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**Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train*, hardcover, 320 pages,
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Commuters into London often find inspiration on trains. In the tedium of the journey and the enforced solitude that Londoners impose upon themselves in public spaces, surrounded by strangers, a face can arrest our attention. Wondering about that life, we spin endless hypotheses and stories about that person. We may imagine fruitful or romantic encounters, the beginning of a new life. As our imaginations run riot, the outline for a novel may emerge. Such a moment of inspiration has sown the seed for Paula Hawkins's interesting debut; in the acknowledgements, she thanks London commuters for this creative stimulation.

The Girl on the Train is a psychological thriller. The novel is structured in terms of the commute into and from London, in the transitional period between the comfortable contexts of home and the work-a-day world: a diary entry in the morning and a diary entry in the evening. The whole novel is formally organised in terms of its relationship to London. Indeed the work could be seen as a comment on London's centrality for its writers, those who invent and investigate the cracks that the city opens up in our lives. The diary entries are mostly from the perspective of Rachel, a voyeur who initially sees the houses along the train line as though they are part of a film, and from another voice, set in a time before the first, the voice of the missing woman Megan, around whose disappearance the novel turns. Another minor character in the novel is also given a voice, although to a lesser extent: Anna, the contented housewife that has taken over Rachel's previous home and husband. The action of the novel mostly occurs in the fictional Witney, an area in the suburbs which has a London end and is both part of the City and its periphery.

The novel begins with an element of mystery. An anonymous voice refers to an unnamed woman buried beneath a silver birch tree, near some old train tracks. The voice wants a 'remembrance' for the departed woman. There is more from the anonymous voice, now slightly incoherent, poised between rhyme and reason. Already we are being introduced to the central theme of the novel: the mystery of the stranger, the unknown personality. We then move to the first diary entry of the novel by Rachel on Friday, July 5, 2013. The diarist, a commuter into London from Ashbury—a fictional 1960s new town in Buckinghamshire—to Euston, is quickly introduced as a person who has been accused in the past, by her nearest and dearest, of having an overactive imagination. She turns out to be single and a lonely alcoholic who drinks on the train for comfort.

Rachel emerges as an interesting figure situated outside belonging and society. She compares herself with other London commuters whom she sees as paragons of normalcy. Like a female Jekyll and Hyde, Rachel's two sides—the sober and the drunken—struggle with each other. Rachel loves trains, and she bought her old house because it was near them. She used to dream of taking romantic train journeys with Tom, her ex-husband. Rachel's inability to bear a child makes her turn to drink and tragically destroys her life and marriage. After the divorce, she feels like a guest in her own home, has lost her job—although she keeps up her commute into and from London in order to maintain the pretence of employment to her flatmate—and says that she has 'lost control over everything, even the places in my head' (18). She calls herself 'damaged', and her troubled state is matched by a deterioration in her looks. She is unable to let go of her ex, Tom, whom she pesters with drunken phone calls and whose surname she has not relinquished. Her daily train journey takes her past the house she lived in with Tom.

Rachel is unable to let go of the past in her fantasies on the unnecessary commute into and from London, a journey 'without point or purpose' (95). She may be undertaking the commute to sustain these very fantasies. Indeed, Rachel invests her imagination in one of the houses she passes on her train journey near her own previous home, the one she attempts to avoid seeing. She names its occupants Jess and Jason, the latter after a film star, and sees their house as a film set in a silent movie. Rachel idealises the couple's relationship, and they enable her to recall her happy life before the split.

The novel alternates Rachel's diary entries with the voice of Megan, the woman who goes missing, whom Rachel calls 'Jess'. It is not often that the victim is allowed to speak in her own voice. Megan is a cheating, bored suburbanite who also mourns her past: her career in a chic art gallery. She is connected to Rachel in a number of other ways. She is a nearby neighbour and for a period she minds the child of Rachel's ex, Tom, and his new partner, Anna. Like Rachel, Megan is also struggling emotionally. She suffers from insomnia and panic attacks for which she sees a therapist, and she hides a dark secret.

