

invernadero.

A commentary on the cultural

Natalia Albin Legorreta



The sounds of spring

MY SPRING PLAYLIST: PEONIES & RHUBARB

Welcome to a part of my brain where I compartmentalise things I can't control (the weather) into things where I can have at least a semblance of control (playlists). Very few things mark the passage of time in my life as the music I listen to, hence I've always kept random selections of playlists: for books, for routines, for evenings and mornings, and ever since I moved to a city where I can appreciate them, for seasons.

PEONIES & RHUBARB



(it

feels

like

spring)

Peonies & Rhubarb is a mixture of new releases I'm loving and old favourites with one thing in common: spring. These songs feel like chirping birds and hot coffee, like warm afternoons and tulips lining the flower shops, like that Princess Diana shorts and jumper look, like getting caught in a hail storm while holding an ice-cream.

While I made it to be listened to in order, you can play with it as much as you like. Shuffle, add, remove... it's yours now, too.

01. Wildflower and Barley // Hozier, Allison Russell

Springtime in the city
The canal banks are empty again
The grass cryin' out to be heated by bodies
The streets for the laughter of young women and
men
Canal boat and trolley, wildflower and barley

02. Blackbird // The Beatles

Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life, you were only waiting for this
moment to arise

03. this is what falling in love feels like // JVKE

Feel like sun on my skin
So this is love, I know it is

04. This is What Makes Us Girls // Lana del Rey

The prettiest in-crowd that you had ever seen
Ribbons in our hair and our eyes gleamed mean
A freshmen generation of degenerate beauty
queens

05. Sunflower, Vol 6. // Harry Styles

Wondering, headshake
Tired eyes are the death of me
Mouthful of toothpaste before I got to know you
I've got your face hung up high in the gallery
I love this shade, sunflower, sunflower

06. Howl // Florence + The Machine

Now there's no holding back, I'm aching to
attack
My blood is singing with your voice, I want to
pour it out
The saints can't help me now, the ropes have
been unbound
I hunt for you with bloody feet across the
hallowed ground"

07. Interlude 01: Sonder // Barry Can't Swim

08. The Wolves (Act I and II) // Bon Iver

With the wild wolves around you
In the morning, I'll call you
Send it farther on"

09. Brindo // Silvana Estrada

Brindo por el río y el silencio
Por regresar a casa aunque esté lejos
Brindo por cruzarme en tu camino
Y así mi voz vuelve a tener sentido"
A toast to the river and the silence
To going home even if its far
A toast to crossing paths
So that my voice makes sense again"

10. The Water // Johnny Flynn, Laura Marling

Where the blue of the sea meets the sky
And the big yellow sun leads me home
I'm everywhere now; the way is a vow
To the wind of each breath by and by

11. Sunsets // Cigarettes After Sex

I wanna hear your voice
A love that nobody could destroy

Took photographs like Brautigan's book covers
That we both adored

12. Melrose Meltdown // Suki Waterhouse

Welcome to my Melrose meltdown
Nobody ever breaks up
We just break down

13. Human // dodie, Tom Walker

I want to give you your grin
So tell me you can't bear a room that I'm not in

14. Interlude 02: Julia (deep diving) // Fred Again

15. About You // The 1975

There was something 'bout you
that now I can't remember
It's the same damn thing
that made my heart surrender

17. The Rain // Oh Wonder

Ever since the rain I've been living days too
slow
Lie around and wait for a heart I used to know
They say that over time there'll be nothing left
to lose

But I still can't find the light, I've given all
my love to you

18. Salut! // Virens

Darling girl your skin like pearl I wrote you
in my dreams
With ink of gold our fable told in words that
don't belong to me

19. Strawberry Sunscreen // Lostboycrow

Taste the strawberry sunscreen
Laughing at songs from the 90s
Don't really care if it rains or it shines, I'm
still stuck inside
The treasure chest center of both of your eyes
Kiss with them open, see what it's like to be
loved"

20. Queen Bee // Johnny Flynn

I'll speak love's truth with oak and ash for you
Sing through April's tears
I will weave the body flowers of spring for you
I will walk for years

21. There it Goes // Maisie Peters

Sunflowers in the kitchen
The universe is shifting
And it's all for me

22. So Sick Of Dreaming // Maggie Rogers

Every little thing's up for takin'
Oh, it makes me wanna sing, my heart's breakin'

23. the lakes // Taylor Swift

I want auroras and sad prose
I want to watch wisteria grow right over my bare
feet
'Cause I haven't moved in years

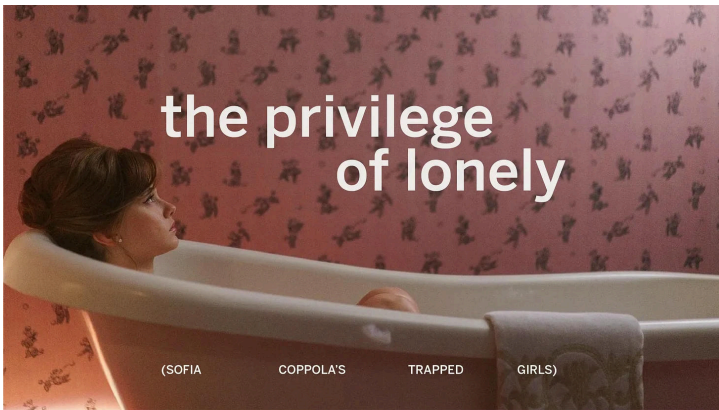
24. BODYGUARD // Beyoncé

Leave my lipstick on the cigarette
Just toss it, and you stomp it out, out, out
Inhalin' whiskey when you kiss my neck

Thursday 18 April 2024

The privilege of lonely: Sofia Coppola's trapped girls

ABOUT A VERY PARTICULAR STYLE OF GIRLHOOD
THAT HAS BECOME AN AESTHETIC DREAM IN SPITE OF
THE HORRORS IT DEPICTS.



“I THINK SHE’S DELIGHTFUL, SHE LOOKS LIKE A
LITTLE PIECE OF CAKE.”

-*Marie Antoinette* (2006)

Sofia Coppola’s portrayal of girlhood is as deeply intimate as it is universal; perfectly messy flat-lays, wistfully looking out of windows, a sad face in beautiful makeup. She focuses her camera on the details of the gilded cages her characters are trapped within — whether it’s a bedroom in suburban America or a bathroom in Versailles —, rather than on the specifics of the characters themselves, allowing the viewer to self-insert into the narratives. She’s not writing scripts for the specifics, she’s writing stories about girls becoming women through a deep loneliness that is, most times, entwined with their privilege.

When watching Sofia Coppola, sometimes my mind traces back to Virginia Woolf, not because of the aestheticised idea of the sad girl, but because of this one passage in *Mrs. Dalloway*: “It is the privilege of loneliness; in privacy one may do as one chooses. One might weep if no one saw.” Privilege means they are allowed to be lonely, which in turn allows them to cry. They are trapped in a beautiful situation while going through some of the hardest moments of their lives (be it their teenage years or, eventually, failing marriages).



Marie Antoinette, suicidal teenagers, rich criminals and women sheltering during the American Civil War don't necessarily sound like colourful and 'pretty' stories. In fact, they sound grey and gritty. But it's in that dichotomy that Coppola works best - these women's exterior lives are entirely beautiful, it's only their inner worlds that are lonely. In *Lost in Translation* and *On The Rocks*, for example, her protagonists are in two of the busiest cities in the world, Tokyo and New York City respectively, and they could not be more detached from it all, suffocated within their luxury houses and hotels.

"I know what people's perception is: that somehow you escape tragedy and loneliness and sadness if you can be rich and famous. There's the human side. So I'm always interested in that, in the fairy tale versus the reality of a situation."

Sofia Coppola for the Irish Times (2023)

A quick Sofia Coppola search online will lead you to videos titled "my life is directed by sofia coppola" and "My bedroom was written and directed by Sofia Coppola" or mood-boards collaging her most iconic characters. So why do people,

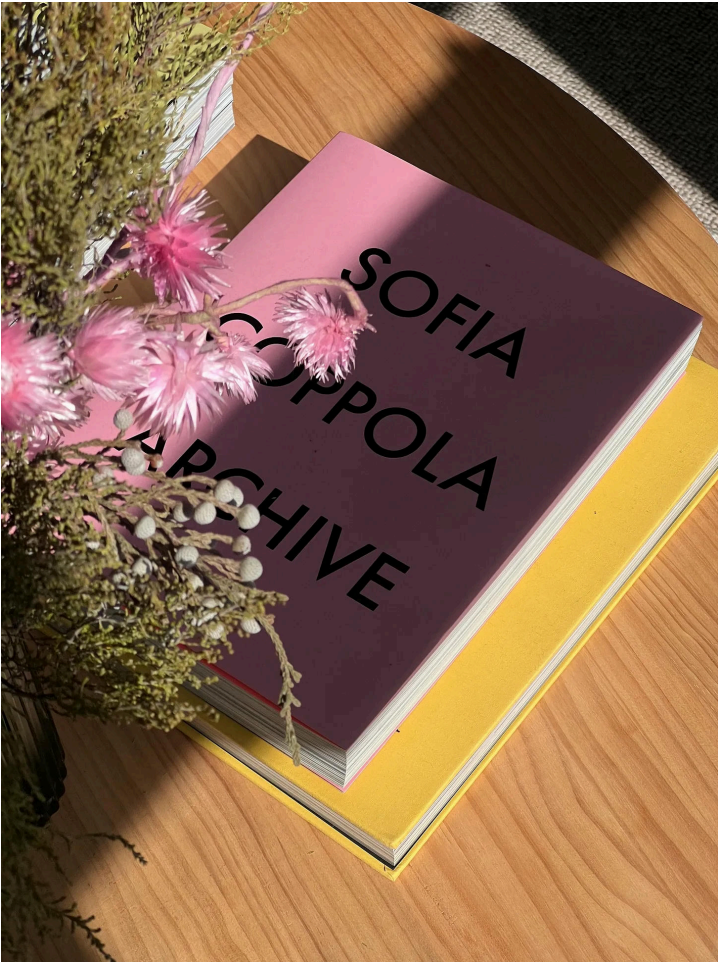
particularly women, want to insert themselves into these terrifying stories so badly? In an essay for the New York Times, Emily Yoshida gives a fantastic summary as to what the beauty in Sofia Coppola's work means to the viewer:

“We're simply invited to participate in the glamorous inertia. The sharper moments of potential darkness are typically buffered by the naïveté of our young protagonists and the glints of beauty they can find in a cruel and confusing world. And they inevitably, in turn, become glints of beauty for us to screen-grab and add to our personal mood boards.”

“IT'S ALWAYS MORE INTRIGUING TO IMAGINE WHAT'S HAPPENING, AS OPPOSED TO SEEING EVERYTHING. I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE AT A DISTANCE.”

-Sofia Coppola

Sofia's idea of girlhood is warped, as is all of ours, by her own experience and privilege. To her, being a girl meant driving around in convertibles before locking herself in her room filled with glossy magazine cut outs and travelling around the world following her father's career. In a way, though, she was perhaps trapped in a gilded cage, too: consistently living in the shadow of the great Francis Ford-Coppola through the eyes of the misogynistic industry of film criticism.



But, and stay with me here, I'm not interested in exploring her personal reasons for depicting girlhood, loneliness and its relation to privilege in the way she does. Mainly because I'm not sure that's what she meant to do, and even if she

did, it doesn't matter. I've found the best way to think about Coppola's filmography is in the same way as she approaches her characters — at a distance.

In an interview with the MUBI podcast, she mentions her father used to talk about film like poetry. And it is; it's a language you can always analyse through authors — Sofia's body of work does all evoke the same themes and feelings, and there's likely a personal reason for that, but the conclusions we draw will always be a reflection of ourselves.

“OBVIOUSLY DOCTOR, YOU’VE NEVER BEEN A 13-YEAR-OLD GIRL.”

-Cecilia, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993)

I grew up in the era of the Tumblr sad girl posts, which slowly morphed into Pinterest collages that shifted into TikTok videos and edits. In case you're not familiar, the sad girl is always a certain type of woman: the Marissa Coopers, Effy Stonems and Lana del Reys. More recently, think Euphoria girls, Phoebe Bridgers listeners and Ottessa Mossfegh readers.

The sad girl movement has been around for much longer than that, though. I don't just mean the tragedy of the beautiful woman that's been a cultural staple since Cleopatra, I mean the aestheticisation of it — and you'd be remiss not to quote *The Virgin Suicides*, Sofia Coppola's first feature, as a cornerstone. It tapped into privilege and created a new aesthetic for the movement sans the greyness and drabness that enraptured it before.

Sofia Coppola's female protagonists are both unlikeable and aspirational, filled with undesirable feelings and unat-

tainable mystique. Almost always outrageously smart and beautiful in an understated way, they have everything they could ever want, except for happiness. Sofia Coppola's girls are the embodiment of tragedy.



And we love to consume that tragedy. It acts as a balm for the loneliness inherent in growing up as a girl. As teenagers, and I've found as adults too, women are told their sadness is narcissistic, individual, something to be tamed. Watching others going through it, especially when it's girls who we can relate to (cue the self-insert) and even aspire to (cue the gilded cage), is avenging. It feels like an act of defiance against a world that expects women to be okay despite the inherited entrapments of their gender. As artist and creator of "Sad Girl Theory", Audrey Wollen, put it in an interview with Nylon:

"Basically, girls being sad has been categorised as this act of passivity, and therefore, discounted from the history of activism. I'm trying to open up the idea that protest doesn't have to be external to the body; it doesn't have to be a huge march in the streets, noise, violence, or rupture. There's a long history of girls who have used their own anguish,

their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency. Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back."

The tragedy is a political choice. In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte finds happiness within possibilities despite her tragic ending because she decided to leave her cage. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the girls remain elusive while revelling against the pre-determined life their parents laid out for them — their tragic ending was theirs to choose, that's the point. *The Beguiled* is perhaps the most obvious of them all, with the girls finding complicity within each other.

Sofia Coppola's characters seem passive. At first glance, it feels as though things are happening *to* them instead of *because* of them. But when you take a closer look, they are actually intensely defiant in the one way women are taught to be: while being quiet and beautiful.



“I’M FUCKING NOTHING... I’M NOT A PERSON.”

-Johnny, *Somewhere* (2010)

At the Chateau Marmont, perhaps to some the epitome of Hollywood luxury, Johnny drifts alone on a pool raft like something straight out of a Slim Aarons photograph (or a Sofia Coppola film). Lonely, sad and trusting that this must be his best life.



DURING THE LONG INTERMEDIATE PERIOD, I STAYED AT THE CHATEAU MARMONT FOR TWO WEEKS. COLEEN PARSON WAS STAYING THERE THEN, AND I THOUGHT OF HIM AND A BUNCH OF ACTORS I’VE MET WHO’RE WRITING THE CHARACTER OF JOHNNY MARINO. LATER IN THE FILM, WHEN JOHNNY IS DRIFTING BACK TO HIS MOVIE STARS AROUND THE HOTEL LIFE.

Sofia’s male characters are perhaps even more tragic than the women. Not because they feel that tragedy, or because they choose it, but because most of the time their most fatal flaw is not noticing it. They don’t understand their own gilded cage because they’re certain that they must belong there. They are entitled to it.

