

[Allegory as Screen Memory: A Review of Aimee Parkison's The Petals of Your Eyes](#)

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The Petals of Your Eyes

by Aimee Parkison

Starcherone Books, 2014

112 pages / [Starcherone](#) / [Amazon](#) / [Goodreads](#)

Review by **Brooke Wonders**

Aimee Parkison's newest novel, *The Petals of Your Eyes*, offers a conundrum: it solicits both a literal and an allegorical reading, while never allowing the reader to comfortably settle one way or the other. I read this as literary fiction inflected with horror, with similarities to Blake Butler's postapocalyptic *Scorch Atlas* and Jessica Bozek's *The Tales*, though it is its own beast and owes allegiance to neither.

In lyrical, paratactic sentences, Parkison unfolds a fable of young women—girls, really—kept in captivity as part of an ongoing theatrical performance, its provenance and purpose unknown. The book's tone is sinister, and the imprisoned, kidnapped actors in this theater all have petals over their eyes, petals that are soft as an eyelid, but also conceal, as the girls themselves are imprisoned and concealed. This tone, combined with a near-complete lack of scenes, keeps the reader suspended in a dream-like state, in much the same way as a fairytale might. Our disbelief is also suspended, as a litany of horrors washes over us: "Some of the theatergoers like to view the dead girls in the cabinets...some of them like to keep a living girl locked inside with a dead girl (9)."

Are we intended to read lines like this one literally? And if so, how can we keep on reading in the face of such abject horror? And yet the book commits fully to its childlike, naïve perspective. We are offered little to no context for how the girls ended up in their predicament, and none of the characters are given names beyond static objects or their position within the text. There's the rose, our narrator, and her sister, the gardenia. The rose has a lover called no one's daughter. The theater where they are kept and displayed to various theatergoers is run by the new director. There is an old director. There are trainers, and actors, and a women butcher, and in all of these cases they are unnamed. Once again we are in the realm of fairytale: the prince, the princess, the queen, the soldier, the pauper. I kept capitalizing these terms in my mind as I read: No One's Daughter. The Woman Butcher. Much fairytale scholarship (Bruno Bettelheim and Maria Tatar especially) involves close reading of the tale through a psychological lens, a process resembling allegorical reading practices wherein submerged content is brought to the surface. Parkison solicits this kind of reading, but *The*

Petals of Your Eyes ultimately refuses it.

I read *The Petals of Your Eyes* as an allegory, even though Parkison is at pains to remain in a dreamspace of complete abstraction. Angus Fletcher, in his critical work *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, produces a taxonomy of literary devices that solicit allegorical reading, and Parkison uses many of them: repetition that invokes ritual, abstraction, and the grotesque. From Fletcher:

Allegories are far less often the dull systems they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles. If they are often rigid, muscle-bound structures, that follows from their involvement with authoritarian conflict. If they are abstract, harsh, mechanistic, and remote from everyday life, that may sometimes answer a genuine need. When a people is being lulled into inaction by a routine of daily life...an author perhaps does well to present behavior in a grotesque, abstract caricature. In such a way may he arouse...criticism, and the method will be justified. (23)

This argument, that allegory is best suited to investigating relations of power, goes a long way to explain how Parkison's unsettling fairytale speaks to this historic moment. *The Petals of Your Eyes* offers a conundrum: when a real-world tragedy like the sexual slavery of young women is so horrible that we want to look away, does allegorizing this tragedy offer us a way to look anyway—and perhaps see more clearly—or does it wind up sensationalizing the horror, reinscribing these young women's victimization? Parkison offers no easy answers, but many arresting images, sentences, and juxtapositions.

Joyelle McSweeney, writing for *The Brooklyn Rail*, provocatively refers to Parkison's style as resembling "a screen memory": "[Parkison] unfolds a fairy tale so harrowing it reads like a screen memory—so harrowing it *must* be true." This precisely articulates how allegory works in Parkison: her work asks to be read as allegory, as a story concealing some far more horrible truth beneath. And yet its grotesqued surface is horrifying enough already.

Perhaps the most interesting question posed by this text, and ones like it, is why this turn to the mode of allegory? Why now? Fletcher argues that the mode resembles religious ritual. Perhaps it speaks to our desire for meaning and order in our lives, a mission that is, on the surface at least, at odds with the ethos of risk promoted by experimental fiction.

The allegorical style slips—I would argue deliberately—toward the final third of the book. We reach a passage that stretches toward realism, in that this uncanny world we've learned to maneuver suddenly bears too close a similarity to our own, with one too many telling details to believe it's pure fiction:

In childhood, my father was a missionary...Just before my sister and I were taken to the secret theater, my sister, my mother, and I went on a ship with my father on a Christian cruise. Mother said we were never to see our home again, that the Lord would take us to

places where people needed us. Then a man put a blue pillowcase over my sister's head one night. My mother was crying when she saw the gun. My father was on the floor with me when the man told him to put the red pillowcase over my head, and afterwards everything was red ,red, red. (Parkison 93)

Our narrator is the rose. Gardenias are usually white, not blue, but can be dyed alternative colors. The man carries the narrator to a boat, then a plane, then a car, then "another boat, another plane, and then a truck that drove into the jungle."

A quick Google search of incidents to which this might refer turns up everything from Boko Haram's alleged kidnapping of Christian girls to sell them into sexual slavery, to the hundred or so people annually who disappear on ocean cruises. This specific narrative, though, of a missionary whose daughters are kidnapped off a cruise, doesn't appear to have a real-world referent. Not that it needs to; this is fiction. And yet this moment is the first in Parkison's book that had me seeking out a search engine, the accretion of telling details sufficient to seem plausibly real.

The cover of the first edition features collage illustrations that resemble shadow puppets, some featureless, and others clearly made of distorted bird skeletons, their limbs askew in a way that turns their wings humanoid and arm-like. This is a wholly appropriate set of images for a book that is itself a shadowbox, its unnamed protagonist a puppet in someone else's theater: "...she will sing to the soul, calling it like a bird, coaxing it as she manipulates the bone puppets inside the garden of the secret theater." This line appears in the novel's epilogue.

Then there's the puzzle of the poems that interrupt the narrative. They are all strikingly similar ("He is lost. Find him and set a nourishing dinner beside him./He is shivering. Warm him in a room of bright light..."), repeated with minor variations over the course of this brief book, and usually including an alteration of the speaker (sometimes no one's daughter speaks these words; other times it's the woman butcher, or the new director). Too, the pronouns shift: the he changing to she changing to they, and finally to I. This is a poem of failed self-making, and the epilogue points to the narrator as becoming a director of sorts, presiding over bone puppets of her own.

Much like the repeated, mutating, mutable poem that repeats like a ritual throughout, the narrator has, in the epilogue, occupied the space of her victimizer, becoming the one who forces her bone puppets into action. It is this, the way in which the allegory never permits itself to be fully cognized, always casting the reader back into doubt—but without sacrificing the reader's feelings of complicity with what he or she is reading—that marks Parkison's work as experimental fiction worth seeking out and reading closely.

Brooke Wonders is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Brevity*, and *The Collagist*, among others. In the interest of full disclosure: her short story, "Memoir," appears alongside Parkison's fiction in the just-released *Wreckage of Reason II: An Anthology of Contemporary XXperimental Women Writers*.