BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

Catriona Ward, *The Last House on Needless Street* (Viper, 2021)

Catriona Ward's 2021 novel *The Last House on Needless Street* is a contemporary gothic-horror novel, hailed by Stephen King as 'a true nerve-shredder that keeps its mind-blowing secrets to very end'.[1] King went on to say he hadn't read anything as exciting since Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). I would argue that it has more in common with Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) than *Gone Girl*. However, as King's comparison suggests, major plot twists are central to both books.

The book opens with the ominous line: 'Today is the anniversary of Little Girl with Popsicle' (p. 1). For Ted, our protagonist, it is already a bad day. He lives in ramshackle house at the end of Needless Street, with his daughter Lauren and his cat Olivia, who can't bear to be in the same room together. He struggles to keep his life together and his 'mind runs like ants, everywhere' (p. 7). He cannot keep track of time and doesn't remember things that he's done. All the while, Dee, the sister of 'Little Girl with Popsicle', is determined to discover what happened to her sister, and moves into a house near Ted.

The American landscape of *The Last House on Needless Street* is one of run-down houses built on the edge of a forest with oversized trees, lakes full of danger where children go missing, under a sun that scorches. This is the suburban gothic of the mundane. Ted's home is dirty, unkempt, and in bad repair, with plywood over the windows. The house no longer has mirrors, to save Lauren from the horror of seeing herself. Ted, we are told, is fat, with a 'rubber sack' (p. 60) of a belly. He bumps into things because he is not used to the space he takes up in the world. His head is covered in 'shiny pale patches of skull among brown' (p. 60) and he has a bushy red beard. 'The rest of me – well, I try not to think about that at all. There's a smell on me these days, like mushrooms, earthy. My body is turning on me' (p. 61). Ted disgusts himself, yet despite this, he yearns for a companion. At the heart of the gothic is the idea of transformation, where the known mind and the fragility of the self are under threat. It is within the horror novel that we can find exploration of identity, trauma, and how we navigate a world that is at odds with the normative viewpoint. All of these elements are apparent in *The Last House on Needless Street.*

[1] See https://x.com/StephenKing/status/1304119516633464832. Stephen King Tweeted this on 10 September 2020.

Indeed, in the Afterword, Ward explains about how she came to write 'a book about survival, disguised as a book about horror' (p. 364). At first glance, it would appear that the supernatural is at work in the world of Ward's novel, but the horror is one of the mind rather than an otherworldly apparition. By employing supernatural elements, Ward lures the reader into a false reality so that she can tell an entirely different story, one dependent on the supernatural as metaphor for the distressed and traumatised mind. Early on in the novel, Ted references 'pleasant chills' (p. 37), imagining what has happened to a young boy who had disappeared by the lake. This calls to mind the 'pleasing terror' of the gothic tradition. The reader is alerted to the sense of the vicarious pleasure in being frightened at a safe distance.

The reader's sensibilities are triggered by the extremes of the sleek beauty of Olivia the cat, Lauren's deformity, and the revulsion that Ted feels towards himself; the darkness of the refrigerator and the dazzling light outside of it; the vastness of the forest along with the extremes of hot and cold. Lauren has suffered burns so bad that that the skin peels off: 'Kind of like snakeskin, but it smelled bad and I wanted to die with how bad it hurt' (p 196). The book's pattern of incarceration and torture followed by release gives rise to the sublime ecstasy of no longer being contained. Lauren whizzes along on her pink bicycle in the house, her only form of joy. Yet Ted asserts that he is working to keep Lauren safe: 'Killing things is hard, sure, but keeping them, safe and alive is much more difficult. Oh, boy, do I know about that' (p. 13).

Ted has construed a family for himself with Lauren as his daughter, along with the cat, and his dead parents looking on from pictures on the mantel piece. This family unit allows for an exploration of what it means to belong, when belonging is in fact a form of possession. Ted's relationship with his monstrous mother is the root of his trauma. Her cruelty is disguised as life lessons: 'Everything in life is a rehearsal for loss', she tells him. 'Breaking me, then mending me, over and over – that was my mother' (p. 36). He loves her and fears her. Ted's mother worked in a hospital looking after sick children. Cutting and then repairing his flesh was her *modus operandi*. What began as a once-a-month occurrence develops until she spends the whole night sewing him up, repairing minor grazes, opening them up and suturing them, as the novel draws on images of the body and medical tropes to instil horror. She uses a tape recorder to record notes of her operations on Ted, and he acquiesces, knowing that if he puts up a fight, he will end up in a disinfectant bath of vinegar and hot water. His mother calls to mind Adora from Flynn's *Sharp Objects* with her twisted sense of mothering and her penchant for inflicting injury. Both mothers share the underlying pathology of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, and both offspring have scarred bodies, etched with their mother's handiwork. The abuse and

trauma that Ted has experienced manifests in his day-to-day life and the only way to manage the enormity of his pain is to share it out.

Memory and the absence of it are constant concerns for Ted. He makes notes in case he forgets, records messages for himself, and fears the past encroaching on the present: 'The past is close tonight. The membrane of time bulges and strains' (p. 149). The pictures on the mantel piece and the mementoes from childhood in the form of a music-box ballerina and Russian dolls provide visual motifs, evoking sensations and memories to unnerve Ted, alerting the reader to the gothic notion that home is not a place of safety and security. The motif of the Russian dolls is also an obvious symbol of containment. The dolls, one within the other, are prisoners. Furthermore, the novel points to the idea of burying things you don't want to see in the form of the burial sites in the forest. Ted, we are being told, is fearful of the past and the traumas that haunt him.

Perhaps one of the more surprising, yet compelling, aspects of the book is the character of Olivia the cat, with her question-mark tail. Ted's relationship with Olivia is one of love and comfort. We have a real sense of the inner workings of his mind when he is relaxed and soothed by Olivia. The cat represents bodily fluidity, hinting at shape shifting and a quasi-feminine form. Cats have a long association with mysticism, superstition, and witchcraft. Olivia is the object of Ted's affection and the only source of affection he receives in return. Ted is an animal lover, who tends to the birds and is distraught when they are killed. Caring for living creatures and 'keeping' them alive against all odds is important to Ted, hinting at the truth of the story that Ted is not the villain. The idea of the self being threatened by something that is not part of us in terms of identity and non-identity, human and non-human finds voice in Ward's work. The dualistic idea of the body and the mind with the body forced to overcome its physical limitations in order to survive is also central to *The Last House on Needless Street*. As Lauren says, 'But it's not enough to survive. I want to live' (p. 197).

The book opens and closes with the reference to the anniversary of the 'Little Girl with Popsicle' (p. 1 and p. 352), creating a framing device of that echoes the crime-novel structure, yet *The Last House on Needless Street* deals more with the effect of crime on the psyche. By the end of the novel, Ted has come to terms with his identity, recognising the trauma that he has endured and how it has affected him. He speaks of the wrestling within, and of experiencing seismic, nauseous struggles: 'It is not easy to hold everyone in your heart at once' (p. 319). Ward asks her readers to do the same for Ted, Lauren, Oliva, and Dee. This is an unsettling read that sits well within the gothic tradition, with its use of unreliable narrators and fragmentary

narrative. I implore you to read it, to enjoy the uncanny and the oppressive atmosphere of paranoia and deception, and to marvel at how Ward pulls off the ultimate feat of illusion.

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