark Behr's novel does not share this particular status, *The Smell of Apples* has been nominated for numerous awards including the Booker Prize and won the Betty Trask award. Perhaps coincidentally, the authors are all white men speaking about the white South African experience. In a country marked by racial segregation, oppression and authoritarianism under apartheid, one would imagine that the stories which are gaining the kind of traction that a prize like the Booker propagates, would work more ardently to give a voice to the previously silenced. Instead, I find myself reading one-dimensional characterisations of people of colour. They are either depicted as villians and violent criminals as is the case with all four novels, or they are depicted as vacant, uneducated characters who are only present to serve their white employers. When asked why the character Salome in the novel is so underdeveloped, Galgut responds that he 'based his decision on the 'brute fact' that 'most' South Africans do not perceive the inner lives of their fellow Black South Africans to the same extent at all.

Thus, a deliberate narrative choice made by Galgut, a case can be made that this lack of representation is merely not enough anymore. It raises the question of why we are continuing to praise and re-read narratives which continue to relegate black South Africans to the margins of the white perspective. This of course begs the question, who should we be reading instead?

The following titles come to mind: Barbara Boswell's *And Wrote My Story Anyway*, 1990, Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eats Dog*, 2004, *The Reactive* by Masande Ntshanga, 2014, Zoe Wicomb's *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990-2013*, 2018. These are but a few examples of what to me forms a more representative canon of the South African literary sphere.

And Wrote My Story Anyway, published in 1990, is a text by Barbara Boswell where she critically analyses English novels written by black female South African authors. Utilising ten texts as a lens through which to examine the transition into democracy, Boswell challenges ideas about nationalism, exclusion and inclusivity of the democratic nation as well as proposing and alternative vision for a more equal and just South Africa.

Dog Eats Dog by Niq Mhlongo narrates the story of a young black university student, Dingz. Dingz occupies a position of the in-between, depicted as a subject of both the apartheid and post-apartheid era. Through Dingz as the focalizer, Mhlongo addresses the endemic of xenophobia that perforated South Africa in May of 2008. In a review by Uche Peter Umez on Dog Eats Dog, he denotes how Mhlongo's appraisal of xenophobia described its effects as, "crushing lives and property, displacing thousands of Amakwerekwere and threatening to decimate the country's age-old multicultural reputation."

The Reactive by Masande Ntshanga similarly deals with the taboo topic of the HIV/AIDS epidemic after years of denial by the South African government under President Thabo Mbeki. Nathi, our young protagonist and AIDS sufferer, narrates his story through a drug-induced haze alongside his two best friends Cuan and Cissie. They travel through Cape Town selling ARVs (antiretroviral treatment) on the black market to buyers they meet at AIDS support meetings. Not unlike The Promise, the narration follows a stream of consciousness narrative style where Nathi muses about both mundane and pertinent aspects of his daily existence. For example, he writes, "Perhaps language, having once begun as a system of indistinct symbols, would never develop beyond what we knew, but instead would continue to function as a barrier between ourselves and others."

This barrier that he perceives between himself and others, is a recurring theme throughout the novel as he wrestles with his black male identity. Similarly to Dingz, he is stuck somewhere between his present and his past as he continues to grapple with what it means to be a black man in current day South Africa. He demonstrates this when he writes that the protagonist was a "studious boarding-school boy, a kid who "didn't know his clan name from his asshole."

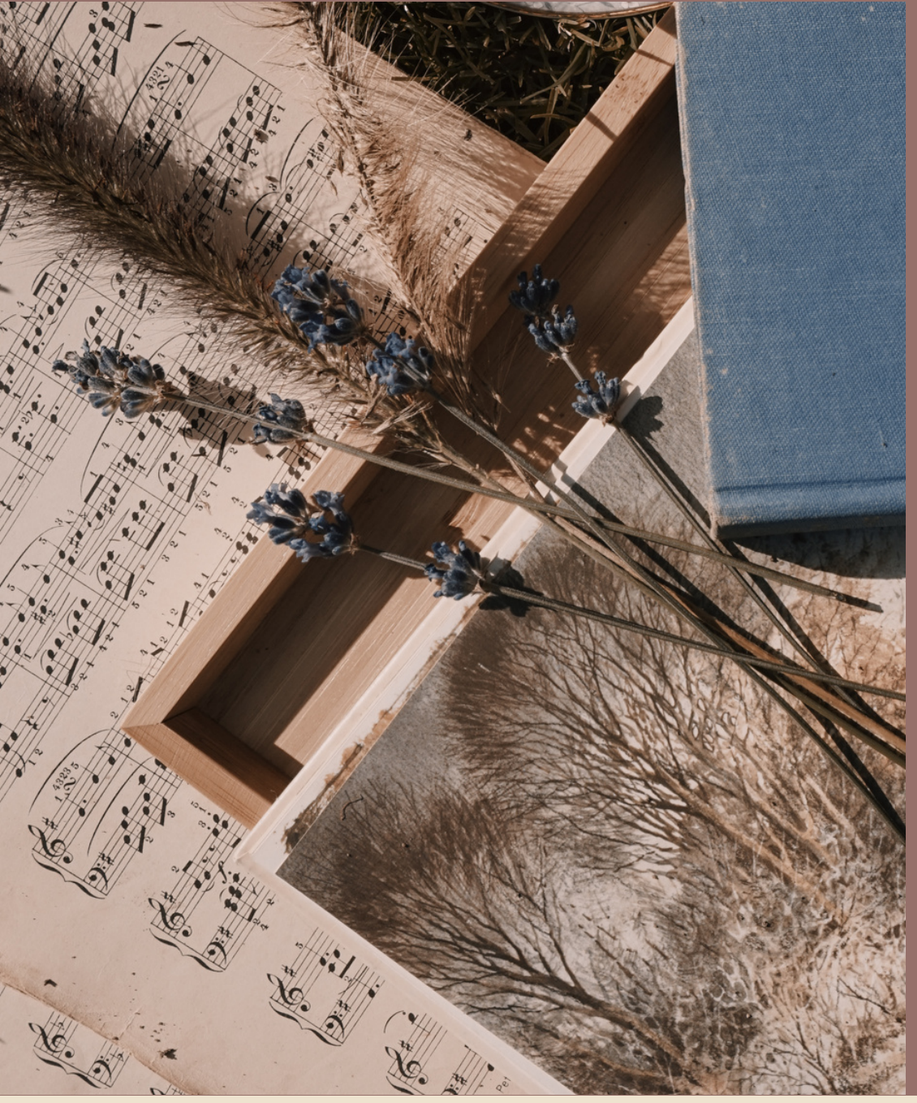
This further exemplifies the incongruence in his identity as he struggles to reconcile his urban, white schooling experience with the expectations of his uncles who want him to undergo a traditional initiation into manhood.

It would be immensely difficult to synthesize Wicomb's essays, *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990-2013*, 2018 into one discernible excerpt, so I will try to be brief. Like the other authors she begins her writings in the culminative years of apartheid and then moves towards the dawn of democracy. Wicomb focuses largely on coloured identity in South Africa, a population group that was often caught in the racialised binary of blackness and whiteness; being both, but simultaneously not enough of either. Additionally, she speaks about the disillusionment with Desmond Tutu's vision of the Rainbow Nation and notes how the youth are impatient with a country that is not transforming quickly enough.

It is at the edge of this precipice that South Africa currently sits, and it was with this in mind that I picked up *The Promise* by Damon Galgut. I expected similar issues to be dealt with as is present in the novels that I outlined in my discussion. Instead, I was left woefully disappointed, faced with a narrative closely echoed in the writings of other white South African authors. It was a story I had read before.

About the Author

Kenau Bester is one of the chief editors of *RevUU*, born and raised in South Africa and currently enrolled in the MA program Literature Today at Utrecht University. She completed her bachelor studies at Stellenbosch University in South Africa with a double major in Philosophy and English and a further honours degree in English Literature. Kenau's research interests centre on the subject of post-colonial identity with specific reference to social media and challenging perceptions of the "authentic self."



Dear Poet, Stay in Your Lane

Laurine Tavernier

Does poetry stop where politics begin? Well it does, according to Nabilla Ait Daoud, a politician for the Flemish-nationalist right-wing party N-VA and member of the Council for Culture of Antwerp. She recently rejected one of Ruth Lasters' poems, *Losgeld* ('Ransom'), as a "city poem" for the city of Antwerp. In her poem, Lasters critiques the stigmatizing character of the school system in Flanders, which Ait Daoud decried as being more of a political manifesto than it was unifying.

'A'-Labels and 'B'-Labels

Every two years, Antwerp chooses a so-called "city poet" (or poet laureate). This writer, usually someone with a personal connection to the city, composes a number of poems to present during official ceremonies and to display around the city to bring art and culture to the people. In February, Antwerp announced that, for the first time since the introduction of the city poet in the early years of the 21st century, instead of one, a group of five poets will represent the city. Lasters was one of them, but following this recent controversy, they are now down to four.

> *Aan Vlaanderen een vraag: wanneer ligt de maatschappij volledig plat? Is dat wanneer de notarissen en de senators staken?*
> *Of als de loodgieters, de bakkers en de havenarbeiders niet opdagen?*

In *Losgeld*, Lasters calls for more attention and respect for the craftsmen in our society. She traces this back to the classist and elitist nature of the Flemish educational system, in which a child around the age of twelve chooses between a more academic and general education (ASO) or a more technical, specialized and profession-based education (BSO and TSO).

Lasters argues that if the child chooses the latter, they will be labeled and stigmatized for life since the "A"-label or ASO is seen as the only label for academic success:

> *Olie-, oliedomme staat die leerlingen vanaf twaalf jaar*
> *nog altijd letterlijk met 'A' labelt of 'B'. Welkom in het middelbaar!*

Lasters herself has been a teacher in an Antwerp school for more than twenty years, where she primarily teaches students in BSO and is confronted with this societal problem every day. She wrote Losgeld together with her students to give them a voice in the debate on education and for others to hear their suffering from the ingrained discriminative labels for B-students. For that voice to be silenced now, by Ait Daoud and the Council for Culture of Antwerp, only further deepens the wound. In light of the decision, Lasters decided to resign from her position as city poet in order to protect her integrity as a teacher and a literary writer.

The Death of the City Poet?

The incident provoked a heated debate about the freedom of the (city) poet, censorship, and whether political opinions should be expressed in city poetry or if it should solely be something aesthetic. From the moment the city council announced that they would have multiple city poets instead of one, various literary figures raised their concern that this might lead to less space for critique. Their fears came true. Tom Lanoye, writer and first-ever city poet of Antwerp from 2003-2005, feared this dilution: "Are they taking out every critical sting now, only to have the entire city poetry program die a quiet death in two years? We are not so provincial, are we?" By having various city poets instead of one, the council has a multitude of poems to choose from, which leads them to be even more selective. And if one of the poets resigns, it wouldn't rock the boat. Or so they thought.

The remaining four city poets echo Lanoye's worries. In a public statement, they declared that they understand and support Lasters' decision to resign from her position. They rightly expressed their concern about their artistic freedom, which they say is crucial and a prerequisite to continuing their duties as city poets in the future.

Though the city has not given a clear explanation on why the poem has been rejected, they have said that "it was not what they had ordered," claiming that the city poet is supposed to write on a commission basis. This, however, is nonsense. The work of the city poet has always been a combination of poems written by assignment and propositions by the author. When Lasters wrote a piece about the well-loved, late Antwerp writer Herman de Coninck, they did not reject the poem because "they had not asked for it." It is only when a writer becomes critical that someone rings the alarm bells. When the committee of the city poet-ship announced the selection of the poets, they stated that they chose these authors because they believed that through their writing they could bring "poetry that introduces both difference and connection." It turns out, they do not want too much difference in their poetry.

