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The Meaning We Are All Looking For

*The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Lê Thị Diễm Thúy was a frustrating read. The writing rests on an uncomfortable ledge between memoir and poem, unable to make up its mind. As we are whisked around slices of time such as the nameless narrator’s past memories and several one-off experiences, it’s difficult to discern what the underlaying meaning of the combined events add up to. Closer to a series of short stories, each chapter of the book has its own disconnected story to tell. While *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* uses advanced and unorthodox writing techniques and styles, it falls short of its potential due to its overuse of imagery and detail, complex symbolism, and underdeveloped characters.

Mel, a minor character only present in the first chapter of the book, is described in excruciating detail for seemingly no real purpose:

*When Mel approached us at the airport, we heard a faint rattling: a ring full of gold and silver keys hanging from his belt. With each step Mel took, the ring swung and rattled by his side. The keys were new to him. Mel was tall and thin, but the ring looked fat, important. Mel caught the ring and pushed it into his pocket. This silenced the keys for a moment. He shook everyone’s hand…* (Le 5)

This extended description seems to indicate the presence of deeper meaning, maybe even something vital to understanding Mel’s character. But in reality, little about Mel is actually being said. What other purpose do these descriptions of trivial matters have than that of a rhetorical question? Is it simply exposition or is there something more to be seen? Perhaps this abstract, fill-in-the-meaning attitude is effective in poetry, but it’s presence in a memoir or novel steals the spotlight and shifts focus away from what is already a meaningful immigration narrative.

The false cues of symbolism from extended descriptions are the least of this novel’s issues. What remains of intentional symbolism is what is either too complex to be detected, or what serves little meaning or purpose:

*One night, Mr. Russel fell asleep and dreamed that the boards were seabirds sitting on the waves. He saw a hand scoop the birds up from the water. It was not his hand and it was not the hand of God. The birds went flying in all direction across the blinding blue sky of Mr. Russell’s dream, but finally he saw them fly in only one direction and that was toward the point where in the dream he understood himself to be waiting, somewhere beyond the frame.* (Le 5)

Just like with Mel’s keys, the author delegates the responsibility of providing meaning to the readers. Bird imagery is plentiful during the remainder of the book but never are these birds explained. Other confusing and dubious metaphors include the glass butterfly metaphor that spanned a large part of chapter 1. Post-analysis, it seems obvious that the glass butterfly was a projection of the narrator’s self-perception, but while reading, the square-shaped symbol of the glass butterfly didn't seem to fit within the circle-shaped hole of the narrative. Oftentimes, the excessive symbolism feels like a substitute for missing dialogue or a character’s inner thoughts and feelings. Because of the use of imagery, it is difficult to clearly say that Mr. Russel wanted to help the Vietnamese refugees or that the butterfly was truly meant as a manifestation of how the narrator viewed her situation. In both cases, neither piece of imagery or metaphor is ever brought up again later in the story, leaving the reader on another search for true meaning.

The unnecessary imagery and symbolism distract from what should have been the focus of the entire book: the character development. Unfortunately, throughout the story, there is not much character development to be seen. Ba’s character development seems to be limited to finding solace in his gardening and getting more and more violent. He appears to be squarely stuck in the same trauma from the war and re-education camp. While Ma would seem to be an important character to the narrator, the book never explains Ma’s journey to California or if she had to suffer through the same experiences as the narrator and Ba. Oddly enough, the most disengaged character seems to be the narrator herself, choosing to focus on objects and dreamscapes more than people. Perhaps it could be the writing style, but the narrator always seemed fairly removed from the situation that she was part of. While Ma and Ba fought, the narrator “[ran] out front and dance[d] like a crazy lady” (Le 93) in front of all of the nosey neighbors. During a separate argument she locked herself in the bathroom and “pretend that [she] was at the ocean on the world’s hottest day” (Le 66). While this is a more typical reaction than dancing, the curt, blocky comment about the arguments seemed to convey a lack of interest or overall affect. Like many of the narrator’s actions, it feels cold and emotionless, completely detached from the events at play. Frustratingly, the narrator acts as more of a clinical record rather than a stained-glass window into her experiences. Why can’t we hear what she’s thinking or feel what she is feeling? Put simply, the author refuses to spell things out and would rather the reader create their own interpretations of the events presented.

The emphasis on imagery and resulting deemphasis on plot and character development may simply be a writing style, but at what point does it take away from the meaning of an already interesting story? The show-not-tell attitude of the writing and ambiguously symbolic representations of people are a poor replacement for a more cut-and-dry description of an emotion playing across a character. All the more frustrating that the end of the book feels like the author expected readers to fill it in themselves. In many ways, this book reads more like poetry than it does a memoir, what with its complexities and subtexts leading to suspiciously similar over-analysis and derivation of meaning where no meaning existed in the first place.

2/5 -Cole Gannon