That loneliness makes them, at times, almost monstrous. The boys in *The Virgin Suicides*, in their innocence, are observing the clearly depressed girls as trophies to be won over. In *The Beguiled*, the deeply lonely male protagonist turns his anger to the women instead of to, you know, the war, or something. In *The Bling Ring*, he's so obsessed with fitting into luxury that he becomes a criminal. In *Priscilla*, Elvis is so tormented by the cage of his own making that he smashes it to pieces along with his own life. You get the point.

Her brilliance with her male characters is that we don't feel alienated by or from them. You're not supposed to hate them, they aren't unlikeable male protagonists in the same defiant way the women are. Sofia Coppola's men are a product of circumstance too, and all we can do is watch their tragedy unfold while they lie as beautifully as the women — with very little choice in the matter.

“YOU'RE LOSING ME TO A LIFE OF MY OWN.”

-Priscilla, *Priscilla* (2023)

Sofia Coppola is certainly not the first person to depict sadness and loneliness, not in text and not in film. People have done it before her and will do it after her. I set out to write this essay because I've always wondered what it is about her particular brand of sad, lonely girls that enraptures us. To assume it's the beautiful bedrooms and pretty dresses would be to play into the sexist calls of frivolity she has dealt with her entire career.

So as I keep returning to the aforementioned Virginia Woolf quote, rummaging through articles and shuffling through Sofia Coppola's films, I realise it's the privilege that

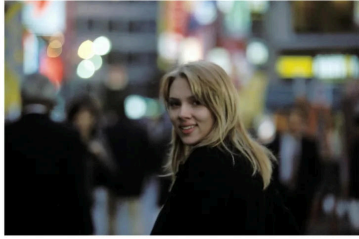
engulfs them. Not because it makes them unattainable, but because of the precise opposite. Seeing them in their rose-gold surroundings allows the story to hone in their sadness, “It is the privilege of loneliness; in privacy one may do as one chooses.” Their privilege isn’t universal, but their feelings are, and that’s the focus.

If there’s no exterior pressure — and even in *Marie Antoinette*, the exterior pressures are dulled by her indulgence —, they can grow from sadness. Her women become *because* of their loneliness, not in spite of it. And isn’t that the dream?

“What better avatar for an internet age when so many see and experience the world through the glass of a screen — and feel, perhaps, unable to act, but certainly enabled to *feel*.”

-Emily Yoshida, *The New York Times*

In a world where deciding our future seems tedious at the best and impossible at worst, the idea of being allowed to simply *be* is a breath of luxurious air. Her films give us permission to be sad, be lonely, stare out of windows, as long as you are able to feel, you have something you can call a life of your own.



Thursday 25 April 2024

Summer literary escapes

THE BOOKS I'M PLANNING TO GET TO DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS, WHETHER IT'S BY A SUNNY POOL OR ESCAPING LONDON RAIN.



Reading in sun-sparkling pools, the smell of sunblock permeating the air, and leisure time galore perhaps describe my ideal reading condition, but sadly it's not actually how most of my summer reading pans out. Realistically, summer in the city leans more towards plans every weekend, rushing from one park to the next, and late afternoon pub visits, which makes finding time to read a tad difficult.

Enter the trusty TBR. I find that if I have a planned-out list of books I'm reading during the summer months, I'm much more likely to get to them. I'm not overly forceful about it and try to keep it to books that I'm genuinely excited to pick up next. I keep my more ambitious book reading for autumn and winter, when social pressures dwindle and long candle-lit evenings are back in the cards.

The list

The Mercies by Kiran Millwood Hargrave

Fiction.

On Christmas Eve in 1617, a storm arrived at the shores of Vardø, Norway. The men were out fishing, and in an instant, they were wiped out, leaving Vardø as a town of women. *The Mercies* follows the events surrounding that storm and the subsequent witch trials that were brought to the island through the eyes of two women: Maren, a Vardø resident, and Ursa, the wife of the man leading the witch hunt.

First paragraph:

“Last night Maren dreamt a whale beached itself on the rocks outside her house.”

I've already started this one and I'm surprised by how much it's pulled me in. While it's sometimes a tad prescriptive in its feminism, I'm looking forward to seeing where it takes the witch hunt retelling.

PS: Reading this for Jess's brilliant book club if you'd like to join.

***Animal* by Lisa Taddeo**

Fiction.

Joan's former lover has killed himself, so she leaves New York City in search of answers about her past trauma in Los Angeles. Lauded as dark, disturbing, and unrelenting, this novel is meant to be an unapologetic look at the trauma of male violence on the female psyche.

First paragraph:

"I drove myself out of New York City where a man shot himself in front of me. He was a gluttonous man and when his blood came out it looked like the blood of a pig. That's a cruel thing to think, I know. He did it in a restaurant where I was having dinner with another man, another married man. Do you see how this is going? But I wasn't always that way."

When the blurb of a book with a female protagonist literally says, "I am depraved. I hope you like me," I'm already a little wary. The trend of the unlikeable female protagonist has become a great way for dull books to hide behind the idea that it's *avant-garde* (perhaps an essay on that soon?). However, I believe if done well it can be a really interesting take on violence and trauma. I've heard fantastic things about Lisa Taddeo's writing, so I'm interested to dig in.



Underland by Robert Macfarlane

Non-fiction

From the catacombs of Paris to the understorey of Epping Forest, nature writer Robert Macfarlane takes a deep dive into the Earth’s underworlds. Arguably, most of human history can be found underground - and, surprisingly, a lot of our future.

First paragraph:

“The way into the underland is through the riven trunk of an old ash tree.”

I embarrassingly started this in January and put it down for a bit in favor of fiction books, but as my mind keeps returning to many of its passages, I’m looking forward to picking it back

up. And it's probably a very good summer read - one for a morning in the park surrounded by freshly cut grass.

***The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* by Mariana Enriquez**

Fiction

Twelve short stories that reinvent and twist terror through classic elements like ghosts, witches, spiritualism, bones, living dead, and hallucinations. The stories are sinister and horrible, but their main tether is the day-to-day trivialities of life. Leila Guerriero describes it as, "Terror, in the stories of Mariana Enriquez, slides like a pant of black water over sunlit tiles. Like something impossible that, nevertheless, could happen."

I've been meaning to get to Mariana Enriquez for a long time, and while it feels like a very Autumnal book of horror, the short story aspect will be a good one to dip in and out of through the summer months.

***Serious Concerns* by Wendy Cope**

Poetry

A poetry collection reflecting on little pleasures, modern concerns and existential twenty-first century living. I always find having a poetry collection going while reading perhaps heavy thematic books is a bit of a dream in the summer, when you can carry it in a picnic bag or pop it out while you have an ice cream in the sun.

***Big Swiss* by Jen Beagin**

Fiction

Greta, a medical transcriptionist for a sex therapist, becomes slightly obsessed with one of the patients. She nicknames her Big Swiss and, when the two meet in the dog park, a not-so-honest relationship develops between the two women.

First paragraph(ish):

“Greta called her Big Swiss because she was tall and from Switzerland, and often dressed from top to toe in white, the color of surrender. Her blonde hair was as fine as a dandelion dander and looked as if it might fly off her head in a stiff breeze.”

Big Swiss sounds like a novel depicting an obsessive relationship between two women that, in premise, reminds me a bit of Sheena Patel’s *I’m A Fan* (an example of an “unlikeable female character” done well in that that isn’t her only personality trait). According to The Cut, Beagin has created an anti-trauma novel, where the characters cannot be reduced to their dark pasts and, instead, examines their actions as they are.

PS: Reading this for Lizzy Hadfield’s new book club, Buffy’s, if you want to join.

***Doppelganger* by Naomi Klein**

Non-fiction

Naomi Klein kept getting confused with someone else online: a far-right conspiracy theorist named Naomi Woolf. While it was funny, perhaps even harmless, at first, she quickly

realised it was distorting her own sense of reality. So she went on a path following her shadowy double, calling it her mirror world: conspiracy theories, incels, anti-vaxxers, and far-right propaganda influencers.

First paragraph:

“In my defence, it was never my intent to write this book. I did not have time. No one asked me to. And several people strongly cautioned against it. Not now— not with the literal and figurative fires roiling our planet. And certainly not about this.”

Naomi Klein is, of course, a staple of our age. With books like *No Logo* being read by students across the world (me). I was immediately drawn to the premise of her newest exploration, the thought of the internet as a rabbit hole that polarises, creates, and destroys worlds. Our very own heaven and hell.

***East of Eden* by John Steinbeck**

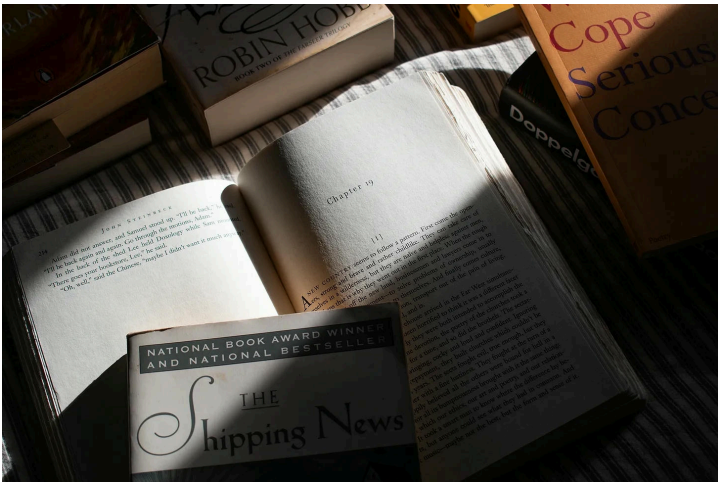
Fiction

Steinbeck called it his “first book”, his masterpiece. Adam Trask arrives in the Salinas Valley, California, to farm and raise his family. But as his story mimics the fall of Adam and Eve as his wife’s madness unsettles and destroys anything in her path, his twin boys, Cal and Aron, fall into the rivalry of Cain and Abel.

First paragraph:

“The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay.”

East of Eden is one of my favourite books of all time, and I'm looking forward to a re-read this summer. From identity to love, morality to corruption, Steinbeck's work of philosophy in fiction is in splendour in this novel - one I think should be required reading in everyone's lifetime. It is, as he says, a first book.



Royal Assassin by Robin Hobb

Fiction

The second book in Hobb's Farseer trilogy, an epic fantasy which follows the illegitimate son of the prince of the Six

Duchies. Fitz recalls and deals with the inner workings of the royal family and political factions within the kingdom while mastering two forms of magic: the Wit (a societally shameful ability to bond with animals) and the Skill (an ability to communicate and control with the mind which runs through royal blood).

While some fantasy falls into the trap of exploring worlds and not characters, Hobb masterfully entwines both an introspective study of Fitz and a fascinating world of magic. I fell head over heels for Fitz, his sensitivities, and childish wonders, in *Assassins Apprentice*, so I'm very excited to keep diving into his brain.

***The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx**

Fiction

Quoyle's circumstances at thirty-six, with his life effectively falling apart, lead him to take his two daughters to his old family home in Newfoundland. Now, in their empty house, aside from Quoyle's private demons and memories, three generations of his family find themselves embroiled in a new life.

First paragraph:

"Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyle, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns."

Another one I've been meaning to get to for a long time, I've found myself slightly intimidated by Proulx's writing, but it might just be time to take on a coastal drama.

Saturday 11 May 2024

The lost promise of the Unlikeable Female Protagonist

ON HOW THE PROMISING 'UNLIKEABLE FEMALE
PROTAGONIST' TROPED ITSELF TO BECOME THE NEW
VERSION OF A PICK-ME-GIRL.



She's anywhere between 25 to 45; her age is incredibly important yet interchangeable. She lives a mundane lifestyle that makes her painfully relatable, and she possesses a wit and intelligence with a repertoire of references and jokes she only uses for sharp retorts you wish you could give. She probably lives in the city and dresses cool in a Patti Smith sort of way, she makes all the morally grey decisions available to her.

You want to judge her, but some kind of trauma follows her, making her relatable again. Oh yeah, and really hot, always messy and unkempt, probably described as a bit dirty because she can't be bothered with showers at the moment, but she's always hot in that indiscernible kind of way.

If she sounds like the main character of this century, it's because she is. I've read more books about her than I care to count. She's the elusive Unlikeable Female Protagonist. The one you love, love to hate, and secretly, not-so-secretly, want to be. And look, there's nothing wrong with her as a character. In fact, her rise was arguably overdue, even if the Unlikeable Female Protagonist is not an invention of the 21st century.

This isn't an essay about the ability of women to be messy and unlikeable, nor about the obvious importance of our gender being represented in as wide a moral spectrum as men. It's about the trope surrounding it: the literary trend in contemporary fiction that leans towards a woman whose only real trait is that she's "unlikeable." To put it another way, she's not like other girls.

The not-like-other-girls idea has been thought-pieced to death. We understand that it comes from internalised misogyny and why our teenage selves felt the need to differentiate from the traditional ideas of girlhood. However, I would argue that the same internalised misogyny follows us under different names: the cool girl, the manic pixie dream girl, the mean girl, the unlikeable female protagonist. When being unlikeable, morally grey, and edgy is her only trait, we're just regurgitating the same tropes that have haunted us for so long. A new type of pick-me girl: the "feminist version".

It would be reductive to say that's the only reason these books are popular. And, lest we forget, they are written by

women, so I think they do speak to something within us, perhaps an itch that hadn't quite been scratched yet. The passively judgemental female character makes us comfortable with our own uncomfortable thoughts. "I want characters to do the things I am afraid to do for fear of making myself more unlikable than I may already be. I want characters to be the most honest of all things — human," Roxane Gay argues in her essay, *Not Here to Make Friends: The Importance of Unlikeable Female Protagonists*.

The feeling of wanting characters to portray the honesty of humanity is pretty universal, and many times used to defend the need for unlikeable female protagonists:

"If [women]'re not strong enough to justify their rudeness, we can't accept it. If they're not weak enough to justify why they're so irritating, we can't understand it. So they have to be somewhat binary but never fully rounded, which is not at all like real life."

-Nia Carnellio, *Warning: Unlikeable Female Protagonist Ahead*

"To empathise with someone, even an unlikeable person, we have to feel connected to their humanity. That's the role of the skilled author and storyteller; to create enough vulnerable space in a character so that we, as observers, can pour ourselves into their desires."

-Anbara Salam, *The overdue rise of the unlikeable female protagonist*

Of course, we want our characters to feel human, and reading is one of the best ways to foster empathy within ourselves. However, I don't believe that the way to do that is through pure mimesis. In fact, I'm not sure these characters are realistic as much as they are an idealistic version of grey morality, of "cool", a trauma-filled version of the people we hate but secretly want to be. Readers pour themselves into this ideal, not into their desires, because the character's desires and objectives are often muddled in their lack of moral world. And so they turn uninteresting, a bit like realistic paintings tend to do if you look at them hard enough (might as well just take a picture).

We tend to discuss this trend around the idea that women should be allowed to be unlikeable and messy, mirroring every facet of ourselves and not just the idealistic versions. If we have Patrick Bateman, why can't we have Amy Dunne? If we're forced to read the inner thoughts of Holden Caulfield, why shouldn't we get Emma? And that is a valid point, but we have failed to understand this trend as a literary device that has become an object for its own sake. It doesn't further a story, or tell us anything about humanity in the same way that Bateman (materialism), Caulfield (resentment), Emma (moral dangers of imagination) and Amy (the role of women) do.