The question remains then: how much value does the city still place on these poets? What sets poetry apart from other literature is that by dint of its distinctive form, it expresses feelings on an intense level that cannot be compared in other forms of writing. If poets can only write on commission about the topics they have been assigned, and if they cannot translate the critical voices of society, then does this not undermine the creative freedom of an artist? Poetry exists beyond praise and likeability, it transcends an aesthetic art. As T.S. Eliot argued, poetry always portrays a "fresh understanding of the familiar," a new perspective we might not have considered before, which can help us "enlarge our consciousness or refine our sensibility". Poetry should be allowed to challenge our existing ideas. By no means are we obliged to agree, however, we deserve the opportunity to make up our own minds.

Lasters reacted strongly to the fallacies provided by the council in an attempt to justify their choice to reject Losgeld, and made clear that she stands behind the poem and the message it portrays:

> *When the city refuses even an educational poem that addresses discrimination against thousands of young people, it is obvious to me that city poems serve purely as a promo for the city and not as an expression of culture or literature. I am not a promo writer. I am a poet and literary (translation mine).*

Poet or Promo Writer?

Despite all the backlash, Ait Daoud continues to defend her decision. She emphasizes that the freedom of every poet is absolute and therefore, in her opinion, there is no question of any kind of censorship. After all, a poet can still decide to share the poem himself. He does not need the city to do so in his place. Although what Ait Daoud says may not be untrue, it does undermine the value of the city poet. It might not be censorship, but it does imply that the city poet works for the city as more of a marketer than an artist, as Lasters claims. This is especially striking if we cast light on the fact that Lasters is neither the only, nor the first, to suffer from restrictions during her tenure as city poet. Ex-city poet Seckou Ouologuem states in an article in De Standaard that his poetry too was met with resistance from the city government. Words or phrases were altered in some of his poems, and others were outright refused. "As long as there was nothing critical in my poem, there was no issue," he says.

And that is exactly the problem. The city poet has all the artistic freedom he wants, until he critiques. Then, all of a sudden, there are all these "rules of the game" that come into play. Could it be that the Council for culture reacted so resolute because they felt personally attacked? In her poem, Lasters flips the coin and raises the question of whether the ministers would like to be defined by an A- or B-label:

> *Wij moesten maar eens over A- en B-ministers praten.*
> *Dan zouden ze*
> *misschien verstaan hoe het aanvoelt. Alsof wij tweede keus zijn,*
> *alsof een stiel leren slechts een plan B kan zijn*
> *voor als de A-richting iemand niet ligt, niet gaat.*

For Ait Daoud, however, a city poem should connect people, rather than divide. And ultimately, she concludes, the decision on whether a poem is a city poem lies with the council of Antwerp. She argues: "A city poem should certainly not be a megaphone for denunciations or politics," and goes even a step further by stating: "If [Lasters] wants to engage in politics, she should get into politics. A city poem is not for that." Ait Daoud is clearly not a writer, or else she would know that culture and politics are more often than not intertwined. Moreover, many of the works in the Dutch-Flemish canon are precisely canonical because they dealt with the social problems of their time. Think about De leeuw van Vlaanderen ('The Lion of Flanders') by Hendrik Conscience, which tells the story of the Battle of the Golden Spurs and contributed immensely to the Flemish Movement in the 20th Century. Conscience's novel ultimately led to the equal status of the Dutch language in Belgium.

One can only conclude this: saying that literature stops where politics begin is preposterous. If it did, the city council of Antwerp would be speaking French today and there would be no Flemish city poets to begin with.

> *Zolang gij, Vlaanderen, niet ook de vakman slim noemt*
> *In kranten, in spelprogramma's en journaals,*
> *Zijt gij de A's in uw naam VlAAnderen niet waard.*

Unfortunately for Ait Daoud, all this fuss is having the Streisand effect and is actually drawing even more attention to Losgeld and the social problem it raises. By resigning, Lasters makes a clear signal to all her fellow city poets and to poetry readers that she will not stop defending the message of her students. Nor will she bend to fit into the mold Ait Daoud and others like her are trying to push the city poet (and poetry) into. She will not stay in her lane.

About the Author

Laurine Tavernier is a current MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University. During her BA in Applied Linguistics she studied in Antwerp, Granada and Oviedo. Previously, she has written for online magazines and KU Leuven University, and she currently works as a freelance translator. She has a keen interest in a wide variety of literature, especially mysteries and translated world literature.

The Other Child
Witnessing Chronic Illness

Jared Meijer

The Other Child

When she was eight, Alice found her mother collapsed on the kitchen floor. By age ten, she and her mother shared a diagnosis, that of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, or ME. "I remember feeling almost pleased with my diagnosis, even if I was not entirely convinced by it. It made me feel closer to my mother," Alice Hattrick writes in *Ill Feelings*. If chronic illness alienated them from the outside world, between them it created a bond made up of shared symptoms and ill feelings expressed through a shared 'hysterical language,' that only they could speak and understand. "For a while it was just she and I together – she often liked to remind me of that." The union between mother and daughter was, and is, primal. Preceding illness, it is nevertheless strengthened by it. But their two-as-oneness could not last, because Alice would have a brother. And because years later, she would spend her teenage years at a boarding school, away from her mother.

If invisibility marks their shared experience of illness, so too is *Ill Feelings* marked by the invisibility of this son/brother, mentioned less than a handful of times. In conversations with doctors, he is "the other child," the one "caught in the middle." He stands in between the mother and the daughter, passive, affected, watching, only to quickly fade into the crevices of the text. We wonder at what he may have seen. When their mother writes in her diary, following her collapse in 1995: "Alice witnessed this," we recognize it to be only the beginning of decades of witnessing. But what has he witnessed? We know that through illness, Alice and her mother became engaged in a shrouded and singular exchange of sick care and symptoms. The son/brother exists on the fringes of that conversation, the text, eavesdropping. His exclusion is marked at every turn, as when Alice remarks: "I always knew my illness was a form of love."

If this illness-in-the-text is a mutual expression of love, then it claims mother and daughter for each other and binds them in their sick relation.

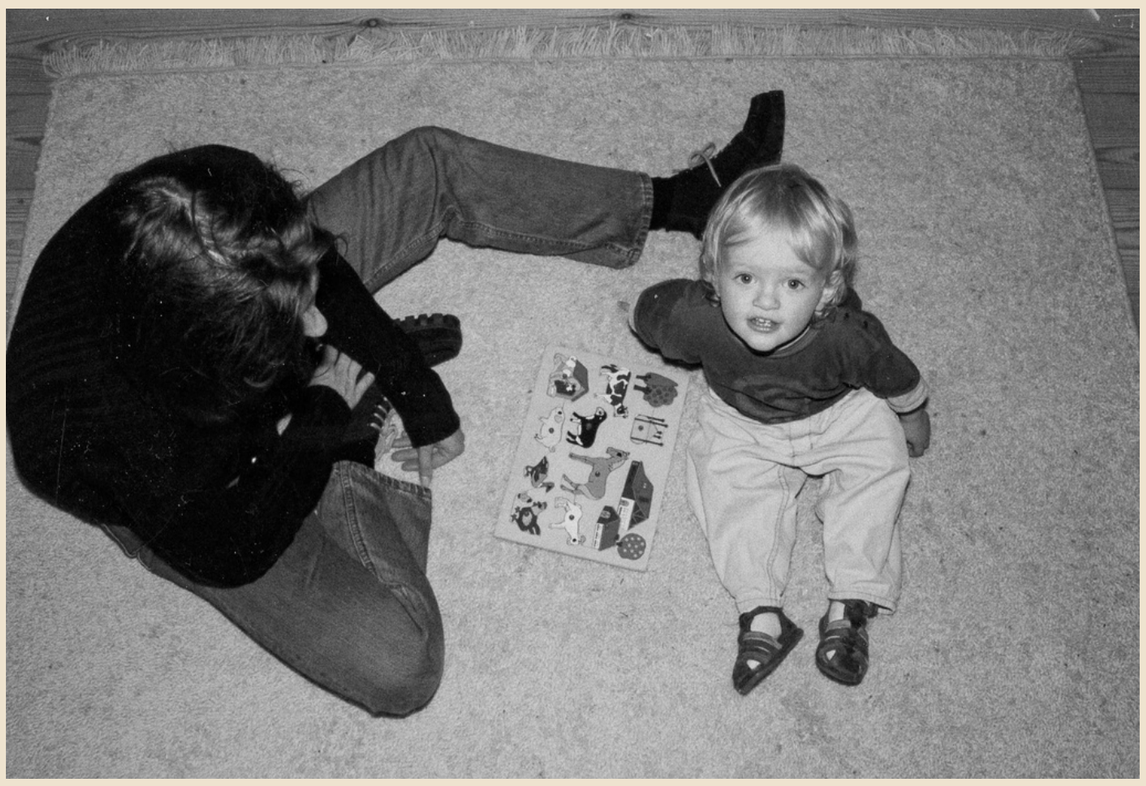
The text leaves no space for a son/brother, because the sheer fatigue of chronic illness does not permit it. But we know that he was there, that he was "distressed" by what was happening, and that he, too, must have witnessed this. In a narrative peopled by daughters and mothers and their shared invisible illnesses, there might simply not have been any room for a son/brother-as-witness. After all, too great has been the focus on anything but the anamnesis. And yet, his specter is there, and we ask: what does it mean to witness illness? Belonging fully neither to the ill or the well, illness subsumes him and in that very same motion, spits him out again. Can this witness speak?

A Brief Interruption on My Way to the Bathroom or Kitchen

The only person generally allowed to enter her room was our mother. The simple fact of a person's presence exhausted her, and I quickly ran out of means to camouflage or neutralize myself. From the doorway, where I often stood, if only briefly, halting on my way to the bathroom or the kitchen, one could peer straight into the thicket of a pine forest, as oversaturated photo wallpaper covered the far wall, a single bed propped up against it. My mother was often found on the edge of that bed, hushed and illegible, one body obscuring the other. By the opposite wall there stood two bird cages. In one, two parakeets. Green, blue. In the other, two yellow canaries, given to her by our grandmother, who got tired of their incessant singing. At night the cages were covered with thick, colorful blankets, so that the birds would know it was night. Shortly thereafter the birdsong would stop, and they would sleep, even if she did not.

The First Interruption, or When I Too Was a Witness

When she was eleven, my sister was diagnosed with glandular fever. She spent that year on bed rest, felled by chronic fatigue. Despite its severity, the diagnosis promised an outcome we felt familiar with, and eventually, she recovered. She regained enough strength that by the end of summer she could have a sleepover. Our stepfather put up a tent in the backyard for her and a friend, and throughout the night I could see their phones and flashlights shine through the tent cloth, which shook with wind and bustling energy. They stayed up most of the night. The following morning she was exhausted. We did not know then that she would eventually be diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and never not be tired again.



Even in Absence: Belonging

Even if the true cause of her mother's illness remained an enigma, the bout of pneumonia that caused her collapse, and the flu-like symptoms accompanying it, offer a context. Alice's illness, on the other hand, could only ever be read in contrast with her mother's, she having turned into her mother's unwitting double. Some believed that Alice's mother was making her ill, or that Alice was mimicking her symptoms. Her maternal grandmother suggested that Alice go to a boarding school, where she would remain until she was eighteen. "If illness was our problem, separation appeared to be the only solution." Separated, she was "unable to pick up symptoms off her. I recovered, for a time, but I am not well now, and we are further apart than we have ever been."

