



THE HAZEL TREE

Edition 5, October 2013

Striking Similarities

In the middle of the summer holidays, I went to the big new public library in Wakefield... which is very nice, full of purple and green easy chairs and sofas, with huge windows where you can look out across the city. The next day I was to go to London (Croydon specifically) to visit my dad for the weekend, so I had decided to go and borrow a book for the four-hour journey down on the coach.

After wandering around idly glancing at all the different book categories, I ended up choosing a book from the shelf marked 'General Fiction'. I chose *Various Pets Alive and Dead*, by Marina Lewycka. I had already read her *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, and just by reading the blurb of this new book, it promised to run in a similarly entertaining vein to the last one. On the coach journey down, this latest book turned out to definitely be funny, but whilst I was trying to keep my giggles to a minimum, it struck me at the same time how similar in themes and ideas both the books were.

For a start both books have a Ukrainian character; this is perhaps understandable as Lewycka is of Ukrainian origin. Both books have a character that only sees the positive things in life, and one who views life in a cynical way. Both books have a misbehaving animal whose gender is misidentified and who disappears only to reappear at the end when all the drama in the rest of the storyline has been solved. There is always a ridiculous character that the rest of the characters are worried about, and think that they are mentally ill.

I'm not criticising what I see as many similarities between the two novels – Anne Frank once remarked on how an author she was reading repeated the same sort of opinions and phrases in her other books – but it made me realise how hard it is as a writer to dissociate yourself and your own thoughts from your character(s). Lewycka was born in, I think, a war camp in 1940's Germany, and her character Vera in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* was also born in a war camp: incidentally, she is that book's cynical and pessimistic character. It is said that all fiction

writing is partly autobiographical. Critics have likened Jacqueline Wilson's main story-themes of little-girl-lost to her own, only-child childhood. In the book *Great Expectations*, the protagonist, Pip, is similar to his creator, Charles Dickens. Even in *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks, currently being studied

by the Upper Sixth, Faulks states in his introduction that a date in his novel is the birthday of a real-life friend.

It's obviously natural that a writer would base their book on their own experiences, especially if they followed the advice/cliché of 'write what you know', which definitely made me realise what difficulties exactly a writer faces. When talking to someone about writing books, they exclaimed, 'Oh, everyone writes a book nowadays.' Which does seem to be true, but that doesn't make it an easy task. However, next time I read something of Lewycka, (I'm thinking of *We're All Made Of Glue*), I'll enjoy trying to spot the similarities and the repeating motifs in what she writes.

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