Later in her essay, Roxane Gay rightly claims, “This matter of likability is largely a futile one. Oftentimes, a likeable character is simply designed as such to show that he or she is one who knows how to play by the rules and cares to be seen as playing by the rules. The likeable character, like the unlikable character, is generally used to make some greater narrative point.” And that is it: the fact that she’s unlikable is not a problem in and of itself, the problem is when it doesn’t make a narrative point.

So why do some of these characters work as feminist milestones in unlikeability while some don’t? Contemporary unlikeable female protagonists, particularly in literature, tend to exist in a world where moral standards aren’t set. In these books, belief systems go out the window, leaving the main character to effectively do as she likes with no consequence. There is nothing inherently wrong with characters getting away with murder; unlikeable men in literature have been doing it for centuries. But if everyone in their world has no moral compass, are they even breaking any rules? And if they aren’t, what is the point of them existing as unlikeable female protagonists at all? In his essay *living shadows: aesthetics of*

moral worldbuilding, Brandon Taylor explains this phenomenon in contemporary literature:

“There is a tendency sometimes to erect free-standing social and civilizational edifices without any real thought or care as to the chain of events or values that brought them about. [...] It seems somewhat silly to say, but how can I as a reader care about people who do not have any beliefs? Who have no inner life except that which flashes temporarily upon the surface of whatever stray object has wandered into the direct path of the character?”

A lot of these books are based almost purely on aesthetics, otherwise known as “vibes”. This perhaps explains why these types of characters work better on screen than on the page. When writing and creating for cinema, while character objectives are important, we can forgive them for their lack of clarity if they replace it with an aesthetic we enjoy (sometimes). It’s harder to get away with that in a book: an unclear, vague objective on the page can become taxing as a reader after the first hundred pages. Books that rely purely on aesthetics can’t work for a simple reason: we can’t see them.

In a novel, the inner world of the character must be interesting. Fiction thrives on specificity, and when their defining traits are as vague as ‘unlikable and traumatised’, something always ends up missing. Going back to Taylor, “we have a fiction of thin moral worldbuilding. Fiction so ambiguous as to become muddled. Fiction that refuses to speak any sort of judgment. Or to pass any sort of judgment.” And where’s the fun in that?



As a staunch feminist, sometimes these books read as a cheat into being taken seriously as women. I'm not asking authors to stop writing morally grey women, let alone asking them to only write likeable ones (*bleugh*, boring!). I'm not asking for a moral guide to their books, or even to state their judgements on their characters (in fact, please don't do that). I'm simply asking them to be good storytellers, to ask for more from their characters — to create female characters that aren't simply unlikeable, make them *interesting*.

A true morally grey character is one who follows their own moral codes despite what society's ethics are. They do what isn't expected of them within their world. They follow their own compass with the consequences to prove it. I'm asking authors to create a character that is actually morally grey, or even doing actively immoral things in a world that could punish them for it - *that* is defiance.

Thursday 11 July 2024

the media capsule: summer (2024)

A COLLECTION

I've always wanted to be a collector of something. The drive to passionately search for, catalogue, and care for items has always been strong in my obsessive personality. I suppose that's where books and films started to come into the mix. I had a need to physically own every book I read (something that has dwindled over time into allowing myself an audio or Kindle book here and there) and my family's DVD collection growing up truly was something to see.

Even if I don't tend to collect physical items, I've always collected lists. Mood lists, playlists, book lists, film lists. I keep a catalog of new and old media that I can return to, care for, and add to. I'm eternally grateful for friendships that add to it and thrilled that they might see pieces of themselves in my collections. Because to me, these are stories to bond through and see ourselves within. Collecting them reminds me of where my love for media and content (in its truest, original sense) comes from.

So I've started creating media capsules. The word capsule used in all its glory: as a time capsule, a medicinal capsule—I enjoy the idea of prescribing media in a way—capsule as a spore producer—media that can lead you to the footnotes of

other media and so on—, and finally capsule as a container of things you treasure and want to keep.

In lieu of keeping the intro short, here's my summer media capsule (2024).

BY THE SEASIDE.



(photography) Slim Aarons

Above the now decorative fireplace in my living room, as the centrepiece of the flat, *Backgammon by the Pool* hangs proud. It's a print of a Slim Aarons photo from his series in Acapulco, Mexico. It manages to both remind me of home (or an idealistic version of home in his signature decadence) and summer year-round. Very few things make me want to bask in sunshine more than a Slim Aarons.

(book) *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke

A book set in an endless house with constant ocean tides running through the rooms. Even in its uncanniness and consistent eeriness, something about the innocence of Piranesi as a character and Clarke's world-building make this a quintessential summer book for me. Granted, it could also be because I read it for the first time by the sea in Greece.



(album) *Solar Power* by Lorde

I will die on the hill of how misunderstood this album is. For Lorde to follow *Pure Heroine* and *Melodrama*, two albums ostensibly about the discomfort and consistent heartbreak of coming of age as a woman in the 2010's, with an album about learning how to be comfortable with yourself and, essentially, chill out—it makes sense. Also, I have a deep connection with blasting this album with the windows down, sunglasses on, and singing to the mellow lyrics.

(book) *In Ascension* by Martin MacInness

This doesn't necessarily make me want to be *in* the ocean (even though there's a lot of ocean in it), but it makes me want to learn all the secrets in the universe and surely that counts. It's cemented itself as one of my favourite books and still catches me by surprise how often I'll think about its prose, characters and questions it poses.

(film) *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

This film is the definition of a dream summer aesthetic. Sprawling Italian landscapes, sun-soaked beaches and street-side bars, classic villas, and old money. Sure, it all ends up in murder and deceit, but that's just part of the fun.



BY THE POOLSIDE.**(book) *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* by Joan Didion**

This book made me think a lot about how to approach life with curiosity. Discovering Didion's writing, oscillating between her subjectivities and understanding, was one of the milestones in my life as a writer. And every time I'm laying back in the sunshine reading most anything non-fiction, I wish I could pick up this California-centric collection and devour it for the first time again.

(film) *Palm Springs*

The first time I watched this was during a heatwave in lockdown, with the window in my old studio flat open wide, wearing a swimsuit (it was genuinely very hot), and sipping

on a cold beer—so obviously I was going to give it a spot. But it's also a really good film.

There's a lot of chat about reviving the rom-com and which films are doing a good job, yet *Palm Springs* is uncomfortably left out of that conversation. Perhaps it's that it feels more like a "genre" film than other rom-coms, but it deserves a top spot in fun, well-rounded, aspirational-aesthetic films.



(album) *Charm* by Clairo

This album makes me want to be under 30-degree sunshine, dripping pool water on the cool floor of a villa while making iced drinks. Something about its folky-jazz melodies and Clairo's vocals is just *chef's kiss*.

(album) *Born to Die* by Lana del Rey

My ultimate poolside album. The hot city, hot mess Americana vibes that cemented Lana del Rey in my life forever.

(book) *In the Distance* by Hernán Díaz

Díaz's description of the scorching hot deserts in southern US is as exquisite as it is suffocating. To me, this book does a beautiful job at giving landscape equal importance to character because they are intrinsically linked. And while a lot of it reminded me of *Frankenstein*, which I consider to be a winter read, it lands itself squarely in my summer list due to its Western-like atmospheres.

(book) *Happy Place* by Emily Henry

Emily Henry's least comedy-driven rom-com, *Happy Place* is still a very summery read with consistent pool scenes and a cast of characters that genuinely make you want to be on holiday with them. I've always thought of Henry as someone writing character through the vehicle of romance (not the other way around), and *Happy Place* is perhaps her most skilful work yet.

AT HOME.



(poetry) *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* by Charles Bukowski

Perhaps it's his slight odes to LA, or that I always find myself returning to him in the warmer months, but something about Bukowski feels like summer. This collection of poetry has been with me for a while, and for some of the most significant years of my adult life, I've returned to it often.

(book) *Persuasion* by Jane Austen

If you can cozy up with a book in the summer, make it this one. Austen's books often feel like warm hugs when you don't think you need one, and *Persuasion*—often a meandering book (not that I minded hanging out with Anne Elliot's thoughts)

—made me feel both gut-punched and comforted by the end. Possibly my favorite experience reading an Austen book.

(tv show) *The Bear*

The last season of *The Bear* has given me the same feeling as reading poetry does. It's a slow, experimental, feeling-driven season that has made me laugh and cry in equal measure.



The Olympics

It's 2024, it's Olympic year, and constantly watching artistic sports in my house while I work has been a staple of the last week. The craft of storytelling that happens at the games is genuinely admirable and I fall in love with the athletes every single time.

ON A PARK BENCH.



(film) *Before Sunrise*

Train rides and long-winded conversations that last the night, there's hardly a film that makes me yearn for summer more than this one.\



(album) *Brat* by Charli xcx

This can't be a 2024 summer capsule without Charli making an appearance. I'll be shocked if listening to *Sympathy is a Knife* doesn't always bring me back to the park walks and long evenings of this year. Plus, I genuinely love this album. Charli is a once-in-a-generation talent and she has managed to make a genre entirely her own with cutting lyrics, unique production, and just plain fun.

(album) *Folklore* by Taylor Swift

You won't catch me without *folklore* blasting through my headphones at any time in the year, but there's a particular space for this album in late summer. It got me through a lot of change in the summer of 2020 and will always continue to astound me as Swift's best work in her career. No matter how many times I listen to it, sometimes a lyric or piece of Aaron Dessner production will still catch me by surprise and reignite my adoration for this piece of art.

(book) *Underland* by Robert Mcfarlane

A lot of people will think I'm obsessed with this book. I just don't think I've ever taken so long to get through a non-fiction purely because I'm savouring it. With its perfect landscape descriptions and unwavering commitment to make the reader fall in love with Earth, I think its place as a wondrous, surprising summer read will stick with me.

(film) *Lady Bird*

One of those films I find myself thinking and rethinking about as the years go by. And there's something about the Sacramento aesthetic, the production design, and fashion that make it a perfect summer watch in my mind.



(film) *Challengers*

It's a bit late in the summer to have Wimbledon in this capsule, but few things signal the season like tennis. *Challengers* is aesthetically grittier than what you'd expect to see on the green lawns of Wimbledon, but mix tennis fashion with a love triangle and summer will ensue.

SIPPING ON AN ICED LATTE.



(album) *ISpeak Because I Can* by Laura Marling

One of my oldest picks in this capsule, this particular Laura Marling album has held a coveted spot in my heart for a long

time. I remember crying the first time I listened to *Rambling Man*, and I don't think I understood why until years later —when Marling's clear struggle to come to terms with the responsibilities of womanhood hit me in a very similar way. I love pretty much everything Laura Marling has to say, and she continues to fascinate me to this day.

(film) *Clueless*

Honestly, few films scream iced latte as much as *Clueless* does. Deep down, the girliest part of me has always wanted to be Cher (and it bears mentioning that while Austen's Emma is meant to be a little dislikable, I feel the same way about her). This film is just peak fun 90s nostalgia and I'll always reserve a special place in my heart for its bright outfits.

(poetry) *Serious Concerns* by Wendy Cope

I was surprised by this collection this year. It's rare that a poetry book makes me laugh out loud, but that's exactly what Wendy Cope does. Her poetry is just the right side of not taking itself too seriously.

(book) *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson

Equal parts heartbreaking and hopeful, poetic and prosaic. A study of the colour blue as pertained through Nelson's life. Pools and skies and sadness all in one.

Sunday 4 August 2024

the media capsule: autumn (2024)

A COLLECTION.

My favourite media capsule to create is here: hello autumn!

I've always wanted to be a collector of something. The drive to passionately search for, catalog, and care for items has always been strong in my obsessive personality. I suppose that's where books and films started to come into the mix. I had a need to physically own every book I read (something that has dwindled over time into allowing myself an audio or Kindle book here and there) and my family's DVD collection growing up truly was something to see.

note: this post gets cut off in the email so come over to the website.

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I enjoy the idea of prescribing media in a way—capsule as a spore producer—media that can lead you to the footnotes of other media and so on—, and finally capsule as a container of things you treasure and want to keep.

Final note to say some things in these lists I've consumed and adored, others I'm yet to dive into (but rest assured, if it's in my 2024 collection, it will be a part of my autumn this year).



under a red-leaf tree.

Pop out this video More screens are more fun. Play this video while you do other things.

(film) *Dead Poets Society*, dir. Peter Weir

No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.

I know my following recommendation is the bible of Dark Academia, but I do believe when it comes to film and aesthetic inspiration, *Dead Poets Society* is what many current Dark Academia literature *wants* to be. Perhaps because it wasn't trying to be. I have always been pulled by the ever-so-slight melodrama covered by genuine adoration for poetry, friendship and inspiration in this film. Perhaps the first coming-of-age film I ever loved.

(book) *The Secret History* by Donna Tart

Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

Now to the bible of Dark Academia. A book so concerned with criticising the obsession with aesthetics that it became an aesthetic itself. The structures and questions within this book

have stayed with me since I first read it, and it'd be remiss not to call it an autumnal staple.

(film) *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, dir. Wes Anderson

*I understand what you're saying, and your comments
are valuable, but I'm gonna ignore your advice.*

Wes Anderson doing autumn in the prettiest way possible with the weirdest characters possible. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is warm, witty and very orange.

(album) *Lost In The Cedar Wood* by Johnny Flynn & Robert Macfarlane

*And the time of dreaming has come
In the dance of night, calling for the light
Of a million moons, a thousand tree rings*

Johnny Flynn & Robert Macfarlane really are a pair made in heaven for writing. Songs that sound like poetry and nature and a breath of forest air all in one.

(painting) *Autumn Leaves* by John Everett Millais



(album) *Chemtrails Over the Country Club* by Lana del Rey

*Seasons may change
But we won't change
Isn't it strange how different we are from all of our
friends?
Seasons will turn
The world, it will turn
The only thing we'll turn is the pages of all of the
poems we burned*

She will always be queen of the summer albums to me, but something about this particular brand of slow, cosy songs makes it feel like autumn to me.

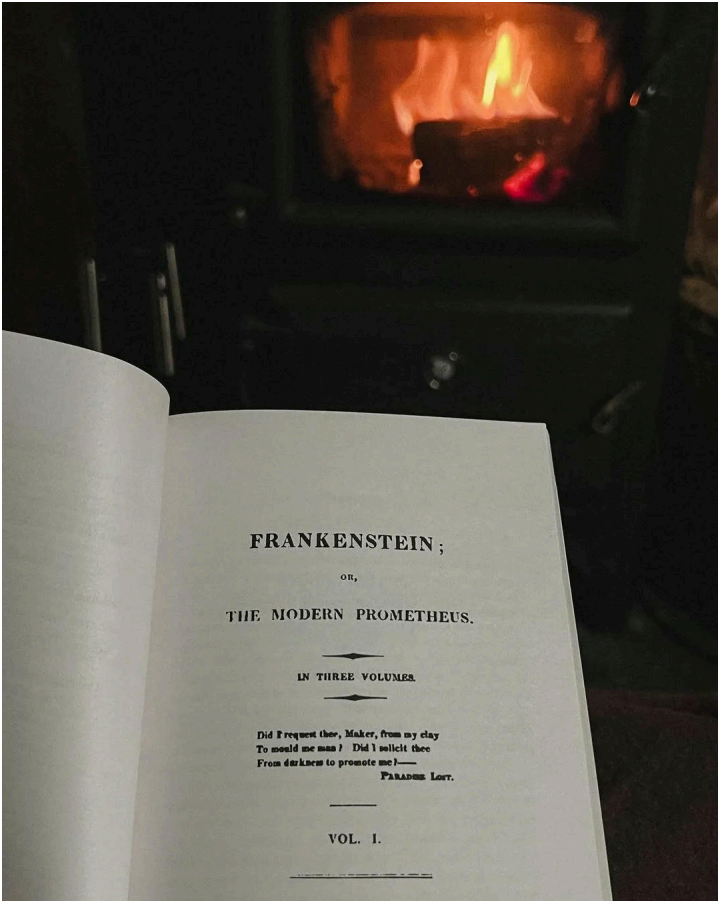
in a log cabin.