In 2017, five years prior to publishing *Ill Feelings*, in an article by the same name, Alice notes how she and her mother would not see each other for weeks and barely spoke. They lacked the closeness of the single mothers and daughters Alice saw around her. "And yet, somehow, I existed in the space between me and her. Somehow I always had."

Interruption as the Daughter Is Take from the Mother

Daughters have a long history of being sent away, or taken. Persephone is one such daughter. In Averno, Louise Glück examines two versions of her story.

In the first version, Persephone is simply taken. Her father Zeus weds her off to Hades in secret. Discovering that her daughter is missing, "the goddess of the earth / punishes the earth", and thus the earth is cast in an endless winter. Eventually Persephone is returned, but does that mean she is 'home'? After all, the "the return of the beloved / does not correct the loss of the beloved."

Ill Feelings, too, marks the return of the daughter, who following her long absence must find a way back to her mother. But no matter how she tries, it is impossible to regain fully what was once shared so intimately. She reads her mother's letters and journals, her medical history. Much is similar, much too, is different. In the second version, according to Glück, Persephone is dead. "You ask yourself: / why is the mother's body safe?" But this turns out to be the wrong question,

> *since*
>
> *the daughter's body*
> *doesn't exist, except*
> *as a branch of the mother's body*
> *that needs to be*
> *reattached at any cost.*

In *Ill Feelings* Alice returns to her mother's body, *her* body, and their shared lives, their ill feelings, and tries to mend what has been severed. By way of writing, she is grafted onto her mother's body. But even if she succeeds, the brother remains disembodied, a root severed, twisted and hidden in the soil. The brother, who has never truly belonged to the mother, can never return, nor correct the loss he has suffered.

Interruption as Old Memories Gain Significance in Light of New Circumstances

Some years before my sister fell ill, our mother was diagnosed with cancer. At the time, I found it hard to imagine my mother as no longer my mother. But if that particular fear eluded me, it did not elude my sister. She had always been clingy, but now she could no longer sleep lest my mother was in the room with her. If she were to wake up and my mother was not there, unable to find her, the panic would set in. She could not be left alone. And I remember that often she would renounce her last name, the one she shares with me, our other sister and our father, and claim instead our mother's maiden name, and get upset if we tried to go against this self-made truth.

It seems easier to sympathize with such behavior now that I am older, as I realize more than ever that our mother was, in fact, terribly sick. Near the end they had removed her ovaries, uterus, and cervix. After rounds of chemo and radiation therapy, it was presumed she would also need to undergo a mastectomy. They settled for the lymph nodes in her right armpit, for which she wears compression sleeves to prevent swelling. The chemo and radiation have weakened her heart. She is easily fatigued and no longer able to work. All I really remember of that time, is that she often wore a shoulder-length wig that was a deep, dark red, the same color she had dyed her hair for as long she had been my mother. It was the only wig she would ever wear, and it grew increasingly scraggy. Over time, the color shifted, and an orange hue appeared. Her hair has grown back, but now it is thin and brittle, and she dyes it blonde.

Interruption upon Discovering Incongruence

Often, too, I was ill myself, in and out of therapy, having never spent a year at the same school, and prone to months of truancy. But illnesses are incongruous, and though the physical illness affects the mind, and the mental manifests itself throughout the body, they require different types of care and do not account for what might be called shared suffering. At the very least, I never felt as if my illness brought me, my sister and my mother any closer.

Interruption as One Tallies Things Lost

She is six-and-a-half years younger than I am and was just about to reach that age where our relationship started to take on a different form. I was no longer cool, but we could speak. She was full of perspective, opinionated, and deeply attuned to life.

When she fell ill, there was no longer such a thing as a casual conversation. For a time, the conversations ceased altogether. Sealed off from the past and any possible future, we had only the present, wherein she could no longer be reached. And I learned that the loss produced by illness belongs first and foremost, but not solely, to the ill themselves.

Interruption, or a New Name

Six years before publishing *Ill Feelings*, Hattrick wrote a series of letters to friend and writer Naomi Pearce. Somewhere in between those letters and the book that would become Ill Feelings she stopped writing "my mum" and started writing "my mother."

Interruption of Care

The only person my sister ever went to for care was our mother, and so they both were swallowed up by illness, subservient to it, but also allied facing it. Their time belonged to each other, and to illness, but was otherwise unobtainable.

Interruption by Pain

Hattrick quotes Adrienne Rich: "the problem is / to connect … the pain / of any one's body with the pain of the body's world." Where does a brother, who exists in the world, attach to the pain that is sister and mother?

Interruption before Sleep

The swelling of birdsong. A poor man's caged bird metaphor for a child leading a caged life. The world moving on without her. But believe me, the birds they sang and their cage was often open and their birdsong floated up into my room.

Interruption, or an Invitation

My mother writes: 'You should have been a girl. You would have been happier.'

Interruption as My Sister and I become Emily Brontë

In Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay," the narrator has just broken up with her lover and is on her way to visit her mother, who lives on a moor. She has brought a stack of books, including those of her favorite author, Emily Brontë. Emily, the narrator remarks, is a "Whacher."

> *She whached the bars of time, which broke.*
> *She whached the poor core of the world,*
> *wide open.*
>
> *To be a whacher is not a choice.*
> *There is nowhere to get away from it,*
> *no ledge to climb up to—*

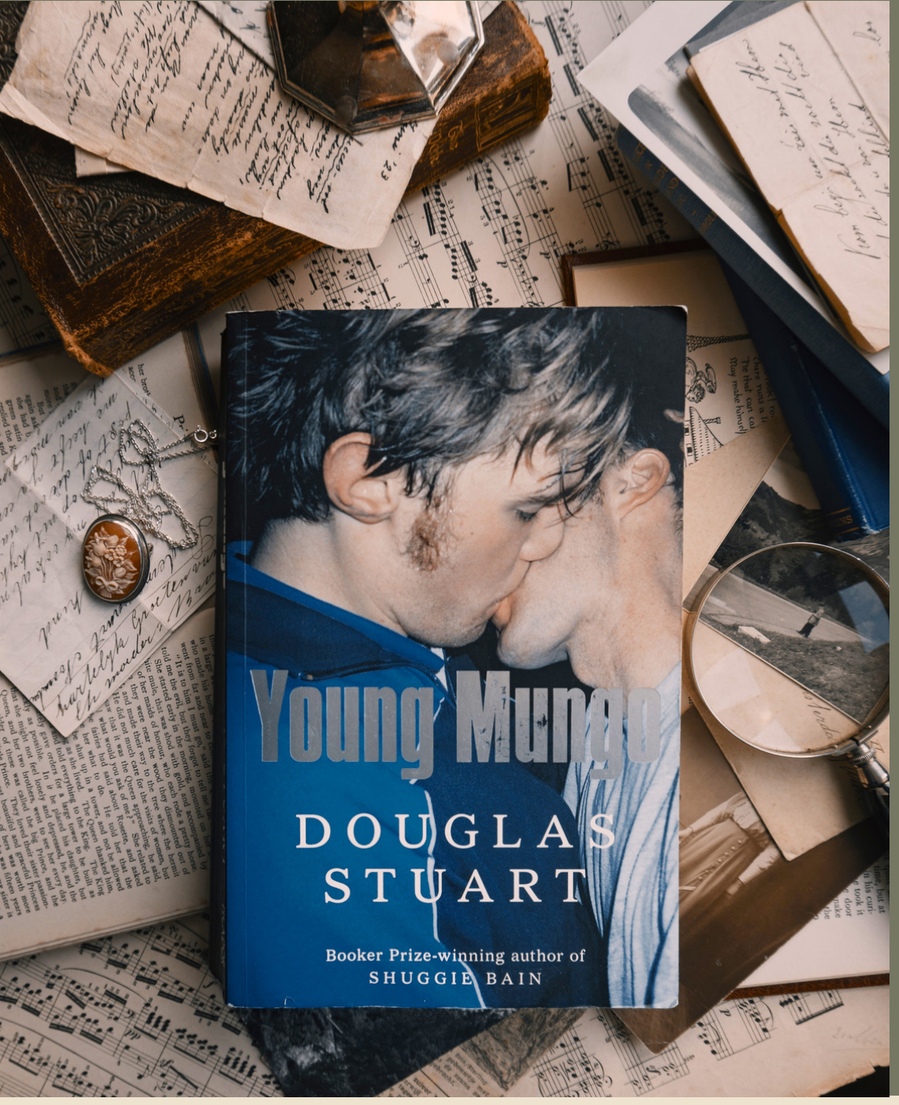
To be a whacher is to be a witness. And if Emily enjoyed a life of limited mobility, so too do Alice and her mother, my sister and my mother. When Emily's biographers write of her "sad stunted life", we hear the echoes of phrases directed at the chronically ill, and pity we can hardly eschew.
We learn that Carson's narrator's father suffers from "a kind of dementia." He uses "a language known only to himself," his own hysterical language "made of snarls, syllables and sudden wild appeals."

Deeply listening, it is be possible to understand what they are saying, both the surface and the depths of things. On my part, I watch and listen doubly. On the one hand, illness is a voice I know and recognize. I know its smell, its gait, its atmospheric pressure.

Those who have lived with illness know how time and space themselves can become ill. But there is another voice, the white noise of the witness, the brother, stood in the door frame, watching, but unable to enter or leave. Yet all I write and live now is in search of a way to be nearer.

About the Author

Jared Meijer is a Dutch writer and photographer with a BA in Creative Writing from ArtEZ, The Netherlands. His work has appeared on Dutch literary platforms, such as *De Optimist*, *De Reactor*, and *Notulen van het Onzichtbare*. *Mistland* (tr. *The Land of Fog*), a novella dealing with chronic illness, loss and loneliness, was his graduation work. He is currently completing his MA in Comparative Literature at Utrecht University.



A Night to Remember

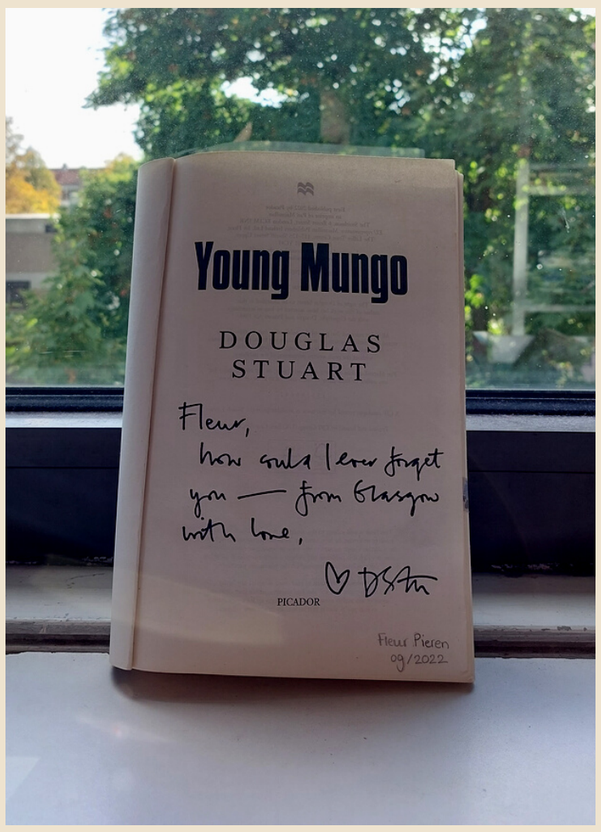
A Review of Douglas Stuart's *Young Mungo*

Fleur Pieren

As I was looking at the stack of books piled in my bedroom window – the luxury of arranging my ever-growing collection in a Pinterest-worthy aesthetic has long been thrown out this exact window – I decided that, one, I needed to get a handle on my impulse buying habit; two, I had to choose what book I was going to read first if I ever wanted to make my way through the pile in this lifetime; and, three, that *Young Mungo* by Douglas Stuart would be a good fit for the job.

