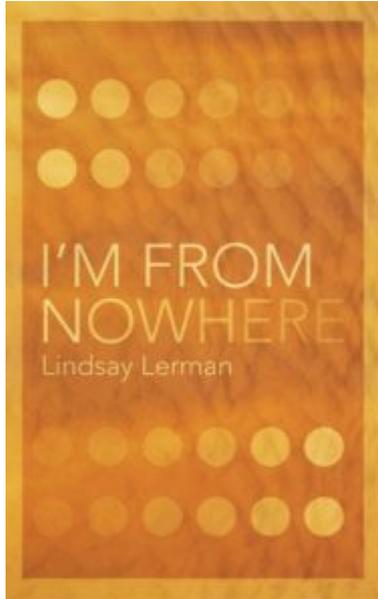


# Lindsay Lerman's Dichotomy of Feminist Pessimism (Submission or Suicide)

written by Guest Contributor | May 30, 2019



*I'm From Nowhere* by Lindsay Lerman  
Clash Books, forthcoming September 2019  
172 pages / [Amazon](#) / [Clash](#) (preorders ship in June)

*I'm From Nowhere* is a portrait of Claire, whose husband's recent death obliterates the last tether she had to claim some kind of identity permanence. As Claire grieves, she recounts the process of untethering, during which she had already given up her career, her hopes for a child, and she relates an accidental failure to form any meaningful friendships or familial relations on which she might find her personhood. The result is a devastating insight into the feminine consciousness unbound.

Lerman's linguistic constructions come off as summary, matter-of-fact rejections of everything to which we are supposed to have become accustomed. Early on, Claire voices a dissatisfaction with her own material existence: "Can you slice me out of me? I don't want this body anymore." (52) The phrase is one of many examples of how Lerman uses short and effective phrasing to force the reader to abruptly take on Claire's mindset, as she laments her situation of continuing to exist, not an independent existent with fully developed agency, but as a lack. Lerman's text uses existentialist themes (by which I mean, philosophical existentialism in the vein of Sartre and De Beauvoir) which, expressed in situation as opposed to in the abstract, create an empathic relation between Claire and the reader. (Lerman has a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Guelph.) Claire's pain is our pain, and not in an abstract sense—in the sense that hers is the pain of existence, that to which we are all subject, and Lerman makes us *feel* it.

As Claire goes about living after the death of her husband, Lerman lures us back and forth between the abstract and the specific. Both extremes of Lerman's book thrust the reader into recognizing the futility of survival, and the idea that living without external purpose comes off as *offensive* to others. The subjective account of Claire's story and the general expression of the human condition exist on parallel levels of consciousness to which the reader is afforded access through Lerman's exceptional prose. We are alternately thrown into Claire's situation and her increasing desperation for meaning, and then removed from that situation just to be faced with an equally devastating general truth of our human condition. For example, we feel Claire's unrelenting desire for the irrational when Claire returns to her family home, despite the fact that her family has long since left: "Nevertheless, she's drawn to this driveway like a fool. She hasn't come here since John and she moved to this town. She's not sure why. *Odd. I used to live here. There must be someone here who can save me.*" (93) We feel our own desperate desire for the irrational when she relates, more generally: "We are feverish with desire to be more than we are. Because we can't stop hoping that our chunks of bone and blood and flesh can somehow exceed their casing, that we matter, that these desires that make us shake with fury are indicative of more than a biological imperative to reproduce. *It's the wanting to carry on that is the exceeding.*" (151)

The co-existence of the specific and the general in Claire's consciousness and Lerman's expression of it is, either by necessity or by design, is a representation of female consciousness as a stratified structure contemporaneously operating at the levels of the particular and the abstract. On the one hand, we have the guttural expression of the irrational things we are not supposed to think, while on the other, we have a sublimation of that feeling with its concurrent self-awareness, and a retreat into universal truths, as when Claire is describing an early interaction with her dead husband: "Maybe it was her pride. Maybe it was that subterranean, always lingering fear of being alone, being exiled. A kind of death to be sure."

Lerman's text expresses a peculiar form of feminism—a feminist pessimism resulting from the consistent exclusion of woman from personhood. She posits a dichotomy in response to the human situation: suicide or submission. Reading the book, we want Claire to come to some kind of conclusion, to solve for us the problems to which Lerman points throughout her recounting of Claire's grief—the situation of humanity to exist as a lack whose hope for fulfillment is a permanent condition of unfulfilled desire. We want, and then we die. But Lerman's expression of the hopelessness of humanity results in a conclusion that is equally pessimistic and comfortingly familiar: "Submission and suicide are the same thing." (152) Lerman's feminism is at once resentful and hopeless. It isn't there to make a point; it's there to express the feminine condition of being excluded from humanity, and to give voice to the resulting despair. Claire's consciousness is as fractured as her desire to *be everything* at once. Lerman writes: "She wants multiple lives running at once—three or more distinct ribbons of time intertwined so that she can run away forever with Luke, grieve John and be fair and true to him, return to her former self and erase her mistakes, erase her acts of self-erasure, become a mother and understand what it is to live for someone else. *Must*

*female subjectivity be split into a thousand pieces?"* (142)

The novel is punctuated with sexual encounters that emphasize the aggressive aspect of female sexuality. Lerman relates a formative sexual encounter in which Claire becomes the exemplar of passivity (and possibly the victim of rape), and then later encounters where Claire has violent sex with a family friend, with full agency. Lerman's feminist pessimism resonates, as it seems there is no place to be a woman. Claire's dichotomy, submission or suicide, demands that we recognize the current state of affairs; it forces us to recognize that despite how distasteful we might find the present situation, nevertheless it is the situation, and that situation precludes any third option: "But the fact was that there had never been a place for her, with a man or without. Never was a place for her. Never would be. Not a single place was for her or any other woman. No safe place. No good place. No secure place. Nothing approaching security. No place for any woman on this planet, ever. What we call melodrama is the honesty we can no longer hide from, when we're worn down to nearly nothing." (118)

With *I'm From Nowhere*, Lerman forces us to recognize the discord between our preferred mode of existence (to live as if with purpose) and the actualities of lived existence—that to live with desire means to live with a lack, an unfulfilled purpose that, even if fulfilled is fleeting, for the nature of all that exists is to destroy itself. This is expressed through Claire's reconciliation with John's death, as the ends of all of her life's projects are suddenly negated along with him, and she's faced not with the necessity of, but the fact of continuing to exist, despite everything. *Suicide or submission* are the choices we face when agency is not an option, and what we are left with is two forms of non-existence. Claire must face the fact that, "she too will end, and maybe should never have been." (154)

Lerman's theory is on point, and expressed through the portrait of Claire, effective as well. Through Lerman's book, a dark undercurrent of human experience is brought to the fore—that of conceiving of our own survival as an inconvenience, and with the knowledge that things will not improve, but rather inevitably come to an unceremonious end.



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