(book) *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley

There is love in me the likes of which you've never seen. There is rage in me the likes of which should never escape. If I am not satisfied in the one, I will indulge the other.

There's very little to say about Frankenstein that you won't know, but it's a perfect little classic to read during this season, not for the reason a lot of people think (that it's meant to be horror), but it's Gothic and Romance stylistic choices carry the quintessential autumn atmosphere and it's genuinely good at pondering humanity, belonging, guilt and innocence.



(book) *Hurricane Season / Temporada de huracanes*
by Fernanda Melchor

*That's what the women of the town say: that there's
no treasure in there, that there's no gold or silver or*

diamonds or anything other than a pulsing pain that refuses to dissolve.

A book that starts with the classic “the witch is dead” before transforming into what is, to me, a quintessential book about violence [against women], folklore and the lives of those on the outskirts of society. It’s a hard book to read, so do look at content warnings before delving in.

(book) *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno Garcia

She was the snake biting its tail. She was a dreamer, eternally bound to a nightmare, eyes closed even when her eyes had turned to dust.

I haven’t read this yet, but it’s on my list for this year after hearing it be recommended a lot over the last few years. Apparently Silvia Moreno-Garcia excels at referencing the Gothic classics while bringing in a new twist – I’m looking forward to reading it.

(painting) *Snow Storm, Hannibal And His Army Crossing the Alps* by J. M. W. Turner



(book) *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer

The effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you.

Speculative fiction, particularly the subset of the Weird, which VanderMeer helped carry onto the mainstream with *The Southern Reach* trilogy, feels quite autumnal to me. Perhaps it's the imagery that, when unknown, becomes thrilling and scary. Or maybe it's just something about VanderMeer's writing in this book where the eeriness takes on the tinge of anemoia (nostalgia for something you haven't lived) that tends to dictate my autumns.

(album) *Red / evermore* by Taylor Swift

*And do you miss the rogue
 Who coaxed you into paradise and left you there?
 Will you forgive my soul
 When you're too wise to trust me and too old to care?*

*Oh, your sweet disposition and my wide-eyed gaze
 We're singing in the car, getting lost upstate
 Autumn leaves falling down like pieces into place
 And I can picture it after all these days*

At risk of putting too much Taylor Swift in this list, I've combined her two most autumnal albums into one (*folklore* is a late summer album, I'm sorry).

(book) *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo

Every breath is like a sip of life one gets rid of.

Pedro Páramo is a weird little book in the best way. Ghost town? Sure. Weird vibes? Aplenty. Being left with a sense that you're not quite sure what Rulfo was trying to say but you're definitely sure he's right? Yup.



(film) *The Witch*, dir. Robert Eggers

We will conquer this wilderness. It will not consume us.

For its score alone, *The Witch* is one of the most unsettling experiences I've had watching a film. True A24 horror which, not relying on visual gore, is purely a build up in your own psyche.

a candle and a cosy knit jumper.



(film) *When Harry Met Sally*, dir. Rob Reiner

When you realise you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.

I did my anual rewatch of this yesterday and it just makes me warm inside. I adore this film. Whenever we talk about the golden age of the rom-com being back, I know it's not true because there's still not a steady stream of *this* coming out.

(film) *Atonement*, dir. Joe Wright

I can become again the man who once crossed the surrey park at dusk, in my best suit, swaggering on the promise of life. The man who, with the clarity of passion, made love to you in the library. The story can resume. I will return. Find you, love you, marry you and live without shame.

I realise a lot of the films I'm recommending also have some of my favourite fashion moments in cinema — but I think that just comes with it being an autumn list. From the iconic green dress to the heartache to the incredible shot of the Dunkirk scene, this film will always hold a special place for me.

(book) *Persuasion* by Jane Austen

...when pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure.

Arguably most of Jane Austen feels autumnal to its core, but *Persuasion* is such a masterpiece at showing what she's capable of that it has to take top spot for this capsule. This book's emotional turmoil hits you like a rock only on the final few pages and it left me, almost literally, gasping for air.

(book) *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

You said I killed you-haunt me, then! Be with me always-take any form-drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!

Possibly my biggest confession for this capsule is that I haven't actually read this book. I know it's in everyone's tongue because of the admittedly questionable casting choices for Emerald Fennell's upcoming adaptation, so I think my time has come to finally get to it.

**(tv show) Gilmore Girls**

I... am an autumn.

I don't think I need to say more about this. Gilmore Girls managed to magically distill autumn into a television show.

(tv show) The Thanksgiving episodes of Gossip Girl

Gobble gobble, Upper East Siders. That's right. It's Thanksgiving again.

Arguably the best episodes of Gossip Girl's run are contained within their Thanksgiving episodes. Namely Season 3, Episode 11: "The Treasure of Serena Madre". But here's a list of all of them if it comes in handy:

Season 1, Episode 9: "Blair Waldorf Must Pie!"

Season 2, Episode 11: "The Magnificent Archibalds"

Season 3, Episode 11: "The Treasure of Serena Madre"

Season 4, Episode 10: "Gaslit"

Season 6, Episode 8: "It's Really Complicated"

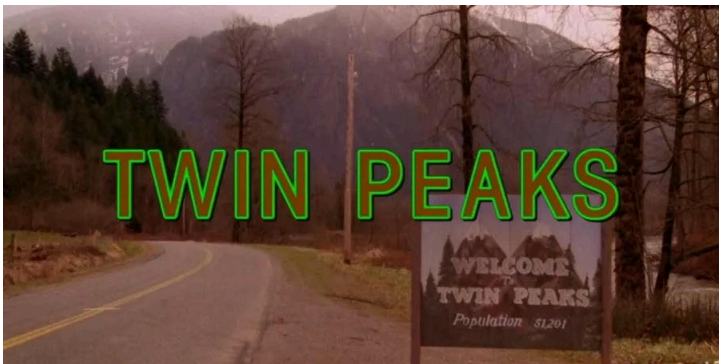
(painting) *Autumn Effect at Argenteuil* by Claude Monet



(tv show) Twin Peaks

Harry, I have no idea where this will lead us, but I have a definite feeling it will be a place both wonderful and strange.

If you were born post Twin Peaks, the first time you watch it you realise just how many of the iconic TV shows of our time were inspired by it. Nothing in 1990 looked or felt like this in television and there's a reason it's become a cult classic. A little bit wacky but never too over-dramatic, a tad eerie but not overly sci-fi.



(book) *The Dead Romantics* by Ashley Poston

Because ghost stories were just love stories about here and then and now and when, about pockets of happiness and moments that resonated in places long after their era.

Her editor is dead. Except he's at her front door. And he's, decidedly, a ghost. I love the niche Ashley Poston has carved for herself in romantic literature, and it helps that she's a good character writer as well. Her books always feel like you've been treated to a sprinkle of magic. Just a note to say my favourite Ashley Poston is probably *The Seven Year Slip*, but *The Dead Romantics* has ghosts and it's an autumn capsule so...

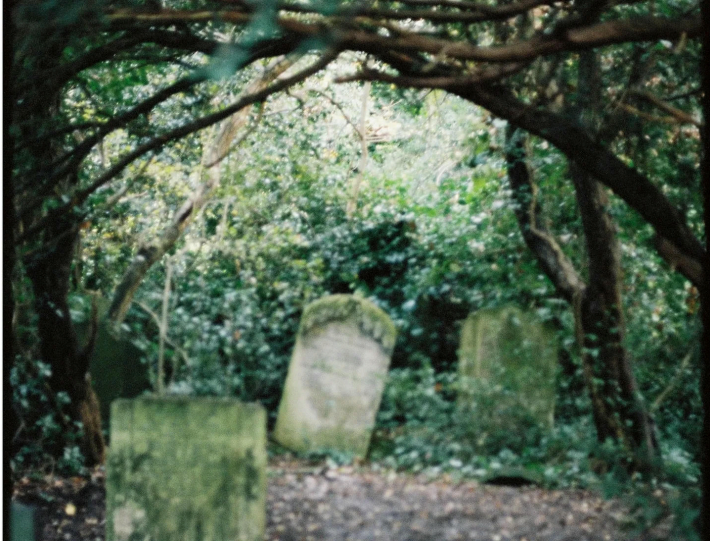


(film) *Pride and Prejudice*, dir. Joe Wright

*You have bewitched me, body and soul, and I love—
I love—I love you. I never wish to be parted from you
from this day on.*

There's a lot of romance on this section but it is the cosy autumn one so it'll have to do. To end, the ultimate autumn romantic film. I know the BBC adaptation means a lot to some people, and as much as I adore it, I have to give Joe Wright yet another hit on this capsule because of his atmospheric achievements.

walking around a cemetery.



(tv show) The Haunting of Hill House

*I loved you completely. And you loved me the same.
That's all. The rest is confetti.*

One of my favourite TV shows of all time. Every rewatch I fall in love with it all over again. The trick to good horror is to tether it to character, and this show has stunning character work. Mike Flanagan ties their traumas, fears and experiences with the horror elements seamlessly. Nell Crain is, genuinely, one of my favourite characters of all time.



(book) The Penguin Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream

Nobody does it like the master of goth. Edgar Allan Poe is perfect to dip in and out off through autumn.

(book) *Poor Things* by Alisdair Gray

Dear God I am tired. It is late. Writing like Shakespeare is hard work for a woman with a cracked head who cannot spell properly.

While Gray takes the ideas in *Frankenstein* and makes them his own in his unique strange style, I couldn't help but feel that he was also incorporating messages that Shelley would've wanted to and couldn't at the time. Gray's feminism is of its time, but it's appreciated.

(film) *Scream*

Sidney, how does it feel to be almost brutally butchered? People want to know. They have a right to know! How does it feel?

It's not October if I haven't watched at least one *Scream* film. It treads the line between slasher/scary and comedy so well, other films have continued to attempt it without nearly as much success.



(album) *Preacher's Daughter* by Ethel Cain

*Sun bleached flies sitting in the windowsill
Waiting for the day they escape
They talk all about that money and how their babies
are always changing while they're breathing in the
poison of the paint*

This quote from Tom Williams's review of the album sums it up best, "a concept album centred around the character Ethel Cain, who runs away from home only to meet a gruesome end

at the hands of a cannibalistic psychopath.” Yeah. This album is a ride.

(film) Fear Street Trilogy, dir. Leigh Janiak

*I will shadow you for eternity, I will never let you go,
and for everything you take and everyone you harm
you will feel the grip of my hand.*

If you like slashers, the world built in the Fear Street Trilogy is one of my favourites since *Scream*. Except this one has a bit less comedy and a lot more supernatural witch avenging, do with that what you will.

(book) *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed / Los peligros de fumar en la cama* by Mariana Enríquez

*He didn't even protest when I told him I was bored.
That I wanted to see it. Rest my hand on his heart
stripped of ribs, of cages, have it in my hand beating
until it stopped, feel the desperate valves open and
shut in the fresh air. He only said that he was tired too.
And that we were going to need a saw.*

A little book of visceral stories that I had to close more than once in order to breathe for a second. Written from a thoroughly Latin American point of view, Enríquez delves into loss, disappearances, poverty and death through the stories of spirits, ghosts and desperately human horrors.

while carving a pumpkin.

(book) *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson

To learn what we fear is to learn who we are. Horror defies our boundaries and illuminates our souls.

The book and the show are very different, so I thought they belonged in different sections. Neither is particularly traditional horror, but the world building in Jackson's book is much more atmospheric and less character driven (even if the characters' psyche is perhaps just as important). The stories, starting from the relationships of the characters, who they are and how we meet them, are completely different. So even if you've watched the show, this is still worth a read.

(film) *Humanist Vampire Seeking Consenting Suicidal Person*, dir. Ariane Louis-Seize

I think people are just afraid of suffering. Or of being alone.

I watched this for review and I'm not entirely sure if it's available yet, but do make a note of it. Like the title suggests, it's a film about a young vampire that is too empathetic to kill to survive, so she seeks a suicidal kid. But, thwarting her plans, they become friends. It's a lovely, fun film. Think *Amélié* if she was a vampire.

(film) *Bones and All*, dir. Luca Guadagnino

I don't trust you. It doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong about that, it matters that I feel it.

One day we'll look back at this film and realise how commercially underrated it was. Cannibals, a road trip, some insane people and a love story.



(album) *Here Come the Early Nights* by Spector

*You know I don't mind dying alone
In another dimension
But here and now
You could cut through a knife with the tension
And if you're not praying yet
Then you haven't been paying attention*

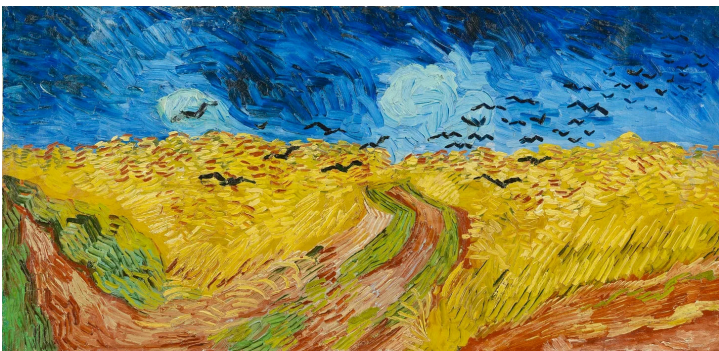
The title says enough about the autumnal vibes of this Spector album, one of my favourites they've put out. A mix of their upbeat sound with nostalgic, slightly bleak lyrics that feel like long nights.

(film) *Coco*, dir. Adrián Molina, Lee Unkrich

*Darkness - and from the darkness... a giant papaya!
Dancers emerge from the papaya, and the dancers...
are all me! And they go to drink from the milk of their
mother, who is a cactus! But, who is also me! And her
milk is not milk, but tears!*

I'm still surprised meeting people that haven't watched *Coco* yet, but it's a staple in my house in November while setting up my Día de Muertos altar.

(painting) *Wheatfield with Crows* by Vincent Van Gogh



(film) *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, dir. Halina Reijn

Someone always ends up crying.

Even if you're someone who would never watch a scary film, I promise you can watch *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. With a cast and a script that gears towards comedy, it's just as strange and delightful to watch as you would imagine.

while casting spells.



(film) *Practical Magic*, dir. Griffin Dunne

Since when is being a slut a crime in this family?

Stylish witches played by Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock making margaritas and accidentally killing men. That's it. Enjoy.

(film) *Hocus Pocus*, dir. Kenny Ortega

Oh, look, another glorious morning. It makes me sick!

There's a particular spell of silliness in *Hocus Pocus* that can't be recreated, even by themselves (see: *Hocus Pocus 2*), so this is one that will always make it into my autumn rotation.

(album) *Bewitched: Goddess Edition* by Laufey

*You bewitch me
Every damn second you're with me
I try to think straight but I'm falling so badly
I'm coming apart*

Laufey is a newfound love of mine. From her aesthetics to her music, she's almost otherworldly (but still painfully relatable). Her album combines the sounds of the ghosts of jazz's past with pop lyrics that lean into the trials of young women in a world of social media and anxiety epidemics.

