

GRETCHEN SHIRM

Lucy Neave, *Who We Were*

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“My Aunt Sammy’s house smelled of the sea...” might easily be the first words of a coming of age novel, rather than a cold-war spy thriller and, in a way, Lucy Neave accomplishes both in her debut *Who We Were*. The book is a first-love story that begins modestly, but morphs into a war-time spy thriller, written with delicate and insightful prose.

We first meet Annabel Rose as a young and ambitious student in her last year of school in 1938. Annabel lives with her aunt in Melbourne during high school, but grew up on a farm in Lake George near Canberra. On her way back to her parents’ farm at the end of the school year, she meets a man named Bill Whitton, a friend of her older brother’s. Bill is keenly interested in the world and is also a budding photographer. After an accident during the car journey into Lake George in which Bill is injured, Annabel and Bill’s fates are tied together. Their courtship follows, only to be interrupted by the war, which changes Bill in ways that Annabel will never completely understand. Although they marry on Bill’s return, he never speaks of his experience of the war to Annabel and this is failure to communicate becomes the first crack in their marriage, although Annabel loves Bill and is determined to persevere.

Annabel’s other true love is science. Annabel and Bill leave Australia for New York, where they both find work in a laboratory that experiments with infectious diseases. Annabel discovers a new sense of purpose and intellectual stimulation in this work and throws herself into her role. Neave describes Annabel’s work staring down the microscope in the following passage:

Some of the cells had inclusion bodies. If I looked closely enough, I could see them: little blemishes in the cells, which indicated infection with a virus. Of course, the virus

itself was too small to be seen with a light microscope; all I could see were its deadly traces.

Neave is plainly familiar with this subject matter and the skill here is in allowing us to comprehend Annabel's work without overwhelming us with scientific detail. Yet there is something sinister about her work, though she tries not to think about its implications and Annabel is more than naïve here; she is wilfully blind to the consequences of what she is doing. The virus Annabel is working on attacks the cells of and ultimately kills its host – its effects have been observed on several ill-fated monkeys. Although clearly conflicted by the idea of producing a lethal infectious disease, Annabel tries to quarantine her love of science from the impact the virus might have in a world overrun with latent cold war conflict.

At various points, Annabel confronts the chauvinistic attitudes of the era. And yet, it is never Annabel who doubts her own ability, rather the attitudes of the era mean she is seen first for her gender before her ability. When asked by a female neighbour whether she is going to give up her job (the implication being because she is married, she will no doubt have children), Annabel replies that she does not want to give it up. Later, she observes,

I might've spent my life making coffee for men; it seemed a happy accident that there was a white coat inside my handbag, rather than a notebook for taking shorthand.

This idea of chance resonates with contemporary readers, particularly women, who can now take for granted their entitlement to an education and a stimulating career. Annabel also struggles with the pressure to bear children, about which she feels ambivalent and fears will amount to a distraction from her work.

Annabel and Bill strike up an apparently innocent friendship with Frank (with whom Bill and Annabel work) and Suzy who, as it transpires, are communists. Later, Bill himself demonstrates his own apparent sympathies, by helping two people escape across the border to Canada. This is the way Neave draws the cold war into the novel and it is an artful depiction of how the political divisions of the time seeped into domestic life. There is a strange sort of undertow to the book that seems symptomatic of the times; like Annabel, we get the uneasy feeling that we don't quite have all of the information we need.

Although the first person perspective offers us a closeness to Annabel, for me it gave rise to a structural problem. Locking us into Annabel's point of view meant that we never really understood Bill or his final deception at the conclusion of the book; we remain as mystified as Annabel at the revelation of Bill's secret. There are interesting questions here that might have been explored, such as, whether we ever really know the person we love, or just some version of them that we have constructed for ourselves. Annabel touches on this, at one point saying,

I'd known him since I was seventeen years old, but now I saw that I'd never really comprehended him. Maybe I hadn't wanted to. Instead, I'd believed that – at the core – we were similar in our desire for knowledge. And that we loved each other. I'd wanted to know him, and at the same time, I hadn't.

Also, the psyche of a traitor seems to me to warrant closer examination. What justifications must a person come up with when betraying those closest to them? That ideology can mean more to an individual than those they love seems to me to be a psychological phenomenon ripe for unpicking.

Neave's prose is largely assured, although there is an occasional creakiness to her expressions, especially in describing emotional responses, which are sometimes conveyed in language that is generic and unspecified, such as "Euphoria flooded my limbs" or "Relief washed over me". But these lapses are offset by the beauty of some of the descriptions, such as Lake George "lying silver in its hollow" or a hand described exquisitely as a "china teacup hand, cool and hard." Neave has an eye for these sorts of descriptions, presenting a familiar world to us in an unusual way – agar plates, for example, are described as being "dead as moons". For a writer this is a rare gift.

I found the conclusion of the novel and Annabel's return to her childhood home very moving. There is something touching about the way Neave portrays Annabel's homecoming, from the large, overwhelming cityscape of New York to the silence and isolation of a rural existence. Neave captures something unique to the Australian experience: the sharp contrast between the urban and the rural and the inability to inhabit both easily.

"Now, I was a thousand miles from anywhere," Annabel tells us. We get the sense that her struggle will not be, now, as a female making her way in the world, but

in feeling comfortable inhabiting herself, after years of wrestling with ideologies and ideas. What we are left with is the idea that while Annabel has travelled and seen the world, it is only in the solitude of her expansive and silent home that she can really understand and come to terms with who she is.