After a year of not living up to my reputation as the household's insatiable bookworm, it was time to end the dry spell. I went from reading no books at all, to devouring a handful of titles in the span of only two weeks. Eager to keep up the momentum, I picked up a book that had been relegated to the window's literary purgatory since May of this year. There was something peculiar about this one that might have instigated me to choose it without much deliberation. I reached over to inspect it. Spurred on by the book's titillating cover – a picture of two men mid steamy make out session – I quickly flipped through it and landed on its title page.

There it was, just like I remembered it. The out-of-place message – jotted down in thick black marker, only exacerbating its illegibility – reminded me why I hadn't given up on this book yet.



Distracted eyes turned towards the corner of the room where I was sitting, as I shuffled in my seat. I had been sitting in the same upright position for this past hour, paralysed by the fear of activating my chair's relentless squeak. The first interview was almost over. I had not heard of either author present tonight but, judging by the audience turnout and the volume of questions, they seemed to be a big deal. "Thank you, Jennifer," said a beaming attendee, who had been honoured with asking the author her final question of the night. The older lady nodded satisfactorily at Jennifer Egan's answer, thereby alerting the interviewer that tonight's first of two book promotions had come to an end. I carefully stretched out my limbs, they had gone painfully stiff due to a prolonged lack of motion, as other audience members started talking to each other in hushed voices or moved their way to the bathroom. Those who remained silent and seated were looking at the stage in anticipation. Several minutes had passed and the second author ascended the stage confidently, expectant eyes following his every move. The interviewer welcomed Douglas Stuart. He expressed his gratitude at the author for stopping by this event, organised by the International Literature Festival in Utrecht, during the promotional tour of his newest novel Young Mungo. Stuart, in turn, introduced himself to the crowd, who was regarding him with a palpable sense of admiration. And with these initial niceties out of the way, the second interview of the night had commenced.

The story started off in the middle of the action, leaving the reader fumbling to fill in the scene's withheld circumstances for themselves. It isn't a surprise, then, that it also took me some time to acquaint myself with the novel's characters.

This is the story of Mungo Hamilton, which probably won't come as a shock, since, you know… his name is in the title. Initially, Mungo is similar to a background character within his own narrative, "a distracted little boy … given to worrying and wandering and fidgeting …". Throughout the first few chapters, he doesn't appear to have outgrown these qualities. In the rugged, patriarchal world of Glasgow's Protestant working class in the eighties, where masculinity's rules are dangerously strict, the benevolent Mungo falls by the wayside in a painfully obvious way. He is consistently upstaged by his older brother Hamish, or Ha-Ha – a caricature of traditional heterosexual masculinity – and his older sister Jodie – a bright, compassionate girl who seems to single-handedly take care of the entire tenement. But Stuart didn't title this book 'Young Hamish' or 'Young Jodie' for a reason. If Mungo starts off as a supporting character, he gradually demands the spotlight when the familiar cast of characters is, ironically, expanded with one more: James, a kind Catholic boy burdened by social expectations, who tends to a doocot in his spare time. The two boys gradually become each others' safe haven, somewhere they can be themselves and "It was a lovely place for two boys to be: honest, exciting, immature." Stuart manages to tie the beginning of Mungo's arc beautifully to its resolution: Mungo always "loitered a while and was happy … to be unobserved", but by the end "Mungo knew what he was going to do, where he was going to go. The only place he would ever want to be." He was part of an ensemble of characters that were headed to an obscure, loveless future; he becomes the only one to find a love that holds the irresistible promise to change his life.

The boisterous sound of clapping awoke me from my daydream. Prying my eyes away from the figure on stage, I tried to gain a bearing on my surroundings. The imposing room looked nothing like the one I had been in for this past hour. My chair's sudden shriek cut through the thunderous clapping. Eyes flicked in my direction again, this time annoyed as well as distracted. People were eagerly raising their hands, hoping to be noticed by the interviewer while he scanned the crowd for any questions. Guiding Stuart's gaze to one such prominent hand shaking from strain, the grateful audience member lowered his tired arm. Disbelief set in as I timidly adjusted myself on the chair. For these past hours, I'd been tucked away behind a large table crammed with colourful paperbacks and sturdy, eye-catching hardcovers. Hours of careful preparation – hauling a dozen boxes filled with books from Savannah Bay to the current location, decorating the small space with as many accessories and books as we could manage, and discarding the evidence that betrayed our frantic efforts – would be callously undone in a couple minutes. But for this past hour I had been somewhere else. I hadn't been in Utrecht as an event volunteer for its renowned feminist bookshop. No… I had been in the front room of a tenement building in Glasgow, swept up in the daily life of the fifteen-year-old Mungo, guided by the steady, warm and commanding voice of Douglas Stuart. Looking around the real room, this time, it's my glossy eyes that meet those of the others; we collectively recover from our daze.

The novel's blurb, which I had quickly re-read before starting, had informed me of a turning point in the story that would have catastrophic consequences. It warned me that the Mungo I would have gotten to know, up to that point, would cease to exist. A fishing trip with two strange men from which he needed to escape and an unspeakable punishment. The short text failed to elaborate more than that. Shaking off my initial confusion, I patiently made my way through the first chapter, cheerful as I started to get a handle on the unfolding events. Unfortunately, I suddenly found myself grasping at a second set of straws with the onset of the second chapter. This pattern would repeat over and over; the story was toying with me. It was slowly inching towards that one dooming event. I was excruciatingly aware that, whatever was coming during the fishing trip, would be disastrous for the character that I was starting to get attached to. Every time I thought Stuart would release me from this foreboding torment, he would yank me away from the action to a whole new scene. There were much needed moments where he granted me some leniency, a time to relax my tense muscles which had been scrunched up in anticipation, as the romance between Mungo and James flourished from "timid tenderness" into comfortable intimacy. I had even started to lose myself in the joys of their young love, when this fake sense of security was wickedly ripped apart. Violence attacked Mungo from all sides. His world would never be the same.

People were walking towards the exit, happiness illuminating their faces. I cleared up the handful of books that had survived the chaos unscathed, the table now an empty echo of the previous display, and I was weighed down by a slowness not unlike that of a hangover. The round of questions had passed me by unnoticed, and the ensuing book sale and co-signing session had been too hectic for me to catch my breath. We pulled out the books that my colleague and I had held back for ourselves and eagerly divided them between the two of us. It was now or never. Douglas Stuart was talking with the second-to-last person in the queue, I could scoot in unobstructed. My colleague swiftly followed me as I joined the line. I was still practicing the short script in my head when it abruptly turned from a thought into speech. I looked at him expectantly. He smiled warmly at me, expressing gratitude for my help throughout the night. Playing it cool, I nonchalantly slid the book towards him on the table. He expertly opened it to the title page and picked up the black marker by his side. He didn't need to be

reminded of my name. "That isn't surprising", I joked, "because you can ask any Dutch girl her name and, chances are, it will be Fleur". A polite smile flickered across his face. He pressed the marker against the paper and I found myself athrill with exhilaration.

I was overwhelmed by a cathartic sadness. The boy that I had grown fond of had been forcibly and aggressively forged into a new character in the span of only a couple paragraphs. In a haunting paradox, "he had not been man enough; now he was too much". Mungo was no longer the person he had been before this fateful weekend. Sorrow clinging to every bone in my body, I felt relieved when the last chapter offered me a kernel of hope. I treasured every encouraging word, relishing in the fact that Mungo might've gotten his happy ending. My heart started beating faster as the figure across the road came into Mungo's view. It was the exact person he had escaped for.

I felt a content hollowness overtake me when my eyes rolled over the final sentence. I had the sudden urge to go through the novel again, to re-live every scene with the knowledge I had now. Because that was the wonder of *Young Mungo*. Every page played out like a picture in my head; every word shone a new light onto a scene that had been unfolding right in front of my eyes. Even something as simple as a smile is treated delicately: "It was the first smile James had given him that day. It was small and it was crooked but it gave off more brightness than the doocot skylight above them." Stuart's writing appears deviously simple, but this is a disservice to his masterful and careful understanding of his story, his characters, and, not least, his language.

Douglas Stuart holds every facet of this novel in a very high regard. His respect for the world he built, one that he himself is intimately familiar with, shines through every sentence; and he trusts me that I, in turn, will treat it with the utmost care. Mungo's story made me cry, laugh, shudder, swoon, worry, and cheer. It has wrung itself into my heart and there it will stay, a tender memory.

Douglas and Mungo,
I won't ever forget you, too.

With love,

Fleur

About the Author

Fleur Pieren is currently a student of the MA Literature Today, and has an academic background in English literature and Gender Studies. She is particularly intrigued by the representation of femininity and masculinity in pop culture, and loves to squeeze in as many commas and adjectives in one sentence as she can. When she's not dreaming of being an editor at a British publishing house, she's anxiously preparing for a potential PHD. In her free time, she is an events volunteer for the feminist bookshop Savannah Bay in Utrecht.

Thread of Life

The Female Perspective in Greek Mythology

Josephine Monnickendam

The Moirai, the three Greek Goddesses of Fate, are not yet ready to cut the thread of life for women in Greek mythology. The sisters, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, are busy spinning, measuring and deciding over the different threads. Whose narrative should be born again? Whose stories have been explored enough? Where the lives of these women in Greek mythology were hanging on a thin thread before, now their lives are woven thickly into stories time and time again, offering them the opportunity to appear from the shadows and find their own voice.

In high school, I was taught Ancient Greek and Latin while simultaneously exploring their mythologies. These fantastical stories were, however, often only told from the male perspective. Stories about the famous fearless male heroes, stories about the brave male warriors in the Trojan war, and stories about the mighty male gods. Where was the female perspective?

Sometimes the Amazons, a group of remarkable female warriors, were discussed, or the female goddesses, but usually in connection to their male counterparts and, it appeared to me even then, constantly presented through the male gaze. These women were flat, cardboard characters, created to be virtuous and to die. Or they were monsters, horrible figures mirroring the male anxiety for women. Rarely was the inner life of these women further explored.

More recently, however, authors have been reimagining these myths by focussing on the marginalised female perspectivesand critically examining the position of mythic men like Theseus and Perseus. As the writer Madeline Miller argues, "[w]omen have traditionally been shut out of epic, but women's lives are epic too."

Clotho: spinning a new female-centred mythology

Clotho, the youngest of the Fates, is busy spinning the thread of life. She is powerful, for she decides who gets to be born, who may live another day, and who is put to death. As her fingers weave the threads together, she reflects on the regret that she sometimes feels for giving the humans the gift of literacy. From the very start, men became obsessed with writing about men, and men alone. Clotho's brows furrow together. Her face contorts into a sneer as indignation creeps up on her. She was the one to invent the alphabet, yet her story was cast aside. Where is her story? She quickly shakes her head, starting to smile. Things are changing. Now, people finally seem to remember the forgotten half of the world's stories. From behind her spinning wheel, she helps emerging feminist writers to bring the forgotten and misunderstood mythical characters back to life. Granting Penelope and Eurydice a newly imagined life...

Greek myths are designed to be retold. This started in Ancient Greece with men boasting as they traced their own lineage back to the heroes of myth through stories and, even after all this time, it continues with this century's writers giving these stories an afterlife. We can view the myths as having been constantly adapted and appropriated by writers as a way to demonstrate their own creativity and to reflect upon their own, contemporary societal issues. The same thing is happening now with the adaptation of the Greek myths from the perspective of the female characters, using *herstory*. As Ester Díaz Morillo explains, the term herstory indicates that "the female gaze is the focal point" in these stories, as opposed to the male gaze in *his*tories.

