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Review of *Our Wives Under the Sea* by M. E. Boothby

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UNIMAGINABLE CONDITIONS

Review by M. E. Boothby

Armfield, Julia. *Our Wives Under The Sea*. Picador, 2022. Novel. 231 pp.

Those familiar with Julia Armfield's short story work, particularly her 2019 collection *Salt Slow*, will not be disappointed by her first foray into the novel form. *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) sculpts a story of beautiful weirdness from a number of Armfield's recurring themes: women, bodies, queerness, mutation, and empathetic monsters. At moments, this book slips into the pace of a shorter story – coming across, in rare instances, as glistening fragments soldered together just a bit too quickly. However, it is ultimately a spellbinding, haunting novel about queer love, memory, and grief, made strange through its grotesque and monstrous elements.

Our Wives Under the Sea is divided into five parts, titled with the scientific names for the layers of ocean depth: Sunlight Zone, Twilight Zone, Midnight Zone, Abyssal Zone, and Hadal Zone. The book is also divided by perspective, with chapters alternating between the first-person narration of the two married protagonists, Miri and Leah. These perspectives also flit back and forth in time, shifting between the present and the past with effortless fluidity, and the resulting effect is a novel that ebbs and flows like the titular sea. Armfield masterfully weaves Leah and Miri's love story across multiple timelines, across their past and present selves, pulling us toward the eventual surface of a whole understanding. Miri begins her first flashback by saying she will tell their story "in pieces, then: a long time ago, we met" (17). She reels her memories of Leah up from the dark, just as Leah herself eventually rises from the bottom of the ocean.

The central time marker in *Our Wives Under the Sea*, the critical before-and-after point, is Leah's disappearance and subsequent changed return. Leah works for "the Centre for Marine Inquiry," or just "the Centre," an organisation that sends her and two coworkers, Jelka and Matteo, on what is meant to be a short mission to the ocean floor in a deep sea submarine. Due to suspicious malfunctions, this submersion ends up lasting six months, during which the crew is unofficially missing. The Centre is cagey about details and we, as readers, must piece together what happened to Leah during those six months on the ocean floor – a chilling and existential slow decline, both literal and psychological – at the same excruciating pace as Miri, who hoards clues amidst agonising uncertainty. Upon her return to Miri, who had come to assume her dead, Leah is different – at first psychologically distant and then, gradually, physically mutating as well. As Leah bleeds from her skin, undergoes inexplicable changes, and spends all her time in salted bathtub water, the couple's shared apartment begins to take on the same suffocating feeling of containment as the submarine

in Leah's flashback chapters. Miri grows increasingly desperate for answers from the unresponsive Centre, but the longer Leah stays in the bathtub and the harder Miri tries to connect with her the more we begin to realise that all the norms of medicine, support, and bureaucracy must be relinquished if Leah is to find peace. This novel thus navigates the line between the mundane and the weird with original deftness.

However, *Our Wives Under the Sea* ultimately leans away from its monsters and mutation by leaving them broadly ambiguous, their existence open to the possibility of doubt in the claustrophobic, sanity-challenging environments of the stranded submarine and the couple's isolating apartment. The novel explores grief and loss through mysterious voices and creatures of the deep sea and through the watery transformations of Leah's body but, overall, its Fantastika elements are understated, creeping up on us, as phantasmagorical as the shifting voices that Leah may or may not hear through the walls of the submarine. In this haunting way, *Our Wives Under the Sea* is a novel about what it takes to let a loved one go. It is about trauma and about what happens when a person we love experiences something that changes them permanently. Armfield asks: how does our love for someone shift and mutate and adapt when they come back to us irrevocably changed, even damaged? Can we accept that what they need may no longer be something we are capable of giving? And can we sacrifice our own happiness in the name of letting our loved one evolve or move beyond where we can follow? Miri struggles to live with the Leah that returns to her, a Leah that is not 'her' Leah. Through these examinations of love and loss, *Our Wives Under the Sea* also depicts queer love in a deeply honest way. Miri and Leah's marriage feels real precisely because of its complexity, its painful joy, and its inevitable grief. Love and loss are as intertwined in Armfield's novel as the "air and water and me between them, not quite either" (228).

