Everything is not as it seems

A review of *The Girl on the Train*
By: Paula Hawkins

Edgar Allen Poe's quote, "Believe nothing that you hear, and only half of what you see" acts as a good basis for Paula Hawkins' debut thriller novel *The Girl on the Train*. While looking through the glass pane on a train during her daily commute to London, a young woman avoids her sad reality by watching and fantasizing about a couple that she sees nearly every day on the patio of their house not far from the tracks. Rachel, the main narrator of the novel, has trouble coping with the end of her marriage and strategically invents the lives of a young couple, who she names Jess and Jason that reside in a house, much like her old one, by the train tracks. When Rachel witnesses something out of the ordinary with 'Jess' she is thrown into the middle of a murder investigation. In this thrilling novel, Rachel must piece together snippets of her broken memory to solve the mystery of her beloved Jess' disappearance.

Hawkins does an expert job keeping the reader as confused as the main narrator throughout the novel. She spends a lot of time creating a believable yet unreliable narrator to

guide the reader through the story and allow the reader to experience the narrator's emotions as they come.

The novel is very character driven, though it has a complex plot. It is written in three different points of view; Rachel, the unreliable, obsessive, sad drunk who has nothing to live for following the end of her marriage. Anna, the mistress that won the heart of Rachel's ex-husband, Tom, and who ultimately caused the end of Rachel's marriage. And Megan, the seemingly innocent young woman who Rachel watches and idolizes from her seat on the train. What is interesting about having three narrators is the fact that Hawkins attempts to fill in missing pieces of each woman's story with another woman's story. This may seem difficult but Hawkins does this methodically. She seamlessly scatters each narrator's account of the night in question throughout the novel while weaving the stories together to create an intricate plot.

One would think that having a story written from the views of three different people would create a more reliable or accurate depiction of the night in question. Instead, all the characters have faults that ultimately label them as unreliable when it comes to providing small details throughout the novel: Rachel, whose memory is full of blackouts and holes, Anna whose memory is all intricate lies formulated to protect herself, and Megan who is the victim.

However, Hawkins' skill with character development is something to applaud. Each character is so well thought out and complex that the reader has a hard time developing and holding on to their feelings about each one. For example, Hawkins excels at making it difficult for the reader to feel sorry for Rachel. She creates a character that is so idiotic and pathetic that it's almost impossible for the reader to have any sympathy for her. It seems that no matter how many things go wrong in her life, Rachel is determined to remain a drunk all while convincing herself that she will take the steps to get better "tomorrow." Her ex-husband, Tom, reminds her of this constantly, saying, "I'm surprised you remember anything at all, Rachel. You were blind

drunk. Filthy, stinking drunk. Staggering all over the place." Throughout most of the novel, Rachel realizes that her drinking is the cause of much of the confusion in her life, but she is far too afraid of what life would be like if she were sober to actually restrain herself. Hawkins writes Rachel's character as someone a reader would typically sympathize with. However, because she uses alcohol as a crutch, it's hard to find a reason to like her or to find justification in many of her motives.

Anna's character is one that doesn't have much of an arc. From the beginning of the novel, Anna's hate toward Rachel is crystal clear. She feels sorry for her husband's ex-wife, but she also believes that Rachel deserves everything she gets. Anna feels fortunate and entitled to her new lifestyle with Tom, and sees no end to her happiness. By the end of the novel Anna's character doesn't go through much of a change, but she does come to a few solid realizations that, although are made for her own selfish needs, still turn out to benefit Rachel. What Anna fails to realize through most of the novel is that she is not much better off than Rachel, and in some weak moments she starts to resent her husband's ex-wife.

Megan, the seemingly innocent young woman who is one half of Rachel's fantasy couple leaves a lot to be desired. As Jess, Megan seems to have it all: the nice house, the perfect husband, the perfect job, happiness and the all-around perfect life. But when we realize that Megan isn't at all like Rachel's fantasy woman, the reader is left wondering about Megan's value to the story. In reality, Megan is sad, unmotivated, bored and lonely. She resembles Rachel only because it seems that they are both scared of being alone. "I can't do this, I can't just be a wife. I don't understand how anyone does it— there is literally nothing to do but wait. Wait for a man to come home and love you. Either that or look around for something to distract you". Unlike Rachel, however, Megan's insecurities are somewhat justified and that allows the reader to feel sympathetic towards her.

Rachel's drive throughout the novel, although unchronological and maddening, is one to praise. She forces herself into situations out of her reach because she has no direction of her own. She is uninterested in finding a new job, she doesn't plan on leaving her ex-husband alone, and she is obsessing over a life that does not belong to her. Rachel searches for purpose and that is probably the only characteristic that makes her likeable to the reader. Overall, Rachel's drive is the only interesting thing that she has going for her.

The entire novel proves that one cannot merely see something and instantly have all the facts. It also proves that not everything you hear is true, most things are either lost in translation or used in the wrong context. Hawkins accurately teaches these life lessons to readers in this novel all while keeping the reader entertained and wondering who is actually telling the truth. I admire Hawkins' use of suspense; she keeps the reader fully engaged throughout the entire story without giving away too much at one time. It's remarkable that she could keep most of the mystery until the very end of the book. All in all, the novel is full of thrill, jealousy, wit, suspense, and twisted comedy.

The Girl on the Train: A Novel

By: Paula Hawkins

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