These mythical *herstories* became more prevalent with third-wave feminism. In one of my first-year courses at university, I was introduced to feminist poems about women in Greek mythology. I was pleasantly surprised that around the 1970s-80s, several authors re-wrote the myths by focusing more on women's emotions and desires, while expressing criticism of the male characters.

Margaret Atwood, for instance, wrote the Orpheus and Eurydice cycle (1976-86), consisting of three poems looking at these two characters. Instead of writing a male-centred text, she underscores the perspective of Eurydice and shows her damning opinion of Orpheus, who has always disregarded Eurydice and expected her to be obedient. As opposed to a tragic love story where two lovers do not want to be parted by death, Atwood imagines how Eurydice is relieved to be released from Orpheus in the Underworld.

In 1999, Carol Ann Duffy published a collection of poetry called *The World's Wife*, wherein she gives a voice to silenced women in history, including the wives of famous men. In her poem "Mrs Icarus", she comically reveals the perspective of Icarus' wife who describes her husband, not in highly lyrical terms, but rather as a "total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock." This is where my quest to find the female perspective in retellings of Greek myths first started.

Lachesis: Measuring and Reassessing the Trend

Lachesis, Clotho's sister, is measuring the threads that will be woven with her rod. How much time do these rediscovered characters get on earth? As the most pragmatic one of the sisters, she relies on the science of her measuring rod alone. Extending her ruler, she comes to the conclusion that the threads of the flattened female characters are ready to be cut, and that their time is definitely up. Gathering these threads, she immediately takes them to her sister, Atropos. However, when examining the rounder female characters and other marginalised perspectives, she deduces that they deserve some more time. Allocating Achilles and Patroclus yet more life...

More recently, multiple novels have been written to continue the trend of feminist retellings of Greek myths, including (again) Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), a rendering of the Odyssey from Penelope's perspective. With this novel, Atwood was part of the Canongate Myth series, where different myths from all different cultures were retold. Unfortunately, this series still largely focuses on the male perspective.

In 2012, Madeline Miller wrote a love story between the famous hero Achilles and Patroclus called *The Song of Achilles*. The novel was popular at the time, but notably, almost ten years after its publication, the novel became extremely popular on TikTok. After the user @moongirlreads_ posted a video in August 2021 recommending the novel for its ability to make readers cry, sales skyrocketed, selling nine times as many copies in the U.S. compared to when it had won the Orange Prize in 2012, according to NPD BookScan. Strikingly, through its new, continuous popularity on this social media platform, the novel-based-on-ancient-myths was granted a greater afterlife. From this point on, the reading of books related to Greek mythology has certainly become a trend on BookTok, the name for TikTok videos recommending books, with videos hashtagged #greekmythology being watched 1.8 billion times.

Atropos: How Long Will this Trend Live on?

Atropos, the oldest of the three sisters, has the hardest job of them all. She has to decide how people die and cut the thread which will end their life for good. Although she is generally known as 'the Inflexible One', she does have some sympathy towards the newest female characters created, secretly hoping that she might have her own narrative one day. Therefore, she is more lenient, and tries to stretch the lives of some of these characters. Giving Ariadne, Medusa, and Medea more time...

After discovering this trend on TikTok, I fell in love with this new literary movement, which finally gave me the chance to re-discover the stories I had missed out on in high school. In every bookstore I enter, I immediately look for the newest mythical feminist releases.

The more recent of these publications critique the role of men in Greek mythology and their status. Are the men really so heroic? Or are they just being selfish, using women for their own vanity? Jennifer Saint's novel *Ariadne* (2021) tells the story of Ariadne, who is mostly known for her association with the hero Theseus and her role in his escape from the Minotaur. In this narrative, however, Ariadne's life is further explored, showing her emotions, desires and struggles with the patriarchy. Furthermore, Saint cleverly questions the role of the heroes and gods in the Greek myths. Early on in thenovel, Ariadne reflects: "What I did not know was that I had hit upon a truth of womanhood: however blameless a life we led, the passions and the greed of men could bring us to ruin", both referring to the male 'heroes' and gods. Even though Ariadne leaves her family and risks her own life in order to help Theseus, she is used by him and is eventually left behind.

Throughout the narrative, Ariadne grows from a young naïve girl who constantly questions and blames herself into a strong woman: "I would not let a man who knew the value of nothing make me doubt the value of myself."

Saint interweaves another myth into her story as inspiration, or rather a warning, for Ariadne. At the beginning of the story, the myth of Medusa is told to Ariadne by her maid. Just like Ariadne, Medusa also has to deal with a hero, Perseus, who is not at all heroic. Throughout the story, Ariadne constantly uses this myth to give herself strength and to reflect on how she will act, identifying with a 'monster' rather than with a hero. Saint argues, through the use of this myth-inside-the-myth, for the urgency of new feminist narratives about women, since "[t]he stories of Perseus did not allow for a Medusa with a story of her own."

Luckily, this no longer seems to be the case. In her newest novel *Stone Blind* (2022), Natalie Haynes gives Medusa a story of her own. Haynes tells her story by effectively using a variety of female voices, ranging from the goddess Athene to the Graiai, three sisters who share only an eye and a tooth, to Elaia, a personification of a (female) olive grove.

In this story, she directly addresses the reader, saying "I see you", which is quite ironic in a novel with the title 'Stone Blind.' She also explains that she "know[s] that the hero isn't the one who's kind or brave or loyal. Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – he is monstrous." In this case, she reverses the hierarchy between the hero, the most highly esteemed figure, and the monster, who should be defeated at all costs. Furthermore, she questions the position of the monster: "[Medusa] is the monster. We'll see about that", setting the premise for the whole novel. Throughout the story, Medusa is depicted with a sense of humanity; showing fisterly love, compassion for animals, love for nature, and experiencing fear. She feels fear for the god who raped her and fear for the goddess who punished her for this, which is a sharp contrast to the monster we are used to. Over and over again, the reader is asked to reflect on their own reading experience with questions and accusations: "You are not. You are not still sympathizing with him. Why?", referring to Perseus. This happens again a few chapters later: "I'm wondering if you still think of her as a monster."

It becomes clear that the 'hero' Perseus is prejudiced himself, concluding that "anything that doesn't look like [him] must be a monster." As I heard Miller describe during her interview at *ILFU* on 2 October 2022, these recent publications often reflect on the traditional misogynistic creation of monsters, which seems to embody male anxiety. This entails the anxiety that the male/female hierarchy will break down and in order to hold this in place, women are vilified. Haynes counters this tradition throughout her novel. She is not only giving women their voices back in Greek mythology through her polyphonic novel, but she also urges the reader to reflect on their own prejudices regarding mythical characters.

The three sisters smile at each other, returning to their work in unison, back to waving, measuring, and cutting. Atropos, bursting with excitement, says: "Clotho hurry, we need more thread, threads of life." Clotho hurries back to her spinning wheel, this time not feeling bitter, but rather starts weaving with a glint in her eye. She passionately starts to treadle working on the stories of Atalanta, Clytemnestra, and Medea…

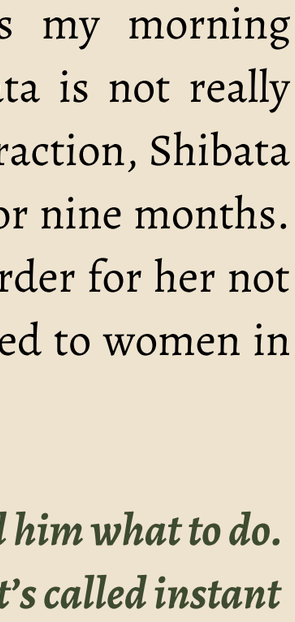
About the Author

Josephine Monnickendam is a current student of the MA Literature Today at Utrecht University. She completed her BA English Language and Culture at Leiden University with a year abroad at the University of Hull, specialising in literature. Her literary passion focusses on defiant (criminal) female characters and the reactions to them in literature, using the interdisciplinary knowledge of her minor in criminology. She is part of the design team for *RevUU*.

Filling the Void:

Exploring Female Connection in Loneliness

Zoë Abrahams



As I get off the metro, I find the streets of Rotterdam deserted. The wet ground reflects the flickering stoplights alerting me to cross the road. It has just stopped raining, but the air is still sticky and weighs heavy on my skin. I see the leaves dwindling down onto the pavement. Autumn is finally coming. My feet carry me to one of my favorite spots in the city – the bookstore. Whereas I found myself alone in the streets a moment ago, as I step foot into the bookstore, that loneliness is suddenly replaced by a certain sense of belonging. People are pondering the bookshelves, talking to each other in hushed voices, patiently waiting in line to buy their new treasures. I maneuver myself through the stacked bookshelves full of recent publications. How am I supposed to find the perfect book? The first few shelves are congested with popular titles and books 'seen on BookTok'. I roll my eyes. Has BookTok really infiltrated my favorite bookstore? It takes a while before my eyes rest on a potential candidate. *Diary of a Void* by Emi Yagi. The title grabs my attention, yet it is the premise of the novel that takes my breath away. This is just what I was looking for.

Sitting down in the bookstore café, sipping on my matcha latte, I decide to open the book. Emi Yagi introduces me to Ms Shibata and her intriguing predicament. Although I do not yet know everything about Shibata, I am immediately invested and feel connected to her character. I am sucked into Shibata's life, the story of her sudden "pregnancy", and the overwhelming loneliness she experiences during it.

After being the victim of sexual harassment at her previous job, Shibata welcomes her new workplace and even the tedious responsibilities that come along with it. Still, she is at her breaking point.

Upon the sight of the once again dirty cups and the penetrating smell of stale coffee in the breakroom, Shibata snaps at her male colleagues that she can no longer be the one to clean the cups after meetings. "I'm pregnant," she declares, "the smell of coffee… it triggers my morning sickness." The twist, however, is that Shibata is not really pregnant. As a consequence of this small interaction, Shibata is now forced to carry out her fabricated lie for nine months. Ironically, this is the sacrifice she makes in order for her not to perform the tedious tasks generally assigned to women in the workplace.

"'Hey, this isn't so bad!' he exclaimed as I showed him what to do. You're right about that, I said back. That's why it's called instant coffee."

Her colleagues immediately celebrate the positive news and embrace her new position within the company – yielding her unexpected benefits such as leaving the office early each day. Enjoying her newly gained freedom as a "pregnant" woman, Shibata makes extensive trips to the supermarket, cooks healthy meals for herself and the "baby," and joins prenatal aerobics classes – activities she did not have time for before she "got pregnant".

As her "pregnancy" carries on, both Shibata and the reader begin to question the deception of her "pregnancy". Might she actually be pregnant after all? After the holidays, Shibata states: "I realized that my belly was a little bigger. That made sense, considering all the Kabukiage I'd eaten back home. But there was something else to it. There was this force I could feel inside me…"

To convince the reader, and maybe even Shibata herself, Yagi combines moments of magical realism, such as her conversations with the original virgin mother Holy Mary, with seemingly realistic experiences of pregnancy symptoms such as the growing sensation of a void.

Yet, the spell of “pregnancy” and “motherhood” soon wear off. Apart from the women she meets in her aerobics classes, Shibata is completely alone and isolated through her upcoming “motherhood”. The lie she carries becomes a burden to her social life, which dwindles as the void inside her grows. Shibata declares: “So this is pregnancy. What luxury. What loneliness.” She realizes in her loneliness that the alienation of pregnancy and motherhood, even when not physically real, might as well be worse than the oppressive and gendered office culture that inspired her experiment in the first place.

