

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 38

Spring 2019

Editors:

Aalia Ahmed and Lucia Scigliano

Review: Christine Mangan, *Tangerine* (New York: Ecco, 2018). ISBN 9781408709993.

Roula-Maria Dib

University of Leeds

Review: Christine Mangan, *Tangerine* (New York: Ecco, 2018). ISBN 9781408709993.

Roula-Maria Dib

University of Leeds

Postgraduate English, Issue 38, Spring 2019

‘Lucy and I had always functioned as a twosome, held separate and apart from the rest. Distinct.’¹

Lucy’s gaze is one to cringe under: ‘But there was still that strange quality, that penetrating gaze that made me blush and look away and that made me love her and hate her all at once.’² The discovery of a friend’s psychopathic tendencies as an uncomfortable epiphanic disillusionment (that might take months, maybe even years, to realize) is tackled in Christine Mangan’s debut thriller novel, *Tangerine*. With its erotically-charged depiction of unresolved sexual and dialectical tensions in a symbiotic, ultimately toxic friendship between two women, the novel has much to tell about psychopathy, the nature of good and evil, the different voices of the psyche, and the detrimental effects of trauma: ‘The feelings I felt towards Lucy, I often thought, were something like this—something sharper than a normal friendship, something that I felt threatened to overwhelm and, quite possibly, destroy. There were moments when I had thought that I did not so much want her as wanted to be her.’³

The novel is set in 1956 Tangier, and action starts when Lucy Mason appears at the door of Alice Shipley’s apartment in Tangier, where the latter lives with her husband, John (who works for the government). Just when Alice attempts to start a new life after her

¹ Christine Mangan, *Tangerine* (New York: Ecco, 2018), p. 90.

² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

separation from Lucy, the latter's arrival threatens to destroy these efforts: 'And there she was: my past, made corporeal, made tangible, or whatever other fancy words I was certain she would use to describe it.'⁴ And various adventures ensued: '...she had so carefully reinserted herself back into my life without a mention of the past, of her part in what had unfolded between us, the tragedy that had ensconced us.'⁵ Told from the points of view of both Lucy and Alice, the novel's events happen via flashbacks of memories from Bennington College, where they were roommates and best friends. Alice was an orphan who had lost her parents a few years before, and was prone to severe anxiety attacks, hives, and hallucinations, which became even worse after the death of her boyfriend, Tom, during her final year at college. Alice, a meek, mild, and demure girl with a weak personality ('Alice doesn't like to make decisions'), was under the care of her rich aunt, Maud, and therefore had significant amounts of money sent to her.⁶ Lucy, on the contrary, did not have the socio-economic luxury of Alice's upbringing, as she came from 'a struggling, lower-class family. A tiny flat above a garage. An absent mother and father'.⁷ However, it was independent Lucy who was in the position of power over dependent Alice, 'strengthening and emboldening me, her presence serving as an armor I could somehow never manage to affix on my own.'⁸ Lucy had wanted to live Alice's life, but the latter also feasted on her friend's strength—the power she wished she had for herself: 'But her hand remained on the lion, and I was struck by the conviction that this strange little demonstration of defiance was for my benefit—to prove that she was a girl who could not be told what to do, that *she* was not afraid.'⁹