(book) *The Manningtree Witches* by A.K. Blakemore

*I know cowards, and I know men. And there's many
say once you know the former you know the latter just
as well.*

A hauntingly written account of the Essex witch trials that doesn't romanticise and rather perturbs. To be honest, it's what I wish a lot of witch trials retellings did – in all the classic literature about the trials, be it Salem, Essex or otherwise, there is an underlying theme of continuing to blame women

for their misfortunes. An “it was women accusing each other” beneath the surface. Blakemore manages to avoid those pitfalls and tell a beautiful story.

(book) *Bunny* by Mona Awad

But I wasn't listening. I wasn't stopping. Because we were already running away again, me and my imagination.

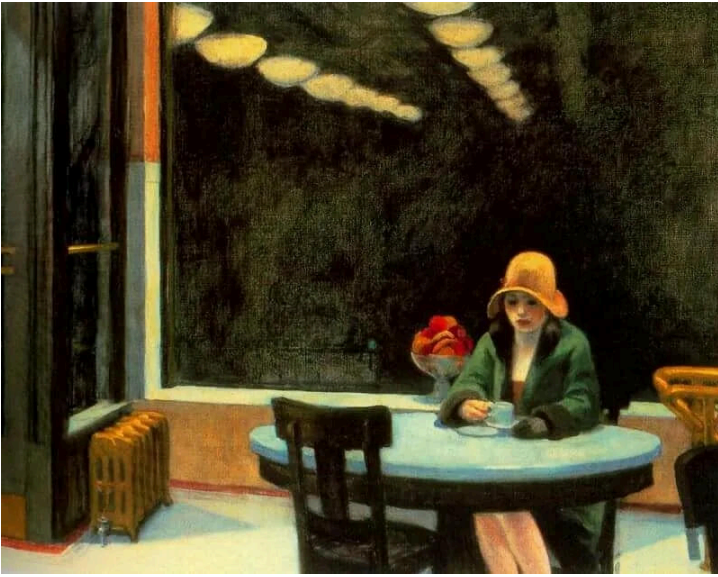
An unreliable narrator, toxic female friendship and a really weird plot. Awad pulls from a few genres for this one, from the unofficial (in my mind) dark academia to the weird to body horror. A twist on the aforementioned on this substack Unlikeable Female Protagonist used to tell us something that's perhaps a little bit more interesting.

(album) *The Good Witch* by Maisie Peters

*I hang all my art, and I dance with the coven
As the rain falls hard on the street, and I
I'm doing better, I made it to September
I can finally breathe*

This album is a consistent soundtrack to my autumn. I love Maisie Peters's songwriting being purely based on storytelling and this album as a body of work is a stunning showmanship of what pop should always feel like.

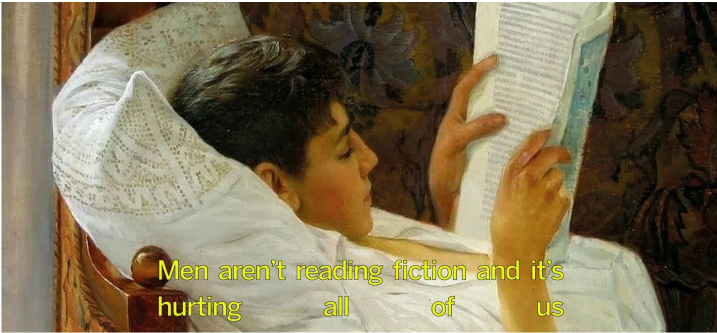
(painting) *Automat* by Edward Hopper



Tuesday 24 September 2024

Men aren't reading fiction and it's hurting all of us

COULD NOVELS BUILD THE EMPATHY WE NEED TO FIX THIS SPIRAL OF SELFISHNESS?



It's safe to say men are not doing alright. With my feminism tracing back to my early teenage years, I understand much of what ails us as women. But could I truly understand it if I wasn't looking into the main cause of it — men? They seem to be in a perpetual state of anti-empathy and selfishness that is fed by internet incel holes. Like Alice, their realities morph through the looking glass of their screens. The loneliness epidemic, the fact that most of them are falling behind in school, not knowing how to act in a world that is (rightly) telling them

to change what they were taught about what it means to be a man.

In the current political climate, it's reactionary and understandable to dismiss these problems; men, and surprisingly young men, seem to consistently vote for the options that hurt women the most and fall into harmful far-right rhetorics. Why should we care about their issues? Because their problems directly impact the state of the world, and it's counterproductive to ignore it. Coincidentally, research has also found that one of the main ways to learn empathy, clarify who we are, what we owe to others and comprehend complex social issues and situations is reading — specifically reading fiction. Statistics show, unsurprisingly, that men don't read fiction, and it is clearly hurting the rest of us.

So welcome to my essay: the case for the importance of men reading fiction and how it could change their downward spiral of hatred.



There are a lot of reports about the reading gender gap. In summary, by most metrics, men read considerably less than women, even when statistically illiteracy affects women more than men. And this starts early on - a study with 15-year-olds found that 40% of girls spend at least 30 minutes a day reading long form content, only 25% of boys did the same. Men also read even less when it comes to female authors – who are at the moment dominating the publishing industry (either because more women read, therefore buy more books written by women or because more women grow up wanting to be authors since they read more, nobody is quite sure). Nilsen Book Research found that “of the 10 bestselling male authors, readership was roughly evenly divided by gender, with 55% male readers and 45% female readers. In contrast, only 19% of the 10 bestselling female authors’ readers were male, compared to 81% female.”

So why don't men read fiction? Well, and try not to gasp, one of the main reasons is misogyny. If we look at the numbers, more women being published in fiction means men are less likely to pick up a novel. But mostly, it seems to be because young men feel the most pressure to conform to 'masculine' behaviours, according to Pew research, and reading fiction has a continued reputation, lagging from the nineteenth century, that it is a frivolous and feminine activity. Of course, at the time this reputation started, women were also not allowed to be as educated as men were, so anything they chose to do would often be seen as 'lesser than' for men's minds. And we've continued on that trend, with things dominated by a female market consistently being put down as unintelligent consumerism (same old, whether it's *Twilight* or Taylor Swift, you don't see the same logic applied to *James*

Bond or Drake). It all stems from the damaging belief that men are rational and deliberate while women are emotional and hysterical.



Why are we still dealing with the fall out of these stereotypes two centuries later? Perhaps due to generational cycles. Reading habits are formed in childhood and boys are likely to imitate the actions of their fathers, who are less likely to read. Research by Deloitte has also shown fathers of sons are less likely to read to them than fathers of girls. When I was growing up, my dad would sit me and my siblings down in our wide living room sofa with a notebook and a pen and read books out loud to us, encouraging us to make notes. In hindsight, this is probably when my personal love for reading began.

With the pressure to adhere to ‘masculine’ ideals, men are also increasingly under pressure to earn more in an economy with dwindling incomes. It’s hard for most gen-z or millennials to imagine living in a one-income household, and the stereotype of men being the main provider is still prevalent – if not outwardly, it’ll take many more generations to disinherit ideals stemmed from traditional roles (if we even manage that, see: tradwives). Men tend to feel a lot more guilt and shame when financially struggling, not only are they

failing to provide, they're failing to *be*. And reading fiction? Not part of the idea of a hustling male.

Every business guru telling men to get out there and create companies that will “make them millions” is selling either their own nonfiction book or telling them to read other nonfiction regurgitating the same ideas about business. There is a place for nonfiction business books (if you ask me, quite a small space made up of their first two chapters, arguably the only useful chapters in 99% of business nonfiction) — but that tends to be the only genre men read. As Jason Diamond pointed out for GQ earlier this year, “the idea that’s put out is that there is nothing a guy who wants to be a *real man* can get out of picking up a novel.”

There is a wide space in readership for nonfiction — educationally and historically —, but it teaches us different skills to fiction — interpersonally and internally—. Novels allow us to mentally step into the shoes of somebody else, to understand their character through experience, and in order to comprehend the story we must feel something towards the characters within it. Reading a novel like *Enter Ghost* by Isabella Hammad will seamlessly garner more empathy for the lived reality in the Gaza Strip than a history book with facts and figures (even if both are important). I may have never lived in 1950s Paris as a young bisexual man, but reading James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* helped me understand the motivations, aspirations and daily struggles of someone who might’ve been in that situation, exercising general empathy for people out of my immediate reach. Fictional narratives allow us to understand the complexity of human interactions, looking at them as if we were within them, yet not being marred by our own inherent selfishness.

“Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it.”

-Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley, *The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience*

In psychology, theory of mind is one's ability to ascribe their own mental thoughts as different to others, understanding others' beliefs, feelings, intentions and perspectives. Theory of mind is essential to navigate the world as a sane neurotic, because we can't read minds, we assume what others want, think, believe and intend. Possessing a developed theory of mind allows us to predict what others might do as well as what we might do. Theoretically, this not only develops empathy, but helps us understand our own motivations as well as new information and what may be false or deceptive beliefs (because we learn how to read and communicate with people). That is, essentially, what fiction allows us to do:

"The historian [understood as the writer of nonfiction] speaks of what *has* happened, the poet [understood as the writer of fiction] of the kind of thing that *can* happen."

-Aristotle, *Poetics*

While nonfiction is seen as more essential to understand history and general knowledge, fiction is actually better for understanding how we move in the world among others. And, perhaps more importantly, it reduces bias against those who are different to ourselves. Multiple levels of research have

shown that one of the main functions of fiction is empathy building, which in turn reduces stereotypes and prejudices. Reading comprehension in fiction literally requires the reader to empathise with the characters, but it also allows them to move through that empathy at their own pace. Novels are effectively a safe space for people to explore and experiment with understanding towards other groups — the reader can step back and go back to their real world, allowing their mind to process or disconnect without consequence.

Having established all of this, it was unsurprising to find that a various studies examining new media literacy have found that men consume in a less critical way than women, which is also consistent with the fact that men are less likely to finish school and go on to university in a widening gap in education. Perhaps the most prominent real life example right now comes from the US elections, polling statistics found that the men voting for Donald Trump were more likely to not have been to university (61% of not college educated men voted for Trump). With less media literacy, you are more likely to consume online content with no critical thinking, making it easier to fall through the looking glass and into far right rhetorics fed by both trolls (see: the Amber Heard v Johnny Depp trial) and the likes of figures like Andrew Tate or Russell Brand. It's not particularly surprising to me that men who statistically don't pick up novels written by and about women would fail to see the perspective of women in the real world, feeding toxic ideals of masculine vs. feminine and undermining violence against women.

Sunday 10 November 2024

the sunday morning coffee table

LAST WEEK OF NOVEMBER (2024)



A while ago, I listened to a sunday scaries podcast episode where they described their ideal sunday coffee table – a place where they have everything they need to lie on the sofa and hibernate for a whole day, and every week since I’ve thought about mine.

In this weekly series, I talk about the bits and bobs that have been occupying my mind. Think of it as a quick review for you to handpick what ends up on *your* sunday coffee table.

I'VE BEEN WATCHING...



Jean-Claude Drouot and Marie-France Boyer in Le Bonheur

FILMS

The Shop Around the Corner (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940)

Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart are clearly the blueprint main characters for romantic comedies in decades to come. They play two employees in a Budapest shop who don't bother hiding their animosity towards each other, what they don't know is that they've been falling in love through anonymous letters. Very *You've Got Mail*, it's a lovely, heartwarming watch for a winter day.



Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart in The Shop Around the Corner

***Le Bonheur* (Agnès Varda, 1965)**

This film is as horrific as it is beautiful. Following a happy family, happy in a you-can't-believe-how-perfect-their-life-is way, and it is perfect. Sundays in the countryside having picnics, good jobs and both parents, François and Therese, are endlessly in love. But when François decides to begin an affair with his local post-office clerk Émilie, he seems to think it's morally fine because *he's* having a *great* time. Basically, I would gladly hang every frame of it on my wall - each shot is woven with colour and flowers and beauty - but that surface hides the horrors of selfishness (particularly male selfishness). This feels like an obvious thing to say, but Agnès Varda was a genius.

TV

***Rivals* (2024)**

Escapist television about escapist television. *Rivals* is just as trashy as you sometimes need your television to be, with a good level of baseline attributes to make it a worthy watch (good actors, well-done cinematography and clearly thought through set and costume design). There's a lot of sex, a lot of screaming, a lot of modernised 80s attitudes and just enough character development to pull it through.

I'VE BEEN READING...

The original Southern Reach trilogy

BOOKS

***Authority* by Jeff VanderMeer**

The second instalment in VanderMeer's Southern Reach series and quite a different one to the first. I do believe VanderMeer builds on the world of Area X not only intentionally, but effectively. Where the first book, *Annihilation*, lands us in as many unanswered questions as the main character has, with misinformation and unreliability at its core, *Authority* dives into how even knowing *some* answers is still meaningless in a bureaucratic system that refuses to see the catastrophe in front of it (sound familiar?). VanderMeer's writing, story and world-building is masterful. I'm hoping to get to the fourth - and newest - instalment in this series sooner rather than later!

ARTICLES

***Marielle Heller's "Nightbitch" Explores the Feral Side of Motherhood* by Emily Nussbaum in The New Yorker**

While I left my *Nightbitch* screening feeling unfortunately underwhelmed by it, this profile by Nussbaum on the writer-director made me appreciate the film in a different way. The film is a tad prescriptive and shies away from its message in moments where it shouldn't, unlike this piece. I may not creatively agree with some of the choices Heller made, but after reading I can understand them. There's a lot that's heart-warming to read, and a few paragraphs that sat quite uncom-

fortably, but that's also perhaps been her life and trajectory as a director. *Nightbitch* is, in many ways, a direct view from Heller's life — and I appreciate reading about how visceral that feels to her as an artist, even if it does sometimes fall flat on the big screen.



Marielle Heller and her children

I'VE BEEN LISTENING TO...

PODCASTS

Inside the scandal that brought down the Archbishop of Canterbury in *The Story* by *The Times*

This is a good run-down of the recent resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, recalling and going into the investigation of serial abuser John Smyth, and the knowledge the Archbishop would and wouldn't have had.

***The Trump Takeover* in the London Review of Books Podcast**

Post-US election information fatigue was a big one this time. And sometimes it's useful to have even a little bit of hindsight before analysing political tide turns. This LRB episode doesn't feel as reactionary as a lot of other media did when the election had just happened and, therefore, delves into the reasons and possible futures in a more nuanced way.

***Master: The Allegations against Neil Gaiman* by Tortoise Media**

Earlier this year, five women accused Neil Gaiman of abuse. While at the time I felt almost numb to it – how many more famous men have abused their power? I of course felt sympathy and anger for the victims but I did realise, however, that I had avoided reading more about it. Neil Gaiman was pivotal in my reading when I was a kid, his writing showed me a lot of what I like in my books and art today. He meant a lot to me growing up. So I ignored it, and him. But it's time to face the Monster, as Claire Dederer would say, and really listen to the women. Tortoise Media has produced some of my favourite investigative podcasts, and it's no surprise they managed to pull this investigation through. It's obviously a hard listen, but incredibly important.