"Even if it's a lie, it's a place of my own. And if I can hold on to that lie inside my heart, if I can keep repeating it to myself, it might lead me somewhere. If I can do that, maybe I'll change a little, and maybe the world will, too."

What started as an experiment, to see whether “it even occurred to any of my coworkers, maybe somebody who’d actually been in the meeting, to clean up”, Shibata’s experiment seems to evolve into an act of rebellion. It almost becomes impossible for the reader not to see her experiment as a form of feminist protest against the rigid gender roles in Japanese society and especially Japanese office culture. At the end of the novel, Shibata realizes the grand scheme of her experiment and the impact her lie has had on her position within the office: “that is what I wanted to see” she says, “unexpected cracks in a giant system that seemed so unassailable.”

While Shibata struggles with the isolating loneliness of “motherhood” in her small Japanese apartment, my vision pans out to my surroundings of the bookstore café. I notice the women sitting around me. Do these women also feel a sense of loneliness in their experiences of womanhood? What did these women have to sacrifice to get to where they are right now in their lives? I look at my phone and scroll through Instagram. All I see are posts of women shaping themselves into desirable objects, women getting married, women getting pregnant. Although they seem happy, I can’t shake the feeling of loneliness and discontent. On the daily, women are impacted by societal gender roles shaped by patriarchal structures.

To fit into the confining normative gender roles, women tend to sacrifice their wants and needs. Whether they sacrifice their career to get children or they sacrifice their wish to have children to the detriment of their career. Women are never allowed to have both. Ms Shibata then seems to have found a loophole in the system through her fabricated “pregnancy”, but by doing so she sacrifices her mental health and enjoyment of life.

Shibata’s story reminds me of another woman’s story in contemporary Japanese literature. *The Woman in the Purple Skirt* by Natsuko Imamura focuses on the same feelings of loneliness and the desperate need for female connection in her novel, but instead of a fantastical “pregnancy”, the lives of the women in Purple Skirt are drastically transformed by an invasive stalker.

On the surface, Imamura’s narrator, who refers to herself as the Woman in the Yellow Cardigan, seems to be a naïve and childlike person who just wants to become good friends with her neighbor, the Woman in the Purple Skirt. Yet, Yellow Cardigan’s obsession – or in her eyes, devotion – to Purple Skirt becomes more worrisome as the story continues. According to Yellow Cardigan, it is Purple Skirt’s life, and we are all just living in it. This idea of ‘being the main character’, is reflected in Yellow Cardigan’s narration, when she states: “when the Woman in the Purple Skirt goes out, it is impossible not to pay attention. Nobody could ignore her.” Strangely enough, however, Purple Skirt is not aware of her impact on the townspeople, as “whatever reactions she gets from people around her, it makes absolutely no difference – she just continues on her way.”

Apart from her order at her favorite bakery, her preferred bench in the park and the games she plays with the neighborhood children, Yellow Cardigan notices another detail in the life of Purple Skirt – she can’t seem to keep a steady job. As a segue into becoming friends with Purple Skirt, Yellow Cardigan decides to take matters into her own hands by manipulating Purple Skirt into having a job interview at the same hotel that she works for herself.

With a little help of Yellow Cardigan, Purple Skirt gets the job as the new cleaning lady of the hotel. Yet, even when Purple Skirt is hired, Yellow Cardigan does not stop her stalking tendencies. Rather, they become more desperate and eerie.

“I think what I’m trying to say is that I’ve been wanting to become friends with the Woman in the Purple Skirt for a very long time.”

Throughout the novel, the reader however becomes less interested in the details of Purple Skirt’s life, but rather in the peculiarity of the narrator, Yellow Cardigan. The reader wonders how Yellow Cardigan gets her information – how does she know what happens behind closed doors? It is because of this peculiar narration that Yellow Cardigan gets an almost non-human quality: she seems to hover over the shoulders of Purple Skirt much akin to a ghost.

Furthermore, the tone of narration seems to change the longer Purple Skirt is employed at the hotel. Whereas Yellow Cardigan at the beginning of the novel seemed to want to become friends with Purple Skirt, at the end of the novel it seems as if Yellow Cardigan wants to undermine Purple Skirt and her successes at work.

Coincidently – or not, I'm looking at you Yellow Cardigan – during the period that Purple Skirt is hired, a bunch of items go missing from the hotel. Who the culprit is the reader never figures out. But it is clear that all the coworkers suspect Purple Skirt. Especially since Purple Skirt seems to be entangled in a sexual affair with the hotel director. Her reputation at the hotel becomes tainted, so much so that even her lover suspects her of stealing. In her distress, a terrible accident happens to the hotel director at the hands of Purple Skirt. But of course, Yellow Cardigan is there to save the day as she helps Purple Skirt to flee town. And even though Yellow Cardigan expresses her want to go with Purple Skirt, she doesn't seem to mind that she is left behind. In true tragic fashion, Purple Skirt has gone from the 'main character' to the 'ostracized scapegoat'. "She is distraught. She doesn't know what to do. And what's more, she's all alone in her distress." Was everything set up, Yellow Cardigan? Was your need to become friends with Purple Skirt a façade?

After witnessing the accident – or rather setting up the accident, right Yellow Cardigan? – she goes to visit the hotel director in the hospital. Whereas Yellow Cardigan went unnoticed before, not only by her object of stalking but also by her colleagues at work, the hotel director finally acknowledges her presence.

Using Purple Skirt as blackmail, Yellow Cardigan convinces the director to give her a better position at the hotel and a higher pay. "How long have you been here Gondo-San?" the director asks. "I've been here all along" she replies.

"Unfortunately, no one knows or cares about the Woman in the Yellow Cardigan. That's the difference between her and the Woman in the Purple Skirt."

The name of the Woman in the Purple Skirt is revealed during a staff meeting one day, yet for Yellow Cardigan, Mayuko Hino remains the Woman in the Purple Skirt. This way she is not just another coworker with a name, but rather remains the object of juxtaposition of the Woman in the Yellow Cardigan.

The idea that it was never about Mayuko, the person, but rather the confidence and sophistication she embodied, comes full circle in the end of the novel. Now that Purple Skirt has left town, Yellow Cardigan starts to embody her. Becoming the main character of her own story, Yellow Cardigan has successfully gotten rid of Purple Skirt and replaced her with herself, Gondo-San.

I finish my matcha latte and pack my bag. I too feel like Gondo-San and Ms Shibata sometimes – invisible and alone. However, through reading the experiences of the two women in these novels, and how they dealt with feelings of loneliness, womanhood and their place in patriarchal society, I feel a sense of connection. Women go through very similar struggles, carrying them in silence, and like Ms Shibata we grow a void deep inside ourselves, of loneliness, of unhappiness, of wants and needs unmet. Yet, by filling this void with female connections instead of alienating ourselves, our loneliness evaporates. Even if for a moment.

About the Author

Zoë Abrahams is an MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University, where she also completed two BAs in Literary Studies and Art History. Her literary passion lies in Japanese and Korean feminist contemporary fiction. In her previous research she analyzed themes of “madness as a feminist protest” in the novels of Han Kang and Cho Nam-Joo (2021), as well as the “female gaze as a negation of eroticization” in the paintings of the forgotten female Renaissance artists Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani (2022).

He's Not a "man written by a woman" – You're Just Ignoring All of His Red Flags as Far as Coco Mellors' *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* Is Concerned

Moe Yonezawa

Coco Mellors, a woman, writes Frank, a man, who has positive and charming qualities, but is in no way a character any man should strive to be compared to. I read Mellors' debut novel Cleopatra and Frankenstein and realised how easy it is for men to appear desirable because the bar is set so low for them, and was left pondering what it really means when men are labelled as being "written by women". A "man written by a woman" has become a popular phrase used to praise men who live up to the impossible expectations of women. But let's be real, they actually just do the bare minimum for being a tolerable person. The presentation of men in works written by women is not always desirable, which is the case in Mellors' novel. Frank is presented as a man with potentially toxic characteristics, but Mellors demonstrates how a character like him can nevertheless come across as attractive, and consequently come dangerously close to being categorised as a "man written by a woman". However, the dialogue-driven and fast-paced novel invites us to acknowledge the complexity of every individual, and to consider that simplifying a person into a category such as a "man written by a woman" can lead to their possibly harmful flaws being overlooked. Ultimately, Mellors' novel goes to show that "men written by women" are not desirable, but realistic.

Cleopatra and Frankenstein follows the relationship of Cleo, a 24-year-old British artists, and Frank, an American advertising executive 20 years older than Cleo. The novel opens with Cleo and Frank's coincidental first encounter while leaving the same party on New Year's Eve in New York City. They immediately have romantic chemistry. Frank walks Cleo back to her apartment, but Cleo refuses to let Frank in because she does not want anything to develop between them since she is leaving New York in a few months.

Nevertheless, in the next chapter set half a year later, we read that they are getting married. Their marriage is hardly supported by their friends, and understandably so. They met only six months ago, Frank is a lot older than Cleo, and it seems like a green card marriage, although denied by Cleo numerous times. The chapters following their marriage span a period of a year and a half, where Cleo and Frank's relationship with their parents, friends, co-workers, and most importantly each other, escalate and unravel.

Both Cleo and Frank come from complicated families and spend their entire adulthoods avoiding the same disaster – becoming just like their mothers. Yet, as their marriage deteriorates, Frank becomes an alcoholic, just like his mother, and Cleo struggles immensely with her mental health, just like her mother. Mellors compellingly portrays both the attractive and unattractive qualities of her main characters, taking us on an emotional journey ranging from sympathy to frustration towards the both of them throughout the novel.

Mostly narrated through an omniscient narrator, the story spans two years, emphasising the speed at which Cleo and Frank jump into, and out of, their relationship. Mellors' use of a third person narrator allows us to catch some of Cleo or Frank's questionable behaviours which the characters themselves might be unaware of.

Frank's Red Flags

Mellors' effective use of dialogue in combination with the omniscient narrator's insights provides us with an awareness of the dangers and risks that Cleo and Frank's relationship hold from the get-go.

Cleo and Frank's first interaction reveals a lot about them beyond the information they share with each other in their conversation. The first chapter, which takes place on New Year's Eve in 2006, consists mostly of quick and witty dialogue between Cleo and Frank. Aside from the "eye-rollable" back and forth about how the British pronounce words differently and have a different set of vocabulary to Americans, Mellors' dialogue is engaging and easy to visualise.

Some might say that the dialogue in the first chapter is too cringey to get through, making one not want to continue reading. But this is the point of it. The dialogue and its omniscient narration work to make us feel awkward, to place us as the third wheel in the conversation. Mellors herself states that the dialogue in the beginning between Cleo and Frank is meant to be cheesy "because that frothy first chapter works to set up an expectation (of a romcom) that then flips."

Our position as the third wheel in the conversation allows us to immediately notice some of Frank's red flags. These go unnoticed by Cleo because Frank has charmed her by running ahead to open a door for her or by considering what she says with "genuine earnestness". Their conversation leads to Frank attempting to recite a Larkin poem, making Cleo remark "I'm impressed you remember any at all," to which Frank replies:

> *"I'm older than you. My generation had to memorize these things in school."*
> *"How old?"*
> *"Older. What's your name?"*

Red flag number one: not revealing his age. At this point in their conversation, Cleo has already revealed her age to Frank. We as readers are also not made aware of Frank's age, but know he is at least a decade older than Cleo as the narrator discloses Cleo's estimation that he is in his late thirties or early forties. His decision to simply tell her that he is "older" but not specify how old and quickly change the subject while knowing how much younger Cleo is compared to him is, for the lack of a better word, weird. By withholding information, he is actually revealing more about himself.