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

However, the truth about Lucy's background is not disclosed (at least not to Alice) until later in the novel, for Lucy, throughout her years of compulsive lying, had feigned orphanhood as well. Alice found herself caught on the horns of a dilemma after Lucy's reappearance into her life; there is an uneasy and suspicious tone in Alice's account of events, where she hints at Lucy's responsibility for the uncanny series of events at Bennington. Alice's suspicions are only heightened, however, during Lucy's stay in Morocco, when Lucy not only admits to but also displays her pathological obsession with Alice. Lucy lets out a parapraxis: 'She had said the next words, ones that were never mentioned in any newspapers, by any police officer [...].'¹⁰ Nevertheless, Lucy keeps planning and plotting during her stay in Tangier, and she finds a local accomplice, Youssef, who helps her to meddle further into Alice's already troubled marriage: 'She had whispered to me about John's infidelities, reminding me of knowledge I already had possessed, though I had worked to bury it, deep.'¹¹ Ultimately, Lucy's goal was to separate Alice from John, in order to give herself leeway to flee with her: 'I thought of the past, of all the plans that we had made, and wondered how it was possible that they had been exchanged for this, for him, though of course I knew it wasn't as simple as that.'¹² Lucy saw that 'John was the problem, the patriarchal head that had to be cut off, the dragon that had to be slain in order to rescue the heroine'.¹³ With that objective in her conniving mind, Lucy uses her manipulation skills to zero in on the enemy.

Mangan's choice of the name 'Lucy' may have ironic connotations—perhaps a reference to the devil, Lucifer. Even the literal meaning of the name, 'bringer of the light', reflects how Lucy had brought her own 'light', or life force, from Alice, feeding on her like a shadow: 'They had come for me at last, my invisible shadows, which Lucy had made real.'¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

Then again, phonetically, the letters in the names of the two women mirror each other. In fact, the reader may sometimes wonder whether Alice and Lucy are actually two distinct people at all, or different depictions of the same person. Lucy wants the perks Alice has, to the extent that she is found stealing some of her belongings, wearing her clothes, and sometimes even using her name/identity. Lucy vampirically and parasitically feeds on Alice's life force, on everything her friend has that she doesn't: 'She had taken everything from me—but I had let her.'¹⁵ In other words, Alice 'had created the lock and [...] had given Lucy the key'.¹⁶ Friend, alter-ego, double, shadow, or evil twin, Lucy, Alice realizes, 'was [...] that awful, wretched part of me that should be locked away and boarded up forever [...]. She was the unfiltered version, the rawness that no one should ever see. She was every wicked thought, every forbidden desire turned real and visceral.'¹⁷

Many juxtapositions appear in Alice and Lucy's symbiotic relationship: the innocent with the manipulative, goodwill and malevolence, the weak and the strong, and the dependent versus the independent. Elements of eighteenth-century gothic literature (the area of concentration of Mangan's PhD) appear in the haunting/haunted behaviour of Alice and Lucy, and gothic literary elements are sometimes alluded to: '[...] it no longer felt like I was some gothic heroine trapped in a haunted castle, a patriarchal labyrinth that was impossible to ever escape. Instead I was simply Alice and she was Lucy, and there was nothing to be afraid of any longer.'¹⁸ Moreover, there is more gothic charm apparent in the novel's psychological overlay, apparent by the influence of surroundings on the characters' minds. Oftentimes Lucy describes the merging of the dark forces within her with the external dark setting: 'I had felt it: the darkness around me, transforming and moving me, making me into something that I

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

had not intended, a monster I had not foreseen.’¹⁹ Alice, on the other hand, is mentally affected by Tangier and its heat: ‘There’s something about a hot, sunny day that puts my teeth on edge. I always feel as though I’m teetering on the precipice of something.’²⁰

Brimming with psychological undertones, *Tangerine* makes for highly inventive, entertaining, and mind-stimulating storytelling. An instant success and suspenseful page-turner, the novel, with its colourful characterization, climactic plot twists, and clever language, leaves the reader wondering about the nature of conscious and unconscious thoughts through the matrices of the mind. Given the novel’s many references to the psyche, sanity, trauma, psychopathy, obsession, as well as allusions to the Jungian concept of the ‘shadow’ archetype, the reader discovers a rich psychological vein that is worth exploring. Alice and Lucy are both wonderfully complex characters, with just the right dose of sanity (or lack thereof) to guide readers through their labyrinthine minds. Moreover, this bestselling psychological thriller also happens to be one of the most-awaited book-to-movie projects now—to be produced by Smokehouse Pictures, George Clooney and Grant Heslov’s production company, and starring Scarlett Johansson.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.