In considering what this novel adds to Fantastika, readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) may try to interpret *Our Wives Under the Sea* in a variety of categorising ways. Is this novel an SFF story about the deep sea and mutation? A ghost story? A queer love story? Is it a meditation on change and loss and grief that just so happens to include a haunted, monstrous, agential ocean, or is it all of the above? *Our Wives Under the Sea* falls within a general trend towards genre amorphousness in SFF, one that often entangles and celebrates monstrosity, femininity, and queerness. Contemporaries of Armfield in this sense might be said to include Daisy Johnson, Aliya Whiteley, Carmen Maria Machado, Chana Porter, and Charlie Jane Anders, despite the fact that these authors are often classified under differing genre headings.

Indeed, like Leah's shifting, fluid body, this novel defies definition. Armfield opens with the line "The deep sea is a haunted house: a place in which things that ought not to exist move about in the darkness," immediately conflating the literary tradition of the Gothic with both impossible monstrosity and an awareness of the current limits of human scientific exploration (3). Scientific fact and its relation to the ecological as-yet unknown is central to this novel. While the physical things that occur in the novel are fantastic, certainly, they are rooted in an understanding of the ocean as an ecosystem. This is a book focalised through Leah's immersion in marine biology, a fact that further blurs its Fantastika plot points with science leaving the reader just a little bit uncertain about what is reality and what is not. For example, in the "Midnight Zone" section of the novel, Leah says that,

“from here on, you’re down in the dark,” depths at which bodies “seldom come with blood and bones included” (76). This mirrors the way that the reader is ‘in the dark’ about the concrete reality of the story’s world, what is really happening. Leah tells us that “There are big things down here, old things, and certainly more of them than we know about,” and reminds us how little humans know of the deep sea (76). This foregrounding of scientific unknowns and the mystery of the oceans lends a peculiar, mesmerising credence to the fantastic events that Armfield then presents us with. *Our Wives Under the Sea* thus serves us a rich combination of everything from weird Lovecraftian SFF to family drama and the ecoGothic.

In conclusion, Armfield’s debut novel is as heartbreakingly beautiful as it is strange, exactly as fans of her short stories would expect. It is both eerie and messily human. Upon Leah’s return from the bottom of the sea, she tells Miri, “things can survive in unimaginable conditions. All they need is the right sort of skin” (3). While this is most obviously alluding to the changes that Leah’s physical skin will undergo, it also speaks to the story’s exploration of loss and trauma as another set of “unimaginable conditions,” the pain of which perhaps calls for the growth of a new ‘thick’ skin. *Our Wives Under the Sea* asks us: what kind of skin do we need to live in this world of pain and love and grief and longing? A hard shell, a thick skin, is not its answer. It asks: in what kinds of unimaginable conditions can queer love survive? And with tender ferocity, like a bite that does not break that protean skin, it asserts queer resilience and continuance – that love, like life, can survive anywhere. As Leah says, “There are no empty places [...] However deep you go [...] you’ll find something there” (4).

BIONOTE

M. E. Boothby (she/they) is a temporary, human-shaped assemblage of matter and microorganisms, currently existing on the traditional territory of the Beothuk, Mi’kmaq, Innu, and Inuit peoples, on the island of Newfoundland, Canada. She is a PhD candidate at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and has studied at Queen’s University Canada and the University of Edinburgh. Her research explores the queer, neuroqueer, and ecocritical intersections of Science Fiction and Fantasy. She has been published in *Untethered Magazine*, *Horseshoe Literary Magazine*, *Ultraviolet Magazine* and *Gothic Nature*.