

Of Sports & Women's Bodies

Book review

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2017

a review of

The Little Communist Who Never Smiled by Lola Lafon. Seven Stories Press, 2016, 320 pp. English translation from French by Nick Caistor

"Today, it is an older, wearier Nadia who raises her arms. She leans into a back walkover, but she falters and falls. "I am not a perfect 10 anymore," Nadia says. "I can only try my best."

—*People Magazine*, 1990 (she was 28)

The Little Communist Who Never Smiled is an impossibly insightful imagining of the events and the political and emotional aftermath of Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci's incredible performance at the 1976 Olympics.

From the first chapter, which plunges us into the emotional suspense felt by a 14-year-old Comaneci waiting to receive her score from Olympic judges, this fictionalized account of Comaneci's life between 1976 and 1990 is an overwhelming, beautiful nightmare.

The unease that begins to mount as Lafon throws post-Olympic gold headlines at us describing Comaneci as "adorable," "petite," and a "fairy," is at first lessened as we swing back into more stories of the young gymnast's successes and ambitions. Yet as the narrative unfolds into a tangle of politics, media, objectification and violence, the dread begins to mount again as familiar themes emerge.

The Little Communist is a fictional biography with a fiercely critical gaze. Various aspects of feminine youth worship and its flipside, the denigration and outright disgust with which the aging female body is viewed are exposed ruthlessly, using the elite gymnastics world of the 1970s, '80s and '90s as a backdrop.

The media picks apart Nadia's body, her clothing, her facial expressions (the title perhaps reflecting what feminist Germaine Greer denounced as patriarchy's need for the smiles of its victims as proof of their compliance), what she eats, and what she says.

Yet the fictionalized Nadia is given a chance to speak back. Part of the novel follows the young gymnast's thoughts and gives her space to question and criticize the world that used and then discarded her. Despite this, perhaps to reflect the reality, many of the novel's other voices seem to speak over hers.

For her coach, Bela Karolyi, Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and the media, so much is riding on the shoulders of these underfed, under-aged, under-slept young gymnasts. These disparate perspectives allow the novel to examine many issues, such as the horrendous way journalists speak to and about young women when it comes to their bodies and sexuality; the arsenal of abusive and coercive tactics used by some gymnastics coaches on girls as young as six; and how in this sport puberty is a career-ending disease, weight gain is a betrayal, and growing and changing bodies are to be feared.

Most women will have experienced the kind of objectification former American gymnast Julie DiCaro describes as the norm in this sport on an episode of the feminist sports podcast *Burn it all Down*: "Little girls learn from a

very young age that their bodies are not their own, that they are constantly manipulated and judged and worked on by other people...[I]t's almost like people talk about your body as if it doesn't belong to you."

This is something Lafon drives home again and again: Nadia's body is not her own. In fact, Nadia is not her own, nor is she alone in this. Lafon's inclusion of a surprise raid of Nadia's workplace by the Romanian secret police, during which women are forced to take pregnancy tests, helps make it clear that at any given moment, this alienation can be systematized, and that in Nadia's world, this is not only a possibility, but a decree.

Ageism is another central theme to *The Little Communist*. These young girls are celebrated, but in the blink of an eye, mourned as they hit puberty and their bodies become unbearably adult.

In the words of the current head coach of UCLA's women gymnastics team, Valorie Kondos-Field, lamenting the apparent end of the era of the "little-girl gymnast" in the *Atlantic*: "Olga [Korbut] was a little pixie. It's human nature to be attracted to [something] younger."

This uneasy look at the prevalence of a somewhat pedophilic tint to women's gymnastics and the many easily drawn parallels in Western pop culture, is incredibly revealing. The fetishization of young bodies that is so taboo in the rest of the culture is allowed in this very specific context, and with the way these young athletes are taught to let others use their bodies, there is a sense that their vulnerability is magnified to a dangerous degree.

The recent charges against USA gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar, on sexual assault charges, and the fact that the athletes, all between the ages of 10 and 15 at the time of the assaults, had tried to report him for many years before they were taken seriously, tells us a lot about the kind of environment this kind of mentality can foster.

Besides these overarching feminist themes, the novel also follows the parallels that can be found in the political context of the time. Lafon, French-born, but was raised in Romania, so her narrator's fictional correspondence with Comaneci provides some contrast to an often unforgiving gaze, reminding us that Romania in the 1970s and '80s was, in some ways, not that exceptional.

After all, as Lafon's fictional Comaneci protests, gymnasts are sold as products in the West as well, French coaches inject their young gymnasts with cortisone, too, and her coach Karolyi's manipulations were just his way of breaking through into the capitalist spectacle of the Olympic spotlight.

The narrative seems torn between two paths when it comes to depicting Romania under the dictatorship of Ceausescu. Lafon does not hesitate to celebrate the resilience of Romanians, having Comaneci describe how starvation and cold created a necessary solidarity in the face of terrible oppression, yet the author of the memoir within the novel is often tempted to dismiss this kind of insight from Nadia in favor of a more "objective" account of the "facts," which are generally far more critical of the regime and suspicious of Comaneci's level of complicity with the Ceausescu family.

Lafon's book within a book is simply another version of a story that's been told by many different parties, each with their own motives. However, a life story can be objectified much in the same way a body can, used and manipulated as an end to a means, even by its subject.

Whose version of Nadia's story should we believe? That told by the dictator trying to bring glory to a failing state? The glossy corporate advertising put forth by a sports franchise hoping to bring fame to the Olympic Games? The West trying to use Nadia and Ceausescu to spit in the eye of the USSR?

Lafon's writing is enchanting and immersive, her style a confrontational realism with hints of magic and a captivating fable-izing or fabulizing of history. With Nadia, the media, coaches, judges and the public all getting a say, *The Little Communist's* voices intersect and intertwine, making us engage with questions of power and coercion, the use of sports, sexuality and gender as political tools for governments of all stripes, and highlighting ageism in the particularly cruel way it affects women.

Whatever we choose to take away from this incredibly dense book, there is no question that Lafon is inviting us to ache at the cruelty of the gaze that slowly, surely, unrelenting pushes or maintains bodies onto the sidelines of desirability once their usefulness has been exploited.

She makes space for us to weep for "...a once-upon-a-time fairy now being gently pushed towards the exit, the one they no longer know what to call: was it a squirrel? Surely not. Possibly a bird, the albatross with "invasive limbs" that falls...on her back, her hands outstretched towards help that's not coming, a disgraced body bursting out of itself."

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