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BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS THROUGH THE FRACTURED LIMINAL GLASS

Review by Ksenia Shcherbino

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Wild and Wicked Things (2022) explores a rite of passage – into adulthood, womanhood, witchhood, and personhood – against the lush background of the roaring twenties, the restless vagaries of the first post-war generation, and bootlegged magic. It glorifies the transformative possibility of love that triumphs against all the odds, but it also challenges the silencing and suffocating rites of society that entrap the main characters in the encasement of privilege and prejudice. The book's interaction with liminality, as a threshold state, is of particular interest, resulting in a re-definition of self and acquisition of voice and action, through which the interwoven narratives of this book come together in the moment of shifting the established power bringing to light secrets and previously silenced voices.

Annie, the main character, comes to Crow Island to reclaim her estranged father's inheritance. We first meet her crossing the water on a ferry from her old established life into the unknown, symbolising her liminal social state. The first words she speaks are those of haunting: "Crow Island might be haunted, but it couldn't be much different than the rest of England had been since the war, life trudging on despite the ghosts" (13). We see Annie passing through the first stage of the rite of passage, separation. She is all alone: estranged from her father (his family name, Crowther, is reminiscent of Aleister Crowley, notorious nineteenth-century occultist and magician), detached from her mother, and separated from her friends. She does not move into the big mansion her father left and chooses a small cottage on the outskirts. She does not try to mix in the life of the isle; she observes it from the threshold, avoiding her father's friends, lingering in the shadows of her neighbour's house without joining the party. Yet her coming to the Crow Isle marks the second stage of her rite of passage: she enters a magical/spiritual realm that has few similarities to the one she left. Here, she will undergo a transformation that will allow her to return to her previous life, empowered and ready to challenge the world.

The story vacillates between the two narrators, Annie and Emmeline, a strange and powerful woman she is attracted to, and short insertions from the diary of Annie's father. The poly-perspective narratives are poised in a delicate balance between contested territories of identity and belonging. The country is ravaged by war and the gap between the rich and the poor is ever-expanding. It is worth noting the book's parallels with the Prohibition-era society of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and its echoes of Britain's between-the-wars golden youth. It is sound to suggest that the *Wild and Wicked Things* of the title are just the other side of the Bright Young Things, the young partygoers of the

twenties who were, in their times, referred to as both wicked and wild and even vile as in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930).¹ Aristocratic, attention-seeking, flamboyant, decadent, rebellious, promiscuous, irresponsible, outrageous, and glamorous, they could be guests populating Emmeline's parties – "all young, beautiful strangers dressed in bright party garb, their headdresses sparkling, their peacock and dove feathers wilted and crumpled [...] a cacophony of noise, the heat of bodies crushed against one another, the light of a thousand twinkling electric stars" (29). Yet behind all this razzle-dazzle lies a haunting un-rootedness and a desire to belong.

In her analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, Meredith Goldsmith suggests that Gatsby's parties were an exercise in performative assimilation, an act of passing for, rather than being, authentic: "Shadowed by the excision of racial and ethnic performance, Gatsby's parties simultaneously celebrate the power of popular entertainment and manifest the efforts of the bourgeois culture to contain it" (453). Gatsby himself is excluded from the power structure and is forced not just to reinvent himself but to perform himself to fit in. Similarly, none of the young characters in *Wild and Wicked Things* are societally authentic. No wonder we first meet Emmeline and her family at a party: the party is a liminal space between the accepted boundaries, a carnival where one can pretend they belong. Most of the key moments happen at a party, too. Emmeline and others write themselves into the constrictive world of Crow Island through make-belief and magic, societal transgression, and taboo. One of the visual symbols of this transgression is the immaculately tailored man's suit worn by Emmeline as she first appears to Annie: a statement of both her self-identification and a tool of her social mobility, as power on Crow Island is concentrated in the hands of rich white men.

The old and the mighty – the unnamed Council of Witches who watch over the Island – are not quite embodied, yet the weight of their power shapes the young generation's perspective. The antagonism between the old and the young – Annie's estranged family, Emmeline's childhood abuse, the background noise of prohibition and disapproval – breaks out into a fight for survival, a fight to reclaim one's place in the world. Our main characters are outsiders – to the system with its strictly defined classes and gender roles and to the Island itself. The old money – property, ancestry, title – gives you a position in this world. The young are only accepted if they follow the rules of the pedigree and give up on their desires. Thus, Arthur, Bea's young and rich husband, is a walking dead even before his death, "stunted and mutilated" by the Establishment, to quote Evelyn Waugh's apt description of the war generation in *The Spectator* (1929). Despite all his wealth, Arthur, with his disapproval of glittering parties and fear of magic and change, is displaced and lost. Society had broken him long before magic did. The society of Crow Island stands for the dead, not for the living. Those who refuse to die inside are marginalised, ousted from the narrative of power through the secrets left untold; half-truths invented for the sake of (self-)preservation, or lies.