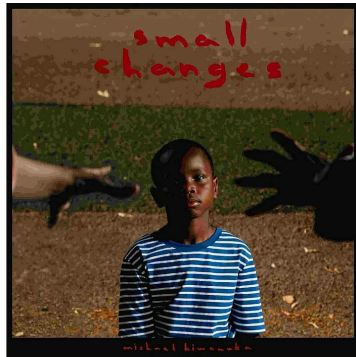
ALBUMS

The Great Impersonator by Halsey

Pitchfork may have called this a “muddled” concept but maybe it’s just for those of us who *get* it, you know? I genuinely think this is one of the best albums of the year. It’s definitely ambitious, it’s devastating and it’s impressive. I would normally say “do more of this” but it’s utter heartbroken anxiety makes me hold off on that – I hope it’s a one-off, but it’s one hell of a one-off.

Small Changes by Michael Kiwanuka

An album to listen to in front of a fire while having a drink. Nostalgic, loving and very Kiwanuka, I was instantly pulled into comfort with this one. It’s been five years since his first album, and this is definitely a return.



I'VE BEEN EYING...

Tea towels

Ever since getting an espresso machine, I've realised how important keeping up the tea towel game is (we do now own a bunch of tea towels that have been seemingly irreparably stained by using them to clean our machine — stick to the instructions and use microfibre barista cloths, is all I will say). I've been eyeing these lovely fern living ones to replace our old ones.

Jumper

As always with Hades, I'm not sure I will actually take the plunge on this jumper, but I'm obsessed with the shape.

Trousers

I'm not the best at shopping for trousers, which means I always seem to need extras. These Toast ones look like a lovely winter wardrobe addition — something about the combination of a good shape and the pyjama look and feel.

Sunday 24 November 2024

the sunday morning coffee table

FIRST WEEK OF DECEMBER (2024)



A while ago, I listened to a sunday scaries podcast episode where they described their ideal sunday coffee table — a place where they have everything they need to lie on the sofa and hibernate for a whole day, and every week since I’ve thought about mine.

A note to apologise that it took me more than a week to get this one out, I was in Copenhagen last Sunday so the coffee table looked a bit different!

I'VE BEEN WATCHING...



Little Women (2019)

FILMS

Little Women (Gerwig, 2019)

Nobody does female coming-of-age like Greta Gerwig, and she truly found her best source material in Alcott's *Little Women*. I watch this at least once a year and it always fills me with every cosy and uncomfortable feeling of growing up, female friendships and the beauty of sisterhood.

Our Little Secret (Herek, 2024)

You can't approach this film without knowing how deeply Lifetime/Hallmark it is. Netflix has a strange space between genuinely gorgeous Christmas films (*Klaus*) and then... these. Is it probably better than *Hot Frosty*? Yes. Is it a masterpiece?

No. But it's low-stakes Lindsey Lohan Christmas fun and a little treat to those of us who grew up with an inappropriate crush on Ian Harding's Ezra Fitz. In a less fun note, seeing Lohan in this did make me think a lot about plastic surgery and beauty trends, so in a recommendation within a recommendation - my friend Maria wrote a piece that I would highly recommend on this phenomenon.

TV



Rebecca Ferguson in Silo, season 2

***Silo* (2023-2024)**

Started the second series of *Silo* on Apple TV+ and it's another impressive high-budget for a streamer that rarely bothers to promote its shows. Rebecca Ferguson is ultimately fantastic and the plot is still as intriguing as it should be for a specula-

tive piece of fiction. I'm aiming to get to this book series in the new year so we'll see how it compares!

***Bad Sisters* (2022-2024)**

Again, lack of promotion had likely stopped me from starting this wonderfully funny dark TV show. A lot of drama these days claims to have the same vibes as *Big Little Lies*, but this is the only one I've found gets remotely close, combined with the relationships between the women in *Yellowjackets*. In short, made for me.

I'VE BEEN READING...

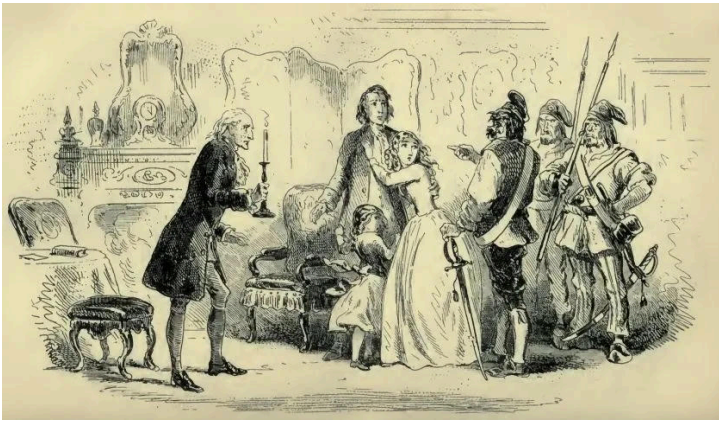


Illustration from A Tale of Two Cities

BOOKS***A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens**

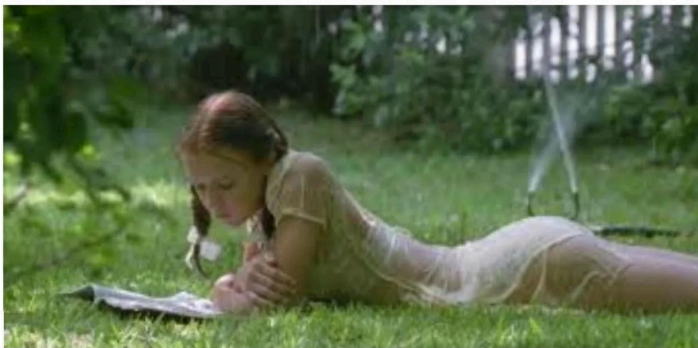
“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” might be a good descriptor for reading this! I loved my first full Dickens experience, but it took me quite a few more pages than usual to get into the rhythm and flow of the story. There’s obviously a million things to discuss when it comes to this book, its depictions of Revolution and characterisation, but ultimately I found myself gripped by the humanity of the final few pages.

ARTICLES***your fave is selling a pedophilic fantasy* by Jade Hurley on her Jade Fax substack**

The title of this essay is more rage-batey than the actual essay is. Jade’s research and analysis on the state of femininity and, by extension, feminism in the current age of internet fame and pop stardom is revealing. Woven through with the importance of race and class in this discussion, alongside relevant examples that never blame the women perpetuating the stereotype but looking directly at the system *making* them do it.

***The Disappearance of Literary Men Should Worry Everyone* by David J. Morris for The New York Times**

Having written about this topic myself, I'm always inclined to listen to what others believe to be the issue and cause of the lack of male reading and writing fiction. This is a short read, but it punches the right points through.



Sabrina Carpenter photoshoot inspired by Lolita

Patterns in Repeat by Laura Marling

I've loved Laura Marling's substack since she started it and her free posts, *The Tarot of Songwriting*, are a fascinating look into her psyche as one of the most acclaimed songwriters in the UK. The process through which she creates worlds, patterns and art through her psychoanalysis studies and her long-standing poetry is such a treat to read.

I'VE BEEN LISTENING TO...



Keiko in Free Willy

PODCASTS

***The Good Whale* by Serial Productions and the New York Times**

This podcast is a triumph of a production. It was recommended to me by a friend and I'm so glad I listened. Not only is it well researched and contains genuinely interesting insights into the story of Keiko, one of the world's most famous whales, but it's the storytelling that really makes it. I yapped about this podcast to my partner consistently as I listened to it and that tells you everything you need to know.

***The History of Bad Ideas in the Past Present Future* podcast**

This is a new-ish series on this podcast and the analysis, if you're interested in the topic, is fascinating. From Nobel Prizes to the Silent Majority, host David Runciman talks to relevant people to debate, discuss and point out why some of our most deeply ingrained societal ideas are... well, bad.

I'VE BEEN EYING...

All-in-one scarves

Not really eying given I've got one, but my friend has released a gorgeous hand-knitted scarf that can be used in a myriad of ways and I genuinely can't take mine off. lana.chic.knits



A post shared by @lana.chic.knits

Sunday 8 December 2024

the sunday morning coffee table

SECOND WEEK OF DECEMBER (2024)



A while ago, I listened to a Sunday Scaries podcast episode where they described their ideal Sunday coffee table — a place where they have everything they need to lie on the sofa and hibernate for a whole day, and every week since I’ve thought about mine.

As much as I love doing these, I promise there is a deep dive essay coming your way soon. And it’s a fun one.

I'VE BEEN WATCHING...



The Substance referencing The Shining

FILMS

Gladiator II (Scott, 2024)

I'd not been particularly drawn to go see this in the cinema - I'm not sure why, given I love the first one and had generally heard good things of its sequel. Honestly, I think it's the fact that I find it ever-so-slightly depressing that we can't get something like *Gladiator* made today because blockbuster cinema has been hijacked and it's now nearly impossible for original IP to be made with blockbuster intentions. I digress, *Gladiator II* is pretty fun. Is it as iconic as the first? Likely not. But it's a good romp of a time and I disagree with the small consensus of Mescal being unable to carry a big budget film. I personally love the nuance indie actors bring through to action-packed dramas.

The Substance (Fargeat, 2024)

I actively avoided this one because I was too tired to engage in discourses. Finally watched it and... It's fine - again, I appreciate betting on originality. But does it *actually* convey the message it clearly wanted to convey? Not really. I understand what *The Idea* was only because of how prescriptive it was about it through dialogue and flashback, not because the storyline actually showed me the consequences of it. The story is a bit confused with itself and I'm not entirely sure that if Fargeat dug deep into what she was actually showing us, she'd even know what she meant.

I would highly recommend this review by Hannah Strong for *Little White Lies*, which sums up a lot of my final feelings. I know people have said that we're confusing *The Substance* for something that *should* have A Big Idea, so I'll just leave this from @HitFactoryPod - a tweet that I have found myself quoting multiple times since I first saw it (for many films).



I'VE BEEN READING...

BOOKS

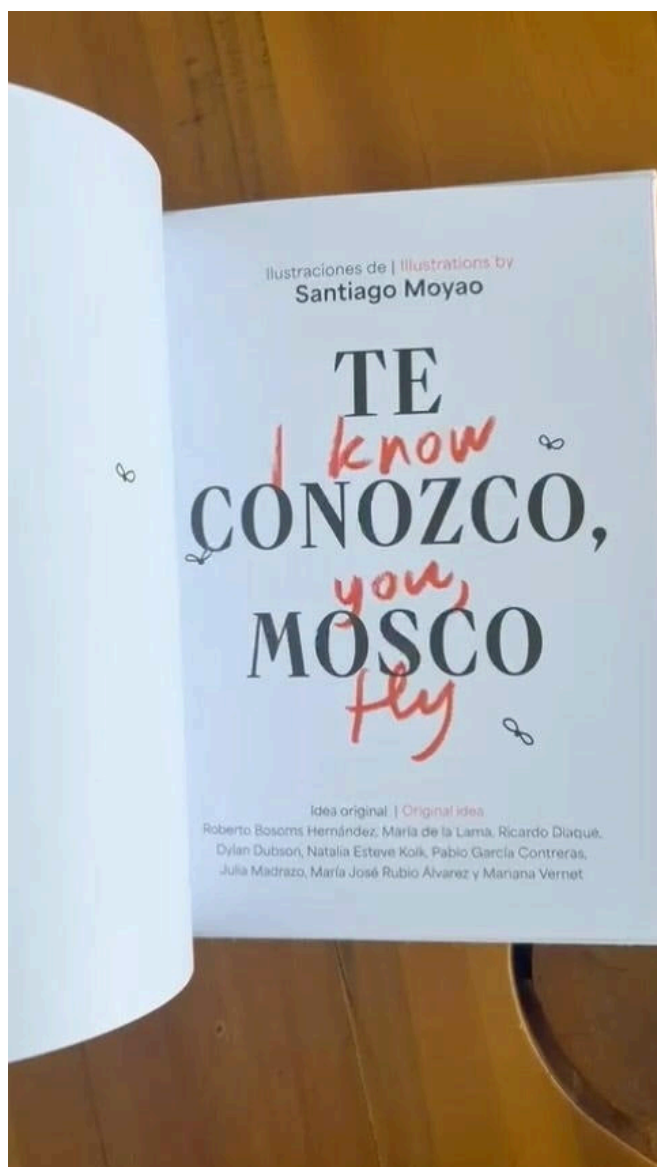
The Vegetarian by Han Kang

Speaking of a story that knows what its message is - Han Kang definitely knows what she wants to tell us in *The Vegetarian*. It's a small novel that packs a punch, and even if I'm not sure

I'll carry the whole story with me, there are some passages and ideas within it that will definitely amble around in my brain for a while.

Te conozco mosco, I Know You Fly

I've been laughing by myself while reading this little book about Mexican sayings translated literally to English, all accompanied by a cartoon illustration. I'm a little biased because my friends created it, but I promise it's amazing. It's all sold out in the UK, so hold fire on your purchase, but it will be back in stock in January. [_teconozcomosco_](#)



A post shared by @_teconozcomosco_

ARTICLES

Luigi Mangione and the Making of a Modern Antihero by Jessica Winter for The New Yorker

I'm sure we've all seen a lot about Mangione in the last week, but I thought this New Yorker piece made an interesting point on what makes someone an out-law rather than a criminal and explains why, despite the act of murder, there is seemingly an apology to be made for him.



Photograph from Girl Culture by Lauren Greenfield

On Girlhood: Lauren Greenfield & Eimear Lynch in Conversation for AnOther

Two female photographers talking about their representations of girlhood, how they shaped their careers and how it's changed overtime. Having read and written about girlhood aesthetics and the likes of the teenage bedroom in Sofia Coppola's films, Greenfield and Lynch's lenses are fascinating to me.

I'VE BEEN LISTENING TO...

PODCASTS

***Gaza, Before and After* by The LRB Podcast**

No matter how much you think you've heard about the state of Gaza and the West Bank, there will always be things that surprise you about how the Zionist campaign has so deeply dehumanised and affected the lives of Palestinians over the last 70+ years. This podcast with Ghassan Abu-Sittah and Muhammad Shehada leans into what life was like before and why this genocide has been completely devastating to past and future.

I'VE BEEN EYING...

The faux-fur coats

I'm genuinely very happy these are back, and I'm pretty sure they'll be in my wardrobe staples for the rest of my life.

Recently got this Superdry coat, which feels like my dream Almost-Famous-Penny-Lane coat. I also am almost unhealthily obsessed with my Axel Arigato Dakota jacket. Next in my eye-sight? Someone I've followed for years and the obvious queen of the faux fur coat herself, Charlotte Simone.

Sunday 15 December 2024

Feminism as a weapon of misogyny

ON BLAKE LIVELY, AMBER HEARD AND WHAT THEIR
CASES SAY ABOUT THE STATE OF FEMINISM



“And socials are really really ramping up. In his favour, she must be furious. It’s actually sad because

it just shows you have people really want to hate on women.”

