



Life, the internet and everything in between

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“NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS”

By Patricia Lockwood

Riverhead Books (\$25)

Patricia Lockwood’s much-anticipated first novel, “No One is Talking About This,” begins with an unnamed central character opening the internet, or “the portal” as it’s known throughout the book. This is a fitting start, as both Ms. Lockwood and her main character are internet celebrities. Ms. Lockwood was once named “the poet laureate of Twitter” for tweets like “@Parisreview So is Paris any good or not?” Her character becomes famous for a post that asks “Can a dog be twins?” and spends the first half of the novel traveling the world to attend conferences as an internet expert.

Ms. Lockwood asks big questions about the internet in the first half of her novel. She wonders whether humans are using or being used by the internet, she worries that the speed of internet life might be destroying our shared history, and she references the internet's contributions to polarization. But she also embraces internet culture, both with her narrative style (the novel is written as a series of fleeting thoughts and questions) and constant references to memes and online jokes. Readers of "No One is Talking About This" will be reminded, for example, that Mitt Romney's favorite meat is "hot dog," that Folgers once unintentionally created a commercial celebrating incest, and that Senator Chuck Grassley's Twitter feed is completely bonkers. When Lockwood patches these memories together, is she shoring fragments against our ruin, like an internet savvy T.S. Eliot? Or is she just recycling meaningless ephemera? Also, what's the difference between the two?

These questions intensify in the novel's second half when the main character receives a text from her mother informing her of problems with her sister's pregnancy. This section resembles Ms. Lockwood's 2017 memoir "Priestdaddy," with the main character returning home to spend time with her parents, trying to balance feelings of love and frustration with her family. But where the memoir mined this situation for jokes (it won the 2018 Thurber Prize for American Humor), the novel is more reflective, wondering whether comedy has any value in moments of crisis.

To her credit, Patricia Lockwood doesn't write this experience as though it will awaken her character to what "really matters." She also doesn't use it to paint her character's prior life as shallow. Rather, she explores whether the two worlds can co-exist, and how they change each other when they meet. Ms. Lockwood explored similar ground in her viral (and autobiographical) poem "Rape Joke" when she daringly asked whether comedy and sexual violence can co-exist. In what may be my favorite passage in this novel, her character talks about the family visiting a series of chain stores after they've bonded over supporting her sister. The Men's Wearhouse, T.J. Maxx, and the Shoe Carnival are made "holy" by the family's presence. The light fixtures at the Cheesecake Factory (of all places) "seemed to bloom the whole time on their stems."

Late in the novel, the main character recalls that when she was a child she would have "knifelike flashes" that would open the reality of the universe to her. "After this I will be able to talk only about what matters," she would

think, “but still she went on talking about the weather.” Similarly, “No One is Talking About This” ends with the main character back on the road, giving a lecture about the internet at the British Museum, talking about Garfield as a body positivity icon and eels in the River Thames doing coke. As she looks into the crowd, she repeats a question from the novel’s opening pages: “This did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did?” This is technically the same question, so readers might be tempted to conclude that the character is stuck in a meaningless feedback loop.

But it feels different the second time around. Patricia Lockwood’s character’s “real life” has been enriched and deepened by her time with her family. Her sympathies have been broadened. She’s been reminded, as readers may be when they read this wonderful novel, of the human capacity to define “real life.”

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