Moving on to red flag number two: flirting with her even though he's aware that she's much younger than him. After realising red flag number one, I reread some dialogue from a page before where Frank asks Cleo how old she is after she insists on getting some cigarettes.

She truthfully tells him she is 24 and "Old enough to smoke, if you were thinking of telling me not to." He presumably asks for her age because he assumes she is too young to be smoking, but he, a forty-something-year-old man, was obviously flirting with her from the beginning of their encounter. The omniscient narrator picks up on this as Frank "laughed generously" at Cleo's remarks even though "she didn't feel she'd been particularly witty." Once again, weird.

Now for red flag number three: his nickname. When Cleo and Frank ponder their nicknames for each other – Cleopatra and Frankenstein – Cleo somewhat objects to the connotations behind the name Cleopatra. This is exemplified when Frank says, "Cleopatra, the original undoer of men," to which she immediately replies: "But I'm just Cleo." On the other hand, Frank seemingly chooses the nickname Frankenstein for himself, stating:

> *"Frankenstein sounds about right. Creator of monsters."*
> *"You make monsters?"*
> *"Sort of."*

Even though he only "sort of" admits to creating monsters – because he creates ads – we do find out that he can create a monster out of himself later in the novel when he becomes an alcoholic. Not to mention, Frankenstein is a "man written by a woman" who has many flaws and is not someone one should aspire to be. All these red flags are detectable in the first few pages of the first chapter, something made possible through Mellors' productive use of cheesy dialogue and an omniscient narrator.

Frank's Yellow Flags

My focus on Frank's flaws does not mean Cleo is innocent in the deterioration of their relationship, or her life in general. Mellors invites us to investigate Frank's faults because of their relationship's dynamic: he is older, he supports both of them financially, and is a man. Frank, therefore, holds most of the power in their relationship, which makes him our main subject for interrogation. Nevertheless, Cleo also has some red flags of her own. Mellors makes it clear that it takes two to get married, as well as divorced.

In the second chapter, which centres on Cleo and Frank's wedding, Cleo finds out that her best friend Audrey hooked up with Frank's best friend Anders. Cleo also hooked up with Anders after she had met Frank, but before they became serious, when she still thought she would be leaving New York. Upon learning that her best friend had slept with the same man she had also slept with before, she feels "a pang of jealousy shoot through her". This is an alarming emotion to feel, especially on one's wedding day.

Mellors foreshadows Cleo and Anders' eventual adulterous relationship, as well as the ultimate failure of Cleo and Frank's marriage, in the very chapter of their wedding day. It feels as though Mellors is asking us (and maybe even Cleo and Frank themselves): why did they get married in the first place?

Cleopatra and Frankenstein also features other significant characters. Mellors emphasises the importance of the character Eleanor, Frank's co-worker, by turning her into a first-person narrator in the eighth chapter, and again in the sixteenth chapter. Through her narration, we get another perspective on the characters, mainly Frank. The switch to first-person narration is done in an unstartling and natural way. No discomfort was felt with the shift in perspective, but I was left wondering why Mellors hadn't used the first-person perspective for some other characters as well, specifically Cleo's best friends Audrey and Quentin.

Eleanor narrates her and Frank's "will-they-won't-they" situation. It becomes obvious that they are both interested in each other, but Frank is married and is also Eleanor's boss, perhaps adding infidelity and being involved in a workplace relationship to his list of red flags. Yet, Frank from Eleanor's perspective actually made me less wary of him.

On top of being literally written by a woman, Frank becomes a man told by a woman who is starstruck by him, making it even easier for us to idealise him. Because of the first-person narration, we aren't given the details of his flaws. Eleanor is infatuated by him, and so are we.

If we were to get Audrey and Quentin's first-person perspective on Frank, he wouldn't be portrayed in such a positive light. This is something that would have made me enjoy the novel even more, seeing as there is a lot about Frank that I already am not a big fan of. A man told by a woman's best friends (preferably ones who dislike him) is just what we need to avoid putting men on pedestals for being just another mediocre "man written by a woman". The omniscient narrator already allows us to give Frank the side-eye, but Audrey and Quentin's narration would have given us the opportunity to directly glare at him. This would have also provided Audrey and Quentin with a bigger purpose in the story, as it feels like they were included purely for diversity points: Audrey, an Asian woman, and Quentin, a gay man struggling with his gender identity. If both characters had been given a first-person perspective in the way Eleanor has, their importance as characters may have become clear.

Cleo and Frank's Red Flags: Coming Soon to a Screen Near You

Mellors' debut novel is clever in the ways it interrogates the issue of age-gap relationships. Aside from the moments depicting Cleo's severe struggles with mental health which can be difficult to get through, and despite of the novel's flaws (or red flags if you will), it is an entertaining and propulsive read. Especially when reading it the way I did: by keeping score of each character's red flags.

The detailed dialogue and shifting narration in Cleopatra and Frankenstein makes the novel perfect for an on-screen adaptation. So much so that it's development into a television series with Warner Bros Television has already been confirmed. When literary characters are brought to life in a film or television series, there is a danger that viewers will admire them even more, largely because they are always (particularly in romance narratives) played by attractive actors. Once the on-screen adaptation of Mellors' novel is released, Frank will probably be labelled and praised as a "man written by a woman". We'll cross that bridge when we get there, by reminding each other of all of his red flags. In the meantime, please remember: Frank, and any "man written by a woman," is really just a man.

About the Author

Moe Yonezawa is an MA Literature Today student at Utrecht University. She obtained her BA at Amsterdam University College where she studied Liberal Arts and Sciences because she couldn't choose exactly what she wanted to pursue. Thankfully, she realised her enthusiasm for literature during those three years. She enjoys reading literature which allows her to be judgmental towards characters, which is especially possible when reading through a feminist lens.

Charming *Oh William!*

Ryan Dougherty

Taken at first reading, *Oh William!* is more like a charming painting than a novel. Here, a kitchen and over there a living room. Of course, there are people, too. And as we delve into the painting, we see that perhaps not everything is as charming as the style suggests.

Oh William! is told from the perspective of Lucy Barton, who proves to be an intuitive, if somewhat aloof, narrator. Lucy's charming observations and insights are tempered by memories of a past that is anything but charming. She grew up in extreme poverty and abuse, we learn from snippets throughout the novel. She doesn't like to talk about it, but enough facts bubble to the surface that we do get a good idea of how bad it was.

The writing is so intimate and personal that we quickly identify with Lucy. The book reads like a biography. Indeed, if you type in 'Is Oh William…' on google, the next suggested word is 'autobiographical'. Surely that is evidence of success in crafting a realistic narrative.

Oh William! is the third novel in a series about Lucy, the first being My Name is Lucy Barton and the second a collection of short stories about how other characters perceive Lucy titled Anything is Possible. However, dividing up the series into one of beginnings, middles, and ends feels contrary to the themes and style of Strout's novels and, in a curious way, I feel sure that Lucy wouldn't approve of this endeavor. *Oh William!* is not the type of novel that can be neatly divided or laid carefully onto a plot arc to show how each part performs. It is more than the sum of its parts.

I compared Strout's novel to a painting because the novel feels closer to a painting thematically. Its story unfolds as we look closer, with the driving plot force being simply an earnest desire to share and confide.

Lucy is such a relatable narrator that by listening to her story, we feel the comfort that comes from knowing we are understood. I will not attempt a dissection of the novel, but simply make an earnest attempt to give insight into how this marvelously meticulous novel touches the soul.

First, the language of the novel and the stylistic choices of Strout irresistibly draw the reader into Lucy's world. Within the aesthetics, we can find considerable philosophical and spiritual depth.

The language Strout uses is casual. Even ordinary. But in its ordinariness, there is an extraordinary intimacy that welcomes the reader to step inside. Strout does this with a style that is strikingly exact. She pinpoints scenes so precisely that we see it right in front of us. Speaking of her marriage to William, Lucy says:

> *Beneath his height of pleasantness there lurked a juvenile crabbiness, a scowl that flickered across his soul, a pudgy little boy with his lip thrust forward who blamed this person and that person. He blamed me. I felt this often; he was blaming me for something that had nothing to do with our present lives, and he blamed me even as he called me "sweetheart", making my coffee – back then he never drank coffee but he made me a cup each morning – setting it down before me martyr-like.*
>
> *Keep the stupid coffee, I wanted to cry out sometimes, I'll make my own coffee. But I took it from him, touching his hand. "Thanks, sweetheart," I would say, and we would begin another day."*

The language is precisely vivid in its description of William. We can imagine the exact face one makes when a 'scowl flickers across their soul'. In fact, the whole scene is not only vivid but personal and intimate. It is a glimpse into a life that only someone with intimate knowledge can see. A third person in that room would see nothing but a husband giving his wife a coffee.

The precision with which the writing holistically describes the scene invites us in automatically. We can't help but to relate to Lucy and see glimpses of characters from our own life in the scene. We feel the resentment of Lucy and we feel the simmering anger of William, and most of all we can taste the pernicious feeling of not having the words to even acknowledge a disaster unfolding beneath our feet.

Within the aesthetics, the content of the novel is a deep expedition into the theme of belonging. There have been many novels dealing with this theme, but *Oh William!*, like Lucy herself, does it in a unique way. Throughout, Lucy is a perpetual outsider. From her troubled childhood, she never feels like she belongs. She is a world unto herself, being simultaneously self-absorbed and making a courageous effort to be less so, a struggle with which we can't help but relate. Each of us is, after all, the central character in our own lives, perceiving a world that only seems to exist in relation to our 'I'. Taken in this context, it is a charming oddity how the feeling that others belong while I do not is strangely universal.

Oh, William! has a consistent theme of belonging but it is not about a character struggling to find a place they belong. Instead, the novel reads more like a reflection on belonging and what it has signified in her life. Belonging can take on many hues. Foremost in mind is an archetypally traditional family, but Lucy's feeling of unbelonging persisted through the formation and dissolution of her own family with William. This novel points to a deeper source. Lucy doesn't belong because she is unmoored from the world just a fraction. Or at least she feels that she is, and in a validating way William senses it also. He says to her, "You're unique, Lucy. You're a spirit. You know how the other day at that barracks when you thought you were flipping between universes or something, well, I believe you, Lucy, because you are a spirit."

Lucy expresses the feeling of not belonging by saying that she feels invisible. She writes, "I have always thought if there was a pin for every person who ever lived, there would be no pin for me. I feel invisible, is what I mean." Indeed, the only times that Lucy feels visible is when she inhabits a role like being a mother. By the time Lucy is narrating this book, her children are already adults with families of their own.

Lucy speculates that her feeling of invisibility comes from her childhood which left her without a common frame of reference for events. She says of herself and David (her second husband, with whom she had a happy marriage), "Neither of us had grown up with a television in the house.

We had only a vague knowledge of the Vietnam War, until we taught it to ourselves later on; we had never learned – because we had never heard – the popular songs of the time we grew up in, we had not seen the movies until we were older, we did not know the idioms that were used in common language." This lack of reference makes Lucy an unmoored character. She was not privy to the shared passage of time in the way most of us are. People navigate the physical world by landmarks and the temporal world by landmark events. Without these landmarks, Lucy is set apart.

The Guardian's Jonathan Myerson writes in his book review that the narrative structure constantly "skids backwards and forwards through time…". This narrative structure reflects Lucy's inner life and feeling of unbelonging. It also relates to her initial attraction to William. In the formative days of their relationship when William functioned as a mentor in her life, he teaches her how to do banal everyday things in life which she never learned during her isolated childhood, and he also teaches her about the shared web of events which make up the mainstream current of time. Lucy says that "it was as though William ushered me into this world. As much as I could be ushered."