The story really begins when Rachel sees Megan—her 'Jess'—kissing a man from her train and then realises that Megan is the missing person in the news and that no one else knows about her lover. As Rachel herself writes, the shock of the disappearance makes her realise that Megan is real, not a character in a film. Indeed,

the novel deals with the realities lurking behind fantasy. As Rachel investigates the mystery, her interest in something other than her own misery brings her back into her past territory in the fictitious Witney and eventually into the very house she has watched from the outside and imbued with her fantasies of love and belonging. Rachel's immersion in the mystery is tinged with an element of self-doubt and guilt: she had an alcohol-induced blackout on the night of Megan's disappearance and was in Witney when it happened and may be connected in some way with the event.

Through its exploration of Rachel's life, the novel considers how loss of family life causes suffering and disconnection with the world. Rachel is characterised so fully that we are able to appreciate all the nuances of her hurt caused by the fantasy of the perfect family. The novel suggests that beyond the cultural ideal, the realities of the family are entirely different. By taking us into the lives of the damaged, the novel also provides insight into the people's terrible actions: for instance, Rachel becomes a stalker. The novel also delves beyond surface appearances into the intimate lives and histories of strangers, and thus questions the extent to which others are merely products of our imagination, an extension of our own minds.

That the novel is told in three different female voices has made some critics claim it has feminist underpinnings. In her review of the novel in *The Huffington Post*, Claire Fallon asserts that the novel is involved in the 'picking apart of stereotypes and oppressive social constructs'. She writes that '*The Girl on the Train* wants us to think about why we hasten to dismiss women who seem broken and confused, when these qualities are often signs of a more painful backstory'. Or again, she argues that 'Hawkins' masterful deployment of unwittingly unreliable narration to evoke the aftershocks of abuse and trauma is an equally powerful way of exploring women's marginalization'.

I disagree with Fallon's interpretation of the novel. *The Girl on the Train* is strongly reminiscent of the themes of early forms of the thriller or mystery. Indeed, it is useful to compare it with Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, generally regarded as the first detective novel. At the centre of each novel is an imposter who pretends to be what he or she is not and almost deceives everyone. Both novels include unconscious mental states—inebriation or an opium-induced trance—which mystify the central characters despite their implication in the crucial events of the novel. Also, in both novels, we have the investigation of different perspectives and different voices around the events linking them. Not least, both novels deal with a disappearance: the disappearance of the jewel in the earlier work, the disappearance of the woman in the latter. In terms of both form and content, *The Girl on the Train* is hugely reminiscent of Victorian detective fiction. This comparison is not intended to detract from the value of the novel, merely to suggest that pigeonholing the novel in terms of feminist politics seems somewhat reductive.

Overall, this is a captivating and compelling read. On the one hand, the terse sentences are immensely inviting, and the tight, spare construction adds to the air of mystery and suspense. On the other hand, I wonder at the lasting value of prose shorn of all poetry. In addition to these reservations, some readers suggest that the key test of a work in this genre is if it managed to fool its reader as to the identity of the guilty party. Despite its cunning misdirection, the novel was not able to do this as

I managed to locate the criminal before the final reveal. Hawkins crafts beautiful characterisations of the two main voices in the work. Yet her characterisation of the minor character Anna, the third woman given a voice, is extremely thin, even though a woman who is proud to be a mistress would seem to be a rather complicated creature. However, this novel is certainly a successful debut, and it uses the conventions of the genre to great effect. It asks us what paths and avenues of thought and imagination the journey into London may lead us into, especially those Londoners for whom London is mainly working London, not London as home.

Reference

Fallon, Claire. 2015 'Why Everyone's Talking About "The Girl on the Train"'. *The Huffington Post*, (4 February), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/04/why-everyones-talking-abo_n_6605958.html [accessed 18 October 2015]

Note on Contributor

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