-Melissa Nathan (during her company’s orchestration of a smear campaign against Blake Lively)

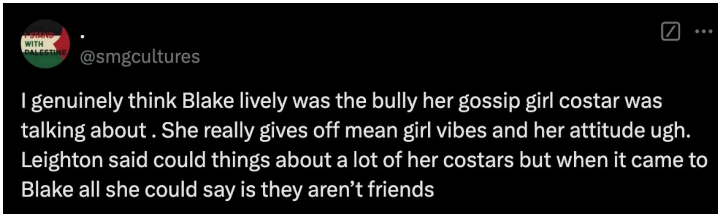
In case you missed it, a film adaptation of Colleen Hoover’s bestselling book *It Ends With Us* hit cinemas over the summer. Just before it was released, sniffs of drama on set started online speculation which culminated in a blinding amount of hate towards the film’s main actress and producer, Blake Lively. She was selfish, tone-deaf and a bully. Her hair was ugly, she didn’t know how to dress and her marriage was cringey. It was shocking, given for years Lively was lauded as one of the best-dressed, most beautiful women in Hollywood and her marriage was seen as a real-life fairytale. Even if you understand the cyclical nature of how society treats successful women, it felt cataclysmic. And familiar. After all, it hadn’t been too long since we saw an even more vitriolic smearing of Amber Heard when she was sued by ex-husband Johnny Depp for defamation. In both, feminism was being weaponised.

A few things were eerily similar:

Facts don’t matter: for the *It Ends With Us* case, the cast and crew of the film unfollowed and refused do any promotion with Baldoni, suggesting something was amiss with him as opposed to Lively. For the Heard v Depp case, the abuse she faced at the hands of Depp was well-documented, with hundreds of messages, videos and photos Heard had kept as evidence. Neither fact mattered.

The bully allegations: despite the previous point, both women were framed as the bullies in the situation. When Heard was heard on the tapes defending herself to Depp, these

moments were clipped as evidence that she was the abuser. When Lively asked for her husband to be brought to set because of her discomfort with Baldoni, this was used as fuel to her being self-obsessed by bringing her famous husband to intimidate the director.



An X (formerly Twitter) user discussing Lively as a “bully” in August

Both men had something to prove: Baldoni had a lot riding on the release of *It Ends With Us*. It could launch his career as a serious director (honestly, thinking this would happen by adapting a Colleen Hoover book is its own can of worms that I won't open). Depp was facing ostracising from Hollywood and had already lost a defamation case in the UK, this was quite literally his last chance.

Both men were well-loved by women online: setting the perfect scene, both Depp and Baldoni (to a lesser extent) had considerable amount of support behind them from women. The first due to his heartthrob status cemented in the nineties and noughts, the latter due to his heartthrob status cemented through Jane the Virgin and, importantly, his TikTok - which was flooded with content about his journey into feminism (more on this later).

Both men hired the same PR firm: Melissa Nathan has worked with Depp, Baldoni and the likes of Drake and Travis

Scott. Her text messages to Baldoni's team read, "You know we can bury anyone."

In a new lawsuit filing by Blake Lively and an investigation by The New York Times, the workings of Melissa Nathan's team are revealed through their orchestrated smear campaign against the actress similar to the one she ran against Amber Heard. The latter is well documented in the Tortoise media podcast, *Who Trolled Amber?*

"When you take a step back from this, actually the most interesting thing is the online misogyny," Mostrous suggests. "There's so much of it. It makes you quite depressed, because there was a groundswell of hate that was there, just waiting for a case to come up".

-*Who Trolled Amber?: Inside the podcast exposing the horrors of the Depp/Heard trial, The Independent*

These types of campaigns come hot off the heels of the strong feminist backlash post-#MeToo. From the take-down of 'girlbosses' to the cultural view of womanhood as undesirable (let's be girls again). From the victimisation of rapists to the return of pro-life as a debatable position. From the election of a US president who had, already in 2016, been accused of sexual assault to the global government back-tracking of feminist policies. The list goes on. I want to make it completely clear that when I use the pop culture campaigns against women being perpetuated online and infiltrating our daily lives as a jumping off point, I'm not just talking about pop culture or silly Hollywood drama. These cultural moments *directly* affect our political lives, they *directly* reflect the views

on and of women and what we tolerate. They matter beyond the individual people involved, whether they are celebrities or not. Trust me, I wish they didn't.

Justin Baldoni had long positioned himself as a public advocate for feminism. "I've had to take a real honest look at the way that I've unconsciously been hurting the women in my life", he says while promoting his book *Man Enough: Undefining My Masculinity*, "Am I man enough to shut the hell up and listen?" he asks himself while giving a literal TedTalk. It doesn't matter, though. He's using the tools we've given him with feminism and shielding himself through it. And while we definitely want men to deconstruct and understand, if a man is co-opting feminism to continuously talk about himself, it's a red flag.

JENNIFER ABEL

The narrative online is so freaking good and fans are still sticking up for Justin and there literally has been no pickup of those two articles which is actually shocking to me. But I see this as a total success, as does Justin.

You did such amazing work

MELISSA NATHAN

Narrative is CRAZY good So did you.

The majority of socials are so pro Justin and I don't even agree with half of them lol


Texts between Jennifer Abel and Melissa Nathan, both on Justin Baldoni's PR campaign (source: the NYT)

While Baldoni cloaked himself in feminist ideals, Depp's public narrative co-opted feminist language in a subtler, equally damaging way. He wasn't a feminist hero, but the language used to talk about him was the same used to speak about female victims of abuse. He was "powerless" (even though he was the more famous one in the relationship), he was "emotionally manipulated", he was "responding to trauma". I'm not saying these can't happen to men, of course they can, and part of the work of feminism has been understanding that

men who go through abuse should be able to speak up. We missed the part where men perpetrating abuse would use our work against us. Apparently you can use the master's tools to dismantle the house, as long as that master is a woman.


Backlash against feminism isn't new, and it seems to repeat itself after the culmination of every wave. In the same way a single woman can't stay on top for too long before being torn down, neither can feminism as a movement. This particular brand of backlash, however, is using the tools of feminism against itself, making it much more pervasive and hard to detect. It's not a coincidence that the people both orchestrating and perpetuating the hate are women — women who understand exactly what it's like to be a woman, what types of men we would naturally defend and therefore, what they need to amplify within the personalities of their clients.

In Baldoni's case, despite the film's marketing team instructing the cast to focus on the lighter tones of the film, Nathan and her team knew that if he spoke about the representation of abuse against women, he'd come out on top. The result: Blake Lively is vapid and doesn't care about women, while Baldoni is a feminist hero (the fact that 'It Ends with Us' itself misunderstands feminism is probably a good mirror to the fact that Baldoni wanted to use it as a front, but again, we can open that can of worms another time).

Evie Magazine 
@Evie_Magazine






The internet isn't happy with how Blake Lively has been conducting herself in "It Ends With Us" PR, comparing her interviews to Justin Baldoni's.

After seeing interviews side-by-side, what do you think?



2:37

9:21 PM · Aug 13, 2024 · **4.2M** Views

 541  3.4K  26K  7.9K 

These narratives worked, firstly, because we've been taught that sexual abusers are "monsters" (see: the Dominique

Pelicot trial and framing around it), so if a man utters “I’m a feminist”, he *must* be good. Baldoni isn’t a monster, neither is Johnny Depp. They’re people with families and ex-girlfriends, wives and friends — if it weren’t for their public image, they’d pass by unscathed as perfectly regular men. Expecting cases with perfect victims and villains turns the actual victims into the villains. So when PR starts speaking the language of feminism, it becomes more natural for women online to jump on-board. They’re saying the right words and... “that woman *has* actually always been a bit annoying, hasn’t she? No wonder she’s a bully.”

Secondly, it’d be remiss to pretend that these tactics don’t also work because there are threads of misogyny everywhere. It’s easy to make people hate the women. And it’s something female public figures know very well — just ask Anne Hathaway, Taylor Swift, Kristen Stewart or Jennifer Lawrence. Margot Robbie, off the back of her success with *Barbie*, said that she’d take a break and disappear for a little while, wouldn’t want the public to get tired of your success. The general public enjoys striking women when they go a bit higher than they’d like them to. It’s not conscious, and these campaigns capitalise on it almost as much as they capitalise on feminism itself.

Even if you’ve been keeping up with it, it’s staggering to look at where the feminist movement was in 2014 and where it is 10 years later. What we expected to be a new reckoning for men in powerful positions has morphed into a weaponised version of itself, amplified by an online environment dictated largely by men. It’s platforms like Musk’s X (formerly Twitter) that have allowed it, not through freedom of speech, but through algorithms that thrive on the hatred of women.



Orchestrated bot attacks against Amber Heard (source: BOT SENTINEL INC)

And while these men, their PR teams and bots use feminism in order to cover up their crimes and continue to be celebrated, women's voices keep drowning, being as buried as Melissa Nathan claims she can make them. The problem now isn't only that victims might be unheard, it's that if you speak up you'll become the enemy. Blake Lively hadn't even gone public with a sexual harassment claim when the smear campaign began, yet it worked. If we're willing to not only tolerate, but celebrate a man who sexualised a breast-feeding co-worker in Baldoni and one who texted his friends about burning his wife in Depp, the message being sent out to men is "You can get away with it, because they all love to hate women anyway."

I can't blame a lot of the women for falling for the tactics, even for perpetrating them, they're speaking *to* you and

they're using *your* words. But I do think we need to be more culturally literate and start critically looking at the situation when women come under attack. And while most may believe this doesn't affect them directly because they're not at this level of fame or notoriety, these cases are a mirror to what's happening around us *all* the time, so the importance of critically reviewing information has never been more prevalent for women. We're waiting for a prescriptively hateful phrase to leave the man's mouth in order to tick the misogynist box, but patriarchal forms morph and adapt, and it's just not how sexism works today. It's much more subtle, and it hides in plain sight, we just need to be better at spotting it.

I suppose the ask, if it's not too mammoth, is to start looking at women with empathy first — even the ones you don't like.

Sunday 22 December 2024

the media capsule: winter (2025)

A COLLECTION.

Yes, yes, this is late - but it's that time of year.

Winter is a tricky one. I didn't want to write this pre-Christmas because Christmas media is its own very specific *thing*. And, somehow, I'm not sure anyone actually struggles to find what they like during that time. "What's your favourite Christmas film/song/book?" is thrown around at every dinner table. However, when the dark days aren't giving in and the characteristically celebratory Christmas/New Year spirit has worn out, it gets harder to find little things that give us joy.

This is the time where this hyper-specific capsule collection might come in handy, when there seems to be a lull in releases and we're looking for cosy media to curl into.



from my collection of winter film

note: this post gets cut off in the email so come over to the website.

Even if I don't tend to collect physical items, I've always collected lists. Mood lists, playlists, book lists, film lists. I keep a catalog of new and old media that I can return to, care for, and add to. I'm eternally grateful for friendships that add to it and thrilled that they might see pieces of themselves in my collections. Because to me, these are stories to bond through and see ourselves within. Collecting them reminds me of where my love for media and content (in its truest, original sense) comes from.

The word capsule used in all its glory: as a time capsule, a medicinal capsule—I enjoy the idea of prescribing media in a way—capsule as a spore producer—media that can lead you to the footnotes of other media and so on—, and finally capsule as a container of things you treasure and want to keep.

Final note to say some things in these lists I've consumed and adored, others I'm yet to dive into (but rest assured, if it's in my collection, it will be a part of my winter this year).

watching snow fall.



from my collection of winter film

(book) *Wintering* by Katherine May

Wintering brings about some of the most profound and insightful moments of our human experience, and wisdom resides in those who have wintered.

This book changed my perspective on many things. It made me feel accompanied through times of anxiety where winter

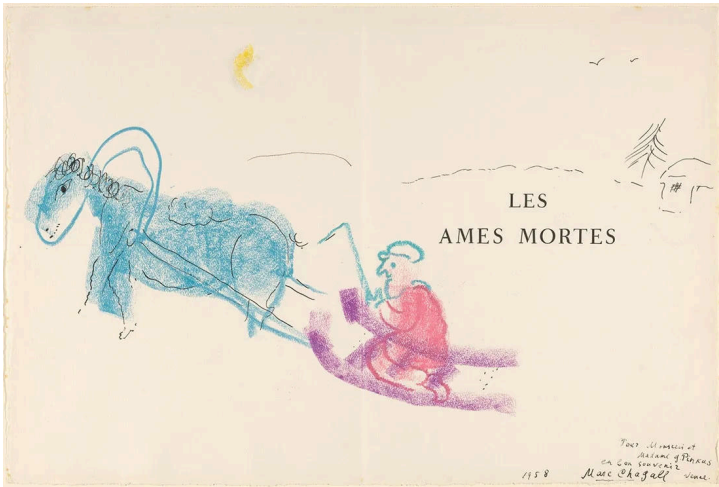
felt interminable, and it made me appreciate and embrace much of what comes this time of year (both physically and metaphorically). I urge anyone that struggles with winter and guilt in sadness to read this. Thinking it was like most books that claim to have the secret to a better life, I avoided it for a long time, but I'm so glad I read it. And I'm so glad it found me when it did. I now use it as a reference point in my life constantly, not just during the winter months.

(tv show) *Severance*

The good news is hell is just the product of a morbid human imagination. The bad news is whatever humans can imagine, they can usually create.

You will find that a lot of my winter capsule is really just art that requires time to sit and think. *Severance*, despite the fact it does feature cold and snow, is here because of how internally moving it is. It's one of those series that, as I finished it, I felt incredibly lucky to have lived at the same time as this was made. Which, given the existential themes it grapples with about our times, is a little bit ironic — anyway, I'm thrilled we're *finally* getting season two this month!

(painting) Marc Chagall, *On the Sleigh*, 1958



(ballet) *Swan Lake* performed by the English National Ballet

I watched *The Nutcracker* yesterday and am now obsessed with this company, and luckily for those of us in the UK, you can watch a performance of *Swan Lake* on iPlayer. What better time than a cold winter's day to sit and admire a beautifully dark story told through ballet?

(album) *For Emma, Forever Ago* by Bon Iver

*So apropos
Saw death on a sunny snow
For every life
Forgo the parable*

*Seek the light
My knees are cold*

Partly nostalgia (which is a feeling I relate deeply with winter months) and partly that this album is truly made for winter, it's one I've gone back to for nearly a decade now. Justin Vernon wrote this album in three weeks holed up in a hunting cabin after one of the hardest years of his life — and if that's not wintering, I'm not sure what is.

(book) *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson

*That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one,
just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things.
To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless.*

I was looking through my underlined quotes of this book and found myself, as I often do when faced with the contents of this book, on the verge of tears. Contained within Maggie Nelson's vulnerability lies shattering sadness, loneliness and, perhaps most importantly, laughter. I'm convinced whenever a dark time in my life comes, *Bluets* will consistently serve as a rope pulling me out of it.

walking in the mist.

(books) *Small Things like These* and *Foster* by Claire Keegan

He thought of her daily kindnesses, of how she had corrected and encouraged him, of the small things she had said and done and had refused to do and say and what she must have known, the things which, when added up, amounted to a life.

Her hands are like my mother's hands but there is something else in them too, something I have never felt before and have no name for. I feel at such a loss for words but this is a new place, and new words are needed.

While *Small Things like These* has much more winter imagery than *Foster*, they both give me a winter feeling in their reflections and ruminations. I'm a big fan of the punch Keegan packs in novellas. Of the two, I think *Foster* moves me the most, but I don't put *Small Things like These* too far behind. They both remind me of the importance of our daily kindness and we owe each other.

Both of these have now been adapted into films as well, *Foster* as *The Quiet Girl*, available on streaming, and *Small Things Like These* (starring Cillian Murphy) is still in cinemas.

(album) *Fleet Foxes* by Fleet Foxes

*I was following the pack, all swaddled in their coats
With scarves of red tied 'round their throats
To keep their little heads from fallin' in the snow*

This whole album is packed with fairytale, dreamlike versions of winter. Bloody snow and cold mountains and frozen lakes.