Being bright, young, and full of life is often chastised as being wild, as opposed to the settled conformity of power. Wilderness is a liminal landscape, not conforming to the property, propriety, and tradition hierarchy. And as such, it is not just a danger to the established norms but invites transgression. The warning voiced by Arthur could not be less ambiguous: "You shouldn't get involved with them. Those people are courting trouble" (44). Annie's neighbours did not just have parties; they were challenging the accepted course of social interaction. Their seemingly innocent

pastime was a disruption, a deviation, a challenge to the patriarchy (young people, moreover, young women running a business of their own, and a business that is borderline illegal!). No wonder the name of Annie's love interest, ruthless and manly Emmeline, echoes that of Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the suffragettes. The suffragettes' fight has an indirect echo, too – the fight for independence, for a break from convention, for a right of their own, be it right to practice magic, love who you want or lead a carefree life. Using Victor Turner's description of liminality in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), the suffragettes' movement forms part of the liminal where "profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, [and] the social order may seem to have been turned upside down" (27). And, like the suffragettes, the young women of *Wild and Wicked Things* are prepared to use force to ascertain their rights.

This fight for acceptance defines the two main love stories of the novel. Love is so deeply intertwined with power that it is hard to determine which conditions are which. On the one hand, there is Bea, who uses love and magic as a tool to attain higher social standing and pursue a conventional Cinderella-style rags-to-riches romance. Her doomed marriage with Arthur is both performative and restrictive. She tries hard to fake happiness and fulfilment but her non-belonging shows through her desperate desire to party, suppressed by her husband. Still, the spectacle of Bea's social advancement pursued with vehement single-mindedness is tinged by her belief in true love and a fairy-tale ending – did she play with magic because she wanted to marry the elites or because she was desperately hoping for love? Was her marriage's dark and macabre end prompted by her willingness to trade her identity in exchange for acceptance? Was her socially acceptable strive for advancement through marriage a denial of her power, and was it this treason, coupled with her betrayal of Emmeline, the reason for her downfall?

But the truly transformative force that allows the characters to be re-integrated into society on their terms is the love between Annie and Emmeline, unaided by performance or magic. Early Modern British society, though quite tolerant about romanticised female friendship, would have never approved of such an overtly physical passion nor accepted their position of strength and ability.² The limits of societal tolerance lie within covertness and powerlessness: as Martha Vicinus suggests in "The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity" (1992), "women's deviant sexual behaviors [...] continued to be male-defined transgression dominated by male language, theories and traditions" (484). Yet Annie and Emmeline refused to be framed by male language or male power. The forbidden, unimaginable, unacceptable love challenges the make-belief of societal norms and offers the characters a chance to speak for themselves. By accepting it, they break out of their chrysalis, prompting the most violent pages in the book, peeling off all the rules that bound them to reclaim their voices. They speak up for themselves in different ways – confessing their love, weaknesses, secrets, and faults in liberated speech as they forge their own future – that, despite all the tragic events, holds a ray of hope for a better life. This conclusion to Annie's narrative represents the third stage of liminality that marks a return to a higher-level status, having completed her rite of passage. She re-joins the world as a different person – equipped with knowledge, experience, magic and, most importantly, love.

As a book, *Wild and Wicked Things* offers a lot of things at once. It plays with the tropes of Gothic romance and societal comedy of manners, though personally, I found some of the scenes too Gothic in a somehow Hollywood way. It is a defiant coming-out narrative that highlights the silenced LGBTQ+ voices in an imagined neo-Victorian setting, and it is also a steampunk re-writing of the suffragette movement and an adamant renunciation of male patriarchy. It is a story about female friendship and female empowerment and how any empowerment can taint your life. It is also a very touching and emotional response to coping with grief, loss, and letting go. But all these possible readings intersect to form a story about finding one's true self and one's place of belonging.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of Bright Young Thing see D. J. Taylor's *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* (2007).
2. For discussion of acceptability of romantic relationship between women see Martha Vicinus "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity." (1992) and Amanda Herbert's *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (2014).

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BIONOTE

Ksenia Shcherbino is a short story writer, illustrator, dancer, and researcher. Her PhD was focused on liminal spaces in Victorian poetry, and now her research is extended into liminality, memory and belonging in speculative fiction. She lives in London, UK.