

# The Bad Victim

The psyches of young girls and their resilience

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a review of

*Reeling* by Lola Lafon, translated from French by Hildegard Serle. Europa Editions 2022

When violent acts seem isolated, rash, inexplicably singular, this gives all those forced to witness or have knowledge of it a way out. To rest somewhat easy in the knowledge that the particular and specific circumstances under which the violent acts took place are unlikely to reoccur.

So, what do we do with acts that are not only calculated, premeditated, intentional, but also collective? When the perpetrator is not one individual in a moment of extreme emotion or loss of all moral compass, but an organization of individuals (a state), who have come together with the sole intent of profiting in some way from bringing harm to others?

In Lola Lafon's *Reeling*, we encounter this form of organized violence. This is not a departure for Lafon, and she continues to bring insight to systems of oppression that disproportionately target young women and girls.

In her 2016 *The Little Communist Who Never Smiled*, for example, we step into the lives of children at the exact age when their bodies become fully feminized, therefore ceasing to belong to their inhabitants and are assumed to belong to the world. When breasts, hips, and lips begin to define the way you will live, how you will be treated, and what parts of yourself you can still claim and control. When your body ceases to be invisible and comes under the strict and watchful control of the state, the patriarchy, and the men and women who enable these systems.

Similarly, in *Reeling* we are privy to the transition from childhood to adulthood in a feminized body, through the inner life of Cleo, a young dancer, who is 12 years old when we first encounter her. When she is "twelve years, five months and one week old," she starts ballet classes. After struggling to fit in with the private school girls whose class privilege is constantly on display and trying hard to "acquire the refinement and haughtiness" her ballet teacher praises, she leaves dance behind. But after seeing a program on television featuring beautiful showgirls, Cleo's passion for dance is reignited, and she soon finds the "deliverance" of modern jazz classes at the local community centre.

Cleo is in the eighth grade, and longs to experience the freedom she feels while dancing in every aspect of her existence.

Leaving dance class one day, she meets a mysterious and glamorous woman. Flushed and out of breath, giddy with the power and pain of training and the carefully controlled expression of dancing, she is entranced.

The woman soon introduces herself as Cathy, the representative of Galatea, a foundation that seeks out "exceptional" girls for scholarships in the arts. She has noticed Cleo and wishes to introduce herself.

Desperate to escape the chains of childhood, dreaming of a life dedicated to this precious art form that consumes her imagination, Cleo jumps at the chance to be considered for a scholarship. She believes something may be finally happening to her, the thing that will break her out of the waiting room of childhood and into the real world.

Cathy does not disappoint. She is an enigma. Worldly, but approachable. Soon she brings Cleo gifts: an expensive perfume, a beautiful new leotard, a special series of Polaroids (“remunerated,” of course) to show to the foundation’s judges...She sees something in her, and wishes only to support, to encourage, to help her fulfill her potential. Cathy meets Cleo’s parents, making an excellent impression, tells them that their daughter might have a chance at a scholarship. Perhaps she could arrange a meeting with the Foundation’s judges, an introduction.

Like Lafon’s other work, this is not fantasy plucked from thin air. This is neither speculative fiction nor historical fiction. While Lafon was writing *Reeling*, the details of Jeffrey Epstein’s tentacle-like venture in the international sex-trafficking in under age girls, involving many men in positions of power, continued to slowly be revealed in the press.

In Epstein’s case, the media is generally interested in legalities (how young *exactly* is young, what is the definition of trafficking, and how do you prove coercion?), as well as the identities of the famous men involved. But in *Reeling*, Lafon’s focus is not on the men who it turns out are behind Galatea, nor on defining what kind of crimes they perpetrated. Instead, *Reeling* zooms in on the ways in which the so-called foundation’s money and power is used to involve the trafficked girls themselves in their own abuse and that of others like them.

Lafon weaves in details that place us on the scene, and sometimes in the bodies of her characters. We sit at a long dining table with them as they chat nervously with the middle-aged men who make up the Galatea Foundation’s panel of “judges.” We lie on the examining table with them as a renowned physiotherapist tries to undo the damage they have done to themselves in the dance studio or on the stage: strained muscles, x and x. We stand in the schoolyard with Cleo, our stomachs churning, as she selects which classmates she will introduce to Cathy next.

Cathy is an important piece to the Galatea puzzle. A fictionalized Ghislaine Maxwell, she is the front line, the face of the operation. She grooms the young teens, buying them gifts, telling them they are very mature for their age, insinuating that they are destined for greatness if they can only “open their minds” to the world to which she will introduce them a world in which she will abandon them once they have ventured in far enough.

Once Cleo finally extricates herself from the clutches of Cathy and Galatea, she is left with an immense inner struggle. Barely into her teens, she is preoccupied, almost obsessed with ideas of good and evil, right and wrong. She struggles to understand systems of oppression, what their existence means, how important it is to speak up for what is right.

This is a theme that readers of Lafon’s other work will find familiar: a young girl who is trying to understand a world in which she and her body are continually scrutinized and judged, and how to build an inner sense of what is good and worthy, in short: how to become her own judge.

The name of Lafon’s fictional foundation is based on a Greek myth, in which a sculptor falls in love with his sculpture, which then comes to life. This myth in turn inspired the play *Pygmalion*, later adapted for film as the hit musical *My Fair Lady*, in which a cockney flower girl is “sculpted” into an upper-class lady, at which point her “creator,” or groomer, falls in love with her.

Lafon’s intertextual reference to this myth, that of the right of the sculptor to take his sculpture as a lover, gets to the heart of *Reeling*’s theme; these girls are told they have “potential.” That with a little help, they can make their dreams come true. This is the coaxing, the sculpting, the grooming. Then, when their so-called benefactors ask for a little something in return, they are asked to endure sexual abuse in exchange. Having come this far, and already unsure who exactly has final say in how their bodies are to exist in the world, how can they refuse?

As Cleo gets older, she finds ways to reclaim her body. She continues to dance, has lovers, and is self-sufficient. She is self-contained in the way she has been raised to believe is right, and which her experience with Galatea has, of course, confirmed: in the end, she alone is responsible for her destiny.

When her daughter is born, she is filled with the old fear, the knowledge that she is a person who can bring harm to others. She sees one of her classmates, who was slightly younger than the other girls, in her daughter’s face, and can’t bring herself to provide the care a mother is expected to take on: feeding, rocking, comforting. “Needing help [isn’t] a sign of weakness,” her partner Adrien tries to convince her. But she cannot bring herself to accept that she is deserving of help, or that she should be allowed to move on from her past. “You [can’t] just drop your ghosts,” she thinks. “You [can’t] just let go of their hands.”

Lafon’s timely novel, which also touches on questions of racialized bodies, queerness, and anti-capitalism, gives us another direction from which to approach issues of consent, exploitation, and agency. At a time when abortion

rights and access to other healthcare that gives people agency over birth control in the U.S. is being dismantled state by state, when parents and teachers are being told to carefully guard the gender expression of the children under their care, this book provides us a new story to base our next moves on.

Unlike the premise of myths like Galatea, *Reeling* does not glorify those with power over others. Cleo's story is about being trapped by and breaking out of the systems that seek to cast us and our bodies in marble. It is about her and all the other statues who come to life and fight back together against those who would claim them and keep them, resisting the systems of power that seek to control us down to the bone.

Marieke Bivar is living in Montreal, but hopes to one day inhabit the deep sea, maybe as some kind of translucent glow-in-the-dark creature. May we see a free Palestine and a free world long before then.



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