(painting) Aka Høegh, *Winter*, 2007



(film) *Black Swan*, dir. Darren Aronofsky

He picked me, mommy! I'm the new swan queen!

Disguised as a thriller, this is one of my favourite contemplative films. This is more like what I would have loved *The Substance* to be like, in that the biggest messages and point making in the film is so subtle you could almost miss it completely – until you think about it again years later and realise how deeply it marked you.

(album) *Hozier* by Hozier

*When my time comes around
Lay me gently in the cold, dark earth
No grave can hold my body down
I'll crawl home to her*

I could add other Hozier albums to this list, a lot of his lyrics are so interwoven with references that you could spend hours in a hole of old books while discerning them (and oh, what a winter's day that would be), but something about his 2014 self-titled album makes me think of winter evenings and red wine.

by the fire.

(film) *About Time*, dir. Richard Curtis

*I'm not particularly proud of many things in my life,
but I am very proud to be the father of my son.*

While the Mary and Tim love story in this film is good enough to carry it through, it's really a front for the true theme at its core: the love story between a father and son. To me, that's

what makes this film so special, and it's that relationship that will bring a tear to my eye, every single re-watch.



About Time

(book) *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck

In uncertainty I am certain that underneath their top-most layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted short cuts to love.

This book isn't particularly wintery in feeling, but it is contemplative (sometimes maybe a tad too much). Also it's long, and the shorter days give us space for longer books. A firm favourite for me, not because it's perfect, but because what it attempts is big enough that I appreciate its flaws.

(film) *Past Lives*, dir. Celine Song

You dream in a language I can't understand. It's like there's this whole place inside you I can't go.

I remember watching this for the first time and not understanding what the huge deal was. I thought it had great observations, but people kept saying how heartbreaking it was and I didn't see it. Until the last scene, when I suddenly found myself sobbing on my own in the living room and thought... *oh*. And there are few things I love more about art than those rare ones that make us think *oh, there it is, that one truth I hadn't been able to articulate yet*.

(tv show) *Normal People*

Sometimes someone will make eye contact with me, like a bus conductor or a person looking for change. And I'll feel shocked that anyone can actually see me. And there's something comforting about it.

It's weird looking back at this show now given the commotion it created and knowing the star power it held. Obviously, both Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones are brilliant in it (so brilliant, they became two of the most sought-after actors of their generation), but it's also genuinely a *good* piece of television. I think, impressively, the show goes beyond the book, which is not the case for the second attempt at adapting a Rooney novel. I'll be doing a re-watch this winter, because sometimes when facing dark evenings what we really need is a good, no-judgement cry.



Normal People

(book) *Possession* by A. S. Byatt

Think of this - that the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, and they were alone with each other.

Speaking of good cries, I can't read the ending of this book without crying. A love letter to art and literature and, in itself, a love letter to love. It does require a bit of thinking from the reader, and a lot of underlining if you want to go deep into it, but, if your brain isn't up for it right now, it can also be read as a more simple romance novel without negating Byatt's writing. Imagery from this book comes back to me at times and I still hold it up as a cornerstone reference in academic-set reading.

(album) *Stranger in the Alps* by Phoebe Bridges

*I went with you up to the place you grew up in
We spent a week in the cold
Just long enough to Walden it with you
Any longer, it would've got old*

Phoebe Bridges always whispers winter to me, perhaps not in the most literal sense of the season, but in the blues of it all.

(painting) Sir George Clausen, *The Road, Winter Morning*, 1923



on a bench under a leafless tree.



from my collection of winter film

(book) *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke

*But your solitude will be a support and a home for you,
even in the midst of very unfamiliar circumstances,
and from it you will find all your paths.*

This is such a lovely, self-affirming short book of ten letters composed by Rilke to Franz Xaver Kappus, a young poet who sought his advise on his work and, after declining to criticise his poetry, Rilke proceeds to advise him on life. The first time I read it, I felt the advise was sometimes perhaps a little rough and unyielding, but upon reflection I think it's both necessary

advise (if not always right, as is the nature of it) and given out of total kindness.

(album) *Patterns in Repeat* by Laura Marling

*To have your children, your flock of birds
Your branch among the wood
You'll try to tell them, but you're lost for words
'Cause it's so absurd, how good
And as those years go by they'll look upon you
Kindly like a friend
A pattern in repeat
And never ends*

This album is about finding your feet and your happiness within the small everyday. Of building a family and friendships that sustain you through good and bad, of shining a light onto those you love because they become a part of you. It's gorgeous, and it's a feeling of hope within the mundane that permeates winter months.

(film) *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, dir. Michel Gondry

Maybe one day years from now, we'll meet in a coffee shop in a faraway city somewhere and we could give it another shot.

One of the best depictions of the importance of sadness and letting ourselves be in that, understanding ourselves through it. Starting to notice a theme in this collection...



Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

**(book) *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by
Gabrielle Zevin**

He loved the intimacy of being in a tight group of people who had come together, miraculously, for a brief period in time, for the purpose of making art.

This is one of the few, if not the only, book I genuinely recommend to everyone. Not only do I think there's something to be gained from it for most people, but I also think it can fit nearly all tastes in literature. It's harsh on its characters, but never in a gratuitous way, and always to get to the core of its thematic points. I love this book, and I will definitely be pushing it into my future children's hands.

(painting) Peter Brook, *Snowland*, 1973



(book) *The Creative Act* by Rick Rubin

Train yourself to see the awe behind the obvious.

I like recommending this book and rummaging through it myself at this time of year, where everything is suddenly lit with new perspectives but motivation wavers at the flick of a cloud being a little *too* grey. This book is not just for artists, and its thesis states that everyone *is* an artist, and living like an artist is simply learning to live in curiosity.

in a fogged up cafe.

(books) *Mistborn Trilogy* by Brandon Sanderson

*Our belief is often strongest when it should be weakest.
That is the nature of hope.*

Winter is a perfect time to dive into a fantasy series which otherwise might seem a bit intimidating. It being one of my first forays into fantasy as an adult, I think this trilogy is surprisingly friendly to first-time fantasy readers. The world is complex in its power systems, but it doesn't require too much work in order to understand it. So if you've been toying with starting on fantasy this year, or just want a good read with good character development, here you go.

(book) *Just Kids* by Patti Smith

We went our separate ways, but within walking distance of one another.

This is a life-defining read for me. I read it during a warm winter in Mexico City and have kept it close since. My copy is quite literally falling apart, but I don't think I'll let go of it any time soon. It's not just about Patti Smith's forays into what being an artist means, it's more about the hopefulness in the love and kindness between her and Mapplethorpe, the idea of finding your person(s), and how no matter how far you are and how much heartbreak there is, it'll always linger — and that's a good thing.

(film) *Into the Wild*, dir. Sean Penn

*What if I were smiling and running into your arms?
Would you see then what I see now?*

Quick disclaimer, I obviously have a complicated relationship with this film because of its director, but I can't not contain it in my capsules because of how much it's meant to me. It's a film that shows me how much I have grown, in a way its main character never got to do. Watching this film for the first time as a teenager, I *understood* Christopher McCandless and felt deeply for his mission. I've watched it a lot since, and slowly... let's just say I see his flaws. I now understand him as a child, really. A petulant one at times, but a child. It's taught me, throughout my life, not only about the obvious importance of being with people, but of how we make a difference to the people we meet.

(book) *In the Distance* by Hernán Diaz

There was a sky. There was a body. And a planet underneath it. And it was all lovely. And it did not matter. He had never been happy before. And it did not matter.

It's funny to put this one in here given most of it takes place in the desert, but again it's about contemplation. And long walks. *Long* walks. I find Diaz's writing really admirable, it's one of those styles that sneaks up on you — its empathy, its subtleties, its humanity. It's a western reinvented, and as someone who's never been too into westerns, it's become one of my all-time favourite books.

having a warm bath.

(film) *Like Crazy*, dir. Drake Doremus

I didn't realize it would sometimes be more than whole, that the wholeness was a rather luxurious idea. Because it's the halves that halve you in half. I didn't know, don't know, about the in-between bits; the gory bits of you, and the gory bits of me.

Me and my partner used to watch this film when we were in a long distance relationship. "Like crazy" became part of our daily lexicon in texts and letters and video calls, so it will always hold a special place in my heart. It's slow and sad, with wonderful performances by Anton Yelchin and Felicity Jones at its center.

(a poem)

EMILY DICKINSON

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
 The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
 And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
 A Wooden way
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
 First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

(short story) *White Nights* by Fyodor Dostoevsky

I like revisiting, at certain times, spots where I was once happy; I like to shape the present in the image of the irretrievable past.

The only one on this capsule I haven't yet read. I've heard it's the one true depiction of love so... looking forward to it.

(film) *You've Got Mail*, dir. Nora Ephron

This woman is the most adorable creature I've ever been in contact with, and if she turns out even to be as good-looking as a mailbox, I'd be crazy not to turn my life upside down and marry her.

We cannot be expected to get through winter without a sprinkle of Nora Ephron, can we?

(album) *Melodrama* by Lorde

*They say, "You're a little much for me
You're a liability
You're a little much for me"
So they pull back, make other plans
I understand, I'm a liability
Get you wild, make you leave
I'm a little much for e-a-na-na-na, everyone*

What's more winter-coded than a little teenage angst in genius lyrics? No, but seriously, Lorde called this album "a record about being alone... The good parts and the bad parts", and I do genuinely think that is winter tied up in a bow.



from my collection of winter film

(film) *The Worst Person in the World*, dir. Joachim Trier

I'm sure I remember things about you that you've forgotten.

I think my theme through this capsule has been “life-shifting” art, so here’s one to end with. I love the balance of this film’s comedy with its sadness, the deepness with superficiality. It’s one of the greatest indies of the last few years, and I come back to its dialogues often.



The Worst Person in the World

Sunday 5 January 2025

the sunday morning coffee table

FIRST WEEK(S) OF JANUARY (2025)



A while ago, I listened to a sunday scaries podcast episode where they described their ideal sunday coffee table — a place where they have everything they need to lie on the sofa and hibernate for a whole day, and every week since I've thought about mine.

I'VE BEEN WATCHING...

FILMS



Conclave is a gift

***Conclave* (Berger, 2024)**

Cardinals choosing who the next Pope should be through webs of gossip should not be as engaging as it was. I loved almost everything about this film. Cinematography, set design, the cast, the script, it's a delectable watch. When I first heard this described as "Mean Girls in the Vatican" I didn't fully believe them, but there is a twist at the start of act three that

will definitely have you rooting for the Cardinal version of Regina George.

***Nosferatu* (Eggers, 2024)**

I am a huge Robert Eggers fan so I wasn't particularly surprised at how much I liked this. Eggers is a master of atmosphere, and when he puts that talent to work on gothic horror, well you've got a winner. Eerie, terrifying and, through pure narrative, manages the near impossible — it kind of makes you want your turn for the most physically repulsive vampire we've likely ever seen on screen to fall just a little bit in love with you.



Lily Rose-Depp in Nosferatu

***Wicked: Part One* (Chu, 2024)**

Finally took myself down to watch this. As a casual fan of the musical, I wasn't rushing to watch but I knew I'd have to go at some point. Honestly, I should've rushed to watch. I enjoyed

this *thoroughly*. It's fun, it's camp, it doesn't take itself too seriously while treating the political topics within the story with the importance they deserve. I love when fantasy stories build on their world and *commit* to it. Jonathan Bailey is beautiful. What else could we want?

I'VE BEEN READING...

BOOKS

The Hidden Life of Trees by Peter Wohlleben

I'd been meaning to read this book for a while and, after going to the Anya Gallaccio exhibition at the Turner Gallery on New Year's Day, I decided this is the year to learn more about trees and flowers. Wohlleben's book definitely feels like a Trees 101 course, which was exactly what I needed. I believe it caused some controversy because it infuses trees with human characteristics that aren't entirely scientifically proven, but I trust most people who pick up this book will have some form of literacy to discern what Wohlleben is trying to convey.

PS: If you have good nature books recommendations, please send them my way!

The Hypocrite by Jo Hamya

A book about generational differences and fatherhood, this book follows a father and daughter. The latter has written a play depicting a holiday with her father years earlier. The

narrative is split in three: the daughter and her mother having lunch while they wait for her father to watch the play, the father watching the play and flashbacks to the holiday being depicted.

There are interesting notes on artistry and what it means to be read by those we love, how we perceive others and our own moralities being as corrupt as the ones we judge most. I liked it, but it being about a subject that I find to be close to me, I found it less provocative than I thought I would. Perhaps it's that the narrative style feels a little bit all over the place without having earned it, with rhythm and perspective changes that don't quite pay off.

***Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov**

I'm glad I read this. I think it's one of those books that underlies a lot of current literature and will definitely inform my reading in the future. Did I enjoy reading it? Absolutely not. I actually found it quite difficult to get through. Not because of its complexity, but because a lot of the rambling from the narrator is unbearable and without a real point to it. It didn't feed its thematic concerns and it certainly didn't build a credible sub-narrative. Nabokov is obviously doing it intentionally, making a point on literary academic circles, but that doesn't mean it was enjoyable to read.

***Seven Days in June* by Tia Williams**

Tia Williams is one of those romance writers everyone is always waxing lyrical about, so it was time to get to one of her novels. I really appreciated this book. It's what good

contemporary romance should be. It builds on both characters enough, making them perfectly flawed people who genuinely make each other better. It depicts important societal issues in a way that feels organic to the experiences of the characters. The foil characters work in and of themselves. It was a lovely Sunday read.

ARTICLES

Did a Best-Selling Romantasy Novelist Steal Another Writer's Story? by Katy Waldman for The New Yorker

A really interesting dive into the world of Romantasy editors, the problems with writing and selling within a genre that has been so oversaturated with tropes that originality and creativity become impossible. I'm not even sure I blame the novelist for stealing someone else's story, it seems in the inner workings of Romantasy publishing... she might not even have known.

What Would A Woman Do To An Unconscious Man If She Thought No-One Would Find Out? by Anna Wharton

Ruminating on the Pelicot case and the idea that it's always the Everyman who perpetuates violence against women. The unearthing of hidden corners of the internet, such as forums titled *without her knowledge*, during the case was astounding yet somehow unsurprising. Wharton's essay is rightfully

angry and a call to action from the people who actually have power.

Everyone wants to be a lit girl by steph

I'm endlessly fascinated by the aesthetics of reading and how quickly they can become vapid in order to be palatable. Over the last year my instagram feed has filled up with similar images of "thought daughters" and "hot lit girls"... but what do these actually mean? And are they offering any value if they're not being at least somewhat contrarian?



lit girl in action

I'VE BEEN LISTENING TO...

ALBUMS

***Carried Away (EP)* by Quiet Houses**

The sounds of Quiet Houses take me back to the indie sounds of 2014 in the best way. There is an innocence to their lyrics

that I find really comforting. Also, I've seen them live twice and feel like they've made a space for themselves on my playlists for years to come — this is only their third EP so keep your eyes peeled for these two.

***Perverts* by Ethel Cain**

Let me start by saying if you have never listened to Ethel Cain before, start with *Preacher's Daughter*, definitely not with this! *Preacher's Daughter* is not totally dissimilar, but as a concept album it's a lot easier to pierce through than *Perverts*.

I genuinely think Hayden Anhedonia is one of the greatest musical artists at the moment. *Perverts* is not afraid to do something so different it's difficult to describe its aerial, whispery, eerie sounds. You can dive into so much lore, but I'd definitely recommend having Genius opened while listening.

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