From a spiritual perspective, the part of Lucy that cannot be ushered into the world is the soul. It is a part of us that is in the world but not of the world. It is the part of Lucy that William refers to as her spirit. In a way, Lucy's marriage to William is an effort to belong, to overcome the part of her that cannot be pinned to a corkboard. Retrospectively, Lucy reflects that "this authority was why I had fallen in love with William. We crave authority. We do. No matter what anyone says, we crave that sense of authority. Of believing that in the presence of this person we are safe."

William does have authority in the sense that he constantly keeps moving forward. In the room next to William's dying mother, Lucy notes how "the woman was not dead yet, but William was already writing her obituary, and for some reason – for all these years – I have admired him for that." Undoubtedly, William pushes forward, carrying or dragging those in his life along with him. However, it is not always where they want to go. He has numerous affairs after marrying and starting a family with Lucy, prompting her to leave him. This pattern repeats itself with William's second wife, who also leaves him.

Authority does get people moving, but it doesn't get anyone very far in the direction they want to go. Even William trips in his bullish plunge into the future when he learns more about his mother's upbringing during a trip to Main with Lucy.

He learns how she grew up in in poverty and learns of the baby, his estranged sister, that his mother abandoned. He is shaken and brought to a halt. After Lucy and William return to their home in NYC, he visits Lucy a final time and invites her to go on a vacation to the Cayman Islands with him, a place they frequented during their marriage. Lucy, in a later moment of lucidity, thinks: "As I lay in bed that night, thinking of William and his face in my apartment, of our conversation, all of a sudden I thought: Oh. He has lost his authority." Lucy cannot pinpoint why exactly she realizes this, though she knows it to be true. The reason for William's loss of authority is that he has, finally, stopped. He is no longer moving forward but instead seeking to repeat a memory from many years ago when he was married to Lucy. She agrees to go on vacation with him.

Oh William! feels particularly intimate because it portrays a truthful and universal experience of belonging. In this world, there is no heroic journey where we arrive home triumphant, loving and loved. In fact, anyone can see that the world will continue right along without us at all and yet, here we are. There are no easy answers or black and white choices. Elizabeth Strout herself says that "it is not 'good' or 'bad' that interests me as a writer, but the murkiness of human experience and the consistent imperfections of our lives." Oh William! stays true to her interests and perhaps I shouldn't say it, but I feel sure that Lucy would have a well-worn copy on her bookshelf.

About the Author

Ryan Dougherty graduated with an undergraduate degree in English literature a number of years ago (he'd rather not say how many). Since then, he spent the better part of a decade teaching in Vietnam. Leaving behind a well-worn sunhat and a promise to return, he came to The Netherlands to start an MA in Literature at Utrecht University. Ryan began studying with grand ambition, but after meeting his classmates has consigned himself to mediocrity.

'Maybe Love and Loneliness Are Not That Different After All?'

A Dialogue about *Klara and the Sun*

Aristi Makrygiannaki

-1-

"Have you started reading *Klara and the Sun*?"

"Well… no, to be honest."

"Come on, why? You love Ishiguro's stories, and I got it for you because I really wanted us to talk about it."

"Um, thank you very much for your gift but…"

"No, no buts. I know, you don't like stories about the future and artificial intelligence because the present is hard enough to worry about the future, but this one is not just a dystopian science fiction novel. It's about what it means to be human, to love, to hope, to sacrifice, to make choices. And all this comes from a non-human narrator, which makes it more appealing. You see, Klara is an Artificial Friend—called AF—who is supposed to give company to teenagers. In the beginning, Klara is at a store waiting for a kid to choose her. You'll like her more and more as the story progresses, especially when she tries to understand the environment and people's interactions, because her unique quality is to learn through observation. Her perspective is so childish and naïve, yet she exposes people's behaviors to the reader without even intending it. Listen to this:

> *when we were still quite new, we'd gathered at the window to see as best we could three policemen fighting with Beggar Man and his dog in front of the blank doorway. But that hadn't been an angry fight, the Manager had been worried about Beggar Man because he'd become drunk and they'd only trying to help him.*

"Klara is someone who hasn't developed critical thinking. Her narrative reflects what the manager wants her to believe: that she and the policemen just want to help the beggar. Ishiguro uses Klara's point of view to criticize this act of coercion implicitly in a humorous and ironic way.

"But especially when it comes to human emotions, a non-human narrator, who doesn't fully understand but tries to speak about them with people, makes us look at them from a new perspective. From this we can have a deeper understanding of human emotions. Hear this, too:

> *…and she and the man were holding each other so tightly they were like one large person […] the man had his eyes tightly shut, and I wasn't sure if he was very happy or very upset.*
> *'Those people seem so pleased to see each other,' Manager said. […]*
> *'Yes, they seem so happy,' I said. 'But it's strange because they also seem upset.'*
> *[…]*
> *'Perhaps they hadn't met for a long time. A long, long time. Perhaps when they last held each other like that, they were still young.'*
> *'Do you mean, Manager, they lost each other?'*

"To me, this description feels very alive and emotional, even though it is so simple. Klara doesn't understand how people can be both happy and sad at the same time, and she keeps asking until she does. Her analysis of something that we usually take for granted makes us think differently about it and appreciate it.

"And it goes on…"

"Hey, hey, are you going to spoil the whole book now?"

"What happened? Suddenly you want to read it? I knew it! But no, it's not a spoiler. It has nothing to do with the storyline, trust me."

"But what about the Manager? Isn't she trying to manipulate Klara's understanding of the world or even dictate how she should feel?"

"Maybe, but isn't this what happens in real life anyway? Isn't there someone telling us how things ought to be and how to feel about everything, especially when we were new like Klara?

"But here we are, some of the things we have learned we are trying to revoke, and some others we still don't know where they come from! I also think Klara will have many opportunities to hear different perspectives later when– "

"Okay, I must stop you now, my friend, I don't want to hear any more spoilers. I'll just grab my coffee and leave. See you."

-2-

"Okay, so to be clear, there is so much I haven't understood yet because Ishiguro delays the evolution of his narrative—as always—and won't let us know anything until we explode with curiosity. So, what's the thing with the capitalized Sun and his special nourishment? I understand that the Sun provides these AFs with solar energy, but the terms with which Klara addresses the Sun are almost religious. When she was at the store and was observing people outside the window, she actually believed that the Beggar Man and his dog were dead and the Sun revived them the next day! Isn't she supposed to use reason and think logically, since she is an android?"

"But then, if she could think only with pure logic, how could she become friends with Josie? People don't think with logic at all, I suppose that's why. But it's interesting that she is actually trying to help Josie to recover with the powers of the Sun, right? She even made a deal with the Sun."

"I guess if the Sun is what gives Klara life, this is where she will turn for help. And she thinks she can offer the Sun an exchange for it. It is, again, a sort of religion. It is about hope through faith. But now I want to ask you, are we ever going to find out what this mysterious illness of Josie's is? We sort of find out that she's ill from the moment she buys Klara as her AF, and I want to know why. Am I asking too much? And Josie's sister had some mysterious illness and died? We also don't know much about this distinction between her and her friend Rick. Is it something about lifted kids? What's that?"

"Someone's got no patience…"

"Oh, the most annoying part: what's going on with the Mother? That's how Klara refers to her: the Mother. By the way I love Klara's language, it's childish and naïve, but speaks with such intelligence. Anyway, back to the Mother."

"Right, Josie's mother, such an interesting character."

"You think? She asked Klara to imitate her daughter to decide if she's the right AF for her? And later she decides to take Klara to some trip without Josie, because she wasn't feeling well, and then asks Klara again to act like Josie. But when she speaks exactly like Josie, the Mother totally freaks out! At least she has started to like Klara by now because she didn't seem so fond of her in the beginning."

"I don't know what to say here. I really like her as a character. She's very complex and is clearly suffering from depression. She actually says to Klara: 'It must be nice sometimes to have no feelings. I envy you.' Wait. Here:

> *There was a time, not so long ago, when I thought I was getting to feel less and less. A little less each day. I didn't know if I was happy about that or not. But now, lately, I seem to be getting overly sensitive to everything.*

"She needs to talk about her feelings with someone so much that she speaks with her daughter's AF."

"Yes, but Klara is a very good listener, you must admit it. The more she observes the more she understands. The second time she imitated Josie in front of her mother, she was able to focus her vision boxes on her emotions and understand that she was both happy and sad. On the other hand, I still don't understand why."

"Now you're being annoying. Just read the rest."

"Don't hang up. There's one more thing. You said this book is about love. But is it? Why does it seem to me that everything is about loneliness? Klara seems to learn something about loneliness from every character. This is even the reason AFs exist. And her conclusions are quite accurate. Like here, listen:

> *At the same time, what was becoming clear to me was the extent to which humans, in their wish to escape loneliness, made maneuvers that were very complex and hard to fathom*

"And, wait, I have another one:

> *'[…] I'm surprised someone would desire so much a path that would leave her in loneliness.'*
> *'And that's what surprises you?'*
> *'Yes. Until recently, I didn't think that humans could choose loneliness. That there were sometimes forces more powerful than the wish to avoid loneliness.'"*

"Yeah, maybe love and loneliness are not that different after all."

-3-

"I am literally terrified of this concept. I just couldn't read any more. I closed the book immediately. The Mother would have wanted Klara to continue Josie if she had died? To be her? Was this the reason why the portrait she was supposed to pose for is mentioned repeatedly, without her knowledge? That is so cruel and so horrifying as a critique on humanity. I mean…"

> *The second Josie won't be a copy. She'll be exact the same and you'll have every right to love her just as you love Josie now. It's not faith you need. Only rationality. I had to do it, it was tough but now it works for me just fine. And it will work for you.*

"Really? Is this how we work? Are we capable of replacing everything, even human beings, in order to avoid the pain of dealing with loss? And is it possible to exist only for the others to love our existence? What are we supposed to do? Here:"

> *I think I hate Capaldi because deep down I suspect he may be right [...] that there's nothing so unique about my daughter, nothing there our modern tools can't excavate, copy, transfer. That people have been living with one another all this time, centuries, loving and hating each other, and all on a mistaken premise.*

"Again, terrifying."

"In addition to that, the fact that Josie's sickness is a result of the process of being lifted to have better opportunities in education and in life is disheartening. Especially when there is a danger for children not to make it through the required genetic alteration and actually die, which is what happened with Josie's sister. And her mother still made the decision to risk Josie's life after all. And she didn't have any regrets even when she almost lost her. And Josie agreed she wouldn't have preferred not having the genetic edits, when Mother asked."

"Wow! I mean, are there any boundaries as to how far we will go just to fit in to society? Has our society become so hostile to humans, and we haven't even noticed?"

"But things don't stop there. As I said, I closed the book. Then I went to sleep. And Klara came up in my dream, as if she were my own AF. Well, in the beginning it was really great because she was willing to tidy my room for me so clothes weren't all over the floor. Some moments later the scene changed. I was not in the room, but Klara was there talking to another person that I couldn't see. And Klara was talking about me. She was saying that she was really sad because she didn't know how to make me happy. She was only trying to be a good AF and to make me feel less lonely, but she didn't know what else to do because I didn't even talk to her. She observed that I avoided her all the time while she was trying to tell me about the emotions she did not understand; that I stopped talking to her because that was easier for me to do than to explain. She also said that I started distracting myself with things she couldn't understand. Everything became very confusing after that, but the last thing I remember is her saying that I should be replaced, because I was so damaged that I could no longer be fixed."

"Was this a dream or a nightmare?"

"I don't know."

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